Useless

JeTi

**Chapter 1**

"Do not ever fall in love."  
  
The tall man whispered to the young girl kneeling on the floor, and warned again with a graver tone.  
  
"In order to be the best, you must not have a weakness."  
  
The girl motionlessly listened, and her bloody knuckles shook in the frigid air. Her gasps could be seen as white vapors, as she steadied her breathing.  
  
The daily morning exercises always beat her to the floor, and her master never displayed sympathy to fragile form. He was shaping her to be the best, and expected no less as he ripped away her faults. Whatever was soft, he hardened, and whatever was dull, he sharpened.  
  
She had been found alive in front of his dwelling one dark night, and he had debated on what to do. He was a sensible man, and knew that a baby - a baby girl - was something unmanageable to a lone man such as himself. But one look at the eyes crippled his logic and tore away his common sense.  
  
He raised her with the help of the village women, and trained her in hopes of having her replace him one day. He was a bodyguard for the royal court, and was feeling the effect of old age slowly with each passing year. He needed a successor in securing the position left to him by his ancestors. The man was past the age of marriage, and the time served in the royal court disabled him in having a normal social life - this child was the answer to his future.  
  
"Love makes one weak."  
  
The girl shivered as a waft of wind blew across the bare forest grounds, and she weakly nodded to his caution. She got up and his keen eyes saw her bruised knees buckle under the strain. He placed a giant hand over the crown of her head, and felt her shake uncontrollably to the growing cold. He spoke in a melancholy voice.  
  
"SooYeon."  
  
She swallowed painfully in order not to stammer.  
  
"Yes?"  
  
An icy wisp of wind slipped through the tears in her clothing, and she tensed forcibly to resist a shudder. He stood an inch from her, but the whisper sounded a mile away.  
  
"How many years has it been since you were found in front of my doorsteps?"  
  
SooYeon gritted her teeth and tried to remember the last time he spoke of the date, and cleared her throat to answer.  
  
"Thirteen."  
  
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**[Six months later]**

"She's Master Kim's disciple."  
  
TaeYang whispered to SeungHyun with the back of his hand. SeungHyun nodded to the ounce of gossip, and watched a girl slice a thicket of bamboo rods cleanly into pieces. The two swords glinted and reflected light onto everyone watching the impressive demonstration, the head master clapped proudly. TaeYang whispered discreetly as the girl took a bow.  
  
"Her name's SooYeon."  
  
SeungHyun never asked for her name, but knew TaeYang said it for a reason. They both had no interest in girls, but were intrigued at the thought of having a female ally. TaeYang crossed his legs tightly together, and clutched at his left. He mumbled hopefully as SooYeon took a seat neatly at a corner.  
  
"She might make it to the top with us."  
  
The head master circled the sitting students and loudly exclaimed the news everyone knew.  
  
"You are training here to be in the HwaRang! Only the best will be picked to be a part of it! The HwaRang will serve the royal court personally and be the pride of the army!"  
  
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"Hey!"  
  
SooYeon felt a stab at her waist and turned from her training post to look behind her. Four boys stood holding wooden swords menacingly, and sneered at her blank look.  
  
"Why don't you stop already? You're going to fail in the end, after all you're the only girl."  
  
SooYeon ignored the taunt and resumed her stance before the man - made dummy in front of her. The tallest of the boys clenched his jaw and growled at SooYeon.  
  
"I won't let a girl ignore - "  
  
SooYeon looked back again to see SeungHyun lifting the boy by the collar of his uniform. TaeYang was barring the three others with his own silver staff. SeungHyun said his words in a calm tone, as the collar tore in his grip.  
  
"Let's not pick needless fights."  
  
The boy knew better than to argue with SeungHyun, and promptly took to running with the others once he was freed. SeungHyun turned to SooYeon with an apology.  
  
"Not all of us are like that. That boy, SeungRi, just happens to be the worst of us."  
  
TaeYang stuck out his hand when SooYeon made no response.  
  
"I'm TaeYang, by the way. This is SeungHyun. We're also aiming to be part of the HwaRang like you."  
  
SooYeon looked uncertainly at the hand, and hesitated for a second before accepting the shake. TaeYang gregariously chuckled and nudged SeungHyun as he continued shaking SooYeon's hand.  
  
"Give her your hand too, SeungHyun!"  
  
SeungHyun frowned at TaeYang's impulsive outburst, but warmly grinned as he offered his hand. SooYeon wore a puzzled frown but dropped her practice sword to the ground as she shook it. TaeYang couldn't help his cry.  
  
"We're going to have so much fun together!"  
  
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**[One year later]**

"C'mon, SooYeon!"  
  
"It's against the rules, and besides we could get caught."  
  
"Trust me - last time there was no one, right, SeungHyun?"  
  
SeungHyun squirmed in his position and tackled with his swords to not answer the question. SooYeon raised both her eyebrows and began stalking away to clearer grounds, leaving TaeYang and SeungHyun at the creek's bank. TaeYang whined and splashed his bow into the cold water's fast - moving current.  
  
"C'mon, guys! Oh, fine, I'll just go by myself then, traitors!"  
  
SooYeon watched in slight interest as TaeYang rolled up his pants and waded across the shallow water. SeungHyun sighed deeply and looked up to SooYeon beseechingly, she growled under her breath and went back to where he stood. They both crossed the chilling rapids, and followed TaeYang into the woods. TaeYang led the way with a triumphant grin and split obstructing branches with a swing of his arms, SooYeon simply flicked her wrist and let her swords do all the work. SeungHyun worriedly cast glances behind them, apparently uneasy with the whole situation.  
  
"We're almost there! It's the best training ground, I promise!"  
  
The trees were lessening and the road was becoming more barren, as they reached the end of the other side. TaeYang hopped forward and stood with his arms akimbo to the scene in front of him. The area was clear of all obstacles, no trees, no plants, no rocks, and best of all, no people.  
  
"See! Great, right?"  
  
SooYeon frowned and walked to TaeYang, not yet willing to agree with him. SeungHyun turned his head around slowly to check everything in sight. TaeYang twirled around and shouted at the top of his lungs.  
  
"Let's start!"  
  
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"You could have killed me!"  
  
"That's the point."  
  
"Cold, SooYeon, just cold."  
  
SooYeon shrugged and inserted her swords to the sheaths hanging on her back, unfazed with TaeYang's peeved glare. SeungHyun chuckled hoarsely as he evened his breathing while kneeling low on the ground. He spun his sword once in the air then sheathed it as SooYeon walked to a tree stump. He said to TaeYang with a wry smile.  
  
"Looks like we still have a while until we get to SooYeon's level."  
  
TaeYang brushed off the dirt on his clothes and picked up a broken arrow. He held it and threw his head back to cry out in frustration.  
  
"I just *made* these too!"  
  
SeungHyun bent over as well to collect the rest of the arrows and trudged to SooYeon, she inched a little to the left to allow him a seat on the stump. TaeYang looked pitifully at his split arrows and made his way to sit on the right of SooYeon.  
  
"How's Master Kim, SooYeon?"  
  
SooYeon stiffened to TaeYang's question, and replied curtly.  
  
"Fine."  
  
SeungHyun held his eyes to the ground. He heard from various sources of Master Kim's ailing health. TaeYang took no notice of the subtle change in SooYeon and jumped up from his seat.  
  
"I wish we could just be part of the royal court already! I'm so sick of shooting arrows all day - I'm already the best! Why do I have to keep on shooting - "  
  
"*Shh!*"  
  
SooYeon threw TaeYang down to the dirt and laid on top of him, SeungHyun crawled next to the two bodies and listened attentively. SooYeon held her finger to her lips and swerved her head carefully, footsteps were approaching and a loud chatter accompanied.  
  
"C'mon, MiYoung!"  
  
"DaeSung, we shouldn't do this! Please, let's go back!"  
  
"This is the perfect place to play, I promise! And there's no one! We can just be ourselves - you won't tattletale on us, right JiYong?"  
  
"With all do respect, WangJaNim\*, we should listen to GongJuNim\*\*, and turn back."  
  
"Nonsense! We're almost here - "  
  
"DaeSung? DaeSung, what is it?"  
  
"N - nothing, I just thought I saw something."  
  
But there was no one on the field. DaeSung smiled and pulled MiYoung forward to the empty grounds.  
  
"See! Great, right?"  
  
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"How long do we have to stay up here? C'mon, let's go back to the palace!"  
  
TaeYang hissed under SooYeon's head - lock, she released him and he rubbed his neck furiously. SooYeon slowly positioned TaeYang's quiver on her back, careful in not making a noise, and tucked the bow under a free arm. She kept her eyes on the distant figures below them and whispered to SeungHyun.  
  
"You can go back with TaeYang, I'll stay here for a while."  
  
SeungHyun gave a brief nod and clamped a hand over TaeYang's mouth before he could ask or protest. He managed a whisper to SooYeon before nimbly jumping down the tree's branch.  
  
"I'll save a spot for you at the meal table."  
  
SooYeon watched as he deftly grabbed on to the tree limbs, and swung away with TaeYang over his shoulder. She reverted her gaze to the people on the ground.  
  
DaeSung strode over to MiYoung and announced miserably.  
  
"MiYoung, your crown's better than mine."  
  
MiYoung gawked at DaeSung's statement and pulled back from his creeping hand.  
  
"What are you talking about? You're the WangJa - yours should be better!"  
  
"But yours is lighter and better for playing outside - let's trade!"  
  
"What? No! Stop reaching for it! JiYong, stop him!"  
  
"Please stop, WangJaNim."  
  
JiYong's soft warning fell on deaf ears as MiYoung and DaeSung began running around the tree stump. MiYoung desperately clutched onto the petite crown on her head, while DaeSung flailed his arms in an attempt to snatch at it. They stopped all movement, however, when they heard a rustle in the bushes next to them.  
  
"D - DaeSung, what was that?"  
  
"I guess this is a sign to go back..."  
  
All three nodded to DaeSung's suggestion and slowly made their way back into the forest entrance. SooYeon watched from atop and smirked when an argument broke out.  
  
"DaeSung, we're lost, aren't we?"  
  
"No, we're not!"  
  
"Yes, we are! I know that face of yours, and it means we're lost!"  
  
"M - maybe..."  
  
"This is why I can never properly address you, my respect for you falls each day."  
  
"THAT'S MEAN!"  
  
"WE'RE LOST - "  
  
An arrow whizzed past them and struck a tree on the right. JiYong silently stalked up to the arrow and looked around warily.  
  
"It seems we are not alone - "  
  
Another arrow flew ahead of him and caught onto a hanging branch. SooYeon hopped over to an adjacent tree and pulled back the string to her bow. She muttered under her breath.  
  
"Follow the arrows."  
  
The three people on the ground watched steadily and stayed in their positions. MiYoung spoke in a hushed whisper.  
  
"I think... I think the arrows are pointing us in the right direction."  
  
DaeSung bobbed his head in agreement and watched as a succession of arrowheads marked a pathway out of the forest. He looked up into the air and tried to scout the origin of the shooter.  
  
"The arrows are coming from different places, maybe there's more than one person up there."  
  
"WangJaNim, I suggest we hurry out of here quickly - "  
  
MiYoung yelled at the top of her lungs.  
  
"MR. SHOOTER? COME DOWN, PLEASE!"  
  
SooYeon narrowed her eyes and shook her head to the bellowing words.  
  
"WE JUST WANT TO REWARD YOU FOR HELPING US - WE'RE OF THE ROYAL COURT!"  
  
"GongJuNim! WangJaNim! Please, we must go!"  
  
"MiYoung, we should go."  
  
"Oh, fine..."  
  
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"Where were you? Your food's cold now."  
  
SooYeon eased herself into the bench and lifted the spoon in her bowl. TaeYang eyed her worriedly while SeungHyun waited for an answer.  
  
"I was just fixing something."  
  
TaeYang piped up frantically.  
  
"That reminds me! Could I have my bow and arrows now? You have them, right? Thanks - WHERE'S ALL MY ARROWS?"  
  
"Quiet, I'll retrieve your arrows tonight."  
  
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"TaeYang, that pansy. Can't he just make some more arrows? What's so hard about whittling these sticks? That pansy."  
  
SooYeon huffed and plucked an arrow off a tree's trunk. She was about to unscrew the last one, but froze rigidly, as she felt a presence behind her.  
  
"So it was you."  
  
SooYeon spun on her heels, and stared as MiYoung approached timidly.  
  
"I - I was hoping to meet you. I knew you'd come back for the arrows."  
  
SooYeon bent one knee and bowed until the strands of her hair touched the dirt floor. Her palms scratched onto small pebbles as she slid them in front of her lowered head.  
  
"Gongju - "  
  
SooYeon felt a hand on top of her shoulder, she unknowingly clenched her teeth and held her breath. A gentle voice instructed her.  
  
"Lift your head."  
  
SooYeon did not listen and instead kept her forehead low to the ground. The voice commanded again in a kinder tone.  
  
"Lift your head, I'd like to see your face clearly."  
  
SooYeon hesitantly tilted her chin and slowly brought up her face. She blushed at the smiling girl and gave a quick glance to the hand on her shoulder, she was not used to such physical contact, warm and non - threatening.  
  
"Are you by chance training for the HwaRang?"  
  
"Yes... GongJuNim"  
  
SooYeon felt awkward with all the formality and MiYoung saw it in her eyes.  
  
"You don't have to address me as such. What's your name?"  
  
"SooYeon... GongJuNim"  
  
"SooYeon, thank you for today."  
  
"It is our duty to keep you safe... GongJuNim."  
  
"Don't not call me that. It is an order."  
  
MiYoung gave a wide smile, and requested softly.  
  
"Could you take me back? I think I'll get lost again without all the arrows."  
  
"Yes, of course."  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"I'd like it if you could play with us. DaeSung and I get really lonely."  
  
SooYeon grimaced at the way MiYoung slanted her eyebrows hopefully, and jerked her head to the right.  
  
"It would be improper for a mere servant to play with you."  
  
"But you're not just a servant, and that's also why I'm requesting you to keep all this a secret."  
  
"I - "  
  
"Please?"  
  
SooYeon grinned and stated lightly.  
  
"I cannot refuse an order."  
  
