Ha Jin finally remembers everything. She remembers her life in Goryeo. She remembers her friends. Most of all, she remembers him. She regrets ever leaving him... she wishes she could make amends, but she knows it's impossible. Or is it?
Memories and Dreams

Chapter Summary

I Won't Leave You

As he sits up in bed, he's feeling restless and groggy. He hasn't had a good night's sleep in months, and today he wakes to find tears in his eyes. He doesn't understand what keeps plaguing him so. He used to think these visions he's been having every night were dreams, but now they feel different... they're more than just dreams - they feel like... memories.

He shakes his head and rubs his eyes. How can they be memories? In his 30 years, he has never even met her - this woman whose body, whose voice, whose face he sees ever so clearly in his sleep, who slips away in his waking hours. Even now he is having trouble remembering her exact features... only one thing remains: her eyes.

She had very big, very bright eyes.

He gives up trying to remember and sighs. There was no point in brooding over a dream. The clock by his bed tells him that it is almost midday. He'd overslept again.

He pours himself a glass of water and gets up, heading for the bathroom. He was supposed to meet that historian again today at the store. Last night, he had fully intended to wake up earlier to be there for the launching of their new product line, but his dreams had other plans.

As he's heading out, he pauses by his notebook and flips it open, immediately finding the page he wanted. He had been storing little bits and pieces of her face into his memory, focusing on them every time he awoke so that he could write them down.

1. long, straight black hair
2. full, pink lips curled up in a smile
3. white, porcelain skin
4. small, soft, dainty hands
5. a small, round face
6. a small nose

This morning, he has something new to add:

7. big, bright eyes

He wonders if it's enough? He isn't much of an artist, but his cousin is. He reaches into his pocket as he closes the door to his flat and texts, "Hey, I remember something else - she had big brown eyes."

A reply comes as he's starting his car, "How big?"

"Big. Like enough to fill half her face."

"Hyung."
"I don't know, alright? Just... big. Tell me when you've finished."

"No, c'mon, I need more than that."

"I can't remember any more! That's the whole point."

"Alright, alright. Are you free later tonight?"

"Sure. Text me the time and place."

He drops his phone onto the empty seat beside him, revs up the engine and drives off. He hopes his cousin will be able to draw her better now that he has a description of her eyes... he wants so badly to remember her. He wants to see her. He can't understand why he feels it's so important when they'd never even met before. He just knows that it feels right. For the longest time, he's lived in frustration, constantly feeling like something important was missing from his life – like a piece of himself had forcefully torn itself off and gotten lost somewhere, just waiting to be found. He had felt that if he could just see her face again... even in a drawing... everything would be alright. All the answers would fall into place.

He pulls into the parking lot and gets out. There are quite a lot of people in the lobby, most of them women sampling the products. He puts on his most charming smile and proceeds to greet them, keeping an eye out for the historian, wondering if the man had left already.

"There are too many people here," a low voice suddenly whispers into his ear, making him jump in fright. "I need to go to the bathroom. I'll see you by the paintings in 5 minutes."

He whips around in frustration to see the historian walking off in the opposite direction. He has half a mind to follow him, partly to tell him he was going the wrong way, but mainly because the historian had a knack for creeping up on him, and he was finding it increasingly annoying. But he decides against it. There's no point in causing a scene. Instead, he takes a deep breath to rein in his temper and makes his way towards the small room adjacent, where the newly discovered paintings from the Goryeo era are being kept on display for the public.

His eyes immediately land on the large painting of the Fourth King, Gwangjong, and his lips purse in amusement, remembering how his friends and family had teased him about the resemblance between him and the old man. He turns away and is about to check his phone when something else catches his attention...

Hajin wipes her eyes and gets up, blinking rapidly to contain her tears. The pain in her chest is still so fresh, so palpable. She doesn't know how it's possible... but it has to be true. What she had thought all along were dreams had in fact been memories. Memories of her life in Goryeo... over a millennia ago.

She had been there. She had been there for a good seven years. And she had fallen in love with the 4th King, Gwangjong... or as she had known him then, Wang So.

Just the thought of his name is enough to send a fresh wave of grief crashing over her, so that she suddenly finds it hard to breathe. She closes her eyes and bumps her chest with her fist to try and get a grip on her emotions, remembering the many people nearby who would think her crazy for
crying over a thousand-year-old dead man if they see her.

She has to get home. She has to know what happened to them... So, Baek Ah, Jung, and even Wook... and especially her baby girl. Did she grow up strong and beautiful? Was she able to live the free life she had wanted so badly for her? Did she ever get married? Did she ever meet her real father?

She has to know. She would scour every book in the country if she has to.

She takes a deep breath and turns, wanting to get out as quickly as possible, but before she can take even a single step forward, she bumps headlong into someone and stumbles backward.

"Ouch!" she yelps in surprise, clutching at her forehead.

"Are you alright? I'm sorry-"

She shakes her head and straightens up. "No, it's okay, it was my fault. I should have..." she trails off as she looks into his face. It's as though the world had stopped turning, and her heart had stopped beating.

She can't believe it. *It's him.*

"I'm sorry, are you hurt?" he asks, reaching out to her in concern, but she grabs him first, feeling breathless with disbelief.

Her eyes rake in the sight of him. He's different from the Prince she had fallen in love with - his hair is cut short, he's wearing a suit rather than traditional clothing, and he doesn't have a scar on his face. But he's just as tall, just as lean and just as handsome as she remembers. His jaw is the same, his long, straight nose is the same, his high cheekbones are the same, his lips are the same... and his eyes. Those sharp eyes that always used to smile whenever they saw her - they're the same, too.

And right now, they're wide with shock.

She realizes how she must look like to him and immediately lets go. She opens her mouth to say something - anything - but nothing seems to work.

*It's him. He's here. He's found her.*

He clears his throat and tries again. "Are you alright, miss? I'm sorry if I hurt you."

She shakes her head, her eyes never leaving his face. "I'm not... I'm fine, I... do we..." she licks her lips, feeling her chest tighten painfully at the way he's looking at her - like she was a stranger; like they had never met before.

But he had found her. They had met again just as she managed to remember everything. Surely, *surely* that must mean something?

"Do we... know each other?" she asks, feeling slightly breathless. Despite all the confusion, fear and hurt in her breast, her heart is hopeful. There has to be a reason... he must be here for a reason...

He looks at her funny and shakes his head. "I don't think so."

She quells the panic rising inside her and tries again. "Are you sure? Think harder... do you think..."
do you remember ever seeing me before?"

Again, he shakes his head, looking more confused than ever. "I saw you crying and was going to ask if you were okay. Would you like a glass of water?"

"It wouldn't have been recent," she cries desperately. "It may have been... a very long time ago."

He runs a hand uncomfortably through his hair, looking like he was sorry for even attempting to talk to her. The look on his face cut her like a knife. He doesn't know her. He had come over out of concern. Maybe he thinks she's crazy... maybe she is.

This is my punishment, she thinks, for leaving him the way I did. This is fate's way of toying with me for ruining all those peoples' lives... for thinking I could make everything better.

She doesn't know she's crying again until she can no longer breathe. She looks down just as he turns around and walks away. The pain in her chest is strong enough to make her pass out, but she doesn't dare call out to him again. She can't bear to have him look at her like a stranger.

She takes a deep breath and takes one more look at the painting of Gwangjong. She commits his face to memory, to make sure her mind remembers what her heart had never forgotten. This will be her punishment; she will carry this burden alone for the rest of her life. Her lips quiver and there's a painful lump in her throat as she says in a voice barely above a whisper, "Goodbye... So."

He stops dead in his tracks, images suddenly flitting through his mind - a beautiful lake, a lone boat on its waters, a walkway lined with trees, fireflies on the grass, blossoms and leaves falling through the air... and beneath it, a vision in white, standing serenely by the lake, staring out into the water.

He's frozen on the spot. His mind is overwhelmed by the sudden surge of images and memories that he knows deep down are his, though he cannot understand where they had come from.

"I trust you."

"You're leaving without seeing me?"

"I guess you have really forgotten about me."

"Have you been sleeping well? Eating well?"

"Do you still... resent me?"

It was that voice. Her voice. The woman from his dreams.

He whips around in shock to stare at the portrait of the late King Gwangjong. Even more memories race through his mind - a throne room full of people, and yet empty of life; faces of both the living and the dead; a lotus hairpin, a smiling face, a soft touch of a hand on his...

"I will never leave you."

There it is again. Her voice. He glances at his shoulder, feeling like she was just there; he can still
feel her weight leaning on him, the comforting smell of roses on her skin filling his senses.

"Hae Soo," the name comes unbidden from his lips.

He rubs his forehead, trying to think. He turns around in search of her - but she’s gone. He’s alone in the room, and suddenly, he's in a panic. Where is she? Where did she go?

His eyes fall on a painting on the opposite wall.

Rain, falling on his face. People calling out his name in supplication. A small hand lightly caressing a scar on his face.

He reaches up instinctively but feels nothing there. There is no scar. Not now. But there had been once, a very long time ago...

"Hae Soo," he whispers the name again and suddenly, his mind clears. "My... Soo..."

She was here. She was here and she remembered him! He turns and bolts through the open doors to the next room, almost bulldozing into the historian.

"Sorry I took so long, you wouldn't believe how many-"

"Where did she go?" he demands, ignoring the apology and scanning the crowd for her familiar face. "Did you see her? There was a girl here."

"Girl? What girl?"

"Jimong!" he says the name almost unconsciously and stops, feeling dizzy. He must be going crazy. People have started to stare at him.

He runs his hand through his hair in an effort to compose himself, but his heart is still beating wildly around in his chest. He has to find her. He can't explain what had just happened, but he doesn't even care. It isn't important right now. What's important is getting to her. Where did she go? Where was she going?

My Hae Soo. I have found you at last.

"I'm sorry, I have to go," he says curtly, brushing past the old historian.

"Do you finally remember, 4th Prince?" the voice that spoke was so low, So isn't sure he'd heard it.

He turns around in surprise, wondering if the man was making fun of him again, but there's no trace of humor on the man's face.

"I have been waiting for you. Welcome back." Jimong smiles a knowing smile.

"What..." So says, glancing around at the people and the objects around him. It all suddenly seems so bizarre - so familiar and yet so foreign. "Are you really Jimong?"

"I'm sure you have a lot of questions to ask, but she is getting away," Jimong nods. "I'll be here when you get back."

Suddenly remembering her, So is struck anew with panic. Where is she? Where did she go?

"I'll be back," he says curtly, rushing out of the building and onto the busy streets. "Soo-yah!" he calls desperately over the heads of the crowd passing him. He turns this way and that in an effort to
see her, but there are too many people. She could have gone anywhere. She could be anywhere by now.

He chokes back his frustration and chooses a direction. He starts running, scanning each face as he passes them, looking for a small girl with long hair.

"Soo... Hae Soo..." he says, going further and further up the road, calling her name. But there's no sign of her. He steps into a secluded side street to think. There are too many people... and she is none of them. Had he gone the wrong way? Did she go the opposite direction? Did she take a taxi? Does she drive a car? Maybe he can use technology to his advantage... print an add with her face and post it all around. He remembers her now. He can ask his cousin...

He halts and finds himself laughing incredulously. His cousin, who happens to be his half-brother in another life. Nothing in life is a coincidence.

He reaches for his phone and sends him a text message, "Yah, I found her."

Baek Ah responds immediately, "YOU DID WHAT?"

"I need your help."

"Of course. Let's meet. Come pick me up."

"I'll be there in 15."

He stuffs his phone back into his pocket and heads back towards the exhibit, feeling let down but considerably better than he has in - he can't even remember.

He takes a deep breath and starts to think. That Jimong... he's kept a lot of things from me.

He's busy thinking of ways to torture the old man when he sees her again.

There she is, walking slowly, dejectedly towards him, her head bent and looking like a lost puppy. He stops and smiles at her, taking in every detail of her face. She's looking incredibly strange in her outfit, with her hair down and wavy like that, but everything else is exactly as he remembers. How could he have ever forgotten her, even for a minute?

He watches in amusement as she continues to walk, so obviously distracted that people have started to make way for her. She was only a few feet away now... five feet... four feet... three feet... two feet...

"Oh! I'm sorry," she gasps, walking headlong into his chest for the second time that day - literally the third time in history.

He grabs her arm to steady her, and suddenly, it's like no one else and nothing else matters except the two of them. He cares for nothing save for the fact that she was here with him now, alive and whole, and he was never - ever going to let her go again.

He would love her right, the way he should have from the start. Now, there's nothing standing in their way. No throne, no family conflicts, no more secrets.

Now, he can love her to his heart's content.

"Soo-yah."
The World As It Is

Chapter Summary

Two people catching up over a cup of tea and coffee... and a familiar face...

Chapter Notes

Since I'm not very good at making names, I decided to just keep their Goryeo identities. That way, we have less to remember lol~

"But how is it that you remember?" she asks curiously, fiddling with the coffee cup in her hand.

They're sitting outside a cafe, enjoying the mid-afternoon sun while sipping on a few drinks. She finds it amusing yet comforting how he still prefers Fresh Leaf Tea.

He shrugs, looking just as mystified as she was feeling. "I don't know, it just happened. It started out as strange dreams, but while looking at the paintings and hearing your voice... I just started to remember it all."

She sighs, "You've already said that."

He lets out an indignant scoff. "Well, if you're so smart, why don't you tell me how you managed to remember everything?"

"As I've already told you," she replies with an air of one lecturing a particularly temperamental 5-year-old, "this is my time. I was born in the year 1990. For some reason that I can't explain, I went back to your time after almost drowning. I was told I was in a coma for a whole year before I woke up."

"And as I've already told you," he says, leaning across the table to look her squarely in the eyes. "I was born in 1988. I'm not some ancient dead man."

"Oh, but you are," she teases, flashing him an impish smile. "To me, anyway."

He narrows his eyes at her and takes a sip of his tea. He scowls immediately at the taste. "You don't happen to remember how to make tea, do you?"

"I happen to know quite a lot of things," she says confidently, leaning her elbows on the table and resting her face on her hands. "Don't you know? I'm a person who learns one thing and picks up ten more."

"It doesn't taste as fresh as it's supposed to," he grumbles sourly, pushing the cup aside.

"Times have changed, Pyeha," she says in the most patronizing tone she could muster. "But I'm surprised. For someone who claims to be so young, you actually remember the taste of something from over a thousand years ago?"
He eyes her grimly. "I don't remember you ever being this mean."

She grins. "We were in Goryeo then. Now we're in the 21st century. I can say whatever I want without having to worry about my head being chopped off."

"There was never a danger of that happening!" he objects, affronted by her lack of trust. "Do you think I would have let anyone hurt you?"

She lowers her arms and smiles warmly at him. "No," she replies honestly. "But it wasn't just my life I was worried about, you know. Life was so complicated then."

He shifts his gaze away from her eyes. Suddenly, his not-so-fresh-cup-of-tea is looking very inviting. He had known that they would reach this topic eventually. Truth be told, it's still a rather sore topic for him to discuss and he wants to delay it for a later time. Right now, all he wants is to start over with her. He can tell she's the same woman he had fallen in love with all those centuries ago, and yet here, in this time, she's different somehow. He supposes that shouldn't be surprising, all things considered. After all, he's different too.

She clears her throat after a while and drains the remnants of her coffee. "So, now that I've got the rest of my day off... what would you like to do? I could show you around. Did you know the Joseon palace is only a few minutes away from here?"

His eyes snap back up to glare at her. "I know my way around, thank you very much."

She laughs heartily at his annoyance and gets up. "I'm teasing. Let's go somewhere else, shall we?"

He nods and leaves a tip on the table before joining her at the bottom of the stairs.

"Shall we hail a cab?" she asks brightly, eyeing the street up and down for one.

He snorts and grabs hold of her hand. A feeling of warmth immediately begins to spread from their hands to the rest of his body in response to the aching familiarity of having her tiny hand in his. She feels it too - he can tell by the reddening of her face and neck.

He smirks and leans over to make her even more uncomfortable. "I drove here."

"Y-you," she stutters, looking away with great difficulty, "you have a car?"

"Of course," he grins, straightening back up and pulling her along with him. "I left it parked at the shop." He stops walking and grimaces, suddenly remembering something - or rather, someone - that he had completely forgotten over the confusion of the past hour or two. "Sorry, I need to send a message," he apologizes, pulling his phone out of his pocket and opening it to find it packed with over a dozen messages, most of which had come from the same person. He scowls and quickly types in his apology for letting his best friend wait so long.

"Who's that?" Hajin asks, casually leaning in closer for a look.

He flashes her a knowing smile. "My best friend. You know him, too."

"And you'll meet him in awhile," he nods, checking to see if Jimong had left any messages for him. There was none. He can't still be waiting at the shop, can he? So shakes his head and resumes walking. If anyone has answers, it would be him. He's sure Jimong had had a hand at helping Haesoo - no, Hajin - remember the past, too.
"I just remembered!" she exclaims, keeping pace with him as they walk. "Jimong. I saw him! He helped me remember some things."

He chuckles fondly at the delay in her thought processes. "Yes, I figured. He was the one who told me to go look at the paintings. He helped me too."

She frowns, puzzled. "But who exactly is he and why does he know so much? How is it that he remembered so easily?"

He sighs, running a frustrated hand over his hair. "Damned if I know. I'll make sure to talk to him about it. He's probably still waiting inside."

As it happens, Jimong was nowhere to be found.

"Did he say he would be waiting?" Hajin asks, continuing to swivel this way and that and wondering if he was just sleeping in a corner somewhere.

"He did," So replies as he attempts to call him for the third time. He sighs in frustration and shuts his phone. "He's not picking up. Maybe something urgent came up and he had to leave."

"Maybe," she shrugs. She sees how annoyed and frustrated he looks and squeezes his hand. "Never mind. It's not like he's gone forever. He'll turn up again sometime."

He takes a deep breath and smiles down at her. "You're right. Let's go. I need to pick someone up from the office."

"Who?" she asks as he opens the car door for her to get in.

"You'll see," he replies with a grin, shutting the door behind her.

The car ride is awkward to say the least. With nothing else to distract them from each other, they had almost been forced to confront the elephant in the room. Almost. Thankfully, Hajin has a load of questions on her mind that she wants answered first. She's curious about this modern day version of her 10th century lover. What is his life like? His family? What are his interests and hobbies? His favorite food? His college major?

And... she doesn't want to admit it, but she's doubly curious about his love life. How many girlfriends has he had? Does he currently have a girlfriend?

_Not Yeonhwa_, she prays fervently, _Please don't let it be Yeonhwa. It's too much rotten luck to have to face that woman in two lifetimes._

She doesn't realize she has her eyes closed until she hears him chuckle. She looks at him, embarrassed. Had any of her thoughts shown on her face?

"What are you thinking of so seriously?" he asks, coming to a stop at a red light. He turns to face her, studying her expression with a curious look on his face.

"Nothing," comes her automatic reply.

"I thought we'd once agreed not to lie to each other?"

"But I'm not lying," she objects. "I just... don't want to share some of my thoughts with you. Not right now, anyway," she adds hastily.
"Hm," he grunts, eyeing her seriously. "You don't trust me?"

"I do!" she says, horrified at the conclusion his thoughts have arrived at. "I do trust you. You know I do. I'm just... curious about you."

A corner of his lips curls up into a smile. "I'm curious about you, too."

They look at each other in silence for a long time before the light flashes green again and he looks away. She exhales the breath she had been holding and slumps back into her seat, clutching the seat belt he had fastened around her earlier. She eyes it evilly, wondering how many women have sat in this same seat before. Well, he's a rich, handsome, smart man. Of course he would have had girlfriends in the past. He probably still has an entire host of women lining up for him. She sighs inwardly, feeling dejected. She had rotten luck in that department. And worse, she feels she's turning into the jealous girlfriend type. And she isn't even his girlfriend in this life - not yet.

"And in case you're wondering..." he says suddenly while rounding a corner. "I don't have a girlfriend."

She straightens up, feeling at once better and lighter. But she doesn't want him to think she had doubted him, so she forces back the smile that's just itching to show itself and says in as cool a voice as she can manage, "Oh."

He chuckles in amusement, noticing some of the luster return to her eyes, and raps her forehead with his knuckles. "I'm not a player either."

She scowls, rubbing her forehead. "I know that."

"Of course you do."

"I do!" she insists, the world around her suddenly filling up with color again. "A thousand years is too short a time to change someone as stubborn as you, Pyeha."

He grunts, returning his attention to the road. "Apparently, a thousand years was enough to make you cynical."

"I am not cynical!" she laughs, punching him.

He grins and grabs hold of her hand, holding it tightly. "You remind me of the Hae Soo I first met."

He smiles warmly at her. "I wondered when I would meet her again."

She blinks, trying to figure out what he means.

"You were fearless at Wookie's place. At the palace, you just seemed burned out," he explains. "I wanted to coax you back to life. For a time, I thought I was succeeding. But life didn't exactly turn out the way either of us wanted."

"Ah," she mumbles, looking away. They're really close now to the subject... she wonders if he knows... if he understands why she had chosen to make that decision. She wonders if he would ever forgive her for it.

"We're here," he says suddenly, reaching a tall building. The guard recognizes his car and waves them into the basement.

"Who are we here for anyway?" she asks, stepping out after he parks and walking over to his side. "You know I'm not dressed appropriately for this place."
He eyes her up and down and smiles. "I don't see anything wrong with what you're wearing."

She sighs. "I'll stick out like a sore thumb!"

He leans over her, "It's not like you'll be parading all over the building."

She grimaces unhappily, but makes no further objection as he takes her hand and leads her towards a set of elevators nearby.

"So what's the deal?" she asks once they're alone inside one. "Is this a family business?"

He nods. "Cousins and all. It's complicated."

"Ah," she mouths, curious about who he had meant by 'cousins'. Had he meant his brothers and half-brothers in the past life?

As though reading her mind again, he says, "You'll see."

She eyes him in surprise, wondering if he had developed the ability to read minds along with his memories. But he just smiles mysteriously and steps out of the lift, holding tightly onto her hand as he leads her past a busy hallway towards a large hall with glass windows. She eyes her surroundings in wonder, trying to ignore the many immaculately dressed people passing by.

"My friend's in this coffee shop," he informs her, eyeing her closely to see her reaction. "Are you ready?"

"For what?"

He grins but doesn't reply. Instead, he holds the door open for her and leads her towards a closed room at the back. People greet him as they pass but shoot her odd, curious looks. She tries her best to ignore them but she can feel her cheeks flaming up from all the attention.

"Hyung!" a voice suddenly calls, sounding exasperated but relieved.

Hajin freezes. She knows that voice. That deep, singsong voice... her mind goes blank when she sees him.

"You kept me waiting long enough. Do you know how many cups of coffee I've consumed waiting for you?"

"Is that why you're so irritable?" So teases, turning to a stunned Hajin.

She's staring at a reincarnation of Baek Ah. He must be. He has the same face, the same voice, the same honest eyes. Right now, he's glaring at his older brother. Or are they brothers? Did So actually mention they were brothers or just friends?

So clears his throat and closes her mouth helpfully for her, smiling at the look on her face. "This is my friend, Baek Ah."

"Baek... Ah..." she mumbles absentmindedly. He's just as tall as she remembers, but like So, his hair is short and cut in a modern style. He isn't wearing a suit, though he still looks handsome in a collared shirt. Even the smile on his face is just as she remembers... though it looks a little frozen at the moment. She realizes why a second later when she finally notices his outstretched hand. She takes it, smiling warmly up at him and feeling at ease already.

"This is Hajin," So introduces, his lip twitching from suppressed mirth as he closes the door behind
them and offers her a seat.

Baek Ah nods and flashes her a friendly smile. "It's nice to meet you, Hajin. I hope my friend has been good to you."

Hajin smiles back happily. "We've just met-"

"She's my fiance," So cuts in smoothly, grabbing a menu off the side table.

Hajin's voice dies in her throat.

"I wonder if their tea here is any good..." he mumbles to himself.

She glares at him and lands a nice, good kick on his shin under the table. He jumps up, startled.

"Your..." Baek stutters, looking just as shocked as she was feeling. "But hyung... you never mentioned... why all of a sudden...?"

"We've been seeing each other in secret for the past thousand years," So says with such a serious face on, Hajin is sure she would find him tomorrow in an asylum.

Baek Ah scoffs, looking torn between disbelief and betrayal. "And what about that girl you've been asking me to draw for months? Do you know my sketchbook is full of her face now?"

So perks up. "Really? Show me."

Baek Ah deftly plucks it away from his reach, "Not before you explain to me what's going on."

So sighs. "She's the same one, alright? I've been testing your drawing skills. Now let me see."

"A test?" Baek Ah asks blankly.

"That's right," So says, leaning over and plucking it from his numb fingers. "Now let's see here..."

Why the smooth liar, Hajin thinks indignanty. "Fiance?" she mumbles through gritted teeth, casually leaning over to him.

"Any objections?" he teases under his voice, flipping the pages.

She glares at him. "You haven't even proposed, for one."

"I already did, if you remember," he reminds.

"But- that's- but of course I want to," she says, exasperated. "That's not the point! The point is-"

"Oh look, here we are," he says, ignoring her, a small, satisfied smile on his lips. "I think she kind of does look like you."

Despite her indignation at So, Hajin finds herself peeking curiously at the drawings herself. "Oh!" she gasps, her eyes brightening as she looks at Baek Ah. "These are really beautiful, Baek Ah-
Baek Ah laughs shyly, though he's looking pleased. "Please, just call me Baek Ah. If you're really my friend's fiance, there's no need to be so formal."

"Ah. Right," she mumbles, having forgotten where she was. "Baek Ah, then. These are really good."

"Thank you," he flashes her a grin. "Now that he's mentioned it, I realize the drawings do look like you."

"That's right, they do," So agrees, returning the sketchbook. "You should have recognized her the moment she walked into the room."

"I had more pressing concerns on my mind," he says, exasperated. "I thought something had happened to you. You ought to check your messages more often. Also, it's a good thing you're here. They're holding an emergency meeting in half an hour, so we'd better get going."

"Another meeting?" So grimaces. "Whatever for? That's the fourth time this week."

"It's a big project, hyung, you know that," he replies, getting up. "We should get ready."

So looks at Hajin for a moment, as though considering his next move, then he gets up and offers her his hand. She takes it, feeling self-conscious.

"You go on ahead. I'll take care of her first," he tells Baek Ah, who nods.

"It was nice finally meeting you, Hajin-shi," he smiles, extending a hand out to her. "We should get together some time."

"I'd love that," she agrees earnestly, accepting his hand and watching him leave with a mixture of sadness and happiness. "Is Woohee here too? Are they friends? More than that?"

"Not that I'm aware of," So replies, leading her towards the elevators. "Or possibly, I've forgotten. Baek Ah hasn't shown much interest in women, as far as I know."

"Oh," she sighs, stepping into the elevator with him.

"Cheer up, you might come across her too, one of these days. If everyone's here, she's bound to be as well."

She looks expectantly up at him in surprise. "What do you mean? Who else is here?"

He eyes her wryly. "Everyone."
Breathe

Hajin takes a turn around So's office, taking note of the black leather couches, the large wooden desk beneath glass windows, the sparse decoration. There's a TV on the wall, and he had given her the office's wi-fi password earlier so she could find some way to entertain herself while he was away... but she didn't feel like delving into technology at the moment so she turns away and instead notices a set of doors leading to a terrace overlooking what should be the park below. She walks towards it, but stops by the stacked bookshelf on the wall.

Curiously, she reads the titles, wondering what kind of books he was interested in. Herbs, architecture, astronomy, travel destinations, encyclopedias, dictionaries... not a single novel. She smirks, wondering if he stored his more personal collections in his home.

At the thought of home, her mind spins and her knees go weak.

Since getting her memories back, she has been feeling an assortment of emotions. Too much, in fact, that she would have probably gone crazy if it hadn't been for So's sudden reappearance into her life. She had been all too happy to see him again - to find out he still remembered her - to think about everything else. But now that she was alone again, she was forced to let the truth of what had just happened sink in. They hadn't been just dreams. They were real. They were as real as the man who had just brought her to this place... a man who, just this morning, had been a mere phantom of her mind.

What was the point in all of it? Why was she sent back to the past? How did it happen? Why her of all people? And how is it that So remembers?

She clutches her empty abdomen, feeling a dull ache in her heart at the thought of her daughter, Seol. It felt like only yesterday she had held her in her arms and told her the same stories she had once told her father. She remembers the soft cheeks, the smooth skin, the small, pink lips, the tiny hand curled around her finger. She remembers the feel of her tiny body against her chest as she cradled and gently rocked her to sleep.

By this time, she will have been dead a thousand years.

Hajin wasn't aware she was crying until she could no longer see anything past her tears. She was on the floor too, her knees having given way to her sorrow. She grabs a pillow from one of the couches and holds it fiercely against her, fighting back the anguish that was threatening to escape. There was an empty place in her heart where they used to be - everyone she had known and loved. How did they live after she left? Had they been happy, in the end?

So had mentioned earlier that everyone was in this time with them. She had already met Baek Ah... would she meet Jung too, and Eun? Woohee, Deok... even Chaeryung and Wook? Lady Hae, Lady Oh?

And what of their daughter?

Thinking of her daughter's reincarnation makes her head ache. Would she have to get pregnant again for their daughter to be reborn into this life as well?

She scowls, remembering clearly the terrible pain of childbirth. It didn't seem fair that she would have to do it all over again so soon just to see Seol. Although... she supposed she would have to do it again anyway, if she and So were to get married.
She snorts, remembering the confident way he had announced their engagement to Baek Ah earlier. Without even consulting her. How could he drop a bomb like that without warning her in advance?

But then, she supposed she wouldn't have expected anything else from him. He was as straightforward as they came. She smiles fondly at the thought of him, but the happiness is short-lived. With a sigh, she hugs the pillow to her chest and stares blankly into space.

"Would it really be alright for us to start over in this time?" she wonders out loud.

He lived for another 25 years in Goryeo after her death... he's had that time to come to terms with his grief, whereas hers was as fresh as the memories that had just forced their way into her mind. Did he ever get to meet Seol? Did he ever find out the truth about her? Since he was not angry with her now, that could only mean two things: either he never found out or he has forgiven her.

She wasn't sure which scenario she preferred. Many times today, they had come close to discussing it... but she couldn't bring herself to mention it. Not yet. The pain, the sadness, the loss - all of it felt too raw.

At first, she thought he would hate her... she died believing he did, because of the way she left him. But instead he came after her and acted like none of it happened, or else, that none of it mattered. Not the pain, not the betrayal. All he cared about was keeping her with him. Does he still love her that much? Has she really been forgiven?

She couldn't stop the memories from resurfacing this time... of the way she so desperately tried to leave the palace, the hurt he must have felt at the sudden change in her. She remembered the deaths of all those who had mattered to her. She remembered the pain in his eyes when he told her he would never see her again. She remembered being tired and broken, waiting for days for him to come to her, until she could no longer fight back the darkness that had just been hovering around the edges of her vision.

Up until she closed her eyes, she thought of him. She thought of the way he smiled whenever he saw her; how he used to come up behind her during unexpected moments and wrap her protectively in his arms. Until she gave in to the darkness, she believed he would come see her. But she had been wrong... despite all her letters, he had stayed away.

She glances down at the pillow in her arms and fingers it. "Do you really... not hate me anymore? Have you really forgiven me?"

She doesn't try to stop them this time... she brings up her knees and leans her head against the pillow, allowing her tears to fall freely down her face.

By sunset, she had forced herself up and out to the balcony. She peers over the edge and sighs, the cold night wind brushing against her cheeks that were now caked with dried tears. She felt better, somewhat - still empty, but thankfully, she had gone numb inside from the shock of the day's events. She sniffs as she watches the twinkling lights below. She can see all kinds of people in the park - some sitting on the grass, having a good laugh, others on benches either by themselves or with a companion or two. There were couples walking hand-in-hand on the paved walkways, and groups of friends chatting idly by the lakeside.

She doesn't know exactly how long she stood there, lost in thought, when he returns. He doesn't see her at first and wonders if she left without saying anything. He pulls out his phone before remembering he hadn't been able to ask for her number earlier.

_How could you forget something like that?_ he chides himself in annoyance. He sighs and walks
over to the balcony doors to close them, wondering why they were open in the first place.

And he sees her. His heart stops, filled with relief. She's still here. She didn't leave. He smiles and takes his suit jacket off to wrap it around her small frame before enveloping her from behind to shield her from further cold.

"You would have been warmer inside," his breath is warm in her ear and sends tingles running through her body.

She turns away discreetly to wipe her face before clearing her throat and replying, "I had a lot on my mind."

He nods in understanding. "Whatever it is... do you still not want to talk to me about it?"

She fiddles with the pillow in her arms while she considers his question. Was she ready to talk about it? Would it be okay? Where should she start?

"Tell me what's on your mind," he whispers, tucking her hair gently behind her ears.

"You..." she hesitates, feeling nervous. She steels her nerves and turns around to face him. Her eyes drink in the sight of him. It was fully dark by now, the only source of light coming from the park and the streets below, the windows to the sides or above them. "Why don't you hate me?"

She can see he's surprised by the question, apparently not expecting it at all.

"What do you mean?" he asks at last, a quizzical smile on his face. "Why would I hate you?"

"I waited for you," she says in a small voice. "I waited for days. I wanted to see you so badly before..." she stops, feeling her throat tighten with emotion at the memory, "but you never came. I thought you hated me. So why, now...?"

"I never hated you," he says seriously, his eyes searching her face for clues, wondering why she was remembering all the terrible things of the past.

"So why did you make me wait so long?" she asks, gripping the pillow more tightly to stop herself from shaking. "I sent so many letters."

"It was my fault," he explains. "I thought they were Jung's. I didn't know your letters were inside."

She could feel her eyes watering again and felt wretched with herself. She blinks them back and clears her throat.

He sees the tears and says it again more forcefully, "It's my fault, Soo-yah." He cups her cheek in his hand and forces her to look at him. "I have regretted everything since then. For 25 years, it was all I could think about. I don't hate you. It's you who should be hating me."

"But I don't hate you," she wails in despair, unable to stem the flow of her tears any longer. "I've never hated you. I just wanted you to think I did so you would let me go! I had to because... oh, it's all such a mess!" She lifts the pillow to cover her face, unable to look him in the eye any longer. This is it... she would have to confess everything to him now. She felt like her insides were tying themselves into knots.

"I understand."

"No, you don't!" she wails miserably in her mind. She closes her eyes and wishes this wasn't
happening. She was nowhere near mentally nor emotionally ready for this kind of confrontation.

"Soo-yah," he says, gently trying to pry the pillow away from her grasp. "It's alright. I know. I understand."

She hesitates. "What do you know?"

"Everything. I just read your letters too late is all," he replies. "I'll say it again... it was my fault. I pushed you away. I should have spoken to you... consulted you before acting. I didn't know how much you were hurting until it was too late."

She sighs, feeling glum. So he doesn't know. That means Seol grew up away from the palace just as she'd hoped. She knows she should be happy by this realization, but somehow, knowing they never met and got to know each other makes her heart ache.

"I should have seen it coming, but I was too preoccupied with everything else," he continues with a sigh. "In my quest for everything, I ended up losing the one thing that truly mattered." There's a bitterness in his voice that finally makes her look up. He smiles a small smile. "I'd wanted to apologize for the longest time... in the end, I couldn't even do that. You were already gone."

She swallows hard, wanting to switch to a happier topic, but her mind was very unhelpfully blank.

"I had 25 years to come to terms with everything. You've had only a few hours." He wipes the tear from her cheek gently with his thumb. "If you want to take it slow... I will wait."

She takes a deep breath and looks into his eyes. "Will you tell me what I need to know to move on?"

"In time," he says softly, "I will tell you everything."

For now, that was enough. She wraps her arms around him and closes her eyes, enjoying his familiar warmth.

"So what's the deal with this pillow?" he asks dubiously, trying to pull it out from between them.

"I needed something to hug."

"And now you have me," he points out matter-of-factly, trying to force it out of the way. She takes a step backward and watches with amusement as he tosses it back into the depths of his office before turning back to her. He pulls her closer by the waist, his eyes scanning her face. "I've missed you, Soo-yah."

She manages a small smile. "It's Hajin now."

"Hajin. Haesoo. It's the same to me."

She would have argued more... but she didn't really want to. Partly because the way he says the name is too endearing and familiar. Partly because technically, she is as much Haesoo as she is Hajin. And most of all, because she was too preoccupied by the kiss she knew was coming.

The moment his lips touch hers, a shiver runs down her spine, making her inhale sharply. Her reaction pleases him - she could feel the satisfied smile on his lips. She doesn't stop. She can't. To say she's been waiting for this kiss for years is a gross understatement. She pours everything into it - her apology, her heart, her pain - hoping they reach him in a way her words never could, and he responds with an urgency of his own so that she all but loses herself in his embrace.
Finally, she breaks away and almost falls on him, feeling weak, flushed and breathless. "It's late. We should go. I should go. Home. I have work tomorrow."

He grunts unhappily. "I'll take you."
Hajin wakes with a start and immediately notices two things: her eyes are swollen and she has a splitting headache. She groans and turns over in bed, and that's when she realizes something else isn't quite right. The mattress she's on is soft, the pillow she's just buried her head under feels like heaven, and the sheets covering her tired body are cool and silky.

She sits up and squints dubiously around the dark room, trying to place her location.

The entire wall to her right is made up entirely of what looks like a work station. There's a computer on the desk beneath a large bookshelf containing books, gadgets, DVDs and a lot of other things she has trouble identifying in the gloom. On her left is a pair of sliding doors that leads to who-knows-where, and in front of her is a large flat screen TV mounted on the wall. She sees two doors, one on each side of the TV. The left door is closed, but the one on the right is open, with a bit of light streaming in from outside.

She gets up and makes her way gingerly towards it, rubbing her eyes. Water. She needs water.

"Oh!" she gasps, walking into someone on her way out of the room.

"Yah!" So exclaims, frantically holding the now half-empty glass of water away from her sopping head. "Oh, you scared me! Why didn't you turn on the lights?"

She eyes her wet clothes for a moment before frowning reproachfully up at him. "I don't even know where I am. I saw light coming in through this door and followed it. I didn't want to go stumbling around in search of a light switch!"

He gives her a patronizing look and reaches into the room. A moment later, she hears a click and the lights come on.

"This is my flat," he explains.

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" she demands defensively.

"Oh?" he leans towards her, a sly grin on his face. "Did you want me to bring you to a hotel?"

She scoffs. "Unbelievable. You know, when I said I had to go home, I meant my home," she points to her person first then to him, "not yours."

"You fell asleep in the car," he says, pronouncing each syllable carefully. "I don't exactly know where your home is, do I?"

She inhales sharply and opens her mouth to retort, but nothing comes out. Too late, she realizes he's right. Crying had completely drained her earlier, and the smooth movement of the car was enough to immediately lull her into a deep sleep. She glances up, unsure of what to say next, but then she sees the confident look on his face and it's enough to reignite her indignation.

"Then you should have woken me up!"

He smirks and pulls her in. "I didn't want to."

"Stop!" she says, holding up a hand in panic.
"I haven't done anything yet."

"I need to go home," she says flatly.

"No. You need water, and you need to eat," he forces the glass into her hands. She scowls but can't deny her stomach's call for food now that she was awake. And she had been looking for water earlier. She puts the glass to her lips and takes a sip.

Satisfied, he strides into the room and makes his way towards the sliding doors. "But first things first, let's get you out of your clothes."

She chokes, her heart rate quickening to twice its normal pace. "W-what..." she splutters in between coughs. "You said... we would take it slow!"

He stares at her for a moment before laughing. "My, my. Cynical and dirty-minded, are we?" He raps her forehead gently. "You've gotten yourself wet. Either you catch a cold unnecessarily or you change into one of my shirts. I'd be more than happy to keep you here until you get better, of course, but I was under the impression you wanted to go to work tomorrow?"

She glares at him. This was his territory and he was in complete control. And he knew it.

"I'll change," she grumbles at last in defeat.

He turns away and rummages through his closet. She eyes his clothes curiously, seeing neat piles of shirts and pants in the drawer he was looking in, more formal wear on hangers above, differently colored ties beside those, and a neat row of shoes lined at the bottom. She realizes she hasn't thought about the kind of clothes he wears and that's when she notices he's wearing a beige cashmere sweater over sweatpants. She catches herself staring dumbly at his broad back and flexing muscles and immediately shakes her head to get a grip. She drains her glass in one go, red-faced and feeling grateful he hadn't noticed her staring.

"The bathroom's over there," he instructs, turning around with a plain white shirt in his hand and relieving her of her now empty glass.

She accepts the shirt and eyes the closed door she saw earlier. She should have known it was the bathroom. Before she could take a step towards it, he pulls her back and lands a quick peck on her lips.

"I'll wait for you outside," he says with a grin, leaving her to gape after him.

She scowls at his retreating back but once he's outside, she smiles.

"Stop smiling, you idiot," she commands, unsuccessfully patting at her cheeks to get them to return to their displeased state. "You should be stern with him."

But even after putting the shirt on, she's still smiling. There's a lightness in her chest that makes her feel like she can do anything. She can't remember ever being this ridiculously happy at being forced to do things against her will. In fact, the only thing that might dampen her spirits at this point would be waking up to find this was all just a dream. That, and no food.

She switches off the lights as she leaves his bedroom, feeling self-conscious and vulnerable - feelings only reinforced when his sharp eyes immediately lock onto her the moment she enters the kitchen. She tries to ignore the fact that she has nothing underneath his shirt save her underwear. *Keep calm. It's just a loose dress. Nothing strange about wearing a loose dress in your 10th-century-possibly-soon-to-be-21st-century-lover's home.*
The thought gives her goosebumps and makes her so nervous, her breaths become measured as she makes her way towards him. She tries to keep her mind preoccupied by looking at the room around her, but she doesn't really see anything. She knows he's still watching her and it's driving her crazy.

*Control, Hajin-ah. Mind over heart, that's the way to do it.*

"I'm hungry," she declares flatly, taking a seat on the opposite side of the counter. At this point, the farther away, the better.

"Of course you are. It's almost nine in the evening," he says. "I don't know what kind of food you like, so I decided to go for the safe choice," he turns around and gestures behind him, "noodles! Everyone loves noodles."

She can't help chuckling. "Yes. I like noodles too."

"Well, that's a relief," he says brightly, depositing two bowls on the table and handing her a pair of chopsticks. "I'll bring you home after you eat."

She should have been happy or relieved to hear that, but she isn't. To her horror, she realizes she's regretting telling him she wanted to go home. To hide her discomfiture, she hastily scoops a large dollop into her mouth. Immediately, her whole face is on fire.

She gets up, choking and fanning her mouth in desperation. "H-hot! HOT!"

"What?" he asks in alarm, getting up as well and going over to her. "What on earth...?"

"Water- water," she pants, grabbing tissue off the counter and attempting to wipe off the spice from her lips. "Oh my god! I'm going to die. I'm going to die!" Her lips are tender, and she feels like her tongue is on fire. She turns around, desperately searching for something to douse the flames in her mouth, but she can hardly see through the tears in her eyes.

"Here!" he quickly hands her a glass of water and watches closely as she drains it in one go. She's still wheezing and her entire face is red when she coughs, "Was that the spiciest flavor?"

"I thought you liked spicy food," he says, confused.

She sniffs and begins dabbing at her watery eyes and nose with a new tissue. "I didn't use to mind it but..." she hesitates, shooting him a covert glance. She swallows hard and grimaces at the spicy aftertaste in her mouth, "since I developed that heart problem... eating spicy food only made the pain worse for me. I haven't really eaten anything spicy in years."

"Heart problem?" he asks blankly. "You have a heart problem?"

"No, no, not me!" she amends hastily, seeing him pale. "I meant Haesoo. Er... her body. Not mine. I'm Hajin now, remember? My body's completely healthy! Really!" she says forcefully because he was looking concerned and totally unconvinced.

"Have you had it checked?" he asks stubbornly.

"There's nothing wrong with me," she repeats, grabbing his arms and giving him her most sincere look. "I meant Haesoo's body, in the 940s. I'll prove it!" she grabs her bowl and attempts to eat more of the catastrophe, but he stops her and instead pulls her into a firm hug.

She loses her train of thought and immediately forgets about the burning pain in her mouth. For a
long time, none of them say anything.

"So... I'm really alright. There's nothing wrong with me," she says in a small voice, feeling guilty at having distressed him for no reason.

He doesn't respond, but she can still feel his rapid heartbeat where her cheek is pressed against his chest, and his body is taut and completely still against hers. The tension in him is so strong, she can practically feel it radiating from every fiber of his being. She realizes words alone were inadequate, so she straightens up and wraps her own arms tightly around him to reassure him of her presence. She rests her head in the crook of his neck and waits.

"I told you once..." he says at last, his voice quiet and barely above a whisper, "I would never let you go. I wasn't able to keep that promise."

Yes, she remembers those words. She remembers everything. "It wasn't your fault."

"It was."

"No," she insists fiercely. "It was everything. It was the nobles, it was your family, it was the palace, it was the throne. There were things you had to do. I didn't like them... but I understood them. I just couldn't do it anymore. It was all too much for me. But it wasn't your fault. I've never blamed you."

He's silent again, and as she looks up, she sees his eyes are distant... looking straight ahead at something far away, that only they could see. She forces him to look at her. "I don't blame you. Please... don't blame yourself. I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere."

His eyes refocus as he looks down at her. "If anything happens to you again... I won't be able to forgive myself."

"Nothing will happen," she says firmly. "I'm fine. Really."

He hugs her again, gently this time, and murmurs into her hair, close to her ear, "Just for tonight... stay with me."

She closes her eyes and nods, feeling his muscles relax immediately under her hands.

She doesn't remember when or how it started - maybe it was a natural reaction to finding each other again and being forced to confront most of their past demons in one day - but she finds herself softly kissing every inch of his skin within her reach, and feeling his answering kisses on her own body. She wants to be closer to him, to start fresh without having their past demons haunting them every step of the way. She wants to reassure him and be reassured. She wants to give herself up to him again, to love him without restraint. She was his person and no one else's.

As her kisses move to his lips, and as he lifts her up to lock her knees around his hips, she has one last rational thought, "Control be damned."
The next day, Hajin wakes early to find him still fast asleep, the pale morning sun illuminating the smooth skin of his broad back and shoulders. He had his face turned away from her, but she continued to watch him, taking in every detail of his appearance now that it was light enough for her to see. He no longer had his scars. She was glad of this observation, but saddened at the same time. She had liked those scars. Making love to him last night had felt slightly different because her fingers unconsciously sought them out, and found nothing.

She wondered what life had been like for him after she died? Last night, he had mentioned reading all her letters too late, and he had apologized for not being there for her when she needed him so. Knowing why he never came doesn't make the pain any easier for her to forget; it only makes her regret what happened more. To think he had missed her because of such a simple misunderstanding...

She takes a deep breath and closes her eyes to clear her mind. She had cried enough yesterday while thinking about the past. Today, she decides, she will spend the day with a smile on her face. This is a brand new beginning for them - a chance to get to know each other again free of the restrictions of palace life and etiquette. This had been one of her many wishes, and she thanks whoever is in charge for granting it.

She reaches out tentatively to feel his back, running a finger lightly over his skin. He stirs immediately at her touch and sighs. She pauses, wondering if she had woken him up... she wishes she had. She was already missing the sound of his voice.

To her delight, he rubs his eyes and turns his head around to face her. His sleepy eyes register her face and he smiles before noticing the time on the clock behind her.

"Is the clock dead or is it really still six in the morning?" he grumbles, shutting his eyes in dismay.

She chuckles and snuggles in closer to him. "It's six in the morning. I woke up and couldn't go back to sleep."

He grunts, but not in anger. "What time do you have to be at work again?"

"Half past eight," she replies, continuing her exploration of his back. "Which means it's just as well I'm up. I'll need to go back to my apartment for a fresh uniform."

"No need. I had someone bring in a new one," he says matter-of-factly. "It's in the bathroom along with some other things."

She pauses and looks at him. "When did this person come in?"

He scrunches up his face in thought. "I don't know. But you were already asleep by then."

"You let someone in while I was sleeping on your bed? Naked?"

"I brought the clothes in," he clarifies, amused. "He never set foot inside. As if I'd let anyone else see you in that state."

"Oh, ok then," she says, mollified, settling herself back down onto his back.

"What're you doing?" he asks, turning his head around to peer at her.
She sighs. "Just remembering. I miss your old scars."

He looks at her like she's crazy. "Why?"

"I thought they added to your character," she explains, biting his shoulder playfully.

"You're free to ravage me to your heart's content," he invites, a playful smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

She sniggers mischievously and plants a kiss on his shoulder. "Another time, maybe. I need to get ready for work." She makes to get off him, but he grabs hold of her and pulls her back down, wrapping her in his embrace. "A few more minutes. Stay with me."

"The last time you said that, I ended up sleeping over," she reminds.

He snorts. "You're not saying you regret it? Your responses last night told me otherwise."

"That's not what I'm saying," she says, blushing at the bluntness of his words. "I'm saying I might be late for work!"

"It's six in the morning," he scoffs indignantly. "You've got well over two hours. And I'm bringing you there, so we needn't even leave until a quarter to."

She rolls her eyes. "I need to shower. And we need to eat. I wanted to cook for you," she adds, the tone of her voice full of lighthearted endearment.

"There's nothing to eat in this place."

"You're kidding." She feels incredibly letdown by this knowledge.

"Nope. Unless you consider noodles. But they're all spicy."

"Unbelievable. How are you still alive? Do you eat nothing but fast food?" she asks incredulously.

He doesn't answer and instead wraps her even more securely under the covers. She tries to break free, but as she's so tiny, her efforts are in vain. She sighs in defeat and slumps against him, trying not to imagine the looks on everyone's faces when she arrives late for work for the first time ever with their boss in tow. Seeming completely oblivious to her internal struggle, So mumbles into her hair, "I don't cook. Baek Ah does though. We can go invade his fridge."

She tuts disapprovingly. "This won't do. I'll stock your fridge with food and force you to start eating healthy."

"Oh?" he mumbles appreciatively. "Does that mean you plan on staying?"

"No," she says, flustered. "I mean I'll visit and cook for you when I can. Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

He sighs, disappointed. "Why not just live here? It's not like we're complete strangers."

"Are you crazy? What'll our families think?"

He shrugs. "Baek Ah already thinks you're my fiance, and he believed me when I said we've been seeing each other in secret for the past thousand years."

"No one would believe that," she scoffs, rolling her eyes at him. Honestly, this man.
"It's fine," he says forcefully. "They won't care how we got together as long as we don't split." He tilts her chin up, forcing her to meet his eyes. "And I don't plan on giving you up. Never again, Soo-yah."

She can feel her skin growing hot beneath his fingertips, but she keeps her eyes on his and swallows hard, "Hajin."

A corner of his mouth lifts up in a half smile. "Force of habit."

As she gazes into his sharp eyes, her heartbeat quickens and she can feel her resolve start to weaken. Staying in this comfortable bed did sound like a good idea. She could call in sick again. Everyone would understand. Besides, he's the boss. They couldn't fire her without his consent, surely?

She takes a deep breath and makes up her mind. "I'm going to go shower."

Before he could react, she quickly rolls off the bed and ducks behind it. He groans and watches in equal parts dismay and amusement as she scans the floor for something -anything- to cover herself with.

"Where are my clothes?" she asks, peeking over the side of the bed to glare accusingly at him after having searched high and low and found nothing. She could have sworn she had folded them up last night and placed them neatly on the side table.

"In the laundry, of course," he replies nonchalantly. "Why bother covering? It's not like I've never seen you without clothes before."

She blushes and looks away, edging low and gingerly past the bed in order to reach the bathroom. All the while, he's watching her, making her feel more self-conscious than ever. "It was dark last night, and the last time you and I goofed around was over a thousand years ago, so excuse me for being a little shy," she reminds, reaching the foot of the bed. She spots the white shirt she wore last night on the sofa and happily reaches for it. Once covered, she turns back to him to say something, only to find that he had gotten up and was now leaning over the side of the bed, inches away from her face. She gasps and jerks backwards in surprise.

Her reaction makes him smile. "You know they can't fire you without my consent?"

"I-I know that," she stammers. "But I don't want to take advantage of our relationship! And I don't want it affecting my job either. It'll be like tiptoeing around jealous Court Ladies at the palace all over again!"

"Tiptoeing around what?"

She sighs and shakes her head. "They thought I was flirting with all of you, princes. Do you have any idea how much they resented me just because you guys treated me like a friend rather than a servant? I've had enough alienation from that lifetime, thank you very much."

He looks highly abashed by the information. "Sorry, I had no idea we were causing you so much trouble," he says, looking so genuinely apologetic that her resentment quickly abated.

"It's alright, it's not like I ever told anyone about it," she mumbles, embarrassed. "In fact, I shouldn't have mentioned it. It wasn't right to blame you and anyone else for my problems. Forget I said anything."

"No, I'm glad you told me," he says seriously, tucking a loose strand of hair away from her face.
"I'll be more careful from now on."

He smiles sadly at her, making her feel terrible for ruining such a perfect start to their day. And she was going to spend the day smiling, too.

Who was she kidding? Here was the man who had once called her beautiful when she was nothing but a laundry maid; who had held her sore, callused hands gently and lightly ran his fingers over her own. He'd already seen her at her worst; he stuck by her through it all. She had nothing to hide from him. Not anymore.

She hitches a playful smile back onto her face and gets on her knees to plant a small kiss on his lips. The gesture catches him off-guard, but only for a short while. She can see his initial look of surprise fading away into one of his more playful smiles.

"I'll count on you," she says, matching his mood. "And since we've just wasted precious time arguing about the past... shall we take a shower together to save time?"

"Now that I think about it... how did you get me up to your floor?" she asks curiously.

They were in the elevator with some residents who were also on their way down to work.

"It wasn't easy," he replies flatly. "I had to invoke the help of the guard to push the elevator buttons and open the doors."

She feels faint. "Do you mean to tell me..." she says, trying to keep her voice steady, "that you carried me all the way up to your floor?" she realizes she's hissing and quickly rearranges her face into a pleasant smile, nodding at the people who turned to look.

"I didn't have that many options. You were dead to the world."

She closes her eyes and groans. How many people had seen? What did they think of her?

"Not that many," he assures her, apparently reading her mind again. "Just, you know... the guard who helped, plus those businessmen lounging around in the lobby, and that elderly couple from the second floor who took the elevator with us... oh and there was a party somewhere on the fourth floor, but only the handful of teenagers coming in saw you." He takes her hand just as the elevator doors swing open, and leads her to the front desk. "Oh, the receptionist on duty last night saw you too."

She glares at him and pinches his hand, making him chuckle.

"Good morning, Mr. Wang!" the pretty lady behind the counter greets, straightening up in her seat. "A few letters arrived for you this morning."

"Thank you," he says with a polite smile, taking a pen from his pocket and proceeding to sign the papers. "Anything from my father?"

"There's an invitation here from your mother," she replies eagerly, pushing said invitation forward.

So spares it a glance. He knows what it's for; he'll have to think of some excuse to get out of it somehow. Again. He sighs inwardly.

Hajin had been lingering two steps back, glancing curiously around the lobby, but now she joins him at the counter and watches with a fond smile as he signs his name. So that's how his
handwriting looks when writing Hangul. She's about to comment when she looks up and finally
notices it - the two ladies staring at her with not-so-pleasant smiles on their faces. At one point,
their eyes actually travel downwards to where her hand is, clasped tightly in his - like they can see
through the marble counter - and their smiles tighten some more.

She narrows her eyes at the pair of them, wondering if she ought to say something. They're giving
her a once-over. She hates once-overs. Do they think he's too good for her? Had they maybe been
hoping to get him for themselves?

Just as she decides she's going to say something, So straightens up and takes the letters. He sees her
annoyed look but makes no comment. Instead, he thanks the two ladies and leads her away.

"What's with the face?" he teases, knowing full well what had made her so unhappy.

"Face? What face?" she asks tightly. "Oh yes! I have a face. It took you a thousand years, but I'm
glad you've finally noticed."

He chuckles at her indignation and decides to appease her with a quick, light kiss on her temple. "I
told before, didn't I?" he murmurs. "I'm not a player. It's you I've been waiting for."

The kiss caught her by surprise and was enough to make her forget her inner turmoil. Blushing
furiously, but feeling elated, she tries to find the right words to say. "It's not you. It's them. They
had such condescending looks on their faces! Almost like..." she sniffs, "like how Yeonhwa used to
look at me."

He snorts, unimpressed. "Yeonhwa was a bitter old hag. You needn't let her affect you so. I never
loved her," he adds, squeezing her hand gently. The effect on her is immediate. She hides her smile
by leaning on his arm.

"Good morning, Mr. Wang!" the guard by the entrance greets brightly as they approach. "Are you
feeling better, Miss?"

Hajin's smile freezes on her face. "Much better. Thank you."

"Ah, that's good, that's good," he nods pleasantly. "I know you're in a hurry, but please sign this
logbook for guests. I was told you weren't able to do so last night."

"Oh, sure," she mumbles, coming over. She glances at him and decides to thank him for the help.
"Thank you for the help."

"Eh?" he asks blankly. Then a look of understanding passes over his face and he laughs, "Oh, you
mean for last night? It's Mansoo you should be thanking. He has the evening shift. I have the day
shift for now."

"But... but then how...?" she stammers, perplexed. A realization hits her and she gapes at him.

"It's the first time Mr. Wang has brought a lady over for the night," he says pleasantly. "We were
all most shocked when we heard! But I'm glad you're feeling better, Miss. You're lucky to have
such a good man in your life." He closes the logbook and smiles knowingly.

She's staring at him in horror and only stops when So grabs her by the shoulders and steers her
outside. The story of her unconscious self being carried all the way up to So's flat had spread. It
explains the random smiles she's been getting from strangers all morning... and the tight smiles on
those receptionists.
"Do you think... the whole building knows?" she asks in a small voice.

He scratches his temple to stall for time before answering. "It's a close-knit community. We have annual parties, gatherings, events..." he gives up and sighs, "most likely."

She groans in dismay.

"Hey, it's not so bad!" he says bracingly. "At least everyone knows you now. Saves us the trouble of introducing you to everyone."

She eyes him glumly. That isn't much of a consolation.

"You'll be late for work so get in." He hastily opens the door for her. Feeling dejected, she almost crawls in.

"Give it time," he says, bending down to her eye level. "They'll forget about it after a few weeks."

She pouts but nods. "I hope so."

"I know so," he says, stroking her cheek. "Let's have breakfast first. I know a good place."

After just a mouthful of extremely spicy noodles last night and nothing else afterwards, she was feeling very incredibly hungry by now. Finally, she smiles and nods. "Breakfast sounds good."

By midday, Hajin's sleepy again. They've only had 5 customers come in all morning, and after the excitement of the last twenty-four hours, suddenly having nothing to do felt like torture. She checks her phone and sees that she has a message. Her heart skips a beat when she sees who it's from.

Pyeha: In another meeting. Zzzzz

She snorts and types in her reply, "Texting while in a meeting? That's not very professional, Pyeha."

As she gets up to go to the bathroom, there's another beep. "That text was an hour ago. Meeting's over. Are you busy or have you just been sleeping on the job?"

Shocked, she checks the time of his message and sees he's right. She tries to remember what she had been doing and remembers applying the make-up of one of her regular customers while idly chatting with her and her colleagues. "Oh, I was in the middle of something when you sent that. Sorry. Have you eaten?"

Pyeha: On my way to a lunch meeting. You? By the way, I sent some people over to your location. Tell me when they arrive, ok?

She frowns at the message. "Sent people over to my location"? She dries her hands and is about to ask him what he means when there's a rap on the bathroom door, making her jump in surprise.

"Hajin-shi? Are you in there?" It was the sales manager, Mr. Park.

"Er... yes," she replies, wondering why he would be knocking on the female's restroom. She checks herself in the mirror and opens the door to ask him what's going on, but she stops when she notices he's not alone.
"Hajin-shi, we meet again."

She gapes at him for about a minute before finally clearing her throat and stammering, "B-Baek Ah-shi. Hi! It's good to see you. Again. For the second time."

He eyes her mock-sternly, "You forgot who I was, didn't you?"

"No, of course not," she says, finding the question ironic. "You're someone I think I will remember even after a thousand years."

It's such a bold proclamation, he laughs. "What? But we only met yesterday."

"Yeeees," she says awkwardly, wondering how best to explain the whole reincarnation thing without getting into the actual details. Because she had no actual details. "But you're So's best friend. And I like you."

He looks dumbfounded for a moment before he regains his composure and narrows his eyes playfully, "I can see why hyung likes you."

"Yah... Baek Ah-yah! What are we really doing here?" It's another voice. A very familiar one, at that.

"You know what we're doing here, hyung. Stop looking at your phone and pay attention. This is Hajin-shi."

For the first time, Hajin notices someone else in the group... a small person with a playful countenance and lighthearted voice.

"Eun-nim..." she finds herself whispering his name.

Both men stare at her in wonder, but Eun is the first to recover. Suspiciously, he narrows his eyes and leans in closer to look her in the eye. "You... how is it that you know my name? Are you a spy?"

_Eun, who died such a horrible death... he's here. He's alive. And he hasn't changed one bit._ To her horror, Hajin finds herself starting to tear up. On the pretense of being shocked by his sudden advance, she turns and hastily tries to blink back her tears.

"Shh! Hyung!" Baek Ah says in panic from behind her. "That woman's So-hyung's girlfriend. Don't do anything funny or you'll never hear the end of it."

There's a sharp intake of air and then Eun says in a voice full of unsuppressed disbelief and wonder, "I didn't know he had a girlfriend! Yah, aren't we cousins? How could you hide something like this from me? I've been a good hyung to you all these years. But does aunty know? Didn't you also receive an invitation to her-"

"Shh! Hyung!" Baek Ah chides, sounding thoroughly exasperated.

_Through sheer will power, Hajin manages to suck in her tears and clear her throat. She turns back around to face them and hitches on her most charming smile. "Hi. I er... heard about you from So. My name's Hajin." She extends her hand in warm greeting._

_Eun eyes her unsurely for a moment before taking it and clearing his throat. "I'm Wang Eun, his younger cousin." He leans closer to her again. "But are you really his girlfriend? Hmm... it's just that... I was under the impression... no, I mean... I'd never heard of you before."_
"Well, really, is So-hyung the type to brag about every woman he dates?" Baek Ah scoffs.

Eun turns his cynical stare on him. "He keeps his private life very hush hush, everyone knows that. Even Yo-hyung knows nothing of anything when it comes to him. How many girlfriends has he had exactly?"

"So, Hajin-shi!" Baek Ah says in a loud voice, pulling an indignant Eun away and steering her back to the shop. "We were told business has been slow today. But wasn't it strong yesterday?"

"Oh," she says, finally realizing what So had meant by his last message. "It wasn't very strong yesterday, actually. There were a lot of people, but they were more curious than anything. Very few actually bought the new products, most went for the older ones. Is that why you're here?"

"As it so happens, yes," Baek Ah nods. "Eunnie-hyung is a natural at marketing and advertising. He has a degree too."

Hajin nods, shooting Eun an appraising look. To think someone like him, with such boundless energy, had sat in university long enough to get a degree amazes her. Even now, he was on his phone, presumably playing a game or two. She turns back to Baek Ah, "And what about you?"

He smirks. "Hyung may have the ideas... but I'm the one who makes them happen. I'm a graphic designer and photographer among other things."

She smiles, not surprised. "I thought so, judging by your drawings yesterday."

"He's a very meticulous planner," Eun mumbles distractedly, rejoining their group. "Writes everything. Notices everything."

"One of us has to be," Baek Ah points out, eyeing the phone with distaste.

Hajin knows he's this close to confiscating it and decides to step in. "Is that Pokemon Go?"

Eun looks up from his gym battle. "You play too?" There's an excitement in his face and eyes as he asks this.

She nods. "I was... well, it's a long story but... I was in a coma for a while. When I woke up, I had a hard time readjusting, so my therapist told me to try the game. It made me go out more, for sure."

"Whoa, what level are you?" he asks, looking at her with a whole new level of appreciation.

"You were in a coma? For how long? Why?" Baek Ah asks with a concerned frown. "Ah, sorry... I didn't mean to pry. Of course it's none of my business."

"No, no, it's alright. It's..." she trails off and shrugs, "I tried to save a boy from drowning about two years ago. I ended up almost drowning myself. I was in a coma for about a year."

Eun frowns. "Hmmm... you know, I always thought people gained weight while in a coma. But you don't look bad at all," he remarks, giving her an appraising look. Hajin notices he's kept his phone. "Or were you fat when you first woke up?"

"Hyung!" Baek Ah exclaims, looking positively mortified.

But Hajin isn't offended by the question. On the contrary, she finds herself laughing heartily because of it.

"What? It's an honest enough question. I didn't mean anything bad by it. Besides, I like healthy
girls. You're not offended are you, Hajin-ah?"

"You don't like girls. Period," Baek Ah says flatly.

The familiarity in Eun's address makes her smile. "No, I'm not offended. To your question... I was not fat when I woke up."

Eun shoots Baek Ah a "See?" look before nodding at Hajin. "Well, I'm glad you're feeling better. Do you know there's a new update to the game? I'll teach you. I know all the good spawning places for some uncommon Pokemon. We should go out sometime!"

"Hyung..." Baek Ah says in a stiff, low voice, his lips barely moving. "She is So-hyung's girlfriend."

"I'm not-" Eun exclaims, looking indignant, but he hesitates and turns to her, "Ask permission from hyung. It'll only be for fun. You can say it's part of your therapy! No, wait, I'm the man. I should take responsibility." He straightens up, looking determined. "I will ask hyung myself."

Baek Ah's lip is twitching from amusement when he addresses Soo next, "So-hyung told us to come here, to see what we can do. We've only got one major thing going on at the moment, so this will be good practice for us. Do-"

"- a good distraction, more like," Eun remarks.

Baek Ah ignores him, "- do you have time? We'd like to take you out to lunch to discuss a few things."

"It's my break in a few minutes, but shouldn't you be talking to the manager?" she asks, confused.

"We've already spoken to him over the phone," he explains. "We'd like to gain a different perspective on the situation before discussing further, and who better to ask than you? I'm sure hyung had you in mind when he sent us here as well." He smiles pleasantly at her. "So, how about it? I seem to recall you agreeing to meet up with me yesterday."

She sees no way around it, and anyway, having lunch with these two definitely has its appeals. "Sure. I'll need to do a few things first before we go."

"Excellent!" Eun claps, grabbing his phone from his pocket and returning to his game.

She leaves them for a few minutes to get ready. She's fixing her bun and reapplying her make-up when she remembers So's last message. She tells him she's met them and they were going out for lunch, and he replies a minute later with a thumbs up. She's in the act of shutting her bag when her phone beeps again. Checking it, she sees another message:

"I love you"

She bites her lip and has to suppress the girlish giggle bubbling up inside her. To tease him, she texts back, "I know ^_^b" and immediately shuts her bag so she isn't tempted to see his reply. After one last satisfied glance at herself, she leaves the office to find the cousins sitting side-by-side on the couches by the door. She notices with amusement that Baek Ah has his phone out by now too, looking just as engrossed as Eun.

"Yes!" Eun exclaims excitedly, jumping up and pumping a triumphant fist into the air. "I win again. That's... 5 to 1, I believe?"
Baek Ah sighs and scowls at him. "Yes, yes, I'm paying for lunch. You're really no fun, hyung. Why do I even bother playing with you? You never let me... Ah, Hajin-shi! All set?"

Hajin can't help chuckling at the pair of them. She nods and cocks her head to the door. "Shall we?"
"I think it's to do with the marketing," Hajin ventures, swirling around the contents of her shake. "It's rather weird to have an art exhibition in a cosmetic shop, is it not? The customers who came in yesterday didn't even realize we were selling Goryeo-inspired make-up until we told them."

"What, really?" Baek Ah asks, surprised.

Hajin nods. "They just wanted to see the artifacts. We've even had history students come in. Just this morning, we received requests from schools to allow their students in for a field trip. It's starting to feel like a museum, actually, rather than a store."

"So the traffic is good..." Baek Ah says slowly, "but the sales are low."

"And we don't even charge an entrance fee to the exhibit."

Eun shrugs, not looking surprised. "I told Wonnie-hyung it was a bad idea."

"Won?" Hajin asks, wondering if he meant that Won: the treacherous ninth Prince.

He nods. "Another cousin. There are a lot of us," he adds, probably mistaking her worried look for that of confusion, "Anyway. He's totally into history. He's even helped fund researches about Goryeo life. That's how he came to get the paintings and artifacts. Of course, they're not the real deal, only imitations. The real ones are being kept safe elsewhere."

"He's very good at managing restaurants and finances, but apparently, when it comes cosmetics..." Baek Ah sighs. "I wonder why So-hyung even agreed to his idea in the first place?"

Eun shrugs, popping a cherry tomato into his mouth. "Maybe he thought it was a good idea, too. They're both eccentric, they are."

"So is eccentric?" Hajin laughs at the term.

Eun flashes her a grin. "He's too serious sometimes. Everyone in the building's scared of him. Much like Yo-hyung, to be honest, except at least hyung hangs out with us sometimes. So-hyung only does when he's forced."

"No, you're not being fair," Baek Ah chides. "He's busy. He's not even the eldest, but you know uncle pushes him the hardest."

"That's what he gets for being so smart," Eun says with a 'what can you do?' shrug.

"Is that why you're always downplaying your talents?" Baek Ah asks wryly.

Eun gasps and clutches his chest dramatically, "Me? Downplay my talents? I don't know what you mean." He turns his attention back to Hajin. "I think it'll be wrong to go against the current marketing strategy so early on. Besides, today's a weekday, so sales are expected to be slow somewhat. Let's observe it for another week or two."

"Oh? Do you have an idea?" Baek Ah asks, looking impressed. "Just like that?"

Eun winks at them both. "I'll let you know. Meanwhile... who wants dessert?"

"It's on the house."
It's a new voice and all three of them turn to see who it belonged to.

"Hyung! We were just talking about you," Eun calls, happily waving him over.

Hajin finds herself gaping again for the third time that day. Two people had just walked into the restaurant... a man and a woman. And she's having mixed feelings about seeing them together. Or, indeed, seeing them at all.

"Oh? Nothing bad, I hope?" Won grins, coming over and pulling up a seat. "Gosh, I'm hungry. What're you guys having? Chaeryung-shi, there's an empty seat over there."

"Ah yes, sir," Chaeryung nods, stuffing some papers into a briefcase as she takes the empty seat beside Hajin.

Then, to Hajin's extreme discomfort, Won looks at her. "Judging by your uniform, you're an employee at the Goryeo cosmetic line."

"That's right, hyung. This is Go Hajin," Baek Ah introduces. "Hajin-shi, our cousin, Wang Won. He owns this restaurant along with others around the city."

Hajin is too stunned to speak, but if Won thinks her reaction is strange, he doesn't show it. Instead, he remarks lightly, "I see you ordered a salad. Is that why you have such good skin? Or is it because you're a user of our products?"

He's complimenting her. Out of all the brothers, Won was the one she had hated the most. And now he was complimenting her. And Chaeryung is still his assistant. Hajin feels completely wrong-footed and not sure at all how to react.

"Hyung, did you say dessert was on you?" Eun asks excitedly, already asking for a menu.

Won turns his attention away from Hajin, "Yeah, order anything you want. It's only right I treat you guys since I'm older."

"Alright!" Eun giggles. He pauses and peeks out from behind his menu to smile at Hajin. "Hajin-ah, would you like some dessert?"

"Huh? Oh... I'm actually quite full already," she says with a weak little laugh. "But you go on ahead."

He pouts at her. "Come on. Hyung is treating! There's always room for dessert. Besides, you're too thin." He leans towards her. "Shall I pick one for you?"

She forces a smile. "Oh, alright then. Nothing too heavy, though..."

He winks at her and disappears behind his menu.

Baek Ah and Won had started discussing something, which meant Chaeryung was the only one left in the group for Hajin to talk to. Hajin's feeling conflicted on all levels. She had felt devastated upon hearing of Chaeryung's death in the past, but the fact remained that Chaeryung had lied to her throughout the entirety of their so-called "friendship". She still thinks of her as a little sister... but could she really trust her again?

"So... it's Chaeryung-shi, right?" she ventures.

Chaeryung looks at her and nods. "Yes, Miss. I'm Mr. Wang's assistant."
"Ah, yes," Hajin smiles, extending a hand. "I'm Go Hajin. I work at the Goryeo make-up department."

"It's nice to meet you, Hajin-shi."

Hajin wonders what to say next. "How long have you been working under him?"

"About 2 years. But I've known him since I was a child," she replies.

"Ah. Were you schoolmates or something?"

"Oh no, nothing like that. All the sirs went to private schools. My family could never afford to send me," she replies with a little embarrassed laugh, "My father was Won-nim's chauffeur before he died."

"I... I see. I'm so sorry to hear that."

Chaeryung waves off the apology with a laugh. "There's nothing to be sorry for. He was very sick and in pain, so death was kind of a blessing for him. But after he died, Won-nim employed me right away, so I'm grateful because I can keep supporting my family."

Hajin nods thoughtfully. Their situation doesn't seem all that different from a thousand years ago. She lowers her voice conspiratorially and leans closer to her to ask, "And how is he as a boss? Is he... nice? Does he maybe force you to do things?"

Chaeryung looks shocked by the questions. "H-he's a good boss, really. He works a little too much, I think, so those of us under him need to match his pace too. But that's the reason our CEO chose him as the company treasurer. He's good with money, being an accountant. There's no one else our CEO trusts."

Hajin tries to conceal her doubt. The 9th Prince... trustworthy?

"So, Hajin-shi, what about you? How long have you been working at our cosmetic line?"

Chaeryung asks, taking a sip from the glass of water the waiter set down in front of her.

"About a year," Hajin replies. "It would have been longer but I had to quit for some personal reasons."

Chaeryung simply nods, not pressing her for further explanations. Instead she asks, "And what are your hobbies? Why make-up, of all things?"

"I know how to mix make-up from scratch," Hajin explains wistfully, remembering that time she had taught Chaeryung how to make soap in the 8th Prince's home. "Foundation, lipstick... bath soaps and all that. I went to school for a year to study how. I suppose I just like beautifying people, you know? To feel like someone's day has been made better because of me." She smiles, lost in memories. "I'd love to do your make-up sometime."

Chaeryung blushes and laughs shyly, "Ah, no... I'm not pretty enough for that..."

"Nonsense!" Hajin scoffs. "All girls are pretty. If you ever need help with anything, just call me. Okay?"

Chaeryung looks flustered by the offer, but she bows her head, a big smile on her face. "I'll remember that, Miss."
"And there's no need to call me 'Miss'. Just call me Hajin."

"I."

"Hajin-ah!" Eun calls happily from across the table. "Our desserts have arrived!" He gestures to three waiters behind him, all carrying trays loaded with cakes and pastries. Hajin's jaw drops in horror. "Quick, pick one! You too, Chaeryung-ah. I'm sure hyung means to treat you too," Eun says, ordering the waiters to unload everything onto the table and to clear their empty plates.

"Are you sure you can finish all that?" Won asks with raised eyebrows.

"Baek Ah-"

"Nope," Baek Ah says with a quick shake of the head. "I think I'll pass."

"Fine," Eun snaps, glaring at him. "Then Hajin and I can finish it."

"B-but... I said nothing heavy!" Hajin protests halfheartedly, because now that she sees how pretty and meticulously made they are up close, she wants to try all of them.

"Don't worry. Chaeryungie will help us, won't you?" Eun asks brightly.

"Ah..." she glances at Won first, as though for confirmation, but he had already turned his attention elsewhere. So instead, she nods and says, "I'll try, Eun-nim."

"See?" Eun hands Hajin a teaspoon, looking incredibly pleased and satisfied. "Just to taste? Come on, Hajin-ah, there are so many delicious-looking ones. Aren't you curious? I know you are. They say all girls like sweet things."

Hesitantly, she accepts the spoon. "Oh, alright... but I just know I'll regret it later."

Eun grins. "You only live once, after all."

As she takes a spoonful of chocolate mousse, she's finding it hard to hide the knowing smile from spreading across her face. "You only live once", he said. She had thought the same at some point in her life, too. But now that she knows better, she can't help thinking about how different and yet how familiar their current lives are compared to their lives in the past. And she can't help but remember the one person in the world who can sympathize with her in a way no one else ever could.

She retrieves her phone from her bag and checks her messages. There's only one from him, sent right after her last text about an hour ago:

"Have fun"

She runs her thumb thoughtfully over the message. She had thought all along that he would be pressing her to say the words back to him since she's never really said them out loud before... but she realizes how wrong she was and how deeply patient and considerate he's being towards her. She doesn't know what keeps holding her back from saying the words; why she feels choked whenever she thinks about them. She knows she loves him; she just can't bring herself to say it. Really, what's wrong with me? she thinks, sighing inwardly.

"Hajin-ahhhhh," Eun's drawl snaps her back to attention. "Why do you look like that? Is someone bothering you?" He gasps, straightening up. "That's it, isn't it? Don't worry, Hajin-ah, I know the
perfect guy to help! Jungie'll teach him a lesson! He's a black belt, and he's almost as good as So-
hyung! Although, I suppose asking for hyung's help would be more appropriate considering-

"No, no, no one's bothering me!" she says, hastily hitching a smile back onto her face. Did he say... Jung? "I just have a lot on my mind, that's all."

"Oh," Eun says, deflating visibly. He sticks his fork into a piece of chocolate cake and pops a large chunk into his mouth.

"But... Jung...?" she asks tentatively.

He looks up, surprised. "But you should know Jung! He's So-hyung's youngest brother. You've never heard of him?"

"Oh! Yes, I've heard of him. Of course I have. I was just making sure," she says. She tries for a nonchalant tone, but inside, her heart's beating twice as fast in her chest. Thinking of Jung just made her think of her daughter, but the Jung of this time can't possibly give her the answers she so desperately needs. And yet, how can she deny her desire to see him again too? After all, she had always thought of him as a younger brother, even though she realized a little too late that his regard of her went beyond that.

"You know So-hyung?" Won asks, eyeing her speculatively.

She looks at him and nods wordlessly, still not knowing how or where to place this present day 9th Prince.

"Oh, that's right. I didn't know until recently too," Eun says. "She's his girlfriend."

The surprise on Won's face is evident. He's so shocked, in fact, that he actually turns his body to face her directly, and his eyes travel all over her, as though assessing her value. There it is. He's about to show his true colors. He's going to say So would never date an ordinary girl like her. He's going to do everything in his power to make sure-

"I didn't even know hyung was interested in dating!" Won exclaims at last, looking her right in the eye. "Or at least I thought, like me, he just didn't have the time. So he's interested in cute girls after all." To Hajin's great surprise, Won actually laughs and claps Baek Ah's shoulder. "All this time I thought he might finally be forced to marry one of those prim and proper ladies of his mother's choosing. He couldn't have run from them forever."

"You and I both know he's shown no interest in that department, hyung," Baek Ah smirks, draining his soda. He sees Hajin's expression and immediately flushes. "Th-that is- I didn't mean- of course not you, Hajin-shi!" he says at once, looking increasingly flustered by the minute. "I meant he's not interested in the prim and proper girls- not to say you're not prim and proper- but he's always found a way to get out of such situations, saying he's not ready for mar- but I'm sure it's different with you- I mean, you are dating after-"

"Yah!" Eun frowns, grasping his shoulder. "Get a grip. You're giving me a headache. I'm sure you're confusing her too."

Hajin isn't really listening, though. She's too busy trying to sort out her confused thoughts. Is the 9th Prince of this time the complete opposite of the 9th of the past? Does he not have hidden motives anymore? Has he learned to be considerate of others, rather than of his own skin?

"What say you, Hajin-ah?" Eun's looking at her with an expectant smile.
"What?" she asks blankly.

"The party," he explains, "the one aunty is hosting this Sunday. Will you come?"

"Er... by 'aunty', do you by any chance mean...?"

"Of course," he says, looking at her quizzically. "If you want to marry our hyung, you'll have to meet his mother first."
"Bye!" Hajin gives one final wave before leaving the store. It's six in the evening and her shift just ended. Immediately, she takes her phone out to ask him where they should meet, but before she can, a new text arrives informing her of his location - at the same place he dropped her off this morning.

"Where do you want to have dinner?" her colleague, Minkyung, asks as they head out onto the streets. "There's that Chinese place you like... or that Italian place we've been wanting to try since forever... oh! What about that new burger joint? The others say they serve really good food. And the best milkshakes!"

Hajin glances up from her cellphone and awkwardly shifts her gaze. "Oh. I uh... actually have plans for tonight."

Minkyung looks genuinely taken aback by this information. "With who? Your parents?" When Hajin shakes her head, Minkyung's eyeballs threaten to pop out of their sockets. "With who, then? You never go out! You never make plans without telling me! Unless..." she elbows her playfully on the ribs, "Is it a man you're seeing? Do you finally have a boyfriend?"

"I- well, I mean- I think I've been... what I mean is, it's been so long and... we met again..." Hajin stammers, trying to get her thoughts back in order. Now that she thinks about it, how is she supposed to tell her parents about her suddenly very intimate relationship with a man she's supposedly just met? They, like everyone else in her life pre-Goryeo, probably think she's still hung up on her ex. She can't really blame them for thinking it... a few months after they broke up, she fell into a coma for a year. They can't possibly know about her 10 years spent in Goryeo. Just two days ago, she was as clueless as they were.

She sighs, blushing furiously, "Ok, fine. Yes, I have a date. Are you happy now?"

"Happy? Happy?" her friend shrieks. "Are you kidding me? Since when? Who? When do I get to meet him? We all wondered why you've been acting strange all day!"

"Nonsense," Hajin scoffs. "Strange how?"

For that question, she gets an eyeroll. "You've been checking your phone all day. You've been smiling all day. Your cheeks are rosier, your eyes are brighter than usual..." she sighs wistfully before suddenly straightening up, looking both awed and excited. "You almost fainted yesterday, too!"

It's Hajin's turn to roll her eyes. She knows her friend too well to guess where her thoughts have arrived at. "No, I am not pregnant."

"Oh." And she actually looks disappointed. "Well then, tell me... this guy you're dating... was he one of those cute guys who took you out to lunch earlier?"

"No, it's... someone else."

"Well...?" She raises her eyebrows expectantly. "Who is it?"

Hajin hesitates, not wanting her personal life so closely scrutinized by other people just yet. She and So have a pretty good relationship, but it's only been a little more than a day since they've gotten back together. She wants to spend more time with him first. Alone, preferably.
Not wanting to offend her friend, Hajin carefully chooses her words, "I promise to introduce you when we're ready. We're uh... sort of just starting out. I don't want him to freak out." She can't actually imagine So freaking out over something so mundane, but Minkyung doesn't need to know that.

"Oh, alright, I won't nag. Just tell me one thing... is he handsome?"

Hajin grins. "Yes."

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*Very handsome, indeed.*

There he is, casually leaning against his car, his brows furrowed in thought as he browses through his phone on one hand and checks something on a piece of paper in the other. His muscles look tense, and his lips are pursed in a way that suggests he's not pleased about something. In fact, he's so distracted by whatever's on his phone that he doesn't even notice her coming up to him until she wraps her arms around his waist and leans in to enjoy his warmth. He flinches in shock at first before he realizes it's her, then he lets out a *that-wasn't-funny* grunt and wraps an arm around her shoulders.

"Sorry, I'll be done in a minute," he says.

"Take your time," she mumbles. "I'm curious though... do you have to wear suits to work everyday?"

She can hear the smirk in his voice. "Only recently because we're dealing with a big potential client."

"Oh."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "I don't like them. They feel stiff and uncomfortable."

"Imagine having to wear one all day," he says wryly. He pushes her off, to her great displeasure, and unbuttons his jacket, then he pulls her back in and returns his attention to his phone.

Feeling happy, she slips her arms inside and leans on him, feeling incredibly warm and comfortable.

"You're purring," he remarks, amused.

"Am not."

"And you're squirming."

"It's called making myself comfortable."

"And you're squeezing me."

"It's a hug!"

"And you're falling asleep."

She opens her eyes and glares up at him. "Stop it. Go talk to your phone."
He chuckles and plants a lingering kiss on her forehead. "I know you're probably hungry, but it's urgent. I wouldn't be doing it if it were otherwise."

She shrugs and gets back into position. "I can wait."

He takes a deep, calming breath as he runs a frustrated hand through his hair. He can't believe it... they've less than a month to go before they sign the deal, and he learns about this only now? It'll be difficult enough to pull out at this point, but will his father even consent to it? They have been working on this deal for about a year, which means they've already invested quite a lot in it. How much will the company actually be affected by this information? Will they lose more than what they stand to gain?

He rubs his temples and sends his informant one last command: *Find out more. I don't want half-truths and possibilities. I want facts, and I want them within the week.*

He lets out one more sigh before finally turning his attention downward. He had felt her start to drift off a few minutes ago, which meant she was probably fully asleep right about now. Curious, he runs a thumb lightly over her cheek to check, but she doesn't stir.

Yep. She's completely out of it.

He smiles and wraps his arms around her small frame, finding comfort in her presence. Until he can get more information on the issue, he doesn't want to even think about it... about any of it: not the company, not his parents, not the situation, not the amount of work he'll have to do if the rumors turn out to be true. He's got an awful lot on his plate, and the strain is starting to get to him. He would much rather spend the next few hours - days, if he can help it - enjoying her company. She always knows how to make him feel better, even when she's fast asleep and using him as a makeshift furnace.

He doesn't realize how tightly he's hugging her until she straightens up with a grumble and rests her head on his shoulder instead, taking a deep breath before exhaling slowly. He wonders if he'd been smothering her without noticing and grimaces... then he realizes she's falling asleep again and leans over to peer at her face. "Hey. I'm done."

"Hmm..."

"I thought you were hungry?"

"Hmm...?"

"If you don't wake, I'll have to carry you up to my flat again."

"Hmm."

He laughs. "Yah, the people at my building will never forget about last night if I have to carry you up to my floor again, two nights in a row!"

She whimpers. "But I'm so sleepy."

"You need to eat," he says, stressing every syllable. "Are you that tired? I thought you had nothing to do at work today."

"I'm always tired after work," she mumbles, "and you're so warm and comfortable..."
He clears his throat and grabs her head, directing it towards him so she has no choice but to open her eyes. She frowns blearily up at him. "I'll take you somewhere warm," he says, amused. "And then, I'll take you home. Wherever your home is."

She sighs grumpily and finally straightens up, rubbing her eyes. "Oh, alright. Let's go."

"But first..." he pulls her back in for a proper kiss. "I missed you."

"It's only been a day," she mumbles, but she's smiling. "I missed you, too."

Sitting upright in the car, she looks out the window at the blurred lights and silhouettes of people as they speed on by. With her memories of Goryeo as vivid in her mind as the images before her eyes, it suddenly hits her how bizarre the modern world looks... almost alien. From the towering skyscrapers to the well-lit, paved streets, to the colorful boutiques, the busy cafes and restaurants... she's saddened by the amount of pollution the modern world produces everyday in the people's never ending quest for convenience, but at the same time, she can't help but feel grateful for such simple amenities as hot showers, electricity, and good toilets.

"What's so amusing?" So asks, hearing her chuckle.

"It's nothing," she replies, looking at him. "I was just thinking... I miss the fresh air and the natural beauty of Goryeo... but I'm glad we've at least managed to develop a better plumbing system. One point to modernization."

"That's random," he remarks. "I definitely don't miss all those layers of clothes, though. And the long hair."

She frowns. "I liked your long hair. I thought you were very pretty," she teases. "They should have nicknamed you The Most Beautiful King of Goryeo."

"Very funny," he says, trying but failing to look severe because the moment she starts laughing, he can't help but smile. He finally reaches their destination and pulls into a parking space. Peering into the place, he finds to his satisfaction that only a few guests are inside. "Have you been here before?"

She shakes her head, unbuckling her seat belt and stepping out. "What is it?"

"It's one of the best barbecue grill restaurants around." He takes her hand and leads her inside.

"Good evening! Oh, welcome back, young sir!" an elderly woman greets from behind the cash register. She eyes Hajin curiously for a brief moment before turning back to So. "Table for two? Private booth?"

So smiles. "You know me too well."

She gets out and escorts them to the very back of the room, barking orders at a young woman nearby, who jumps and immediately does as she's told. "I haven't seen you here in a while. I thought maybe you had forgotten us."

"Never," So replies. "I've just had my hands full these past few months. It's been hard to get away."

She looks up at him, then down at Hajin, a knowing look on her face.

"Not me," Hajin says at once, shaking her head and blushing furiously.
The woman grunts, unconvinced, and prepares the booth for them. "Your brother still comes often though, the rascal. My granddaughter could do with a little less violence in her life, but with a friend like that and my son for a father..." she shakes her head and sighs morosely. "I'm still hoping one day she'll wake up and realize she's female, and then maybe she'll actually manage to get herself a boyfriend. Hopefully, before every decent man gets taken off the market." As she says this, Hajin can't help but notice the dark look directed at her and she finds herself puffing up with indignation all over again. Another one who doesn't want to see them together, eh?

So just smiles politely and pulls a seat out for Hajin before taking the one opposite hers. "She's still young. I'm sure she'll grow out of it, eventually." He accepts the menu being handed to him and that's when he sees her red face. He raises his eyebrows in question, but she shakes her head and buries her nose in her menu.

"Yes, well," the woman sighs, turning to leave. "Hopefully before I die. Alright, I'll have Minji attend to you tonight. She's our best server. Enjoy your meal."

Once they're alone, he turns to her. "Is the heat getting to you already? They haven't even added the charcoal yet."

"Charcoal?" she asks, forgetting her indignation for a moment.

"That's why this place is so good," he explains, "they use charcoal rather than gas burners. That woman was Mrs. Park, the owner of this restaurant. She and her husband opened this place up decades ago and it hasn't changed much since, not even after he died."

"Oh," she says, eyeing her surroundings brightly. Everything does look rather old-fashioned and outdated, but not in a bad way. The place is quaint and charming, and has quite a homey feel to it. She can definitely see why he likes it here. She sees a uniformed lady position herself inconspicuously outside their booth and checks her menu again, trying to decide what kind of food she was in the mood for tonight... but then she remembers an earlier snippet of his conversation with Mrs. Park and decides to voice out what's on her mind first. "Did you send Eun over with Baek Ah for my sake? Did you want me to meet him?"

His lips curl up into a smile. "This and that. Of course, putting your mind at ease has its merits, but I also wanted his input. Eun's surprisingly very perceptive when it comes to knowing how to catch people's attention. I knew Won's marketing strategy wouldn't work when he suggested it, but I had a strange feeling about the Goryeo art and decided to go with it. I'm glad I did," he looks up at her. "I wouldn't have met you again otherwise. But now that the exhibit has done its work, it's time to do some real marketing," he continues. "And that's where Eun and Baek Ah come into play. To be honest, there's no one else better that I trust."

She smiles broadly at his words. In Goryeo, there were only two people he truly trusted: herself and Baek Ah. She's glad that at least his present-day list of trustworthy individuals has expanded to include Eun. But then again...

"I also met Won...nim," she adds, trying not to scowl at the name.

"Ah," he nods, a look of understanding on his face. "I know what you're thinking, and I know you have questions... but before I explain, I think we should order first."

With the promise of answers hanging in the air, Hajin peruses her menu with a newfound hunger. "What's their best dish?"

"They're all good, to be honest," he mumbles. "I'm always partial to the beef though."
"Okay, let's have that," she says, closing her menu and setting it aside.

"That's it?" he asks blankly.

She picks it up again. "Well, what else would you-? Oh! I think I want seafood, actually. The squid looks good." She pouts. "But it's spicy..."

"That's not a problem," he says, gesturing for the woman outside to come in. He places their initial orders, adds a few more, and finally requests that none of them be made spicy. "Please try to have everything served at once instead of individually."

"Yes, sir," she nods, taking their menus. "Standard waiting time is 10 minutes."

She bows and exits the booth, leaving them alone again. He turns to Hajin then. "Won in this time isn't that bad. It's hard to believe, and I definitely would have been suspicious of him too if I hadn't grown up with him, but it's true. He's had it tough since he was a kid."

Hajin sniffs and takes a sip of water, grumbling, "So he should... he did a lot of awful things."

He smiles at the look on her face, "He died full of regret. You made sure of it."

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat and sets her glass back down. "I just wanted him to repent is all. He was so full of himself. He didn't even bat an eyelid when Chaeryung... when... she died," she trails off, suddenly wanting very much to sink into her chair and disappear. Of all things, why did she have to bring that up now?

They lapse into an awkward silence, the topic of Chaeryung's death weighing heavily in the air between them, like a thousand layers of cloth falling down during the curtain call of a particularly tragic play.

And she hates it. She doesn't want to be awkward around him. She wants to clear the air between them once and for all. They had promised once never to lie to each other; she would make good on that promise now. Well, not now... there were still some things she couldn't tell him. Not yet.

She clears her throat and fingers her phone, turning it around on the table as a form of distraction. "So... you were saying about Won?"

He straightens up and clears his throat too. "In this time, he's the bastard son of my father's younger brother. He's the only son, actually, so his stepmother particularly hates him because he's set to inherit most of his father's fortune, leaving his sisters with considerably less than they would have gotten otherwise. His biological mother died when he was around twelve, so my uncle took him in. He's been trying to prove himself ever since. The right way," he adds, seeing her skeptical look. "He works twice as hard as everybody else and is always ready to sacrifice his time and resources to lend a helping hand."

"That doesn't seem like much of a punishment to me," she can't help sounding bitter.

"Aside from the fact that he had to start working at the age of 10 to support his sick mother," he says with a smirk. "He's lonely, too."

Hajin doubts that. "How can he be lonely? He's got family and friends and everything."

"His step-family hates him and his father doesn't care much for him either," he explains. "But they're not the reason he's lonely... it's because he deals with everyone with a sort of impersonal, professional filter on, pushing personal sentiments away like they're nothing. I think deep down, he
feels he doesn't deserve to be loved. Because of how he died in Goryeo."

Hajin flushes. "So... it's my fault?"

"Neither here nor there, I think. Like you said, he wasn't exactly a saint in his past life."

"Definitely not," she agrees wholeheartedly, making him laugh. The sound makes her feel better and she finds herself chuckling too.

"Excuse me," their server had returned with the lit charcoal, which she immediately sets under the grill in the middle of the table. She turns on the exhaust before placing their orders down onto the table along with complimentary drinks. "From the madame," she explains with a small smile, handing them each a pair of tongs before wishing them a good meal and bowing herself out.

"Can we finish all of this?" Hajin asks, eyeing the full platters doubtfully.

He smirks. "You will."

She glares at him. "Maybe once upon a time, I could have, but I'm not a teenager anymore. My metabolism isn't as good as it used to be so I need to be mindful of what I eat." She scowls.

"I didn't know you were so concerned over your looks," he remarks, putting slices of beef onto the grill to cook.

"I make people look good for a living. Does it make sense to have someone not even concerned over her own looks beautifying you?" she says, pointing her tongs at him. "No, it does not."

He shrugs dismissively. "You can be fat and still have a pretty face."

"But I don't want to be fat," she wails. "I'll have to change my entire wardrobe!"

He laughs, finding her concern adorable. "Alright, you don't have to finish all of it. I promise you, though, it's good."

"I'll eat as much as I can, but not excessively," she promises firmly.

As it turned out, the food was very good, and Hajin was shocked when they managed to actually finish it all in the end. And she wasn't very full, too. There were different stages of fullness, she decided: one is I'm-okay-full, two is I-feel-good-full, three is I-feel-like-the-food's-stuck-in-my-throat-full, fourth is Oh-my-god-I-can't-walk-full, and fifth is let's-never-do-that-again-full. And she was at stage two.

"Thank you! Come again, sooner rather than later!" Mrs. Park had said when they left, cheerfully waving them out the door.

"We'll try," So had replied, making Hajin feel happier than ever, just because he had said 'we' rather than 'I'. It's a small thing, but it spoke volumes; she loved how he was always considerate of her, even when it came to food. But the thing that truly made her night complete happened when they finally arrived outside her parents' house.

"So you live with your parents?" he asks, glancing curiously up at the dark windows.

"Er... I didn't use to. It's a long story," she replies evasively, grateful it was dark so he couldn't see her flushed face.

Her reply and tone of voice don't escape him, but he doesn't press her for answers. He knows,
eventually, she'll tell him. When she's ready. "Are they even in?" he asks instead.

"They're probably already asleep. It is pretty late," she replies. "Don't worry, I have a key."

He nods. "I should give you a key to my place too, one of these days."

She grins and they look at each other for a moment. There's something he's been wanting to say to her - ever since their conversation at dinner - but he never got around to it because she had changed the topic before he could make up his mind. But now, he's seriously debating opening the topic again. It might ruin the evening, it might not. But it's better than keeping quiet, surely?

He opens his mouth to say something, but she has other plans. Before he can register the small kiss she had left on his lips, she's already out the door, smiling down at him and wishing him a good night. Numbly, he watches as she shuts the car door and opens the gates leading up to her home. Without really meaning to, he gets out and calls out to her, making her turn around in surprise. He opens his mouth again but no words are forthcoming. Instead, he feels his chest tighten painfully from nerves. If he wanted to, he could have let it go then... but when he sees her turning her body around to face him completely, and when she smiles expectantly at him, he knows he has to do it. He can't put it off any longer. She deserves this much from him.

His mind made up, he walks up to her and pulls her into a firm hug. "I'm sorry."

"Whatever for?" she asks, confused and alarmed by the desperate tone of his voice. In an attempt at lightening the mood, she says, "Pyeha? Missing me already?"

He takes a deep, shaky breath, "I never apologized to you before... for her death. I knew it affected you badly. I should have apologized sooner, I know that, but I was too stubborn. I hurt you and I never apologized for it."

And just like that, there's a painful lump in her throat. She tries to swallow, but it remains stubbornly in place. "You did what you had to do."

"I did, and I ended up hurting you," he says. "I'm sorry, Soo-yah... I should have consulted you beforehand. I shouldn't have tried to do everything on my own. I should have spoken to you more, I should have trusted you, I-"

"It's okay," she says, gently cutting him off. She can feel her eyes welling up with tears again, but she doesn't blink them away. She takes a deep breath and lets it all out at once - those painful memories and the hurtful feelings they used to stir inside her. "I understood your reasons... and I forgive you." She says it again more firmly, "I forgive you."

He exhales the breath he'd been holding and closes his eyes, feeling weak with relief. She doesn't resent him... she understands him. She forgives him.

"Thank you," she says, allowing her tears to fall. "For saying sorry. Thank you."

She hadn't realized until that moment just how much that unspoken apology had been weighing on her all this time. She had already forgiven him before tonight, but for the first time since finding him again, she feels lighter and renewed. His apology had healed a soreness in her that she had long since forgotten.

As she kisses his cheek and wraps her arms around his neck, she imagines some of the many curtains that had been shadowing their story finally being drawn back...

One down.
The next morning, Hajin's feeling letdown. She gets two days-off from work a week - Tuesdays and Saturdays - and as it's a Tuesday, she was really looking forward to spending some quality time with So, except he just informed her that he wouldn't be free until much later in the afternoon. She counts the number of hours 'til then and pouts in dismay. Ten hours. Ten more hours until she can have him exclusively to herself. It feels like a lifetime. Sighing, she ends up rolling around in bed, pathetically going over his messages again.

"Yah!" her mother yells, bursting into her room, her hair still in curlers. "Where were you last night? And the night before that?"

Hajin flinches. "Good morning to you, too. And I thought I texted you. Didn't I text you?" she asks sheepishly.

"Oh yes, that's right! 'I'll be back soon'. That's all you said," her mother growls. "Did you not see my next texts? Who were you with? Where were you?"

"Umma," Hajin wails, desperately trying to think of a way out of the situation. "I'm 27-years-old. How am I supposed to find myself a boyfriend if I'm constantly being babied by you? I just... wanted to try going out for once. It's been almost a year since I woke up! I wanted to test the waters again, to see if I could handle it; have a few drinks and er... get to know some people!"

Her mother seems temporarily at a loss for words. "I know this is hard for you," she says at last in a calming voice, sitting on the edge of her bed. "And you know we're very proud of you for trying to save that little boy... but we do worry about you, you know? You could have done that while informing us, we wouldn't have minded! We just want to make sure you were safe."

Hajin's feeling guilty. She's considering confessing everything when her mother continues with, "Even your aunts and uncles keep asking about you! 'Does Hajin have a boyfriend yet?'; 'When is Hajin getting married?'; everyone's worried you'll end up an old maid."

She groans and buries herself under her covers.

"Yah, is this about that stupid ex-boyfriend of yours?" She prods, patting her shoulder sympathetically. "I know today is supposed to be your anniversary but it's about time you forget about that good-for-nothing. You know, there are many men out there! You're still young and beautiful, you shouldn't waste away your life waiting for someone like that. And anyway, from what I hear, he and Jihye don't have the most stable relationship. Always fighting and getting back together and then fighting again, serves them right for-"

"Umma," Hajin says, sitting upright and sighing. "I've already told you, I'm not interested in hearing about those two. And the only time I do end up thinking about him is when you mention him!"

"Well then, are you just going to lie in bed all day?" she retorts. "If you're not depressed over him, then what is it?"

Hajin doesn't know what to say. Her mother's right... if she and that jerk hadn't broken it off, today would have been their anniversary. She scowls, thinking how unfortunate that it should fall only two days after her reunion with So.

So. Pyeha. Unconsciously, she smiles again. Maybe she could spend the day looking for something
"Why are you smiling?" her mother asks suspiciously, peering closely at her face.

"Wh-what? I'm not," she quickly rearranges her expression and gets up, heading for the bathroom.

"You were!" her mother insists, following her in. "You were smiling like..." she gasps. "Omo! Are you... in love? Is that why you've been away for practically two days? How long have you been together? Have you been..." She gives her a meaningful look.

Hajin keeps her face carefully blank as she pushes her mother out the door. "I'm going to shower before going out."

"But where will you be going?" she shrieks. "Since you're not denying it, is it true? Who is he? Hajin-ah! Yah!"

Hajin shuts the door firmly on her face and locks it, biting her lip to prevent herself from laughing out loud. Pressing her ear to the door, she can hear her mother's excited footsteps retreating until she's out of the room. Well, that solves one little problem... now the bomb won't be so huge when she finally decides to drop it. A ping makes her look down to see she's got a new message from an unknown number:

**Unknown:** **Hajin-ahhhh!** I got your number from hyung! You know what this means?

Even though there's no mention of his name, she knows exactly who it's from. Amused, she saves his number and states the obvious to tease him, *"We can start texting each other now?"

Barely two seconds had passed before she receives another message, *"We can play together! He says you're free today. I'm free too! How about it?"

A day catching Pokemon. She thinks about it and shrugs. Why not? She really had no concrete plans for the day, anyway.

She finds him approximately an hour later standing beneath a tree, looking strange as he points his phone upward, apparently in hot pursuit of a flying Pokemon. Playfully, she comes up behind him and says, "It better be more worth it than a pidgey."

He jumps in surprise and spins around. "Hajin-ah!" he cries happily. "It's not a pidgey, it's better than that! Quick, get your game out, it's a-" he turns his attention back and gasps, "Omo! Where did it go? Ya! Don't tell me it despawned! Can you see it on your screen? I can't find it anywhere on mine!"

Hajin holds up her phone apologetically to show him the loading screen. "I'm sorry. Was that my fault?"

He shifts his gaze mournfully between his screen and the tree for a moment before sighing. "No, it's my fault. I wasted time trying to get a good picture of it. It was a chansey! Do you have one of those? That would have been my first ever."

She tugs at her earlobe. She's never heard of a chansey before. "No, I haven't. I suppose they're very rare."

"Very," he says. "One of my friends managed to hatch one though, from a 10km egg. I'm incubating one now. I hope it's something good and not another pincer!"
Her game finally opens and she shows him. "Okay, I'm ready."

Eagerly, he stands beside her and peers at her screen. "You're only level 12?"

"I don't really play much," she admits sheepishly. "I only played for about three weeks and stopped maybe... 2 months ago?"

"Oh. So you're not really a gamer?" he asks, his face falling.

"It's because I mostly catch rattatas and pidgeys!" she explains glumly. "And the highest level I have is a staryu at CP 300. Some Pokemon at the gyms are over 2,000! One hit and my Pokemon die instantly."

Eun nods in understanding and grabs her by the shoulders. "Don't worry, Hajin-ah. The master is here. I will teach you everything you need to know! Which eggs are you hatching now?"

"Er... are there eggs in this game?"

He looks positively scandalized. "You've gotten to level 12 without hatching a single egg? Yah, this won't do. We'll have to start from the basics."

An hour later, and Hajin thinks she's got it. They've been walking around the park, doing nothing but getting Pokestops, increasing the mileage on their eggs, and looking for Pokemon. All the while, Eun's been guiding her, giving her advice and explaining to her the functions of the different parts of the game. There were a lot of other players around, too. She could tell they were playing the same game because they kept swiping away at their phones. At one point, someone had screamed, "VULPIX!" from out of nowhere and caused absolute mayhem. Hajin had never witnessed a stampeding herd of wildebeests before, but she could have sworn that's what they looked and sounded like. Eun had grabbed her by the hand and dragged her over, and she caught her first ever vulpix after one try.

"It's so cute!" she gushes, eyeing her screen. *Sure, it's only CP 50 compared to Eun's 540, but it's better than nothing.*

"You should see its evolution!" he says, positively skipping with delight. "Set it as your buddy so he can start collecting candies. You remember how to do it?"

She nods and demonstrates. She can't help but feel proud at how much she's managed to learn in just an hour, a pride clearly reflected on Eun's face. "Yah, you learn so fast," he says admiringly.

She smiles smugly. "That's because I'm someone who learns one thing and picks up ten more! Plus, I've found myself a really good teacher."

He giggles, looking embarrassed. They're sitting side-by-side on a bench by the lake, taking a moment to rest their tired legs and feet. He glances curiously at Hajin to see her sorting out the Pokemon in her inventory, reading the descriptions out loud, her eyebrows drawn together in concentration. He doesn't understand why it was so easy for him to befriend her when he had always been so awkward around girls... he supposed it had to do with knowing she was So's girlfriend. Anyone who can handle his cousin's cold, intimidating aura must be some sort of saint.

Well, whatever it was, he was glad he chose to get to know her. She was easy to get along with and seemed genuinely interested in getting to know him too, the latter being a quality he has yet to encounter in other girls.

"Ah, I'm thirsty," he says with a yawn. "There's a cafe to the south side of the park that I think may
be a gym. Shall we go there?"

"Sure." She grabs her things and gets up to follow him.

For a time, they walk in companionable silence, broken only when a Pokemon pops up on the screen. "So, I've been curious about something..." Eun begins hesitantly after they've caught their third pidgey in a row. "But I don't know if I should ask it."

"What is it?"

"You won't tell hyung I asked?"

She's looking at him strangely, almost as if she knows what he wants to say. But she only nods and says, "I promise. What is it?"

"It's just that... hyung's so cold and serious, and you're so fun to be with. How on earth do you two even get along? To be honest, I don't see it happening." He frowns in contemplation.

Hajin's taken aback by the question, but it makes her smile. "You probably won't believe me, but your cousin's not all serious when we're together." When he looks even more skeptical, Hajin laughs. "I'm not lying! Baek Ah's a pretty fun guy too, how come he and So are best friends?"

"Ah, well," Eun shrugs. "I always thought that was because of Baek Ah's past. Hyung's been looking out for him in the company since we were younger, so naturally, they've become good friends."

"Er... Baek Ah's past?" Hajin prods tentatively.

Immediately, Eun flushes. "Y-you... you don't know? I- I assumed that you..." He shakes his head and looks determinedly ahead. "No, forget I said anything."

"You can't do that! How am I supposed to just forget something like that?" she asks, exasperated. "What happened to Baek Ah?"

When he continues to stare straight ahead at nothing in particular, she glares at him and pokes him in the ribs. He gasps and jumps in surprise before turning an accusatory glare at her. For a moment, they exchange glares, sizing each other up, and then they attack simultaneously.

"Stop, stop! Yah-haha!" Eun shrieks, trying to grab hold of both her hands while keeping one of his own free to counter-tickle.

"If you don't-" he gasps, edging his body away from her and instead bumping into a tree. In a panic, he tries to go around it, but she's surprisingly strong and keeps him in place, looking satisfied. Flushed at having been defeated so easily by a girl, he puffs up his cheeks and growls, "If you don't let me go, you're dead!"

"Come on, I don't want to have to do this either," she grunts.

"If I stop, will you let go?"

"If I let go, will you promise not to have revenge?"
Eun narrows his eyes briefly, then nods. "Deal."

"Deal."

They both stare at each other for a long time - either one willing the other to back down, neither giving in - until somewhere near them, someone clears his throat and then a familiar voice says, "What are you two doing?"

Immediately, Eun jumps as though he's been scalded and bows a greeting. "Hyung-nim!"

"You're here!" Hajin exclaims in delight, letting Eun go and running up to give So a hug instead.

He's eyeing them both suspiciously with narrowed eyes. "I was able to get some time off. So what's going on between you two?"

"I just asked him a question," Hajin shrugs innocently. "He wouldn't give me an answer, so I was trying to force it out of him."

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Eun inflating, ready to voice out a retort, but he seems to think better of it and deflates again. She turns her attention away from him to see So bending over her, lowering his voice, "If it were any other man, he'd be dead by now."

"You don't trust me?" she asks indignantly.

"I don't trust other men," he says simply. "What did you want to know?"

She lowers her own voice and looks at him seriously. "Baek Ah."

She doesn't need to explain what she means; he understands and nods. "I'll tell you later. When we're alone." As he says this, he cracks a mischievous smile, causing her heart to flutter in anticipation and her cheeks to grow hot.

"I have about an hour," he says out loud, straightening up and checking his watch. "Were you two going to do anything else other than... wrestle?"

"Drinks!" Eun says at once, remembering. He clears his throat, looking suddenly self-conscious. "I was thirsty. There's a cafe somewhere over there."

So eyes the direction he's pointing at before exchanging glances with him. Hajin finds this behavior strange, but before she can ask what's going on, So nods and entwines his fingers with hers. "Baek Ah says you've got an idea about the cosmetics," he says to Eun as they begin to walk.

Immediately, there's a smug smile on Eun's face. "I have a few tricks up my sleeve. I'll let you know when I have more than just an idea. It'll impress even you, hyung."

So smirks. "I'm sure it will."

"How'd you know where we'd be?" Hajin asks curiously, wondering if she'd mentioned it in her texts earlier.

"Eunnie told me."

She glances at Eun in surprise. He narrows his eyes at her first, clearly still sour over the outcome of their brief fight, but then he shrugs and cocks his head in So's direction as though that ought to explain everything. She glances at So instead to see him on his phone again.
"I thought you said you were free."

She makes to snatch it away, but he's got quicker reflexes. Holding it well beyond her reach, he grins, "Free to be here, yes, but I still have a lot of things to take care of. Don't be greedy."

She rolls her eyes and sighs. "But you'll be free later, right?"

"I made sure of it," he replies, to her satisfaction. She happily hugs his arm as they continue to walk.

"Hajin-ah! A squirtle!" Eun exclaims, already attempting to catch his.

"What!" she says, letting go of So to check her phone. Sure enough, there's the squirtle. She clicks on it and begins trying to catch it.

"You're choosing a turtle over me?" So asks, peering over her shoulder.

She rolls her eyes. "It's a squirtle?" she corrects, pointing at the name.

"It looks like a turtle."

"Because it's a turtle Pokemon."

"So it's a turtle."

"Ugh," she says, exasperated. He chuckles and grabs both her arm and Eun's as they cross the road to the other side.

"Needs improvement," Eun grumbles, scowling at his phone. "What about you?"

"The best!" she says happily, marking it as her favorite. "But it's only got 200 something combat points."

"That's alright, you've got a lot of stardust anyway. Just don't level him up until you evolve him. The cafe's over here," he says, gesturing to the one on their left. "They make the best frappes for miles around! You've been here before, right, hyung?"

"I think so."

They follow Eun and wait for him to open the door, but before he could, it opens from the inside and someone steps out. Hajin inhales sharply and grabs So's arm. An image has just flashed through her mind... this has happened to her many times before - in Goryeo: she had seen flashes of So doing things that hadn't happened yet... of him killing Eun at the latter's request, to him becoming the 4th King, Gwangjong.

This time, the vision isn't about him... it's about the two people who were currently looking at each other. There's Eun, smiling bashfully in a tux, and her...

"Deok," Hajin breathes. Soon Deok in white, with flowers in her hair. The image lasts only a few seconds, and Hajin has to shake her head to make sure she's still in the present. The next time she looks, Eun is back in his polo and shorts, and Deok's in her gym outfit.

So touches the hand squeezing his arm and looks down at her, trying to gauge her reaction. She's looking both astonished and shaken... but also somewhat confused. He wonders what's on her mind.
Deok's eyes travel all over the group and she greets them formally first before turning around and calling to someone inside. "Jung-ah! Your brother and cousin are here." She turns back to the group and eyes Hajin, but Hajin's too stunned to introduce herself. Deok... and did she just say...

"Hyung!"

Jung.
As Jung steps out the door, Hajin freezes. Vastly different from the vision she just saw of Eun and Deok, a new set of images are now flashing through her mind - memories of her final days and moments in Goryeo. She can't help it; he had been her one constant companion in those days; a solid, understanding presence in her darkest moments.

Seeing him again so clearly now is making her remember all their past conversations; she remembers his promises of taking her out to the ocean and the deserts once she was feeling better; the stories he told to try and make her laugh; his empty threats to force her to eat something. She remembers how they both smiled at the tiny, warm body sleeping soundly on her chest, while he fingered the equally tiny hands and ears; she remembers how he took care of her day and night when she became too weak to do anything herself. She owed her baby's life to him, something she knows she can never repay in full.

But this Jung won't even have such memories. He won't even know who she is.

Hajin's chest hurts from loneliness and grief. She's not sure she can handle talking to Jung just yet, not when she sees him as a valued friend and he sees her as a stranger... it would be like seeing So again that day at the museum, only to have him look at her, but not see her.

Feeling inexplicably anxious, she looks up at So. She can feel him standing beside her, she can feel his hand on hers and his own arm in her firm grip... but she needs more than just his physical presence - she feels like all the air had been sucked out of her lungs, and the world around her was spinning.

As though anticipating her need, he looks down and their eyes meet. And it's all she needs to feel anchored again.

Her breathing easing back to normal, she closes her eyes and tries to compose herself, grateful to him for being here because she can't imagine what seeing Jung again would have been like without him. *You're not alone... He's here. He's here.*

She wonders what sort of relationship both brothers have at this time. Is it still hostile, the way it used to be in Songak? She had always thought it a pity that they never got along in Goryeo. They were so much alike, she just knew they would have gotten along swimmingly if only circumstances had allowed them to get to know each other better.

She decides that if their relationship is as busted as it had been a millennia ago, she would do her best to mend it. With this new resolve giving her strength, she opens her eyes to look at Jung, forcing the memories of their past friendship to the back of her mind. She sees that he's wearing a similar outfit to Deok's, and a huge grin on his face. "And hyung! You're here too!" he adds pleasantly, spotting Eun.

For the first time, Hajin notices Eun's expression. His face is red and he's looking anywhere but at Deok, and at Jung's call, he forces a laugh. "Jung-ah! It's been a while. What're you doing here?"

"We always come here after training," Jung replies, nodding at Deok's direction. He looks at So with a determined grin. "I learned a new move today, hyung! I'll make sure to beat you next time we spar."

"Won't be for a while," So says, smirking at Jung's crestfallen expression. "You know we're busy.
Besides, I haven't trained in ages. At this rate, you'll beat me for sure."

"That's what you said last time," Jung grumbles sourly. "You still beat me anyway. Ah, really, it's not fair. I train everyday, but you only do it when you're bored!"

"I started younger."

Hajin's listening to this exchange with wide-eyed fascination. They're actually getting along. So's teasing Jung. Jung looks up to him. It's enough to finally calm her frantic heart.

Jung grumbles, "I wish mother and father had let me start earlier too. Instead, they made me have piano lessons, even after I begged for them to send me to your school." He grimaces with distaste before motioning for them to get into the cafe. "Let's get in, it's so hot out here. Deok-ah, are you really leaving?"

"Yeah, I need to go. I promised grandmother I'd help around in the restaurant today," she replies with a careless shrug. "It's the only way she'll allow me to go on that trip. I'll see you tomorrow, same time?"

"The usual," Jung nods, giving her a fist bump.

She nods to Eun and So in turn and gives Hajin one last curious look before departing. Hajin monitors Eun's reaction closely... and now she's sure of it. As they head into the cafe, So holds her back, a concerned frown on his face. "Are you alright? We don't have to go in if you're not ready."

"No, it's fine," she says with a slight shake of the head and a small, reassuring smile. "I just suddenly remembered a lot of things, that's all."

"You're sure?"

"You and Jung don't fight anymore?" she asks, both to switch topics and because her curiosity was getting the better of her.

He smirks. "If you had been listening, you'd know we do fight. A lot. In fact, every chance he gets."

"But friendly spars. Not like when... you know," she gives him a look, which he understands.

"Unlike in Songak, we actually grew up together here," he explains. "So no. We're not estranged." He taps her under the chin. "You didn't think we hated each other until we died, did you?"

"You didn't?" she asks, her voice so obviously hopeful that he smirks.

"No."

She can feel herself tearing up out of happiness. So they managed to set aside their differences in the end... then, does that mean... So and Seol... did they actually get to meet after all? Even if he doesn't know she's his, won't he at least know what she was like? Could he give her the answers she needs to hear? How would she broach the subject? In fact... stinking meatballs! How is she ever going to tell him the truth now?

"You're not alright," So decides, frowning at her tearful expression. "Let's go somewhere else."

"No!" she says, mortified. She forces back her tears and glares at him accusingly. "Why didn't you tell me Mrs. Park's granddaughter was Deok?"
He's taken aback by the sudden change of topic, but seeing as she's being feisty again, he leads her away from the heat into the relative coolness of the cafe. "I didn't want to overwhelm you. You seem overwhelmed enough as it is," he replies easily.

"He likes her!"

"Jung?" he eyes his brother's seated form skeptically. "Jung treats her like one of the boys."

"Not Jung," she says impatiently. "Eun!"

The surprise on his face is evident. "That, I didn't know."

"It's so obvious," she insists, feeling excited in spite of herself. "He became quiet and red all over. He wouldn't even look her in the eye."

"Well, that's a coincidence," he remarks. "Maybe their fates are just as entwined as ours."

Hajin wants to tell him more, but she hesitates. Should she tell him of the vision she just saw? She wants to. She should. But maybe not now.

"It's Hajin, isn't it?" Jung's voice makes her jump. She realizes they had reached the table he and Eun were at and that he was offering her his outstretched hand in greeting. Tentatively, she shakes it. "I've heard about you from hyung. I can't believe he only told me yesterday." As he says this, he eyes his brother evilly.

"I've... heard about you too," she manages, taking a seat and eyeing him curiously.

"I wondered when I would meet you," he says brightly, retaking his seat beside Eun, who was still looking rather lost and out-of-it. "I've always been curious what sort of girls my brother's interested in." He flashes her a wide grin. "I suppose now that I see you, I know. You look like an innocent type of girl."

So snorts in laughter, but attempts to pass it off as a cough. Hajin isn't fooled. She smiles sweetly at Jung and aims a kick at So's shin, except she's finding it difficult to do so because of the way the chairs' legs are designed - that and the fact that her body is turned at a 90 degree angle away from him. So takes this chance to put a restraining hand on her knee.

"So, are you still a student?" she asks Jung instead.

He scowls. "No, thank goodness. I graduated last year. Physical Therapy," he supplies before she can ask, then he smiles at the shocked look on her face. "It's a long story."

"He wanted to spite our mother by choosing something as far away from business as possible," So blandly, asking for a menu.

This revelation is an even bigger shock to Hajin. To spite his mother? Jung?

"That's not fair, hyung!" he chides, choking on his drink. "I also want to help people. You won't believe how many young children are in need of physical therapy, and there aren't enough therapists around."

Hajin finds herself smiling at this version of Jung. He had always been willing to help her and people he loved in the past... Now, a thousand years later, he's still helping people and they're no longer limited to people he personally knows. He seems more laid back and easy-mannered too, like the young prince she had first gotten to know rather than the battle-hardened prince he became
years later.

"So do you have a clinic of some sort?" she asks curiously.

"No, I volunteer at the children's shelter thrice a week. The hospital too, sometimes," he replies easily. "It helps me get my mind off things. I've been telling hyung to come, but he always says he's too busy." He glances mournfully at So, and Hajin mimics him.

"What? I am busy!" So objects, burying his nose in the menu he's managed to procure.

Jung leans over the table to Hajin. "I told all the kids he's a master fighter, and they've been hankering to meet him. Maybe you can convince him to come? I've heard you're good at applying make-up. We have some young girls over there, too. You should come teach them a few things next time you're free!"

"I'd love to," Hajin exclaims enthusiastically.

"Alright!" Jung cheers, giving her a fist bump. "Eunnie-hyung, the kids miss you too! You promised to give them new toys last time you were there."

Eun looks up at the mention of his name, "Say what?"

"The kids. At the shelter...?" Jung prods, looking confused at Eun's stupor.

"Kids... shel- oh!" Eun exclaims, straightening up. "Yes. Annoying little things. Always pulling at my clothes and calling for me and-

"So you'll come?" Jung interrupts.

Eun stutters to a halt. "Come? Where?"

"To the shelter!" Jung expostulates, looking this close to smacking his cousin. He turns and grabs Eun by the shoulders, then he stares into his eyes. "Something's up. You're distracted and I bet I know why..."

Eun couldn't have turned any redder. "Distracted? Me? Yah! What are you talking about? It's the heat of the sun, you know how easily I get-"

"Did you lose another ranked DOTA match?" Jung asks seriously.

Eun blinks uncertainly for a few moments before finally letting out a relieved laugh, "Oh- ohhhh! That's right." Realizing laughing was a strange reaction, he makes his voice go deeper and assumes a dignified expression. "The people on my team were total noobs! You should have played with me then!"

Jung shakes his head with a sigh. "I couldn't, my mother wanted me to have dinner with her, and you know what she's like."

"Are you thirsty?" So asks Hajin, ignoring the other two.

She looks at him. "No, not really. I'm alright. How much longer before you have to leave?"

He checks his watch. "I have to make it back to the office by one, so we've still got some time. Would you like to have lunch first? We could leave these two behind."

"Where are you going?" Jung asks, immediately turning to them. "I have nothing to do for the rest
of the day. Let's go together!"

"Oh, me too, I'm free!" Eun states, still red in the face but looking relieved that Jung had stopped badgering him. "Hajin-ah, you promised to spend the day with me."

So rolls his eyes. "What is this, an extended relationship?"

As though just realizing they were being inappropriate, both Jung and Eun exchange sheepish glances and begin poking randomly at the droplets of water on the table.

"Yeah, we can have lunch together," Hajin says easily, looking pointedly at So. "All of us."

He opens his mouth to retort, but the other two cut him off.

"I know a good place nearby!" Eun offers enthusiastically. "It's got a Pokestop too and a lot of magnemites."

"That's right, Noona!" Jung says. "We can get to know each other more."

"Noona?" So asks blankly.

"Naturally, hyung. If she's your girlfriend, then that makes her my sister. You're older than me, right?" he asks Hajin, who nods. With a satisfied shrug, he gets up and grabs his things. "We'd better get going if you need to be back at the office by one."

Eun also jumps up, whipping his phone out and ordering Jung to do the same. "Let's take the gym here first before we leave. It's a Level 8. Piece of cake! Hajin's also part of Team Instinct, you know? It's fate!"

"Whoa, you play too?" Jung asks, bright-eyed with interest.

"We'll go on ahead. You guys catch up," So says swiftly, pushing Hajin firmly towards the door.

"Wait! Hyung! It'll only take 2 minutes!" Eun protests, but they're already outside.

Once they're alone, Hajin nudges him with her elbow. "You ought to be nicer to them."

"Trust me," he says wryly. "Eun said level 8, that means the 2 of them against 8 opponents. After the gym, they'll be looking for Pokestops to replenish their supplies and catching whatever Pokemon pop up. What they mean by two minutes is actually 20."

She eyes him suspiciously. "I thought you didn't play?"

"I don't," he says. "But that doesn't mean I don't take notice."

She can't help but chuckle. For him to know the mechanics of the game and the habits of Eun and Jung this well, he would have had to spend some time in their company prior to today - one might even argue considerable time. At first, she had felt apprehensive, wondering if he was still as distant towards other people as he was in the past... but now, she's sure he isn't, despite what Eun had said to her the other day. She's sure So spends as much quality time with his family as he can, despite his busy schedule, and he makes sure to spend that time getting to know them, studying their behavior. He probably knows all his brothers and cousins from the inside out.

They walk in companionable silence. Hajin's not sure where he's taking her, but she just follows along. The long boulevard they're walking on is lined with shops, mostly boutiques, but with the occasional pastry and souvenir shop in between, or two. His phone suddenly rings and he excuses
himself before walking a little ways away to answer.

She watches him for a moment, studying his sharp profile and features. Seeing him in this light, with the shadows of the leaves overhead covering him, interspersed here and there by a shower of mid-afternoon sun, it's impossible to distinguish him from the Wang So she had known and loved centuries ago. She can almost see his dark robes lined with golden embroidery, and the topknot holding his hair in place. And of course, his scar. It would have been covered by make-up, but she knew it by heart; she could trace it on him even now, when there was nothing to trace on his unblemished skin.

He tugs on his earlobe, making her smile, remembering another pair of smaller ears that looked like that. She turns away and decides to focus her attention elsewhere, not wanting to drown in any more depressing memories today... but it seems she's not meant to forget. Her heart drops as she takes in the display of baby clothes behind the glass window they had stopped in front of. Her eyes automatically travel all over the little onesies propped on stands, to the little socks and shoes lined below, to the hats and other accessories hanging on either side. She closes her eyes in dismay, trying to remove the image of her little girl in those clothes from her mind's eye. She doesn't need any more visual reminders of the daughter she already dreams about every night without fail. She was already considering carrying a pillow around to hug whenever she felt like hugging a small body - the fear of So asking awkward questions about it being the only reason she's managed to desist this long.

She shakes her head and turns resolutely around, wanting to focus her attention on that fat cat she had seen earlier sprawled out onto the pavement, but she bumps into So instead. He catches her and holds her steady, a quizzical look on his face. Seeing his face after just imagining their daughter's makes her blush uncomfortably, feeling all sorts of strange emotions bubbling up inside her. She can hardly trust herself to speak. The only word her grieving mind can register right now was "baby" and lord knows she was in no mood to discuss anything remotely related to the topic.

"Are you sure you're alright?" he asks. "You've been looking pale since seeing Jung. Do you want me to bring you home? I'd feel better about leaving you if I knew you were in a safe place."

She shakes her head resolutely. No. She's not going to go home and mope around all day, if she can help it, and not just because her mother might think something's up... So many things have happened in the last three days that she still finds herself reeling from the shock of it all. There's only one thing she does know; one thing she's been certain of from the start: him. Her need to be with him, to make up for lost time. Maybe it was the effect of dying while longing for him, or the act of vainly waiting for him to come see her for months after she left the palace, imagining him bursting through the doors and wrapping his arms around her the way he always did when she needed him, never mind if he found out about the baby. She had cried herself to sleep too many nights to count. She had been so tired towards the end.

She blinks and determinedly pushes any thoughts pertaining to "baby" out of her mind. "I'm fine," she says as firmly as she can. She grabs his arm and steers him away from the shop lest he gets any strange ideas and proceeds to march him down the street.

"NOONAAAAAAAA!"

She whips around in surprise to see Jung sprinting after them, with Eun panting in his wake. She smiles at the sight and squeezes So's arm. "I'll spend the day with them while I wait for you."

He sighs in defeat. "If you feel poorly at all later, send me a message, and I'll come pick you up."

"I'll be fine," she reassures him, giving him a little kiss on the cheek.
Jung's eyeing So in amazement. "I don't think I've ever seen you blush before."

"Tell anyone and you're dead."

"The... restaurant's..." Eun gasps the moment he's close enough. He bends over, wheezing and trying to catch his breath. "I am... so completely out of shape. The restaurant... is..." he points in the direction they had just come from, "two blocks that way."
"Jung-ah," Eun calls as he takes a seat beside him on the grass by the lake. It's fully dark by now and the lights around the park flicker to life around them as he glances surreptitiously behind him to make sure Hajin's nowhere near. He spots her ordering a drink a little ways away on the main road and turns back to Jung. "What's your mother's party on Sunday for?"

Jung pops open his soda can and takes a swig before replying with a shrug, "I don't know. She always has parties."

"Yeah but... about Hajin," Eun says with a little jerk of the head in her direction. "Does she know?"

Jung clears his throat, looking uncomfortable. "Considering I only found out about Hajin yesterday... I doubt anyone else knows but us."

"I invited Hajin to come."

Jung chokes on his soda. "Are you out of your mind?"

"I think it's only fair she knows what's going on! What kind of family..." Eun falters at the sudden sour look on Jung's face. "Well, your mother can be a bit... overwhelming at times."

"Understatement of the year," Jung grumbles with a sigh. "But this is hyung we're talking about, after all. You know he doesn't do anything unless he's 100% committed. I don't think this is just some casual fling he has. I think he genuinely likes her."

Eun nods agreement, looking thoughtful. "He even introduced her to us. Sort of. He introduced her to Baek Ah, who introduced her to me, but that's the same thing."

"No it's not," Jung chuckles.

"And anyway," Eun continues in a louder voice, "he makes time for her. He didn't even make time for my birthday party last year."

Jung rolls his eyes. "You threw a Star Wars themed party and told him to come dressed as Darth Vader. Of course he wouldn't show up! It's only because it's you that even I went. Do you know how hard it was to look for a Wookiee costume? And why did you make me the Wookiee anyway? Mu-hyung's naturally bigger and hairier!"

"Aish, this guy," Eun tuts, "Yah! Just be grateful I didn't make you Jabba the Hutt!"

"There's a jigglypuff!"

Hearing her voice makes both men jump out of their skins in shock, but Hajin doesn't seem to have heard their conversation. She's holding a drink in one hand, her straw caught in between her teeth, and her phone in the other hand. "Aish!" she growls in frustration, stomping her foot. "I've wasted 10 Pokeballs on this thing already! Why does it keep jumping?"

Immediately Eun and Jung drop their conversation and get up to peer over her shoulder.

"Here, let me," Jung offers, holding out his hand. Hajin eagerly hands her phone over and watches as he twirls the ball around and lets it fly, expertly catching the jigglypuff in the middle of the tiniest circle. He smiles smugly and returns her phone.
"Excellent curve shot!" Eun says with approval.

"Whoa," Hajin says, clapping her drink in amazement. "Thank you, Jung-ah. I don't think I'll ever get the hang of this curveball business. I've already wasted about 30 balls trying to perfect it. On a bunch of weedles."

"Of course you will, don't worry!" Jung says bracingly, holding up a fist. "Fighting!"

Hajin blinks and smiles, feeling ridiculously happy at hearing him say that word again. She hasn't heard him say it in the longest time. "Fighting!" she replies, holding up the fist clutching her phone.

"Fighting?"

This time, all three of them whip around to see So approaching.

"Oh! You got here quick," Hajin remarks, checking her watch. "Five minutes!"

"The road was relatively free. And it's been fifteen minutes," he corrects, rapping her forehead with his knuckles. "You probably got my message really late."

"Ah!" she gasps then proceeds to rub the spot resentfully. "Well, how was I supposed to know that?"

He grins and turns to his brother. "Jung-ah, mother wants you to spend dinner with her again tonight. Says she's lonely."

Jung groans inwardly. "She's always lonely. Why me? Why doesn't she ever ask you? Or Yo-hyung?"

"You're the youngest," So shrugs. "And I told her I was busy."

"You're always busy, though," Jung mumbles. He sighs in defeat and says, "Fine. I'll go. Is she at home?"

"For now, but she'll probably want to eat out. You know how she is."

"Aigoo, that means I'll have to shower and dress up," Jung rubs his face and exhales forcefully. "If she was only going to be this lonely, she shouldn't have filed for that divorce. Or maybe she should think about getting herself a boyfriend. Father moved on quick enough."

Surprised by this unexpected piece of information, Hajin glances up at So. Their parents are divorced?

"Yah, don't start," So says with a grimace. "I've already got a headache coming on."

Jung pouts unhappily and checks his phone. "She wants me to fetch her. Ah, really, I'm going crazy."

"Jung-ah, you must be good to your mother," Eun says seriously, but Hajin can see his lip twitching. "You know she's been taking care of you since you were a baby! Don't be ungrateful just because she wants to spend some time with you. One day, when she's gone, you're gonna miss her neediness! You'll think, 'Why didn't I do this for her that time?', 'I should have taken her out more', 'I should have-'."

"Alright, alright, point taken," Jung eyes him evilly and grabs him by the shoulders. "You're free
too, right, hyung?"

"What? Me?" Eun asks blankly.

"Yes, you're right! I was thinking the same thing!" Jung says, theatrically patting Eun's face. "We should totally have dinner together."

"Dinner... tog- YAH! What are you saying? I have plans! I need to get home! I was going to exact my revenge on those noobs!" Eun exclaims, trying to free himself from Jung's grip. "I am not free! I am totally not free tonight!"

"Hyung," Jung says seriously. "You need to be good to your cousins. One day, I might get into an accident and die, and you'll think, 'Why didn't I eat with him that one time?', 'How could I have chosen DOTA over my precious youngest cousin?', 'I should have-' "

"YAH! You can't do this to me!" Eun yells and makes to turn around and leave, but Jung's obviously stronger and easily wraps an arm around him, keeping him in place.

"Hyung, noona, we'll be going," he says, smiling smugly. "Noona-yah, keep in touch, okay?"

Hajin smiles and nods. "I will. Enjoy your dinner."
He waves and turns, dragging a furiously struggling Eun along with him.

"Hajin-ah! Helpppp-p-p-p!" Eun wails, flailing an arm that managed to escape.

"You keep in touch too!" she calls after him, "Thanks for the lessons!"

"You mean the Pokemon lessons?" So asks, amused.
She nods. "Yeah. They were really helpful. He really knows his stuff!"

So snorts dismissively and hooks his finger under her chin to make her face him. "How's your forehead?"

Thus reminded of her injury, Hajin glares daggers at him and rubs her fist once more over the spot. "You know, it hurts when you do that. And not just physically," she snaps, lips pursed in a very displeased fashion. "I feel like you're belittling me. I feel like a little kid rather than your-"

Not waiting for her to finish, he leans over and presses his lips to her forehead, right over the spot she'd indicated. She's so surprised, her mind goes blank and her words die on their way out of her mouth. He tilts her chin up to face him and smiles. "I understand. I won't do it again."

She blinks multiple times and turns away, feeling disoriented, the feel of his warm lips lingering tantalizingly on her forehead. "That's right, don't do it... again," she snaps halfheartedly. "I'm supposed to be angry with you."

"But I don't want you angry with me," he says, hooking an arm around her waist and tugging her closer. He pecks her forehead again, making her blush an even deeper shade of red. "Better?"

"Stop it!" she says, trying her best to sound stern. "I'm trying to make a point here!"

"Point already taken," he says solemnly. "Taken, drilled and nailed. Push it any harder and I'll bleed to death."

"I don't like metaphors."
"I don't want to fight," he murmurs, eyeing her lips.

Involuntarily, her own eyes mimic his so that she suddenly finds herself staring back at him, indignation forgotten to be replaced solely by desire. "Promise not to do it again," she whispers at last.

"I promise," he whispers back, tracing his thumb lightly over her lower lip.

She swallows hard and pulls up her drink. "Fresh watermelon shake. Thirsty?"

He purses his lips in disbelief and takes it, but he doesn't drink. Instead, he nuzzles her nose and cheek softly, running his lips ever so lightly over her skin until they find what they're looking for. She holds tightly onto his jacket and closes her eyes, feeling gooseflesh ripple across her body at the contact. His kiss is tender and affectionate, and so light, she finds herself holding her breath so as not to shatter it.

"My mama says kissing in public is rude."

Hajin shrieks and pulls away to find a little girl frowning up at the pair of them. She's out of breath and her entire body's charged, leaving her mind completely blank and incapable of dealing with little people.

"No one told you to come waltzing into the dark," So says in a crisp, patronizing tone. "Now turn around and go away. Your mother should have told you it's rude to disturb adults when they're talking."

"You were kissing."

"Do you have proof?"

"What's that?"

"I rest my case." He grabs her by the shoulders and spins her around, giving her a nudge in the right direction. Confused, the little girl gives them one last baffled look before complying. He turns back to Hajin, only to find that she had retaken her drink and was now trying to douse her inner flames with it.

"Fresh watermelon shake. Thirsty?" she coughs, taking a deep breath and offering the cup back to him.

He sighs, feeling incredibly vexed, and takes it from her. "So, what are you in the mood for tonight?"

She coughs again and sniffs. "You have a headache, you said?"

"Work," he grumbles by way of explanation, putting the straw to his lips.

"Then let's go to the supermarket," she says, smiling impishly up at him. "I'll cook something for you."

He stops sipping for a moment to regard her, trying to gauge her mood. Her answer to his next question would spell out how this night was likely to end. "My place or yours?" Either scenario was fine by him.

"Yours," she replies, her smile widening to a grin. He watches as she saunters away from their
place of concealment towards the lit walkways of the park, where she turns around and waits for him to come to her, her long, straight dark hair swishing delicately around her shoulders, her big eyes sparkling with unfinished mischief. He tosses the remaining drink into the nearest bin and joins her, taking her hand firmly in his grasp and allowing her to lead the way.
"Are you allergic to anything?" she asks, scanning the meat section for good parts. "Chicken?"

"Nope," he replies, leaning on the cart he'd been pushing and rubbing his temples. "No allergies."

"Oh, that's good!" she says cheerfully, picking out a whole chicken and depositing it into the cart before turning to him with a concerned frown. "You know, you can wait for me in your car. I won't mind."

He looks at her in shock. "What kind of man would I be to let you carry around everything and cook dinner by yourself?"