MiYoung smiled broadly.  
  
"I order you to play with us."  
  
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**[Nine years later]**

"This is where the WangJa and GongJu were seen last."  
  
The queen laid down her hand over the piece of parchment and spoke gravely.  
  
The map had an enlarged black cross painted on a network of fine lines with blurred instructions. A servant rolled up the sheet of paper and handed it to a masked individual. The mysterious stranger accepted the scroll and tucked it away safely inside a black pouch.  
  
The queen's icy voice burned the room's numbed state.  
  
"I understand that you might not want to do this, but you must remember that they killed the king. We are all about to head into war, and we cannot have them joining the enemy. Who knows what kinds of secrets they will spill to the Seo Kingdom."  
  
The queen thinly smiled and stood up from her seat. Everyone bowed and touched their heads to the floor, as she took lengthy steps forward. She stopped before the individual with the devil - horned mask and spoke pleadingly.  
  
"You are the best in the HwaRang with swords. I trust you will get the job done. You need to kill them."  
  
The stranger rose up gracefully, and took off the snarling mask.  
  
"It shall be done."  
  
SooYeon replied coolly.  
  
  
  
**TBC**  
  
\*WangJa/WangJaNim - Prince  
\*\*GongJu/GongJuNim – Princess

**Chapter 2**

"SooYeon?"  
  
SooYeon tugged the black cloth over her mouth down with an index finger, and lowered it to her chin. She cupped her mask and looked through its empty eyeholes. Distant footsteps came her way and SooYeon crouched low before jumping up onto a roof's slanted corner. She balanced her footing and stopped her sword from swaying on her belt. She covered her face once again with the mask, as she grabbed the hilt of her sword.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
JiYong.  
  
SooYeon remained mute and watched JiYong approach and stand below her. He was scanning the grounds and spoke in a hushed voice.  
  
"Are you all right?"  
  
"I'm up here."  
  
SooYeon released her thumb from her sword's hilt, and tilted it back to its position. She grabbed the edge of the roof and silently jumped to the ground. JiYong commented lowly on her mask.  
  
"It really does make you look frightful."  
  
SooYeon shrugged and controlled her breathing behind the mask, she held out her hand to him. JiYong looked then sighed wearily, as he produced a dart from within his sleeve.  
  
"It's to paralyze them."  
  
The black needle glinted in the bright sunlight, and SooYeon tucked it away carefully into her belt.  
  
"I probably won't need to use it."  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
"Hm?"  
  
"I don't want you to use it."  
  
SooYeon looked to the dim horizon, and heard a few crows caw from towering trees. JiYong desperately whispered.  
  
"The GongJu - we played together as children. Remember?"  
  
Sometimes it helped to have a cover over your face. SooYeon faced JiYong with the mask's delighted snarl and bitterly smiled as she lied effortlessly.  
  
"I don't remember."  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
SooYeon was about to walk away, but stopped to look at JiYong. He fretted with the tassel by his sash, and used his last resort.  
  
"SeungHyun and TaeYang wouldn't have wanted this."  
  
SooYeon bit her tongue and pressed it to the roof of her mouth, she hated hearing their names. JiYong couldn't see the anger behind the mask, but saw the way in which her fingers tensed visibly.  
  
"Don't talk about them as if they're dead."  
  
"Y - you're right, they could still be alive."  
  
SooYeon dug her teeth into her lower lip, and roughly turned away from JiYong. She crossed a rocky bridge hanging over a stream, and asked JiYong calmly, all hints of anger gone.  
  
"You're planning to come with me, aren't you? Whether or not, I invite you?"  
  
JiYong answered sternly.  
  
"You can't stop me."  
  
"You'll be a burden."  
  
"With my skills in medicine, I'm actually more of a help than burden. I don't think I need to remind you that I'm at the top of my division."  
  
SooYeon replied dully.  
  
"You don't."  
  
She slid the mask up and directed a cold glare to him.  
  
"You don't think they killed the king?"  
  
His reply was defiant and stubborn.  
  
"No, I truly don't, and I also know SeungHyun and TaeYang would have agreed with me."  
  
SooYeon pulled down her mask and played with its metal edges.  
  
"In the end I'm just a servant, I live to follow orders."  
  
JiYong controlled the waver in his voice.  
  
"You have feelings too."  
  
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"Ready?"  
  
SooYeon fastened the straps to the saddle on her horse, and hopped on her right foot to mount it. JiYong struggled with controlling his horse, but readily lined behind SooYeon as he nodded solemnly.  
  
"It'll be a long journey, but we'll reach the place in a few days with a steady speed."  
  
She petted the mane on her horse, and its ears flicked to the right as she kicked lightly at its side. JiYong did the same and accommodated his body to the jumbling steps. He brought up one hand to adjust his slipping hat, and wrapped his other hand on the reins.  
  
"You know what I remember?"  
  
SooYeon did not ask, and JiYong answered his own question with sobriety.  
  
"I remember that time you got a scrape on your shoulder."  
  
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"You should break your falls better, SooYeon."  
  
SooYeon gritted her teeth as she held onto MiYoung. Her shoulder had hit the ground first, and she knew there would be blood. JiYong went down the muddy slope and helped MiYoung into an upright position, while SooYeon used her legs to push her body up from the ground. The seam to her sleeve had ripped and her blood spread quickly, turning her black uniform even darker. MiYoung sucked in her lips with guilt.  
  
"I'm sorry."  
  
SooYeon cocked her head, and was intrigued at the apology.  
  
"You don't need to say things like that. I'm supposed to protect you."  
  
"You still got hurt. I should have been careful, and not go near the slope."  
  
SooYeon shrugged and stated flatly.  
  
"As long as you're fine."  
  
They all climbed up the hill, and SooYeon went over to a rock. She sat down on it and further inspected her injury. MiYoung sat down next to her with furrowed eyebrows, her lips twitched with forming apologies, but in the end only came up with a whine.  
  
"I hate these nails."  
  
SooYeon looked to MiYoung's hands. Ten long nails, each on a finger, hung dauntingly. MiYoung daintily held her arms up and scowled as the long black claws shined. SooYeon spoke in a mild tone.  
  
"It's to ensure that you don't have to do anything though, isn't it? It's the reason why you have servants everywhere."  
  
"I know... but I can't do *anything*. I can't play, eat, or even go out of a room by myself."  
  
MiYoung whined and carefully laid out her hands to her sides. The nails were three inches long and made of metal, MiYoung had been forced to wear them just recently. She closed her eyes and spoke sullenly.  
  
"I wish I could use swords like you, or even shoot an arrow like TaeYang. All I do every day is memorize dead people's names and our kingdom's history."  
  
SooYeon smirked to the irked reply, and unsheathed a sword on her back, she swung it in front of MiYoung and stated gently.  
  
"You could never kill anyone."  
  
MiYoung's eyes opened and she swung her head to SooYeon.  
  
"Have you killed anyone before?"  
  
"No."  
  
MiYoung gave a small frown and used her nails to lower the sword in SooYeon's hand.  
  
"You're not a killer either."  
  
She woefully looked to the bleeding patch on SooYeon's shoulder, and gingerly flicked off the excess dirt around the wound with a nail. SooYeon felt her shoulders raise to the invading touch, and withdrew from the caring gesture.  
  
"Will it leave a scar?"  
  
"It might if I don't apply some medicine onto it."  
  
SooYeon tugged her uniform's collar and covered her exposed shoulder from MiYoung's touch. She was grateful for DaeSung's intrusion.  
  
"MiYoung, we have to go back, and learn about old geezers now!"  
  
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"The GongJu has gotten really fond of you."  
  
SooYeon raised her eyebrows to SeungHyun's remark but kept her focus on her sword, she was brandishing it with a white rag. SeungHyun commented dryly.  
  
"I'm just worried that you might get into trouble."  
  
SooYeon lifted a corner of her lips, and nodded in appreciation. She put the sword to her side and straightened her posture. A shout from afar made them both turn their heads.  
  
"Don't waste your breathe, SeungHyun! SooYeon sticks to the rules, but she also does what she wants in the end!"  
  
TaeYang came thundering down, and flung himself onto a chair. He stretched his arms into the air, and yawned shamelessly.  
  
"Besides it's better for us if SooYeon gets on the GongJu's good side."  
  
SeungHyun pondered out - loud.  
  
"Why is that?"  
  
"SeungHyun, we agree that SooYeon is the best, right?"  
  
"Right."  
  
"And we also agree that the best should go to the WangJa, right?"  
  
"Right."  
  
"Which would leave us - the second best - to the GongJu, right?"  
  
"Right."  
  
"But if we're given to the Gongju..."  
  
TaeYang looked around and whispered discreetly.  
  
"Then we have to become eunuchs..."  
  
SeungHyun's mouth dropped and he hung it in morbid realization. TaeYang picked himself up from the chair, and pointed with his index finger to SeungHyun.  
  
"That's why we have to let SooYeon get closer with the GongJu! So that the GongJu will beg the WangJa for her!"  
  
SeungHyun nodded gravely and clapped a hand over SooYeon's back. He spoke seriously.  
  
"Do you think the GongJu's going to pick you?"  
  
SooYeon got up from her seat and made her way to the practice grounds.  
  
"I don't care who she picks."  
  
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"SooYeon?"  
  
SooYeon glanced over her shoulder to see MiYoung tagging along helplessly. She furtively glanced around and scurried to SooYeon, there was a white package in her hand. SooYeon pulled her sword away, and kept it behind her as MiYoung neared.  
  
"I got you this. JiYong says it's the best in treating scars."  
  
MiYoung held the package out with both hands and beamed at her. The nails were spread so as to not tear the parcel.  
  
"Hurry, and put it on."  
  
SooYeon's words were heavy.  
  
"You shouldn't do such things for me. You might get caught."  
  
MiYoung was hurt by the cold advice, and the package drooped in her hands. She gave a sidelong glance to SooYeon and weakly chuckled.  
  
"Sorry..."  
  
SooYeon stepped forward while holding her sword to the right. She whispered to MiYoung.  
  
"I did not mean to be so ungrateful. I apologize."  
  
MiYoung shook her head violently, and inched closer to the sword - carrying girl.  
  
"No, I should take your advice - it'd be bad if I were caught."  
  
SooYeon's eyes softened, but she suppressed a smile from appearing on her face. She took the gift into her free hand, and said her words clearly.  
  
"Thank you, I'll use it well."  
  
An appeased smile broke across MiYoung's face.   
  
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"You were thinking of the past, weren't you?"  
  
There was confidence in JiYong's voice.  
  
"You haven't forgotten, I know you haven't. The GongJu really took to you when we were young."  
  
SooYeon twisted the reins in her hands and urged her horse faster. JiYong forced his horse to trot in the same speed.  
  
"You - "  
  
"It's a long journey, I would conserve on energy if I were you."  
  
Her words held no malice, but JiYong realized SooYeon had meant for the conversation to stop. Light rained down as distorted shapes while they passed through tall trees and shifting clouds. SooYeon was enjoying the scenery, the fresh air always made things easier.  
  
"JiYong."  
  
JiYong perked his head at the soft reply, and hastily sputtered his words.  
  
"Y - yeah?"  
  
SooYeon maneuvered her horse around a bush and looked down as she spoke.  
  
"I never wanted to kill her."  
  
JiYong immediately brightened up and a smile lit his face. Her next words quickly dampened the mood.  
  
"But I'm still going to go through with this mission."  
  
He pressed his lips together, and bit down on his tongue. She whispered as she held her head higher.  
  
"I need to get answers too."  
  
---  
  
"It's been a while since I've felt rain."  
  
"Sorry, we had to go through it if we wanted to reach our destination in time."  
  
SooYeon tied her horse to a high branch, and began picking up the abundant wooden limbs scattered on the floor. JiYong cowered under a tall tree, and fastened his horse to a branch lower than SooYeon's, he crossed his arms tightly and shuddered.  
  
"I wonder if we'll be able to predict the weather one day."  
  
"That'd be a luxury."  
  
"It'd be amazing."  
  
"It would. Could you search for a bird's nest?"  
  
"Why?"  
  
"They're good in starting fires. See if any are on top of a tree, try to get a dry one."  
  
JiYong nodded, and tilted his head back. There was one lone and empty nest resting by a branch high on the left. JiYong rubbed his palms and mustered up a grin.  
  
"I guess I should get it."  
  
"If you can."  
  
SooYeon trudged forward and dropped a stack of lumber onto the ground. She wiped her hands and stepped on the tree's roots.  
  
"I think I would be better suited for this job, but I need to gather the wood before it rains any harder."  
  
JiYong smirked and started up the tree's bark, he wheezed out a response as he began clawing his way up.  
  
"How hard... could this be?"  
  
SooYeon ignored the question and turned away in search of more dry wood. She heard JiYong grunt and pant his way up the tree. All seemed to go well until she heard a sharp crack. JiYong was hanging desperately onto a broken tree - limb, his weight pulled at its snapped hinge, and he began falling helplessly. SooYeon threw the collected pieces aside, and rushed to him. She managed to catch his body, but immediately fell on her back to his impact. She bit back a cry when a twig poked and scratched her arm.  
  
---  
  
"Wait here while I try to find the proper herbs for your arm."  
  
"It's still raining. Don't be stupid, it was hard enough in making this shelter. We only need to travel a couple of days more to reach the destination."  
  
SooYeon snagged at JiYong's shirt and pulled him back. He swatted her band and forced his way to the shelter's entrance.  
  
"You're on a mission here, and it's my fault you got this cut. I should at least treat it for you. What good am I otherwise?"  
  
SooYeon fingered her bandaged forearm and watched sadly as JiYong exited. The raindrops continued strumming their patterns onto the shelter's top, and SooYeon lulled deeply into sleep with their beats.  
  
---  
  
SooYeon woke up to a rustle, sensing that it was JiYong, she kept her eyes closed. She thought differently, however, when the being crept closer to her. A warm air was blowing on her cheek and SooYeon felt delicate hands touch her injured arm. The hands were doing a hasty job and the fingertips were trembling as they unwrapped the thin cloth. SooYeon opened her eyes to slits, and counted to three before roughly pushing the other person to the ground.  
  
"Wait, please!"  
  
SooYeon had already stopped, and was instead staring in shock. It had been quite a while, and changes had occurred, but the face was the same.  
  
"You... how are you here? It was reported that you would be much further. Where is the WangJa?"  
  
MiYoung lowered her arms from her face and weakly smiled. She no longer wore a dress but was adorned in a peasant's attire, her hair braided and in a single tail. SooYeon clenched her hands into fists, but listened to her plea.  
  
"I - I need your help."  
  
SooYeon shut her eyes and ducked her head.  
  
"You've come to the wrong person for that. I'm here on an order."  
  
"Please! You need to listen - "  
  
"I'm to kill you."  
  
MiYoung gravely shook her head and said the words sternly.  
  
"The queen must have ordered you to do so."  
  
SooYeon released her fists, and the loose clothe on her arm fell to the floor.  
  
"I'm sorry for this."  
  
"You're not going to kill me."  
  
SooYeon flinched at the words and glared at MiYoung.  
  
"What makes you say that?"  
  
"You're not a killer."  
  
SooYeon kept the hard stare.  
  
"I've killed many while you were away."  
  
"But you would never kill me."  
  
MiYoung picked up the bandage and slowly started wrapping it on SooYeon's arm.  
  
"I didn't mean to unwrap it, but I was worried about your injury and wanted to see it."  
  
SooYeon turned her face away and whispered.  
  
"I need to know the truth."  
  
"You don't think we did it?"  
  
SooYeon felt MiYoung gently tie the ends. She didn't shy away when MiYoung rested a hand firmly on her arm, and she said the words with assurance.  
  
"You could never kill anyone."  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 3**

**[Present]**

"What do you remember of that night?"  
  
SooYeon interrogated MiYoung and waited for an answer.  
  
"N - nothing..."  
  
"Why? How can you remember nothing?"  
  
"I wasn't conscious when everything happened. I just remember entering a room to gather with my father and brother, and then nothing else..."  
  
"You don't remember anything unusual? Anything concerning the Wang?"  
  
"No... we were just talking and I suddenly started to get drowsy - I tried to meet you that night..."  
  
MiYoung fluttered her hands and regained her breath to explain more.  
  
"I had no idea of what happened with my father, I got the news through the village I was at - "  
  
"A lot more happened on that night - "  
  
Something fell with a soft thud behind them.  
  
"What..."  
  
JiYong stood in disbelief as the sight of the GongJu's smile greeted him at the shelter's front, what took him back further was her plain clothes. An exotic plant lay at his feet and he inched closer to them.  
  
"I am seeing right, yes?"  
  
He checked SooYeon's face for a sign of assurance, but the other girl busily freed the reins on her horse and hopped onto its back. She slipped on her mask from a pouch hanging on her horse's saddle, as MiYoung awkwardly ran to her and got in the way.  
  
"Where are you going - "  
  
"I need to reexamine the area. You could have left tracks for others."  
  
She tapped her heel against the horse's rear and galloped away before MiYoung or JiYong could utter a complaint.  
  
---

**[Past]**

"You were not at today's practice."  
  
SooYeon was mum and swiftly wiping the floor grounds in guilt. The severity of her master's tone made her scurry to the foot of the entrance, hoping her legs would somehow slip out of the tense room.  
  
"What is that inside your pouch?"  
  
SooYeon cringed and cursed inwardly, one more step and she would have avoided the question. Perhaps it was inevitable to be asked though. She slowly turned her neck and lowered her gaze in discomfort. Her pouch rested in the side of the room under a small table. Her master continued to interrogate her.  
  
"I saw you walk in with a limp last night, and the pouch is fuller than it was a day before."  
  
He opened his eyes and directed his stare at her.  
  
"Where were you last night, and why do you have a limp?"  
  
SooYeon clenched her jaw and recited the lie in her head, before speaking it.  
  
"I was practicing near the waterfall, and I happened to slip into the stream. I was there collecting some herbs."  
  
SooYeon grabbed inside the pouch and revealed a brown plant root. Her master did not blink, but instead his eyes fell to the rip on her pants' right leg. The rip stretched from her ankle to her knee. He nodded once and said his warning before letting go.  
  
"Remember my first warning: Never fall in love."  
  
---  
  
"Good thing you were able to cover your alibi. I never would have guessed that the herb JiYong had given you would serve as an excuse."  
  
SeungHyun examined the rip on SooYeon's pants and offered the new set of clothes as she went behind a tree. He chided her gently as he caught a piece of clothing she threw carelessly into the air.  
  
"You shouldn't tear your clothes though."  
  
"I was running out of excuses."  
  
SeungHyun shrugged and caught another article of clothing as TaeYang came running to them. He spoke to SooYeon first as she emerged from behind the tree, fully dressed in her new attire.  
  
"Are you going to see MiYoung today?"  
  
"TaeYang, you should address her properly!"  
  
"What? Don't be so uptight, SeungHyun! SooYeon doesn't address her properly either!"  
  
"That's because she and the GongJu share a special friendship - "  
  
"If you ask me, I think it's more than just a *special* friendship."  
  
"WHAT DO YOU WANT, TAEYANG?"  
  
TaeYang snapped his head back to SooYeon's outburst and smiled mischievously.  
  
"I just wanted to know if you could, you know, mention our names if you guys ever happen to talk about the HwaRang?"  
  
"You two will get in if you try hard enough. I have to go now."  
  
TaeYang flicked his hand to the side and offered a smirk full of comprehension.  
  
"Can't wait to meet the GongJu that much, eh? Hey, are you blushing - "  
  
"Shut - up."  
  
SooYeon was already facing her back to TaeYang and walking away, she started a light jog at hearing TaeYang's comment.  
  
"You might want to hide your bright red ears before meeting her!"  
  
---  
  
"Why are you covering your ears today?"  
  
They were at their secret meeting place, the place both TaeYang and DaeSung had first discovered while venturing beyond the palace fields.  
  
"It's getting colder these days."  
  
SooYeon tugged on the cloth and tightened the milky shawl around her neck, it settled around her shoulders and covered her mouth. She averted her eyes and cursed at the memory of TaeYang's shout. MiYoung raised her eyebrows at SooYeon's uneasy silence and edged closer to her.  
  
"Well it's good you're protecting yourself from the cold."  
  
SooYeon softened her eyes and gently pushed MiYoung to the back, and led her down a set of snowy steps. The winter iced the leftover dew from the morning, and made everyone take cautious measures while walking. She made sure to focus on the ground while maintaining her hold on MiYoung's hand, until a thumb slid and caressed her calloused palm. SooYeon stopped in mid - step and thanked the heaven above for her shawl, because nothing could have prevented the blush emitting from her face.  
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
She heard MiYoung move past her, and go down the final step, hand still tightly wound in hers.   
  
"It's good that you're keeping yourself warm, but..."  
  
MiYoung slid the back of her finger down SooYeon's cheek and nestled it on the scarf. The wind picked up a slight breeze and sliced through her cheek, but all SooYeon felt was how MiYoung's breath soaked onto her face.  
  
"We had our first kiss a month ago. Our last one was a week ago..."  
  
SooYeon squeezed her eyes shut at the whisper and listened to the wavering tone, MiYoung didn't have to say she was impatient to get the point across to her.  
  
"And I've been waiting for another one..."  
  
SooYeon opened her eyes to see below a shaky grin and a pleading stare. They've been standing for some time, and yet MiYoung's breath on SooYeon's cheek radiated warmth.  
  
"Couldn't I... couldn't I get another one?"  
  
MiYoung looked at her with half - lidded eyes and her lips came together to a small part, mouth soft and red from the cold. Her fingers slowly pushed down the wrapped cloth around SooYeon's neck, and exposed her nervous face completely. SooYeon heard her master's voice in the back of her head, she would have to go see him again and offer yet another lie, commit another sin because of her indulgences. She pulled MiYoung forward, and thought back to all the years of her rigorous training, none prepared her for this kind of a challenge. She lowered her mouth and set it to MiYoung's cheek, opened it as she slid it to MiYoung's lips, her eyes fluttered closed as she pushed her tongue in. SooYeon liked kissing, she liked more the thought of sharing it with someone like MiYoung, but she didn't like how it tormented her. They would start like this, then end up panting for air, MiYoung would want to continue, and as always she would have to refuse. Because SooYeon felt MiYoung deserved someone better, and MiYoung never understood why.  
  
"MiYoung..."  
  
SooYeon tried to pull back only to have the other girl force their lips together again, unwilling to accept an end to their intimate act. She felt fingertips dig into her uniform and weigh her ams down as MiYoung captured her upper lip, she gasped at the tongue that curled against hers tenderly.  
  
"We should stop..."  
  
MiYoung gave a soft whine when SooYeon firmly pulled her face away. Hesitation flickered for a moment in her gaze, but SooYeon took MiYoung's hands and pushed them down to her sides.  
  
"We... we should be more careful."  
  
SooYeon neatly tucked in a single strand of hair behind MiYoung's right ear, and looked away from the pleading eyes.  
  
"Let's head back before they start questioning your disappearance. Your advisors almost caught us last time - "  
  
"W - we don't have to hurry back! Last time they thought I was playing in the snow because of your uniform. You look like snow..."  
  
MiYoung happily tugged on the white uniform specifically made for SooYeon in the winter. It was to have the HwaRang be better disguised and untraceable, but so far, SooYeon had been using it for other purposes rather than attacking enemies. It made her invisible to everyone except to those within the HwaRang who had trained their eyes to such stealth. It also surprisingly could not fool MiYoung, who sought and found SooYeon whenever they played in the vast white grounds.  
  
She went down the staircase and walked toward the palace walkway when MiYoung called out to her.  
  
"SooYeon!"  
  
SooYeon stopped and glanced over her shoulder. MiYoung stood with a struggling smile, a person with her status would never beg like this - her ancestors would have been appalled and insulted - but this was what she wanted most in life: SooYeon's love. Begging would be a small price. She asked in a relatively pitiful voice.  
  
"Meet me here tonight?"  
  
---  
  
"Why don't you go?"  
  
"Because it isn't right."  
  
"Says who?"  
  
"Everyone around us."  
  
TaeYang snorted and locked his elbow in place as he drew back an arrow on his bow. He let it go and they watched it strike a tree some hundred meters away. He picked up another one in the quiver on his back and prepared to shoot it. SooYeon rested her chin on her hand as he talked.  
  
"We approve of it - DaeSung too. He's WangJa, you know. Shouldn't that account to something?"  
  
"It's not that easy."  
  
"How can it be any harder? You like her. She obviously likes you. Her brother, the future Wang, approves. How can it be any harder?"  
  
"It's... more than just that."  
  
TaeYang released the taut string and it plucked a low hum as he asked almost angrily.  
  
"How?"  
  
SooYeon sighed through her nose and her shoulders rolled back, unable to carry atop her weariness. Her fingers subconsciously glided over her lips, slightly chapped from MiYoung's winter kiss.  
  
"She's of royal blood, and I'm just - "  
  
"The future - top - HwaRang."  
  
"That doesn't qualify me of royal status."  
  
"It qualifies you to be side - by - side with them. I think that's something for a person who started off with nothing."  
  
TaeYang slung his arrow back and removed his hand to have it shot and crack through the arrow shot prior, he turned his head to look sternly at SooYeon.  
  
"You guys deserve each other."  
  
---  
  
"You are not allowed within these perimeters."  
  
SooYeon swallowed and heedlessly nodded, she turned on her heels to walk away, but DaeSung's voice rang out to the guards.  
  
"Let her in! She's allowed!"  
  
He came stomping to her with a wide smile full of happiness as SeungHyun and JiYong trailed behind him, arms full of board games and weapons. DaeSung wildly pointed to a distant meadow in the view behind them and exclaimed hastily.  
  
"I was just about to go hunting with SeungHyun and JiYong for ducks - what are you here for? Want to join?"  
  
SooYeon stumbled back and apologetically smiled at the WangJa.  
  
"Forgive me, but I am actually here for - "  
  
"Oh!"  
  
DaeSung winked and smugly rubbed his chin as he spoke.  
  
"You're here for MiYoung. I should have known. She's at the end of this hall in the middle of a lesson, but wait outside as it'll be over in a matter of minutes."  
  
DaeSung then ran off with a wave as the other two boys breathlessly followed him. SeungHyun looked back long enough to give SooYeon a helpless smile. She read the silent words he formed with his lips.  
  
Go make her happy, SooYeon.  
  
---  
  
"That is correct."  
  
A brush slid across paper, and SooYeon heard the wet paint wipe off the dry parchment. She crookedly grinned with satisfaction at the thought of MiYoung getting an answer correct, maybe harbor a bit of pride along with it. The door was screened with white rice - paper, and through the little wooden square framework, SooYeon saw two shadows sitting and working. One with a desk and instructing with a finger in the air, the other with her head held down and writing diligently. SooYeon strained her ears and heard the quiet breathing of MiYoung, it was even and deep, no signs of stress apparent.  
  
"GongJu."  
  
SooYeon watched as MiYoung held her head up uncertainly and rest her brush aside. She asked her instructor politely, SooYeon knew the smile she was wearing, insincere but courteous.  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"I heard you refused to meet with the Wang from the Joh kingdom."  
  
SooYeon felt cold goosebumps run down from her head to the end of her spine. She had heard about talks of the Kwon kingdom, she now realized why the invitation was sent.  
  
"I did."  
  
MiYoung's voice did not waver but SooYeon heard the barely audible quickening of her breath.  
  
"GongJu, if I may..."  
  
"Go ahead."  
  
"But I think it would be wise to at least meet with him, I heard he is a good ruler as well as young for his age."  
  
Suddenly SooYeon felt intrusive, she shouldn't keep listening but running now would only prove to be stupid.  
  
"I heard that as well, but I just do not have an interest for marriage right now."  
  
"Your father, the Wang, was quite upset over it."  
  
"I'm sorry, did he make his wrath known to you all that day?"  
  
"N - no, but we also noticed that you have been different these days."  
  
MiYoung's shadow became still, and the paper - thin screen allowed SooYeon to see the guilt in her rigid posture. The instructor prodded with a small inquiry.  
  
"It almost seems you are happier these days?"  
  
MiYoung was silent for a beat then said faintly, voice short - winded despite having sat on the floor for an hour.  
  