"If it bothers you that much, you can always help me later," she suggests, pouting her lips slightly up at him. He never could resist her aegyo.

"I really don't know how to cook," he says flatly. "Baek Ah's been trying and failing to teach me for years. I've no interest in that department, so stop giving me that look because it won't work."

He turns resolutely away and rubs the spot between his eyes.

"Oh, alright," she grumbles, turning away. "Then let's go grab some vegetables. And eggs. And spices. Oh, and herbs! I wonder if they sell fresh organic herbs here..." she mutters thoughtfully. "We didn't have pesticides in Goryeo. Those things aren't good for the body at all..."

"I have no idea," he replies at once the moment she turns to face him.

"But I haven't said anything yet," she says, baffled.

"You were going to ask me where the fresh herbs could be," he hazards. "And I have no idea."

She tuts impatiently at him and walks away.

"Yah! It's not like I go shopping for food every week," he cries defensively. "Why don't you ask me something useful like where the liquor is?"

She shakes her head. "No. Alcohol will make the vessels in your head inflame and you'll feel worse," she points out matter-of-factly.

He sighs and goes back to rubbing his temples. Just hearing the word "inflame" was enough to get it throbbing again.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you," she says playfully, waltzing up to him. "Now stay put. I'll go look around."

"You want me to just stand here in the middle of nowhere for an indefinite amount of time?" he asks.

She nods imperiously. "That's right. Or you can go sit in your car and wait for me there."

"I'll stand."

Back in his place an hour later, Hajin rummages through his kitchen to find the things she needs. "How can you not cook when you have everything you need right here?" she demands, plonking a perfectly good, unused pot onto the counter with a bang. She flinches when he does. "Sorry, it's
heavier than I thought it would be," she grimaces, moving around with extra care this time. His headache's only gotten worse in the past hour, leaving him with his head in his hands, his elbows propped tiredly on the counter.

She hands him a glass of water and hoists herself onto the table beside him. "You should go sleep. I'll be fine. I'll wake you when I'm done."

"I'm fine," he says, ignoring the glass and instead pulling her easily over until she's directly in front of him so he can lean his forehead on her knees.

"No, you're not," she insists, running her fingers through his hair. "Why are you so stressed anyway? Have you had any sleep at all the past few days?"

"Nope," he mutters. "Work."

"What's with work?" she probes. "Is there a problem or something?"

"Mhm," he mumbles. "Big problem."

She hesitates, wondering if she should pry. If he had wanted to tell her, he would have done so already... but seeing as he hasn't... she decides to try a different tack. "I suppose having me around isn't helping much either," she says sheepishly.

"Not when you're banging heavy objects around the place."

"That was an accident!" she expostulates, before remembering that he isn't feeling well and is therefore not in a position to defend himself against verbal tirade. She sighs. "If you needed sleep, you could have said so, you know. I wouldn't have minded spending the day at home... especially now that I know you're not feeling well. I'll cook for you and then let you sleep, ok-"

"I'm fine," he says firmly, getting up so suddenly, she gasps in surprise. His face is so close to hers, she starts to heat up. "You are never a problem. You," he stresses, "are the only part of my life that's keeping me sane right now. If I could, I'd tie you up and keep you in here forever." He smiles at the stunned look on her face and closes her mouth for her before taking the glass of water. "I'll go change. Do you want another one of my shirts?"

She blinks and finally recovers herself. "I'll be fine. I'm fine," she shakes her head and hops off the table, feeling disconcerted. "I'll just... get on with it."

He grins and leaves her to her own devices. Truth be told, he feels terrible. There are too many things going on in his life at the moment; he feels overwhelmed and exhausted beyond his wits. But he doesn't want her to leave, and he doesn't want her to feel like a burden either just by being here, so he decides he's going to endure the pain and bring her home afterwards. Once she's safely home, he'll think about resting.

He spends a good ten minutes in the shower, just letting the cold water flow over him, dulling the ache in his temples. Wook had said they'd be ready by Sunday... for some reason, he and his family had been invited to his mother's party, which tells him she's not planning on hosting just some random family dinner like usual.

He frowns and shakes his head to clear it of any thoughts save Haesoo. He blinks. Not Haesoo, Hajin. He smirks. Despite being in this time and seeing her dress and act like a modern woman, he still hasn't gotten used to thinking of her as one. He's so used to calling her Soo that calling her any other name just seemed strange. He shuts the water and proceeds to dry and dress himself before rejoining her. A few feet from the kitchen door, he stops to watch her work. She's molding a clump
of rice between her hands, a small smile on her lips and her tongue in between her teeth. She plucks a strip of seaweed off a platter and sets it carefully. Once done, she holds her work at arm's length, eyeing it critically. She smiles a satisfied smile and happily positions it on a plate. There goes one rice ball. He smiles and walks in.

Hajin glances up from the rice ball she had just made to see him entering. He's looking significantly better, with his dark hair wet and plastered untidily across his forehead and temples, a towel draped across his shoulders over a plain black shirt, and as he takes a seat beside her, she sees that his eyes look less tired, more alert than they had been just minutes ago.

"Welcome back," she says, turning the plate discreetly around so he won't see the face she's made on the rice ball. "I infused some herbs into the rice to build up your immune system, so you had better eat a lot of it."

"Hmm. That depends. Is it nasty?"

She glares at him. "Would I feed you anything nasty?"

"You might," he chuckles at the dark look she's giving him. "Thank you," he says sincerely.

She smiles brightly. "You're welcome."

"So what do you need?" he asks, glancing around.

She lifts an eyebrow imperiously. "I thought you weren't interested in cooking." She scoops up another dollop of lukewarm rice and proceeds to mold it carefully into another tiny rice ball. Her hands are so small that they're the best she can do. She'd also fried some eggs and meat while waiting for the rice to cook earlier, and the chicken has been slowly boiling in a pot on the stove, beside a kettle with hot water for tea.

"I'm not. But then you gave me that look," he says it almost accusingly.

"Look?" she asks blankly. "Ah! You mean at the grocery?" Intrigued, she finds herself laughing heartily at the memory. She knew that look was effective on him; she had no idea it would bring him back to life long enough to help her cook dinner.

Her laughter is contagious and enough to make him smile, despite his indignation. "Yah, it's not funny! I need to be able to say no to you once in a while!"

"I don't know about that. It works out pretty well from my point of view," she teases with a roguish smile.

He grins and kisses her lightly on the cheek. He doesn't know how he's managed to survive this long without her... the day she died was the day he stopped looking for love and happiness. Everything lost its color and meaning then - nothing felt right, nothing anyone said could make him laugh - everything paled in comparison to her iridescence. For years, he kept trying to do right by her by being a good and just king, but nothing he did ever felt enough. Until he met Seol.

Even in death, Haesoo had managed to save him from a lifetime of loneliness and anguish.

Trying not to let any of the depressing thoughts show on his face, he pulls away and sees her blushing, but instead of shyng away, she drops the rice ball she'd been working on and wraps her arms loosely around his neck, demanding for more. He's more than happy to oblige. Cradling her in his arms, he can't help but smile, knowing she was probably still driven by that kiss he gave her earlier at the park. Maybe he should have offered to have a cold shower together.
There's a sudden sharp whistling sound from the stove and she swivels her head around to face it. "For the tea," she explains with a grin, turning back to her rice ball. "Since you so generously offered... please put out the fire and bring the hot water over."

"You know there's a water heater by the fridge?"

She rolls her eyes. "Who's making the tea here? For all you know, it's those water heaters that have been making your tea taste bad!"

He decides not to argue with the master and places the hot kettle on a coaster in front of her.

"Also, those vegetables have been soaking long enough," she points to a mixing bowl by the sink. "Can you slice them up for the salad, please?" she gives him another one of her cute faces.

He hangs his towel on the back of a chair and takes the vegetables out of the water. Then he rummages through the cabinet for the chopping board.

"For the carrots, please julienne them. I don't want them in big chunks," she requests. "You do know what julienne is...?"

"Shakespeare?" he kids.

"Sha- not Juliet!" she laughs. "Julienne! /n/!"

"I know, I know," he grins. "I may not have gotten the gist of actual cooking, but I think I'm at least smart enough to remember all those complicated terms. And I do know how to handle a knife, thank you very much."

"I definitely hope so," she mumbles seriously.

"Yah, don't you trust me even just a bit?" he asks, slightly offended.

She smiles impishly up at him. "You know I trust you with my life. But do you trust me?"

"I'm positive you know the answer to that already."

"Then... can I ask you a few questions?"

"Shoot," he says, eyeing her curiously.

She clears her throat and straightens up. "Baek Ah. What did Eun mean by 'Baek Ah's past'? Is his life... as bad as Won's?"

"Ah," he nods. He did promise her answers earlier. Weighing the knife in his hand, he chooses his words carefully. "It's nothing particularly bad - Eunnie just likes to exaggerate sometimes - at least, Baek Ah himself hasn't done anything wrong." He brings down the knife on the cucumber and slices it neatly into halves. "His mother bailed on an arranged marriage to someone important on her wedding day. She ran off with uncle right in the middle of the ceremony. I don't know who the important person is, I'm not interested in gossip," he adds just in case she was thinking of asking. She sighs and plucks another strip of seaweed off the platter to complete the scar on her second rice ball.

"Anyway," he continues, "obviously, it was a huge scandal. It negatively affected the company image. Our grandfather disowned her and we never even met Baek Ah until years after the old man died about ten years ago. Baek Ah was just a student when his mother brought him to our place to
speak with my father. She begged for him to be allowed to work with us. Her inheritance had been scrapped, but she hoped he might be able to make something of himself in the company."

"Eun says you helped him," Hajin remembers, glancing up at him.

He smiles. "I saw his work, and he seemed like a good kid. I told my father I'd watch out for him for a few months, to determine whether or not he'd be useful to us. Well, he turned out to be very useful. He's smart, honest, intuitive, creative, hardworking, discreet and kindhearted. Much like he used to be in Goryeo."

She nods, smiling. "I'm glad the story has a happy ending."

"Far from it. But it's getting there."

"Okay, so I can relax about Baek Ah... can I ask another question?"

"You just did."

She growls her annoyance, which makes him chuckle. She doesn't look threatening at all... much more like a puppy whose bone has just been confiscated. "Yes, yes, you may," he says, amused by this image of her. A particularly fluffy white puppy with big round eyes. Maybe that's why he had been so drawn to her in the past. "What is it?"

"Jung mentioned... your parents are divorced?" she ventures hesitantly.

"Oh, that. Yes, they are," he replies easily, then stops to think. "It's been... 3 years? Give or take."

"Oh," she murmurs, poking at her rice ball. "Why?"

He grunts, seemingly unconcerned. "Their's was an arranged marriage, too. My father had to give up another woman for her. The moment grandfather died, he immediately went searching for his old girlfriend. He found her after a few years. I think you know who she is."

She gasps and almost drops her little Wang So ball. "No! Y-you... you mean...?"

"In this time, she's Mu-hyung's mother," he adds, finding this knowledge strange now that he remembers their past lives. "You can imagine how my mother reacted."

"How did she react?" she asks, feeling incredibly curious by now. "Does your mother treat you the same way now as she used to?"

"No," he replies, shrugging his shoulders uncomfortably. "The opposite, actually. It's Yo-hyung she's currently disappointed in. Strange, isn't it?"

"Very strange," Hajin agrees, trying to process this piece of information. "So how did your mother react? And what of King Yo- er... your brother?"

"One question at a time," he laughs. She sees him unconsciously massage his already-aching temple and immediately feels guilty. Putting her finished rice ball carefully on the plate beside the rest, she proceeds to make another one and waits patiently for him to get on with his narration. "Obviously, when mother found out, she threw a fit. She probably would have demolished the entire house, except father was smart enough to bring us all the way to some crude mountain resort to break the news. She tried everything to win him back. It was quite depressing, really. Yo-hyung and I were old enough to understand the complexities between our parents' relationship, but Jung wasn't. Isn't. He's the one who was most affected by the drama," he sighs. "He started learning
She filed the divorce? Isn't that strange? Why would she do it, not him?"

"You'll find my mother hasn't changed much over the years," he replies dryly. "She's still as ambitious and prideful. He wanted her consent before making the divorce official; she just threw it at him as some sort of desperate last attempt."

"Which didn't work."

"Nope," he chuckles grimly. "You'll find my father hasn't changed much either. He signed the papers right then and there and left. Mother had a nervous breakdown. We had to rush her to the hospital."

Hajin had no love for Queen Yoo, but she flinched in sympathy. "So why doesn't she like your brother?"

"They were alright before," he replies with a shrug. "Then Mu-hyung came into the picture. She wants the company to be passed on to one of us, "his real sons". She's been trying to set us up with daughters of influential families for years to help better our position in the company. But Yo-hyung refused," he looks at her then, also finding this next piece of information amusing, "he had a childhood sweetheart whose father was an ordinary salaryman. He married her without telling our mother and she hasn't quite forgiven him for it. Not that he cares. He's perfectly content being away from the spotlight."

"Oh," Hajin mumbles, feeling uneasy. So that's what this Sunday's party is for. Queen Yoo's probably going to try and set So up with some foreign princess or other.

Sensing her inner turmoil, he crouches in front of her and smiles. "You know I never cared for any of those girls."

"But... if you don't marry some rich princess or other," she says 'princess' a little harsher than she'd intended and glances at him to see his reaction. His smile widens to a grin. "Won't she disown you or something?" she asks in a rush.

"She might."

"And... you're not bothered by it?"

"While it's true she's infinitely nicer and pays a whole lot more attention to me now than she ever did in Goryeo, if it's a choice between her and you, there's really no competition," he says easily, taking her rice-covered hand in his. "I don't even know why I was so fixated on her in the past. Her death was devastating... but losing you destroyed me completely." He says it quietly enough, but Hajin can see the underlying sadness in his eyes. "Even if it means losing her love in this life... it doesn't matter to me. You're the only thing that matters to me now."

A huge lump forms in Hajin's throat and her vision's blurring with tears. She tries to blink them away, but too much had pooled in her eyes and as soon as she blinks, they roll down her cheeks in torrents.

"Don't cry, Soo-yah," he says gently, squeezing her hand.

"I'm sorry for leaving..." As soon as she says it, she wants to slap herself. She had bigger things to be sorry for.
"Water under the bridge," he says firmly, getting up and pulling her to her feet. "Come here." He wraps his arms tightly around her and presses his lips to her temple while she sobs.

"I'm sorry for dying," she hiccups, "without your permission."

If he hadn't been so damaged by her death, he might have found her apology funny. "There's nothing to be sorry for," he assures her gently. "I don't think there's anything you can do that I won't be able to forgive."

She could think of one reason. A particularly big one. But she doesn't want to test his generosity just yet, so instead she says, "You just showered and now you're covered in rice."

"You said it wasn't nasty."

"It's not. It'll make you feel better."

He grunts. "Then maybe you should take one, too."

She sniffs and nods. "Okay. One each." She turns away briefly to pluck a piece off the plate. She holds it up for him to inspect. "It's you."

He blinks at the face scowling up at him. "You know... it was my mother who gave me that scar." He had meant it to be just a passing remark, but she looks positively mortified and almost immediately starts crying again. "I didn't know! Now you're not even going to eat it and feel better!" she wails in despair.

"I will!" he assures her hastily, taking it from her. "I will, Soo-yah! Yah, stop crying," he pleads. "I didn't tell you all this to distress you."

"How can I not be distressed?" she demands wretchedly, burying her face in his shoulder.

"It's all in the past," he reminds her, remembering belatedly that while he had welcomed death with open arms after spending 25 years contemplating the life he'd lived, Haesoo had died decades earlier with a lot of unresolved issues and heartaches. He tries to imagine what she must be feeling right now, but it's difficult. All he can really do is comfort her. "Soo-yah," he says, putting the rice ball back on the plate and pushing her gently off him. She has her face pressed in between her palms, and she's looking sulky. "I love you."

Her eyes snap up to meet his and the sulky expression slowly goes away. He smiles. "Let's forget about everything for tonight, hm? There's no point in the both of us getting headaches."

She shuts her eyes and groans. That's right. He's not even feeling well; she probably just made his headache worse. She wants to curl up somewhere and disappear, but with a sudden jerk, he pulls her towards him, making her body flushed with his. She yelps and eyes him with surprise.

"The food's getting cold," he decides to state the obvious.

With a quick glance around them, she realizes he's right. She sighs in defeat. "Aish, why isn't anything going right today?" she demands sourly.

"I don't know what you mean," he says, teasingly.

"You have a headache, the food's cold, and... those!" she points at the half dozen rice balls she's managed to make, all with his face on them. "Maybe we should have just eaten out. This is a disaster."
"I don't know what you mean," he says again.

"I just told you-"

"I don't care where I am or what I do," he interrupts, stroking her cheek gently with his forefinger, "if you're beside me, how can anything be a disaster?"

She blushes but can't deny the fluttering of her heart at his words. He kisses her forehead and watches as her expression transitions from being shocked to eventually housing a small smile. He smiles and proceeds to lightly kiss the bridge of her nose, moving steadily south to her slightly parted lips.
So wakes a couple of hours later on the sofa. The moment he opens his eyes, he has to squint and shield them from the bright light overhead. A quick glance towards the clock on the wall tells him it's a little past midnight, and as he sits up, he feels something slide off his head. His vision still bleary from sleep, he peers at it and his sleepy brain takes a moment to register a small, delicate hand before coming fully online. His jaw drops when he sees she's still here, slouching against the couch, fast asleep. He'd been using her as a makeshift pillow for over two hours.

"Soo-yah," he calls, trying to shake her gently awake. "Soo-yah?"

She purrs in her sleep and opens her eyes long enough to murmur, "Pyeha?" before snaking her arms around his and burying into the sofa.

"You were supposed to let me sleep for 15 minutes only," he protests, poking her cheek. "It's been two hours. Yah? Soo-yah!" But she'd already gone back to sleep, and he doesn't have the heart to disturb her again, not when she's looking this tranquil. He sighs inwardly and fixes her hair away from her face before making a decision.

Extricating himself from her grip, he proceeds to gently lift her off the sofa and into his bedroom. Once she's wrapped securely under his bedcovers, he takes a turn around the apartment to turn off all the lights and appliances before changing out of his rice-covered shirt. He smiles at the memory of her rice balls - the stunned look on her face when he'd told her the truth behind his infamous scar... the scar that had dictated how he lived in Goryeo - from his unjust banishment to the Kangs, to the years of suffering thereafter, and to the estrangement of his entire family. She had been his savior then; the only one he had considered a friend. Everyone else was either afraid of him, hated him, or trying to use him for one reason or another. She was the only one who treated him like he was a person, even - despite their difference in rank - like an equal.

He settles himself down behind her and holds her close, reveling in the familiar feel of her soft body against his. He'd missed her so much.

She stirs then, taking a deep breath and rolling over so that she faced him. Her face is so close to his that all he has to do is dip his head an inch and he'd be nuzzling her. He watches as she brings up a fist to rub her eyes, and seconds later, when she blinks sleepily at him, he smiles. She seems to see him because she smiles too and wriggles in closer so that their noses touch.

"You didn't wake me up," he says softly, caressing the soft skin of her lower back with his fingertips.

"You needed the sleep," she mumbles, moving her fingers lightly over his jaw, barely touching, until she reaches his lips. He closes his eyes, remembering how she once did this in the past: her delicate fingers hovering a hair's breadth over his skin - to feel him, she'd said; to be acquainted with every strand of hair, every contour of his muscles. It was their first night together after he was crowned King and every move they made had been slow, deliberate. They'd been thorough in their exploration of each other, almost like they knew it wasn't going to last.

He pulls her hips closer and leans over her temple, intending to run equally light kisses all over the side of her face, but before he can so much as breathe, she sits bolt upright, cracking her forehead...
against his jaw in the process.

They cry out in unison, but her first words are, "My mother's going to kill me!"

He massages his jaw and gives her a withering look, wondering what on earth her mother's got to do with anything, and is torn between frustration, exasperation and curiosity as she makes to jump off the bed. But as she plants her feet on the floor, she pauses and breathes a sigh of relief.

"Oh, I texted her earlier," she says with a relieved little laugh, turning back to face him. She notices his sour expression and seems to finally register the pain on her forehead. Clutching her head in her hands, she wails, "Ah! Aigoo, you have a hard jaw."

He scoffs. "Not as hard as your head." He flexes his jaw once, determines it's still in working condition, and buries himself under the covers to sulk.

"Pyeha," she says, crawling up to him and shaking his shoulder. "I'm sorry, does it hurt very much? Can I see it?" When he doesn't respond, she tries to pull the covers off but he's got a firm grip on them and she's easily outmatched. "Pyeha, don't be angry," she pleads in her most penitent voice, draping herself over him in search of a weakness or opening she can exploit. Unfortunately, his fort's well-sealed and guarded. "I was half-asleep. I wasn't thinking straight."

"Hm."

A response! Feeling slightly more hopeful, she lays down behind him and snuggles into his back. "I do love long and cold nights," she comments with a deliberate sigh. "It forces one to think of past wrongs; to contemplate on the futility of life and our never-ending struggle against fate. Ah! And it's a good thing I don't have a knee injury anymore. It would have been throbbing like crazy right about now," she pauses for effect and kisses the spot she deems to be the back of his neck. "Good night, Pyeha."

There's a moment of strained silence, but it doesn't last long. He sighs in defeat and, without turning, reaches behind him to offer her one of the blankets.

She pouts and pushes it back towards him. "No, thank you. I think you need it more." She rolls away and hugs the pillow on her side of the bed instead. She starts counting under her breath. At thirty, there's a movement behind her and the mattress dips slightly before she's wrapped once more in warmth. She rolls over and finds to her delight that he's under the blanket with her. She reaches out to touch him. "I'm sorry," she says, rubbing his jaw soothingly with her thumb. "Don't be angry."

He gives her a wry look, but he doesn't pull away. Heartened, she edges closer. "Shall we try again?" she asks in her most sultry voice, tenderly kissing his point of injury.

"I think we both need sleep more."

She pouts mournfully at him. "That's not fair, Pyeha, I've been waiting for you for hours."

"Is that why you told your mother you weren't going home tonight?"

She's no longer surprised at how astute his mind is. She props herself onto her elbows and looks down at him. "Yes and no," she replies, transferring her massage to his temple. "I wanted to make sure you were okay first. How's your headache?"

He eyes her concerned frown and suppresses a sigh. He can't stay mad at her. It's just not in his programming. "I feel better," he says at last.
She smiles a self-satisfied smile and bends down to kiss his forehead. "Fresh tea to soothe the nerves, herbs to strengthen your immune system and a nice head massage," she ticks them off her fingers one by one. "What'd I tell you? Okay, now I can sleep in peace." She plops back down onto the bed and immediately gets pulled towards him. Their bodies are flush together, giving her a very good feel of his muscles beneath his clothes.

Her heart starts beating wildly as her fists clench themselves around the fabric of his shirt, and she closes her eyes as he whispers, "I have to thank you first."

"No, I don't think so," Hajin sighs apologetically into the phone.

It's Sunday evening and she's got a few more minutes until the end of her shift. There's a scarcity of customers around the shop tonight, as per usual, so when she received a call from Eun 5 minutes prior, she decided to take it.

"Come on, it'll be fun!" he's insisting now. "Jungie and I will be there. Baek Ah, too, and Won-hyung... and some other cousins you still have to meet!"

She wrinkles her nose and declines again. "I don't know. So hasn't mentioned anything so... I think it'll be strange if I come."

"Nonsense! You can surprise him once you're there," he suggests brightly. "I'm certain he'll come. Baek Ah said he will."

Now that she has a pretty good idea of what to expect at So's mother's party, and hearing from a third person that he's sure to go even though he's mentioned nothing of it to her so far, Hajin's feeling subdued. She mechanically arranges a few bottles of perfume on the shelves before replying, "I'm sorry, Eun-ah. I really don't feel like going out tonight. Maybe another time?"

There's a drawn out sigh on the other end. "Well, okay, if you insist. Aunty usually prepares really good food, though. And it's a new mountain resort, so I'm really curious about the beautiful view and the design of the building and everything..."

"I'm sure it'll be beautiful," she says sincerely. "You'll tell me all about it afterwards, won't you?"

Eun tries not to feel too depressed. He had so been looking forward to seeing Hajin again. His entire family is so full of males that having a female around to play with for once was an extremely refreshing, welcome change. "Of course," he says, trying to stay upbeat. "I'll tell you all about it! I might even visit you at work when I'm bored. I have something to discuss with you anyway."

Her interest piqued, she asks, "Discuss what with me?"

"I'll tell you when the time's right! I have to go now. Good bye!"

"Wh- hey! Eun-ah! You-" but he had already dropped the line. She sighs at the blank screen and straightens up to check the time. Two minutes more. She steps into the shop's backroom to change into casual clothes and unpin her hair. It falls in cascades over her shoulder in a slightly messy heap, slightly wavy from being kept all day, but she doesn't have the strength to care. She runs a hand through it and leaves, saying her goodbyes and waving off invitations for dinner, saying she has other plans for the night and promising to hang out with them again another time. But the moment she turns and begins making her way towards the bus stop, her smile disappears, and the gloomy feeling returns.

After their dinner date last Tuesday, they haven't had the opportunity to spend much time with each
other again, though they still talked over the phone whenever they could - usually in the evenings. Just last night, they spoke for so long that she fell asleep mid-sentence, and he hasn't stopped teasing her about it since.

On her day-off yesterday, she went out shopping with her mother, which was mostly good except for the parts when her mother would try all sneaky-like to trick her into answering questions about So. Hajin doesn't want her parents forming preconceived notions about him, so she's been very careful in mentioning him. The only time she had to mention something more than the usual, "He's 29" or "Yes, he has a job" or "Yes, I'm sure he's not secretly married" was on Wednesday evening, when she came home from work and they lambasted her for spending the night in an unknown place for the second time that week.

"What if you get pregnant? Ever thought about that?" her mother had snapped halfway through their interrogation.

Hajin automatically retorted, "Umma, I'm on pills!", before she realized her mistake.

"Omo! You mean you... him..." her mother actually teared up. "But we've never even met him!"

Hajin silently cursed herself for her carelessness. "Umma, it's the 21st century. It's natural. It happens! Wasn't I born out of wedlock?"

"But appa and I started dating five years before you came into the picture. How long have you been dating?"

"Er... for quite... some time now, actually," she replied, inspecting the ends of her hair so she wouldn't have to look them in the eye.

"Like... how many months ago?"

Hajin sighed and decided to go for a little white lie. "Years ago. Before Youngjae. I was 16 when we met, and we liked each other and became good friends. But we were both too young and he... had to do some things, so we broke it off. We met again a few months ago and just picked up where we left off."

"You had sex at 16?!" her mother roared in outrage.

"No! Umma!" Hajin yelped in horror, seeing her usually stoic father pale. "I said we became good friends! FRIENDS!"

"Omo, omo, I think my blood pressure just skyrocketed," her mother groaned with a theatrical grimace.

Hajin got up and said as firmly as she could, "We became FRIENDS when I was 16 and had to break it off after a few years because he had to focus on his university studies. A few months ago, we met again by chance and we did some catching up over lunch and we clicked. We've been seeing each other since. Is that clear enough?"

"Oh, so he's got a degree at least!"

"And how serious are you about him?" her father asked quietly. "If you're so serious, why haven't we met him?"

"It's... complicated," she mumbled awkwardly. "But I promise to introduce you to him soon. Happy?"
They exchanged grim looks before finally turning to her with similar nods of assent.

On the bus, Hajin chooses the seat farthest from the door and puts on her earphones, hoping a bit of music might cheer her up. She tries not to think about what might happen at the party later. She doesn't doubt his affections towards her, but she can't help thinking about Goryeo. She hadn't doubted him then, too, and yet they had broken up for one reason or another. It was almost like fate was bent on keeping them apart.

As she stares out the window, she lets out a morose sigh. She's so out of it, she doesn't notice her phone's vibrating like crazy until the person next to her gives her a nudge to grab her attention.

"Oh!" she exclaims, hastily scooping it up. "Thank you, and sorry for the disturbance," she apologizes at the people near her with an embarrassed smile, putting the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"Soo-yah."

She's so shocked to hear his voice, she inhales sharply and chokes on her own spit. "P-pye..." she falters and clears her throat, "Hi! What uh... what's up?"

"Where are you now?"

"I'm on the bus, on my way home. Why?"

"I'm sorry this is so sudden... but are you busy tonight? Have you made any plans?"

She straightens up and tries to keep her breathing under control. She'd promised to watch a marathon of *Goblin* with her mother tonight, but they can always watch it again another time. "No, not really. Is something wrong?"

"My mother's throwing a party tonight," he explains hesitantly. "I was wondering if you'd like to come with me?"

Hajin flings her wardrobe open in a panic and quickly starts inspecting the many dresses hanging there. She hasn't worn any of them in ages and wonders if they'll even fit. "Umma!" she calls again, tossing possibilities onto her bed and pacing up and down nervously. On top of having to suddenly dress up well enough to meet So's mother, her own parents will be meeting him for the first time as well, and the tension is driving her up the wall. Her father's already positioned himself in the living room, pretending to read a book but she knows he's on the lookout for headlights.

"Coming!" her mother huffs, entering her room, a large case in her arms. "Okay, I've got all my jewelry here! How about we choose one of these and then pick a dress to match it with?"

Hajin eyes the box for a moment before nodding and walking over to peer at the contents.

"This was my great grandmother's!" her mother says, proudly pulling out a large emerald pendant gilded in gold.

Hajin shakes her head. "It'll make me look ten years older."

"Okay... then what about this? It's real jade!"

"I don't have anything that'll go with that color."

Her mother puts it away resentfully. "You know jade relieves anxiety? Maybe it'll stop you from chewing your fingers off!"
Hajin hesitates. Lord knows, she needs all the help she can get. "Is there a bracelet?"

"You're sure?" Her mother dubiously hands over a simple jade bracelet, which Hajin easily slips her wrist into. It's nothing remarkable, but the light bluish-green color looks good against her milky white skin. "This will help calm me down?" she asks, fingering it thoughtfully.

"So they say. Who knows?" her mother waves a dismissive hand. "Necklace? Earrings?"

Hajin nods absently at all her mother's suggestions. That's right, Hajin-ah. There's nothing to be worried about. You've met Queen Yoo before anyway... sure, she was scary and strict and not the most pleasant person in the world, but that was in Goryeo. She can't be all that bad, surely? Then she remembers that Queen Yoo will be wanting to set So up with some rich young woman and will probably not take too kindly to his sudden attachment to a woman she's never even met before - one who is neither rich nor influential.

"You were never able to wear this dress before, Jin-ah!" her mother interrupts her thoughts by holding up a dress to her. "It was for Aunty's wedding anniversary, you remember? But you fell ill and couldn't go. I always thought it was a waste that you never got to wear this!"

Hajin glances down at the peach-colored chiffon dress. She remembers this dress and the day she bought it. It has a free-flowing, layered skirt that reaches an inch or two below her knees, short puffed sleeves that meet at her collarbone, which just manages to peek out slightly at the base of her neck, and a two-inch wide satin belt to be tied around her waist.

As they gaze at her reflection a few minutes later, her mother beams with pride. "My baby's so beautiful! You look so grown-up now!"

"I'm 27 years old," Hajin reminds with an amused chuckle, letting loose a few strands of hair from her chignon and putting on some nude heels. "Do you think my cheeks are too pink?"

Her mother scoffs. "No. In fact, I think you ought to put on a darker shade of lipstick-"

"I like this one!"

"It matches too well with the dress."

"But that's the point!"

"I don't like it. It doesn't add to your character. You look like a little girl!"

"Who was the one who said I looked all grown-up now?"

Before her mother could reply, there's a flash of light on the wall and they run to the window in time to see a black Audi parking outside their gate.

"Nice car," her mother remarks as Hajin hastily runs back to her vanity to apply a fresh coat of darker lipstick. "Jin-ah, do I look okay?"

Hajin turns around dubiously. "Why would it matter?"

Her mother looks at her like she's daft. "I need to make a good impression, too!" Then she gasps, "Omo! Your father's not wearing those horrid brown shorts, is he? I should have gotten rid of them ages ago. I need to go make him change before-"

"Yeobo!" her father's voice calls from below just as the doorbell rings.
"Nevermind," her mother groans, rubbing the spot between her eyes. From below, Hajin can hear So's deep, familiar lilting voice accompanying her father's crisp, sharp tone, and it's enough to make her nervous but breathless with excitement. She hasn't seen him in so long. She grabs her bag and checks her reflection one last time.

"Do I really look okay?" she asks her mother, who flashes her a bracing smile.

"If he's a man, he'll want to look at nothing but you all evening."

Her mother's wisdom proves right when the moment Hajin steps into the living room, So's sharp eyes immediately lock onto her. She grips her purse tightly and swallows hard, wondering what he thinks. Does he approve? Is it too much? She had made sure to apply only a bit of make-up to make it look as natural as possible, and because her hair was already wavy from work, she had decided to let a few strands out to curve naturally around her face and neck. For a moment, they do nothing but drink in the sight of each other, and then his lips curl into a smile and there's a gleam in his eyes that makes her knees go weak.

"Ah, Jin-ah," her father says, recovering from his own shock of seeing her dressed so well. He can't recall ever seeing her dress like this for that ex-boyfriend of hers, but this time around, she had clearly taken pains to look her best despite the short notice and time constraint. He can also see the faint blush creeping up her neck and cheeks, and the unconstrained joy in her eyes as she looks on at their visitor.

"Oh," her mother gasps, entering the room after having changed into a better looking top. "Hello."

So turns his eyes away from Hajin's long enough to bow low to her mother. "Good evening, eomeonim. I apologize for asking Ha-jin out on such short notice." Hajin grins at the minor slip. He had almost called her Haesoo; luckily, he seems to have already gathered his wits about him.

Her mother nods pleasantly and lifts her eyebrows at Hajin, waiting for the introduction.

She clears her throat, "Umma, appa... this is Wang So," she smiles impishly, "my boyfriend." He parries her smile with one of his charming, lopsided grins.

"Wang..." her mother mutters thoughtfully. "I'm sure I've heard of a Wang before."

"He brought over chestnuts!" Hajin's father declares happily, holding up a large box. "I've been meaning to buy some for days now but it's so hard to find good ones this far from winter."

Hajin tries to hide her smile. When So asked her what her parents would appreciate for a gift, she immediately told him that her father was nuts for chestnuts. Apparently, he was able to procure some on his way over.

"My father also enjoys chestnuts," So puts in conversationally. "He says it helps with his joint pains, so I always have a supplier at the ready."

"She told you, did she?" her father asks, giving Hajin a 'that's cheating' look, but he just chuckles amiably, too happy with his chestnuts to remember to be stern. "Why don't we sit down for a while?"

"We have to get going!" Hajin pipes up at once. "We're running late enough as it is."

Her parents exchange dark looks.
"I'm sorry for the inconvenience," So says with another formal bow. "I'll try to make it up to you next time."

"Why don't we have a barbecue lunch one of these days?" her mother suggests brightly, looking excited. "I've been wanting to have a barbecue for weeks now."

Hajin opens her mouth to say So's too busy, but he replies first with an affirmative, "I'd love to. Please inform me a week in advance so I can free up my schedule."

Her mother gives him an appraising look. She could tell by the car and the expensive suit that he was well-off - possibly from a well-off family - but he's apparently a hard worker too. She'd always believed hard working men were more trustworthy, and not just because they're more likely to be rich, but because they've less time to spare gallivanting after other women.

"Of course, So-yah! May I call you that?" she asks enthusiastically.

"You may call me anything you like, eomeonim," he says politely, making her mother beam.

"Shall we?" Hajin interrupts, reaching So after a few strides. She beams up at him before waving her parents off. "Goodbye, umma, appa! Don't wait up for me, okay? Good night!" She quickly shoves So out the door before her mother can say anything embarrassing, but her father beats both of them to it.

"Please make sure to bring her home this time!"

"Yes, abeonim," So promises, grabbing Hajin's hand and holding it firmly in his. Under his breath, he whispers, "If I can keep her awake long enough."

"Haha, funny. Let's walk faster," she instructs, urging him on.

"If you don't, she has a toothbrush at your place, doesn't she?" her mother calls after them.

"Yes, eomeonim," So assures her over his shoulder.

"Good night, you two!" Hajin says pointedly, glaring at them.

When they finally shut the door, Hajin breathes a sigh of relief. "Parents..."

So chuckles, opening the passenger side door for her. "Your parents are nice. You look like your mother."

"So I've been told," she says, getting in. "That's what my future looks like. Are you having second thoughts?"

He snorts, amused, and leans against the door. "I don't know what you mean. Your mother's beautiful."

Hajin laughs. "I'll make sure to tell her you said that."

He grins and crouches by her, taking her hand and depositing a small rectangular box in it. "I've missed you," he says, curling her fingers around it. "I'm sorry for being away."

"It's only been a few days," she shrugs, feeling curious and touched as she carefully unties the ribbon. "I missed you, too. Any more headaches?"

"Your tea helps," he assures her, watching closely for her reaction.
She pulls the lid open and stares uncomprehendingly at the hairpin inside. "This... this is-"

"I couldn't find the original, so I had one remade," he explains, smiling at the look on her face as she fingers it.

She trains her eyes on him, her expression suffused with affection. "Thank you..." She leans over and pulls him close for a kiss.

"You look beautiful," he whispers, stroking her cheek fondly.

She smiles shyly, but then she sees something that makes her freeze. "My parents are watching from the window."

He turns around in time to see the curtains sway shut. "Then I guess we'd better get moving."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this took so long. Our internet able got cut by some truck so I won't be able to update as regularly as I would like orz

But I promise to read and respond to your reviews whenever I can! The next chapter is already halfway done. I hope you enjoy this one! ^^
To Party

Chapter Notes

Hello! Y’all are probably aware of my internet problem by now so you know it might be a while before I can post again, so I decided... DOUBLE CHAPTERS! I’ll reply to your comments at the end of the next chapter :)

As she steps out of the car an hour later, Hajin's nerves are in a jumble. Her palms clutching her purse are sweaty and she's having trouble trying to keep her breathing normal as she surveys the place they’ve arrived in. There are expensive cars parked everywhere and she can see a lot of finely dressed people milling around the bright lobby far ahead.

"Are you alright?" So asks with concern, seeing her.

"I didn't think there'd be so many people," she admits stiffly.

He has the gall to laugh. "You're nervous? Whatever happened to your fighting spirit? In Goryeo, you physically beat up Eun without a moment’s hesitation and had no qualms about exchanging words with me either, despite my oh-so-fearsome reputation. These commoners aren't half as powerful as we used to be. Why would you be afraid of them and not us?" he says, suddenly reverting to old speech.

She tries to contain her amusement. "Because I felt I deserved those apologies, thank you very much. You did throw me off your horse like a sack of potatoes!" Her voice rises with each word, in direct proportion to her indignation at the memory.

He clears his throat and decides the best way out of a confrontation would be to focus on something else. "Why did you and Eun end up fighting anyway? I never got the reason."

"Oh. I saw him peeping on Chae Ryung while she was changing."

"Ah," he says with an amused little grin. "To be fair, he was rich enough to buy virgins to 'peep at' if he had wished it, but he never did. That says something about his character, hm?"

She glares at him. "Nothing about what you just said is fair. What are we, goods for sale?"

"It was perfectly normal in Goryeo," he says reasonably, then quickly adds after seeing her face, "Not anymore though."

"Did you use to ‘buy virgins to peep at', too?" she asks sharply.

When he colors, she gasps in horror. "You didn't!" Furious, she begins stomping as fast as she can away from him.

"Yah, I didn't even say I did! Don't jump to conclusions!" he protests, grabbing hold of her arm before she can get far enough away and steering her back around to face him.

Silently cursing her heels, she snaps, "You're blushing."
"Because even though I never engaged in any of those activities, I did grow up with people who did," he explains patronizingly. "Yah, I had a reputation to maintain and the title of Prince to uphold. Did you think I'd risk ruining my already ruined life for the pleasure of cavorting with a bunch of loose women? I had more important things to do, like, say... staying alive."

She's still glaring at him, not sure if she should believe him, when she's struck by a sudden realization. "Oh! Then does that mean... was I your first?"

His blush deepens.

"I was!" she exclaims delightfully, all traces of indignation gone.

"Why does that make you so happy? Weren't you a virgin too?" he snaps before adding thoughtfully, "You certainly felt like a virgin."

"Well, I..." she stammers, suddenly wishing she'd never brought the topic up, "I mean, as Haesoo... of course I was... physically. But mentally..."

Realization dawns on him and his lips purse into a thin line. "Ah."

"What? I was a 25-year-old modern woman in the body of a teenager!" she reminds defensively.

He sighs, "I thought you knew a little too much, but I put it all down to intuition." She blushes as he looks at her. "This is depressing me more than I care to admit. Let's just go inside."

Remembering where they are, she feels panicky again and grabs hold of his arm, not wanting her only sure ally cross with her throughout the evening. "Pyeha, if I'd known I was fated to travel back in time and meet you, I wouldn't have given myself up to that good-for-nothing ex of mine!"

"Who is he?"

"I'm not fond of him, but I don't want you to kill him either."

He rolls his eyes. "Oh ye of little faith. Do you see me risking everything just to kill someone I've never even met?"

She narrows her eyes unsurely, wondering if that was a trick question.

"I was just going to tweak his bone structure a bit," he explains delicately.

She slaps his arm with her purse, trying to rein in her laughter. "It's in the past. Besides, I'm not naive enough to think you stayed a virgin for 29 years in this time. For 25 years in Goryeo, maybe, but certainly not now. So tell me, how many before me?"

"I'm hungry, let's go eat."

"That means a lot!" she gasps angrily. "You're only my second after him!"

"I still want his name."

"And I want a definite number!"

He sighs. "I think maybe we should save this discussion for a later time. We're not exactly in a private place."

She glances unsurely at the packed lobby, torn between staying and leaving; between wanting
answers and just letting it go.

"It'll be fine," he says, taking her hand and squeezing it reassuringly. "She never holds parties this big just to try and set me up with some woman. She must have another reason for this."

"I never really liked your mother," she admits sheepishly.

He smirks. "I don't blame you. She used to manipulate and use people all the time. She's not as bad this time around, though." He fingers the pin he'd fastened on her chignon earlier this evening. "Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?"

Despite how she's feeling, she smiles. "Yes, before we left my parents' place."

"You're beautiful, Soo-yah," he repeats, looking into her lively eyes. "I promise you... while I'm around, I won't let anyone hurt you. Not tonight. Not ever."

She's heard a promise like this before... from someone else. But she has no trouble believing it this time, simply because it's him. She steels her nerves and nods.

As they ascend the steps to the lobby, heads turn to look at them and quite a number of curious eyes land on her. She holds tightly onto So's hand and tries to look interested in the interior of the place, wondering if Eun, Jung and Baek Ah are around because she can really use a familiar face right about now.

The entire lobby is an open pavilion designed as a wooden lodge; the clean walls are coated in fresh paint and the numerous planks of dark wood supporting the vaulted ceiling overhead are thick and sturdy. In between the vaults are three enormous luminous spheres of varying sizes made up of uniformly shaped shreds of glass. As the shards sway in the cool mountain air, the light dances with them, casting off a brilliant shimmering glow to the already beautiful room. The sleek white couches upon which dozens are seated, the wooden floor lamps with their soft, warm light, and the glass tables all point to the newness of the place.

When they finally reach the end of the lobby, Hajin takes a deep breath, only to have it taken away from her again as she gazes at the great, ethereal garden below. The pathways are lit and delicately tiled, with lamps interspersed here and there amongst the bushes. There are trees around too, providing cover in the relative darkness of their shades.

"It's beautiful," she breathes, eyeing the nearest marble fountain to their right.

"So I've been told, but I'm even happier hearing it from you!"

Hajin beams at Baek Ah as he approaches. "You designed this? Wah, you're amazing. I should really start calling you Baek Ah-nim."

"Don't, I've been told you're older than me," he grins. "I'm glad you could make it, noona. Eunnie-hyung was pretty upset when you told him you wouldn't come."

"Oh," she mumbles, abashed. "Is he here?"

"Yeah, running around somewhere with Jungie," he replies, waving a dismissive hand. So clears his throat loudly and Baek Ah turns to him at once, "Oh, hyung! I didn't see you there."

"Naturally," So grumbles. "Have you seen my mother?"

Hajin tugs at his hand in panic. He's not going to take her to see his mother right then and there?
“I saw her about an hour ago. She wanted to compliment me on what I’ve done with the place,” he explains, coming into step beside them. “I haven’t seen her since, though. She’s probably in one of the suites. Almost everyone arrived half an hour ago... even your father’s here, hyung.”

The surprise on So’s face is evident. “They haven’t been civil in 3 years.”

“We were all shocked too,” Baek Ah agrees, plucking a yellowed leaf off a bush and tossing it onto the walkway. “Jungie was most upset when he saw him... what’s this about, hyung?”

“That’s what I want to find out,” So sighs, rubbing his jaw. A flashback of last Tuesday evening suddenly enters Hajin’s subconscious and she hides her blush by focusing her attention on the neatly trimmed grass poking out from in between the tiles at her feet. So turns back to Baek Ah, “Did I see reporters in the lobby?”

Baek Ah nods. “There are quite a lot of them, but I don’t know what they’re doing here... maybe publicity for the resort? It’s set to open in a month, after all.”

“Does your mother own this place?” Hajin asks curiously.

So nods. “Her entire family is into resorts and hotels. That’s why she and my father were married. My grandfather wanted to venture into the hotel industry after our health and beauty industry boomed. He thought it’d be a good partnership, and he was right,” he explains in answer to her questioning look.

_These rich people_, she thinks sourly.

“Ah, So-yah. So you’ve finally arrived.”

Hajin’s step falters. She knows that voice too, and hearing it even in this time is giving her a sudden propensity to get on her knees in formal greeting. It’s lucky So’s holding so tightly onto her hand and King Taejo’s wearing a formal suit rather than his usual King’s robes, so Hajin has the sense to keep her knees locked upright and her voice to herself.

“Abeonim,” So greets with a formal bow. Hajin and Baek Ah follow his lead, but don’t say anything. “I’m sorry I took so long. I left something behind.”

At these words, Wang Geon’s eyes fall on Hajin, and she holds her breath. She didn’t think she would meet him again so soon; she had thought she would be meeting only Queen Yoo today. But Taejo’s eyes aren’t cold or distant the way they’d been in Goryeo – they’re curious and, Hajin notices with surprise, warm. He’s looked at her this way before, when he was dying and she had been tasked to serve him his tea. He had called her his daughter then.

A lump suddenly forms in Hajin’s throat at the memory, and she hastily tries to shove it away from her mind lest she begins crying for no reason. Unfortunately, the next image to invade her subconscious is the same image that had made her uneasy earlier – of broad shoulders, a sharp jaw, firm muscles and...

Hajin wants to slap herself.

“And who is this pretty lady?” Taejo asks kindly, eyes crinkling at the corners as he surveys her.

“My girlfriend,” So replies. “Go Hajin. Hajin-ah, this is my father.”

Hajin bows low. “Good evening, _abeonim._”
He chuckles. “And how old are you, Hajin-shi?”

“I’m 27-years-old,” she replies, resisting the urge to call him Pyeha. Luckily, she’s acknowledged a different king for quite some time now.

He nods. “And what do you do?”

“I’m a make-up artist,” she replies, feeling quite awkward and inadequate compared to her companions. “I like painting people’s faces.”

He lifts his eyebrows in surprise, but the look on his face is pleasant rather than disdainful. “What a coincidence! My second wife is also a make-up artist. Well, you know what they say - the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, eh, So-yah?”

So sighs at the cliché, making Taejo chuckle. “Well, I won’t keep you. It’s actually Baek Ah I wanted.”

Baek Ah looks up in surprise, “Yes, uncle?”

“There’s someone I’d like you to meet. He’s a good friend of the family and he’s looking for an artist to paint a mural in his granddaughter’s bedroom. I personally recommended you. Do you have time?”

“Abeonim, surely this can wait until after dinner?” So protests.

“It’s okay, hyung-nim,” Baek Ah assures him with a nod. “I’ll see you two later. I hope you have fun tonight, noona. You’re very pretty today, by the way.” He grins and walks over to Taejo.

“Hajin-shi, you should meet my second wife,” Taejo tells her before he leaves. “I’m sure she’d love to meet you. She’s around here somewhere. So-yah, make sure to introduce them.”

Flushed with excitement, Hajin bows and says, “Yes, abeonim. I’d love to!”

The moment they’re out of earshot, she looks excitedly up at So. “Lady Oh’s a make-up artist too?”

He smiles. “You shouldn’t be so surprised. You two have always been very similar, I thought. You even became a stiff thanks to her.”

She glowers at him. “I was head lady at the Damiwon! There were standards I had to comply with, as well you know. Plus…” she mumbles, pouting unhappily at the memory, “she died because of me.”

He draws her into a one-armed embrace. “That wasn’t your fault. My father’s, yes. My mother’s, yes. Mine, yes. It was a lot of people, but not you. You were as much a victim as she was.”

“But she did it to protect me.”

“She did it because she loved you.”

She looks up at him. “You drank the poison for me, too, even though you said you didn’t.”

He grimaces at the memory. “Not my finest moment, but at the time, it was the only solution I could think of to save both you and Mu-hyung.”

She scans his face, remembering how pale he’d been when he visited her in her cell after she was
tortured. “I never did thank you for that, did I?”

Amused, he looks down and taps her under the chin. “Don’t get sappy on me now, there are eyes everywhere.”

“Fine,” she snaps, narrowing her own pair at him. “Maybe later.”

He grins. “Definitely later.”

“HAJIN-AHHH!”

“NOONAAAA!”

Hajin jumps away from So to see Eun and Jung sprinting up the path towards them. She waves cheerily back and says to Eun the moment he’s close enough, “Er… I decided to come.”

“But of course!” he exclaims delightedly, cheeks flushed from running around. “I totally knew you would.”

“Everyone’s here for once,” Jung informs So, looking surprised, though he wrinkles his nose in distaste as he glances at their father’s retreating back. “I wonder what mother’s thinking, inviting him and… that woman over?”

Hajin can’t help but feel stung at the way Jung referred to Lady Oh, but considering the circumstances, she supposes she can’t really fault his resentment. So simply shrugs and says, “That’s what I intend to find out. Do you know where she is?”

“Yes, she’s in the largest suite with some guests,” he replies. “You should tell her you’ve arrived. We’re all starving!”

“You mean you’ve all been waiting for… him?” Hajin points at So, feeling guilty.

Jung and Eun nod grimly.

“Mother was particularly adamant about it,” Jung grumbles. “I mean there are snacks and drinks going around so no one’s actually starving, but-”

“MEAT!” Eun growls savagely. “I don’t want pastries, I want meat! Well, at least, Jungie does. I’m perfectly content eating anything.” To prove his point, he pulls out two wrapped pastries from one of his pockets and hands one over to Hajin, who accepts it.

So sighs and nods. “Fine, I’ll go make myself known. Hajin-ah… you…”

She knows what he’s asking, but after careful thought, she decides she’s not ready to confront Queen Yoo just yet, not when the latter is surrounded by friends in an expensive suite, and certainly not when they’re all starving. She frowns apologetically and shakes her head. “I think I’ll go with these two for now…”

He sees how nervous she is and decides not to force her. Nodding, he gives her hand one final squeeze before letting go. “I’ll see you later, then. If anything happens to her, you’re both dead,” he adds to the younger two.

“Hyung! How little you trust us!” Eun cries out in a stung voice, staggering dramatically into Jung, who mechanically holds him upright.

“We’ll be fine,” Hajin says, relieved at the thought of not having to face Queen Yoo tonight. “I’ll
see you later.”

She watches him go with a slightly heavy heart, but when she turns and smiles at her two companions, she feels much better. “So, what have you two been doing?
“This one, Hajin-ah, it’s really good,” Eun offers her yet another pretty pastry from a platter.

They’re at the gazebo where majority of the dinner tables are, and Eun’s been giving Hajin sweets to sample ever since she’d confessed about not having anything to eat since 3 o’clock that afternoon.

“Hyung, she’s not going to want to eat dinner now!” Jung protests. “Noona, you don’t have to eat it. If you’re really hungry, we can go down and buy some ramyun in the convenience store. It’s only a couple of miles away. I’ll drive.”

Like his brother, she thinks with a grin. “It’s okay, I like sweets,” she assures him cheerfully, tasting the mint chocolate éclair. “Oh, it’s so good, Eun-ah!”

“Isn’t it?” Eun agrees with a smug smile. “My mother made it.”

“No kidding!” Hajin says with amazement, looking at all the platters they’d just tasted from and looking at the platters up ahead that they’ve yet to try. “All of this?”

He nods. “Not by herself, of course, she has people to do it for her… but it’s her recipe and all. My mother owns the best bakeshop in the country!” he proclaims boldly, gesturing wildly with his arms. “And I’m not making it up. She was featured on Modern Living: Lifestyle Magazine last December as a Christmas special. They sampled ten of the best bakeshops and determined hers was the best of the best.”

“Whoa, that’s awesome,” Hajin says, meaning it. “She deserves the honor. These are really good!”

“Eunnie-hyung’s going to end up a diabetic before he turns 40,” Jung murmurs conspiratorially. “He gobbles them up like they’re real food.”

“I heard that!” Eun exclaims in the middle of unwrapping a piece of toffee. “Jung-ah, these are real food, you know. You know they say meat isn’t all that good for your health, either!”

Jung snorts derisively. “At least it fills you up. Eating too many sweets will only make you sick, hyung!”

“Nonsense. I’ve been eating sweets for 27 years and I’m perfectly healthy!” Eun declares, stubbornly stuffing the entire chunk of toffee into his mouth.

Jung smiles deviously and puts out a hand over Eun’s head. “You’re perfectly cute too, hyung.”

Eun gasps, eyes wide with betrayal. “Yah!” he snaps, pointing an accusing finger at Jung. “You did not just go there!”

“Ah, that’s ok, Eun-ah,” Won says, suddenly appearing from out of nowhere with Chaeryung in tow. Hajin looks up from So’s text in time to see him pluck a piece of pastry off a platter. “You’re big in other places!”

There’s a moment of stunned silence before Won finally registers what he just said. Choking on his
éclair, he lets out an awkward little laugh, “Ah, what I mean is… like your heart and consideration for others! You’re even feeding our most important guest.” At this, he looks at Hajin and smiles. “We meet again, Hajin-shi. I saw you come in earlier with hyung and now I’ve come to collect my dues,” he says this last line to Jung, who scowls before taking his wallet out and handing over some cash.

“You two made a bet?!” Eun exclaims in outrage. “Without even telling me?”

“About me?” Hajin asks, just as surprised but also a tad indignant. “What’s your bet about?”

“I made a bet that you would come,” Won explains, looking smug. “Jungie thought otherwise.”

Jung looks at Hajin sheepishly. “It’s not that I doubt your relationship with my hyung, noona, but Eunnie-hyung told me you weren’t coming!” He glares at the culprit.

“And now you’re blaming me?” Eun scoffs incredulously. “Yah, you should trust your brother more. Even I knew he’d eventually cave and bring her.”

Jung pouts unhappily. “But she said she wouldn’t come…”

“I wasn’t planning on coming,” Hajin explains apologetically. “But then he invited me at the last minute, and I had no real plans for the evening…” To cover up her embarrassment, she takes an éclair off the platter and gives it to Chaeryung, who smiles her thanks.

“I didn’t think he’d want to subject you to…” Jung mumbles, then seems to think better of what he had been about to say. “Anyway, the evening seems different than usual. There are reporters and quite a lot of people, so there’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Why would I be worried?” Hajin asks, confused.

Jung blushes. “That is… I didn’t mean it that way, just that… er…”

“Hajin-ah, I’ve been wanting to tell you this from the start, but I didn’t want to interfere,” Eun says, looking suddenly serious. “But you’re a good friend to me now so I don’t want you getting hurt. Aunty’s desperate.”

“Aunty? Desperate? You mean… Jung and So’s mother, yes?”

Eun nods. “She’s been at it for over a year now, but hyung never took the bait. We thought it’d be the same tonight, but it doesn’t seem that way, so you needn’t worry.”

Won snorts with laughter, seeing Hajin’s confused frown. “Yah, you’re not making any more sense than Jung! Hajin-shi, what my very inarticulate cousins want to say is… the Madame’s been trying to set So up with some women for over a year now, using parties similar to this though in a much smaller scale as a cover-up. Hyung would never agree to a blind date, so she has to resort to these so-called ‘family dinners’.” He takes a glass of champagne off a passing tray and nods to her. “They’ve been quite awkward, to be honest, but now that you’ve finally come into the picture, I’m hoping there’ll be less talk of marriage and more of business.”

“But that’s what I said,” Eun grumbles.

“Speaking of business,” Won states loudly as he turns to Eun. “What’s this I hear about you switching up the marketing plan for the Goryeo cosmetics?”

Eun shrugs, folding up his toffee wrapper. “So-hyung wanted my input. The products aren’t selling
that well, hyung, but don’t worry… I won’t touch your exhibit. I’ll just… add in a few things.” He
glances surreptitiously at Hajin, who lifts her eyebrows in question, but before she can ask,
someone else joins their little group, rendering her temporarily speechless.

“What are you all doing here?” Yo asks, eyeing the desserts on the platters with distaste.

“Just talking,” Won replies, making room for him at their circle.

“Waiting for So-hyang and mother to get it over with so we can finally eat,” Jung grumbles with a
little wail. “I’m starving. I knew I should have stayed at home!”

“Oh, is he finally here?” Yo asks with surprise, looking around. “I thought I saw him earlier, but
there are too many people so I couldn’t be sure.”

“Yeah, they arrived together,” Won nods, gesturing towards Hajin.

To Hajin’s unease, Yo’s sharp, dark eyes turn to her. He frowns. “He came with a woman?”

“Ah, that’s right… you don’t know about her yet,” Jung says, wrapping an arm around Hajin’s
shoulders and clearing his throat. “Hyung, this is-“

“Your girlfriend?” Yo interrupts, a slow grin spreading across his face. “Yah, I thought you were
interested in tomboys like that girl you train with! And all this time, you’ve been chasing after a
cute girl. Has she met mother? What’s her name?”

“She’s not mine!” Jung says hastily, dropping his arm. “That is… what I mean to say is she’s not
my girlfriend! And she’s right here, hyung, you can ask her yourself.”

“If she’s not your girlfriend, whose girlfriend is she?”

Hajin sighs impatiently, annoyed at people talking about her while she’s present in the group. “I’m
So’s girlfriend. You’re his older brother, Wang Yo. I’ve heard about you,” she forces a sweet smile
and extends a hand. “I’m Go Hajin. Nice to meet you.”

He looks taken aback by this piece of information. “So? As in my brother?”

“Are there any other So’s present?” she asks stiffly.

His mouth twitches as he shakes her hand, eyeing her curiously. “This is a surprise. Have you met
our mother?”

“Not yet,” she replies, straightening back up. “I’ve met your father though.”

He nods thoughtfully, reminding Hajin of the proud, cunning prince he used to be. She also
remembers what So had told her about him days ago… she still has trouble wrapping her mind
around the information. Like Won, is Yo really not as bad as he used to be?

She glances at Eun, remembering how he had been cornered and pierced by Yo’s arrows; how So
was forced to end Eun’s life with a single swipe of his sword… she remembers the lonely, paranoid
king Yo became – all those confessions he suddenly told her in the final months leading up to his
death, when he thought no one else was listening…

Most of all, she remembers how he died, forcing her to make the ultimate choice between his
brothers: Jung or So? Who did she think would be better suited for the throne? In the end, she had
chosen So, but by then, Yo’s heart had already given up.
He had been ruthless, heartless… but surprisingly also sensitive. Hajin knows that he had been driven, not by his own greed and ambition, but by his mother’s. The Queen Mother had forced him to do things he otherwise wouldn’t have done… all for the sake of the throne. If that’s the case, Hajin’s no longer surprised that modern Yo would choose to disobey his mother’s wishes and marry someone of his own choosing rather than hers.

If Won feels he doesn’t deserve love because of how he died, then Yo probably feels deep down that he’s not suited to power because of how he lived when he finally had it… and he’s determined to live this life making decisions for himself. The thought makes Hajin glad.

“Mother!” Jung suddenly gasps, pointing to the far end of the garden. There’s a wide staircase leading up to the grand hotel, and at the top, Hajin can see Queen Yoo descending slowly with So. She’s dressed in a shimmering, midnight blue gown with silver jewelry all over her person and her hair done up intricately over her head. Even now, she looks like a queen.

“It’s mother!” Jung says again with a relieved sigh.

“Yes, we know it’s your mother,” Eun tuts, craning his neck to see above the heads of the crowd.

“Shall I carry you? Or get a chair?” Jung teases, his spirits greatly lifted at the thought of finally having proper food to eat.

Eun glares at him with wide eyes and bumps his chest with his own, but before they can make an even bigger commotion, Queen Yoo speaks.

“Good evening, my dear guests!” she greets pleasantly, showing off a perfect, brilliant smile. “I’m so sorry for making you wait. I hope you’re not very cross with me? If you are, maybe you’ll forgive me once you’ve sampled our extra special dishes tonight?” she asks with a hopeful lilt, causing a susurrus of murmurs to ripple across the area. With a satisfied smile, she straightens back up and gestures towards the waiters standing by behind her. “Our menu has been specially prepared and cooked by one of the country’s most promising new talents. You will have seen him on TV a couple of times this past year, and I am most pleased to tell you all,” she pauses for effect, her eyes travelling all over the crowd, “that he has agreed to be the master of our kitchen here at Mountain Springs!”

There’s an appreciative murmur and clapping of hands at this, and Hajin takes this moment to look at So. He’s looking politely interested, but he’s shifting from one foot to another, indicating his restlessness and impatience to get it over with. She smiles and makes to turn back to Queen Yoo when he suddenly looks her way and their eyes meet. She wonders with surprise how he knew she was there. Tentatively, she raises a hand, wondering if she was seeing things, but then his shoulders relax and a corner of his lips curl up in recognition.

She grins back at him and cocks her head slightly in question. Is he coming over after his mother finishes talking?

He gives an almost imperceptible nod before turning away to gaze at the floor.

“We hope you will find this evening to your liking,” Queen Yoo’s saying, “especially since we have a double celebration tonight.”

So glances up in surprise. She hadn’t mentioned a second reason for such a glamorous party when they spoke earlier. What has she got up her sleeve this time? Are they to find out the real reason for this event?
“Double celebration? What does she mean?” Won asks Yo, who shrugs.

“I can’t say. She doesn’t share her plans with me anymore.”

“I don’t think anyone else knows. Even So-hyung’s looking surprised,” Eun mumbles thoughtfully. “What could it be? Omo! Do you think she partnered with my mother too?”

“Ah, you might be right, Eun-ah!” Won nods with approval. “It would make sense.”

“I have a very important announcement to make on behalf of my son,” Queen Yoo declares, looking flushed with excitement as she extends an arm to So. “So-yah, come stand beside eomeonim.”

So looks troubled but takes the remaining few steps towards her.

She takes his arm and turns back to the crowd with a dazzling smile. “I’m sure you are all familiar with my son, So. He graduated with top honors from Seol National University, the best in his year at everything. He was awarded Most Outstanding Student of the Year for multiple years in a row, and is a champion martial artist. He has already been featured on the covers of many magazines as a growing force in the business sector, though he is only just beginning to show us his true potential. Recently, he has been in talks with foreign investors to bring our business across the seas, promising further growth for our already booming business enterprises – all thanks to his innovation, hard work and dedication!”

There’s a thundering of applause at her words, and heads everywhere are nodding with approval.

“An underhand blow to uncle if ever I heard one,” Won remarks under his voice. “He’ll have an even harder time convincing the board of Mu-hyung’s ascension now.”

“What’s wrong with what mother said?” Jung demands defensively, clapping the loudest. “It’s true, So-hyung’s done more for the company than all of us combined. If anyone deserves to be CEO after father, it’s him.”

Yo nods agreement. “I’m older and it’s embarrassing to say, but it seems all the talent skipped right by me when mother and father made me. It’s not fair how So can be so good at everything without trying half as hard.”

“That’s not true either,” Won scratches his stubble. “He’s a perfectionist. He does whatever he sets his mind to and does it well. You’re just as talented, hyung, you just don’t work as hard.”


Queen Yoo flushes with pride as she continues, “Really, is there anyone who can claim to have a better son? I am the proudest mother in the world. He is lacking in nothing, save one thing…” So seems to have heard enough. He lifts a hand in recognition and makes to walk away, but her hand on his arm holds him in place. “He still very stubbornly refuses to get married.”

At once, intrigued laughter ripples across the crowd and the reporters move in closer to catch every word. The powerful Wang family is known for having quite a number of good-looking male heirs, most of whom are still eligible bachelors. So, being the eldest and most influential of that bunch, is especially susceptible to dating rumors.

“Is she actually setting him up again?” Won asks with surprise. “In front of all these people?”

“She’s cornering him,” Yo mumbles with a frown.
Hajin can feel a bead of nervous sweat trickling down her spine. She has a very bad feeling about this. She wills So to look at her, to tell her all her fears and anxieties are unfounded, but he’s frowning fixedly at his mother.

A hand reaches out to squeeze her shoulder instead, and looking up, she sees Jung’s kind smile. “It’s okay, noona. This will never work on hyung.”

Won and Yo glance her way, looking troubled, but they don’t share any of their thoughts with the rest of the group.

“But tonight is a different matter,” Queen Yoo beams. “I am very pleased to announce to you all the news of my precious son’s engagement!”

“Engagement?!” Eun and Jung gasp in unison, looking at Hajin.

Her stomach is in knots and she feels faint. Engagement, she said…?

“My dear…” Queen Yoo calls to someone at the front of the crowd. “Please come up and be known.”

As they watch, a finely dressed woman in a long, silver gown steps away from the crowd and begins making her way slowly up the steps towards Queen Yoo. There are camera flashes everywhere, and no one seems to want to breathe.

Hajin can see So’s face darkening with each step the woman takes, and by the time she turns to face the crowd alongside Queen Yoo, his lips are pursed in a tight frown, his brows furrowed in anger as he takes in this new development.

_Over my dead body_, he thinks savagely, his muscles hard with tension. Seething with rage, he doesn’t look at his mother, he doesn’t acknowledge the woman, and he drops all pretense of affability in the midst of all these camera flashes.

His eyes snap back up to where he saw her last, but she’s gone. Frantically, he scans the crowd for her face, her hairpin, her dress – anything… but he can’t find her. His brothers and cousins have dispersed as well, save for his older brother. As they lock eyes, Yo smiles without humor and sighs. His message couldn’t have been plainer, _“I told you so.”_

But So doesn’t care about that right now. He doesn’t care about anything except her.

With resolve, he frees himself from his mother’s tight grasp and turns to her with a stiff bow. He doesn’t look at either of them and he doesn’t turn back when she calls his name. He single-mindedly descends the stairs, cutting through the crowd of curious reporters and ignoring their meaningless questions. He has to get to her.

He should have known better.

“Hyung’s going to come for you, I’m sure,” Jung says soothingly, leading Hajin through a covered walkway towards the back of the gardens. “I’ll need to distract mother. Will you be alright here by yourself?”

Numbly, Hajin nods.

“Would you like a glass of water?” he asks kindly.
She shakes her head, but is unable to answer. Memories… so many painful memories are pounding through her head…

He squeezes her arm and makes her sit on the fountain. “Just stay here, noona. Everything will be alright, you’ll see.” She forces herself to look at him and nods, but the moment he’s gone, she feels hollow. Alone.

Of all things, she had wished for one thing in this life… that she would never have to face Yeonhwa again.

Chapter End Notes

I'll update again when I can. Thanks for the kudos! ^_^
The Future I Want

Though the sound of rushing water soothes her frayed nerves, Hajin doesn't like the brightness. As she looks around at the vast, empty garden with its bright lights, she feels lonelier than ever. Jung had brought her to the very edge of the garden, where the trees are abundant and lined neatly in rows with benches underneath, overlooking the sparkling city lights miles below, just visible through the thick layer of fog.

The eerie silence accentuates how bereft the place she's in is of life in contrast to the hustle and bustle at the gazebo; the coldness of the evening air numbing her but not enough to relieve the ache in her heart and mind. She decides she can't stand being in the light and makes her way to the nearest tree. She sits on the bench, grateful to the darkness for the privacy it provides. How did she manage to endure this before? When So and Yeonhwa were married in the past, and she spent all day praying for inner peace by Lake Dongji, telling herself it was the best choice, futilely convincing herself that it didn't matter who he married as long as she had his heart... and when that didn't work, she had stayed up all night, wondering... alone in her room... lost in her imaginings of him with another woman.

She takes a deep breath and lets it go in a drawn-out sigh; she feels shaken, ill at ease with herself; her thoughts are scattered and her heart feels like it's been ripped apart and trampled on. Because of everything she had to endure in Goryeo, these feelings are no longer new to her... but that doesn't make them any easier to bear.

The first thing she notices is the warmth - someone has wrapped a jacket around her cold shoulders. The next moment, she hears someone call her name and her eyes snap open in disbelief to see him kneeling in front of her.

She had been so choked up by her memories that she was sure he would have forgotten her, like he did in the past. She imagined herself sitting there, waiting for endless hours for him to come to her, with nothing but the cold and her torturous thoughts as company. But this isn't Goryeo. She's not in her little room. He's right here in front of her.

Tears of relief prickle the back of her eyes and she looks away to hide them.

He saw the look of anguish on her face and hesitates before reaching out to touch her. He wishes he could do something – anything – to take away her pain, but he's as powerless to make her forget as he was even as a king. "I'm sorry, my Soo," he says earnestly, warm hands lightly squeezing her kneecaps. "I'm always making you cry, even in this life."

She shakes her head but is unable to speak. He's here with her. That's all she'd ever wanted, and in this moment, that's all she really cares about. She closes her eyes to free her mind of the painful memories; they aren't relevant anymore. She needs to let them go if she wants to move on. But for some reason, she can't. To forget them, she would have to forget everything else: the good times as well as the bad. She's not sure she's ready to let them all go. Not yet. She has to make things right first.

"Soo-yah," he pleads, wanting to hug her but afraid she might recoil. Despite his touch, her skin remains cold and her muscles stiff. He can see and feel her shaking, but he's not sure if it's because of what happened tonight... or what happened in the past. "Please look at me. Don't shut me out. Don't push me away."

She wants to reassure him, but her voice catches in her throat. She tries to take in deep breaths to...
help her calm down, but her chest still feels gnarled and it's suffocating her.

"I can't change what happened in the past, but I can change what happens from here on out," he continues. "You know there's no one else I'd rather be with, not then and not now. You are my person. There is nothing in eternity more precious to me than you."

She finally looks into his eyes. There's an uncertainty in their depths that claws at her heart. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

He looks pained. "No, of course not."

Her lower lip trembles but she forces herself to speak, "I thought you'd forgotten, the way you did in Goryeo."

"I never forgot you, Soo-yah. Why would you think that?"

"Did you resent me?" she asks instead, unable to hold it in any longer. "For refusing you and telling you to marry... her?"

"No, I didn't." He takes her cold hands in his. "I knew someone had spoken to you to make you aware of what was at stake. I hated that person, but I could never hate you."

"It was Jimong," she informs him softly. "He told me a marriage to Yeonhwa would be the best for you. And she... she told me she could keep you safe. I wasn't strong enough. I'm sorry."

He can't keep himself from her any longer. He gets up and pulls her to her feet. "I don't care about the past. What happened then has no bearing to the kind of future I want with you." He tucks away the strands of her hair that had plastered themselves around her face with her tears. "I love you and I want a future with you. I can't see myself with anyone else. There's no reason in hell or on earth that will make me consider another marriage to any other woman. Even if you beg, it won't happen. You're stuck with me."

She tries to smile, but she ends up crying instead, so she hugs him, wishing her health had allowed her to fight harder back then. She had had so much to offer him still, not least of all the daughter she eventually bore him... but now, there's nothing stopping her from fighting back. Yeonhwa can try to take him away over her dead body. She inhales deeply, "How did you find me?"

"Jungie," he replies, arranging the jacket around her shoulders. "I don't know what's happening over there, but I don't want to stick around longer than necessary. There's a back exit nearby, that's probably what Jung was thinking of when he brought you here. Do you want me to take you home?"

She shakes her head and grips his shirt in panic. "Don't leave me. Please."

He can hear the desperation in her voice and it tears him up that she would think it necessary to ask it of him. But he can't blame her. After all, he had left her alone to marry Yeonhwa in the past. There had been dozens of perfectly good political reasons why marrying that woman had seemed the better choice at the time, even when he knew deep down that it wasn't so. Not even remotely. Life with her coupled with Haesoo's death had made him cold and cruel beyond imagination. He had made sure the nobles felt the brunt of it. He never let them forget their part in separating him from Haesoo – by forcing them to tremble in fear at the mere mention of his name. He made them regret ever choosing a heartless king over a more benevolent one.

"I won't leave you."
"Promise?" she whispers.

"I'd already spent 25 years married to that witch," he says more savagely than he'd intended. He takes a deep breath to control his temper. "That's 25 years more than I would have liked. I won't lose you again. I'd rather die first."

She sniffs. "Don't die. As long as you won't change, I won't either."

"I won't change," he says firmly, lifting her chin up to face him. "You are, have always been, and will always be... my only Queen."

As she gazes into his eyes, she can see his determination there mirroring her own. She blinks back her tears and nods once before resting her head once more on his shoulder. How cruelly fitting that they should have discussed their past love affairs barely an hour earlier... she no longer cares about any of it. She cares not how many women he's dated or had. It all seems so trivial now.

"Hyung!" Baek Ah's voice pierces through the air.

Hajin sees him circle the fountain in confusion before So sighs and calls out to him. "Over here."

Startled, Baek Ah rounds the tree they're under and sighs when he sees them. "Where's- Hajin noona!" he exclaims in shock, seeing her. He hastily offers her his handkerchief. "Are you alright?"

She nods weakly and accepts it with a mumbled thanks.

"What's happening?" So asks.

"Eunnie-hyung ordered his mother's caterers to bring out all the sweets they'd brought and had them block the way here. Won-hyung told his people to force people into their seats. It's a good thing everyone's so hungry, so they couldn't put up as much physical resistance as they would have liked," Baek Ah scratches his head in exasperation. "This was a huge blow. I can't believe aunty would undermine all of us like this."

"What of my mother?"

"Your brothers have her covered," he explains with a sigh. "It's like she forgot she was being filmed. She began shouting after you like a crazed person. Yo-hyung had to step in and knock some sense into her. She was so angry at having him tell her what to do that she almost forgot about being angry with you. Jungie's with her now."

So nods and squeezes Hajin's shoulders. "I need to take her out of here."

Baek Ah nods agreement. "It's for the best. You should go soon before people manage to break free. Some of the reporters are already at the parking lot, waiting for you."

With a suppressed sigh, So fixes his suit jacket above her head to conceal her face. "It's better they don't know who you are," he explains in answer to her questioning look.

"They saw me entering with you, though," she points out.

"Did they manage to take pictures?" Baek Ah asks.

She shakes her head. "I don't think so. I didn't see any flashes."

"I noticed a few using their hand phones," So corrects, pinching her nose and making her scowl up at him. "They always do, even when they know I hate it. I don't know if they managed to get good
enough pictures, though. I guess we'll find out tomorrow."

"This is a huge scandal. It probably won't blow over for months," Baek Ah grumbles.

So shrugs nonchalantly. "Negative publicity is still publicity."

Baek Ah cracks a smile. "Being engaged is negative publicity?"

"Being engaged to anyone other than my girlfriend is negative publicity," So snaps crossly, making Baek Ah chuckle.

"So!"

As one, all three of them turn to the sound of this new voice. Hajin in particular is pleasantly surprised to hear it. She wondered when she would meet 8th Prince Wook again.

"Wangja-nim?" she sniffs, pulling the jacket down to peer curiously at him, but to her consternation, So pulls it back up and forces her to turn the other way. He wraps his arm more securely around her to limit her movement.

"Even after all those letters," she hisses into his ear, "you still think I'm in love with him?"

He sighs. "Just… just trust me, alright?"

"I just want to see how he looks like with short hair."

"So, I had nothing to do with this," Wook says, panting.

"Does that make sense?" Baek Ah snaps angrily. "She's your sister! How can you not know what she's planning?"

Wook looks at him. "We're not on the best of terms. So, you have to believe me. I had no idea about this at all. I would have told you beforehand if I knew. It was probably my mother's idea."

"Then shouldn't you have known about their meetings? They would have had to meet multiple times to plan something like this," Baek Ah points out.

"Please…"

Hajin stiffens at this new voice. It's a woman's voice, and she knows it well. She looks up at So, her eyes tearing up instantly, and whispers, "Lady Hae?"

His eyes remain fixed on Wook, but he brings her down gently to cry on his shoulder. Lady Hae Myunghee had been both her older sister and mother figure in Goryeo; her true friend and protector. Apart from So, no one else in Goryeo had loved her unconditionally. The moment Lady Hae died was the moment everything started going south.

Hajin missed her terribly. Even now, she feels an overwhelming need to rush to Lady Hae and give her a hug, regardless of what everyone might think, and sees the wisdom behind So's restraining arm around her.

"We're all hungry, tired, and in shock," Lady Hae presses on in her calming voice. "Please come over to our place so we can discuss this."

There's a drawn out silence, during which Hajin tries her best to calm down.
Finally, So speaks, "Do you have the files I asked for last Monday?"

"Yes, I do," Wook replies, sounding relieved. "They're in the car. I didn't want to bring them out for fear of anyone seeing."

"Is it bad?" So asks.

Wook eyes him steadily for a few seconds before nodding. So curses internally.

"What files?" Baek Ah asks sharply.

"I'll fill you in later," So promises. To Hajin, he lowers his voice, "Do you still not want to go home? We'll be discussing business."

She shakes her head, feeling irrationally anxious again as she grasps his shirt. "Don't leave me. You said you wouldn't."

"It'll be boring. You might fall asleep halfway through your dinner."

She can't believe he's taking this moment to tease her, but her indignation is enough to finally replace her anxiety, and for that, she's grateful. "Then let's drop by a café on the way so I can order extra strong coffee," she snaps, smiling when he grins.

He assumes a serious expression as he turns back to their companions. "Alright, let's go before anything else happens. Baek Ah-yah, did you bring your bike?"

"No, I hitched a ride with Eun," he replies.

So nods. "Then come ride with us. Let's exit through the back."
As she makes her way gingerly through the shrubbery in her heels, flanked by So and Baek Ah on both sides, Hajin can’t help but steal curious glances behind her at Wook and Myunghee, who’ve managed to maintain a respectful distance of a few feet, and as the pathway to the back gate is unpaved, she’s tripped a couple of times on some long blades of grass, loose stones, and slippery leaves.

"One more and I’ll carry you all the way to the parking lot," So warns after her third trip. He doesn’t let go of her arm this time and instead offers the other one to Baek Ah. "Yah, hold this so she doesn’t fall flat on her face."

"You try walking on uneven ground in heels!" she snaps defensively, feeling ridiculous at being held up by the arms on both sides by two tall men. "I feel like a convict being brought in for questioning by the NIS."

"It’s only until we reach the stairs," Baek Ah assures her, his voice shaking with laughter. "It’s a couple of meters ahead."

"Baek Ah-nim," she snaps. "I can walk perfectly fine by myself."

He glances up at So, who shakes his head, before saying solemnly to her, "Sorry, noona, but hyung-nim outranks you. Though you look very pretty even while glaring at me, I'm more terrified of his high kicks."

"You wouldn’t!" she says to So, taken aback.

"To Baek Ah, no, I wouldn’t."

She shakes her head. She’ll have to discuss this violent streak with him later; for now, she had more pressing concerns. "Are they married?" she asks under her voice.

So assumes she means the two behind them and shakes his head. "No. They’ve been dating for quite some time, though."

"Oh. Are you cousins?"

Again, he shakes his head. "They were my classmates in middle school up to college. He and Myunghee started dating then. I always felt like something of a third wheel around them, to be honest."

She nods thoughtfully and steals another peep behind her to find Wook staring at her with an equally thoughtful expression on his face. His eyebrows dip slightly in a frown, but he doesn’t say anything, so Hajin looks at Myunghee instead, who’s busy sending texts on her phone. She turns back to So. "Then... were you best friends in school?"

He scratches his nose, looking uncomfortable by the question. "In middle school and high school, yes. But we drifted apart in college. He recently turned his deceased father's publishing company into a PR company, so our relationship is mostly business in nature."

"Oh," she mouths. "Did you..." she pauses and glances at Baek Ah, who tries to look interested in the shrubs. She lowers her voice further and pulls So close to whisper in his ear, "In Goryeo... did you two ever make up? Like with Jung?"
He shakes his head, looking apologetic and even more uncomfortable than ever. "I exiled him to his home, so I never saw him again. I don't know why in this life..." he trails off unsurely. "Was I supposed to make peace with him? He died years before I did."

"Oh," she mouths again. "It doesn't matter. You can make peace with him now."

"We're not even fighting."

"You seemed pretty angry earlier."

He sighs. "Can you blame me? You were crying your eyes out."

"He says he and... his sister aren't on good terms, though."

"They're not. I remember when they used to argue all the time."

"Over what?"

"A lot of things," he replies. "I'll tell you later. For now... you need to focus on getting to the parking lot safely."

She's about to ask what he means when she sees it... the steep steps hugging the wall, leading down to who-knows-where. There are no handles, no harnesses; nothing to block the perfectly good view of the mountain on the opposite side of theirs. She might have marveled at the beauty before her were it not for the sudden onset of nausea in her gut. "You mean... we need to go there...?"

"It's the only way to avoid the press at the front entrance," So explains apologetically, pulling the gates open and peering out over the edge. "It's only about 50 steps. The gardeners use this entrance, as well as the caretakers. They live somewhere below."

"The steps are wide, noona," Baek Ah assures her. "We'll hold onto you, don't worry."

"Is there... really no other way?" Myunghee asks suddenly, looking just as faint as Hajin. "So-yah... you know how terrified I am of heights."

"That's right!" Hajin exclaims, grasping readily at this excuse. "I'm scared too, unnie, let's try a different path." Myunghee looks surprised as Hajin grabs hold of her arm and pulls her back towards safety, but she doesn't protest.

"Yah, there's only one other way out of here, and it's through the reporters," So reminds.

Hajin lifts the jacket he'd wrapped around her. "I'll cover my face with this. I can't do it. I can't go through... that. I'll die of fright. My legs will shake so badly, I'll trip and fall to my death, I just know it. And I might end up dragging you and Baek Ah with me, then I'll have to suffer for eternity for murder as a ghost. I know how it works. I've seen Goblin. I won't do it. Don't make me."

He's shocked by the trail of her thoughts, but when he sees how genuinely frightened she looks, he relents. "Fine, we'll go through the reporters," he grumbles with a sigh.

"But... the parking lot is right there!" Baek Ah exclaims, shocked by how his usually firm cousin could give in so easily to just a cute face with big, watery eyes and pouty lips. "Just there!"

So gives him a pained look. "Yah, if your girlfriend ever threatens you with death, tell me how it goes."
Relieved, Hajin steers Myunghee away from danger and back where they came from. "I'm Go Hajin, by the way," she introduces, holding out a hand.

Myunghee looks pleasantly surprised. "I'm a Go, too. My name’s Myunghee."

"Really?" Hajin asks, trying to match her surprise. "Erm... maybe we're related."

Myunghee looks thoughtful. "My grandfather's name is Go Jiwoo."

Hajin frowns, trying to remember her own grandfather's name. Her eyes light up, "My grandfather's name is Go Jiyong!"

Recognition lights up Myunghee's face and she says excitedly, "That's the name of my grandfather's younger brother! They were estranged so we never got to meet."

"Really?" Hajin asks, taken aback. She didn't think they would actually be related in this time. "So we're related?"

"I guess so," Myunghee flashes her a bright smile, her cheeks reddening from delight. Hajin is heartened to see that she looks healthy and well. "My, what a coincidence, indeed! How old are you, Hajin-shi?"

"I'm 27."

"Ah, then I really am your unnie," she nods. "I'm the same age as So. We should get together sometime... without all this." She gestures around them and ahead of them. "My grandfather died last year, unfortunately... but I'm sure my parents would love to meet yours."

"I was told my grandfather died when I was a baby," Hajin explains. "It's a shame... but I agree, my parents will want to meet yours too, I'm sure."

"Here, I'll give you my number."

"They seem to be getting along well," Baek Ah remarks to So.

"It's the nerves," So says offhandedly, smiling at the brightness of Hajin's smiles. "Wook-ah, did you see your sister before coming to meet me?"

Wook shakes his head. "She was surrounded by reporters," he sighs. "I wonder what she was thinking? Did she and my mother mention anything to you at all before tonight? Any hints of what they've been planning?"

"You were there, you saw his face. He was as shocked as the rest of us," Baek Ah says.

So puts a restraining hand on Baek Ah's shoulder as he addresses Wook, "You and Myunghee are the only ones I keep in contact with in your family anymore. I didn't even know they were acquainted with my mother."

Wook sighs and crosses his arms. "I don't understand what they could have told your mother. I gave Yeonhwa her inheritance last year. I should have kept track of what she's been doing since."

"I'll count on you to look into it. For now..." So halts and pulls Hajin close. Both women had stopped walking, seeing the dozens of people milling around at the bottom of the stairs ahead, on the stairs itself, and up at the reception hall. He fixes the jacket around her head. "Ready?"

She nods once and they begin to walk purposefully towards the stairs. "Whatever you do... don't
look around," he instructs, holding her close. "Look at the ground. Watch your steps."

She tries her best to focus on her feet, even when bodies suddenly begin pressing themselves around her, trying to pull the jacket off so they can snap a good picture of her, or when they start yelling questions into her ear... she flinches each time there's a flash and she gasps whenever somebody rams into her small frame. She's gripping the jacket so tightly, her knuckles have become numb, but being held by So, she manages not to trip too badly on her way up the stairs. She can hear his deep, imperious voice ordering people to get out of the way, but they're too determined to listen. And then suddenly, it dies down. There are no more bodies pressing against her and the flashes don’t look as bright.

She breathes a sigh of relief when they reach the parking lot, and when she finally gets inside his car, she feels safe.

"Those guards saved our lives," Baek Ah remarks from the passenger seat as they hurtle down the mountain, with Wook and Myunghee in a separate car ahead of them.

"Guards?" Hajin asks, folding the jacket up and leaning forward to rest her chin on the back of the driver's seat. "Is that why the reporters suddenly backed off?"

"Oh right, you couldn't see," Baek Ah says. "Yeah, body guards. Uncle has a lot of them. But hyung... what did you mean by papers? What's bad?"

So rubs his jaw, a deep frown on his face. He's thought of little else for the last five minutes. "Wook discovered something last week... it might cause problems for the partnership deal. If it's bad as he says, then it'll definitely cause problems."

"Partnership... you mean... with the J&J Group?" Baek Ah asks in surprise, feeling worried now too. "But the contract signing's in less than a month."

"Tell me about it..." he grumbles.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hajin whines crossly. "Is this what's been giving you headaches for the past week?"

"I didn't want to drag you into the company's problems," So explains apologetically. "Until tonight, I kept hoping the rumors were just rumors."

She tuts and tugs testily at his ear. "You could have talked to me about it. I wouldn't have minded listening to all the boring details!"

"Yah, I'm driving!" he protests, flinching away from her.

Baek Ah sighs and closes his eyes, gripping his seat tightly when the car swerves dangerously to the side. "If we were just going to die anyway, why'd we even bother going through all those reporters?"

They arrive at an apartment complex some time later and as Hajin steps out of the car, she surveys her surroundings. The building is about half a dozen stories tall, elegantly designed and wrapped around a brightly lit, large pool from which she can hear excited peals of laughter. The parking lot for guests is mostly empty, with tufts of grass breaking out from between the tiles.

Wook and Myunghee meet them at the entrance to the nearest building and lead the way past the front desk, down a long hallway, finally stopping in front of a wooden door. As they enter, Hajin sees a modest but luxurious apartment with a set of double doors across the room leading to an
outdoor garden. Through the light outside, she can just make out the flowering bushes lining the walls, and what appears to be a small pond.

"Please, take a seat," Myunghee says, nodding to the couches as she ties her hair up in a bun. "I'll prepare dinner."

"Ah, I'll help you!" Hajin offers eagerly.

Myunghee's eyes crinkle into a smile. "That's right. Since we're family, you can help me. I want to learn more about you."

"Family?" Baek Ah asks blankly. "You're related?"

"Long lost relatives and such," Hajin explains, taking off her heels in favor of the slippers offered to her. She leaves her purse on the couch and follows Myunghee into the kitchen where they proceed making dinner together, getting to know each other all the while. Hajin learns that Myunghee's family is into business, her mother quitting her career as a teacher in order to raise her children full-time, and Myunghee, the youngest of three, is left to look after her aged parents, her older siblings having migrated to different countries years ago.

"We have quite an age gap," Myunghee explains. "My parents had me late, so I'm very happy to finally meet a relative closer to my age!"

Hajin smiles, but is confused. Then, how big is the age gap between their grandfathers?

"This should be enough... can you take these to the table?" Myunghee asks, handing over a platter laden with various vegetables, and another with rice paper wrapper.

Hajin wipes her hands dry and takes both, exiting the kitchen to lay the dishes on the round dining table at the center of the next room, where the rest of their company are currently seated, poring over some papers and generally looking miserable. As she approaches, Wook takes the suitcase off the table and disappears for a while to deposit it elsewhere, and she takes this moment to peer over So's shoulder at the article he's reading.

"Animal cruelty?"

He looks up and sees her. "Plus other offenses," he grumbles, tossing the article onto a pile and reaching for another one.

She reads the headline of this next one out loud, "J&J Heir Accused of Sexual Harassment?!" She stares indignantly at Baek Ah and So. "Why would your company partner with a company like that?"

"All these charges have been cleared," Baek Ah explains with a morose sigh. "Insufficient evidence, false accusations, perjury... when we did the initial background check, there were no suits and such cases to their name. These all came out of nowhere... aish, this is frustrating. How could we have missed so many cases?"

"But surely people would have talked?" Hajin insists. "If they have such a reputation..."

"They did, but as there were no legal basis and evidences to prove those claims, we dismissed them as just malicious rumors. They're common among rival businesses, even here. And they're the biggest retail company in Japan," So explains. "It made sense to do business with them."

"So what happens now? Is it bad if you continue with the deal?"
"It depends... for now, these rumors have been hushed up. So long as the general public remains ignorant of them, it should be fine."

"But...?"

"But these things don't stay hidden forever." He gestures to the papers on the table to prove his point. "The backlash we'll receive once the public finds out... I don't know if it's worth the risk."

"And worse, aunty mentioned the business venture in her speech this evening," Baek Ah explains. "Now the reporters are going to start investigating, too, and if Wook-nim was able to get these evidences, then so can other people. I wondered why he told us to postpone the press conference last week..."

A memory crosses Hajin's mind and she taps So's shoulder in sudden realization. "Oh! That day we went to Grandma Park's restaurant... was that Wook-nim on the phone with you?" She remembers how troubled he had looked that night and is certain this must be the reason.

He cracks a smile. "You are observant, after all."

She scowls and crosses her arms indignantly over her chest. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

He turns to face her, trying to keep a straight face. "Nothing... just that Myunghee's been trying to catch your attention for the past minute."

She swivels on the spot to see her cousin waving at her to come back. "Ye, unnie!" she says at once, giving So's shoulder a final pinch before hastening back into the kitchen to help. She's thoughtful as she ladles some soup into the bowl, and coming to a decision, asks Myunghee if she has any tea available.

"Tea?" Myunghee begins rummaging through one of the cabinets. "Yes, I do. Wook's parents are always sending over jars of leaves and flowers, but I've never acquired a taste for any of them so I don't really... ah! Here they are... which would you like? Would you be needing the kettle? There's a water heater in the cabinet over the sink."

Hajin eyes the numerous herbs before her with excitement. She can see a variety of leaves and flowers including mint leaves, chamomile buds, lemon leaves and... raspberry tea leaves. A flashback of her kneeling on the floor in a wooden room while a thick herbal book is plopped onto her raised arms enters Hajin's mind. "Sage of Tea. It is a book written by medical expert Lu Yu from the Tang Dynasty," intones a stern voice.

Hajin smiles at the memory. In the end, she didn't get to meet Lady Oh at the party.

She fingers the raspberry leaves in thought. These are supposed to help with fertility and reproduction. She wonders briefly if Myunghee and Wook were thinking of having kids before remembering that his parents had sent these over and Myunghee admits to not being overly fond of them. Hajin hides a smile, wondering if they knew the implication behind the tea leaves.

"I'll use the kettle," she tells her cousin, choosing the jar of lemon leaves and mint to help calm their companions' nerves, and steering clear of the raspberry tea.
They're on tenterhooks the next day as they're having breakfast, with her scanning through the day's paper and him checking the news portals on his phone.

"There's something in here..." she says, turning to the page and skimming through it, "in the... er... gossip section. About you and..."

He looks up, lips pursed in evident distaste. "Is there anything about you?"

"Er... yes," she admits, feeling a small, indignant blush creeping up her neck. She hopes he doesn't ask what the article's about... she's not sure he'll tolerate being called a cheater to his oh-so-perfect girlfriend, who, as it happens, does not happen to be her. "She's spun quite a story," she adds hastily to dissuade him from asking, "about you being friends for a long time and getting along quite well and going on a few dates and..." she eyes him narrowly then, "Have you been on a date with her?"

He coughs tactfully and asks, "Anything there about J&J?"

She glares at him. "You're deflecting! It's true?"

"You know Wookie and I have been friends for more than 10 years, so of course I've known Yeonhwa for a long time," he says matter-of-factly.

The name hangs in the air between them, but she ruthlessly shoves it aside. "Yes. But have you gone on a date with her?"

He hesitates. "Will it matter if I have?"

Instead of feeling angry or hurt or betrayed, Hajin feels a sort of crippling depression and pushes her bowl of porridge aside so she can mope on the tabletop.

"That was before I started to remember everything! And it happened once," he says hastily, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. "Once! I only did it as a favor to Wook. We had dinner, watched a movie, went our separate ways. Last night was the first time I saw her in over a year."

She takes a deep breath and straightens up, deciding nothing good will come out of her feeling jealous at this point. Clearing her throat and hitching on a smile, she says, "Okay," before burying her nose in the crossword puzzle.

At work later, her colleagues seem unable to discuss anything besides the party last night, scenes of which have been all over the news. No one mentions the overseas business venture Queen Yoo let slip, which Hajin supposes is a good thing… if it weren't for the fact that she's suddenly become the center of everyone's conversations without them even knowing it. She's relieved she hasn't introduced So to her friends or they would have been bombarding her with questions right about now, and she's not sure she can answer them all.

"But who is she? I've been searching all over the internet. There are no pictures of her face…” Minkyung asks.

"What? How is that possible? There were so many reporters! I saw it all on TV," another workmate
scoffs.

Even Manager Park joins in the conversation, "Ladies, ladies… have you never been to a company press conference?" When they shake their heads, he tuts, "Someday, I must bring you along. The reporters know better than to take pictures before the actual conference begins. Our boss is ruthless when it comes to that order being disobeyed."

"Really? What does he do?" they ask, intrigued.

Manager Park smiles condescendingly. "He has them thrown out of the building."

Hajin huffs and turns away from the surprised group, herself not putting it beneath So to do something like that. She wonders how he's doing right now? Her workmates may not know about their relationship… but quite a number of people in his apartment building do. Can they really get them to keep quiet?

Worse, Myunghee had called her just this morning to ask her to keep a low profile for the time being, and because Hajin knew what was at stake, she had readily agreed to the request before fully realizing what it entailed – less dates, if at all, and no more sleepovers in his place. Last night would be the last in a long time.

_Better safe than sorry._ She sighs, crestfallen.

"Hajin-ah!" Eun's voice rings through the air, and Hajin looks up to see just the man entering with Baek Ah and Won right behind him. "Let's go out for lunch!"

"I'm not really in the mood," she sighs despondently.

"Cheer up!" Baek Ah says, leaning over to whisper, "If it makes you feel any better, hyung's in a bad mood about all this as well."

She huffs. "I don't feel better."

"We're here to cheer you up," Eun says brightly.

"I'm in the middle of work, though."

"Not anymore, I asked the manager to give you a break," Won informs her, joining their group. Hajin stares at him in shock, "You can't do that!"

"I just did."

"We have a business proposition for you," Baek Ah explains in a hurry.

Hajin blinks uncomprehendingly at the three of them for a few seconds. "Classes?"

"I overheard you talking about it to Chaeryung that one time," Eun explains brightly. "You know how to mix make-up and soap from scratch. And you're good at applying make-up, too. We want to put your talents to good use."

"But... classes? To whom?"
"To anyone who wishes to learn. The people aren't buying the products... there's a misconception that they're inferior in quality compared to their more modern counterparts. But when they see the raw, fresh materials you put in, they'll know that's not the case. It's an entirely new concept, and if we hype it up just right, I think it'll sell well," Eun explains, taking a sip of his soda.

"I have researches about the Goryeo era," Won adds eagerly. "As well as learn how to make soap and make-up, the customers can learn about history! And the exhibit can stay. It's a win-win. Ahh, Eun-ah, I always knew you were a genius."

Eun gives a modest nod, countered by the smug smile on his face. "You may call me that a couple more times, hyung-nim."

Hajin can't deny the spark of excitement she feels at their proposal. How many times has she thought about doing just that this past week? It certainly beats standing around, doing nothing but gossip while waiting for customers to come in.

"What do you think?" Baek Ah asks, a sly grin spreading across his face. "You know what this means, if you accept?"

Hajin lifts her eyebrows in question.

"You can see hyung-nim from time to time!" Eun responds for him. "He's in charge of the whole thing, so you'll have a perfectly good reason to come to the office, or for him to come visit you!"

At once, blood rushes up to her face, making her lightheaded and feeling warm despite the cool drink she's sipping.

"We knew you'd like that," Won nods, satisfied. "Shall I call him to-? Oh. You've got a call."

They turn their attention to the vibrating phone on the table. "Pyeha?" all three men read out loud, looking and sounding confused.

She snatches her phone up with an embarrassed laugh, "Er… a little inside joke. Hello?" she greets, turning away for a modicum of privacy.

"Have you heard?" he asks without preamble. "Eun's idea?"

"Ah, yes, they just told me about it. What do you think?"

"I think it'll be good for you." She can hear the smile in his voice. "You always were such a restless little thing."

She scoffs. Couldn't he have been a little more flattering?

"You could put your skills to good use," he continues. "Won's already bought a plot of land and Baek Ah's been tasked to design a new building that'll be similar to how the Damiwon used to be. We just need a teacher to agree to our terms."

"And what exactly are your terms?" she asks, unable to hold back her surprise at how quickly they've acted on the project.

"Weekly dates with the department head."

She suppresses a laugh. "I'm being serious here!"

"So am I." He's definitely grinning now. "You'll also need to train some people… it'll be just like in
Goryeo. You'll be head Court Lady."

"Was this your idea?" she asks, wondering if the concept would freak people out rather than draw them in.

"Won's. He's a history nut."

She looks over at Won, who's talking animatedly to Baek Ah about garments and traditional dress. "You think it'll work?" she asks dubiously. "It might freak people out. Intimidate them, you know? Are we supposed to act like court ladies?"

"No, just dress like them. For all intents and purposes, you'll be teachers. We've already sent out ads to draw in other qualified ladies," he explains. "And I don't know if it'll work… which is why we'll be having a trial period of a few weeks. We're already preparing a space for you near the office, for you to train the new recruits to your liking and get a feel of the job. That is… if you accept?"

She hesitates, anxiously biting at her lip. "I don't know if I'm qualified enough."

"Soo-yah," he says, the disbelief evident in his voice, "you were head Court Lady at the Damiwon for years, trained by Court Lady Oh, of all people. You already know more history than Won. You're qualified. In fact, there's no one else better."

She smiles shyly at the compliment. "Ok. Then I guess… I'll give it a shot."

"That's my girl. I'll inform the rest. They'll be pleased. How are you holding up?"

The question wipes the smile from her face. "All everyone can talk about is last night's party. I've become a villain in a soap opera overnight!" she hisses, her indignation at all her workmates' speculations about the mystery woman's identity suddenly bursting out of her.

He sounds amused when he says, "It'll die down eventually. I'll just make sure to steer clear of Yeonhwa and my mother."

"Is it ever that easy?" she mumbles glumly.

"No. But until anything else happens, it's best not to put much mind to it," he says. "I have to go. Are you free later tonight?"

"We're not supposed to see each other."

He purses his lips and says in a dry tone, "Thank you for the harsh reminder. But it's not me you'll be seeing… it's my stepmom. She's as skilled as you in terms of creating and applying cosmetics. She wants to test you on your knowledge."

She inhales sharply. "Test me? You couldn't have said this earlier?"

"Relax, you'll be fine. She trained you in her past life, though she doesn't know it. You'll pass with flying colors. Besides, I thought you wanted to see her?"

She shifts restlessly in her seat. "I do want to see her."

"Then it's settled. I'll have someone pick you up later," he says, hesitating for a moment before saying what's on his mind. "Soo-yah… if anything bad does happen… I want you to call me, alright?"
The sudden seriousness in his voice is alarming. "What do you mean? Like what kind of bad?"

"I don't know, just… for whatever reason. Call me, and I'll come to you, reporters or no reporters."

She takes in a deep breath and lets it out in a sigh, but she smiles when she says, "Ye, Pyeha."

He smiles too. "I have to go. I love you. Stay safe."

Before she can say anything else, the line goes dead and she stares at her phone in a blank state of shock.

"It sounded like you were talking to So-hyung?" Won prods after a while, forcing Hajin to turn back to the group.

She nods wordlessly, nibbling on a slice of carrot, too preoccupied with her many thoughts to think coherently about any one of them in particular.

"But… do you really call him Pyeha?" Eun asks curiously. "Why?"

"Oh, it's nothing… just a little inside joke… I guess you could call it a pet name?" Hajin says with a little shrug.

Baek Ah and Eun look mystified, but Won nods knowledgeably. "Of course, it's a common thing with lovers. I'm jealous now," he says with a disdainful purse of his lips. "My ex-girlfriends never called me a king, even when we were alone…" he frowns thoughtfully. "Is it to do with size? But I don't think I'm that lacking."

Hajin chokes on her carrot. "Not like that!" she yelps in horror.

"Aish, hyung!" Baek Ah and Eun tut in unison, shooting him similar looks of disgust.

"What?" Won laughs, spreading his palms open in a did-I-say-something-wrong? gesture. "Isn't that it? We're all adults here."

"No!" Hajin says firmly, so red in the face now that she's sure the rest of her body's in shock from the lack of blood. "That is most definitely not it!"

"So it's not the size?"

"That's not-" Hajin stammers in confusion. "It's got nothing to do with sex!"

She says this last line so loudly that some people nearby turn to give her scandalous looks. She grabs the menu the waiter left earlier and buries her face in it, dying from embarrassment.

Won laughs heartily at her discomfort. "Yah, like I said, we're all adults here. We should be able to discuss these things openly."

She glares at him from the side. "It's between me and him and I'd like to keep it that way. Oh look, Chaeryung is finally here," she adds curtly to distract him, seeing just the woman walk in. She tries her best to return her friendly smile, but then something happens that causes her to freeze.

Like before, it came suddenly with no warning: As Won locks eyes with Chaeryung, Hajin sees it…

*Chaeryung standing alone in the rain, drenched and in tears.*
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for taking the time to read and review, even though I know you must be busy because of the holidays! All your comments encourage me to write more and help me to organize my thoughts, so they're very much appreciated! Things are going to start steadily going downhill in the next chapters, but I'll try not to make us all too depressed. See you in the next chapter ^^

P.S. I'm currently watching Arang and the Magistrate. Lee Joon Gi is LOVE.
Regrets

As she’s standing outside the shop, waiting for the car to arrive that will take her to Lady Oh, Hajin’s deep in thought. She’s seen two now… first of Eun and Deok… now of Chaeryung. What did they mean? What was she supposed to do about the visions? Much as she tried to prevent them from happening in the past, she had failed terribly. She’s not even sure if, in her efforts to stop them, she had caused the visions to happen instead… or if they would have played out that way no matter what she or anyone did.

Had it been my fault? Did I lead Eun and Deok to their deaths? If I don’t do anything now… does that mean nothing will happen?

She’s so deep in thought she doesn’t notice him standing in front of her until he says her name. She gasps, taken aback, and stares at him.

“You…” she begins, looking around in search of the woman who had once pretended to be her best friend. “What are you doing here? What do you want?”

“I…” he stammers, scratching his head. “I was in the vicinity and I just thought I’d… ask how you…” He glances at her and clears his throat. “If I still can, I just wanted to apologize… for what happened between us. You changed your number so I couldn’t call you…” he falters at the shrewd way she was looking at him. “Hajin-ah… believe me… I hated it… I hated myself for a very long time afterwards, especially after I found out that you…”

She eyes him narrowly, wondering what he wanted.

“I couldn’t even see you, your parents wouldn’t let me…” he says, looking anywhere but at her.

She jeers at him, “Why would they let you in? Are they idiots? Do you know what I was doing before I drowned? I was running away from the people you owe money to!”

He flinches.

“Oh, really? You were ashamed? Hah!” She crosses her arms in disbelief. “And where did you suddenly find the courage to come talk to me? You and her! You took everything!” She resists the urge to whack him senseless with her bag. “What was I to you, really? A credit card? The moment you sucked me dry, you threw me away and fed me to the wolves!” She chokes at her own analogy.

“No, of course not, I just made a mistake. I was wrong, I was stupid, I was-“

“Yes, you were!” she snaps, recovering. “Before I made her beautiful, did you ever look at her twice? How is she, by the way? I hope she’s still using all the make-up I recommended. She must be if you’re still together. And that ring you bought with a bit of my insurance money? Are you finally getting married? When? Am I invited? It’ll be awkward if I go, you know, though since I am a principal sponsor, I suppose it’s only right I get to see what all my money has bought.”

“Hajin, please!” he begs, desperately trying to calm her down. He flinches away from the disapproving stares of the people passing by and wishes he had worn a hat, never mind that it’s evening.

This had been a bad idea. He had quite forgotten how much of a firecracker Hajin could be when angry.
“I had no idea we were in a type of relationship where you can address me so casually,” she says scathingly. “You!” She points an angry finger at him. “You need to pay back all those *ahjummas* and *ahjussis* right now! Did you know that after waking up, I had to immediately get back to work? I am almost 30-years-old and I have nothing in the bank. No savings, no insurance – nothing to show for all my hard work! You bastard!” She really does whack him then, tears of anger and frustration flying with every blow. “How could you do that to me? How?! What kind of a person are you?!”

“I’m sorry!” is all he can say as he tries to defend himself from her blows, “I’m sorry, Hajin… I’m sorry…”

*He’s sorry, he says, Hajin seathes in her mind, He kissed her in front of me. He knew I was on duty that day. How thoughtless were they. How gullible was I!*

She makes an effort to calm down after a while, clutching tightly onto her bag and panting from her efforts. “If you really want me to forgive you…” she says in between breaths, “then pay back the people you borrowed money from. Tell them it’s only you who owes them; that I had nothing to do with it… I can’t go on with my life if I have to keep repaying them every month with the salary I have.”

He wipes the tears from his eyes and nods. “I’ll… I’ll do that…”

She wipes her own eyes. “You fool…” she whispers harshly, “Everyone told me I shouldn’t give everything to one man at once… I should have listened. I was too naïve, too foolish to think you would be different. That we would be different. You used me, and I allowed you to.”

He doesn’t know what to say. He can’t refute her; he can’t defend himself. All he can do is ask for her forgiveness.

“If you’re really sorry and you really want to fix things…” she says, gingerly holding out a hand, “shake on it. And I’ll forgive you.”

It takes all of his willpower, but he eventually takes her hand – her small, familiar, deft hands, capable of creating so many things.

She clears her throat and lets go as soon as she can. As she does so, a black car pulls to a stop in front of the shop and a man steps out and bows to her. She nods to him once before turning back to her ex-boyfriend.

“I have to go,” she says awkwardly, feeling suddenly embarrassed by her outburst. She takes a small white jar from inside her bag and presses it into his hand. “For your… bruises. Apply immediately, as many times as you like.”

With an awkward twitch of her neck that she decides can pass as a farewell nod, she hurries to the car, feeling better… lighter. She can finally turn away from that chapter in her life. She checks her phone and sees a single message:

*Good luck. ^^ Tell me how it goes.*

Smiling, she assures him that she will.
Sooyeon’s watchful eyes are as attentive to detail as ever as she hovers over Hajin’s shoulders, watching as the latter finishes moulding her last bar of soap. Pressing the mixture between her hands, Hajin finds she isn’t nervous at all, though she knows she would have been once… a very long time ago.

“Soap?” Lady Oh had pronounced the word very carefully, like it was a foreign language. “What exactly is ‘soap’?”

“It’s a bathing aide!” Haesoo explained enthusiastically. “You mix oil and salt, as well as herbs and fragrances for the skin… I’ll show you.”

“And you’re supposed to apply this directly onto your skin?” Lady Oh brought the finished bar to her nose to smell. She smiled at the faint smell of jasmine, a fragrance she had always favored.

Haesoo nodded. “You wet it a bit, like this… and then you rub your hands over it. The lather helps get rid of the dirt and oils from your body.”

Lady Oh’s eyebrows lifted in pleasant surprise as she sniffed at the inside of her wrist where Hajin had applied and rinsed off the lather. “And the smell stays on your skin.” She eyed the bars thoughtfully then. “His Majesty might like this. See if you can make one for him. He has been under a lot of stress lately.”

“Yes, sanggung.”

“Interesting choice of herbs,” Sooyeon remarks as Hajin turns to face her.

Hajin smiles demurely. “I’ve heard from So that his father sometimes has joint pains. And since he’s under stress, the smell of lavender might help.”

Sooyeon shoots her a thoughtful glance. “So he does. Well, I can see you’re knowledgeable on herbs and oils. Did you make all these with my husband in mind?”

Trying not to look too self-conscious, Hajin takes one bar from the counter and hands it over, watching with bated breath as Sooyeon takes a sniff, wondering whether her preference was the same for this time as it was…

With raised eyebrows, Sooyeon asks, “How did you know I liked the smell of jasmine?”

Hajin hides her relief. “I thought I detected a faint whiff of it on you when you came in earlier.”

“Hm. A good nose as well,” Sooyeon mumbles. “Well, I had no reason to doubt So's judgment in the first place. So far you’ve proven capable.” She narrows her eyes. “Where on earth did he find
“Oh, you know… here and there,” Hajin waves a nonchalant hand. “It’s a rather long story…”

The door suddenly opens and Hajin is surprised to see a familiar face smiling curiously at her. She hadn’t expected him to come home to his parents’ home… isn’t he married?

“Are you her?” Mu asks, striding into the room and extending a hand in greeting. “I’ve heard about you from my cousins.”

“Have you?” Hajin manages to stammer. An image of Mu drowning in a tub full of mercury-laced water had just entered her mind, making her heart uneasy and her nerves jangled. As she looks at the man she had once called Crown Prince and King, she thinks that maybe this man isn’t as different from who he once was. He still has on that same kind smile, and his eyes are sparkling with mischief. Even his facial hair is the same, she notes with amusement.

“Well, by cousins, I actually just mean Eun, Baek Ah and Won,” he says with a chuckle. “They have pictures of you hanging out on their Instagram accounts.”

“They do?” Hajin asks blankly. Instagram. Twitter. Facebook. She realizes she hasn’t logged into any social media in a while and wonders whether they all had accounts? Does So? She inhales sharply and makes to take her phone out to check when she remembers she’d left it in her bag earlier. And her bag was all the way at the back of the room.

“We were just about to have tea, Mu-yah,” Sooyeon says, taking her apron off and heading to the door. “Has your father arrived?”

“Not yet. I left before he did,” Mu replies, his shoulders tensing immediately at the mention of Taejo. Hajin watches him curiously, trying to understand this reaction. “He probably won’t be long though.”

Sooyeon nods. “Would you care to join us, Hajin-shi? I daresay you haven’t had dinner?”

“Oh, I ate a bit before coming here. It’s actually quite late now… I should go.”

“I haven’t finished examining you yet. Let’s talk more over some tea and cakes.” Hajin can hear the command in Sooyeon’s voice and finds herself consenting before she realizes it.

Mu helps her tidy up, and as they work, Hajin can’t help but steal curious glances at him, wondering what life was like for him in this time. He had been born out of wedlock… she wonders if he’d known about his inheritance and paternity growing up? How was his relationship with his cousins?

“So, last night must have been quite a shock,” he remarks, startling her out of her thoughts.

Hajin shrugs. “That’s an understatement…”

“I’ve never thought of So as being impulsive. I was surprised when he left like that… I saw it in the news that you left the venue together with Baek Ah. I assume you were the woman with the jacket over your head?”

She gives a little nod. “They told me it would be better that no one knew who I was.”

“I still don’t know much about this kind of world,” he admits sheepishly, “but my cousins and brothers know what they’re doing. If they say it’s better that way, then it probably is. At the very
“least, anonymity ensures that you’re able to keep living the way you always have.”

“There’s that…” she mumbles, feeling conflicted as she arranges the jar of herbs back on their shelves.

Mu suddenly lets out a bark of laughter. “Ah, but of course… you’re not allowed to see each other as often anymore? If you want to keep being anonymous, that is…”

She blushes, wondering if her thoughts had shown on her face. Had she been too obvious? “There’s always video chat,” she says, trying to cover her embarrassment.

His expression is teasing when he nods, but he doesn’t say anything else.

When they enter the dining room minutes later, it’s to find that Taejo had arrived and was already at the table with Sooyeon.

“Ah, Hajin-shi,” he greets with that same warm smile. “I hear you’re quite talented.”

Hajin looks curiously at Sooyeon before smiling at Taejo. “I can’t really say, abeonim.”

“She’s being modest. I saw the soaps and make-up she made. They look exactly like mother’s.” Mu winks at her before pulling up a chair and telling her to sit. “I can’t stay long, by the way. I promised Heunghwa and Gyeonghwa I’d be home earlier today.”

Hajin tries to conceal her shock. Lady Gyeonghwa. Wang So’s first wife. She shakes her head. No, not his first wife. Princess Gyeonghwa had been a child when they were married… she wasn’t considered his first wife. That title belonged to…

With a purse of her lips, Hajin pours Mu a cup of tea.

While thinking of King Gwangjong and Queen Daemok, a question suddenly crosses Hajin’s mind and she puts the kettle down a little stronger than necessary, causing Mu to flinch, contents of his cup splashing all over his shirt sleeves.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” she says in horror. She hastily looks around in search of a tissue or napkin.

“It’s nothing,” he says with a wave of his hand. He shakes the liquid off and smiles kindly at her. “Anyway, I was going to say we can leave together. I’ll drop you off wherever is convenient for you.”

“Ah, thank you.” She flashes him a grateful smile, trying to push the unwanted thoughts out of her mind. King Gwangjong and Queen Daemok. She would research about it the moment she got home…

“Why are you already talking of leaving?” Taejo demands crossly. “It’s barely been five minutes.”

“I still have questions for you, Hajin-shi,” Sooyeon reminds with a little quirk of the eyebrow.

“Oh, right!” Hajin exclaims, straightening up and preparing herself. “Do you want to know where I received my training? Or when I graduated? What school I went to?” That must be it. They’d already covered everything else earlier.

Sooyeon’s lips purse slightly in negation. “No. You’re skillful enough for me not to question your professional background. I’m curious about how and when you and my stepson met.”

Hajin blinks in surprise.
“Me too,” Mu says at once, looking up from his cup. “He’s always so busy and you don’t seem like an easy type of girl. Where on earth did he find the time to chase after you?”

Hajin’s mind is in a whirl, trying to remember the fake story she and So had agreed upon just the night before. They had joked through half of that conversation, and though she had enjoyed herself very much, she now wishes they’d been a little more serious.

“Well,” she begins awkwardly, “we met about ten years ago. I don’t really remember exactly where or when anymore since it was so long ago.” The vaguer the better, she decides.

“How did you meet?” Mu presses.

“I… well I…” she casts her mind wildly around for anything. “I almost fell into a body of water and he caught me.”

“So you met at a beach?” Mu asks, looking more intrigued than ever.

“Maybe… or it might have been a river, or a lake, or a little mud puddle,” she says, tapping her temple apologetically. “I was in a coma about two years ago, so my memory’s become a little hazy.”

“Coma?” Sooyeon asks, surprise evident on her face. “You were in a coma?”

“This is shocking. Why were you in a coma?” Taejo asks.

“I tried to save a young boy from drowning and ended up almost drowning instead,” she replies, sounding foolish as she says it. Whatever had possessed her to jump into that lake after the boy? He’d had a safety vest on and thinking about it now, it’s clear to her that the more logical thing to do would have been to call for help… and what exactly had pulled her under the water? She would have been fine if it weren’t for that sudden force, keeping her from resurfacing.

She remembers vividly the fright she had felt at that moment – the feeling of suffocating, her lungs aflame from their desperate call for air, her limbs heavy, weighed down by tons of water all around her, soaking her everywhere, keeping her locked in their depths… and the looming darkness – watching as though in slow motion that fascinating moment when the moon’s shadow embraced the earth completely, keeping the sun’s brightness at bay, until she could no longer remember which came first… her darkness, or the moon’s? All she remembers is waking up to a different world, in a different time…

“Drowning… that was you?” Taejo asks, stupefied.

Even though her palms are sweaty and her pulse rate has quickened to an alarming pace, Hajin wrenches her thoughts away from that moment to focus on the present. “What was me?”

“You’re the company employee who almost drowned more than two years ago?” Mu interjects. “Ahh, I see! Is that how you met again? Did he check on you everyday until you woke up?”

“Did who…? What do you mean? You mean So?” she asks, confused, not quite sure what was happening anymore.

“This is a coincidence, indeed,” Taejo remarks thoughtfully. “To think it had been you…”

“Stop it, you two,” Sooyeon suddenly snaps. She’s noticed Hajin’s unease and sudden paleness. But of course, anyone would be frightened by having to relive such a moment. “Maybe we can continue this discussion at another time. I can see you’re tired.”
Hajin nods gratefully and gets up. “Yes. I’m sorry, I really would have wanted to chat more but… I’m not feeling very well at the moment.”

“Was your test that stressful? Mother,” Mu chides, giving his mother a reproachful stare.

“No, no, it’s not that… I just… it’s been a long day, I guess,” Hajin says, trying to inject some normalcy into her voice. “Too many things are happening…”

“Let’s leave together, then,” Mu nods, getting up as well.

Hajin turns to Taejo and Sooyeon with an apologetic bow. “Abeonim, eomeonim… please forgive my rudeness.”

Taejo only chuckles. “Such formality. We should get to know each other more. Rest well, then, and go home safely.”

As Hajin leaves with Mu, she’s surprised to find Lady Oh right behind them. She’s about to greet her goodnight when Lady Oh addresses Mu, telling him to get something from the study they had been working in earlier. Once they’re alone, Lady Oh turns to Hajin with a serious look on her face.

Hajin remembers this expression… she knows what’s coming next…

“Before you go, I have a few words of advice,” Sooyeon says without preamble, looking right into Hajin’s mesmerized eyes. “I like you, Hajin. I see a lot of myself in you, which is why I don’t want you to make the same mistakes I did.” She pauses, trying to find the right words, and all the while, Hajin can’t speak. She’s heard these words before… she knows them. She didn’t heed them then, and that decision had almost caused her everything. Then again, perhaps, it did.

“Based on what I saw last night, my stepson cares about you a great deal. But you should know that people like him and my husband are tied to their family names, to the responsibility those names bring. Whatever happens, the company must always come first. That’s how it is, that’s how it has always been. They hold the lives of thousands in their hands. One wrong move could have disastrous consequences.”

Hajin nods, wondering where this was all headed.

“I’m warning you of what might be coming,” she presses on, her expression softening. “Plenty of things can go wrong now – I am well-acquainted with my husband’s ex-wife to know what she’s capable of. She has no qualms when it comes to getting what she wants.

“I’m not saying this to scare you…” she reaches out to squeeze Hajin’s shoulder, “I’m saying this so you’ll be prepared. Whatever decision you make in the future… remember that you come first. Not anyone else, not even So. Your happiness comes first; your safety; your peace of mind. Don’t sacrifice too much that you end up losing everything. When the bad starts to outweigh the good, don’t wait for the scales to tip completely before you decide to let go; by then it might be too late. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Hajin swallows hard. “I… I think so.”

Lady Oh nods encouragingly and drops her hand, looking suddenly businesslike. “Tomorrow, you start accepting applicants for the job. I will be there to observe, but you will have full control. Do you know where the office is?”

“Yes, I do. I’ve been there once.”
“Then I’ll meet you there tomorrow at half past eight. Goodnight, and think about what I said.” With a little nod, Lady Oh retreats back into the dining room, leaving Hajin alone with her very confused thoughts.

Five.

It’s well past midnight and Hajin still hasn’t plucked up the courage to call or message So. She stares numbly at her blank screen, wishing she’d never thought to look for that kind of information in the first place because now she feels horrible, sick to the core.

The moment she had gotten home, Hajin had exchanged a few words with her parents and told them she was tired before going immediately up to her room, locking the doors and opening her laptop in search of the information she wanted…

Five. King Gwangjong and Queen Daemok had had five kids together.

The frustration in her makes Hajin want to scream, but she doesn’t even have the energy to do so. What did she think, that the 4th King and his Queen would spend the rest of their married life with a ten-foot pole wedged between them?

No, that’s not it… Kings needed heirs. And to make their marriage legal, they would have had to consummate. Yeonhwa would have been expected to provide So with at least one heir to his throne… but hadn’t their first child been a boy? Then… the other four were…?

Taking a deep breath, Hajin sits up and glares at the blank message template on her phone. She’d been wanting to message him all night… but at first she thought maybe he’d still be busy… then she thought maybe he was driving… then she realized she really didn’t know what to say to him… and now she thinks maybe he’s already asleep.

In truth, she had been toying with her thoughts and feelings all night, poking at her sores, trying to numb the irrational hurt and betrayal she felt at the thought of So sleeping with Yeonhwa enough times to produce five children.

You’re an idiot, Hajin. He needed heirs. They were a married couple. It was expected of them. It was natural. You left him, and he had no one.

Hajin shakes her head and brings up her pillow, sending a silent scream into it. Everything… let everything go. Don’t hold onto the past. Focus on what you have.

Satisfied, her throat throbbing like crazy, she sits back up and turns her attention once more to her phone. Say something… anything… but her mind remains unhelpfully blank, and the throbbing in her throat was starting to dull.

A tear escapes her eye and she brushes it away angrily. “You’re being stupid,” she hisses at herself. “Stop thinking about it. Forget about it. It’s been done.”

She scrunches up her face and wails, “Aish, why did you have to look? Why couldn’t you be content with not knowing? Pabo… pabo!” She runs her hands roughly through her hair, messing it up. She buries her face in her hands. “Those kids have done nothing wrong… you have no reason to resent them… no reason to resent them…”
But she did have reason. She feels anguished at the thought of So spending time with and loving those children Yeonhwa had given him… not knowing of their own daughter… the daughter she had exchanged her life with.

Shoving her phone aside, Hajin instead reaches for the hairpin he had given her. She lays back down and runs a finger over the intricate details carved onto it… everything, from the colors to the flowers and leaves… everything was exactly as she remembered. She clenches a fist around it, so tightly that it digs painfully into her flesh. But she doesn’t mind. She welcomes the pain – anything to distract her from her feelings.

She took Seol away without telling him… she had no right to feel this way. She shouldn’t be regretting her actions.

But she is. Painfully, wholeheartedly… she finds she regrets not dying in his arms. She regrets not staying with him for as long as she could. She regrets not trying hard enough. She regrets leaving him that way.

And she feels sick and terrible about the regret.

She closes her eyes, prompting her tears to fall. “I know I made the right choice…” she whispers into her clenched fist. “But I wanted you to love her... So. I really... wanted you to love her...”

She takes a deep, shaky breath and wraps her blanket tightly around her, using her pillow to stem the flow of her tears. "Hajin... you really are selfish.”
Hajin wakes the next morning to the fresh scent of flowers in their living room.

"What...?" She pauses on her way down to stare in wonder at the bountiful bouquets on the windowsills, tables and floor. "What's all this?" She approaches the nearest one, and before her mother can even begin to explain, she already knows. They're peonies, and they're beautiful... and there's only one person who would send them... what they meant, however, she had no idea, but she smiles nonetheless.

"Anything we need to know...?" her mother prods for the second time. "Hajin!"

Hajin snaps out of it and stares at her, not having heard a thing she'd said. "Sorry. What?"

"This," she repeats, gesturing excitedly around the room. "Is there anything we ought to know...?"

Her parents give her a pointed look.

"Er..." Hajin tries to think. "I'll go check my phone for messages to see what he-"

"Yah!" her mother exclaims so suddenly, Hajin jumps. "What other explanation is there? They're peonies!"

"I know they are," she says, confused.

Her father clears his throat, trying but failing to look interested in his newspaper. "Does this have anything to do with what we saw on TV the other day?"

"What...? Oh," Hajin mumbles. "You mean at the party? I'm not sure... that's why I need to-"

"Oh, just tell us already! Where's the ring?" her mother exclaims excitedly, running up to inspect her empty fingers. "Well?"

"We're not engaged!" Hajin protests, reclaiming her hands, her face flaming. *Not officially, anyway. "What makes you think we're engaged?"

"They're peonies," her mother stresses, trying to look as patronizing as humanly possible. "Pink peonies. We searched the meaning online."

Her father sighs, finally closing his paper. "They're not pink. They're almost white. It's an apology. Did you break up?"

"No!" Hajin replies indignantly.

"Then maybe he's saying sorry for that fiasco that other night," he declares knowledgeably. "For my part, I thought he handled it quite well, all things considered."

"Did he come to find you right after he left all those reporters?" her mother asks.

"Yes, he did, but-"

"And did he propose right then and there?" Her mother practically hopped with excitement.
"Umma," Hajin says sternly. "We are not engaged."

"Rubbish," her mother scoffs. "What are all of these, then?"

"I wasn't feeling well yesterday and he knows they're my favorite," Hajin ventures wildly. "I suppose he just wanted to cheer me up. There are peonies of varying colors all around the room."

She guesses right. He calls her on her way to work, and though at first she had felt apprehensive, remembering how troubled she had been last night, she also felt foolish and decided to try and sound as normal as possible when she finally picks up.

"My stepmom told me you were feeling poorly last night," he explains. "That's why I didn't call you. I thought maybe you wanted to sleep early to rest."

"Oh," she says, shamefaced. "I thought you were busy... so I just waited."

He sighs. "You could have sent me a message, you know. I was worried about you."

"I'm sorry," she says sincerely. "I just got a little overwhelmed is all, but I'm feeling better now... thank you for the flowers. They were beautiful."

"I thought you might like them. I hope your parents didn't mind too much? They're not allergic to pollen, are they?"

"No," she chuckles. "The first thing they did was look up the meaning of peonies online. My mom was convinced the flowers meant we were getting married. My father thought the complete opposite... that you were saying sorry because we had broken up."

There's a prolonged silence on the other end before he finally speaks again, "Flowers do tend to have different meanings... that's why I didn't send a single color."

"That's what I told them," she informs him brightly. "Don't worry, they didn't get any strange ideas. At least, I hope they didn't."

"I'm not entirely averse to your mother's interpretation, though," he says with just a hint of slyness creeping into his voice.

She sighs dramatically, wanting to tease him. "Ah, if only you weren't engaged to someone else. I might have actually considered it this time."

Though the taxi driver's eyes remain fixed on the road, she can't help but notice the straightening of his back and sudden interested gleam in his eyes. She flushes and leans away from him to the window, wishing she'd sat at the back rather than at the front seat.

"And if I publicly break off my supposed engagement right this moment...?"

"Nope," she counters swiftly, grinning at the exasperated sigh that followed. "You'll have to think of something else. Besides, won't there be consequences?"

He grunts unhappily. "I'm fairly certain I can handle the consequences. I'm just looking for the right moment to break it off officially. I'll need to talk to my parents first, in any case, preferably sooner rather than later to prevent further misunderstandings. I'll probably talk to my father tonight, but my mother's a different matter... she's bent on avoiding me. Even Jung can't seem to get a hold of her, and I need to know what she's planning before I take any decisive action."
She nods, then adds tentatively, "And... her?"

He snorts. "I'd rather not see her at all if I can help it."

His answer makes her happy. "My day-off's been moved to tomorrow, by the way," she informs him.

"So I heard." He sounds apologetic. "I'm sorry, Soo-yah, Wook and I will be meeting some people tomorrow about the authenticity of those articles he found. I didn't know your day-off had been changed until after we set the appointment."

She suppresses a sigh. She had expected as much, but that didn't stop her from feeling disappointed. There were things they needed to talk about... conversations long overdue that needed time to sort out...

"It's okay," she says, trying to sound upbeat. "I'll find some other way to entertain myself. Don't worry about me."

"What about tonight? I have nothing really important going on. I'll postpone meeting my father."

"No, don't do that," she says at once. "That meeting is important... you said it yourself, the sooner the better."

He sighs. "Then send me a message whenever you're free."

She smiles ruefully. "Now that we'll be working in the same building, we aren't allowed to see each other. Ironic, isn't it?"

"Rotten luck," he grumbles crossly.

"I need to go. Don't worry too much. Who knows? We just might accidentally-on-purpose bump into each other," she says bracingly, making him laugh, the sound lifting her spirits considerably. She hopes it will last her the entire day.

As she eyes the building before her, bag clutched tightly to herself, she’s filled with a sense of foreboding mingled with excitement. She doesn't know what she's getting herself into, but it can't be worse than what she's leaving behind. She could continue working with her qualified coworkers from the shop, for one, and with So and his cousins so nearby, she won't feel so lonely.

Steeling her nerves, she steps through the glass doors and approaches the front desk, informing the immaculately dressed woman seated there of her purpose for coming.

"Ah, yes, Ms. Go. We've been instructed to escort you," the woman says at once, rising from her seat and stepping out from behind the counter. She smiles politely and gestures for Hajin to follow her, past offices and closed doors lining hallways, to the elevator, ascending all the way up to the topmost floor of the building. She remembers So's office being on the sixth and wonders whether she was allowed to sneak down there from time to time.

Stepping off the lift, they turn right and walk a few paces before rounding a corner, where a view greets her that’s enough to take her breath away. She’s pleasantly surprised to find that an entire section of the floor has been turned into what appears to be a botanical garden, with water sprinklers lining the ceiling overlooking hundreds of plants of varying sizes and colors. There are even berry patches and stunted fruit-bearing trees, as well as ponds littered with beautiful lotus
flowers and water lilies. The glass wall seems to stretch endlessly, and she's itching to investigate, to see what kinds of plants this place is housing.

She stops walking to stare at the paradise before her. "This is beautiful," she can't help remarking.

"My husband had this floor added last year." Hajin tears her eyes away from an actual buzzing bee to see Lady Oh exiting a room on the opposite side of the hall. She takes off her gloves and checks her watch. "You're early," she notes with approval as Hajin greets her. "I wanted to show you this before anything else. I thought you might like it."

"I do like it!" Hajin exclaims in delight. "There are so many plants! Did you bring in a beehive too?"

Lady Oh looks pleased by her reaction. "Yes. Natural pollination is always the best, and the honey created is pure and perfect for our purpose. One day, I’ll take you in to have a look around, but for now, I have something else I wanted to talk to you about. We have less than half an hour. It should be enough time."

"Of course. What is it?"

Lady Oh gestures for Hajin to follow her back through the door she had just exited from. “I know this entire concept is being styled around the Goryeo period, but so much more plants and herbs are available to us these days that it seems a waste not to use them. Are you familiar with tropical plants?”

They discuss tropical plants and herbs for a few minutes, with Hajin agreeing that adding a bit of modernity to the concept might be worth looking into. After promising to bring it up with So and his cousins at the next possible opportunity, they head to the ground floor together to meet the applicants for the day. They’re sitting on a long table in a big empty room, going over the many application letters and resumes when Hajin sees a name that makes her gasp.

“What?” Lady Oh glances curiously up from her own stack of folders.

“This… this woman,” Hajin says, trying to contain her excitement. “I um… think I know her.”

Lady Oh raises an eyebrow. “Shall I be the one to interview her? Your opinion might be biased.”

“No, I want to do it,” Hajin says at once, then stops, realizing she must have sounded impolite. “Please let me do it, sanggung.”

It takes her a long time to realize what she’d just said, and it’s only because of Lady Oh’s amused expression that she finally does. Hajin wants to slap herself for the slip. “That is… eomeoni! I’m sorry, it just sort of slipped. I don’t know what I was thinking, I-“

To her surprise, Lady Oh chuckles. “It’s good that you’re taking this role so seriously, but you forget that I won’t be the sanggung. I’m just here to provide you with guidance and advice.”

“Ah, right,” Hajin forces a laugh, grasping at this excuse. “Forgetful me.”

“Shall we begin?” Lady Oh asks, taking a file and telling the assistant to send in the first two ladies.

They spend half the morning interviewing possibilities, learning more about their background, asking them random questions to test their knowledge, and gauging their personalities. One applicant seemed to know a lot, but her skin was marred by blemishes, and Lady Oh had been clear
on that point: they would be selling beauty products; their employees must look the part. Another one was blessed with a pretty face and a very pleasing, humble personality, but she had failed to answer any of the questions thrown at her. Out of the twelve she had spoken to thus far, Hajin had selected five of them as possible employees, which was a lot compared to Lady Oh’s one.

“Since this is but a trial period, we will be hiring three at the very least, five at most,” Lady Oh had informed her earlier. “Apart from a pleasing personality, they must dress well, speak well and look well. They need to know how to carry themselves in public and in private. Additionally, those chosen will have their skills tested later in the afternoon. The trade test should narrow down our options even further.”

Hajin smiles at the lady before her. “Well, that’s it for now. Thank you for coming. Next please?”

The door opens to reveal a young woman clumsily making her way into the room. She has a violin case slung across one shoulder, a big, stuffed shoulder bag on another, and her blouse shows signs of dirt and paint stains. Even her jeans look frayed, and her shoes are splattered with dried mud.

Hajin almost groans in dismay, trying to ignore Lady Oh’s disapproving stare from somewhere beside her.

“I’m so sorry,” Woohee says, panting from her efforts. Her face is flushed as she takes a seat and sets her things on the floor. “I’m an artist and I had to rush over from school to make it in time, so I wasn’t able to change out of…” she falters, fingering self-consciously at her stained blouse. “I do have a change of clothes in my bag. Can I maybe go change for a few seconds? I won’t take long, I promise.”

Hajin clears her throat and nods. “Of course. Make yourself presentable. The bathroom’s beyond that door, on the right. I’ll give you two minutes.” She hopes two minutes would be enough. She daren’t give her more than that, for fear of deepening Lady Oh’s disapproval.

To their surprise, however, Woohee returns exactly two minutes later, dressed immaculately in a simple cream-colored dress and white shoes. Her hair is tied up and swishes pleasantly behind her as she retakes her seat. She’s even managed to put on a bit of make-up.

“Good morning,” she greets with a small smile, looking self-conscious. Beads of sweat had already begun to reform on her brow, and she was still panting slightly. Presumably, she had been running only minutes before arriving. “My name is Kim Woohee. I am a working student.”

Hajin nods, smiling as warmly as she can manage to make her feel at ease. “It’s nice to meet you, Woohee. How old are you?”

“I am 24 years old,” she replies.

“And why do you want to work with us?”

“I am interested in all forms of art.” Woohee straightens up eagerly in her seat. “I took up Fine Arts in university and am currently studying music. I’m also a dance instructor.”

Hajin lifts her eyebrows in surprise. “You seem very busy.”

“I am, but don’t worry... I only have classes on the weekends and I’ve already resigned from my job as a dance instructor,” she assures hurriedly. “I just had to go to school today to practice for a performance. I’m perfectly free to work on weekdays.”

Hajin nods and can’t help asking, “Why would you quit being a dance instructor?”
"Well, for one thing… the pay wasn’t much,” she admits sheepishly. “Although I do enjoy teaching… but it was getting harder and harder to get by."

“And why cosmetics? Do you have any background knowledge on make-up and herbs?” Hajin asks tentatively, skimming through Woohee’s resume in search of a degree or a certificate of some kind.

“I haven’t received any formal training, but I do have some knowledge,” Woohee says firmly. “My grandfather used to own an apothecary before my father took over, then he turned it into something similar to what you’re offering now… except it never hit off and didn’t get as much attention as we’d hoped it would, so we had to close down about ten years ago…”

Hajin flashes her a sly smile. “Are you here to get ideas?”

“No, of course not,” Woohee says hastily, her cheeks coloring slightly. “I really want to work here. I feel like it’ll bring me closer to my father. He died a few years after our shop, and my memories of him are becoming fuzzy. I want to remember him.”

“Oh, I had no idea, I… I’m very sorry to hear about…” Hajin says, flustered, flipping the pages in her hand hurriedly to see what else she can ask about. She clears her throat. “Would you be willing to answer a few technical questions?”

Woohee takes a deep breath and straightens up in her seat, looking like she was getting ready for battle. Then she nods and braces herself.

“Can you give me any three natural ingredients that we add to soap that can help brighten the skin?”

“Uh… my father used to put apricot seeds, chamomile, and pears… I think persimmons might help as well…” she answers, unsurely.

Hajin narrows her eyes playfully. “Are you asking me?”

“No. Persimmons can definitely help,” Woohee says at once.

Hajin stares at her for a few moments before finally nodding. “Persimmons are known to be anti-aging and possess a lot of antioxidants. A healthy liver means healthy skin. It’s the leaves that help lighten skin pigmentation.”

Woohee slowly exhales the breath she’d been holding.

Hajin considers her next question. “If I were to ask you to make me a facial mask out of ingredients you can find at home… what would you use and why?”

“Oh, I usually use a mixture of egg whites to tighten my pores, honey and sometimes olive oil to moisturize my skin, and fruits, if I can have them, because of the vitamins they possess… usually mashed up grapes. Or cucumbers. I’d use bananas, but they’re more expensive. Well, fruits really are expensive these days…”

Hajin smiles in satisfaction. “That’ll be all, then. We’ll be having a trade test later in the afternoon. Please stand by for further instructions.”