"I am."  
  
SooYeon blushed and shyly ducked her head, chin sticking to her chest as fingers fumbled together. She felt miserable at having to listen with such anxiety, but thrilled at getting indirect praises thrown to her. The instructor, forgetting her place, asked hurriedly.  
  
"What is making you so happy these days?"  
  
SooYeon shut her eyes and tried to block out the rest, but failed, and heard the timid whisper.  
  
"Snow."  
  
---  
  
"I thought you were going to see MiYoung?"  
  
SooYeon sank to her knees in the snow, and ignored TaeYang's slew of questions as she buried her face into the plush ice.  
  
"Hey, what's wrong? Did something happen?"  
  
TaeYang pulled SooYeon back from the snow, and dusted off the melting flakes on her bangs. He stared at her in alarm and burst out into a hearty laugh.  
  
"God, you should see your face! You're as red as a baboon's a - "  
  
His head plummeted to the ground and disappeared down into the white fluff, as SooYeon pressed her fist flatly to his temple. She shook her head and shouted with embarrassed rage.  
  
"STOP! TALKING!"  
  
His voice gurgled, and he poked her ribs teasingly with his right hand that was above the snow.  
  
"Are you all red because you did something naughty with her - "  
  
SooYeon promptly pushed the rest of his body into the ice, and was in the process of covering his sunken form, when SeungHyun bellowed to her from afar.  
  
"SooYeon! Stop playing in the snow and come eat dinner! Get TaeYang too, wherever he is!"  
  
SooYeon grumbled and popped TaeYang's head out from the built frost. He blinked then coughed into his hand, SooYeon stood up and patted her uniform dry. His voice was with earnest concern despite its pitched croak.  
  
"Are you going to meet her tonight?"  
  
SooYeon shied away from his stare and set her sleeve's length. She bit a corner of her lip, not liking how her chest hurt as she replied.  
  
"Don't know."  
  
"Yes, you do."  
  
TaeYang rose up and bits of snow flew off as he bristled. He smoothed his hair to push away the bangs in his eyes as he advised her.  
  
"You should go. What if she waits all night for you if you don't?"  
  
SooYeon tersely answered and stalked to drier grounds.  
  
"She wouldn't wait for me."  
  
She reared back when TaeYang firmly grasped her shoulder. His words heavy and encompassing everything of what he and she knew about MiYoung.  
  
"She's already waiting for you. She's been waiting for a while."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 4**

**[Past]**

"I think TaeYang's right. What if she wants to meet you because of the arrangement with the other kingdom's Wang?"  
  
SeungHyun's voice barely reached above a whisper, but that was because they were all supposed to be eating mutely. Although no one would dare to touch SooYeon while in the dining tables, she was always forced between them as they ate, more for their reassurance than hers. TaeYang reached over and connected his forehead to SooYeon's temple, he buzzed in her ear while she cringed in irritation.  
  
"I say you guys run away to elope - *ow*!"  
  
A row of heads turned to the cry, and the trio immediately clammed up. SooYeon hissed to both of them as she dropped her chopsticks into a bowl.  
  
"My master's been getting suspicious, and I shouldn't keep on disobeying rules for selfish reasons."  
  
She grabbed for her cup of water and stifled a yelp when it was ripped away briskly. TaeYang controlled his voice as he admonished her behavior.  
  
"You're being selfish *right now*. She might be out there waiting for you, and here you are with your cozy little meal!"  
  
The meal wasn't exactly the epitome of comfort, but TaeYang's scolding stirred up a fleeting wisp of guilt, a big gust of guilt to be frank. She imagined MiYoung's petite frame racking against the night's chill and shut her eyes in agony. This shouldn't faze her, this shouldn't budge her, this should prove her strength in resistance - this was pure torture.  
  
"SooYeon."  
  
It was SeungHyun's barely audible voice that brought her back to reality.  
  
"We want you to be selfish."  
  
He frantically swiveled and swept his eyes over the area, then continued in a controlled tone.  
  
"Go to her. We'll cover for you."  
  
---  
  
"Did you wait long?"  
  
SooYeon winced and bit down on her tongue when she saw MiYoung's red and shaking fingers. She quickly grasped them and asked another question in a somewhat tormented tone.  
  
"Why didn't you just go back to your room?"  
  
MiYoung kept her watch on the hands clasping her own and smiled, unable to conceal her delight at the endearing gesture, she leaned onto SooYeon's chest and whispered.  
  
"I knew you'd be here soon."  
  
SooYeon went pink around the ears instantly, and ferociously rubbed MiYoung's hands together, inwardly cursing at her shrinking composure. MiYoung caught the other girl's bashful discomfort, and placed her grin onto SooYeon's neck.  
  
"I heard from DaeSung that you came by to visit me. Why didn't you greet me?"  
  
"I - I, um, the thing is - "  
  
"Did you overhear the conversation with my instructor?"  
  
SooYeon felt lips glide up to her neck, and coolly kiss at the coil of her ear. She went stiff, not from the frigid weather, but from the suffocating emotion starting to pool inside of her. SooYeon's prolonged silence answered the question, and MiYoung rubbed her nose into the crook of SooYeon's neck, begging SooYeon in a small voice.  
  
"I'll keep refusing - really, it doesn't bother me... so don't... don't accept anyone else. Please?"  
  
MiYoung pulled down SooYeon's collar and planted a heated kiss to the dip beneath her throat. She slipped her hand underneath and carved SooYeon's slender stomach, moving up to lightly scratch over her sides, then resting it finally on the small of her back. SooYeon squirmed and gasped out white vapors as MiYoung explored. She hissed and narrowed her eyes when MiYoung bit the underside of her jaw, awkwardly spreading out her arms to allow MiYoung further scrutiny. A simple push would have disrupted MiYoung in her act, but SooYeon clenched her jaw at the thought. She would let the GongJu have her way in the dark. The only pain she felt, was the restraint in temptation, she curled her hands into tight balls as she willed herself to remain motionless.  
  
It was pushing her to the brink of insanity.  
  
"Wait... we... shouldn't..."  
  
She said her words shakily, her mind barely grasping onto sound judgement. Fingernails weakly clawed up to the nape of her neck, and teeth bit her lower lip greedily. SooYeon winced and shut one eye, as MiYoung let go and kissed the hurt lip tenderly. She heard the other girl's pants, urgent and increasing, along with the whispers.   
  
"Why?"  
  
MiYoung grazed her forehead onto SooYeon's brow.  
  
"Why? Don't you understand? If I can't touch you here... then when can I?"   
  
She implored as she closed her eyes, her breathe trickling across SooYeon's nose.  
  
"I want you all the time... but when am I allowed to have you? Don't you... question the same thing? Don't you want the same thing?"  
  
SooYeon raggedly exhaled and stared deeply into the watery pair of eyes. She licked her swollen bottom lip and seized MiYoung into an embrace, her teeth scraping against MiYoung's pale skin as she harshly whispered into her ear.  
  
"Stop crying."  
  
The weather was at its coldest for the night, but both girls felt sweat fall back behind their necks, as they held onto each other. MiYoung choked and gratingly breathed out through her nose before she faltered with a question.  
  
"I - isn't there anything you want from me?"  
  
SooYeon pulled her in for a deep kiss. She slid her fingers over MiYoung's temple and brushed her nails though the silky strands of hair. MiYoung repressed a whimper when SooYeon weakly clenched her hand possessively over her hair and whispered hotly into her ear.   
  
"Everything."  
  
---  
  
"SeungHyun! SeungHyun, check this out!"  
  
TaeYang wrinkled his nose and broke into hysterical fits as he slapped his thighs. He pointed a trembling finger to SooYeon's back and pulled at the other boy's sleeve.  
  
"Look! Look!"  
  
TaeYang childishly lifted the hem of SooYeon's shirt and pointed at the short thin red welts scattered across her back. SeungHyun flushed deeply and shared SooYeon's mortification as TaeYang crowed.  
  
"MiYoung showed her who's ruler of this body last night!"  
  
SooYeon growled, peeved at the squawking boy, and jerked away from his grip. She muttered rapidly, in hopes of redeeming herself.  
  
"It's from a tree's bark!"  
  
TaeYang raised an eyebrow and asked in a mocking tone.  
  
"Oh, and just why would you be up against a tree, SooYeon?"  
  
"B - because - "  
  
"You got pushed onto it!"  
  
"I didn't! I just - okay, maybe I did - but I didn't want to roll her over..."  
  
SeungHyun smiled gently and finished for her.  
  
"Because then she would have gotten scratched instead."  
  
TaeYang giggled gleefully, aware of the rosy tint on SooYeon's cheeks. He affectionately jabbed her right cheek with his finger and asked.  
  
"So our chivalrous SooYeon got mauled up a tree to keep our GongJu happy and scratch - free?"  
  
He sighed happily and grinned at SooYeon's irked stare.  
  
"I would have paid to see the great SooYeon struggle helplessly - "  
  
"I DID NOT STRUGGLE HELPLESSLY - "  
  
"Do they hurt?"  
  
The squabbling duo snapped their heads to SeungHyun's concerned whisper. SooYeon ducked her head and lowly replied.  
  
"No."  
  
They left a dull stinging sensation, a sort of prickling fire, on her back, but SooYeon felt no pain. She wanted the burn to remain forever, it felt warm to know MiYoung did not want to let her go.  
  
---  
  
SooYeon crept back into her room, her footsteps gingerly placed and strained. She carefully lifted up the end of her blanket and eased into her bed.   
  
"You are late."  
  
She clamped down on her tongue at her master's disapproving voice.  
  
"I do not approve of what you are doing. End it at once."  
  
She hurriedly stood to her feet and hung her head.  
  
"I am sorry, master."  
  
He glared at her submissive form and crossed his arms.  
  
"I do not know who you are meeting, but you should hope I never find out."  
  
SooYeon gulped the fear in her throat, and nodded vigorously. Her master coughed and clutched his chest, the skin around his knuckles turning white and stretched. She scrambled to his side and helped him lie down. He swallowed then opened his eyes to her.  
  
"Tonight is the last night you sleep here. Tomorrow your training will become more rigorous, and therefore you will sleep in a housing made for the future HwaRang. I won't be able to watch over your moves from now on, but don't disobey me."  
  
---  
  
"What's this?"  
  
SooYeon eyed the pitch - black liquid inside the basin. SeungHyun peered over and jutted out his lower lip as he guessed.   
  
"This morning I heard there would be a special drink at lunch to congratulate all the warriors training for the HwaRang - us, that is. I suppose this is the drink?"  
  
TaeYang attempted to stick his finger in it until SooYeon slapped his hand away. She looked over her shoulder to see the other soldiers sitting at their tables, all of them red - faced and drinking the liquid merrily. She scoffed and pushed the two boys down along the line, distancing them from the drink as she explained.  
  
"It looks like it has a bit of alcohol mixed in it - we don't need that kind of distraction."  
  
TaeYang whined and said a little too loudly.  
  
"You just want to be alert when you make love to - "  
  
SooYeon effectively elbowed TaeYang's stomach and SeungHyun quickly shoved a boiled egg into the boy's gawping mouth. They dragged his limp body over to a table and set their meal trays down. SeungHyun chided TaeYang in a hushed tone.  
  
"You should be more careful! You can't just say something so carelessly!"  
  
TaeYang groaned as he touched his tender stomach, and closed his mouth to chew the egg slowly. He looked at SooYeon, a disgruntled frown plastered onto her face, and asked curiously in an unusually quiet voice.  
  
"Well? I'm not too wrong, right? You are meeting again tonight, aren't you?"  
  
SooYeon pushed around the food on her tray and mumbled.  
  
"She wants to."  
  
TaeYang quipped immediately.  
  
"So you are."  
  
"My master caught me."  
  
Her two friends both reared back and gasped. SeungHyun tentatively asked the glum girl.  
  
"What did he say? Did he see her with you?"  
  
SooYeon smirked bitterly and muttered.  
  
"What else? That I should stop being so blind and weak. He didn't see her luckily, but if I continue, I'm sure he will."  
  
"But tonight you'll be in the new housing, he won't be able to catch you."  
  
"I know, but I do feel guilty at having to to go against him so many times."  
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
TaeYang shook his head and thumped his hand over her back. She flinched as the scratches on her backside stung, and directed her glare to TaeYang.  
  
"Don't look at me like that."  
  
SeungHyun laid a heavy hand on SooYeon's tense shoulder and smiled with his words.  
  
"SooYeon, what about MiYoung?"  
  
"What about - "  
  
"Isn't she also going against the rules?"  
  
SooYeon was mum, and SeungHyun picked up his chopsticks, his final opinion voiced as TaeYang clapped SooYeon's back again.  
  
"I don't think you two are blind or weak. Just a little scared, but I think that comes with the unknown. But SooYeon..."  
  
SeungHyun's eyes gleamed in wrapped excitement as he spoke.  
  
"We know it'll be all right in the end."  
  
---

**[Present]**

SooYeon dismounted her horse silently and pushed off her mask. She stalked to where the tiny shelter stood. The moon streaked a beam of silver across the dark forest paths, and SooYeon made out the dying flames of a fire. She surveyed the glowing timber, it had been going on for a while, a mound of ashes indicating its lifespan. SooYeon bitterly smiled at the leftover dried fruits and water on the flat of a rock, food obviously saved for her return. She whipped her head to a rustle from the shelter, and saw MiYoung's head emerge, strands of hair catching the glint of the moonlight.  
  
"You're back... we saved your portion of the meal - "  
  
"Sleep. We have a lot to do, and we'll need all the energy."  
  
"A - all right."  
  
SooYeon brushed past MiYoung's stunned figure, and slumped down onto a tree's bark. She shut her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest, hoping it'll dismiss MiYoung. It didn't, and SooYeon gritted her teeth in the dark, hating the way MiYoung wordlessly watched her. SooYeon slowed her breathing, she released the tension in her shoulders, leisurely lolled her head to the left - did it all in hopes of feigning sleep. An hour, and still SooYeon heard MiYoung's steady intake of air, it was testing her mental stability. The hoarse whisper nearly opened her eyes.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
MiYoung's words all sounded like pleas for forgiveness.  
  