The day passes by swiftly enough. Hajin had lunch with Lady Oh at a nearby restaurant, and halfway through their meal, her cousin Myunghee suddenly showed up looking for her to ask her how she was, saying So had told her where to look.
“You could have just called me, unnie!” Hajin makes room for her at the table, flustered but extremely pleased to see her again. “Have you met So’s stepmother?”

“Yes, we’ve met,” Lady Oh nods politely to Myunghee. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you. Your boyfriend… isn’t he the brother of that young lady Myeongsun’s trying to force on So?”

“Ah, yes,” Myunghee nods awkwardly. “But as far as I’m aware, they aren’t on good terms. Myself, I haven’t spoken to her in a very long time. That announcement was as much a shock to us as it was to everyone else.”

“And you and Hajin are friends? This is a small world.”

“It is,” Hajin agrees, wanting to diffuse the sudden tension at their little table. “We just found out we were related.”

Lady Oh’s eyebrows shoot up at that. “Really? What a coincidence.”

“We were going to make ourselves known to you at the party, but things happened that prevented us from doing so. I sincerely apologize,” Myunghee addresses Lady Oh with a somber expression. Hajin can’t help but notice the way she’s fidgeting with her purse. She looks uncomfortable, like she has something to say but she doesn’t know how to go about saying it.

“We’re interviewing applicants today, so I’m a little busy…” Hajin says, slightly apologetic, then adds hastily because Myunghee looks horrified at the thought of interrupting them, “but I’m perfectly free tonight! Unless you have plans?”

Myunghee looks relieved. “No, I don’t… I’ve nothing better to do either, actually…”

“Let’s have dinner together then,” Hajin grins, feeling excited at the thought of spending more time with her, like old times. She wonders if Chaeryung’s free as well? She turns to Lady Oh instead. “Eomeoni, you…?”

Lady Oh purses her lips. “Maybe another time as I have some things that I need to take care of first. Besides, you young ones will enjoy yourselves better without me.”

Hajin leans over the table to smile impishly at her. “If I schedule it with your secretary in advance… you can’t say no, right?”

“I’ll say no if I don’t want to,” Lady Oh says flatly, but there’s a small smile on her lips.

After lunch, they bring the remaining applicants to the topmost floor, where a series of practical tests had been prepared in advance earlier in the day. Hajin and Lady Oh watch carefully as applicant after applicant performs the required tasks diligently – from safely mixing lye with water, to creating the perfect foundation to match a commissioned model’s skin tone, to the correct way of extracting oil from different sources, and much more.

Apart from an unfortunate incident resulting in one applicant getting a lye burn and having to leave for further emergency treatment, nothing too spectacular happened. No one had managed to get perfect marks, so Lady Oh tallied all their results and hired the top three on the spot.

“Really?” Woohee asks dumbly, staring at Lady Oh in shock. “I’m in?”

“If you had arrived a little more gracefully, you would have gotten top marks,” Lady Oh’s lips curl in what Woohee considers to be a smile. “Congratulations. Your head lady will brief you on what you’ll be doing over the next few days, so pay attention. For the rest, thank you for your time and
efforts. We have prepared some snacks for everyone in the hall. Do take something before you leave.”

“You did well, I’m impressed,” Hajin says to a beaming Woohee.

“Thank you so much, miss… um… how should I address you?”

Hajin looks at the three new hires. “I think you’re all familiar with the concept by now. We will be opening a modern-day Damiwon, which means that at least within the premises, you’ll have to address me properly as your senior court lady. Outside, however, you’re perfectly free to call me Hajin. We will have much time to get better acquainted with each other over the next few weeks, so for now, rest up. Have a piece of cake or a sandwich or two, and report here tomorrow at half-past eight to complete your hiring process. You will be given temporary company IDs on your way out, please don’t forget to bring them with you tomorrow.”

“I can’t thank you enough for this chance, unnie,” Woohee says to Hajin as the other two leave to join the rest of the group by the snack table. “I really needed this. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

Hajin beams, barely able to contain her excitement at the thought of setting Woohee up with a clueless Baek Ah one of these days. There’ll be plenty of opportunity for it… and what a coincidence that she’s as much into art as he is! Hajin can hardly wait to share her plans with So.

“You’re a hard worker, you’re nice, and you’re smart. I’m sure we’ll get along just fine,” Hajin says bracingly.

“I hope so.” There’s a sudden determined look in her eyes that captures Hajin’s curiosity, but Woohee doesn’t share those particular thoughts. Instead, she hitches on a carefree smile and bows low. “I have to go back to practice. Thank you very much, sanggung.”

It's almost seven when Myunghee and Hajin bid Lady Oh farewell. As they go through the building, Hajin can't help but glance around in search of a familiar face... but there's no one else she knows, not even Mu or Won or Chaeryung. She'd texted So earlier to tell him about dinner with Myunghee, but he hasn't replied, presumably still busy with whatever it is he and Wook are doing.

"Ah, aigoo! How could I have forgotten?" Myunghee suddenly exclaims, stopping dead in her tracks and grimacing. She turns to Hajin with an apologetic look on her face, "I had something I wanted to give you, but I left it at the apartment. My grandfather kept an old photo album from his youth, and I had the photos copied for you. I thought your parents might want to see. There are pictures of your grandfather, from when he was a baby to after he graduated from college."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful!" Hajin says brightly. "I'm sure my father would like that very much. He has so few pictures of his father... myself, I've only seen the one picture of my grandparents on their wedding day."

"Is your grandmother still alive?" Myunghee asks. "My grandparents are both gone."

"Very much so! I'm sure she'd love to see those pictures, too."

"Great," Myunghee grins, hailing a cab. "Then shall we go get it? We can just make our own dinner like last time as well. I bought fresh strawberries just this morning and I'm sure I have some cream... I also found a really good slice of beef in the market. We can cook that and just make do with the rest."
Hajin readily agrees to the suggestion. They chat happily the whole ride to the apartment, and Hajin can't help but wonder how much more fun Myunghee would have been in the past if only her health and status had allowed her such freedom. Her present-day cousin smiled and laughed easily, retaining that same gentle, reassuring countenance that had always brought Hajin comfort in Goryeo and made her feel safe.

"My mother wants to have a barbecue one of these days," she says as they walk the length of the hallway towards Myunghee and Wook's room. "It'll be the perfect time to meet up!"

"That sounds lovely, indeed," Myunghee agrees with bright-eyed enthusiasm. "I'll inform my parents at once. Do you have a specific date for..." she trails off, and Hajin knows why. Myunghee swipes the keycard again and again, but nothing happens. Confused, she mumbles, "Is it busted?"

"Maybe... it's already open?" Hajin suggests apprehensively, putting a hand on the knob and attempting to twist it.

Myunghee shakes her head. "I'm sure I locked it before I left. I-"

They both grow silent when the door swings open. Trying to be optimistic, Hajin says brightly, "Maybe we just didn't hear the click because we were laughing too loudly."

"Maybe." Myunghee clears her throat and turns to Hajin with an attempt at a smile. "Hajin-ah, you stay here, alright? I'll just go in and get it..."

Panic grips Hajin as she grabs hold of Myunghee's arm and pulls her away from the door. "You're not going in there alone. We could call a guard. We should call for security. If there's anyone in there who shouldn't be..."

Myunghee opens her mouth to say something, but it's not her voice Hajin hears... it's someone else's. Someone she had never wanted to see nor hear from again. "Ah, I thought it might be you."

Hajin freezes, her breath caught in her throat.

"What are you doing here? How did you get in?" Myunghee demands. Slowly, she positions herself in front of Hajin, a physical barrier separating her from Yeonhwa. "You should have told me you were coming."

Yeonhwa lifts an eyebrow. "I told my brother. That should be enough for you. Why, did he not tell you?"

"No, he didn't. I was under the impression he'd be busy tonight. Did you not bother to wait for a reply before barging in here?"

"I didn't need to. I only came to return this," She holds up a keycard, which she thrusts into Myunghee's hands. "I was just about to leave, actually, so it's just as well you came."

"You could have returned this at the front desk," Myunghee snaps testily.

Yeonhwa's laugh is curt, her tone condescending. "Really, we haven't seen each other in months... perhaps even a year! Even if it is in your upbringing to lower your courtesy to people you only see on certain occasions, shouldn't you make a consideration for me, being your boyfriend's sister? We can even grab a coffee if you'd like. Catch up, you know? You can tell me all about your problems, and I'll tell you mine... just like old times."

"My cousin's with me. Maybe some other time."
"I don't believe we've met," Yeonhwa's voice is sweet as honey, and her smile even more so. "You look oddly familiar, though. Have I seen you somewhere?"

Hajin doesn't trust herself to speak. She's not sure if she wants to bolt, scream, or scratch out Yeonhwa's eyes. She hasn't changed. She's still the same princess who used to enjoy watching me suffer... the same princess who took a stick to my back and would have continued to do so until I bled.

"Maybe you're seeing things," Hajin says with an equally sweet smile. "You do look quite tired. The dark circles around your eyes are telltale signs. I can help you with those, for a fee, of course."

Yeonhwa looks taken aback. One dainty hand reaches up to feel her eyes, which glower at Hajin for a moment before turning back to Myunghee. "No one would deny she's your cousin, dear sister. A few lessons on manners won't go amiss, if you don't mind me saying."

"Was there anything in particular you wanted?" Myunghee asks. "We don't have all evening."

"Of course, you must be busy." Yeonhwa's patronizing tone makes Hajin's skin crawl unpleasantly. "I shouldn't have bothered coming at all. I was only going to extend my invitations to my bachelorette party next month, but I can see you're too busy to attend anyway. Do forgive me for intruding," she smiles broadly then, though it never quite reaches her eyes, "this was a lapse in judgment on my part. Please, enjoy your evening."

She turns to leave then, but Myunghee stops her with a question, "Bachelorette party next month?"

Yeonhwa turns, affecting surprise. "Why, yes. Didn't you know? I thought you of all people would have known, considering you're handling my fiance's PR."

"You mean, So?" Myunghee says with a frown. "You're getting married?"

Yeonhwa really does laugh then, a confused look on her face. "Really, have you been sick for the past two days? It's been all over the news. I'm going to have to talk to So about changing his PR team. You're laughably lacking."

"He hasn't proposed to you yet," Myunghee says with such certainty, Yeonhwa's smile falters slightly. "What makes you think he's going to marry you?"

"The deal's been signed," Yeonhwa informs her crisply. "Both sides have consented. What's to stop it from happening? Business deals like this aren't easy to break off, you know. Oh! But of course you wouldn't know. I'm sorry, I'm always overestimating your abilities."

"He's in a relationship with another woman. Have you no consideration at all?" Myunghee surreptitiously reaches behind her to squeeze Hajin's cold hand.

"He's been in relationships before," Yeonhwa shrugs indifferently, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "If by 'relationship' you mean dinner, a movie, casual sex and the works, everyone has that these days. You and my brother are the only ones I know who've stuck this long together without any real plans for the future. Maybe you ought to reassess your own life before you start..."
judging mine." With a smirk, Yeonhwa turns and leaves without another backward glance.

Myunghee's hand is as cold as Hajin's, who wonders through her shock whether Yeonhwa's words had struck a chord with her cousin somehow... She wants to comfort her, but her body's as numb as her mind.

Slowly, Myunghee unfreezes and turns around to face her, a small smile making its way across her face. "Shall we go in? We still have to cook, and I have to show you those pictures."

Hajin manages a nod, but her throat's too tight to utter anything other than a murmur.

"Don't listen to her," Myunghee says as she locks the door behind them. "She's a bully. She knows how to make other people feel bad with just a few words. It's some twisted talent she has that she uses to her advantage whenever she can."

"What she said... 'both sides have consented'... has So's family agreed to it?" Hajin manages to ask.

Myunghee shakes her head, taking a rectangular box from a nearby table and handing it over. "She probably just means his mother, and that's something everyone knows by now. Their family business is a whole lot more complicated, Hajin-ah... CEO Wang Geon loves all his sons, but he wants his eldest, Mu, to take over for him once he retires. He's been stubborn about it for years now; it's caused quite a controversy. He won't readily agree to any of his ex-wife's plans, not if they undermine his own." She reaches out to squeeze Hajin's shoulder. "Like I said, don't listen to Yeonhwa. She just wanted to unnerve me. She has a roundabout way of insulting people that she knows drives me up the wall. But if you're this uneasy, just call So... he'll tell you what you need to hear." Myunghee's familiar kind smile warms the numbness Hajin's feeling and she finds herself smiling back.

"Okay."

But when Myunghee leaves to prepare dinner and Hajin gathers up the courage to make the call, she's disheartened to find that he's unavailable. She tries several more times before giving up, instead deciding to send him a text to tell him to call her as soon as he's able.

She spends the next two hours with Myunghee, trying to stay upbeat for her cousin's sake, while discreetly checking her phone for a call or a message from So - anything to ease her nerves. But even when she's lying in her bed, her eyes droopy and her body tired from the events of the day, there's nothing. With a sigh, she turns off her bedside lamp and buries beneath her covers, imagining the many ways she could make Yeonhwa pay for the atrocities she'd committed in her past life, each succeeding image less likely to happen the previous, but no less satisfying. With a small, amused smile, Hajin closes her eyes and enters into a dreamless sleep.
The Beginning of the End

The missed calls on her phone are enough to jolt Hajin fully into consciousness and out of bed. It's still early in the morning, and she deduces he either must have just woken up or is still getting ready for the day.

She calls him at once, frowning when the automated voice tells her he's unavailable. He always makes sure his phone is charged, and unless there's anything particularly important going on, he always leaves it on. Is he perhaps talking to someone else?

Hajin tries a few more times before deciding to delay the call for a few minutes in favor of breakfast. She makes her way to the bathroom to splash some water onto her face to get rid of the last vestiges of sleep, thinking... He had called some time after midnight. What time had he gone to sleep? She wondered if he was okay - if the problem had turned out to be much bigger than they'd anticipated, or if he had gotten caught up by something else entirely.

Once downstairs, she finds she's alone at home, her father having already gone off to work, and her mother having left her a note on the fridge door telling her she would be visiting an old friend and wouldn't be back until much later in the afternoon, leaving Hajin with absolutely no idea as to what to do to pass the time on her rest day.

They had left her some food on the table, though. She takes a seat and starts piling bits of food onto her plate. It's as she's biting into a hard boiled egg that she gets an idea.

She gets up and goes around the kitchen preparing the things she needs - slicing up cucumbers and carrots, frying two more eggs along with some meat. She also cooks rice, mixing in a bit of seasoning while it cools down, and procures a fresh pack of kim from the pantry. She smiles as she works, glad of having something to do, of being able to help him in some way.

"I know you said you liked beef, but we only have pork at the moment," she mumbles as she lines the ingredients carefully onto the spread-out rice. "Anyway, as long as it's made with love, you should appreciate it."

Love.

Immediate warmth rushes to her cheeks, making her uncomfortable. But of course she loves him. She's known it for years... she's written it down in letters, conveyed it through her actions.

So why can't she just say it?

"Aish, Hajin, you're hopeless," she mumbles with a scowl, digging the base of her palms into her eyelids. She purses her lips in thought, and in sudden inspiration takes a scoop of warm rice and places it in one of the compartments of the lunchbox she was preparing. After flattening it out, she proceeds to cut off strips of seaweed, to form a single word:

愛

Love

There's a pang in her chest as she gazes at the character. Her hand itches, remembering the feel of a slender brush between her fingers, the smell of new hanji suddenly so vivid in her imagination that she can almost feel herself smoothing out the pages, as she writes, and writes... and writes some more. She had written for days – every day until she no longer could. And everyday she had told
him she loved him, hoping he could find it in him to forgive her.

A misunderstanding. Something so small and simple had kept him away. She could have had hours, days more with him – to talk, to tell him what she never could, to show him what he might have forgotten or grown to doubt in the months they had spent apart...

She grimaces at the memory and shakes her head. There's no use thinking of the "what if's" or the "if only's" anymore. They only serve to upset her. All she can do now is make the best out of the present.

"Omo!" she gasps, seeing the time. She hastily finishes her second roll of *kimbap* and slices it up, neatly arranging the pieces to fit into the largest compartment. She puts in the remaining strips of egg and pork, plus a side of *kimchi* and pickled radish to complete her surprise.

Satisfied, she takes a pen and paper from the drawer to scribble down a short note, which she sticks onto the cover, and goes back up to her room to get changed.

"Miss!" The guard on duty seems genuinely surprised to see her.

She recognizes him and walks over to sign her name in the logbook. "Good morning," she greets, glancing curiously around the place. "What's happening? Why are there so many people in the lobby?"

He looks even more surprised by the question. "Haven't you seen the news, Miss?" He lowers his voice. "It first appeared in the newspaper this morning... and now it's on the TV."

"News? What news?"

She didn't think it was possible for his eyes to go any wider, but he proved her wrong. "But you and... shouldn't you know about it?"

"About what?" She was losing patience with the conversation, not least of all because she was starting to feel a sense of dread. The missed calls late last night, his unavailability...

Before he can answer, a woman in a suit approaches them, her manner brisk and slightly intimidating. "Has Mr. Wang left or not? We've been waiting an hour and no one seems to want to tell us anything."

Hajin tries to look inconspicuous. Are all these people here to see So? What for? And has he really already left? But it was so early still...

"I apologize, but I cannot answer your question," the guard says grimly, shutting the logbook and turning to Hajin. "Miss, if you already have a keycard, you may proceed upstairs."

Hajin nods and grabs her things. Her head bowed, she quickly makes her way past the crowd of reporters to the elevators, where she slips in and jabs So's floor number, her mind abuzz with a million different questions. What had happened? Was everything alright? Was he alright? Was it something to do with the company? With his engagement?

The moment the elevator doors ping open, she zooms through the corridors to his place and just as she’s about to swipe the card he’d given her mere days ago into the slot, the door opens from the
inside, causing her to jump away in surprise.

Jung’s stifled scream might have been funny if it weren’t for Hajin’s nerves.

“Noona!” he exclaims in a strangled voice, clutching at his chest.

“Jung-ah!” She stands on tiptoe to peek past his shoulders.

“Hyung’s not in,” he informs her with an apologetic grimace, sidestepping to give her space enough to enter. “I don’t think he came home last night… or if he did, he must have left really early this morning.”

“What?” Even though she’d heard Jung clearly, she can’t help glancing around in search of him – his hair, his broad back, his strong arms, his smile… anything that might indicate his presence.

“He called this morning to ask me to get some things for him. I was just about to leave, actually, when you…” Jung hesitates as he closes the door. “Would you like some coffee? No, scratch that… perhaps something more relaxing. Maybe tea? There should be some teabags here somewhere…”

“Jung,” she cuts him off, anxiety plain on her features as she gazes up at him. “What’s happened? Why are there so many people in the lobby, and why didn’t So return? Where was he last night?”

His initial hesitation only makes her more nervous. “Here,” he says finally, handing her a copy of the day’s paper. “I got it this morning and… well… I’ll go look for that tea.”

Hajin easily finds what she’s supposed to be looking for. There’s a blown up image of So, looking resplendent in a suit, beside another man she doesn’t recognize, and as her eyes scan through the article dedicated to the Wang Group and their upcoming joint-venture with the J&J Group, her insides completely abandon her. She feels hollow. Scared.

What So, Baek Ah and Wook had been working on to verify and conceal for the past week… everything was…

“Someone must have leaked it,” Jung says with a scowl as he comes out of the kitchen. He hands her a cup of fresh milk and settles himself down beside her. “Sorry. It turns out I don’t know my way around my brother’s kitchen, only his fridge.”

She accepts it with a mumbled thanks. “Wook-nim said these were all over the internet, though… that it was only a matter of time before the news outlets…” she falters when he shakes his head.

“They verified last night that the articles are fake,” he tells her seriously. “At least, most of them are. Some are half-truths, others real scandals that had happened, but most are definitely fake, and they should have been removed from the internet years ago. It’s not unusual in business… any little thing a chaebol does is largely scrutinized. The scandals especially get blown out of proportion. Scandals sell, even if they’re but mere speculations… good news, not so much.”

“They treat your lives like you’re celebrities,” she says, indignant. “People don’t really read this kind of thing anyway, do they?”

“You’ll be surprised by what people read and believe… or gossip about,” he smiles wryly as he answers. “Public perception is very important, noona, especially in business. Already, there are protest groups outside the office, crying about animal rights and human rights. It was all over the TV this morning. Most people won’t even bother to verify the authenticity of the articles, and even if we say they’re fake, how many will believe us? They’ll just say we’re making excuses.” He rubs
his brow with a sigh. “You know what the latest trend is on social media?”

“What?” she asks, wondering if she really wanted to know the answer to that.

“In light of the animal abuse charges, people are saying our products are being tested on animals, and that they’re not really organic and safe to use… they’re speculating we have cages upon cages of animals stored in the office for experimentation. They’re using images from father’s renovation last year as proof… when he added that floor just for that woman.” He shakes his head. “It’s crazy, but some people actually believe it!”

“But the articles are against the J&J Group… why would the reporters and the public pin them all on your family?” Hajin asks, more than a little confused.

“The article in the paper was phrased to make it seem like hyung knew everything beforehand,” he explains. “What’s worse… Baek Ah-hyung told me this morning that the reason they finished up late last night was because they had to look for some techs to remove all the related articles from the internet, but the techs weren’t fast enough… so now the media has the perfect excuse to tell the public that we’re covering our tracks by deleting the so-called ‘evidence’. It’s unreal how fast everything is happening. The timing is just…” He shakes his head in disbelief. “Everything, everyone seems to be against us.”

Hajin groans, trying to digest all of this.

“What did So want you to get for him?” she asks instead. He was her priority, and he must be under a lot of stress right now. Her heart goes out to him, and she wishes more than ever that she could help him in some way.

But what can she do? She has no power, no sway over the media… if anything, she might just end up getting in the way of things. Or making everything worse.

Jung snaps out of his dark thoughts and pulls up a bag. “Just some essentials,” he replies. “I don’t think he intends on coming home for the next few days… maybe even weeks. They’re all having a hell of a time trying to salvage the situation. I don’t usually involve myself in affairs of the business… but I think I might have to lend a hand this time. Everything’s fallen on hyung’s shoulders. This had been his idea, after all, and it’s his name and picture on the newspaper… and because of that fiasco at mother’s party, with his engagement and then running off with you… let’s just say he’s become more of a hot topic than usual. And he’s not exactly happy about it.”

No, he wouldn’t be.

“What are you going to do?” she asks tentatively.

He smiles a small smile. “Whatever I can. I might even ask for mother’s help. I don’t think we can count on father this time… it’s the perfect opportunity he’s been waiting for to get the board to agree on Mu-hyung taking over after him… but he can’t be too happy about the situation either. If we don’t handle this properly, there’ll be little left for Mu-hyung to take over anyway, if at all.”

“That bad?” Her voice is small and weak to her own ears.

His smile widens and he claps her back bracingly. He’s strong and almost knocks the wind completely out of her. “Don’t worry. My second brother’s smart. He hasn’t come across a problem he hasn’t been able to solve yet. I have complete faith in him, and so should you.”

She wonders about that, even though she knows full well how capable So is. Even in Goryeo, he had been a man of his words, a man of action and quick thinking. But even then he hadn’t been
able to handle the combined pressure of the throne and his family. He had cracked under the strain, the crack widening and forcing them eventually apart. Would he really be alright by himself?

*No, that’s not right… he’s not alone anymore.*

As Hajin returns Jung’s friendly smile, she feels reassured. So has his brothers and his cousins supporting him now – with him rather than against him. And he has her. She was determined to stick by him through and through this time.

She nods and holds up the food she had packed and brought with her. “Then… can you do me a little favor?”

_Eat properly, and don’t forget to sleep._

_Rest well, when you can, so you stay healthy._

_Try not to have bad dreams, either._

_I’ll wait for you._

_Fighting, Pyeha! ^^_

As So reads the square note on the parcel Jung had brought with him, he smiles – his first genuine smile that day.

"Are you telling me you actually understand that? It’s written in _Hanja_, except for ‘fighting’," Jung challenges, eyes widening in surprise as So chuckles. "When and where did you learn to read that?"

"You should have told me, hyung, I’ve been wanting to learn _Hanja_ for years now," Baek Ah admonishes with a pout even as he flips through mountains of paperwork. "There’s a certain beauty in how the strokes are so fluid and complicated~"

He’s rudely interrupted by Jung's gasp of delight. So and Baek Ah both turn in time to see him reverently holding up a slice of _kimbap_. "Ooh, these look good. If having a girlfriend means getting handmade lunches, maybe I should think about getting one for myself, after all!"

"Yah!" So protests, grabbing the lunchbox and holding it out of reach before Baek Ah could reach in. "She made these for me. Get yourselves your own lunchboxes."

"Ah, hyung, I’ve been reading papers since last night," Baek Ah whines. "There are so many things we need to do, who knows when we can eat again?"

"So have some food delivered," So suggests crisply, eyeing his younger brother evilly.

Jung smacks his lips in apparent satisfaction. "Maybe Hajin has a friend."
She ponders over the new note she had written for him as she absentmindedly wanders the streets. *Did I say too little? Should I have said more?*

She shakes her head, “No, no… there was limited space to write anyway, stop thinking about it. The food alone should be enough to… ah!” She stops walking to smack her palm against her forehead with a groan. “I should have told him to eat all of it!” Grabbing her phone out of her pocket, she’s about to send him a message, when it beeps:

*I will. Thank you. 爱*

His message is short, as it usually is, but she finds herself playing the words over and over again in her mind. What did she expect? Maybe an “*I love you*”? Or an “*I miss you*”? But she can’t really complain… after all, she hadn’t had the courage to write those down, either.

*Never mind,* she thinks, plastering on a wide smile as she makes her way to the bus stop. *It’s only been a few days. The good thing about technology is that people are never as far away as they seem. He’s only a call or a video chat away. Oh! Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. I still need to look for him.* The thought of having that to do, no matter how trivial, brightens her spirit. *Everything’s alright, Hajin, you’ll see… everything will be alright.*

She didn’t know… couldn’t have known… and it’ll be a long time before she understands why it’s the last time she’ll hear anything directly from him for weeks.
With You

Chapter Summary

She doesn’t respond, but she’s no longer trying to pull away from him either. Her whole body shakes whenever she draws breath, and not for the first time, he wonders at the wisdom behind his reasoning.

In the end… perhaps he had been selfish in forcing her to stay out of harm’s way.

The days drag on, and Hajin hears news of So only through his family, who always seem to find some time to visit her – sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs, sometimes as a group. She suspects it’s So’s way of making sure she has company and is up-to-date on the latest happenings, but as he hasn’t messaged or called her, she can’t be sure. And she’s too embarrassed – not to mention sour about the distance he’s keeping – to ask.

She can’t help the resentment. She knows he’s busy. She knows what he’s doing is important… but it’s not like she was asking for hours of his time. A few minutes, a few words were enough to reassure her of his well-being. Reassurance was all she wanted.

Most of all, she hates that she’s too cowardly to call him first; afraid she’ll disturb him somehow and end up feeling unwanted. She had sometimes felt that way in Goryeo… especially in the days following his marriage to Yeonhwa. Those had been the worst. Not only had he actively avoided seeking her out, but he had closed himself off; acted on his own. It wasn’t until a week had passed that he began eating with her again. And she had been happy, so happy to see him, only to have her spirits dashed by the strained, silent dinners they shared… and in the little room she had been afforded, the silence, in stark contrast to their usual chatter, had been deafening.

Until now, she’s not entirely sure he’d done it to protect her… or to punish her.

Today’s lunch was better than usual, with Jung, Eun and Baek Ah to keep her company. As before, she had invited Woohee to tag along, hoping to spark a possible relationship between her and Baek Ah, but her friend had declined again, opting instead to eat with the rest of the ladies in their workplace. Hajin didn’t want to force her for fear of arousing suspicion.

Fun, curious, engaging, and smart, Woohee was just as easy to get along with as she had been in Goryeo. She and Hajin became quick friends, especially since they both shared similar tastes in music. On their break time, Woohee would teach her how to strum a guitar, and they would sing songs together – classic songs, new songs, foreign songs. They could sing anything but rap music and beatboxing.

On one of Hajin’s weekend day-offs, Woohee had actually invited her to come to her university, to sit in on one of her music classes. The professor had invited some elementary school kids over for music lessons, to give his own university students a chance to demonstrate their years of acquired skills and knowledge.

“Your songs make me sleepy,” a young boy from their assigned group had drawled, looking
The boy’s eyes narrowed at being called “a little boy”, but he chose to ignore it in favor of his request, “Music by Big Bang hyungs.”

Hajin remembers her jaw dropping and Woohee’s lip twitching. Not to be easily outdone, Woohee had straightened up magnificently and said, “Oh, that’s what you want, is it? Fine. You can do the beatboxing, while we sing. What shall we sing, then? One of their older songs? I know! Haru Haru. That’s a classic. Nice, catchy melody and a lot of rapping and beatboxing opportunities.”

“I don’t know how to beatbox,” the boy protested.

“Oh, a pity.” Woohee tutted, pouting mock-apologetically. “Looks like you’ll have to content yourself with being sleepy.”

“What about TVXQ hyungs?” he suggested instead.

Hajin couldn’t help it … she burst out laughing. “And who’s going to sing Changmin oppa’s high notes?”

“Let’s sing together,” Woohee suggested brightly, testing out the sound on her guitar. “I’ll need to look for some music sheets first but…”

They began singing an acoustic version of Mirotic, a classic from almost a decade ago, the little people joining in at the chorus, the only part they seemed to know. Hajin thought the lyrics were a little too mature for such young children, but then decided that people tend to not bother understanding what they were singing, anyway.

Finally, the part they had all been waiting for approached. Everybody had fun trying to do the rap, their voices overlapping each others’, children and adults, so out-of-sync and sounding like excitable chickens that they couldn’t help but giggle.

“You know you got it-“

Woohee stopped strumming. The room exploded.

“YEAHHHHH-ha-ha-ha!”

Hajin couldn’t continue for laughing too much and everyone in the group joined her, each child taking turns to see who could belt out the highest, best sounding note. With every unsuccessful try, the two women laughed harder, crumpling into each other and clutching at the stitch in their sides, until finally, Woohee’s amused professor came over, trying but failing to look stern.

“There are other classes going on around the school. Please be considerate about the noise you are making,” he warned.

“Ye, seonsaeng-nim ,” Woohee said at once, arranging her expression into a more serious one. But the moment he walked over to another group, they started giggling again.

The children had been a whole lot more cooperative after that.
“Baek Ah-nim,” Hajin calls from across the table. “You promised to come visit me at work sometime. I really want your opinion on the fragrances and colors we’re making.”

He smiles a sheepish smile. “I know, but I’ve been preoccupied. I’ll try my best next time, I promise. Really!” he adds because she’s looking skeptical.

“I’ll really look for you this time,” she threatens. “I’ll call you nonstop.”

“Noona,” he says seriously, leaning across the table to stare into her eyes. “I’ll be there.”

Satisfied, she proceeds to dump the shrimp into their hot pot.

“But how have you been?” Jung asks her, looking both curious and cautious.

She shrugs. “Good. Fine. Same as always. Why do you ask?”

It’s Eun who speaks. “Hajin-ah…” He has on such a serious expression that Hajin stops stirring to listen. “I hear you haven’t spoken to or seen So-hyung in a long time…”

“Hyung!” Jung exclaims, mortified. He tries to hush Eun up, but the latter had anticipated the move and easily evades by ducking sideways and staying that way.

Hajin tries to sound like it matters little, even though her cheeks are red and a lump has formed in the base of her throat. “Yes. I understand he’s busy, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s very busy. We all are,” Baek Ah glares a warning at his older cousin.

Eun ignores him, too, his eyebrows furrowing in concern. “Even if he’s busy, shouldn’t he find time to check up on you? Send a message or call? Anything?”

“Well, I did receive a bouquet of roses yesterday at work. It was anonymous, but as there’s no one else who would send it, I just naturally assumed it had been from him.” The roses were a shocking pink color; they were beautiful. She had checked both Google and Naver for the symbolism of pink roses and both searches came out with the same result: love, gratitude, appreciation. There had even been a “Please believe me” in one result.

Believe in what? Hajin still has no idea. She had waited all night for him to call or send a message – any kind of explanation, which never came.

Then she thought maybe she was overanalyzing things and the roses had been sent just to cheer her up. She had blamed her parents - their penchant for finding meaning in every little thing seems to finally be rubbing off on her. She also thought maybe she was just desperate for any sort of message from him to explain this sudden silent treatment.

It was easier to secretly blame her poor parents.

“Anyway, I have been curious about what you’ve been doing with aunty!” Baek Ah interjects loudly enough to capture Hajin’s attention. “We all thought it was daebak when you suggested receiving the customers’ complaints yourselves and offering them some free lessons to learn about your natural herbs and remedies, in light of the recent controversies.”

Jung nods emphatically. “The responses on social media have been mostly good. Hardly anyone protests about animal abuse anymore. At least not right outside our building.”
“It made perfect sense to do it,” Hajin says modestly. “How else do you curb such a negative reaction? Words weren’t enough, so we had to show them we meant what we said.”

“And now you have customers lining up to be taught!” Baek Ah concludes with a grin. “They must really like you a lot.”

Hajin laughs, embarrassed. “I have a team. I can’t take all the credit.”

“But you should. It was your idea, and it’s through your guidance that your team has become so adept in such a short time. He was right about you,” Baek Ah winks, and Hajin knows he means So. “You’re very talented, noona. He was right in recommending you for this task.”

The praise warms her, especially after knowing it came from So originally.

“Well, then I guess I’ll just have to say thank you,” she says, handing out pairs of chopsticks. “Shall we dig in?”

It’s as she’s fishing out some mushrooms that she notices Eun’s dark expression. “What’s wrong? Are you not feeling well?”

Eun looks up. "It's not me that I'm..." He seems to come a decision. "Hajin-ah... I think there's something going on that you should know about."

"Hyung," there's a warning in Baek Ah's voice that Hajin hasn't heard in a long time.

"She deserves to know! Even if he's our cousin, what he's doing is wrong," Eun declares stubbornly.

"We don't even know if he's really..." Baek Ah sighs. "I haven't heard anything in weeks and you said you haven't either. It was probably nothing!"

Jung looks as confused as Hajin feels apprehensive. "What are you talking about?" he asks at last.

"We believe he's seeing someone else," Eun blurts it out before Baek Ah can stop him, staring at Hajin intently. Baek Ah purses his lips but doesn't say anything to contradict him. Seeing this, Hajin feels as though her insides have evaporated.

Jung is the first to react. "What?!!"

"You mean..." Hajin swallows hard, refusing to believe her ears, "his fiancée?"

Eun shakes his head. "I thought it was her at first too, but then Baek Ah admitted to hearing him call this woman even before that announcement."

"Come on, my brother would never-!" Jung protests angrily. "And he's not even engaged to that other woman! We all know he's not. He’s not a player."

Yes, the thought flashes through Hajin’s numb brain, he’s not a player. He said so himself. He said it twice.

"Then how do you explain the secret phone calls? The way his face lights up whenever he sees it's her calling?" Eun insists.

"Maybe it was an old friend," Jung suggests.

Eun shakes his head. "I've heard the way he speaks to this woman... it sounds just like..." he
glances apologetically at Hajin, "like how he talks to you."

It's the final straw for Jung. "I'm going to kill him! How could he do what our father did to our mother? Mother was never the same after what happened!" Jung hisses in outrage, his chopsticks snapping in two from the strength of his clenched fist.

There's a stinging pain in Hajin's chest, and the pooled tears in her eyes are causing her vision to blur.

Baek Ah sighs to Eun. "I only heard them one or two times and you mentioned only hearing them once - and never again! Hyung, there could be a million explanations. I can't believe you would say this to her in the middle of lunch!" The look of sympathy on his face when he turns to Hajin is enough to instigate the flow of her tears. "Noona," he says, his voice pleading, "please forget what hyung said. It's not a confirmed fact, it's just something we talked about briefly two days ago."

"How can you say that?" Eun snaps angrily, handing Hajin a tissue. "How do you explain his avoiding her then? How do you explain who this 'Soo' is?"

"Soo?" Something in Hajin's distressed brain finally clicks. She looks up. "Did you say 'Soo'?"

"Why, do you know her?" Eun asks, clearly surprised. Baek Ah and Jung seem just as unable to mask their curiosity as they wait for her answer with bated breaths.

"You mean to tell me..." Hajin says through gritted teeth, trying to keep her voice steady, "that the woman you think he's cheating on me with... is this woman named 'Soo'?"

"That's what we've heard him call her," Baek Ah finally admits. "I thought little of it before because he seemed completely devoted to you but now..."

"We got to thinking maybe we should have looked into it more, sooner, before you... are you okay, Hajin?" Eun's voice is full of concern.

"Noona, do you know this woman?" Jung asks, anger and disbelief evident on his face. He suddenly gets up, heads all around the restaurant turning to look at them. "I'll deal with them. You won't need to do anything. I'll knock some sense into my brother, and I'll make sure that woman-"

"I'm Soo!" Hajin snaps. She flaps her hands to get him to sit back down, then she turns a resentful eye towards the two people who had, for a few minutes, made her consider taking up self-destructive habits. She knows she shouldn't be angry – after all, Eun had been concerned for her well-being and Baek Ah had been trying to protect her from the supposed-truth – but the relief was making her edgy. She suspects she might start bleeding soon, too. The pains of being female. "I'm Soo."

"You're-?" Baek Ah looks flabbergasted by this sudden turn of events.

Eun looks equally stumped. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," Hajin says, taking in deep, calming breaths and drying her eyes, "I'm Soo. That's what he calls me. It's like a nickname."

"You're kidding," Baek Ah says in a deadpan voice.

"Hajin... Soo?" Eun mumbles with a frown. "How did you become Soo?"

"It's just... one of those things," she waves a flippant hand. "It's a long story. The point is, for a
moment there, I felt like dying! Don't you mention any of this to So. Understood?"

"Are you really this 'Soo'?" Jung asks suspiciously. "You're not just saying this to protect my brother's reputation or honor?"

Hajin sighs. She knew she and So should have worked more towards getting used to calling each other by their actual names in this time, rather than her past name and his past title. The nicknames had just seemed so familiar and comforting, and how were they supposed to know they would cause such a misunderstanding?

"Yes. I'm Soo. It's a codename," she says lamely, handing him a new pair of chopsticks. "Now let's eat before anything else happens."

Lunch ends with Jung inviting Hajin to an event on Saturday at the orphanage as they're walking back to the office building.

"It's the orphanage's founding anniversary. There'll be games and lots of fun activities," he informs her brightly. "So far, I've gotten two of my friends from the gym to come for a little demonstration."

At these words, Eun perks up. "I've nothing to do this Saturday either!"

Jung narrows his eyes at him. "I thought you played Counterstrike every Saturday morning? The party's in the morning."

Eun shakes his head as he assumes an offended expression. "Jung-ah... what's more important - Counterstrike or those poor little kids? That's right. I'm going."

Hajin can't help but chuckle, speculating that it was likely the thought of seeing Soon Deok again that's making Eun so determined to come. She nods to Jung, "I'll be there, too."

"Great!" Jung beams at the pair of them before turning to Baek Ah. "Hyung, you're really busy now. You should relax! Why don't you come too? You could teach the kids about art or music..."

Baek Ah inhales through his teeth, considering the offer. "I suppose I could. I can free up my morning."

"Awesome!" Jung pumps a fist into the air in triumph.

"Then... can I bring over a friend as well?" Hajin asks casually.

Jung grins. "Noona, you can bring as many people as you like. The more the merrier."

It's Saturday and Woohee had promised Hajin she would try to show up before lunch, earlier if her professor would allow it. Hajin vowed to keep Baek Ah busy at the orphanage at all costs until her friend arrived. Today would be the day. He and Woohee can finally meet again!

With this cheerful thought in mind, Hajin's spirits soar. She hasn't been this excited and happy in weeks.

"I told you to put just a little!" she exclaims in horror, setting down the wash basin she was carrying onto a nearby table before coming over to inspect a group of little girls huddled together
by the corner, the older ones having slathered lipstick all over a confused 2-year-old's mouth.

Hajin hastily grabs some tissue to wipe up the mess. She can't help but laugh. "You're supposed to put only a little bit," she reminds, taking the lipstick and using her own lips to demonstrate. "You must be careful so that the color only touches your lips, and then," she smacks her lips together audibly, "you do this. Try again, and let me see you do it. Look at the mirror closely."

It's 9:30 in the morning and she's been here for a little over an hour.

The moment she had arrived, Jung had immediately put her to work in this room with a group of young girls to look after. She had brought with her all the makeup she could find, along with a few donations from various friends and workmates, and the children absolutely loved it.

"That's an improvement," she says with approval, wiping a bit of smudge off the girl's lower lip. "Now the rest of you help each other. It's almost time for your snacks."

"Food, food, food!" they cry excitedly in unison.

She chuckles and picks up the basin, heading towards the sink.

A bell suddenly rings through the compound, signalling everyone to gather back at the courtyard for some refreshments. With excited yells, the children get up and run to the door.

"HOLD IT!" Hajin yells through the clatter, rushing to keep the door closed. "You need to wash your hands first. Line up at the sink, go on."

She keeps a watchful eye on the kids, making sure they wash up properly before allowing them to leave one by one.

"Don't run," she orders sternly every time she sees them rushing.

It's as she's ordering the same little girl with the smudged lipstick to walk properly that she sees him, standing by the door. And he sees her.

They lock eyes and Hajin goes deaf, the world around her shrinking to encompass him, and only him.

Heart in his throat, he can't stop his eyes from travelling all over her, seeing the multiple colors - shiny and matte- on her forearms and hands from the many beauty products she had sampled on her skin earlier in demonstration. To match the day's cool, pleasant weather, she had worn a light tweed sweater with the sleeves curled all the way up to her upper arms, over a pair of denim cuffed jeans and light brown oxfords. Her long hair was in a bun and slightly messy, with wisps of hair escaping to rest on her neck and shoulders, shorter strands splaying across her forehead, slick with sweat.

He watches as her eyes slowly fill with tears, and he feels so terrible, he calls her name... but she only looks away.

"Why are you..." her voice catches in her throat and she can't continue. She hears the door close behind the last child to leave, and for a moment, she wonders if he'd left her too… but then she hears his footsteps, coming steadily closer.

She's turned away, not wanting him to see her hurt. She hates that she's crying... that she should cry immediately after seeing him, not knowing if it was because she missed him or was mad at him... she hates how good he looks in his casual clothes - the unbuttoned blue and white patterned polo
shirt, the leather wristwatch fastened at the end of one toned arm, the slightly ripped jeans over immaculately white sneakers. She feels messy and childish in comparison, with her arms full of different shades of lipstick, blush and eyeshadow.

She proceeds to wash them off, glad of the distraction. And suddenly, she's angry.

Halfway through scrubbing, she whips around and glares at him. “Where’ve you been? What've you been doing? Why are you here?”

He considers his response, eyeing her warily. “Jung told me Baek Ah would be here.”

She can't help feeling hurt. Even now, he isn't looking for her, but his cousin.

“Turn right at the end of the corridor,” she says stiffly, turning around again to resume what she'd been doing. “He’s in the second room on the right, though he's probably at the courtyard now with the rest of the-”

“I didn't know you were here,” he cuts her off, his tone deceptively gentle.

“Is that why you came?” she snaps crisply, still rubbing her forearms and hands, even though they were red by now and felt raw. “Because you didn't think I'd come?”

He doesn't answer her question right away. He tells her her arms are clean enough, like she doesn't know, like she doesn't feel them stinging.

“Why would you care?” she mumbles under her breath.

He hears her and reaches over to shut the tap. Fuming, she faces him, ready for the heated argument she felt was coming, ready to tell him everything that had plagued her mind in the seventeen days that he'd avoided her… but before she can draw breath, he pulls her into a crushing hug, the fight in her temporarily released along with the air in her lungs.

“You know I care very much,” he says, his hold on her tightening with every attempt she makes at breaking free.

“Let me go,” she demands angrily.

“I know you're angry.”

She grinds her teeth. “I'll be even more angry if you don't let me go this instant.”

“I don't want to,” he says, and he was practically crushing her now, her body pressed so firmly against his that she can hardly lift her arms to push him away anymore… and his once clean shirt was now wet from the water on her arms, and he smells and feels so familiar that she can't believe he's really here hugging her, but the knowledge only brings her more pain, heightening her confusion.

“Why?” she demands through her tears. “What have I done wrong?”

He exhales slowly, taking his time in answering, weighing his words. “It's not you. Of course it's not you. I just didn't want you to get hurt.”

Disbelief courses through her. “So you decided avoiding me was the better option?” she almost shrieks. “You didn't think I'd be more hurt and confused by your silent treatment?”

“I didn't want you involved in the company politics.”
“Am I so weak in your eyes?”

“That’s not it…” he sighs, resigned. "I know you. I know you like helping people…” She can feel one of his thumbs gently kneading her rigid shoulder, “and when things go wrong, you have a tendency to blame yourself. I’d watched you beat yourself up over things that were completely out of your control: Lady Oh, Mu-hyung, Eun, Soondeok, Chaeryung… Woohee and Lady Hae. I watched as your bright personality slowly dwindled into embers. Do you think I want the same thing to happen to you in this life?”

She doesn’t respond, but she’s no longer trying to pull away from him either. Her whole body shakes whenever she draws breath, and not for the first time, he wonders at the wisdom behind his reasoning.

In the end… perhaps he had been selfish in forcing her to stay out of harm’s way.

“I haven’t forgotten you,” his breath is warm and pleasant to her ear, his voice deep and reassuring. “A lot of things can still go wrong… I wanted to spare you from further heartache.”

Finally, she speaks, clenching her fists around his damp shirt. “Pabo… the only reason I had for living despite everything… was you. You made me want to try again… so how can I be happy when you’re pushing me away? When I don’t even know why?”

“Myunghee told me you’d met Yeonhwa…” he begins to explain, “she told me how shaken you were afterwards. It seems Yeonhwa isn’t much changed from a thousand years ago.”

“Unnie said you’d tell me what I needed to know!” Hajin snaps, feeling angry again. She takes the opportunity to free herself and glare at him, but he looks away. “I called you!”

“I did try calling you back,” he reminds in as placating a tone as he can muster, running his hands along her exposed arms to warm her. “I wanted to call you first thing in the morning… but then that article got released without warning and we had a hell of a time trying to contain everything. Things went from bad to worse so fast… eventually, I decided maybe it was better that I hadn’t involved you. You’re going through so many changes in such a short time. And you have problems of your own. I’m sorry if it felt like I had forgotten you or was pushing you away… that had never been my intention.”

She sniffs, feeling torn now between wanting to argue and scream at him for being so infuriatingly rational, and not wanting to argue and scream at him for the same reason.

In her confusion, she decides to get more answers. “Your cousins see me almost everyday.”

He looks into her eyes then, an actual smile on his lips. “You always manage to get along with them, no matter which life you’re living. I figured they needed the distraction as much as you did.”

She shakes her head and tuts. “I wanted you.”

His smile widens. “I wanted you, too.”

“So why do they see me, and you do not?” she huffs.

“I didn’t know what to say to you, for one… I haven’t met with my mother… and though I’ve spoken to my father about what her plans might be, and he doesn’t like that she’s trying to sabotage all of us… he thinks it’s for the best that I don’t refute Yeonhwa outright just yet. Because of the nature of her father’s past business, she has always had close ties with the press. We don’t need any more negative articles. At this point, the public will believe anything, no matter how ridiculous.”
She glares at an upturned chair to her right, her lips pursed in distaste. *Doesn’t this situation seem familiar?*

So in a pickle, influential people spreading false rumors, Yeonhwa an easy way out of the situation… and Hajin being completely powerless to do anything but watch from the sidelines. Her helplessness frustrates her.

He suddenly jerks her towards him, his warm hands reaching up to cup her face, and an even warmer smile shining through the fogs of her doubt. “Do you really think I’d leave you to marry her again? I told you before… that one time was enough to last me the rest of eternity. Do you not trust me?”

“I trust you,” she grumbles. “But I’d appreciate it if you could trust me more. In the past, the only reason I had been able to endure most things was because I had your support and confidence. Everything became unbearable when you stopped sharing things with me. Couldn’t you tell how miserable I was? How lonely?”

Yes… her misery had tripled his own. It always did. “I had no way of making things easier or better for you… just like now.”

She stomps a foot in frustration, wanting to pull out her hair or hurl something at the wall. She knows the urge to throw a tantrum is childish, but she can’t help it. “I don’t care about that! I want to help you. I want you to help me. I want us to be partners, not just in good times, but in bad times too. Especially in bad times!” she lets it all go in one breath.

Grabbing the front of his shirt, she pulls him down and glares at him through her teeth, finding satisfaction at having startled him. “Ignore me that way again and I won’t let it go. I’ll… I’ll…” she roots around her memory for something to threaten him with, “I’ll upload that picture I took of you weeks ago and spread it around the internet! You know which one…” she eyes him grimly.

“You wouldn’t.” He’s so dumbfounded, all he can do is gape at her.

“I would,” she says firmly, lifting her chin. “You know I would.”

His lip twitches, torn between stealing her phone to delete everything, and laughing. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“I won’t take this matter lightly.”

“I believe you.” He manages a chuckle, his eyes roving her determined face - from her brown eyes beneath damp lashes to her pink cheeks and nose, to her soft lips. Even angry and in tears, she was lovely, and he missed her. He missed her fire, her laughter, her smiles, her words of advice… her silliness, her insights.

He removes her hands from his shirt and brings them up to circle around his neck, then he pulls her in by the waist, close enough to nuzzle her slender neck, to kiss the edge of her jaw, to rake her earlobe with his teeth.

“My darling,” he breathes into her lips, “I’ve missed you.”

She almost melts to the floor. Her hands dig into his hair, fingertips feeling his scalp, palms brushing the tips of his pliant ears. “I’ve missed you, too… too much,” she admits with a shaky breath. “Don’t push me away… don’t let us repeat our past mistakes… I’ll feel worse if you do.”

So will he, he realizes. “I won’t,” he murmers, “I promise. I’ll confide in you from now on.”
She takes his lips in hers for one last time before wrapping her arms around his neck. “A few minutes a day… that’s all I’m asking.”

As they get ready to leave the room minutes later, Hajin asks him about the flowers and what they meant. “I checked Naver and Google. Neither meaning made sense to me.” She unfurls her sleeves and checks the room one last time, making sure it looked exactly the way she had found it earlier.

“Meaning?” he lifts an eyebrow quizzically. “Must there be a meaning?”

She knew it. She had overanalyzed and stressed over nothing. “Well, then why pink of all colors? Why not red? Everyone knows red is the symbol of passion,” she teases.

“You were wearing pink that day,” he explains, fastening his watch back onto his wrist with an amused smile. “They reminded me of you.”

For a moment, her mind draws a blank, and then she frowns, “When did you see me?”

“I saw you leave the building with Chaeryung,” he explains.

“And you didn’t bother to say hi,” her voice is back to being accusatory.

“Hey!” he protests, drying his hands on a towel. “I thought we were past this.” Before she can retort, he wraps an arm around her neck and heads for the door. “You’re just hungry. We ordered a continental buffet. You’ll feel better once you’ve eaten.”

She ducks out from underneath his arm and shoves him playfully towards the door. “Now you’re trying to bribe me with food?”

“Depends,” he flashes her a handsome grin, “is it working?”

She grabs her purse and follows him out the door. “I’ll let you know.”

Yeonhwa rounds the corner and finally sees him, exiting a room up ahead. Her eyes light up and her heart races in her chest. She had been looking everywhere for him. His brother and cousins had been most unhelpful, deliberately giving her directions to the wrong building, wasting her time.

But no matter. They didn’t matter. She had found him in the end.

She hitches a charming smile onto her face and lifts a hand to greet him, but she freezes when she sees he’s not alone. A woman has followed him through the door, and in the emptiness of the hall, she can clearly hear their laughter.

Her curiosity propels her forward, closer, and as she nears them, she sees it clearly… the adoring look on his face, something she’d give anything for, as he gazes down at…

That girl.

Yeonhwa’s so shocked, she stops walking to stare. Isn’t she Myunghee’s cousin? Yes… there’s no doubt about it. Yeonhwa never forgets a face. What did this mean?

But of course… there could really be only one meaning.
So even you’re a part of this, she seethes darkly, thinking of her brother’s girlfriend. I won’t let you get away with this. Both of you.

She lifts her chin haughtily and puts on her most charming smile. “Oppa!” she calls playfully, batting her lashes as she trots up to them. She takes satisfaction in seeing their smiles fade… especially hers. Yeonhwa spares her a glance, trying not to notice or resent the way So steps between them, as though to shield her.

Soon. You will learn the truth soon. “I knew you would be here. Everyone’s looking for you. Shall we go together?” she says out loud, grabbing his arm.

“Why are you here?” he asks tonelessly.

She smiles sweetly up at him. “I heard about the fundraising and the occasion. Helping orphans. Very good publicity! Oppa should have told me. I would have prepared something better to give to the children. As it is, I was only able to bring them crates of dried persimmons.”

“Good, now you can go home,” he says crisply, grabbing her by the elbow and steering her away from the other girl.

“How can you say that?” she asks with a small laugh, reclaiming her arm. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees that the girl looks troubled, rooted to the spot, and she’s happy seeing it. Yeonhwa slips a hand through the crook of her fiancé’s elbow and tries to strike a conversation with him. She’s careful to keep her voice light and carefree, her sweet tones carrying across the empty stone hallways, back to her. She doesn’t care that he’s not really listening, only caring when he finally puts his phone away after they round the corner, when she hears a beep - loud and clear - from the hall they’d just left. And in the absence of the girl, Yeonhwa can’t keep up her facade any longer.

She stops him from descending the final flight of steps to the courtyard below. “Who was she? Why were you two alone in the room? What were you doing together?” she demands.

“It’s none of your business.”

She isn’t daunted by the cold look in his eyes, the harsh tone of his voice. He can’t hurt her. He needs her. “I’m your fiancée,” she hisses angrily, gripping his wrist so tightly, her nails were starting to protest.

But he seems unfazed by her anger; in fact, he looks amused. He walks back up to her, slowly, taking one step… then another until their eyes are levelled.

“Let me make this clear,” he says in a low voice. “You may call yourself my fiancée… but I will never acknowledge you.” He slips his hand easily through her numb fingers. “I’m marrying someone else.”

“You need me,” she reminds in an equally low, threatening voice, “you know you do.”

He smirks but doesn’t say anything else. Turning away, he reaches the bottom of the stairs before she can think to do or say anything, but by then it’s too late… the reporters she had brought herself have already started to swarm him. She clears her throat to compose herself.

Just you wait and see. You’ll come to me in the end, she thinks darkly, swishing her long hair behind her and following him into the courtyard.
Memories versus Premonitions

Chapter Summary

The rain is cool, the sound of it soothing her tired mind and body. Like a rhythm for meditation, she allows it to. The shimmers of light bouncing off the river of rain flowing from the upper roads down to the main road below is hypnotizing. The flow of water. The flow of time.

What had she seen earlier? Why had she seen them?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Did your mother make these, too?" Hajin asks Eun, big eyes shining with appreciation at the beautiful pastel-colored pastries on the dessert table. "Oh! Those little frosted shoes and bags look lovely!"

"Don't they?" Eun's smile couldn't have been more smug. "She made these fists and swords and shields for Jung and his friends, too!"

"But he won't let me touch any of them," Jung grumbles, coming over. He crosses his arms and leans towards Hajin, "So, how did it go?"

"What?" she asks in the middle of biting off a heel. "How did what go?"

"The diarrhea was my idea," Eun whispers with a happy chuckle. "I told her hyung's been suffering in the bathroom all morning."

Jung's face lights up and he says eagerly, "Deok told me she saw her yelling outside the men's bathroom for ten whole minutes before she finally gave up."

"Are you talking about Yeonhwa?" Hajin glances surreptitiously towards their right, to where Yeonhwa was seated, having evidently given up on keeping up with So.

"That woman gives me the creeps. She walked right up to me this morning and demanded to know where hyung was," Eun grumbles.

Another person joins their little circle. "Judging by his current mood, I'd say your plan worked, Jung, Baek Ah says with approval, exchanging gleeful fistbumps with the other two. "Who knew you could be so cunning?"

"Hey! I may not be as smart as both my brothers, but I'm not completely stupid either," Jung snorts.

Hajin narrows her eyes, only just realizing what they were talking about. "You invited me here to set us up?"

"Now, don't be cross, noona," Jung holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "Things were getting out of hand. You needed an intervention."
Baek Ah agrees with a grimace. "Hyung's usually difficult to deal with when it comes to work. But lately, he's been… er… impossible. And I don't think it's all to do with the current crisis."

Eun nods vigorously. "I accidentally stepped on his foot the other day and he actually threatened me with death. I really thought I was going to die. I imagined my life flashing before my eyes."

"You did splatter mud all over him," Baek Ah points out fairly.

Hajin wants to laugh, finding the situation ridiculous. At the same time, she wants to walk over to So and give him another good smack. But she desists. She'll think of some other way to torture him… preferably when there are no reporters snooping around.

She's managed to steer clear of the reporters thus far, mainly because, thankfully, no one seems to remember or to take much notice of her. She had exited the building elsewhere, bypassing them completely, and contented herself with serving the children food from the buffet table, stealing curious glances towards So and Yeonhwa once in a while. By observing, she could tell almost immediately that Yeonhwa was deeply infatuated with So: the way she clung to his every word, her eyes following him everywhere, watching his every move... it was classic schoolgirl crush. Had she been in love with him since high school?

And Yeonhwa had definitely recognized her earlier… it wasn't anything she'd said; it was the way she acted - her forced laughter, her frozen smile, her honeyed tones. Yeonhwa had always been smart and devious. Had she managed to put two and two together and deduced what Hajin's relationship was with So? What kind of repercussions could her knowing instigate?

If So shared any of her qualms about Yeonhwa knowing of their relationship, he didn't show it.

"Your eyelids have different colors, fyi."

She'd almost choked when she read it. Rushing to the bathroom, she had hastily redone her makeup, mortified that he hadn't told her sooner. That man. How could he take her seriously with one eye masked in blue, and the other in pink?

Hajin looks down to check her watch, partly to hide her smile at the memory, but also because she hasn't received word from Woohee all morning and she worried there might not be enough time left before everyone left. It was already a quarter past ten.

"Hey, Jung," the sound of Soondeok's voice makes Hajin look up to see just the woman approaching, "you should get changed. We'll be starting soon. The mats are in place, and the older kids are in their outfits."

Jung nods. "I'll get ready, then. See you at the playground later?" he asks the rest of his companions.

"Won't miss it for anything," Hajin assures as they watch him go.

"I should get over there, too," Baek Ah says with a little cock of the head in So's general direction. "I don't think his good mood will last if we leave him alone with those little ones for too long."

Hajin glances at So at the far end of the courtyard, and she has to smile. Jung had enthusiastically introduced him to the younger children earlier, and they had badgered him nonstop about showing them a few kicks and punches and whatnots until he finally gave in. At the moment, they were busy thinking of ways to best him.

As she watches, a little boy of about eight tries to ram him from behind, but So sidesteps and trips
him easily, grabbing hold of the back of the youngster's shirt before he can fall flat on his face, and setting him on his feet to try again.

"You're grandma Park's granddaughter, right?" Hajin says casually, turning to Deok. "I don't think we've ever been introduced."

"Yeah, that's me," she grunts in the middle of stretching, "I'm Park Soondeok. I know you're hyung-nim's girlfriend. Jung told me."

Hajin blinks. "Hyung-nim?"

"Oh. Yeah. That's what all the boys in my father's gym called him while I was growing up, so I learned to call him that too. It stuck," she explains with a little shrug. "I can't really call him anything else now. It's too weird."

"Oh," Hajin says with an unsure little laugh. "In that case, I'm Go Hajin. I've met your grandmother."

She nods. "She told me. The moment I saw you together that day at the cafe, I knew you were the one she meant. How'd you two meet? If you don't mind me asking... it's just... he's never brought a woman with him to the restaurant before."

"Oh... er... it's a long story," Hajin says evasively, plucking a red fist from the pastry plate and handing it over, knowing Eun had requested them with Deok specifically in mind. "Cookie?"

Deok eyes her strangely for a moment before accepting it with a little thanks. Hajin can't stop the knowing grin from spreading across her face, seeing Eun's anxious expression. His eyes rest on the cookie in Deok's hand, and follow its slow progress into her mouth.

"Is it good?" Hajin asks casually, taking another bite from her own cookie.

Deok nods. "I love sweets. My mother used to bake cookies for me all the time when I was a child. They tasted a bit like this, actually."

To stop Eun from fainting, Hajin grabs his arm and holds him steady, "Eunnie's mother baked these cookies herself last night. Aren't they cute?"

"Oh, really?" For the first time, Deok's eyes land on Eun's red face.

"Y-yes," he confirms after a quick nudge in the ribs. "There are more here, if you want."

It's the first time Hajin sees Deok smile in this life. "They're so cute," she remarks, "Would you mind if I help myself to a few more? I'll need all the help I can get... a sugar rush is just what I need..."

"Sure," Eun says eagerly, handing her an entire platter and watching with fascinated eyes as she begins to wolf down three more cookies in quick succession. "Help with what? Is it something we can-"

"For this," she mumbles, grabbing a glass of water and swallowing everything in one large gulp. She glares straight ahead of her, a savage grin on her face. Before any of them can react, Deok suddenly lets out a battlecry, sending Hajin flying into Eun. Deok breaks into a run, charging, yelling warnings at the children to move away to avoid getting hurt.

Everybody stops what they're doing to watch.
"Yah!" Baek Ah shrieks, running away to avoid getting hit as Deok launches herself into the air at So. She spins and tries to land a kick, but he blocks her with his arm, looking both surprised and amused.

"What are you doing?" Hajin can hear him say. Excited, she grabs her phone and pulls Eun closer to watch.

"Jungie says you're as good as ever, but I don't believe him," Deok replies, taking her stance. "Nobody can remain good without practice. Not even you, hyung-nim."

He sighs. "Yah, you should stop calling me that. Your grandmother's already this close to killing me."

She ignores him. "Haaaahhh!" she screams, throwing punches, kicks, jabs his way. They both move fast, Deok on the offense, So on the defense, but as the sparring draws on and it's clear So has no real intention of fighting back, Deok's expression becomes frustrated. Finally, she breaks away. "Hyung-nim! Be serious! After all these years, you still underestimate me just because I'm a girl!"

He sighs. "I know you're currently the best student at the gym and Jung's been trying to beat you for ages."

"So fight me! You never fight me!" she demands, scowling and looking as resentful as humanly possible. "Just admit it. It's because I'm a girl, isn't it?"

"I don't like hitting girls."

"Unlike other girls, I can fight back," she says, retaking her stance. "I'll really go all out this time! You won't be able to just defend. You'll have to counter."

"I'm not dressed appropriately for this," So protests, but it doesn't matter. Deok attacks him with renewed vigour and determination.

They're a whirl of blue and white, and Hajin's untrained eyes can't really see what's happening, can't tell who's attacking who, but what she does see is the moment his expression turns confused, then troubled, then serious.

And then she sees something she'd already seen twice before, in a different life: So tinged in red, slashing downwards at his dying tenth brother.

Hajin frantically shakes her head to clear it. She grabs hold of Eun's arm. That had been in the past. Why would she see it now?

"They're amazing, aren't they?" is all Eun says, keeping his eyes on the fight before them. "I should have learned how to fight. I wonder if it's too late for me?"

All Hajin can do is stare at him. *I should have convinced you to stay with me. The both of you should have left sooner. It wouldn't have been too late. It shouldn't have been too late.*

The next time Hajin looks at So, he has Deok in a headlock. She struggles to free herself, and he lets go, stepping away, that same troubled frown creasing his forehead.

Deok coughs, massaging her throat, "Where did you learn to fight like that? I've never seen anything like it. It's no wonder Jung can't beat you."
It's when he locks eyes with Hajin that she knows.

For a moment there, he had fought, not as himself in this time, but as the battle-hardened Prince he had been in the past, skills he'd learned from years of intensive training coupled with raw survival instinct, enabling him to go against dozens of warriors at a time and come out unscathed. He had been the best warrior in Goryeo. The most feared.

Deok never stood a chance, whether in this life or the other. No one did.

"Hyung-nim, please teach me," Deok says solemnly, bowing low the way a subordinate would to a master.

So clears his throat, "I'd have to feed you to the wolves."

Deok blinks thoughtfully. A figure of speech? Or was he being literal?

"Don't beat yourself up." He claps a hand on her bent back, making her cough and sway on the spot. "I'm too busy anyway."

Leaving the circle of onlookers, he locks eyes with Hajin one last time and ruffles Eun's hair.

"Hyung-nim! Me too! Please teach me!" Eun calls after his retreating back.

So's voice is resolute. "No."

"Hajin-ah, convince him for me," Eun whispers.

"Me too," Deok agrees, sounding equally hushed as she draws closer. "I want to learn his methods. I think my father's are outdated, that old-"

"Good show!" Jung remarks brightly, fastening his belt around his waist.

"You think?" Deok's tone is dry and full of disbelief. "I never stood a chance."

Jung pats her head sympathetically. "I understand you."

She tuts and swipes impatiently at his hand. "I want to learn from him. Convince him to teach me."

"What do you think I've been trying to do for the past three years?" Jung demands. "He always says he's too busy."

"He is," Hajin mumbles absentmindedly, her attention divided between the group she's in and the two people facing each other yards away. The look of anger and hate in So's eyes is evident, and Yeonhwa is so stunned to see it, she just stands rooted to the spot, barely moving.

But Hajin understands So, and in that moment, she knows… for some reason, he had seen it too… that short glimpse of the past.

It had been through Yeonhwa's information that Eun and Deok never made it out of the palace alive that day. She had ratted them out to King Jeongjong, Third King of Goryeo, after discovering Eun's toys and creations in the Damiwon. Not a day later, So had been forced to end Eun's life.

"Baek Ah-yah," So calls suddenly, finally turning his attention away from Yeonhwa. "What time's the meeting?"

"After lunch," Baek Ah replies from somewhere nearby. "Are you leaving already?"
The question makes Hajin's spirits drop. So soon?

So turns away. "I'll see you later, then."

"Wha- hyung, wait!" Baek Ah hastens after him, trying to reason with him.

And there goes Baek Ah, Hajin thinks glumly. Just as she'd resigned herself into trying to set up yet another meeting between Woohee and Baek Ah, Hajin receives a text from the former.

"Almost there! Can you meet me at the gate?"

Hajin can barely suppress her excitement. She texts back at once, telling her to wait. "Eun, why don't you ask Soondeok to teach you? Since she's the best at the gym, you can't possibly ask for a better teacher!" she can't resist saying before she leaves.

"You're leaving?" Jung calls despondently from behind her.

She shakes her head. "Just meeting my friend!"

The parking lot was located right inside the main gate, which meant she had to get to Baek Ah fast to stop him from leaving. Catching up to them, she immediately says, "Don't leave."

"I'd love to stay longer but..." he shrugs at his cousin.

"Just because he's leaving doesn't mean you have to."

So scoffs, anger temporarily replaced by indignation. "You're asking him to stay and not me?"

She flashes him a coquettish smile. "If I asked you to stay, would you do it?"

"No."

She scowls. "Then why would I bother?" She tries to ignore him. "Baek Ah-nim, let's have lunch together with the rest, and you can go to wherever it is you need to go afterwards. Come on, it'll be fun!"

So scoffs again. "You could try to be a little more convincing."

"I don't think a kiss would work on him."

He tugs her closer. "I meant me."

"People. Reporters," she reminds at once, holding up a hand to his lips and going around him to Baek Ah's other side.

"I told them to stick around for the demonstration," he says grimly, watching her flit away from him. "And they're here for Yeonhwa, not me. There's no point in following me around when I'm leaving before the event's over."

She rolls her eyes. "There could be cameras anywhere, so stop talking to me."

"Lunch with happy cousins versus lunch with grumpy cousin," Baek Ah mumbles thoughtfully, making a show of weighing both options in his hands. "I'm starting to see the appeal in your offer, noona."

"Of course!" she says eagerly, excitement bubbling up higher and higher the closer they get to the..."
They're so close now.

She squints, trying to see if she can spot a tall, slender woman with a guitar. "Where are you parked, anyway?" she asks So.

When there's no reply, she looks at him to find him sulking. "Are you mad?" she asks in a small, playful voice, circling back towards him. "It's true, there are people everywhere. There could be cameras following you, even now. Aren't we supposed to be cautious?"

"Whatever happened to 'stop talking to me'?" he snaps.

"Omo, he is angry," she says with a gasp. "Baek Ah-nim, what should I do now?"

Baek Ah's face crumples in thought. "I'm not sure, noona, we've never had this kind of a crisis before. I'd say kiss and make up, like they do in the stories. Literally."

She turns back to So, "I'd kiss you but there could be cameras anywhere."

He sighs again. "I might have to rethink my priorities when it comes to personal relationships."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demands, taken aback.

"It means," he mutters through his teeth, pulling her even closer and bending down to her eye level, "if you don't stop talking now, I really will kiss you in the middle of all these people and non-existent cameras."

She narrows her eyes. "It doesn't sound nearly as appealing when you say it like that. And there could be a camera behind that bush over there."

He straightens up with a groan, addressing the heavens. "Why must I be attracted to such a tiresome little creature?"

She wrinkles her nose at him and turns to the gate in time to see Woohee walk through. "Woohee-yah!" she calls.

Woohee looks up from the ledger she was signing in to wave, a bright smile on her flushed face. She makes to turn her attention back towards the ledger, but something seems to catch her eye, and she freezes. Curious, Hajin follows the direction of her gaze and sees...

Baek Ah, all traces of amusement gone from his usually friendly face. He pales, his lips pursed in evident anger, his eyes unwavering, boring holes into Woohee's startled ones. The intensity in his expression shocks Hajin speechless, more so when something else invades her vision... a memory of a time long ago when they had both mourned the life of the very woman standing just feet from where they stood. The memory before her eyes is so clear that she isn't sure that's really what it is. But how can it be anything else? The angry Baek Ah of this life fusing with the brokenhearted Baek Ah of the past.

And then, just as easily as it came, it goes, and all that's left is the anger... the resentment. Turning back to Woohee, she sees her friend looking just as pale, though more surprised than angry, with her mouth half-open, the pen in her hand forgotten.

"I'm parked outside," So says into the heavy silence, glancing from one face to the other. "Baek Ah-yah, shall we get going?"
After what seems an eternity, Baek Ah looks away. He clears his throat and nods. "Yes, hyung-nim. Noona, I..." He isn't quite able to meet her eyes. In fact, he doesn't seem to want to look at anyone. "I'll see you some other time?"

Hajin's too stunned by this unexpected development to do anything but nod. Did they know each other after all? "Sure."

He nods once and walks briskly past Woohee, not sparing her another moment's glance, through the gate and out of sight.

There had been an awkward silence after the two men left, but Woohee recovered quickly.

She finished signing her name and smiled, giving Hajin a brief hug before apologizing profusely for being late, asking if the event was over and giving a lengthy tirade about her chatterbox of a teacher and how she had wanted to pluck the bells he had been discussing about so enthusiastically from the screen to wave in his face to get him to stop talking.

Hajin had tried to be upbeat, had tried to match the excessively jovial tones of her friend, but her mind remained abuzz with speculations. What did it mean? Baek Ah's anger, Woohee's surprise... her feigned indifference afterwards? Had they been friends in the past... or, more likely, more than that? What had led to their fallout? What had happened between them?

She was dying to know, but she couldn't see how she could possibly broach the topic without prying, and she could tell Woohee was trying her best to steer clear of it.

Hajin respected that. She forced her questions down and managed to enjoy the rest of her morning, watching Jung, Deok and another friend teaching orphans who were over ten years of age simple self-defense techniques, and listening as Woohee serenaded the younger children and other volunteers with common crowd favorites.

She and Eun were kept busy as well, the children constantly asking the latter to make them animals out of balloons, and Hajin deciding to volunteer to inflate the balloons for him to save time.

They were exhausted by the end of it, and they reeked strongly of balloons, but it was worth it. Seeing the children laughing and enjoying themselves was worth it.

Lunch at grandma Park's restaurant afterwards was just as enjoyable. The organizers and patrons of the event had invited all the volunteers to a little after-party to show their appreciation, and Jung had been quick to suggest the grill. It was the first time Hajin had seen the old woman look so happy in their brief acquaintance, her restaurant thrumming with nonstop chatter, food plates rushing in and out of the kitchen at breakneck speed, and dozens of people of all shapes and sizes complimenting her on her dishes.

It's a quarter to four now and everyone has finally parted ways. Woohee had to leave early for university, but Hajin, Eun and Jung had stuck around longer than necessary to help tidy up the restaurant, something an already-happy grandma Park was profusely grateful for - grateful enough to give them more free bottles of soju, a generosity which, they realized too little too late, they shouldn't have abused.

Between the four of them, Eun and Deok ended up being the most tipsy, the former practically falling asleep on his way to his car and the latter stretched lazily out over several chairs, staring
blankly into space. Jung apologized to Hajin many times for not being able to bring her home as she was headed the opposite direction they were.

"If it weren't for hyung being in this state, I would have taken you!" he said anxiously. "Will you be alright by yourself? If you can wait, I can drop you off after hyung."

She shook her head then and smiled. "I'll be alright. The bus stop is only a few blocks from here. Take care of Eun and you get some sleep, too. You must be exhausted." She had hugged him then. "Thank you for today, Jung-ah… truly… thank you."

Despite his worries, he had smiled warmly. "You're most welcome, noona. I hope you smile more often now. You're prettier when you're happy."

She nodded and watched him leave with a smile.

It's as she's crossing the street minutes later to get to the main road that it suddenly pours - torrents of rain soaking her as she backs up to take shelter underneath the overhanging roof of one of the nearby houses she had passed earlier. Grandma Park's Grill was located in a suburb not too far from the city. It was close enough to walk on normal days, but with the rain being this strong and the chances of an empty taxi passing through down to a minimum, there's nowhere Hajin can really go. She was already starting to shiver from the cold, her wet sweater soaking her undergarments, her oxfords drowning in the water from her dripping clothes and the droplets of rain ricocheting off the ground.

She breathes some warmth into her hands before rubbing them together and pressing them to her cheeks and neck with a sigh. What rotten luck. Of all the days for it to suddenly start raining. Of all the places she had to be. Of all the hours of the day...

Hajin shakes her head and straightens her back. Getting angry and feeling sorry for herself won't do her any good right now. She has to stay positive. To think positive.

The rain is cool, the sound of it soothing her tired mind and body. Like a rhythm for meditation, she allows it to. The shimmers of light bouncing off the river of rain flowing from the upper roads down to the main road below is hypnotizing. The flow of water. The flow of time.

What had she seen earlier? Why had she seen them?

She had always seen visions of the future... so why was she suddenly seeing memories of the past, flashing before her eyes as though she were seeing them happening right then and there instead of in her mind, where they should be? What did they mean?

The Baek Ah and Woohee of this time had been more than friends once, she was sure of it now. What she didn't know, what she wanted to find out was what had happened between them to make Baek Ah so angry...

She closes her eyes and breathes deeply. There were simply too many questions, and not enough answers... she wonders if she will ever get her answers?

It's as she's crouching low to hug her knees that she sees it... a familiar black car rushing up the road. She stands up quickly, in part to avoid getting hit by the splash of water that barely misses her, and to catch his attention. It works. The car slows down yards up from where she stands and makes its way back to her, coming to a stop right in front of her. She doesn't quite believe what she's seeing, even as he gets out and rounds the car to her side, holding up a jacket to shield himself from the rain and wrapping her cold shoulders with it the moment he's close enough.
"You're freezing," he remarks, the alarm in his voice evident. He's wearing the same clothes he wore this morning, his shirt getting soaked for the second time that day as he pulls her into a warm hug.

"You're here," is all she can think to say.

"I was looking for you. I went over to your place first, but your parents told me you hadn't arrived yet," he begins to explain. "Why didn't you answer any of my messages? None of my calls were getting through. I was worried. We were all worried. I would have gone to the police if Jung hadn't messaged me when he did."

"Oh, my phone's out of battery," she replies sheepishly, "and I left my powerbank and charger at home. They wouldn't fit in my purse because of all the makeup."

He sighs, incensed. "Why couldn't you bring a bigger bag?"

"I didn't want to lug a huge bag around all day," she says indignantly, feeling better now that she was being properly warmed and looked after. "How was I supposed to know it was going to rain today?"

"You could have checked the live weather updates on your phone."

She sniffs and mumbles, "Who does that?"

"I do and so should you. So should Jung. He should have brought you home."

"No," she shakes her head. "He was tired and a little tipsy. He needed rest."

"You're tired and a little tipsy." He frowns disapprovingly down at her. "How much did you drink?"

"Not as much as Eun and Deok." There's nothing funny about the situation, but she finds herself giggling at her last images of the two. Both practically passed out. Both with silly grins on their faces. They'd had a lot of fun together today. "But why are you here? What about your meeting? Or is it over...? Why would you be looking for me at my house?"

"I cancelled it," he replies. "Baek Ah was distracted. So was I. We went out for some drinks instead."

She frowns. "You could have come back to us, then! It would have been doubly fun with you two!"

He tuts and taps her forehead with his finger, earning him a reproachful glare. "He needed some time alone. You must have drunk more than you're letting on if you think I could have dragged him back to the orphanage with Woohee there, after what we saw pass between them."

"Oh!" she gasps in realization. "You're right. Do you think they could have been friends once?"

He snorts. "Forget friends, it looked a lot more than that. They probably knew each other from before he came to the company."

"I thought so, too," she agrees, her eyelids dropping from exhaustion, her tired body almost giving in to the temptation.

"I have something to tell you. We need to talk," he says seriously, forcing her awake for a few more minutes. She looks up at him with a quizzical frown. "It's important." He runs a thumb down
her cheek, "I'll take you to my place."

"Anywhere with you," she breathes, closing her eyes, "is fine."

Chapter End Notes

Happier times up ahead now that SoSoo are finally on the same page again.

Thanks a bunch for the comments, all you lovely people! A lot of revelations in the next chapter, and then... the elephant. Slowly but surely getting there ^^
"I thought he was different, too."

Though So's words seem to be directed at Myunghee, his eyes are fixed on Hajin, who nods and whispers softly, "I hoped he would be."

"You what?" Hajin's hushed voice carries throughout the silent kitchen. She presses her phone more firmly to her ear, the hangover she'd been trying to nurse adding to the throbbing pain in her temples at this unexpected piece of news. "But unnie… why?"

Myunghee sighs. "To be honest… things haven't been good between us, for quite some time now. What Yeonhwa said back at the apartment… she was right. I don't really know where Wook and I are headed anymore. I haven't for a long time. The bitterness in her voice is palpable.

Hajin feels her chest inflate in anger, indignation at Yeonhwa suddenly spilling out, "Don't listen to her, unnie! You said so yourself… she has a talent for making people feel bad about themselves. You can't let her get to you, you're-"

The rueful chuckle on the other end only serves to make Hajin more apprehensive. "But she was right, Hajin… she was right about us. And I don't want to do it anymore. I'm almost in my thirties, and it took me this long to realize that the man I gave ten years of my life to has different goals than I. Wants different things than I.

"I can't begin to tell you what that's like… Wook and I have been together for so long, I've forgotten what life was like without him. I've sacrificed too much… my dreams, my time, my family… I gave him years of my life, and for what? What have I to show for it?"

"But..." Hajin swallows hard, hot tears blurring her vision, "you love him. I know you do."

There's a thoughtful silence at the other end as Myunghee mulls over Hajin's words. "A long time ago, maybe I did love him. I must have, mustn't I? To have stuck with him this long... But, 'love'... I don't think I even remember what that's supposed to feel like anymore... and I can't spend an indefinite number of years waiting for him to show me he cares."

The sadness in Myunghee's voice is too much for Hajin. She can't believe this is happening - that someone as kind and gentle as Lady Hae should feel unloved and unwanted even in this life by the same man.

"But what are you going to do?" she asks as she takes a seat, her legs no longer able to keep her upright. "Do you have anywhere to go? Where are you now?"

"I checked into a hotel for a few days, and I'm buying tickets to my hometown to visit my parents sometime next week." To her surprise, Myunghee actually laughs - carefree and happy. "You know, I haven't done anything spontaneous like this in years? Wook's such a planner. He plans everything from start to finish, lays out exactly what he wants to happen... he's so detailed and meticulous, it was quite stifling. It feels good to be in control of myself again after years of feeling..."
like someone else's shadow," she remarks, sounding surprised by her own realization. "I want to rediscover myself, Hajin, to remember who I used to be before I became a fixture in his life… I want to do the things I'd always wanted to do… I..." she takes a deep breath, "I don't know if he feels the same way but… I feel... free. Does that make me a bad person?"

Hajin wipes her tears on the back of her hand, and even though she knows her cousin can't see it, she shakes her head. "No, of course not. You need to do what's best for you. Do you… are you happy? Truly?"

She's not surprised when a pair of strong arms snake their way around her middle, soft lips kissing away the tears running down her cheeks to her chin. She had felt rather than seen him enter the room earlier, his mere proximity providing her with the kind of comfort she hasn't had in weeks.

"I am," comes the sure reply. "I am happy… I'm ready to start writing a new chapter in my life, and I'm excited." There's a long, drawn-out breath. "I must seem like a caged animal."

"Don't say that," Hajin admonishes, though she finds herself smiling, reassured by Myunghee's optimism and sense of humor. She reaches behind her to rake her nails roughly through his damp, dark hair, finding satisfaction at the suppressed sigh that follows, his warm breath tickling her neck, which he'd been nuzzling. "Let's have dinner again some time," she suggests, trying to sound upbeat.

"Of course," the smile in Myunghee's voice is evident. Well, if her cousin was happy, then she should be happy for her.

Hajin felt no love for Wook… she pitied him, pitied his choices - how he had fallen from grace in Goryeo and lost himself along the way - and now she pitied him because even though she doesn't know what he's like in this life… for some reason, she knows… she knows that he does love Myunghee, and whatever Myunghee was feeling now, she was certain Wook shared no similar sentiments.

"Will you be alright?" Hajin asks. "Do you need me to come over for anything?"

The arms around her waist tighten and So lets out an audible grunt of displeasure at the suggestion.

When Myunghee hears him, she laughs, "Thank you, but I'll be alright. Besides, it's still raining quite heavily outside. I don't want you getting sick. And I don't want my remaining best friend cross with me either." That last line was said loudly enough for So to hear, close as he is. He makes no verbal acknowledgment, but he dips his head possessively into the smooth neck before him and stops moving.

"Alright, if you're sure," Hajin mumbles. She rubs her temples and suppresses a sigh. She shouldn't have drunk that many shots of soju. The last time she had drunk so much was years ago, when she was just a university student, celebrating the end of exams. "I'll see you tomorrow, then? Lunch or dinner?"

"I…" Myunghee's voice is suddenly tense with hesitation and the weight of something unspoken… something ominous. She hates what she's about to say… hates that it'll shatter whatever happiness her young cousin currently had… but she has to know. Hajin has to be ready to expect the worst come morning. "There's something else I need to tell you, Hajin-ah… I'd already told So earlier, and I even tried to call you, too, but I couldn't get through for some reason so I-

"Slow down, unnie," Hajin says, straightening up with a frown. She lifts her eyebrows in question, watching So rise from his seat, but her words aren't addressed to him, "I'm sorry you couldn't reach
me earlier - my phone was out of battery. What did you want to tell me?"

He plants a light kiss on her temple and utters a command, "Put her on speaker."

Although baffled, she complies, laying her phone on the counter and watching with her head propped on her hands as he takes an empty glass and heads for the fridge.

"It's to do with Wook. He's been acting really strange for the past few weeks…" Myunghee begins to explain, sounding apprehensive, "more secretive than usual. I attributed it to work and tried to ignore it, but then I found something in the mail this morning that alarmed me…"

Hajin takes her eyes off the half-filled glass in So's hand. Though he doesn't falter in his movements and he seems completely at ease, her knowing eyes saw the way his tense shoulders lifted slightly at Myunghee's words; she sees his jaw is clenched, telling her he isn't pleased by the information he'd received earlier… and by the way he's looking at her now, she knows she won't be pleased to hear it either.

"It was about you," says Myunghee at last. "And… it wasn't good."

Hajin's brain seems to be moving deliberately slow. All she can do is stare at So, who doesn't look away, even as he passes the glass of fresh orange juice across the table towards her.

"What…" Hajin manages to say after a while, ignoring it. "What about me?"

"The envelope was full of articles and documents, a lot of them," she explains. "I think he's been gathering information on you for weeks."

"But… why? What kind of information?" Hajin searches frantically around her brain for answers, but she comes up with a blank. She can't remember ever doing anything that might cause a scandal or hurt her or anyone she knows in any way… because judging by Myunghee's caution and So's quiet anger, that's exactly what Wook had found. And apparently, he had found a lot.

She scans So's eyes, but they're unhelpfully guarded.

"Why didn't you tell me you were the company employee who was in a coma for a year about two years ago?" Myunghee asks.

Hajin frowns, surprised by the question. "I didn't see the need to. Is it relevant?"

"It's very relevant…" Myunghee says with a sigh. "He… no, they… they're using it as evidence against you."

"Evidence for what? What exactly have I done?" she asks, trying not to panic. She looks away from So's sympathetic eyes and buries her head in her hands, her head spinning more rapidly now with the weight of her speculations.

"Do you remember anything at all from before you lost consciousness until after you woke up?"

Myunghee's cautious tone jangles her nerves further, but she doesn't want to be cross, so even though her head hurts and her mind is filled with memories of Goryeo that she can share with none but one person, Hajin tries her best to answer. "I was talking to a homeless man when it happened…" She looks up, wondering if So knew that the homeless man she was referring to was Jimong. She’d never spoken to anyone about the details of that day, even though her doctors had tried to coax more information out of her, telling her she would feel better after talking.
For one, she had woken up dazed and disoriented. For another, before that day at the gallery, she had passed off the vague memories of her life in Goryeo as little more than vivid dreams, conjured images of her battered, restless mind deprived of its usual stimuli.

"I saw a little boy playing by the edge of the lake..." she begins to narrate, remembering clearly the events of that day. "I looked away for a few seconds, heard a splash and he was gone. The water was deep, and nobody else seemed to have noticed that he had fallen in. I know I should have called for help, but the boy was flailing so badly, and I knew I could help him so I..." She closes her eyes against the memory. "I jumped in and helped him onto the boat his father had brought over..." She stops talking, feeling suddenly very choked and anxious.

*Her lungs feel trapped, her body heavy, free falling into an endless abyss even while her limbs desperately try to propel her forward - up towards safety, and air, and life - up towards the looming moon making its way across the sun.*

"Then you drowned?" Myunghee's voice is gentle, understanding. "Did you have a cramp?"

Hajin doesn't know. Had the invisible force that grabbed and sucked her in been nothing more than a cramp? "Maybe... I don't really remember. I remember only the darkness."

And that hectic morning in the hospital - the bright light hurting her sensitive eyes as she scanned the hospital room that had been her refuge for a year. She remembers seeing her frantic doctors, the rushing nurses, her crying family and friends... the smell of sterile cloth and alcohol, the feel of crisp sheets around her flaccid body, tubes sticking out of her arms, calibrated air coming in and out of her lungs... she remembers the splitting pain in her skull and the maddening ache in her heart that didn't go away for weeks.

At the time, she didn't know what the pains meant... her doctors had feared permanent damage, but when a full-body check-up revealed nothing, they concluded she was having phantom pains... psychological pains.

She had accepted their diagnosis, only vaguely wondering why her heart should ache and not her lungs; why she should have such realistic dreams of living a life from a millennia ago when she knew but a few bits and pieces of trivia on life in those days.

It had taken months before she could walk by herself again without hurting and tiring so easily; months of psychological evaluations and continuous physical check-ups; months before the dreams came in more consistently, insistently wanting to be acknowledged for what they really were. Months before she saw his face again as clearly as she sees him now.

"The little boy's parents offered to pay for your medical bills," Myunghee says quietly after a moment's pause.

"Yes," Hajin chokes out the word, trying to stay focused on the conversation, "I've been trying to convince them into letting me pay them back, but they're so stubborn about it," she grumbles. "But I sent over gifts on his birthday, and I'm going to make sure to send him gifts and money on *Seollal*. They can't say no to that."

So can't help but smile at his stubborn little lady. "That's probably because they didn't end up paying for everything."

She looks at him. "They didn't?"

He shakes his head, but it's Myunghee who answers, "When the public heard the family had
offered to pay for you, they started sending in their own donations. They set up a GoFundMe page for your fans."

The dumbstruck look on Hajin's face was endearing. "You're joking," she says flatly.

"It's not a bad thing!" Myunghee's tone is both amused and bracing. "The people were really touched by what you did. They wanted to help in their own way."

"But why don't I know about it?" Hajin splutters. "My parents never mentioned it!"

"That's because majority of the funds came from Mu-hyung," So explains, leaning over to level himself with her eyes. "When you woke up, he didn't want to burden you with the knowledge, so he asked to keep it a secret until after you were deemed ready."

Hajin didn't think it was possible for her to be more surprised than she already was, but this revelation proved her wrong. "But I stopped seeing my doctors months ago," she protests, feeling suddenly anxious. Mu… to think she had met and spoken to him and his parents about her accident! If only she had known…

"You are not going anywhere," So cuts in smoothly, grabbing her hand and forcing the glass of orange juice into it. "Not until you're feeling better. Drink."

"I wasn't…" She vaguely wonders why she's denying rushing out to find Mu when she was already standing upright and poised for the door. She's too shocked to think clearly.

"This is exactly why he wanted it kept a secret," So sighs and walks over to her. He forces her back into her seat and urges her to take a sip. The sweet, citrus taste helps to revive her somewhat. "He didn't want you feeling indebted to him before you could get your life back in order."

Will I ever get my life back in order? Hajin thinks, glumly.

"Wait! I still need to tell you something important," Myunghee's alarmed voice rings through the heavy silence in Hajin's numb mind. "Hello? Hajin? So? Yah!"

"We're here," So assures, rubbing life back into Hajin's numb arms and shoulders.

"Oh," Myunghee clears her throat. "Anyway, I was saying… this morning, I found those articles in an envelope along with… statements. Bank statements and other documents."

"Bank statements…?" Just like that, Hajin's stomach falls and her chest is filled with dread. "My bank statements?" She doesn't need to hear their replies to know what they're talking about. A dreadful idea had already started to form in her mind. "How…? Why…?"

"He spoke to your ex," Myunghee explains, confirming Hajin's worst fears. She closes her eyes and groans.

Her bank statements. Her empty accounts. Piles and piles of debt.

"How did Wook know who…? Even you don't…" She finds she can't look So in the eye.

"I do now," he says grimly.

"Wook's good at what he does," there's a tinge of pride in Myunghee's voice that makes Hajin's skin crawl, "he probably saw something or asked around or-"

"In front of the store," the memory of that encounter suddenly comes crashing into Hajin's mind.
"My ex came to apologize that day, before I met La- your stepmother…" She looks at So, but swiftly turns away, feeling embarrassed and horrified by what she was hearing.

"He must have had someone tailing you, then…" Myunghee mutters thoughtfully.

There's a strained silence in which Hajin seriously contemplates running away from the impending horrors of her present reality, but instead, she steels her nerves and swivels in her seat to look up at So.

Her palms are moist from nerves, her heart feels like it's choking her and a trickle of cold sweat runs down her spine. "Those bank statements were his, not mine. He and my best friend… they took everything I had - my money, my house… they even cashed in my insurance policy. When he told me he would pay back all those debts, I believed him. I had no idea that…" Though she tried to fight them back, she can no longer stop the deluge of hot tears from spilling onto her cheeks. As usual, her inclination, her desire to see the good in everybody had brought her trouble. "So… please, believe me."

The intensity of her grip on his shirt and the weight of her sudden plea surprises him.

"Soo-yah," he says, wiping her tears away with his thumbs, but with each gentle swipe, another tear flows in its place. There seemed to be no end to the pain and betrayal she was feeling. Seeing her cry like this was making him angry.

Sitting back on the stool he had vacated earlier, he takes her hands in his and squeezes hard, leaving no room for her to doubt his words, "I believe you, Soo-yah. Of course, I believe you."

Her logical, betrayed mind thinks it's not right for him to trust in another person's words so easily, even if that other person was her, but her selfish feelings give her relief. She breathes deeply, only just realizing that he had known of all this before she did, and yet here he was with her still - taking care of her, comforting her, flashing her one of his reassuring smiles despite the worry lines etched on his lovely, familiar face.

He believes her. He trusts her. She feels she can never love him enough.

She finds herself calming down, enough to finally register Myunghhee's words. "He seemed to think he was doing you a favor-"

"Favor? My ex?" Hajin shrieks in outrage, getting to her feet and wanting to strangle something, her sorrow and humiliation giving way to suppressed frustration and rage. "You met him?"

"We both did," Myunghee replies. At this, Hajin turns back to So, who shrugs.

"His number was in the envelope. All we had to do was call him and pretend to be reporters. He met us readily," he explains. "Evidently, he had spoken to other reporters before us."

"And that means articles about you should be popping up in the news, if not tomorrow, then likely soon after," Myunghee concludes. "I'm sorry, Hajin-ah… I should have been more vigilant… I should have monitored Wook more closely or opened up to him more… I could have prevented this."

Hajin crosses her arms over her chest and sniffs. "It's not your fault, unnie. That bastard ex of mine… I can't believe I thought he was being sincere when he apologized. I even gave him an ointment for his bruises!"

To Hajin's great surprise, So, of all people, comes to his defense. "It's not entirely his fault. It took
a lot of convincing and a broken nose, but he finally admitted that Wook had told him you were
dating someone who was going to leave you to marry another woman. He thought helping them
meant helping you." He rubs the back of his neck and sighs. "So really, they screwed over the both
of us."

"They?"

His smile is strained and without humor.

"Yeonhwa," Myunghee answers for him. "Apparently they've been in contact for weeks now. And I
had absolutely no idea."

Of course, Hajin thinks darkly. How could she have forgotten that woman?

"I really am sorry, Hajin…" Myunghee says again. "I just… never in my wildest dreams did I
imagine Wook doing something like this. Making up stories, spreading false rumors… he told me
the reason he didn't want to inherit his father's publishing company, the reason he turned it into a
PR company, was because he hated all the controversies associated with mass media… and here he
is, deliberately creating one to hurt you. I just never thought he was capable of doing something
like this."

"I thought he was different, too." Though So's words seem to be directed at Myunghee, his eyes are
fixed on Hajin, who nods and whispers softly, "I hoped he would be."

He laces his fingers through hers and gets up, pulling her close and gazing into her eyes.
"Myunghee-yah… I need to take her home. You take care, alright?"

Hajin can imagine her cousin nodding on the other end. "Alright. I just realized we've been talking
for about an hour. You both take care too. Hajin, whatever happens tomorrow, we'll sort it out
together. The truth always comes out in the end."

"Thank you, unnie," Hajin says seriously, and suddenly, she feels guilty. "For everything. You're
always looking out for me."

"I like you, Hajin," Myunghee says, a fond smile in her voice. "And not just because we're related.
Between you and Yeonhwa, of course I'd believe you. Yeonhwa is good to people who are useful
to her… she's better at throwing them away when she no longer needs them. You can't trust people
like that. I just don't understand why Wook would choose to trust her now."

"It doesn't matter," So says gruffly. "Whatever his reasons, the outcome is the same. If I ever see
him, Myunghee-

"Knock some sense into him," she says at once, her voice grim. "He wouldn't listen to me… maybe
he'll listen to you. He values your inputs." Again, the bitterness is clear in Myunghee's voice and
Hajin's guilt increases tenfold.

"I'll throw in a punch for you, shall I?" So suggests in a deceptively light tone.

Myunghee chuckles, but it's a resigned sound - sad and full of regret. Despite everything her cousin
had said, Hajin wonders if she really was okay… she was going to have to meet with her more often
from now on.

"Give him three from me," Myunghee says at last with a sigh. "Well, goodnight, you two. Drive
safely."
There's a final beep and the screen flashes momentarily before going out, blanketing them in semi-darkness. The only light came from the setting sun outside, streaming into the room through the partially opened blinds.

They're both silent, lost in their thoughts, watching the sun descend until it finally disappears. The brilliant red and orange sky was now a dull blue, perfectly matching Hajin's mood.

She somberly allows herself to get pulled into a hug. By this time tomorrow… what will her life be like? What kind of image will the media have given her? She's not sure her parents will take too kindly to her being painted as a gold digger. She's certain she'll like it even less. How will she face her friends? Workmates? So's family?

The idea of having to face all those people in order to explain herself makes her dread even the thought of walking out the door.

"I'll take you home."

In the silent chill that had settled after twilight, his deep, warm voice is a welcome melody to her ears. She nods, blinking back tears of misery as they make their way through the gloom, grabbing what they need along the way, and out the door to the equally silent hallway beyond.
Destiny

Chapter Summary

She’s not surprised to discover her fears are allayed. She trusts him - of course she does. She always has and she always will. With all her heart, she trusts and believes they can overcome this. They can overcome anything… together.

No more secrets.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"What are you thinking?" So's deep voice breaks the silence between them as they walk through an unpaved path leading down to the town square.

It's almost nine in the evening and they had left her parents' place momentarily for a chance to be alone. The path she had chosen was a fairly secluded one, providing them with the privacy they need to sort out the events of the day.

"I think that went rather well, all things considered," she replies, randomly kicking a loose pebble out of her way. She wasn't sure which reaction mortified her the most: her father's gasp of horror at the sight of her entering the house wearing nothing but a large shirt, or the knowing smile on her mother's face.

"It was raining, I got soaked, he came to get me, gave me a shirt, brought me home," she had explained tonelessly before either of them could say a word to embarrass her.

She smiles at So. "At least they didn't ostracize you."

He grunts his agreement and stuffs his hands in his pockets. "I thought your father was rather close to beating me up with a frying pan." The memory of her father's glare makes his face twitch.

"Don't be silly. My mother would have killed him for even touching it. Maybe his golf club, though. Or one of his slippers. Or the mug of coffee on the table. Or-"

"I see your point."

Despite the gravity of the situation, she laughs. She slips a hand through his arm and tries to sound upbeat. "It's only because the rain never reached here. Otherwise, he would have been thanking you."

"Maybe," he breathes deeply and looks down at her, "but I don't mean you coming home so scantily dressed."

The subtle reminder makes her flinch involuntarily. "I know," she mumbles, squeezing his arm. "Well, they'll just have to trust you as much as I do. Do you think there'll be articles up by tomorrow?" she asks in a quiet voice. She hugs her arms, drawing into herself.

"Damned if I know," he sighs, sounding frustrated by his own helplessness. "This is exactly why I
didn't want you involved in the company politics."

Abashed, she looks away. "I'm sorry for causing you trouble."

He's surprised by the direction of her thoughts and corrects her immediately. "I didn't mean that. I meant you getting hurt. All these lies and..." he sighs again and runs his hands through his hair. "You shouldn't be saying sorry. I should be saying sorry."

"You don't need to," she mutters, her voice small. "It's not like you knew this was going to happen. I should have been honest with you from the start. I never did tell you what happened between me and my ex... I just never thought I needed to."

They lapse into a depressing silence, each absorbed in their own thoughts.

The sudden, quiet stillness of their surroundings unnerves her. She can almost imagine the flickering candlelight behind paper lanterns, the faint sound of crickets beyond the shutters of her room... she can almost feel the soft, cold sheets on the space he had once occupied, which she had always kept painfully empty... hopeful, despite her loneliness, that one day he would return to her and things would be as they had been.

A naive wish. A devastating truth.

"I can't help thinking that nothing's changed," she says into the silence, her voice sad, subdued. "This is like Goryeo all over again."

When he doesn't say anything, she feels worse because it means he agrees - he's noticed the pattern and similarities, too... and if the path is the same, then so must the end be. She's certain she won't die... but to lose him again after everything they've been through would destroy her. She's not sure she can recover from it a second time.

She has to clear her throat of the lump that had formed there before she can speak again. "This morning... when you were fighting with Deok... you saw it too, didn't you? I saw your face... I know you saw what I did."

He looks thoughtful and doesn't answer right away. She waits with bated breath as he studies her... and when he finally nods, relief - glorious relief - washes over Hajin. It was happening to him too. She wasn't going crazy.

"Was that the first time it's happened to you?" she asks.

He shakes his head. "The second... the first time was at the exhibit, before my mind cleared and I remembered everything. I saw... too many things."

"Me too," she says. "To be honest... I had visions even in Goryeo."

To her surprise, he doesn't seem surprised. He just smiles. "I thought it might be something like that. Before he left Cheondeokjeon for good, Jimong told me he thought you might not be from our time. Prior to that, I'd already surmised that he might have been something of a seer... the airplanes he'd constructed, the cars, the telescope models... they were technology far too advanced for that time. They did not belong in the tenth century." His sharp eyes are steadfast, looking into her own. "Rumor has it when he was a child, he drowned and was thought to have died before coming back to life. Baek Ah told me something similar happened to you."

She manages a weak smile. "You're too smart for your own good."
"What exactly... did you see?" he asks, sounding both curious and cautious.

His question wipes the smile from her face, but she had been expecting it. There was no going back now. "I saw bits and pieces of the future... your future."

He doesn't seem surprised by this revelation either.

"I saw you become King... and... I saw..." she swallows hard, unable to continue. "I... I saw you..."

"You saw me murder people," he hazards.

She nods, wondering if she should tell him more. It's a widely known historical fact that the Fourth King Gwangjong had ordered mass killings in his time, known as The Purge, aimed at reducing the power of the nobility and strengthening the power of the throne. History would forever remember him as a Bloody Tyrant, a Bloody Monarch.

One might argue his decisions were necessary evils... but necessary or not, ordering the deaths of so many must have taken its toll on him. If he had remained the gentle soul she had always known him to be, albeit hidden underneath the bigger, more menacing mask of Gwangjong, then she's certain he must have suffered greatly, indeed.

Perhaps she should leave it at that and not go into any details. After all, it was a thing of the past; maybe forgetting was for the best.

_I should have been there... to help you, to comfort you... I'm sorry for leaving you alone._

"Eun?"

She stares at him, startled out of her earnest contemplation. "How did you know?"

"You hid their location from me even after I told you I was looking for them to help them," he shrugs. "I can't think of any other scenario that fits."

She purses her lips. He was definitely too smart for his own good. "Yes. Eun and Deok," she admits at last. She wonders what he must be thinking - if he was angry or sad or regretful... but he merely nods and walks on, so she grabs his arm and holds it tightly, keeping him in place. "It's not that I didn't trust you... I just thought you avoiding each other was for the best," she explains at once, "I didn't want you forced into a situation where you had to use your sword against him. Anything could have happened and I-"

"It's alright. I understand." He cuts her off with a small smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. And he walks on, despite her hand on his arm, too preoccupied, perhaps, to even notice it.

_Do you really?_ she thinks, letting her hand drop to her side and trailing behind him. She hugs her arms, feeling miserable as they stop at the crest of the hill and look down at the bustling night market below.

They both stand, frozen, torn between moving forward, and staying back.

But they had to talk about the past in order to move on from it. They needed to bury everything associated with it... that past which had destroyed them. Hajin knows... she would rather go through the leg screw torture again than let it destroy their future. She knows keeping it locked away, ignoring it, would be fatal to their relationship; it would come back to haunt them again, someday, in one way or another. There was simply too much blood between them... too many
deaths.

She knows it might hurt, and she's not at all sure how the night might end, but she decides to say what's on her mind. She has to be honest.

She eyes his back sadly, wanting to touch him, but at the same time afraid to. In a hushed voice, she begins her confession, "Maybe I was never supposed to go back in time. Maybe we were never supposed to meet. Everything went wrong because you ended up loving me."

"You know that's not true," he says quietly.

"If you hadn't loved me, you wouldn't have drunk that poison. Lady Oh wouldn't have died. Maybe King Taejo would have lived longer. You would have been free to live your life the way you wanted..." Her legs are shaking so badly that she has to sit down. The grass is damp and soaks her jeans immediately.

"Do you really believe that?"

"You never wanted to become king... I made it happen. You suffered because of me."

He shakes his head and sits across from her. He sees her tears and his expression softens. "What do you think my life was like before I met you? Butterflies and daisies?" Unable to look away from his dark eyes, she looks on, mesmerized as the dim lights from the street lamps below cast shadows across his face, completely still against the gloomy darkness around them.

My Prince, her mind whispers.

"I grew up with hate," he continues, "they trained me in the art of war, a sword to wield whenever they needed. For the throne. What kind of a future do you think I would have had if it weren't for you? As long as I was needed, I remained alive. The moment I lost my purpose..."

She swallows, her hands fumbling nervously over the tufts of grass around her. He puts an end to their fidgeting by holding them tightly in his.

"I don't know myself what kind of a future awaited me there... but I can tell you it wouldn't have been a pleasant one. No matter what, I would have lost," his hands are rough, but gentle and comforting in their familiarity. "A life with you versus a life without. It's not even a question, Soo-yah."

"But... I died. In the end, I left you alone," she whispers.

"It doesn't matter," he whispers back. "You brought the sun into my world, and for the first time, I appreciated its presence. I learned to appreciate a lot of the things that I'd always taken for granted. I learned to see the stars as being more than just bad omens. I saw more of life, less of destruction.

"You taught me the small things that mattered," he lets one hand go in favor of her face. His touch is gentle, warmth matched in his eyes. "To be able to feel even an ounce of happiness in a life full of misery... I can't begin to describe to you what that's like. And you didn't just give me an ounce... you gave me everything.

"You are my everything."

"But how are we to interpret these visions?" she asks in a quavering voice. "Everything I saw then ended up happening. And now we're even seeing the past again... are they warnings? Reminders? Should I not interfere? Should I... stay away?"
"Whatever happens," he says abruptly. "Don't stay away. Don't leave." He grips her hand tightly. "I won't let you."

Don't push me away. Don't tell me to leave. You are... my person.

The memory of his voice flashes immediately in her mind. She shakes her head, feeling wretched at the things she was saying, "I want to be with you... but what if being with you is wrong? What if we end up ruining everything?"

"How can it be wrong," he says, "when it's the only thing in this world that feels right?"

"But if we continue like we did in Goryeo... how can we survive?" she cries, "I saw Chaeryung crying in the rain. I saw the memory of Eun and Deok dying. I saw Baek Ah crying over Woohee's mangled body. Unnie even left Wook because of me! I've been trying to set them all up again, but what if bad things happen because I interfered with destiny? What if we're just not meant to be?" She pleads into his eyes. "I don't want to hurt you."

He doesn't tell her that just the thought of being without her again hurt him like a physical stab in the chest. He doesn't want to hurt her, either. "Then... what have you seen happening for us?"

She's halted momentarily by the question. "I... haven't seen anything about us," she admits at last.

He doesn't want to hurt her. He wants to love her. He wants to show her his love.

"You forget some things..." he eyes her seriously. "Though circumstances make it seem like our past is catching up to us and forcing us apart... not everything is exactly the same. Lady Oh and my father are married in this life, and I promise you he's not about to do anything to harm her in any way," he begins to enumerate, "Won and my brother, Yo, are entirely different people. Jung and I get along perfectly fine. Myunghie is in perfect health. And this time... Soo-yah... I will, truly, never let you go."

She wipes her eyes with the cuff of her sweater. "But what can we do? How do we fight against this thing called 'destiny'?"

He smirks. "I don't believe in destiny. I never have. I believe our choices define our lives. They spell our futures. And I choose you, Soo-yah." He lifts her hand to his lips. "I will always choose you."

You are my person.

Our choices define our lives. They spell our futures. Can they really escape the kind of future she fears is inevitable? She hadn't been strong enough to fight against it in the past... but she doesn't have to face it alone this time. She had shared her burdens with him, and he had willingly accepted them as his own.

"You said you trusted me..."

"I do trust you," she says at once.

He smiles. "So trust me. As long as we stay honest and open with each other... there's nothing to fear."

Honesty. "We'll tell each other everything."

He nods. "No more secrets."
She's not surprised to discover her fears are allayed. She trusts him - of course she does. She always has and she always will. With all her heart, she trusts and believes they can overcome this. They can overcome anything... together.

No more secrets.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she gives herself back to him, whispering her resolve: *She is his person and she chooses him... always him.*

"I love you."

There's a slight pause between them when he seems to hold his breath. She gives it time to sink in, wanting him to hear what she has left to say, and to remember. From her position on his lap, she can feel the precise moment he starts breathing again, and she smiles - shyly into his cheek.

"I have loved you for a very long time... So."

He can easily count the number of times she's called him by his name... but none of those times quite match up to this moment, because in all the time they'd been together, counting the years they spent in Goryeo, first as friends and eventually as lovers, it's the first time he's ever heard her say she loved him out loud. There's a tiny fluttering in his chest and warmth courses all through his body. His cheeks instantly heat up, especially the side harboring her lips.

But he's quick to recover from his surprise. "I know."

She can hear the smile in his voice and she's indignant that he should use her own tactic against her, but her pout quickly transitions into a sad smile. "I should have said it sooner. Often. Every day, every time I saw you... but..." She pulls away enough to see his face.

"The words just felt so inadequate..." She wants to explain... to let him know it was never because her love for him was lacking, but because it was more... so much more than she'd ever felt for anyone else. "I'd said it to others many times before, so how could I just wantonly say it to you? It didn't seem genuine enough. I'm sorry. I should have said it more often. I should have always let you known how much you meant to me. I should have-"

Whatever else she should have done, she never gets to say. He kisses her suddenly, soft lips claiming her own in savage desire, scarcely leaving her room to breathe. She feels like she’s drowning, but she accepts the feeling - treasures it - her lungs on fire, her heart bursting at the seams, her whole body restless with her own desperate desire to be with him... her breath of life.

She runs her hands through his hair, reaching down to grasp the back of his shirt and to pull him closer to her, her senses heightened and focused solely on him, dulling out the rest of the world.

She should have told him before now. She should have told him everyday.

*Do you still think that you don't have my whole heart and resent me? I'm always worried that I may have left you with hatred instead of love, not allowing you to rest in peace.*

Her words come crashing back into her mind. In the end, her dying thoughts had betrayed her dying words. Because she remembered. She remembered everything. All of them. She couldn't let go of
her love, not even in death.

Rest in the knowledge that I love you
My beautiful prince
My strong king
My beating heart

“I love you,” she says it again, smiling from ear to ear, feeling elated at finally being able to say it out loud. “Very much.”

"I love you, too.” His whisper is a soft caress on her skin, his tender smile a touch of heaven on her once-shattered soul. “Hajin.”

Nothing can quite compare to the happiness she felt in that moment, hearing him say her name in that way. She had known it all along, but it’s only now that she fully understands: he loves her in her entirety.

Hajin. Haesoo. It's the same to me.

His words, spoken to her that night outside his office, mere hours after they had found each other again. Even then, he had accepted her. All of her. Hajin and Haesoo.

And she loves and accepts him, too, and she knows… it’s time. The moment has finally come for her to tell him… her secret… the biggest of them all.

"There's something else," she begins, cementing her resolve with one shaky breath. "After tonight… I don't want any more secrecy. I want you to know everything."

He eyes her curiously. "What's on your mind?"

"I have something else to tell you, to confess," she tells him in a rush before she loses her nerve. "The real reason I left..."

His face is a mask, his eyes dark and unreadable, searching her face for answers. Heart racing in her chest, she wonders how he'll react to this kind of news...

But he deserves to know. She can't claim to love him and continue to keep him in the dark. After all, she had been his as much as she had been hers. A beautiful, perfect in every way, physical manifestation of their love; her parting gift to him, her ultimate sacrifice… one he could never know about… until now.

As always, her heart fills with love and longing at the memory of Seol’s little body in her arms - the soft, fair skin, the small, curling fingers, the thin, dark wisps of hair. Her ears ring with the sound of her cries, and her heart aches, knowing she can never reach her… not anymore…

"In Goryeo... I had a baby."

Chapter End Notes
So normally, my rule is to post a new chapter after either 1) 10 comments, or 2) 500 views, just so I know my readers have caught up with the story... I reached both goals yesterday (on a diff site) but since it's almost Valentine's Day, I decided to wait a day longer before posting this hehehehe

Lotsa love in this chapter. I hope y'all felt it. I hope it isn't too cheesy or sappy. Doh!

Advanced Happy Valentine's Day!
May your hearts be filled with love - today, tomorrow, and forevermore!
Seol

Chapter Summary

No matter how harsh the drought, the clouds would eventually rise again. No matter how long it took... the rain would surely come.

When the water has run dry,
Sit and watch for the rising clouds.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The real reason I left..."

Haesoo cried as she retched, spilling out what little she had managed to ingest for breakfast. Her mouth tasted of bile and her chest felt like it was on fire, but her stomach muscles wouldn’t stop heaving.

Let it stop. Please, let it stop.

Jung was beside her. Ever since finding out about her condition, he had adamantly refused to leave her side.

“It’s alright, nui...” He rubbed her back and cooed comforting words to her while she sobbed. “We’ll figure this out. There must be something you can take that won’t make you so sick every morning,” he tried to sound brave, but she could hear the worry and uncertainty in his voice - justified as her nausea had only gotten worse since leaving the palace.

Relief came eventually.

Shaking and weak, she gasped for air and swallowed the bitter taste in her mouth. She grimaced against the stinging pain in her chest, pushing the basin away from her face and gripping the bed stand tightly as though to transfer the tension from her heart to her fingers. It worked after a time. Her chest pain eased and she sighed with relief, hand covering the small curve just starting to show on her stomach, felt through her morning dress.

For you, I will endure this. For you.

“Let’s go to the mountains before fall fully sets in,” Jung told her brightly one day, sweating from his morning exercise and dropping his sword on the table before coming over to sit beside her. “It will not be so cold yet and the view will surely lift your spirits. There is one place in particular that
I have been wanting to show you. We can bring Little Person with us.”

That was what he called her unborn baby. Little Person.

Haesoo looked up from the book she had been reading. “She’ll be too small to travel.”

“We’ll wrap her up securely and put all sorts of talismans around her,” he suggested. “She’ll be the most protected princess in all of Goryeo.”

She managed a small laugh, feeling her baby move at once. She always seemed to like it when she laughed. “You’re still so sure I’m having a princess?”

“You know we can never be sure, but it’s best we always think of her as such. Maybe the heavens are actually listening this time and they’ll answer our prayers.” Jung had been worried about the baby’s gender even early on. A daughter would be relatively safer than a son. “If my brother ever finds out-“

“He can’t. He mustn’t,” she interrupted at once with a frantic shake of the head. “The Queen… the ministers-“

She had given up too much… she won’t be able to rest quietly if she thinks there’s even the slightest chance people will discover her baby’s true paternity… if she thinks leaving him had been for nothing.

The thought of her prince, her king, so far away brought fresh tears to her eyes. She hadn’t seen him in months and she missed him terribly. She still imagined him with her during her quiet moments. She felt him every night in her dreams. She heard him in his poems. She saw him in the stars.

She missed him.

“I know, I know,” Jung said soothingly, rubbing her back while she clutched at her chest, wincing against the pain. “Worry not, nui. I promised I’d keep you safe. Both of you. No one can harm you here. I swear it.”

No one but herself. Her memories.

“For you… my little princess,” Haesoo whispered, laying a light hand over the little torso before her, happy just to feel the rise and fall of her baby's breaths. “I want you to grow up strong and beautiful.”

Her sleep disturbed, the little girl opened her eyes and frowned up at the ceiling, unaware that her mother was on the bed beside her.

“Follow your heart, but don’t be blinded by it. Be happy.” Haesoo felt one small ear, so much like her King’s that she has to smile. The baby looked at her then and Haesoo ran a thumb lightly over her forehead to ease away the frown. She chuckled fondly at the small smile on her daughter’s face - a delightful response to her mother’s touch. She wondered if she recognized her words… her prayer.

“Always be happy. Listen to your Uncle Jung for he shall be your father. Listen to the woman who
will be your mother.”

She pressed her lips to Seol’s soft cheek, breathing in her sweet baby scent, feeling her love dull the pain in her heart even as the flow of tears soaked the sheets beneath them. “I’m sorry I won’t be around to watch you grow up… I’m sorry you will never know your real father… I’m sorry for everything…”

Her grief made her voice waver, raw pain at the thought of leaving her daughter so young and fragile coursing through her veins. She kissed one small hand. “My love is all I can leave you with, for I do love you, my Seol.

“For you, I gave up my world.”

“In Goryeo…” Hajin can hardly keep her voice steady. “I had a baby. A girl.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence as they both stare at each other and she finds she's terrified of what his reaction will be. Will he be angry? Will he hate her? Will he leave and never come back? Will he even believe her? After everything they’ve been through… after everything they’d just said to one another… surely, surely they can get past this too?

Unbeknownst to her, he's struggling with something else entirely.

The time had come at last for them to talk about her… their little girl. Not that she remained little all her life, but that was how he had always seen her, even after she had matured into a beautiful woman.

He’s not quite sure how to react. An array of emotions has flooded through him so that all he can muster is a perfectly blank expression. Along with the emotions are the memories… memories of a little girl running into him… of straight, long black hair, big eyes, a small nose and chubby cheeks.

She was six when they first met. Seven when they met again.

“Why are you crying?”

The little girl crouching beneath the stairs looked up at the sound of his voice. Her eyes met his, and he thought he saw a hint of recognition flash through them. They had met once, briefly, almost a year ago. Would she really still remember him?

Without warning, she got up and ran to him, slipping one tiny hand into his, while keeping the index of the other uncertainly on her lips.

He was Gwangjong, the infamously powerful, highly feared Fourth King of Goryeo, but he lowered himself to meet her eyes, to study her as he had done briefly before.

She was a little taller than he remembered, dressed in beautiful pink and white silk, her hair down and arranged haphazardly about her small face. Her pink lips were pursed in a small frown, and her big eyes raked their surroundings cautiously.
“Are you lost?”

When she answered, her voice was small and tremulous. “I don’t know where my abeoji is.”

The smile dipped slightly from his face, but he forced himself to remain pleasant. “Your father is not here. He is overseeing a few things for me in the village, but he will be back soon. Do you know where you are?”

She shook her head and used her free hand to swipe strands of hair away from her face. “Abeoji said to stay in the room, but I followed him outside.” She lowered her eyes then, looking guilty.

It was dangerous for her to be out and about the palace grounds all alone. He would have to speak to his brother about additional guards for her safety while they were here.

And, he thinks grimly, the ladies in charge of looking after her will have to be punished in some way.

“And you got lost?” he guessed, smiling at the pout on her guilty face. She looked like her... so much like her. “You are but a few steps away from the Damiwon.” He decided not to point out that she was at the other end of the complex, a long ways away from where she should be. “Do you know who I am?”

Her eyes brightened. “You are Pyeha,” she enunciated the title carefully, looking pleased with herself at having known the answer to at least one of his questions. Suddenly looking like she remembered something, she quickly withdrew her hand from his grasp, leaving his own painfully empty.

Again without warning, she prostrated herself on the ground before him and said in as formal a voice as she could muster, “Greetings to you, Pyeha.”

He smirked. “Did your father teach you to say that?”

“Yes,” she replied, lifting her face from the ground. He was pleased to see that she was looking less scared, her eyes now sparkling with barely concealed curiosity. “He said if I meet a man with a golden dragon, I should greet him properly.” She lowered her head once more. “Thank you for your benevolence, Pyeha.”

The unexpected statement made him laugh, a genuine laugh, something he had consciously denied himself for years. “You only say that after I give you something.”

“Oh,” she smiled brightly as she straightened up. So watched with open fascination as she dusted her hands on her skirts and wiped even more strands of hair away from her face, caking her cheeks and forehead with dirt in the process. She was slick with sweat, presumably having run around all morning in search of Jung, and as she straightened her skirt, her stomach grumbled a loud protest. Embarrassed, she twisted the ribbon of her jeogori.

He smirked in amusement and got up, extending his hand in invitation. “Since you have already thanked me, I feel obliged to give you something. Come, let us have a meal together.”

She practically hopped from excitement, her soft hand slipping once more into his roughened one.

At the entrance to the Damiwon, he turned to his armed escorts and motioned for them to stop moving. “None but my brothers shall be permitted whilst we are here.” His command, spoken once, was to be obeyed for the entirety of his reign.
They had spent the rest of the risen day together at the Damiwon, undisturbed, all his previous appointments cancelled and forgotten, none of them so important than her.

Every little thing she did and said fascinated him to no end. He couldn’t get enough of her. He had helped her wash her hands using the pretty soaps her mother had once taught the court ladies to make. He had wiped the smudges of dirt off her face while she ate, chuckling quietly at the delightful way she sampled the many dishes laid out before her, at the way she cooed at the colorful, sweet rice cakes that the court ladies gave after she had eaten her fill of beef.

“This?” she asked, lifting up yet another kind of rice cake and offering it to him.

“No,” he replied flatly, smiling at her disgruntled expression.

She took a bite. “Umma says not eating will make you sick.”

“But I did eat.”

“Yes, when I fed you,” she sounded and looked so exasperated, he had to chuckle. She leaned closer to him, whispering, “Maybe if we are good, the nice lady will give us more beef. I know you liked the beef, too, Pyeha.”

He thought it likely she just wanted to eat more, because despite being so tiny, she had a large appetite. Already, she had devoured an entire plate by herself, and then some, and making her sick was the last thing he wanted. “Seol-ah...”

“How?” she mumbled, picking at the sesame seeds on her rice cake.

“When it is just the two of us,” he hesitated only a second, “I would like it if you addressed me as Uncle So.”

She blinked curiously up at him, food half-forgotten. “Uncle? Like Uncle Baek Ah?”

He nodded. “Your father and Uncle Baek Ah are my younger brothers.”

“Oh,” she said, realization dawning on her fair face. She fixed her eyes on him... questioning, curious... bright eyes, like her mother’s had been.

And when she smiled, the world smiled with her.

He had watched her grow up. They had become friends. Where Haesoo took the sun with her when she left, Seol brought it back in. The first snow. The purest of hearts. Of all things during his reign, he had ensured her utmost safety and happiness the most.

His lack of reaction has Hajin’s nerves on edge and before she knows it, she’s crying again, "I'm sorry for not telling you sooner... I was scared,” she admits, fidgeting with the hem of her blouse and looking down, not wanting to see the anger, the betrayal, the hurt. "I'm so sorry..."

He snaps out of his memories to comfort her. "It's okay, Soo-yah..." Gently, he runs a hand through her hair and lets his palm rest on her cheek, now streaked with tears. His chest tightens painfully at the sound of her sobs. Unlike him, she had never gotten to know Seol. He knows she can never rest easy, not until her questions are laid to rest... and he was the only one with the answers. "She
looked like you."

Startled, Hajin chokes back a sob, frozen in the act of drying her own tears. "You… met her?"

A memory of a pouting face crosses his mind. "Yes, when she was six."

This information is new to Hajin… one she hadn’t expected at all. Why hadn’t he said anything before now? "And how did you know who… that she was… ours?" As she whispers the last word, her heart starts beating erratically.

He knows. They met. He knows.

Hajin’s not sure if she should be happy or apprehensive. At the moment, she’s feeling both. Did he take Seol with him to the palace? Did she live there with him as one of the princesses? Hajin had no doubt he would have protected her, but for how long? Had she been happy? And what of Jung? The queen?

"She was wearing your hairpin. The one I gave you."

She’s looking at him, wide-eyed with either fear, surprise, or anxiety… or perhaps all at once.

"Jung brought her to the palace on your… death anniversary." He stops, feeling suddenly choked. He thought he would be okay, that he had come to terms with everything long ago… apparently, he was wrong.

She had left him when she found out she had gotten pregnant. She wanted their daughter away from it all. Away from him. He can understand the reason behind her actions, and after years had passed and he had watched Seol grow up happy and safe with Jung, he even agreed it was the right decision to make.

But he couldn’t help feeling betrayed. She was his daughter too, and he at least deserved to know she existed - something Haesoo and Jung clearly decided against - even if he didn't get to have a say in her upbringing.

Clearing his throat, he draws back his hand. He had originally wanted to say more, but now he can’t bring himself to.

Hajin’s mind is working furiously, trying to get a read on him. She can tell he was struggling with something. But what?

"I wanted to tell you. I was going to tell you," she hears herself saying, her voice sounding strange to her own ears. "But how could I? I never would have been able to leave."

"I would have kept you safe," he snaps, sounding more severe than he wanted to. He takes a deep breath and tries for a gentler voice, "Why?"

She turns her body to face him and cups his face in her hands, willing him to understand. "I was dying, and I was scared. I didn't want her to experience the same things I did. I wanted a different life for her."

"Away from me."

"The throne!" she says desperately. "Away from everything. I wanted her to be free."

He swallows hard and looks away.
There's a suffocating pain in her chest as she watches him, breathless with guilt. "Pyeha… I did what I thought was best for her. I couldn't help but think of Lady Oh…” She takes a deep breath to steady her voice. "The longer I stayed, the sicker I got. I was afraid of losing her prematurely. I couldn't risk it. I did it to keep her safe, not because I wanted her away from you," she says earnestly. "Pyeha… please… believe me…"

"Then why didn't you tell me?" he asks, once more locking eyes with her. "Why the secrecy?"

"If I had told you… would you have let us go?"

For a long time, they both look at each other, connected by a shared past that was now tearing them apart. They're bombarded by memories, feelings from a thousand years ago - feelings that even now are as fresh as they had been when they had first felt them.

"Probably not," he says at last with a sigh, looking away.

She appreciates his honesty and tries to maintain a steady voice as she whispers, "I know how much you wanted her." But the truth of it shatters her resolve.

I wanted you there.

Though I knew I had lost you, I searched for you - constantly.  
I saw you in everything - and I lost you every day.  
Always, I waited to hear the sound of horses, hoping that one day one of them would bear you to me.

Because I wanted you.

I wanted to fall asleep every night beside you, in the comfort and protection of your love.

I wanted to wake to the morning sun kissing your skin as it chased away the dark.

Because I wanted you with me.

Because I wanted to celebrate her birth with you - to fight with you over what to name her - to see the look in your eyes as you beheld her: she who was precious and loved, who could not have been more wanted… who neither of us could have.

"I'm so sorry… I'm sorry for taking her away without telling you. I'm sorry for leaving you even when I said I wouldn't.” No longer able to fight against the turmoil building up inside her, she lifts her prayers up to whichever deity could be deigned upon to listen.

Because you were my world… and I had to let you go so that she could live.

“So…” her voice is hushed, but loud in the silence between them. “Can you ever forgive me?”
The silence stretches and roars in Hajin’s straining ears. Crystal tears reform on her lashes as she hugs him, praying he won’t leave. She doesn’t know what she’ll do if he does.

_Forgive me._

After what seems an eternity to Hajin, he finally returns her embrace, closing his eyes to rid himself of the bitterness of the past, because despite the hurt and the betrayal, he knows - she was right. He wouldn’t have let them go. He couldn’t have.

He couldn’t have just stood there and watched them leave - the only two people in the world who could have given him what he wanted most: a real family, somewhere to belong, something that was truly his - the only two people in the world he would have given anything to keep beside him. Wang So as a Prince - emotionally scarred, shunned all his life, lonely and insecure - would have done everything in his power to make them stay.

And in the palace, if they had survived, they would have been miserable.

Seol’s open laughter rings through his ears, a melodic sound that made every sacrifice worth it. She had been happy. She had been free. She had lived.

"I forgive you," he says at last, meaning it. His voice held no traces of anger or resentment. "Soo-yah, I forgave you a long time ago… long before today. What can I do?" He smiles resignedly. "I love you that much."

She doesn’t quite believe it at first. She remains frozen, latched onto him. It’s only when he starts kissing her shoulder that she realizes she hadn’t dreamt it. He had forgiven her. He loves her still.

She feels a surge of relief, gratitude and remorse, and she begins to cry in earnest, holding tightly onto him, overwhelmed by the deluge of emotions pouring out of her.

"Why are you crying?" he asks, trying for a lighthearted laugh. "I just told you I forgave you."

"It's because of that, _babo_!" she snaps, instantly overcome by yet another wave of sobs.

"Because of what?" he asks, his voice teasing. With difficulty, he pulls away from her strangling hold and tries to look her in the eye, but she covers her face, embarrassed by the irrational intensity of her cries. "Is it because I said I forgive you?" he finds a way around her small hands and begins to peck at her quivering lips, and she has to consciously force herself not to start melting, "or was it when I said I'd already forgiven you a thousand years ago?" he murmurs in between kisses, "or is it because I said I loved you?" His lips linger on hers, slowly, lovingly kissing away her tears until they fell no more.

"Haven’t I made it clear enough how important you are to me?" he pulls away her unresisting hands and wipes the lone tear left streaking down her face. “I love you, Soo-yah, more than I think you'll ever know or care to admit."

She knows. She’s overwhelmed by the intensity of his affections and she feels unworthy. "Hajin," she says with a sniff.

He cracks a smile. "Hajin. If you can call me Pyeha, I can call you Soo. It's only fair, Soo-yah."
He grunts in surprise when she tackles him to the ground, kissing him like she's never kissed him before - possessive and deep, their fused, warm breaths trapped within their enjoined lips, flowing over each other as powerfully as a river crashing onto its rocks. Her hands on either side of his face hold him steady; his hands on her lower back and neck do the same.

She breaks away, but only just. Not allowing him to speak, she pushes his fringe away from his face and closes his eyes to kiss his lids - first his right, trailing across the bridge of his nose to his left.

She hasn't yet done this in this life, but now, with gentle, lingering kisses, she traces the area around his left eye, remembering perfectly where it had been, remembering the first time she had kissed it in Seokyung, telling him through actions rather than words that she loved him, she accepted him, and that she was his as much as he was hers.

No words are necessary, but she tells him, over and over, whispers it against his skin, at the place that had tormented him all his past life. *I love you.*

“You asked me once how I could love your scar… it's not a curse to me. It never brought me misfortune.” She draws back and gazes into his dark, thoughtful eyes the moment they open. She cracks a smile, finding it endearing how he's always trying to read her, trying to calculate her every move. She pinches his nose and chuckles when he pulls away, frowning. “It brought you to me, and you made me live again. So when I found out my time was limited… I knew the only thing I could do for you was to give your baby a fighting chance. The both of you had to live.”

“Our.”

“Our,” she agrees, closing her eyes and leaning into the hand that had reached up to cup her cheek.

Her dark hair fell in waves around her fair face and swayed ever so slightly in the breeze. Airing out her biggest grievance had given her peace, and he can see it in the way her pink lips tilted upwards in a small smile, at the slow, steady pace of her heart beating against his…

“Did you… suffer very much?”

She seems to consider her answer, but he can see it in the subtle way her face falls, in the way her eyes cast downwards - she did.

He sits up and draws her to him, his imagination torturing him… he sees her in his mind’s eye - pale and weak - waiting for him by the window she kept open, writing the poem he had given her once, a long time ago, over and over again:

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When the water has run dry,
Sit and watch for the rising clouds
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“Did you really wait everyday?”

Slowly, she nods, and he breaks. Gwangjong breaks. The wall he had built so carefully around his emotions shatters, expelling everything he had bottled up and locked away. The worst is the grief - that raw, profound stab he had felt upon hearing the news of Haesoo’s death, upon reading her letters. There had been so many letters.
“I wanted to believe you would come for me,” she whispers.

Because he had told her to wait: that no matter how harsh the drought, the clouds would eventually rise again. That no matter how long it took… the rain would surely come.

He had made her wait futilely, all for a childish grudge, believing she had chosen his younger brother over him and was happy, leaving him alone in the palace to fend for himself against the circling wolves… wolves who would soon recognize their true alpha.

He had allowed his hurt to cloud his judgment; to overlook all that she had given him in favor of resentment at the mere thought of her leaving. And she had left for his sake… for Seol’s.

There were no words suitable enough to describe the anguish he was feeling. He simply held her, too choked up by his own tears to even utter a single sound.

She offers no words of comfort. Instead, she kneels before him, and to his very great astonishment, she thanks him…

“You did come for me. In this life, against all odds, you're here with me now. I don't know how you did it... but I thank you. Now," she fixes his hair, "I can freely, truly love you all I want."

That had been her wish; she had told him once on the banks of Lake Dongji.

"Perhaps it was the stars that guided me." He manages a weak smile. "Perhaps they decided I shouldn't keep my Lonely Maiden waiting any longer."

The sudden memory of that night unites them in silent laughter. And it feels so good just to laugh again, to smile after all the heartaches of the past hour. It heals the wounds they had just reopened, but this time, they intend to leave no scars.

Chapter End Notes

You guuuuys, making me work double time! My plan was to leave y'all with good, warm feelings for Valentine's, but it seems I underestimated the power of the "elephant" lol

I reached more than 10 comments two days ago, but I didn't want to rush this chapter for obvious reasons, so I'm sorry for the wait, even though it's only been three days :P

Was the wait worth it? xD

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In case you don't understand the reference, the "Lonely Maiden" is an inside joke of sorts that is part of the standalone fic I had written some weeks ago called "Like Falling Stars".
On Babies

Chapter Summary

Hajin nods enthusiastically, shoving the stick towards him. "Halmeoni is right. It's hard."

He eyes her wryly and takes it, bowing politely to the old woman. "Yes, halmeoni. I'll definitely..." though his expression is neutral, his eyes twinkle mischievously when he looks at Hajin, "do my best to make her happy from now on."

"Now," she fixes his hair, "I can freely, truly love you all I want."

He looks at her and smiles.

"Perhaps it was the stars that guided me. Perhaps they decided I shouldn't keep my Lonely Maiden waiting any longer."

They laugh, and Hajin hasn't felt this free, this light in a long time. She thinks maybe she should have confessed everything sooner, and yet, she knows they hadn't been ready for it then. They had been through so much together - their relationship stretched, broken and trampled upon so badly in the past that she was afraid it might shatter again...

But she also knows she had never intended to keep him in the dark forever, and now that they've finally aired out their feelings, they can start looking forward - confident and secure in their relationship.

"We're a mess," she remarks, straightening up to pluck blades of grass from his hair and tossing them aside.

He hums his agreement, fingering her slightly soaked, stained clothes. "I foresee a frying pan within my immediate future."

She snorts, unconcerned. "I'll tell them we tripped on our way down to the market and ended up rolling down the hill the rest of the way... No, I tripped and dragged you with me. They can't possibly blame you for that."

"Or," he says, looking suddenly serious as he takes both her hands. "We tell them the truth."

Her eyes widen in surprise, and she wonders if he's gone crazy. "They'll never believe that! No one will!"

"The truth," he continues, a devilishly handsome grin on his face, "that I asked you to marry me and you said yes, and in your happiness, you bulldozed me into the ground."

She lifts an indignant, though no less amused, eyebrow. "I said yes, did I?"

"Hm?" he assumes an innocent expression, "Why, is that a no?"

"No."
"No?"
"No, yes!"
"No, yes?"
"Yes, yes!"
"Yes, no?"

"For the love of Taejo!" she growls and really does bulldoze him flat. "Yes. Though I must say, you haven't improved much since Goryeo, but because I love you and can't possibly imagine living a life without you in it... yes." She smiles broadly. "Yes, I'll marry you."

He scoffs indignantly. "If memory serves me right, the first time I asked you, I was offering you a way out of that godforsaken palace. I was willing to risk everything for you, including my father's ire. How is that not a worthy proposal?"

"But you didn't even think to ask me that second time," she mumbles. "You just immediately started talking about babies."

His sudden, strong grip on her hips makes her yelp in surprise. "And what's wrong with babies?"

"What's wrong is my parents will kill me if I ever have a baby out of wedlock."

"It won't be out of wedlock."

"We can't have a baby now!" she splutters, trying to free her hips because she's only just realized she was straddling his thighs between her own - dangerous. "Everyone will think I did it on purpose to force you into marrying me!"

She knows she's raised a valid argument. He's silent for a while, looking contemplative, and she uses this chance to wrench her body free, but as she sits up, he follows, trapping her once more inside his arms. "But how do we even know you're not pregnant now?"

"What?" His question catches her off-guard, leaves her almost speechless. "What do you mean?"

"You've been quite emotional lately. Isn't that one of the symptoms?"

"But of course I'd be emotional," she can't help but sound exasperated, "even you were emotional."

He ignores that. "When was the last time you bled?"

"Last month," she answers readily. "Sometime before your mother's dinner party."

"And this month?"

She blushed, remembering the last time they made love. It had been weeks ago. "Not yet. Soon, I expect."

There's a satisfied smile on his face that makes her laugh despite herself. "Yah! Even if I am, you shouldn't be happy about it. Think of the scandal. You're supposed to be engaged to Yeonhwa."

"Who cares about the scandal?" He grimaces in distaste. "It's a baby. Yours and mine. Nothing can be more important than that." Wistfully, he says, "You don't think I haven't noticed the way your eyes land on every baby you see? Even little baby clothes and toys."
She gives him a pained, almost pouty look. “Do you want me to start crying again?”

“No, I want you to admit you miss her as much as I do,” he says matter-of-factly, dipping his head into the hollow between her collar bones and sucking playfully at the skin there.

“Of course I miss her,” she finds herself mumbling into his hair, enjoying the sensation.

“Then shall we go somewhere else?”

She comes to her senses, her eyes snapping open. She then rolls sideways onto the grass and says something that deflates him completely: “I want to go to the market.”

“You’re joking.”

“No, I really do! There are so many lights and I can hear the music from here.” She gets up and brushes the blades of grass off of her clothes. She ignores the red blotch on the base of her neck. With luck, people will assume it’s a large mosquito bite.

“You’re joking.”

“No.” To his dismay, she walks even further away from him. “I haven't been to a night market in so long. Let's go down and have a look around.”

“You’re joking.” His consistently flat tone makes her chuckle deviously but she remains firm on what she wants.

“I can see food stalls and games, and some really cute accessories nearby!” she informs him, pointing to the crowd beyond the trees at the base of their hill.

“Soo-yah.”

“Ohmona! There even seems to be an apothecary! I might find some herbs there for Sanggung ...”

“Soo-yah,” he practically wails this time, refusing to believe his ears. Of all the times...

She kneels in front of him and gives his lips a good smack. “Ten minutes! We'll have a quick look around and be on our way.”

“Is this punishment? I did say I was sorry for leaving you in the dark these past two weeks.”

“I just want to walk through the night market with you,” she assumes her most innocent look with matching aegyo voice. “It’s not as though we do this all the time. Please?”

He has his head in his hands, not wanting to see the look in her beautiful doe eyes, refusing to succumb to this weakness.

But she was having none of it. She leans in, planting both her hands on either side of his crossed legs. She's so disarming close, he can hear her every breath; feel it on his fingers. Her long hair tickles his arms, sending wafts of his own shampoo his way with every gust of the evening wind.

It was driving him nuts.

“Five minutes,” she bargains.

He chances a peek and is greeted immediately by the sight of her fair collarbone, now slightly red from where he had played with her skin earlier, the neckline of her partially unzipped sweatshirt
folding outward, dipping low enough for him to almost catch a glimpse of her breasts beneath the white shirt she had on. He shuts his eyes with a sigh. “Fine, let’s go.”

Excited, she gets up. Frustrated, he follows her, but he pulls her in before she can take another step. “Five minutes. Yes?”

“Hypothetically speaking.”

He narrows his eyes, but before he can protest, she wrenches herself from his grip and races down the hill, “Last one down decides where and what to eat!”

“Wha- you don't play fair!” he can't help but laugh. He reaches her but not before she's able to plant a foot on the road in triumph.

“So, where do we go first?” she asks brightly, checking left and right for any signs of passing cars before crossing the street.

“No matter where I choose to go, we always end up where you want to be anyway.” He wraps an arm around her shoulders. “So you choose.”

“I can never choose,” she tuts. “You should know that by now.”

“Then I guess that means this trip is over.” He makes to steer her back up the hill, but she pulls him towards the opposite direction, huffing and puffing with all the strength she can muster.

“We are visiting every single one of these stalls tonight,” she declares, dragging him towards the nearest one.

“All of them?”

“All of them. Have you ever been to a night market? Any market?” she asks curiously, eyeing the bright accessories on display.

“I tend to avoid crowded places.”

Seeing nothing interesting, she looks at him. “Why don’t we split up? Let’s go around and each buy something, then we’ll meet at the fountain over there.” She points to a brightly lit fountain situated in the middle of everything, where families and other couples were currently seated, either idly chatting, eating, taking pictures, or just resting.

“No.”

“No?”

“Yes.” His lip twitches. “I am not letting you out of my sight.”

She sighs as he leads her deeper into the crowd, before she realizes that not splitting up meant more time spent together. Happy with this realization, she wraps her arms around his waist and watches as he takes in their surroundings, a curious look on his face.

“Shall we try some street food?” she asks, taking her purse out of the front pocket of her sweatshirt. “Oh, that ahjumma sells the best fishcakes in the entire market. I wonder if she still remembers me…”

Lips pursed, he chides, “I know what fishcakes are. Do I look like some snooty rich boy to you?”
She eyes him up and down - from his perfect hair down to his expensive outfit and accessories. “Yes.”

He’s affronted by her quick, blunt reply. “Jung, Eun and Baek Ah regularly visit public markets when they’re stressed or bored,” he informs her with a light flick to her forehead. “Just because I don’t like going to crowded places doesn’t mean I’ve never been to any.”

“Aish!” she hisses, rubbing her forehead. “You said you’d stop doing that!”

“Oh, I did say that, didn’t I?” he mutters thoughtfully, quickly grabbing her by the waist when she stomps angrily away. “Yah, I forgot. I’m sorry.”

Learning from the past, she fixes her hands firmly on her forehead, a sulky look on her face.

He has to laugh. “I can’t take you seriously when you look that cute, Soo-yah.”

She throws down her hands in irritation and he sneaks in a kiss, much to her chagrin, but the feeling is quickly replaced by mortification when So begins kissing her face.

“Pye- there are people everywhere!” she hisses, her face beet red.

He ignores her discomfort. “Say you forgive me first.”

“I forgive you!” she says at once, putting a restraining hand on his lips and bringing up her hood to cover her flushed face from the many observers around them.

“Aigoo, someone’s still glaring,” he sighs heavily and grips her hand to prevent her from fleeing. “Pray tell, what do men do to earn forgiveness these days?”

“Careful, Your Prehistoricness, you’re reverting to old speech,” she grumbles, trying to pull him away from the varied looks they were getting - from amusement to open interest to head-shaking disapproval.

“A real kiss, hyung!” an excited teenager pipes up from the crowd, shrinking away almost immediately under Hajin’s gimlet glare.

Not wanting to antagonize her further, So allows himself to be dragged away to the rim of the market.

“Thanks, now I can never show my face here ever again,” she snaps the moment they’re relatively alone.

“Why not?” he asks nonchalantly, pulling her into a one-armed hug as they walk through a less busy street. “I see nothing wrong with letting the entire city where you grew up in know how much I love you. You are my fiancée, after all.”

“Did you not see the scandalized looks on those old people’s faces?” she looks at him like he’s crazy. “That halmeoni carrying the cabbages looked about ready to pass out.”

“I don’t care much what other people think,” he shrugs. “It comes with ruling a kingdom with an iron fist for 25 years.”

“I have no such experience.”

He lowers her hood, away from her face. “You should only worry if you think what we have is a passing thing-”
“Of course not,” she interjects at once.

He smiles. “Then stop worrying. It’s bad for the baby.”

She sighs in defeat. “You better not be too disappointed when I start bleeding tomorrow morning!” she warns grimly. “But er… speaking of babies…” She clears her throat, the flush on her cheeks returning with a vengeance. Nervously, she wonders if she should bring up the topic at all… what will his reaction be? Will she ever be ready for such answers?

“Hm?”

“It’s just… I er… did some… research…” she mumbles, inserting her hands into the front pocket of her sweatshirt so he wouldn’t see her fiddling fingers. “About you and the Queen. Did you and Yeonhwa really… have…?” She can’t finish her question, too embarrassed and conflicted.

Thankfully, So understands immediately. “Ah. I wondered when you’d bring that up…”

She waits with bated breath, barely able to look at him, and he’s equally silent, looking thoughtful.

Finally, he speaks, “You know I only really married once?” He looks down at her. “My first marriage to the Princess Gyeonghwa was never consummated, though she maintained the status of a second queen until the end.”

Hajin nods, interest piqued by this firsthand account of history.

“And I did need an heir,” he says slowly, trying to gauge her reaction. The eager look on her face catches him momentarily off-guard. “The ministers were under the impression that more heirs meant more stability. I thought it was a silly notion, considering the bloody aftermaths of my father’s reign, but they were adamant about it, so…” He waves his hand as though that ought to explain everything else. “They would have settled for two princes, but the second died at a young age.”

He says it so casually, Hajin’s not sure if she should express her condolences.

“I saw the need for more heirs when that happened, but after three consecutive girls, I couldn’t do it anymore.” He frowns at the memory. “I ended up severely punishing anyone who so much as breathed a word regarding heirs in my presence. But to put everyone’s minds at ease, I did decide to increase the Crown Prince’s protection and had him learn martial arts, but that’s about all I was willing to do for the sake of their supposed “stability”.

“Much as I tried to, Soo-yah… I couldn’t bring myself to really get to know any of those kids,” he continues, looking slightly apologetic. “I knew more than anyone what it felt like to be estranged from a parent, or two, but that didn’t stop me from distancing myself from all of them, innocent though they were… and I couldn’t bring myself to add another one, if it meant estranging him or her, too.”

She takes his hand and squeezes it in understanding.

“Your Seol was the only one I wanted,” he says softly, squeezing back.

Hajin closes her eyes as she leans against him. She’s known it all along, though she wishes it were otherwise - he had suffered in Goryeo too. While her suffering was all-around, intense and consuming, it had been fleeting compared to his.

With a forlorn sniff, she mumbles, “Okay, you win. I’ll give you your baby.”
To her indignation, he laughs. “Yah, I was only joking earlier. I would never force you to do anything against your will. In your own time, my darling.”

She hugs his waist. “But I feel so terrible about everything…”

“Don’t.” He smiles fondly down at her. “She was beautiful, Soo-yah… and she was happy. She had all the freedom you ever wanted for her.”

“Really?” she sniffs. “Was she really happy?”

“Yes, she was.”

The thought of her baby girl living a happy life without her was too much for Hajin. She bites her lip to try and master her emotions, making her nose and throat hurt in the process.

Seeing her tearful expression, So reaches out to pluck a stick of *bbopki* from a nearby stand and gives it to her. The old woman managing the store eyes the pair of them curiously.

“She was beautiful, Soo-yah… and she was happy. She had all the freedom you ever wanted for her.”

The old woman eyes the pair of them curiously. “Pregnant,” he explains with a perfectly straight face.

Normally, Hajin would savor the treat, eating around the central figure… but she doesn’t have the will to even do that, much more contradict him. She just takes the candy and bites into it, cracking the heart in two.

“Pregnant,” he explains with a perfectly straight face.

The woman’s expression clears and she nods knowledgeably. “Of course. Here, my child, have another.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly…” Hajin shakes her head, trying to push it away. “I’m feeling much, much better now. I was just…” she clears her throat. “I was just-”

“Nonsense! I’ve been there before - cried over every little thing. It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” she says with a kind smile. “I’d watch the sugar, though, so maybe just the two sticks for you. Would you rather have a star? Heart?”

Hajin takes the star. “Thank you.” Turning to So, she informs him, “Did you know that if you manage to eat around the figure, you get one for free?”

“Yes, I do know that.” He pays for the candies and starts to steer her away, but she holds him back. She plucks a dolphin off the stand, a small smile on her lips, but it quickly disappears when he says, “No.”

“Young man!” the old woman snaps sternly, making them both jump. “Did you not see how happy she was? How can you say no just like that? Oh, you’re just like my husband! You know, even if you aren’t fond of sweets, you need to make an effort for her sake. Men!” she tuts disapprovingly. “Do you think creating a new life is easy? The least you can do is make sure she’s happy all the time!”

Hajin nods enthusiastically, shoving the stick towards him. “Halmeoni is right. It’s hard.”

He eyes her wryly and takes it, bowing politely to the old woman. “Yes, halmeoni. I’ll definitely…” though his expression is neutral, his eyes twinkle mischievously when he looks at Hajin, “do my best to make her happy from now on.”

Hajin blushes and looks away to pay, but with that same kind smile, the old woman waves her off and wishes her well, “Babies are a wonderful thing, my dear. Do come around with the little one
next time! I’ll prepare especially little candies for her. Or is it a him?”

“Um… too early to tell,” Hajin says hastily, pushing So away and bowing her thanks profusely until they’re out of earshot.

“You walked right into that one,” So says, biting off a piece from the *bbopki* Hajin had given him.

“I feel like a criminal,” she flinches guiltily. She slaps his arm with the back of her hand. “Why did you have to tell her I was pregnant?”

He looks amused. “Then, should I have told her you were crying over the daughter we had over a thousand years ago? I don’t mind long distance relationships, but I’d rather not have them while in an asylum.”

“You could have told her my goldfish died. That’s just as likely to make me cry.”

“I didn’t know you had a goldfish.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why would I say that?” he asks, exasperated.

“Because now I’ll have to constantly watch where I’m going! How would it be if I meet her again a few months from now and she’ll see I’m…” she gestures to her body, “baby-less?”

“Of course, there’s one quick way to solve your dilemma,” he grins, “we get you pregnant tonight. Problem solved.”

“You said to wait,” she reminds at once.

“Weren’t you willing to do it a few minutes ago? That, coupled with your new predicament - both point to the same conclusion.”

“You are engaged to Yeonhwa,” she says, pointing her empty *bbopki* stick sternly at him. “I haven’t forgotten that for a second.”

“Really? I forget about it all the time.”

“I’ve been wondering though… why is she so obsessed with you?” she demands, eyeing him suspiciously. “You weren’t lying when you told me there was nothing going on between you two, were you? I mean, before you and I met again… what was your relationship with her? You said you two went on a date. One date.”

He runs a hand uncomfortably through his hair. “Okay, but you have to promise to listen until the very end.”

“You lied?” she asks in a small voice.

“What? No! Soo-yah,” he says hurriedly lest she started crying again. “Yeonhwa and I went on that one date last year, like I told you. That was it, I promise.”

“So… what else is there?”

He sighs. “I told you I’ve known her for years, because of Wook…” She nods, and he continues, “I’d be lying if I say I never noticed her feelings for me. I did notice, I just never paid it much heed, partly because she was Wook’s sister, and Wook was my best friend at the time. Mostly
because I saw her as something of a sister, myself.

It was when my parents were going back and forth trying to destroy each other… Yo-hyung and I had originally intended to postpone enlistment in the military until we were much older, but after the divorce was filed, things got terribly messy… the entire family and the company suffered. Hyung and I were both old enough to start learning the ropes of the company, so everyone wanted to use us for one reason or another - mother, father, uncles, aunts, board members…” He shakes his head.

“Lies were spread, scandals unearthed… it was terrible, Soo-yah. Hyung and I enlisted together and disappeared for 2 years. In hindsight, I think maybe we should have sucked it up and stayed, if only for Jung’s sake… but we were younger then and fed up with everything, so we left. I did recommend Jung to Mr. Park, though, because I figured learning martial arts was as good a way as any to release pent up frustration.”

Hajin nods, trying to digest this information. It was all very interesting and tied up nicely with what little information she had, but what did it have to do with Yeonhwa?

“And as you know,” he continues, giving her a look that told her he knew exactly what she was thinking, “while in the military, we’re… er… completely starved of females. Living, breathing, seeing nothing but males day in and day out… though there is that feeling of camaraderie and belongingness…” he shakes his head, “being around too much testosterone for long periods of time does things to you.”

She narrows her eyes in warning. Does he mean what she thinks he means?

“Er…” he coughs delicately, “after getting discharged, I decided I didn’t want any more casual flings and… one night stands,” he looks anywhere but at her, “Hyung felt the same and married his girlfriend almost immediately in private. And Wook… sort of decided it was a good idea to try and set me up with his sister…”

Hajin wrinkles her nose in distaste. “And was it a good idea?” Her voice is a few notches higher than usual. So senses danger.

“I’d be lying if I say she isn’t attractive,” he says fairly, to which she gives a grudging nod, “I hadn’t seen her in years and suddenly seeing her as a woman was very mind-boggling. We got along well during dinner.”

Hajin’s frown deepens with every word, wondering how this scenario could possibly end badly.

“I probably would have called her the next day, except that night was the first time I started having dreams of Goryeo,” he explains, taking her elbow and making her face him. He runs a light hand over the side of her face - literally, the woman of his dreams - and remembers the feeling of contentment that came over him that day when he had taken her arm, said her name, and seen the recognition in her lovely eyes; when he knew he was home again, in her company; when all his wishes culminated into that one miraculous moment when he finally held her again in his arms after a thousand years of searching.

“It was the first time I saw your face… and even though I didn’t know who you were, I knew you were important,” he smiles warmly at her. “The dreams continued until I finally met you again, so really, I had no thought left to spare for any other woman, even if I wanted to. You consumed me. You always seem to consume me.”

She swallows hard. “So… I ruined Yeonhwa’s chances with you? Again?”
“And I will forever thank you for it,” he kisses her forehead and draws her into a hug.

Though Hajin feels guilty and sheepish at the thought of Yeonhwa waiting in vain for So to return her affections after one seemingly perfect night together, she can’t stop the smile from spreading across her face as she leans her head on his shoulder, his familiar body pressed against hers.

His phone rings suddenly, and he fishes it out of his pocket with a sigh to answer, looking surprised at the caller. “Hyung?”

She lifts her eyebrows in question, hearing who was on the other line. It was ten in the evening… why would Yo be calling him this late at night?

The conversation was brief, but it was enough to change So’s disposition entirely so that by the time he hung up, he was back to looking like the professional chaebol that he is rather than the passionate lover she currently wanted him to be.

“So-yah, I-”

“Something urgent?” she asks with a defeated sigh. “Do you have to rush off to some place now?”

“I’m sorry,” he says sincerely. “I’ll make it up to you another time.”

She shrugs and straightens up. “I did say only five minutes. It’s been considerably longer than that.” She crosses her arms, feeling anxious at the thought of whatever urgent matter Yo wanted to discuss. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” he assures her with a smile. “Everything will turn out alright in the end, you’ll see.”

She nods and waves her goodbye, trying not to look too sorry for herself. “Drive safely. Text me when you get home, okay?”

“Silly girl.” He takes her hand and leads her out of the market. “I’ll take you home first.”
Yo sighs inwardly. "And when do you want these up?"

"Anytime within the week. I know you're busy, but please do this for me... for your brother. In spite of our differences this past year, I am certain you and I can both agree: we don't want to see him ruined all for a girl. He's come too far for that. He needs a good, proper marriage to someone who is well-acquainted with our world - someone who easily fits in."

Wang Yo is cautious as he passes through the gates to his childhood home. The night is chilly and the outdoor lamps aren't lit the way they're supposed to be. If his mother hadn't called and asked him to come, he might have thought no one was home.

He smirks. The house might as well be uninhabited. Aside from a few household help, no one else lived in this house with her.

As he gazes up at the tall, dark windows and doors of what had been his home, he isn't hit by a wave of nostalgia... he's relieved. He had hated this place, so had his brothers and their father. Their father was quick enough to get away from it. His brothers, too, had left the moment they were able, even his youngest brother whom she had always favored above everyone else.

He walks in and immediately ascends the stairs, knowing he would find her in the upper sitting room. There's an opened bottle of champagne with two stemmed glasses already filled on the coffee table beside a pot of tea. There's a plate of sweets too – mung bean cakes, his favorite. He knows she hates them and only keeps a few packs around for his sake, in case she ever needs his help.

"Yo-yah!" she greets, coming over with the warmest smile he's seen on her face in over a year. "Thank you so much for coming. Was the traffic very bad? It's a cold evening, so I had these prepared for you. Would you like some champagne? Or we could always open a bottle of wine. There's tea too, and some cakes. Come, I haven't seen you in so long!"

He makes no comment as she ushers him towards the nearest chair and just watches as she pours him a cup of milk tea and deposits two pieces of cake onto a saucer before pushing them all towards him and sitting back with a relaxed smile.

"How is your wife?" she asks pleasantly.

He tries to mask his surprise by looking around at the room they're in. It hasn't changed much. The only difference lay in the photographs hanging on the walls. His photograph, as well as his father's, are no longer present, neither is the family picture they once took by the Tokyo Tower when they were little.
"She's fine," he replies shortly.

She nods, still with that unnaturally warm smile on her face. "You should bring her over to visit sometime. What a shame that we haven't had the chance to get to know each other yet."

Yo resists the urge to roll his eyes. He doesn't want a confrontation. He wants to know what she wants and leave as quickly as possible. His wife will be looking for him soon.

"Maybe after the baby is born. I don't want you antagonizing her," he says casually, taking the cup of tea and lazily swishing the contents around. The surprised look in her eyes satisfies him, but he doesn't give her any further information. If she wants it, she'll have to ask.

"Baby?" For the first time, her smile falters.

"It's only natural, eomeoni. We've been married for over a year."

For a long while, she doesn't move, her smile frozen on her face. As Yo takes a sip of tea, he swears he can almost hear her brain thinking.

"That's right," she finally says, trying to look pleased about it. "When will that be?"

"A few months," he shrugs. "If you really want to, I'll ask her if it's okay to bring you." He almost wants to laugh at the incredulous look on her face. That he should be considering his pregnant wife's well-being over his estranged mother's would surprise no one but his mother. "Tell me what you want."

"What I want? Yo-yah... how ungenerous of you," she says, mildly reproving.

"Then, if that's all..." He makes to get up but she holds out a hand to stop him.

"Wait. I have a favor to ask you," she says, the smile disappearing completely from her face.

"Favor?" he asks politely, retaking his seat and his cup of tea. "What kind of favor?"

She procures a folder from one of the bookshelves and hands it over to him. Curiously, he flips it open and tries not to look too surprised by what he sees. It's his brother's girlfriend - the pretty one from the party - and she's on every page.

"What's this?" he asks curtly, flipping through the files.


"I'm sure you know who that is," she says calmly. "That's the woman."

"So's girlfriend. I know. What I mean is why are you giving me this? And what are all these papers? Who is this man she's with?" He takes one picture from the pile and holds it up. It's a picture of Hajin talking to a man Yo has never seen before.

"Her ex-boyfriend. She owes him and many others quite a large amount of money. See for yourself, it's all in there."

Yo frowns, wondering at the authenticity of these documents. He'll have to ask Won about them. As a certified accountant, his cousin would know better than anyone. "And these articles...?" he falters, his brain finally clicking everything together. He understands what she wants, what she's asking him to do.
"You remember there was an employee who almost drowned more than two years ago?" she begins to explain. "It's that same woman. She was in a coma for a year, and because your father's company was in a bind that time, they paid off her medical bills to regain the public's trust. A hero, the press called her, all for saving that one life."

Yes, Yo remembers. Their half-brother, Mu, had volunteered to pay off everything the moment he had heard of her situation.

Because of the widely publicized legal battle between their parents, and the uncertainty of the company's future, their stocks had dropped drastically that year. And then news of an employee in a coma reached their ears. She had been trying to save a young boy, the parents of whom had set up a fund campaign to help with her medical bills. It had been all over social media, and prayer groups had even started showing up in front of the office and the hospital to pray for her recovery.

Her accident had been an unexpected blessing. Helping her had helped to improve their public image and it had banded the family together long enough to convince the board and the press of the company's stability. It had also helped Mu secure a favorable position in the company - favorable enough to rival even him and his brothers. It didn't hurt either that Mu had had no hidden motives for helping out, his genuine concern, levelheadedness and pleasing manners winning over everyone he came in contact with - that is, except for Yo's mother, who insisted on faulting him.

"We're gone for two years and everything goes to hell," Yo had remarked to So, unable to hide his amusement as they watched the morning news. It was always the same these days - about the many troubles the Wang Group has been facing since its sudden, unexpected split with the Yoo Hoteliers.

Jung took that moment to enter, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and wearing nothing but his pajamas. Yo tossed a pillow at him. "Yah! What kind of trouble did you get into while we were away? How could things turn out this badly?"

Although still half-asleep, Jung had been able to catch the pillow.

So nodded approvingly. "It seems you haven't taken those classes for granted. Do you still go to the gym regularly?"

"Of course," Jung exclaimed brightly, tossing the pillow back to his eldest brother. "I go there thrice a week since I want to beat all your previous records."

"Don't hurt yourself. We're being nagged enough by mother as it is."

Jung scowled. "Speaking of mother, she and father are the reason the company's like this. She's been pressuring him into naming one of you as his successor and legalizing it, but he's so stubborn."

"Naturally," Yo snorted. "Neither of us are sufficiently experienced, and we've been gone for two years."

"It's not that. He wants that woman's son to succeed, even though it's only been a few years since they've met." Angry, Jung gulped down an entire glass of water in one go. "It's bullshit. One of you should succeed, not him. It's only right, after what father did to our family."

"It's not a sympathy vote," So yawned, reclining in his seat and closing his eyes to take a nap.
"Then don't we matter as well? So what if he was forced into marrying mother? We didn't ask to be born!" Jung's anger seemed to only grow with each passing minute. "He found his past love and couldn't wait to just throw us away!"

"Don't take it too personally, Jung-ah," Yo waved a dismissive hand and raised his voice a notch, "Despite what mother's been telling you, I'm sure father still loves you. You're their little baby boy, after all."

"My god, that sounded so bad," So couldn't help but shudder. "A word of advice: don't do that in front of your girlfriend. Or me. Or anyone. Ever."

"For your information, my girlfriend loves it," Yo scoffed, hitting a relaxed So squarely in the face with the pillow. "You're just jealous you're still single. I still don't understand why you didn't call that girl you had dinner with. I thought you said she was cute and... are you even listening? Yah, don't fall asleep! We need to get going!" He tossed a second pillow at him, but So caught it this time.

"Where?" Jung asked, curiosity temporarily replacing his anger.

"To his new place."

"You're moving out?" Jung gaped at his second brother.

So got up. "I'd rather not be around to witness hyung merrymaking with his wife."

"Wife?" Jung yelped, turning to gape at his first brother. "You're married?"

"I will be in a few hours. Why'd you think I invited you to sleep over?" Yo asked matter-of-factly, searching for his keys.

"Oh, I don't know! Maybe because you missed me? Because we've barely seen and spoken to each other in years? When were you going to tell me? Do our parents know?"

"We just told you," So reminded, to Jung's immense annoyance. "And no, they don't. We kidnapped you for the sole reason of keeping them in the dark."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not feeling too generous towards father, and mother would move heaven and hell to stop it," Yo replied, helping So with some of his bags. "It'll only be us and our cousins. Less drama and less expenses."

Jung sighed, feeling repressed. "And what am I supposed to wear? I only have my gym clothes and pajamas with me!"

"Baek Ah's got us covered," So assured him.

"I don't believe you two. No one ever tells me anything. I should hang out with Wonnie-hyung more - at least he tells me important things, even things about the company, which I just shared with you two!"

"Yah, don't be like that. Be grateful we didn't put Eunnie in charge of your outfit," Yo could barely suppress his laughter at the thought.

"Aigoo, this guy hasn't stopped smiling since last night. You even laugh at your own jokes now," So
shook his head, pushing a sulking Jung out the door and deftly evading the kick aimed his way. "But Jung, have you heard anything about Mu-hyung's plan to help out that girl who was in a coma? I heard she woke up recently."

"Won-hyung said it's been done," Jung shrugged. "He was asked to have the cheque delivered anonymously to the hospital days ago. What are your thoughts?"

Yo's unconcerned voice said from behind them, "Let him do what he wants."

"I think we should help." So's sudden declaration put a temporary halt to the conversation. He punched the elevator button.

Jung's the first to speak, "Why should we help him?"

"It's not him we'll be helping, it's the girl and the company. If he does everything alone, he gains nothing but the public's favor. If we help him-"

"We help the company," Yo nodded, looking thoughtful. "Give the press something nice to talk about... even if our parents are divorced, we're still Yoos as much as we're Wangs. We should be helping both sides."

"Does this mean we'll have to start being friendly towards him?" Jung couldn't help but bristle at the thought.

So raised his eyebrows and nodded, "I've spoken to him a few times already. He seems like a genuinely nice guy."

"I don't know why I feel betrayed, but that's not important... how will helping him help someone else benefit the company?"

"The fight is between our parents, not us," Yo explained, warming up to the idea now that he's had a few moments to think it through. "I guess being away from the spotlight does have its benefits. The press don't really know what kind of relationship we have with father's new family. If we play it just right, they'll think it won't matter who eventually succeeds the company, if we get along just fine. The press can chalk up all the drama to being consequential to any normal divorce, rather than a struggle for power." He nodded and thumped So's back. "Jung's right, you should succeed father."

"You want me to help you destroy her. Her image." Yo's voice is carefully guarded. His mind is in a whirl, thinking things through, trying to play out every possible scenario.

"I know you're good with computers. I need you to make sure these articles stay on the internet for a long time."

"But, eomeoni, why should I?"

"She's using your brother," she says casually, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Surely a smart boy like you can see that? You were always such a perceptive child. She has plenty more debts to her name, she can't possibly clear them all right away. You don't believe me? Her ex-boyfriend's number is in there. Call him, if you want proof. He'll tell you all that you need to know."
She takes a sip of champagne and smiles benignly at him.

"Have you confirmed her side of the story?"

"Why would I need to ask for her side of the story? Of course she would deny it," his mother lets out an incredulous laugh. "The bank statements are there, as well as the sworn statements from the people she owes money to. What other kind of proof do I need?"

Yo sighs inwardly. "And when do you want these up?"

"Anytime within the week. I know you're busy, but please do this for me... for your brother. In spite of our differences this past year, I am certain you and I can both agree: we don't want to see him ruined all for a girl. He's come too far for that. He needs a good, proper marriage to someone who is well-acquainted with our world - someone who easily fits in."

Unlike his girlfriend... or my wife, Yo thinks darkly. Shutting the folder, he asks if there are more documents he needs to know about, to which his mother replies in the negative. Satisfied, Yo checks his watch and gets up. "I'll see what I can do, but right now, I need to get going. Good night, eomeoni."

"Thank you, Yo-yah. I can always count on you. I don't need to tell you that your brother mustn't know of any of this; not yet. There's a proper time for everything." His mother gets up and follows him to the door, a pleasant, satisfied smile on her face. "Drive safely. Do send my regards to your wife. I'll be sure to send her gifts at the earliest opportunity!"

Yo gives a final nod and leaves. Once in his car, the first thing he does is to call his wife to tell her he'll be home much later than he promised, and then he calls his brother and asks to meet.

"Yah, do you think I'd rather spend my evening with you than with my wife?" Yo scoffs when So protests. "It's important. It's about your girlfriend."

That does it. With a promise to be in the office in half an hour, they hang up.

"So she's in on this, is she?" So's voice is grim as he tosses the folder onto the desk and takes a seat. "I suppose it makes sense, all things considered. Actually, I'm more surprised I didn't make the connection sooner."

Yo turns from the coffee dispenser to look at him, eyebrows raised in mild surprise. "You know about this?"

So nods and begins to relate the events of the day, from Myunghee's call to their meeting with Hajin's ex. "He admitted the truth, eventually. Lies," he nods towards the incriminating folder on the table. "They're all lies."

"All the same," Yo sighs, taking the seat opposite and pushing a mug of coffee across the table. "I don't think I'm the only one she's asked to do this. We can't possibly fight off everything ourselves. Think of the scandal of it all... you leaving your newly announced fiancée in front of all those cameras, and then leaving the venue with a different girl. It all sounds romantic, but once the stories regarding Hajin start popping up, things will start to look quite different. This combined with the fiasco surrounding the J&J Group, will make people doubt your judgment. It won't look good to the board."
Forehead throbbing with too many what-if scenarios, So ignores the coffee in favor of a glass of water. "Did she say when she wanted the articles up?"

"She wants them within the week," Yo replies, eyeing his brother intently. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I want to disappear and just live forever listening to the sound of the ocean," So grumbles.

"There's a simple solution to your problem."

So looks up, curious as to what his brother has in mind. For his part, he could think of nothing.

"You know what eomeoni wants," Yo leans forward in his seat, hands clasped together the way they usually do when he's in a business meeting. "She wants you to succeed father as CEO. To help achieve this, she's been trying to marry you off into an influential family for the past year. That woman she wants you to marry inherited half of her father's company. She's well-connected, well-liked and, because of the nature of their business, highly influential."

"I don't see where you're going with this," So admits blankly.

Yo sighs and rubs his lower lip with his knuckles. His brother's not going to like this next part. "I'm saying... if you're that opposed to marrying the Hwangbo girl, then you don't have to do it - mother will move on from that disappointment and find another one for you... but once she does find another," he pauses and tactfully says, "you'll need to be free to give her a chance."

So understands what his brother means and curtly says, "Not an option."

Dismayed, Yo hangs his head. So has always had a stubborn streak to rival even that of their father's, especially towards things he's passionate about. Since seeing Hajin at the party, Yo had already suspected, though he'd never given it much thought 'til now - his brother was serious about this girl. But this time, he had to see reason. There was no going around the shithole they were in.

"Yah, just think about it... if you break things off with Hajin, mother will stop thinking of her as a threat. She'll leave her alone, which means the articles will never be released. She won't have to get hurt at all," Yo reasons testily.

"I know it sounds selfish, especially since you put it that way," So's voice is determined, his eyes dark, serious, "but I can't give her up. I refuse."

"Then I hope you have another plan because I sure as hell don't." Yo leans back in his seat, forehead creased with tension. "Instead of posting the articles, I can assemble a team to try and get rid of the rest once they start popping up. But there's not much we can do about the prints, because they're sure to be in the newspapers as well. We don't even know when those will be out. We are at a huge disadvantage."

So drains his coffee in one go. He'll need to stay up longer than he thought. "I do have something. You might not approve once you hear it, but it's been lurking in the back of my mind for quite some time now and I think it's the best way to go. Do you think Won's still up?"

Though curious, Yo doesn't press him for answers just yet. Instead, he gets up and heads to his desk. "I'm sure he is. That insomniac sleeps at three in the morning, most days. Shall I tell him to come in?"

So nods. "And you? Don't you need to get home?"
"I've told my wife not to wait up for me. I can pull an all-nighter for tonight. So what do we do?"

Chapter End Notes

Hehe nothing about babies just yet, but it will be cleared in the next chapter. Been rather busy with work, but I'll try to have the next chapter up soon. Methinks you guys will like it lol
This is Your Plan?

Chapter Summary

Hajin looks up to see him standing a few feet away. She assumes her most stern expression and stomps out from behind her tree to face him.

"This is your plan? You better have a good explanation for all of this!" she says through gritted teeth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"It's better this way, oppa," Yeonhwa tells her disconsolate brother as she roots around in his cupboards for surviving shot glasses. The soju had been easy enough to locate, but the rest of the place was in disarray.

Upon entering earlier, her path had been partially blocked by an armchair and though she had asked for his help, none had been forthcoming. After forcing her way in, she found to her disgust that not only were there papers strewn all over the floor, but there were broken glasses and upturned chairs as well.

The management of the apartment had called her last night, telling her that the residents nearby were concerned about the noises coming from her brother's place. She had dismissed the call, wondering what business it was of hers to call her so late into the night when her brother and his girlfriend were clearly having an argument over something… but they had called again this morning and insisted she came over.

"He's responding but won't let anyone in, miss," a woman said to her. "Please drop by, even for just a few minutes. We just need to know everything's alright inside. You're the only other person listed on his emergency contact list, apart from his girlfriend."

"Oh, forget it," she snaps irritably and grabs two mugs instead. "Let's just use these. Here, have a drink."

Though her brother takes the mug, he makes no move to drink from it. He merely stares blankly into space.

"The alcohol will help you forget. It will make you feel better," Yeonhwa says lazily, taking a swig.

"She found out about the articles."

Yeonhwa sighs impatiently. "Yes, you said."

Wook looks at her then. "You aren't worried what she'll do with the information?"

With an amused little smile, Yeonhwa shakes her head. "Myunghee's always been rather timid. So she found the articles... other than confront you, what else can she really do? Talk to the press? Who will believe her?"
"She could have spoken to So."

"Could have, but I doubt it. We would have heard from him by now. It's been over a day since you and Myunghee argued. Besides, he won't believe her, not without proof." Yeonhwa pours herself another drink. "You should have told me sooner."

When her brother goes back to looking distant, she snaps, "Why didn't you tell me that the woman So was seeing was Myunghee's cousin? You told me you'd take care of it. You promised me you would."

"I am taking care of it," he murmurs.

"If I had known, I would have done things myself! I would have even taken care of Myunghee for you!"

"Myunghee has nothing to do with this." There's a clear warning in Wook's voice that makes Yeonhwa scoff with disbelief. He's still defending that woman?

"You really believe that? Her grandfather's business has been dying since his death. What better way to get money than to swindle someone into giving it? She and her cousin are the same. They look so innocent and they act so nice, but no one really knows what's lurking underneath. And she claims to be his friend!"

Wook ignores Yeonhwa's jibes. He doesn't have the strength to argue right now.

"Look, I'm sorry if you think this is the end of the world, but I'm telling you… she did you a favor. Your relationship was headed nowhere," Yeonhwa drawls carelessly. "It's high time you found yourself a new woman."

Wook slams the mug hard on the armrest, spilling soju everywhere. Why did she think he agreed to help her in the first place?

Myunghee... this had all been for Myunghee...

"I appreciate your concern, but I'd rather you didn't try to interfere with my life. You have yours, I have mine. I'm only helping you because it was father's dying wish that I took care of you, and because I wanted to help So out." He deposits the mug onto the table and pushes it away from him. "He's my biggest client and he's done a lot for me over the years."

Yeonhwa lifts an eyebrow, amused by his sudden outburst. From where she sat, her brother was looking much older than he actually was. "And I'm telling you, his mother is right. That girl is only using him. In a few days, he'll be thanking us and you'll have his complete trust… and that girl… that girl will finally be out of the picture."

Her phone rings then, and she smiles when she sees who's calling. "Yes, eomeoni?" she greets in honeyed tones, but the voice that answers is nowhere near as welcoming and warm as she's used to hearing from Yoo Myeongsun.

"If there's a TV where you are, turn it on right now."

Yeonhwa frowns, confused. "What?"

"Just do it!"

Flustered, she gets off her seat and makes her way to the television at the far end of the living
She needn't have asked. The moment the TV flashes on, it shows her the daily morning news, and on it is So. She can recognize him anywhere. He's in a press conference, talking to a room full of reporters, with two men on either side of him and a large screen at the back.

Her first thought is how handsome he looks in a business suit, his hair combed neatly to the side, showing off his sharp eyes and chiseled features, heightened by the serious look on his face… her second thought is to wonder where he currently was and if she could somehow intercept him on his way out later… and her third thought is horror when she realizes what he's saying… when she reads the caption on the screen…

"Well?" Ms. Yoo snaps.

Yeonhwa's too stunned to speak, her face hot as she turns to glare at her brother, who was standing behind her… but he was staring transfixed at the screen, looking just as shocked as she was feeling.

"He didn't mention this…" is all Wook can say.

"He can't do this!" Ms. Yoo's voice rises shrilly in her anger. "Not after everything we've done! How are we with the articles? They should be released immediately! I'll speak to my eldest and see if we can have the first batch up in a few hours, but what about the printers? Hello? Young lady!"

Yeonhwa snaps out of it and clears her throat. "Yes, eomeoni. I… I'll talk to my contacts at once, see what I can-"

"Do it fast, or our deal is over."

The line goes dead and Yeonhwa is left to stare dumbly at the phone in her hand. There's a few moments of silence during which none of them move, and then Yeonhwa slowly starts to recover from her shock.

"She told him." It was a statement, not a question; an accusation. Bubbling hot anger rises up from inside her as she continues to gaze at her brother's blank look. Of course, he would freeze. He always freezes when something goes wrong!

"Your precious girlfriend told him! Why else would he be doing this now? He didn't even bother to call you!" Yeonhwa hisses. "Oppa, aren't you going to do something?"

A few more seconds of strained silence and Yeonhwa has enough. She grabs her bag and keys and, cursing under her breath, slams the door shut behind her, leaving Wook to his thoughts.

"But… how did it happen?" Hajin asks gingerly, dabbing at Won's bruised face.

From somewhere nearby, Chaeryung watches apprehensively, checking her watch as though waiting for something.

Won lets out a little embarrassed laugh. "I arrived home before sunrise this morning to shower and change, and our dogs greeted me loudly enough to wake my father."

Hajin pulls away to stare at him. "Your father did this?"
"It's not the first time," he says, waving a nonchalant hand and wincing when she begins to apply a cool salve on his skin. "He's a light sleeper and he doesn't like being woken up."

"That's no reason to hit your own son!"

From her perch on the table, Chaeryung nods emphatically.

"It's alright, Hajin-ah, your indignation is more than enough to warm my heart." Though his tone is serious, there's a small smile playing on the corner of his lips. Not for the first time, Hajin wonders at the difference between this Won and the Won from the past. He cocks his head slightly in Chaeryung's direction and says, "Besides, she cursed him enough on our way here. Chaeryung-shi, what did you call him again? A wart-faced toad with a mouth too big for-"

"Ah-ah! By the way, agassi, I'm so sorry for calling you so early in the morning," Chaeryung hastily interrupts, getting off the table to address Hajin properly. "I wouldn't have, but there's an important press conference happening this morning, and we can't have him looking like this in front of everyone."

Hajin smiles and waves away the apology. "It's alright... I usually come to work this early to help eomeoni, anyway. I'm glad you asked for my help. You did good in applying ice immediately to the area." To Won, she tells him the salve will have to stay on for a few more minutes before she can start covering up the ugly bruise marring the left side of his face. "If we don't, it will swell even worse and no amount of make-up will be able to hide it."

He checks his watch, not looking all that concerned. "That's alright. It's almost nine so the press conference has probably already started by now. My cousins can handle it. I've already done most of what I was supposed to do."

Hajin eyes him curiously while she prepares the make-up she'll be needing. "What's it about, anyway, this conference? Is it very important?"

Won nods, a thoughtful look on his face. "It's very important. The future of the company will be determined this morning."

"Really?" Hajin can't hide her shock. "Is it to do with So? He came here last night to talk to his brother."

Won's mysterious smile tells her nothing. "It's everything to do with him."

Before she can ask further, the door opens and Lady Oh comes in, carrying a basket of freshly picked strawberries. After acknowledging their greeting, she makes her way to the sink, Chaeryung close behind to help.

"Alright, I think this will work..." Hajin mumbles after a few minutes, comparing Won's skin tone to the mixture on her wrist. She smiles, satisfied, and orders him to gently rinse off the salve with water before getting ready to apply the make-up.

"Wow, you're really amazing, agassi," Chaeryung munches on a strawberry while they watch Hajin work. "I can barely see it anymore and it had been such a big bruise!"

"The color is a little darker than his actual skin, but with powder, it shouldn't be noticeable," Lady Oh remarks critically, ordering a passing court-lady-in-training to tell her comrades to start making strawberry extract with the rest of the strawberries if they're done cleaning up the orchard.

"Ah, nothing like eating freshly picked strawberries while being gazed at by three beautiful
women," Won says with a blissful sigh, popping an entire piece into his mouth.

Hajin straightens up with a satisfied smile. "There, good as new!" She hands Won a hand mirror and waits to see his reaction.

"Whoa, this is amazing!" Won almost chokes on his strawberry, his eyes widening with surprise as his fingers gingerly pat his face. "If it weren't for the pain, I wouldn't have known I had a bruise, myself. Chaeryung's right, you're good. More than good. Thank you." He stares at Hajin in wonder.

"It's no problem," she smiles as she washes her arms at an unused sink, trying not to look too smug. "It's half past nine. Is it alright for you to be so late?"

Won nods pleasantly and gets up. "Like I said, I'm not really needed anymore, but since you ladies will be going down soon, I'll help you with your things."

"Extra help is always welcome," Lady Oh says pleasantly.

It's after they deposit their things at a room on the ground floor that Won asks Hajin if she'd like to come with him and Chaeryung to the press conference. "You're curious, aren't you?" he winks.

After careful consideration, she decides there's no harm in tagging along, especially if what was happening could affect her future in the company. She's surprised when even Lady Oh comes, telling the rest of the ladies to follow as well.

The largest conference hall on the ground floor is packed with people, with company employees lining the walls on the sides and at the back, and dozens of reporters seated at the center of the room. As Hajin squeezes in with the rest by the door, her eyes land on the man talking at the front, and she has to consciously remind herself not to smile so broadly when everyone else was looking so serious.

He's looking very formal, with his neat hair and dark suit. She especially loves how steady his sharp eyes are, exuding confidence as he addresses the room, his familiar deep voice teasing her ears. They hadn't yet spoken today, and after dropping her off last night, all they had were exchanged text messages before she called it a night.

To So's right are his older brother, Wang Yo, and a man Hajin doesn't recognize, and to his left are his father, Wang Geon, and half-brother, Wang Mu. Everyone is listening intently, the only sounds being the constant flash and click of cameras, and the scribbling of pens on paper.

"Is this true, Won-ah?" Lady Oh asks suddenly.

Won looks at her, mildly surprised. "Yes, aunty. We informed uncle first thing in the morning about this."

She snorts and crosses her arms. "That man never tells me anything."

"Like father, like son," Hajin can't help grumbling, mimicking Lady Oh's actions. "I wasn't able to catch what he was saying, though. I was… preoccupied. What's he talking about?"

Won backs himself up until he's behind them and lowers his voice so as not to draw attention to themselves. "The plan was to give updates on the company stocks and growth first, along with information on the trouble with the J&J Group, before telling everyone the real agenda for today…"
"Which is…?" Hajin prompts.

"He's officially withdrawing from the CEO candidacy in favor of supporting Mu-hyung."

Hajin whips around in surprise. "He's what? Why?"

"He has his reasons," Won shrugs. "Yo-hyung wasn't too happy with it last night, but he knows there's no going against So-hyung once he's made a decision. We spent all night preparing everything, coming up with detailed plans and drafting the necessary documents. Judging by the silence around the room, he's already told everyone, and they're in the middle of having their questions answered."

As So nods to a woman at the front, a microphone is passed to her. "Does this decision have anything to do with your engagement to Hwangbo Yeonhwa? I think I speak for the majority when I say we expected you to take after CEO Wang Geon after your marriage."

Hajin sees his temper flaring and has to scratch her nose to hide her smile, but his answer surprises her, catches her and everyone else completely off-guard.

In a loud, sure voice, So declares, "I am not engaged to Hwangbo Yeonhwa."

At once, there's a flurry of movement, accompanied by whispers from all around the room. Even Wang Geon and Mu are looking shocked, staring up at So with their mouths slightly agape, but So doesn't stop there, "The woman I want to marry is someone I have loved since I was eighteen, and she is neither an heiress nor a public figure."

Since you were eighteen a thousand years ago, you mean, Hajin thinks, staring blankly at him, feeling her blush creep higher into her cheeks. What are you doing?

"Then what of your mother's announcement?" the same woman asks, baffled.

"I ask you to disregard it as a fluke. I do not appreciate being forced into situations without my consent and made it perfectly clear what my thoughts were on the issue when I promptly left the venue with a different woman," he says crisply.

"Who was the woman?" a man asks out of turn. "They told us she was a distant cousin who had been taken ill and had to leave."

He shrinks when So's hard eyes land on him, but the latter's expression softens when he answers, "That's a lie. You will remember the woman I'm seeing as the one who saved a young boy from drowning a few years back. After finding out her identity, I got in touch with her and we have been seeing each other in secret since."

"The one who was in a coma? Is that why you decided to help her then?"

"No. My brother, Mu, is the type to help even a complete stranger. I got in touch with her a few months after she had already recovered."

It was at this moment when Hajin's coworker, Minkyung, suddenly makes the connection. Turning to Hajin with wide eyes, she says, "A woman who was in a coma… saving a young boy…"

Before Hajin can do anything to stop her, Minkyung gasps loud enough for the people near them to hear, "Hajin! Is he the man you've been seeing? Is that why you've been so secretive?"

Hajin freezes when heads turn to look at her, and she listens, helpless, as the whispering begins,
spreading like wildfire around the room. She glares at her friend, who clamps a hand over her mouth, looking horrified, but there was no taking back what she'd said. Without warning, a camera suddenly angles her way and flashes.

She takes a moment to wonder at how silly she must look in that picture before she meets So's eyes from across the room and stares into them. Her feeling of nausea doesn't go away when he smiles, and it only heightens when a man starts shouting her name.

"Hajin? Go Hajin? Look this way, Hajin-shi! Hajin-shi!"

The room is instantly filled with the sounds of dozens of chairs scraping against the floor, followed by a mad scramble to get to her. If it weren't for Lady Oh's quick thinking, she would have easily been overrun. Her final view is of So getting off the podium before she's forced out the door, into the relatively empty corridor.

"To the garden, quick! Stay there," Lady Oh commands into Hajin's ear. "Chaeryung, go with her. Won, you stay and try to keep them away. Minkyung, what were you thinking?"

"This way, agassi," Chaeryung yelps, dragging a numb Hajin to the elevator and jabbing nonstop at the button, willing for the doors to open.

"Hajin-shi! Go Hajin! Please say a few words," a man slides across the floor just as Hajin and Chaeryung step into the elevator.

Chaeryung screams when he sprints towards them, but the doors close shut before he can get close enough. "Aish! That was like a horror movie," Chaeryung shakes her body. "What are you going to do, agassi?"

Hajin had already gotten over most of her shock. Shaking and pale, she types So a message, "What are you up to?!"

"This way, hurry…" The moment the doors slide open, Chaeryung rushes the both of them down the hall, stopping halfway to decide where to go. "Did the Madam say to go to the garden?"

"I think so," Hajin replies, confused. "Why the garden, though? It has glass walls. I think the lab would be-"

"I don't know, but mothers know best so…” Chaeryung opens the glass door on their right and gets in. "I don't think anything's going to happen. The guards will probably block all those people from entering, so maybe we can sneak you out through-"

It's muted but there's no mistaking it - the sound of dozens of pairs of feet making their way across the hall from the elevators. Both women freeze then simultaneously start moving again.

"Behind the tree! Or behind that bush, agassi!" Chaeryung commands, grabbing Hajin's arm as the latter makes to get out and into the laboratory across. "If the Madam says the garden, you must stay in the garden."

"I feel like a fish in an aquarium!" Hajin hisses, trying to break free, her heart hammering in her chest. She feels sick with nerves, and even remembering So's smile earlier isn't enough to make her feel better. How could he smile at a time like that? That man! He'd better have a good reason for all this...

"What are you doing here?"
Chaeryung and Hajin freeze and turn to the door to see Lady Oh gaping dumbly at them. "Why aren't you in the laboratory? You're in plain view of this area is restricted. No, I'm sorry, please step away."

The throng of reporters had arrived, blinding them all with flashes, their calls muted by the thick glass walls enclosing her.

The two women stare at each for a moment before Chaeryung clears her throat. "Right. Well, uh… you stay here, I'll just go… help..." she blushes, looking sheepish as she steps out, leaving Hajin feeling lonelier and more confused than ever. She turns and makes her way behind one of the flowering persimmon trees, calling So's number.

"Chaeryung-shi, why were you two not in the laboratory?" Lady Oh asks Chaeryung out of the corner of her strained smile, watching as the guards finally arrive to force the reporters back, away from the door.

"Because… you said garden."

Lady Oh breathes, praying for patience. "I meant this floor, not the room. Obviously, I meant for you to come to this floor and hide in one of the rooms… not literally in the garden! Of all places!"

Chaeryung can only look down, blushing to the roots of her hair.

"Eomeoni, may I go in?"

Lady Oh narrows her eyes at So. "I assume you have a good reason for all of this." By way of a reply, So smiles. Lady Oh sighs and nods him through the door. "You're definitely full of surprises. Just know she's probably not too happy with you right now."

Grimly, he lifts his phone to show her the missed calls and flood of texts. "I can tell."

"I'm sorry aunty, I couldn't overrule him. He allowed them to come up." Won had arrived with Eun, Baek Ah and Mu. They all watch as So makes his way through the bushes towards the tree Hajin was hiding behind.

"Soo-yah."

Hajin looks up to see him standing a few feet away. She assumes her most stern expression and stomps out from behind her tree to face him.

"This is your plan? You better have a good explanation for all of this!" she says through gritted teeth.

"I love you?"

She rolls her eyes. He was not getting out of this that easily. "I would appreciate something a little more concrete." A camera flash hits her squarely in the eyes, causing her to jerk back in reflex. She inches a little closer to him, intending to use him as her new shield. "Aish, those cameras... I'll bet you anything all they'll see later are the reflections of their flashes on the glass..." she grumbles, rubbing her eyes. "And you! Whatever happened to not rejecting Yeonhwa outright? To allowing me to keep my life and affairs private? What if the articles about me are released tomorrow? You'll
"Maybe, but the company will be safe. It's in Mu-hyung's hands now. Whatever happens to me is of little consequence."

She can't believe she's tearing up when she's supposed to be angry, but she can't help it... she feels touched, realizing what he must be giving up just to be with her. "I can't let you do this. You're talented and smart and everyone expects you to take over after your father! You can't throw everything away just for me!"

"Of course I can," he grins, looking unconcerned. "I won't really be throwing anything away, I'll still be helping hyung with whatever he needs. It's meant to be this way, Soo-yah... he was always meant to rule after father. He was prevented from doing well in the past, but not anymore. I may have the ideas and the plans... but smiling for the cameras, keeping up with images, lifting company morale... it's not me, but it comes naturally to him. The company image will be much better with him leading it. He has a good, level head and he's a good man. He'll do well."

"And your mother?"

He shakes his head. "She'll probably hate me as much as she hates Yo-hyung... or she might even hate me more now for making her look like a fool in front of everyone... but it doesn't matter. She was willing to hurt you to get what she wanted." He takes her hands and squeezes them, remembering a time in the past when he had willingly drank poison to save her, overpowered by a protective instinct so potent, it went beyond his own call for survival. "I can't forgive her for that."

"She was? She was in on everything with Yeonhwa and Wook?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it had been her idea originally."

Hajin glowers at a nearby bush, feeling indignant that people should think so easily of ruining her just to get what they wanted... that they should think so little of the lives of those they consider to be beneath theirs.

"If the next time I see your mother, I end up slapping her... would you be very angry?"

He grins. "Be my guest. She needs a good wake up call."

She sighs, feeling completely, emotionally spent. "Now what? How are we going to get rid of all those people? Why are they still here anyway, if you're no longer important?"

Her blunt words wipe the smile from his face. "As always, you're subtle. They're here because it's part of the story. You have to admit, it's a juicy bit of scandal... it'll be even juicier the moment the articles come out, most likely tomorrow."

"I can't say I'm looking forward to it."

"Neither am I," he says with a small laugh. His expression suddenly turns serious, even though he's still smiling, his eyes tender, searching her face. "I'd originally wanted to do this elsewhere, in a different way... but I guess this works well, too."

"What's that? What work-" Hajin falters and watches breathlessly as he gets down on one knee.

There's a splattering of light from outside as the cameras begin flashing nonstop, trying to capture everything, but Hajin can hardly see them, neither can she hear anything. He has her complete, undivided attention.
"A ring! Is that a ring?" Chaeryung squeals, clapping her hands to her mouth and jumping up and down from excitement. "Wait, I need to snap a photo. Everyone, let's take a selfie!"

"As always, hyung is fast and efficient," Baek Ah remarks, folding his arms and nodding proudly at the scene unfolding inside.

"Does he always do what he wants?" Mu asks.

Won nods. "If it's something he really wants, there's no stopping him." He bows formally to his cousin then. "Congratulations, hyung, you're everyone's new boss."

Mu laughs, embarrassed. "Nothing's set in stone yet. There's still Jungie to consider."

"No, he's right," Baek Ah nods, doing the same. "Jung's not interested in the company at all. So-hyung was your only real competition, and he's given you his full support. You can count on me too, hyung."

"That's right, you can order us all around now," Eun says brightly, shaking Mu's hand. "You can be the Wookiee in my birthday party this year."

Mu looks baffled. "What's that?"

"Hey, what about me?" Jung's voice rings through the crowded hallway as he approaches them, sweating slightly and still in his gym clothes. "I saw everything on TV and came right away. Hyung!" he gazes reproachfully at Eun. "What am I supposed to do with my Wookiee costume?"

"We can donate it to the children at the shelter!" Eun says bracingly. "And you can be Han Solo instead since Yo-hyung failed to show up in costume last year. Baek Ah will be Darth Vader."

"Hey!"

"It's better than C-3PO!" Eun points out defensively.

Mu just watches, amused, as his cousins and youngest half-brother begin bickering amongst themselves, with Chaeryung exasperatedly telling them all to stay still long enough so she can take a decent photo.

His mother takes his arm and asks him a single question: "Can you handle the responsibility?"

"I can't turn back now," Mu says with a small smile. "I don't know if I'm ready, umma… but in terms of handling it… how can I go wrong with these guys helping me?" he grins fondly at his young relatives. "I can't say it's been an easy ride, but I'm glad I got to know them."

Lady Oh smiles. "So am I."

"I already said yes yesterday," Hajin says blankly through her fingers. Her face is aflame, her eyes blurring again with unshed tears, her heart racing a marathon in her chest. She had thought herself to be emotionally spent, and yet here she was feeling emotional again.
"I thought you said that wasn't enough," he teases, a wide grin spreading across his face at her reaction.

"I still said yes, didn't I? Oh, why are you doing this to me?" Hajin wails, covering her face completely, now suddenly very aware of the people staring at them through the glass walls.

"Say yes again. Soo-yah…"

She eyes him through a crack between her fingers.

"I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you," he says seriously. "Things were too hard in Goryeo, but not anymore. If it weren't for you, I never would have found it in me to give way to Mu-hyung. History would have just repeated itself. Nothing would have changed. But because of you, I remembered… because of you, I know… I'm not meant for power. Not in this age, not when there's someone else better suited for the job. Because of you, I feel complete as I've never felt my whole life. If there's one thing I know for certain, it's that there's nothing I want and need more than having you in my life.

So, Soo-yah… say yes. Be with me. Stay with me. Spend your days and nights with me. Brighten my world with your smiles, let me share in your laughter. You were my life once. Be my life again."

It takes a while but she finally manages to nod through her fingers and tears, though she remains completely speechless for a few more seconds. "Yes. Again. Yes, you stubborn man! Yes and yes until you get it through your head that I love you, and I will marry you a million times over in a million lives if I have to just to prove it to you!"

He grins and gets up to take one of her hands, the ring sliding perfectly onto her finger. "I'm not at all averse to that scenario." He lifts her hand then and presses it to his lips, but he can't help adding to tease her, "Are you still so sure you aren't pregnant?"

"Shut up," she orders, wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him a kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Ok... so I know I said this would be the address-the-baby-issue-chapter but it became too long so I had to cut it.

FORGIVE MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE

If it weren't for this massive headache I've had since last night, I would have finished this chapter sooner for y'all.

FORGIVE ME AGAINNNNNNNNNNNNN

And um... too many comments to reply to now @__@ I've decided to reply to just questions from now on and to dedicate a chapter for y'all at the end of this fic! XD I mean, hey, all things must come to an end, right? heheheh

Good night, sweet dreams, and see you in the next chapter!
Chapter Summary

A sharp pain makes her gasp, and when she finally registers the gaping wound on her palm, coupled with the steady flow of blood, she feels lightheaded… faint… the edges of her vision closing in around her slowly, until all she’s conscious of is the darkness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yeonhwa is stunned when she sees just how many people are waiting for her outside the home her mother shares with her stepfather. Did anything else happen since she left her brother’s place?

Before she can check the news, she gets another call from her future mother-in-law. Nervously, she answers it, only to find Myeongsun more panicky and desperate than ever.

“Yeonhwa-yah, call off everything!”

“What?” Yeonhwa stammers, perplexed. “What should I call off, eomeoni?”

“The articles! Don’t release them,” the older woman hisses. “He’s made their relationship public. Ruining her won’t do us any good anymore, we need to think of some other way to break them up.”

Shaking, Yeonhwa puts her phone on speaker and begins searching the news. The images and articles that greet her make her sick.

“Are you listening? Call off everything at once. If even a word of it gets out, my son will be ruined. He will never be able to take over the company!”

Yeonhwa inhales slowly. “He’s already given the position up, eomeoni. We can still release the articles to let everyone know what kind of a woman-”

“Don’t be absurd! I will never allow it. I will speak to him, make him see reason. We discuss the situation with him in private. Apart from him, no one else need know about that woman’s past. Once he sees she’s only been using him, he’ll break things off on his own and withdraw his words. He can still take over after his father. We just need to work fast.”

Yeonhwa dare not tell her that So, in all likelihood, already knew of the articles. Anger and hurt fills her, making her want to take immediate, ruthless action against the ones who have wronged her.

Myunghee… Go Hajin… I will destroy you.

She clears her throat. “I’m afraid, eomeoni… that the articles have already been printed and many of them have already been sent out. They’ll be ready for distribution early tomorrow morning.”

“So call them back!” Myeongsun shrieks in disbelief. “Useless child! If you have no power over the press, why do I still need you? If I see a single article tomorrow-”
Without waiting for her to finish, Yeonhwa ends the call and flings her phone aside. Hot tears are blurring her vision, and her body is tight from the effort of reining in her emotions. Images of So kissing that woman… of smiling down at her, taking her hand, kneeling before her in front of all those people… the images have burned themselves into her mind.

“Go Myunghie!” she screams, balling her hands into fists and pounding the steering wheel. “You will regret this!”

She remembers Myeongsun’s threats and harsh words, and her anger reaches boiling point. Just talking to So won’t work. He knows about the articles… he probably knows she and her brother had bribed Hajin’s clueless ex into testifying against her. Evidently, a scandal like that isn’t enough to faze him… but maybe the fallout will be enough to faze her.

Taking her discarded phone, Yeonhwa searches for a number.

“Ahjussi? It’s Yeonhwa… about those articles…”


Yo shuts his briefcase and nods to his father. “I need to see mother. She says she wants to have a word.”

“Ah…”

“Besides, I’ve a pretty good idea what So’s up to. I don’t need to see it.”

His father chuckles as they leave the hall together. “This morning certainly is full of pleasant surprises. I can never understand you boys. What changed?”

Yo shrugs. “It was all So. He seems to think hyung is better suited for the job. I don’t happen to share his opinion, but who am I to argue? Better them than me.”

Wang Geon eyes his son thoughtfully, wondering why none of his sons want the position that so many others would willingly take if given the opportunity… but as they part ways at the lobby, he doesn’t say anything except to remind Yo to drive safely.

Yo is contemplative the whole ride to his mother’s house. He had expected her call. He knows what’s coming next.

“Yo-yah!” she greets the moment he enters the same study. Visibly relieved, she ushers him to a seat. “Thank you for coming so fast, but I am sure you were just as shocked as I was by what your brother did. It’s all over the news now. Yo-yah… you mustn’t let those articles leak out… they’re no good to us anymore.”

“As you wish.”

Similarly deep in thought, she takes a seat. “The plan will have to change. We can’t ruin her publicly, so we’ll do so in private. We’ll show So the evidences, make him understand the gravity of the situation. You and I both know that he really wants to take over after your father. We know he only said those things for the sake of that girl. Yo-yah, we’ll have to help him come to his senses before it’s too late. With the merger situation being what it is, he has to tread lightly. He needs to marry into an influential family. He must.” She looks eagerly up at him then, ideas
lighting her eyes. “Where is he now? Tell him to come over at once. Say it’s urgent and can’t wait.”

Yo takes his time answering. He clears his throat and adds in a teaspoon of sugar into a cup of freshly brewed coffee. He takes a sip. They hadn’t slept at all last night and he was feeling the strain. “I don’t know about that, eomeoni.”

His mother looks perplexed. “Don’t know about what?”

“I don’t know if you and I agree on what he really wants. I happen to believe the opposite of what you’re saying.”

His mother can only stare at him in disbelief before laughing. “You can’t be serious? He has known that girl for less than a year.”

“From what I heard, he’s known and loved her since he was eighteen. That’s a decade.”

“Lies!” she scoffs impatiently. “If that were true, we should have known about her before now. But where has she been for the last 10 years? Why has he only proposed marriage to her now?”

“That’s their business.”

“Yo-yah,” she has to force herself to remain pleasant. They were chasing after time and he wasn’t moving at all the way she wanted him to. “After everything your brother’s done for the company, how can he not want to take over? He deserves to!”

“Yes, he deserves to,” Yo nods. “But he doesn’t want to. Why must you force him?”

She snaps, “I’m his mother. I know what’s best for him.”

“Do you?” As Yo leans forward in his seat, his stare is penetrating, accusatory. “Do you really know what’s best for him? Do you even want what’s best for him?”

He can see she’s surprised, but she quickly masks it with anger. “What nonsense is this? We don’t have time to be cryptic! Are you going to help me or not? Time is of the essence.”

Yo nods, still moving in that infuriatingly slow manner. “Let’s clear some things up first, then. I happen to have a little story I’ve been wanting to share with you…

“Eomeoni, some weeks ago, you received a report that my brother had brought a woman into his apartment… an ordinary woman… a company employee. To discourage it from happening again, you sent out invitations to your party first thing the next morning to remind him of your expectations. After all, So isn’t one to casually bring women over to his place, no matter how pretty or important they are. You thought the sooner he can break things off with this woman, the better.”

Yo doesn’t wait for her to respond. “And then, just to be on the safe side, you went ahead and published fake articles and documents against the company he’s been trying to build a relationship with for over a year, thinking you could make him desperate enough to try and salvage our company’s reputation by finally marrying into a rich and powerful family like you’d always wanted.”

With every word said, his mother grows paler and colder, her hands forming fists around the fabric of her skirt. “You-”
“But despite all that, So held on to Hajin. You had underestimated the seriousness of their relationship. You realized that if the company’s well-being isn’t enough to deter him, then the only way left to break them up would be to ruin her. The perfect opportunity came when her ex-boyfriend came crawling back into her life, ironically, to apologize. After a hefty bribe, you got him to hand over documents related to Hajin’s dwindling finances. You faked some documents, got affidavits from people related to her troubles, and planned to have everything released at once for maximum impact.

“With her image ruined that badly, and with the company reputation on tenterhooks, how can So still hope to hold on without letting go of either?” Yo chuckles without humor. “It was a good plan, eomeoni, but poorly calculated. Perhaps there was a time when So would have placed the company over everything… but that time has long since passed. We are no longer children constantly seeking approval. Believe it or not, we are completely capable of making our own decisions now.”

His mother’s tone is crisp, slicing harshly into the silence that had descended after he stopped talking. “Are you?”

“Unlike you, I trust my brothers,” Yo shrugs, unconcerned, and takes another sip of coffee. “No matter what, they’re free to live their lives the way they want.”

She shakes her head with an exaggerated sigh of regret. “I was willing to give you another chance. I truly expected more from you this time, Yo-yah, but as before, you disappoint me. How can I possibly allow your brothers to repeat the same mistake you did? I will do everything in my power to make sure it doesn’t happen again. I will make sure they are known and respected in our world. Somewhere, sometime, you’ll come to see things as I do, but by then it will be too late for you.”

He scoffs, “Is that what you think you’ll get out of forcing So into a marriage he doesn’t want? Do you think he’ll thank you for it? Do you think he’ll be happy? After all these years, eomeoni… you have learned nothing.”

He knows he’s hit a nerve when she rises to her feet, furious. “How dare you!” she yells. “Everything I have done, I have done for him! For all of you! For your children and grandchildren!”

“You are deluding yourself,” he says calmly, leaning back against his seat. “It isn’t enough that you and father had to suffer through years in your marriage, so you want us to suffer the same way? When I disobeyed you and married my wife, I hoped you would have learned something… instead you decide to pull the same shit on So.”

“Impudence!” she screams. “How dare you speak to me in that way? What do you know about my relationship with your father?”

He ignores her and plows ruthlessly on, “And if all your schemes don’t work on him either? You’ll move on to Jung?”

She rounds the table in a few steps and smacks a hand across his face, her chest heaving rapidly from the weight of her pent up anger. Stupid child. Stupid, ungrateful child.

“Do not speak of what you do not know! Everything was perfect until that… that woman!” she seethes, choking on the last word, her anger getting the better of her. She takes in deep breaths to steady herself. She mustn’t let him affect her. She had been crazy to think she could count on him in the first place.
Yo is undeterred by the blow. Instead, he fixes a steely gaze on his mother. “All I see, eomeoni …” he says in a quiet voice, “All I know is that So loves her, and she loves him, though I can understand how you are unable to understand it. I am certain you cannot even recognize it even if it were to be displayed before your very eyes.”

“Love?” she hisses with a disdainful laugh. “What use is love? Love makes you sick and clouds your judgment. It makes you lose sight of your dreams and ambitions. Love is a distraction. But power and influence? Those are important. To be remembered even in death.” She lifts an eyebrow haughtily. “After everything I have taught you, how can you still speak of love? It seems it is you who have learned nothing. In the end, you are still but a child.”

“Knowing about something and experiencing it are two different things,” he smirks. “You cannot pass judgment on something you have never experienced before.”

“Tell me, are you happy being constantly told what to do? Are you happy when someone is deemed more important than you? Are you happy to have people ignore you in favor of your father’s bastard son?”

“What do those have to do with my happiness, eomeoni ?” he asks, amused. “I am happy just to spend time with my wife, brothers and cousins.”

She forces a laugh. “You must be joking.”

“Then you tell me… does it make you happy to keep smiling for the cameras, even when you are sick and tired? To have your every move closely watched and scrutinized?” He lowers his voice, “Does it make you happy to come home to an empty house everyday, knowing your husband is in the arms of another, one who receives the full force of his love and affection? This love which you laugh at, which you will remain ignorant of for the rest of your life. Does it make you happy?”

He might as well have slapped her, so striking are his words that they’ve wiped all traces of a rebuttal from her tongue. She blinks, caught temporarily off-guard by the harshness of her son’s tone and words.

“Get out,” she orders at last, voice low and deceptively calm. “I never should have thought you could still be useful to me.”

He doesn’t need to be told twice. Smirking, he gets up. “Before I go, I think it’s only fair for me to warn you that Won, our cousin whom you look down upon for being an illegitimate son, has been helping me out these past few weeks,” he begins softly, “we’ve been compiling evidences to pinpoint your involvement in the release of the articles pertaining to J&J.

“We noticed the pattern, you see… your party, the timing of the articles… you could have been a little more discreet. We’ve built up quite a case against you to help father and So,” he informs her. “I am a computer specialist, eomeoni. Coupled with Won’s wide network, we were able to find quite a lot of things.” He smiles coldly at the look on her face. “You’ve hidden your tracks well, but no data is ever lost on the internet. I therefore advise you to be prepared because neither the company nor J&J will take this matter lightly. Today, the files will be sent out to everyone concerned. I suspect you’ll be dealing with another legal battle soon.

“As for all the accusations you have against Hajin, though I’m told they’re false, I will question her about them myself. If you publish your so-called evidence, and we find out you’re wrong…” He fixes his suit. “I don’t need to remind you what So’s like when he’s angry. He’s not nearly as forgiving as I.” With one final smirk, he turns to leave. “It seems there is nothing left for us to say to each other.”
“You don’t know…” Her voice quivers with both anger and panic. In her wildest dreams, she never expected this would happen… she had been discreet, careful… “You can’t know…”

“What don’t I know?” he asks mildly, glancing up from the door handle.

“All the sacrifices I have made… everything I have done… for you! For your brothers! You ungrateful child!” she shrieks, causing the cups on the table to fall and shatter onto the floor with one swipe of her arm.

“All your schemes and media plays, you mean?” he scoffs. “In all my life, I have only ever found true happiness once… and you tried to take her away. For what? To fuel your greed, your ambitions? You say it is for our sake, but you are fooling yourself. If you continue like this, I won’t be the only son to leave your side. It won’t end at So, either. I know for a fact that even Jungie is very fond of Hajin. So what are you really fighting for? For whose benefit? Ours… or yours?”

Without another word, Yo leaves, shutting the door behind him with force, the sound echoing loudly across the large, empty halls of his childhood home. He feels no regret or remorse over their exchange, but remembering how fragile his mother’s health and state of mind can be, he hails a passing maid, “Go and check on her from time to time. Just in case, her pills are in the medicine cabinet in her room.”

Then hurrying out, he turns to his phone to learn the whereabouts of the rest of his family.

“Catch up, hyung, we’ve only been on the road half an hour!” Jung screams.

Yo flinches and holds his phone a foot away from his ear. “Yah! You haven’t even reached the rest house and I can already smell the alcohol all the way from here!”

“Hyung~!” Eun’s singsong voice interrupts Jung’s response, “No need to worry about hyeongsu-nim. We picked her up on the way!”

“You what?” he yelps. “Who’s she riding with? If it’s not So or Won, you two are dead.”

A new voice answers, sounding distant, obviously the one driving. “She’s fine, she’s with uncle, aunty and cousin Mu’s family!” Baek Ah giggles. “You know how well they get along.”

“Whose smart idea was it to kidnap her?” Yo demands sharply.

There’s a short silence before Eun starts yelling again, “There’s a case of soju in the trunk with your name on it, hyung!”

“A whole case?!!”

“We’ll be waiting!”

Before Yo can say anything else, the line goes dead and he sighs.

Breathing heavily, Yoo Myeongsun sinks to the floor, wincing against the stabbing pains in her chest. Her vision is blurred and she feels cold. She gropes around her for her phone… she has to make some calls… she has to do something… anything.

In her anger, she slams her fist on the floor, forgetting the shards of glass littered there from the
fallen cups earlier.

A sharp pain makes her gasp, and when she finally registers the gaping wound on her palm, coupled with the steady flow of blood, she feels lightheaded... faint... the edges of her vision closing in around her slowly, until all she’s conscious of is the darkness.

It’s mayhem when Yo finally arrives at one of the family’s more remote rest houses two hours later, and he’s immediately swarmed by plates of food and shot glasses from his younger cousins and half-drunk youngest brother.

From the wraparound balcony overlooking the shoreline, Hajin watches the scene with a smile. She finally met Yo’s wife today and liked her a lot, but with the former being heavily pregnant, the topic of conversation naturally began to revolve around babies. Not feeling entirely up to the discussion, Hajin had left the group of women in favor of some temporary seclusion.

“Hiding?”

Hajin smiles when So appears at the doorway and leans on the railing beside her. She closes her eyes and inhales deeply, enjoying the soft breeze coming in from the sea. “How can anyone not want to take time to enjoy this view?”

He nods his agreement. “The weather is particularly pleasant today. You’d enjoy it much better on the sand.”

The thought had crossed her mind earlier, but taking into consideration her lack of spare clothes, not to mention the impromptu party being held inside for them, she had thought it best to stay put where she was. She says as much, but instead of agreeing, So grabs her by the waist and tugs her towards him.

“There’s a small town nearby. I’m sure they sell clothes there.”

She snorts. “And just leave everyone here? Won’t they wonder where we are?”

He sighs in distaste. “I’ve had enough of people staring at me for one day. If I’d had my way, I’d have brought you to my place and spent the day sleeping.”

“Sleeping?” She can’t help but laugh, not believing him for a moment.

“I’m not kidding. I haven’t slept in about 30 hours.”

“Aww, poor baby,” she coos, patting playfully at his cheeks. “You do look rather tired. It’s amazing you managed to drive us all the way out here at all. Why don’t you go upstairs and take a nap?”

He lowers his voice suggestively. “I will if you come with me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Should I? I don’t know how much help I’ll be if you’re looking to fall asleep.”

The sarcasm makes him grin. “And that’s why we should just go buy you some clothes and escape to the water.”

“My parents will be here soon with unnie,” she reminds, smiling at the disgruntled ‘oh-yeah-
you’re-right’ look on his face. Lifting her face up to him, she whispers, “Tonight?”

His smile is wolfish as he gazes down at her. “A noblewoman must always keep her word.”

“I’m not a noblewoman.”

“You were in a past life.”

“Much good that did me. Remember when you told me that they’d treat me well at the Damiwon just for being highborn? I got bullied everyday.”

He frowns. “Did I say that?”

“Didn’t you?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Huh, it must have been the 8th Prince, then,” she mumbles absentmindedly. His grim expression amuses her. “Do I detect jealousy, pyeha?”

“Soo-yah, considering your personality, history, and dislike of multiple marriages, I find it strange how you could have… admired… someone like Wook, who was not only a married man, but married to your cousin, of all people.” It doesn’t seem like he’s asking a question, but she feels like he is.

Hajin doesn’t know what to say. To save her the trouble of coming up with an explanation, she decides to shift the topic onto him. “Perhaps I would have admired you sooner if you hadn’t thrown me off your horse and attempted to have me trampled on!” she tuts and turns her back on him to continue marveling at the sea.

“Yah, that was just to scare you to get you to move out of the way. I wasn’t really going to let him hurt you.”

“Your careful consideration warms my heart.”

“Really,” he murmurs from behind her. She holds her breath as he closes the distance between them, wrapping his arms around her and laying a light hand over her abdomen. “I would never knowingly hurt the mother of my baby.”

God, now even she wishes she was pregnant.

There’s a shattering of glass from behind them. Turning to look, they find themselves face-to-face with a wide-eyed, slack-jawed Eun, who croaks out a single word, “Baby?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

Hajin glares at So and steps away from him. “No, Eun.”

“Yes, Eun,” So insists, pulling her back towards him.

“There you both are! Hyung, noona -hic- we can’t finish these by ourselves, come help-” Jung’s smile is wiped from his face when Eun grabs the bottles of Soju he’s carrying, as well as Baek Ah’s. The younger two protest, but Eun silences them with a finger.
“No alcohol! She’s pregnant!”

Hajin shuts her eyes and sighs inwardly, ignoring So’s triumphant chuckle in her ear.

“What, baby?” Jung gapes.

“Is there any other kind of pregnant?” Eun snaps. He shoves the bottles into Jung’s hands and orders him to put them back. Obediently, Jung turns around, his wide eyes never leaving Hajin’s flushed face.

“Is it true?” Baek Ah beams widely at the pair of them.

Hajin clamps a hand firmly over So’s mouth and says, “No.”

Baek Ah deflates. Eun rushes over to shake her hand.

“Eun-ah, I am not pregnant!” she expostulates, keeping her hands determinedly out of his reach. “It’s entirely wishful thinking.”

“But since you wish it, it should happen soon, eh?” Eun giggles in delight. “Congratulations, Hajin-ah, hyung-nim!”

“We’ll be getting a nephew soon, so I hope this one’s a niece!” Baek Ah agrees, reaching out as well to try and shake Hajin’s flailing arms.

*These stubborn men!*

Hajin turns and wraps her arms around So for protection. “Baek Ah-nim, Eun-nim… I am not pregnant. I repeat: *not pregnant*. Negative! No baby!”

“Noona, you can’t fool us. Hyung-nim said you were,” Baek Ah grins.

“Hyung-nim lied,” she declares stoutly.


“Thank you,” she says, grateful that he’s finally come to his senses.

“It’s not good for the baby.”

She growls under her breath.

“You got it, hyung-nim,” Eun winks, patting Hajin’s stiff shoulder. “Don’t worry, Hajin-ah, we’ll go drink all the soju and eat all the sweets right now to help you curb your cravings.”

“Cra-!” Hajin chokes. “I’m not pregnant! Hey, get back here! You two!”

But they’d already traipsed away. She frowns up at So, who just smiles. “What?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’? This is a disaster! What if word spreads around? We’re not even sure yet. Everyone will think we’re having a shotgun wedding!” she whacks his arm. “Why’d you tell them I was pregnant?”

“Because I want you to be,” he replies simply.
“Pyeha,” she whines reproachfully, “I will give you your baby, but after we’re married.”

He nods. “I know.”

She points at the open doorway through which Jung, Baek Ah and Eun had passed. “Explain yourself.”

“It doesn’t matter what everyone thinks. If you’re pregnant, they’ll all find out eventually, so there’s no use hiding it. If you aren’t,” he shrugs and kisses her forehead, “no harm done. We’re still getting married. We can start having babies then.”

She purses her lips. “For future reference, please allow me time to breathe in between babies.”

He grins. “Whatever you wish, my dear.”

She can’t help it. She has to speak up now while they’re on the subject. “And can we maybe limit the number to just… two?” She can’t bring herself to say one, not when she knows how much he’s always wanted to have children with her. “It’s just… my first experience wasn’t a very pleasant one. Actually, it was terrible. I want to have another baby with you, I do… but I’m scared. I’m not sure I’m ready to relive the experience. Not so soon.”

“I understand.” And he does. He knows how fresh the memory must still be for her. It might have even been traumatic. “I left you to suffer alone, and I’m sorry… I have no excuses to give you… I have no way of making it better… but I promise you, Soo-yah, it won’t happen again. Never again.”

She swallows hard. “It was my fault for leaving.”

“I won’t leave you.”

She nods. “I know you won’t.”

“I’ll look after you, take care of you. You won’t have to worry about being alone again.”

“I’m not really worried about being alone,” she admits in a small voice. “I’m scared of the pain. It hurt too much, even just to breathe. I ended up not being able to walk for days.” The memory is enough to make her blood run cold, her palms sweating from nerves. “But… I’ll do it again, for you… for her. Someday. I promise, I will.”

He smiles. “However long it takes, I will wait.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you, thank you for the comments and critiques! They mean a lot.

I'm sorry for making you all wait, I've been busy and a bit distracted hehe
But I'm finally on break so hopefully, I can update more often - assuming I don't get writer's block, that is!
Love in the Afterglow

Chapter Summary

"Is this the room?" she asks breathlessly, looking around. The sun on the horizon was now nothing but a sliver of light over the darkening waters.

"Yes," he whispers, laying her down on one of the two beds in the room.

In the afterglow, she looks up at him, raking his features with her eyes. "You're beautiful." The words escape her as she lifts a hand to his face, her thumb running over one high cheekbone. His dark gaze holds her captive; his smirk sinful and mesmerizing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, it’s getting late and it’s a long drive back to-" Wang Geon starts to get up from his seat, but is halted by immediate protests from the younger generation.

“Uncle, let’s just stay the night. We haven’t had a get together as a family in so long… and everyone’s here, even Hajin’s parents!” Eun exclaims from across the room. Under normal circumstances, he never would have spoken to his uncle in such a manner… but being drunk had certain repercussions.

Horrified, Baek Ah elbows Eun’s ribs, but their uncle only laughs. “You youngsters can continue partying, but I’m not ashamed to say that us old-timers can’t possibly keep up much longer.”

“I concur.”

“Umma, not you, too!” Eun pouts at his mother, who sighs.

“I have orders to attend to, Eun-ah, and there’s no signal here. Besides, you’ll have more fun without us. Just remember that the tide seems to be coming in and if you’re too drunk, you might fall in and drown.” She says this to the youngest three in particular. To Eun, she adds, “Your toothbrush and clothes are in the car, come get them before I go.”

Eun looks embarrassed as he gets up, mumbling, “What am I? Ten?”

“Are you leaving, too?” Hajin asks her father in an undertone, not sure whether she’d rather they stayed or left. Out of the corner of her eye, she watches as her mother gets up to leave with Lady Oh, both immersed in a conversation about home remedies.

“My Hajin has never taught me how to make these!” her mother says with a tut, listing down ingredients to a homemade facial mask on her phone. “She always makes them for me, of course, but I can’t rely on her forever… not when…” She and Lady Oh look at Hajin then, similar knowing smiles gracing their faces as their eyes travel downwards to Hajin’s midsection.

Blushing, Hajin hides behind her father and shoots a glare in So’s direction. He notices and lifts his eyebrows in question, but instead of replying, Hajin shakes her head and turns back to her father.
“You don’t have to leave. You can stay the night,” she tells him as he slips an arm around her shoulders and leads her outside.

“CEO Wang Geon is right, we’re too old for this,” he says with a mild chuckle. “Ah, to think they’re the ones who helped us before… it was no wonder your boyfriend’s surname sounded so familiar. We probably would have made the connection sooner if it weren’t for the fact that we’ve been referring to the good fellow as young master this whole time.” He nods pleasantly at Mu’s back.

Hajin scratches her temple. “I don’t know how I’m ever going to repay him, appa.”

Her father just smiles and pats her hand. “You’ll think of something. You always do. Now, don’t stay up too late and if you must drink-”

“I haven’t drunk anything but water and juice,” Hajin grumbles sourly. “They won’t let me near anything else!”

Her father eyes her sternly over his spectacles. “Just as well, too. No coffee in the mornings, either.”

“Appa, for the last time, I am not pregnant!”

“You’re not sure. My dear, it’s better to be safe. I think we passed by a town on our way here, there should be a pharmacy there that sells pregnancy tests. You could go buy one now before the sun fully sets, and take the test first thing tomorrow morning.”

She grits her teeth and says in as teeny a voice as she can manage, “I can’t be pregnant… the last time we… I was on birth control.”

He’s visibly shocked. “Why didn’t you say so sooner?”

“I remembered just this morning…” she blushes, “I know I’ll have to tell everyone sooner or later, but I don’t have the heart to ruin everyone’s mood… not right now.” She knows of one person in particular who won’t be too pleased by this trivial piece of information, and just imagining his reaction makes her scowl.

“Better sooner, rather than later,” her father whispers into her ear. “Though I must say… considering all the hooah you’ve stirred, adding a baby into the mix wouldn’t have been ideal. At the same time, your mother and I were rather excited at the prospect of finally having a grandchild of our own. They say grandchildren make fools out of their grandparents. I’m more than willing to put it to the test,” he chuckles again.

Hajin laughs, “You will never be a fool, appa.”

Her father’s eyes crinkle into a fond smile. “You flatter me.”

“Hajin, you take care of yourself, okay?” her mother interrupts, rushing over to kiss her cheek. “Don’t stress and don’t stay up too late-”

“No coffee in the morning,” Hajin sighs in defeat.

“That’s my girl! Also, young master has offered to take us home, and I daresay he’s a most reliable young man, so you needn’t worry about us encountering any accidents, either.” Her eyes look above Hajin’s shoulder then and she smiles brightly. A second later, Hajin knows why.
“Go home safely, eomeonim, abeonim.”

She’s not sure if it’s the radiating warmth of his body behind her - close but not touching - or the smile in his deep voice, or the topic of conversation, but her body is suddenly flush with a sharp tingling sensation running from the roots of her hair on her scalp down to her toes. She shifts uncomfortably on the spot, fervently hoping her parents hadn’t forgotten to pack her some underwear.

“I’d say the same to you, but I already know she’s in good hands,” her mother beams.

Hajin can’t see So’s expression, but she can feel his fingers playing with the hem of her blouse, causing the fabric to lightly caress her flushed skin. She swallows hard when one of his fingers brushes against the sensitive skin on the base of her spine.

Note to self: low waist jeans can be hazardous to health.

She clears her throat. “You’ll call me when you get home?”

“There’s no reception in this area,” her mother reminds. “And we wouldn’t want to bother you kids, would we, yeobo?”

“Definitely not.” There’s a definite twinkle in her father’s eyes as he smiles at the pair of them. “Don’t worry about us, we’ll be fine. We’ll see you when you get back. Have fun.”

Before she can say anything else, her parents turn around and head for Mu’s family car.

“Myunghee-yah, you’re leaving, too?” So asks with surprise.

Hajin wrenches her mind away from the gutter to focus on Myunghee. “Unnie, you can’t leave now!”

“I’m a little out of place here, don’t you think?” she says in an undertone. “Besides, I’m supposed to be visiting my parents tomorrow. I’d already booked the ticket and everything…”

“Noona, you’re leaving?” Baek Ah asks, having overheard their conversation.

Myunghee looks at him and smiles. “Sadly, yes. I have… other plans.”

“I promised to play the piano for you as punishment for losing earlier. Have you forgotten already?” Baek Ah reminds with an easy, teasing smile.

“Oh, that’s right,” Myunghee shuts her eyes in memory. “I did forget. May I take a raincheck on that?”

Baek Ah purses his lips in mock-hurt. “I suppose you never really did want me to play for you. Ah, and to think I spent all this time wondering what song you would like…”

“No, it’s not like that!” Myunghee protests at once. “It’s just… I’d already bought the ticket. It seems a waste not to use it. We can always meet up again some other time.”

Baek Ah nods, but doesn’t look convinced. “We could.”

Remembering Myunghee and Baek Ah’s close friendship in Goryeo, Hajin feels a glow of pleasure spreading through her at the sight of the two getting along.

“Are your parents expecting you?” So asks Myunghee.
“Well, no… I was going to surprise them.”

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“Then no harm done. Stay the night.”

“Then no harm done. Stay the night.”

“But- my ticket!”

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“Yah, I’ll drive you there myself if you want me to.”

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Baek Ah gestures to the people filing into their cars. “So many people are leaving. If you leave, there’ll be only us cousins left, plus Hajin-noona, Chaeryung-noona and Wonnie-hyung’s date. In short, we’ll be lonely.”

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“No,” Hajin interjects. “It’s just… didn’t you know? Baek Ah and unnie were very good friends in Goryeo. I think… Baek Ah might have even had feelings for her.” Remembering bits of their drunken conversation on the night of Myunghee’s funeral makes Hajin almost sure of it.

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“So you are giving up on Woohee.”

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“No,” she repeats firmly, glaring at him. “I’m still hoping Woohee and Baek Ah can set aside their past differences… but then again, it’s really none of my business what they do. Who knows? Maybe unnie was never meant to marry Prince Wook… maybe she and Baek Ah had always been destined for each other.”

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“Why?” he asks suspiciously.

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“I need to dump my things somewhere,” she replies easily.
He sees the sense in this and leads her to the safe in his father’s study on the second floor. “Did you have a room in mind?”

“A room facing the sea sounds lovely.”

He knows exactly which key to give her. “This is a corner room with a terrace and wide windows. You’ll have an unimpeded view of the sea on one side, and a view of the cliffs on the other.”

She takes it from him, smiling brightly. “Thank you. I’m sure it’ll lift unnie’s spirits greatly!”

He halts in the act of bending down to kiss her. “Say what?”

“I can’t very well leave her to bunk with your family, can I?” Hajin points out matter-of-factly. “She’s a woman, and so am I, and I’ll be lending her some of my clothes. It makes sense for us to share a room.”

“Chaeryung’s a woman, too.”

Hajin nods. “She can stay with us, too.”

With matters steadily progressing from bad to worse, So has to rapidly think of a way to salvage the situation.

In one fluid, practiced movement, he lifts her up, smiling when she yelps and locks her knees on either side of his hips. “Pyeha!” she breathes, blushing prettily as she eyes the open doorway, paranoid that someone should walk in and see them.

“Relax, they’re all having fun elsewhere,” he murmurs, his voice low and husky as he brushes his lips against hers, leaving trails of light kisses in their wake.

Her body betrays her, immediately surrendering to the sensations he elicits. There’s a stirring in her loins as her fingers dig into his hair and her lips part to allow for deeper kisses. She wants skin. She hasn’t felt him in weeks and her body has no qualms about reminding her of just how much she’s missed him. She finds all their clothing offensive, and very uncomfortably so. Her jeans, blouse and undergarments feel suffocating, and she wants them off. She wants them all off.

Her fingers are quick to undo the upper buttons of his shirt, his own fingers slipping under her blouse to unclasp her bra. She has to break off from his kiss to breathe. As she does so, she becomes aware of their surroundings. They’re no longer in the study, but are in a wide room not unlike the one he had described to her earlier. She doesn’t even remember handing him the key, though she vaguely remembers hearing the click of the door’s lock.

“Is this the room?” she asks breathlessly, looking around. The sun on the horizon was now nothing but a sliver of light over the darkening waters.

“Yes,” he whispers, laying her down on one of the two beds in the room.

In the afterglow, she looks up at him, raking his features with her eyes. “You’re beautiful.” The words escape her as she lifts a hand to his face, her thumb running over one high cheekbone. His dark gaze holds her captive; his smirk sinful and mesmerizing.

“Judging by how intensely you’re staring into my eyes, I’m going to assume you’re talking to your own reflection,” he teases.

She has a retort at the ready, but it’s quickly forgotten when he slips a hand into the back of her
jeans, the locks of which have already been undone, and squeezes her left cheek, his fingers tantalizingly close to her center. She bites back a whimper and shifts position, but his hand had already traveled to the small of her back, further warming her already heated skin. Breathing heavily, she grasps the back of his shirt and tugs it over his head. He returns the favor, leaving her upper body entirely open for inspection.

The only light aiding them coming from the windows with their drawn-back curtains, he props himself over her with both hands planted firmly on either side of her shoulders, leaving a good foot of nothing between them. Despite the room being closed off, a chill washes over her exposed flesh, making her shudder.

“God, I’ve missed you,” she says fervently, bringing him down for another steamy kiss. At once, his warmth spreads through her, melting her into a puddle beneath him.

“You are beautiful,” he breathes into her parted lips, “my… Soo.”

Though Hajin remembers falling asleep in his arms, he’s nowhere to be found when she wakes. She switches on a lamp and checks her watch. It was already a quarter to eleven in the evening. She’s surprised to discover how late it is, but even more so when she realizes Myunghee isn’t in yet. She also wonders if Chaeryung has found a room to stay in?

She gets up and heads for the bathroom to wash up, but not before shutting all the curtains and slipping out of his shirt, wondering how on earth she could have slept through him putting it on her. She folds it carefully and enters the shower.

It’s when she’s all dressed in pajamas and drying her hair that she hears it - a strange, familiar howling coming from outside her window. Her mind flashes her a distant memory, and she chuckles quietly so as not to be heard. “Ah, but I have to tidy up first. You’ll have to wait.”

The howling becomes less frequent as the minutes drag, and though Hajin doesn’t speak wolfdog, she’s pretty sure it’s starting to sound strained and impatient.

Her clothes piled neatly in one of the drawers, she ties her hair into a bun and leaves. The hallway is dark and completely still. It seems the party has ended. Everyone must already be asleep.

“Finally,” So exclaims when he sees her. He’s sitting on the top step of a short flight of stairs leading down to the sand, except the sand is now gone, completely submerged in water. Evidently, the tide had rolled in while she slept.

“How did you even know I was up?” she asks, sliding the door shut behind her.

“The light.” He gestures at the lit windows above them. “You usually take twenty minutes in the shower.”

Impressed, she nods. “I had no idea you’ve been studying me so closely. It appears you know me quite well now.”

“It appears you don’t know me as much,” he narrows his eyes at her. “I was starting to think maybe you’d mistaken me for an actual wolf.”

“I had no idea wolves still roved rampantly in these parts,” she remarks airily, plopping herself onto the floor beside him and leaning her head on his shoulder. “It still sounded like you were choking on a rice cake.”
He snorts and takes a swig of beer. “And yet you took your sweet time coming here.”

“Hm? Do you need me to do a heimlich?”

“I’d go for a CPR.”

His cheeky reply makes her burst out laughing, but she stifles it when she remembers their sleeping companions upstairs. “We shouldn’t be so noisy, I think the rest are already asleep.”

“Now you worry about making noise?”

Hot blood rushes immediately to her face. She straightens up, indignant. “Those were involuntary!”

He makes a deep rumbling sound in his throat as he leans towards her, a wicked, very satisfied smile on his lips. “Yes, and next time, you shouldn’t try to hold it in.”

She sighs and pushes his face away before resuming her position on his shoulder. “If we ever find ourselves miles away from the next human being, maybe. Or possibly in a room with soundproof walls.”

“Or in the water?”

She takes one look at the dark water below them and immediately feels apprehensive, but she tries to mask it by sounding upbeat. “Nice try, but I’ve already washed up, and I’m in my pajamas.” She looks up and runs a hand through his cool, damp hair. “It seems you’ve already washed up, too.”

“There’s this new thing,” he murmurs against her forehead, “it’s called skinny dipping.”

No way. “What did I just say about keeping quiet because the rest are asleep?”

“My love, the only ones fast asleep are Jung and Eun, and we left them sprawled all over the dining tables. As far as I know, this part of the house is empty except for the two of us.”

Hajin frowns. “But everything’s so quiet. Where are the rest?”

“I’m told Yo-hyung decided to go home. As for the rest… last I checked, Baek Ah and Myunghee were sharing drinks at the bar, Chaeryung was helping out in the kitchens, and Won and his date are probably off somewhere making noise.”

“That’s it? We’re all that’s left?” she asks, surprised.

He nods and slips a hand under her shirt. “So about that swim…”

“I’m feeling cold,” she says at once. “Can’t we just… er… sit here, like this, and talk?”

“Soo-yah, you do know what I intend to do with you in the water?” he raises his eyebrows, wondering why she was being so adamant in her refusal. “Clue: you’ll only be cold for a few seconds.”

His whispered invitation makes her shudder. “I… yes, but…”

“There’s something else bothering you. What is it?” Though the soft tone of his voice doesn’t stop her from being nervous, it does make her feel comfortable enough to share her fears.

“I… I don’t like the water,” she admits at last, drawing her knees to her body, “it reminds me of… because it’s so dark and calm, and it looks deep. I’m reminded of…”
Realization dawns on him. “Your accident - when you drowned and almost died.”

Swallowing hard, she nods. “It’s not true, what they said in the papers… I didn’t have a cramp… rather, there was something… something strong pulled me under and kept me there. I don’t know what it was, but… do you believe me?” she asks, seeing the look in his eyes. Is it doubt? Confusion? Concern? She can’t tell.

“I believe you.” The look in his eyes leaves no room for her to doubt his sincerity. “I believe you were sent back in time for me, Soo-yah, and now that that time has passed and you’re here with me again in a different world… there’s no reason for you to travel back anymore. You needn’t be afraid.”

“It’s irrational, I know… it feels silly to be afraid of calm water.”

“Since when is fear ever rational?”

Before she can react, he does something that makes her shriek and draw away from the porch’s edge, “Pyeha! Get back here!”

He grins as he positions himself below her. “Since I’m already wet, it seems a pity to stop now. Come join me instead.”

“Pajamas,” she snaps. She eyes the rippling water around him apprehensively, wondering what she’d do if he suddenly disappeared. Would she risk drowning again to go after him? “Come back here, please?”

“There’s no eclipse tonight.”

“But there could still be all kinds of animals under the water…”

“Sure… fish, crabs, shrimps, maybe an octopus, snails, starfish… nothing remotely life threatening. The entire house, including this area, has been elevated. As long as we stay here, we’ll be fine.”

Still, she hesitates, trying to calm herself as she gazes out over the dark water towards him, willing him to stop walking away from her… to come back to where she knows it’s safe. She heads over to the top step and slips her feet into the water. It’s warm, not at all like the cool water from the lake.

A little dip… probably won’t hurt.

The moon is full overhead, its luminescence casting an almost unnatural glow to their surroundings. She chews nervously on her bottom lip.

Slowly, he turns his body to fully face her, his hair swaying lazily in the breeze, the light from the full moon casting shadows across his face, but still bright enough for her to see him clearly. His eyes are steadfast, unblinking, watching her from afar. And for a moment - one heart-stopping moment - she sees him… her Prince.

"I won't let you go."

She can’t tear her eyes away from this vision. Her knees have gone weak, her muscles slackening from shock and longing. She hasn’t seen him in the longest time… she thought she would never see him this way again. Her Prince, not her King. She sees him as he was before life broke them, with the smile he kept for her, only her, on his face; his gaze warm and gentle.
At once the vision disappears. She's jolted by the sound of his voice, and if it weren't for the shock keeping her in place, she would have already run to him - her fear notwithstanding, so deep was her trust that it went beyond unfathomable depths. She had trusted him with her life once. She can trust him with her life again. She would trust him with her life forever.

"Wangja-nim," comes her automatic reply.

His smile turns shy, with just a hint of uncertainty. *My beautiful Prince.* He lifts a hand to her in invitation. "I'm here. I won't let you go... Soo-yah."

Her name on his lips is like an incantation. Immediately, she moves towards him - trusting, wanting, hoping - not caring even as the water engulfs her waist and soaks her chest. She reaches out a hand to grasp his and is flooded with relief to find she can touch him.

Gently, he pulls her closer until there's nothing left between them, nothing left to keep them apart. His free hand reaches up to lightly touch the side of her face, and in the moonlight, as he smiles down at her, she sees him again... her Prince with that same adoring smile.

*You're here... in this time... how great it is that I get to love you the way I have always wanted.*

“Sometimes, I can’t believe it’s really you,” she whispers, raking his face with her eyes, taking in every familiar detail, her heart bursting with unadulterated affection. “This was all I ever wanted… to be with you, like this.”

“I’m sorry you waited so long. My Lonely Maiden.”

She cracks a smile. “I only had to wait a year or two. You waited longer…”

“The long wait enabled me to die peacefully. Despite all that had happened… I welcomed death, thinking if there was but a chance that I could see you again in a different world, I would spend eternity searching for you.” He smirks then. “You found me first this time. But I still loved you longer.”

She lifts a hand to his face, feeling his jaw, his lips, his nose… reaching higher to the scar marring his left eye. As her fingers connect with his skin, the vision dissipates, leaving behind the man who still held her. A man who, in everything but that scar, is the same man she had loved so dearly all those years ago.

She smiles, her arms circling possessively around him. "I love you."

The smile she gets in return is almost blinding in its radiance. It's infectious. She can't stop smiling even as he kisses her, again and again, small kisses that have her melting into him, her body moulding perfectly into his, the way it always has.

“I have something to tell you…” he says, looking suddenly serious.

Could it be another revelation, like what she has to tell him? “I… have something to tell you, too…” She can’t help but blush. This is the moment… she’ll have to shoot him down - better sooner rather than later.

“Ooh? What’s that?”

“You first,” she says hastily, lowering her eyes to the water as she lets it run through her fingers.
How should she tell him? Should she be gentle about it, subtle and cute? Or should she take a leaf out of Gwangjong’s book and be ruthless?

“I have to go out of the country for a few weeks.”

Hajin did not see that coming. Startled out of her musings, she stares at him. “Why?”

“The situation with the merger hasn’t improved much. They’ve confirmed only some of the articles are true, and those have already been dealt with…but there’s still too much miscommunication. Also, Yo-hyung sent us some very important files today… it’s best I go to Japan myself so there are no more misunderstandings. I want this issue settled once and for all. Before Mu-hyung takes over, the company has to be stable again.”

“So… you’re going to Japan… for a few weeks?” she can’t help but feel crestfallen. It’s only been two days since she got him back.

“I want you to come with me.”

Again, unexpected. “I don’t know… I’ll have nothing to do there.”

“I have no idea what my mother or Yeonhwa are planning next, but it can’t be anything good, not after what happened today. They might even release the articles about you tomorrow. They might have already released them today without our knowledge. I don’t like the thought of leaving you here alone.”

The thought is foreboding and gives her gooseflesh. She doesn’t know what horrible possibilities await her back in the city, but they can’t be good if they have So this worried. At the same time, she doesn’t want to abandon her work… her team will be needing her. They still had so many things to do to prepare for the launching of their modern-day Damiwon. “Will you allow me some time to think it over?”

He nods. “I’ll be leaving in two days, though.”

That soon. “Tomorrow, then,” she promises. “I’ll have my answer by tomorrow.”

He smiles and fingers strands of her hair away from her face. “What did you want to tell me?”

Oh, bother. She had completely forgotten about her own revelation. She eyes him cautiously, wondering what kind of mood he was in, then she decides that since he went Gwangjong on her that she should go Gwangjong on him, too.

“I’m not pregnant,” she says in a rush before she loses her nerve. “I was on birth control… I’d been on birth control ever since we started seeing each other again.”

They’re both shocked into temporary silence. When Hajin regains her wits, she blushes. “I’m sorry… I stopped taking them when you ignored me… and all that talk of the past completely drove the memory from my mind. There were no birth control pills in Goryeo! I only remembered this morning when a packet fell off my desk while I was leaving for work.” She flinches at the memory. “I did want to tell you as soon as I saw you, but then you… you know! And there were so many people and… I decided to tell you after lunch, but then Eunnie interrupted us before I could and now… now…” She hugs him, not wanting him to see her face. “Are you very upset?”

“No,” he replies. “Maybe a little depressed.”

She shuts her eyes in fervent apology, “I’m sorry.” But then he laughs and assures her it’s alright,
that even though it was unexpected, he couldn’t blame her for taking precautions.

“Maybe it’s better this way, if you decide not to come to Japan with me… I’ll have one less thing to worry about.”

His statement makes her pout, but she can’t think of anything to say, so she keeps quiet, focusing her attention on the steady beating of his heart beneath her ear.

“But if you stopped taking the pills…” he says suddenly, sounding confused, “we had unprotected sex earlier.”

She nods, blushing deeper. “If I wasn’t pregnant then… I probably am now.”

There’s a smile in his voice as he says, “Oh?”

Unfortunately, she has to shut him down again. “But I read it will take a while for my hormones to normalize… so I could just as easily be not.”

He sighs, “You’re killing me with the suspense.”

She chuckles and looks up at him. “If I start feeling at all strange, I’ll let you know.”

Chapter End Notes

Hee hee

Nice long chapter of SoSoo fluff to make up for crashing and burning all your hopes about baby Seol finally making her appearance. Is Hajin pregnant, or not? *snigger* I'm not telling. Think of it this way... if she's pregnant now, hooray! If she's not... more reason to have sex so... hooray again!

BUT that's about as far as I'm willing to go in terms of smut. For better writing on the subject, please check out the works of Lady Silvermaine, ChildlikeEmpress, BubbleTurtle (AO3), Pixelbutterfly... hmm who else... Nath Tsubasa Evans. I might have missed a few names (doh!)

Rest assured, those are all SoSoo smut LOL (well, except for Pixelbutterfly's, she'll be writing about Soo with all the brothers ;_; but it's good. Or interesting.)

To everyone asking... yes, Yeonhwa will crash and burn! Mama Yoo, too! fufufu for any requests/wishes, please tell me in the comments and I'll try my best to fulfill them!

Also, So going to Japan is necessary not just for the plot, but so I can finally focus on the other couples. Expect less SoSoo, more Won/Chaeryung, Eun/Deok, etc~ hehehe bear with me.

I'll be traveling a bit with my workmates, but only for a few days. See y'all when I get back! ^^
Chapter Summary

“I suppose…” she whispers, lost in her own recollections. “You must have really loved her.”
“I did,” he whispers, closing his eyes to sleep. “She was my best friend.”

=====================================================================

She looks into his eyes and sees he’s serious. He doesn’t see her as a friend. He’s probably never seen her as a friend. How can he? Why should he? She was but a poor girl from a poor family. If he doesn’t even consider her a friend... how can she even hope to be considered as anything... more?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Chaeryung-shi, I think I saw young master Won’s car outside.”

Chaeryung looks up from the dishes she’d been drying. Has he finally returned? “Did you happen to see him enter? Was he alone?”

The maid shakes her head. “I’m sorry, miss.”

“It’s alright. I’ll go check his room.” Chaeryung lifts off the apron she had been wearing as she gets up and checks her bag one last time for the salve Hajin had given her that morning. It had been hours since she’d last applied it onto Won-nim’s bruise. She wonders if it’s healed enough by now that he’s no longer bothered by it, or if it’s gotten worse from lack of attention?

“It’s almost midnight, miss, if the young master is not yet home, don’t wait up any longer,” the old matron says with a tut.

Chaeryung just smiles. “Ah, I can’t do that... he needs this medicine. I’ll just come back and help you if he’s still busy. We all came here so suddenly, there’s still much work to do.”

“Quite,” the old lady admits grudgingly. The house is always kept clean just in case any of the Wangs suddenly decide to visit, but the sheets in the rooms still had to be pressed and changed, the young masters’ soiled clothes washed and dried, fresh flowers bought and arranged, as well as food prepared in advance for tomorrow.

As Chaeryung leaves the kitchen, she hears the old woman tell the rest of the ladies inside to resume their work, while mumbling under her breath about how someone as meticulous as Won could be so clumsy as to constantly bruise himself by bumping into furniture.

Smiling, Chaeryung makes her way to Won’s room, and is about to knock when she hears voices
from inside. Heart in her throat, she lowers her hand. He’s inside, alright… but he’s not alone.

From the foyer downstairs, the old grandfather clock calls out the start of a new day.

She had had a long and tiring day. Salve held tightly in her hand, Chaeryung makes her way to one of the sofas on the upper landing and lies down for a short nap.

“I trusted her.”

Baek Ah’s whisper is loud in the big, empty room. He takes a deep breath before putting the shot glass to his lips and downing the liquid in one gulp. There’s a dull aching in his temples from the amount of alcohol he’s taken, but it’s no match for the pain in his chest.

Understanding his need, Myunghie says nothing as she refills their glasses.

“I really… trusted her, noona.” He turns to his companion with fresh tears in his eyes. He’d never spoken of his past to anyone before… not even to his cousin, So. It’s something he’s wanted to bury and forget for years.

“We let the people we love into our worlds… and so it hurts more when they wrong us,” Myunghie says in hushed tones, sympathy filling her gaze. “I really trusted him, too.”

Baek Ah sighs and slumps onto the dark countertop, his eyelids drooping from exhaustion. “They say time heals all wounds. So why is it I still feel this way?”

“I suppose…” she whispers, lost in her own recollections. “You must have really loved her.”

Long, light brown hair fell over one shoulder as she strummed her guitar. The sun was bright, the grass green and fragrant after a light summer drizzle. She stopped strumming momentarily to complain about the heat.

“Shall we grab an ice cream?” he asked, already searching for his wallet. Their plates and projects were expensive and they had a school trip coming up, but he always saved enough money from his allowance and part-time job for occasions such as this.

As she ran her fingers through her hair, she smiled at him - a dazzling smile, captured immediately under the sunlight.

“Another picture?” she laughed, trying to grab his camera from his hand. “You’re always taking pictures! Yah, let me see that!”

He stuck out his tongue and danced away - far away from her reach. He smiled at the beauty on his screen, another addition to the birthday gift he’d been making for months.

“Nope!” he grinned, lifting his camera high up above his head as she caught up to him.

“Let me see it!” she demanded, tugging at his arm. “I’m sweating like a pig and my hair’s a mess! Delete it right now.”

“It’s not a bad picture.”

“Then let me see it.”
“Patience. You’re beautiful.” He snuck in a little kiss, and chuckled as he ran away. “Race you to the convenience store!”

He thought he had imagined it all… the sadness in her eyes… the look of regret. He had thought wrong.

“I did,” he whispers, closing his eyes to sleep. “She was my best friend.”

The moment he sleeps is the moment Myunghee hears the rain, pounding relentlessly against the walls and windows. She gets up and pushes the curtains back. The night is dark, but illuminated by a brilliant full moon, the sky full of pink clouds from which the rains fell, crashing into the ocean, stirring up waves.

_Raining. Like the day she left him._

“It seems you aren’t as good at predicting weather as you used to be,” Hajin remarks, shivering as So shuts the door behind them. She hugs herself, wishing she’d had the foresight to bring a towel. Her So, near water… in the dark.

She really should have known better.

“What makes you think I didn’t know it was going to rain?” he murmurs, pulling her by the waist and nuzzling her neck.

His body heat warms her enough to stop her teeth from chattering. “Do you mean to tell me… that you lured me out here in my pajamas, forced me to skinny dip, knowing full well that it was going to rain heavily tonight?”

There’s a low rumble of assent deep in his throat as he continues his interrupted, highly eventful exploration of her cold body. “The better to warm you, my dear.”

“We should get dressed,” she says with difficulty, trying to keep her wits. She considers making love in the water outside, with nothing but the moon and bedroom lights from the upper floor to guide them, completely sheltered compared to making love inside the biggest, most open room in the house. “Jung and Eun are sleeping right over there!”

“They’re dead out of it.”

“Somebody could walk in!” she says firmly, pulling away and walking towards an open doorway to cool herself. “Besides, some of the doors and windows are still open.”

He reaches out and shuts it, but she merely walks over to another open doorway.

“There, all closed!” he exclaims when they finally reach the other end of the room. He shuts the last door, and, when she tries to make a run for it, reaches out and grabs her, pulling her back. “You’ve nowhere to escape now.”

Her smile is coquettish to a fault. “Escape? But I thought we were playing a game.”

“Were we?” he murmurs leaning into her.

She nods and holds up two fingers. “As the saying goes: killing two birds with one stone. We
managed to close all the windows and doors, *and—*

“Don’t explain,” he clamps his lips over hers to reinforce his command.

“Quickly, the rain isn’t letting up anytime soo—” There’s a startled gasp when three young ladies enter the room to lock all entrances. They hadn’t expected to find anyone awake in the room - certainly not one of their young masters with his new fiancée, dripping wet, the latter meticulously tying the ribbons of a nearby curtain.

“It’s okay, we’ve closed everything,” So tells them in a dry voice. “We’ll take care of Jung and Eun, too.”

“Ah, yes…” they stammer, giving a perfunctory bow before leaving the way they came.

So turns around, prepared to resume what they had been doing, only to find his fiancée had gone off to try and wake the dead. “They won’t wake.”

“We can’t just leave them here,” she says stubbornly, to which he holds back his reply, “Why not?”

Instead, he clears his throat and walks over to rearrange their bodies so that they’re less likely to wake with cramps.

“I am not carrying them both to their rooms,” he states flatly when Hajin opens her mouth to suggest it. “No, not even with you helping. And yes, that’s final.”

She rolls her eyes, but decides that since the two look comfortable enough that they should move on to other pressing matters. “We should check on unnie, too… they can’t still be drinking, can they?”

“Nah, they’re probably browsing through Baek Ah’s portfolio.”

“Or not.”

As So walks over to inspect his unconscious cousin, Hajin tries to wake hers.

“Unnie… unnie? It’s cold here…” she says, shaking her gently awake. “You’re freezing.”

Myunghee mumbles something unintelligible before opening her eyes and smiling. “Hajin-ah… you’re wet.”

“Um… yes. We got caught in the rain,” Hajin explains awkwardly. “Let’s get you to the room. Can you walk? I’ll help you…”

“Hm? Yes, I was going to home with my parents,” Myunghee mumbles, closing her eyes. “But the rain is too far away.”

“What?”

“She’s drunk,” So whispers into Hajin’s confused ear. “Keep her company while I help Baek Ah to his room.”

She lifts an incredulous eyebrow. “You would help Baek Ah but not Eun and Jung?”
“Helping Eun and Jung means carrying their limp bodies up a flight of stairs,” he says, innocently adding, “I could hurt my back.”

“Wouldn’t want that,” she can’t help but smile. “I think we can leave her by herself for a few minutes. I’ll help you with Baek Ah.”

“You,” he says firmly, plopping her onto a bar stool, “will do no such thing. Just keep an eye on her and I’ll be back before you know it.”

“You know it can take days for fertilization to occur.”

“Humor me,” he grins, spinning her seat so she faced Myunghee instead.

Once alone, Hajin gets off and begins clearing away all the glasses and bottles. They’d drunk a lot… and she thinks she knows why. She leans on the counter and fixes Myunghee’s hair away from her face.

“You helped me so much in Goryeo… sacrificed a lot for me,” Hajin whispers. “I wish I knew how I could help you.”

She jerks back in alarm when Myunghee lifts her head and stares at her with tired eyes. “You’re lucky, Hajin-ah… you know what you want… and you’re good at what you do… and you have So to help you.” She sighs. “I have nothing.”

“That’s not true,” Hajin puffs up at once to defend Myunghee from herself. “You still have me! I know I’m not much, but I’ll always be on your side, unnie. You don’t have to be so alone. You don’t have to be so strong all the time.” But whether Myunghee hears or understands her, Hajin can’t tell… and she’s powerless to stop those tears from falling.

Hajin has only ever seen her cousin cry this much once… a memory that still pains her.

“I want him to remember me looking beautiful.”

“Do you know what the worst part is?” Myunghee sniffs, wiping her tears with her hand. “I know he betrayed me, he betrayed my trust… he betrayed you and So… he tried to hurt a lot of people… but I can’t stop thinking about him. I can’t forget. I keep making excuses for him, and I blame myself. If only I’d listened more, noticed more… if only I hadn’t been so focused on the negative, if only-”

“It’s not your fault,” Hajin says fiercely, squeezing Myunghee’s cold hand. “None of it.”

Myunghee gazes into her eyes. “After what So did today… those articles… I’m afraid they might have already-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hajin tries to sound braver than she feels. “He did it. He and his sister. You had nothing to do with it, unnie. Please, stop worrying about me. You need to look after yourself.”

Myunghee drops her gaze and sighs. “Like a coward, my first instinct was to run home to my elderly parents. I tried to sound brave, happy… I lied. I’m a liar. I’ve been lying for years - to him, to myself, to everyone. I thought we could still make it work. So I stayed, lied to myself and pretended everything was alright. He’ll ask me to marry him, eventually. One of these days, I’ll be able to convince him to take a vacation. One of these days… he’ll remember he loves me.”

“I want you to make a pillow for him.”
“Unnie,” Hajin whimpers, words failing her.

“And now I’m even making you cry,” Myunghee sighs and closes her eyes.

“It’s the alcohol talking. You just broke up… you’re vulnerable and you’re hurting. Come, let’s go to the room. You’ll feel better once you’re warm.” Hajin wipes her tears and walks firmly over to Myunghee’s side.

“I’ll do it.” So returns, shaking the rain from his hair. He sees Hajin’s tearful expression and frowns, but she looks away and helps Myunghee up.

Were you hurting this much in Goryeo? With no one to tell… did your sorrow make you lose the will to live?

“I’m asking you... to take care of him.”

Did I do it?

Did I kill you?

“I’ll… look for Chaeryung,” Hajin mumbles, watching as So lifts Myunghee up. She meets his eyes and knows he wants an explanation for the sudden shift in her mood, but she shakes her head and says, “I won’t be long.”

He understands - she’ll tell him later, when she’s ready. “I last saw her in the kitchens. She might still be there.”

Hajin nods and leaves the room.

Chaeryung had always been a light sleeper.

The sound of the rain wakes her, less than an hour after she had fallen asleep.

Sleepy and disoriented, one thought enters her mind, her hand still holding tightly onto a little jar.

“Won-nim, are you asleep?” she says in a low voice after listening at the door for a few seconds and hearing nothing. Hesitantly, she knocks. “Can I come in?”

Before she can touch the knob, the door opens and Won stands before her in nothing but a bathrobe. “Chaeryung-shi? Why are you still awake?”

She’s so shocked by his appearance that she doesn’t register his question. “What happened to your face, Won-nim?”

He lifts a hand to his eye and winces. “It doesn’t matter. But why are you still awake?”

Numb, Chaeryung lifts the little jar. “Hajin-shi told me to apply this as often as I can. I haven’t been able to do it all day so… omo, what do we do now? It looks even bigger than this morning!”

He goes back into the dark room without another word, leaving the door open behind him in invitation. A light suddenly flashes from within, revealing a messy room with clothes strewn all across the floor, and the woman he had brought with him fast asleep under his bedsheets.

An all-too-familiar scenario.
“Do you want to do it by the lamp or in front of the mirror? Or I suppose we could transfer the lamp to the mirror,” Won mumbles thoughtfully. “Don’t worry about her, she’s dead to the world.”

Closing the door, Chaeryung tries to keep her eyes away from the bed. “I think by the lamp is better. I need to see what I’m doing… do you have any other injuries?”

“Cover only those that can be seen,” he says carelessly, taking a seat. “The rest will heal in time.”

She’s angry, indignant that he should act so recklessly, that he could care so little about himself. This isn’t the first time this has happened… the woman on the bed is just one of many Chaeryung has encountered.

Tight-lipped, she begins applying the salve, but after her second swipe, he grabs her wrist to stop her. “You have something to say. Spit it out.”

“I have nothing to say,” she murmurs, pulling her hand away and resuming her task. “Even if I did, it’s not like you’ll listen to me anyway. You’re always doing things your way.”

He sighs. “See? You do have something to say. It’s just a bruise, Chaeryung-shi. Why are you so upset?”

“Just a bruise?” Chaeryung snaps, anger flaring up inside her. “You talk as if this is the first time.”

He waves an impatient hand, motioning for her to finish what she had started, but she can’t. She’s too angry now. She’s had enough.

“How many years will you keep punishing yourself for that one mistake?” she bursts. “So you cheated on your girlfriend and she broke up with you. That was years ago! You’ve been torturing yourself for years! When will you be satisfied? When will you move on? You’re always looking for ways to hurt yourself—”

“What do you care?” he retorts, ignoring her questions. “If it’s that hard for you to stay out of my personal life, how can you keep working for me? I expected you to know better, Chaeryung-shi. I don’t need anyone meddling into my personal affairs.”

“Let me make this clear since you seem to be confusing some things,” Won begins, reclining in his seat. “We grew up together, played together when we were kids. I even shared a few meals with your family when I was younger. In memory of that past, I hired you when your father died, knowing you had no one else to turn to. You’re my secretary and I expect you to do your job, nothing more.”

“I do do my job!” she snaps, her breaths becoming labored. “But how can I concentrate when you’re hurt this much? When your face is so swollen, I’m amazed you’re still able to see! Why won’t you take better care of yourself? Do you really believe yourself that difficult to love?”

“Why do you care?” he asks again. “If it’s that hard for you to stay out of my personal life, how can you keep working for me? I expected you to know better, Chaeryung-shi. I don’t need anyone meddling into my personal affairs. I don’t want anyone meddling into my personal affairs.”
She looks into his eyes and sees he’s serious. He doesn’t see her as a friend. He’s probably never
seen her as a friend. How can he? Why should he? She was but a poor girl from a poor family. If he
doesn’t even consider her a friend… how can she even hope to be considered as anything… more?

“I’m sorry if I sound harsh, Chaeryung-shi, but-

But she’s heard enough. Wordlessly, she looks away and twists the lid of the jar closed, her mind
numb, her heart heavy. She puts the jar on the table beside him and looks into his eyes one final
time.

“It’s late, and you must be tired. I’ll arrange for a cab to come fetch her tomorrow morning,” she
says.

“No need, I’ll be heading back to the city tomorrow, so I’m taking her with me.” He gets up and
checks his phone. “You too, be ready before lunch.”

“As you wish.” She gives a small bow and turns to leave.

“Good night, Chaeryung-shi.”

She falters just a bit by the door, but doesn’t break a stride as she opens it and heads out… out the
room, down the stairs, and out of the house.

She hopes the rain will help her. She doesn’t want to feel her tears.

It’s a long time before Hajin finds her.

She’s checked every room available, asked the women in the kitchens if they’d seen her anywhere,
but the last time anyone had seen her, Chaeryung had been fast asleep on one of the couches on the
second floor, and she was no longer there. She was not to be found in Won’s room, either.

“Could she be outside?” she asks So in a panic.

“Stay here, I’ll check.”

“No, she could be anywhere. Let’s split up,” she suggests.

“Soo-yah… I’m not letting you wander around in the rain. You might get sick.”

Knowing it would be better not to argue, she offers a different solution, “I’ll change into warm
clothes and wear a jacket. There are umbrellas in the other room. Pyeha, it’s faster this way. Who
knows what could have happened to her?”

He sees her determination and reluctantly nods. “I’ll ask some of the women to help search while
you change. Hopefully, we find her before you can step foot outside.”

However, he isn’t back by the time Hajin’s done changing. She grabs a random umbrella and
switches on a flashlight, then heads outside.

The rain is strong and, despite the umbrella, she finds herself soaked to the bone within minutes.
She was glad of the jacket for the bit of warmth it provided and now worried about So in addition
to worrying about Chaeryung.

“Chaeryung-shi!” she calls into the night. She can see and hear the rest of the search party in the
distance, and decides to head the opposite direction, towards the parking lot. “Chaeryung-shi!”

She quickly scans the area with her flashlight, ducking in between the few cars left and even checking under the trees.

At the far end is where she sees her, partially covered by the bushes, sitting on the gnarled roots of a large tree.

Hajin recognizes this moment… she’s seen it before… some months ago over lunch.

*Chaeryung crying silently in the rain.*

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update! The LJG dating news caught me little heart off-guard and sunk my ship (I cry). But that’s ok, because SoSoo remains very much alive in my heart and soul. THEY ARE STUCK THERE FOREVER, DRIVING THAT NAIL DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO MY ALREADY ACHING HEART. I'm not complaining. The pain is worth it.

Anyway, I'm genuinely happy for LJG and hope he can move on from this controversy, because he's committed no serious crimes.

And speaking of crimes... I hope he takes part in Criminal Minds. I would love it if he played Reid! The mere thought of nerdy Joon Gi with glasses gives me life.
A Change of Hands

Chapter Summary

“It had always been enough. I never asked for anything more in return. I never expected to be more.” She wipes her tears away again, but not before a couple manage to break free, falling onto her already damp sheets.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next few minutes are something of a blur.

After much yelling and shaking, Hajin managed to snap Chaeryung out of her silent daze long enough to get her back into the shelter of the house, where they were given fresh towels and hot tea. The color returning to Chaeryung's cheeks and lips, Hajin's next thought was of So and how long he had been under the rain.

"Has he returned at all?" she asks one of the ladies attending to them.

"Not that I saw, miss," comes the apologetic reply. "We all split up and I've no idea where it is he went."

"I saw him heading out of the property," another pipes up, "I don't know which way he went, though."

Anxiously, Hajin wrings her fingers and paces the room, taking the cup of tea offered but not sipping it, only using it to warm her stiff hands.

Finally, when she determines she's waited long enough, she puts her cup down and declares she's going back out to search for him. Ignoring all protests, she grabs a random umbrella and rushes into the dark and immediately bumps into someone.

She screams.

"Yah!" a startled exclamation greets her reaction, followed by a pair of hands that grab at her flailing arms. "Yah, it's me, stop screaming!"

"You!" she screeches, dropping the umbrella and closing the distance between them with a fierce hug. "Where did you go? What took you so long?"

"I was only gone a few minutes."

"Half an hour! In the rain!" she snaps. "I was worried sick!"

"Your friend is missing, and you worried about me? I had no idea you cared so much. Soo-yah, I'm touched. But his teasing only antagonizes her.

"I found her," she snaps again. "Did it not occur to any of you that she might be in the parking lot? I saw her within 5 minutes."
"Seeing as she has no car and no business being in the parking lot, under the rain this late at night..." So points out matter-of-factly, "no, it occurred to none of us. I thought it more likely she went out to buy something. There's a tiny shop somewhere down the road. I went over to ask if any of them had seen her. What was she doing in the parking lot anyway?"

“I don’t know,” Hajin admits in a low voice, picking up her discarded umbrella and giving him a final, tiny whack for good measure. “I’ve been trying to coax an answer out of her but she’s been tight-lipped so far. Do you think it has anything to do with Won?”

He peeks into the room and says, “Yes.”

“Right, agassi?” Chaeryung asks immediately the moment Hajin and So enter.

Surprised, Hajin can only say, “Pardon?”

“I’m spending the night with you and Myunghee-shi,” she explains, keeping a firm distance between her and the man standing beside her.

“Ah! Yes. There are two beds and unnie’s sharing mine. You’re free to take the other.”

Relieved, Chaeryung nods and bows her head to Won. “There’s no need to trouble yourself further, Won-nim. Please go back to bed.”

“Still, you’re soaking wet and freezing,” Won tuts, grabbing her discarded towel off the couch and attempting to wrap it around her shoulders, but she takes hold of it, thanks him with a final nod and leaves for the stairs.

They watch her go in awkward silence, after which Won bids the other two goodnight and follows her.

“What was that about?” Hajin murmurs to So as they shut the lights and bolt the doors.

He shrugs. “Knowing them, it could be anything. I’ve never seen Chaeryung act that way towards him, though. It was like he had some kind of disease that she didn’t want to catch.”

She sighs when they reach the second floor landing, coming to a decision. “Well, whatever it is... I think I’d better go make sure everything’s alright. At the very least, unnie might be awake.”

“She’s drunk. She’ll wake in the morning with a nasty headache.”

She grins when he rolls his eyes and jabs playfully at his ribs, making him jump. “Pyeha, did you just roll your eyes at me?”

He glares at her. “Fingers off the ribs.”

“I had no idea parts of you were off-limits to me.”

“These little parts,” he entwines his fingers with hers, “are henceforth prohibited from poking my ribs. Everything else, you may inspect and poke whichever way you please.”

Grinning, she stands on tiptoe to smack his lips. “I shall endeavor to exploit this generosity at the earliest opportunity. But not right now.”

“My bed feels cold already.”

She steps back, one step, then two, then more until only the tips of their fingers are left linking
them. “Goodnight. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

But he pulls her back until she’s flushed against him and his kiss is so sensual, his entire presence overwhelming, she almost loses herself again.

Thankfully, Chaeryung and Myunghee both look like they’re fast asleep when she enters the room, so she goes to the bathroom for yet another restless shower and has to restrain herself from rushing back out the moment she’s done.

“Agassi…”

Startled, Hajin turns to see Chaeryung sitting up in bed. “Chaeryung-shi! I thought you were sleeping.” She switches on a nearby lamp and discovers to her surprise that Chaeryung hadn’t bothered to wash up or change her clothes.

“Agassi… I don’t know what to do. I’m embarrassed… ashamed. I don’t know how I can ever face…”

Hajin sits on her side of the bed and looks at Chaeryung. “What did Won say to you? Did he hurt you?”

Slowly, Chaeryung shakes her head, but she doesn’t look too convinced by her own reply. Her brows are drawn together in a confused frown and her lips are pouting slightly, making her look like a lost puppy. “Not anything physical but… we exchanged some words. I may have stepped out of line and made him angry.”

“Oh,” Hajin mumbles, not quite sure what to say. Won’s earlier behavior didn’t look angry to Hajin, but concerned. Taking into account Chaeryung’s past with the 9th Prince, Hajin decides to take the plunge and ask, “Chaeryung-shi… by any chance… do you have feelings for Won-nim?”

The stunned look and fierce blush on Chaeryung’s face is answer enough. “Is it very obvious?”

“No, no,” Hajin shakes her head, “it’s just… you’re very loyal to him and you take very good care of him. I thought it was because you’re childhood friends, but since you’re so easily affected by everything he says and does… not to mention overly concerned over his well-being…”

To her surprise, Chaeryung laughs bitterly. “We’re not friends. He made that very clear tonight. I always thought we were, though.” She wipes away her tears before they have a chance to fall.

“You know, I never expected anything from him. I didn’t want to burden him with my feelings, so I kept quiet and just strived to be a good secretary and friend… I thought it didn’t matter if he never saw me in the same light… his friendship was enough. Being able to look after him, even as a secretary, was enough. Seeing him everyday was enough.

“It had always been enough. I never asked for anything more in return. I never expected to be more.” She wipes her tears away again, but not before a couple manage to break free, falling onto her already damp sheets. “But now he knows… and I don’t know how I can face him again without feeling sorry for myself.

“It’s the worst feeling in the world… and to have someone I’ve held at such high esteem make me feel that way… there are no words, agassi… I never imagined even his friendship was off-limits to me. Was I too forward in thinking we could be friends? Since we grew up together, I naturally thought it was a given.”

“Chaeryung-shi… you’re not wrong. You’ve done nothing wrong. You shouldn’t be too hard on yourself,” Hajin says gently. Apparently, Won isn’t the only one with issues of feeling unloved.
She wonders if this is their punishment? One forever pining after the other, who will forever refuse. Both considering themselves incapable of being loved truly.

“I don’t like being pitied,” Chaeryung says softly, fingering the sheets around her. “I was pitied enough as a child. I promised myself I would do something to make my family proud… become something worthwhile. I never knew what that was until Won-nim entered my life again. Working for him, I felt important. Now, I just feel foolish.”

Not sure what to say to comfort her, Hajin decides the best thing she can do at this point is to listen.

“I’m ranting,” Chaeryung says suddenly after a few moments of silence. Straightening up, she fixes Hajin with a pair of determined eyes and says, “Agassi… I know I’ve no right to ask any favors, but… can I work for you? In your department? I’ve been observing you for weeks, and I know I can be useful to you. I can learn. At the very least, I can do all the paperwork for you since you hate it so much. I’m an excellent organizer.”

The request came completely unexpected, and Hajin has to blink several times to make sure she’s thinking straight before replying. “You wish to transfer departments? Then, what about Won?”

Chaeryung shakes her head. “I’ve thought about it… and I think it’s best I resign from my position and hire someone more capable for him. It won’t be awkward if we don’t see each other. There’ll be no more misunderstandings.”

Hajin tries to understand where Chaeryung is coming from, what she’s feeling and thinking… she’d heard a request similar to this in the past. It was a request she had granted and soon regretted… a request that led to this same person’s death.

“I’ll think about it,” she says at last, feeling conflicted. “I’ll need to confer with the rest of my team. I’ll let you know when we get back to the city, okay?”

Chaeryung nods and lays back down under her sheets.

“Goodnight, Chaeryung-shi.”

“Goodnight, agassi… and… thank you.”

As soon as she’s sure Chaeryung’s asleep, Hajin gets out of bed. She’s troubled and needs advice… and there’s really only one person who can give it to her.

He smiles the moment the door clicks shut behind her and watches, amused, as she gets under the sheets with him, wriggling her way through his arms to rest her head on his shoulder, both legs wrapping themselves around one of his.

“I expected you sooner,” he says, putting away his phone.

“I wasn’t going to come.”

“Right.”

“I was going to make you wait up until five in the morning.”

“Is it already five in the morning? I hadn’t noticed.”
“It’s not what you think,” she says, propping herself up on her elbows and looking down at him. “I came because I need advice.”

That surprises him. “You’re right, it’s not what I thought. What kind of advice?”

“Chaeryung wants to stop working for Won,” she explains without further preamble. “She wants to transfer departments… under me. This has happened before.”

The look in his eyes tells her he knows exactly what she’s referring to.

“You told me you trusted Won in this life… and so far, I’ve seen no reason to doubt him or her… but,” she hesitates, knowing this was a sore subject for the both of them to discuss, “the last time I had Chaeryung stay, she ended up… it didn’t end well. I don’t know if I should accept her.”

He studies her quietly for a long time before finally saying, “What are you really worried about?”

“I’m worried that if I interfere, I might cause more harm than good. What if things go really bad, the way they did in Goryeo? It’ll be my fault all over again.”

He mulls over her words and fears, relating past events to present, wondering if he was the right person she should be asking. “I don’t have the answer, Soo-yah,” he says at last, truthfully, “but I think you’re looking at this the wrong way. Whatever you saw, whatever happened in the past… none of it matters anymore. You shouldn’t let the uncertainty of the future stop you from doing what you think is right. You’ve always been kind and helpful. Stop worrying about the future and regretting over the past… think only of now.

“You’re asking if you can really trust Won in this life… and my answer is yes, you can.”

She sighs, still feeling conflicted. “But how do I know what’s right and what’s wrong? I’m so confused! What if I do something and it turns out to be the wrong decision? And everything is ruined?”

“Yah, what did I just say about worrying about the future?”, he admonishes, running his fingers through her long hair, knowing the gesture would soothe her. “Think it over carefully… why does Chaeryung want to stop working for Won? Is it a valid reason? Will you be helping her by saying yes?”

She falls back onto him with a little groan, closing her eyes to fully enjoy the sensations on her scalp. “I think so. She seems determined to avoid him… and she does need the job… and she has been observing me for weeks… and I do need a secretary to do all that tedious paperwork for me…”

“So say yes,” he shrugs. “I don’t even know why you needed my advice.”

“Because I’m afraid history might repeat itself!” she whines. “Some of the present events are already too similar to the past for comfort…”

“Perhaps… well, whatever you decide to do, you can be sure of some things…”

Curiosity piqued, she looks up and waits for him to continue with bated breath.

“I won’t be ordering anymore beatings.”

She scowls. “Pyeha, I’m being serious.”
“So am I,” and he does look serious, “you can also be sure that none of my brothers and cousins will die prematurely in this life. I will not be taking over after my father. I will be marrying only one person, and that is you. My love, whatever happens from now on will be entirely up to us.” The small smile on his lips comforts her. “Just do what you’ve always done… stop overthinking things. And if you ever run into trouble…”

He hoists himself onto one elbow and looks down at her, his eyes scanning every inch of her face, his smile becoming more tender with each passing moment, “I’ll be here for you.”

As she gazes into his eyes, it finally dawns on her…

They’re engaged.

They’re getting married.

Something erupts inside her at this realization.

They’d been through so many hardships, disappointments, and pain… but in this time, this life, they have a chance to finally be happy - to live the life they’ve always wanted… together.

And she’s ready. Ready to face everything, to welcome everything into her life - all the ups and the downs, the goods and the bads. Every little change.

And she knows. She knows she has much to offer him, much to pay him back for. He made life in Goryeo bearable. He was her friend, her protector, her lover. She only wishes they’d had more time together… wishes she’d seen it sooner - his loyalty and his heart. She shouldn’t have allowed herself to be blinded by everything else - those visions, the 8th Prince’s empty promises…

“What are you thinking?” his deep voice penetrates her musings, makes her heart flutter.

“I’m thinking I should have loved you sooner.”

His smile is teasing. “Yes, you should have.”

This time, she gives his teasing a free pass. She’s too elated to feel anything remotely negative. Taking his face in her hands, she kisses him, lightly at first, then gradually deeper.

“I was going to return to my room after getting my answers.”

“As if I’d let you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update! Was on vacation for a few days and only recently got back tee hee
Thanks to everyone who's left kudos and comments! Your thoughts are much appreciated :D

The good news is I managed to write Yeonhwa's entire tortured future while on vacation. Something about the sound of soothing waves and glorious sunshine beating down on my back gave me inspiration LOL I'm not sure if I should post it as a post-credit work kind of thing in this fic, or if I should add it to my Christmas snippets and
make that an official epilogue to this epilogue. Thoughts? Suggestions?
“I love you,” she says in a rush, her cheeks flaming up when she sees how shocked he is.

You really had no idea. You never noticed me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Soondeok made sure to bring her father’s megaphone.

Fire in her eyes, she steps out of the car and marches in through the villa’s open doors, discovering to her horror that not only had her one and only pupil left the city without informing her, but he was still fast asleep at 10:30 in the morning.

“Holy-!” Jung exclaims in shock as Deok blares her megaphone at maximum volume. He tumbles out of the seat he had been sleeping on and smashes into everything in a failed attempt at remaining upright.

Even on his knees and disoriented, Eun has no trouble recognizing their visitor. “M-master! Mercy!” he wails, trying to grovel with both hands and cover his sensitive ears at the same time.

“A student must never disappear without his master’s permission!” Soondeok growls, a steely glint in her eyes. “A student must never let his master wait for one minute, let alone half an hour! I should make you run the hundred miles you forced me to travel to get here!”

The sharp noise is enough to jerk the entire house awake.

“What is that?” Hajin moans grumpily before burying her head under her pillow.

“It sounds like an angry Park Soon Deok,” So replies, pulling the sheets up over their heads and attempting to drown out the noise by snuggling into Hajin’s back. “Aish, you’re so skinny. I should fatten you up.”

Indignant, she whacks him with her pillow.

The woman on Won’s bed wakes with a start and blinks around the bright room, her eyes landing immediately onto the man standing in front of the large mirror, finding him already showered and dressed. “What time is it?”

“It’s half past ten in the morning,” Won replies, fixing the collar around his neck and running his fingers through his damp hair. “I was just about to wake you. The bathroom’s free if you want to wash up, and brunch is ready downstairs. We leave for the city in half an hour.”

Thankfully, the swelling on his face had subsided overnight, though the area remains blotched with blue and purple. He would need help covering it up again. Feeling inexplicably restless, he leaves.
the room, holding a tiny jar tightly in his hand.

“We weren’t able to watch the sunrise,” Hajin mutters. She turns to wrap her arms around So’s neck and smiles when he opens his eyes. “I was going to tell you something.”

“You’re pregnant?”

“No,” she growls ferociously, though she can’t help laughing at how stubborn he is about the subject. He wrinkles his nose but doesn’t say anything else. “It’s about Japan… I’ve thought it through, and I think it’s best that I stay.” She smooths away the slight crease that had appeared between his brows with her fingers, noticing that though his eyelids are half-closed, his eyes underneath are alert. “It’s a beautiful country, and I do want to go there… someday. But unnie needs me right now, and Chaeryung, too. Plus the Damiwon construction is almost finished and Baek Ah wants my input on the interiors, uniforms, and other things… I can’t leave your stepmom to do everything.”

“I need you, too.”

She grins. “They need me more.”

“I seriously doubt it.”