"I should have been there - I tried! But somehow I was summoned into a meeting with my father and brother, and all I remember is drinking and nothing else afterwards..."  
  
MiYoung moved towards SooYeon's motionless figure.  
  
"I just woke up to see DaeSung beside me... we were in a foreign village and there was a note and a set of clothes beside us."  
  
SooYeon stiffened involuntarily at the nearing contact, and MiYoung pulled away to mask her hurt at the other girl's reaction. SooYeon spoke curtly and to the point, she knew she would have to talk in order for this conversation to end.  
  
"What did the note say? Where's the WangJa?"  
  
"It just said for us to dress in the clothes and to live our lives in quietly in the village. I didn't even - I didn't even know about the death of our father! We were just trying our best to live our lives in peace at that village, and all of a sudden we got news that a henchman from the queen arrived in the village... and after that we fled... and lost each other..."  
  
MiYoung reached out to tentatively touch SooYeon's hand, the other retracted and methodically instructed.  
  
"Go back to the shelter. We're going to search for your brother tomorrow."  
  
MiYoung sounded tearful and beaten, she blinked her eyes several times, and asked.  
  
"Are you angry at me because of that night?"   
  
No... it's not because of that.   
  
I'm not angry, and it's not because of that.  
  
SooYeon wearily sighed and ordered MiYoung.  
  
"Go to sleep."  
  
"Be near me."  
  
"Sleep."  
  
"SooYeon - "  
  
"GO TO SLEEP!"  
  
MiYoung's lips quivered and she asked with wounded eyes.   
  
"What do you dislike of me?"  
  
MiYoung's shoulders sagged as she went back into the shelter. A couple hours passed, and SooYeon bit her lip as she looked up into the sky. She soundlessly stood up and stalked to the shelter as well. MiYoung was fast asleep, cheeks dry from cried tears. SooYeon bent down without a noise, and softly kissed MiYoung's cheek, tasting her sadness. She screwed her eyes in anguish, and moved her lips to wordlessly answer.  
  
"Nothing."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 5**

**[Present]**

"You're up."  
  
JiYong adjusted his outer robe and crossed his arms as he slipped out of the shelter. SooYeon gave a side - long glance and answered as she wrapped a fresh strip of gauze onto her arm.  
  
"I'm sure you heard what happened to the WangJa? We need to be more alert now that he could be in danger."  
  
JiYong assented with a nod and turned to attend to his horse. He brushed its mane with the flat of his hand and spoke dryly.  
  
"Are you taking care of your horse? I didn't hear you return last night."  
  
"I made sure to give it food and water in the middle of the night. We should depart now."  
  
JiYong looked back at the shelter and coughed once softly before talking, clearly uneasy with revealing his thoughts.  
  
"The GongJu waited all night for you. The last thing I remember awake, was her sitting and looking outside. Perhaps we could let her sleep a little longer?"  
  
SooYeon fixed on her mask and her muffled voice commanded JiYong.  
  
"We'll let her rest, but use the time well to gather on necessary items. What did she tell you while I was away?"  
  
JiYong shuffled his feet and stooped down to inspect the plants, he peered up into the sky and muttered in a small voice.  
  
"She happened to escape the village she was at because of an henchman from the Queen, and while fleeing, she lost the WangJa. It might be that the village is quite a bit away from here, since she's been wandering from area to area, making sure in not getting caught."  
  
"How was she able to support herself? Does she remember the name of the village?"  
  
"You know the GongJu, she could easily be passed as an instructor of noble class. It wouldn't be too hard for her to obtain such a job, especially for a short while of time. I also marked the village on our map."  
  
JiYong dug at his satchel tied to his pants and smoothed out the aging paper. SooYeon held it and surveyed it as she asked.  
  
"She managed to survive for this long by doing that?"  
  
"Yes, but it seems like she was wise as well - moving from place to place frequently. The Queen pointed us to the right direction, but we would have never have found them there. I guess news traveled rather slowly, or her guards were wary of letting her know that they failed so easily."  
  
He spoke wearily.  
  
"She always took the more hidden routes such as this forest while fleeing, which is how she spotted the shelter. She told me that she spotted you and knew you'd be able to help her."  
  
JiYong continued in a distant tone.  
  
"It looks like it'll snow."  
  
SooYeon sniffed out in acknowledgement, and said it while she turned away.  
  
"We'll head out to the nearest village for further necessities."  
  
---  
  
They started on their long journey once MiYoung woke up, keeping a steady pace until they approached a desolate part of land. Small markets and shops lined in an askew road, and the team got down from the two horses to buy their materials. SooYeon counted out the coins and pointed at various spots among the stocked walls, as she spoke to JiYong, who was occupied with helping MiYoung off their horse.  
  
"This is perhaps all we'll need for the rest of the way and weather."  
  
SooYeon strapped on the bundles of blankets and garments onto the back of her horse, and stepped away to ask JiYong and MiYoung.  
  
"Do you two need anything else?"  
  
The two shook their head and SooYeon led her horse away by its rein. JiYong urged MiYoung back onto the four - legged creature, as he guided it to SooYeon's footsteps. He asked her while trudging forward.  
  
"Are we going to rest here for tonight, SooYeon?"  
  
She answered in a stoic voice.  
  
"Yes, we'll find an inn along the way."  
  
---  
  
They arrived at a small deserted home. The roof was stable but JiYong and SooYeon had gathered enough woodwork to reconstruct some of the bearings. The weather had turned cooler, and SooYeon saw the feathery flakes fall down beyond the window. They would have to haste their journey.  
  
"We should go around this region."  
  
JiYong circled an area on the map and suggested to SooYeon.  
  
"Since we've been coming from here, and the GongJu has been searching from here, it would only make sense that the WangJa would end up at this point. We might have to cross a lake..."  
  
SooYeon nodded and eyed MiYoung whose eyes drooped with fatigue. She began crossing the room to an isolated one and responded.  
  
"We'll keep on heading that way then, and search until we find him. He might give us more clues as to what happened that night. You sleep in this room."  
  
She pointed to the room on her left.  
  
"And we'll occupy this one."  
  
JiYong got up from the floor and scurried over to the other room as he laid out the bedding. MiYoung snapped out of her slumber to walk over to SooYeon.  
  
"SooYeon... could we share the same bed? I'd feel better that way..."  
  
SooYeon stepped back and glared at MiYoung.  
  
"That isn't allowed."  
  
The hurt shone clearly in MiYoung's eyes. She gingerly rested her hand on the other girl's shoulder.   
  
"Why are you so... distant?"  
  
MiYoung said the final word delicately, but that just proved how long it had been on her mind. SooYeon tensed her jaw and wretched the hand from her shoulder briskly, she didn't care if MiYoung wouldn't understand.  
  
"This is how it should be."  
  
MiYoung tried again in touching her, but SooYeon backed away quickly. She looked directly at the other girl and said the words loudly, as if allowing everyone, including herself, to hear them.  
  
"I'll help you in clearing your name - I'll even protect you, but don't ever take it the wrong way. It's been some time and I've changed from before."  
  
SooYeon could feel her nails dig into her palm, their sharpness defining as the minutes slipped past. She said her ending words with determination, and did not look away as tears slipped out of MiYoung's eyes.  
  
"I'm doing all this because of my pride as a HwaRang, not because I want to."  
  
JiYong scampered to the door's entrance and grabbed at SooYeon's hand. He hissed in her ear.  
  
"What is wrong with you?"  
  
SooYeon jerked away his hand, and he hurried over to MiYoung's side. She muttered low, her voice too hollow to have been heard by JiYong or MiYoung.  
  
"It's better if you don't know."  
  
JiYong whipped his head to her, and asked furiously.  
  
"Aren't you going to apologize - where are you going?"  
  
"I'm going to gather branches for tonight's fire."  
  
The first step pivoted her body, the second carried her away from the crying, the third turned JiYong's yells into whispers - she lost count after the fourth. She was running and swallowing the freezing air in her burning throat, any form of pain would do, anything that can make her hurt. She collapsed to her knees when she reached the base of a cracked tree stump.  
  
"Sorry..."  
  
She cursed and bit her lower lip viciously, tongue pressing to the roof of her mouth. Her eyes squeezed shut to the throbbing in her chest, but they opened again at the image of MiYoung in her mind. She wanted to be stronger than this. It would be worthless to say an apology, as it would just bring them closer. So she said her apology to the scratched - up tree bark, wary of her voice hitching and straining.  
  
"I'm sorry."  
  
She leaned her forehead against the tree, and pushed down the disgust in her stomach.  
  
"I just can't... I'm sorry, but I just can't..."  
  
---

**[Past]**

"Going?"  
  
"No."  
  
SooYeon answered snappily, and covered her head with her blanket, as she shut out TaeYang's face. He sighed and rolled over to the far - end of the bed, as SeungHyun whispered to her.  
  
"You should go."  
  
Two hours of the night passed, and SooYeon laid awake in the blackened room. She heard TaeYang's snore and SeungHyun's steady breathing. She also heard MiYoung's voice in the back of her mind. Carefully she rolled off her blanket, and sat up in her bed. She made sure to not dip too far on either side, as she crawled out between the two boys. Her clothes were thrown over her head as she stealthily dressed in the dark. She crept on her toes to the exit, and looked over her shoulder with an apologetic smile.  
  
She hoped her friends would cover for her.  
  
---  
  
The snow decorated the grounds, and SooYeon's feet sank into the fluff. She carefully took her steps over a frozen stream, and grabbed onto obstructing plants or branches as she came to her destination. She waited for an hour in the subnormal temperature before asking in a weak voice.  
  
"MiYoung?"  
  
No response anywhere, and instead the creaks of twigs and the sighs of leaves landed on her ears. She shut her eyes and crossed her arms closer to her chest. She waited until the trees, white with snow, glowed with a faint blue. The sun was starting rise in its early stages.   
  
SooYeon continued her wait. Snow building and forming into small hills around her feet. She blew warmth into her hands, massaging her sore knuckles as the time passed by slowly. She had waited for hours. Her toes numb and frigid when she finally decided to leave, her heart heavy and puzzled. She knew MiYoung would never abandon her like this without good reason.  
  
She hunkered back to where the HwaRang slept. Her cheeks no different from her ears, all sharing the same red hue. It was the brink of dawn, and SooYeon heard nothing, as she rounded the small housing. It chilled her slightly. There usually would be a raucous in the mornings, as the trainees got themselves ready for the day's work - out. Therefore, the silence was new and ominous. She controlled the panic in her heart, and swallowed her parched throat, as a strange smell filled her nose. She looked down to trace the source of the smell.  
  
The snow on the ground wasn't white.  
  
Dark, nearly black, footprints lied at the doorstep of her resting place. Footprints that smelled like rust, an odor that gripped her heart achingly. She trailed her eyes to the door, it was ajar and inside SooYeon heard nothing but the wind's howl. Her breath fell short and her vision began to blur.  
  
"SeungHyun?"  
  
She wanted him to rush past and slam the door open, scold her for being late, scold her for worrying him. She wanted all of that, but no one came.  
  
"TaeYang?"  
  
She earnestly hoped a loud yell, an annoyed one at being woken early, a laugh at her unsightly appearance. She expected all of that, but no one did any of it.  
  
Her feeble hand pushed the door, the wind did the rest and swung it back to let her have a full view of the room. A bloody heap greeted her. She recognized the soldier's face, but tore her eyes away from the tragic scene as she looked further. Some were slain in their beds, covers scrambled and dyed with twisted lumps. Others had put up a fight, their efforts futile and confusing. Her bottom lip quivered as she approached her bed, she closed her eyes then opened them, praying all the while that she would wake up from the nightmare.   
  
Scratches and spots of blood were on her bed.  
  
She frantically looked over and under it. Her eyes finding nothing but puddles of dark crimson and smeared shapes. A set of prints illustrating a scuffle, but none leading anywhere. Her heart started to grieve.   
  
"SeungHyun? TaeYang? Come out..."  
  
She whispered with a shaky smile.  
  
"Come out..."  
  
She didn't want to think of the possibilities, that perhaps her absence had killed them. It was making a painful bubble rise in her throat. Her feet stumbled over each other as she swirled around and examined every inch of the room.  
  
"Come out... please..."  
  
She awkwardly half - ran and dragged her legs outside. Her head hurt and her sanity deteriorated as her feet dipped into the lukewarm snow. She wildly shouted at the top of her lungs. Her stomps flinging ice everywhere, as she searched in disquiet rage.  
  
"SEUNGHYUN! TAEYANG!"  
  
She gulped a breath, the dreariness from earlier gone, as she screamed into the morning. Her legs pushing past the aches of her muscles.  
  
"SEUNGHYUN! TAEYANG! SEUNGHYUN! TAE - "  
  
Her foot caught onto a rock hidden in the ground and she stumbled forward. Her cheeks burned from the combination of tears and snow, as she blindly struggled to get up, only to crumple down in fatigue and pain. She gripped her shirt's front, and opened her mouth to a dejected wail.  
  
"PLEASE!"  
  
She gasped as her voice grew hoarse, and bared her clench teeth with tightly shut eyes. She disobeyed her master's warning. She had disobeyed him, and also left her friends for her own desires. The thoughts left her bawling and shaking on the cold floor.   
  
"Please... please... don't do this to me..."  
  
Her tears melted away the snow.  
  
"Come back..."   
  
---  
  
"The slaying of the HwaRang was done by the Seo Kingdom. We found this while sweeping the grounds."  
  
The commander held up a rusted emblem high into the air, the atmosphere grave and silent, the gathered all suffering from the loss. He continued tersely and in a heavy voice.  
  
"The Wang's body was found - burnt to the bones. We are assuming, no doubt, that the Seo Kingdom had to do with the fire as well. As for the WangJa and GongJu..."  
  
The commander coughed and nervously looked down to his feet. His medals clinging as he straightened his shoulder.  
  
"As for the WangJa and GongJu... their bodies were not found in the fire. And they are nowhere in the palace. They are now considered traitors as the Queen confirmed both to have been in the room with the Wang."  
  
SooYeon numbly listened, head hung low, and her gaze set to her slackened hands. She sat at the back of the gathering, having no strength in being able to walk any closer, let alone stand. Her eyes wide, but seeing nothing, as a raw sensation ate her heart.  
  