“No true. I won’t be of any use to you in Japan. I’m afraid I’ll be stuck wandering around by myself, or else waiting for you to return. I know you’ll be busy. I don’t want to burden you.”

He frowns. “You won’t be a burden. You’re never a burden.”

“Thank you for saying that,” she whispers, “but I’ve made up my mind. My parents have an extra room and my father thinks it’s a good idea for unnie to stay with us while she’s still undecided about her plans for the future. At least she doesn’t have to come home to an empty apartment in the city. She also says she wants to rediscover herself… So, she doesn’t really have anyone else.

“It'll only be for a few weeks. It won't be the end of the world.”

Seeing that there was no persuading her, he sighs. “I should have known a restless little thing like you would find it hard to stay put, even when faced with the idea of a vacation. There's so much to explore in Japan, though, enough to keep you occupied for days on end.”

“But I want to experience all those first times with you,” she purrs.

That does it. There's a twinkle in his eyes as he rolls on top of her.

“Then I guess we'll just have to make every moment count.”

She reaches out to grab her watch from the bedside table, feeling immediately flushed by his physical attention to her sleepy body. “It's a quarter to eleven!” she laughs, trying to squirm away. “I'm hungry.”

“Mm,” he mumbles, ignoring her struggles and keeping her firmly in place. “So am I.”

“I’m sorry for the intrusion, and for waking you,” Soondeok apologizes solemnly the moment Hajin and So appear, tousle-haired but wide awake, supporting two groaning people between them.
“How did you know where we were?” So asks as he and Hajin force Baek Ah and Myunghee into their seats.

Soondeok’s face darkens. “I waited in the gym for half an hour before someone arrived and informed me that ‘the young master’ had left the city and requested I joined him.”

Hajin’s lip twitches from amusement. “That’s right, you both agreed today would be your first lesson.”

“He insisted, so I agreed, and he stood me up!” the younger woman pouts crossly. “He deserves a harsher punishment, but since he’s hungover and it’s our first meeting, I decided to treat this as a first warning. Also… since it was your engagement party he attended…” she blushes and gives an awkward bow. “Congratulations on your engagement, hyung-nim, unnie. But I won’t be so forgiving of tardiness and no-notice absences in the future, no matter how valid the reason.”

Smiling to herself, Hajin thinks it unlikely Eun would be late to any more of their lessons. He’d probably never skip a single one, either. “Thank you. It’s good to see you again. How are you punishing him? And where is Jung?”

“Oh, they’re outside. I made them jog from one end of the shoreline to the other ten times,” Deok shrugs, eyeing the two incapacitated people at the table with a mixture of pity and disapproval. “They should eat something. Eun and Jung ate a few eggs each before leaving. I don’t know how helpful tea will be.”

“Alcohol dehydrates the body and causes migraines, so the tea should help. But you’re right, they’ll need to eat something to bring up their blood sugar,” Hajin agrees, walking over to inspect the dishes that had been laid out over a nearby table. She picks two bananas, a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon strips, plus a few slices of toast for their suffering friends, and then she makes a few sandwiches and offers one to So the moment he returns with two glasses of apple juice.

“Is it always this bright here?” Myunghee mumbles, squinting at the food laid out before her. “What is this? Oh, a banana.”

“Bananas have potassium, which can also help, since you vomited a lot,” Hajin explains. She walks over to an open doorway, intending to draw the curtains shut, but is greeted by the sight of Jung and Eun sprawled out on the sand below, making sand angels with their arms and legs. They had each taken off their shirts and wrapped them around their heads, presumably for protection against the glare of the sun. “You two should drink something,” she calls.

They look up and wave.

“Hajin-ah, take a picture! We made sand angels!” Eun explains gleefully.

“Hyung, yours looks more like a fairy,” Jung teases, pointing out their difference in height, which was about a foot.

“Why you- you little-!” Eun scrambles to his feet and chases Jung around the sand.

“But hyung, I’m not the little one,” Jung choke in between laughs, evading sandballs and kicks. Hajin sees through Jung’s teasing and laughs along. Eun, not physically fit, would have had trouble running the length of the shoreline. Riling him up gave Eun the boost he needed to keep on running to avoid further punishment.

Just in time, Soondeok appears beside Hajin, sees the two running off into the distance, and nods in a satisfied way before heading back inside.
“Is something wrong?” So’s voice breaks into Hajin’s thoughts. She closes the curtains and sees that Won had entered, looking troubled and frustrated.

“Chaeryung left,” he explains, to everyone’s surprise. “I was surprised, too. Apparently, she took an early train this morning and left me this jar.”

“What’s in it?” So asks.

Won twists the lid open and shows them. “It looks like some sort of brown powder.”

“It’s make-up,” Hajin replies, taking it from him and matching the color of the contents to the skin on his face. She’s impressed to find it a near-perfect match. Chaeryung must have paid close attention to Hajin’s mixture the day before and went out to the market early to purchase the ingredients needed to make this. Maybe she should take on Chaeryung as an apprentice after all.

“Did she not leave a note of some kind? It’s for your face.”

“She asked someone to pass on a message… something about urgent work to be done back in the city. That’s about it,” Won says, eyes on the powder.

Hajin thinks she knows what Chaeryung is up to and offers to complete the mixture and help Won apply it to his skin.

“Not so fast!” Soondeok screeches as Jung and Eun enter, panting from their mid-morning run. She snatches the glass of water from Eun’s quivering lips. “Don’t sit if you don’t want a cramp, and no cold water just yet, either. Stretch out your muscles. Do what Jung’s doing.”

“I’m dying of thirst,” Eun protests, attempting to pour himself another glass.

“You’ll die for real if you drink that,” Soondeok snaps, bringing the jug of water to another table. “You’re sweating profusely, which means if you drink fresh water now, you’ll have an electrolyte imbalance. If you’re that thirsty, I’ll prepare you a drink. Just… wait a moment. Jung, restrain him.”

“Listen to your teacher, Eun-ah,” So says as Deok asks for directions to the kitchen. “She knows what she’s doing.”

Jung nods and slaps Eun’s drooping back. “Hyung, let’s stretch. You’ll feel better.”

Hajin returns minutes later to apply the foundation onto Won’s face, noticing all the while that they had the undivided attention of So’s ever-watchful eyes. It makes Won nervous and eventually leads him to suggest finishing up by himself, but she orders him back into his seat.

“Reminds you of something?” she murmurs to So as she turns around to take the remaining powder, which she uses to cover up the foundation she had just applied. He doesn’t respond and remains silent even as Won thanks her and heads back upstairs.

She makes a beeline towards the nearest bathroom to wash her hands, knowing he was following her.

“I don’t think I like you touching other people’s faces,” he murmurs into her ear.

She splashes a bit of water onto his face with her wet fingers. “It’s my job. His is not the first face I’ve touched and it won’t be the last.”

His face darkens, making her chuckle. “So possessive, pyeha. If you keep doing that when we're
not even married, I'll want to run away.”

He frowns, the line jogging his memory, but before he can fully place it, she says, “By the way, I’ve been meaning to discuss this with you… I think we should rethink what we call each other.”

“Why?”

Reluctantly, she begins to relate the misunderstandings their nicknames caused some time ago with his family. “Soo is nowhere near Hajin!” she explains vehemently when he laughs, “And that’s strange enough, but it’s nothing compared to what I call you! How am I to justify calling you ‘Your Majesty’?”

“Why should it matter? Just let them think what they want,” he leans over her with a kiss. “You’ve cleared up the misunderstanding with your name, and Won’s not wrong in his assumption. I see no further problems.”

She blushes but isn’t ready to give up. In a small, tentative voice, she says, “Oppa?”

The effect is immediate. She watches, fascinated, as blood rushes to his cheeks, his eyes wide with surprise, his mouth momentarily opening before closing again, like he wants to say something but isn’t sure what.

Chuckling in triumph, she wraps her arms around his waist and presses against him. “You like it.”

Who doesn’t want to be called oppa by their girlfriends?

He clears his throat. “No, I don’t like it. Plenty other women call me that, including Yeonhwa.” The name dampens Hajin’s mood.

“There were instances when I unconsciously called you pyeha in public and got strange looks from everyone. It’s not fair that I get to look crazy just for addressing you in such a manner.”

He grins. “If it’s fairness you’re after, shall I start calling you hwanghu?”

“That won’t solve anything!” she splutters after one startled moment. “We’ll both look crazy.”

“Hopefully they won’t send us to separate asylums.”

“This is hopeless,” she sighs. “We’re going nowhere with this conversation.”

“Who started it?”

“You made it difficult!”

A knock on the door prevents him from retaliating, and Won’s voice floats in from the outside. “Hyung, I’ll be leaving now. What time can we expect you back at the office?”

So gives Hajin’s elbow a squeeze before joining Won outside. “Probably much later. Before you go, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you…”

Hajin watches them go with apprehension. Before falling asleep last night, they’d both agreed on one thing: whether or not the reports against her character had been published, they would tell his family about them… the whole truth, knowing hearing it from them would be better than hearing it elsewhere.

Shaking slightly, she turns back to the sink to wash her hands and face. She doesn’t really want to
be there when he tells them… doesn’t want to see their faces, the possibility of them doubting her. So instead of following them back into the dining area, she quietly ascends the stairs and makes her way into the room to tidy up her things.

It’s as she’s folding the blanket Myunghee had used that the door suddenly bursts open and Eun and Jung rush in.

She holds her breath, wondering what their wide eyes could mean, but before she can say anything, Eun walks over to give her a hug.

“Those bastards!” he curses.

“I can’t believe mother would do something like this,” Jung shakes his head. “There must be some sort of misunderstanding. She hasn’t been the same since the divorce, maybe someone’s taking advantage of her. I can’t believe she would willingly try to sabotage hyung’s work just to get him to marry someone. It doesn’t make any sense!”

“You said it yourself, Jung-ah, she hasn’t been the same since the divorce,” Eun tuts.

“It must be the Hwangbos,” Jung insists. “They’re pulling the strings. They practically own the media. They could have easily dug up those articles and made fake ones to cause trouble. I knew that Yeonhwa woman was trouble ever since she kept badgering me about hyung in school… I just never thought Wook-hyung would be the same. He has always been a good friend to us.”

“It doesn’t matter who instigated everything, they’re all equally guilty for taking part in it. I’m sorry, Jungie, but Won-hyung said they found evidence against your mother as well as the two siblings. She won’t be able to escape punishment. She could have ruined two companies this time, and hurt a lot of people…”

Hajin doesn’t really hear what they’re saying because knowing they’re on her side has made her tear up from relief. “You believe me?”

“Yah, don’t cry,” Eun says, shocked. “We’ll beat up that ex of yours if we ever meet him. I’ll train really hard so you don’t have to worry. You should have taken him to court when he stole everything from you!”

Hajin’s arms grab Eun by the neck in a fierce hug as she begins to cry into his shoulder. *I should have taken better care of you in Goryeo. I should have appreciated your friendship more.*

“Y-yah,” Eun stammers, blushing furiously, “it’s OK, we totally believe you.”

She lets him go so she could hug Jung, who pats her back in a comforting gesture. “Even without them explaining the situation to us, we would have believed you. I’m sure there’s a good explanation for all of this. I’ll speak to my mother when we get back to the city. Don’t worry, noona.”

Hajin’s not sure how much influence Jung has over his mother, but she thinks it not likely he’ll be able to sway the older woman’s opinion of her. Though it saddens her, it’s not enough to completely dampen her spirits.

They spend the rest of the day at the beach, watching Eun struggling to keep up with Jung and Soondeok, who determined that her new student had to build his strength and endurance first before she could hope to teach him anything.

“Rest again?” she had cried out in disbelief as Eun dropped to the sand, dead tired and looking like
“You rested half an hour ago!”

“That was… half an hour… too long,” Eun mumbled, attempting to crawl away from his prying master. “Hajin-ah… hyung-nim… Baek Ah-yah… help.”

“Hyung, how can you get tired so easily?” Baek Ah asked, trying to contain his laughter.

“You try training for 3 hours straight!” Eun snapped, offended. He turned his puppy eyes to So, the highest in rank of them all, knowing his eldest cousin had the most say in the group. “Hyung-nim, this is my first day. I should be allowed to rest, right?” But instead of helping him, his cousin only made matters worse.

“Eun-ah… you haven’t been training for 3 hours. It’s only been an hour and a half.”

“What?!” Eun gaped at him in horror before looking at Hajin for confirmation, sure he was being lied to.

Wincing, Hajin sighed, “Sorry, Eun-ah.”

Eun did pass out at that point.

“Will you still be visiting your parents?” Hajin asks Myunghee, helping her unpack. It’s nighttime and they were in the spare room in Hajin’s parent’s home.

“I think I should. I haven’t seen them in a while…” Myunghee replies, closing the closet and plopping onto the mattress, smiling gratefully at Hajin, who lies down beside her. “Thank you for letting me stay.”

Hajin shakes her head. “Like appa said, you’re family. You’ll always be welcome here.”

At the mention of family, Myunghee perks up. “Have they seen the pictures I gave you? The album?”

“Yes, and they loved it,” Hajin grins. “We should plan a family reunion one of these days. There’s this beach resort on Jeju Island that my parents and I used to frequent when I was little. I’ve been wanting to go there again but never really had occasion to. I think it’d be a lovely place for a reunion!”

“I’m sure my parents would love that,” Myunghee agrees enthusiastically. “There’s so much to explore in Jeju and I’ve never been there before.”

“Really?” Hajin gasps and sits upright, immediately launching into an animated narration of all the places she and her family had visited in the past.

Myunghee can’t help but smile and laugh along at her young cousin’s bright-eyed enthusiasm. “Hajin-ah…”

“Hm?”

“I’m glad we found each other.”

There’s an immediate lump in Hajin’s throat as she nods her agreement. “So am I.”

“I really am sorry for everything,” Myunghee says solemnly, lowering her eyes. The articles had
indeed been released today. The moment they had gotten their reception back, So had received a message from his older brother, Yo, informing him of the state of things at the company, something So had avoided sharing with the two women in the car with him… which only meant things were bad.

But Hajin merely smiles and squeezes her hand. “It’s not your fault.”

“I called Baek Ah to ask him about what’s happening…” Myunghee sighs, “he says So’s father is angry. Very angry.”

Hajin nods, “I know. His stepmother wants to meet me early tomorrow morning at the office.” Outwardly, she tries to look reassuring, but her heart is running a marathon in her chest. She’s had experience dealing with Lady Oh’s anger… but she’s more worried about the disappointment.

“I’ll postpone going home. If you want me to, I’ll come with you tomorrow to explain things. If she’s angry too, then she can be angry with me.”

“It’s ok, unnie,” Hajin says, resigned to the inevitable, “She has a sharp tongue, but she means well. Even though So isn’t her biological son, I know she cares for him, so I can understand her anger and I’m willing to listen to what she has to say. She’s not unreasonable. Don’t worry… I’ll be fine.”

They’re silent for a moment, but Hajin is determined to make Myunghee’s first night a good one. “Let’s finish packing first! My mother’s been wanting to marathon some dramas with me. Do you watch dramas?”

Myunghee gives a weak smile as Hajin gets up. How anyone could want to hurt someone like her with lies was beyond comprehension.

*I will protect you.*

When Won finally sees Chaeryung again, he’s unable to contain his anger.

“Won-nim!” she yelps, startled, as he grabs her wrist and wrenches her away from the plants she had been pruning, towards an empty corridor.

“What the hell is this?” he demands, holding up a crumpled letter in his hand. He clenches his fist around it and angrily tosses it into the nearest bin. “A resignation letter out of the blue? A woman I’ve never met sitting outside my office-”

“I discussed it with Yo-nim,” she cuts him off, massaging her wrist and taking a resentful step back, “I’m perfectly free to resign, given I am able to find a suitable replacement.”

“And that’s the ‘urgent business’ you had to attend to?” he asks incredulously. “This won’t work. I won’t allow you to resign.”

“It’s already been done,” she says crisply, “Your new secretary has been briefed on what to do. She’s a graduate from a top university. She’s young, smart, talented-”

“We’re in the middle of a fucking crisis!” he explodes. “I can’t afford to have a new woman rooting around in my office! I can’t afford to have my schedule disrupted! If this is about what I said at the beach house-”
“Of course this is about what you said at the beach house!” she snaps, irritated by his yelling. “Just because I’m poor doesn’t mean I don’t have feelings!”

“I didn’t say those things to hurt your feelings, I said them as a warning! I think we’re both old enough to know where to draw the line between our personal and professional lives. You know I don’t like it when people pry into non-business related matters. If my reminder sounded too harsh, I’m sorry, but that’s reality. Now will you get back to work or not?”

“I was working,” she seethes, “and it was rude of you to pull me out so suddenly without alerting my superior.”

“Rude of me?” he scoffs in evident disbelief. “You’re the one who quit without having the decency to say it to my face… without even attempting to explain why.”

She shakes her head, laughing silently to herself. “I’d always thought you were smart, Won-nim. Turns out there are things even you don’t understand.”

He’s surprised, but she cuts him off before he can have another chance to speak. “The reason I felt bad about your warning… is because I am unable to keep your personal life out of my concern. You said there was no way I could work for you under that condition. So I quit. I saved us both the trouble.”

“The trouble of what?” he asks, exasperated.

“I love you,” she says in a rush, her cheeks flaming up when she sees how shocked he is. *You really had no idea. You never noticed me.* “I have for a long time. I kept silent for the sake of our friendship… but it turns out we don’t even have that. I know I have no right to feel this way towards you… that’s why I’m keeping my distance. Until I can sort out my feelings, I am unfit to work for you.”

They’re silent for the longest time. Won seems to be at a complete loss for words, even though his frown is thoughtful.

It’s alright with Chaeryung. She doesn’t need to hear what he has to say. She doesn’t need a repeat of the previous night.

Clearing her throat, she gives him a low bow. “It has been an honor working for you, Won-nim.”

She turns to leave, but he stops her with a question, “And if you are unable to sort out your feelings?”

She doesn’t turn around, doesn’t let him see the tears in her eyes. “You needn’t worry… the secretary I picked for you was the best of the best,” she replies quietly. “She will serve you well… and professionally.”

She leaves then, rounding the corner out of sight before rushing back into the shelter of the plants, where she can cry for a few minutes without being judged.

Won is left standing alone, thinking about the conversation they just had. He is undeterred even as people pass by, staring curiously at him, some asking if he needs help. He doesn’t respond. It’s only when his phone rings that he begins to move again.

He looks back at the place she had disappeared to for one last time, then he turns and leaves through the stairs.
Thank you to everyone who reads and takes time to comment! This story is nearing its end - I can't really say how many more chapters - so I hope you can stick around until then :D I won't be going into details of the legal battle (who wants to hear those? lol), so instead I'll be focusing on the other love stories, but mentioning once in a while what's happening.

Thanks again and see you in the next chapter! ^^
Chapter Summary

"Stay with me," she says again, pressing her body firmly against his and running her tongue along his sharp jaw, made even sharper by his evening stubble. “I don’t want to say goodbye… not yet. Don’t leave me, pyeha…”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After seeing Myunghee off early that morning, Hajin immediately goes to work, trying not to think too much about the situation she’s in. Her parents had been horrified by the articles, but were advised not to give any unnecessary statements as of yet.

“I know it’s hard, and I’m truly sorry something like this has happened, but trust that we are doing everything we can to remedy the situation,” he had told them the night before, just minutes after they had returned. “We have to work as one in this. Multiple statements will only serve to confuse the public and escalate the issue further. Anything you say now can be distorted and used against you and Hajin.”

“So we just let this go?” Hajin’s mother shrieked, pacing restlessly about the room. “These… these lies! Are we supposed to just pretend they’re ok?”

“That’s not what we’re saying, umma,” Hajin said in a conciliatory tone. “We just have to be careful that the issue does not become bigger than it already is. Like So said, anything we say can be used against us. We have to be careful.”

“The people we are fighting against have much power in the media,” Myunghee explained quietly. “They are influential and widely connected.”

So nodded. “We have already built up a pretty good case against them. Soon, the courts will decide the outcome of this battle.”

Hajin’s father had been silent the whole time, but at that moment, he sighed, “When she came back home all those years ago - crying, devastated after losing everything to those two people she had considered her friends, I told myself: never again . Never again did I want to see her being hurt and used like that.

“And so the first time we met you, I was equally wary. Could I trust you? I had my doubts, however happy she looked in your company. Then we watched you get engaged to that woman on TV, and when you left all those cameras to go after Jin, I felt the burden in my chest ease a little. At least you were not a two-timer, and you showed us early on that you could be depended upon to look after her, even in tricky situations. And when you two got engaged, I had a genuine smile on my face, because then I knew you were serious about her and I felt she could really be happy with you.

“I understand that all of this scheming and public shaming is part of business, but it does not sit well with me. She is subjected to this kind of controversy just for being your fiancee. What will
happen when she becomes your wife?"

Hajin could hardly breathe. Was he saying what she thought he was saying?

So felt her slip her hand into his. “I share your concerns, abeonim. That is why I gave up my claim to the company yesterday. Once we are able to resolve all these issues and make the company stable again, all eyes will be on my eldest brother. Hajin…” he squeezed her hand, “will no longer be subject to controversy.”

As Hajin nears the office building, it’s to find multiple reporters already waiting outside. Whether they’re waiting for her or someone else, she does not know, and she does not want to find out.

“This way,” a female voice whispers into her ear, making her jump. Turning her head, she sees Chaeryung, who smiles. “Good morning, agassi. There’s a back entrance that only employees are allowed to take.”

“You’re early,” Hajin remarks as they go around the building. She does what Chaeryung does and takes out her company ID, and they’re immediately let in.

“I always come to work at around this time,” she replies, “Won-nim is very specific about how his coffee is made and relies on me to make it for him every mor-” she stops then and gives an awkward laugh, “but I’m not- I’m just used to waking up early and coming to work early.”

Hajin recognizes it’s a sore topic and simply nods to show she understands.

“So why are you so early, agassi?” Chaeryung asks her after a moment’s pause.

“Oh, you know… controversy and stuff… all those articles…”

It’s like a switch was turned on, plunging Chaeryung into immediate fight mode. “I know all about those. It’s disgusting what rich people are willing to do just to get what they want! I helped dig up dirt against them, agassi, so you needn’t worry. We’ll make them pay for sure!”

Hajin scratches her temple, embarrassed. “Yeah, but that’s why I’m here. So’s stepmother wants to talk… and I think it’s to do with those articles.” She sighs. “It’s okay. I’ve been mentally and emotionally preparing myself since last night.”

The moment they reach the topmost floor, Hajin’s nerves are close to breaking point. She’s so nervous, she’s shaking by the time she steps into Lady Oh’s private room.

“Ah, Hajin-ah, you’re here.”

“Yes,” Hajin nods, closing the door behind her.

“Come light this up for me.”

“Yes.”

They work in silence for a few minutes and Hajin can’t help but be surprised. She had expected Lady Oh to plunge into a tirade immediately. She’d never known Lady Oh to circumspect or delay. She had always been upfront.
“So, while that's heating up, there are some things we need to discuss.”

There it is. The attack.

Hajin braces herself and takes the seat offered her, but she doesn’t say anything. She knows she needs to hear it first, whatever Lady Oh has to say. Clasping her hands together, she sits quietly and waits.

“Your mother and I have agreed that three months from now is ideal,” Lady Oh begins, much to Hajin’s confusion. “The winter would have given us much better pictures, but seeing as how you’re already knocked up, we can’t afford to wait long. Anyway, the colors of autumn will provide excellent contrasts in the pictures. Baek Ah’s already agreed to help us with all the planning, so we can consult him whenever we need to…”

Hearing the words knocked up had wiped all sense and thought from Hajin’s mind. “I’m sorry… what are we talking about?”

Lady Oh looks at her like she’s stupid. “The wedding. Your wedding. We need to start planning if we’re to have it in three months. And So will be leaving for Japan, too, to deal with all that business nonsense. What terrible timing…” she mumbles, rifling through a cabinet and pulling out magazine after magazine.

Dumbfounded, Hajin sees they’re all about weddings. “Wedding?”

Lady Oh straightens up and snaps, “Or did you and So manage to break everything off after one night?”

“No, no, of course not,” Hajin waves her hands in negation. “It’s just… I thought you were going to lecture me on those articles. I hear… I hear CEO Wang Geon is very upset.”

To her surprise, Lady Oh snorts dismissively and drops more books onto the table. “That old fox is always upset these days. He really needs to start watching his blood pressure.”

Hajin can hardly believe it. She had spent all night and all morning worrying… over nothing? “Aren’t you upset with me, too?”

“Why should I be?” comes the offhand reply. “I’m not the one being lied about and presented as a gold digger to the entire world.”

The bluntness makes Hajin blush. “But… it’s made everything worse. Everyone’s working even harder now to repair the damage. And it’s my fault. I understand why abeonim is angry… I thought you would be, too.”

“Well, I’m not,” she sighs and takes the opposite seat. For the first time that morning, she looks straight into Hajin’s confused eyes. “The boys have assured me of your innocence in all this, and I have no reason not to believe them. You are a victim here - the biggest, in fact. If anyone has a right to be upset, it’s you.”

She’s right and Hajin knows it. She blinks back her tears and clears her throat with a little nod. “I was… am… pretty upset about it. But everyone I care about believes me, so I’m grateful… at the same time, I’m very sorry for the inconvenience I have caused.”

“None of this is your doing,” Lady Oh shrugs, flipping through a book and showing her a picture of a wedding cake. “Chaeryung proved most useful yesterday. I asked for these and didn’t expect to receive so many in such a short time. She has already contacted each supplier and gotten a list of
prices. What do you think of this color scheme? Sister-in-law has already volunteered to make your cake.”

“Eunnie’s mom? Yes, it’s beautiful.”

Lady Oh gives her a blank stare. “Well, don’t get too excited. We’re only discussing your wedding."

Hajin blushes and buries her melancholy so she can focus on the conversation. “Since it'll be in autumn, won't it be better to use cool colors? Like purple? Not dark colors, but pastel colors.”

“Hmm…” Lady Oh doesn’t look convinced, but all she says is, “We'll discuss this another time. Now for the invitations. We need to send them out by next week, two weeks from now at the latest, so that our guests can reserve the date. We already have a list from our side of the family and your mother has volunteered to list down everyone from your side of the family, but I imagine you have friends you would want to invite as well?”

“Er… not really. I sort of lost touch with most of them after my accident. And my best friend betrayed me, so I can’t invite her. I only really have my workmates.”

Lady Oh looks dumbfounded, but she closes her mouth and clears her throat, “Your subordinates can naturally be invited. Five plus Chaeryung makes six-”

“I have six subordinates,” Hajin reminds kindly. “Six plus Chaeryung makes seven.”

She can tell immediately that she’s wrong by the expression on Lady Oh’s face which plainly says, “Oh, that’s right. I forgot to tell you.”

“That’s right, I forgot to tell you,” Lady Oh says with a little shake of the head at her forgetfulness, “Woohee resigned yesterday. That’s why we were able to hire Chaeryung immediately.”

“Resigned?” The information shocks Hajin, and before she knows it, she’s dialing Woohee’s number on her phone. “Unavailable. Did she say why, eomeoni?” She sighs, her mind working. Baek Ah. There’s no other explanation. But surely Woohee would have known that Baek Ah was a Wang descendent and therefore working under the Wang Ent. group? Isn’t that why she had decided to apply here in the first place?

Lady Oh shrugs. “She says she had to go home and take care of her ailing mother. I couldn’t say no, and anyway, Chaeryung had sent in her application letter. I saw no reason not to grant both their wishes.”

“Oh.”

“After lunch, we shall be visiting all the well-known tailor shops in the city to find you a wedding dress. Of course, we can also have one custom-made, but Baek Ah’s too busy with work-related matters on top of everything else, and I don’t know anyone who can design things as well as that boy…”

As promised, they get into a car with Chaeryung after lunch and leave the building. Hajin is pleasantly surprised when they first pull up at the place where her mother works part-time, and she can tell by the radiant smile on her mother’s face that she’s just as happy to be tagging along.

“This is all I’ve managed to remember,” she says, handing Sooyeon a sheet of paper. “There are only a few of us, plus a few friends.”
Sooyeon nods and hands the list over to Chaeryung, who has been busy on her phone the entire time. “Chaeryung-shi, there are about 40 people on this list. Including the 200 from our side, will the venue suffice?”

Hajin is surprised to hear that so many people would be attending the wedding. They can’t possibly all be So’s relatives… most likely, they’re friends or acquaintances from work.

“Yes, ma’am,” Chaeryung replies, taking the list and marking it with her pen before filing it into her folder. She really is a very efficient secretary. Hajin wonders how Won was faring without her. “We expected Hajin-shi’s guests to reach 200 as well so we booked the largest ballroom. However, it might be too big now. Shall I ask for a smaller one?”

“No need,” Sooyeon says, “We can use the empty space for decorations and other things. Anyway, a bigger venue means more room to move around. Eunnie says he thinks Hajin would look good in a large dress, and I agree.” She looks Hajin up and down at this point. “Though you’re well-built, you’ve a small frame. You would look good in a large, multi-layered skirt and intricate but light top.”

Hajin’s about to protest and point out that she would like to be able to move freely around on her wedding day, but her mother interrupts her before she can even draw breath.

“Don’t worry, darling, we can request for light fabric for the skirt so you won’t strain yourself and the baby with all that additional weight.”

“I-” Hajin sighs. It’s no use negating at this point.

“Speaking of baby, I know an excellent obstetrician,” Sooyeon says, “We can go have you checked up as soon as we’re able. Chaeryung-shi, do we have a free hour or two anywhere this week?”

“Unfortunately not, ma’am,” she says, checking a calendar, which, Hajin saw to her amazement, was full of the tiniest scribbles. “I can free up two hours on the third day of next month.”

“That’s a little late, isn’t it?” Hajin’s mother says, looking worried.

Lady Oh looks at Hajin and before the latter can react, she presses a hand to her abdomen. “Have you been feeling ill lately? Breasts hurting? Sense of smell stronger than usual?”

“No,” Hajin stammers, straightening up from surprise.

Lady Oh looks beyond her to her mother. “If she’s pregnant, it’s early. It can wait a month.”

The dresses are beautiful. Between the opinions of Chaeryung, Hajin, and her mother, it’s impossible to decide which dress they think is the best of them all.

“And this is just the first of a dozen shops!” Chaeryung whispers in awe as they finger the delicately embroidered bodice of a floor-length silk gown. “What about this one, agassi? I think it’ll look really good on you!”

“Yes,” her mother agrees, turning the price tag over and dropping it in shock. “5,000,000 won! For a dress! My wedding dress cost only 70,000 won!”
“That was more than 25 years ago though,” Hajin reminds weakly. “But you’re right, five million for a dress is a little too much.”

“It’s ok, agassi. The budget for your dress, shoes, make-up and everything else is set at ten million,” Chaeryung informs them brightly, smiling as she taps at her clipboard.

Flabbergasted, Hajin immediately says, “Don’t be silly. That’s too much! I’ll only be wearing the dress once. It doesn’t make sense to spend so much for it, just to lock it away in a box for the rest of eternity.”

Chaeryung scratches her temple and consults her notes. “Then what amount shall I set for the budget? And where should I put the extra money?”

“What extra money?” Hajin rolls her eyes. “We spend as much as we can while still remaining practical, and just… don’t use the rest.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option,” Lady Oh appears, a handful of ladies in tow, each of them with beautiful white dresses in their arms. “My husband wants a lavish wedding. He’s using this opportunity to reinforce business ties, make new ones, and put up a strong front to the media.”

Hajin eyes her grimly. “‘Business again?’”

Lady Oh shrugs in a it’s-not-my-call kind of way. “Now get inside a dressing room and try these on.”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“What?” So’s voice on the other end is shocked, almost panicked. “Soo-yah, what’s wrong?”

She massages her aching shins with a sigh and lies down on her bed. “Sorry, I should have been more specific. I don’t want to get married in front of all your business friends.”

There’s a short silence on the other end, then he simply says, “Ah. So you heard.”

“Your stepmother is thinking of getting a monstrous wedding dress worth seven and a half million won!”

He listens silently as she begins to recount her day, starting from the surprising conversation with Lady Oh that morning, to the highly eventful and publicized dinner at Grandma Park’s Grill, where they’d wrongly thought they would be safe from prying eyes. In fact, it was when the pictures of her and her companions surfaced the internet that So gave her a call to ask how she was.

“Oh, and Woohee resigned…” she says glumly, suddenly remembering. “Seeing Baek Ah that day must have spooked her a lot more than she let on… and worse, I can’t get a hold of her on her cell. On the upside, your stepmom’s really pleased about hiring Chaeryung, and I have to admit, I’m impressed by her secretarial capabilities.”

At this, he finally chimes in, “I can tell. Won’s been in a sour mood all day… something about no coffee and misplaced files. He fired his new secretary before lunchtime.”

Hajin frowns. “That’s harsh. It’s a little too soon to judge her, isn’t it? He should give her a few
days to get used to her job.”

He chuckles but it’s without humor. “If you ask me, he’s sour about losing Chaeryung. And I don’t think it’s all to do with her secretarial abilities.”

“Oh?” Hajin’s ears perk up at this. “You think he’s in love with her?”

There’s a short pause while he mulls this over. “I don’t know about love… but I think he values her very much. He’s gotten so used to having her around, he unconsciously calls her to ask her to do something before remembering she isn’t there.”

Hajin snorts. “If he really does care, then he shouldn’t have pushed her away like that. She was really torn up about what he said. And no, I was sworn to secrecy, so I’m still not telling you.”

He scoffs. “I have no interest in their private affairs. As long as it doesn’t interfere with their work output, there’s no reason for me to meddle.”

“You’re as bad as he is!” she whines. “What is it with you rich boys and not caring about relationships?”

“What?” he laughs, surprised by her sudden anger. “I do care about relationships, Soo-yah. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be talking to you right now.”

“Don’t try to distract me,” she snaps sternly. “Friendships are important. You need to build these types of relationships! You need to open up, to share your thoughts and let the other person know you care by listening to theirs. So-yah, you need to let people in.”

“Great advice!” he says brightly, cutting into her passionate speech. “I think your parents may be asleep so there’s no one else who can open up.”

His words make no sense whatsoever. She says as much, asking if he’s drunk or tipsy. She should have asked him where he was.

“My darling, I didn’t have time to eat all day, much more drink,” he says dryly.

“It’s almost midnight! You need to eat something or you’ll get sick. I know you still have instant noodles hidden in your kitchen somewhere. It’s not healthy, but it’s better than having you starve yourself.”

He hums his agreement. “In that case, the sooner you open up, the better.”

She’s about to ask him what he means when a thought hits her. It creeps in through her sleepy mind and forces her to walk to the window, where she looks down and sees…

“Pyeha?” she whispers into her phone, squinting at the figure on the grass below. She can tell it’s him, even before he looks up and waves at her. She can tell by his stance, and the way he carries himself. For a moment, she’s rooted to the spot, too shocked by his sudden appearance to do anything but gape. And then, she comes to her senses and moves as quickly and as quietly as she can, out her room, down the stairs, and to the front door.

He had been leaning against the hood of his car, but the moment the front door opens, he straightens up and, seeing her sprint, gets ready to catch her.

“You’re here!” she whispers, launching herself happily into his arms. She hadn’t seen him all day and she misses him terribly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? I would have cooked
“You’re tired. You’ve been walking around all day, going from place to place,” he explains, accepting the little kisses she’s planting all over his face. “I only came to say goodbye. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

That douses her fire immediately. Of course she had remembered his trip to Japan… but she’d always assumed he would be leaving in the evening. She’d purposely asked for her lunch break to be free tomorrow just so she could have a meal with him before then. “What time do you leave?”

“Before sunrise,” he replies quietly. “Both of my older brothers will be coming along, and the three of us will need time to get everything ready.”

Which means that after tonight, she won’t be seeing him for another few weeks. She’s upset, but she doesn’t want to show it, so she bites the inside of her cheek while she tries to think of what to say. Unfortunately, he knows her too well by now.

Stroking her cheek with his thumb, he murmurs, “Don’t be upset, Soo-yah. It’ll only be a few weeks. I promise I’ll call whenever I can.”

But he’ll be busy and she knows it. She’ll be busy too, what with work and all the wedding preparations. It suddenly dawns on her that she might end up planning their entire wedding without him, and the thought depresses her. She’s so deep in melancholy that she doesn’t realize he’s been talking for the past two minutes. “Stay with me tonight,” she cuts him off softly. There’s surprise in the way his eyes widen ever so slightly, but there’s also uncertainty in the quizzical frown he gives her. His eyes glance unsurely towards the upper floor window of her parents’ bedroom. But she’s quick to reassure him, “They sleep like the dead. And anyway, we’ll be getting married soon. Everyone even thinks we’re having a baby. There’s nothing wrong with having you sleep over.”

He purses his lips. “Your father was pretty upset yesterday. I don’t want to push my luck. I’d hate to meet his frying pan right before my flight.”

“I promise you, they won’t wake. Stay with me,” she says again, pressing her body firmly against his and running her tongue along his sharp jaw, made even sharper by his evening stubble. “I don’t want to say goodbye… not yet. Don’t leave me, pyeha…”

Her plead stirs something within him and he finds he doesn’t want to leave her either. He’s never wanted to leave her.

He kisses her ear. “Okay,” he says simply, holding her against him. “I’ll stay.”

He tries his best not to wake her, but the moment he gets off the mattress, she groans and rolls over to find that the area next to her is empty. She props herself up on her elbows to look for him, feeling slightly panicked, thinking that he’d already left and she hadn’t been able to see him before he did.

But he hasn’t left yet.

He leans over her until she’s lying down again, savoring the feel of her tiny hands on his face and scalp, the smooth skin of her body beneath his hands, her warm breath licking his lips as she sighs into his slow kiss.
“I have to go.”

She knows and she feels miserable. “Drive safely.” is all she can say.

“I love you.”

She smiles. “I love you, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update! Hehehe
The Fallout

Chapter Summary

“Enough!” he bellows in disbelief. “We are in deep enough shit as it is. Are you never satisfied until you win? We are already being accused of libel. Do you want to give them more reason to attack us? At this rate... we really will end up losing everything.”

She steels herself for what she’s about to say. “No, we won’t.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oppa, thank you for agreeing to meet me.”

Wook turned immediately and frowned at his sister. “Was it you? Did you release the articles about the J&J Group? Everything I had managed to find, all of my files have disappeared. Myunghee told me you were at our apartment two nights ago.”

She smiled a demure little smile and nodded.

He couldn’t believe it. He and his sister had never been on the best of terms, but he had always been willing to help her. And now she had caused him and his clients a great deal of trouble. “Why?”

“Your investigation would have led you to her eventually... those articles on the internet were set up by Yoo Myeongsun, So’s mother,” she explained, taking a seat and looking out over the city lights below.

“What?” he asked in disbelief, taking the seat opposite. “Why would she...?”

“So has a girlfriend,” she explained, trying to sound like it mattered little... but just the memory of his retreating back, watching as he left her and his mother looking silly in front of all those reporters, was enough to refuel her anger. “And we have reason to believe she might be using him. We just need the evidence.”

At these words, Wook’s frown deepens. “Using him? What do you mean?” He recalls what he knows of Hajin. He had recognized her right away as the hero who drowned, fell into a deep sleep, and woke up after a year against all odds, with no lasting serious injuries.

“His mother hasn’t revealed much to me, but from what I gather, the girl is of humble origins and has a ton of debt to her name,” Yeonhwa explained, rejoicing over the girl’s troubles. Such a girl dared to come between her and her goals. Yeonhwa couldn’t let it happen. She had waited so long for So to acknowledge her feelings... she had worked tirelessly for a year, building a reputation, using her inheritance to reestablish her father’s old publishing company... just to have some nobody ruin her plans? No. Yeonhwa was having none of it. She would marry the man of her dreams, have the life she had always wanted for herself, no matter what the cost.

“Oppa... I need your help. You and So have been friends for a long time. Surely, you don’t want to see him ruined over a girl? His mother thinks she is using him to pay back her debts, and I believe
she may be right. How can we allow him to associate himself with such a woman?"

“What do you know of her?” he asked, weighing all the information in his mind.

The question annoyed Yeonhwa, because the answer was, “Not much. As I said, though we are partners in this, his mother rarely shares details with me. She only tells me what I need to know and what she wants me to do. But you… oppa… I know you. You know everything. You can help me. We can help So together.”

Finally, Wook looked at her. “But you do know what his mother is planning?”

She nodded. “That much she has shared with me. She is currently digging up dirt on the woman. This is how you can help. There’s no one else I know who is better than you at this. If we can break off So’s relationship before it can become any more serious, we have a chance. His mother has promised him to me, in exchange for a lasting alliance between their family and the press. Once I am his wife, it will be easy to depose his bastard brother. I can make So CEO. Oppa… I know you have been struggling with your PR company. Imagine having the entire Wang Group as your clients. You will be rich, you will be known. You will have more power than you can imagine.”

As tempting as the offer sounded, Wook had one concern in his mind: Myunghee. She and Hajin had recently bonded over the discovery of their shared blood. If Hajin were to fall, how would Myunghee react? Would her family’s business be affected by mere association with Hajin’s name?

“I have to think this through,” he said at last.

“Of course,” she smiled sweetly at him and got up. “Do what you must, dear brother.”

Yeonhwa turned to leave, but he stopped her. “You realize what you’re doing is risky? I have dug enough to know that many of those articles against J&J have been fabricated. If they’re traced back to you… you could be in big trouble.”

“But that’s exactly why we need to act fast,” she explained confidently, “The sooner we can get rid of So’s girlfriend, the sooner my engagement to him can become a reality. Then the attack on J&J will stop. That company’s CEO is no saint. He has received backlash for his rash actions in the past. His PR is entirely capable of defending their clients. It’s the Wangs who will suffer more because of their joint venture. They have invested a lot. They will lose a lot if it all falls apart.”

“The debts are her ex-boyfriend’s,” Wook explained to Yeonhwa a week later, dropping a stack of pictures onto the table, careful not to include those with Hajin’s face on them. “I’ve been having her followed since the party and was able to get these pictures. But he has already started paying his debts back little by little. So what now? She’s clean.”

Yeonhwa frowned. Her brother was looking tired and stressed, like he hadn’t slept in days. “It doesn’t matter. She is penniless. She could still be using him for his money.”

“We don’t know that,” he snapped irritably. “How can you possibly know that?”

“Oppa… we can turn it into the truth,” she whispered, leaning forward in her seat. “It says here her ex-boyfriend works in a small shop. He has a wife and they are expecting their first child. How can they prepare properly for the birth if most of his salary goes into paying off his debts?”
Wook was smart. He knew immediately where his sister was going with this. “You mean to bribe him to get him to lie for us.”

“It’s a small lie. Until recently, weren’t those debts hers to pay?”

Wook shook his head. “He has already apologized and agreed to start paying them off himself. What makes you think he’ll retract just for you?”

“You said it yourself, he is trying to pay off his debts. We offer him money he can’t refuse in his desperate situation. If he wants to be noble, then we lie to him about So’s relationship. Tell him his ex is being played, that So will leave her soon to be with me. It’ll be a win-win for him. If you don’t want to do it, I will. Tell me who he is and I’ll talk to him myself.”

“No,” Wook said firmly, to her annoyance. Like Myeongsun, he had refused to tell her the identity of So’s girlfriend.

“Why don’t you just tell me who she is?” she snapped. “Why do you protect her?”

“The less you know, the better,” he said vaguely. He couldn’t risk Yeonhwa finding out about Hajin. She and Myunghee hated each other enough. What would she say to Myunghee if she ever found out the woman they’ve been plotting to destroy was none other than Myunghee’s young cousin, Hajin?

Neither could Myunghee find out about their plans. Wook was certain she would take her cousin’s side. “Especially if you mean to cover up your lies with more lies. I’ll do it. I’ll speak to him.”

“Fine,” Yeonhwa gritted her teeth. “Just do what you must. I don’t care about the details.”

At this point, Wook sighed. “Yeonhwa-yah… are you sure you want to do this? It would be better, easier to back out. Don’t involve yourself in the struggle between the Yoos and the Wangs. Live a little simpler. Forget about So.”

Yeonhwa set her jaw stubbornly upon hearing the last line. “I can’t, oppa, you know how much I admire him. I can’t give him up. I have loved no other for years. Everything I have done, I’ve done to get closer to him. How can you ask me to give up now? We are children of the press. We live in lies and manipulation. Are you scared of getting caught?”

“Of course I am,” he said in defeat. “So should you. We are dealing with powerful families here.”

She shrugged, unconcerned. “Bigger newspapers and news portals lie about the government everyday.”

“They’re protected by law. We, on the other hand, are held accountable for everything we release to the public.” He got up and held her by the shoulders, looking right into her eyes. “Tell me again… is this what you really want? I will help you with anything… give you whatever you want. Just say the word, and we can drop this.”

Despite her nerves, her voice remained firm, “I have wanted nothing else for years. Oppa, please… help me.”

Eyes closed, Wook clenches his fist around the paper in his hand.
“What is going on?” his mother says in a terrified voice. “Wook-ah, why are you being summoned to a court hearing? What has happened? Is it Myunghee?”

“Yes.”

“No.” Wook turns a steely glare towards his younger sister, but she only stares defiantly back. “It’s not Myunghee… it’s Yeonhwa.”

Stunned, their mother turns around, “Yeonhwa-yah, what does he mean? What have you done?”

“Even then, I told you… I told you what you were planning was risky,” Wook says, shaking from both rage and fear. “I told you to back out. I would have helped you with anything… why did it have to be this?”

Yeonhwa swallows. “It was _her_… her plan all along. I just went along with it.”

“And now we have to pay the price!” he hisses, slamming a fist onto the countertop, the sound loud enough to make the two women jump in fright. “You told me you were partners, but now you say you’ve had a falling out. So what does that mean for us? That we are alone in this fight? That we have to answer to the charges made against us by one of the top business groups in Japan, and my biggest client? Do you have any idea what would happen if we lose?!?”

He reaches her in three quick strides. “Those articles about Hajin… you knew So knew about them. You knew his mother didn’t want to have them published. Why did you do it?”

“Because I genuinely believe Hajin is using him. She wants him for his money. Oppa, I can’t let her get away with it… he has been completely bewitched.”

“He’d already read the articles! He didn’t believe them then, he doesn’t believe them now! Even if you’re right, you should have found another way to convince him. Why didn’t you consult me before acting? Were you out of your mind?!?”

She would never admit something like that out loud. “I thought that even if they didn’t matter to him, that they would matter to her.”

The smirk on Wook’s face chills Yeonhwa to the bone. She has never seen her brother so angry before… never this worried. “So… you hoped that she would be the one to leave him? You thought that being plagued by reporters would be enough to make her break off her engagement?”

“I thought that having everyone she knows doubt her could shake her… scare her away. At the very least, how could his family accept someone like that? She has nothing and she’s already causing them so much trouble. Oppa… there’s more… so much more we can do. We have all the papers in our hands, all the evidences… we can-”

“Enough!” he bellows in disbelief. “We are in deep enough shit as it is. Are you never satisfied until you win? We are already being accused of libel. Do you want to give them more reason to attack us? At this rate… we really will end up losing everything.”

She steels herself for what she’s about to say. “No, we won’t.”

Wook is surprised by the confidence in his sister’s voice, but it’s nothing compared to the shock of hearing her next words.

“We are not being sued, oppa… only you are.”
There’s a stunned silence as everyone processes these words.

“Yeonhwa-yah,” their mother says at last, frozen in place, staring at her daughter with wide, horrified eyes. “You don’t mean that. You can’t mean what you’re saying.”

But she does. “Oppa… answer their charges. There’s no point in the both of us getting sued. I promise, I will find a way… I will get you out… trust me and I will do everything I can to help—”

He staggers away from her and has to brace himself against the wall. “You wish for me… to bear the full consequences of your actions? You wish for me to taint my name, my reputation… for…” he takes a deep breath to steady himself.

“If we involve the entire company, we will be ruined. Father’s legacy… your PR company…” Yeonhwa pleads in as convincing a manner as she can. “We really will lose everything.”

He laughs, pained and crazed. “Yet you were the one who gave the order to release the articles. You were the one communicating with Yoo Myeongsun this whole time.”

“If you tell them you told me to do it…”

He’s heard enough. Shaking his head, Wook slams the door shut behind him and drives away.

“Is this right?” Baek Ah asks Hajin, showing her his work.

She stares in wonder at the finished drawings in his hand. “Yes! They’re perfect, Baek Ah-nim! The color, the design…” she looks up in awe, “you really are amazing.”

He blushes, looking pleased. “So now we have the outfits for all the court ladies! I suppose we’ll be using silk for the material? We can have your uniforms by next week.”

She nods happily, taking all the drawings from him and gazing at them with wonder. Her eyes land on the sketches of her own uniform - grey with warm flowers and leaves - and the memories they elicit make her smile… of when he first told her he loved her… of the first time she kissed him on the banks of Lake Dongji…

“You’re spacing out again,” Baek Ah teases. “It’s only been three weeks, and it’s not like you two don’t text or call each other.”

She narrows her eyes and whacks him playfully with her head court lady stick. “Don’t think you know everything about me, Baek Ah-nim. I wasn’t thinking about that at all.”

“But you were thinking of him?” he grins, dancing out of her reach. “It’s natural, noona, you miss him. Why don’t you give him a call right now? I notice you’re always the one waiting for him.”

She sighs. “Because he’s busy. I don’t know who he’s with or what he’s doing. I might disturb him. If only he had Facebook or Instagram, or some other form of social media! Then I could just leave him a private message or even check if he’s online and free to chat. SMS is so unreliable… not to mention expensive across countries!”

“But he does have a Facebook account, noona.”
Hajin is stumped. “He told me he didn’t.”

“Well… that’s probably because he didn’t make it. Eunnie-hyung did,” Baek Ah explains, his upper lip twitching. “He needed extra lives for some online game. We all helped for a time, but then it became annoying, and that’s when Eunnie-hyung figured that since So-hyung had no interest in Facebook that he could just make the account and manage it himself. It’s been years since he stopped playing the game though, so the account might have been deactivated.”

She decides to ask So about it the next time he calls.

“Agassi.” Chaeryung enters the room with Sooyeon, who looks around the newly constructed Damiwon building with appreciation. “Here’s the complete list you asked for of all the antique shops in Seoul, and in the nearby cities.”

“The garden outside looks lovely, Baek Ah-yah. It’s a very pleasant place to relax,” Sooyeon remarks, touching the surface of the smooth wooden staircase before looking down at the inner bathing pool by her feet. “I suppose that will be filled with water later on?”

Baek Ah nods. “There are two bathing pools in total. We’ll be adding a heater to the one outside so it’ll be like a spring, and Mu-hyung thinks having a sauna would be good, too. We just need to furbish the place, buy some antiques or passable imitations, furniture… then we’ll be all set.”

Sooyeon nods, satisfied. “We already have a growing list of clients interested in availing our products. Does little Eun have a marketing strategy in mind for our opening? I notice he hasn’t been coming into the office that often.”

“Ah, ye…” Baek Ah scratches his temple. “That’s because he’s busy training.”


“Martial arts,” Baek Ah explains, miming a punch and a kick. “He’s developed a sudden interest. But I’ll remind him later, I promise. I’m sure he hasn’t been neglecting his work.”

“And while you’re at it, remind him that we’ll be getting your measurements tomorrow for the wedding. Hajin-ah, what about your bridesmaids and maid-of-honor? Will they be available?”

Hajin feels slightly panicked, but she swallows it down. “Yes, eomeoni, they’ve all been informed. My cousin, Myunghee, has agreed to be my maid-of-honor… as for the bridesmaids, there are only Chaeryung and Soondeok.”

“Add another to make it three. I’m sure you can think of someone else. Perhaps another cousin?” Sooyeon suggests.

Hajin did have three bridesmaids in mind originally… however, the other one had disappeared, and she and Chaeryung are still trying their best to locate her.

“I do have someone in mind, but she’s busy. Is it ok if we have her fitting postponed?” Hajin crosses her fingers.

“I suppose so. But not too long, mind.”

Hajin nods, relieved. She turns to Chaeryung as Sooyeon and Baek Ah ascend the stairs to the upper floors. “Any news?”

To her delight, Chaeryung smiles and nods. “I’ve found her, agassi. It hasn’t been easy, especially
since she filed a temporary leave from university, and I couldn’t find any records of her family, nor an address, but… you mentioned she was a musician. I put up an ad for small bands and song groups to come sing at your wedding… and one of them was this.”

She hands Hajin a sheet of paper, eyes shining with excitement. “That’s her, isn’t it?”

The young woman in the photo is smiling, an acoustic guitar sitting on her lap, her long hair down and covering her left shoulder. Around her are four men on different instruments.

“Yes! You did it, Chaeryung-shi!” Her face breaks into a wide smile. “You’ve found her… This is definitely Woohee.”

“The auditions are scheduled for the week after next… but I can send them a message and ask for a private interview, if you’d like?”

Hajin’s still apprehensive about this. She’s not sure how Baek Ah and Woohee will react to seeing each other again… and she definitely doesn’t want to ruin her own wedding by forcing them to meet without their knowledge. But still… she wants Woohee there. Woohee had been something of a sister to her in Goryeo, and before she resigned, they had become very good friends.

“Perhaps an interview first would be best,” she decides at last. “How soon can you arrange it?”

“Your schedule is all full, so it’s really up to you. What time would you like me to free up for you?”

Hajin decides she really needs to talk to So first. He would know what to do. If anything, he can convince Baek Ah to let Woohee into the wedding. “The day after tomorrow. Lunch time.”

Chapter End Notes

10,000 views! Thank you to all the readers and your comments!! I hope you all enjoy these next chapters leading up to the end ^^

I'm thinking of a way to prolong the story a bit, but I don't know if I can write 4 more years of their lives until we reach the Christmas Special I wrote. Maybe just until Seol's birth or something xD
Baek Ah and Woohee Part 1

Chapter Summary

_They became quiet then, trying to look anywhere but at each other. When the food arrived, their eyes met and he smiled. He was gratified to see the answering, somewhat forced smile on her lips._

_She was even more beautiful when she wasn’t glaring, and before he realized what was happening, his heart was already skipping beats in his chest._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The windchime tinkles and the women beam at Baek Ah as he pushes open the door. He hasn’t been in this restaurant in years - not since he graduated - a fact quickly pointed out by the people there.

As he looks around, he finds the place hasn’t changed much… not the tables and chairs, not the flowering plants on the windowsills, not the staff, and not his paintings on their walls. He certainly hopes the menu hasn’t changed either.

“Ahjumma, you’re still here?” he teases an elderly woman as he’s led to his usual spot by the corner of the room.

“Why, do I look like I’m old enough to retire?” she demands, wiping her hands on the apron she wears over her uniform.

Baek Ah immediately raises both hands in self-defense. “No, of course not. That’s not what I meant-”

But she cuts him off with a stern look. “And what about you? Are you working now? Do they treat you well there?”

He smiles and nods. “Yes, I’m having a lot of fun. They treat me very well.”

“Well, it’s been so long!” a younger waitress rushes over to chat. “We saw you on TV and in the newspapers. You used to be such a scrawny boy, and now look at you… all grown up and important. Oh, you’ve become so handsome!” she pinches his cheek with a squeal. “So tell me, are you really related to the Wangs? Are all those young masters really your cousins? You should have told us something before you left. We thought you’d never come back. We’ve been worried about you!”

He grins. “I didn’t know if working there would work out for me. My cousins are all so rich. I thought I wouldn’t fit in.”

She tutts, “How can you not fit in when they’re supposed to be your family?” Her scowl is quickly replaced with a smile when she adds, “Yah, do you have any handsome men for me?”

“Get back to work!” the older waitress orders in scandalized tones.
“Sunbae!” the younger one protests with a pout.

“He’s here to eat.” The older woman determinedly whips out a pad and pen. “Now stop pestering him.”

“Aish, he’s just going to order his usual favorites. Honey garlic fried chicken wings with ranch dip and soda. Am I right?”

“Bingo!” Baek Ah gives her a thumbs up.

“Shall I throw in some mushroom soup?” she smiles knowingly.

He laughs. “You know me so well.”

“Our little artist hasn’t changed at all.” She swishes around, satisfied. “I’ll go get your order.”

“But this is my table! Yah-” the older woman sighs and shrugs. “Well, less work for me.”

Baek Ah clears his throat. “Uhh… actually ahjumma… instead of a soda, could I have a bottle of soju and a beer?”

She’s surprised, thinking it’s a little early for him to be drinking, but then she notices something she hadn’t noticed earlier… the rings around his eyes and the lines on his face. His bright words and quick smiles aren’t enough to hide the sadness in his eyes.

She doesn’t say anything but she smiles kindly in understanding. “Of course. You just sit here quietly and relax.”

Everything Baek Ah sees and smells triggers some distant memory. Old memories. Absentmindedly, he touches the wall beside him, running a finger over the tiny written letters there, remembering the day they had been written…

He closes his eyes in surrender to the memories.

"Hey… hey wait!" called young Baek Ah as he chased after the girl in the stained pink and white dress down the school corridor. He saw her take a left turn and followed quickly, coming to an abrupt halt inches away from knocking her down for what would have been the second time in the last five minutes.

"What is it now?" she demanded, wiping the paint off her arms and face with a soaked handkerchief.

She wouldn't look at him, and he knew it was because she had tears in her eyes.

"Hey... I'm really sorry about the paint," he apologized again. He clenched his fist tightly around the little trinket she had dropped in their tumble earlier.

"Whatever. What do you want?"

Ignoring her glare, he grabbed her arm and led her towards the open field.

"Yah... yah! What do you think you're doing?" she shrieked, trying to fight him off. Who was this
Baek Ah brought her to a washing area lined with taps and took out his own handkerchief. Seeing him twist the nearest tap open, the girl knew what he was going to do and immediately turned, but he grabbed her before she could get away.

"I didn't see you, so I accidentally bumped into you," he said in a low voice, wiping the paint off of her arms.

Blushing, she grabbed his handkerchief and took over with pursed lips. She saw him smiling and glared at him. "Do you normally laugh at people you're apologizing to?"

"Who's laughing?" he grinned. "I'm smiling because now that I've had a good look at you..." He grabbed the paint-smeared handkerchief she had been using on herself and washed it before giving it back in exchange for his own soiled handkerchief. "You're quite pretty."

"Oh, I get it," she said with a sarcastic little laugh, "you want my name? My number? Is that it?"

"Well," he lifted his shoulder in a half shrug, "I won't say no."

"You couldn't have just asked? Why ruin my perfectly good dress with paint?" she demanded.

"Yah, I told you, I didn't do it on purpose," he protested. "And I told you I was sorry. It was an accident. I didn't see you."

She scoffed. "Whatever." Shaking her arms, she grabbed her things and glared at him. "Just leave me alone."

He didn’t stop her this time as she stalked away, but he took the little elephant out of his pocket and studied it. “It looks like something you can buy from a souvenir shop.” He eyed the girl’s retreating back and smiled. “I’ll just have to clean this then return it to you.”

He gasped loudly the next day upon entering art class. Heads all around turned to see what he was staring at and, feeling the weight of so many eyes on her, the new girl looked up and saw him. Her own eyes widened in disbelief before she turned away, grimacing.

“Yah, I had no idea we would be classmates!” he said, gleefully trotting up to her. “You must be new. It’s no wonder I’d never seen you around school before."

“Go away,” she hissed, glaring at him when she saw that he had taken the empty seat beside her. “There are so many empty seats in the room. Go sit somewhere else.”

“Which school did you transfer from? Is it because of your parents’ work that you’ve moved here?”

“You seem to have a death wish.”

He grinned. “Why? It’s not like you’re an assassin or a spy on a mission. We’re just two students who happen to be in the same class, so there's no reason for you to be so secretive. Now that we’re classmates, you’ll have to tell me your name. I’m Kim Baek Ah... and you are?”

“Bok Soon,” she snapped.
“Bok Soon…?” he repeated the name suspiciously.

The door opened then, prompting everyone to stand and greet their teacher, who had walked in consulting a piece of paper in her notebook. “Woohee?” she called, glancing around the room. “Where is Kim Woohee?”

From beside him, Baek Ah heard the girl sigh. He watched her reluctantly raise her hand. “Here, seonsang-nim… I’m Woohee.”

“You’re who, Bok Soonie?” Baek Ah teased, giving her good reason to kick his shin. He grunted in pain and bit his tongue to keep from crying out.

“Ah, yes. Everyone, please help me welcome our new student,” their teacher smiled, setting her things down on the table. “I hear you arrived only yesterday?”

“Ye, seonsang-nim.”

“I shall give you a list of everything you’ll need for school… in the meantime,” their teacher looked at Baek Ah, “Baek Ah is my best pupil. Baek Ah, I will put you in charge of her. Make sure she has notes and materials so she doesn’t fall too far behind. Exams are only a month away.”

Baek Ah flashed Woohee an impish smile. “Ye, seonsang-nim. Let’s work together from now on, eh, Woohee?”

Her smile was strained, but in front of everyone, she dared not protest.

“Watch the movement of your wrist,” Baek Ah murmured from behind. “Keep it steady… don’t be so stiff, let your movements flow… ahhh, you see… what did I tell you? Even the tiniest of movements can ruin everything. You’ll have to start over.”

“We’ve been doing this for hours. I’m tired!”

“Our practical exam is two days from now and you can’t even do the basics. How do you expect to pass if you keep giving up after just a few tries?”

“A few tries?” she scoffed in disbelief, gesturing towards the crumpled pieces of paper littering the floor. “You know what? Whatever. Can we continue this tomorrow? It’s getting late.”

“Tomorrow again? You’ve put this off for so long, now even I have to do overtime! I’m putting off studying for our other exams just for this, and you want to just quit?”

“Look here… I never asked for your help. Stop bothering me and just think about yourself.”

He couldn’t believe his ears. “Seonsang-nim asked me to help you, so you are my responsibility. What about instead of complaining all the time, you make things easier for the both of us and just do what you’re told? I’ve been trying my best, but you’re always distracted and don’t listen!”

Frustrated, she slammed her things onto the table and removed her apron. “I need a drink.”

He watched her go with a sigh. They’d been partners in art class for almost a month now. At first, her glares and fiery nature intrigued him, but now, much as he tried to be understanding, his patience was running thin.
They’d been fighting nonstop for three hours and he was tired. He thought about just leaving and was stuffing his sketchbook in his bag when he considered what his teacher might say to him should Woohee fail. He scratched his head in frustration.

“You be grateful I respect our teacher so much or I wouldn’t be doing this for you!” he yelled towards the open door, through which she had left. He kicked the nearest table and ended up hopping on one foot, cursing at nothing and everything for the situation he was in. “Aish! It’s no wonder you don’t have any friends…” he grumbled, sitting down.

The moment he said it, he felt terrible. Though he thinks a month should be more than enough time for someone to get used to a new school, he also acknowledges that Woohee may be different, and maybe her family was struggling.

He fished the little elephant out from his pocket and rolled it between his fingers. He had cleaned it up nicely weeks ago, but hadn’t been able to return it to her yet. He had hoped to become her friend first.

He sighed and rubbed his face. “Alright fine, I’ll help you! Even if you keep yelling at me!” He glared at the door and crossed his arms. She’d been gone for over ten minutes now. “Where are you getting your drink from, anyway? The supermarket two blocks away? There’s a perfectly good dispenser at the ground floor…” he grumbled.

But when twenty minutes had passed and she still hadn’t returned, he couldn’t sit still any longer. He got up, fuming. “If you left without telling me, you’re dead!”

Grabbing his things, he ran the length of the corridor, peering into the rooms for any sign of her. He searched the floor beneath, then the floor beneath that, then the gym, then the canteen, and couldn’t think of any other place within the school campus where she could possibly have gotten herself a drink.

He looked up at the dark sky and growled, “Tomorrow… I’m going to give you a piece of my mind.”

It was as he was passing the school gate that he heard it… the sound of a girl sobbing quietly. It can’t be, he thought with surprise. He rounded the corner and could barely make out her lone figure squatting on the ground next to the wall. Though it was dark, he knew it was her. She was wearing the same dress, for one, and with his eyes having adjusted to the dark, he could see that she had paint smears all over her arms.

For a short time, he felt lost and confused, then his good nature got the better of him and made him sit down beside her. She jerked when he did, and stared with wide eyes before she realized who he was.

“You’re glaring at me even though you’re crying?” he said. He wanted to be severe with her, but he couldn’t do it, not after seeing her in this state. Could she be crying because of me? Feeling terrible at the thought, he gave her his handkerchief, but she ignored it.

“Just take it,” he tutted impatiently, forcing it into her unresisting fist. He had expected her to yell and hit him, but to his surprise, she merely stared blankly ahead of her at nothing.

They were silent for a few minutes before he suddenly tutted again and got up. She thought he’d finally left her for good, but to her surprise, he returned sometime later with drinks in his hands. “Here. I didn’t know what you wanted so I decided to get you water,” he said gruffly, holding out a
bottle.

“No, thank you.”

“Just take it,” he ordered with a sigh. “You said you’d get a drink, and yet here you are, drinkless and doing nothing. Do you know how long I waited for you?”

She cut him off before he could continue, “I appreciate the drink… but you should go. It’s dark and your parents will be looking for you.”

“And you?” he scoffed, taking a sip of his own water. “You’re a girl, you shouldn’t be out alone on the streets in the dark. What’ll your parents think?”

She was silent for the longest time, and he thought perhaps he had offended her again in some way, but then in a soft voice, she said, “They won’t care. They stopped caring a long time ago.”

He studied her faraway expression… Marriage problems? Money problems? He really couldn’t figure her out, but seeing the fresh tears leaking out of her eyes made him forget his anger. Whatever she was dealing with, it was obvious she was struggling. And it was equally obvious that she had no one to talk to.

Coming to an abrupt decision, he stood up and smiled. “Well, since it’s dinner time, we might as well eat. Here, it’ll be my treat.” He held his palm open for her, but she looked away.

“I think we should just go home.”

“Yah, don’t be like that. I’ve been in this school longer and I’m helping you with your studies. I’m your sunbae. Don’t you think you’re being disrespectful right now? On top of that, I’m a man. Are you going to hurt my manly pride? After working and fighting for 3 hours straight, you should be hungry. You can’t tell me you’re not.”

“I’m not,” she snapped, irritated by his nagging.

At that moment, her stomach grumbled loudly enough for Baek Ah to hear. She looked up in surprise and blushed scarlet when she saw the amused grin on his face.

“Oh? Is our Woohee hungry after all?”

Embarrassed, she struggled to her feet. “Thanks for the water, but I’ll be fine on my own. Then…” she nodded stiffly and turned to leave, but he grabbed her in a headlock and led her down the street. “Yah… yah! Let me go! Now!”

“Stop being so stubborn, I told you I would treat you to dinner,” he said. “The restaurant is not far from here and it’s the best chicken and beer place near campus. Tada!” He gestured happily at the store, with its warm art decor and murals. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“I told you I would be going home,” she gritted her teeth. “Let me go.”

“No.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “No?”

“No,” he repeated. “I don’t know what’s wrong, but I think it’s a family issue. If I’m right, then why would you be so eager to go back home? If you’re just going to be miserable there, why not spend an enjoyable evening with me instead? I’m hungry and lonely, we might as well enjoy each
others’ company.”

She sighed. “Since when have we ever enjoyed each others’ company?”

“We have to start somewhere,” he pointed out, pushing the door open and dragging her in.

“Baek Ah-yah, we thought you’d drop by! Exams soon, right? We’ve prepared your absolute favorite: honey garlic frie—” one of the waitresses greeted with a bright smile. “Oh? Who is this? A girlfriend?”

He laughed. “This is Woohee, a classmate. Noona, we’re starving.”

“Of course,” the woman said brightly and led them to a far corner. “Will she be having the same as you, Baek Ah-yah?”

“Yes, and she’ll have the same.” He watched the woman go with a smile before turning to Woohee. “I painted this whole place.”

Shocked, Woohee looked around her and saw that every wall was, indeed, painted uniquely by hand. “You mean just you? No one helped you?”

He shook his head. “Just me. I was bored last summer and needed the money… they saw my sketches and commissioned me to redecorate the whole place. Even the tables and chairs, the plants on the windowsill, the utensils they’re using… I suggested them all.”

“You want to be an interior designer? An architect?”

“I’m not entirely sure yet,” he shrugged. “But this place couldn’t afford a professional designer, so they paid me half of what they would have paid a professional, and promised me a lifetime discount on their chicken.”

She couldn’t not be impressed: the paintings all around the walls were so beautifully, meticulously done. “And here I thought your only talent was annoying people.”

Baek Ah stared at her for a moment before bursting out laughing, “So you do have a sense of humor!”

“What? How was that funny?” she asked, confused.

“You were teasing me!”

She blushed. “So? Is that so strange?”

The last thing he wanted was to make her feel more awkward around him, so he just nodded. “You’re right. I overreacted.”

They became quiet then, trying to look anywhere but at each other. When the food arrived, their eyes met and he smiled. He was gratified to see the answering, somewhat forced smile on her lips. She was even more beautiful when she wasn’t glaring, and before he realized what was happening, his heart was already skipping beats in his chest.

The first time he saw her dance was the moment he realized he loved her.
He watched, mesmerized, as she spun and moved through the air - with movements as graceful as silk, freer than the fluttering ribbon in her hand, lighter than the sunshine on her hair.

And when she sang her first note, that’s when he knew... he had to have her. His best friend.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be a continuation of Baek Ah and Woohee's history :D

Can you guess what happened between them?

And if you think Woohee is hiding some kind of deep, dark secret, then ding! You're right. But I won't be revealing what it is yet... not for a couple more chapters. Because the suspense. :P

Parts of the next chapter have already been written. Will just need to edit and check with some facts, then I'll post it. 'til then... have fun reading! :P
Chapter Summary

_They weren’t meant to be. She had sealed the fate of their relationship by lying to him. She’d never intended for it to happen… just like she’d never intended to fall in love with him. It all just happened naturally. And once she’d started, she couldn’t stop, no matter how hard she tried._

_In the end, she had to let him go._

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Woohee had been walking the streets absentmindedly all morning. Slung across one shoulder is her guitar, and across the other is a slingbag containing her resume and other papers needed to find a decent job in this little town.

She checks the list on her notebook. Only two out of a dozen options remain open for her, and they’re the options she had hoped to avoid at all costs.

“I don’t want to go back to those places,” she mumbles dejectedly, putting her notebook away with a sigh.

That’s when she realizes she recognizes the street she had just entered. Many times in the past, she had found herself at the corner of this street, facing the familiar shop signs and buildings that lined it. Never did she have the courage to walk through it again, not since the day she left him.

They weren’t meant to be. She had sealed the fate of their relationship by lying to him. She’d never intended for it to happen… just like she’d never intended to fall in love with him. It all just happened naturally. And once she’d started, she couldn’t stop, no matter how hard she tried.

In the end, she had to let him go.

Despite the pain, his memories bring her comfort. The years they’d spent together had been some of the happiest of her miserable life, and as she’s feeling particularly down this day, she decides to treat herself to some chicken and beer - his favorite food. She forces herself to smile as she takes one step, two steps forward.

_It was a cold day on Seollal when Woohee finally agreed to meet Baek Ah’s parents. Though Baek Ah remained upbeat and pleasant throughout the evening, it wasn’t enough to completely dispel the coldness in the room, radiating mainly from his mother. After her fifth inquiry about Woohee’s family and financial status, Baek Ah finally decided to intervene, knowing it was a painful topic for Woohee._
“I’m only curious,” his mother said defensively, “Since the fall of their family business, how have her parents been supporting her? Is she an only child?”

“Yes, she-”

“No,” Woohee corrected, her heart racing from nerves. She could see the surprise on Baek Ah’s face, which wasn’t surprising considering she’d never mentioned her sisters before, not in the year they’d been together. Now it was time. She had to tell him the truth before things got further out of hand. “I’m the eldest of three.”

“Oh, and are they all in school? It must be tough on your parents, trying to support so many children after declaring bankruptcy,” Baek Ah’s mother remarked casually.

Woohee steeled her nerves, ready to confess. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she began, “Actually, my-”

“Stop, Woohee,” Baek Ah ordered, getting up and taking her hand, “you don’t need to answer that. Umma, appa… thank you for the meal. I’ll take her back now. The dormitory has a curfew.”

“But you haven’t even finished eating yet,” his father protested, giving his wife a pained look. But she wouldn’t meet his eyes. “Just finish your meal first. Okay?”

“I’ll be back soon,” Baek Ah said firmly, pulling Woohee out the door.

She had barely enough time to say her thanks and farewell before the door was shut and she found herself out on the cold streets beside her fuming boyfriend, who was leading her away from his home.

They walked silently for a while, lost in their individual thoughts. When his pace finally slowed enough and Woohee judged he had calmed down, she figured it was time to confess.

“I have something to say-”

“I’m sorry about my mother-”

They looked at each other, and he decided he had to apologize first before anything else was said. With a heavy heart, he sighed, “I’m sorry about my mother. She means well… she’s just having a hard time. She had to give up a lot in order to marry my father… and I don’t think she really knew what she was getting herself into when she did.”

Curious, Woohee couldn’t help but ask about his mother’s life.

“She came from a wealthy family, but her father wanted her to marry someone else. When she ran away with my father, her family disowned her. Before that, she’d never had to work a day in her life…” Thinking of his mother’s sacrifices made him feel guilty about leaving in the middle of dinner. In hindsight, it was probably not the smartest thing to do if he wanted to gain his mother’s approval.

“I suppose… she just wants what’s best for you,” Woohee said in a quiet voice, realizing that evidently, she wasn’t good enough. Considering her current situation in life… she might never be good enough.

Baek Ah cleared his throat and forced a smile. “Let’s not talk about that, I’m sure she’s just being cautious. She’ll warm up to you eventually. Anyway, we’ve some time before the next bus. Should we grab an ice cream?”
“In this cold weather?” she asked, astounded by his suggestion.

He laughed. “I was kidding. Let’s grab a hot chocolate. I know you like that, too.”

She narrowed her eyes playfully and took his arm. “You know that I do.”

“So what did you want to tell me?” he asked as they crossed the street together to get to the cafe.

She pretended to be surprised and confused. Hearing about his mother’s life and expectations had considerably lowered Woohee’s confidence. She found she couldn’t tell him… not now.

If his mother thought she wasn’t good enough for him… then Woohee would just have to prove her wrong.

“Ahjumma…” Baek Ah says suddenly, deciding he doesn’t want to eat here after all. “I just got a message saying I’m needed back at the office. Can you pack the food for me instead?”

He can tell the staff are disappointed… they’d probably wanted to talk to him more… to catch up and find out more about his new life and new job. But he can’t stay. The place holds too many memories.

“Of course. Please wait a moment,” she says kindly, disappearing into the kitchen.

He sits back down and rubs his face with a sigh, remembering the conversation he had had with his third cousin the night before. “I don’t know if I’ll be okay with having her around, hyung…” he mumbles truthfully to himself. When he’d first heard that Woohee had worked under Hajin for a month before resigning, Baek Ah had been more than a little shocked. Hearing that Hajin wanted her to be a bridesmaid at her wedding shocked him even more. To think the two had developed such a bond in such a short time…

Despite the unease Woohee’s sudden reappearance brought him, he was grateful to Hajin for taking his feelings into consideration. It’s her wedding… she should have a say on who would be allowed to attend. His own personal feelings shouldn’t matter, but they did - to Hajin and to his cousin.

“Don’t rush. Think carefully before you decide,” So had said last night over the phone. “If you really don’t want her there, I’ll tell Hajin.”

“Aish! Do I want to see her again or don’t I?” he tuts, sliding lower into his seat.

They sat side by side on the grass, waiting for the fireworks display that would mark the start of the next solar year. She had her head on his shoulder, listening to music, while he sketched randomly in his notebook.
"Are you really going to Seoul after graduation?" she asked suddenly, voice low.

He momentarily stopped drawing. "My mother wants me to work for her older brother’s company, but… I don’t know. I’ve never met anyone from her side of the family before. I feel like it’ll be awkward."

"Are you afraid?"

"I’m not afraid, I just don’t know how I can possibly relate to them. They’re rich and some of my cousins are years older than me." He shrugged. "To be honest, I want to just continue working at the studio as a photographer for the time being, make it a full-time job… What do you think?"

After a few moments of silence, Baek Ah turned his head to face her, wondering if she had somehow fallen asleep. "Woohee?"

"I think you should go," she said at last, to his surprise.

"You think I should go?"

She nodded and faced him. "I think it’s a really good opportunity, and you should take it while you can. Even if it doesn’t work out, you said your uncle’s company is a big company… you can add the working experience to your resume and increase your chances of finding a better job in the city. You could earn enough money to pay for college and become a professional designer like you’ve always wanted. There are a ton of reasons for you to go."

"But I have one good reason for me to stay, and it’s all I need," he said, looking at her seriously. He’d already thought about everything she’d just said, and his mother insisted on pointing those facts out to him at every opportunity. "But if you really want me to… won’t you come with me?"

"Huh?" she looked genuinely surprised by the question, but he smiled and took hold of her hands.

"You can pursue your dreams in the city, too. Audition. Become a dancer and singer. Or study some more. You can do anything! We’ll rent an apartment and live together."

The effect was immediate. Woohee blushed so hard, she felt lightheaded. "L-live… live together," she coughed. "Yah! That’s not even funny."

"I’m not kidding!" he exclaimed with a little laugh. "It’ll be cheaper if we share the rent, and we won’t be so lonely too. Come on, what do you say?"

She glared at him. "I say get your head back on straight and think."

"Okay. I think we should get married."

Now she knew he had lost his mind.

He grinned, reading her thoughts correctly. "We’ve been together for two years. I want to marry you."

"I…" she swallowed hard, "That is… I’ve only met your family a few times and I know your mother doesn’t really like me-"

"You don’t need to worry about my mother. She’ll come around. But if you’re worried about your parents, then you know I’ve wanted to meet them for a long time. Do you want me to ask permission from your father first? I’ll do it. In fact, let’s go to your place right now and-"
“Get down!” she ordered, pulling him back so forcefully that he fell and landed on his butt. She sighed and thought things over in her mind. At last, she said, “You don’t need to do anything. I’ll talk to them... let’s just focus on graduating first, okay?”

A slow grin began to spread across his face. “That’s a yes?”

“Huh?”

“You’ll really marry me after we graduate?”

“Well, not right away!” she spluttered.

He pulled her in. “But it’s a yes?”

She blushed and nodded.

Baek Ah stood outside the girls’ dormitory, worried, waiting. He was still in his graduation clothes even though the graduation ceremony had concluded hours ago. His phone in his bag hadn’t stopped ringing since lunchtime and he knew his mother’s patience was running low. But he couldn’t go home yet, not even if his very-important-cousin had been waiting to congratulate him for hours, not until he found out what had happened to her to make her skip her own graduation.

He was about to block his mother’s call so he could try calling Woohee again when a familiar face sauntered up the steps towards him.

“Ga Hee!” he called out, relieved and thanking his lucky stars that of all people to return, it had to be Woohee’s roommate.

“Oh? Baek Ah-yah!” she called back, stopping right in front of him to congratulate him. “I’m actually supposed to have dinner with my family, but when I got home, I couldn’t find my volleyball jersey and had to come back and go to the office to get a key to our room, only it took forever because our dormitory head was out celebrating, so it’s only now that I-”

“Congratulations to you, too!” Baek Ah cut in hastily, knowing Ga Hee was a talker. “Listen, have you seen Woohee anywhere? Or heard from her? I haven’t been able to reach her cell. I didn’t see her at all during graduation, I was afraid something might have-”

“Woohee?” she asked, shocked. “But didn’t you know?”

“Know? Know what?”

“Everyone knows!” she said very unhelpfully. “Woohee got her diploma straight from the office about a week ago, and then she packed up and left.”

“A week ago?” Baek Ah frowned. But he saw Woohee last week. “Impossible. We had graduation practice last week.”

“Oh, I meant she packed last week, left yesterday.”

Stunned, Baek Ah could only stare. Apparently getting impatient with him, Ga Hee turned to leave,
but he stopped her with a question, “But where did she go?”

Ga Hee shrugged. “Home, I guess? I don’t actually know where that is, though.”

Neither did Baek Ah.

He searched everywhere.

He first went to the office to try and get a record of her student file, but the lady refused to give it to him, saying it was confidential. So he tried all the phone books. Though many other people shared Woohee’s father’s name, it didn’t stop Baek Ah from calling every single one of them. To his immense frustration, hours of dialing countless numbers led to nothing. No one seemed to know who Kim Woohee was. He had even tried to locate their homes and only stopped when he had spent all his money on bus fare.

It was almost midnight when Baek Ah finally decided to return home, dead tired. He had wanted to quietly slip in and go to sleep, wake up early the next morning to begin his search again, but he saw that the living room lights were still on, indicating that his parents were still up, waiting for him.

“There you are!” his mother rushed forward, looking flustered. “Where on earth have you been? Have you eaten dinner? Why are you so cold and dirty?”

“Baek Ah-yah, it’s almost midnight,” his father admonished with a sigh. “Your cousin has been waiting for you since morning. So-yah, this is our son, Baek Ah.”

To Baek Ah’s surprise, he realized his parents weren’t the only ones in the room. With them was a tall, lean young man who looked every bit the rich city boy Baek Ah knew he would be. His cousin stood and nodded to him politely, congratulating him. When Baek Ah failed to return the gesture, despite being the younger one, his mother pinched him and forced him to make a low bow.

“Thank you,” Baek Ah said through gritted teeth. “I’m sorry, but I’m in no mood to entertain guests, no matter how important they are. I’m tired and I want to be left alone.”

“Baek Ah!” his parents both snapped, looking at his cousin in horror. He hated seeing it… he hated seeing them treat someone younger than them like he was more important than they were. So or whatever his name was may be rich, but he had been born that way. He had probably never worked a day in his life.

“So-yah, don’t mind his words. He’s tired and it’s late,” his mother rushed to say.

If So took any offense, he didn’t show it. Instead he nodded and said in that same, maddeningly calm voice, “Of course. It is pretty late. I’m sorry for intruding, aunt, uncle. You probably want to rest, too.”

“It’s no bother, really,” his mother laughed. “You’re family. Of course you’re welcome here at any time.”

“Thank you, but I really should get going,” So smiled politely and took out a set of car keys. “I’ll
drop by again tomorrow for that soup you mentioned, aunt, and also to bring the gifts from my father.”

His mother nodded. “I’ll prepare my specialty especially for you. Drive safely!”

The moment he left, Baek Ah’s parents rounded on him, demanding answers.

“Some other time,” he sighed, shrugging off their concern. “I really am tired…”

“You need to be nicer to your cousin,” his mother said, “he’s a very pleasant, proper young man.”

But Baek Ah only had thoughts of Woohee, wondering what had happened to her and where she could be.

“Here’s your food,” his server hands him the bags with a small smile.

He gets up and smiles as brightly as he can. “Thank you. I’ll come back another time.”

She chuckles. “We know you’re busy. I’m sure you’ll forget all about us the moment you finish all that chicken. Ah, young men are all the same.”

The rest of the ladies around the shop nod their agreements, making Baek Ah laugh. “What? You ladies have lost faith in me after just a few years. Just you wait, I’ll come back and I’ll bring all my handsome, single cousins with me, and then you’ll have to apologize.”

“That’s a promise!” a younger one pipes up from the other end of the room.

He laughs and leaves the restaurant, their calls of goodbyes and shouts of promises ringing in his ears.

He gives one final wave, turns around, and freezes. He hadn’t expected to encounter her here ever again.

It was as though time had decided to slow down. The breeze passing through the street suddenly died down, the clouds blocked out the sun, the birds stopped chirping, and a single drop of rain fell onto his cheek.

Her hair is much longer than before and dyed a light brown… but everything else from her big, round eyes, to her pale skin, to her full lips are the same.

“Baek Ah-yah.”

The rain came.

Chapter End Notes

I've been feeling rather down lately, so while working on this chapter, I also
developed a stand-alone fic of 5 chapters... full of angst, intrigue and all that stuff, completely unrelated to this one. I'll probably post it within the week, or whenever I'm able to finish writing chapter 5.

The next chapter to this series won't be exclusively Baek Ah and Woohee. I did worry that some people might not be interested to know about Baek Ah and Woohee's relationship, but Baek Ah is So's favorite person after Soo, and Woohee and Soo were good friends in Goryeo. And I had to write their history for you, my lovely readers, to understand why and how their relationship turned out the way it did. Like the rest, it has some relation to Goryeo, but more revelations on that in the chapters to come!

Until then, thank you as always and have a good day!
Unexpected Meetings

Chapter Summary

Woohee always had the feeling that Hajin knew things about her that no one else did... and for some reason, even though Woohee used to steer clear of such people in the past, she found herself trusting Hajin completely.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eun took his martial arts classes very seriously.

Every morning, he surprises everyone by waking at the crack of dawn (how they doubted him!), and every night, he would force himself to fall asleep only after finishing two rounds of his master’s recommended daily stretching exercises.

He feels good. He no longer tires as often as he did before, and he feels healthier and much more robust.

The only downside is he’s no longer able to eat all of his mother’s sweets... oh, and his online gaming and blogging reputation has started to suffer due to his lengthy absences, but he figures he can always go back to those once things die down at work.

“I’ll drive myself today,” he informs his driver, who simply nods and gives him his keys.

Eun tries not to look too smug. The first time he’d suggested driving by himself, everyone had gaped at him in horror and persuaded him to reconsider, but he had been adamant, and in the end, they’d relented. (Sure, there had been two other cars trailing him the entire time, but Eun chose to overlook that minor detail.)

He still feels massively satisfied with how far he’s come from being a totally dependent, helpless lit - cough - young boy, to becoming a stronger, self-assured adult capable of driving himself anywhere without getting lost (that much).

And it’s all thanks to his master’s guidance.

There are only three days a week when he can have her exclusively to himself, but those are the days he looks forward to the most.

This morning during break, Eun gathers his courage and walks up to her.

Surprised, she looks up to meet his rapidly blinking eyes. “What’s this?” she asks, her eyes leaving his face to peer at the colorful tie in his hand.

“It’s... because yours is frayed and looks like it might break off any time soon,” he informs her stiffly, gesturing towards her hair. “I just saw someone selling it on the street and had spare change, so I bought it.”
“Oh,” she says simply.

Eun watches as she frees her long hair and swishes it around. He watches in unblinking adoration as the silky strands frame her face, falling one by one down her shoulders.

Eun feels faint.

“Thank you, it holds my hair very well,” she smiles happily, fixing her hair with her new tie. “Two more minutes, then we start again.”

Heart in his throat, he can only nod. And when she walks away, he allows himself a small smile.

“So… how… how have you been? Have you been well?” Woohee asks tentatively, twirling her straw in between her fingers.

Baek Ah shrugs. “As good as can be expected.”

“Ah, that’s… good,” she feels pathetic and forces a smile. “I see you really did end up working with your cousins. I had no idea your rich and powerful uncle was the CEO of Wang Enterprises.”

Baek Ah considers telling her that she would have known had she not suddenly upped and left without a word, but he’s not in the mood for a confrontation, so instead he nods and says in that same toneless voice, “Yes, well… I guess I saw no reason for you to know.”

Woohee understands the implication behind his words and is flooded with renewed guilt. “I…” she tries to think of something more neutral for them to talk about, “Did you get degrees in advertising and photography like you’d always wanted?”

He nods. He remembers he hadn’t wanted to accept his uncle’s offer to pay for his university tuition, so before his cousin So entered the military, he gave Baek Ah a decent-paying job and told him to work hard if he wanted to stay.

“You won’t be treated differently just because you’re family, so don’t try to slack off,” So had warned, watching while Baek Ah read through the profiles of the clients he would be working with for the next two years. Baek Ah had expected no such thing in the first place, so he felt his cousin’s warning was completely unnecessary. “Similarly…”

Baek Ah stopped reading to listen.

“The working environment here is pretty tough, with everyone competing to claim higher wages and promotions,” So explained, “blame my father,” he added, seeing Baek Ah’s frown.

“It’s a dog eat dog business, and the people you’ll be working with have worked tirelessly to get to their current positions. You’ll be an underdog in an already stressful environment. If you can’t handle that kind of competition and stress, then I suggest you leave now and look for a job elsewhere. However… if you think you’re strong enough and up to the challenge, then I’m hoping
Baek Ah blinked, not at all expecting to hear such words.

“I’ve seen bits of your work and I think the company could benefit greatly from having someone like you around.” His cousin turned to leave. “I sincerely welcome you to the company, cousin. I hope to meet you again in two years.”

“I thought everyone would look down on me for my background, but it wasn’t the case at all,” Baek Ah says with a small smile, remembering his hectic first few weeks at work: meeting clients, working out a schedule, getting into university, and, of course, his first encounters with the rest of his cousins. “I also thought my cousins would be bums, living off of their parents… but then I found out that even the silliest of my cousins had to work hard to stay, and they all had degrees or were working towards getting them.” He looks at Woohee properly then, “I realized that the only prejudice came from my side.

“I didn’t get my degrees for myself… I got them so that I could be worthy to work with my family.”

“Oh, that’s great!” Woohee says brightly. “I’m glad you found your place.”

“Yes, well… now that we’re on the subject, I’ve actually been meaning to thank you.”

Woohee’s smile falters ever so slightly in her confusion. “Thank me?”

He nods and says matter-of-factly, “If it hadn’t been for you, I never would have gone to the city. I never would have met all my cousins. They are truly family to me now, and they’ve never let me down. So, thank you, Woohee.”

“But… what did I do?”

“You’re the reason I went to Seoul,” he explains, to her great surprise, “I thought - hoped - that I might find you there. I was wrong, though.”

“Oh. I…” Woohee clears her throat loudly, “It’s only in recent years that I went to Seoul to pursue my own degrees. After graduation, I actually stayed in this town for a few more years, working. I didn’t think I’d be able to find a job in such a busy city as Seoul.”

Baek Ah nods, wondering if that was code for I knew you’d be there and didn’t want to meet you.

“Well, I’m glad you found your own path, too. It seems we both got what we wanted.”

The coffee in her hands was going cold, but Woohee had no inclination to drink. Everything that is being said between them now, even though they’re positive things, is making her upset.

“Anyway, I’ve actually been looking for you,” Baek Ah says, straightening up, suddenly cheerful. “I had no idea you’d been working in our company. If I’d known, I would’ve come to see you sooner to ask why you disappeared without a trace.”

Woohee tensed. Is he going to ask her now? She prays hard he won’t.

But he just laughs, “I’m kidding. You’ve become so serious, Woohee-yah. The truth is I’m not the one looking for you. Hajin-noona is. She wants you at her wedding.”
“Me? Unnie does? She’s getting married?” Woohee asks, feeling thoroughly discombobulated by his sudden change in attitude. “Oh, to your cousin? The one you were with at the orphanage?” Her face breaks into a smile, feeling happy for her friend, “I’m glad. She seems to like him a lot.”

Baek Ah nods in wholehearted agreement. “They’re thoroughly devoted to each other; it’s quite depressing for us young singles to see, actually.” He suddenly laughs again. “I’m kidding. They’ve both been through a lot and they deserve to be happy. So, on account of our past friendship, I’m asking you this as a favor… will you return to work at our company again? Hajin misses you a lot. I’ll be meeting her soon and I want to give her good news to cheer her up since she’s been feeling down lately. You won’t disappoint her, will you?”

“I- I don’t know if-”

“Yah, don’t be like that. You know I don’t usually ask for favors. You can’t turn me down now!” he watches her closely, sees her blush, and grins. “I’ll take your silence for a yes. I expect to see you hard at work in the office tomorrow morning. If you end up upsetting my pregnant noona, I really won’t forgive you then.”

“Pregnant…?” Woohee says, feeling weak and dazed by how quickly things were happening.

She can only stare in silence as Baek Ah drains his cup and gets up. “I have to go, but I’ll handle the bill this time so you’ll be even more indebted to me.” He smiles wickedly and drops a few bills onto the table. “So, Woohee-yah… welcome back to the company. See you tomorrow.”

“Wait, it’s raining…” she stops him and rummages through her bag for her umbrella. “Take this.”

Baek Ah eyes it for a moment before giving her a shrewd smile. “If you’re trying to lessen your debt to me, then no, thank you. This isn’t nearly enough.”

“That’s not it!” she says, taken aback. “You get sick so easily. Just take it, Baek Ah! It won’t change anything, I promise.”

He reaches out, to her relief, but he stops inches short from touching it and grins widely. “Don’t want to! I’ll be fine, don’t be such a worrywart. You use it.”

Woohee stares out at the rain, feeling just as drowned as the streets outside.

Besides seeing her wonderful workmates again, working under Hajin again would solve all of her problems. She could pay her tuition and rent again, graduate from college and fulfill her dreams. But she feels uneasy. Baek Ah’s sudden easy manner, his teasing… she’s not entirely sure he was being sincere. And if she takes the offer and returns to work, then she would have to see him more often… endure the awkwardness of their earlier conversation again, maybe on a daily basis.

“Whoever said life was easy?” she sighs.
“Agassi, I got a match!” Chaeryung says excitedly, rushing into Hajin’s office. “What do you think?”

Hajin thinks Tinder isn’t really ideal for finding suitable relationships, but she doesn’t say that out loud because Chaeryung has been putting in a lot of effort into it these past few weeks. “He’s cute! How old is he?”

“Er… well, 47. But he’s a professor and a basketball enthusiast and he loves to travel!” Chaeryung adds in a rush. “I love smart guys and basketball and traveling. He’s perfect!”

Hajin lifts a skeptical eyebrow. “I had no idea you were into basketball. Tell me, when’s the next season again?”

Chaeryung shuffles her feet uncomfortably. “Season?”

Hajin wrinkles her nose. “Yeah, I don’t know either.”

“But who cares about basketball? There are dozens of other sports. Like… table tennis!” she insists. “And swimming. And I used to run a lot as Won-nim’s secretary.”

Hajin has to swallow her laughter. Instead, she masters her expression and says, “And are you sure he’s still single and ready to mingle? Someone so perfect… at 47, he might already be married. Why don’t you try searching for him on other social media sites? Report back when you’ve found him.”

“Yes,” Chaeryung mumbles, seeing the wisdom behind such words. She opens the door to leave, but halts when she sees a familiar face. “Oh, it’s you! But your bandmates canceled last night…”

Hajin glances up to see Woohee standing there, looking sheepish.

“Yes, I quit from the band so they had to cancel today’s interview,” Woohee explains to Chaeryung.

“Which means you’re here because…?” Chaeryung’s pokerface lasts only until she turns around and makes eye contact with Hajin, then her eyes widen and she secretly points to the woman behind her, mouthing, “It’s her!”

Woohee sees Hajin then, and rushes in to prostrate herself on the table. “Unnie, I have wronged you! Please forgive my rash actions!”

“Hey! You can’t just burst into this room like this. Agassi is on her break, she needs her rest, she’s been walking around all-”

“Chaeryung-shi, your task?” Hajin reminds, staring pointedly at the younger woman, who hangs her head and leaves them in peace.

Once the door is safely shut again, Hajin looks at Woohee. Baek Ah had told her about their little chance encounter yesterday, but Hajin hadn’t really expected Woohee to show up today.

“Have you been well?” she asks kindly, making Woohee look up in surprise.

“Oh. Well, I’ve been better…” Woohee admits in a small voice. “I suppose you’d like to know why I left?”
Hajin gestures for Woohee to take a seat. After a moment’s pause, she does. “Actually, I’m the person least curious about that. I’m sure you had your reasons. My only question is: are you back for good?”

Woohee hesitates only a split second before she nods. “Yes. I’m back.”

Chaeryung sighs in annoyance as she browses through her match’s Facebook account. “Married with three kids, are you? What are you even doing on Tinder?” she tuts in anger. “I wonder if we can report married people pretending to be single…”

“Chaeryung-shi!” Won’s loud bark makes her shriek in fright.

“What are you doing, yelling at people out of nowhere?” she demands, thumping a fist over her marathoning heart. “May I remind you, Won-nim, that this is the Damiwon and you of all people should know that there are rules at place here. Silence must be observed at all times.” She points to the room on the mezzanine directly above them. “Sanggung is having a very important meeting right now. If you cannot abide by these rules, I will have to escort you out.”

Won is stumped by this passionate speech, but he shakes his head and puts back on his angry face. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing.”

She tries to look confused. “What can you mean?”

“Stop trying to interfere.”

“If you’re going to continue being vague and noisy, you may leave the same way you came.”

“If those girls can’t make it on their own merits, they don’t deserve to work for me. Stop helping them.”

At these words, Chaeryung lifts her chin to face him squarely. “Don’t think I’m doing it for you because I’m not. They came to me for help. Are you happy now? Even when I’m trying to get away from you, you’re pester me!”

“What?” he can’t quite believe she just tutted at him. She’s never done that before. “Pester me? You’re pester me!”

“I don’t recall ever barging into your workplace,” she points out, crossing her arms. “And yet, by some unknown miracle, here you are. I’m so thrilled.”

He’s caught off-guard by her hostile behavior and decides to revert to their original topic. “Stop helping them.”

“Why?” she snaps. “They’re people too and they need jobs. You’re always taking people for granted, Won-nim. Are you afraid they might get too close to you if they stay long enough? Are you afraid they might turn out like me? Because here’s a newsflash: you’re not all that great. In fact, I’ve recently started to wonder why I ever had feelings for you in the first place!”
He scoffs, disbelief evident on his face. “Is that so?”

“Definitely so.”

“So you’ll continue helping these women?”

“I won’t shun them like you do. Unlike you, I think people deserve to be given chances. So long as they ask me, I will help them.” She glares at him, daring him to challenge her, but after a few seconds of strained, awkward silence, he snorts and walks away.

“Were you and Baek Ah like that?” Hajin asks Woohee in a small voice. They close the door as quietly as they can and head back to the desk to continue their interrupted discussion.

“No,” Woohee replies sheepishly. She looks at Hajin and wonders how much she knows… if she knows less than or as much as Baek Ah… or more.

Woohee always had the feeling that Hajin knew things about her that no one else did… and for some reason, even though Woohee used to steer clear of such people in the past, she found herself trusting Hajin completely.

“No, actually… it was good. We had a good thing going on. I just… er… had things I needed to do.”

There it is again, Hajin’s smile that seems to say she knows a lot more than she’s letting on. It makes Woohee blush.

“Woohee-yah, allow me to give you a piece of advice… whatever happened then, and whatever happens now… just be honest.” She smiles. “Take it from someone who knows.”

Hajin had decided not too long ago to write down all her experiences and knowledge in a book.

“Step by Step?” she mumbles, trying to come up with a good title. “The Life and Death of Gwangjong? Goryeo Living? Aish, why am I so bad at this?”

She puts down her pen and pours herself a glass of water, and that’s when she notices her phone ringing with an unknown number.

“Who could this be?” She shuts her notes and answers the call. “Hello?”

And a voice that she has no trouble recognizing greets her.

“Hajin-shi, we need to talk.”

Hajin contemplates hanging up and blocking the number, but hearing Yeonhwa speak so
imperiously had brought back all of her past resentment.

Hajin doesn't want to run away. She doesn't want her life to be dictated by this woman ever again.

It's her turn to set the terms.

“Sure,” she says in as lighthearted a tone as she can manage while burning with anger. “I can give you a few minutes of my time.”

“Meet me at-”

“No. There's a cafe across the street from where I work. Be there by one.”

Chapter End Notes

Time for that much-needed showdown! :))

Shall I make it comical? Serious? Parts are already written down, actually, and I've another er... surprise waiting for you all by the end of the next chapter. And the chapter after that. Hehe! I'm full of surprises.

Also... has anybody seen Lady Silvermaine around? I haven't heard from her in ages! If you're reading this, I've been waiting on an update on SoSooSeol family dynamics for ages :(.

Also, my standalone fic Sweet Kisses is up and running! I know it's upset quite a lot of people so far, and I'm sorry about that, but a sad mind makes you write sad things. But I am a good person, so not to worry, my friends! Chapter 3 will be uploaded tomorrow :)
Yeonhwa's Bargain

Chapter Summary

“So... you're not going to do anything? You're that brave?” Yeonhwa’s voice is dangerously low, and Hajin stops to listen. “And you're sure you won't regret this?”

“I have nothing to hide. You have nothing on me.” She doesn't feel as confident as she sounds, but she refuses to back down to Yeonhwa.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If anyone asks, I'll be at the cafe,” Hajin tries to act casual as she descends the stairs from her office to the inner bathing pool, which was slowly being filled with water.


“I won't be long,” she assures them, then stops and adds, “But just in case I do take longer than expected, please prepare the herb pouches we made last week, and make sure the water is still warm when I return.”

“But... but...” Chaeryung bites her lip, looking anxious.

Hajin turns to Woohee. “Woohee-yah, are you familiar with this process?”

Woohee looks up and nods.

“I'll leave you in charge for now.”

Chaeryung opens her mouth to protest again but Hajin had already turned and left.

She enters the cafe at exactly one o'clock and looks around, wondering if Yeonhwa had arrived. She spots her almost immediately sitting by the window, sipping on an iced espresso. She takes the empty seat opposite and waits.

For a time, both women just look at each other. Hajin notes her adversary's perfect teeth, perfect hair, perfect clothes. She has to control the urge to slap that perfectly plastic smile off her face.

Finally, Yeonhwa speaks, “You're looking well. They do say money can buy beauty.”

Feeling like she's just swallowed a toad, Hajin forces a laugh. “Sadly, I can't say the same about you. I suppose there are some things even money can't help.”
A vein on Yeonhwa’s temple throbs in response, but she doesn't let her anger show on her face. "Is that so?"

Hajin nods vigorously. “Though, I would suggest a facial mask. My offer still stands, you know. I'd be glad to help you for a price.”

Yeonhwa sighs expansively, “That's very kind of you, but when my mother and I came over last time, there was a kind of unpleasant smell in the area. I don't think we'll be able to stomach it a second time.”

“Ahh, it must have been the paint,” Hajin nods knowledgeably.

“No,” Yeonhwa grimaces theatrically, “it smelled distinctly human.”

“There's this thing called a deodorant. I could make you one of those, too.”

“Tell me, are you always this unpleasant?”

“Only when I smell something unpleasant.”

Yeonhwa is prevented from replying by the arrival of a waitress, who hands Hajin a menu. But Hajin waves it away and asks for a glass of warm water.

“Not feeling well?” Yeonhwa inquires sweetly.

Hajin smiles just as sweetly back. “The sooner I can stop smelling you, the sooner I can feel better.”

Yeonhwa makes a show of sniffing the air and wiping her nose. “Ah, something dirty has triggered my allergies. I agree. Let's cut to the chase, shall we? I called you because I have a proposition for you.”

Hajin can't help but be surprised: she had expected a confrontation, not a negotiation. “I had no idea there were things left for us to discuss.”

“My brother is being accused of selling client information,” Yeonhwa continues, ignoring the interruption, “he's also being accused of slander and defamation. Both you and I know these charges are false.”

“Indeed,” Hajin remarks, “you should come clean before his reputation gets tarnished for good.”

“That's not what I mean.” Yeonhwa’s expression is cool, confident. Hajin wonders how the woman can be so composed when her brother was facing trouble on her account. “You may have been able to fool So and his family, but you and I both know the truth.”

“The truth?”

“Those debts are in your name, don't think I don't know that. You must be a very skilled little vixen to have your ex pay off your debts when he's got enough to worry about with a baby on the way.”

This is news to Hajin. She had no idea her once best friend was pregnant... her ex boyfriend had failed to mention anything. Were they struggling right now? Should she ask after them?

Hajin shakes her head to clear it. She shouldn't feel guilty or sorry for them... they had wronged her, not the other way around. Yeonhwa was messing with her head again.
“Are you surprised? Did you think I wouldn't be able to find out?” Yeonhwa chuckles in triumph, seeing her confused look. “Here's my proposition… get So to drop the charges against my brother. Do that, and I'll leave you alone. If you don't, I'll make you regret it.”

Hajin scoffs in disbelief. “Yah, what kind of influence do you think I have? You think I can do whatever I want just because So and I are getting married?”

Though the informal address surprises Yeonhwa, she is unable to say anything as Hajin plows on, “Don't presume to know everything about me. The only person who can come even close is my fiance. All you have are lies. You really haven't changed one bit.”

“Excuse me?”

“You still only see the status, not the person.”

Yeonhwa laughs. “What does that even mean?”

“You started this. You should fix it yourself. Then, if that's all…” Hajin regrets coming. She gets up and turns to leave.

“So… you're not going to do anything? You're that brave?” Yeonhwa’s voice is dangerously low, and Hajin stops to listen. “And you're sure you won't regret this?”

“I have nothing to hide. You have nothing on me.” She doesn't feel as confident as she sounds, but she refuses to back down to Yeonhwa.

“Don’t be so sure. Everybody has secrets. Even your lovely cousin. Imagine how torn up she'll be once she hears my brother will be going to jail just because her precious cousin refused to help him? Will she be okay then? It's too bad… Myunghee has always been the sickly sort. It would be a pity for her to suddenly fall ill.”

“Are you threatening me with my cousin right now?” Hajin faces her, barely able to keep the disbelief from showing on her face. “She knows Wook did wrong. She knows he'll have to pay for all that he's done.”

"Well, if you're so sure…” Yeonhwa sighs loudly and gets up as well. She walks towards Hajin, getting as close to her as she can, and stares her down. "This is your last chance. Agree to my terms and we can get out of each others' lives. You don't want more people to suffer because of you, do you?"

*Because of me?* Hajin looks at Yeonhwa's perfect teeth, perfect hair, perfect clothes... amazed at how someone can look so perfect on the outside but be so rotten on the inside...

That perfectly plastic smile is what finally makes her snap. In her anger, Hajin does something impulsive. She grabs her glass of warm water and flings the contents onto Yeonhwa's face.

"You bitch!" Yeonhwa takes a step back, spluttering in outrage. "How dare you-!"

*How dare I?* Hajin grabs Yeonhwa's arm and twists it sharply behind her back, forcing her to scream and bend over in pain. "Ya- ah!- yah! What do you think you're doing? Get your hands off me!"

"Stay away from my family. *All* of them. Or I'll make you. I'll fight you tooth and nail if I have to," Hajin seethes, remembering how excited Eun had been to show her this new move. If Yeonhwa could threaten Myunghee, someone her brother genuinely loves and cares about, who knows who
she would hurt and trample on just to get what she wants? The fact that in Goryeo, Yeonhwa had shamelessly betrayed even her own flesh and blood...

Tears prick the back of Hajin's eyes at the memory of Eun and Soondeok's lifeless bodies, the tortured look on So's face before, during, and after he had been forced to kill his own brother. And all because this woman, who was supposed to be their sister, couldn't keep her mouth shut.

"If you really think you can still hurt me after all that you've done, you're deeply mistaken," Hajin growls. "I'll return the favor and warn you this: stay away or you'll regret it." She flings Yeonhwa as far away from her as she can and storms out of the cafe, ignoring the stunned, curious looks from customers and staff alike. She hears Yeonhwa crash into a table and scream after her, but she doesn't look back; doesn't care.

She's never felt so angry and indignant in her entire life.

That woman never changes! She'd better stay away. I'll study martial arts with Eun, I'll get her good one of these days, I'll-

"She had it coming."

Immediately, Hajin stops moving. She stops breathing. It's been months since she's last heard that voice. She has to blink multiple times to make sure she was seeing right.

“Soo-yah, I'm sure we aren't friends on Facebook,” So had whined over the phone. “I don't even know who my Facebook friends are. We have less than an hour to talk, tell me why I'm doing this again?”

“Check again, please? Maybe you missed him.”

“I've triple checked. There are names here that I'll have to ask Eun about, but I'm sure none of them are him.”

Hajin sighed. “Then we really don't know where he is.”

“You,” Hajin manages to say through her shock.

“She's been terrorizing people since time immemorial. But you would know all about that.” The man before her smiles knowingly and bows his greeting. “Lady Soo.”

Chapter End Notes

Surprise! Another cliffhanger :P

I know I've been updating a lot, but I'm in the zone and I need to take advantage of it before I get writer's block again lol~

Have a pleasant week ahead! I'll try to update soon.
Chapter 4 of *Sweet Kisses* will be uploaded in a few hours :)

Chapter Summary

When he turns to leave, Hajin calls out to him. "Wait!" She had been avoiding this subject for fear of being disappointed... but her curiosity is getting the better of her. Feeling her abdomen, she says, "Am I really...?"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jimong shifts his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Hajin has been staring intently at him for the past ten minutes: from the moment he said her name, to when he steered her away from the cafe, even after passing several streets and rounding corners. He tries for a smile but gets nothing in response.

"My Lady, I'm afraid we are starting to attract attention," he says through his smile.

Hajin sucks in air and narrows her eyes. "Astronomer... no matter how I look at it, you looked better with the mustache."

Jimong drops his smile. "Is that all you've been thinking of for the past ten minutes?"

"Not quite. I've been wondering how best to torture you for leaving us in the dark this long." She frowns accusingly at him. "You are here to give us answers, are you not?"

He coughs delicately. "Torture?"

She crosses her arms. "Pyeha has been most upset with you."

"Ah, yes, well," Jimong has the audacity to look smug, "that's why I chose this time to meet with you."

Hajin sighs morosely. That's right. So isn't here. Almost four weeks of being So-less. Four weeks of not seeing his smile, four weeks of not being able to tease and tickle him, four weeks of hearing his voice only through her cellphone... four weeks without being held... four week without...

Hajin, let's not even go there.

Jimong clears his throat and looks around them. "There's a bench over there in case you're tired of standing."

"I may have been sickly in Goryeo, but I'm perfectly healthy in this time," she snaps, but she walks over and takes a seat anyway. She doesn't know if she's cranky because of Jimong, or if she's still feeling the effects of being exposed to Yeonhwa, or if it's stress from the wedding preparations, or work.

"Yes, you're looking very well, My Lady," Jimong remarks with an understanding smile, taking a seat beside her.
“Call me Hajin,” she mumbles with another sigh. “You know very well I'm from this time. I'm no noble lady. We met before, by the lake.” She looks at him, curiosity plain on her face.

He nods. “Yes, we did. I saw them pull you out of the water.”

“You drowned me,” she scowls. “Thanks a lot.”

“Hey, hey, now! Why all of a sudden?” he protests, clutching his chest as though in pain. “I was told you jumped in to save the boy. There was nothing in the news reports about ‘homeless man shamelessly drowns woman trying to save young boy’. What do you mean it’s my fault?”

“You were told?” she asks dubiously. “Did you not see me jump in?”

“I hadn’t made it back yet so I wouldn’t know.”

Confused, she eyes him intently. “What do you mean? I have so many questions. Why did I drown and wake up in Goryeo? How were you able to help me and So remember?”

“First off, I would like to tell you that I am no deity,” he says. “I am nothing but an observer.”

She scoffs. “You expect me to believe that after all the times you interfered with palace politics?”

“My Lady, I simply divined the future from the heavens. Everything I did was dictated to me by the stars.” He fixes his glasses and chooses his words carefully to make her understand. “I had vague recollections of what life in Goryeo was supposed to be like but, like you, I did manage to remember some things. I knew that General Wang Geon was destined to unite the kingdom and become the first King of Goryeo. I supported him, divined his future, and he rewarded me for my service by letting me serve him in the palace.

“You see, when I woke up in Goryeo in the body of a child, I was confused too. I had no way of knowing what had happened, so I looked to the sky, remembering the eclipse that brought me there. Naturally, that led me to study the stars.”

“The eclipse brought you there? What do you mean?”

“It would appear so. I believe that during a full solar eclipse, the shroud of time becomes stretched and thin enough for souls to pass through. You drowned in this time just as Haesoo drowned in hers. And that enabled your souls to switch places. Unfortunately for Haesoo, she was in the water for too long and died. That’s why your body here remained in a coma-like state for a year.”

Hajin rubs her forehead, trying to make sense of this. “What about you?”

“My case is different,” he smiles. “My past self traveled to the present, just as I traveled to the past. I was a grown man who woke up in the body of a young boy. He was a young boy who woke up in the body of a grown man. I had the advantage and was able to make something of myself, while he-”

“He became a beggar,” she finishes for him, starting to understand. “He couldn’t adjust to life in the 21st century.”

He shakes his head with a sigh. “What I had to go through to pull myself up again. I had only been gone for about four years in this time, having stayed in Goryeo for forty.”

“And what happened to him? The Jimong from the past?”
“I can’t say,” he replies sadly. “Unfortunately, while I have had the fortune of living both my life and his life to adulthood, he’s only spent roughly eight years alive: four in Goryeo, four in our time. I hope he was able to adjust better once he returned to Goryeo, and live a long and fruitful life under the fair rule of Gwangjong, but I can’t really say. It does make me sad and depressed when I think about it. I left him everything I’d managed to save up as a royal adviser, so I’m hoping that helped.”

“Oh,” Hajin looks at her hands, also feeling sorry for the other Jimong. What a terrible thing to have his childhood stripped away like that. “Well, you said Gwangjong was a fair ruler, and you were friends. So maybe even if he did seem crazy after you switched back, Gwangjong might have had him looked after. I think… So would have done as much to people he cared about.”

Jimong nods with a small smile. “He would have, at that. He’s a good man. I’m just sorry he had to live life the way he did.”

“What do you mean?” Hajin asks. “How did he live after…?”

“After you left?” Jimong’s smile is sympathetic, knowing the reason for the tears clinging onto her lashes, for the reddening of her nose and cheeks, and the quivering of her voice. “In a word? Lonely. But he was a strong ruler. Smarter and more cunning than anyone imagined he’d be. With you gone, he had no reason to tiptoe around court officials. He was ruthless, Hajin-shi. He played their games, twisted the outcomes in his favor. He outsmarted them all. He really was the best, most powerful King Goryeo had ever seen.”

“But if you were there with him… surely, he couldn’t have been that lonely?” Hajin says, trying to keep the desperation from her voice. “Weren’t you there with him?”

“I was, for a time. But he was different. He had changed. Though he sometimes did confide in me, mostly he did everything on his own. Nobody really knew what he was thinking or planning, so everyone had to be careful because they had no way of guarding themselves against whatever he had in mind. Now that I think about it… perhaps he was protecting me?” Jimong frowns in sudden realization. “If he had confided in me more, I would have been the only one apart from himself who knew of his plans. I would have been a valuable resource for the nobles. Ah, now I feel bad about leaving him.”

“You left him, too?”

“I found out the date of the next solar eclipse and wanted to test out a theory. I hadn’t wanted to leave and make him even lonelier than he already was… but then he met someone that made him smile again, and that gave me the peace I needed to move on.”

“He met someone? Who?”

Hajin needn’t have asked. The knowing smile on Jimong’s face is answer enough.

“You mean… Seol?” she asks to confirm.

He chuckles. “She was a lively little one. Baek Ah was very fond of her and visited her often, and when she started visiting the palace more frequently with Jung… let’s just say Gwangjong hadn’t been so lonely in those times.”

“Really?” She tries to imagine all three of them bonding over Seol, and she feels both proud and sorrowful. She can see So, Baek Ah and Jung spending time together, chatting like the brothers they used to be… she can imagine them so clearly in her mind. But not her Seol. She only knows
how she looked like as an infant. And she has no wish to put a face to her daughter before she has a chance to see her in person.

*I will see you again,* she promises silently to the void in her heart, *someday, with your father. I will love you both the way I should have.*

“But now that we’re on the subject, allow me to congratulate you and Pyeha!” Jimong says, clasping her hand in both of his and shaking it.

Hajin looks at him and at her engagement ring. “Hm? Oh, our engagement. Thank you.”

“Yes, and also on the other one,” he says brightly, gesturing to her person.

Hajin glances down, sees nothing and eyes him suspiciously. “The other one? What other one?”

“You know,” he gestures towards her again, a large grin on his face. When she continues to look confused, however, he retracts. “But everyone’s been talking about… they all say you’re… you can’t tell me you don’t know?”

“Astronomer,” Hajin says testily, “what on earth are you yapping about now?”

Jimong turns away and starts counting on his fingers, mumbling, “But what I saw was in winter… oh, how far away is that, exactly?” He ticks off his fingers one by one - one, two, three, four… seven… eight? “Oh. Is it too early to tell? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

Hajin was this close to losing her patience. “Astronomer. Either you tell me what you’re counting on your fingers for, or you tell me more about your so-called experiment, or-”

“But everyone’s been mentioning it for weeks,” Jimong says, eyeing her thoughtfully. “Then again… shouldn’t there be physical changes by now?”

“Astronomer, what-?” and then Hajin notices where he’s looking at and she finally understands. “Oh, I’m not pregnant.”

“You’re sure?” Jimong asks, lifting a doubtful eyebrow. “I had a vision of you carrying an infant in winter time. But I suppose that could have been another year… no, it can’t be. The next eclipse is on the spring solstice and I’m supposed to be gone by-”

“A vision?” Hajin snaps, suddenly alert. “You get visions, too? What do they mean? Why do we have them? Are they warnings?”

“Hm?” Jimong looks at her and laughs, “No, no, they’re not warnings. We tamper with time when we travel between worlds. Naturally, we would get random flashes of the past, present and future. It’s time’s way of correcting itself. At least, that’s how I see it.”

“That’s it?” she cries incredulously. “They mean nothing?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” he chides, looking slightly piqued. “Of course they mean something. Who knows what reason we have for seeing these things? In the past, your visions would have pushed you away from So, but you still ended up loving him. So tell me, do you think they were meant to bring you closer or to separate you?”

“I- I don’t know,” Hajin admits in a small voice. “I did see him do things that terrified me… I wanted to distance myself, but I also wanted to help him. So I suppose… both?”
“Precisely,” he beams at her, “because it matters not what you see, but how you see them. The visions may have told you something, but your actions determined the outcome. As William Shakespeare once said: It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves.”

Hajin grunts, deep in thought. “Okay, so you’ve explained about the both of us… then what about So? How is it that he remembers? Did the same thing happen to him?” She suddenly feels panicked, “Will he go away again on the next total eclipse?”

“Relax, My Lady, you have nothing to fear. Pyeha is an entirely different story altogether,” he assures her.

She breathes a sigh of relief, but she wants more answers. “Then why? How? He remembers everything as clearly as we do…”

“And there, My Lady, is where my experiment begins,” he beams. “Before I left Cheondeokjeon, I told him to stop pining after you or he might end up like me. I don’t think he understood exactly what I meant then, but as I had no more need of my notes and charts, I left them all in his study. If I’m right, he read them, and arrived at the same conclusion I did. And he succeeded.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Did you know Gwangjong died underneath a total solar eclipse?” he asks casually, to her surprise. “I believe he timed his death so he could meet you here. There are many cases of time travel recorded in history. Usually, the evidences are debunked as fake, but there are the few exceptions… and they made me wonder… if people can travel through time by accident… could they also travel at will?”

“But So doesn’t remember any of that. He’s as clueless as I am as to why we’re here.”

“As to that mystery, I can only guess. Traveling through time is an unnatural event that should never happen, however there are the occasional glitches,” he gestures to the both of them. “Even more rare are those who travel at will. I suppose to prevent it from happening again, certain memories are wiped from the person’s mind. Otherwise, we’ll have people traveling across time whenever they want. It’s dangerous to interfere. Besides…” he smiles at her then, “as I’ve already told you, Pyeha came forward only after his death. That was his sacrifice. There’s nothing for him to go back to even on the very off-chance that he should wish it. His past has perfectly assimilated into his present now. I saw it happen minutes after he regained his full memories of you. That’s when I knew… it was possible. I could do it, too.”

“Then… the moment he remembered everything… was the moment he died in Goryeo?” Hajin asks in a hushed voice. “Is that what happened to me?”

“Not quite,” Jimong winks. “The moment you died was the moment you woke up. You already had all of your memories. A little suggestion on my part and they came tumbling out of the box where they’d been hiding. It’s different with him because he came here on his own. I kept on the lookout… watched over him and you, and when I judged he was starting to remember, I knew… I just needed to make you meet. You were what he needed to remember. Strangely enough, he started having his dreams the moment you woke up, too. I knew the moment he began asking questions about Goryeo that even Won had never thought of.”

“ I was what he needed to remember? But all I did was say his name-”

Jimong nods. “That’s all he needed to hear.”
Hajin takes a moment to process everything. She’s not quite sure she gets it, and before she can go over everything again, another question comes to mind.

“Jimong, why did you tell me to give him up?” Try as she might, Hajin couldn’t keep the accusation from her voice. “Everything went foul after he married Yeonhwa. I found out I was pregnant but couldn’t tell him because he had changed so much. And once Yeonhwa became the most powerful woman in the country, I knew I had to leave. I couldn’t risk her finding out about Seol. But I never would have left otherwise… and I also believe he never would have hurt Chaeryung like that if you had just let us be.”

“Even though she had committed treason and regicide?” Jimong reminds.

“Even then,” she says firmly. “He let her live that long because he was willing to give her a chance. Thinking about it now, if we had married, we wouldn’t have avoided each other like that. He would have confided in me more, I know he would have.”

Jimong bows his head in apology. “I truly am sorry for what happened then, My Lady, but history had to happen the way it was supposed to. For you, for me, for everyone. For this!” He spreads his arms wide, taking in the city and its people, and life in general in the present day. “With you there, would he have been as ruthless in dealing with the nobles? He had nothing to fear once you had gone. Nothing at all. That’s how he managed to reign for two and a half decades. If nothing could touch him, nothing could hurt him. You were his greatest happiness… but you were also his greatest weakness. He cared more for you than even his own life. Do you see what I’m trying to say?

“Even if you did manage to survive long after giving birth to your daughter… your deteriorating health would have hampered him. And he still would have needed a Queen to give him a son. The nobles would have pushed for Princess Yeonhwa. With palace politics being what it was, how long before the Queen and the nobles eventually reached your daughter? Used her as leverage to control him? She never would have gotten the kind of freedom you wanted for her.”

Hajin tries to think of a way out of his reasoning, but she can’t. She sees his point and she relents. “I suppose so. I never did want Seol in the palace. I just… feel bad about not telling him. I took her away and left him alone. Even if you say it was necessary, it was still cruel.”

“Yes, it was, and I am as much to blame for it as you are. As he is. As everyone was.” Jimong puts a consoling hand on her shoulder. “They were hard times and we all had difficult decisions to make. But I want to believe we all made the best out of our circumstances. Look at us now, where we are. Isn’t this proof enough that we did the right thing?

“You told him once that the higher up a person is in ranks, the more responsibility he holds. For 25 years, he was the most powerful man in Goryeo. And even though you had gone, My Lady, the memories he had of you made you the most powerful woman for that same length of time. Those years helped shape what we have today. Do not dwell so much on the past for they are out of our reach. Instead, focus on the present and the future. There are things left to be done.”

She frowns at him. “What do you mean? What needs to be done?”

“Watching the Wangs of this time, I became afraid that history would repeat itself… now, in the next life… over and over again… but since you came into their lives, things have changed. Mu will be CEO thanks to you and they’ve all united under him, something that never happened in Goryeo. Eun and Soondeok are getting to know each other, and even Woohee and Baek Ah have been given another chance to fix their problems. I think even the Ninth, whom you had hated so much, is starting to learn things about himself that he never would have if he and Chaeryung had been left
alone. And of course, you’re getting married soon! Our Fourth Prince was always better off with you. Live the life you’ve always wanted with him. After everything you’ve done and been through, no one can say you don’t deserve this happiness together.”

Hajin had never looked at the situation in that way, and she’s not entirely sure what she can or has done for her friends, but she’s grateful to Jimong for his words. She smiles and nods. “I’ll try my best to make them happy. All of them.”

He smiles warmly at her and gets up. “I’m sure you will.”

“Would you like to meet them?” Hajin knows how important all the Princes are to Jimong, most especially Mu. “So and Mu aren’t here, but you can meet the others-”

“Ah, actually, my time’s almost up,” he says, checking his watch. “He’ll be here any minute. This will be the last time we’ll be seeing each other in a long time, Hajin-shi. It has been my great honor knowing both you and Pyeha. I wish you well and hope everything goes right with you and your baby.”

“But where are you going?” she asks, confused.

“I won’t be going anywhere for a while yet, but I don’t want to linger either. I don’t wish to have any attachments when I travel.”

“Travel?” With this, she thinks she finally understands his plan. “You’re going somewhere we can’t reach you… aren’t you?”

He chuckles. “I wouldn’t say that. I am certain we will meet again, My Lady, but whether or not you’ll remember me…” His smile is mysterious, wistful, “well, we shall see when I get there.”

“But why? Why won’t you stay? Everyone’s here, you can meet them, become friends again-”

“Yes, but they are all grown up now and happy. They have no need of me and, frankly, no reason why they would bother with an old history professor when they have you and Pyeha to turn to for answers. Besides… I’m after something I’ll never be able to have in this life, not with things as they are.”

Hajin frowns, feeling suddenly very sorrowful. She and Jimong hadn’t been particularly good friends… but they had been through a lot together… shared a lot of ups and downs. She already feels herself missing him. “But if you leave… you won’t remember how to get back. You’ll forget.”

He can feel her sadness and has to choke back his own. He’s made his choice. Now, he has to stick with it. “Where I’ll be going… I’ll have no wish to be anywhere else but there. Hajin-shi, I have no right to ask for any favors, but please look after the Princes. They are very precious and deserve more than what they got in Goryeo. Mu, Eunnie, Jung, Baek Ah… even Wook, Won and Yo. They were innocent kids forced to do evil things to survive. Please don’t blame them for the hardships you had to endure. Each of them suffered in their own profound way.”

Hajin finds herself tearing up again as she nods. “I know. I don’t blame them… not anymore. It was hard to forgive Won at first… but he’s really not so bad in this time. And I’ve always understood Yo. My grudge with him lasted only until the day he died.”

“And Yeonhwa?”

Surprised, Hajin flushed. “I’m still upset with her.”
He chuckles in understanding. “So you should be. Unfortunately, while Wook, Won and Yo died regretting how they lived, Yeonhwa only died regretting what could have been between her and So, and hating you for it. Even when I left, she never stopped trying to make him hers. But she was after a man who had already given all of himself to another. Even if she were to have him then, she would have had nothing but his shell. She is also to be pitied, Hajin-shi. She is but a woman in love with a man she can never have.”

Hajin feels uncomfortable. Try as she might, she can’t find it in her to pity such a proud woman as Yeonhwa.

Sensing her hesitation, Jimong laughs. “I leave it to you, then. I offer you my congratulations again, Lady Soo. I am certain we shall meet each other again… in this life, or the next.”

When he turns to leave, Hajin calls out to him. “Wait!” She had been avoiding this subject for fear of being disappointed… but her curiosity is getting the better of her. Feeling her abdomen, she says, “Am I really…?”

He scratches his nose and coughs delicately, “Well, I can’t be sure. I am only telling you what I saw… if I’m right, you should have her by winter. Wasn’t your Seol born around that time?”

“No,” she replies, feeling choked up with emotion. “She was born weeks premature…”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, I can never tell how old babies are just by looking so… either you have her already or you’ll have her soon. Either way, congratulations are in order, if not for that, then for your upcoming nuptials! Please tell Pyeha I send my regards.” He checks his watch again and gasps audibly. “I should get going. Stay here or you’ll miss him.”

“But he’s in Japan!” she reminds, rolling her eyes as she watches him hurriedly cross the road. And she was just starting to think the astronomer knew everything.

"Soo-yah!"

She freezes. That voice. It can’t be.

She turns around and there he is, walking handsomely towards her in a diamond-patterned red and white collared shirt, long sleeves folded up to his elbows, and white pants over white shoes. She stares dumbly at him in shock.

"Pyeha…?” her voice is so small, even she can’t hear it. “You’re here.”

He frowns, reaching her. "Are you alright? You look sick."

She shakes her head, her numb mind trying to work through the numbers. She hadn’t bled in maybe two months, but that’s normal, considering she had been on birth control pills. Her doctor said it sometimes took months for hormones to normalize. Some women bled instantly, while others had to wait longer. She thought she would be in the latter category, but… what if she had been wrong?

They stare at each other in silence for a long time before So finally sighs, “I missed you too, Soo-yah. I’m absolutely thrilled to see you again!”

When she continues to be impassive, he becomes worried. “Yah, are you sick? You look pale. Shall I take you to a doctor?”

Should they go to a doctor? Should she just buy a test from the closest pharmacy? Should she tell
him? She’s not entirely sure what to do. Grief, happiness, fear and longing - all these emotions and more have lodged themselves in her throat, making it hard for her to breathe properly. He becomes anxious when she starts to cry silent tears, but when he takes his phone out to call the company doctor, she stops him by giving him a tight hug. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine, you look like you’re about to faint. Are you well? Is that why you’re here instead of at the cafe? They told me that’s where you’d be, but you weren’t there, and you weren’t at work either. I was just starting to panic when I heard your voice. Who were you talking to?”

She meets Jimong’s eyes from across the street and she smiles, feeling elated at the possibility he had instilled in her. “An old friend.”

So follows the direction of her gaze. "Wait, is that…?" he mumbles, squinting. "Jimong!" he exclains in shock, pointing at the smiling man. "You sly old fox! You owe us some answers!"

Jimong bows low and walks away.

So makes to follow him but Hajin holds him back, smiling at Jimong’s retreating back. "So… let's go to the hospital."

"But... but Jimong! He's over there!" he stammers in confusion.

She nods. "But now I really need to go see a doctor."

At this, he grows worried again. “Are you very sick? How long have you been feeling ill? Why didn’t you tell me when we spoke last night? But you don’t seem to have a fever…”

“I’m fine. I just need to have something checked.”

Seeing that she’s in no immediate danger, his mind reverts back to other important matters. "Okay, but before that…” he jerks a thumb towards Jimong’s form slinking away into the distance. “You don't care about answers? We don't know when we'll see him again.”

"Maybe never."

"And you're okay with that?" He can’t hide his surprise. Up until last night, she had searched for Jimong everywhere she could, and now she was going to just let him go…?

“I’ll tell you later. For now,” she grabs his face and gives his lips a good smack, "let's go to the doctor.” Her initial fear had given way to anxiety and excitement at the thought of what the doctor might say. She hopes it’s a positive. She’s missed her baby terribly, and just imagining how happy the news would make him is enough to get her emotional again. She laughs, releasing some of the tension that had built in her, and hugs him again. “I’ve missed you.”

He’s more than a little dumbfounded. He had planned this surprise visit for weeks and found her lack of surprise somewhat disappointing. Not to mention... what was Jimong doing here? Had he and Soo talked? Thinking he will never understand her, So sighs and says, "Fine, let's forget Jimong and go.” The excited look on her face makes him curious. It’s enough to make him drop the subject of Jimong… for now. “You don't seem very sick anymore though."

She shakes her head and pulls him along. "I'm not sick."

"So exactly why are we going to the doctor?"

She flashes him a knowing smile and tightens her grip on his hand. Her So was smart, but he could
be impossibly dense sometimes. “I told you… we need to check something.”

Though he doesn’t know what’s made her so excited that it’s eclipsed even his surprise visit, her bright-eyed enthusiasm has him smiling after her. He jerks her back towards him and kisses her temple. He hasn’t forgotten his real reason for coming back. He’d spend eternity by her side - not in front, not behind. He’d make her happy and shower her with all the lost hugs and kisses of their past. And more.

"Should I be worried?" he asks, keeping his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

“No,” she replies. “At least I hope not.”

He sighs. “I had something planned for this afternoon and even tasked Chaeryung with keeping you in your office, but you just upped and left without prior warning.” He eyes her darkly. “You really know how to cause me problems.”

She pouts. “What problems? If you have something planned, we can still do it afterwards.”

“Ah, it’s too late now. We’ll do it some other time.”

“Do what? What is it? Tell me,” she begs, tugging at his shirt.

“I’ll tell you if you tell me where we’re really going.”

“To the hospital!”

“Fine, let’s say I believe that. What will we be doing there?”

“I told you, I need to check something,” she repeats, sounding exasperated.

“What?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Then mine’s a surprise, too,” he says with a satisfied chuckle.

Annoyed, she pokes his ribs and watches as he immediately stumbles away, eyes full of betrayal. But it doesn’t last long because she attacks again, only this time, he catches her. “Yah! You don’t play fair.”

“I’ll tell you my secret if you tell me yours!”

“Soo-yah, I asked first so you tell me, then I’ll tell you mine.”

“That’s not how it works. The one who’s at a disadvantage talks first.”

He can’t help but laugh at how cute she is compared to him. “I’m at a disadvantage?”

From far away, Jimong turns around and sees them bickering. The King with his Kingmaker.

He smiles and aims a solemn bow their way, wishing them all the best, though he knows they’ll be happy.

The 4th King Gwangjong finally with the Queen of his heart.

Satisfied, Jimong turns and disappears into the crowd, never to be seen or heard from again.
Rather long chapter and it required a lot of thinking, so it took longer than expected for me to update XD

Is it confusing? I tried to inject as many explanations as I could. There are many theories about Jimong and his role in the time travel, and what I wrote is just one of many that I've toyed with in my mind. Does it make sense? I'll be more than happy to engage in debates and discussions about the topic! Please tell me your thoughts :D

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I just realized this fic has reached 100,000 views on fanfiction, so as a thank you, I'll write a little something about Seol in the next chapter. Thank you everyone for reading and for leaving reviews! Love you all, see you in the next chapter! So's surprise :D
Of Poetry and New Beginnings

Chapter Summary

*She sighs, looking so miserable, he feels bad and immediately starts spouting whatever random food names enter his mind.*
*“Peanuts!” she gasps loudly, sitting back up.*

*He’s astounded. “I was kidding.”*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So had a hunch. When she changed course from the hospital to a nearby clinic after consulting her phone, his hunch only grew bigger. But he didn't say anything. He didn't want to jinx it. His person was always making him second guess himself.

“Unnie says this doctor is good,” she says brightly, stopping in front of a neat little building with large glass windows. She glances up at him, wondering if he finally realizes what's going on. Surely, the large placard and the posters of pregnant women would have told him everything he needed to know by now.

When he continues to look impassive, she shakes her head and pulls him through the door.

The lady that greets them is nice. She asks Hajin a few questions and then hands her a form to be filled up. Once done, they only sit for a few minutes before they’re called in to meet the doctor.

“You’re not messing with me, are you?” Soo-yah finally asks when the doctor leaves after drawing a bit of her blood.

“No,” she says. “Why would I joke about something like this?”

Good point. The truth is he’s in shock. He had come home expecting to surprise her, not the other way around. And this surprise was something he had not anticipated at all.

“Although now that I think about it… shouldn’t I have done the test in secret and surprised you afterwards?” she asks, shoulders slumping in dismay. “Why didn’t I think of that? Everyone does it these days.”

“Soo-yah…” he begins, not entirely sure what to say.

She frowns. “What is it? I thought you wanted a baby.”

“I do but… why all of a sudden?” he asks. If she’d told him days, weeks ago that she suspected anything, he would’ve flown back sooner to be with her.

“I have it on very good authority that we’ll be parents by winter. Late winter, possibly.” She tries to do the math but her excited, apprehensive brain refuses to cooperate. Instead she shrugs and smiles. “I didn’t think I was when we spoke last night… but we’ll know in a while, won’t we?”
The door opens and Dr. Shim returns. “The blood test will take about 2 to 3 days, but according to the urine test…” she takes a seat and smiles.

Hajin feels overwhelmed. Though the possibility had always been there, her lack of symptoms had made her doubt it, but now…

Mind spinning with all sorts of questions and possibilities, she tries to sort out what to do first and is already thinking of everything she’ll have to buy and eat for the baby’s development. She had been sickly in Goryeo and always worried that Seol would grow up being sickly as a result, though So’s assurances that she had been completely healthy had helped to alleviate that guilt. Still, she hadn’t been much of a mother then and is determined to make up for it this time.

“Do we tell our parents? Now that we know for sure… oh, but this means I might need to have my wedding dress readjusted!” she wails, remembering. “Should we have forced her to do the ultrasound just so we’d know how far along I actually am?”

Taking everything into account, Dr. Shim had advised them to wait a few weeks before doing an ultrasound, saying there won’t be much to see at such an early stage.

Instead of answering, So takes her into his arms. He hasn’t said much since they left the clinic, but she understands: while she never got to know Seol nor experience her growing up, he had - not as her father, but as her King and uncle.

This chance to be more to her is something they’ve both wanted for a very long time… and she’s determined to experience everything this time around… together.

“Do you think we’ll make good parents?” she asks quietly.

He doesn’t hesitate in telling her he thinks she’ll make a wonderful mother. The direct compliment has her smiling from ear to ear.

“I think you’ll make a great father, too,” she says, feeling inexplicably shy.

He grimaces. “Five royal children in Goryeo and I know as much about parenting as my mother does.”

She figures that means not much.

Unaffected, she lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug and kisses his cheek. “We’ll just have to learn together.” She grins, teasing, “I’ll fill your library with all sorts of books and videos on parenting, and I’ll book classes and-”

He gives her a wry smile and heads for the market, “And I’ll make sure you have food 24/7, starting right now.”

She blushes. “How’d you know I was thinking of food?”

“Your face says it all,” he pecks her lips and draws away to evade her little punch.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asks indignantly, though she can’t help but laugh, intrigued. “What does my face say?”

“You have a ‘I want food’ face,” he explains, “your eyes glaze over and you bite your lower lip.”
“Do I?” she thinks back to a minute ago and realizes he’s right.

“Yep. Also, just so you know, I sent Baek Ah a text telling him you’re not feeling well so you’ll be taking the rest of the week off.”

She chokes on the imaginary food in her mouth. “The rest of the week? What on earth will we be doing for an entire week?” She narrows her eyes in suspicion. “Does this have anything to do with that secret you mentioned earlier?”

His mysterious smile is killing her.

“Tell me - you already know mine!” she whines, tugging at his shirt sleeve. “I have your baby hostage!”

“And I know you’ll take good care of her.”

She sniffs. He’s right. That hadn’t been much of a threat.

Without warning, she suddenly finds herself being lifted off the ground. She yelps but her look of surprise shifts easily into a broad smile when she sees his. She lowers her face towards him and kisses his lips, not caring who sees, not caring if anyone cares.

Neither her encounter with Yeonhwa, nor her sad farewell with Jimong could douse the flames of happiness dancing around inside her.

She’s getting married to the love of her life and carrying his baby.

There’s nothing else she wishes for but for them to stay this way always, now until forever.

Together.