She had been happy at first at the possibility of her friends' survival, but it faded as reports came in gradually. No sights of bodies anywhere outside of the palace, except for a few that were found along a river's edge. The corpses no longer recognizable. Her hope thinned, her happiness died, and her guilt grew.  
  
Her friends had indeed covered for her.  
  
---  
  
"Master?"  
  
SooYeon crept into the room, shame and worry spreading down to her toes.  
  
"Master, are you here?"  
  
SooYeon stepped in further and implored.  
  
"Master, I - I didn't mean to disobey you that night..."  
  
It would be easy to conclude that SooYeon was able to escape the slaying because of her disobedience. SooYeon figured her master would realize the reason for her salvation and be upset over it. She wanted to appease his anger and talked more into the still air.  
  
"Master, please speak. I am ready for any form of punishment - "  
  
The room in which he occupied was empty. SooYeon saw no signs of the folded blankets or usual trays of food. Water pooled and spilled out of her eyes as she sank to the empty floor. She whispered dejectedly.  
  
"You must be so ashamed of your pupil..."  
  
She gritted her teeth and cried the rest of her tears.  
  
Another person who left her because of her selfish ways.  
  
---

**[Present]**

"You're back finally?"  
  
SooYeon kept her silence to JiYong's agitated reply, and closed the door to the house.  
  
"She's asleep."  
  
JiYong spat out and removed his body from the ground, as SooYeon shoveled an armful of logs into a hearth. She mutely lit a fire and rigorously did her chore, gradually coming to a halt when JiYong exited the room. MiYoung was now asleep and unaccompanied on the floor. SooYeon sighed greatly and inspected her arm. The bandage peeled off as she unraveled it adroitly, the wound left a dry crusted residue. She pulled over her sleeve and tossed the last log into the crackling fire. The fire glowed and casted a warm light over MiYoung's serene face, SooYeon knelt down and watched the shadow of the flames paint over her smooth brow.  
  
"Sleeping?"  
  
She whispered to MiYoung.  
  
"I can't be with you."  
  
SeungHyun's laughter briefly interrupted her thoughts, and TaeYang's grin blocked her vision, but she warily inched her right hand to MiYoung's face. Her fingers could feel the fine tiny hairs on the back of her neck, and she brushed over them, causing MiYoung to stir. SooYeon paused and held her hand, her eyes roved over MiYoung's mouth, breathing evenly once again. She delicately traced her finger over the shirt's collar, it was thin and ill - matched for the on - coming winter. She lifted her head to see the rest of the outfit more clearly, noticing for the first time holes on certain places. SooYeon pushed herself up and threaded over to where their supplies laid, untouched and in bulks. SooYeon pried loose a hanging cloth and felt the thick fleece between her fingers. She treaded over to where MiYoung slept, and covered the entire length of her body with the blanket. She stood back and whispered some more.  
  
"I just can't..."   
  
The memory of the tainted room haunted her. The way she smiled and fled into the dark as TaeYang and SeungHyun slept in ignorance, wishing her happiness with MiYoung - it disabled her.  
  
"I'm guilty of... a lot of things... you have to understand that."  
  
She swam effortlessly when it came to battles or trials, but with MiYoung, she felt like a fish out of water, confused and helpless.  
  
"At least..."  
  
SooYeon lowered her head and smiled ruefully.  
  
"At least I can still watch you from afar?"  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 6**

**[Present]**

"I guess this is a bit risky, but we should go for the sake of the WangJa."  
  
JiYong whispered, as if the ice below his feet would crack to a louder pitch. He watched as SooYeon strode forward and swiveled her mask to hang over her back, her swords lined against her shoulder - blades. She tested the frozen ground by stomping on it once, and replied in a diffident tone.  
  
"It'll be fine if we hurry."  
  
She trudged forward and told JiYong.  
  
"You should travel closer to the lake's bank with the horses."  
  
JiYong affirmed with a nod and twisted his hands around both horses' reins, as he slowly started his walk with their steady trots. He whispered gentle instructions to MiYoung, but SooYeon saw the other girl politely shake her head to whatever JiYong had said. She strained her ear to pick up the distant whispers.  
  
"But GongJu it really would be much safer to walk with me along the bank."  
  
"It's fine, thank you, but I think I'll follow behind SooYeon instead."  
  
SooYeon raised her shoulders unconsciously, torn with the undying loyalty, and kept her grip strong over her slung swords. She shouldn't have listened, it only brought back unforgotten memories.   
  
---

**[Past]**

"It's fine, thank you, but I think I'll follow behind SooYeon instead."  
  
"But GongJu, *I* got the top marks in archery! The danger will be at a distance with me, while it'll be near with SooYeon - look at the length of her swords! They can't compare to an arrow's path!"  
  
TaeYang argued pitifully and flung his skinny arrows about in the air. MiYoung scoffed in a mocking way and kept her walk behind SooYeon as she explained.  
  
"But I don't feel safe with you, TaeYang - "  
  
"WHAT? HOW CAN YOU SAY THAT, YOU FIEND!"  
  
"TAEYANG, YOU CAN'T CALL THE GONGJUNIM A FIEND!"  
  
"BUT SHE INSULTED ME, SEUNGHYUN!"  
  
"SHE'S THE GONGJU - LET HER INSULT YOU ALL SHE WANTS!"  
  
"You guys never fight over me like you do over MiYoung."  
  
DaeSung mumbled dejectedly and sauntered after the two girls in a sulk. Meanwhile, SooYeon maneuvered her way through the dense grass, and lead the team to their usual secret place. She heard her friends try to console the future Wang, and sighed tiredly as she reached the end. MiYoung's uncertain voice made her lose her balance.  
  
"Don't... keep me waiting."  
  
"P - pardon?"  
  
SooYeon regained her footing and immediately corrected her stance. She heard a giggle, no hints of malice in it, and said again in a stronger tone.  
  
"Pardon?"  
  
"I said... don't keep me waiting."  
  
MiYoung outstretched her hand and spread her fingers as she timidly smiled to SooYeon. SooYeon muttered bashfully before taking the hand.  
  
"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to - "  
  
"I started to have these weird feelings recently."  
  
"Weird feelings?"  
  
"I don't know, but I wanted to especially hold your hand today..."  
  
"Ah... well that is understandable I guess - "  
  
"And I heard from someone about kisses..."  
  
SooYeon halted and swallowed as MiYoung spoke.  
  
"Have you heard of them?"  
  
"Y - yes."  
  
"I wanted to try one... but only with you."  
  
---

**[Present]**

"Do you have someone else?"  
  
It was a small and weak question, it was a vulnerable one as well, but SooYeon cringed inwardly as she replied.  
  
"I don't understand what you say."  
  
The answer couldn't extinguish the trepidation MiYoung carried as she carefully shadowed SooYeon's steps. She tried again to gain a more precise answer.   
  
"Do you love someone else?"  
  
SooYeon held her tongue, then spat out with a frustrated scowl.  
  
"Stop talking about these things!"  
  
"I can't - "  
  
A shrill whinny pierced the air, and both girls turned their heads to see the horses kicking and huffing. A tiny fox arched its back below their raised hooves and scampered away in terror. The horses pedaled their feet high in the air, and brought them down with a loud crack.  
  
The bundles of goods and cloths tumbled down from the backs of both creatures, JiYong winced and went down on one knee as he struggled to keep his focus on the excited animals. The horses reared back again, and this time clumsily, their hooves teetered then slipped against the slippery ground. SooYeon bent her knees as both fell, their limbs hammered the ice below and created a gaping hole. It devoured their bodies instantly. JiYong skirted around the massive gap and leaned over with jittery hands. The horses thrashed wildly against the freezing temperature, and kicked the ice above their bodies. SooYeon instinctively shouted to MiYoung.  
  
"Get to the bank - "  
  
A crack.  
  
SooYeon sucked in her breath as she heard it again. The sound was like that of a rock splitting in two, heavy and reverberating below her feet. She whipped her head to JiYong and saw his terrified face, his body absolutely still but hands shaking.  
  
Another loud pop.  
  
SooYeon shifted her eyes to MiYoung, lips apart and stuck at a question. She opened her mouth, controlling the waver attempting to betray her feigned nonchalance, and walked toward MiYoung.  
  
"JiYong, get the things that fell, and just go slowly to the lake's edge!"  
  
The nearest bend was about a hundred yards to their left and JiYong nodded stiffly. The horses continued their swim along the ice, disrupting the lake's frozen exterior. SooYeon was almost to MiYoung, hand reaching out while the horses splashed to the other end anxiously. She swallowed when MiYoung zealously took her hand, and refused to meet her eyes.  
  
"Let's go."  
  
SooYeon pulled on her hand, and exhaled in exasperation when the other girl declined to budge.  
  
"We need to go!"  
  
"No."  
  
SooYeon snapped her head to MiYoung, and questioned incredulously.  
  
"Why are you not moving? We need to get off this ice - "  
  
"You're not going to hold my hand after this moment... right?"  
  
MiYoung asked with a wan smile, and SooYeon noticed a pain setting in around the back of her hand. She looked to see white fingertips digging onto her flushed skin, and reverted her stare to the somber girl.  
  
"Let's go!"  
  
SooYeon roughly pulled her hand away from the other girl, and the fingers slid down to clasp her around her wrist, firmly cuffing them as MiYoung steadfastly shook her head. SooYeon tightened her jaw and hissed in insistence.  
  
"This isn't the time for this!"  
  
"You say that so easily... it hurts that you can say it so easily."  
  
SooYeon pressed her lips thinly and darkly whispered.  
  
"You're making things difficult."  
  
"You gave me that blanket last night, didn't you?"  
  
SooYeon froze and watched as MiYoung tearfully yelled.  
  
"Why are you doing this? Why are you being so confusing and so different - "  
  
"Stop this nonsense - "  
  
"GONGJUNIM! SOOYEON! THE HORSES HAVE GONE TO THE OTHER SIDE NOW! PLEASE GET OFF THE ICE SO THAT WE CAN RUN AFTER THEM - "  
  
SooYeon screamed to MiYoung, lost in her anger at the girl who clung to her affection so dearly, even when it meant death.  
  
"LET'S GO!"  
  
SooYeon pulled her hand away roughly, and MiYoung reacted stubbornly with a cry.  
  
"No!"  
  
She resisted too strongly and fumbled backwards with a step. SooYeon watched with a silent gasp as the other girl's right heel pushed down a layer of thin ice. MiYoung's hold on SooYeon loosened as she sank below the broken pieces. Several droplets stung SooYeon's face, as she hurriedly drew out her swords.  
  
"GRAB ONTO THEM!"  
  
The sheaths on the swords began to slip, and SooYeon pried them off quickly. She gripped the bladed edges, and pointed the handles to MiYoung. The swords cut her deeply, and blood made its way to the gleaming edges, but SooYeon held even tighter, too concentrated on MiYoung's erratic splashing.  
  
"STOP PANICKING AND - "  
  
She saw MiYoung's hands slip beneath the ice - riddled water, the swords' reflection shining where she had thrashed earlier. She heard a distant and crazed yell, JiYong's, she heard him scream at her, but she couldn't bother in listening. She was already tearing her jacket, throwing her swords, pulling her mask, and jumping towards the watery grave. The frosty wind seeping through her flimsy shirt and pants, chilling her to the bone, as she dove into the broken ground.  
  
It was as if she was swimming through fire.  
  
The shock of the cold opened her mouth, a few bubbles escaped in distorted shapes, and she willed her mind to think rationally. Her body wanted to gasp and struggle up for air, but her mind desperately searched for MiYoung. She pushed out her arms and swam deeper into the murky water. Her blurred vision caught the wave of dark hair and ghostly face. She swam madly towards the suspended girl and ignored the screaming protest of her legs. SooYeon jerked MiYoung towards her, and began kicking upwards to the surface. The short travel was dizzying, and the glistening water camouflaged their cracked entrance. She saw JiYong's frantic shoe - prints trample anxiously over the frozen water. She held onto MiYoung with her right arm, and pulled back on her left arm, ready to make an escape. Her distress was growing, not because of the freezing temperature, but because of her depleting oxygen, she knew MiYoung would not last long. She pedaled her legs once more, exerting so much energy that bubbles slipped out at the corners of her mouth, and punched the thin wall with all her might. She cursed the water for delaying her speed, and weakening her impact, she tried again with her dying strength, and a hairline crack made an appearance. All it took was JiYong's stomp to break through the split barrier.  
  
SooYeon burst through the water and wheezed, unable to get a sufficient amount of air into her lungs.  
  
"Get... her..."  
  
She forced her drooping arms up, and lifted MiYoung's slumping body onto the edge of the ice, her grip slipping because of her numb fingers. JiYong hooked his arms below MiYoung's, and dragged her soaked body forward. SooYeon aligned her body to the ice, and horizontally kicked towards the glazed land. She was wincing at the strain in her muscles, and biting her quivering lips as a fiery sting set course over her body. JiYong seized her left hand, and aided her to her feet.  
  
"HANG ON!"  
  
He yelled and ran with MiYoung draped securely over his shoulder. SooYeon picked up her leaden legs and scurried over to the lake's edge. Tripping and stumbling as her feet wobbled under the strain and slippery floor.   
  
JiYong had already assembled a small collection of wood, ready to light a much needed fire.  
  
SooYeon felt the tremors start to set in on her body and was unable to repress them. Her body was rejecting the cold, and was also refusing to stay still. She weakly gasped out.  
  
"My jacket... b - bring it... put her down..."  
  
JiYong hurried over to a side full of trees, as SooYeon hovered over MiYoung's mouth. She clenched her jaw, and pried open MiYoung's lips with her shivering fingers, then lowered her head and placed her shaking mouth over the other girl's. She blew short puffs of air in, and pulled away to lay her hands atop one another over MiYoung's chest. SooYeon pumped her arms up and down while JiYong rustled busily behind her shoulder. He put the jacket over her, and rubbed her back vigorously, before turning around to work on the fire.  
  
"Live..."  
  
She gasped and repeated the whole process over again.  
  
"Please... MiYoung... "  
  
She bent over and did the strenuous act without missing a beat.  
  
"Live... I - "  
  
MiYoung coughed violently and weakly rolled her head to the right. She looked at SooYeon through the corner of an eye, and breathed raggedly. SooYeon pulled her shirt over her head, and proceeded to undress the other girl as well. She blew hot air into her hands, and stuttered the words.  
  
"J - JiYong... f - fire..."  
  
JiYong scampered to the sack attached on a horse's saddle, and tactfully kept his eyes down as he threw it over SooYeon's nearly naked body. She pulled MiYoung closely to her chest and tightly wrapped the blanket around them. JiYong was already back on clapping a couple of rocks together, bright sparks flying and landing over a pile of dry grass and sticks. His face slowly worked up a sweat as he continually blew into the smoking nest, and exclaimed with joy when a small flame shot out from the bundle of twigs.  
  
"HANG ON JUST A LITTLE MORE!"  
  
He ran to SooYeon and MiYoung, hauling their fatigued bodies towards the fire.   
  
SooYeon's teeth clattered and rang in her ears.   
  
"S - SooYeon..."  
  
A pair of arms snaked over her back and pressed her close. The fire increased in height and popped little specks, as MiYoung nuzzled the crook of SooYeon's bare neck.  
  
"You're s - so dishonest now... I don't know what to b - believe."  
  
She hugged cautiously, so scared of disturbing SooYeon's compliance to her physical contact, and said the whisper.  
  
"What are you hiding from me?"  
  
---  
  
SooYeon figured it could have been the fire with all its crackling, or perhaps the animals with their various sounds - but she knew exactly what woke her up. The kiss to her wounded hand stirred her from sleep, and SooYeon cracked open an eye to see the crown of MiYoung's head nestled under her chin. JiYong was sitting by the fire, as SooYeon wondered on how long she had been asleep. She had been awake long enough to regain all her body's warmth, but slowly subsided to sleep once her body took control, the day had drained her of all her spirit. Her mind went back to MiYoung's lips when they pressed over her injured palms. It felt comfortable to be under the heavy blanket, and in MiYoung's tender touches. She shut her eye as MiYoung warily pushed her body up, placing her face contently next to SooYeon's.  
  
"Are you dreaming?"  
  
SooYeon had only been having nightmares before reuniting with MiYoung.  
  
"I always dreamt and woke up with you on the edge of my mind."  
  
MiYoung paused and said the words delicately.  
  
"I almost wish I could go back into the water again."  
  
Fingertips trailed down her spine.  
  
"It was lovely to finally wake up to your face above me."  
  
SooYeon felt an outer heat creep across her cheek, and settle over her lips.  
  
"SooYeon... you've already given your life to me, but..."  
  
A thumb lightly pressed into the cut on her palm, it soothed the prickly jagged line by drawing faintly over it.  
  
"I want nothing more in this world than your love."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 7**

**[Present]**

"They're long gone, the horses, aren't they?"  
  
SooYeon asked in a sullen tone while JiYong assembled the various goods by the side of their lit fire. He gave each item an occasional shake to see if they were intact, then dusted the knitted ones.  
  
"I believe so. What are you going to do about this?"  
  
JiYong held up two pieces, each sporting a jagged edge, and SooYeon sighed at the sight of her cracked mask.  
  
"Throw it away."  
  
She turned over both her hands, and stared at the ugly tear on her palms. She remembered the fleeting kisses from last night, and curled her fingers into fists. She started down a cleared path. JiYong called after her.  
  
"Where are you going?"  
  
"Fishing. Look after her."  
  
She gave a side - long glance, and saw MiYoung's form under the thick blanket by the fire. JiYong nodded and advised her.  
  
"Don't be too long."  
  
He added with some hesitation.  
  
"She starts to look for you when you take too long."  
  
SooYeon turned her face away and hunkered over the plush snow. Her swords both intact and well despite tasting the ice the day before, she was thankful for this, and stopped walking.  
  
"JiYong."  
  
He looked at her, and raised both his eyebrows. SooYeon took off one sword's strap and tossed it to his feet.  
  
"Use it if you need to."  
  
JiYong looked to the weapon, and bent over to pick it up. He unsheathed it and the blade glinted, its metal mirrored his widened eyes, as he spoke.  
  
"You grabbed onto this... for her."  
  
SooYeon cocked her head, and began walking to the wood's parting, her other sword faithfully tagged to her back. He raised his voice to have her know.  
  
"Not just anyone would grab onto harm like this."  
  
She squeezed her eyes and hissed.  
  
"Don't think much into it."  
  
"You don't have to."  
  
"What are you saying?"  
  
"You love her - "  
  
"Don't be so sure."  
  
"SooYeon."  
  
He went to her with the sword in both hands, and beseeched with a whisper.  
  
"Listen, I don't understand why you're doing this to her. I know you still love her - you do - that's why I don't understand this. You said you would protect her, but your coldness is killing her. SeungHyun and TaeYang... they wouldn't have wanted this."  
  
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**[Past]**

"I'll come back with SooYeon instead!"  
  
SooYeon heard MiYoung's cheery rejection to SeungHyun, and practiced slicing her sword through an invisible enemy. She intently listened to the rushing footsteps.  
  
"We'll be waiting for you then, SooYeon! Have fun with MiYoung!"  
  
TaeYang shouted as he crunched down on the crisp leaves, and faded into the tall trees. SeungHyun advised kindly, and waited for DaeSung.  
  
"Don't take too long with your practice, and aid the GongJu back to the palace well!"  
  
DaeSung reached SeungHyun and commanded in a bright voice.  
  
"Take as much time as you both want!"  
  
And then they were gone. A bird chirped to the setting sun, and hopped its tiny feet over the brittle branches. It saw MiYoung softly tread to SooYeon.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
The stern frown on SooYeon relaxed into a wry smile, and she replied to the other girl. Her sword whizzing sharply as she practiced with her back to MiYoung.  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"Do you need your jacket back?"  
  
It was draped over MiYoung's shoulders, and she fingered the jacket's open flaps, as SooYeon answered assuredly.  
  
"I am fine with wearing a shirt for now. You shouldn't have to worry about what is mine, as everything is yours under this land."  
  
"Not everything is mine."  
  
"Oh? What?"  
  
"I'm a little embarrassed to tell."  
  
"Well I'm sure there are ways in which you can make it yours."  
  
"You think?"  
  
"You're the GongJu. You probably just have to say it is yours, then it'll be no one's, but rightfully yours."  
  
MiYoung neared and tentatively asked.  
  
"Have you ever kissed?"  
  
SooYeon dropped her sword, and it bounced with a dull clap on the grassy field. MiYoung laughed as the other girl hurriedly knelt down to hide her blush. She kept her head low, and fervently inspected the weapon.  
  
"W - we, in the training for the HwaRang - I - no, I haven't."  
  
She busied herself with wiping the dust collected onto the dirtied sword, and shined it until her face clearly shone in reflection. She also caught a familiar figure approaching in the background, and her stomach flipped at the light voice that blew in her ear.  
  
"They say it's something wonderful when you do it with someone you like."  
  
SooYeon fumbled with her fingers, and scratched her nails over the fallen metal, as MiYoung hugged her from behind. Her stammering grew worse when the GongJu caressed her burning cheek.  
  
"I - um - well, I - *ah!*"  
  
The contact of warm lips against her sensitive ear, made SooYeon jerk in surprise. Hesitant hands claimed her waist, and she balanced herself on her toes. Her right ear was blocked of sound as the lips descended over its inner shell. She could not hear the flutter of wings from birds along with the occasional chirps, yet she heard her own blood rush and roar.  
  
She had suspected MiYoung's yearning for physical intimacy, it became more evident and shameless each time they met. She was scared of it at first, the wandering hands and prying eyes, she tried to deny them. But her uncertain and backwards steps just seemed to propel MiYoung to run forward. The cat - and - mouse game resulted in this; a quiet moment in which SooYeon was cornered for answers, truthful answers, so that MiYoung left SooYeon defenseless.  
  
"I got into a fight with DaeSung today. It wasn't really a fight, but..."   
  
SooYeon hitched her breath when a thumb traced her pronounced cheek.  
  
"He knows about us. He knows what you know... he knows that I like you."  
  
The murmur along her jaw traveled to the corner of her mouth, and SooYeon closed her eyes to the fingertips gliding above her brow.  
  
"He wanted to know if you felt the same for me, and I told him the truth... that I don't know. That you get nervous when I try to touch you, but smile when I wake you. He said I was an idiot for not knowing such a thing, and then we argued for an hour. But looking back, I admit he's right."  
  
MiYoung side - stepped to crouch in front of SooYeon, and bore her eyes to the shut ones.  
  
"Do you like me?"  
  
SooYeon peeled one eye open, and stared at the shoes before her, tailored specially and decorated with jewels, nothing dared to taint their embellished look. The shoes showed the division between them, yet SooYeon lifted her chin to answer. Her hand awkwardly clenching her sword's handle, as she could not control the tremors.  
  
"Yes."  
  
MiYoung gingerly uncurled SooYeon's fingers over the laid sword, and ordered her hoarsely.  
  
"Don't pay attention to that."  
  
SooYeon obeyed and moved it to the side. MiYoung leaned in and connected her forehead to SooYeon's, she whispered with flushed cheeks, unable to hide her embarrassment at such apparent jealousy.  
  
"I want you to pay attention to me... only."  
  
The kiss was hot and unsure, gradually changing as MiYoung clung to SooYeon's wrists, and pressed deeper into the intimate gesture. She slid her lips to wet SooYeon's upper one, and stifled a gasp from the other with another firm kiss. MiYoung opened her eyes and gazed at SooYeon with lust, breathing heavily as she waited for a response. SooYeon breathed through her nose, and raked her teeth over her bottom lip, as she silently deliberated on her next action. She licked her lower lip, and whispered before removing her arms from MiYoung.  
  
"I will."  
  
SooYeon pushed MiYoung gently, the jacket on her back slipping then crumpling into a puddle beneath them. MiYoung watched with an ache, as the other girl hovered over her, eyes closing slowly as she came down. SooYeon's mouth searched for MiYoung's, and took it, as she held herself up by propped elbows. Her tongue flickered out experimentally, and pushed between the swollen lips, conjuring a delicate sound from MiYoung. She brushed MiYoung's smooth tongue with her own, and lowered her raised body, as the other girl grabbed her neck. SooYeon winced when MiYoung broke away from the kiss to bite below her ear. The GongJu pulled back to ask worriedly.  
  
"Did I hurt you?"  
  
SooYeon rasped out a chuckle.  
  
"No."  
  
MiYoung grinned before pulling SooYeon forward by the neck, raising one hand to twine her fingers through the cascading hair. She gnawed lightly at SooYeon's jutting collarbone, and marked the exposed flesh. SooYeon could feel the grains of dirt embedding themselves into her palms, as she clamped her teeth over her lip while MiYoung sucked on her tender skin.   
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
She barely heard the frail words as they drifted over her throat.  
  
"You're too good, but I want you."  
  
MiYoung raised her voice, declaring with an intense gaze, as she grazed her teeth over a quivering lip.  
  
"And I'll love you more than anyone else."  
  
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**[Present]**

"Forget such things."  
  
SooYeon flung down the bait, and drew her shoulders in as she waited impatiently. The string dropped gradually into the punched hole, and waved gently against the chill in the air.  
  
"There's no point in keeping the memories."  
  
She growled at the images of last night, and bit her tongue in irk. She should have tried to resist the touches more, then she wouldn't have to face the guilt of today. She violently whipped her head to the left as SeungHyun's smile and TaeYang's grin floated through her mind.  
  
"Why - "  
  
SooYeon heard a branch snap in half. She had hidden several in the snow for possible intruders earlier, and it seemed one would near her soon.  
  
"Who's there? Come out!"  
  
SooYeon threatened loudly, and waited as she gripped her sword's handle.  
  
"I - it's me."  
  
MiYoung appeared to her with an unsteady gait, she stood behind a tree, and covered half her face as SooYeon released the hold on her sword. SooYeon exhaled through her nose, then breathed in heavily through her lips, she asked with a furrowed brow.  
  
"Why are you here?"  
  
"I just thought you might need help? Couldn't I stay in case of anything?"  
  
The answer was too hopeful to be rejected, and too pitiful to be ignored. MiYoung saw SooYeon's displeased stare, and she fretted silently by wringing her hands together. She was not, however, apologetic enough to take back her request. SooYeon had not properly slept throughout the night. She wanted some peace for her mind to clarify all the muddled thoughts before they became a full - blown chaos. MiYoung would just interrupt her mental organizing. She opened her mouth to speak, and halted at the pair of downcast eyes. SooYeon's muscles were also not in the best of conditions, it wouldn't be wise to overexert one's self for such a journey. She would let MiYoung win this round, and bore a brooding frown, as she gestured to a spot on a fallen log.   
  
"I hope you understand that I'm not in the mood for a talk."  
  
She was too tired to yell, and the smile on the other girl blanked her senses. She simply sat down on the lumber in front of the fishing hole. MiYoung skirted around the rim of the opening, and sat to the right of SooYeon, the edge of her dress brushing lightly over the tip of SooYeon's scuffed shoes. The string in the water swung back and forth, going in sync with their breaths. SooYeon felt her eyes start to throb, a sure signal that she was concentrating too hard, and on unstoppable things.   
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
SooYeon rubbed her eyes languidly, as her temples started to pulse with the same rhythm. She drawled out her response, her words failing to reach a higher pitch, as she shook away the pain.  
  
"Why do you say my name?"  
  
"Because I want you to look at me."  
  
"We agreed not to talk, didn't we?"  
  
"We don't have to talk. I just want you to look at me."  
  
SooYeon noticed how MiYoung scooted closer, moving surreptitiously to avoid garnering attention, she sighed inwardly at the sly attempt.   
  
"You'll say no more if I look at you?"  
  
"Yes."  
  
SooYeon lifted up her head, mouth set to a grimace, eyes hardened with burden, and lips chapped to the weather's state, but MiYoung smiled in endearment at her appearance. SooYeon couldn't appreciate it.  
  
"Why do you smile like that?"  
  
MiYoung answered with a playful tone.  
  
"I can answer the question?"  
  
SooYeon knitted her eyebrows and replied tersely.  
  
"Yes."  
  
"Because your face makes me happy."  
  