“It’s a go, people!” Baek Ah yells into the silent room, immediately spurring everyone into action. “We’ve less than a week to perfect this. Let’s do it right.” He grins and takes his phone out to inform his cousins.

“What about the plan for this afternoon?” Chaeryung asks, already sending emails and letters to everyone else concerned.

“Postponed until further notice,” he replies. A familiar figure catches his eye and he watches as Woohee leaves the room with a team of ladies.

“Great! More time to plan and practice…” Chaeryung says brightly, leaving him to answer a call.

Baek Ah shuts his phone and takes a slow, deep breath to clear his head before shaking himself and going the other way.
Myunghee hasn’t felt this excited in weeks. She closes the door to her new flower shop and takes her key out of her bag to lock it, thinking of all the beautiful ways she could arrange the flowers needed for her young cousin’s wedding. *Yellow*, Baek Ah had said, *that’s her favorite color.*

She thinks it’s fitting that such a bright, energetic young woman as her cousin would favor such a bright, warm color.

“Myunghee,” the familiar voice of her ex-boyfriend has her jumping out of her skin in fright.

“Wook!” she gasps, spinning on her heels to find him standing a few feet away. She thumps her chest with her hand. “You startled me! I… wasn’t expecting you.”

He lowers his eyes to the ground, trying to think of what to say. He had debated coming over for days… there had been so many things he’d wanted to say to her… so many things he’d wanted to apologize for… but seeing her now, he’s not sure his apology is enough. He’s not sure what he can do or say that could possibly mean anything anymore.

Myunghee awkwardly shifts her gaze elsewhere. “How… “ she begins, then reconsideres, knowing he wouldn’t be fine. Instead, she says, “What are you going to do?”

She has always been able to read him and his mood, even in the dark. No one else knows him quite like she does… Wook was a fool to not notice it sooner: how much she means to him… how much he needs her in his life. All the power and wealth he’d strived for now seem utterly meaningless. He should have fought instead to keep her by his side. He should have known she was all he needed.

Exhaling tiredly, he shrugs and forces his decision out of his mouth. “I’m going to tell the truth. When they ask… I’ll turn in my sister and plead guilty.”

Myunghee’s heart aches for him. “It’s the right thing to do.”

He nods and tries for a smile, but everything in his body feels heavy. He even has trouble lifting his eyes. “I know, that’s why I’m doing it. I don’t know what’ll happen after-” he stops and bites his tongue. He hadn’t come here for sympathy. He couldn’t drag her into his problems, not when she looked so happy and content with the life she’s currently living. He had only wanted to see her for one last time. Clearing his throat, he forces a smile. “It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to see how you were.”

Myunghee isn’t fooled, but she says softly, “I’m doing very well.”

He nods and for the first time in a long time, his smile is genuine. “You look very well. I’m glad.”

She takes the steps needed to give him a hug. She can feel how tense he is; she knows how desperately he’s trying to keep it all in. This facade he’s showing her… she’s not sure how long it will last. All she knows is he won’t want her to be around to see it crumble. “No matter what happens… take care of yourself. No matter what choices you’ve made, you’re still a good man. Remember that.”

He exhales heavily. He’ll miss her smell of flowers, her soft smiles and wisdom. He’ll miss talking to her, touching her, seeing her everyday. He had come here tonight, drawn by the aching emptiness in his heart which she had once filled, which he knows will only grow bigger when he leaves her again.
She swallows hard. “If you want me to… I will wait.”

He longs to say yes; his soul screams for him to ask it of her, knowing his entire life is days away from falling into ruins. One promise from her, and he knows he can bear it all: the ruining of his name, company, father’s legacy…

With every ounce of control he has left, he shakes his head and brings his hands up to caress her face one last time. Grant me this final touch that I might remember… give me the strength I need to do what I must. “You are a treasure worth more than anything any man could ever possess… you deserve better than me.” He scans her face with his eyes, determined to remember, for though he can't have her in life, he can still meet her in his dreams.

And in his dreams, she’ll smile. In his dreams, she'll trust. In his dreams, she'll stay. “I wish you happiness, Myunghee. Thank you for the years.”

She meets his eyes and sees that even though it couldn’t have been easy, his decision has allowed him a bit of peace within himself. He plants a lingering, light kiss on her forehead. She closes her eyes to remember their past, and when he pulls away and leaves without another word, she says her final piece:

“Green, O green is the willow, placid, peaceful the flow;
Hark and I hear on the river, songs from my love, my beau.
To the east, the sun is up, to the west, drizzles persist;
Though they say the sun is naught, to me, the sun is aglow.”

He stops but he doesn’t turn around. “Liu Yuxi’s Song of Bamboo Twigs.”

Her first tear escapes her, followed by a second and immediately by a third. “You gave me that poem when you were too shy to confess your feelings. I know every word of it by heart.”

He looks down and is silent for a long time. But when he finally speaks again, all he says is, “Good night, Myunghee… and goodbye.”

Breathless, she watches him leave. Though he’s far away when it happens, she knows the moment he finally lets go. She knows he’ll go home and shut the lights and lie in bed and try to sleep. She knows he won’t be able to.

“Storms pass,” she says as he rounds the corner and disappears from sight, his retreating back the last she’ll see of him in a long time. “Life goes on.”

"She was clever and full of energy… always getting into trouble, though always knowing how to get herself out of it. I could never tell if it was mostly because her wits were sharp or she was just charming." So smiles at one particular memory as he lays down on the grassy slope to gaze at the stars. They don’t shine nearly as bright in this time as they did a thousand years ago. "She loved making people laugh, and sometimes not on purpose."

The evening breeze passing through the banks of the Han river is strong and cool. Hajin shivers and curls up beside him to listen. "It was after the second time I met her... I'd invited Jung and his family to attend the exorcism ritual that year and had her fitted with a new hanbok for the
occasion. Her uncle Baek Ah did her hair, snaking ribbons into her braids and adding in small, flowery hairpins.

"She was the perfect little girl, and I swear we were turned away for only a few minutes, but the next thing we know, she had her ribbons tangled in her braids so badly, they refused to come off no matter how hard she tugged. She looked so scared... but she was so cute, we couldn't take her seriously."

Hajin tries to imagine the scene: So, Baek Ah and Jung in their ceremonial robes, silently laughing at her little girl. "What happened?"

"Baek Ah er... decided to tease her a little bit."

Seol's stricken expression made him want to stop his favorite brother from joking around, but Jung had joined in before So could do anything.

"Your uncle is right, Seol-ah... what were you trying to do?" he asked with a believable sigh of regret.

"There was a pin that was painful, and I wanted to take it out," she explained in a wavering voice, keeping completely still while Baek Ah pretended to work on her hair. When he shook his head and drew away a few seconds later, she panicked, flapping her little hands in distress. "I only wanted to take it out!" she cried, little hands covering her head, trying to protect her hair from uncles and father alike.

Baek Ah nodded. "But it's too tangled now, Seolie, we'll have to cut it off."

She cried for real then, large tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes. She was so upset, all she could say were, "no" and "don't" over and over again while shaking her head.

At this point, Hajin sits up straight and cuts into his narration, “How could you let them do that? Poor baby must have been frightened.”

“Patience, I’m not done,” he rolls his eyes and makes her lay back down before he continues.

"Aigoo, aigoo, this poor little lady," Baek Ah exclaimed loudly, drawing Seol into his chest for a warm hug, controlled laughter evident in his voice. "What should we do now? The pins just won't come off?"

"Abeoji," she wailed, turning to Jung. "Help me, abeoji."

"Hmmm... there is something we can do to keep Uncle Baek Ah away," he said, his eyes lighting up in inspiration as he turned to look at his fourth brother. "We'll ask Pyeha to issue a decree stating no one is to cut your hair. Then Uncle Baek Ah will have no choice but to help you fix it."

"Yah, yah, there’s not enough time!" Baek Ah protested with a laugh, but Seol had already walked up to her Uncle King.

"Uncle King, please issue a degree-"
"Decree," Jung corrected in her ear.

"-a decree to keep Uncle Baek Ah away from my hair."

So smiled. "There's no need for that. I could just lock him up in a cell."

Alarmed, Baek Ah's tone shifted automatically to serious. "Seolie! Come here, little peanut, Uncle will help you!"

Seol prostrated herself on the floor in front of So and said reverently, "Your benevolence knows no bounds, Pyeha!"

"Yah, yah!" Baek Ah got up in panic.

So ignored his brother and offered Seol his hand. "Let's head to the Damiwon for a few minutes."

"And did you lock Baek Ah up?"

So snorts. "No. Would I ever?"

"Yes."

"Your trust warms my heart."

"So then what happened?"

Seol wouldn't look at Baek Ah. When she saw just how easily the pins had come off, she knew she had been fooled.

"Do you want Uncle to play your favorite song?" Baek Ah coaxed, ordering for his flute and zither to be brought to him. "Which one do you want Uncle to use? Or do you want to see Uncle use both at the same time?"

Seol stubbornly fixed her eyes on the lanterns overhead.

"Yah, Uncle was only having fun. You know how to have fun, don't you? Remember that time Uncle was sleeping innocently under the tree, and you came and threw grass all over my face and one of them got into my nose and I swallowed it?"

Seol’s cheek twitched.

"Or what about when you put a hot mung bean cake on Uncle’s chair, hmm? I had to borrow clothes from your father!"

Seol giggled at the memory. "Uncle poop!"

Baek Ah growled and began to tickle her. "It wasn't funny! I still had places to go!"

Her shrieks of laughter were infectious. They attracted the Queen’s attention.

Coming over, Queen Daemok accepted her younger brothers’ greetings before smiling and greeting her husband. The Queen’s close proximity had made Jung visibly anxious, a feeling
Hajin cuts him off again. “Did she ever find out the truth about Seol?”

He searches through his memories for any signs of it. “Honestly, I don’t know. We were always careful about having Seol visit the palace. There were only two times when I was ever truly alone with her… when I brought her to the Damiwon for the first time, and before I died.”

She looks up at him then. “Did she ever find out the truth about you?”

Slowly, he shakes his head. “There was no reason to tell her. It would have been selfish.”

Hajin thinks that after all he's done and had to give up, he could have afforded to be selfish once in awhile… but she also knows what it's like to think of another person's well-being before her own. They'd both had to make sacrifices for the same person. Given the same difficult choices, she knows he'd do it all over again, just as she would.

She thinks of the little person growing inside her and wonders if she knows just how loved she had been… how loved she will always be.

“So what happened when the queen came over?” she asks quietly.

“Nothing,” he replies just as quietly. “I sent them off to enjoy the festival outside.”

Leaving him alone to deal with his enemies.

So this is what Jimong had meant by lonely… to have people he cared about so close by, but beyond reach.

She touches his face, wishing she could touch all the negative memories just as easily; erase them with a single swipe of the hand.

_I promise you will never be lonely again._

“I want food,” she says suddenly, drawing circles on his chest with her fingers. She blinks at him with large, doleful eyes.

Immediately, he forgets his troubled past to focus on her present need. “Again?”

She narrows her eyes. “What happened to making sure I had food 24/7? It's barely been a day since-”

“I'm kidding,” he says at once, instantly avoiding danger. “What do you want to eat?”

“Anything.”

“Noodles?”

“No.”

“Meat?”

“No.”
“Something cheesy?”
“No.”
“Chinese?”
“No.”
“Soup?”
“No.”

He groans and rubs the spot between his eyes, making her laugh and say defensively, “What? I’m not feeling any of those!”

He wonders if they’re always going to have this problem… and if it was only going to get worse now that she was pregnant. He gathers himself and says as rationally as he can, “Why don’t we walk around and see if anything appeals to you?”

“But I want to eat now,” she wails.
“But I don’t know what you want.”

She sighs, looking so miserable, he feels bad and immediately starts spouting whatever random food names enter his mind.

“Peanuts!” she gasps loudly, sitting back up.

He’s astounded. “I was kidding.”

She appears not to hear him. “I think the market’s still open. Let’s go quick!”

“But- but how much peanuts will you need to consume to satisfy your hunger?” he exclaims, completely flabbergasted.

“I’m not hungry,” she says sheepishly, scratching her nose. “I just… want to… eat.”

For a moment, he gawks at her, and then to her vexation, he bursts out laughing. “Don’t laugh!” she chides. “I’ve been eating random things for the past… oh, I’m going to be obese by the end of this, aren’t I?”

“You,” he murmurs, rolling on top of her and eyeing her lips, “are lovely. You will be lovely no matter what shape or form you’re in.”

She needed to hear that. "But I would rather not be round."

He dips his head to nuzzle her cheek and neck while she absentmindedly strokes his hair. "Mhm. Let's go get your peanuts."

She doesn't hesitate. "Okay."
Sorry it took awhile for me to update! I could only write in between work hours, and I spent forever editing before I became satisfied with what I wrote. In fact, I'm still not completely happy with it orz

The Seol bit is for maraudergurl2010 because she asked for a bit of So telling Soo stories some chapters back hehe

To those reading Goryeo Outlander, I'll try update within the week :D

Thank you everyone and happy reading!
She watches as they leave, hand in hand, to a place she can no longer see because the tears pooling in her eyes have clouded her vision.

She watches... and she wishes... and she lets go.

Woohee gulps down her anxiety.

She can do this, no problem. She's been talking to him the past few days, hasn't she? Their conversations have been natural, haven't they?

But as she peers into the room and sees him writing something on the desk, her heart does an unwanted somersault and she has to take a step back.

It always starts out this way. She always feels inexplicably nervous when she enters, even though she knows she'll feel relieved and light as a fluffy cotton ball when she leaves. First-hand experience from the past three days has taught her as much.

Take a breath. Fix your hair. Smack your lips-

She sighs. She always puts on lipstick before seeing him. She thinks he's noticed.

Woohee, you're an idiot. He's an artist. Of course he's noticed.

“Are you getting in or what?”

Woohee squeaks in alarm and turns to find Park Soon Deok, still in her gym clothes, a duffle bag on one shoulder. Behind her are Baek Ah’s cousins, Jung and Eun, who smile and wave when she sees them.

“Is Baek Ah in?” Eun asks.

Before Woohee can reply, Baek Ah’s deep voice responds from behind her, “Yes, I’m here. Oh, Woohee. Did you want something?”

Blinking rapidly, Woohee immediately gives him an update on their work around the Damiwon. “We’ll probably have everything finished at the end of the day.”

“Excellent,” Baek Ah claps his hands and motions for all of them to follow him into Hajin’s designated office, which he had been using as the Damiwon’s temporary manager. “We’re right on schedule with the preparations, and just as well too because hyung reports noona’s been feeling restless, so if we can have everything ready in two days, that’d be great. Myunghee and Chaeryung
are working on the flowers together as we speak. I called you guys in because your clothes have arrived. There are spare rooms everywhere; take your pick and try them on.”

“Do I really need to wear a dress?” Soon Deok grumbles, eyeing hers with dread. She gingerly lifts a pair of heels with two fingers.

“It’ll only be for a few hours,” Jung says bracingly. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll look good in it. Right, hyung?”

Eun packs away the scattered images of Soon Deok in dresses from his mind and shrugs, “They say all pretty girls like dresses.”

Soon Deok scowls and exits the room.

She knows she isn’t pretty. She’d been bullied and shunned in the past just for being interested in martial arts.

After her mother died giving birth to her, her grandmother had raised her to think of inner beauty rather than outer. Her father, though he cared for her deeply, knew nothing about raising a daughter, and so raised her like she were a son.

But Soon Deok can’t complain: she knows they both did the best they could with what they had. So what if she turned out a little different? She still has friends, albeit more male than female, which is why she had been surprised by Hajin’s quick friendship and acceptance of her. In her experience, pretty girls were always the most difficult to get along with, and she thought that Hajin, being both pretty and well-versed in the subject of beautification, would be no exception.

Soon Deok eyes the beautiful fabric, noticing how soft it feels in her fingers… and then she sees the callouses on her hands and sighs. A pretty girl would indeed appreciate such nice dresses. That little student of hers was becoming too comfortable around her. She will make him pay for his little remark later.

Now… she sighs again, which sides are up and down?

It’s when she lowers the dress that she sees an unwanted figure marching through the Damiwon gardens, up the stone-lined path, heading straight for the entrance.

Grimly, she blocks the intruder’s path.

“The Damiwon is closed for today. We are preparing for its opening. Please leave,” she says tonelessly. It’s another pretty woman, only, based on what she’s heard from her friends… this one isn’t nearly as nice.

The woman smiles sweetly up at her. “I’m here to issue a complaint against one of the employees.”

Soon Deok knows exactly who this woman is and what she wants. “Sanggung is not in today. Please leave.”

Yeonhwa is visibly surprised, but she smiles again. “Good! Then I can issue this complaint without any further violence. Who’s in charge?”

Unamused, Soon Deok blinks slowly before repeating herself, “Sanggung is not in today. Please leave.”

Yeonhwa’s face falls, but she looks angry. “I heard you the first time, silly girl. Did your superior
Soon Deok sighs inwardly but doesn’t say anything else. She’s about to close the doors on the woman’s face, but she’s pushed back instead and watches angrily as Yeonhwa takes a look around.

“Oho!” she yells, grabbing hold of Yeonhwa’s wrist before the latter can go any further.

“Let me go, I demand to speak to the one in charge!” Yeonhwa hisses, twisting her arm every which way in an attempt at breaking free. “I told you to let go, you stupid girl!”

“Sanggung is not here,” Soon Deok growls a third time, losing her patience. “Please leave!”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Yeonhwa shrieks angrily.

Having enough of being nice, Soon Deok swipes a leg easily beneath Yeonhwa, who falls roughly on her knees from surprise. Before she can fully recover her breath, Soon Deok pushes her down and locks her arms behind her back. When Baek Ah, Jung, Woohee and Eun run down to see what all the commotion is about, they’re greeted by the sight of Soon Deok perched on Yeonhwa’s back, while the latter struggles uselessly to break free.

“What’s happened?” Jung asks, rushing over. “Why is she-?”

“She forced her way in after I told her to leave,” Soon Deok explains.

“I demand to speak to the one in charge!” Yeonhwa screams to Baek Ah’s feet as they position themselves in front of her.

“I’m in charge until Go Sanggung gets back. The Damiwon is strictly off-limits to outsiders today,” he explains, amused. “I apologize for the inconvenience, but please leave.”

“I’m here to issue a complaint against one of your staff!” she says, tired by now of having to repeat herself and hearing the same response. This place is run by a bunch of morons.

“A complaint? Sure, I’ll be glad to hear it.” Baek Ah nods to Soon Deok, who grudgingly gets off.

Yeonhwa straightens up in disarray and glares at Soon Deok, who stares back. The room is silent, but Yeonhwa is the first to back down, apparently thinking better of whatever she had been about to do. Turning her back on Soon Deok, she frowns at Baek Ah and takes a piece of paper from her bag. “I suffered physical harm under your Head Lady three days ago and ended up with bruises. If she does not pay for damages, I will sue this establishment. You’re supposed to be taking care of customers, not harming them.”

Baek Ah mimics her smile and snatches the letter from her grasp. “We are well aware of the mistreatment that occurred three days ago. Leave now unless you wish to suffer further harm.”

Jung, Soon Deok and Eun glare menacingly at Yeonhwa, who looks shocked. “Did you not hear me? Go Hajin attacked me.”

“A what now?” Yeonhwa asks, growing more and more stupefied by the minute.

“If you insist on harming her by making false claims, we will be forced to take further action
against you,” Baek Ah says. “Enough is enough. You’ve already lost, now leave her be.”

Yeonhwa can’t quite believe her ears. Was Hajin really-?

“The doors are wide open, miss,” Woohee slides the doors farther apart and bows her out, the way she’s been trained to do as a court lady. “Please stop by the stand on your way out and help yourself to our brochures. We also have some samples of our best products, free for the taking in the next room. Do return with your family and friends on our opening. Have a nice day!”

Recovering slightly from this unexpected piece of news, Yeonhwa reaches out to reclaim her letter, except Baek Ah holds it away from her. “This is our copy, is it not?”

Fuming, she spins on her heels and leaves, muttering curses under her breath.

The five watch her go. They see her trip on the stones at the edge of the bathing pool, but she recovers splendidly and finally disappears around the bend. They’re silent for a moment, before Woohee cracks a smile and they end up in fits of giggles. They’re having so much fun recalling the incident that they don’t notice one of them isn’t laughing until she bends down.

Soon Deok eyes her dress in her hands, careful not to show any emotion. What had been a beautiful dress only moments before now had dirt stains and creases all over it from her struggle with Yeonhwa.

“Ah, it’s a pity, she even ruined something so pretty,” Baek Ah sighs. “We don’t have time to make a new dress… I suppose we can go out and buy one that’s ready-made.” He makes to take the dress from Soon Deok, but Woohee cuts him off.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asks. “So it’s a little dirty and crumpled… it’s still beautiful. She hasn’t even tried it on yet, and you already want to throw it away?” Turning to Soon Deok, she smiles warmly. “I’ll help you. Let’s go into the first room. We have some make-up there.”

Without waiting for a response, Woohee leads her into the room indicated and shuts the door behind them. She’s aware of how Soon Deok feels… she saw it clearly when the young woman ran her fingers through the fabric. No matter what she makes people think, Woohee is sure that Soon Deok does find the dress beautiful and she had been looking forward to wearing it.

Minutes later, Soon Deok emerges from the bathroom, beet red and looking self-conscious.

Woohee gets up and nods to the recliner opposite her, a large smile on her face. “Baek Ah really does have good sense when it comes to fashion. The dress looks really good on you, Deok-ah… the color makes your complexion glow, and the grooves show off your good figure.”

Soon Deok blushes even deeper, not sure what to say. “It’s still dirty.”

“Nothing that can’t be cleaned. Trust me… when I’m through with it, no one will ever know what happened. Now come on over so I can do your make-up.”

“Oh, I don’t like make-up,” Soon Deok says at once, frantically shaking her head. “Maybe just a little lipstick and powder, then I’ll tie my hair. The focus will be on unnie the entire time anyway, no one will notice me.”

Woohee gives her a dry look. “Deok-ah… trust me. Everyone will notice.” She nods to the chair in invitation. “If it really makes you uncomfortable… I’ll make it light. You won’t even know it’s there.”
She’s hesitant at first, but she takes a seat and fidgets restlessly with her fingers. Woohee doesn’t do her make-up just yet, choosing to apply a facial mask on Deok’s face first. She brushes a very fragrant oil that Soon Deok does not know the name of, but which Woohee explains later on is rose oil. “It’ll brighten your skin even more.”

She’s forced to stay still for thirty minutes, an almost impossible feat, and she’s so restless, Woohee has to remind her to keep still every two minutes.

She’s so idle, she falls asleep.

By the time Woohee shakes her awake, Soon Deok feels refreshed and almost like herself again, but when she gets up and looks in the mirror, she stumbles backwards, not recognizing the woman staring back at her.

“What do you think?” Woohee asks, excitement in her voice. “You look amazing!”

“What… what did you do?!” Soon Deok gasps in horror. She reaches up… feels her fingers on her face and is forced to believe that the person standing in front of her is, indeed, herself. She looks down and finds the dress unblemished - no shoe marks, no creases… the way it looked when she first received it. Only now she feels overly self-conscious and thinks she might freeze on the day of the wedding. “Unnie!”

“What?” Woohee cries, unable to stop smiling. She sees how genuinely anxious Soon Deok looks and takes her hands. “Deok-ah… it’s not everyday people get married. It’s not everyday you get to dress up. Why don’t we leave the make-up on and go out? So you’ll be used to it before the wedding!”

Soon Deok recoils, “Go out looking like this? I don’t like people staring at me.”

“People will look at you no matter what you do, and people will judge you no matter how you look. Trust me, Deok-ah… you’re really pretty,” Woohee says earnestly. “Fighting and martial arts are good, but once in awhile, allow yourself to feel beautiful.”

“Women who only become pretty because of make-up are not pretty. I would rather not try to look like someone I’m not.”

Woohee sighs. “Is that what you’re worried about? I only accentuated what you already have. You still look like yourself. You want proof? Let’s go out right now to see if anyone doesn’t recognize you.”

“No!” Soon Deok shrieks, pulling back, but Woohee is stubborn.

“If there’s anyone at all who won’t recognize you as Park Soon Deok, I’ll remove the make-up myself and tell Sanggung you’re allergic or something,” Woohee says. “There are only a few people here, and they’re all your friends. I promise you they won’t judge.”

“But… but…” Soon Deok is so frozen, she allows herself to be brought outside, where she’s partly relieved yet partly disappointed to find the foyer deserted.

At least, it was. The sound of footsteps alerts her to the presence of someone coming down the stairs, and seconds later, she’s greeted by the surprised face of her pupil.
Hajin tries not to skip as she makes her way to the Damiwon, congratulating herself on having given her increasingly watchful fiance the slip.

It’s not like she’ll be gone for hours, she reasons to herself as she gets off the bus, and it’s not like he’s going to suspect anything if she’s only gone for a few minutes, what with him on the phone and all. She’ll slip quietly into work while he’s preoccupied, ask how everyone is, and slip quietly back. No harm done. He’ll probably just assume she’s in the bathroom, taking a really long leak.

She stops halfway through the garden, spotting two familiar people framed at the doorway. The scene is familiar. Her memory brings her back to a bright, sunny day outside a cafe months ago… when she saw Soon Deok for the first time in this life.

There’s Eun, dressed handsomely in a tux, and there’s Soon Deok in front of him, looking beautiful in a cream-colored dress, with matching flowers adorning her hair.

Hajin wonders what’s going on. She’s too far to hear the conversation, so she edges closer.

“Missing?!” Baek Ah gasps, immediately getting up from the desk. “What do you mean, ‘missing’?”

“I mean that I looked away for a minute and found her gone the next,” So grumbles, getting into his car and backing up as fast as he can.

“But she could be anywhere. Maybe she went to the convenience store, or her parents’ place or Myunghee-”

“No,” So sighs, rubbing his temples, “I’m sure she’s headed there. I’ve told you, she’s a restless little thing. Just stand by and try to intercept her if you see-”

“Oh sh-” Baek Ah hisses suddenly, causing So to step on the brakes.

“What?!”

“You’re right, she’s here… at the worst possible moment,” Baek Ah groans, trying not to panic. From behind his pillar, he manages to make eye contact with Woohee, who stares frozenly back at him from downstairs. He gives her a ‘What happened?’ look and receives an affronted ‘How would I know?’ look in return.

“Hajin-ah!” Eun yelps, clutching his hand to his chest. “You’re here!”

“Yes,” Hajin says, eyeing them both quizzically as she ascends the steps. “Why are you so dressed up? Is there something I- oh!” She clamps a hand over her mouth and looks from one guilty face to the other. “Are you two going out on a date?”

Eun and Soon Deok stare dumbly at her for a moment, and then they start talking at once.

“Yes!” they exclaim in unison, forcing laughs.

“We… we’re… going… on a date.” Eun wishes his master didn’t look so beautiful. He has to try twice as hard to come up with a good enough lie. “You caught us. We weren’t going to tell anyone, but now that you know…”
To their dread, Hajin frowns. “Your outfits are a little too formal for a casual date, though,” she says, “unless…”

They gulp.

Hajin pouts. “Have you been seeing other secretly all this time? I really believed you when you said you were having martial arts classes, you know.”

“What? What do you mean?” Eun asks, confused. “But of course I’m taking up martial arts!”

“But I don’t think this is your first date. You look like you’ve both been seeing each other for a while now, and this is some special, important occasion,” Hajin reasons out.

“No, no, you’re right,” Eun says. “This… this is…”

“First… month… sary,” Deok mumbles, making Eun blush all the brighter.

“Oh, okay,” Hajin says, still looking slightly confused. “Have fun, then!”

“But- but why are you here? We thought you weren’t feeling well,” Eun stammers, trying to get the conversation focused on her rather than on them.

Hajin clears her throat, trying not to look too guilty. “I’m actually feeling much better! But,” she feigns a cough, “I need to get back soon or So will wonder where I am. I wanted to see how everything was progressing! I’m surprised to find the both of you here. Did you just finish training?”

“Y-yes. W-Woohee-unnie… has been… h-helping,” Deok gestures awkwardly behind her.

Hearing her name, Woohee smiles. “Sanggung, you’re here! Are you really feeling better?”

“Much!” Hajin responds, happily looking from one face to the other. To think two of the people she had considered sisters in her past life are getting along! And Eun and Soon Deok dating! She wants to hug them all. If only unnie and Chaeryung were here...

“The flowers are ready for- omo!” Chaeryung stumbles to a halt, trying to cover the huge pot she and Myunghee had been carrying together behind her back. “Sanggung!”

“Hajin-ah!” Myunghee gasps, herself almost losing her grip. She turns around and frantically signals the men to get back and not bring in the rest of the pots.

“Unnie, you’re here, too!” Hajin exclaims in surprise. She sees the pot and Chaeryung’s red face. “What’s that for? I don’t remember us ordering a pot of flowers that huge.”

“It was my idea!” Baek Ah yells in panic, rushing down the stairs and straightening up. He clears his throat. “I heard you weren’t feeling well and thought maybe some flowers in your office would cheer you up. It was supposed to be a surprise.”

Everyone nods, impressed by Baek Ah’s quick wit.

“Awww, you shouldn’t have,” Hajin smiles, taking a step towards the flowers.

Before she can get far enough, Jung walks in, looking splendid in his own tux. His smile and steps falter when he sees Woohee waving furiously at him to get back. When he sees Hajin, he understands and immediately turns, but not before Hajin looks up and sees him.
She narrows her eyes in suspicion, looks from one guilty face to another, and crosses her arms. “Something’s going on. I wanted to believe you were all being honest with me, but I’m not stupid! What are you doing and why is nobody working on finishing up the Damiwon? We open in two weeks!”

She taps her feet and sighs. “Okay, tell me. Who’s getting married?”

Nobody breathes.

Hajin looks at Eun and Deok. “You two?”

They shake their heads.

Hajin can’t believe it. There was only one other couple in the room. She gapes at Woohee and points at Baek Ah. “You two?!” She had no idea they were even back together.

The two exchange glances, and Woohee says, “Well… you’re getting married.”

“Nice try but my wedding motif is lavender, not cream.” Hajin feels betrayed. There she was, feeling happy that her sisters were getting along… only to find she was being excluded. Even Chaeryung and Myunghee know and are a part of whatever is going on.

She feels so terrible, she considers running away, but then a familiar voice puts a halt to that thought process immediately.

“It’s alright, you don’t need to lie to her anymore,” So says, walking up to her.

She gapes accusingly at him. “Not you, too!” She can’t believe it. “All this time, keeping me locked up, and you and them! Them and you! Without me!” she isn’t making much sense but she doesn’t care because she knows he’ll understand her even if everyone else doesn’t.

“It’s really not what you think.”

“Is that so? Then is it ‘don’t tell Hajin anything and let her misunderstand all by herself’ week?” she snaps heatedly.

“It’s a surprise for the opening of the Damiwon,” he replies. “Your court ladies asked for this chance to thank you. Naturally, I agreed to help them. Everyone’s been working tirelessly for days.”

Stunned by this revelation, Hajin glances around her to see everyone looking pouty. “Is that why Soon Deok is here? And unnie?” she asks weakly, her face and neck reddening with guilt.

So nods.

“Oh,” is all she can say. She bites her lip and covers her face with her hands. “Did I just ruin everything by coming here?” Though she doesn’t see it, she knows they’re all nodding their heads. “I’m sorry;” she wails, shutting her eyes tightly. “I was just really bored and I knew the new shelves would be installed today, so I wanted to see how…”

She doesn’t know what to say. She had gone from feeling betrayed to feeling sorry within seconds.

“If you’re really sorry, then come with me and let them finish, hm?” So suggests, taking her elbows and pulling her towards him, sensing a cry coming up. He sends a silent message to Baek Ah to continue with the plan before he takes her away.
Back outside the building, she immediately looks up at him. “Did I just ruin everything? Am I a horrible person?”

“No,” he assures her with a small chuckle. “So you found out about the surprise... at least you don’t know how they’ll surprise you.”

“But they all looked so disappointed! And I was yelling at them!” she cries. “I feel awful!”

“Don’t.” He lets her cry against his chest and silently orders the men holding up the rest of the flowers to start bringing them in. They’re so noisy, but so are Hajin’s sobs. When the last of the flowers are gone and the truck has left, he starts to properly comfort her.

“So-yah, I’m sure they all understand,” he says in soothing tones. “Besides, I think it’s even better this way! Do you have any idea how difficult it is to keep you from rushing all over the place? I was running out of reasons.”

She raises her eyes and pouts. “That’s not really helping.”

“It’s helping me,” he says, grinning at her glum expression. “Cheer up, Soo-yah... they wouldn’t want you to be upset about this, either.” When she continues to sniff, he tries a different tactic. “Peanuts?”

Amused, he watches her eyes brighten, and then close firmly. “No,” she says, snuggling up to him. “You should not reward negative behavior. It’s in the parenting book I’ve been reading.”

He rolls his eyes. “I’m pretty sure that rule does not apply to hormonal women.”

“Do you think I’m being unreasonable right now?”

“Do you want the sweet or the salty kind?”

“Sweet.”

In her car, Yeonhwa can only watch.

She had seen Hajin enter the building and had wanted to go in after her... but knowing she would be outnumbered, she lost her nerve. And then, some time later, he arrived and her first instinct was to hide, even though she knew he couldn't possibly see her through the tinted windows.

She had never known heartache like this before. Just watching him get out of his car and rush in through the gates was enough to start her crying.

It was only just dawnning on her... the end of the road she had strayed into: her brother going to jail, her mother in hysterics, her dreams unmet, her whole life falling apart.

Now that Hajin was expecting a baby, Yeonhwa and Yoo Myeongsun could no longer hope to separate them. Yeonhwa knows how strong So's sense of duty is... how loyal and unwavering he can be. This new development will have cemented everything by now. She wonders if his hag of a
mother even knows about the baby? She wonders if she'll try to get in between them anyway?

Yeonhwa can expect nothing else... she can only regret and wish she could wake up from this nightmare. She wishes she could wake up to find it's still 2016 and she had just had the best evening of her life. She wishes she had forced him to come up to her apartment for another drink before calling it a night. She wishes she could go back and do everything in her power to make him stay. She wishes... she wishes... but she can only watch.

In her car, she watches as the two come back out and So hugs her, and Yeonhwa can see it's because she's crying. She can only watch as he kisses away her tears, exchanges frowns for smiles, and holds her in a way that says he'll always be there for her.

She watches as they leave, hand in hand, to a place she can no longer see because the tears pooling in her eyes have clouded her vision.

She watches... and she wishes... and she lets go.

Chapter End Notes

And cut! Sorry for the late update. It's hard to get into the zone when you're writing two different stories at once hehe
So by "more humiliation for YH", that's what I meant. Is it enough? Still no meteors (cough Jenny cough), but there's regret? :D

CRIMINAL MINDS ON WEDNESDAY!! Mark your calendars, people. We're in for one hell of a ride :3
It's Lee Joon Gi, how can it be anything less than spectacular?

Have a great week ahead, everyone!
"If you really want me to forgive you... won't you tell me why you did it? When you told me you were going on a blind date, I helped you. When you told me it went well and that you were going to see him again, I believed you. What happened? Make me understand."

As Yoo Myeongsun stares out the window of her home, pictures lay scattered on her desk, a half-empty bottle of wine beside them, and a fresh pack of cigarettes. Her doctors had advised her against such vices, but today couldn't be helped. For the first time in her life, she's not sure what she should do.

There's a knock on the door and her secretary comes in. "Chairman, I've confirmed that the board is holding an emergency meeting in an hour. What are your instructions?"

Without her.

She knows what they're meeting about, just as she knows exactly what's happening right now with her sons.

Also without her.

"Chairman... what should we do?" he asks again.

She takes a deep breath and turns around slowly. Her eyes run through the shelves in her study, landing on the dusty photograph albums at the bottommost shelf - forgotten. She pours herself another drink and walks over.

"Ch-Chairman?"

"Nothing," she replies, taking one album and blowing off the dust. She watches them swirl in the sunlight, for just one moment vigorous in their dance through the air before eventually losing momentum and falling into nothing onto the carpeted floor. Pointless. "We do nothing."

"But Chairman, do you not know what they-?"

"You are dismissed," she says curtly. "Fire everyone immediately, but keep my maids. And when you're done doing that, hand in your resignation letter. Thank you for your past services, Secretary Kang, I have no more need of them. I shall prepare your severance pay accordingly. You may come get it later."

Her secretary is stunned, and rightly so. She had always fought... always outsmarted her opponents... always won. But this time, she can't find the strength to do it.

Not one disobedient son, but two... and she feels her third might follow soon.
"What are you really fighting for? For whose benefit? Ours... or yours?"

She flips the album open and sees her eldest as an infant. He had been her perfect first... and also her first great disappointment. "You may leave."

Secretary Kang opens his mouth to speak, but then he sees her expression and thinks better of it. Feeling sorry for his boss, he graces her with a 90-degree bow and says his final greeting, "Then, I shall take my leave. It has been an honor serving you, Chairman. Please look after yourself. Remember what your doctors-

"Your concern is appreciated but unnecessary. Please proceed with my orders."

He bows one last time and shuts the door behind him.

Looking at the studio photographs of her young boys, she feels nothing. No particular memory comes to mind. No emotion. She remembers telling that same secretary to have these photographs taken and published almost three decades ago.


"All the sacrifices I have made... everything I have done... for you! For your brothers! You ungrateful child!"

"All your schemes and media plays, you mean? In all my life, I have only ever found true happiness once... and you tried to take her away. For what? To fuel your greed, your ambitions? You say it is for our sake, but you are fooling yourself."

She reaches the end, not finding a single photograph of her boys smiling genuinely back at her. Not a single stolen picture of them enjoying sports, laughing at an inside joke, swimming at the beach, lounging in the sun. All had been meticulously planned and executed, like everything else in her once-perfect life.

She scans her memories, but even they betray her. Her mind draws a blank when it comes to her children's lives.

"Love," she whispers into the still room. She tosses the album aside and drains her glass in one gulp. "Ridiculous."

"Soo-yah?" So calls, checking his watch. He leans on the wall beside the bathroom door and sighs. She's been in there for almost an hour. "We're going to be late."

"I don't even know where we're going," she says as the door finally opens. She pouts and asks again, "Where are we going?"
But he just smiles and straightens up. "You look beautiful."

"You're avoiding the question again," she tuts, then smiles back, "but thank you." She hasn't worn this dress in awhile and decided this morning when he told her to dress up that she ought to wear as many of her dresses as possible before she starts ballooning.

As they leave his apartment, her phone beeps, the screen flashing with an unknown number. Shrugging at So's silent question and then ignoring the way he was pointing at his watch, she takes the call.

"Hello?"

Her question is met with silence, though Hajin can hear the faint sounds of someone breathing on the other end.

She tries again and this time is greeted by a hesitant, familiar voice calling her name. "Jinnie… it's me."

Hajin blinks in surprise. She didn't think she'd hear her name being called by this voice ever again and is not sure what to do… remain silent and listen, or end the call? Her curiosity gets the better of her in the end.

So sees her tense up, hears the stiffness in her voice as she responds to whoever she's talking to, and walks over to ask her if she was alright the moment she ends the call a few minutes later.

Her expression is troubled - angry, hurt and uncertain - and she doesn't respond right away, not until he takes her hand, forcing her to look up. "What is it?"

"Do you think…" she hesitates again, but eventually decides she needs this in order to move on, "do we have time to make a little side trip?"

Her ex-best friend isn't difficult to spot. Entering the market square, Hajin immediately sees her standing in front of what used to be their favorite food stall. There are years in between their last meeting and Hajin had gone through a lot in that time, but this woman had been her best friend since middle school. Though she has shorter, undyed hair, is facing the other way, and has developed an awkward gait due to her burgeoning belly, Hajin has no trouble recognizing her.

She first takes a moment to ready herself, reminding herself that So was waiting and that they had somewhere to go to after this. "Tell me what you want, and then let's get out of each others' lives for good," she rehearses under her breath. "She helped him steal all of your money… you shouldn't feel sorry for her. You should be firm. You should be cold. You should be harsh."

But the moment they make eye contact, an old wound tears open inside Hajin, reflected in her eyes, and she has to look away to hide it.

"Jinnie…" Jihye says by way of greeting.

"Why did you call me?" Hajin asks, steeling her emotions. "What do you want?"

"There's something I've been wanting to give you," is her reply. Reaching into her shoulder bag, Jihye pulls out a package carefully wrapped in gold and silver. "I got it when I heard you had gotten out of the hospital… I wanted to apologize for-" She stops speaking when Hajin takes it, but resumes hastily when she begins to unwrap it. "I wanted to give it right away, but I didn't know if you'd take it. There were so many people and I couldn't get near you-"

Underneath the wrapper is a sleek, rectangular leather box, and the moment Hajin sees it, she knows what it is… inside the box is a beautiful set of designer makeup brushes she had wanted and saved up to buy years ago.

"These brushes are expensive," she says tonelessly, giving everything back. "I don't want them."

"Please take them," her best friend insists, pulling away.

"The money you spent on these could have gone to your baby," she points out, taking her best friend's hands and depositing the box firmly into them. "The money is ill-spent on me. So, if that's all you wanted, I have somewhere I need to-"

"I did wrong!" her friend cries out so suddenly, Hajin flinches, watching with guilt, horror and embarrassment as the tears begin to stream down her friend's face. "I did a stupid thing. I have no excuses, and I can't even begin to beg for your forgiveness, so please… please just take them!"

Hajin presses a finger to her lips, "Shh! People are staring!"

But that only makes her friend cry harder. In desperation, Hajin looks at the ahjumma manning the stall they're in front of and orders her friend's favorite sandwich and drink.

"I don't actually… like that anymore," her friend hiccups.

"Then why ask to meet me here?" Hajin pauses in the act of paying.

"I thought that you might… still…" Forcing a smile, Hajin apologizes to the ahjumma and asks for just two drinks instead, then she finds an empty table and takes a seat. "I haven't been here since you and Youngjae left," Hajin explains, sloshing her drink around with her straw.

Ashamed, her friend does the same and they sip in awkward, strained silence. And then, because Hajin had always wanted to understand why her friend did what she did, she asks, "If you really want me to forgive you… won't you tell me why you did it? When you told me you were going on a blind date, I helped you. When you told me it went well and that you were going to see him again, I believed you. What happened? Make me understand."

Jihye flushes in discomfort, but she knows Hajin has a right to the truth, and after everything that's happened, how can she deny her the answers? So taking a deep breath, she begins their story, "I didn't lie when I told you I had a blind date… and I really was looking forward to it, that's why I asked you to help me… but the guy turned out to be a jerk, so I called it quits and went home early. But on my way home… I ran into Youngjae." She swallows hard, trying to put into words her emotions… wanting to tell Hajin in a way that would make her understand. "I've always had bad luck when it came to men, and I was always jealous of what you had with him… but please believe me… until that night, I never imagined I would end up betraying you for him."

"He was just so nice to me. He told me all the guys I'd dated were fools and that I deserved better.
He took me to a nice restaurant and bought me dinner… and we had a good time," she explains, keeping her eyes firmly on her drink. "I tried to tell myself it was nothing… that he was being nice to me because I was your best friend, and I shouldn't put too much meaning into it, but it happened more often: he intercepted me at work, asked for my number, and we frequently exchanged texts. At first, they had been about you… but then he started asking about me, and… I liked it. No man had ever given me so much attention before, and seeing how he was with you, I felt like he was a good man. I told him to break it off with you first if he was serious about being with me. He told me he would, and I believed him. It was my fault for not pushing him to do it… I didn't want to push him away by forcing him."

All this would have been hard to hear three years ago, but now, Hajin can only listen with a curious, sad sort of detachment. "And the money? Breaking my heart was one thing… why did you have to leave me penniless?"

A simple question with tough answers, it instigated the flow of more tears. "I only found out much later, as well… he didn't want you to know it… he's a gambler, Jinnie. He owed a lot of money to a lot of people, and they were starting to threaten him. Those bruises that he said were from falling off a motorcycle? He lied about those… in truth, he had been beaten up at an alleyway. I was with him when it happened. He told me afterwards that they would kill him next time. I told him he should go to the police. He told me that doing so would only get him arrested." At this point, Jihye's hands are shaking so badly that she clasps them tightly together and hides them under the table.

"He said they had allowed him to gamble because they believed he had assets under his name, but in truth, he only told them what you had…" She would find out much later on during a major fight that Youngjae had fully intended to marry Hajin; that it was because he'd wanted to give her a nice, big wedding that he thought the fastest way would be to try and win some money by playing with higher stakes. "He said if he didn't give them what they wanted, they would not only hurt him but you as well. I asked him if he'd broken up with you… he said yes and that there was no time to waste, so… so I went into your room, found the deed to your apartment and the briefcase I knew held all your important documents, and I gave them to him.

"When you confronted me that night after losing everything… I was so ashamed that I couldn't even say anything. He brought me to his place and said that I could live with him instead, and he said we would just have to find a way to pay you back. I stayed because I loved him and had nowhere else to go." Brushing away her tears, she takes Hajin's hands tentatively. "When we heard you had drowned and were in a coma… we tried to come up with some money to help you pay your bills. I started taking different jobs, working three at once on most days, and I managed to save up something… but then he used the money and went gambling again. He said he was feeling lucky. What if tonight was his lucky night? He would regret it forever if he didn't try… and he would blame me and throw me out.

"So I let him take the money, and he lost it all again. In the end, I couldn't even help you to save your life." She sniffs and looks right into Hajin's sorrowful eyes, "I'm truly sorry, Jinnie. After all you've done for me… all I ever did was hurt you."

Though Hajin tries to blink back tears, a few manage to escape. Is this the reason for all the hardships she had to endure? Gambling. In the end, her life had been ruined by a game. Almost ruined, reminds a small voice in her mind. You have an even bigger family now, and it's only going to get bigger in the future.

Thinking of So causes Hajin to sit upright in shock. How long has it been since she left him
"Please… it's not much," Jihye says in a small voice, closing Hajin's fingers once more around the leather box. "Please take it."

"I appreciate the thought behind it," Hajin assures her gently, "but all the same… your baby needs the money more than I need makeup brushes."

"I worked for it," she explains, refusing to take it back, "I got a job as a babysitter to a rich family for a few months, and I saw that the wife had two sets. She told me she didn't need both, but that her husband had bought the second for her, not knowing she'd already bought one for herself. Instead of payment, I asked for the second set. I knew how much you wanted them, and how close you had been to buying one. I couldn't trust Youngjae with money, but he wouldn't have known how much those are worth so it was safe for me to have them."

After being told such a reason, Hajin couldn't find it in her to refuse any longer. With a nod and a thanks, she accepts it. The happy smile on her friend's face is enough to assuage her guilt for taking something that could have easily benefited an innocent baby. She hadn't known about her ex-boyfriend's addiction to gambling before, but now…

Clearing her throat, she switches the topic to a more pleasant one and asks her friend when she's due.

"In about two months," she replies, looking miserable and scared, which Hajin supposes is normal. Even she's scared and she hasn't even started to show yet.

She tries for a smile, "Congratulations, then, to you both. And thank you for the gift… but I need to get going. My… er…" She gestures behind her awkwardly, wondering whether it'd be considered flaunting to mention So now, knowing her friend is in a rough place in her own relationship. Though she hates what happened in the past, she can't regret it… because step by step, those events all brought her to So, and with him more than anyone, she knows she can be truly happy.

"Anyway, he's waiting for me. Take care of yourself. I wish you luck." She means it.

"Wait," Jihye gets up, stopping Hajin from leaving, "does this mean… do you forgive me?"

"That's a tough question. The real answer is no, not right now," Hajin responds bluntly, "but maybe someday. Do right by your baby, and I will." While listening, she had come to the conclusion that neither her friend nor her ex really wanted to stay together anymore and were only doing so because, for one reason or another, the former had gotten pregnant. All signs pointed to a bad relationship, and her friend would just have to think of a way to make things better or endure it.

Whatever she chooses to do now, only her friend can decide; the entwined path they had started on together has finally divided - with a box of brushes, and an unspoken promise of better days.

The two friends look at each other for a while longer, understanding and for the first time in years - at peace. Then Hajin smiles and her friend returns it, and they let each other go.

Curious about the man she had only ever heard about but never seen or met, Jihye follows from a distance as Hajin races through the crowd, towards a street lined with cars. She watches as Hajin clasps her two hands together and stops in front of a well-dressed, handsome man leaning against the hood of a black car. Though she's too far to hear their conversation, Jihye is familiar enough with Hajin to guess what was happening: her friend was begging for forgiveness for taking too
long, and though her fiance's expression is unmoved at first, it changes when Hajin hugs him.

She can almost read his lips, asking her if she was okay. She knows Hajin is probably enjoying the way he was stroking her hair, even though her face is streaked with the tears she'd refused to shed in Jihye's presence.

"There you are," her husband of a few months appears behind her, not bothering to hide his irritation, "I've been searching everywhere for you. It's late and I have work to do, so unless you want to waste your money on a taxi, get on the bike and I'll take you home."

Jihye isn't fooled. She hasn't been fooled in a while. She knows he'll be out gambling again. And she knows he'll come home drunk and raving about how she and her baby are ruining his life. She knows that unless she gives him what he wants, he'll end up hitting her.

What he wants, never what she wants.

What she wants is what she sees, and what she sees is her once best friend in the arms of a man who genuinely cares for her and her happiness. It's something Jihye knows she'll never get in the relationship she's currently in, no matter how long she waits or hopes for change.

Taking her eyes off the happy couple down the street, she aims them towards the angry man behind her.

"What? Are you craving for something again? You know I won't tolerate that kind of bullshit. If you want something, go get it yourself," he snaps, turning away, but he had barely gone a few steps when he feels her brush against him and rush on ahead, wordless and determined.

She knows what she has to do. In the position she's in, there's no such thing as a best option… this hole she's dug for herself is too steep to try and climb out little by little. She needs to be able to regain her footing. She needs to find a way to break free. She needs to start thinking of what's best for her son.

"And you feel sorry for her?" So asks gently after she's done talking.

With a sniff, Hajin nods. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

He smiles. "I think you're a good person. You understand better than most that though people may do bad things, it doesn't mean they are bad people. It's why I fell in love with you in the first place."

She looks up, interested. "Really? For being naive?"

"For seeing people as they are, behind the masks and the titles," he corrects. "For giving us a shot at redemption instead of condemning us like everyone else does."

She understands what he means and smiles. "You're a good person, So. Despite your fearsome reputation, after getting to know you, I saw a lost puppy instead of a wolfdog and it made me want to take care of you. Call it motherly instinct."
He finds no pleasure, no comfort in such words.

The unamused look on his face makes her laugh. "I'm not taking back what I said because it's true. You realize that despite being in a 15-year-old's body, I was still a 26-year-old woman when we first met? You were only a teenager then. Thinking of the difference in our ages now makes me feel like a pervert."

"Good, feel that way," he says dryly, opening the car door for her and gesturing for her to get in.

"Don't be angry," she turns immediately to him when he slides into his seat, and pouts. "I'm only being honest."

He pulls her in, and though his hands are gentle, his kiss is savage. She whimpers at first, before falling into his kiss, giving in to the wonderful taste and feel of him. Her insides are stirring - restless and fired up - fueled by her increasingly responsive hormones.

"We're late," he says, pulling away suddenly. *Later*, he thinks to himself as he starts the engine, her vexed, angry whimpers making him smile. *I'll show you wolfdog.*

As they cruise through traffic, they chat amiably about random things. She's curious about how the lawsuit is progressing, though he seems relaxed enough - a good sign. Whatever is happening can't be bad. At least not for them.

"You've been spending a lot of time away from work lately," she observes casually. "Have things gotten better since you came back from Japan?"

He nods. "Sort of. Business-wise, we've reached a consensus and are pushing through with everything. Father has left Mu-hyung in charge for now. He has to work double time to put everything back on track."

"This whole venture was your idea though… are you okay with him taking over?"

"It's no longer my call to make… besides, credit only mattered when we were competing for the top position in the company. I don't want it anymore. He needs to learn the ropes, meet with people… so this is good for him."

There's sense in this. She eyes him guiltily then. "And… are you sure you're fine about not becoming your father's successor? Your brothers were pretty upset about your decision at first…"

He shrugs his shoulders nonchalantly. "It's not up to them either. Our lives are our own."

Squeezing her hand, he smiles. "Besides, he's the one stuck in Japan for another three or four months. I don't envy him. I'd rather be here with you."

"Even though you think I'm only keeping you around so you can buy me peanuts?"

He glances mournfully at her and asks, "Is that really the only reason?", to which she chuckles, "Of course not, silly." Just in time, the traffic light signals a stop. She grabs him by the collar and jerks him towards her so she can give him a taste of his own medicine.

"Soo-yah-" he grunts in surprise and tries to pull away, but like every other time the past few days, he's hesitant to exert any amount of force on her, giving her complete advantage over him. She grazes his bottom lip with her teeth and finally releases him, satisfied.

Seeing his reflection in the rearview mirror makes him sigh. It had taken all of forever to remove the lipstick earlier, and this time, she had made sure to smudge up to his cheek.
"Wet wipes?" she offers sweetly, redoing her own lips.

Minutes later, they enter a familiar street and stop in front of a familiar building. Baffled, Hajin looks at him. "This is…?"

He gets out and circles over to her side to open her door. "Come on."

"But… I thought this place was off-limits to me until-" she gasps, "is it today? But we don't open in another week or so!"

He just smiles and extends a hand. "It's supposed to be a surprise, isn't it?"

She's surprised, alright. Grasping his hand, she steps out and gazes into the open gates of the new Damiwon. Everything is still and silent, and nothing looks amiss. She supposes everyone involved must be inside.

Though she's nervous, she's also excited. He can tell she is by the increasing redness of her cheeks - or maybe she's still reeling from the effects of her own kiss.

He wraps an arm around her waist and draws her to him. With a smile, he tucks her hair behind her ear and strokes her cheek, adoring the look in her beautiful eyes. "Enjoy today, my love. You deserve it."

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Every long lost dream led me to where you are
Others who broke my heart they were like Northern stars
Pointing me on my way into your loving arms
This much I know is true
That God blessed the broken road
That led me straight to you

- Rascal Flatts -

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the late update! I've been focusing more on my Goryeo fic hehehe it's hard to juggle between stories, but thankfully both are set at very different times with very different themes. I just didn't want to lose my train of thought for the other fic, that's why it took so long to update this one.

The punishments for the wrongdoers might seem lacking compared to the others, but please remember I'm basing them on the characters' final moments in the drama. Wook regretted his life, as well as Won and Yo. Yeonhwa and Queen Yoo, I feel, never did. My way of punishment is to take away what the characters have been fighting for (imo, the best kind of punishment!).

i.e.,
Queen Yoo - power and recognition
Yeonhwa - love and a good life with So
Wook - prestige, wealth to give Myunghee a life she deserves

Thank you to everyone who's still reading and commenting ^^
Chapter Summary

*I don’t need much... good weather, you by my side, and everyone I love as witness to my unending devotion... as I give myself to you forever.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hajin isn’t sure what to expect.

Hand-in-hand with So, they walk in and she can’t help but marvel at the suddenly neat walkways that she had been harping about for weeks, at the beautiful flowers arranged by Myunghee in massive ceramic pots that could only have been painted by a very busy Baek Ah...

“Are you crying?” So asks incredulously.

She nudges him with her elbow. “Don’t judge me.”

Once in front of the closed, wooden doors, she fans her face with one hand while carefully drying her eyes with a hanky. “Do I look okay?” She pats down her hair, her skirt, her puffy eyes.

In a knee-length, flowing beige dress trimmed at the waist, quarter sleeves, nude shoes, her long black hair falling over her back, tucked behind one ear - she’s elegant, beautiful, blooming.

Unable to resist the pull of her full, red lips, he kisses her lightly, immediately prompting a pretty shade of pink to flush her cheeks. “The flowers wilt in comparison.”

The embarrassed little laugh that comes afterwards is accompanied by a grateful squeeze of the hand. “If you say so.”

He smirks. “I know so.”

Wiping the bit of lipstick left on a corner of his lips, she takes hold of the handle before her, while he takes hold of the other. Together, they slide the doors open, and the sound that greets them knocks Hajin backwards, tripping over her own feet, So’s quick reflexes the only reason she’s still upright.

“Congratulations!”

The roar of voices, the faces of so many people make her momentarily deaf and blind. There are so many things to see - streamers and petals falling from the ceiling, people behind the upper banisters beaming down at her, strings of flowers and strips of cloth adorning the walls and door frames, rice and flower wreaths lining the walls.

People smile at her from booths, opened rooms and couches as she passes, and she realizes she recognizes some of them. Some are her friends from before her accident, whom she hasn’t seen in a long, long time. There are old workmates, unfamiliar faces of interested customers, and people who can only be reporters, asking her questions and snapping pictures of everything.
She can’t believe how many people have come. The venue is so packed, it’s stifling, but she smiles, thanks them all for coming and for the gifts some are giving her, which she isn’t sure she deserves, but she accepts them anyway until she’s laden.

She reaches the very back of the building where she thinks she can finally breathe again, until Lady Oh appears looking a little stern. Behind her future stepmother-in-law are the wooden sliding doors separating them from the yard outside, where she just knows another surprise awaits her. All this for the Damiwon opening?

“Eomeonim,” she greets formally, more than a little overwhelmed. “You’re here! I thought you weren’t feeling well. Are you better now?”

“You certainly took your time getting here.” Though Lady Oh’s voice is stern, her expression gradually warms. “After all the hours we put into this, of course I had to come see. Everything is set. We just need our Head Court Lady to return to work.”

That’s when Hajin notices the carefully wrapped package in her teacher’s arms. So relieves her of her gifts, leaving her free to take the package and open it.

From within it flows soft gray silk with finely embroidered flowers warming her eyes, gliding between her fingers in the exact way her old uniform did. She can already feel it on her skin. She can see it’s exactly the way it’s supposed to look.

Having her teacher from the past give her her new uniform is making Hajin emotional again.

“How is it?” Baek Ah asks, joining them. “Everyone else loves theirs, but you were so meticulous with the designs that I-”

“It’s perfect,” she assures him at once, eyes shining with tears of appreciation. “You’re amazing, Baek Ah-nim.”

The smug smile on his face is eclipsed by Jung and Eun’s arrival.

“Hajin-ah, for you!” Eun gleefully thrusts a bouquet of roses into her hands, but before she can even thank him, Jung cuts him off.

“She’s my sister-in-law, so she should get mine first,” he says, smiling swiftly at Hajin and giving her a bouquet full of beautiful stargazer lilies. “I sincerely welcome you to the family, noona.”

She will never forget how, in the past, he had welcomed her into his family by marrying her, to help her get out of the palace, for she had been too late to see it then - his heart - too late to see his heartache. But knowing she never could have reciprocated his feelings, she had decided to feign ignorance, hoping it would lessen his suffering, knowing all too well that until they closed forever, her dying eyes would seek the face of another. “Thank you,” she says, feeling even more choked by unshed tears.

“Yah! Do you want to die?” Eun glares, “I’m older and I got here first.”

“Oh, stop it,” snaps Soon Deok, pushing them both out of the way. Hajin is pleasantly surprised to see her here again - dressed in a pretty pink blouse and black pencil skirt, her hair tied neatly above her head, and her makeup done subtly but beautifully. Hajin can tell it’s Woohee’s doing and wonders where the woman could be hiding as Hajin has yet to come across a single court lady. “Unnie, congratulations,” Soon Deok says, giving her a rectangular box.

“Thank you, but you shouldn’t have…” Hajin sniffs, not sure what she’s done to warrant the
receiving of so many gifts and attention. “Gym gloves!” she gasps, taking the pair out and gazing at them reverently, excitement suddenly replacing her tears.

Deok, Eun and Jung nod happily.

“I chose a pair that supports your wrists especially since you have such dainty hands and fingers. This will cushion the blows when you start training. You’ll get less bruises,” Soon Deok explains enthusiastically.

“I wish I had started off with gloves,” Eun grumbles sourly, earning him a hiss.

From behind Hajin, someone clears his throat.

“Yes?” she smiles sweetly up at So, who looks disbelieving.

“Training?”

“Oh,” Hajin grimaces sheepishly, “yes, just a little er… something we discussed… you know, *those days when I was being locked up*. I figured it’d be good for me to know how to defend myself, don’t you think?” When his face darkens, she indignantly adds, “After the baby is born, of course!”

Before So can respond, Baek Ah steps forward again, fanning his face. “It’s stuffy, isn’t it? Shall we step outside for some fresh air?”

Hajin’s sure there’s another surprise waiting for her the moment she makes eye contact with Eun and Jung. They don’t even bother trying to hide their grins as they take her gifts and lead her to the doors.

“Ladies first,” Eun bows theatrically.

The doors, new and polished, slide open at the barest of touches. With so many people inside, Hajin had indeed felt stuffy, so the gust of fresh air filling her lungs is a welcome relief. And when her eyes have adjusted to the bright sunlight, she sees…

Long tables line the yard on three sides - long tables containing plates and platters and glasses, draped in royal blue and red ceremonial cloth. But it’s not the food, nor the beautiful cake, nor the heaps of gifts and congratulatory flower wreaths that catches her eye, it’s the seven traditionally-dressed ladies posed right in the middle of it all, in suspended animation.

Colorful ribbons adorn their hairs, brightly woven strings and trinkets tied together to complement their layered hanboks of dark mesh, silk and cotton. And in their hands are large fans, beautifully crafted, hand painted, covering the dancers’ faces.

While she surveyed the scene, the rest of the crowd had filed out from behind her, positioning themselves around the place to watch the presentation.

An expectant hush befalls the crowd at the sound of the first drum beat. As one, the dancers flip their fans closed, and Hajin can see it’s her seven court ladies, with Woohee at the very center, leading the group. They all look beautiful.

She watches in awe as they begin their dance, long sleeves twirling gracefully through the air with every turn, every high and low swish of their hands. Hajin can’t take her eyes off the performance, especially with Woohee in the lead. A trained and skilled dancer, she absolutely shone. Her dance is as perfect as it had been a thousand years ago.
The sounds of fans opening and closing at the same time, the beating of the drums with the accompanying zither and occasional flute filling the otherwise silent courtyard mesmerize the crowd. They’re brought back in time, completely bewitched. The court ladies continue their graceful dance, shifting positions, weaving in and out of each other with practiced ease.

It’s with this same silent adoration that the dancers eventually end their performance, flushed and sweating, but smiling happily up at their Head Lady, bowing triumphantly towards the cheering crowd.

“Our choreographer, the beautiful Kim Woohee, with help from master martial artist, Park Soon Deok,” Won announces from across the yard beside Baek Ah, who had a zither in his hands. Hajin hadn’t even realized it had been he who had been playing it. “With this, we officially welcome you all to our opening! A resounding thank you to our very own court ladies for the wonderful performance - many toes were stepped on and many faces were slapped in pursuit of such perfection, I’m sure.” The crowd laughs when the seven ladies nod. Won continues, “And I know we’re all hungry, but before we eat, please help me welcome the real star of today - someone whose knowledge and guidance has been, in a word, invaluable.”

Hajin blushed when all heads turn to her.

“Go Hajin-shi… would you grace us with a few words?” Won extends his hand, gesturing for a mic to be handed to her.

Hajin has never been one to give speeches, especially unplanned, but she has so much to say that she accepts the microphone and greets her audience.

“I’ve never been very good with words, so please bear with me as I try to express my gratitude to… everyone. Thank you all for taking the time to come and be with us today. I must have been the only one who didn’t get the memo!” She gives her friends and court ladies accusing glances, which makes them snicker. “Thank you, everyone, for your wonderful gifts. My ladies, my friends-”

“Family!” Jung adds in a loud voice, making everyone laugh.

“My family,” she grins. “Eunnie, Jungie, Baek Ah… Won, Mu who’s still in Japan, Yo who’s probably at home with unnie… and of course… So.” She smiles and reaches for his hand, gaining confidence as she bows to Lady Oh. “Eomeonim, who generously helped and taught us so much this past month… we couldn’t have done this without any of you.

“I want to thank you, all of you, sincerely from the bottom of my heart.

“We set up this place with a goal… a common vision to bring the past to the present. To provide clean, fresh, natural remedies and products to those who wish to avail of them. To teach others how to live with and appreciate nature in a world where chemicals and pollution are becoming the norm.

“As long as people are willing to learn… we will teach,” she bows low, formally to everyone else. “Thank you for joining us today. The day is made even brighter by your presence.”

“Indeed!” Won quips, clapping along with the crowd as Hajin hands the microphone back and retreats into the crowd. “You’re all so hot, our lovely flowers are starting to wilt. On that note, we invite everyone to sit down for a few refreshments, and lunch. In further celebration, all services will be available at a discount until five o’clock this afternoon, continuing all week, so do take advantage of this opportunity and don’t forget to spread the word to your family and friends! Free samples and brochures are in the main hallway, and our beautiful ladies will be more than happy to
Umbrellas had been erected all around to block out most of the autumn sun’s heat as Hajin sits, talks and laughs with her new family. Together, they occupy a table and exchange amusing stories of their childhoods, as well as of the past two weeks. She learns that Woohee had asked Soon Deok for help in choreographing the dance as she had no experience with weapons, and that the original dance had required the use of swords rather than fans.

“Swords would have looked so good, though!” Jung tuts, disappointed.

“Yah, that’s easy for you to say, you’re a seasoned martial artist. Until they started practicing, these ladies could barely even dance! I know… I saw their first practice.” Won flashes Hajin’s court ladies a teasing smile.

Chaeryung hisses and throws him a napkin. “We got it right in the end, didn’t we?”

A beep makes Hajin look down to see a message from So, telling her to come inside when she’s free. She tells him she’s coming, wondering why he isn’t out here with everyone else.

“Are you going in?” Lady Oh asks, setting her napkin aside.

Hajin nods. “You too?”

“I need to use the bathroom.”

Excusing themselves, Hajin and Lady Oh leave the outside heat in favor of the cooler shade of the Damiwon. They part ways: Lady Oh headed to one of the downstairs bathrooms, Hajin to the foyer, to where So was waiting.

He smiles when he sees her. “There’s one other thing I need to show you.”

“Another surprise?” she grins. “Have you eaten anything at all?”

“Just one other, and yes, a little,” he assures, leading her up the stairs until they’re standing before the closed doors of her new office. He doesn’t open it right away. He takes her hand, looking thoughtful, nostalgic.

She wonders what he has in store for her. “More flowers?” she hazards with a raised eyebrow, teasing him. “I thought that was Baek Ah’s surprise.”

When he just smiles back, eyes completely serious as he gazes down at her, she drops whatever mischievous remark she had been about to make. “What is it?” she asks softly instead.

He leans in and she closes her eyes, heightening the feel of his lips as they lightly kiss her
The door opens and there, facing her from the other side of the room, is a beautiful floor-length white dress, studded with shimmering silver sequins on the bodice and intricate embroidery of lotus flowers on the elegant, layered chiffon skirt. It’s one of the first wedding dresses that had caught her eye before, but which she had decided not to get upon checking the price.

“That-” she chokes, her mind a pile of disoriented smudge. Their wedding day is still a little over a month away, and she had chosen a different dress, so what…?

His warm hand guides her in until they’re standing in the middle of the room.

“What’s this?” she manages to say at last.

He squeezes her hand, her engagement ring snug against his. “I thought about how unenthusiastic you were about the big luxury wedding my father was planning in front of all his business associates… so, with my ever-supportive sidekicks, I developed a plan.”

“A plan,” she repeats tonelessly, realization creeping into her rapid heart beats, snaking its way all over her body and manifesting itself on her suddenly very red face.

Is he saying what she thinks he’s saying…?

“Let’s get married today, Soo-yah.”

That’s all he needs to say because the pieces finally fit. She finally knows what he’s been busy with all this time… why he never took calls in her presence, why she had received so many gifts, why he had holed her up in his place for days… why he had come home from Japan suddenly without telling her.

He’s giving her what she had wanted from the start: a small, intimate wedding surrounded by friends and family, what she had envisioned before the choice had been taken away.

I don’t need much… good weather, you by my side, and everyone I love as witness to my unending devotion… as I give myself to you forever.

She realizes she’s crying and has to choke back an audible sob. “Today?”

“The weather’s good, I’m right here, and so is everyone who matters,” he points out in reference to her words from before.

She lets out a startled gasp and covers her mouth with her hands when her parents suddenly appear. If she hadn’t been so surprised earlier, she would have noticed them standing quietly to the side of the room. “The both of you are in on this?”

Her father chuckles amiably. “In on it? We helped plan everything from the start.” He smiles fondly at So, accepting the young man’s formal greeting.

“I wanted to give you my old wedding dress, but it’s so out-of-fashion, and anyway, I was very pregnant when I wore it so they’d have had to rip it apart to make it fit you and-”

“Really?” Hajin sees her mother’s tears and chokes on her own, “Umma…”

In a thick voice, her mother says, “Since Youngjae, we’ve been so scared… so worried. You’re our only child and we always want what’s best for you… so when we heard you were in a serious
relationship with another man we’d never even met before, we became very anxious but… we’ve come to see that he’s someone who knows your worth, and so we know he will always treasure you above everything else.

“Your future together looks bright. We believe we can send you off safely. We’re content.”

Her father pats his wife’s shaking shoulders and says to So, “No one less could have deserved her.”

“Thank you,” So says sincerely.

Hajin rushes to hug her parents, thanks them for all they’ve done. But there’s one little hitch that makes her anxious. Looking at So, she voices it, “This is all very unorthodox. What will your father think?”

Taking this as her cue, Lady Oh steps into the room. “He’ll be happy as long as he still gets to hold the big wedding he’s always wanted.” After being jilted by his second son and meeting his first son only after the latter was wed, she doesn’t need to add.

She smiles at Hajin. “Are you ready?”

“For what?”

She nods to Hajin’s mother and together, they force the men out the door. “We shall see you later with everybody else.”

“W-wait!” Hajin hasn’t said anything to So yet… hasn’t thanked him for his thoughtfulness, for everything. She feels she has to while the emotion is fresh, but her mother pulls her firmly away.

“Sit still and don’t stress, dearest, you have a little one to consider now,” her mother says in crisp, businesslike tones, dabbing at her eyes with a hanky.

“A few minutes, that’s all I-” Hajin insists, getting back up.

“There’s time enough for that later,” her mother says firmly. “You have the rest of your lives to talk, while we only have a few hours to get you ready. Priorities, Jin-ah!”

“Do you have everything you need?” her father asks from the open door. “Would you like some refreshments, maybe?”

“Just so you know, she eats… a lot. All the time,” So murmurs to Lady Oh. “I’ve put a pack of peanuts in her drawer… they calm her down for some reason.”

Lady Oh’s eyes twinkle knowingly, “She’s in perfectly good hands. Now shoo, both of you, we have work to do and so do you.”
At a quarter to five, the ladies of the Damiwon begin to tidy up. The opening event had been a success - their products all sold out, wide coverage on the media, and an hour ago, they had even started to trend on major business websites. And the reviews have all been positive.

“We’ll finish up. You both get ready,” one court lady, Lina, takes the cleaning implements from Chaeryung and Woohee, to the consensus of everyone else.

Grateful, the two nod and remove their aprons.

“Thank you. We’ll leave you in charge of Myunghee-unnie, she should be here soon. And afterwards, get yourselves ready. Remember that the car will be here at half past five,” Woohee reminds them, rushing out of the room to look for Soon Deok.

She finds her out in the yard, her makeup smudged and her outfit in disarray, but Woohee doubts their friend notices as she’s happily stacking chairs and tables to the sides with the men.

Woohee whisks her away in a minute and leads her to the room where Chaeryung has prepared everything they need. Their evening gowns are already laid out on one table, while piles of makeup are scattered on another. Chaeryung and Woohee work on Soon Deok first, then on each other.

They work fast and at a quarter past five, they’re done, standing side-by-side in front of a floor-length mirror, admiring each other.

“Picture time!” Chaeryung takes her phone out while Woohee directs Soon Deok on where to stand and how to pose.

“And what’s this supposed to mean?” the confused girl asks, staring at her crossed forefinger and thumb.

“It's a heart. It's alright, you don't have to understand it, just do what we do,” Woohee says bracingly.

They had just taken their fourth picture and Soon Deok was just starting to get a hang of the poses when the door opens and they all freeze.

“Wah, you girls look amazing!” Baek Ah exclaims admiringly, striding casually into the room with Won and Eun.

Deok blushes at the way Eun is dumbly gaping at her, but he doesn't say anything so neither does she.

Won pretends not to care and instead leaves, saying, “Everyone is waiting, we should really-” but Baek Ah cuts him off with a tut and a headlock, “Hyung! We may never get this chance again! The room lighting is perfect, we're at the prime of our lives, and we look good! One picture. Come on, hyung~”

Woohee has an urge to laugh. She hasn't seen this side of Baek Ah in years.

“Guys, they're looking for us at the-” Jung enters and stops, looking at each face in surprise.

There's Woohee smiling shyly at Baek Ah, who's clinging onto Won’s arm… and there’s Eun gawking at Soon Deok, who's looking at him like he's crazy… and then there's Chaeryung, who's taking candid pictures of everyone.
Jung could have said a number of things, but all that registers is, “Hey! I can't believe none of you called me for pictures!"

After what seems like a hundred later, Won finally puts his foot down, saying they’re going to be late. When nobody listens, he adds, “Hyung’s going to kill us.”

That does it. He watches, satisfied, as everyone hastily exits the room. He catches Chaeryung’s arm before she can escape. Lately, the two of them have been fighting over every little thing and he’s been wanting to clear whatever misunderstanding had caused such a rift.

“The van’s going to be full of people. Ride with me instead.”

He isn't surprised that she's surprised… he's surprised that she looks apologetic. “Oh, I'm not riding with them. My date is waiting for me outside.”

“Date?”

He knows he said the wrong thing when her eyes flash in anger. “Why are you so surprised? Are you the only one allowed to date? Shall I live my life all alone, then? Just because you don't want me doesn’t mean other people won’t either!”

Already, he regrets his thoughtlessness. He reasons that it's due to the fact that in all the years they'd worked together, he'd never heard of Chaeryung going out on dates. It felt like an entirely alien concept. Thinking it through, however, he realizes how much of an ass he must have sounded like. Chaeryung is young and perfectly free to do whatever she wants.

And now he's stuck trying to figure out how to defend himself. “I didn't mean that!” he snaps back, quickly regaining his composure. “How can you bring a strange man to a private event between friends and family?”

“The invitation said I could bring an escort and I asked permission beforehand, so why should it bother you? Stop trying to control me, Won-nim. I don't work for you anymore. We have nothing more in common. If you won't stop,” she narrows her eyes and sidesteps him on her way out, making sure to keep a distance of two feet between them, “I'll have to assume you're obsessed with me and get a restraining order.”

He's so dumbfounded by this that for the first time in his life, he's incoherent. “O-ob-obsessed?!” he roars, outraged. “Restraining order?!”

“That's right! I'll get one first thing tomorrow morning if you keep bothering me!”

Fuming, Won growls between clenched teeth, “Fine. Fine! Do what you want. We have nothing in common. I don't even know why I worried about you in the first place. Forget I offered!” He overtakes her and storms out of the building.

Breathing heavily, Chaeryung takes a moment to calm down. “Worried? Hah!” she scoffs, flinging her bag roughly over her arm and stomping away. “Like you ever.”

Her date is handsome enough in his dress shirt and slacks to make her almost forget her anger. Almost. Hastily putting on a smile, she greets him as warmly as she can. “Hi! You must be Junsushi?”

She already likes the way his eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles. His voice is very pleasant, too. “Yes. And you're Chaeryung? You look very beautiful tonight. I hope I'm dressed suitably enough.”
Feeling self-conscious at the compliment, she tucks her hair behind her ear and takes his proffered arm. "You look fantastic."

She's a little taken aback to see he isn't looking at her, but behind her. Turning around, she sees why. To her right, Woohee gasps as well, but, surprisingly, it's Soon Deok who takes out a phone to snap a photo.

Myunghee's looking beautiful in her ivory gown, her hair up in a stylish chignon held by a string of white pearls. From her ears fall two more pearls on delicate silver chains, and on her neck is a simple pearl necklace to finish the set. Her excited smile grows wider as she pulls the doors wider apart, revealing the vision in white behind them.

"Watch your step now," Hajin's mother can be heard saying, fussing over the long train of her daughter's wedding dress.

"Oh! You're so beautiful, sanggung!" Woohee says, rushing forward to help her down the stairs.

When they reach the bottom, Hajin shakes her head. "Woohee-yah... outside of work, I'm not your superior. You know I think of you as a sister."

Woohee knows, and she smiles as she lowers the veil over her sister's face. "Unnie." She's so happy, she has to force herself not to tear up.

"Alright, it's a very cool evening, so here are some shawls for the girls," Lady Oh says briskly, telling the guards to lock up as she descends the stairs and helps Hajin into the white sedan with her parents. "We're a little behind schedule, so let's hope the traffic tonight isn't bad."

To everyone else, she claps her hands, "Get in and let's go!"

Chapter End Notes

So sooooo sorry for the late update! It took almost a month :(

Readers of Goryeo Outlander will know it's because we had an event at work and it used up most of my time and energy, and then afterwards, either from exhaustion or depression, all I could do was sleep lol

I promise the next chapter won't take so long! We're very nearly there, guys, just a few more stuff to tackle and then we're done!

Some of you might be wondering "why an evening wedding?" well, because wedding in ancient Chinese is 婚姻, "hun yin", which I remember hearing in SHR when So proposed to Soo in episode 18 (when she said no and gave him to Yeonhwa T-T). Wikipedia led me to the information that 昏 (hun) means night/dusk, which implies the ceremony be held in the evening, "which is deemed as a time of fortune". Also, because night fits with the concept I have planned! I hope you all enjoy the wedding in the next chapter ^^

Going through all your reviews has made me really guilty! So sorry guys that it took so long to update! I'll be a better person, I promise TT-TT I've already started on the wedding. Here's to hoping I can get it done in three days! haha
Do You Remember?

Chapter Summary

*Hajin is sure of only one thing: that at the end of this dark trail, someone is waiting.*
*Someone who’s waited for her for a very long time. Someone she loves.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s fully dark by the time they arrive at the venue. Instead of dropping them off at the hotel lobby, the cars drive on up a road lined with lamps with warm light that barely reaches the top of the tall, old pine trees. The higher up the mountain they go, the more nervous Hajin gets. She hadn’t at all expected to be wed today. The surprises so far have been endless.

“We’re almost there,” her mother says in a hushed whisper, squeezing Hajin’s hand, which she hasn’t once let go of.

The city lights below look beautiful from where they are, and she had just started to wonder when they would arrive when the sedan slows and eventually stops. She takes a confused look around. “Are we in the right place?”

They’re at the crest of the mountain, where the air is crisp and cool. It’s entirely dark out, the only lights coming from the cars and the gadgets the rest have brought with them.

Her father lends her a hand and she steps out, slowly, looking around at the imposing dark trees. “This way,” he says quietly, leading her towards a brick path the cars’ headlights are pointing to. Woohee arrives with Soon Deok and Chaeryung, the three of them going over Hajin, arranging her train, her veil, her bodice. And then Myunghee comes, holding a beautiful bouquet of red roses and white calla lilies.

“It’s a bit further in,” Myunghee explains in a hushed voice.

With everyone and everything so quiet, Hajin takes the bouquet with a nod and follows them onto the path between the trees.

The moment they reach the last tree, all the lights go off, and even her companions gasp at the sight: ahead of them is a vast field of grass, with trees in the far distance, surrounding them all. She can see the still silhouettes of people and objects before her, but it’s the clear sky that draws their eyes, for here, tonight, high above and away from the brightness of the cities, it plays host to thousands of twinkling stars, so much more than she has ever seen in this life.

The constellations are there for all to see. They float down to her in memories.

*That square thing over there is called Pegasus.*
*P-Pe- what?*
*Pe-ga-sus.*
*Peg... Pesus.*

The ghosts of laughs long lost reach her ears, make her shiver from cold and nostalgia. *Finally,*
they seem to say, *freedom under the skies.*

All of it… all those years of pain, laughter, experiences… culminating into this one moment.

“Ready?” her mother’s whisper seems to carry all the way to the end, because a moment later, a piano starts to play, so softly that you can hardly notice it until it’s accompanied by a violin, then a guitar, then the deep hum of a cello.

Hajin is sure of only one thing: that at the end of this dark trail, someone is waiting. Someone who’s waited for her for a very long time. Someone she loves.

The thought of him warms her as she takes her first step towards their shared future. She pauses when light comes to life by her feet. With each startling step, another light illuminates, another row of stars gone above, but shimmering on her gown with all its sequins and silver dust. With each light, a familiar face smiles at her.

Her court ladies have found their seats. On the row ahead of them are some of her old friends. On other rows, she can see her relatives, and people she assumes are So’s. She’s surprised to see Mu, who beams widely at her, a deep, throaty chuckle escaping him when he sees her startled face. She’s more grateful than surprised to see Yo, who waves cheerily from beside Jung, who pumps a fist and mouths, ‘Fighting!’

Eun, Baek Ah and Won also wave at her, having found their own seats by their families, and as they reach the last row, Hajin is greeted by Oh Sooyeon’s kind smile beside Wang Geon’s indulging one.

But Hajin has eyes for only one person and she watches as he comes over to stand beside his parents. Both families greet each other in silence, and then her parents let her go.

*Do you remember?*

She takes his hand and walks with him. He can’t take his eyes off of her.

*I remember when we first met.*

The stars overhead are gone, only his star remains, shining brilliantly before him. The star that rose in Goryeo.

*I remember when you first told me you loved me.*

The lights blare, the music dies, everything returns to silence.

*I remember our first night.*

Audible gasps escape everyone when tiny specks of white float down towards them from above. *It’s too early,* they whisper in awe, but she doesn’t think so. He smiles as he watches her, his Soo holding out a gloved hand to catch them.

The first snow comes and goes in a matter of seconds, but it’s enough. Through the veil, their eyes meet, and she relaxes into a smile. *You’re here. You’ll always be here. Beside me.*

*I’ll hold your hand -*

- *and walk with you through the ages.*

*I’ll remember.*
“I thought you were stuck in Japan!” Hajin can’t help but pout when Mu walks up to them with his family.

“Ah, how could I miss my own brother’s wedding?” he chides.

“You look very beautiful tonight,” his wife, Yujeong, gushes from beside him.

“Thank you,” Hajin smiles. She hasn’t stopped smiling all evening. “You’re all very handsome and beautiful tonight, as well.”

Her new sister-in-law reaches behind her to bring a young girl forward. “Gyeonghwa made you a little something. Give your gift to your new aunty.”

Shy as she had been in the past, Gyeonghwa raises the card she had made at home and hides behind her father’s legs when her aunt takes it.

In a child’s awkward scrawl are written words of congratulations and welcome atop well-drawn little people that Hajin can only assume is the entire Wang clan.

“Did you draw this?” she asks, looking at every face and easily recognizing Jung’s toothy grin, Eun’s mischievous wink, Baek Ah’s confident grin among others. Hajin is full of admiration for the child’s work. “Thank you, Gyeonghwa-yah! It’s very beautiful!” she says sincerely, giving the delighted little girl a kiss on the cheek.

“Munnie sends her congratulations and apologies,” Yo appears, clasping his brother’s hand and turning to Hajin. “She really wanted to come, but…”

“It’s alright, she needs to take it easy,” Hajin understands at once. “How does she find the cream I made her? I was going to make her more.”

“She likes it a lot,” he replies pleasantly, “says it makes her itch less than the others she’s tried.”

“Great! I’ll send more over, shall I?” she says happily.

“Cream?” So murmurs into her ear after Yo leaves to talk to their father.

“For the stretch marks,” she explains, trying not to feel too exasperated at the puzzled look on his face. Taking his chin and bringing her face close to his, she feigns a kiss and says, “Read up because I expect you to help me with mine!”
one glass of champagne and then another.

His father, stepmother, and half-sisters are seated at another table, having spared him a glance during the wedding and nothing else afterwards, but that doesn’t bother him… he’s used to the silent treatment. In fact, he prefers it because it’s a big improvement to the snarling and the sarcasm. What bothers him… is the way she keeps smiling, touching her hair and laughing at every little thing her date says. At one point, Won’s pretty sure he saw her ask what time it was and then laugh when the man answered, “9:00”. Is there perhaps a spinach leaf stuck in between the man’s teeth? Did he maybe rinse his mouth with laughing gas by accident earlier? Won can’t wrap his mind around it. She laughs at Every. Little. Thing.

“Hyung, after party in the hotel later, Jung’s already booked the bar,” Baek Ah whispers into his ear halfway through dinner. “If you have friends, call them over. The night is young! We should be celebrating!”

Friends? Sure, he has friends. In fact, he has a lot of them. He takes his phone and types in a message. She’s right, she’s perfectly free to date whomever she wants, he thinks savagely, and so am I.

He tries not to look interested when Baek Ah hops from one table to the next, eventually landing himself at her table. She says yes, and so does her date. Won scoffs.

“Me?” Woohee asks, surprised, when Chaeryung starts talking about the things they should do, the songs they should sing.

“Yes, you!” Chaeryung’s more surprised that Woohee’s surprised. “Aren’t you coming?” She doesn’t miss it - the stolen, awkward glance between Baek Ah and Woohee. It was brief but definitely there. Could these two possibly have a history?

“But of course you should come!” Baek Ah’s easy manner almost convinces Chaeryung she was just imagining it. Almost. Because Woohee is, despite her many talents, a terrible actress. “The more the merrier, right?”

He claps Woohee’s shoulder, laughing easily before going to the next table. Woohee sees Chaeryung looking suspicious and forces a laugh of her own. “The salad is good, isn’t it?”

Chaeryung rolls her eyes. “Oh yes, I just witnessed something interesting between you two but by all means, let’s talk about the lettuce.”

Woohee sighs heavily. “Whatever Baek Ah and I had is long gone. Please… act like you don’t know anything. It’s awkward enough as it is without other people knowing.”

“I’m thinking sanggung knows, though?” Chaeryung hazards, nodding at the confirmation on Woohee’s face. “Well, if it bothers you that much, I won’t say anything about it… but I don’t think you’re being entirely truthful.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I don’t think it’s true, what you said… if it’s awkward, then doesn’t that mean there’s still a little something there?”

Woohee blushes. “Maybe, but it’s nothing good.”

“I don’t believe that either,” Chaeryung shrugs, eyeing Baek Ah from across her shoulder. “I haven’t known him as long as the rest, but from I’ve seen, he’s someone with firm opinions. He
doesn’t go around pretending to be someone else. He’s his own person. He wouldn’t play with you like this, acting all cozy and friendly, if he secretly hated you.”

Woohee wants to believe that… but she’s afraid to. She’s been alone all this time and just recently started to feel it again… what it’s like to have a family… sisters. She doesn’t want to mess it up by bringing up the past, something she’s long since buried. “Or I mean nothing to him and that’s why he acts like it doesn’t matter. Whatever it is… I’d rather just… not.”

Chaeryung sees Woohee isn’t keen on the subject and decides to drop it in favor of something more neutral. “So,” she says instead, leaning back to include Junsu in the conversation, “what are good karaoke songs that you guys like?”

At a separate table, Eun and Jung clasp their hands together and kneel. “Grandma Park, please!” they cry out in unison.

The old woman tuts. “You boys don’t know how to quit, do you?”

“That’s what makes them good businessmen,” her son, Park Sookyung, chuckles. “Geon is the same… never takes no for an answer.”

“Master Park!” Eun says, turning to him, “Soon Deok’s such a good daughter. Don’t you think she deserves a night out?”

“I don’t know, kid, I have to get up early tomorrow morning,” comes the reply. “I can’t wait around for her to come home, or to call me or-”

“I’ll take her home myself, just give her a key to your home,” Eun says without thinking, though he finds himself fervently wishing he had thought it through more carefully when father and grandmother alike lean forward in their seats.

“What are your intentions towards my daughter?” Master Park asks gruffly.

“In-in… intentions?” Eun chokes, stumbling backwards onto the grass.

“Oh hush, it’s about time that girl got herself a boyfriend! I was starting to lose hope,” Grandma Park shoves her son aside and points at Eun, “you take her home whenever you want, young man.”

Despite his nerves, Eun can’t help but say, “Really?”

“No!” Master Park growls. “I do not accept!”

“Abeoji, I promise I’ll only give her non-alcoholic beverages, and she’ll be home before midnight!” Eun says. “Jung swears too, right, Jungie?” On cue, his faithful young cousin nods.

“Abeoji?” Master Park can’t hide his disbelief.

“That’s right, that’s right. With you two looking out for her, she’ll be just fine,” Grandma Park chuckles merrily, getting to her feet. “Deok-ah! Here’s grandma’s key.”

Surprised and confused, Soon Deok comes over to take it. “What’s this for?”

“Your father and I are going home early. You can stay and party with these fine, young men. Just be sure to be home by midnight.”

“Really?” Soon Deok can’t believe it. Her overprotective father never lets her stay out that late.
“Umma!” Master Park protests, but his mother ignores him.

“But I’m telling you now, I don’t want to hear about you getting drunk and having sex,” Grandma Park adds, to the mortification of her young listeners. “I’m old and I believe in waiting. I waited, my son waited, and I hope my one and only granddaughter can-”

“OKAY!” Soon Deok says loudly, blocking her dumbfounded friends from view. “Thank you, sleep well, see you in the morning.”

So wraps his arms around his wife’s cold shoulders and leans against his car. They had just bid farewell to most of their guests and are now left with just some of their immediate families and closest friends. They take this moment to breathe. “Tired?” he asks when he sees her rub her eyes.

“A little,” she admits, leaning into him. “But it’s okay.”

They exchange mutual smiles and watch the scene before them with interest. “Is it just me or has Chaeryung been smiling more often than necessary tonight?” she remarks.

He shrugs. “Maybe she really likes her date.”

“Or,” she nudges him with her elbow and nods at Won, “she’s trying to make someone jealous?”

So snorts. “That’s not very nice.”

“My dear, all’s fair in love and war. Nice becomes a relative term.”

“Well, if you’re right, she’s certainly succeeding;” he forces down a laugh at the sight of Won’s upper lip twitching, watching Chaeryung’s date wipe a smudge of chocolate from her lips with his finger. He tuts at Won’s simplicity. “That kid needs to start reevaluating his feelings. He’s losing major points just standing there.” He hears Hajin’s noncommittal hum and laughs, “You enjoy seeing him like that? Soo-yah…”

The note of accusation in his voice makes her blush. “What? He played her worse in the past. She should be allowed to be this petty,” she defends her friend. “I like him, I do, but let me remind you how he brutally shot her down when she confessed her feelings that one time. Besides… if it works…”

“Alright, alright, I see your point. You win,” he says, adding in a grumble, “Married an hour and already fighting.”

She pats his hand good-naturedly. “It’s not a fight, it’s a discussion.”

“Mhm.”

“Speaking of which… what do you think Eunnie and Soon Deok are talking about so seriously over there?”

As they watch, Eun takes something out of his coat pocket and gives it to her.

Hajin gasps excitedly. “Is he confessing?”
Soon Deok scowls and pushes the object back towards him.

“Oh,” Hajin deflates, her feelings changing rapidly from excited to horrified as Soon Deok walks away. “Oh. I don’t think it went very well.”

To her chagrin, So covers her eyes. “One: it’s a private matter. Two: you’re only distressing yourself. Three: you don’t need to do anything, they’re adults and they’ll figure it out themselves. Four: everyone’s having an after party at the hotel. Do you want to join them or go to bed?”

It’s a tough choice, but if she’s to be completely honest… “It’s not like I can drink or party as hard as they can,” she mumbles morosely.

“To sleep it is.”

She turns in his arms. “Really? You’re going to let me sleep, just like that?”

“As much as I’d like to entertain you ‘til morning, Soo-yah…” he murmurs, amused, “your health comes first.”

“It’s not yet even ten in the evening,” she protests.

“You’ve been up and about all day. Your eyes are already starting to droop.”

She can’t deny it. She would have been fine if she had had her usual afternoon nap, but with everything that happened… she stifles a yawn and pouts up at him. “I wasn’t able to prepare a gift for you. I thought I had time…”

“All I want is you.” He taps her playfully under the chin. “As long as you’re happy and healthy.”

She grins. “I’ll do my best to give you a happy and healthy baby.” She loves seeing his smile. She contemplates dedicating an entire album to nothing else. “So…”

“Hm?”

“I love you forever.”

She wishes she had a camera to capture this one in particular.

“I’ve loved you longer.”

Her smile is gone. She can’t believe he’s teasing her. “It’s not a contest,” she remonstrates.

“No, it’s the truth.”

Angrily, she straightens up, but he holds her in place. “I love you, too.”

Unable to escape, she decides looking impassive and annoyed will have to do - a hard feat when he’s kissing every inch of her face. “So you’ve said,” she says stiffly.

“Is this still a discussion or are we actually fighting now?” he murmurs, moving down to her neck.

“It’s a protest.”

“Mm,” he nods, “and what do I need to do to stop it?”

“Ice cream.”
Shocked, he stops kissing her. “In this cold weather?”

She shrugs. “The body wants what it needs.”

“How can ice cream possibly be good for a baby that small?”

“I don’t know. Don’t question mother nature.”

“I’m questioning mother, not nature.”

She ignores that and whines. “Ice cream. I want.”

He laughs at how cute she looks. “Fine, let’s go get some ice cream.”

Eun remembers the first time he met Soon Deok.

It was a warm spring day. The park had been full of children enjoying the good weather and Eun, who had always been small, had waited patiently for some older kids to finish playing at the sandbox at the edge of the playground before taking over, only to have them return and tell him it was their territory and he was unwelcome.

“You said it was boring,” he had shot back, “you said it was a place for little girls and that you’d rather go biking ins-”

To his surprise, the larger kid had grabbed him by the collar and hauled him off his feet. “You rich kids always do whatever you want. Do you think you own the world just because you have more money than the rest of us?”

“No, that’s not what I-”

“Strutting around in your rich clothes and rich cars. Where are your bodyguards, little boy?”

“I don’t have any b-”

“Good.” And that’s when Eun knew he was in real trouble. The boy’s large face loomed right above him, menacing eyes meeting frightened ones. “Boys!” he yelled over his shoulder and Eun watched, frozen, as three others came into view. “Shall we teach this rich boy some manners?”

It was the first time he’d ever been punched. He cried out in pain and almost pissed himself when, crashing to the ground, a large shadow covered him. He cowered away from it and attempted to call out for help, but his fear choked him. All he could do was sob and pray someone would come and save him somehow.

Someone was quick to answer his silent plea.

He soon realized that the shadow’s owner had not, in fact, been facing him. “Back again?” it challenged the older boys in a young girl’s voice. “I thought I warned you to stay away last time.”

“Park Soon Deok!” the biggest boy spat, though he made no attempt to come closer. “Stay out of this.”
“Or what?”

“We won’t hold back this time! We won’t care that you’re a girl,” another boy replied.

“Go play with your dolls, little girl,” their leader mocked in a singsong voice before feigning a gasp, “Oh, but my mother says only pretty girls can have dolls. Is that why you don’t have any, ugly?”

Eun seethed with rage at the insults. A group of older boys ganging up on a girl. They were nothing but cowards with big fists. He got up to help, but Soon Deok pushed him back down.

“I won’t warn you again,” she growled.

Eun wanted to scream at her to run away. Five large guys versus one small girl hardly seemed a fair match, but to his surprise, Soon Deok had moves even the older boys couldn’t counter. She was quick, moving between her heavier, slower adversaries easily. And though she looked small, her punches and kicks were strong. She knew just where to hit to cause pain.

With one final swipe of her arm, she smacked the largest boy’s nose, hitting it squarely with the hard bone of her elbow. He howled and fell to the ground in pain, blood dripping from his nose to the green grass beneath him.

“I warned you,” Soon Deok growled, stomping her foot at the other bruised up boys, satisfied when they flinched away. “This playground is for all children. Until you understand that, don’t you dare come back!

“I’ll be watching you!” she yelled after their retreating backs. She looked down at their shocked victim and smiled. “It’s okay now, you can play at the sandbox.”

“Y-you... how did you...?”

She helped him to his feet. “My father taught me. Oh, your eye is very hurt. You should ask someone for help with that.”

But he shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m used to getting hurt.” That was a lie and they both knew it. “...thank you for saving me,” he mumbled, embarrassed. “People are always picking on me for being small. Even my own cousins don’t want to play with me...”

Soon Deok watched his sulky expression with sympathy. She was something of an oddball, herself. Without hesitation, she made a decision and stepped into the sandbox. “My father taught me how to make this when I was smaller...” she said, carving out a round pair of ears over a large, heart-shaped head. “He told me that even though bears usually live alone... they have strong family bonds and will always protect each other from harm. He said that even though my mother is not with us anymore, she’s always watching me.”

Eun watched, transfixed, as the animal’s face slowly came into view; he listened with equal fascination. Afterwards, when she smiled and held out a hand, he hardly knew what to do with himself, nor where to look.

“I’m Park Soon Deok and I’ll be your family if you want.”

He stared dumbly at her hand. His family?

“Bears don’t stay with each other forever, so the babies need to learn how to take care of themselves. I can teach you how to fight so you won’t be afraid of getting hurt anymore,” she
explained.

“I…” he tried to find the right words, “My-”

“Park Soon Deok!”

They both jumped at the sound of this new voice. Paling slightly, Soon Deok got up and faced her glowering father.

“A bunch of parents just came to me… they said you beat up their sons! I saw the boys and they are very badly injured. I didn’t teach you how to fight so you can go around beating other people up!”

“They started it! Look, they hit him first!” she cried out defensively, pointing at Eun, whom Park Sookyung had not noticed until then.

“Did they, boy?” he barked, making Eun jump then nod in quick succession. Park Sookyung’s mouth twitched at the sight of the frightened, pitiful boy. His daughter, defender of the weak and helpless. While he thought about whether or not he ought to punish Soon Deok for beating up four kids while saving another, Eun said, “Please, ahjussi… she saved me. Please don’t punish her.”

He cleared his throat, deciding he’ll think about punishing his daughter on their way home. “I’ll be the one to decide that. Soon Deok, let’s go. I only promised you an hour.” To Eun, he added, “You should put some ice on that eye, boy.”

“Will you be back tomorrow?” Soon Deok asked quickly when her father turned away. “I have to go now, but I’ll be here same time tomorrow if you can come.”

Eun smiled and nodded. “I’ll be here.”

“Great! See you tomorrow, then!” She was gone before he could even tell her his name.

“That was Soon Deok?!” Jung’s loud gasp earns him a smack in the face.

“Shh!” Eun hisses, putting a finger to his lips. “Are you crazy? Keep your voice down.”

“But,” Jung whispers, aghast. The number of times he’s heard that story… “I’ve known Soon Deok for years! My brother even longer! Why didn’t you say so before?”

Eun sighs. “What for? I stood her up. My mother never let me go back to that park after she saw my face. Soon Deok… probably really hated me. It’s better that she doesn’t know.”

“You don’t know that,” Jung says. “Maybe she was disappointed, but she wouldn’t hate you!”

“I saw her again after a year… my mother brought me to one of So-hyung’s competitions and she was there. She didn’t even recognize me. I figured she hated me so much that she blocked me from her memory.” Eun’s so glum, he lays on the bar counter and begins drawing little bears out of the water droplets there. Or maybe he just wasn’t important enough to remember. “Until I became her student, she only knew me as your cousin.”

Jung watches his pitiful cousin and then comes to a rash decision. “I’ll call her right now-”
“NO!” Eun yells so loudly, everyone at the hotel bar turns to stare. He quickly lies, “You’ve had too much to drink, Jung-ah, you need to think about your health! Think of your poor liver!”

“What?” Jung’s so confused, he doesn’t stop Eun from forcing him back into his seat.

“One word to her and you’re dead!” Eun warns in a low voice.

Jung shakes his head. “You make no sense, hyung. She’s the girl you’ve had a crush on since you were eight!” To himself, he adds, “I can’t believe I never noticed.” When Eun makes no comment, he sighs, “Hyung… I know Soon Deok. She doesn’t hold grudges. She’s one of the nicest people I know.”

Eun knows that, too… and remembering what happened earlier gives him more than a twinge of regret.

“Master.”

Soon Deok stopped waving after her father and grandmother and turned around, a pleasantly quizzical expression on her face. “Yes?”

“There’s something I…” Eun hesitated for just a moment before closing the distance between them. “I wanted to give you something.” He took a box from within his coat pocket and gave it to her, anticipation building when she took it.

“What is it?” she asked, turning it over curiously for clues. She had just started unwrapping it when he said, “Just a little something for the most beautiful girl here.”

He waited for her to continue, but she didn’t. To his bafflement, she looked annoyed and angry, pushing the box back towards his hands with such ferocity, he almost dropped it. “What-?”

“Stop making fun of me.” Eun was surprised to see and hear this side of Soon Deok. Her face, her voice held no trace of humor at all.

“Making fun of-?”

“I’m not beautiful, I know that. I know people make fun of me behind my back, saying I look like a man. And it’s true. I look like my father. I’ve come to terms with it and have learned to ignore the comments. But you…” she narrowed her eyes at him in disbelief. Eun had never seen so much hate directed at him in his life. “I thought of you as more than a student, I thought of you as a friend. So why? Why would you make fun of me like this? The evening was going perfectly! Did you really think I would find this funny? I know you like to joke. I tolerate it and sometimes even encourage it… but I never thought you’d go this far.”

He watched in horror as a tear rolled down her cheek. “But, I didn’t-”

“Yeah, you didn’t think I cared,” she said curtly. “Strange Soon Deok, ugly Soon Deok, tomboy Soon Deok, wanky Soon Deok… the butt of all jokes. No matter how hard I try, nobody takes me seriously.”

Eun was so bewildered and lost for words that he could only stare.

“But I thought you did,” she whispered, lifting a hand to wipe her tears as she hurried past him into the trees.
Before Eun could come up with a plan to remedy the situation, she had called for a taxi and gone home.

"She deserves better," he whispers softly, hating himself for being so thoughtless and foolish. The number of things he could have said and done... the number of ways he could have approached her... after all these years, he was still nothing but a coward.

"Hyung..." Jung puts a consoling hand on his shoulder. "Just tell her the truth."

Eun wonders if it can really be as simple as that. Before he can contemplate it further, a scream immediately followed by a crash alerts them to danger.

Chapter End Notes

Completely unorthodox wedding! Well, can you really see So marrying his woman the way everyone else does? :P

Also, props to those who may have noticed the “startling step” in reference to the English translation of the book hee hee…

On Mu’s wife’s name… in Goryeo he was married to Queen Uihwa, but no other information is given as to her birth name, etc, so I used a translator and found out Uihwa (이화) meant “fairy”, another word for which is “Yojeong (요정)”. I tweaked this and made it “Yujeong” which means warm-heartedness xD As for Yo, his queen was Munseong and there’s no English translation for it, so I had no choice but to keep it as is lol

On the silent monologue/dialogue happening at the wedding, some of you might be confused… is it just Soo talking to herself? Or is the crazy author making So and Soo communicate telepathically for dramatic effect? All I’ll say is how you interpret it is entirely up to you :D I wrote it that way precisely so that it can go both ways. Personally, I’d rather it be a silent conversation, but really… whatever floats your boat!
“It was a nightmare,” Jung rests his head in his hands, feeling tired and depressed. “Maybe I shouldn't have booked the bar and just let everyone go home early. So much mishap could have been avoided.”

From across the table, So and Hajin silently sip on their drinks. Seeing Jung’s miserable expression, however, Hajin finally speaks up, “You shouldn't be too hard on yourself. You just wanted everyone to have a good time. We're sorry we left so early.”

“No, don't be. You were tired and needed sleep,” Jung mumbles glumly, at the same time thinking his cousins would have behaved better with his brothers around.

Hajin makes the mistake of glancing at So because the moment their eyes meet, she has a strong urge to giggle.

“Note to self... do not give tired, pregnant wife ice cream in the evenings.”
“Note to husband: do not come between pregnant wife and food.”

In her defense, the hotel’s penthouse suite had been large and beautiful and cozy and made for some very new and interesting experiences.

Much better for trusting, innocent Jung to keep thinking they had spent their wedding night fast asleep in each others’ arms.

She clears her throat. “So what happened to Won?”

Jung shakes his head. “His face is messed up. That athlete got him real good. He disappeared last night, no one knows where he went. I suppose he didn’t want Uncle and Aunty to see him like that. You know how they are…”

So does know. His uncle and aunt’s attitude towards Won can be quite despicable. “I suppose I shouldn't be surprised.”

Hajin is aghast at So’s nonchalance. “While he did say some stupid things, Chaeryung’s date shouldn't have hit him! Violence is never the answer.”

“Sounds to me like he did more than say some stupid things,” he shrugs.

Jung grimaces in memory. “He was very drunk. I wonder what possessed him to bring over so many girls… he usually only brings one or two to such occasions, but yesterday, there were ten.
Once again, So and Hajin exchange looks and know they’re thinking the same thing. It seems likely Won thought he could make Chaeryung jealous by flirting with so many at once. Evidently, that plan backfired. Miserably.

“You should give Won dating advice,” Hajin whispers out of the corner of her mouth.

So laughs without humor and murmurs back, “You know the world has gone crazy when someone like Won starts taking dating advice from me.”

She rolls her eyes. “He may have been a smooth talker in the past but in this life, he’s severely misunderstood!”

“Sooyah,” he leans over to whisper in her ear, “I don’t think he’s even aware that he’s jealous.”

“Hyung…” Jung’s quiet voice breaks through their bickering. His tone is strangely serious, his expression even more so. “Is father really going to file a case against mother?”

So had wondered when the subject would be brought up. “Yes.”

Jung looks up from the glass he’s been turning in his hands. “Can't you do anything to dissuade him? He listens to you, hyung. There's no one else better who can stand up for her.” Seeing So’s hesitation, he continues, “She hasn't been right since the divorce, you know she hasn't. I know what she tried to do- what she did was bad but she's almost 60 years old. She doesn't have long to live because of her illness… she won't survive being sent to prison. Hyung…”

“Illness?” Hajin asks.

“She has a heart condition,” Jung explains. “She developed it after the divorce. The doctor said she had too much pent up frustrations.”

“The ailment of the heart has become an ailment of the body…” Hajin has an acute understanding of that pain. She would not wish it on anyone, not even the worst of her enemies.

Jung and So both look at her.

“How bad is it?” she asks.

“The doctor said it was manageable, but that she had to take it easy,” Jung sighs. To his brother he says, “I just heard from Secretary Kang… he's been fired.”

This is news to So. “What?”

“All of mother's staff have been fired. And… she's been taken off the board. She holds no power in the company anymore. She does nothing but stay at home all day and Secretary Kang says she's been drinking and smoking again!” Jung’s desperation has made him teary-eyed. “I didn't want to say anything because of the wedding… but she’s been pushing herself too hard. They found her unconscious in her study just a few months ago and the doctors said the damage was irreversible. And now she's even lost grandfather's company. Hyung… she's dying.

“That's why…” Jung plants his palms and forehead on the table, begging, “I know it's a lot to
ask… I know she tried to hurt you and a lot of people, but she's powerless now. Please, she only did those things because she thought she was helping you, hyung. It was misguided and wrong and there's no excuse for any of it… but she can't hurt anyone anymore. I beg you… please ask father for leniency.”

So feels like his mind is on fire, burning through too many memories from both his past and present as they fight for supremacy in his mind.

His mother had neglected him, shunned him, manipulated him, allowed others to mistreat and abuse him for years. She had called him a liar, a thief, a monster. Her disgrace.

No, she took care of him… sent him to the best of schools, gave him the best teachers, made sure he never wanted for anything. She called him her pride, her joy. She made sure the world knew it.

Wrong… misguided…

“Is there anyone who can claim to have a better son?”

“You are nothing but a thief who stole my son’s seat.”

“I am the proudest mother in the world.”

Hajin’s soft hand covers his, makes him glance up, at her. Her smile reassures him and calms his inner turmoil. It’s all he needs to see. His eyes rove her face, wondering if that’s what she really wants. She tried to hurt you the most.

I’m fine, she squeezes his hand, rests a hand over her abdomen. We’re fine.

The sound of sniffling brings So’s attention back to his brother to see that his shoulders are shaking, racked with sobs. Past and present, their mother’s motives have been the same: power, recognition. The one thing that has remained constant is her relationship with Jung. Though their youngest brother has started to accept their father’s illegitimate son and treats their stepmother with civility, he still genuinely loves and trusts their birth mother. He has always been her baby; her comfort and consolation.

So and Yo hadn’t been there for her when she first developed her illness, only Jung had. And now, only Jung remains on her side. So has no wish to hurt his brother… and he realizes he does not wish for his mother to suffer in that way either, no matter what she’s done to deserve it.

“I’ll speak to him,” he says, causing Jung to look up, his face streaked with silent tears. He reaches across the table and flicks Jung’s forehead. The surprise and pain make him blink. “I’ll speak to father, so stop crying. You’re making my wife cry.”

It’s true. Hajin buries her nose in her drink to hide it.

Jung dries his eyes and says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean-”

“I can’t make any promises,” So warns quietly, “Our father’s family is not the only one she’s wronged.”

“It’s alright as long as you try,” Jung says, feeling hopeful for the first time in weeks. “You can do things other people can’t. I’ve never known you to fail at anything.”

So eyes him grimly. “Your blind faith in me is misplaced, brother.”
“I believe in you, too,” Hajin says firmly. To Jung, she smiles, “Don’t worry, Jung-ah. Your brother is a man of his word.” So sighs, feeling pressured by the obvious praises directed his way.

“Thank you…” Jung sniffs, “the both of you… for understanding.”

They lapse into silence, sipping their drinks and absorbed in their own thoughts.

While Jung hopes the best for the future and Hajin wonders what exactly the future has in store, So thinks about his brother’s request. Even on the off-chance that their father does agree to drop the charges, the J&J group will likely not be as understanding, which means there’ll be no escaping punishment for their mother… but maybe they can come up with a compromise. The relationship between the Wangs and Yoos is brittle enough as it is. Though their mother no longer holds any power, whatever happens to her will still reflect on her family. Jung, So and Yo might not be enough to stop the ties from completely severing this time…

Their father must know this as well as he does and, like him, must not want such a powerful enemy on the onset of Mu’s role as CEO.

While he tries to figure out what kind of punishment might befit his mother and appease the J&J group at the same time, his phone suddenly rings, causing the three of them to spring upright in their seats and remember why they’ve been waiting at the hospital cafeteria since early morning. The call can only mean one thing… Yo had promised they would be the first to know.

“Is it him?” Hajin demands excitedly as So answers.

“What does he say?” so does Jung, forgetting his troubles for the moment as he leans forward in his seat. “Hyung!”

“Shh!” So hushes them both then kisses Hajin when he sees her hurt pout. It’s their brother, alright, and…

He smiles as he ends the call. “Make yourselves presentable. It’s time to meet our nephew.”

“Omo, he’s so tiny,” Hajin and Jung squeal, looking down at the bundled up little boy fidgeting restlessly at the other side of the glass. “Hello, baby,” Hajin croons when the little eyes land on her. They stay on her for approximately two seconds but it’s enough to get her excited.

“Chunwinnie,” Jung chants, waving his hands, “it’s Uncle Jung! I brought you a present!” He holds up the huge paper bag he’s been lugging around all morning.

“I hope it’s not a pair of nunchucks.” They spot Yo coming towards them from the other end of the hallway. He’s unshaven, his hair is unkempt, and he looks dead tired, but his eyes are shining and there’s a smile on his lips that even exhaustion can’t seem to take away.

“Congratulations!” Hajin says, giving him a hug the moment he’s close enough. “He’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” he grins, himself looking down at his squirming newborn son. It’s bizarre to think that such a tiny creature had been living and growing inside his wife all this time, but there he is… after months of waiting, sleepless nights, mood swings and midnight snacks, they finally get to see him face-to-face.
“Not nunchucks!” Jung exclaims, offended. He takes out a huge teddy bear and shakes it in his brother’s face. “I know kids, hyung, I spend hours a week treating them at the shelter and the orphanage!”

Yo laughs and pushes the bear away. “I know, I know, I was kidding.”

“How’s sister-in-law?” So asks, giving Yo a cup of coffee. “You look terrible, by the way.”

“She’s asleep.” Yo takes the cup and punches his arm. “And let’s see how well you’ll look after 10 hours of watching your wife suffer.” He chokes on the hot coffee and adds, wheezing, to Hajin, “Not that I wish the same for you, obviously, I just meant-”

“It’s okay,” Hajin flashes So a tiny grin before winking at Yo. “I’m curious, too.”

So snaps in disbelief, “Whose side are you on?”

From inside the nursery, the baby suddenly cries. They can hear his tiny wails through the thick glass.

“You scared him!” Hajin says reproachfully to So.

“I scared him?”

“Mr. Wang?” A nurse pokes her head out of the nursery and smiles at Yo. From the open door, Chunwon’s cries are punctuated by the cries of other infants. “We’ve finished our tests. You can hold him now.”

“Hold him?”

She nods and opens the door wider for him to go through. “Visitors may do so later.”

As Yo seems glued to the spot, Hajin, Jung and So decide to help him by pushing him towards the door. They watch from the outside as he puts on a green hospital gown and washes his hands on the sink at the far end of the wall. Finally, after covering his nose and mouth with a mask, he approaches his son.

Hajin feels sentimental seeing the fascinated look on Yo’s face as he lifts his son for the first time, listening as the baby’s cries slowly come to a stop, as he looks up and meets the loving gaze of his father. Though the baby’s forehead is wrinkled in a frown, it’s clear that he recognizes the voice of the man carrying him. It’s clear that he’s listening.

She feels So’s arm around her shoulders and leans her head on his.

She hopes she can be there to witness him holding their own baby for the first time.


With a happier mindset, he pushes open the door and immediately yells, “UNCLE EUNNIE IS HERE!” The room goes silent and that’s when he realizes… “Sorry, wrong room.”
Hastily, he leaves and checks his messages. “Room 123, not 113!” he smacks a hand across his face and heads further down the corridor. As he had used up all his positive energy on that one greeting, all he can muster as he opens the door this time is a breathy, “I’m here,” spreading his arms wide enough to encompass the whole room. “Where’s the baby?” he asks blankly, seeing it devoid of people save for his second cousin’s wife and step-aunt.

“At the nursery,” his step-aunt replies in a whisper, arranging the piles of gifts and fruit baskets on the table. “Munnie is resting, so keep your voice down. Your cousins are over there, too, you might want to go to them.”

“Oh. Right,” he mumbles, lowering his arms. He eyes his gift and walks over to place it on the table, then he turns to leave.

“Hold it.”

“Aunt?”

Sooyeon takes Eun’s face and eyes him critically. His eyes are bloodshot and downcast, making him look very different from his usual boisterous self.

“Feeling unwell?”

“A little,” he admits in a small voice, avoiding eye contact. “But I’m probably just tired. We finished up quite late last night.”

She lets him go and orders him to take a seat, then she rummages through her bag for a bottle of peppermint oil. “This always calms me when I’m feeling troubled,” she explains quietly, rubbing a few drops onto his temples and forehead. He glances up, but she doesn’t meet his eyes. He wonders how she had known he was feeling troubled. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply, the mint doing wonders for his headache and stuffy nose.

“That should do the trick.” She wipes her hands on her jeans and zips her bag shut. “The nursery is just a floor below us. Here, take this with you,” she gives him the bottle of peppermint oil, plus a list of food and things to buy, “and give this to whomever is free. So many gifts and no one thought to bring any water…” she grumbles.

Eun pockets the list and the bottle and leaves for the staircase. He descends one floor and asks for directions to the nursery, though he needn’t have bothered. All he had to do was listen closely and follow the direction of the noise.

“Is that him?” he asks, surprising everyone by his sudden appearance.

“Hyung, we wondered where you were!” Baek Ah grins, clapping him on the back. “Yes, that’s him. Our first- er… I mean second ever nephew.”

Inside, Eun can see his cousin Yo and uncle Geon holding and talking to his little nephew. He can’t remember the last time he had seen his uncle laugh so openly.

“Hey, are you okay?” Hajin’s voice is gentle, as is her touch on his arm. The look on her face is concerned, but not patronizing, and it makes Eun want to tell her everything… to ask her what had gone wrong last night. He doesn’t really have any other female friends he can talk to.

But it isn’t the time nor the place, so he forces a smile and nods. “Yeah, I’m good. Actually, I’m terrific! Aunt Sooyeon just gave me a head massage.”
She's not convinced, but she understands his hesitation. Jung had told them what had happened last night between Eun and Soon Deok.

Her keen sense of smell immediately picks up on the scent her mother-in-law used. “Peppermint oil?”

He nods and takes the bottle out. “I also need to buy some things. She says… water, milk, tissue, wet wipes… hey guys, I’m going out for a while, but I’ll be right back.”

“You’re leaving?” Jung asks, surprised. “Where?”

“Aunty Sooyeon asked me to buy-”

“I’ll come with,” Baek Ah pipes up, hoisting his pack higher up on his shoulders. “I finally finished painting that mural for uncle’s friend and I’m starving.”

“I’ll go too since it’s almost lunch,” Jung says.

“Let's all go. It's not like we're doing anything standing here.” So manages to catch his older brother’s attention and gestures that they'll be going somewhere but that they'll be back later. With a nod from Yo, the five of them leave.

“Have any of you seen Wonnie-hyung?” Baek Ah asks as they reach the ground floor. “I saw his name on one of the fruit baskets, but I haven't heard from or seen him at all since he left last night. Uncle told me he’s filed a temporary leave from work.”

“Has he?” Jung shakes his head, looking worried. “I haven't heard from him either…”

So doesn't think they'll hear from Won anytime soon. Despite being of closer age to So, Won had always been closest to Yo, who had seen and helped develop his potential even early on, but he won't want to disturb Yo with his problems right now, not in light of recent events.

“I'm gonna go grab a salad,” Baek Ah decides as they step onto the roadside. He points to a restaurant farther down the road, “Anyone else?”

“Me!” Jung says, raising a hand. “Hyung, hyungsu-nim?”

“I don't need more food,” Hajin shakes her head firmly, resisting the temptation. Her anxiety over her sister-in-law coupled with last night's activities and Jung’s narrations had made her extremely hungry early in the morning. In consequence, she had ended up eating for 2 hours straight. “You go, though,” she tells So, who, in contrast, ate very little.

“You're sure?” he asks, frowning.

“I ate a lot,” she reminds in a whisper. “Also, I'll be with Eun. Don't worry too much.” She gives him a sudden parting kiss and pulls Eun away without waiting for a response.

“Eun-ah!” So calls after their retreating backs.

Before he can get another word in, Eun turns, does a stiff salute and says, “I shall protect them with my life, hyung-nim!”

“Aish, those two,” So grumbles as Baek Ah laughs.

“But he really has learned a lot under Soon Deok, you know. You'll be surprised when you see him in his rank advancement!” Jung grins widely and begins telling them all the things Eun can do now
as they head the opposite direction.

Hajin and Eun walk into the nearest convenience store and browse through the shelves.

“How much water do you think aunty needs?” Eun asks, his hand hovering between varying sizes of water bottles.

“I think it’s for everyone's consumption, so we best take two of the largest,” Hajin reasons. She reaches up to take one, but Eun stops her, “I'll do it!” He takes a deep breath and brings one down, expecting a struggle.

“Oh?” he gasps, surprised at how easily he’s able to lift it. He takes another bottle in his free hand. “Oh!” he gasps again. They hardly weigh a thing!

“Wah, you've gotten so strong since you started training,” Hajin remarks in admiration.

Eun puts the bottles in a basket and stares at his hands. “I had a good teacher.”

Hajin sees her opening. Clearing her throat delicately, she remarks, “You didn’t go to the gym today. I hope your teacher isn't too cross with you.”

Startled, he looks at her, but there's a knowing look on her face that he can't refute.

“You were always in and out of the Damiwon. I know your training schedule,” she explains gently. “Also, you're in casual attire and not acting like yourself. What's up? Is… everything okay with Soon Deok?”

At the mention of her name, Eun breaks down. “Hajin-ah!” he wails, clinging onto her.

“Omo, omo, omo!” Hajin exclaims, trying to maintain her balance by grabbing the shelf nearest them. Eun’s a lot heavier than she remembers him being, too!

“Sorry,” he releases her and grabs her arms to keep her steady. “I just…” He just doesn't know. He sighs, feeling glum.

Hajin spots an empty table by the window and points to it. “I'll go sit over there. Buy yourself something to eat and drink, then come join me, okay? You look like you haven’t eaten yet today.”

She's right. “I'm not really hungry, though,” he mumbles but walks around in search of something anyway.

He joins her a few minutes later with two chocolate shakes and two slices of apple pie.

“If you starve under my watch, hyung will kill me,” he insists when she declines. “Besides, it's not for you, it's for my little nephew! Or is it a niece?” For the first time that day, his smile is genuine.

“It's too early to tell, but I think it's a girl,” Hajin says, hoping she's right. Not for the first time, she wonders how she'll feel when they go for a checkup months from now and learn they’re having a boy instead. Will she never meet her Seol again?

“If you don’t like this kind of pie, I can get you another!” Eun says in panic, seeing her eyes fill with tears.

She blinks them back and lies quickly, “It's not the pie, something flew into my eye.”

“Oh. Then, shall I blow it away?” he offers, already leaning towards her.
“No, it's gone now,” she says, waving him back, “but thank you.” She looks at the food in front of her and suppresses a sigh. She isn't hungry but the pie looks good. Trying not to think about how she'll look like months from now, she takes a bite and gets down to business. “So… what’s going on between you and Soon Deok?”

He looks sheepish. “Nothing.”

“I know you like her.”

She’s so blunt about it, he's shocked.

“I knew it the first time I saw you look at her, actually,” she shrugs. “Outside that cafe.”

Eun scrunches his face in memory, then his expression clears. “You mean that day we went looking for Pokemon?”

She nods. “You were redder than your shirt.”

“Man, that seems like ages ago…”

She chuckles. “Do you still play? I'm sorry to say I stopped.”

He grimaces and shakes his head. “I've stopped, too. There's no end goal and it uses up too much time and battery life. Besides, we've been rather busy with the Damiwon.”

“And you've been busy training during your free time,” she adds, making him blush. She knows what he's trying to do. He wants her to forget about Soon Deok and talk about something else. But it's not going to work. “I'm listening.”

“I don't know, really, I had this whole scenario planned out last night… the whole concept with the stars and the lights in the trees, it was genius! I had no idea So-hyung had such a creative, romantic streak.”

Hajin blinks in surprise. “That was his idea?”

“You didn't know? He and Baek Ah spent weeks looking for an ideal location. He said the stars are important to you.”

She smiles at the thought of So going through all that trouble, while she remained clueless. “They are important… well, to the both of us. It's a long story,” she adds in answer to his questioning look. “Besides, we're here to talk about you, so start talking.”

“Okay, okay,” Eun grumbles, resigned.

Hajin listens intently as Eun begins his narration, starting from when they were kids and finally finishing at the night of the wedding.

“And… I don’t know what happened but she seemed to think I was making fun of her,” he says, poking his drink with his straw and looking so downcast that Hajin offers him hers. “Nice try,” he can’t help but chuckle, “but I got that for you.”

She smiles and takes it back. “Do you usually make fun of her while training?”

He shakes his head. “Jungie and I make fun of many things… but I’ve always treated her differently. Maybe it's my face. Maybe it’s naturally goofy.”
“Was that your first time calling her beautiful?”

Again, he shakes his head. “At the Damiwon, that day you learned we were planning a surprise for you… I told her all pretty girls liked dresses.”

“Oh. And how did she react then? Did she say anything?”

“No,” he replies, thinking back, “now that I think of it, she scowled and left. But… I was being completely serious! I wasn’t making fun of her at all!”

Hajin nods. “I know, but you should also know Soon Deok isn’t like most girls. She doesn’t have that many female friends, in fact. So told me she got bullied a lot growing up.”

“She did?” Eun frowns, finding it hard to believe that someone as strong as Soon Deok could have been bullied. “But she used to stop kids from being bullied. I was one of the kids she helped!”

“Girls are different from boys,” she explains gently, “while boys usually resort to physically beating each other up, girls are more likely to do so using words… and words can hurt just as much as a punch or a kick. Soon Deok was raised by her father. She grew up learning how to fight and probably didn’t know how to act around other girls her age. She probably felt like she didn’t fit in. Can you believe that?”

Eun remembers how hurt Soon Deok had looked… he remembers what she had said. Yes, he can believe it. “So, what do I do?”

Hajin sighs, thinking. “For the moment… let her calm down first. From what I gather, she can be very stubborn. If she’s as hurt and as angry as you say she is, she won’t want to see or hear from you and will take pains to avoid you at all costs. Maybe in a few weeks’ time, you can try calling her… or visiting her at the gym or her grandmother’s restaurant.” Hajin takes his hands and squeezes them, “Just let her know how you really feel. If you’re sincere, she’ll feel it and hopefully give you another chance.”

“You think so?”

She nods once, firmly, and smiles.

Having this conversation has greatly improved Eun’s mood. Already, he’s thinking of ways to make it up to Soon Deok. Feeling infinitely more optimistic, he nods once, firmly, and smiles too.

A little cough causes them both to glance up to see that So, Jung and Baek Ah have found them and are staring curiously at Hajin and Eun’s linked hands.

Eun gasps and pulls away as though he’d been burnt. “Hyung-nim! Jungie, Baek Ah!” he laughs sheepishly. “How nice of you to join us.”

Jung and Hajin have a silent conversation.

He cocks his head at Eun’s direction, eyebrows raised in question.

She lifts her own eyebrows. *Affirmative.*

Jung grins broadly and holds up two thumbs, silently thanking her for her help, and then he watches as Eun gets up and gathers three more chairs around their little table, telling them all to sit while he buys them some dessert. Seeing his appetite has returned, Jung laughs loudly and gathers him in a headlock. “Still substituting sweets for meals, hyung?”
Eun struggles to break free. He had thought he would be strong enough to handle Jung by now. Unfortunately… “Yah, let me go!”

“Come, I’ll help you carry all your food,” Jung says brightly, pulling him to the counter.

“What was that about?” So asks, taking the empty seat beside Hajin.

“Oh, just a little heart to heart talk,” she replies, chuckling at Eun and Jung’s antics. She looks at him then, “I just gave him a little dating advice.”

“Oh,” he says, smiling knowingly, “better you than me.”

“Hmph.” She looks at Baek Ah, who’s busy updating his Instagram with his latest project, and wonders how his relationship with Woohee is. She hasn’t been around the Damiwon as of late so she has no idea how they’re getting along at work. “You wanna take Baek Ah?” she whispers to So.

“Take him where?”

She exhales sharply, unamused. “Dating advice.”

He looks confused for a moment, and then he connects the dots. “No,” Hearing her impatient tut, he says in the voice of one trying to reason with the unreasonable, “They’re adults and perfectly capable of handling themselves. Let them deal with their own issues.”

“Families help and support each other,” she says imploringly. “If we don’t have family, what do we have? Imagine how much better your life would have been in Goryeo had your brothers been on your side from the start.” She can see these words have gotten to him and presses on, “Sometimes, a little help is all we need to make everything better. Don’t you agree, my love?”

Put that way, of course he does. The little help she had given him had allowed him to become king. No one can attest to the truth behind her words more than him.

To curb another ‘discussion’ from happening, he says as diplomatically as he can that he’ll help Baek Ah if and when he asks for it. Only then. Hajin decides to take this promise, recognizing it as his best offer.

“Speaking of family… I’ve been meaning to ask you… with regards to my mother…” He meets her eyes and asks softly, “Are you sure it’s what you want?”

She doesn’t hesitate to tell him it is, adding, “When you first became King, I wished and prayed for many things. Good health, long life, happiness, discernment… I wished for you to rise above the people who had hurt you; a good king but an even better man.

“I believe good deeds beget good consequences… that the price of kindness is unrivaled in the book of karma.” She believes all her good deeds have led to him. It took two lifetimes and the impossible but they’re finally where they’re supposed to be - everything in its rightful place.

“You’re too good for this world, Soo-yah.”

She shrugs. “I only need to be good enough for you.”

He returns her fond smile. “I don’t think I’ll ever be good enough for you.”

“We’re partners now,” she reminds him, “there’s no need to think about what we owe each other.”
She tilts her head to the side, long ponytail freefalling over one shoulder, and fixes the collar of his shirt. “You know there’s nothing I won’t do for you.”

He catches her hand, holds it tightly in his grasp as he brushes her fingers with his lips. “I know. It’s why I placed myself in your hands.”

_Do whatever you want. From now on… I am yours._

The familiar words make her smile and she reaches up to trace the area around his left eye, where the ghost of a scar remains but no longer haunts him. “And I in yours.”

Chapter End Notes

And cut! :3

On Won and his women, I always had the impression that he was something of a playboy, probably because of Eun’s birthday party in the drama. There were dancers there and he was directing them so it looked to me like he had gotten them for Eun as a gift or something. But that’s just me lol

Recognize the last bit of SoSoo’s conversation? :3 That’s right! Episode 8 of the drama, when Soo applied makeup on his scar for the first time! Ahhh JG and IU were so good in that scene *3*

Lastly, it’s late and I have to be up early tomorrow morning so I wasn't able to proofread this chapter as much as the others. Do forgive any mistakes! XP

Thanks for reading and see you all in the next chapter ^^
Second Chances

Chapter Summary

Hajin held her breath when the baby came into view. On 3D, they could better see the baby’s face... the closed eyes, the formed, little nose, the curled fists... the probe moved downward, showing them two feet and-

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Don't panic,” Woohee tells Hajin. “Breathe in, as deeply as you can. Ready?”

Hajin nods, bracing herself against the chair in her office.

“On three. One... two... threeeeee,” Woohee grunts as she tugs at the zipper of Hajin’s wedding gown, trying her best to pull it up... up... up...

“Stop, stop, I can't breathe,” Hajin gasps, waving her hand frantically behind her.

Woohee steps back immediately and watches helplessly as the zipper falls away.

“What do I do?” Hajin wails, looking on the verge of tears. “The big wedding's this weekend! Woohee-yah, I've gained six pounds in five weeks!”

“Unnie, that's normal!”

Clearly, that's not what Hajin needed to hear.

Hastily, she suggests, “Maybe we can have it refitted.”

Hajin shakes her head. “Not this dress. It's a designer dress. Oh, I knew those pastries would come back to haunt me!”

“Well, what did the doctor say yesterday? How long have you been pregnant?”

Hajin stops pacing up and down her office, her expression clearing. “Oh, I forgot! You haven't seen them yet!”

“No, I haven't,” Woohee agrees as she rushes over. She watches as Hajin rummages through her bag, eventually producing an envelope and... “Oh,” she says softly, running a light finger over the scan before her. There's a small head and small hands tucked under a small chin.

Despite her mood, Hajin can’t help but smile. Everyone has been extremely busy the past three weeks, preparing for the public wedding as well as a party to celebrate Chunwon’s birth, on top of the hearings and lawsuits, the ongoing merger in Japan, and making sure the Damiwon’s success rate during the opening remains up for the entire first month. Apart from the lawsuits, all other press releases have been positive, especially since Mu had stuck around an additional week after the wedding to visit all the company offices around the country in order to meet with the entire business staff, something which greatly boosted company morale. Operations have being going
smoothly in every sector.

But the best thing happened just yesterday when So and Hajin freed up their schedules to visit her OB for the first time since that first visit.

“Is that…?” she had asked, feeling slightly breathless as she gazed at the monitor.

“That’s your baby,” Dr. Shim smiled, pointing towards the baby’s different body parts. “There’s the head, two hands, two feet… heartbeat is strong. Baby looks perfectly healthy. You’re a lot further along than I realized, though. About 15 to 16 weeks.”

“Really?” Hajin glanced down, surprised. That meant… she was in all likelihood already pregnant that night she confessed everything to So. How did he know? She looked at him, but he had his eyes fixed on the fidgety little human on the screen. She smiled and held his hand.

The doctor finished scribbling down some notes and straightened up. “Alright, everything looks good. Would you like to know what you’re having?”

Hajin had been tempted to say, ‘She’s not human?’ before realizing what the doctor meant. Her mind screamed, ‘Yes!’ but the uncertainty made her hesitate.

It was at this moment that So finally decided to join the conversation. “Yes,” he said simply, then smiled at her, teasing. “She’s been wailing about it for weeks.”

Dr. Shim nodded good naturedly and switched machines. Hajin nibbled on her thumb as she watched the doctor work.

“Relax,” So said, seeing her so agitated. He wove his fingers between hers and held her hand tightly.

“What if it’s a boy?” she whispered, trying to contain her feelings.

The possibility had crossed their minds many times. They both wanted the same thing… a second chance with Seol… but if it’s not her in there…

“Will you not love him if it is?”

The question surprised her, but she had only one answer to that. “Of course I will! But… our girl…”

“I know.” He did. He missed her, too.

Before they could communicate further, Dr. Shim sat back down and positioned the probe over her exposed flesh. “Alright, here we go…”

Hajin held her breath when the baby came into view. On 3D, they could better see the baby’s face… the closed eyes, the formed, little nose, the curled fists… the probe moved downward, showing them two feet and-

“Congratulations,” the doctor grinned at the mesmerised couple. “It’s a girl.”

Together, So and Hajin looked down at her, and So was the first to find his voice. “Thank you.” He looked at Hajin to see she had started crying for real.
The doctor probed around for a few more minutes, showing them other parts and forcing the baby to move around for her parents’ pleasure, and then finally, she got up. “Let me prescribe some supplements first and have the pictures printed. It might take a while to make a copy of the video, but rest assured, we will have it delivered to your address as soon as it’s ready. Meanwhile, you’ll be happy to know that babies actually begin hearing at this stage.” Dr. Shim winked and the image disappeared. But it was alright. It was enough. “I'll be right back.”

“Thank you,” Hajin managed to choke out, finding her breath at last. She reached for So, who got up and leaned over her. With one hand, he lowered her blouse and held her; with the other, he dried her tears.

And if it's not her, they'll love her all the same.

Tenderly, he kissed her lips.

“How big is she?” Woohee eyes Hajin’s small frame from the side.

“The doctor says about the size of an orange. Woohee-yah… do I look like I have an orange hidden away in there?”

Woohee shakes her head. “I mean I see you everyday but… you look the same to me.”

“Except for the dress.”

“Except for the dress.”

“Which no longer fits.”

Woohee nods and repeats slowly, “Which no longer fits.”

Hajin sighs, accepting the inevitable. She rings her mothers. “Eomeonim,” she says forlornly when Sooyeon picks up. “It doesn't fit.”

Sooyeon had been expecting it. “Ah well, at 16 weeks, there should be physical changes. It was still worth a try. After all, you exhibited no symptoms for the first three months. It’s okay, Jin-ah, we’ll just buy another one.”

“Buy another?” This one had been pretty expensive.

“We'll do it tomorrow.”

Resigned, Hajin says, “Okay.”

“Under no circumstances are you to go on a diet,” Sooyeon says suddenly, sounding stern. Somewhere in the background, her mother yelps, “Go Hajin! Don't you dare starve that baby!”

Before Hajin can summon a retort, Sooyeon adds, “We will pick you up at nine tomorrow morning. Take care.” Then she hangs up. Hajin sends a silent scowl to her mother.

“Wardrobe problems?”

Hajin and Woohee turn to the door to see Baek Ah. His eyes fall on the pictures in Woohee’s hands and he gasps, not waiting to hear their reply.
“Wah, is this her?” he beams, staring avidly at the images. “She looks like an alien.”

Horrified, Woohee slaps his shoulder, but to her surprise, Hajin chuckles, “Little alien.” And then, as expected, she starts crying, “Baek Ah-yah, what if I gain five more pounds before the wedding and the new dress becomes too small, too? I could start showing any day now!”

“Aigoo, aigoo, you must feel really bad if you're calling me Baek Ah-yah instead of Baek Ah-nim,” he says, trying to joke, but it doesn't work. She only stares at him, unamused. So he hugs her instead and pats her back consolingly, “Noona, noona, I'm sure you won't gain five pounds in the next five days.”

“I will if you all keep feeding me!”

“I promise I'll stop bringing you food, and I promise to tell my cousins to stop as well,” he swears solemnly. A movement by the door catches his eye and he quickly signals Jung to put away the takeout in his hand.

“What?” Jung mouths, baffled.

“No food,” Baek Ah mouths back, pointing at Hajin’s depressed back. To her, he adds, “Cheer up, noona, it's just the hormones talking.”

Woohee walks stealthily up to Jung and takes the bags of food from him. “She's feeling sensitive. Her wedding dress doesn't fit anymore.”

“Oh,” Jung whispers in understanding. Clearing his throat, he walks in, a wide grin on his face. “My lovely sister! Wah, you look so beautiful in that dress!”

Hajin sniffs. “But I won't be wearing it anymore.”

He quickly changes tact. “Yeah, you're right, it's nothing special. Better to buy a new one.”

“But I liked this one.”

“It's very pretty,” he agrees hastily, getting confused now. He meets Baek Ah’s amused stare and blushes. Deciding he isn’t helping the situation at all, he changes the topic to get her mind off of it. “Eunnie-hyung didn't go to the gym today.”

It works. Looking and sounding dismayed, Hajin faces him. “Really?” She had told Eun to wait a week before going back, not three.

Jung nods sadly. “Soon Deok told me. She hasn’t heard from him, and he keeps avoiding the topic when I try to bring it up. I was wondering…” He puts on his best aegyo look. “He listens to you… I wondered if you could maybe…?”

Hajin understands. “He hasn’t been around here much, but I'll think of something.”

“You're the best!” Jung exclaims, giving her a bear hug. He’s so happy and relieved, he forgets himself. “Grandma Park sent you some extra special ribs today, shall we-?”

He finds himself wishing he hadn’t said a thing.
Eun raises his voice dramatically, moving his action figures across the table. “Captain America hits the Winter Soldier! Bang, pow, whoooosh! And the Winter Soldier fights back, but his punch is too strong - argh!” The children groan as Captain America falls to the table. “But look! What’s that over there?”

“His shield!” a little boy pipes up excitedly.

Eun makes a series of noises with his mouth and makes his action figures tumble and turn. Hastily, he puts the shield in Captain America’s hand.

“Get him! Kill him!” the children all yell eagerly when they see their hero is armed at last.

“They fight to the death - Cap uses his shield to destroy the Winter Soldier’s mechanical arm - the Winter Soldier is cornered, he has nowhere left to go…” He makes Captain America walk slowly towards the Winter Soldier. The children hold their breaths. “But first, to see his face…”

Everyone gasps when he does. “It can’t be…” Eun lowers his voice, making it wobble for additional effect. “Bucky?”

“His best friend?” a little girl adds, mouth hanging open in surprise.

Eun smiles and straightens up. “To be continued tomorrow!”

“Nooooo,” they all wail, begging him to continue, but he just chuckles and pockets the toys, then he reminds them all to eat the treats he brought with him and waves goodbye.

“Wow, that was intense.”

He finds himself plastered to the wall in fright, face to face with an amused Hajin, who has her arms crossed and is looking dangerous.

“Hajin-ah!” he yelps. He had been dreading this meeting. He had tried to put it off for as long as he could, found every reason to. He’s not ready to face reality… just yet… or ever.

“Hello, Eunnie,” she greets, narrowing her eyes. “May we talk?”

“Wow, I think she kind of looks like Chunwonnie,” he remarks, smiling delightedly at the pictures. He glances from them to Hajin and back again. “Bizarre!”

Hajin clears her throat. “If you’re quite done stalling… whatever happened to meeting Soon Deok after a week?! she almost screeches. “With you and Won on leave from work, the staff have had to work double time. Eun-ah…” She takes the hand holding the pictures and forces him to meet her eyes. “What happened? Why have you been avoiding everyone?”

He lowers his eyes and shifts restlessly in his seat. “I didn’t know what to say to her.”

“Just… you know… tell her how you feel.”

“I don’t know… I don’t think that’s enough…”

“You’ll never know unless you try.”
Eun looks desperate and lost as he clutches his hair. “But what if she slams the door in my face? Kicks my ass? She doesn’t even want to see me!”

“Like I said, you’ll never know unless you try!”

“But I did try…”

She raises her eyebrows in surprise. “You did? When? Jung said-”

“I lied,” he admits in a small, sheepish voice. Then, sighing, he drops his hands. “I went to the gym the next week like you suggested… but… she wasn’t there. She tasked someone else with my training.”

“Oh,” Hajin says, finally understanding. So that’s why he hasn’t gone back. Sympathetically, she squeezes his shoulder. “I’m sorry, Eun-ah… I didn’t know.”

He wipes his nose and shrugs. “It was my fault, anyway.”

They’re quiet. Eun’s too glum to talk and Hajin’s too busy thinking of what to do to say anything. She sees his messy hair and decides to tidy it up to stall for time. Taking out a hairbrush, she gets off her seat and begins combing it neatly back in place.

“Or you know… the big wedding’s this weekend,” she says, suddenly remembering. “She’ll be there, she’s a bridesmaid!”

“I know.”

She tosses up her hands. “Well, then problem solved! Corner her and kiss her like you mean it!”

“I can’t do that!” he gawks, mouth agape and cheeks flaming, mind caught in wild imaginings of him and her… her and him… on a terrace, under the moonlight… him in a tux, her in a dress, and they… they… “She’ll kill me!”

“I didn’t mean literally,” Hajin tuts and forces him to look down again. “I meant you can kiss and make-up then. It’s an expression.”

His imagination vanishes in an instant and along with it, his adrenalin. He slumps against her, clutching uselessly at her top. “Hajin-ah… I’m hopeless! I don’t deserve to live!”

“So this is where you were.”

Hajin smiles widely at this voice. She wants to run to him, but Eun’s still clinging onto her like a baby koala. So walks over to them and tuts at the glazed expression on Eun’s face. “Yah, instead of moping around and hiding from the world, why don’t you do something more productive? You’ve been her student for some time now and you’re the most creative person I know, apart from Baek Ah. Surely, you can think of some way to make it up to her.” He wraps an arm around Hajin’s waist and pushes Eun away. “Also, stop yelling at my innocent baby.” To Hajin, he smiles and greets, “Hi.”

“Hi,” she giggles when he kisses her.

Back on the table, Eun’s in a slump. What can he do? He wished he knew. His mind is in turmoil as it wanders back to when they first met, to when they were still kids.
“My father taught me how to make this when I was smaller… He told me that even though bears usually live alone… they have strong family bonds and will always protect each other from harm. *He said that even though my mother is not with us anymore, she’s always watching me.*”

*I thought you would remember me.*

“I’m Park Soon Deok and I’ll be your family if you want.”

*You said you’d be my family.*

“Bears don’t stay with each other forever, so the babies need to learn how to take care of themselves. I can teach you how to fight so you won’t be afraid of getting hurt anymore.”

*You said you would teach me.*

*Do you hate me that much?*

It’s that word that finally triggers it. *Hate.* He doesn't want her to hate him. In no existing universe should it happen. Every particle of his being rebels at the idea.

Feeling like he's just been hit by a bolt of lightning, he sits upright, startling Hajin, who says, “Eun, what’s wr-?”

“I can't let it end this way,” he says breathlessly before turning to them. “I'm going to explain what happened. I'll tell her how I feel.”

“That's the spirit! Go get her!”

So eyes him thoughtfully. He knows that look. It's the look Eun gets when he's just had a brilliant idea. “What are you planning?”

Eun grins, already working through all the details in his mind, “Something that'll knock her socks off.” Excited, he slaps the table loudly and yells, “Okay!” then he hugs them both and dashes away, thanking them loudly over his shoulder as he goes.

“Eunnie, jjang!” Hajin calls after him, getting a thumbs up in return. She watches him leave, smiling contentedly.

“Were you able to pick something this morning?” So asks as they follow Eun to the parking lot at a much slower pace.

“Yeah,” she replies, “it’s a shame about the other one, but there was no helping it. Anyway, the new dress is much more comfortable. It's less itchy because of the cotton layer underneath, and it looks much more simple.” Even though it costs twice as much, she doesn't add. They had decided on a relatively light, floor length wedding dress with a free flowing chiffon skirt and plain white tulle overlays, and a v-neck top embroidered with silver flowers. “The belt is higher up and adjustable so we needn't worry about size.”

“Does this mean the ban on food has been lifted?”

She huffs. “It didn't last very long anyway. Grandma Park sent over some ribs yesterday two minutes after my declaration. I just couldn't say no.”

He manages not to laugh. “Then let’s go have dinner. Where would you like?”
Myunghee shuts her eyes when she hears the verdict on the evening news.

The court had taken Hwangbo Wook’s confession and cooperation into account and reduced his sentence greatly from seven years to five months after deciding that he was not the principal offender, but a secondary accessory in the widely publicized and controversial defamation attempts and libel against the J&J Group and the Wangs.

“In light of the compelling evidences and testimony provided by Mr. Hwangbo, the court has summoned Yoo Enterprises’ recently ousted CEO and ex-wife of CEO Wang Geon, Ms. Yoo Myeongsun, as well as Mr. Hwangbo Wook’s own sister, Ms. Hwangbo Yeonhwa for investigation two weeks from today. Apart from the five months of prison time, Mr. Hwangbo will also be paying for some of the damages incurred during this period: an estimated 20 billion won, a fourth of which is Mr. Hwangbo’s to pay.”

Five billion. Myunghee feels faint. That's practically all of Wook’s assets combined. And if Yeonhwa is to pay for half of the remaining 15 billion…

“What will you do?” Myunghee asks quietly, watching as he’s led away from the room.

Grandma Park shuts the news with a, "Hmph! Lucky bastard. If it were up to me, I'd jail them all! Big shots picking on an innocent woman like that…"

“But he is going to jail,” Soon Deok reminds, turning a piece of meat over on the grill, but her grandmother is too busy ranting in the back of the kitchen to hear. To So and Hajin, she says, “That's a hell of a lot of money though.”

So shrugs. “Those articles caused a great deal of damage. We’d already invested billions into the merger, and we almost lost it.”

Soon Deok determines the meat is ready and plops it into Hajin’s bowl. “People should know better by now. Even teenagers can get sued for harassing someone online.”

Hajin nods her agreement. Bullying cannot be tolerated.

“I'm also thinking… seven years to five months… that's a major cut. Even if he didn't come up with the ideas, he still acted on them and did all the dirty work. They're letting him off too easily, in my opinion.” Deok narrows her eyes suspiciously at So. “Unless you had something to do with it…?”

He cocks his head in Hajin’s direction.

Soon Deok sighs. “You're too kind, unnie. He would have happily ruined you and you're letting
him off the hook, just like that?"

“He's still going to prison, isn't he?” she shoots back defensively. “I just… don't want to be responsible for ruining another person’s life. I don't want to be like them. Before this whole thing happened, he was a good man and did his job well. I think… like everyone, he deserves a second chance.”

Soon Deok sighs again, but it's an I-admire-your-patience kind of sigh, rather than the you-must-be-out-of-your-mind one from earlier. She’s always hated bullies and has a low tolerance for them. She takes her entire plate and deposits all her meat into Hajin’s, who chokes. “That's too much!”

“No, it's not.”

“No, it's not,” So agrees.

Tasting it, Hajin has to agree. The barbecue here is the best.

“And what about the other two?” Soon Deok asks, putting fresh meat onto the grill. “Your mother and… that other woman.”

“My mother’s sickly and won’t survive prison, especially if J&J is going to push for the maximum jail time. We’re working on a compromise,” So explains.

Soon Deok nods. “Jung’s been secretly crying to me about her. He didn’t want any of you to know… thought you’d think he was taking her side. But I suppose now he can rest easy again.” She looks up and tilts her head sideways. “And the other woman?”

“Actually, I’ve been wondering about that,” So replies, glancing at Hajin, who looks pouty and uncomfortable. “Tell us, wife, what is your verdict?”

Hajin’s head twitches slightly to the side, disliking the topic of conversation. “I don’t know, husband, I haven’t actually thought about her in a while. But everyone’s being given lighter sentences… it seems a shame to leave her out of it.”

Soon Deok sighs again. “Are you going to let her off the hook, too?”

“No,” Hajin replies. Her dislike for Yeonhwa has not diminished in the slightest. “She hurt unnie, and she made her brother do illegal things. She deserves to be punished.”

So and Soon Deok nod their wholehearted approval.

“But… I mean, I don’t want to be responsible for ruining her life, too.”

“That blame lies entirely upon her,” So says firmly.

“Still,” Hajin fumbles with her chopsticks uncomfortably. She can’t believe she’s saying this. She blames Jimong. Does she actually pity Yeonhwa?

_She is but a woman in love with a man she can never have._

She looks up at So. “She already owes you guys billions of won in compensation… do you think she can even pay it off?”

So shrugs, unconcerned. “If she gives away her entire inheritance and all of her assets, maybe. She’ll be penniless, but she could do it.”
Hajin knows the feeling of losing everything, but unlike them, she had done nothing to deserve it. Thus reminded of her ex, she remembers the day he was sent to prison. She had been there, in the back row with So, and when he spotted her, he began screaming, begging for her to help him.

“They’ll kill me, Hajin-ah! If you let them do this, I’ll die! Please! Hajin-ah! I made a mistake! I was wrong! Please!”

His screams still occasionally haunt her dreams and waking hours, though those moments of her jolting suddenly awake in the middle of the night became less and less frequent as the days wore on. It helped that she had So to comfort and hold her during those times.

As for her friend, she had managed to escape prison, but taking into account all the money her husband owed, the court deemed her unfit to look after her own baby, who would thus be taken away the moment he’s born. The good news is once she can find a stable job and a suitable apartment to live in, she can have him back. But until then, she’ll have to content herself with weekly visits at the center.

Hajin leans against So’s arm, feeling bad for her friend. She knows what it’s like to have to give up a child.

“You do feel sorry for the…” Soon Deok stops herself in time, eyeing Hajin’s tummy warily. She leans closer and whispers harshly, “bitch.”

On account of the many thoughts running through her mind, Hajin hadn’t managed to hear the earlier bits of the conversation, but she has no trouble identifying who the ‘bitch’ is. Does she pity Yeonhwa?

She nods and Soon Deok’s mouth falls open in a loud gasp.

Hajin meets So’s eyes. He sighs, but he also smiles. “You really know how to cause me problems.”

She pouts and shrugs, “You don’t have to help her if you think she doesn’t deserve it. I’m just saying… I feel sorry for her. A bit. Just a teeny, tiny bit.”

But he hates seeing his person upset. “But you know I’d do anything for you.”

She smiles happily and hugs his arm. It’s hard to stay worried about others when she’s surrounded by so much love and support from family and friends alike. She pulls Soon Deok into a hug too, making the younger woman yelp in surprise.

“And you, Deok-ah… do you believe in second chances?” she asks.

Soon Deok looks thoughtful but nods eventually. “Sure, if the person deserves it.”

*Oh, he deserves it.*

Chapter End Notes

And cut! A bit of fast forwarding now~ I’m not gonna go into compleeete detail about Soo’s pregnancy but I will (did) add some moments because many of you asked for them :P The check-up snippet was written for Charlie in Ao3, who requested it in a much earlier chapter. Seol’s significantly more than a bean now though hehehe
The next chapters are going to focus more on the other characters, with just casual mentions of SoSoo, so there might be time skips, but I hope they're not as jarring to read as they were to watch in the drama xD

As for the punishments, I did read up on SK's Cyber Defamation Law and stuff, and as I'm a fan of TVXQ/JYJ, I've read a lot of articles in the past about JYJ's legal battle with SME... but again, this is fiction and I tried to find a good balance between real and not real, feasible and not feasible. I don't think I'll be mentioning the baddies anymore after this (or maybe a casual reference here and there just for update purposes), but as stated before, I will write some special chapters dedicated to them and their lives after going down. I'll post those up once this fic is finished :D
I Love You, I Remember You

Chapter Summary

*Feeling like the most ungrateful person alive, I dry my eyes on my pillow, the steady drip of my tears eventually lulling me to sleep.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Soon Deok

I can’t sleep, even though I’ve been tossing and turning for the better part of an hour. It’s still dark outside, my neighborhood quiet and fast asleep; my pillow is cool beneath my cheek, as is the sheet beneath my body. I’m entirely relaxed, completely comfortable. I should be able to go back to sleep.

Except I can’t. I shut my eyes and immediately see his face. His hurt eyes. His confused frown. As though he hadn’t been kidding when he had called me…

Because I wasn’t. How could he call me the most beautiful girl there with Hajin-unnie looking so beautiful just feet away?

Still… something about the look in his eyes, and the sincerity in his small smile… and the fact that he hasn’t shown up for classes since that night… makes me think maybe, just maybe, he hadn’t been making fun of me after all.

I give my head a little shake to firmly remind myself that I have to be up and about to help grandmother prepare the restaurant in the morning. And that’s when I remember:

*It’s already morning.*

“Aish!” I kick off my blankets and stumble out of bed. If I can’t sleep, I might as well do some morning stretches.

One, two, three, four… he was kidding… five, six, seven, eight… but he looked sincere… eight, seven, six, five… but why would he suddenly say that? Could he be… four, three, two one… crazy Park Soon Deok, how could you think such a thing?

I sit on the floor and spread my legs far apart. *How could I not think it? What other reason could he have to say it, if he wasn’t kidding around?* I lay on the floor, arms stretched out above my prone head, and close my eyes.

“What is it?”

“Just a little something for the most beautiful girl here.”

I want to scream my frustration to the heavens, only I’m pretty sure they’re still sleeping, too. Restless, I grab my coat and the house keys my grandma had given me that night and head to the nearest convenience store about a mile away.
“But I thought you did.”

I’m still restless when I get back home.

Wiping the tabletop, I consider the possibility that perhaps I had overreacted. Whether he had been joking or not… there really was no malice in Eun’s eyes that I could detect… in fact, I don’t recall ever seeing malice in his eyes, only… genuine interest and friendship.

“They say all pretty girls like dresses.”

Could he have been serious? I realize I’m blushing again and hastily down a glass of water.

“I’ll make some coffee, go wake the- omo!”

I look up and there are my father and grandmother gaping at me with the most incredulous looks on their faces, especially when they see the spotlessly clean kitchen.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I explain shortly, pouring them fresh cups of coffee and getting to work on breakfast.

By mid-morning, I’ve dressed and left for the Damiwon. The wedding’s tonight, but I was told to come earlier for my makeover. It had been difficult and awkward at first, but I think I’ve gotten quite used to the process by now and have even started using the products Hajin-unnie had given me during the Damiwon opening. They were good. My skin has never felt smoother.

Entering the Damiwon, I’m greeted immediately by the original court ladies on duty. Knowing that Chaeryung would be busier than usual today, I return their greetings and ask where I could find Woohee.

“She’s at the back, training the new recruits,” Minkyung replies with a wink. I thank her and head that way.

I’ve been told that the influx of customers wishing to avail of the Damiwon’s products and services keep increasing every week, and the original seven ladies are no longer able to keep up. Hajin-unnie had recognized the need for more recruits and asked Chaeryung two weeks ago to hire ten more. Together with Woohee, they’ve been training these recruits at separate intervals.

“I want each of you to take a copy of this book. It contains a list of the tropical plants we’ve been importing and adding into our products. We shall be discussing those next week so read up in advance,” I can hear unnie saying.

She spots me and waves, then comes over, “I’m almost done. Just a few more minutes.”

“Take your time,” I assure her. “I’ll go… er… look at the um… soaps.”

“Great! I’ll see you there.”

I nod and turn around, wondering where the hell the soaps are. I squinch my eyes and pick a direction. Left seems like a good place as any to explore. I haven’t been to that part of the Damiwon, for one.

It’s as I’m halfway down the corridor that I hear it… undeniably… unmistakably…

“Baek Ah-yah, I want it big. BIG!”

“Hyung, any bigger and it’ll be the size of an airplane!”
“Yes, that!”

“No.”

Panicking, I run to the nearest door, pray it’s open, thank my stars it is, and rush inside.

“Omo!”

“Unnie!” I yelp in horror, steadying her.

“Oh! Soon Deok-ah,” Hajin-unnie seems genuinely happy to see me despite the fact that I ran into her and stepped on her foot not one minute ago.

“Did I damage her?” I ask quietly, filled with dread. Hyung-nim will never forgive me if I-

“No,” she laughs and I can breathe again. Then, as though knowing I had been running away from someone, she gestures for me to come in and shuts the door.

To my delight, I find I’m in a room full of soaps. “Is this the soap room?”

She takes a seat on a nearby table and uncorks the small cylindrical bottle in her hand. As she does so, I take a whiff of the liquid inside… it’s tangy and citrusy, like an orange. “Well… we make soaps here, if that’s what you mean?”

It probably is. I decide it is and take the seat opposite hers. “But unnie… why are you working today? Shouldn’t you be resting or, I don’t know… getting ready?”

“We’re severely understaffed and in desperate need of products,” she replies, pouring three drops of the pleasant-smelling liquid into a larger bottle with clear liquid. Then she corks it, looks up and smiles wryly, “The final guest list for tonight reached seven hundred two weeks ago. We only expected five. Abeonim paid the hotel a large sum to let us use the room beside the one we reserved, and everyone’s been working overtime to redo the decorations, the food, the giveaways… everything.” She then nods to the far wall, and that’s when I see the hundreds of soap bars wrapped in beautiful paper and ribbons, stacked and ready to be packed.

“We managed to finish wrapping all those up last night,” she explains, “but now there are no more for sale. And our stock of essential oils is running out.” She sighs. “To think this is just our first month and we’re already struggling this much.”

“But that’s a good thing, isn’t it?” I say, trying to inject as much positivity into my voice. “The business is doing well, that’s what matters. All of you are still adjusting. Once the adjustment period is over, everything should run more smoothly.”

“That’s true,” she says, looking happier.

The door opens and for one tense moment, I think it’s him, but then Woohee comes in and I relax.

“Hi! I’m sorry I took so long,” she apologizes at once, removing the pins from her hair. I watch as her long, light brown hair falls effortlessly down to her shoulders, frames her delicate face. It’s just like watching a shampoo commercial. Her hair compliments her red senior court lady uniform quite well, I think. “Sanggung, I sent the new recruits to observe and assist the others for now, and I’ve told them to remind everyone that we close early today.”

Hajin nods. “Thank you, Woohee-yah.”
Woohee smiles and ties her hair in a ponytail, then her eyes fall on the many soaps on the opposite wall and she gasps, “Omo! We haven’t included those in the giveaways, yet! I’ll get to work on them right away. Deok-ah, I’m sorry, but could you wait just a little bit longer?”

I shake my head and get up. “It’s no problem. In fact, I’m not doing anything. I’ll help you. Where are the bags? I’ll help carry the soaps over.”

“Would you?” she beams and grasps my hands. “Thanks! Sanggung, we’ll be going in and out.”

Hajin looks up from her work and nods. “Sure.”

Woohee and I immediately get to work, spending the next fifteen minutes transporting soap bars from this room to the one at the far end of the hall.

“I’ll get the last batch,” I offer, already poised for the door. “You can show me how to sort them out after.”

She nods and I leave. I transfer the remaining twelve soap bars onto my tray and leave the room. Halfway down the hall, a door opens to my left, and to my very immense discomfort, Eun walks out, browsing through a folder.

He glances up and meets my eyes and is it just my imagination or does he tense up and grip his folder more tightly?

This is the moment, I decide, I should apologize. He gave me a gift and called me beautiful, and I threw it all back at him, all because I wrongly believed he was mocking me.

I open my mouth but the moment had passed. He looks down and brushes past me, and I can only watch, troubled, as he rounds the end of the corridor and disappears.

_Did I hurt you that much?_

Later, I decide, I’ll apologize to him later. There’ll be plenty of time and opportunity, then.

Or so I had thought.

The wedding that night is beautiful. Baek Ah had used that unexpected first snow from the wedding at the mountain and edited the wedding pictures to make them look more magical, then he passed off the best one as a prenup shoot to the guests. Building on the same concept, the ceiling tonight is a network of canvases of the palest lavender and silver, from which dangle bright silver lights of varying lengths and sizes. There are thousands of them, and though they’re not enough to completely illuminate the entire hall, the candlelight on every table, along with the spotlights shining down on the long walk leading up to the brightly-lit stage, are enough to highlight what really matters.

The ceremony begins and ends beautifully, with Hajin drawing the undivided attention of everyone in the large hall. Woohee and Chaeryung had given their all to make sure of it.

She’s beautiful in all white; the dark room and spotlights emphasizing the pure whiteness of her wedding gown, veil and train. I have never seen a person shine before, but it seems to me that she does that night: she looks as bright as the moon does on its fullest, or else as a sun coming out of an eclipse. I even catch sight of my grandmother drying happy tears.

“I’m very happy to have you for a daughter,” I overhear Mrs. Oh Sooyeon say quietly to unnie when everyone comes up to take pictures.
“Thank you, eomeonim,” she whispers back, looking teary-eyed. She hugs and thanks Myunghee afterwards, sharing a short, private moment as they whisper in each others’ ears. Finally, she sees me with Chaeryung and Woohee and beckons us over. “Thank you for everything, you three.”

“Group hug!” Chaeryung says, wiping her own eyes and spreading her arms wide.

I’m not used to hugging. Maybe I should say I’m not used to affection. My grandma and father both love me, I know it, but they’re not very verbal and physical about it so I never got used to… all that hugging and kissing. In fact, I used to avoid romance like the plague, finding such blatant displays of affection disturbing and unnatural.

But on this evening… finding myself suddenly squashed in between the three of them… I think… it isn’t so bad after all.

As I had expected, I also see Eun a lot that night. There are many instances, in fact, when we’re in the same group circle and I find I’m close enough to say what I want to say… or at dinner, eating at the same table, when I think he’s smiling at me and I pluck up the courage to get up after him when he goes to get some drinks… but he’s elusive. One moment he’s there, the next he’s gone. One moment he’s alone, the next he’s talking to someone else.

Is he avoiding me on purpose? Or do I only think he is because I’m conscious of his movements now? Or is it because in all this time that we’ve seen each other and stood in close proximity… we haven’t exchanged a single word. Not one greeting or joke. I find this cold treatment unnatural.

The one time he does speak to me… it’s only to say goodbye.

It’s early morning and I’m still awake, not tossing and turning, but lying perfectly still and staring straight ahead at my plain ceiling. If I stare hard enough, I imagine I can see a dark sky with pale lavender and silver clouds, and a million twinkling stars in their midst.

I would never admit this to anyone… but when I was a young girl, I too used to dream of weddings and magical evenings such as tonight had been. I used to wonder what it would feel like to have everyone look at me in admiration, to have a certain someone wait for me at the end of that long walk, to be dressed more beautifully than every other girl in the world.

I let go of those dreams when I reached middle school, when I saw just how different I was from every other girl my age, when the first boy I had ever liked started making fun of me for the entertainment of the pretty girls in our class.

I avert my eyes from the ceiling and lay on my side, looking to the window at the dark sky.

I’d spent the rest of my school life alone, finding companionship only in the gym where at least the students treated me well out of respect for my father.

I see his face again as I stare at the sky, but I don’t shut him out this time. Through my memories, I look at him… really look at him. I remember all the sweets he used to bring, all the little gifts and trinkets he used to give me. They were small things, but I always had use for them: a clip, a hanky, a new pair of gloves, a neck pillow… the most expensive had been a smart watch that monitored heart rate and distance traveled, as well as other things. He had gotten a matching pair - his black and mine white. He claimed he had bought two as part of a sales promotion at his cousin’s tech store.

From within my bedside table drawer, I take it out and run a thumb over it, wondering now if he had been bluffing about the sales promotion. I had checked the store for the price of one of these
things… and it costs more than my entire monthly allowance.

For the nth time, I wonder why he would give me something so expensive… why he had always found ways to take care of me in his own little, discreet way. I find it ironic how I’m only appreciating his little gestures and gifts now that he’s stopped giving them.

Feeling like the most ungrateful person alive, I dry my eyes on my pillow, the steady drip of my tears eventually lulling me to sleep.

Eun

I feel proud. It’s been two weeks since I started planning this surprise, and I’ve managed not to spill it - to anyone. The only ones who know are:

1. Baek Ah
2. Jung
3. Hajin
4. and So-hyung because Hajin thinks “absolutely must not tell anyone” is synonymous with “except your husband” #thetroublewithmarriedrelatives

Luckily, hyung’s the least likely to blab of all my cousins because even though he says he doesn’t care, I know he secretly does and just does not want to ruin my big surprise. Sometimes, I think brotherhood is underrated.

Don’t get me wrong… there had been moments… real, heart-stopping, turn-around-and-pretend-you-don’t-see-her kind of moments where I had feared everything might fall apart… like that time I was looking through some pictures and suddenly found her standing in front of me with a tray full of soap… or when I met Jung at their usual cafe after he had assured me she had gone home early and would under no circumstances be returning that day, only to overhear her telling him over the phone that she had left her gym towel and was on her way back and could he please keep it until she arrived? I had to force poor Jungie to stand outside in the rain to intercept her lest she came in and saw me.

Although, nothing can quite compare to the night of the wedding, because not only did she look stunning in her lavender gown, but our families just had to share one table! And, naturally, my delighted mother had me sit beside Soon Deok so she could speak to Mr. Park. Not even gonna lie: the most awkward and silent dinner of my life. But, with great strength of will and determination, I managed not to show my excitement and blab too much. It was only on our way home, when I was sure I was out of harm’s way, that I spoke to her enough to wish her and her family a pleasant evening.

I take out my pocket calendar and mark yesterday a “SUCCESS”, then I look through my list of things to do and feel a glow of pride when I see just how close I am to reaching the end.

1. Offer to plan Chaewonnie’s “Welcome to the Family” party. Side note: remind everyone that
A Very Harry Halloween theme is FINAL, but rent additional costumes just in case they accidentally forget like they do every year on my birthday.

2. Construction at secret location for secret plan - finally completed!

3. Remind Baek Ah-

I can hear footsteps outside my office and I quickly throw everything into my drawer and open my laptop and pretend to be working so that when my secretary comes in, she’ll think I’m busy and stop harassing me with other to-do-lists.

“Excuse me, Eun-nim?”

“Hrm?” I grunt, trying to sound grumpy.

“There’s someone outside to see you.”

I check my watch. “Sorry Mina, but I really need to finish this by lunchtime or aunt Sooyeon will murder us both.”

“But sir, she says she only needs a few minutes-”

“Mina,” I glare at her, “I am busy. Give her a post-it and ask her to write her message there, then leave it outside my door. I’ll read it later. That’s final.”

I completely forget about the post-it when I go out for lunch with my cousins, and by the time I return much much later in the day, that’s when I see it… a short message written by someone whose handwriting I can recognize a mile away:

I hope you can come. - Soon Deok

Behind the note, Mina has stuck an invitation to a party to celebrate Grandma Park’s 70th birthday. I’ve been invited! Have I been forgiven already? I can hardly contain my excitement as I check the date and time… a week from now. My plan is in three days. If all goes well…

I ring Jung immediately. “It’ll go well, right?” I say the moment he picks up.

“Say what?”

“My plan. My super-duper-uber secret plan. It’ll go well, won’t it?”

He’s quiet for a moment, and I realize maybe he’s still half-asleep from his mid-afternoon nap even though it’s already 3 in the afternoon.

He grunts and yawns, “Oh yeah, sure. Your plans never fail.”

“That’s right,” I nod, a smile breaking through my nerves. “Thanks, Jungie, you’re the best!”

He yawns again. “Anytime, hyung.”

I find myself giggling, thinking of all the possibilities. Back in my office, I go through my list again.

Three days.

As expected, my eldest cousins forget their costumes. I try not to judge Yo-hyung, even though it’s his baby’s party, because there are bags under his eyes and he looks really tired, as though he had just spent the last few hours fighting Voldemort himself. But So-hyung…
“He’s undercover as a muggle,” Hajin whispers, effectively saving him from an hour of dramatic ranting from yours truly. She hangs a green and silver scarf around his neck while he isn’t looking.

He looks down and frowns at her red and gold scarf. “Why am I in Slytherin when you’re in Gryffindor?”

We gape at him in shock. He rolls his eyes. “Contrary to popular belief, I do not, in fact, live under a rock.”

“Well, I just thought you’d look best in silver and green. I didn’t know you knew what they meant… but I have more scarves if you want,” she says excitedly, pulling them out from within her bag, which she probably charmed to be much bigger than it actually looks. Honestly, she is the coolest. Well, okay, the second coolest. “But I think you could also be in Ravenclaw since you’re smart.”

“Oh, Professor McGonagall,” he says, taking her hand and pulling her to the front of the room, where 2-month-old Chunwonnie is sitting on his mother’s lap dressed as Harry Potter, staring up at Grandpa Dumbledore who is such a sport and is totally rocking that white beard and half-moon spectacles, “why don’t we go to Professor Dumbledore and ask to try on the sorting hat?”

“But our gift?” she asks, handing me two scarves. “I got Hufflepuff for Jung and Baek Ah.”

“Sent over hours ago,” he replies, tugging her along.

“Eunnie! About later, just tell us when!”

I give her a thumbs-up and try not to let my nerves run me over as I check my phone for messages. Jung and Baek Ah aren’t here yet, and they’re vital to my genius plan.

“Have the others arrived yet?” aunt Sooyeon asks, coming over with Munnie-noona’s mother.

“Er…” I try not to look too sheepish, “well, Jung and Baek Ah both messaged me, saying they might be a little bit late.”

“And Won?”

I shrug, “As for him, I don’t know, truly. I sent him an invitation but his secretary swears she doesn’t know where he is… but she did send him a text, though he hasn’t replied. Maybe he’ll be late, too.”

She purses her lips, looking doubtful, and walks away, saying nothing more.

“All ready!” Baek Ah says the moment he comes in, shrugging off his coat and ruffling his hair.

“Is it raining?” I ask, horrified, thinking of everything outside that I had spent hours making.

“Just a bit,” he replies with a wink, “don’t worry, hyung, everything’s under control.”

“Okay, I trust you,” I mumble, biting my lower lip. The party shouldn’t end too late… maybe another hour and a half… and then…

I clear my throat and make my way to the front, smiling widely at my audience, “Who wants to play some games?”
Everyone congratulates me on the success of the party. Chaewon fell asleep halfway through the magic show, but other than that, everything went quite smoothly, I thought. Everyone definitely had a good time.

“You can’t go wrong with good food and good company,” I say modestly to my uncle.

He chuckles and pats my shoulder, “Indeed. Goodnight, Eun-ah. See you in the office tomorrow.” I bow and smile politely and sigh when the last person finally leaves.

“I hear everything’s set.” I turn to see Baek Ah, Hajin and So-hyung behind me.

Hajin crosses her fingers. “We’ll be wishing you luck from the control room.”

Heart in my throat, I can only nod. Baek Ah laughs and wraps his Hufflepuff scarf around my neck, and I have half a mind to remind him that I don’t wear Hogwarts scarves, being Minister of Magic, but I can’t. So-hyung probably notices my shortness of breath and passes me a can of beer.

“I’m not very good at drinking,” I remind him, but I take it anyway. My tolerance for alcohol ends at three bottles of beer, but maybe hyung’s right… maybe just a bit will help. I cough as I take a swig. “Jung’s on his way, isn’t he?”

They nod and I take a deep breath. “Alright. Wish me luck.” I give the bottle back to hyung and head for the door, vaguely aware of them shouting words of encouragement behind my back. I head for the elevators and press the button that’ll take me to the ground floor, then I exit the hotel hastily and rush to the playground.

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**I Love You, I Remember You**

Jung is silent as he leads Soon Deok through the dark and quiet park towards the playground beyond the trees. Jack-o-lanterns smile at them from all directions, with strings of colorful lightbulbs lighting the paths and walkways.

“It’s so quiet. Where is everyone?” she asks, hugging her arms. The ground is damp from the light rain from earlier and frogs have started to make themselves known amidst the ceaseless chatter of crickets.

“They’re probably at the other end of the park. The playground has been off-limits for the past two weeks. Some kind of construction,” he replies evasively, taking two steps back, ready to sneak away. He stays on the path just long enough to make sure she’s on track, following the colorful lights, and then he ducks behind a tree and uses his dark wizard robe to blend into the darkness.

“Off-limits? Then why are we here?” she asks, but when there’s no reply, she turns around to find him gone. “Jung-ah!”

Baffled, she retraces her steps, wondering if she had taken a wrong turn… but a sudden flash of light and whooshing sounds from behind her draw her attention. Wondering what Jung was up to, she heads for the light. The playground that she used to play in as a child had indeed been covered
up temporarily with a huge, dark cloth, hiding whatever construction is taking place within, but as she draws closer, the cloth suddenly falls away, and she’s blinded by the sudden brightness of the fountain firework in the middle of it all.

She squints through her fingers and sees she isn’t alone. There’s a man in front of her, that much she can tell from his silhouette. She has half a mind to run away or to stay and fight, but then the firework dies and her eyes adjust enough to see…

“Eun?” she calls out in disbelief. “What-?” She lowers her hands and frowns at him, then at the playground around them. Everything looks the same. What construction had Jung been talking about?

“Master, good evening. I… I have something to tell you,” he says, looking nervous and shy as he fidgets with his hands. He hopes she’s not still angry with him... or not angry enough to not listen to what he has to say. “Actually, I’ve wanted to tell you this for a long time... will you come with me?”

She hesitates, wondering what this is all about, but then she remembers she has something to say to him too and nods.

Relieved, they start to walk together, quietly, as Eun struggles to remember his speech.

“Over a decade ago, when I was a young boy… I fled from my bodyguards and found myself in this very playground,” he begins, taking her to the far end, to where she remembers the sandbox to be. She realizes whatever construction they’re doing is happening over there, as it’s surrounded by yet another layer of dark cloth.

“I was something of a brat… no, I was a brat. I was small, spoiled by my parents and grandparents, wanting everything but not really interested in anything… and I was so bossy, even my own cousins didn’t want to play with me.”

Soon Deok frowns. She’s heard this story before. But when? Where?

“Anyway, I was having some kind of tantrum that day because my parents had cancelled our beach outing for work… so I ran away to teach them a lesson,” he blushes, remembering how stupid he had been as a child, “and I stumbled across this playground and saw the sandbox. I figured, even if I couldn’t go swimming, I could still play with some sand. So I waited for the older kids to go away and then I stepped in, but then... something happened that would change me forever…” He walks to a tree and begins to untie the rope holding up the barrier between them and his creation. “I got punched in the face.”

“Wait… little boy…” she gapes at him, dumbfounded, “that was y- omo!” She takes a step back in surprise when the dark cloth falls away.

What used to be a tiny sandbox that could fit just five kids has grown so big as to fit about fifty. Kids won’t have reason to fight over who gets to use it now.

Eun smiles at her incredulous expression and lets the rope fall so she can see everything. He watches, both proud and ecstatic as she moves closer and peers at the dozens of animals, big and small, that he had spent the entire morning and afternoon sculpting.

On cue, his trusty sidekicks switch on all the playground lights and the full extent of his work comes into view.

“Do you like it?” he asks.
“Did… did you make all of these?” she stares at the resting lions, the waddling penguins, the elephant with the squirrel on its head, the deer, the wolves, the foxes, pandas… How did he make them all look so real? “How did you…? These are amazing.”

He swells with pride at the compliment. “You taught me how.”

Stunned, she looks back at him. “Me?”

“You showed me how to make my first,” he explains, gesturing for her to follow him. They step into the sandbox, and weave in and out of animals until they reach the very center, to where a family of four life-sized bears stand, tall and proud.

Careful so as not to ruin anything, she peers closer, examining the little details on the fine sand - the furs, the teeth, the claws, the eyes. Everything so real!

“So that was you!” she gapes at him, “but I could never make something so… so…” She’s at a loss for words. She takes a step back to admire everything.

“I may have improved on it a little bit,” he says with a modest little shrug that doesn’t quite match his smug smile. “I can make more than sand sculptures now. I make toys, design video games for kids. It took some years but I eventually found my place… and I have you to thank for it.”

She blushes at the way he’s looking at her, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and looks away.

“But all I did was beat up some bullies.”

“It may have seemed like nothing to you, but that day… you changed my life. That day, I learned to share. I learned how to be a friend. I learned about… family.” From within his coat pocket, he produces a familiar rectangular box and hands it to her. “I’m sorry if my words and actions that night offended you… but I meant what I said. Every word.”

She can feel herself shaking as she takes it, as she fumbles to pull open the lid.

It’s a necklace made of pure silver, with a pendant in the shape of a bear’s paw.

A loud, snapping sound makes her look up to see a huge balloon the size of a small plane soaring through the air, and on it are multiple images, a collage of her in all angles, doing such menial, everyday things that she can’t imagine why anyone would bother taking pictures of her doing them at all. There’s one of her tying her hair, throwing a punch, laughing at a joke, sipping a drink, looking back with the sun in front of her…

“I asked everyone at the gym to take pictures and send me their best ones,” he explains sheepishly, “since I wasn’t allowed to see you anymore.”

So that explains their odd behavior. “What do you mean you weren’t allowed to see me? Did my father-?”

“No,” he mumbles, looking just a teeny bit pouty. “But you assigned me to another teacher. Obviously, you wanted nothing more to do with me after I-”

“What? No, no,” she shakes her head frantically, blushing - at him, at his words, at the blown-up images of her face. “I went on a 2-day trip with my maternal uncle. It’s the reason I’ve been working part-time at the restaurant all this time. My grandma would only let me go if I did 400 hours.”

Eun’s so dumbfounded, he’s speechless. He can’t believe it. Jung was right. “So… so you mean
I’ve been skipping classes for nothing?”

This is it. Now’s the time for her to say her piece. “About that… I’ve been wanting to apologize to you for… for the way I acted at the wedding.” She looks down and suddenly feels cold. She doesn’t know why she’s so nervous. “You’ve always been good to me, and I repaid you with sarcasm. I’m sorry, Eun-ah, for being so cynical and quick to judge. I just… I’ve had my fair share of… I know what it’s like to be—”

“It’s okay.” Truly. He smiles and comes closer, and she doesn’t move, doesn’t want to. She just looks at him in amazement, seeing reflected in his eyes something she has only ever seen in her father and grandmother - pride, joy, warmth… something a little more?

“Soon Deok-ah,” he says softly, and she wonders if it’s the first time he’s ever called her by her name. Has he always been this tall? “I’ve wanted to tell you since I was eight, but I never got the chance to, until now…

“Thank you, for saving me that day, for saving me in ways no one else could have. You made me a better person and I wouldn’t be here now if it weren’t for you. You… are a very special person to me.

“Soon Deok-ah, what I’m saying is… I… I really love—”

Her heart skips a beat and it causes her to punch his arm. Surprised, he stumbles backwards into his bears.

“Ah!” he gasps, rubbing the spot and pouting reproachfully at her. “I squashed the baby bears. Is… is that a no?”

“That’s for skipping classes,” she mumbles, and then, without warning, she tackles him, wraps her arms around his neck until he loses his balance and falls completely onto the wet sand. How could she have ever thought he had been making fun of her?

He blushes to the tips of his fingers and watches, dumbly, as more of his sculptures tumble into smithereens around them. “There goes Bambi.” But he doesn’t really care. He only cares that she’s holding tightly onto him, sobbing into his shoulder. Tentatively, he reaches up to pat her back. Comforting her seems like the most natural thing in the world to do.

“Hey,” he says quietly, extricating himself and taking her necklace from her. He clasps it around her neck. “It suits you! I think you look even more beautiful now.”

She’s blushing about as hard as he is, and she’s feeling an assortment of strange emotions that she can’t quite name yet. They’re so foreign, they’re making her uncomfortable. She punches him again, more softly this time. “Why didn’t you just tell me from the start who you were?”

He wrinkles up and rolls dramatically in the sand, grimacing in mock-pain. “Well… because I thought you would hate me if you knew.”

She frowns. “Why would I hate you?”

“Because…” he glances sheepishly at her, “I stood you up the next day. My mother forbade me from ever coming back here. And when you ignored me at So-hyung’s tournament, it only confirmed my suspicions.”

“Tournament? Ignored you?” she scratches her head, wondering what the hell he’s talking about. “Back up and explain it to me step by step, won’t you?”
“It was about a year later. I saw you there and did a little wave like this,” he demonstrates, “but you just walked right past me.”

She closes her eyes and tries to remember. “You mean when hyung-nim advanced a rank? You were there?”

He nods. “And I did a little wave like this, but you just walked right past me.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t remember much of that day, but I probably didn’t recognize you without the blackeye. I mean, I did wait an entire morning for you… but I figured you had your reasons for not showing. It’s not something I would hold against you for eternity.”

He can’t believe it. What had Jung said? “She doesn’t hold grudges. She’s one of the nicest people I know.” He’d just spent half of his life moping over nothing. That’s what you get for being such a brat and thinking the whole world revolved around you.

“You’re not kidding.”

“No, I’m not. I really didn’t recognize you. If I did… I would have asked how you were.”

They’re quiet, staring dumbly at each other, and then, for reasons she can’t explain, she starts laughing… small giggles at first, at how ridiculous he looks, and then real laughter at how ridiculous the whole situation is.

“It’s not funny! I felt really bad about it, you know!” he says, but he’s this close to laughing along. “Yah, do you have any idea how much courage it took for me to finally say all this?”

“Probably a lot more than the amount you spent redecorating.”

“Yes, actually,” he grins. He’s never heard her laugh before. It’s a pleasant sound, and her smile highlights the dimples in her cheeks. He gets up, brushes sand from his soaked clothes, and holds out his hand to her.

She coughs and clears her throat, feeling suddenly self-conscious. What happens now? Slowly, unsurely, she slips a hand into his grasp and allows him to pull her up.

“Soon Deok-ah… will you be my teacher again?”

Wordlessly, she nods.

“And… will you allow me to take you out to lunch or dinner sometime?”

She nods again.

“And…” he tugs at a chain around his neck, showing her his own bear claw to match and fit hers, “will you be my Ginny Weasley?”

She frowns and he thinks maybe she doesn’t understand the reference. “She’s the one Harry Potter eventually-”

“But you’re not dressed as Harry Potter, you’re dressed more like Fudge, the Minister of Magic.”

He practically hops from excitement. She’s a Potterhead, too! Can she be any more perfect? “Oh, right!” he says, looking down at his outfit. “I forgot. Silly me.”

“But yes,” she murmurs shyly, “I’ll be your Ginny.”
From inside the control room, Hajin, Baek Ah, Jung and So exchange high-fives, congratulating each other on their success as they observe the happenings below.

“I prepared these earlier,” Jung whispers, bringing out three beers for himself, his brother, and their cousin. To his sister-in-law, he sheepishly holds out a box of chocolate milk.

Morosely, she takes it, but her mood improves significantly the moment she takes a sip. She wants another.

“Ah, who knew hyung could be such a romantic?” Jung remarks, shaking his head.

Hajin perks up. “What about you, Jungie? Anyone important you want to-?”

She doesn’t even get to finish her question as he’s already cringing. “Honestly? It’s bad enough that I see it. Romance and… love… it’s not for me.”

Hajin wonders if it’s anything to do with his unrequited and unreciprocated love for her from before. She tries her best to avoid So’s knowing eyes and says bracingly, “Not yet, you mean. You will, one of these days. You just haven’t found the right girl yet!”

Jung looks horrified, but he just laughs unsurely and shrugs. “Maybe.”

She’ll take that for now. Turning to Baek Ah, she starts to say, “Baek Ah-nim-”

“Nope,” he holds a finger to her lips and shakes his head, “I will not be drawn into this conversation.”

“What?” she cries defensively, pushing his hand away.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” he winks and taps his beer against her milk, “it won’t work on me, noona.”

She rolls her eyes, but So grabs her by the shoulders and pins her to him, whispering, “One at a time.”

Seeing she’s overruled, she grumbles, “Oh fine,” and puts the straw to her lips.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! Longest chapter yet, I believe. I’m sorry it took so long to update... but it's a long update? :D
In case you're all wondering...

1. Why bears? Because Soon Deok gave Eun bear skin every year on his birthday :D If So's a wolf, she's a bear.
2. I changed the timeline a bit, pushed it back because it didn't make sense LOL (Idk what I was thinking before). So the first wedding happened in mid-autumn, that's why the first snow was so unexpected (though maybe not considering mountain air is significantly cooler than city air), and the second wedding happened about a month later; Eun's confession 2 weeks after the second wedding. So at the end of this chapter, Hajin is about 5 months pregnant.
3. I also changed some details about the wedding... in an earlier chapter, I said it
would be in summer and the theme yellow. Well, now it's in autumn with lavender theme xD
4. You might also recall waaaay way before in the chapter "brothers", SD actually mentioned the trip in passing :P details, details!

I hope you guys enjoyed reading this. I hope it isn't too rushed. It's 2:20am and I have work tomorrow so no time to really proofread anymore :( 

Anyway... next pair I'll be tackling is WooheexBaekAh. More answers hehehe I hope you look forward to it! ^^
Good night and have a pleasant week ahead :)
Forgetting You

Chapter Summary

Baek Ah is quiet, unmoving. Whatever he had expected to hear tonight, this hadn’t been it. He looks back and sees her sobbing into her gloves, and he unwinds his scarf from his neck and gives it to her.

“I think we both could use a drink,” he says at last. “Wait here.”

Chapter Notes

Warning: Depressing, slightly graphic chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Woohee

The end of Halloween marks the beginning of Christmas for the Damiwon, mainly because our beloved sanggung loves the holidays so much. Myself, I haven’t celebrated it in years, but her enthusiasm is catching.

It’s in this jolly spirit that we find ourselves spending an hour or two after work putting up Christmas decorations. I don’t mind. Apart from study for exams, there’s really not much to do back at the university dorm.

“Woohee-yah, have you seen the rest of the yellow lights?” unnie asks.

“Yes, Chaeryungie got them. They’re putting lights in the halls,” I reply, peeking out from behind the tree to see her peering into the many boxes littering the Damiwon main hall.

She pouts, “Hmm… I thought we had bought enough but it seems we’ll need to buy more.”

“Like you don't enjoy buying Christmas things.”

She looks up and rolls her eyes at her husband, who had just walked in. “You could show a little more enthusiasm, yourself.”

“You're enthusiastic enough for the both of us.”

I hide behind the tree and put on my earphones to give them some privacy.

“Woohee-yah!”

Surprised, I pause the song that had just played and unhide. “Yes, sanggung?”

“Dinner?”
It’s always nice to have company to share a meal with, especially when it’s with good friends, however…

“Er… sure,” I reply, hoping this time won’t be one of those times.

“You’re safe: he’s on site doing something for abeonim,” she informs me under her breath when we lock up a quarter of an hour later.

“Oh, okay.” I feel much lighter, and yet disappointed at the same time. And I hate myself for feeling the latter because it’s a feeling I’ve been trying to let go of… even though I secretly really want to hold on.

And so it is that I find myself once more in the backseat of their car, trying to suppress the uneasy feeling in my chest by chatting amiably with Hajin.

“Do you think the malls are still open?” she asks suddenly.

“They’ll probably close in a few hours,” I shrug, “thinking of buying more Christmas lights? Or more items for the new house?”

“Both.” She turns in her seat to look at me. “You’ll help us set up, won’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything,” I assure her again, knowing why she keeps trying to make sure. I smile and hook my small finger with hers. “Or anyone.”

So’s phone rings. He takes one look at the screen, glances ever so discreetly my way, and I know immediately who it is before he even answers.

“Oh, Baek Ah-yah…”

*It’s not important. It doesn’t matter. It won’t be awkward.*

“Unnie,” I say quietly, leaning forward so I can whisper in her ear, “I have a recital next Wednesday, and I’d really like it if you could come.”

“I’d love to!” she says immediately, “What time is it?”

“Seven to nine in the evening,” I reply, feeling better already. “Can you really go? You’re not too busy?”

She shakes her head. “The wedding’s over so I’m free most evenings now. I’ll ask Myunghee- unnie if she’d like to come as well. I think… she needs a break; something to take her mind off things.”

“Of course.” I understand at once. "I look forward to seeing you both there. Don’t worry about the tickets… I have free passes for my guests. You can take two of them.”

“Oh, yey,” she says brightly and then adds not-so-brightly, “Is there a dress code?”

I chuckle at the way she said it. Between buying things for their new house *and* the Damiwon, she hasn’t yet found the time to shop for maternity clothes. Thankfully, our uniforms are adjustable so she can probably continue wearing hers for another month, and the weather becoming cooler means she has reason to wear all of her sweaters… but there isn’t much she can do about her jeans, which she has long given up on in exchange for sweatpants.

“Not really, but I’ll be wearing a dress?”
She sighs. “All my old dresses don’t fit.” Then she shakes herself and winks, “I’ll shop for clothes tomorrow.”

“Baek Ah’s in the neighborhood,” So announces suddenly, “he’s having trouble finding a ride. Do you ladies mind very much if he…?”

Knowing he really means me, I catch his eye in the rearview mirror and shake my head, trying to calm my frantic heart. Months of working together and I still feel faint whenever I think of or see him. It doesn’t help that Hajin has become my closest confidante and that Baek Ah and So are as close as cousins can be, so accidentally bumping into each other has become something of a norm… though that doesn’t make it any less awkward, at least on my end.

In the restaurant an hour later, though I’m seated beside Hajin, right across from So, who has Baek Ah beside him, right across from Hajin, I find myself struggling to focus on the food I had ordered, and it’s not long before I realize someone else doesn’t have much of an appetite as well.

“Is there something wrong with the food?” I ask unnie with concern.

She frowns at the noodles she’s been turning over in her chopsticks. “I don’t think so… I mean, I thought I wanted noodles… but looking at this just makes me want to puke.”

“Are you alright?” So and Baek Ah reach out to touch her.

“I’m fine,” she reassures them at once with a wave of the hand. “I guess I’m just not hungry.” I hide a smile as I take a sip of water, not all that surprised. Her mother had sent over an assortment of home-cooked food for lunch today… a lot of food.

“Maybe she thinks you’re growing an entire basketball team,” I had joked.

“You want to swap with my steak?” Baek Ah offers, extending his plate to her, but she shies away with a small laugh.

“No, it’s fine.” She looks at her bowl like she’s about to go to war. “I can do this.” I can hear her muttering the words over and over again under her breath, every time her chopsticks come within an inch of her mouth.

We watch her struggle for a while, and when it becomes clear she’s never going to eat it, So suggests, “Salad?”

“Yes, please,” she says, clearly relieved as she pushes the bowl away from her. “I don’t like… looking at the oil on the soup. Is that strange?”

“What? No,” Baek Ah scoffs, scowling at the offending contents in her bowl. “I don’t like looking at all that oil, either. It looks so… so…”

“Oily?” So puts in helpfully.

“Unhealthy, actually, was the word I was going for, but thank you for the input,” Baek Ah glares at him.

I have to laugh. These three have the most amusing conversations. While they’re busy bickering, I hail a passing waitress and order an extra salad.

“So, Woohee, when’s graduation?” So suddenly asks.
I glance up to see them all watching me curiously. “Oh, sometime February, I think. They haven’t pinned down an exact date yet.”

“February…” Hajin mutters then glances down, knowing she’s due around that time. “Hopefully sooner rather than later.”

“Or much later,” So says.

“Oh yes, then I won’t have to worry about…” she gestures to herself as though that ought to explain everything. Then, she clears her throat and very casually adds, “she also has a recital next Wednesday.”

“Really?” So looks politely interested. “What music?”

“Just some classics. It’s a fundraiser for the Happiness Home for the aged community, so much of the audience are going to be seniors,” I explain. “Something of an early Christmas present.”

So nods and then laughs at Hajin’s expression. “Hearing Christmas has just made her even more excited.”

“Stop it,” she glares at him, but there’s a smile lurking at the corners of her lips. She turns to me and whines, “He keeps making fun of me.”

Being the loyal friend that I am, I tell him sternly, “Stop it.”

“Ah, but you’re so cute, noona,” Baek Ah grins. “You’re like a little teddy bear.”

“You too. Stop it,” I glare pointedly at him.

“She feels like a teddy bear,” So murmurs into his glass.

I can’t help but agree with him on this. “She does, doesn’t she?” I hug our human teddy bear and pat her rounding tummy. “Oooh, was that her?”

“Where?” Baek Ah flies off his seat and into the one next to hers. He waits. “I don’t feel anything.”

“You never do,” I say with a pitying tut. “You like your auntie Woohee more, don’t you?”

“What?” Baek Ah scoffs, “that’s not fair, you spend more time with her!”

“Neither here nor there. Only results matter.”

I realize we’ve been arguing on both sides of unnie, who’s been having a silent conversation with So this entire time, so I shoo Baek Ah away and back into his seat.

Forlornly, he shakes his head. “I should enroll myself into the Damiwon program, then I’ll have an excuse to go there more often.”

“Don’t you have unfinished business there?” So asks.

Before Baek Ah can respond, I feel another little movement beneath my hand. “Oh, there she is again! You like hearing your daddy’s voice, do you?”

Baek Ah zooms back in an instant. “WHERE?”
Dinners and meetings like this happen rather often… and they always start out awkwardly, but end with everyone leaving each other in good spirits.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright by yourself?” unnie asks anxiously. “It’s rather late.”

“Yeah, I’ll take the next bus. It'll arrive in about ten minutes.” I help load the last of the Christmas decorations we had just bought into the trunk and give her a hug. “I can tell you’re tired. I have an hour before the dorm closes. Don’t worry about me.”

“Well, if you’re sure… be safe.”

“You too.”

I wave my goodbyes to So and Baek Ah and jog to the bus stop, hugging my hands to my body to warm them. I really should have bought a pair of gloves at the store but by the time I realized I had left mine at work, we were already back at the parking lot and the mall was already closing.

“Woohee-yah.”

Surprised, I turn to see Baek Ah jogging after me. From within his coat pocket, he pulls out his own gloves. “Your hands need to be in perfect condition for next Wednesday. I won’t be needing them since I’ll be riding with hyung.”

Tentatively, I reach out. They’re still warm from his body heat, and very soft between my fingers. I had just opened my mouth to say my thanks when he runs back, and I have to yell it loudly, “Thank you!” He waves and I smile from behind my scarf. I put them on and clasp my hands together with a sigh, remembering a time when I was younger and holding onto a different hand underneath the same gloves.

The day of the recital is a busy day for me. I get off early from work to prepare: return to the dorm, wash up, put on the dress I had bought for the occasion, and do my own make-up. I make sure I have everything I need before I leave for the concert hall. Violin case in hand, my fingers moving, recalling all the notes I'll be playing later, I arrive just in time for the final rehearsal.

“Are you ready?” my professor asks, to which I nod affirmative. He gives me a thumbs up and everyone watches as I take my place in the middle of the concert stage, my violin poised to begin.

I had chosen this song for him, hoping he would hear it, and feel…

But he won’t be here to listen…

Love that left autumn behind
But the winter is far away yet
The tears of sorrow that deepens as I love
Were they a fragrant dream?

Once upon a time, on a starry evening in a place much smaller than this city… I sat with you under a cherry tree.

"I think we should get married."
When I recall your tears
The dreams remaining in my memory,
When I close my eyes,
Will turn into countless stars,
And flow in the dark night sky

I remember everything we used to do… all the walks we used to take, all the random pictures you used to shoot. I never did get to see any of them.

“We’ve been together for two years. I want to marry you.”

I wanted to marry you, too.

But I wanted many things. Too many.

Oh how I wish to sleep by your side
Like a migratory bird with folded wings
The letter written with tears
I will erase again with tears
Though to my heart, spring is far away
How my love wishes to be a flower

I glance up from my instrument, to the silent crowd below. I see on the faces of the elderly tears of nostalgia. I try to imagine what their thoughts are… how many hidden memories must have resurfaced tonight… how much love they must have lost before today… how they must wish for a past that is long gone.

I’m young but I’ve already been through much. Seen much. I imagine I know how they feel.

My chosen song brings me no comfort, but I’m happy that it’s able to comfort others. Everyone deserves to be as happy as Hajin-unnie during Christmas season. Through the smiles of the people before me, I can feel how much they appreciate everything we’re doing for them.

I stand up and take a bow. My light blue dress swishes around my ankles as I walk to the microphone. And I smile pleasantly to my audience.

“This next song is one of my favorites. If you know it, please sing along with us. A Goose’s Dream.”

“Unnie cried,” Hajin says without preamble when I meet them outside an hour later.

Myunghee gives me a hug. “You played beautifully tonight.”

The compliment makes me blush. “Thank you.”

“And don’t be fooled. She cried, too,” she adds, smiling playfully at Hajin, who links arms with us and quickly steers us towards the nearest coffee shop where plenty of people are currently headed.
“I had a lot of emotion I had to get rid of.” She nudges me with her elbow. “I’m not being biased when I say: you were the best tonight. Everyone around us said so, right unnie?”

Myunghee nods firmly. “Those are pretty. Who sent them?”

She means the large bouquet I’m carrying in my other arm, and though I know there’s nothing on the card, I still find myself checking again to be sure. “I don’t know, my teacher gave it to me right after my performance. There’s no note or anything.”

“Looks like you have an admirer,” she teases, but I just laugh.

“It could be from my teacher. Or the school.”

“Or your parents.”

I hold my breath, my smile frozen on my face. They’re staring at me, waiting for a reaction, but I can’t think of anything to say. “I… well… I mean, they’re not really… they can’t-”

“Oh, I see,” Myunghee cuts in softly, “they’re not the supportive type, are they?”

“Well,” I mumble awkwardly, “I mean, it’s not that, it’s just that they can’t… the thing is, they’re-”

Before I can loosen my tongue enough to tell them, Hajin gasps, “Oh! I just remembered something!” She lets go of our arms to rummage through her bag, eventually producing a letter envelope. “I forgot to drop this at the donation boxes.”

I take the envelope from her and see that it’s from all the Wang brothers and cousins, and their families. The words ‘Merry Christmas’ are written in the middle in beautiful calligraphy using red and green markers.

“Gyunghwa wrote that,” she tells me proudly. I have to think hard to remember who that is, and eventually manage to place a small, shy girl of about twelve years. The eldest daughter of Wang Mu.

“That’s so sweet,” I gush, looking around. There are less people milling about the school grounds, and the lights in the concert hall have been switched off. Could there still be people inside? “I’ll go check if my professor is still in. Why don’t you go and find us a table? I’ll be right back.”

“We’ll order you a hot chocolate, shall we?” Hajin calls after me.

She knows it’s my favorite. I grin and nod and hurry back across the field.

I may not have family, but I have friends. And for them, I’m grateful.
Forgetting You

Baek Ah leans beside one of the pillars of the College of Arts building, watching Woohee run across the field, back towards the concert hall, wondering where she’s headed off to in such a hurry.

“Where’s she going?”

He glances up to see So putting his cellphone away. He frowns at Woohee, but relaxes when he sees Hajin with Myunghee entering the nearby cafe. “So, are we just going to stand around here all night or are we going in after them?”

After much deliberation, Baek Ah had decided earlier that he didn’t want the women to know that they had come to watch. “I don’t know. I’m not really in the mood for hot chocolate or tea.”

So wonders what his cousin keeps waiting for… but as he’s never been one to pry, he doesn’t ask. “I think we passed a bar on our way here.”

On days like this, Baek Ah’s grateful he has his cousin to rely on for company; someone who listens even when no words are spoken. “Yeah, I could use a drink.”

The days pass quickly; they progress into weeks, which stretch into months. Woohee wakes one morning to find that it’s Christmas Eve, and everywhere she goes, she’s greeted by Christmas carols, Christmas lights and Christmas trees. Santa smiles at her from every shop window; pop idol groups sing and extend their greetings from TVs and billboards alike.

She had just spent the entire afternoon at the park, serenading some passing families and young children for fun, stopping only when it got dark. As she returns to her dorm, she drops by the lone guard on duty and gives him the muffins she had bought for him on her way back.

He’s an old man and has always been kind to her. Her gift has just brightened his day. “Thank you, Woohee-shi.” In a whisper, he adds, “I know how much you like looking at the lights. I asked Jun-shi to keep the ones near your dorm on just for tonight.”

“Really?” she laughs, thankful to have something to look forward to later.

“It’s your last year here. I wanted it to be special,” he smiles kindly.

She bows her head in gratitude. “I’ll definitely enjoy myself. Thank you, ahjussi. Merry Christmas.”

Back in her dorm, she’s all alone as her fellow students had gone home for the winter holidays. It’s impossibly chilly and everything’s quiet; so quiet, she can hear her every breath, her every movement.

She switches on the lights and plays some cheerful music to drive away the gloom, then she goes
to the kitchen to cook.

The dormitory kitchen is complete with utensils and the first thing she procures from the cupboard is an old kettle that no one else seems to use but her. At the stove, she turns the knob and a fire clicks to life. On days like this, she can always count on a cup of good, hot chocolate to make her feel better. She sets the kettle on the fire and begins to chop up some vegetables. Carrots… onions… garlic… potatoes…

She opens a can of spam and dices up the meat inside, and when the kettle starts to whistle, she exchanges it with a pan, in which she drizzles some oil.

She doesn’t really know what she’s doing. Of all the arts she’s studied, cooking was one she never really got the hang of.

Baek Ah, though… Baek Ah had always been a great cook. She remembers how he used to cook for her while they were still students, on those days when they didn’t have enough money to go eat at restaurants… or on special occasions, like on her birthday, or on Valentine’s. On anniversaries.

At the thought of him, she smiles, wistful. He’s probably at home right now, having dinner with his parents.

And as always, her heart aches and she screams to let out her frustrations. So many years of trying to forget him… of burying her feelings… proved futile the instant she saw him again. How easy it was for her to remember… every touch of his hand, every kiss from his lips, every embrace.

Being around him felt like walking through both heaven and hell at the same time.

To forget her heartaches, she opens a pack of cookies and lays them out on a plate in front of her fresh cup of hot chocolate, then she returns to the stove to resume cooking.

“Soo-yah,” So calls, trying to follow his paranoid wife as she flits from room to room.

“I don’t remember in which boxes we packed the plates,” she wails, grabbing a soiled dish towel that she spots lying on the kitchen counter and tossing it into the laundry hamper in the next room. “My mother says they’ll be here in an hour!”

He finally manages to grab hold of her. “Stop moving for a minute and breathe,” he orders, cupping her face and looking into her eyes. “Go lie down for a while. I’ll look for them,” he says firmly when she opens her mouth to interrupt. “You and Baek Ah have been cooking and baking all day. I know where the plates and bowls are, and once Baek Ah’s done showering, we’ll set the table together. No buts, Soo-yah.” He gently kneads her aching lower back and has to smile when she closes her eyes and groans in pleasure.

Their mothers had given Hajin a concoction to put in her bath, and she’s been wanting to try it since. “I have been wanting a hot bath,” she murmurs, placing her hands on his hips and tiptoeing to reach his lips. “Join me?”

“I have a table to set,” he reminds her, amused at how quickly her hormones can take over her thought processes these days.

“Oh right,” she mumbles glumly. “Later, then.”
A panicked scream makes them both jump. “Hyung! My towel-”

So sighs and assures Hajin, “This always happens.”

“-I don’t have one!”

Hajin snickers. “He forgot to bring a towel?”

“Go have your bath,” he kisses her, ”and stop worrying about-”

“Is it safe to come out-”

“No!” they both yell in unison.

Hajin disappears into the master bedroom. The bathroom is chilly, but quickly warms up as the tub is filled with hot water. She adds a few drops of the concoction into the soapy bubbles and puts a hand in to feel the temperature. It’s a little too hot, but it’ll cool down soon enough.

She slips into the water and lays down with a contented sigh as the weight of her growing belly lifts from her lower back. The sudden rise in temperature startles her little one, who immediately goes through a series of acrobatics that’ll make any martial artist proud. The movements make Hajin smile as she goes lower, dipping her head backwards to soak her hair. She closes her eyes and breathes in the scent of the bath water, wondering what her mothers had given her this time. Since her mother had started taking classes under Sooyeon, they’ve been sending her all sorts of soaps, lotions and creams. This time, her sensitive nose detects chamomile… and perhaps a hint of lavender? She’s so relaxed, it’s all she can do to stop herself from falling asleep.

She thinks of Myunghee, who had gone home to celebrate Christmas with her parents for the first time in years. No matter what had happened recently, she hopes her cousin can be happy today, and tomorrow. She had tried her best to be positive and surround Myunghee with positive aura, but since Hajin had recently gotten married and moved out of her parents’ place, Myunghee had also decided to move out and now lives in a small but cozy space at the back of her new flower shop. Hajin didn’t like the thought of Myunghee being so alone, and was very happy to hear she would at least be spending some time with her parents.

Next, she thinks of Woohee, wondering what her friend has been up to. Out of all the court ladies, Woohee alone had volunteered to come to work for half a day today. The rest had to draw straws. Hajin remembers what Woohee’s life had been like in Goryeo… she remembers Woohee’s reaction to Myunghee’s casual mention of her parents at the charity concert…

She opens her eyes and sighs glumly at the ceiling. The bathroom door slides open but she knows who it is and isn’t alarmed.

“Why the long face?”

"Just thinking,” she replies shortly, turning her head to the side to pout at So as he takes a seat on the edge of the tub. “What kind of life do you think Woohee has in this century?”

He looks thoughtful, but shrugs. “I don’t know, Soo-yah.”

“I think…” she turns over on her side and rests her chin on the tub, “her life is not so different from what it was in Goryeo.” He asks what makes her think so and she tells him her reasons quietly, ordering him first to lock the door to make sure Baek Ah can’t hear any of it.

When she finishes speaking, he neither argues nor questions her logic. All he does is ask what she
wants to do, and she feels grateful to have married such a direct, practical man. “If I’m right, then she’s alone tonight.”

He crouches to meet her eyes, slips a hand into the water and runs it over her sensitive, stretched flesh. He can feel gooseflesh ripple across her skin. “And you don’t want that.”

She shakes her head. “But I don’t know if having her and Baek Ah over at the same time will make things worse for them. They already meet too often because of us.”

“First, it’s not like we let them meet on purpose. Second, I actually think the tension between them has lessened as of late.”

“Really?” she straightens up, heartened. “So if I invite Woohee for dinner tonight, they won’t think I’m trying to set them up?”

He hides a smile. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes and no,” she replies honestly. “Yes, I think they like each other and they’re good for each other. But no, my real purpose for inviting her would be for her to have company, not for any ulterior motives. I’m a good person!”

He chuckles. “I don’t doubt it. I get Baek Ah, you get Woohee?”

“Deal.” She points to her bathrobe. “Help. Please.”

As she sits on the edge of the bed minutes later wearing nothing but her bathrobe, she calls Woohee’s cell, wondering suddenly if her friend had already made plans for tonight.

“Unnie?”

“Woohee-yah!” she says, happy to hear her voice. “Where are you now?” So comes in, flashes her a thumbs up, and closes the door quietly behind him. Now all they need is for Woohee to say yes. “The dorm? Oh, well I- what? No, no, nothing’s wrong. I was just wondering, if you don’t have any plans, if you would like to come over for dinner tonight?”

She unties her robe and helps So apply the cream she had made to minimize the appearance of stretch marks with her free hand.

“Trouble? What trouble?” she indignantly splutters all of a sudden. “Kim Woohee, you are like a sister to me. Stop thinking of yourself as being troublesome or so help me, I will get angry!”

“Blood pressure,” So whispers into her ear. She shudders, holds her phone away from their mouths, and says, “is perfectly normal, as well you know.” She puts his hands back on her body and tries not to get sidetracked as he resumes what he had been doing.

“Two hours,” she bargains. “Dinner for two hours. Come on, it’s Christmas Eve! I haven’t given you my Christmas gift yet. I’ll even make you a cup of hot choco and throw in some marshmallows.”

It takes a little bit of coaxing and bribery, but Woohee finally agrees.

“She says to give her one hour,” Hajin tells So in triumph, tossing her phone and putting her arms around him.

Flushed, he pulls away from her insistent kisses. “Baek Ah’s outside.”
“Mm. I can smell his cookies.”

“Soo-yah, we don’t have time,” he laughs, trying to get away before things can progress any further.

“You can’t touch me like that and not expect any consequences.” She licks his lips and fingers his pliant ears. “Pyeha, you worry too much.”

“I worry too much? Didn’t you say our parents will be here soon?”

“Not soon enough.”

Every time the doorbell rings, Baek Ah holds his breath, and every time someone else comes in, he relaxes. That is, until she finally arrives.

She’s smiling as she enters, carrying two boxes of baked goods that she had obviously just bought. Her cheeks are red from the cold but she looks to be in good spirits, especially when she sees Hajin and Soon Deok.

“It’s so cold outside!” Baek Ah can hear her saying as she sheds her winter clothes until all that’s left is a Christmas sweater over tattered blue jeans. He tries not to follow her with his eyes as she goes around greeting everyone: his aunts and uncles, cousins, niece and nephews.

“Merry Christmas.” She reaches him finally.

His smile is easy, well-practiced after years of dealing with uncomfortable situations. “Merry Christmas to you, too.”

“Your parents…?”

“Oh,” he makes a little gesture with his hand as he says, “well, they rarely come to family gatherings. Actually, they never do.”

Right then, she remembers why. “Ah, right! Sorry, I… forgot.” His mother had been disowned for ruining a marriage deal by marrying an ordinary salaryman. “I thought maybe since it’s Christmas and all…” she clears her throat awkwardly and then, after deciding she had nothing more to say, left him to talk to the others.

The last to arrive are Yo and his family. Jung’s with them; he’s been spending a lot of time at their place, helping them take care of baby Chunwon, who easily steals everyone’s hearts with his toothless smiles and high-pitched laughs.

“We decided to wait for him to wake up,” Munseong explains after apologizing for being late.

“He’s so full of energy!” Eunnie’s mother laughs, then turns to Baek Ah. “Baek Ah-yah! Let’s take pictures before we eat. Quick, everyone, to the tree!”
He takes out his camera and begins to direct them. They take pictures of Chunwon by himself, then with his parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins… and finally, they want a picture of the whole family.

“I’ll do it,” Woohee suggests quietly to Baek Ah, offering him her hand, palm up. “I’m not family, so…”

“Oh, right,” he nods and gives her his camera. He doesn’t need to tell her what to do or how to operate it. He’s bought a lot of cameras over the years, but for special occasions, he only uses the one his parents had bought for him in college.

After taking pictures, they settle down to eat.

Woohee knows when she takes her first bite that Baek Ah had cooked everything, and Baek Ah watches, wondering if she remembers how he used to cook for her in the past. He always squeezed in one or two of her favorite food during family gatherings, even before she came back into his life.

“Do you remember the year we all went on that 2-week-long cruise around the country for Christmas? That was fun! We helped sail the ship and everything,” Eun recalls brightly. His older cousins tell him they do remember, but Jung looks lost. Eun tells him with a pitying tut, “Make that all of us minus you and Baek Ah.”

“Why, where was I?” Jung asks, trying to place the memory.

“At home with your mother,” his father replies. “She was afraid you’d drown.”

“But you two went?” he frowns at his older brothers, who nod, “Of course.”

“You were left behind because you were her baby,” Yo teases, tugging playfully at Jung’s cheeks. “You don’t remember because we lied to you and said we were sleeping over at Won’s. He hates going there,” he adds to those who don’t know enough family history to understand.

“So that’s why you returned all tanned!” Jung says, finally remembering. He glares accusingly at his brothers. “You two! You’re always lying to me! Just because I’m years younger than you are!” He turns to the rest of his family, “Right after they returned from the military, they kidnapped me and only told me hyung was getting married on the morning of the wedding.”

“You’re not still sour about that?” Yo laughs at the memory of Jung in his striped pajamas. Jung rushes on, “And when I was five, they gave me a whole red onion and told me it was a special kind of apple from Malaysia.”

So’s eyes light up, “I’d forgotten about that one.”

“How could you forget? Our butts were never the same afterwards,” Yo recalls. His wife looks down in interest, “Really?”

“I still can’t bring myself to eat onions because of you!”

“But, Jungie…” Baek Ah says, trying to keep a straight face, “that soup you’ve been sipping all evening… it’s onion soup.”

Everyone laughs at Jung’s horrified expression, but the stories don’t stop there. One by one, confessions and memories come pouring out, mostly funny stories aimed at amusing their guests. Even outsiders like Woohee and the Park family laugh along. Drinks also get passed around when
they start playing drinking games, the only ones exempted being Hajin, who’s pregnant, Munseong, who’s breastfeeding, and Yujeong, who has to drive her two kids home.

Finally, full of food and drunk on alcohol and laughter, people begin to cluster into smaller groups to talk quietly amongst themselves, and Woohee decides it’s time to say goodbye.

“The dorm might close earlier today,” she explains in a low voice to a drowsy Hajin. “Thank you for inviting me, unnie.”

“You know you’re welcome anytime.”

She does know. “Merry Christmas,” she says, giving Hajin a massive hug. “I had fun tonight. Really.” The most fun she’s had in years.

“Take care on your way back.”

“I’ll take her,” Baek Ah offers from out of nowhere.


“No,” he replies at once with a short laugh, “I’m kidding, noona. Yes, of course. But if we get into an accident and die, you’re free to yell at my funeral.”

So comes over and wraps his arms around an unamused Hajin. “We’re still not naming the baby after you.”

Baek Ah winks and kisses Hajin’s cheek. “Was worth a shot. Well, anyway, thank you for keeping me company today.”

“I should be the one thanking you,” Hajin says.

“And Merry Christmas!” He hugs them both before leaving with Woohee. “Noona,” he calls as he’s starting his motorbike, “I left you a whole container full of salad that you have to finish!”

Hajin groans at the thought of more food.

“I put in a lot of peanuts! You have to stay healthy!” he adds with a grin. And then, with a final wave, they back onto the main road and go on their way.

Despite how tired she is, Woohee is wide awake during the whole ride. The city streets are empty and they make it back to the university dorm in good time. By the time she gets off the bike, Woohee’s mustered enough courage to thank him and invite him in.

“I can’t. I promised my parents I’d sleep over at their place tonight, so I have to get going.”

“Then, can you wait for me for a little bit? I have something for you.”

She rushes through the gates, across the field, and opens the dorm as fast as she can. Running up to her room, she flings open her closet and begins tossing things aside indiscriminately until she finds what she’s looking for. Then she runs back to the gate, hoping he’s still there.

He is.

“Merry… Christmas… Baek Ah-yah,” she pants, holding out her gift. It’s something she’s had for a while now… something she’s been working on for years. Embarrassed and feeling vulnerable,
she thanks him for the ride, bids him goodnight and leaves. She shuts the dormitory door behind her and sinks to the floor, breathing heavily, wondering if he would like it.

After what seems like an eternity, she gets up and begins collecting the things she had discarded onto the floor during her hasty entrance earlier, but just as she’s about to go back up the stairs, a loud banging makes her double back.

“Woohee!”

Baffled, she opens the door and comes face to face with a very angry Baek Ah.

“What the hell is this?” he demands angrily.

In his hand is the CD she had just given him. She’s sure he knows what it is. “It’s a CD with all your self-compositions from highschool. It took me a while to compile because I had to figure out the notes by ear, but-

“I know what it is,” he growls, “why are you giving it to me?”

“I… I thought you might like it,” she says, feeling unsure and frightened now. She had no idea he would react this way. Of all the ways she had imagined his reaction to be, furious had not been one of them.

“Like it?” he grabs a fistful of his hair and begins to laugh, incredulously, humorlessly. “For fuck’s sake, Woohee!”

“For fuck’s sake, what?” she shrieks, confused. “Why are you angry?”

“Why?” he seethes, closing the distance between them with a single step. “Years ago, you disappeared without a single trace right before graduation. I searched for you… for years. And when I couldn’t find you, I decided to forget about you, and I managed to. But now…” he shakes his head and takes a step back, “now you’re back and I’ve put up with it for everyone’s sake, but you’re not making it any easier!”

She’s stunned. “But you were always so happy… joking around, smiling-” She sees his closed expression and finally understands… it had all been an act. All this time. He hasn’t forgiven her. He’s been bottling up all this anger and resentment for months.

“Then why did you ask me to come back?” she yells, feeling choked with guilt and anger herself. “Why did you have to act like you didn’t care whether or not I worked for your uncle’s company? Why did you have to be so fake?”

“Why not?” he hisses, “After all, I learned from the best.”

She realizes he means her and can’t help feeling hurt. “Fake? You think I’ve been faking it all this time? That I haven’t been sincere?”

“You tell me.”

Despite the hurt in her breast, she takes a moment to calm herself. Yelling and exchanging sarcastic remarks won’t help the situation. “I have been sincere. I do care. And I did- do love you.”

“Then why…” he approaches her slowly until they’re only inches apart. He towers over her. Once upon a time, she had found his height attractive and charming. Tonight, it only serves to intimidate. “Why?” It’s all he can say.
She blinks back tears, trying to gather her courage. The courage to finally tell him the truth.
“You're right if you think I've been lying to you, but not- never about how I feel,” she has to emphasise when he scoffs unpleasantly. “I… I wanted to tell you even before… but I never got the chance to. And also… I didn't know how.”

His expression is carefully controlled to give her no indication of his thoughts and feelings.

“Would you like to come inside for a minute?” When he doesn't move, she decides that's a no and closes the door. “There’s a bench nearby,” she informs him instead, hugging her arms to her body and going down the steps. She doesn't bother to check if he's following because she knows he is.

They reach the mushroom tables and chairs stationed under the trees surrounding the quadrangle, and that’s when she remembers… guard-ahjussi had asked his friend to keep the Christmas lights on for tonight, just for her. She had thought to take a stroll, to maybe compose some music after having dinner earlier. With the way she’s feeling now, she doubts she’ll be able to write very much.

She sits but he doesn’t join her. Instead, he walks to the nearest tree and leans against it, his back to her. The lights overhead flash all kinds of colors onto him; their cheerful dance a stark contrast to the dour mood between the only two people on campus.

“The truth is,” she begins shakily, eyeing her hands. She wonders how and where to begin. “When I was young… my parents used to drive my sisters and me around town during Christmas eve, to see the Christmas lights. If business was really good that year, we would leave earlier and they would take us to the bigger cities. We would bring canteens of hot chocolate and containers full of biscuits, and when we came across a particularly beautiful display, we would stop for a while to take pictures and to share stories of whatever interesting thing had happened to each of us that year. Life was good. I had a wonderful family: a doting grandfather and parents who loved each other.

“But one day, my father and grandfather were attacked while on their way to deliver some items from the store. A man ambushed them, asked for their money… but they hadn’t brought much. They told him they would have more after they deliver the beauty products. He didn’t believe them. My grandfather died protecting my father, and though my father survived, he was never the same again.”

She lifts a gloved hand to wipe her runny nose. She remembers how her mother shook as she packed them up to go to the hospital. She remembers seeing her unconscious father on life support, comforting her younger sisters who kept calling out for him. When he woke up a week later, they were overjoyed. But something was wrong. He didn’t speak, didn’t smile, didn’t laugh. His hands, the hands of an artist, the same hands Woohee had inherited, had been hurt - smashed, broken beyond repair. The doctors said he would be able to use them again… eventually… with rehabilitative therapy.

“Expenses piled… business slowed… father stopped going to therapy, saying he could do the exercises on his own. On good days, he would be like his old self: laughing, joking around… but then he would try to lift us up… and he couldn’t. Not even our youngest. He’d try to do the things that he used to do with ease before, only to find his hands were uncooperative. And he would get angry again. He cursed at customers, cursed at my mother, cursed at us. My mother tried to be patient and understanding, but sometimes, he was too much.

"Finally, one day, she came home very late after doing some overtime at work… they had agreed that he would be the one to cook dinner that night… he had promised. And when she came home and found us hungry, secretly sharing a pack of biscuits that a classmate had shared with me at school, she lost it. She found out that he had thrown away all the canned goods and instant noodles
because they were unhealthy. She was so angry. They got into a big fight. He called him lazy, he called her a whore. He didn’t believe she had been at work. He was convinced she was cheating on him.”

“I’m done!” her mother screamed, grabbing her bag, then her daughters and ushering them out the door. “Do what you want! I’m done!”

“You are not taking my children anywhere!” he yelled, going after them. He grabbed her by the shoulder, spun her around, and punched her in the face. Caught unawares, their mother had staggered and fallen onto the pavement, whimpering from pain and fright.

The sight of his wife sprawled on the ground, clutching at her bruised cheek, seemed to bring him back to his senses. His anger dissipated, and he tried to help her up, but she cowered away from him.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, swatting his hands away with her bag. She got to her feet, crying, staring at him with disbelief written all over her face.

Woohee grabbed her distressed younger sisters and led them away from the house, wishing she could wake up from this nightmare, but she could still hear her parents as clearly as though they were right beside her.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean… I wasn’t…” her father tried to apologize, but her mother would have none of it.

She took off her wedding ring and flung it in his chest, then she rushed after her daughters and left, deaf to his anguished pleas.

She brought them to the nearest convenience store and told them to sit outside. “Mother will be back,” she said, trying to act normal despite her visible shaking. “Hush, stop crying now, I will just go in and buy some food. What would you like? Mother will buy whatever you want.”

But Woohee was mute from shock, staring at the dark mark on her mother’s pale face, and her sisters were too distressed over what they had heard and witnessed to even think about eating.

“Woohee-yah, watch over your sisters. I’ll be back soon.”

Being so late at night, the convenience store didn’t have much by way of warm food, so she had bought some noodles, cold drinks, and some street food from a nearby vendor. They ate in silence, but as their tummies began to fill, their mood improved. This was just another fight. They could overcome this like before, couldn’t they?

“Of course,” their mother assured them. “Don’t worry, mother was just angry. We’ll go home after you finish eating and then we’ll talk to father. Ok?”

With the promise of reconciliation, their appetites improved. Woohee shared some new jokes she had learned at school to make them laugh, and she could see the gratitude and pride in her mother’s eyes, and they were warmer than the soup she was sipping.

But the warm feeling would not last very long. Upon returning home, they discovered the door unlocked. Thinking nothing of it, their mother immediately got to work doing the dishes and cleaning the house, while she told her daughters to get ready for bed.
Not five minutes had passed, they heard their mother scream. Woohee ran to the source of the sound - her father’s workshop. She rushed through the open doorway and couldn’t comprehend what she was seeing. Her mother continued to scream, frantically tugging at the ropes that bound her father to the ceiling.

“Yeobo! Yeobo!” she called, then ran to the window, ”Help! Somebody, please! Woohee, bring your sisters outside. Don’t let them see!”

But Woohee was too numb to move. Too numb to think. All she could do was stare. She wasn’t aware of even falling to the floor… wasn’t aware of people dragging her outside… wasn’t aware of losing consciousness.

She stops talking for a moment to dry her tears, but no matter how many times she wipes them off, more just keep on coming. She hasn’t thought of that day in the longest time. Everyday for a year, all she could see when she woke up… and all she could see when she closed her eyes… was her father’s lifeless face.

Baek Ah is quiet, unmoving. Whatever he had expected to hear tonight, this hadn’t been it. He looks back and sees her sobbing into her gloves, and he unwinds his scarf from his neck and gives it to her.

“I think we both could use a drink,” he says at last. “Wait here.”

Woohee vaguely wonders if he’s leaving her there for good. She won’t blame him if he does. Her story is enough to ruin anyone’s mood, and who would want that on Christmas Eve?

But he returns a couple of minutes later, fresh snow in his hair and a plastic bag full of soju in his hand. He opens two bottles and passes one to her. Together, they take a long draft. And then he waits. He feels there’s more to the story, and he’s right.

“After that, the business died completely. We had to sell the house and move into a small apartment. Before grandfather died, mother had been a housewife. The day job she had found was hardly enough to support three growing girls, so she took a second job. She wouldn’t let me work. She said I had to focus on my studies, so I did. But I was angry, Baek Ah-yah…” she can feel her guilt eating away inside her; she felt rotten inside. “I was so angry. I was angry at that man for killing my grandfather… at my father for killing himself… at my mother for making him believe she was leaving him for good. I was angry at the world for taking everything away. My good life, my perfect childhood, my good home. To my sisters, I was an ideal sister. But to my mother, I was mean… unreasonable. I blamed her for everything. When we lost our old house, I blamed her. When we had to transfer schools, I blamed her. When I had to pick up the responsibility of cleaning up, doing the laundry and taking care of my sisters, I blamed her. I was such a bitch.”

She closes her eyes, pained at the memory of all the hurtful things she had said to her mother, at the many times she had heard her mother crying quietly in her room in the middle of the night when she thought no one else was awake.

“It’s Christmas Eve. Do you girls want to do something special tonight?” their mother had asked the year following their father’s death. “Why don’t we go out to see the lights? We haven’t done that in a while. Don’t you miss it?”

“Mom. It’s almost midnight,” Woohee snapped, annoyed.
“I know. We needn’t go far.” She fidgeted uncomfortably with her fingers and turned to her younger two. “What about you two? I have hot chocolate and cookies. You used to love them!”

None of them really wanted to go out that night, but she was insistent. She did everything. She packed the food, their clothes, took out all the money she had saved, and started the beat-up, secondhand car she had recently bought. “Girls, hop in and let’s go!” She pointed out all the pretty lights they passed; the big houses with their big trees, and the street lamps with lit stars. She turned on the stereo and played Christmas tunes, and pretty soon, the younger two were singing along. Seeing her younger sisters enjoying themselves made Woohee feel better.

“Let’s go somewhere special,” their mother said, veering off the main road and entering a street that led up to the mountain. “It’s a place I used to go to when I was a kid. You girls will love it there.”

Fifteen minutes up, the youngest began to complain about needing to go to the bathroom. She couldn’t wait for them to reach their destination and said she’d do it in a bush.

“It’s freezing cold!” their mother exclaimed, but pulled over anyway. “Don’t go too far, and put your tissues in this plastic bag when you’re done.”

Woohee waited for her sisters to disappear before confronting their mother. “Are we celebrating something?” she asked without preamble. “Do you have a new boyfriend?”

Her mother was shocked, but not angry. She laughed, “No, of course not. But I do have good news.” Woohee could tell her mother had been waiting all day to tell them. She could see it in the excited gleam in her eyes, and the upward turn of her smiling lips. “Woohee-yah, I got promoted.”

Those three words were enough to dispel what little remained of Woohee’s dark mood. “Really?”

Her mother nodded, excited, and took hold of her hands. “My boss really likes all the effort I’ve been putting into my work and promoted me yesterday. A Christmas gift, he said. Woohee-yah… I know you’ve been having a hard time. I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you, but things will be better from now on. I promise. We just need to be patient.” She hugged her then and stroked her long hair. “Thank you for looking after your sisters. Mother is very lucky and happy to have you for a daughter.”

Woohee was crying. All this time, her mother had worked to provide them with everything they needed… and yet Woohee had found every reason to be nasty. “Just a little more. Can you keep doing what you’ve been doing for just a little longer?”

Wordlessly, Woohee nodded, and when her sisters returned, shivering and hopping from the cold, she even managed to tease them and laugh. Spirits high, they hopped back into the car.

“You girls will love it there!” their mother said, starting the engine. “We’ll be able to see all the lights of the city, and we can sit on a blanket and drink hot chocolate and eat cookies just like we used to.”

“And unnie can play a song for us!” Jaehee, the middle child, suggested. “I brought your flute, unnie.”

Woohee readily took the flute from her and tested it out. “Sure, what song would you like?” She played a fun, jagged little tune that made their youngest giggle.

“If you study hard enough, you could go to college,” their mother said, finally getting the car to start. She looked at Woohee, who sat on the passenger’s side, and smiled, “We’ll save enough
money so you can study music, like you’ve always wanted.”

Woohee couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so happy and hopeful. She began to play an original song. It was a slow song, and everyone fell silent to listen. Their mother backed up slowly, careful to avoid the slippery ice. She was just about to finish her turn and continue her drive up when a speeding van came at them, rammed right into the driver’s side, and sent their car spinning out of control.

Chapter End Notes

hehe well I did promise some angst. Sorry for the very late update! It's a very long chapter. Also, I was busy making grades, and when I finally finished, I was too tired to do much but sleep and be lazy hehe

But I'm back now and ready to keep updating! This is soooo long, I had to cut it lol
See you in the next chapter... hopefully :D

Song: 가 (Love that Left Autumn Behind) by Patti Kim
“Not many people went to their funeral… just some friends, and my uncle. He was my only living relative left so I went to live with him. I wanted to be a better person this time. I told myself that as long as I lived my life right, my mother and sisters would forgive me and be proud.” Woohee stops talking for a moment to breathe deeply. “But my uncle made it difficult. I found out when I turned 17 that he had spent all the insurance money from my mother and sisters. It was the only reason why he had agreed to take me in.”

“Seventeen…” Baek Ah murmurs. They were already together that time.

“I asked for it, you see, so that I could go to Seoul with you and study music, like my mother wanted,” she explained in a whisper. “He was furious when I asked for the money. He told me he wouldn’t give me anything, and I told him it was fine because I could take care of myself. I’d been taking care of myself since my mother’s death anyway. I thought it didn’t matter that I had nothing because I could always work, and I had you. I promised myself I would leave as soon as I graduated and come clean with you about my whole past. I was hopeful you would forgive me for not telling you the truth about my family sooner… but then something… else… happened.” Her cheeks flush from embarrassment and suppressed rage and she’s so restless, she can’t stop fidgeting with her hands.

“Woohee-yah.”

“Yes, uncle?” she called back with difficulty, wondering why he was suddenly talking to her when they’d barely spoken to each other in a week.

He came into her room and sat on her bed. She was so surprised, she looked up from her homework and frowned at him. He looked pale and nervous, wiping beads of sweat from his forehead.

“Uncle has been thinking long and hard… and I’m very sorry about everything I said to you. I’m sorry for spending your money without telling you either.”

She was so taken aback by his apology that she didn’t know what to say.
“I realize I haven’t been taking care of you the way my dear sister would have wanted. I’m not married and I don’t have children so I didn’t know what to do when you first came here. But sister did tell me once that you were very good with music.” At this, he got up and gestured for her to follow him into the living room. There, sitting on the couch, was a brand new acoustic guitar, something she had been saving up for since she first saw it at the shop months before. “Will you play a song for me?”

Touched, Woohee looked at him for confirmation, then pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming, and took it. She ran her fingers over the body and neck before plucking at each string. It was as perfect as she had imagined, and already tuned to perfection. Finally, a guitar of her own. She would paint butterflies on it, and flowers, and write down her family’s names, so that when things got tough, she could look at it and remember her promise to live her life well, the way they would have wanted her to.

“This used to be mother’s favorite song,” she said, wondering if her fingers would remember. They did. She played three songs in a row, and every time she finished, her uncle would clap and tell her how talented she was, and how natural she looked holding that guitar.

While thinking of a song to play to Baek Ah the next time they saw each other, her uncle returned with a glass of water and said brightly, “You can start your own band. Become a pop star!”

She blushed at the idea, but was secretly happy that someone thought she was good enough to actually make a career out of music. “I’ve never performed in front of a large audience before.”

“Tell you what, I have some friends who own a nightclub,” he said in sudden inspiration. “I’ll call them for a favor and let you play a few songs, just to get you used to the idea. For the experience, you know?”

“A nightclub? I can’t go to nightclubs yet, I’m underaged.”

“Sure you can, with an accompanying adult. You didn’t think I would let you go there by yourself?”

“Oh right.” She felt stupid. “Of course.” Then, feeling optimistic, she agreed to it.

She stops talking. Baek Ah doesn’t rush her. He wonders silently what could have happened that night to make her up and leave without telling anyone…

Closing her eyes, she continues her story. “Living with him for two years, I thought I understood why he was called the black sheep of the family; why mother never let us see him. But I was wrong. I was so wrong… so naive.”

“You didn’t think we let you play tonight for free?”

Alarmed, Woohee backed up, only to find the door blocked by large men in black shirts.

“My uncle is outside,” she tried to sound brave, threatening. “He’ll call the police!”

The bossman looked grimly at one of the men standing guard. “Fetch her uncle.”

Relieved, Woohee hugged her guitar to herself and waited. Her uncle would explain the situation.
He said he and this man were friends. He would save her.

“Woohee, just do it,” he snapped the moment he entered the room.

“What-?” she spluttered, dumbstruck.

“I thought you said she was your niece,” the bossman drawled, pouring himself another shot of whiskey.

“She is,” her uncle assured him. He looked like a puppy about to be punished. “Let me talk to her for a few minutes.”

“You have one.”

“Uncle,” she said, confused, “what are you doing? What is this about?”

“If you don’t do this, we’re both dead!” he hissed, trying to pry her guitar away from her. But she held fast. She would use it as a weapon and run away if need be.

“I am not a whore!” she screamed. “I’m your niece! I’m the daughter of your sister!”

“That’s why I’m telling you that you need to do this,” he said placatingly, trying to grab her guitar again, but she pushed his hands away. “Everything has a price! Be grateful he’s not asking for your whole life,” he snarled, grabbing her by the collar of her dress and pulling her roughly towards him. She was surprised by his sudden strength and by the anger in his eyes. And was that panic?

“It’s true. You sold me?” she whispered, tears in her eyes. “Uncle, please… I’ll do anything else. Anything!”

“There’s nothing we can do! It’s just for one night for fuck’s sake!” he said. “Don’t think I’m blind. I know you have a boyfriend. I am not so old-fashioned to think that you’ve never slept with him.”

“I haven’t!” she cried. “He respects me! He respects me…” she began to sob, wondering what Baek Ah might think if he found out-no… she had to get out of this no matter what. She had to fight. No sooner had the thought reached her when her guitar was wrenched out of her grasp. Turning, she found herself face to face with the boss.

She had no time to think. She grabbed whatever was nearest her - a heavy paperweight made of lead and in the form of a hand - and banged it against his cheek. Two sets of arms grabbed her immediately from behind to prevent her from inflicting more damage and running away.

“Let me go!” she screamed, kicking at them. Her arms were useless, being held up. She felt thoroughly exposed, and to make things worse, her attack didn’t seem to deter the man whose cheek she had grazed and bruised. Instead, to her horror, he smiled unpleasantly and walked ever so slowly towards her.

Then he moved fast, giving her no time to react. One large hand grabbed at her breast, and another cupped her between the legs. She shrieked and tried to kick him away, but he was so close and so strong, she couldn’t hit him hard enough, and his hand between her thighs made it impossible for her to knee his groin.

“If you struggle, it’ll hurt more,” he said huskily, twisting her breast and making her cry out in pain. “I could make it pleasant for you… but you’re not giving me that option. No matter. You
needn’t enjoy it.” To his bodyguards, he barked, “Hold her still. Make sure she doesn’t escape.”

She fought and fought, but it seemed clear that the harder she struggled, the more he liked it. She cried and called out to her uncle for help. “Uncle, help me, please... help me! I’ll do anything! Uncle, please!”

But if he was still in the room, he ignored her.

She cried harder when the man slid down her underwear. She begged for him to let her go, but he was as deaf as her uncle. And then the man felt her. She winced in discomfort and tried to pull her hips away.

“A true virgin,” he breathed, delighted. “Tight... but dry as hell.” He tutted and moved towards his desk. When he returned, his hands were glistening with oil.

Woohee looked around but her uncle was nowhere to be found. He had left her to her fate.

“Please,” she sobbed, so tired now that it was all she could do. “Please, let me go...”

But it was pointless and everyone there knew it.

When he forced himself in, she couldn’t help but cry out, and he didn’t... wouldn’t stop, entirely oblivious to her pain as he worked to pleasure himself.

She had never felt so humiliated in her life... never so worthless or weak as when they finally released her and all she could do was fall to the floor, weak and dazed. She hurt all over, but her physical pain was nothing compared to the loss of her self-worth, her dignity, her power, her trust, her love... gone in just a few minutes.

A pill was placed in front of her along with a glass of water to ensure she wouldn’t get pregnant, and after forcing her to swallow, they threw her out of the room with her guitar and left her in the dark.

When her uncle found her, she wouldn’t let him apologize or speak. She slapped him hard across his face, and when he tried to speak a second time, she slapped him again. She took her guitar as a reminder never to be so gullible again and returned to her school dorm that same night with all her things. She spent the rest of the winter holidays in her dorm, locked up, trying to regain control of herself before school started again. But nothing was ever the same for her.

“I couldn’t face you. I felt so stupid.” Her voice is small and she’s shrunk into herself, hunched over her legs that she had pressed tight together. She had never spoken to anyone of that night. She imagined she could still feel him between her legs and she shuddered with revulsion, feeling like she might throw up.

Baek Ah is stunned. He can’t even face her. In his wildest dreams, he never imagined he would be hearing such a story tonight.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered, allowing her hair to hide her face as she bowed her head further and cried. “I’m sorry for lying. I’m sorry for leaving without a word. I’m sorry for everything.”

She shouldn’t be sorry. After all she’s been through...

Baek Ah wants to comfort her, to say something useful, but he feels paralyzed. But as the shock subsides, he begins to feel hurt and rage all at once. It’s all-consuming, and were it not for her
evident distress, he would have gone home, found out where her uncle lived, and beaten him to a pulp. It’s an option he plays around with even as he continues to listen.

“I didn’t tell you about my family when we first met… because the pain of losing them was too raw and I was too afraid of opening up to anyone. My uncle was terrible as a parental figure. I just wanted to keep imagining I was living with my parents… that everyday, I would come home and sing songs with my sisters. I wanted to imagine what my father would say if he found out I had a boyfriend. I wanted my mother to tell me how to deal with my first feelings of infatuation and love.” She sobbed wholeheartedly into her knees. “I wanted their forgiveness. I wanted to keep imagining my life was not completely ruined. I wanted them back… so badly.”

She’s exhausted from crying, but she can’t stop. Since leaving her uncle, she’s pushed all her negative memories back, away from her mind. Up until graduation, she had tried to focus only on Baek Ah, the one ray of light left in her sea of dark, crashing waves. But she couldn’t really forget… not when every time he touched her, she felt someone else’s hands; not when every time he kissed her, she felt someone else’s lips. And when she thought about living with him in Seoul… and all that entailed… she didn’t think she would survive thinking of another man while she was with him.

For that man’s face, his breath, his mouth, his hands… they all haunted her constantly.

“So I did what I do best…” she whispered. “I ran away.”

It’s late morning and Hajin finds herself sitting numbly in a university dormitory for girls, sharing a cup of warm tea with a tired Woohee. “So that’s why Baek Ah asked me to come,” she whispers. She sees Woohee’s swollen eyes and reaches over to squeeze her hand. She doesn’t know what to say. She’d had a suspicion about Woohee’s past and hates that she had been right.

“What did Baek Ah say after you told him all this?” she asks quietly.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember. I think… I fell asleep. I only remember waking up on the couch, wrapped in blankets.” And then suddenly, alcohol flushed from her system, she’s overwhelmed by an outpouring of years of suppressed emotions. She feels fear, hate, self-loathing, cowardice all at once and they’re so powerful, she begins to weep again, in earnest. “And now I’ve even ruined your Christmas… I’m sorry, unnie, for being such a bother.”

“No,” Hajin says at once. “Woohee, you’re not a bother, alright? I’m glad you told me. I’m glad you told Baek Ah. You’ve been bottling up so much for so long!” She gets off her seat and walks over to give Woohee a hug.

Woohee clings to her, feeling like her world had just toppled over again.

She’s 12 again and her grandfather was just stabbed to death.

She’s 13 again and her father just hung himself.
She’s 14 again and she’s blinded by headlights and pain as she collides strongly against the car window.

She’s 15 again and closing her eyes and ears, pretending she can’t hear her drunk uncle and his women in the next room by focusing on the cute boy who keeps trying to be her friend.

She’s 16 again and spending more time in school than at her uncle’s place, in love for the first time and hopeful.

She’s 17 again… and she should have been excited for the future, but instead, she finds herself hiding from the world.

And she’s 18 again, living alone in a tiny, rundown apartment, trying to list down reasons why she should keep on living.

Her mother’s dream… her sister’s wishes… they kept her going. They wanted her to become a musician and that’s what she would be. Though the memory pained her, she used that guitar and studied. She began with small audiences, gradually working her way towards larger ones. She sang at weddings, parties, all kinds of events. Finally, three years ago, she was able to save enough to go to Seoul to pursue her dreams.

The pain had dulled over the years as she occupied herself with work and school, but it never went away.

And now she hurts… too much. The wall she had built to protect herself has crumbled at last. And she’s vulnerable… and so weak. And she doesn’t know if she can survive this pain again.

She’s dimly aware of Hajin rubbing her back, whispering, “I’m here…” over and over again, and she closes her eyes and hugs her, grateful to finally have someone to share this pain with, even if that someone can never understand.

“You’ve been strong for so long. You just cry.” Hajin’s voice is strange and Woohee realizes it’s because she’s crying, too, but trying not to let her know.

She looks up and she’s right. Hajin’s eyes and nose are blotched with red. “Don’t cry, unnie…” she whispers.

“Yah, how can I not?” Hajin whines back, crying harder now that she’s been discovered.

“I don’t want you to cry-y-y,” she sobs, letting go of all her reservations. They’re so loud in the big, empty kitchen that it’s a surprise So hasn’t barged in yet to ask why his pregnant wife was wailing like a wounded animal.

But it feels good to cry. It feels good to talk. It had been hard at first, but Woohee finds that the retelling is easier the second time around. She doesn’t think her old wounds will ever heal… but the weight they’ve imposed on her does feel lighter.

“None of it was your fault. You know that, right?” Hajin says in a wobbly voice, using her hands to wipe the tears from Woohee’s face. “You were young and your uncle used you. If anyone is to be punished, it’s him.”

Woohee takes a shaky breath. “But I believed him so easily. I knew he was a bad man and still I trusted him.”

“You were young,” Hajin repeats firmly, almost savagely. She would find out where that uncle
lives and rip him to shreds. “And he brought your guard down by pretending to be nice. Don’t blame yourself. I won’t let you.” She draws Woohee to her chest and rubs her shoulders in a tight hug. And she lets her cry it out some more.

*If only you had been this open in Goryeo… if only you had allowed us to help you instead of trying to solve all your problems by yourself…*

They stay that way for a few more minutes, until finally, both completely dry and spent, Hajin slumps heavily back into her seat and passes Woohee a napkin so she can wipe her eyes. She takes a sip of tea and grimaces in distaste when she finds it cold. And then, another need surfaces that drives everything else from her mind.

“Woohee… I really hate to do this right now,” she says with a sigh, “but I really need to use the bathroom.”

Woohee wipes her nose and eyes on her napkin and gets up with a nod. “Do you think you can make it up a flight of stairs?”

Hajin says weakly, “I really want to say yes, but I don’t think so.”

“It’s okay, there’s a bathroom down here. It’s not very nice but it’s cleaner since no one has been using it…” Helping her unnie with something as normal as finding the nearest toilet has brought a bit of normalcy back into her life. It’s something she can build on. “Do you want me to make you a fresh cup of tea?”

“Yes, please, if it’s not too much trouble,” replies Hajin, opening the door.

Woohee smiles tentatively. “It’s never trouble.”

Hajin returns her smile, then inhales sharply, mumbles, “I really need to go.” and disappears.

When she comes out sometime later, she sees Woohee busying herself at the kitchen, and finds So in the main hall, still trying to contact Baek Ah. When he sees her, he puts his phone away for a minute, gets up and gives her a hug. “Are you okay? You look terrible.”

“I feel terrible,” she grumbles into his shoulder. “I was right, sort of. She’s been through a lot. More than anyone should.”

“I gathered as much from your howling.”

She glares at him. “We did not howl.”

Undeterred, he rubs her back. “Sure you did.” Seeing her continued glare, he adds matter-of-factly, “Soo-yah, I wasn’t called a wolfdog in Goryeo for nothing. I know what a howl sounds like and yours is a very cute howl.”

“Cute?”

“Very cute.”

Her indignation disappears somewhat. She supposes they did sound like animals earlier. “Were you able to locate Baek Ah?”

With a sigh, he shakes his head. “I’ve been calling him all morning but he hasn’t picked up, so I’ve asked the others to keep a lookout.” He kisses her forehead and nudges her back towards the
kitchen. “Go sit, I’ll try calling again.”

“Hey,” she says to Woohee as she retakes her seat. “I know you’re not feeling right, but I want you to do something nice today. It’s Christmas! What do you usually do?”

Woohee shrugs. “I don’t really do anything. I like to hibernate around this time.”

“You sound like So on his birthday,” she grumbles. “Then your Christmas tradition starts today. Think of what you want. Anything at all. I’ll do it with you!”

“Anything?” Woohee eyes her doubtfully.

“Anything.”

“Even… skydiving? Swimming?”

“Er…” Hajin grimaces. “Maybe no skydiving. And swimming only if it’s night and there’s absolutely no light.”

Woohee smiles wryly. “I’m teasing.” She takes a seat and plays with her teacup, and eventually decides she needs a distraction, so she takes up unnie’s offer to keep her company today. “I suppose I wouldn’t mind going shopping. And watching a movie.”

“There we go! Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“And…” she has no idea when the thought occurred to her… she only knows she has to do it, “I want to destroy my guitar.”

Hajin coughs out her tea. “Excuse me?”

“I’ve carried around all this negative energy for so long and that guitar is a constant reminder. I want to be rid of it.”

Hajin sees Woohee is serious. She supposes banging a guitar on the ground until it shatters can be fulfilling in its own way. “Alright, then let’s do that first! Get rid of your negative energy before we do something fun.”

The more Woohee thinks about getting rid of that guitar, the better she feels until finally, she smiles, an unadulterated and hopeful smile. “I’ll go get it.”

She’s gone only a few seconds when So raises his voice, speaking agitatedly to someone. Hajin turns curiously towards him, wondering if it’s Baek Ah, but her spirits drop when she hears what he’s saying.

“He asked you to research on who and now he’s going where with a guitar?”

He meets Hajin’s panicked eyes from across the room and tries to tone down his voice, but it’s useless. She’s heard enough. She suspects she knows what’s happening.

“That’s odd, I know I kept it in my room upstairs…” Woohee mumbles, coming down the steps with a frown.

“Is your guitar gone?” Hajin asks briskly, feeling sick.

Surprised, Woohee nods. “But I’m sure it was in my room. I always put it beside my-”
“We have a problem.”

Hajin grabs Woohee’s hand and walks as fast as she can to So. “He’s going to her uncle, isn’t he?” she says the moment she reaches him.

He sighs. “There’s no hiding anything from you, is there?”

“Wait… who…?” Woohee looks from one to the other, a dreadful thought already creeping into her brain.

“We need to stop him. He doesn’t know how to fight!” Hajin says anxiously.

“We will, we will,” he assures her at once. To his phone, he says, “Eun-ah, you did good in telling Jung to follow him. No, don’t call the police, you’ll only get Baek Ah in trouble. But if you hear anything, please tell- what? No, you’re not coming!” The disbelief on his face increases the more he listens. Hajin can hear Eun arguing on the other end. “Eun- Soondeok-ah! You are not going- yah! Yah!”

He stares at his phone in disbelief. “They hung up on me.”

“There’s a first time for everything. Come on,” Hajin says, tugging him along to the door, but he pulls her back easily.

“Whoa, whoa, you’re staying here.”

It’s her turn to stare. “I am not!”

Sensing an argument coming up, Woohee quickly leaves to pack some things.

“Soo-yah,” he assumes his most reasonable tone. “It’s dangerous. Where we’re going- it’s gangster territory. For my peace of mind, I need you to stay here.”

“I can’t stay!” she cries. “Not when you could all be in danger! What about my peace of mind?”

He realizes his best business voice is no match for his wife’s tears. “Soo-yah,” he pleads desperately, “think of the baby. You’ll be safer here, or at home.”

She shakes her head stubbornly. “So take me with you but leave me at a cafe or a restaurant or somewhere!”

Knowing Hajin eats more when she’s agitated, Woohee grabs all her cookies and stuffs them into her backpack, then she takes her cellphone, wallet, powerbank, and a few other essentials before rushing up to her room and grabbing her guitar case. By the time she returns, So and Hajin’s argument has regressed into who loves the other more, with Hajin looking more determined and So more desperate.

“She won’t be coming with us to battle,” Woohee assures him, returning with her things.

“Us?” So repeats, eyeing her get-up with even more dread. The last time he had allowed Woohee to fight her own battles, she ended up jumping off Cheondeokjeon’s battlements. “Battle? Woohee, you’re staying here, too.”

“The hell I am!” she says, affronted. “Look, even if you leave us here, we’ll just get into a taxi and follow you. Would you really trust anyone else to drive them?”

Hajin nods emphatically.
So has to give in. “Fine. But you’re staying in the car. Locked up. The both of you.”

Taking it as his best offer, Woohee agrees. She doesn’t put it past him to lock them up against their will if it meant keeping Hajin safe.

As Woohee exits, So draws Hajin into a tight hug. “I mean it. You stay in the car only.” When she nods, he breathes a sigh of relief. “Then we better get going.”

“Do you still love him?” Hajin asks quietly as they sit in the car two hours later. She stares out the window at the white snow, watching families walk past them.

It’s a small town with quaint little tea shops and corner cafes and restaurants decked with holly and mistletoe and running Christmas lights. An unwitting visitor might call it provincial.

Woohee knows who Hajin means. “Yes.” She shrugs. “But I really don’t expect anything from him. I just wanted him to know… it was never about him - me leaving… it was always about me. He needed the closure.”

Hajin nods, understanding. She remembers how, in the past, Baek Ah had blamed himself for Woohee’s death. She’s sure that if Woohee could have spoken to him then… that she would have told him the same thing she had just told Hajin.

Forcing a smile, she looks at Woohee. “I think he still loves you, you know.”

Woohee blushes. “I don’t think so.”

“Think about it… he came here all by himself to avenge your honor as a woman. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

At this, Woohee’s panic returns. “Unnie… he won’t die, will he? I didn’t just kill him, did I?”

Hajin tries not to look too patronizing. “He will not die. You know how I know? Because So, Eun, Soondeok and Jung are on their way to help him.” Unlike in Goryeo. “Also, he’s going up against one middle-aged man, not an entire army.”

“But my uncle’s part of a gang…”

“W-well,” she stammers with a half-shrug, “at least he’s got back-up.”

Woohee moans her despair, wishing she could take back her promise and rush out to help.
“Hyung!” Eun calls with a relieved sigh, rushing over with Soondeok.

So stops walking and says when they’re close enough, “Where are they?”

“We got lost,” Soondeok explains flatly, jerking her head towards Eun. They’ve been walking in circles only he won’t admit it.

“But,” Eun says loudly, glaring at Soondeok, “I’m pretty sure they’re with her uncle and I’m pretty sure you know where he lives, hyung, so… lead the way!”

So sighs and resumes walking. “Keep up.”

They pass a couple more streets and round some more corners before they arrive at their destination. Eun knows they’re at the right place because not only does So stop walking, but there are Baek Ah and Jung right there in the middle of an empty street. Jung has Baek Ah’s arms in a firm grip, trying to make sure he doesn’t reach the small, balding man cowering away from him on the ground.

“Please, please, mercy!” the man can be heard begging.

Eun watches in awe as Baek Ah tries to kick him, yelling at Jung to let him go. He looks at So. “Hyung… what’s this about? What did that man do?” He’s never seen Baek Ah lose control like this before.


Eun and Soondeok nod, watching as he makes his way towards the other three.

So steps into Baek Ah’s line of vision, and the moment Baek Ah sees him, he cries in frustration, “Hyung! Let me do this! Even if you drag me away or beat me up, I’ll come back and won’t stop trying until he’s-”

“I know,” So says simply.

Baek Ah frowns, taken aback. For a moment, he’s shocked into silence. Finally, he splutters, “Aren’t you here to drag me away?”

“No.”

Jung gapes at his brother. “Hyung!”

But So ignores him. “Woohee’s here.” He also ignores Baek Ah’s look of shock. “I think she deserves to do this more than you, don’t you?”

“Hyung,” Jung whimpers in panic. Has he lost his mind?

Baek Ah glares at his cousin, then he glares at the man lying on the pavement.

So steps closer, “If you beat him up, his gang will hunt you down. This is a family matter,” he says matter-of-factly, “let family deal with it.”
“I go where?” Hajin demands crossly, shooting a glare at the shaking little man Jung and Baek Ah are ushering away. She whispers to So, “Is that him?”

“Yes,” So replies, grabbing hold of her hips to keep her firmly in place, “and you are to stay away. I’m leaving Eun and Deok in charge of you.”

He's treating her like a criminal and she tells him so.

“No, but we all agree you have VIP status at the moment so your safety comes first before all of ours,” he explains firmly, nodding at Eun and Deok. They step up to their jobs by flanking Hajin’s sides.

Next, So opens the car door to let out a pale Woohee, who stammers, “What’s this? What is… he… doing here?”

“Waiting for your decision,” So explains simply. He steals a small kiss from Hajin before gesturing for Woohee to follow him.

“Decision...?”

Hajin watches them go, feeling both glum and apprehensive. “So I’m not allowed to watch?”

“You are. We just don't recommend it,” Soondeok replies with a shrug. “Grandma says you should only look at beautiful things right now. Hear beautiful things. Smell beautiful things. Think beautiful things! Everything beautiful!”

Absently, Hajin mumbles, “Beautiful.”

“So baby girl will come out beautiful,” she explains, turning them all around and gesturing to the pretty little shops.

“Hajin-ah,” Eun gasps, running to a store, “chocolate!”

“Oh look, a toy shop!” Deok adds excitedly.

“Cakes!”

“Dinosaurs!”

“Baby things!” Eun exclaims out loud. “We have to go in. There’s a cute little hat that I just know Chunnie will like.”

“Your nephew is four months old,” Deok reminds with a little roll of the eyes. Eun looks offended. “You can never be too young for fashion.”
Woohee remembers this place. It’s clear Baek Ah remembers it too. They’re standing in the middle of what used to be a field of peonies; the snow is inches deep and the surrounding trees are bare. In spring, this place will be full of life, with young butterflies enjoying the fresh blossoms amidst the greens.

They used to come here often… to talk, to relax after a day of exams, to paint, to sing… she can’t count how many pictures Baek Ah’s taken of this place.

Seeing her uncle again after all these years isn’t what she imagined it would be. He’s thinner, for one, with a receding hairline and round glasses that only make him look like a praying mantis. He looks petrified, for another, staring at Jung and Baek Ah with an expression Woohee had never seen before. And when he sees her, cautiously making her way through the snow, his eyes widen and the first thing he does is clasp his hands together and beg for her to help him.

“Woohee-yah, it’s you, isn’t it? Help me. Help me, please.”

She doesn’t know what to do at first. She can’t take her eyes off of him. For years, she had contemplated what she would do if she ever saw him again… and now she can’t think of a single thing.

“Heelp me, help me, please,” he cries, rubbing his hands together as fast as he can. “I’ll do anything you ask. Give you anything. Anything!”

“Anything?” Suddenly, her anger flares, and it’s so strong, she half expects the snow around her to start melting. “Help?” she spits, rushing towards him. “The way you helped me?”

He looks stricken, as frozen as the ground under him.

“When I screamed at you, when I begged you…!” she yells, trying to find the right words, but her anger is making her incoherent. Tears sting her eyes and she decides just yelling isn’t enough. She reaches him at last and slaps him hard across the face. “I begged you! You used me!”

She’s 17 again. She’s angry, she’s hurt, she’s been betrayed. She lashes out at him, doing what she had been unable to do before, and begins to pummel him with her fists, wishing it were spring so she could find a rock to bash him with. “You left me! You left me!” she shrieks.

“I’m sorry-y-y,” he sobs, trying to block her blows with his arms. “I’m sorry, Woohee-yah…”

“I trusted you! I thought you were my family!” She learned the hard way that day… that family is more than blood. Family is a relationship. And he was never, would never be… her family. “I needed you… to be my family. You used me.”

“I tried… I tried,” he gasps, relieved that she had stopped hitting him. “I tried, Woohee-yah…”

“No, you didn’t,” she snarls. She sees her guitar in Baek Ah’s hands and grabs it.

He sees the anger in her eyes, and how tightly her hand is gripping the guitar, and he knows what
she wants to do. Eyes widening, he gets on his knees and wails, “Woohee-yah! Have mercy, Woohee-yah! I’m your uncle… your mother’s brother!”

“And I’m your sister’s daughter but that didn’t stop you from selling me.” She doesn’t care that Jung and So are around to listen. “I can’t even begin to explain… the kind of damage you did to me that night,” she growls through clenched teeth. “I could have killed myself and you would’ve cared less!”

“No, no…” he mumbles, sobbing as he falls to the ground. “No… I had no choice… he asked me to… they would have beaten me-”

“Then you should have been beaten!” she screams, raising her guitar high up above her head, ready to smash him with it, but before she can, he says something that knocks the fight out of her.

“I have a son! Please… I have a son… he’s sickly and he needs me… I can’t miss work… please, Woohee-yah… he’s your cousin… spare him… I can’t miss work…”

“You lie,” she says, but he just keeps mumbling the words over and over again like a broken record, too caught up in misery that he’s become oblivious to everything else.

“If you have a son, prove it,” Baek Ah spits from behind her. When her uncle doesn’t move, Baek Ah bends over him and grabs him by the shirt. “Prove… it.”

“Pocket,” her uncle gasps, face and nose swollen from crying. He looks disgusting and it’s a wonder Baek Ah can stand to be near him. “Wallet… picture…”

Woohee hastily feels his coat until she finds it. Opening it, she’s greeted by a tattered image of a baby boy.

“You’re married?” she asks to stall for time. She’s still angry, but this new development has given her pause.

He shakes his head. “Left… I can only… see him… once a month.”

"Good, because then he won’t grow up to be like you!” she says savagely. She knows her words had stung him because instead of crying for his life, he begins to sob quietly, grieving the loss of his small family.

“What’s wrong with him?” Jung asks.


Woohee wants to snap that he’s a cancer of her blood, but she holds it in. Her uncle may deserve it… but this little boy doesn’t.

Getting up, she shoves the wallet roughly into his hands and walks around, restless. Her murderous energy has left her, leaving her confused, tired and unsure of what to do next.

That is, until So hands her back her guitar, saying, “You have a choice. Revenge or mercy.”

Shaking, she takes it. “What do you think I should do? Unnie… what do you think she would do? How do I forget if I can’t avenge myself?”

He eyes her thoughtfully for a moment, and then he shrugs. “I can’t say. I would have beaten him up already, to be honest. As for Hajin… she would have forgiven him.”
She looks at her uncle, wondering if she feels even a bit of pity for him. She doesn’t. “I don’t know if I can… or want to forgive him.”

He nods, looking like he understands completely what she’s going through… like he’s faced similar situations before and knows what it feels like to be in her shoes. “It’s entirely up to you, of course. But just so you know… revenge may not work out the way you think. You’ll feel good, but it won’t last. Take it from someone who knows: revenge…” he shakes his head, “it won’t solve your problems.”

Woohee wonders curiously who he’s hurt in the past for him to be so sure.

“If you’re confused about him, then think of his family. It sounds like his son needs his money for treatment. If you’re willing to take responsibility for him missing work for a few days, then go for it. If not…” he sighs and gestures behind him, to where civilization is, “They’ve probably already bought you a cup of hot chocolate.”

The thought of Hajin and Soondeok waiting for her helps to finally seal her decision. She turns back to her uncle… stares at him for a full minute… and throws the guitar at his feet.

He looks up, his expression hopeful.

“Keep it,” she says gruffly, “as a reminder… of the kind of scum you were... and the kind of scum you shouldn’t be. Goodbye, uncle. Our paths end here.”

She turns on her heels and begins making her way towards her hot chocolate.

“That’s it? You’re going to let him go?” Baek Ah asks, disbelief plain on his face as he catches up to her.

She looks at her uncle, who’s still on the ground, clutching his wallet to his chest as he sobs. “The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.”

“William Shakespeare,” he intones automatically.

She nods. “I may be scarred and damaged… but at least I won’t have that kind of blood on my hands.” She looks at him. “I won’t be like him.”

The farther away from her uncle she is, the better Woohee feels, so when she finally steps into town again, the first thing she does is to breathe... freely. She looks around for her friends and spots them at a nearby shop.

“Where’s my hot chocolate?” she demands, walking up to them.

Hajin whirls around and stammers guiltily, “I was just about to get it. Really! Eunnie distracted me!”

“I did,” Eun says gallantly.

“He really did,” Soondeok affirms.

“But how did it go?” Hajin asks, miming a punch. “Did you give him a smack or two?”

Woohee stretches luxuriously. Her fists ache from whacking her uncle, but she feels lighter than she’s ever felt in years. “Here and there. Come on, I’ll buy you a muffin.”

After eating a little bit, Eun suggests visiting Baek Ah’s parents as they’ve never met before. As
everyone except Baek Ah is keen on going, he eventually agrees to take them there, but not before Woohee makes a little side trip to the cemetery.

After offering her family drink and food, she closes her eyes and begins to pray…

She wishes them a Merry Christmas, hopes they’re in a good place and tells them not to worry about her anymore because she’s finally found hers. “They’re good people, but of course, you’ll always be my favorite baby sisters. Jaehee… Minhee… unnie will visit again. Next time, I’ll play your favorite songs.”

Baek Ah’s parents are surprised by the sudden visit, but pleasantly so. His mother is so flustered to hear they haven’t had a proper lunch yet that she offers to cook for them. They tell her it’s okay, that they’ll survive, but she insists, so Hajin offers to help.

“No,” Woohee says firmly, keeping her seated. “Soondeokie and I will help. You keep off your feet for now.”

“Yes, do make yourself comfortable, you must be incredibly tired-” Baek Ah’s mother fusses over her, grabbing all the pillows and fluffing them up.

“I’m not really-”

“Do you want more pillows?” she asks. “Hot water? A bottle of hot water used to always help with my back pains.”

“No, it’s fine, I’m fine, really,” Hajin says at once, laying down obediently so as not to trouble the woman any further. “I feel much, much better. Thank you.”

“Albums!” Baek Ah’s father booms, striding happily into the room with three massive photobooks.

“Abeoji…” Baek Ah groans. He buries his face in his hands as his cousins begin to crowd around the albums like a pack of hungry hyenas. They’re on the floor in front of Hajin, browsing, and it’s only when Baek Ah hears Eun ask his father for a buttnaked picture of him for his mother’s collection that he puts his foot down.

“Of course, there’s one in this album right-”

“Noooo!” Baek Ah screams, diving towards the album in question, but So is too quick for him.

“Hold him,” So orders Jung, who sits obediently on Baek Ah’s back. He turns the pages until he finds what they’re looking for: one-year-old Baek Ah standing on the couch, buttnaked as promised, with a carrot stick in his hand.

“Aww, how healthy, he has a carrot,” Hajin laughs, deciding she wants a picture like that of their baby.

“Thank you, samchon!” Eun sings, tucking the picture gleefully into his wallet before looking for more.

They spend the rest of the afternoon there, eating, sharing stories and generally having a good time. They’re in very high spirits when they leave, in fact, that Eun actually invites his uncle and aunt to his birthday party.
“It’s not for another month,” he assures them. “I’ll have someone send an invitation.”

“Er… I’m not sure if we…” his aunt mumbles awkwardly. “It’s been very lovely to meet all of you, but I’m not allowed at family gatherings.”

“But it’s not an official family gathering, it’s my 28th birthday!” Eun insists.

When she continues to look unsure, So says, “My eldest brother has replaced my father as head of the company. He is not so bound by rules, my brother. Whatever ban grandfather placed on you… I doubt my brother will honor it.”

She looks down, apologetic. “I cannot defy my late father. I’ve disappointed him enough.”

“Do you regret marrying father and having me?” Baek asks.

She looks at him in surprise. “No, of course not.”

"Then… do you think he would have been disappointed to have me for a grandson?”

“No,” she says firmly, taking his hand. “If there’s one thing I am sure of, it’s that he would have been proud to have you. You have an artist’s hands… the same hands that my mother prided herself in. He would have been… very happy to have you.”

Eun sees his opening. “So I’ll expect to see you and uncle at my party! Thank you for the meal! Merry Christmas!” He waltzes out the door before she can say anything.

“Merry Christmas and thank you for the meal,” Soondeok repeats following him with more dignity.

Baek Ah’s mother looks at a loss for words.

Jung laughs, “We’re businessmen, aunty… what can we say? We go for what we want.”

She nods, accepting this. “That trait you got from your grandfather. Well… have a safe trip home, all of you. Thank you for dropping by. We were feeling lonely today, thinking Baek Ah wouldn’t show up. And instead we got to meet you all!” To Hajin, she says warmly, “Good luck on your baby, my dear. It should be any day now, so take plenty of rest and don’t stress.”

Hajin looks horrified as So quickly bids them farewell and ushers her out the door with a sheepish Jung.

“Am I very big?” Woohee can hear Hajin whimper to So, who assures her that she is not - she is beautiful and perfect and that the doctor said the baby was just the right size at 30 weeks.

“Actually… she’s only seven months pregnant,” Baek Ah corrects, exchanging amused glances with Woohee.

His mother gapes at him, feeling just as horrified as Hajin. "Oh... but I thought..."

His father, though, ever the optimist, merely chuckles, “Healthy mother, healthy baby. That’s what matters.” He clasps Woohee’s hands and smiles in a familiar, friendly way. “You too. Visit more often.”

Woohee can only smile back and nod awkwardly.
Out in the cold, they’re reminded of the same memory… of a decade ago, when they had stood in the same spot, on the same day, after a disastrous evening with his parents.

But instead of being alone, Woohee now has a family. And instead of all the questions, Baek Ah now has his answers.

They wave at their family, who are telling them to hurry up, and as Woohee takes a step towards them, Baek Ah says from behind her, “Thank you… for finally telling me.”

She stops, heart pounding in her chest.

“Of course, I wish you could have been honest from the start but… I don’t blame you. After all, I spent ten years pretending you didn’t exist.” Slowly, he takes her hand. She flinches in reflex, but he holds on tightly and forces her to face him. “You said you were damaged… scarred…”

She can feel herself shaking as she looks into his eyes. Is she imagining it or has his anger gone? Has he forgiven her at long last?

“I…” he whispers, determined, “will make you whole again.”

Sooo there you have it... very dark past. You might think her talk with Hajin was a little too light, but remember that the incidents all happened years ago and she spoke about them first to Baek Ah. I don’t know about you guys but I find voicing out my grievances helps to lessen the pain greatly. And also, I thought a bit of comic relief after so much tragedy was warranted.

In the drama, it wasn’t an uncle who kept threatening Woohee (the one she eventually killed), it was a former minister of Baekje. But for the purposes of this fic, I made them related :D

As for Baek Ah "going into battle", he had been more scared in the drama but still willing to fight if it meant clearing Woohee's name and helping So, and Jung had been the only one to see him off then.

Anyways, looong long chapter again xD

Next up, finally, we have WonxChaeryung! Please look forward to it :)
This Is My Life

Chapter Summary

He drives me crazy… in a very, very bad way. “You’re impossible.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chaeryung

“You seem different today. Did something happen on Christmas? Something good?” I ask Woohee, nudging her ribs with my elbow as we sprinkle flower petals all over the water of one of the Damiwon’s inner bathing pools.

She looks thoughtful for a moment, and then she nods. “Yeah. Something did happen and… it was… mostly good.”

I know I shouldn’t pry but-

“Woohee!”

Surprised, we exit the pool to see Jinki with a package in her hands. Looking at it more closely, I see that it’s a bouquet of beautiful red roses. As roses are very expensive this time of year, I wonder who they’re from.

“Thanks,” Woohee mumbles, taking them with a blush to match.

“You got a boyfriend for Christmas?” I ask when we’re alone again.

“Er…” she cocks her head to the side and grimaces, “I’m not sure, to be honest. Maybe yes, maybe no?”

How can you not be sure you have a boyfriend?

“It’s Baek Ah,” she explains in answer to my frown. Everything clears in an instant. “A lot of things happened, and we managed to talk, sort some things out…” she shrugs, “He wants to try again.” There’s a faraway look in her eyes as she says this, and I wonder if it’s because she’s remembering the past few days, or the long ago past that they both tried to forget?

I nod, feeling like I should have guessed from the start. “Did Sanggung have something to do with it?”

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“How can you not be sure you have a boyfriend?

“It’s Baek Ah,” she explains in answer to my frown. Everything clears in an instant. “A lot of things happened, and we managed to talk, sort some things out…” she shrugs, “He wants to try again.” There’s a faraway look in her eyes as she says this, and I wonder if it’s because she’s remembering the past few days, or the long ago past that they both tried to forget?

I nod, feeling like I should have guessed from the start. “Did Sanggung have something to do with it?”

“The good feeling I had felt upon seeing her genuine smile quickly disappears. I snort and wave a
hand. “No need. I dumped him last week.”

“What? Why? I thought you said he was perfect!” She’s so surprised, I feel guilty for building her expectations of that douche so high, and for not updating her sooner on the situation. “I thought you two really hit it off at the wedding.”

I scowl. “Yes, well… he used to get along with his wife, too.” She gasps, as curious as a toddler in a new playground, and I make a rash decision to tell her. Because I have to tell someone. I sigh, “I saw him walking hand-in-hand with her. So picture this... there I was carrying grocery bags full of food for my family, sweating and limping as I struggle to make it to the taxi stand… and I see him… and he sees me… and he just walks on.”

She tuts. “What an ass.”

“I thought maybe I was seeing wrong, so I called his name out loudly like, ‘Junsu-shi’, and he didn’t turn but the woman did. Can you believe it? And she looked me up and down and said, ‘Do you know her?’ and the idiot replied, ‘A little’ and I knew right then that I had been played.” I still seethe about it.

“And er... what did you do?”

I force my blood pressure down and smile sweetly. “Well, I couldn’t let him get away with it. I told her he was my customer and that I worked here, at the Damiwon, and she was so happy because she’d apparently been trying to get into our beauty program for weeks.”

“You have a very good boyfriend, miss, for thinking of giving you only the best this Christmas,” I had told the woman with a perfectly straight face. To him I said, "This must be your girlfriend, Sori."

As I had made the name up, he naturally got confused.

“Sori?” the woman asked sharply, looking from him to me.

He struggled to explain that he had no idea who I was talking about, which should have been easy considering he really didn’t know who I was talking about as I had literally made her up, and as I listened to his confused stuttering, and as I watched her reddening face, it suddenly hit me that perhaps this was not his first time cheating on whoever this woman was. Or on me, for that matter.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” I interrupted with a genuine gasp, ignoring the way he discreetly kept shaking his head. “Sori was another customer, I must have mixed you two up.” His shoulders slumped in relief, but he must have been crazy if he thought I was through with him. “You must be Sora, from Japan. Sori, Sora…” I forced a fake laugh, “your names are so similar, you must forgive me for the confusion. Well, I would like you to know, Sora, that your boyfriend ordered only the best for you two on Christmas morning. Mind you, it wasn’t easy putting you in - as you know, we are fully booked for the next six months at least - but he was so passionate about wanting your anniversary to be special that I called in a favor with my boss and-” I spread my hands, waiting for the gratitude that I knew would never come.

Everything was silent for the longest time, and some people had even stopped to watch. A security personnel had just approached us to ask us to please take our conversation elsewhere when everything exploded.

“Yeobo, we’ll be late for the-”
“THE WHAT?” she screamed into his face. “Sori? Sora? Anniversary? How many more, you cheating bag of shit?!”

“Yeobo, I really don’t know what—”

“How much?” She suddenly turned to me, pointing at him, her face redder than the scarf around her neck. “How much is he spending on that whore?”

Without waiting for me to reply, she kicked him. “Start again? A baby?” she yelled, swiping her bag across his face, but he grabbed it with one hand and held the other out to try and reason with her.

“I don’t know her. She must have mistaken me for someone else, yeobo, I promise, there’s no one else but y—”

“Bullshit!” She took advantage of his raised arms and landed a solid kick straight at the bundle of nerves between his legs. Men around us groaned in sympathy as he gasped and fell on his shaking knees.

“You tell that bitch that she can keep him,” she said to me, snatching her bag off the floor so strongly, the strap came off. “I am done. Done!”

He called out to her as she left, and when he saw me taking my things, he raged, “Chaeryung-shi! You will pay for this!”

I charged at him, but stopped inches short, satisfied at the terror on his flinching, cowardly face. “Maybe now you’ve finally learned your lesson. Asshole.”

I felt good, and not just because people cheered and clapped for me as I left… but because even though he had made a fool out of me, at least I had been able to save that woman from her sham of a marriage.


I sigh. “I knew he was too good to be true. Sanggung was right… I should stop with these stupid dating websites. You both found yourselves decent men well enough without them! Soondeokie too,” I add, feeling miserable. And they’re all cousins. Of all the young, eligible Wang men to choose from, it was just my luck that I ended up falling for the most troublesome.

“You know who else was right?” she says, sounding cautious.

I look at her with raised eyebrows.

“Won.”

I roll my eyes. “No.”

“He warned you about him!”

“He called him a cheap bastard for driving a secondhand car!”

“And now we know he is a cheap bastard.”

“Won only knew the man was a cheat because he's a cheat, himself. It takes one to know one,
doesn’t it?” I point out matter-of-factly.

She brings up her hands in surrender. “It’s still Christmas season. Let’s not fight about men on Christmas.”

“You’re right, they’re not worth it,” I grumble, lighting the last of the scented candles. “I think we’re done here.”

She nods, packing everything up and shutting the lights. We stand back to admire our work briefly - the steam rising lazily from the shallow but large square pool; the scented candles on mounts on the walls; the bottles of wine and platters of sliced fruits.

“Will you tell Mr. Lee that pool number 3 is ready for his parents?” Woohee asks an intern, who immediately complies. To me, she says, “It’s almost time for our break. Where’d you like to eat?”

“We should ask sanggung what she’s in the mood for,” I suggest, before remembering that she has a lunch date today. “Right. Weekly dates. Daily dates, more accurately.”

“Only when he’s free,” she chuckles, removing her bun to give her hair a chance to breathe, “which just happens to be almost everyday.”

A knock on the doorframe makes us both turn. “Chaeryung-shi… excuse me, but there’s a woman looking for you. Shall I send her in?”

I think I know who it is. I suppress a sigh and nod.

The moment Won’s secretary comes in, I tell her what I’ve been telling her since her boss stopped coming to work: “I don’t know where he is, I don’t care where he is, and no, I am not calling him for you.”

“Agassi,” she begs with clasped hands, looking on the verge of tears, “he hasn’t been answering any of my calls lately. His father has threatened to disown him!”

“So tell him.”

“I tried.”

“And?”

“He hasn’t been answering any of my calls.”

Right. “Look, you’re his secretary. It’s bad enough that I have to keep telling you what to do when it’s not my job to do so. Find him and talk to him if you have to.”

“I’ve tried that, too,” she says, opening a folder, sheets of paper immediately falling to the floor. The poor girl hasn’t had a proper break in months and is looking considerably worse for wear. What used to be perfectly styled hair has been hastily tied with a rubber band, with strands of hair sticking out every which way; her make-up now only consists of a dab of lipstick and a bit of mascara; her crisp uniform is ruffled in more places than one; there are spots of dirt on her black shoes.

“I have been to… every single restaurant Won-nim owns,” she explains, carelessly bunching up the fallen sheets and showing me a list. “He’s in neither of them. I spent… Christmas Eve… dialling up every hotel in the city to ask if he was there, and when they wouldn’t tell me, I had to go there myself to check… I still haven’t found him, but I’m looking. Just one minute. If you can help me
just a bit, I promise I’ll stop bothering you!”

I narrow my eyes, challenging. “Forever?”

The poor girl looks speechless and apprehensive, even pathetic - a far cry from the confident fresh graduate she used to be.

I sigh, giving in to pity. “His family has an unlisted resthouse in Daegu and another at Busan. You may want to file a short leave from work to visit those places. I’ll text you the addresses over lunch.”

“Thank you, agassi!” she says, actually tearing up.

“Yeah, yeah…” I grumble with an inward sigh, before I notice she’s giving me something. “For me?” I ask, surprised.

“Thank you for helping me all this time,” she says as formally as she can, “I wouldn’t have made it this far without you, so… really, thank you very much!”

I’m shocked. No one’s ever thought to give me a gift as payment for my help before. “Thank you… and good luck on your search.”

The moment the door closes behind her, Woohee tuts. “She should just quit. Let his father disown him. It’s clear he doesn’t care.”

“She has a lot of debts to pay. Won-nim quadrupled the basic salary before disappearing,” I shrug, resentful that he hadn’t thought of increasing my pay back when I had worked for him, “she needs the money. If he’s disowned, she loses her job.”

Woohee isn’t satisfied. “Then she can find another job, one where she can actually breathe and relax from time to time. I just don’t think all that stress is worth it.”

“Yes, well…” I shrug, putting the little gift in my bag and shutting my locker, “it’s a good thing I no longer work for him.”

A scream in the hallway alarms us. “Chaeryung-shi! Chaeryung-shi!”

“Busy day today. I wonder what the fuss is now?” I ask, opening the door to ask, but not before someone barrels into me, knocking me backwards into Woohee.

“What the-?” we exclaim in unison, but Jinki is unapologetic, looking very distressed.

“Trouble at the lobby,” she begins to say, “there's a man and he claims you ruined his marriage. He's threatening sanggung!”

Woohee and I don't need to be told twice. Dropping our things, we immediately head in the direction indicated, and the closer we are, the louder Junsu’s voice is.

“I'm losing everything! Everything!” he booms. “Her little joke went too far!”

“As I have told you, you are disturbing our customers. Whatever grievances you may have, please take them up with her in private-”

“I demand to see her right now-”

“-but not before you calm down. I will not have you yelling in these premises!”
“Call security,” Woohee orders Jinki, who’s managed to keep up with us, though she’s visibly shaking. “How long has he been here?”

Jinki replies, “Not long. I’ve already sent someone to fetch the guards outside.”

“Good,” nods Woohee, but I’ve stopped listening to them. As we enter the lobby, we’re greeted by a scene that sets my blood immediately boiling.

“You get away from her!” I shout, rushing forward and physically getting in between him and sanggung. He stops advancing up the stairs and fixes me with a deadly glare. I admit to some fear at the sight of him, but it’s overshadowed by my anger that he would try to physically threaten one of my best friends. “Don’t involve her, this is between me and you.”

“Are you okay?” I can hear Woohee ask Hajin from behind me.

“Yes,” she replies. I feel her hand on my arm and she’s pulling me back. I sense the danger too, as clearly as I can see him balling his fists the same way he did before he punched Won…

As scared as I am of his strength, I’m more worried of what might happen to my friends in the event he suddenly decides to get physical. I need to force him away. The center of the lobby is empty. If a fight breaks out there, there won’t be any other casualties.

“You inconsiderate beast!” I yell. Gathering my courage and anger, I push him back, back, back until there’s no one else near us. “You cheating, lying bastard! You ruined your own marriage!”

He blocks my final prod with a nasty swipe of his hand. “What, did you actually think I was serious about you? Did you think I would leave her for you? I was just having a bit of fun. You were just a little cookie on the side of my plate,” he mocks with a small laugh.

“Did your wife find it funny, too?” I shoot back in disgust. “Was your little cookie worth your marriage?”

I was unprepared to handle the punch, and it sent everyone screaming. From my position on the floor, I try to sit up, to get my vision to refocus, but I’m completely dazed. He had struck my ear, that much I’m aware of, which accounts for my loss of balance. It’s a miracle I’m even still conscious.

“Stop!” It’s Woohee’s voice, and I wonder with dread if it’s her shadow I’m seeing in front of me. From behind us, Hajin is yelling, but I can’t hear her very well. I can only hear… him… and Woohee. “If you don’t leave right now, I’m calling the police!”

“Out of the way if you don’t want the same thing happening to you!”

A pair of hands reach me, inspecting my face. I shake my head to clear it. It hurts but it works. Eventually, my eyes refocus and my hearing returns to normal.

I watch in horror as Woohee continues to block him, preventing him from getting to me, and when I look up, I see that Hajin has joined us with the rest of our staff.

“No, you’ll get hurt,” I tell them weakly, trying to push them away. “Sanggung, go back…” She’s on her knees and it’s her hands that I had felt earlier.

“Are you dizzy?” she asks sharply.

“A little,” I admit, forcing myself to sit up.
“Shh, it’s okay, security is taking care of him,” Minkyung assures me, and that’s when I realize she’s right - the two security personnel of the Damiwon have arrived and are trying to get Junsu to leave.

But Junsu soon proves to us all just how angry and desperate he is for revenge when, refusing to leave, he charges straight at the two men and knocks them over backwards, his years of training as an athlete giving him an advantage. Before either of the personnel can get up, he kicks them hard, forcing them to stay down.

“You’re crazy,” I manage to croak, trying to get away from my friends to keep them from possible harm.

“What will hurting her do?” Hajin demands angrily. “Will it bring back your marriage and solve all your problems?”

He smiles unpleasantly at her. “No, but it’ll make me very… very happy.”

“Revenge won’t solve anything. It won’t make you happy!” Woohee tells him. She and the rest of the ladies help me and Hajin up. We huddle as a group, backing slowly away until we reach the stairs.

“Oh yes, it will,” he says with malice in his eyes. He’s savoring this… like a predator eyeing his kill, enjoying every minute of our fear. This man is crazy.

“My friends and customers are innocent,” I croak, forcing my way to the front of the group and spreading my arms wide in an attempt to shield them, but he doesn’t seem to care. “If you want to blame me, then blame me! Only me! They’re-”

There’s a collective scream when he draws back his fist a second time, and I shut my eyes tightly, expecting to die at any moment, but then the screams turn into gasps, and when I open my eyes again, I see why.

It’s So and Baek Ah, and they’re angrier than I’ve ever seen them. In fact, I think with both relief and dread, So looks positively murderous.

Meanwhile, Junsu looks surprised, finding the fist he had raised to strike suddenly locked in a man’s tight grip. He twists and manages to free himself, but before he can even get a good look at his new opponent, he gets a punch in the face.

“Leave,” So says, ignoring Junsu’s howls of pain as blood splatters from his broken nose to the wooden floor.

“She ruined my life!” Junsu screams, cradling his bloody appendage, turning around to keep So within his sight as the other man circles around him to stop in front of us.

“I don’t care.”

With a furious yell, Junsu raises his leg for a kick, but So catches it and tosses it back, causing Junsu to fall to the floor with a resounding crash.

Everyone's silent when Junsu shakes himself and gets back up again, spitting blood onto the floor as he does so. He's red from both blood and humiliation, but his need for revenge spurs him on for one last attempt.

He does what he did to the security personnel and charges at So, bent over and hands in front of
him, yelling like a man ready to fight to the death.

I can feel everyone behind me tense up, and no wonder, too, as Junsu is well-built and heavier looking than So, who's more lean. But we needn't have worried.

It just goes to show how brains, as much as brawn, are necessary in the art of fighting.

Instead of going against Junsu and risking injury, So uses the larger man’s strength and momentum against him by simply grabbing the man's jacket at just the right moment and spinning him around until he's facing the opposite direction before releasing him. Junsu can't find his feet fast enough to stop himself from hurtling out the doors, down the Damiwon steps and out of sight, into the cold snow, where we hear him crash into one of the pots adorning the gardens.

There’s a moment of stunned silence when everyone waits for him to reappear… and when he doesn’t, the place erupts in cheers. Customers and staff alike are clapping their hands, relieved that the threat has finally been dealt with. My knees are about ready to give way when there's movement behind me and my colleagues gasp one word that brings me back to life.

“Sanggung!”

I turn to see Hajin sitting on the steps, hands up, shooing people away. I want to help her, but then I see So and decide she’d prefer him than me right now. I’m probably the last person she wants to see, actually.

“Stand back, everyone, let her breathe,” Woohee orders sharply. She quickly tells the rest of the girls what to do - apologize to the guests and give them all complimentary drinks. Baek Ah is way ahead, already making rounds, doing damage control.

As soon as Woohee is through briefing them, the girls immediately get back to work, ushering people back to their rooms and offering them whatever drink they want, suggesting calming teas for those who look pale and shaken.

“Hey, go with them,” Woohee tells me with a swift pat on the back. I look up to see So carrying Hajin up to her office. “I have to help down here, but you need to have that checked. It's starting to look really bad.”

I'm so ashamed, I can't bring myself to follow - or move for that matter. This had all been my fault. I had completely underestimated Junsu’s character… and if it weren't for So’s timely entrance, who knows what kind of damage could have been done today?

Eventually, I do manage to get up the stairs. I knock on the door and feel sick with remorse when I enter to find Hajin lying on the chaise lounge.

So is with her, holding tightly onto her hand even as he talks to someone on his phone. When he sees me, however, he gives her hand a small kiss and vacates his seat, which I nervously take. Still, I reason, somewhat heartened as he leaves the room, if she were in any real danger, he wouldn't have left her alone.

“Are you okay?” I ask shakily.

“Yeah,” she replies, lifting her hand for a moment and allowing it to flop right down. “I was just finding it hard to breathe.”

“I'm so sorry,” I blurt out at once, unable to face her. “It was all my fault. You all could have been seriously hurt because of me.”
“Yes, but we weren't,” she says quietly, but I know she must have been scared for her baby earlier. Because I was. Am. “Let's not dwell on the what-ifs because we have bigger problems right now.”

I notice her breathing is somewhat labored and get up to refill her glass of water.

“There were too many people today,” she begins. “This will be all over the news, our first bad publicity since opening. We don't know yet how badly this could hurt the business but we're hoping the new PR team So hired to replace Hwangbo Wook can salvage the situation.” Judging by the way she said it - she isn’t sure yet how much confidence she can place in their abilities. “I don't know what happened between you two, Chaeryung-ah… but it must have been very bad for him to come all the way here like that.” And then she sighs and finally looks at me in a what-am-I-going-to-do-with-you? kind of way, “I hate to be the one to say this but… you have rotten luck with men.”

I flinch, unable to deny it. “Or really poor judgment.”

She sits up with a groan and begins applying a cool gel onto the side of my face as I talk, telling her all that I had told Woohee earlier.

“Well, I can't say you were wrong,” she says with a grudging smile when I’m through, “but you could have handled it better today.”

“I know,” I admit, shamefacedly, “I panicked. I'd seen him hit Won-nim before… and when I saw him being aggressive towards you…” I wipe my nose with a half-hearted shrug.

She lightly squeezes my shoulder. “I’m grateful you came to my help… but when word of this reaches the higher offices and if they decide to punish you, I'm afraid I won't be able to do much to stop them.”

I must admit… before she mentioned it, I hadn't at all thought of how this incident might affect my work. Frightened, I whisper, “Am I fired?”

“Not by me and not if I can help it,” she assures me. “So and Baek Ah are already working to contain the situation. Let's hope they can wrap this up peacefully.”

The door opens and Woohee comes in. “The police just took him away. You're safe now,” she tells me, to my immense relief. I hadn't known until then just how scared I had been of confronting Junsu again. To Hajin, Woohee says, “They've decided not to charge our customers today for our services, and a request for additional security has already been made to reinforce our promise of providing a safe environment for everyone.”

Hajin nods. “It’s probably for the best. Thank you, Woohee-yah, you've done well.”

“Are you okay? You seemed really shaken earlier, but you look less pale now,” Woohee says, eyeing her critically. “Would you like me to get you anything? Ice cream or some fruits…?”

“No, thank you, I'm not really in the mood for food.”

The door opens again and this time, it's So and Baek Ah. Baek Ah is looking harassed, but So looks angry.

“I'm firing these guys when this is over,” he grumbles, presumably referring to the new PR team. “They keep asking me what I want them to do. Shouldn't they know? What did I hire them for if I have to do their jobs for them?”
Baek Ah shrugs. “Will we be pressing charges against the man?”

“Of course. Footage from the surveillance cameras should be enough to sentence him.”

“And Chaeryung?” Hajin asks, making room for them on the couch. “What did abeonim say?”

It’s clear he had wanted to avoid the topic, but as Hajin had asked…

“He wants her fired.”

Woohee and Hajin immediately protest, and I feel just about ready to faint. Fired. On Christmas season. After being promoted just two months ago. After I had promised to help pay for my sister's college tuition. After I had promised to give my family a much needed vacation.

“But,” So says loudly amidst the protests, somewhat amused, “he's not in charge anymore. I've asked Mu-hyung to intercede on her behalf. He's not like father. He can actually be reasoned with.”

I can breathe again.

“Thank you,” Hajin says wholeheartedly, sounding as relieved as I am.

“And this time, he looks directly at me. I flinch. “As fond as my wife is of you, your actions endangered everyone here today, and you've caused a great deal of trouble. I think it’s fair to warn you to expect some repercussions. If I can stop them from firing you, I will, but I won’t stop them from doing anything else.”

God, he’s scary when you get on his wrong side.

But I know what I did wrong and there’s no one but myself I can blame. “Of course,” I agree meekly, feeling worse than ever.

He looks at Hajin with raised eyebrows that I imagine ask, ‘Well?’

And though she looks sour, she answers with a shrug and a look of her own that says, ‘If you must.’

Satisfied, So checks his watch. “I think we've done all that we can here… shall we stop stressing and go grab some lunch?”

I’ve been suspended. One month without pay.

And as I’m too much of a coward to tell my mother and siblings about it, I had forced a smile on my face upon coming home and pretended all was well and good with the world. It’s only now that they’re asleep, and all the lights have been shut off that I can finally give in to the negative emotions that have been plaguing me.

I’m out in the cold, with nothing but my mother’s dead plants for company, and half a dozen bottles of soju that I had smuggled in earlier to keep me warm.

One month without work and pay, with fees and bills to settle just around the corner, and my family oblivious to everything. How do I explain to my mother and younger siblings that I had fooled around with a married man, it had almost cost me my job?
I can’t do it. Not now, when they’re all still so happy, not when they had thought things were finally looking up for us. I ponder asking Hajin if she would want to hang out tomorrow since it’s her rest day... but then I think better of it. After the scare and all the stress from this morning, she’ll need the rest.

I had already asked Woohee if she would like to hang out on her rest day, but she had declined politely and apologetically, saying something about a therapy session. Soondeok and I aren’t as close, but I would have asked her if only she and Eun would do things other than martial arts and computer games. Also, as they’ve officially begun dating, tagging along with them just... doesn’t seem right.

It’s only now that I realize… how much of a loner I am. I’ve spent all these years working for my family. I have no social life, no friends. It’s depressing, really.

Someone nearby coughs. I think nothing of it. But when Won appears, walking right over our little gate and clearing his throat loudly, a bag in his hand, I think maybe I’ve finally lost my mind. Or is it possible to get drunk after just one and a half bottles of soju? As I’ve never drunk so much before, I wouldn’t know.

“Go away. You’re supposed to be in Busan,” I mumble, closing my eyes and lying down. The floor is cold and hard. Perfect for numbing out feelings of regret.

“Busan?”

I sigh and ignore him, wishing he would stop talking and let me go to sleep.

“You’ll freeze to death if you sleep out here.”

“Who cares,” I grumble, turning over so I won’t have to look at him. “Go back to Daegu already.”

“Daegu?”

Running out of patience, I sit up and wave my hands in the air, hoping it’ll clear whatever hallucination this is. But he just laughs. “What on earth are you doing?”

I try a pinch to my face. Ouch. That’ll leave a mark.

“It’s so dark.” The light above switches on, blinding me temporarily. “Get up and let me look at that thing you call a face.”

“What-?!” I splutter, covering my eyes with my hands. He can’t be a dream because I haven’t fallen asleep yet. He can’t be a hallucination because the lights are on and I distinctly remember switching them off. “Are you real?”

He doesn’t reply, but I can still hear him emptying out the contents of his bag onto the rusty little table by the wall.

“What are you doing here?” I demand, getting up and rearranging myself to look more presentable. Then I remember who he is and stop. He’s just another cheat like Junsu. Hajin is right… I have rotten luck in men. And I seem to be attracted to the especially nasty ones. But not anymore. This time, I’m putting my foot down and deciding I want better. I deserve better.

He evades my foot and gestures to the items on the table, with a look that says quite plainly, ‘What do you think I’m doing?’ and as I get a closer look, I realize they’re ointments and salves and oils and pills and...
“What's all this?”

“I didn’t know which to buy, so I bought everything that said good for bruises. Now stand still while I read the instructions to some of these—”

“I know what they are!” I snap, grabbing the bottle in his hand and putting it back on the table. “I meant why are they here?”

To my surprise, he actually pulls out a mirror. “Because you look like half a panda right now. What did you tell your mother? That you fell down the stairs?”

“That’s none of your business!” He’s right, and I’m angry that he is. And I’m angry that he’s here. “You’ve been gone for months. No one has seen you in months. And now you decide to show up? Do you have any idea how stressed your secretary’s been?”

He looks piqued at my questioning, so it’s no surprise that he doesn’t answer. After a tut, he simply picks up another bottle and begins reading again.

And I put it away… again.

He sighs impatiently. “Yes, I know, she’s been calling me nonstop for weeks. I’m going to have to fire her.”

“Oh no, you won’t,” I tell him firmly, crossing my arms. “It took all of forever for me to brief her about what she’s supposed to do. No other woman has lasted this long. You’d better keep her, or so help me, I’ll… I’ll...”

“You’ll what?” he challenges. “You’ll stop helping? Good.”

He drives me crazy… in a very, very bad way. “You’re impossible.”

“Sure,” he says easily, choosing a bottle randomly and twisting the lid open. “Hold still.”

“Your father wants to disown you.”

He shrugs, “They're not my family. I've only stuck around this long because of grandfather. You know that.”

I do know. I'm probably the only one who knows, apart from his father, about his grandfather’s wish.

He takes advantage of my temporary silence to dab a cold gel on my face. I flinch away, but he holds me still and I decide to humor him.

“I don't understand why your grandfather would want you, but not Baek Ah,” I remark mildly. “Why would he visit you but not make an effort to even just... see him?”

Maybe he thinks my questions are rhetorical because he doesn't say anything, so I press on. “I mean, yes, Baek Ah’s mother disobeyed him and brought shame to his family and some unwanted enemies, but Baek Ah is innocent of his mother’s crimes, just as you're innocent of your father’s.”

Crime? Is it right to call it a crime when she's guilty of nothing but disobedience?

“To know the answer to that, you'll have to ask him yourself,” he murmurs, squinting so closely at my face that I blush. “I can help you. Just stand in front of my car and I'll run you over.”

“Ha ha, funny,” I say sarcastically. Then, deciding he's too close, I push him away and begin
looking at the things he'd bought, myself. “Most of these are makeup… for covering up scars and unwanted dark marks. Did you even read these labels?” I ask, exasperated. “What did you just put on my face, anyway, toothpaste? It’s minty.”

“I didn't exactly have time to read through them all,” he says, handing me the container of the gel he'd just used. “I came as soon as I heard.”

Even though I'm supposed to be reading what the label says, I can't. It just dawned on me suddenly… the real reason he's here… why he had come with a bag of makeup and herbal things.

I'm embarrassed and can't look at him.

“I hate to say I told you so.”

“I knew it!” I snap accusingly, ears burning. I can't believe this man. One minute, I think he's being nice and sincere, and the next, he's back to being… well… himself. Why do I even put up with him?

He shrugs and sits on the edge of the table. “I warned you. When he lost control and punched me, you should've known then. You should've believed me. Why didn't you?”

“Why didn't I?” I echo in disbelief. “Why should I have? How was I supposed to know you weren’t just being a dick?”

He shrugs again, reading labels on bottles at random. “I am a dick. But I’m a dick who knows what he’s talking about.”

“Oh, well, forgive me for thinking you were being a dick just to mess with me,” I snap, grabbing my half-empty soju bottle and taking a huge gulp.

“Yah!” he tuts, confiscating it. “You’ve drunk enough. Since when do you drink, anyway?”

“Since now,” I reply with a clumsy swipe in the direction of my bottle, but then he lifts it up, way out of my reach, and I end up tripping all over him.

It’s unsettling how unaffected he looks when our faces are this close to each other, so close that all I can do is stare up at him and wonder why… after all this time… I still feel this way.

“Give it back,” I order him quietly.

“No.”

I don’t even know why I’m on the verge of tears. I’ve had a trying day, for sure, but it’s not like I had been serious about Junsu… and it’s not like I’ve been suspended from work for a whole year…

But I still find myself hurting.

I suppose, despite the fact that Junsu turned out to be a mighty jerk in the end, I genuinely did enjoy his attentiveness towards me while it lasted. He made me feel, even if for a short while, like I was special.

“You were just a little cookie on the side of my plate.”

It’s only now that I realize how much those words actually affected me; why I keep seeking to numb myself.
“Just because you don’t want me doesn’t mean other people won’t either!”

Even then, you were right, weren’t you? You’re a dick but you’re always right when it matters.

I no longer want to look at him. I take a step back and am about to open up a fresh bottle of soju when he grabs me and pulls me in again, hard.

I’m so surprised by the sudden intensity that I find myself staring back, speechless as he downs the remaining soju in my second bottle, finishes it all without even taking a breath. And then, tossing the bottle onto the snowy dead bushes, he takes advantage of my partially opened mouth.

As I’m so startled, my instincts take over and I resist him with all the strength I can muster. I try to spread his arms apart when they close around me; I pull my hips back when his own press against them; I struggle to find air as he continues his assault, his kisses so deep and so intense that my lips actually hurt.

Against his strength, I’m useless; completely helpless. I cry even as I hit him, hating how he’s taking advantage of me in this way when he must know how awful I feel already.

And he doesn’t stop; doesn’t let up, not until my arms have gone numb from hitting him, and my knees have gone weak from fear.

Then he finally pulls back and I inhale gratefully, feeling lightheaded. Before I can muster the energy to slap him, he kisses me again - slowly this time, and far less rough.

My senses remain on high alert, even though my body has gone rigid. I wince unconsciously, expecting him to start being rough with me again, but instead, his hand frames my face, cups my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly against a corner of my lips.

His kiss has broken up into smaller ones, showering my tortured lips with gentleness. It’s not long before I realize I’m actually kissing him back, leaning against him like a marionette whose strings had just been cut. His hands are curious, exploring me the way I’m exploring him. Under his coat, his body is warm; I run my hands over his chest and abdomen, my fingers liking what they’re feeling. His fringe tickles my skin, and it only adds to the strange, pleasant sensation that’s been surging through my body this whole time. He moves from my mouth to my cheek, and when his warm breath reaches my ear, I gasp, shuddering against him, only just realizing that he had stopped everything he had been doing all at once.

We’re panting, immobile; I’ve never felt so charged in my life.

“Men who are like me… think only of pleasuring themselves,” he says at last to my ear. I have to force myself to pay attention. “Look for someone who respects you and puts your needs above his.”

My needs above his.

I feel lost when he leaves me.

“Look for someone who makes you feel comfortable.”

I just stand there, staring at the empty wall, confused as hell as to what had just happened. Feeling my lips, I turn around to find him already gone, the falling snow the only thing moving in the darkness beyond the lonely light I’m under.

“Comfortable,” I murmur. I snap out of it. Without pausing to think, I yell after him, “ Couldn’t you
have just told me that, you freaking pervert?!”

A neighbor’s dog suddenly barks, and another, and the next thing I know, all the dogs nearby are barking loudly, waking everyone up.

I panic when the first window opens. Quickly tossing all the stuff he had bought for me back into the paper bag, I run inside the house and bolt the doors.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the late update! But it's another long chapter :D

And I'm sorry also to those readers who were deeply disturbed by the previous chapter! I should have put a warning, but I forgot. I deeply apologize. Trust that nothing that bad will happen from here onward.

Aaaand I'm sorry also to those who want more SoSoo :( There will be more SoSoo after Chaeryung and Won, I promise!
Trust

Chapter Summary

The past no longer ties any of them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Hajin says, watching her husband get dressed from her perch on the bed. “You say Won isn't treated like a son in his family… but if they dislike him so much… why did they agree to take him in in the first place?”

“Grandfather probably had something to do with it,” So replies, vanishing inside the closet.

She waits for him to explain.

“He tried to be discreet, but back when Won was a kid, he used to visit him… quite often, if I’m not mistaken.” He returns with a shrug. “Mother was very vocal about her disapproval. She probably thought we wouldn’t understand, young as we were.”

Hajin frowns. “And Baek Ah? Did he visit Baek Ah at all?”

He shakes his head. “No, Baek Ah never met our grandparents. He told me as much.”

Hajin can’t help feeling indignant. “But why not?”

“I don’t know,” he admits. “I suppose at the time, it didn’t suit well for a family as known as ours to have bastard children, or divorce, or mistresses. Those situations… weren’t as generally accepted as they are now. And grandfather had been particularly conscious of image. That’s why he pushed for such big, advantageous marriages for his children. Having a secret, bastard grandson was bad enough; having a daughter publicly elope on the day of her wedding… well, you can see why he would be angry.”

Even though Hajin disapproves, she grudgingly sees his point. Even people nowadays generally turn a blind eye when children are born out of wedlock… but they would still openly gossip about a woman running from her own wedding.

“There’s something you should know about the company,” he says suddenly, pulling a white shirt over his head. “Our grandfather had a trust fund set up after the world war. It was devised in such a way as to make all future descendants heirs to the corporation, at least as far as money is concerned. Considering how unstable the economy had been, and how quickly the business boomed, he was wise to do it, else the family would have fought amongst themselves after his death.”

Hajin is intrigued. “What do you mean you all become heirs?”

Deciding it’s about time they talked about this part of their lives, he sits on the floor in front of her and tells her the general gist of things, “Whenever we achieve something that’ll benefit the company, we get something in return. Graduate from school, the corporation pays you. Graduate
with honors, you get more. Find a job and you get an allowance to match your salary. Work for the company, and they triple your pay. Get married, have kids… basically the company provides for everything.”

Wow. “In short, you rich kids can have anything you want.” Suddenly, Hajin sees everything in a new light - like why they all work for the company and why Baek Ah’s mother had begged for her son to be welcomed into the family after her father’s death.

He cracks a knowing smile. “If we deserve it, yes. But it's more than that. It's a way to ensure that the company stays within the family. Because who would want to leave? We leave nothing for our kids when we die save our names, but it doesn't really matter because they'll be provided for all their lives.”

There's that. She wonders what it must be like to be financially secure all your life… but to never be able to go after the things you want. She thinks of the little girl sleeping snugly inside her and wonders what kind of future she might have. “But what if you were to want a different life for yourself…?”

As always, he knows the direction of her thoughts. Running his hands from her ankles, up her knees, to her hips, he confirms, “You're on your own.”

She purses her lips. How is this any different from Goryeo?

“On what this information has to do with Won… the fund is… rather biased towards males.”

There it is. She has an urge to roll her eyes and heave a great sigh, but he continues, “Only in that a family receives twice as much yearly if they have son. Daughters are only entitled to their dowries, leaving their parents with even less once they are married off into different families.”

“So you're telling me your uncle and his family took Won in for the simple fact that he’s male? For money?” Without giving him time to reply, she blurts out, “What's wrong with girls?!”

“Nothing,” he says emphatically, knowing the reason she's particularly indignant of the discrimination is because of their unborn daughter. “Society has always been patriarchal, Soo-yah, you know that.”

She knows. It was the same then, it's the same now. “Why are you smiling? It's not funny,” she snaps.

“No, it's not,” he agrees, getting on his knees so he can mollify her with kisses. “I just knew you would react this way.”

She scoffs but she knows her anger is misdirected. She hasn't forgotten how, in Goryeo, he had taken her words to heart and dedicated his life to fighting against the rich and powerful families in favor of the destitute majority.

The shift in her mood is sudden as gratitude eclipses her anger.

“Your uncle’s an ass,” she grumbles, fondly playing with his ears.

“Yes, he is.”

“Why would he disown Won, then?”

“He won’t. He loves money too much. He’s just afraid Won will get fired and lose all the monetary
benefits.”

“I don’t think Mu would fire him… am I right then in assuming your uncle is only threatening Won?” It would explain Won’s indifference to the threat. When So nods, Hajin really rolls her eyes. Now that she understands the situation, it all seems so silly. But another concern has invaded her mind. “And you?”

He lifts a quizzical brow. “And me what?”

She gives the belly he’d been nuzzling a little poke and immediately, he understands. With an amused laugh he says, “Soo-yah, why do you think I gave the company to Mu-hyung?”

“You were being… noble?” she suggests.

He smiles. “It’s so our children can be free to be whatever they want to be… to do whatever they want to do.”

“Free?” She certainly can’t object to that.

“The main family has more benefits, that’s true, but also more pressure. If Mu-hyung doesn’t have another son, the company will be passed on to young Heunghwa, who must accept it. The main family is expected to produce at least one son for this purpose, else the company is passed on to the branch family next in line… which is why my father was particularly happy to hear we were having a girl.”

Because it meant Wang Geon could rest, safe in the knowledge that the company truly belonged to his eldest, Mu. Hajin’s not sure if she’s happy or indignant… that so much is determined by something so unpredictable as gender seems ludicrous.

“Father loves us… but he doesn’t trust us very much because of our connection to the Yoos.”

Hajin narrows her eyes. “How shrewd of him. I never could tell if Taejo Wang Geon was a good or shitty father.”

He smiles. “He’s better now but not perfect. I don’t blame him. I’m wary of my own mother, and I’m not the one she’s been trying to sabotage for almost thirty years. Power… influence… recognition… anything to fuel her vanity. That’s all my mother really cares about… and that’s why her lifetime house arrest seemed very fitting. She wanted the world… now she has to settle for just that big, empty house.”

They’re aware of thinking the same thing: of a time in the past when he had inflicted the very same punishment onto someone else.

“He’s getting out in a few weeks, isn't he?” she says quietly.

He affirms, “Two weeks.”

Hajin knows Myunghee still cares for Wook. She knows Wook had been incredibly misguided in trusting his sister and it had cost him everything. “Was it the same in Goryeo? Did she make him do all those things, too?”

He studies her for a moment, and then he shakes his head. “She only gave him the reason he needed to do what he deemed necessary.”

She supposes that holds true, even now. Exasperated, she tuts, “Aish, he keeps messing up his life
for all the wrong reasons. Will he never learn?"

Cutely, he asks, “Concerned?”

“For Myunghee,” she says narrowly. “She tries not to show it, but she’s been badly affected by all this.”

“She would be,” he agrees, getting up and helping her to her feet, “she’s been in love with him since high school. And we should get going if we want to get to Eunnie’s party on time.”

“Must we?” she asks, forgetting all about Wook as she nervously pats her black kaftan dress into place. “You know the baby came early in Goryeo. What if it happens halfway through dinner?”

He reasons with her as he leads her to the front door, “Soo-yah, you were sickly in Goryeo but perfectly healthy in this time. Also, you’ve holed yourself up at home for over a week now. Everyone’s been asking about you.”

“Really?” She gets into her boots and coat with his help. “Have they been bothering you?”

He’s tempted to say yes, but decides on a delicate, “Eun and Jung.” Those two who have been nagging him the most - Eun because of his party, and Jung because he’s a dutiful little brother.

The party at Eun’s place is chaotic, with bright streamers hanging between trees in the snow-covered garden, multicolor spotlights peeking out from beneath bushes, and pastel-colored tablecloths over a dozen round tables.

Hajin has to blink to clear her vision. “Loud,” is the only way she can describe the scene before her.

Amused, So murmurs, “That’s Eun for you.”

Speaking of Eun, he appears in that moment to greet them, arms wide open, euphoria all over his face. “You’re here!!!” he bellows, rushing over with Soondeok trailing behind. He looks ridiculous in such colorful garb but at the same time so happy that Hajin immediately plasters the warmest smile she can manage and gets ready to greet him back… but then Eun lowers his gaze and goes straight to her belly. "And how is my little niece? Bigger now? Stronger? Have you eaten? Uncle Eunnie bought new gifts for you!"

Like most people, he had bypassed the carrier in favor of the carried. Hajin sighs and greets Soondeok instead.

“Grandma says exercise is good for you right now,” Soondeok informs her after returning the greeting. She points to a closed door inside. “Eun cleared that room recently and cushioned the floor so he can keep practicing even while at home. Do you want me to teach you some yoga poses?”

Hajin pales and grips So’s arm hard. “No, thank you. It’s a little late to get started on that, don’t you think?”

So cuts in before Soondeok can reply, “Her doctor wants her to rest. Perhaps after.”

“Yes,” Hajin agrees at once, relieved. “Eunnie, where do the presents go?”

Eun straightens up, shimmering eyes on the perfectly wrapped parcel in her hand. “You got me a gift?”
“Of course,” she says, snatching it away before his fingers can close themselves around it. “Not now. Later. Do I see Baek Ah’s parents?” she adds to distract him.

It works. “Yes, aunty’s with my mother right now. They haven’t spoken in years, you know? Mother was very surprised to see them.”

“It was a sobfest, really,” Soondeok whispers to So, loud enough for the other two to hear.

“It was a touching moment!”

“Just as well we were late, then,” So says. “She cries over every little thing these days. Even that dog commercial on TV.”

Hajin tears her eyes away from the happy reunion to glare at her husband, betrayal clear on her face. “It was a nice commercial! And why would you tell them that?” she suddenly wails.

“Yes, it was,” he agrees hurriedly, seeing tears fill her eyes. “Very cute, fluffy little dog.”

“And he looked so happy to be back home, didn’t he, Hajin-ah?” So can’t tell if Eun’s solemn expression is genuine or not. He watches, amused, as Eun takes Hajin’s hand fiercely. “The way he ran towards home… through rain and snow!”

“And how happy he was to finally be reunited,” Hajin gasps, this time excited.

“And the music!”

“The music,” she whimpers in tearful memory.

“I am never having kids,” Soondeok mumbles.


Soondeok looks blankly from him to Hajin and shrugs. “No reason.” Clearing her throat, she points to a nearby buffet table, says, “I’ll get drinks” and scurries away.

Hajin turns guiltily to Eun. “I’m sorry, Eunnie. Did I just ruin your future?”

After a while, he snaps out of it, looking determined. “Nothing that a few well-chosen activities can’t fix.” He starts at the meaningful looks they give him. “Not that kind of activities!”

“Ah, but after all Eun-ah, there’s only one way to make a baby.”

The three of them turn to the door to see Won walking in, dressed all in black. He lifts a hand in greeting, “Hey guys.”

“Hyung! You’re here,” Eun gasps, agog, “Where have you been? I’ve been- we’ve been calling you for months! Complete radio silence, this guy,” he adds to Hajin, pointing an angry finger at Won.

“Sorry, Eun-ah, I decided to take a little break.”

“For over half a year?” Eun looks dubious. “What, did you travel the world?”


Eun stares at the envelope in his hand. “Europe?”
“Whenever you want.”

“Two tickets?”

“Your first girlfriend ever. Your first trip together should be special!”

Eun’s eyes are shining. “Wow. Thank you, hyung!”

There’s a mischievous glint in Won’s eyes as he leans over and says, “Then you can put all your baby making abilities to the test.”

“Hyung,” Eun groans, embarrassment flooding his cheeks. He looks torn between melting through the snow and punching Won in the gut.

“There's no need to be shy, little cousin!” Won guffaws, causing Eun to glare at him. “It's a biological need. You know, you can always turn to your hyungs for advice.”

Eun looks disgusted. “Soondeok and I are not in that kind of relationship! Yet,” he adds with a grumble. “She's just not that kind of a girl. And I'm not that kind of a guy!”

To Hajin’s surprise, Won stops teasing, “Of course, you'll need to wait til you're both ready. All in good time. Still,” and this time, he winks at Hajin, “it doesn't hurt to be prepared, eh? Tell you what, why don't you take our cousin-in-law to a table so you two can have a little heart-to-heart chat?” Eun looks baffled, but Won doesn't give him a chance to speak, “She's been standing a while and you haven't even offered her any refreshments!”

Eun eyes Hajin’s delicate condition with a mixture of horror and concern. “Would you like a chair?”

“I'm fine,” Hajin assures him, frowning suspiciously at Won.

Won nudges them both towards the rest of the family, some of whom wave. “They've been waiting. You wouldn't want to miss your own party, would you?”

Hajin can tell Won wants a private word with So and, judging by her husband’s expression, it's clear he knows it too. What could be so important that it would draw Won out of wherever he's been hiding?

“Mother’s starting to get impatient,” So says suddenly, nodding in the direction of Sooyeon, who at that moment catches Hajin’s eye and quickly beckons her over. After giving her a little nudge in the right direction, So exchanges looks with Won and together, the two of them return inside the house.

“Eunnie, why did you decide on an outdoor party in such cold weather?” she asks before Eun can call them back.

His practical answer surprises her. “Well, the family’s so big this year, we wouldn’t have all fitted inside.”

“Finally!” Sooyeon exclaims when they’re close enough. “Drink some tea, it’s still warm. It’s good for you,” she adds sternly, seeing Hajin’s expression.

Hajin quickly hides her scowl. She’s gotten quite tired of drinking raspberry tea.

“That seat’s cold, unnie, take mine,” Woohee says, getting up.
“Don’t be ridiculous!” Hajin splutters, but before she can grab hold of the seat closest to her, Soondeok slides into it. After an initial wince, she manages to look at Hajin with an otherwise perfectly straight face and says, “This seat’s mine.”

“I brought this from inside, so it’s warm,” Jung says, appearing suddenly from out of nowhere with a little throw pillow. He arranges it neatly onto Woohee’s newly vacated seat and gestures for Hajin to sit down.

“I’m fine, really,” Hajin keeps saying, but her assurances fall on deaf ears. She watches, helpless, as Woohee and Baek Ah begin bombarding her with food, as Sooyeon refills her cup with more warm raspberry tea, as Jung takes out blankets and more pillows to keep her warm and comfortable, as Soondeok secretly squirms in her cold seat.

A warm hand on her shoulder makes Hajin glance up into the face of her father-in-law. He’s smiling, amused, and he whispers into her ear, “They mean well. Just let them take care of you.”

But of course they do. Hajin smiles back and nods, then she watches, grateful and resigned, as people continue to fuss around her. They’re family, after all.

“You’re sure about this?” So glances at the document in his hand a second time before looking up at Won. “You realize what this means?”

Won shrugs, unconcerned. “We both may have grandfather’s blood, but I’m not your family. Not really. I’m a bastard. I don’t belong anywhere.”

“Your father claimed you. And even if he didn’t, of course you’re family. We grew up together.”

But Won shakes his head. “But I never thought of him as my father. And now I’m throwing him away. Him and his name. This was always what grandfather intended for me, hyung… it’s why he took special interest in me growing up. He paid my mother’s hospital bills, made sure I had a roof over my head, forced father to take me in… for this. And it’s time.”

Looking thoughtful, So leans back against his seat. “You’ll have nothing. All the businesses you’ve been running will be returned to the company. Once this becomes final, you’ll be just another employee.”

Won nods. He knows all this.

“Uncle will throw you out.”

Then he’ll be homeless. Won knows this, too. Still, he nods.

“Is this why you’ve been away for so long?” So asks quietly, already connecting the dots: Won’s sudden entrance into the family, their grandfather entrusting half their restaurant businesses to him even before he graduated from college, making him the company treasurer… all to teach Won everything he needed to know to become the company trustee. And to do that, he has to throw away his family name, all his assets, to become just a regular employee - someone impartial, able
to delegate between the families.

“It was always my choice to make.” Won smiles, having already made his decision. “Someone has to take up the role once Lawyer Bong resigns… and who better to ensure the family’s continued interests than myself?”

The issue of Lawyer Bong’s successor has always been a sensitive and controversial topic in meetings. The appearance of their grandfather’s secret will will at least put an end to the arguments on that point. So nods. “And why would you tell me first? Mu-hyung is the one in charge now.”

“I’m just going by grandfather’s wishes. He always assumed you would be the one to take over after uncle resigned. So, if you approve of this, hyung, your signature is all I need to make everything legal. Being the one who created the trust fund, nobody can go against grandfather’s direct wishes. Not your father, or mine, or the current CEO.”

“And yet he gave you the choice… why choose to lose everything in exchange for less?”

“I wish to fulfill the role grandfather always intended for me… and I wish to be of use to the family. You can trust me, hyung. I can take care of the fund. This is what grandfather trained me for, and I’m ready for the responsibility.”

So hesitates at this. He looks at Won and sees not his present cousin, but his past half-brother - treacherous, scheming, opportunistic, and vile. He sees the man who helped poison their oldest brother, the man who threw people away without a second thought when he no longer had any need of them. He sees the brother he once loathed.

Can he really be trusted?

“I’ll have to think about it,” So says at last, folding the document and their grandfather’s will up again and sliding them back into the envelope. “Give me three days.”

“Of course,” Won agrees, holding out a hand for him to shake.

After a moment’s hesitation, So clasps it and gets up to join the party, but instead of following him in, Won turns around and heads out the other way.

Hajin smiles when he finally reaches her. “That took a long time. Where is Won?” she whispers over her shoulder as he settles into a chair behind her. The garden lights had been dimmed, and all attention is focused on the projector up ahead, showing videos of Eun’s many friends and workmates as they wish him a very happy birthday.

“He left,” So murmurs back, reaching around her to clasp her hands. She jumps, startled, when his cold nose brushes against the side of her neck. “Sorry,” he sighs inwardly, lost in thought.

“Trouble? Something to do with the company?” she guesses, leaning back into her seat.

“How do you figure?”
She shrugs. “There's no other reason Won would single you out.”

“Is that right?” he sounds intrigued. “Am I so cold and aloof?”

“Let's face it, Pyeha,” she says almost patronisingly, “you're not really the first on people’s lists to go to when they want to discuss feelings.” She chuckles at the very thought.

He grunts, seeing truth in her statement. “It’s complicated. Bottomline… he’s asking me to place my complete trust him… and if I do, the whole company will be at his mercy.”

Hajin attempts to understand. She spreads his hands out over her stomach and begins playing with them. “And you’re not sure you can trust him?” When he doesn’t reply, she looks back. “Why not?”

His eyes focus on her, and though he doesn’t answer, she understands.

“Because of his past.”

He nods once and continues to look thoughtful.

“I had trouble trusting him, too, when I first regained my memories,” she reminds him, resuming her physical examination of his long fingers. “Do you remember what you told me then?” Without waiting for an answer, she says, “You told me you trusted him… that he works twice as hard as everybody else and is always ready to sacrifice whatever he has in order to lend a helping hand. In this life, has he ever given you a reason to doubt him?”

So knows the answer. He shakes his head. “We could always depend on him to do what needed to be done.” He smirks at the look on her face. “Honest things, Soo-yah. Good things. Legal. We run an honest business.”

“Of course you do,” she says hastily, patting his hands.

He chuckles, but his thoughts are clear, his doubts gone. He trusted Won then, he can trust Won now. In this life. The past no longer ties any of them. “Thank you,” he says sincerely, kissing her cheek.

Chaeryung is more than surprised. She's in a complete state of shock. She gapes, dumbly, staring at the tiny memo in her hand that Won's young secretary had found lying on her desk first thing that morning.

"What-?” Chaeryung mumbles, not believing her eyes. She looks up in utter astonishment. "Has he been disowned?"

The young woman blows her nose. "I can't think of any other reason. His entire department has
been replaced. Someone else is running it now. All of us who used to work for him have been fired." She sighs and shrugs in defeat. "I guess I'll have to find another job."

"But... but why?" Chaeryung splutters. In a million years, she had never thought Won's father capable of doing such a thing - not out of concern for his bastard son, but she had always thought him too greedy to make good on his threats. But what other explanation could there be for this to happen? All of Won's staff replaced, his entire department given to someone else...

Suddenly, Chaeryung is angry. She slams the memo onto the table. "That idiot!" she seethes, breathing heavily. "Stubborn fool! He should've gone back to work when he had the chance! Now he's lost everything. No family, no money, no home, no..." She's so agitated, she has to stand. 
Breathe in, breathe out. Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! Breathe in, breathe out.

And what are the odds that this had to happen just months after his ex-girlfriend's wedding?

"I have to go," Chaeryung declares suddenly, grabbing the memo and her bag and quickly dropping a bill onto the coffee table. "I'm so sorry for all the trouble you've gone through. I hope you can find another job that's better than what you had. Find a better boss. You're a hardworking girl and you're smart. You deserve more."

Her companion looks shocked and concerned. "But where are you going?"

Chaeryung pushes back her seat and heads determinedly to the door. "To find him. It's about time someone knocked some sense into that man."

Chapter End Notes

I am sooooooooooooooooooo sorry for disappearing :(

I've been so uninspired... the words just wouldn't come to me whenever I decided to write, so I became anxious and depressed for a while. (Ok, not a while, but for a long time) Thank you to everyone who commented and said positive things about my stories! They helped to return my confidence and forced me to write bit by bit until I finally came up with something good enough and long enough to share. Thank you also to everyone who has stuck around despite the breaks! Thank you, thank you! We've only a few more chapters to cover and then it's bye bye to this story. Please bear with me a while longer while I work through this block!

Thank you and have a blessed week ahead!
Don't You Know?

Chapter Summary

Feeling impatient, I turn away. How foolish. I was wrong to think she would understand. Despite the women I've flaunted in front of her, despite my bad treatment of her, despite everything… how can she still think of her love as a source of strength, when all it's brought her is misery?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Wook has to shield his eyes against the glare of the sun reflecting off the snow that had fallen overnight. He waits in line for his cuffs to be removed, all the while contemplating what he’s supposed to do now that he's served his time.

He has no company, no money. Work had been his life for the past five years, so he does not even have friends he can rely on. His sister, he’d heard, began her 5-year sentence just some weeks ago, and it was too much to hope that his mother and stepfather would be here to see him after they had been forced to sell their home to help pay for his and Yeonhwa’s debts to the Wangs.

No. He crushes the feelings of guilt the moment they surface. You don’t owe them anything. He will never forget how, in her moment of desperation, Yeonhwa had asked him to take responsibility for her crimes and how, not wanting to see both her children go to jail, their mother had thrown him away in favor of siding with his sister.

“Wook-ah, we will help you. Do this for us. We will lose everything if you don’t!”

“Oppa, it is the only way. We can still salvage something from this.”

He takes a moment, a deep breath to calm his temper. His dignity and honor… they were all he had left, and they had wanted him to throw away even those… to have him walk with his head bent perpetually in shame; to not be able to find work; to have people mistrust and step on him… to have to rely on his sister for the rest of his life.

No. His sister had to pay just as much as he did. And if it meant losing everything, then so be it. He would leave prison a broken man, but not hopeless. He can salvage whatever is left of his reputation to try and rebuild himself.

Knowing there’s no one out there waiting for him, he allows his eyes nonetheless to sweep the parking lot. Some of the inmates are fortunate enough to have people waiting for them - families to welcome them back with open arms, some with disappointment plain on their faces; others with relief, and even happiness.

He watches as one man sprints across the grounds towards a small family huddled by an old car. Wook watches him scoop the two little children up into his arms and their combined cries can be heard even from where Wook stands. At least, he reasons to himself, he does not have to carry around the guilt of disappointing a family of his own. He does not find much consolation in such thoughts, only in the fact that at least Myunghee had been spared the shame of being associated
with him at the time of his downfall.

He averts his eyes from the scene and takes a step closer to the gate, but then his eyes snap back up, because he thought he had seen... but it can’t be... what could... why would...

Why?

“Hwangbo Wook.”

Mechanically, he lifts his arms to have his cuffs removed. He realizes his mouth is open but he has no thoughts of closing it. He’s only aware of being shoved out the gate, of stumbling through the thick snow.

“So?”

Wook has known So for more than half of his life - for some of those years, they were even best friends - but he had never, in his wildest dreams, imagined that he would be seeing him again... not after everything. This is the first time they’ve met face-to-face since the whole controversy spilled as So had refused to see him even during court hearings.

“Why...?” Wook begins, but he’s confused. His exhausted mind can’t fathom a reason for this visit, other than that maybe his former friend is here to kick his traitorous ass. “I’m...” He licks his frozen lips, wondering what kind of apology he could give that could possibly make up for everything he’s done. “I’m deeply sorry for everything... I don’t have anything right now but... I promise I’ll-”

“I’m here to thank you.”

Wook stops talking for a long time to stare. “Excuse me?”

“Thank you for telling the truth,” So explains. “You spared us a great deal of trouble. We would have found a way to convict your sister, of course, but your confession made it easier. So, thank you.”

He’s thanking him?

Wook is stunned. His lawyer had been as baffled as he when the Wangs had suddenly agreed to reduce his sentence. Had that been So’s doing all along?

“I-” stammers Wook, perplexed. “I don’t know what to-”

“I have a business proposition for you.”

Wook wobbles, feeling like his knees had just turned to jelly. Could he have finally lost his mind?

“So,” he says, wondering if this was some kind of twisted game. Should he play along or run away? Wook’s not sure he can avoid whatever So has in mind even if he had the means to. He finally notices the wooden bench sticking to the side of the parking lot and collapses gratefully onto it. “What are you saying?”

“I want to hire you.”

Afraid he might have an aneurysm soon, Wook holds up his hands. “You want to hire me? After everything I’ve done?” Unable to resist, he adds, “Are you insane?”

“I’m practical.” So shrugs and takes a seat on the bench beside him. “You’ve already paid for your
foolishness. You have nothing and nowhere to go, and I need a PR man. It’s a win-win.”

“There are PR agencies everywhere,” Wook reasons, trying to get a hold of the situation. “Why me?”

“You know how I work and what I want, and you’re good at what you do. And I trust you.”

Did he slip and fall into a coma? Is he living some sort of fantasy in his head? The So he knows is practical, that’s true, but not one whose trust can be gained back so easily. “You do,” Wook says in a flat voice. “After everything I’ve done… everything. The scheming behind your back with my sister and your mother, the-”

“I already said you were foolish,” So reminds bluntly, shutting Wook up. “But even a foolish man can be honest. What you did was misguided, but you had good intentions, did you not?”

There’s a short pause as Wook tries to figure out what the catch could be.

“I know you thought Hajin was using me. It’s not an unfair assumption. We got together fairly quickly with none of our families or closest friends even knowing how or when. I can’t fault you for that. What I did have a problem with was your lack of trust in my judgment… that you took it upon yourself to save me from whatever you thought I had gotten myself into without even talking to me first…” Wook tenses when So pauses, trying to detect hate, scorn… anything from him. But there’s nothing. So’s tone is casual - pleasant, even. Is this real?

Finally, So continues, “But I’ve my fair share of flaws and I’ve hurt a lot of people in the past, including someone I had promised myself I would protect and love with my life. And if she can forgive me… then I can most certainly forgive you your lapse in judgment.”

There’s silence as this sinks in. Though he hadn’t mentioned a name, Wook realizes he knows who So means. In the past, So had easily and gladly crushed anyone who had wronged him, nevermind the reasons why. But throughout all this, he’s showed Wook a great deal of mercy - mercy he doesn’t deserve, that he’s not sure he could ever earn back.

He feels a lump in his throat and has trouble choking out a response. When he had woken up this morning, he had thought he would be returning to the world of the free with nothing but his determination to help him. Instead, he’s found compassion and help from a most unlikely source.

“And so, if you accept,” So presses on, facing forward to give Wook the privacy of his thoughts. “I’ve already had a contract drafted for you to sign. You’ll be paid a regular salary and working for me on my floor. We’re prepared to help you with your lodgings, if needed. You can begin on Monday. There’s already a mountain of work for you to go through.”

Wook lets out a little wheeze.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” he chokes out at last. He’s not alone. He hasn’t been left with nothing, after all. He’s relieved… so relieved. “Yes… thank- thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” So says quietly, getting up. “I’m only the guy paying for your services. Thank her.”

Wook looks up, quickly drying his eyes. If Hajin is here, he’ll take this opportunity to beg for her forgiveness and to thank her for her help. But as his eyes travel to So’s familiar black car, he sees not Hajin, but…
“Myunghee,” he breathes, absentmindedly rising to his feet.

There she is, standing unsurely behind the open car door, her dark hair framing her gentle face, her gloved hands clenched into fists, her lovely brown eyes unsure but hopeful, and her cheeks flushed becomingly, looking more beautiful than the sweetest of dreams that have scarcely visited his nights. She’s breathtaking... picturesque. He would have thought her unreal were it not for the sound of the car door closing, and the crunch of snow beneath her boots as she makes her way slowly towards him.

“Thank you,” Myunghee whispers sincerely to So as he passes her.

He smiles and she has to give him a hug. She’s shaking, but when she lets go and walks to Wook, she’s sure... confident with her choice.

“Hi,” she greets softly, looking up at him. “Welcome back.”

He can’t stare at her long enough. He had thought her gone from his life forever. After he had neglected her, lied to her, after all the things he had said to her in the heat of anger...

“You really waited.”

“Of course.”

Shaking his head in wonder, he asks her why.

Her answer is simple. “I love you.”

He continues to shake his head as he looks away. “I have nothing. I can’t support you... I can’t protect you... I don’t even have a home to go to. Myunghee-yah, I’m thankful for your help, truly I am, but I cannot do anything for you-”

“Why would you need to support me? Why would you need to protect me?” she asks.

“I just-”

“Do you think I only stayed with you because you had money? That I would just forget about you now that you have nothing? If yes, then you really have forgotten me. Or is it that you never really knew me?” She waits for him to respond and is disappointed when he doesn’t. “I stayed with you because I loved you. I want to be with you because I still love you. If you don’t feel the same way, just say so, and I’ll go.”

“It’s not that,” he says with a sigh, running a defeated hand over his face. He loves her, of course he does. Not a day went by that he hadn’t thought of her. “I wanted to give you everything. I worked hard so that you didn’t have to. I wanted you to have the perfect life, the kind of life you deserve, the kind of life that-”

“When did I ever ask that of you?” she asks in frustration. “When did I ever ask you for anything more than your time?” If he had just talked to her... if he had just asked her how she was... “You shut me out. You always used to treat me as a partner, not as someone to provide for, not as something to place on a pedestal or as something to protect... in your quest to acquire everything, you lost sight of what you already had. And now you’ve lost... all of it.”

He swallows hard, not liking how much truth there is in her words - truth that he had avoided facing for months. “So why are you here?”
“Let me help you,” she says, then she grabs his shirt to force him to meet her eyes. “There was a
time when you used to ask for my opinions… when you used to share your burdens with me…
when I would stay up late at night for you to call and talk to me about trivial little things. I was
always waiting for you. Did you not see that all I wanted was for you to talk to me again?”

There’s shame in his eyes that he does not want her to see… the shame of a man whose eyes have
finally been opened… of a man who had always looked, but never saw; who had charged forward
towards his goals without once looking to the sides to see who he had trampled on or neglected on
his way there. He can see it all so clearly - from the moment he took on So as a client, to his quest
to make his company bigger and greater than what his father had built. He can see his greed, his
arrogance. He can see how it had all started to go wrong, even when he had thought he was finally
on his way to the top.

She can see when the realizations hit, and that’s when she knows they still have a chance. “Won’t
you trust me again?”

“You know I’ve always trusted you.”

“Then let me help you. It’s not too late. It’s never too late. I want to give us another chance. Will
you not grant me this one wish?”

Wook looks at her again, still not believing she’s really here, asking him to return… that So had
offered him a job just a few minutes ago. For the first time in months, he feels hopeful, that maybe
his future doesn’t have to be so bleak… maybe it doesn’t have to be so lonely.

In the backseat, Hajin squirms, trying to get a better view, but So covers her eyes.

“Pyeha!” she gasps indignantly, trying to pull his hand out of the way. “You realize the baby can
only hear what we’re saying and not see ?”

Still, So lowers his hand only after Wook had stopped kissing Myunghee. He checks his watch to
see that they’ve been here an hour. “Do you think Myunghee would mind very much if we left her
here?”

Hajin’s watchful eyes carefully assess the happy scene before them. “No,” she decides at last, “but
I’ll send her a text anyway to let her know.”

Together, they pull out their phones.

“Mu-hyung’s asking if I can come in,” So informs her after reading his messages. “Shall I bring
you home? I’d bring you with me but the office would only bore you, and I don’t want you
anywhere near mother’s garden.” Under his breath, Hajin would have sworn she had heard him
call her a workaholic.

“And about that… now don’t panic,” she warns slowly, putting a consoling hand over his knee, “but
we need to go to the hospital.”

He pales and actually stops breathing.

“It could be nothing,” she assures him quickly, seeing his eyes travel all over her body, “I’ve just
been feeling very uncomfortable since morning so I messaged Dr. Shim and she says I should come
in for a check-up. It’s no big deal!”

His eyes snap back up, horrified that he hadn’t noticed at all. “You’ve been feeling uncomfortable
since this morning?!”
“Since before breakfast,” she admits sheepishly, adding before he can explode further, “When your hormones are all over the place and you’re carrying this much weight, comfort becomes a luxury!”

Knowing that an argument is the last thing they both need right now, he concedes, “You’re right, you’re right, let’s just…” He fumbles with the handle of the backdoor, finding to his annoyance that his fingers have become rather uncooperative.

As Hajin turns towards her own door, she feels another distinct tightening in her belly that makes her catch her breath.

“Where are you going? Stay here,” he commands sternly.

“I want to move to the front,” she says as casually as she can while moving as calmly as she can. Breathe. Just breathe.

“Won’t you be more comfortable here? There’s more room for you to… roll around…”

“I’m feeling dizzy.”

She quickly steps out and, bracing herself against the side of the car, tries to remember what giving birth had been like, but all she can really remember is the excruciating, numbing pain - the tired screams ripping through her weak lungs, the hours of agony, of feeling her heart burning in her chest.

Not in the least bit helpful. In fact, the memories are beginning to scare her senseless.

“Soo-yah,” So says, rounding to her side and reaching cautiously out to touch her. He peers worriedly into her pale face. “Are you alright? Do you hurt very much?”

She looks up and shakes her head. “I’m fine.” For now. Unable to resist, she whispers, “You won’t leave me, will you?”

“Of course not.”

“Even though your brother needs you?”

There’s genuine fear in her eyes, as though she truly believes he would leave her to birth their daughter by herself a second time. “I’ll be wherever you need me to be,” he assures her.

“I want you with me the whole time.”

“Then that’s where I’ll be,” he promises, pulling her gently in for a hug. I’m right here. I’m right here. I will not leave you. “I will never leave you.”

She closes her eyes and inhales deeply. How she had longed then for him to hold her like this… how relieved she is now that she need only ask, only open her eyes and see just how different her life has become with him in it.

“Ohay,” she says at last, steeling her nerves. “Let’s do this.”

But Myunghee has noticed them. Concerned, she calls out to ask if everything is okay.

So opens his mouth but it’s Hajin who answers first, trying to sound casual, “Just a little dizzy.”

Myunghee doesn’t look entirely convinced, but then a sudden movement beside her draws
everyone’s eyes, and Hajin watches in confusion, followed by a bit of horror as Wook wordlessly
gets down on the ground and kowtows to her.

“What- please don’t,” Hajin protests weakly, feeling blood rushing up to her cheeks. She catches
Myunghhee’s eye and gestures for her cousin to help Wook up, but instead Myunghhee smiles and
also bows her head. “Unnie!” she protests more strongly, wanting to go over to stop them, but the
front door of the car suddenly opens and So’s hands are on her elbow and back, urging her to get
in.

“Hospital. Baby. Yes?”

“Yes,” she agrees, getting in as quickly as she can. The sooner she’s out of the picture, the sooner
Wook can stand back up. “What was that about? Is he still kneeling?” she grumbles as they leave,
lowering her car seat slightly. She’s restless, trying to find a position that might ease her
discomfort for even just a few minutes. Now that he knows, there’s no point in hiding it.

“Probably a millenia’s worth of regret and apologies,” So replies, eyeing her with concern. “After
all, you saved his life in Goryeo and shortened his sentence in this life.”

“And Myunghhee?”

“You saved their relationship.”

That baffles her. “No, I didn’t. I almost broke it for good!”

He shakes his head, freeing one hand to help her wedge her little pillow behind her back. “At the
rate they had been going, they wouldn’t have lasted. Myunghhee had been ready to take the next
step in their relationship for years, but all he could think about was work. Nothing would have ever
been enough for him. Eventually, she would have tired of waiting and they would have grown
apart. You saw how quickly she left him after just a few well-chosen words from Yeonhwa. Just a
little nudge towards the door and out she went.”

The mention of Yeonhwa on top of the physical pain she’s been feeling turns her mood sour. “
Well-chosen … insensitive, more like…”

“And really none of her business, but don’t you agree she also did them a favor? Else, they would
have been stuck in that unhappy cycle for years more without anything ever being done about it.”

Hajin thinks that’s a really nice way of putting it… for Yeonhwa’s bitchiness to actually equate to
any level of kindness, no matter how unintentional, is irony in the most twisted sense. “I suppose
so,” she says unhappily. “No one’s entirely useless, after all.”

The bitterness in her choice of words amuses him. “Jealous, Soo-yah?”

“Jealous?” she snaps, twisting in her seat. “Why would I be jealous? And of Yeonhwa of all
people?” In fact, she does feel a little bit jealous, though she can’t understand why and she’ll never
admit it out loud. She figures it’s her nerves and hormones talking.

“My darling,” he says sincerely but with a hint of humor, “a thousand Yeonhwas can never match
up to one of you.”

Hajin grunts, though she feels a teeny bit better.

“A wolf may spend his life howling at the moon without ever reaching it. The wind may forever
blow against a mountain that will never break. Just think of her as a cold that comes once or twice
a year. Uncomfortable and inconvenient, for sure, but still just a cold.”

She can’t help it: her lips are twitching. “Did you just liken Yeonhwa to a cold?”

“Strengthens the immune system, too,” he adds cheerfully, seeing her smile.

“A single maggot can ruin an entire fruit.”

“Not if you squash it in time.”

“Is that what we did? Did we squash her?”

“Nah… just forcibly plucked her out and left her to terrorize some smaller, rotten fruit. She can eat it or die.”

The thought of eating rotten fruit makes Hajin want to hurl. “Let’s not mention rotten food.”

At this, the atmosphere grows tense again. “How’re you feeling?” So asks cautiously.

Nothing works. She’s uncomfortable no matter what position she’s in. She wonders if she should have just stayed in the back after all. “You don’t have to look so scared. I have done this before, you know. I mean, yes, I died two weeks later, but-”

“Don’t,” he cuts her off reproachfully, not in the least bit reassured. The last thing he wants is to talk about her dying.

She turns on her side to face him, curious. “Were you ever this nervous with… her?”

He purses his lips. “No.”

“Not even a little bit?”

Stiffly, he shakes his head.

“You really didn’t care?”

Again, he shakes his head.

Wow. “Didn’t they announce that sort of thing to everyone? Halt all activities and pray to the ancestors for good luck or some other…”

“I used to go away to the Southern Palace for months at a time whenever she was close to her date, as far away from the capital as I could,” comes his stiff reply. “After the third time, people learned to stop informing me. I would return half a year later and be spared the task of seeing her.”

Hajin wonders how that must have been like for Yeonhwa. Not that I care, she reminds herself sternly, he hadn’t been there for you either. Of course, it’s not like he’d had a choice, seeing as he hadn’t even known you were-

“Oh!” she suddenly exclaims.

Startled, So steps on the gas, then hastily on the breaks, then shuts everything off and turns to her, afraid that the sudden acceleration and halt had jostled her somehow. “What?” he demands anxiously, not sure where to place his hands.

“Just… nevermind,” she grumbles, sinking as low into her seat as she can when cars begin honking
their horns around them. “Let’s just go. Please?”

“Your face hasn’t changed at all,” Hajin remarks to Woohee, trying not to think too much about what was going on with her body by focusing on the images in the scrapbook in Woohee’s hands. “But Baek Ah used to be such a lanky thing. Look at him, all skin and bones...”

Woohee laughs. He was still handsome to her. “He gave this to me after my graduation. All those years taking pictures... for this. I really had no idea. That idiot,” she adds affectionately, fingerling an image of her and Baek Ah on their school balcony.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it today,” says Hajin, but Woohee shakes her head and tells her there’s nothing to be sorry for.

“You were preoccupied,” she adds, taking a glass of water from the table. “Mrs. Oh says you are to drink as much water as you can. So, drink.”

Though Hajin thinks she can’t stomach much more, she takes a sip anyway. “Where are they, anyway? Especially that husband of mine? He should be here. I told him to stay...”

“They just left,” Woohee reminds with a chuckle. “They’ll be back, don’t worry. Your waters haven’t even broken yet. Shall we walk around? I expect everyone else will be here soon.”

“No,” says Hajin, alarmed. “Tell them not to come! Who knows how long this will take!”

Woohee tries not to look too patronizing. “You know telling them not to come is useless because they’re probably already on their way. And the nurse says you can have as many visitors as you want at this stage. You need the distraction. Come, let’s take a turn around the room.”

After a few rounds of walking, So finally returns with Baek Ah, closely followed by Jung, Eun, and Soondeok.


“Shouldn’t you be on the bed?” asks Eun, walking carefully towards her, as though afraid that any sudden movement on his part might scare her and cause her to convulse and drop the baby on the spot.

Alas, if only childbirth were that easy.

“Moving around helps,” Woohee explains for Hajin, handing her over to So.

“You said you would stay with me,” she manages to pout.

“I had to clear up some things,” he explains apologetically, tucking her hair behind her ear. “From now on, there’ll be no interruptions. I’m all yours for the week.”

“The whole week? You realise this will probably be over in a few hours?”

It’s a busy time at the company, what with the launching of the new shopping mall in Japan and the
shift of power from Wang Geon to Wang Mu. And since So is his first brother’s most trusted adviser, Hajin had thought he would be busy for another year at least. To her pleasure, however, So nods. “I’ve prepared everything beforehand. They’re to contact me only if we’re on the brink of total collapse. They can’t possibly mess up that much in a week.”

“What about your trip to Japan?”

“Jung’s going in my place.”

“Jung?” It’s a surprise to Hajin as Jung had never shown much interest in matters of the company before.

Hearing his name, Jung perks up, “Yes?”

“I think he’s grown quite fond of Mu-hyung,” So says, loud enough for the others to hear.

“Really?” Hajin welcomes this bit of information with a grin, which rises to a chuckle when she sees Jung’s blush. Jimong would have been happy to hear this.

“I’ve decided to help. Everyone’s busy, even you. I should do my part!” Jung explains.

“I think that’s really great of you, Jung-ie. Wah, you’re becoming such a reliable young man!”

“Anyway,” he says quickly, trying to steer the conversation away from his budding bromance with his half-brother. “Hyung, I need to go to mother’s doctor to ask about her medication. I’m told her heart palpitations have gotten worse. They found her unconscious in her bathroom last night. She slipped and bruised herself quite badly.”

So nods. “I heard the same. She’s lucky she didn’t break anything.”

The thought of his mother’s body breaking makes Jung wince. “Yeah, lucky. Anyway, I won’t be long. Hyungsu-nim, you don’t mind, do you?”

“No, no, of course I don’t mind. In fact, you should all go home or go out. Live your lives! We’ll be fine,” Hajin says, waving them all away.

“We’re staying,” informs Soondeok flatly and she pulls out a folded sheet of paper. “Chaeryung plotted a schedule for us. We did our research and this could take hours to days, so we’re prepared to take turns guarding you.”

“Guarding me?”

Hajin’s incredulous tone makes Soondeok tut. “Unnie, many people have tried to hurt you.”

“At the very least, we can provide you with ample distraction from the pain!” Eun adds brightly, holding up a large knapsack. “I’ve got DVDs and games and puzzles, some food…”

“What she needs most right now is rest.” Eun jumps away from the door at the sound of his Aunt Sooyeon’s imperious voice. “Once the pain really starts to hit…” she shrugs and shoots Hajin a foreboding look by way of greeting.

On cue, Hajin’s mother enters after Sooyeon, “We came as soon as we heard,” she says to Hajin, quickly giving her a hug before peering into her face. “Are you hungry? Do you want anything?”

But Hajin just shakes her head. “I’m okay. But I’ve been walking for the past quarter of an hour so I’d like to lie down now.”
“Of course.”

Everyone suddenly surging forward to help would have been funny to Hajin, were it not for the fluid trickling suddenly between her thighs. “Oh,” she gasps, holding tightly onto whoever is closest to her, “I think my water finally broke.”

“I’m here! How are they?” Chaeryung rushes into the hospital hallway at half past six.

“Her water broke about two hours ago,” Eun replies, biting nervously on his nails. Soondeok takes his hand to keep it away from his chattering teeth.

Jung turns from the door, eyebrows furrowed in concern. “It’s awfully quiet inside. Where’s the screaming?”

“You watch too much television,” Chaeryung tuts, but he pretends he hadn’t heard. “So now we wait.”

Jung sighs. “I don't know why I'm so nervous. The moment Baek Ah and Woohee return from their date, I'm going out to eat.”

“Stress eating is the best,” Eun approves.

“No, it's not,” Soondeok disapproves.

Jung shrugs his shoulders restlessly and paces the corridor. He can't understand his nerves.

“Jung-nim, have any of you heard from Won-nim lately?”

Jung shakes his head. “After submitting some documents, he just disappeared again. My brothers think he’ll be gone for a while to study law so that he can take over Lawyer Bong’s position immediately in the future, but... he has no reason to stick around the company until then. He’ll probably only be back after he graduates.”

“But how is he to pay for law school if he’s unemployed?”

“We have our suspicions,” Jung says with a thoughtful frown. “He could be working, though we haven’t found traces of him yet in the bigger establishments. Another guess is someone’s loaning him the money, most likely Yo-hyung, but you won’t get any answers from him. Baek Ah thinks grandfather probably left him an account with some money before he died. What about you? Have you figured out where he could be staying?”

“No,” Chaeryung mutters. “I’ve tried everything. All his old apartments, restaurants... but they’ve all been given to someone else.” Now she knows how that poor secretary had felt.

“Aish, why won’t that guy let us help him?” Jung crosses his arms in frustration. “No matter what happened between him and uncle, he’s still our cousin! We grew up together! He can be so stubborn sometimes.”

“Truly.” She still isn’t sure what to do when she sees Won again. Punch some sense into him or yell? Or release everything all at once?
“Well, anyway… I need to give these pills to my mother. Are you going to wait here?” Jung asks, grabbing his things.

Chaeryung sighs. She’d spent the last few days of her suspension searching for Won and hasn’t stopped since resuming work. “I think I’ll go over my list again… see if I might have missed something.”

“Alright. Call me if you find anything. Hyung, if anything happens, give me a call?” At Eun’s thumbsup, Jung leaves.

Once he’s out of sight, Chaeryung peruses through her notes, but she’s gone over them so many times already, she’s sure she won’t be able to find anything. She feels like she’s missing some vital information but she can’t figure out what it might be. “Aish! Where are you hiding?!”

*Daegu... Busan... obviously not. Restaurants... been to this one... checked that one, too... this one’s closed for renovation... this one’s too close to the office... hotels... I still need to visit half of these...*

The constant sighing makes Soondeok look up. “You look tired, unnie. Don’t you need to be at work early tomorrow? You should go home and rest. I’m sure Hajin would prefer it if you all focused on work instead. We’ll be here for another hour, then Baek Ah and Woohee will take over. We’ll let you all know if anything happens. Right, Eunnie?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Are you alright?” She frowns at Chaeryung, who’s standing quite still, a look of realization on her face. Evidently, she’s had an epiphany.

“Unnie?”

Chaeryung looks up. “So many babies being born lately, have you noticed?”

Soondeok and Eun stare at her.

“I have to go,” Chaeryung says, hastily stuffing her things into her bag. *That must be where he is... how could she not think of it before? Of course he would be there... after all, that woman had been his first love. “Do you think it’s okay for me to…”?*” she nods unsurely towards the door, one hand already on the handle.

“I wouldn’t go in there, she was in a lot of pain. We’ll just tell her you had something important to do. I’m sure she’ll understand,” Soondeok offers.

Chaeryung nods, “Thank you! I’ll see you two tomorrow!” before sprinting across the hall, down the stairs, out onto the paved street.

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Won

A taxi stops in front of the house and someone steps out. Before the door bangs shut, her voice floats up to me, sounding rushed and exasperated. I’ve no trouble recognizing who it is. It seems
she’s finally figured out where I’ve been staying.

I count the number of seconds it takes for her to reach me. The house isn’t that big, and I’d left the front door unlocked. Five seconds to cross the tiny living room… another five seconds as she hastens to run up the stairs… there’s a pause outside the bedroom, but the door opens eventually and she steps inside. I can hear her footsteps behind me, coming closer… three more steps, two more steps… a pause…another step and-

I grab the pillow before it can hit me.

“How’d you know I was going to do that?” she demands, tugging it free and tossing it back onto the untouched bed of my childhood room.

“I know you.”

“No, you don’t.”

I just smirk. “Perhaps I don’t.”

She narrows her eyes and sticks her head out of the window. “How did you get up there?”

“I climbed.”

She retreats with a sarcastic grumble, and a moment later, the sounds of a chair being dragged across the room destroys whatever calm there had been of my evening.

“Your front door is open,” she informs me, clambering onto the rooftop from my open window. I watch as her fingers try to find a handhold in the thick snow, and when she can’t find anything, she braces herself on the roof and forces her way over and out.

“There’s nothing to steal. And you should really stay inside, it’s…” I trail off and try to stay my laughter at how clumsy she is. Her large winter boots had caught on the window frame, making her lose her balance and fall face-first all over the snow. Clearing my throat, I try to be severe, “Get back inside. You have the worst luck in the most difficult situations.”

“It’s because I have no luck that a situation becomes difficult,” she retorts, struggling to get through. I watch her struggle for awhile before I decide to finally help her.

“Fix your hair,” I order, wiping my wet hands on the sides of my jeans. “And tuck your pants into your boots. If they snag at anything up here, you’re going to fall down and drag me with you.”

I can see her clenching her teeth in annoyance and I know she wants to snap back, but instead she swallows her retort and smiles at me. “Fine. In consideration of your life, should I suddenly slip and fall, I’ll make sure to keep my arms raised so that I won’t make the mistake of holding onto you.”

I scowl. “Stop smiling, you look demented.”

She snorts loudly and splatters a handful of snow onto my face.

Shaking her off, I quickly go for my revenge by using her own move against her twice over so that she has no choice but to lay down and roll away, shaking her head and coughing.

“Oh my god,” she wheezes, sitting back up, a look of disgust on her face. “I think I just swallowed some of it.”
I throw a tiny snowball at her. “It’s just water.”

“Dirty water!” she says with emphasis. “Who knows how many birds have pooped on your roof? Or how rusty it is underneath? Or.”

“Or,” I interrupt loudly. “Why don’t you drink some water and hope for the best? If you feel sick tomorrow, I’ll take you to the hospital myself.”

She shoots my water bottle an evil look but takes it anyway. Once she’s had a drink, she settles back down and is silent, but I know the silence won’t last long so I decide to break it myself.

“How long before you found me?”

“A couple of weeks,” she replies. “I realized just today.”

“You’re losing your touch.”

I just know she’s rolling her eyes. “I’m sorry, but this place isn’t exactly in your top 10 list of holiday spots,” she snaps. She’s not wrong. “So…” and she sounds less severe as she continues, “when I learned you were not on vacation after all… well, there’s no better place to torture yourself than this house, is there?”

I can only sigh. I shouldn’t have let her know too much about me. I feel and hear her edging closer, little by little until she’s only a few inches away.

“So… why are you torturing yourself? Why did you have yourself removed from the family? Is it… because of…?”

I have my answers ready. “I’m not torturing myself. I had myself disowned because I was supposed to. And this place is the only thing that belongs to me now. Why shouldn’t I stay here?”

She frowns suspiciously. “Did you buy the family that lived here out of their own home, or-?”

“Grandfather paid for my mother’s medical expenses by buying this house from her before she died. As soon as Mu-hyung became CEO, Lawyer Bong gave me the deed. It’s mine.”

“And your grandfather probably left you with a bit of money, too,” she nods, as though confirming a suspicion. “So then your moving here, your disowning yourself… they have nothing to do with the fact that your recently married, pregnant ex is living in her parents’ old house just a few steps away?”

“Nope.”

“Right.” Her tone is heavy with skepticism. “And you sitting out here also has nothing to do with the fact that it gives you a perfectly good view of her living room?”

“Nope.”

“Please.”

“Did you come here to answer my questions for me?”

“Come on,” she expostulates, “you can’t expect me to believe you. I did enough research on the way here to know this is more than just coincidence.”

“If you say so.”
The next thing I know, she’s sitting in front of me with an all-too-familiar expression that I’ve grown used to seeing these past months. “Well, I’m all ears. Tell me the truth.”

The truth, she says. I’ve told her nothing but the truth since this conversation began. “Now because uncle is no longer the most powerful man in the company. Here because this is my home. It was my home growing up and it will be my home until I die. That’s all there is.”

“And her?” she cocks her head to the back, where, through the window, I can see my ex lounging on the sofa with her new husband.

“And she’s nothing to me now.”

One thing that has always fascinated me about Chaeryung is the fact that her face can twist into a thousand different expressions. At the moment, her eyes are shut, her cheeks are puffed up and her nostrils are slightly flared. She’s irritated.

“You wanted the truth and now you have it.”

“It’s not the truth!” she screeches in an outburst of frustration. “Just admit it to yourself already! You’re still in love with her and you’re sorry you ever cheated on her, and if you had the chance, you would do things differently and live the rest of your life with her. Admit that you would rather it were you in that room, watching TV while she lays on your lap, cooking your bun in her oven. Admit that you would rather be with her than out here in the cold like a lost puppy for months and months with no family, no money, no friends!”

“You’ve always had a wild imagination.”

“Is it the truth?”

“Nope.”

At this, she throws fistfuls of snow into the air. “Here’s the problem: you will never get over her if you won’t admit you’re sorry. So just admit it and move on with your life! Clearly, she has.”

“I am sorry,” I admit with a casual shrug that throws her off balance. “I’m sorry that what I did hurt her and broke her heart. But I’m not sorry I did it.”

She frowns in confusion. “What do you mean?”

I snort and lay down to look at the stars. "I mean that your perception of those events seems to be faulty. I mean that I did cheat on Yeseul that night… but she didn't break up with me because I cheated. I cheated so she would break up with me."

There's a long pause in which I cast my eyes downwards to study her surprised face. She's rightfully speechless.

"Is it so shocking?" I ask at last.

"But," she begins, twisting her face yet again and rubbing her temples, "you loved her. Why would you want her to leave you? You were childhood sweethearts. She was there for you when your mother was sick. She knew you before you moved in with your father, before we even met! I don't understand why you would hurt her in such a way just to make her leave."

"I did love her… as a friend."
Her expression clears and closes off in an instant.

“When mother fell ill, Yeseul was the only one who stood by me. Grandfather was only nice because he had plans for my future and he only came to visit twice a month. Yeseul, on the other hand, was there to help me calm my mother during those times when she wasn’t lucid. She was a shoulder I could lean on, an ear I could confide in… and those nights when my mother had to sleep in the hospital, her home became a place I could return to. She was my constant companion and it was so natural for people to assume that we would grow to be lovers and marry and live happily ever after… but…”

“But you never loved her,” she finishes for me.

I look at her. She looks angry, sad, depressed, and murderous all at once.

“No.”

Her irritated eyes snap up to meet mine. “Then why not just tell her? Why would you go to such lengths to…” she takes a deep breath, “by chance, are you a psychopath?”

The unexpected question makes me laugh, “I wish I were. Unfortunately, no. I did try to break it off with Yeseul after mother died. I wanted her to have a good future with someone better than me who could reciprocate her feelings, but she always chalked it off to grief and never left me alone. I tried gently for years to spare her feelings, but her loyalty is her biggest flaw. The only way I could give her a clean break was to make it clear I had no intention of devoting myself to her, and it worked. She cut herself off from me and never tried to contact me again.”

I imagine I know what Chaeryung must be thinking right now… I had known of her feelings for me for a long time, but I’d always hoped she would eventually get over them so that we could maintain our professional relationship and - on occasion - friendship. The moment she confessed was the moment I had to make things clear between us.

“She’s happier now,” I add, gesturing to the living room window below. “He’s completely devoted to her. Women like her deserve men who can be there for them - heart, mind, soul.”

When Chaeryung continues to be silent, I take her cue and shut up.

“And you’re not one of those men because you don’t have a heart, is that it?” she suddenly snaps.

“I don’t know how to love.”

“You don’t have an ounce of sentimentality in you? Towards her, towards your cousins, your grandfather, your mother? You feel… nothing?”

“Nothing that I can acknowledge.”

“Then I’m right: you are a psychopath.”

“Perhaps.”

She huffs, now very irritated. “Well, I can see you’re doing well. I’ll tell your cousins to stop looking for you and leave you to your happy thoughts and never bother you again. Have a great life!”

She jumps to her feet and heads for the window, and something in me snaps. The moment she reaches out to touch the windowsill, I grab hold of her wrist, forcing her to turn around to face me.
“What are you-?!?” She's visibly angry, but it's nothing compared to how I feel after hearing her words. Happy thoughts? Great life? I had thought she of all people would know… would understand…

Before I stop to consider what I'm saying, I hiss, “My mother only kept me around so she could blackmail my father. My grandfather only showed interest in me so he could use me. My own father took me in for money.” I'm beyond caring at this point. I had bottled all these up for years; had tried my best to forget about my own insignificant existence, even though every time I'm with my cousins, all I can really think about is how they're wanted and I'm not… about how only Yo-hyung, shunned by his mother, could possibly understand a fraction of how I feel every second of everyday.

I remember that each of them had been born with the freedom to choose their own paths in life, that mine had been taken in exchange for money to pay for the care of a mother who never even gave a damn.

“Love is weakness.” I had learned early on… to love is to hurt. To love is to sacrifice. To love is to be disappointed. To love is to be lonely.

“No,” she says quietly, “love is strength. You just don't realise it.”

Feeling impatient, I turn away. How foolish. I was wrong to think she would understand. Despite the women I've flaunted in front of her, despite my bad treatment of her, despite everything… how can she still think of her love as a source of strength, when all it's brought her is misery?

“You may think your mother, grandfather and father took away your belief in love, but you're wrong. I'm not blind, Won-nim… I may not be the smartest tool in the shed, but even I can see how hard you work, how easily you offer to help your cousins. Is that not love?”

“That's work.”

The stubborn girl shakes her head. “You know what disappointment feels like, so you work twice as hard so that your cousins never experience the disappointment you felt when you placed your trust in the wrong people.”

“Isn't that just being selfish?” I scoff. “I don't want to be seen as incompetent. It has nothing to do with them.” But even as I say it, I know I'm lying. I may not care about much, but I do know that I care about what my cousins think of me, and I do care about them. The reason I’ve worked hard all these years is so that I can try to spare them the hardship, the pain, the disappointment that has plagued me my whole life.

Chaeryung just looks at me, and for the first time ever, there’s pity in her eyes. I gulp, horrified. How could I let this girl pity me? This girl who has nothing… not even a name to recommend her in life.

“Yes, I know I’m no one,” she suddenly snaps, the pity gone in an instant.

Startled, I blink.

“You're awfully easy to read, you know. Apart from the fact that you’ve already told me I mean nothing to you, I know you enough to know how you look at people you think are not worth the time and effort.” She hoists herself back into the room before I could think of a rebuttal. I can hear her angrily stomping her feet across the room.

“Do you know why you’re lonely?” she suddenly screams, stopping for a moment to face me
again.

I crane my neck and see her on the doorway, face red and fists clenched from anger.

“It’s not because you’re not lovable or unwanted or… or…” she mimes a punch and a kick. “It’s because you choose to be. Well, as I said, if you like it so much, then I’ll just leave you to it. Goodbye, Won-nim. Have a great life.”

I stare into the room as she leaves, and I continue to stare as she descends the stairs, crosses the threshold to the outside world and slams the door behind her.

“Chaeryung-shi!” I hear myself yell after her. “Why do you love me?”

There's no response. I wonder if she’d even heard me. I crawl over to the edge and squint out at the dark, cold street. There she is, two yards away and walking as quickly as she can away from the house.

“Chaeryung-shi!” I bellow as loudly as I can. “WHY DO YOU LOVE ME?”

Immediately, a few curious faces peep out at me through the windows. From one of the houses down the street comes a baby’s startled cry, and a second later, its mother bangs the window open to curse at the demon who had woken her child up.

But the insults slip past me because I had achieved my goal. I watch, satisfied, as Chaeryung marches back towards my house. “Are you crazy?!” she hisses, pulling her hood up over her head to hide her face. “Shut up! You’ll wake the entire neighborhood!”

“Answer me first. Why do you love me?”

“Screw you.”

When she tries to leave, I yell again. “CHAERYUNG-SHI!”

“I DON’T LOVE YOU!” she screeches. She actually jumps and makes a futile swipe at me from way below. “I don’t love you, alright? Now leave me alone.”

“Liar.”

“Excuse me?”

“Why do you love me?”

She’s so angry, I’m surprised the snow hasn’t yet melted around her.

“You… you! Forget it! I’m leaving. Wake the whole neighborhood with your cries. I,” she straightens up and walks away, “don’t care.”

I keep calling after her, but no matter how loudly I bellow and how angry my neighbors become, she ignores me. The moment she reaches the opposite street, she hails a passing cab, and without thinking, I jump.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the late update... it's a really long update though? hehe
I Know You

Chapter Summary

I make the mistake of meeting his eyes. He rarely lets people know what he’s thinking, but there are moments when he becomes vulnerable. This is one of them.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jung

My whole life, I don't remember ever being this scared. This even tops the time I saw my own mother collapse from chest pain right in front of me, or that time I broke my leg in a terrible motorcycle accident, or when I had to face off dozens of foes in a stadium full of people for my rank advancement…

I can’t understand my apprehension. I hadn’t even felt this way during Chunwonnie’s birth. What makes this time different?

With a sigh, I lay down over the stretch of chairs lining the corridor and just stare at the ceiling, wondering when this is all going to be over. I had told my cousins that I would be staying overnight so that they could go home and get some rest. What I hadn't told them was the feeling that’s been plaguing me all day, telling me that I had to be here. I knew that I wouldn’t have been able to focus on anything else if I had gone home anyway.

“What's happening? Is everything alright?” I ask abruptly as another nurse exits the room. They've been coming and going more frequently the last quarter of an hour, and every time they appear, they tell me that everything’s fine… and every time they tell me, I manage not to believe them, especially this time as she simply mumbles something about a doctor before hurrying away.

Doctor? My whole body tenses, reacting to the multitude of images my mind has suddenly managed to conjure - images of the worst scenarios that might be happening inside that room. Now, I’ve never had a great imagination. I've always been more of a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of guy, but right now, I feel as though I’m being hit with two decades worth of untapped imagination potential.

I can picture my sister-in-law… pale, weak. If I try hard enough, I imagine I can even hear her screaming.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I mumble abstractedly as I pace the length of the door, back and forth, trying to reach a decision. What in the world is happening?

I can no longer stand not knowing, so, dreading the worst, I open the door and step into the room.

My sister-in-law is the first person I see. She’s sitting up in bed, and despite her eyes being closed, I know she’s wide awake. Her breathing is shallow, her hair slick with sweat, and though she’s as pale as I had pictured her in my mind, she’s nowhere near as weak. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look so strong.
My stepmother is the first person to notice me. “Jung? Is everything alright?”

“Er, yes,” I reply awkwardly, withering slightly under the combined gazes of everyone in the room - family and nurses alike. “I was just… checking. I'm sorry, I'll go-”

“No. Stay.” The fatigue in Hajin’s voice sends alarm bells ringing anew in my head. Her eyes are open and she's looking at me strangely.

“Are… are you… I don’t think I…” I mumble, torn between running away to safety and staying for my peace of mind. “I’ll just be in the way.’”

“No, no, this is good,” says my stepmother as she extricates her hand from Hajin’s grasp and beckons me over. Against my better judgment, I obey.

I find myself in an inadvertently awkward situation, sitting on the side of the bed opposite my older brother, who's clasping one of Hajin’s hands in both of his and gesturing for me to take the other.

“So, what… what's the doctor f- oh- ah- ahh…!” My misguided attempt at starting a conversation flies out the window in an instant, replaced with the pain of one whose bones have suddenly turned to jello. I bite down on my free hand to stop myself from yelling too loudly.

“Why do your hands feel like sponges?” Hajin suddenly growls, sounding so ferocious, my brother and I both flinch. “I can’t- I can’t anymore.”

“Yes, you can, and you will,” her mother says in a firm but soothing voice, wiping her brow with a towel.

“We’re nearly there, agassi, just a little more,” a nurse assures her. In a small voice broken by grunts and sobs, Hajin says, “I know.” Then she turns to my brother and says something in a voice too low even for me to hear clearly. "... doing this again… and so soon…”

_Huh?

To add to my confusion, my brother whispers back a reply that sounds suspiciously like, “It was a thousand years ago.”

"Not for me!”

_Jung, stop. What does father always say to you? ‘Nothing good ever comes out of eavesdropping, Jung-ah, unless it’s for business.’_

It’s the first time father’s words of wisdom have ever been useful.

The doctor arrives then and announces after a quick check that she’s finally ready to start pushing. Then everything becomes a blur. I remember that I had stopped caring about my hand and began caring instead about providing Hajin with whatever encouragement I could, listening with half an ear to the doctor’s instructions and to the constant flurry of movement around us.

Mostly, I was in disbelief about where I was and what I was doing. Being the youngest in a family of predominantly male cousins and purely male brothers meant I grew up rightfully ignorant about the workings of the female body. Childbirth was an entirely foreign concept to me. I’d heard about it, read about it, studied it in biology class and seen it happen in movies, but witnessing it firsthand was something else. For the first time since being allowed in the room, I wondered why my sister-
in-law had asked for me to stay. Could there have been a deeper reason other than having a larger hand to squeeze than my stepmother’s? Is it that she wanted more people around her for support? Or did she maybe not want me to remain outside all by myself?

Whatever reasons she had, I was grateful. In my wildest dreams, I had never imagined I would be here, so physically and emotionally involved with the birth of my niece. And yet here I am, and I’m as caught up in the moment as everyone else is.

"There she is," the doctor says suddenly, her low voice hushing the room. “She’s crowning. We’re so close now, Hajin-shi."

My breath hitches and I realize I’m squeezing Hajin’s hand just as hard as she’s squeezing mine. After a deep breath, I whisper, “You can do it, hyungsu-nim. Just a little more.”

She’s shaking from exhaustion, but she still nods to me. I can’t even begin to imagine the kind of pain she must be going through right now, but seeing her like this has given me a whole new appreciation for all the mothers in the world.

I can’t imagine my mother being in Hajin’s place, but she too had to go through this experience - not once, but thrice. She too must have felt helpless against the pain, endured hours of exhaustive labor, and for what? For her to end up all alone.

I am not blind to my mother’s faults. I know she’s not the best person in the world. I know she’s hurt many people. I’ve heard her yell profanities at her subordinates over the smallest of mistakes. I’ve seen her throw objects at my father in fits of anger. I was there the day she screamed at my brother Yo to get out and never come back. I had resented her for being unable to keep our father from marrying another woman. The older I got, the less perfect she became.

But she's still my mother.

Not many people will understand her, but I do. I understand that she yells over the smallest of mistakes because she doesn’t want hardwork to be scrapped by carelessness and oversight. I understand that the reason she hit my father and threw things at him was because she loved him and didn’t want him to leave. I understand that the reason she had disowned my brother was because she thought she knew what was best for him and wanted to give him everything she could. And I understand that the reason she couldn’t convince my father to stay was because he never really loved her, and no amount of fits or begging could change what was never meant to last.

And now I know… I know that even if it takes me a lifetime, I was going to find a way to repair the rift between my family.

A small cry suddenly punctures through my thoughts, and I glance up in shock to find my vision blurred with tears. Hastily, I wipe them away, and then I see her…

She’s small and red, squirming angrily against the nurse that’s holding her, her face scrunched up and her fists flailing through the air. Immediately, everything melts away - my doubts, my fears, my insecurities, my exhaustion, my worries. I can’t stop looking. Her cry is probably the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

“Oh, she’s beautiful,” my stepmother coos over the nurse’s shoulder, holding onto a silently sobbing Mrs. Cho.

I feel that I need to congratulate my brother and sister, but I can’t seem to stop crying, myself. I tear my eyes away from the little girl so I can turn to her parents. Hajin looks so tired, I'm scared she
might pass out on all of us, except that she also looks exceptionally happy. On both her and my brother’s faces are two of the brightest smiles I’ve ever seen. In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever seen my brother quite like this - with a smile that completely transforms his face from the strict brother I’ve known my whole life into a man overflowing with love and appreciation for the woman who’s just given him the world.

I feel like no amount of kisses and sweet whispers will ever be enough to repay her, but she’s enjoying his attention regardless. It’s a start.

“Con… con…” I manage to croak before burying my face in the sheets. I can hear my brother and sister chuckling as they reach out to ruffle my hair.

“I need my hand back, Jung-ah.”

I let go at once. I’m very strangely emotional. I’m happy, grateful, and sad at the same time. I’ll even admit to being lonely. My father and two brothers have families of their own now, and my mother is off-limits to me most of the year. Eun has Soondeok, Baek Ah has Woohee, Won is missing. Ironically, the only person who could want my company right now is the half-brother I’d spent years ignoring.

“Here you are…” a voice says from behind me. I get up at once to move out of the way, but Hajin tugs at me to stay.

“I want my babies to have a few minutes of skinship with their parents right after birth,” Dr. Shim explains, smiling as the baby is handed over to her mother.

Holding her baby for the first time seems too much for Hajin, who immediately starts crying. “It’s her,” she whispers again and again to my brother, who, I’m surprisingly not surprised to see, is crying too.

And because they insist on not being left out, the pipes on my face decide to resume their interrupted leaking. “Aish, for real, what is wrong with me?” I sob as I take hold of one tiny foot. It’s so small and perfect that I find myself sobbing even harder.

“You’re just happy,” Stepmother says, patting my back.

I stand up and step away for a moment to get a grip on myself. I walk to the window to find that snow is falling outside, even though winter’s supposed to be making way for spring. There’s something familiar about the snow… not in the way they’re falling, but in the feelings their descent has stirred in me. And I remember that the last time I had stopped to enjoy a snowfall was during my brother’s wedding just months ago.

“Seol.”

I turn in surprise after hearing my thoughts spoken out loud.

“That’s a beautiful name,” Stepmother says, planting a kiss on Hajin’s head first before doing the same on the baby’s forehead.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful little girl,” Mrs. Cho coos, offering her finger for the little one to grasp. “Hello, Seol-ah… your grandmothers are here. We love you so much.”

“Uncle Jung is here too,” my brother says. And that’s when I realize they’re all smiling at me.

After giving my nose a final wipe, I return to the bed. I look at my niece properly for the first time
and see how beautiful she is despite being all red and wrinkly. Her eyes are half-open, alert to the voices of the people surrounding her. Her forehead is creased, frowning at this strange, new environment.

Something about her stirs a sentimentality in me that I never knew existed. Is it because of how small and fragile she is? Or the fact that I'd just witnessed her being born? Is it the tiny version of my brother's ears on her equally tiny head, or the way her frown resembles her mother's?

Or is it just… her?

“I know you,” I hear myself say in a voice too low even for my ears. Like many things tonight, it's something that I don't understand… I just know. “I think we’ll be best of friends,” I declare in a louder voice. *Nothing will hurt you while uncle Jung is around.*

I reach out to gently smoothen her frown away with my finger, and watch in fascination as she closes her eyes and twists in her mother’s arms. A feeling of protectiveness and warmth washes over me.

I can feel my life changing forever. I want to do better, to be better. It's the most natural thing in the world for me to want to protect her, to take care of her, to give her her heart’s desires. And I wonder if this is how all parents feel?

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Chaeryung

I’ve been having a hard time trying to keep a straight face.

“Omo, it's happened!” I squeal in excitement. In consideration of Won, who broke his leg not too long ago, I try not to bounce too much.

“What?” he asks weakly, trying to peer into my phone, but even the smallest of movements can hurt. He clutches his busted leg and hisses in pain.

I ignore him and turn instead to the cab driver. “Ahjussi, change of plans. Please take us to Samsung Medical Center!”

He looks at me like I'm crazy but changes direction anyway.


“Because that's where your family is.”

“Has my bastard of a father finally died?”
Shocked at his morbidity, I hit him, and then I remember that I shouldn't have. “Sorry,” I wince through his howl of pain, “Since when did your father become family? I was talking about Hajin. I just checked and learned she’s had the baby! Mrs. Oh wants me to buy more seaweed.”

“You mean…” Won groans, “not only will it take us an extra hour to get to a hospital, but you also need to pick up some seaweed on the way?”

“Yep.”

He slumps into his seat. “You are not a nice person.”

I roll my eyes. “Who told you to jump off the roof of your home anyway, Spiderman?”

“It’s because you wouldn’t answer me!”

“I did answer you.”

“I honestly.”

“I was being honest.”

“Stop lying.”

“You stop lying first!”

We glare at each other until the cab hits a bump on the road, and then Won is back to howling through gritted teeth. Considering everything he’s put me through, it’s silly of me to feel sorry for him, but I can’t help it.

He’s not all bad. Oftentimes, he acts like a jerk who doesn’t care, but I know the truth. And the truth is that he does care - too much. I’ve seen him help people despite being drunk off his ass; I’ve found him asleep on his desk after working tirelessly overnight; I’ve heard him beg in his sleep for his deceased mother to come back. And even though he used to parade women in front of me all the time, I had thought it was all to forget about his ex. Now I know that it was to keep me at arm’s length. But why? Does he fear being left alone and hurt again? Does he really not think himself capable of loving, or being loved? Or is it that he simply doesn’t see me in that way?

“Stop moaning. You sound inappropriate,” I snap. He opens his eyes to glare at me, but I ignore him. “Ahjussi… please take us to the nearest hospital.”

With incredible patience, the driver wordlessly changes direction once more. I try to pretend that I don’t notice Won staring at me by checking my phone and glancing out the window.

“Look at you, suddenly caring.”

“I don’t care.”

“Sure, you don’t.”

“I don’t.”

“So why do you love me?”

I could have hit him again. “I don’t love you.”

He scoffs. “Right. And I’m just pretending to be hurt.”
“Are you? Ahjussi, please-”

“No!” Won exclaims in panic before succumbing into howls and groans.

“You shouldn’t move so much.”

“You think?” he growls. “Just answer the damn question.”

“You know you’re paying for the taxi.”

“Am I?”

“If it weren’t for you, I’d be on my way to unnie by now. So, yes. You’re paying.”

He sighs, not caring enough to argue. “Fine. Whatever.”

“We’re here,” the driver says suddenly, coming to a stop.

“Great!” I exclaim in delight. “Please wait for me, ahjussi. Won-ah, give him your credit card.”

“Won-ah?” Won grumbles. “What happened to the respect?”

“You left it on the ice you splattered yourself on. Now, be a good boy and pay the nice ahjussi while I get help.”

“I don’t have a credit card. I turned them all in, remember?”

Oh, right. “Well, how much cash do you have on you?”

He checks the cab meter. “Not enough.”

Ugh. “Fine, I’ll pay this time. Now you owe me twice as much!” After promising the driver I would pay him at Samsung Medical Center, I leave the taxi and enter the emergency room.

Three strong-looking male nurses come out to help. I fill in the patient sheet while they get him onto the bed and check his vital signs, and when I’m done, I tell Won that I’m leaving.

“You’re just going to leave me here?” he demands in a shrill voice.

“I have a baby to meet.”

“And I don’t?”

“I had no idea you were even interested in her.”

“She’s my niece!”

“I also have seaweed to buy!”

“This isn’t even going to take long. Just wait awhile, why don’t you?”

When a nurse tells us they’ll need to run some tests to see the extent of the damage before patching him up, I decide I can’t stick around that long. “I’m sorry, but I have to get going.”

“And how am I supposed to get home?”

“You have a phone and a ton of cousins. Just call one of them!” I know immediately it’s not the
right thing to say because his expression closes up, which is silly. “They’ve all been worried about you, you know? Especially Jung.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I say goodbye and head back to the taxi, hoping he does decide to call any one of them for help, at the same time knowing he probably won’t.

“I just saw her. I think she looks just like you!” I whisper quietly to a drowsy Hajin.

My observation makes her smile. “That’s what everyone says. She’ll probably look different when she’s older, though.” She spots the bag I’m holding and asks what’s in it.

“Well, Mrs. Oh asked me to buy more seaweed for you before coming over, and as I was rather dirty, I decided to go home and change first. My mom usually wakes early to prepare meals for my siblings, so she took care of cooking this for you while I was washing up…” I place the package on the bed and unwrap it, revealing a huge, steaming container full of freshly cooked seaweed soup. “I hope you’re hungry because there’s more where that came from.” I pull out a flask full of the stuff and give it a little shake to show her.

She doesn’t look too enthusiastic. “I just ate about a ton, actually, but thank you, Chaeryung-ah. Just put it on the table with the rest.”

When I reach the table indicated, I see that it’s teeming with similar containers full of seaweed soup. “Will you be able to finish all this?” I ask dubiously. “Where’d they all come from?”

“Grandma Park, mostly,” she replies, stifling a yawn. “Plus my mother… and then she informed my aunts so they sent some over, too. I’m not entirely sure where the others came from.”

The door opens then and two women enter. I recognize the first as the wife of CEO Wang Mu, Yujeong, and the second is someone I’m quite familiar with because Won looks up to her husband and is always asking me to run errands for him - Munseong, the wife of Wang Yo.

“Hello!” Yujeong greets brightly. “Congratulations. How are you feeling?”

“Tired but happy,” Hajin replies.

“I know. One moment, you think you’re definitely going to die, and then the next… just…” Yujeong doesn’t even need to finish her sentence because her fellow mothers understand and voice their agreement.

I feel like an outsider in more places than one.

“Where’s little Chunwon?” Hajin asks, managing to sound alert.

“With his father, trying to communicate with his uncles and cousins,” Munseong replies. She and Yujeong start exchanging stories of their children, and as I can’t relate with either, I just sit there quietly, wondering whether I would consider having children of my own someday.

I know immediately that I don’t want any. Apart from the fact that I still have younger siblings to
support, I just don’t think I’m parent material. I’m impulsive and tend to make very bad
decisions… and bad luck sticks to me like a wet shirt.

But I also know that I don’t want to be alone. When my siblings will have all graduated,
when everyone I’ve been helping no longer needs me… I’ll have no one… then what will my life
be like?

“Pardon me. I’m sorry,” I say quietly, getting up from my seat and going over to Hajin. “I have
to go. You rest and be sure to drink all the soup, ok?”

She checks the time. “You’ve two hours before the Damiwon opens.”

“I have to go help someone. I’ll visit again later with everyone else, okay? Don’t forget the soup!”

“You’re back.”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“I knew you’d be back.”

“Really? Because I didn’t.” I drop my bag onto the hospital bed, just a tad too close to his broken
leg. “So they had to place it in a cast. Is it dry? Stiff? Uncomfortable?”

“Yes to all. Now stop poking!”

“Hmph.” I grab a chair and pull it closer. “When can you go home?”

“In a while, once I’ve settled the bill.”

“I thought you didn’t have any money.”

“Grandfather left me a bank account.”

“That was nice of him.”

“I was supposed to spend it on law school.”

“That’s too bad.”

“I guess I’ll just have to find a part-time job.”

“That’s how us commoners do it.”

He sighs and resumes his contemplation of the wall opposite his bed.

“Here,” I say after a while, handing him a bag of food. “You haven’t eaten anything, have you? I
managed to steal some from under my mother’s nose this morning.”

I half-expect him to sound cross and return it, but he opens it and stares at the food inside instead.
He stares for so long that I begin to feel self-conscious.

“It’s nothing fancy. It’s just lunch food for my siblings,” I explain, slightly embarrassed, belatedly realizing he probably doesn’t eat this kind of cheap food. “If you don’t want it, I can have it. There’s a cafeteria nearby anyway. I’ll buy you what you want.” I try to take the food container away but he motions for me to get back.

“Yah, I thought you brought this for me?” he snaps.

“You mean you’ll actually eat it?” I ask doubtfully. “You don’t have to. I can take it. I’m used to-”

“It’s fine.”

There’s a finality in his voice that stays me. I retake my seat and watch him take a bite, trying not to let my curiosity show. A thought is forming in my mind… I wonder if…

“Your mother is a good cook,” he comments quietly, taking a bite of egg this time.

“She is,” I agree. He’s probably never had a home-cooked meal before. His mother had been too sickly, his father’s family doesn’t eat with him, and he used to spend most of his time away from that house anyway… his cousins tend to eat out rather than in, and being put in charge of most of the family restaurants means he’d probably eaten in them more often than in anywhere else. In fact, he probably doesn’t know what it’s like to have a real family.

And that’s why he values his cousins… I realize, they’re the only ones who treat him like an equal without expecting anything in return. Not his life, nor his future, nor money, nor his time. They treat him like he’s one of them. Family.

“I thought about your question,” I begin some time later. “I guess it’s because, despite everything, I know you’re a good person. You’re just not so sure of yourself. You rarely admit to being interested in anything. You put this barrier between you and people so that most of them see you as a heartless jerk who likes to have too much fun. You distance yourself from people who start to get too close. You can be incredibly mean when you want to be.” At this, I shoot him a reproachful look. He’s stopped eating to listen. “I guess I’m just someone who prefers to see the good in people, rather than the bad. I like to hope for the best.”

There’s a bit of silence after I say my piece, and then, in typical Won fashion, he says, “So I was right. You were lying last night.”

“You don’t have to be right all the time!” I screech, whacking his arm and almost toppling the container of food over.

“Yah!” he exclaims, scrambling to get a grip. “You almost spilled it all! Do you know hotels charge extra for stained sheets?”

“We’re not in a hotel, we’re in a hospital, which means I can beat you up without fear of killing you!”

Fearing for his food and his leg, he quickly says, “Alright, alright, just calm down. Why would you tell me this, then?”

“I thought you wanted a straight answer!”

“I do, but you wouldn’t tell me last night. So why now?” he eyes me suspiciously. “Is it because of the new baby? Did she make you want to be a better person?”
“No, not really,” I reply with a sigh. “I guess it was just… seeing them all together, so happy and sharing stories and… I don’t know, I just thought about you… here…” I lean in closer to him, “all alone. With a busted leg. No family. No friends. No money. Poor thing.”

The look on his face tells me he’s contemplating dumping the rest of his precious home-cooked food on my head.

“You know, just because the situation is different now doesn’t mean your relationship with your cousins has changed,” I say before he can put his thoughts into action. “They still consider you as one of them. You don’t have to do this alone.”

“It’s what grandfather wanted. No biases.”

“Screw your grandfather,” I tut impatiently. “If more parents considered their children’s happiness over their own, the world would be a better place. Here’s a newsflash, Won-nim: your grandfather is dead. There’s no one stopping you from doing what you want except you.”

“I made him a promise, Chaeryung-shi.”

“I’m not saying you should go back on your word. I’m saying if what he wanted was for you to be unbiased in your future work… you can do that without sacrificing your relationship with your family. Do you think so little of your cousins that you’re afraid they might take advantage of your relationship to mess with your work and judgment? Because I don’t.

“Here’s the difference between you and your grandfather: your grandfather trusted no one. You’re not like him.”

He’s silent and staring at me. What are you thinking, Won-nim?

“Will you answer me this?” I ask seriously, not waiting for him to reply, “Why did you jump off your roof last night? Why did you come to my house with a bag of makeup? Why did you put your guard down and tell me your secrets? Why did you try to save me from Junsu before I even knew what he was?

What am I to you?

“I don’t know,” he replies at last.

“That’s not fair. I answered your question, now you have to answer mine.”

Why were you so angry when I stopped working for you? Why were you so mean to the secretaries who came after me? Why did you not want me to teach them?

Was it because you wanted me to work for you again, or because you thought I’d betrayed you and didn’t want another doing the same?

“I wasn’t aware your answer came with conditions,” he grumbles, resuming his breakfast.

“Then at least tell me this… do you want me to work for you again?”

He takes his time answering. I’m about to repeat the question, when he says, “Yes.”

“Why?”

He shrugs. “You know me.”

“You just…” he looks uncomfortable, “know me. You were always there, and then suddenly you weren’t. It just didn’t feel right. Why do you ask? Are you quitting your job at the Damiwon?”

“Probably not. I like it there,” I reply honestly, adding, “I’m treated well.”

“I treated you well!”

“Eh… debatable,” I scowl. “Here’s the crux, Won-nim… I love you, I think. I’m just not so sure I like you very much anymore.”

I make the mistake of meeting his eyes. He rarely lets people know what he’s thinking, but there are moments when he becomes vulnerable. This is one of them.

“I still think you’re a good person. But… well…” I sigh. “I’m looking for something, too. Or someone. People always rely on me for everything. I just want to rely on someone else for a change.” I shrug and smile sadly at him. “I don’t think you can be that person for me.” Not when I’m that person for you.

“No one else knows me like you do,” he says quietly after a while; almost absentmindedly.

It hits me then that maybe he considers me family, too… because I’ve stuck with him through thick and thin, through all his mood swings and insecurities. I do know him better than everyone else.

“You want someone you can anchor yourself on. Someone who knows your history and accepts you in spite of it,” he continues.

“Yes, exactly. I want what Hajin has in So. Or what Woohee has in Baek Ah. Or what Soondeok has in Eun. All of those couples,” I nod, satisfied at his understanding. And then I begin to see where his thoughts have led him. “But we’re not that to each other.”

“We’re not.”

“Well.”

“We work well together, though.”

“I want a relationship with someone outside of work.”

“I suppose so.”

“We’re not even friends outside of work.”

He sighs. “I’m sorry I said that. I shouldn’t have.”

“It doesn’t matter. I no longer work for you so what I feel and what I think matter even less now than they did before.”

“I didn’t mean it.”

“Didn’t you?” I ask softly.

“I actually… think of you as a…”
I don’t say anything and wait patiently for him to continue.

“You are my friend. No, you’re more than that. I think of you as-”

I consider exiting through the window if he says sister.

“Hyung!” Won and I both jump out of our skins in surprise. I had quite forgotten we were at a hospital. “I came as fast as I could!” Jung says, hurrying into the room. “What happened? How did you break your leg?”

“You’re here,” I say blankly, staring at him.

“You’re here, too,” he counters, equally confused. But he just shakes his head. “We’ve been searching everywhere for you, hyung! Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been? Why did you just suddenly disappear?”

And then it hits me. Jung is here because Won had called him. He actually listened to me.

“I had a lot of things to think about,” Won replies with a casual shrug, reverting to his usual self. “But it’s okay now. I think I’ve sorted everything out.”

“And this?” Jung gestures to his leg.

“I slipped on the ice.” Luckily, Jung isn’t the suspicious type and accepts his answer. “How’s the baby?” Won asks.

The question wipes the worry off of Jung’s face. He’s glowing when he replies, “She’s beautiful, hyung! She looks just like hyungsu-nim except with hyung’s ears and probably his nose, too.”

Won scrunches up his face, trying to picture the baby. “I think I’ll have to see her to know what you’re talking about.”

“Aish, if it weren’t for your broken leg, I wouldn’t have left the hospital at all! She’s only a few hours old but already responding to our voices. She especially enjoys Gyeonghwa’s singing,” Jung enthuses. If I hadn’t known better, I’d have thought he was talking about his brother’s. “We should get out of here. You have to meet her! Have you settled the bill yet?”

“Not yet. The nurse hasn’t returned with my-”

“I’ll get it. Chaeryung-shi, will you stay with him?”

“Sure,” I nod, watching him leave with a skip in his step. “I don’t remember ever seeing him this excited. He should find a nice girl to settle down with and have babies of his own.” And then, to let him know I haven’t forgotten him yet, I plonk my chin onto my hand, raise my eyebrows and say, “What were you saying?”

Won looks flustered. “I- I don’t remember- I mean… I do see you as a friend… but also more than that.”

Without warning, I feel panicked. I realize I don’t want to hear what he has to say, especially if he says he thinks of me as a sister. Being sister-zoned by the guy I’ve had a crush on for years is just tragic.

“You know what? It’s okay. You don’t need to tell me,” I say hurriedly. I notice that he’s through eating and hold out the empty bag for him to put the container in. “Let’s clean up so that you can
leave the moment Jung comes back.” I begin to move around the room, arranging furniture and straightening out sheets, doing my very best to distract myself from my own thoughts and his insistent calls.

But it’s not to be. When I reach out to grab my bag from the bed, he takes advantage of the proximity and grabs my arm. Oh, god.

“You’re my best friend,” he says in a rush.

My mind is blank. I haven’t been sister-zoned, I’ve been friend-zoned. And not just any friend-zone… BEST-friend-zone. Is there anything more pitiful than someone in love with someone who regards her as his best friend? Although as I no longer expect anything from him, I suppose being his best friend isn’t so bad.

I smile and shake his hand. “So we’re officially friends now?”

“Mark your calendar. I know you carry one around wherever you go.”

He’s not wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Hellooooooooo~ yey for quicker update than last time :D

So my Won has issues. Lots of them. He's into history because he's searching for a place to belong, or a reason to think himself part of the family. His dead mother didn't really want him, his father's family definitely don't want him, his grandfather only wanted to use him, etc... I hope this chapter has straightened up some of the complicated curls of his character, and his relationship with Chaeryung.

The next chapter will most likely be my last, though as I've mentioned before, I might add snippets in a different book/story (probably the Christmas special) about what happened to the characters after the end of this book, just so we can connect the dots and find even more closure hehehe

About Jung, I notice that people tend to overlook his character because of how childish he was towards So in the drama, but remember that he did raise Seol as his own and loved her like his own. So I thought he deserved to be there during her birth, or that Hajin would want him there. It further made sense to write the birth in his POV since he's the only one (apart from Mu and Yo) who hasn't had a chapter in his POV yet as he has no particular love interest in this story hehehe

So that's that. Once again, thank you all for your continued interest! And I'm sorry for the delays in the previous chapters. I already have thoughts about how I want to write the first part of the next chapter, and the second part was already written months ago, so... hopefully, I'll be able to update soon. Thoughts on this chapter will be highly appreciated :D

Have a great week, everyone!
Happy Endings

Chapter Summary

For one last time, I see it... the final veil connecting me to my past fluttering in the wind so that for a moment, I don't see my family as they are... I see them for what they could have been.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

So

“What does she mean to you?” my father had asked me one day after my engagement. He had come into my office and poured us both drinks. “I know there’s nothing I can do to stop you now that you’ve made up your mind. I won’t even ask for explanations. Just tell me… what does she mean to you?”

Where do I begin?

From the moment I first started dreaming about her, I already knew she was special. Seeing her in the flesh a year later and finally remembering who she was to me felt surreal, to say the least.

How do I explain to my father that this was the woman I’d crossed a thousand years to be with again?

How do I tell him that if it weren’t for her, the kingdom he had spent his past life building would have crumbled mere years after his death as son after son, brother after brother killed one another for power?

How do I describe how I had felt that night when I finally got to hold her again, when I had despaired a thousand years ago, believing that she was forever lost to me?

“She means everything.”

She more than saved my life... she saved my soul.

“How do I look?” she’d asked the first day she’d donned her new Damiwon uniform.

I looked up from my laptop in time to see her spin around, showing me the workmanship.

It was masterfully done and I could have watched her all day. Seeing her like that brought me back in time - to an evening of fireflies, of little adventures that we had taken while she was Head Court Lady under Mu’s reign.

And on her hair, she had fastened the hairpin I had given her on the night of my mother’s disastrous party.
The moment I saw it, my vision shifted so that I suddenly found myself standing on a dirt path lined with ancient, majestic willows. And beneath one such willow she stood, dressed in white with her long dark hair pinned back by another hairpin of the same design.

“It’s great, isn’t it? It’s almost exactly like the original. Baek Ah’s so talented!” she’d gushed happily, her voice disrupting my visions.

I blinked and was brought back to the present. Instead of standing on a dirt path, I found myself sitting on a bar stool in my old kitchen, staring at Hajin as she waltzed up to me.

“Everything alright?” she asked, peering curiously into my face.

I reached out to touch her new uniform.

Everything was exactly the same... everything except the century we were in and the woman before me - for not only did she have more freedom to express her feelings in this time, but she was also more than just a Court Lady - she was my wife.

“Baek Ah made it adjustable,” she explained as I fingered the band around her waist.

I couldn’t feel it at that moment because of the layers of clothing she had on, but her once-flat stomach had very recently started to swell - a visible manifestation of the life growing inside her.

I remembered the first time I noticed it, roughly two weeks after we were married.

We had just gotten back after being out all day and she had stripped off her outer clothing to get ready to take a shower. The small change would have escaped anyone else’s notice, but I was well-acquainted with her body and spotted the difference immediately.

It was like her body had waited for that one little change to finally begin showing off. In the next few days, her appetite varied with her mood, her nose became extra sensitive to even the mildest of scents, and her weight increased in proportion to her waistline.

I think back to the time I had felt those first stirrings of life. Hajin had already been feeling the baby move for weeks and was always disappointed when I told her I couldn’t feel anything.

Until one evening when we were lying in bed and talking quietly about how well Eun’s surprise for Soon Deok had gone, as well as our thoughts on Jung’s aversion to romance. I was stroking her then very visible bump when I felt an unmistakable twitch beneath my hand.

At first, I thought perhaps it was wishful thinking, but then I saw Hajin’s face and she had on a serene smile that she usually reserved for moments such as this.

When she saw my expression, she gasped, “You felt it too?”

“Was that her?” I asked in awe, hand poised in case of more movements.

She nodded and kissed me, happy to finally be able to share these precious moments. We’d waited quietly for a few more minutes before deciding our little girl was done for the night.

But it was enough. I had felt her for the first time, and the euphoria of that moment only grew everyday when I began to feel her more frequently - whenever I hugged her mother or talked to her directly in the mornings before getting ready for work and again at night before going to sleep.

Some days, she made making love to her mother seem wrong.
“She won’t be able to feel anything from in there,” Hajin had said, both exasperated and amused after I’d finally decided to express my concerns. “And it’s not like she knows what we’re doing. It probably feels like I’m… riding a bike. Or exercising. Both completely child-friendly activities.”

“But she moves everytime I try to get close,” I sighed. “You see? She moved again.”

“She’s an active girl! And she can hear perfectly well, you know,” Hajin replied before bursting out laughing. “Maybe if we’re really, really quiet she’ll go back to sleep…”

It was my turn to tease. “That’s not a problem for me. You, on the other hand…”

Her mirth died and she glared at me. “Sometimes, it can’t be helped. Now, are you going to help satisfy my hormones or not?”

I always did in the end, especially once I’d gotten used to feeling the baby move against me. I never could refuse nor deny Hajin anything.

She was irresistible to me. From the moment I first lifted her onto my horse, I had never been more drawn to anyone… never been more enchanted.

And in my eyes, she grew more beautiful everyday. More beautiful than the day she finally accepted my feelings… than on the night I first made love to her in Seokyung… even more beautiful than when we were finally wed was the undeniable joy on her face in that early morning when she held our daughter in her arms for the first time.

“It’s her,” she had confirmed as tears streamed down her face.

Nothing could have prepared me for that. I was overcome by a hoard of emotions I hadn’t even realized I’d been bottling.

I finally had an answer to one piece of my puzzle of questions about her.

So this is how you had looked like as a baby.

Despite knowing I owed my daughter’s life to Jung, I had nonetheless felt jealous of him for being able to witness all of her firsts, for meeting her before I could, for getting to know her better than I ever did, and for being able to shower her with all the affection she deserved without fearing that anyone would punish her for it.

His reaction to meeting her again in this life was something I had expected, even though he couldn’t possibly have understood why he had felt that way. I knew it was because his love for her had been genuine. Nothing I did now would ever be enough to repay him for the kind of life he had given her.

“Will she never wake?” he’d whined as we watched her through the nursery glass window of the hospital.

I messed up his hair. “She was just born. Give her a break.”

All he could do was pout.

“I’ll need to catch up on some work next week. Why don’t you come over and lend Hajin a hand?” I suggested.

His pout quickly transformed into an eager smile. “Sure!” he beamed, and even though he knew
Seol was asleep and couldn’t hear him through the glass, he still said to her, “we’re going to have lots of fun, you and me!”

Back at home two days later, I found my wife alone with our newborn. She smiled when I entered the room, and as we gazed down at our baby’s face, she started to hum.

For one last time, the scene before me changed.

Gone were the modern furnitures and lights. In their place were wooden beams, candle holders, and windows covered in hanji.

There was a bed by the wall, and standing by that bed was my Soo. She’s in traditional clothes of bright hues and singing softly to the dozing baby in her arms.

There’s a place I want to return to
Now even my footprints seem unfamiliar to me
My friend, my dear friend
Thank you for being you

I had heard that song sung many times over during my reign because the people all believed it to be a favourite of mine - the song that had made their ruthless king fall in love with a mere court lady.

I never stopped them from performing it because it felt like a well-deserved punishment each time I heard it. The pain of Soo’s passing never dulled over the years. I spent the rest of my life trying to forgive myself and never did.

“So?”

The vision disappeared along with my recollections. I focused my attention back to the present and saw Hajin eyeing me curiously.

“Did you see something?” she asked. “It hasn't happened to either of us in awhile.”

I smiled. She knew me so well. “It was your song that triggered it.”

“Oh,” she said, understanding. She couldn’t have known what it was that I saw… that I had just glimpsed one of the few moments she and Seol had together before she was ripped from that life. But my melancholy must have shown because instead of pressing for details, she offered the baby to me.

Neither in my past nor present life have I ever held a baby, especially one so young, and one who was mine.

My heart swelled.

Every little thing she did was fascinating. Despite being so tiny and fragile, she was surprisingly strong. Hajin and I watched as she scrunched up her face and stretched right before opening her eyes.

The grin on my face came naturally as I looked into those eyes, the way I had done many times in the past. They were the same curious eyes I had adored.

“Welcome home, little girl,” Hajin cooed, tapping her lightly on the nose.
Welcome home, indeed.

I wrapped Hajin in a one-armed hug and kissed her temple. “Thank you for my babies.”

She smiled and leaned against me, sighing in content. “For you, anything.”

It’s a bright and quiet Sunday morning and I’m wide awake. The tranquility of the morning is what had brought about the recollections.

I’m lying in bed, listening to the occasional chirp of summer birds fluttering outside the window, watching as the sun bathes the entire room in a warm glow. Warmer still is the body of the woman in my arms. Her eyes are closed, her sleep thus far undisturbed, but she smiles when I kiss her shoulder.

“Good morning,” she reciprocates my greeting and stifles a yawn. “Is she up?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll check. You go back to sleep.”

“Okay. Thank you,” she mumbles, burying back under the covers.

I put on a fresh shirt as I make my way over to the nursery.

It’s been almost six months, but I never tire of watching her. Whenever I see the even rise and fall of her tiny breaths, I feel at peace. And I’ve never known anything to match the elation I feel whenever she opens her eyes. It’s a different kind of happiness from when I’m with Hajin, with whom I can share everything.

Watching Seol, I feel whole… purposeful.

She shows off a toothless smile when she sees me.

“Good morning,” I greet as I lean over her crib and offer up a finger for her to catch. She grabs hold at once, but when she guides it towards her mouth, I pull back and hand over a teether instead.

She doesn’t like it. Angry, she lets out a loud yell that I just know will wake her mother.

“Shh!” I shush hastily, lifting her from her crib. “Your mother needs her rest.”

Apparently enjoying the change in scenery, she looks around and lets out a squeal of laughter.

“Yes, I’d be bored with having to stare at nothing but the ceiling all night, too,” I agree with a chuckle. Whispering, I add, “Mommy is much better to look at. Maybe I should’ve let your uncle Eun plaster stars all over your ceiling, after all…”

The determined look in her eyes is what I notice first, but instead of my finger, she tries to go for my nose.

“Nice try,” I say smoothly as I hold her at arm’s length.

She looks disgruntled at having failed a second time. I sense a call for backup coming, so before she can scream for her mother again, I draw her in and kiss her cheek.

“I love you.”
Her eyes are bright when she finally lands a slobbery kiss all over my face, but what had started as a kiss quickly turns to sucking when she reaches my nose.

I pull her away again. “Shall we go wake mommy, then?”

She laughs suddenly, waving her arms and legs my way. It dawns on me that maybe she thinks we’re playing a game, so I lift her up above my head and laugh along when she lets out another peal of laughter.

I bring her down for another kiss. “Let’s go wake your mother.”

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**Hajin**

Growing up, I’d always believed in happy endings. I believed everyone deserved to have one.

Life was quick to rid me of that delusion as tragedy after tragedy followed me the moment I reached the age of twenty-five. Before then, I was working the perfect job, hanging out with a perfect set of friends, enjoying the support of my wonderful parents, and to top it all off, I had thought that I had found the man I would one day marry.

How naive I was!

My boyfriend and best friend stole everything I had and left me alone to deal with the consequences. My perfect set of friends abandoned me when they learned of the kind of trouble I was in. My own parents stopped trusting me for a time.

And because life thought that wasn’t bad enough, I made a choice to try and save a young boy from drowning one day and ended up drowning myself… and woke up to find myself stuck a thousand years in the past in the body of one who looked exactly like I did when I was sixteen.

But then life in the past didn’t turn out to be so bad… at the start. In fact, I actually enjoyed it.

I enjoyed putting all those snobbish princes in their places. I enjoyed being their friend. I enjoyed teaching the servants at the 8th Prince’s mansion how to make soap and makeup. I enjoyed my time at the Damwon despite all the challenges I faced. I enjoyed the change in scenery - the freshness of the air and the untamed beauty of the forests and plains.

I can still recall the scent of the ocean, the strong breeze that had rolled over me when I got off the horse and stood on my own by the shallows. I remember watching as the sun steadily rose on the horizon…

*Did you know it, then? That despite my refusals, I had grown fond of you…*

“You have a face like glass,” he’d told me on our way back from one of our lunch dates.
Confused, I asked what he meant.

“People can tell what you think and feel just by looking at your face.”

Unfortunately, it was the truth. I scowled. “Being honest about how I feel is a good thing.”

“And it breaks so easily,” he added with a grin.

“Being able to show how I feel is a good thing,” I snapped with a glare.

“Yes, it is,” he agreed. “So don’t bother lying or trying to hide things from me because I can always tell when you do.”

Again, the truth. The only reason he hadn’t been able to figure out I’d gotten pregnant in the past was because we had seen so little of each other and grown distant. I’ve no doubt that if we had spent just another hour together somewhere, he would’ve realized it and locked me up to prevent me from leaving.

I mentioned as much.

After a thought, he agreed that he probably would have had me quarantined and guarded 24/7 - like some kind of infectious disease.

I patted my offended bump.

“Valuable object,” he objected with a slight roll of the eyes.

It still amazes me sometimes how easily we’re able to talk about the past now - those events that had used to cause so much pain no longer weighing us down.

Some days, it all still feels like a dream. I would catch myself staring at him doing the most mundane things, wondering if I was still in a coma or perhaps living out a fantasy in the afterlife.

My greatest fear is that one day I’ll wake up to find that none of this had been real.

My fears often turned my dreams into nightmares. I would wake in the middle of the night in a panic - crippled by phantom chest pains, haunted by faces of the dead, or fearful that despite all the care I’ve taken, I had somehow lost my baby.

And I wasn’t the only one.

“Will they ever go away?” I asked him groggily one morning after a restless night of tossing and turning. “Is this what having PTSD feels like?”

“Almost,” he replied, handing me a warm glass of milk.

I eyed him mournfully. “How did you deal with it?”

“I had you.”

Just like that, I felt like crying again. I always cried on those days. I cried over every little thing.

“We see each other everyday,” I pointed out, sipping on my milk to hide my watery eyes.

“Maybe it’s not enough,” he suggested, leaning on the countertop in front of me. “Shall we change your job description to daily dates with the department head instead of weekly?”
I raised my eyebrows. “You think that’ll work?”

“No idea,” he admitted after a quick kiss. “I just want to see more of you.”

Laughing, I reminded, “We already see each other everyday.”

“Then, is that a no?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, no?”

“No, yes!”

“No, no?”

_Not this again!_ I glared at him. “Yes, yes, let’s have lunch together everyday! How many schedules will your secretary have to clear for this to happen?” _I should send that woman a fruit basket._

“A fair amount,” he replied. _Make that a fruit basket and some personalized soaps._ “It doesn’t matter. They can always reschedule. You are more important. It’ll be worth it if it makes the nightmares go away. If it doesn’t help at all, then at least I get to spend some extra time with my girls.”

I couldn’t say no, not with our little person doing happy dances against my ribs in time with the rapid beating of my racing heart.

Lunch wasn’t the only added thing we did together.

Two months before my due date, I decided to stop going to work, not because of any physical problems, but because I was worried about going into preterm labor like I did in the past. It was an irrational fear, but not unfounded… and even though So thought I was worrying too much, he respected my decision and began spending more time at home to keep me company.

He even suggested taking walks together around the neighborhood park, an activity which I readily agreed to. I never did enjoy being cooped up anywhere and little walks with him in the snow seemed harmless, more beneficial.

Before heading back home, we would sit on an empty bench and talk about all sorts of things. There was never a shortage of topics. We talked about work, our families, the past, and we even occasionally talked about the people in our neighborhood.

“She helped me with my things the other day,” I told him on one of those instances, nodding towards the sweet old lady walking her dog. “She’s nice but very lonely. Her husband died in the war years ago and she never remarried.”

“Does she have kids?”

“One, but he works in a different country.”

He frowned, looking thoughtful. “If I suddenly die tomorrow, I give you permission to remarry.”
I rolled my eyes. “No one’s dying tomorrow. Let’s not talk about that.”

“There are no guarantees when it comes to life. I should probably get to work editing my will…”

“Then if I die suddenly tomorrow, promise me you’ll do everything in your power to make sure our baby lives and then you have my permission to remarry, too,” I snapped in annoyance.

“You’re right, let’s not talk about this,” he retracted, rubbing my shoulder consolingly. “But her son ought to visit her on holidays, at least.”

I had to agree. I thought about my parents and how they must have felt when I left home. I very seldom visited them after I moved out. Now that I was about to become a parent myself, I felt guilty, wondering how I would feel if I were in their shoes… or the old lady’s… and then I decided that I didn’t even want to think about it.

I just found myself hoping that Seol would end up working in the company when she’s all grown up just so she could live a lot closer to home.

“At least she has her dog,” I pointed out halfheartedly. “He’s a good boy. Very smart and loyal.”

“Probably would have been better if they’d had more children, though.”

My heart skipped a beat. We’d never properly discussed how many children we planned on having.

“Probably,” I shrugged noncommittally.

“Probably three. There’s usually one who’ll remain loyal even if the other two decide to go rogue.”

Suddenly, I wondered if he was thinking about how he and his brothers turned out with regards to their mother.

“Be honest with me… do you feel bad about what happened to your mother?” I asked.

“I feel conflicted,” he admitted after some consideration. “She won’t win any awards on parenting, but in her own strange way, she tried her best. She taught us to strive for perfection… raised us to be independent, confident. I know it and my brothers know it. We owe a lot of who we are to her.”

The idea that had been brewing in my mind sprung out of me before I could consider it further.

“Why don’t we invite her over for Christmas dinner?”

My casual invitation sent him reeling.

“What?” I cried out defensively, seeing his expression. “Don’t you think it’s the right thing to do?”

“Soo-yah,” he said, laughing a little, “she’s being punished by the law for trying to mess up your life, my life, and the lives of many others.”

“Next year, then,” I said stubbornly. “She gets one scheduled day-off a year, three if she’s good. Why not have one on Christmas?”

“And what about the rest of the family?”

“We’ll tell them beforehand. No biggie.”

“No biggie?”
“We don’t even know if she’ll say yes,” I said matter-of-factly before he could protest further. “Since she despises me so much, she’ll probably say no every year but, if someday she does decide she wants to be a part of something meaningful again - like your daughter’s life,” I could tell that got to him, “then the invitation is there. No one can say we didn’t try. We can keep enjoying life with no regrets.”

He eyed me thoughtfully for a few moments, and I was feeling extremely proud of myself for this solution to his dilemma when he suddenly leaned into me and said, “I think I want five daughters, all exactly like you.”

I felt like passing out. “FIVE?!”

“You’re a remarkable woman, have I ever told you that?”

“You… you can’t just drop a bomb like that and… and…” I stammered, perplexed. “I haven’t even finished with this one, and you’re already saying you want four more!”

“I’m open to negotiation.”

“Two.”

“Four.”

“Three.”

The full realization of what I was getting myself into sunk in then. I felt my jaw drop open in horror. Did I just agree to having three kids?

He grinned. “I told you three was a good number.”

“I thought we were talking about the nice old lady.”

“We were, and now we aren’t. Three’s good.”

“Sure, if I don’t die tomorrow.”

That snuffed the fire in his eyes. “I deeply regret bringing up that subject now.”

I grinned in triumph. “It’s getting late. Let’s continue this conversation later at home.”

We got up from the bench and chose a path. Before I could follow it, he took my hands and spun me slowly around to face him, eyes unhappy.

“Now that I’ve finally found you… I don’t want to think about even the possibility of you leaving again.”

I plastered on my most confident smile. “I’m not going anywhere, Pyeha.” I stood on my toes briefly to kiss him. I fully intended to live an entire lifetime with him this time, and if I had to fight with St. Peter to do it, I would.

I suddenly became aware of being watched and, looking down, came face to face with a familiar little girl.

“You again,” So said, noticing her as well. “Please tell me you don’t live here.”

Instead of replying, the little girl said haughtily, “Mama says kissing in public is wrong.”
“Your mother’s right,” So said, to my surprise. He placed a hand over my sizable midsection and added, “This is what happens when you kiss a boy.”

The girl looked horrified as she scampered away.

“What the hell?! You’ve scarred her for life!” I exclaimed, laughing despite myself.

“What I did,” he grumbled as he urged me back onto the path towards home, “is prevent one case of teenage pregnancy. She was too nosy for her own good.”

I thought that was grossly optimistic, but agreed that the child has shown a lot of interest in the private affairs of adults and that a little shock and caution was probably warranted.

I wonder at the enigma that is my husband, a man who wants kids but claims to have no patience with them, even though I’ve seen him interact with kids and I think he handles them pretty well. Or is it that kids, like adults, just naturally listen to him and do whatever he says? When and how did he develop this “no patience” bias about himself?

Whatever it is… everything changed the moment our baby was born. I knew it. I saw it. I still see it.

I felt it - the change in him on the morning she came, like a weight had been lifted, allowing him to breathe more easily. I saw it best the first time he finally held her. I understood how he must have felt then for though he’s loved her for a thousand years, he’s never been able to show it until now.

“I’m sorry,” I had apologized quietly as I watched them together.

I don’t know if he’d heard me… but he pulled me into an embrace and thanked me for her. And I remember being equally thankful… that despite everything we’ve gone through, he’s remained positive, looking forward towards our shared future without lingering too long on the regrets of the past. It’s something I’ve been working on.

“*Nothing was ever enough for me. No matter how many awards I won, no matter the praises people threw at me, no matter how high my reputation soared or how hard I worked… I always felt that it wasn’t enough. That I wasn’t enough. Until I found you again, I used to feel nothing but worthless.”*

*It’s my fault that you grew up in this life feeling that way… and now you’ll never have to feel that way again.*

*Never. “You’re enough. You’ve always been enough. I’m sorry you felt that way after I left…”*

*But he just smiled. “None of it matters anymore. Now… here… with you… that’s all I care about.”*

It’s Sunday morning and I’m woken from the same dream a second time, this time by the high-pitched scream of our baby girl. I remember when I used to sleep like a log. These days, I’m at her beck and call.

I rub the sleep from my eyes as I get up. Since she hasn’t yet started crying, I figure I’ve a few seconds to a minute to wash my face before I’m actually needed.
When I’m done, I head to the nursery, where I’m greeted by the lovely sight of him playing with her. And she’s liking the attention.

I stand quietly by the door and just watch as he lifts her up, high above him. She laughs, her little limbs flailing in the air in her attempts at reaching him, and as he brings her down for a kiss, she squeals in delight.

For one last time, I see it... the final veil connecting me to my past fluttering in the wind so that for a moment, I don’t see my family as they are... I see them for what they could have been.

His hair is in a topknot, his dark blue hanbok delicately embroidered in gold. She's no longer in her onesie, but in a tiny set of traditional garments fashioned from the softest of silks and the brightest of colors. Behind them, the glass windows have been replaced by wood, and candles flicker brightly on a table nearby.

The image fades as easily as it came, leaving me breathless and mournful in its wake.

_Could it be? That somewhere, someplace, in some other time... could our story have ended well? After all, time is a web of circumstances and events, not a straight path leading to a sure end._

_If we had made better choices..._

I stop my train of thought before it can extend further. I can long for a different end to our story, but I can never regret what really happened.

How can I? All of those paths have led to this… this life, this moment. And I wouldn’t trade this time with them for the world.

Feeling a little shaken, I close the distance between them in a few strides and immediately wrap my arms around him, feeling at once secure and reassured.

"What's wrong?" he asks, looking down at me with a worried expression.

Everyone who has seen her has mentioned how much Seol takes after me... but as I look at the pair of them now - with both their eyebrows drawn together in a frown - I'm struck by how similar they look, even when she's drooling all over the tiny fist she's got clamped firmly in her mouth.

I shake my head and look up at him. "It's nothing. I'm just happy."

He shifts Seol onto one arm and draws me in to plant a kiss on my forehead, and Seol does her part by trying to rip the hair off my scalp.

Our story is not a happy one - it’s full of heartaches, loss, betrayals and hard choices. But I’m where I want to be, caught in between the two people I love the most.

This is how our story was always meant to be... and this is how it will continue to be for eternity.

As I nestle into him, I close my eyes and allow the distant memories of our past to flow through my mind for one last time... the lake, the trees, the stars, the sky; the wounds, the scars, the goodbyes; the deaths, the pains, the betrayals, the heartaches...

I exhale slowly and let them all go.

Memories from this life take over their places: from the moment I met him again, to our first date, to the day we found out we were having a baby, to our first and second wedding, to the day our
baby was born… all of them beautiful memories.

I still believe in happy endings... but I no longer believe that everyone deserves to have one. Because it's never been about deserving it, but rather about fighting for it.

We've fought for ours and we've won.


All of those paths have led to this...

I open my eyes and smile.

"I'm happy."

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Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap! Finally, after almost 2 years!

It's been a long, hard, emotional road and I thank everyone who's stuck around this long, despite the many haituses in between some chapters, specifically towards the end. I suppose I'm just not good at saying goodbye, even to fictional characters lol

Thank you! For liking the story, for sharing with me your thoughts, for taking time to even read it. I know it's not perfect... there are moments when I reread, myself, and I think, "Why didn't I do this instead?" or "I forgot about this part!" or "I could have done this better", but then I read your comments and I remember that I did my best with what I had at the time and I feel better haha. So thank you again for sharing this journey with me!

Real life has been hectic, to say the least, but I'll still be around to read those stories I'm addicted to (authors, you know who you are!). My reviews might come a bit late, but they'll come and that's a promise :D

Goodbye, folks! See you in the Christmas side story for some extra snippets on Won X Chaeryung, Madame Yoo, and of course Yeonhwa.

Stay safe, eat well, live happily and have a great, great day!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!