"I don't understand you."  
  
"Yes, you do."  
  
The two girls are side - by - side, and MiYoung places her fingers cautiously over SooYeon's knee.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
The other girl made no reply, but MiYoung spoke with mirth.  
  
"How hard is it to catch a fish?"  
  
"Somewhat."  
  
"How hard is it to make you smile?"  
  
SooYeon said nothing to this, and MiYoung widely grinned to the possibilities swirling around in her head. She suggested hesitantly, adding weight to the hold on SooYeon's knee.  
  
"What if I could make your frown into a smile? Before the day ends that is."  
  
"You can't do that."  
  
"What if I can? Would you grant one wish?"  
  
"Why do you even want that?"  
  
"I want anything from you."  
  
The challenge intrigued her, enough to distract her mind of its previous worries. She declared in a voice close to condescending.  
  
"Go ahead then, if you can - "  
  
SooYeon then felt a hand slam onto her chest, shoving her backwards. The force lifted her feet up into the air, and she slid off the log. She grunted as her head hit the soft ice, and looked with disbelieving eyes to the girl smirking above. Her voice betrayed a flicker of hurt as she asked.  
  
"Why did you push me?"  
  
"Since your frown's upside - down, it's a smile now, right?"  
  
The GongJu in turn held up a self - satisfied grin, and clasped her knees as she thrust her face to SooYeon. The tip of her nose hovering over a set of stupefied eyes.  
  
"I get to have my wish granted, don't I? I know they regard promises and contracts highly in the teachings of the HwaRang."  
  
SooYeon hunched her shoulders, and stressed the muscles in her thighs, as she lifted her torso up from the snow.  
  
"That was not fair."  
  
"All I said was that I'd turn your frown into a smile, yes?"  
  
SooYeon wiped the frost off her back, recollecting herself with careful movement, and scowled out a response.  
  
"What is it that you want?"  
  
"How about we start from the beginning?"  
  
"What beginning?"  
  
"Let's start with holding hands again."  
  
"That - "  
  
"You allowed one request to be made, and that is all I want for today."  
  
SooYeon tightened her jaw, and turned her face away. MiYong was despondent at the expected response. She was in the process of standing up when fingernails, careful and sharp, scraped over her hand roughly. There was a long pause and a dry whisper, one that made MiYoung clasp the lingering hand above hers in bliss.  
  
"I'm just holding your hand because of my word. Don't think too much of this."  
  
"You don't really need to."  
  
MiYoung traced her fingertips over the coarse skin and its protruding knuckles. SooYeon winced with slitted eyes as the other girl thumbed the torn cut on her palm, and questioned uneasily.  
  
"It doesn't repulse you to touch that?"  
  
MiYoung silently counted the creases scattered over the calloused palm, and answered into SooYeon's ear.  
  
"This little scar brightens my whole day. I don't want anyone else to touch it."  
  
MiYoung was too content in watching their silhouette on the ice, merged and inseparable, than to have noticed the frown slip away on SooYeon's face. SooYeon was not smiling, but her eyes softened at MiYoung's fragile form, emphasized by the dress billowing in the wind. Her words nearly died with her uncertainty.  
  
"You must still be tired from yesterday's event. Go sleep, and get rest."  
  
MiYoung shook her head, intertwined her fingers with SooYeon's, and said with a yawn.  
  
"There's no use in going back."  
  
She blinked her eyes blearily, her worn smile indicating the peace she felt, and groggily murmured with SooYeon's hand pressed over her thigh.  
  
"In the end I can't rest until you return."  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 8**

"Who is she, JiYong?"  
  
SooYeon jerked her head to a stranger, snoring quite loudly and in an inconsistent pattern, by the side of their glowing fire.  
  
"Who is she?"  
  
SooYeon's hiss was dangerously low, and seconds passed before JiYong sputtered up a clarification.  
  
"SHE'S - I SWEAR SHE JUST CAME OUT OF NOWHERE - I DON'T KNOW HER NAME!"  
  
He was too lost in his own confusion to answer coherently. SooYeon bared her clenched teeth, and seethed with distaste.  
  
"I go out to catch fish. I also watch over the GongJu - and you can't even keep out intruders?"  
  
The fish were perforated along a stick in SooYeon's left hand, and they shook as she spat out her irritation. MiYoung had SooYeon's right hand, and squeezed it with a soothing whisper.  
  
"She didn't bring harm. Maybe she can help us?"  
  
SooYeon controlled her breathing, and cleared her throat, as she let go of the other girl's hand. She instructed her in the most passive tone she could muster in such a situation.  
  
"Give the fish to JiYong, and have him gut them. I'll deal with the girl."  
  
MiYoung nodded and accepted the caught food, delighted with the way SooYeon had exclusively treated her. She hoped the tenderness would carry on over to the stranger, but her hope quickly shrank when SooYeon reached for the stranger's collar. Her tone was monotonous despite having lifted the girl up into the air with her right hand.  
  
"Who are you?"  
  
The girl in SooYeon's hold roused in a disorientated manner, and slurred her words, which added fuel to SooYeon's surliness.  
  
"What? Oh, hello."  
  
The girl stretched back her arms and yawned shamelessly, her legs freely dangling over the ground. SooYeon swallowed the frustration threatening to erupt out of her throat, and whispered with a twitching grin.  
  
"We do not need to greet ourselves, rather I would like it more if you could answer my question."  
  
The girl dropped her arms, and smiled lazily.  
  
"What question?"  
  
"WHAT IS YOUR NAME?"  
  
"Oh...HyunA."  
  
"And why are you here, HyunA?"  
  
"I saw your smoke!"  
  
Hyuna squeaked over the rumpled grip on her collar. She smiled brightly to both JiYong and MiYoung, and waved as she asked the pair gleefully.  
  
"Are you preparing a meal?"  
  
SooYeon lowered HyunA, and roughly pushed her to the left, purposely obstructing her view from the others. She persisted with her interrogation.  
  
"What do you do for a living?"  
  
"Me? I'm just a wandering merchant. Could I eat with you people?"  
  
"No."  
  
"What? Why not?"  
  
"You've received enough by sleeping here without permission. Now go, and disturb someone else."  
  
"*Aw*, don't be like that! I'm a merchant, and I can be of use to you people - look!"  
  
HyunA directed SooYeon's gaze to a oversized pack lying to the right of her feet, folds of silk and clutters of silverware hung by the straps. HyunA smiled with child - like pride.  
  
"Eh? Eh? Good, right?"  
  
"No, now go away."  
  
"BUT I HAVEN'T EATEN FOR DAYS! I MIGHT DIE TOMORROW!"  
  
"Then leave now, and spare us the burden."  
  
"SHOW MERCY TO A STRANGER, PLEASE!"  
  
"No - "  
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
MiYoung gently laid a hand over SooYeon's back, her fingers easing down a rigid spine.  
  
"SooYeon, she doesn't seem to be of threat, and we did catch enough fish. Maybe we can just allow mercy this once?"  
  
The rub on SooYeon's back was mollifying, her anger diminishing as HyunA's smile was growing, she groused as she walked away.  
  
"Leave after the meal."  
  
---  
  
"What do you think about her?"  
  
JiYong whispered to SooYeon while he wrinkled his nose in quiet surveillance. The doctor and warrior were crouching over the river's bend, encircling a hole in the ice. HyunA had created the hole with an odd tool, eager in aiding as she had consumed most of the fish. The merchant was raucously making jokes and telling small gossip, as MiYoung attentively listened over their finished meal.  
  
SooYeon answered without thinking twice.  
  
"I don't like her."  
  
"Oh, I don't think she's that bad. I mean she's been able to hold her own ground until now. It's incredible, isn't it? So young for her age too."  
  
"Oh, she's incredible, all right."  
  
"Yeah, isn't she - "  
  
"Look at her."  
  
HyunA had been holding up a fishbone, and had been waving it overtly after every other sentence, but stopped suddenly. She squinted at the bone in hand, saw a speck of meat at its end, and tugged a corner of her mouth downwards. She then gobbled the tiny morsel of meat with a smile, and tossed the bone over her shoulder as she joyously resumed her gab.  
  
JiYong chuckled and agreed to a level with SooYeon.  
  
"Well, it is true that GongJuNim shouldn't hang out with someone of such class and... manners. But she did bring along a lot of useful instruments in her possessions. I don't think it would a bad idea to have her tag along?"  
  
SooYeon sighed and probed the fishing rod impaled into the snow by her side. She flicked the stick with her tapered fingers, and told JiYong.  
  
"We're here doing this because we need to catch fish in case of emergencies along our way. Another mouth to feed will become troublesome if we are not able to provide as easily."  
  
The line in the water gave a sharp tug, and SooYeon deftly yanked the string out. A fish squirmed on the end, and its scales glistened against the sunlight. SooYeon admitted to JiYong with some reluctance.  
  
"But it looks like she does bring benefits."  
  
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The tools on HyunA's pack made an eccentric song as they walked, a medley of low rings and sharp whistles, it would have normally driven SooYeon mad. But the music was tolerable today, because today MiYoung had held her hand, and the touch was already sorely missed. The unpredictable melody made her forget the gone bliss, it made her guilt less, and for that she was thankful.  
  
"Hey, SooYeon! I'm *tired*! Can we take a quick rest?"  
  
And yet the owner of such music could not be as aiding.  
  
"This is such a long walk! Why are we in such a hurry?"  
  
HyunA whined and threw her head back, a pout resting on her lips, as she screwed her eyes shut in complaint. SooYeon had subconsciously inched her hand to her sword, her fingers grazing over its sleek metal. She heaved a sigh, and explained to HyunA as civilly as possible.  
  
"We need to reach a village. If you cannot keep up, you may leave."  
  
HyunA whimpered at the penetrating glare, and pouted as she asked pitifully.  
  
"But why do we have to get there so quickly?"  
  
Of course, HyunA was uninformed of her team's true status and rank in society. The trio planned to keep HyunA's ignorance alive. It would take hours in explaining the tricky situation, and SooYeon also perceived that it would be wiser in keeping some things a secret. She simply told little of the truth.  
  
"We need to find someone."  
  
HyunA dropped her pout, and immediately became fascinated.  
  
"Find someone? Who? Why? Is it a man, or a woman? Does the person owe you people something - this is so exciting!"  
  
HyunA squealed and skipped past JiYong and MiYoung to be closer to SooYeon. She clutched her pack tightly, and brilliantly smiled to the other girl. She must have taken notice of the frown on SooYeon's face because she warily drew back with an unsure laugh.  
  
"Yeah, um... you don't have to answer any of that. I'll shut up now."  
  
She hunched her shoulders, and proceeded back to where she had been, her large backpack covering her petite frame, it looked as if the sack had legs. SooYeon watched her go down with a relief, and caught MiYoung's gaze as she was about to look away. She wanted to stop looking, but was unable to break away from the stare. MiYoung's eyes were beautiful, the kind of eyes that could never fool any one, the kind that told you how they felt, and right now they depicted a fond affection. SooYeon wondered how anyone could love her so much, and unconsciously licked her upper lip in habit. MiYoung knew the habit well, it meant SooYeon was nervous. The GongJu pretended as if she saw nothing, and cast her eyes to the ground with an unreadable smile.  
  
She liked that SooYeon no longer had on a mask.   
  
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"Hey, hey, by the way!"  
  
Everyone, even SooYeon in her weariness, listened to HyunA's cry. The little chat earlier did shut HyunA up on the complaints, but it did not suppress the girl of her talkative nature.  
  
"So you all heard about the foreigners, eh?"  
  
A murmur from JiYong, a vigorous nod from MiYoung, and a blank stare from SooYeon, which was everyone's own way of agreeing. Hyuna broke into a grin, and chortled.  
  
"I happened to meet one recently while I was wandering! There were several of them, but I met two originally from here! One came from China, and the other from Japan - I still remember their names! HyoYeon and SooYoung... they went to the nations in hopes of meeting the Westerners and learning from them - look at what I managed to haggle!"  
  
SooYeon disliked the idea of encouraging HyunA's yapping, but she was curious enough to overlook the nuisance. HyunA set her pack down gently, and pulled off a knot to rummage inside. She brought out a heavy blanket, rolled into a peculiar shape, and slowly unraveled the bundle. The blanket revealed three mysterious devices, one being more taller than the other two, and two small boxes. HyunA piped in a loud voice, clearly happy with what she had purchased.  
  
"They're called guns!"  
  
SooYeon kept her eyes on the three gadgets, as HyunA explained their functions.  
  
"These are able to surpass arrows - these three! And these boxes by the side contain things called bullets! You insert the bullets into the guns, and fire them by pulling this crescent moon - shaped thing here... so the gun is like the bow, and the bullet is like the arrow! I heard a single bullet can drop a man to the ground a thousand feet away!"  
  
She pointed to the two smaller guns.  
  
"They're called revolvers. Colts? I forget the name exactly..."  
  
She sheepishly laughed, and hurried on with her explanation.  
  
"And this one! This one has a name: Henry! He's a rifle!"  
  
SooYeon ignored the extended examination of the rifle, and felt her eyes drift back over to the revolvers. HyunA saw SooYeon's interested gaze, and ran up to her, the goods held over her arms.  
  
"Hey, hey, you look like you could easily use these! Yeah, they look made for someone like you!"  
  
She presented the guns to SooYeon, and SooYeon drew back cautiously. She shifted her eyes over to the identical pair, and muttered the following question.  
  
"How much for those two?"  
  
JiYong's mouth fell open and he gawked with amazed eyes, while MiYoung also mutely showed her surprise by holding onto her breath. HyunA giggled and nudged SooYeon's side amiably.  
  
"So you're interested in these, eh? These may not be as powerful as the rifle, but they can still fire far! And tell you what... I'll let you have them for free. No charge, and all of the bullets - which is many - free!"  
  
SooYeon reached for the weapons, but HyunA nimbly stepped back from the approaching hand. She tutted, and reasoned with SooYeon's smoldering look.  
  
"Eh, eh, *but*... just a small, tiny, minuscule bargain?"  
  
SooYeon's eyes darkened briefly. She raised an eyebrow and casually replied.  
  
"Name your price."  
  
"I knew you'd be a good customer! Oh, people like you know what they want, and they get what they want - okay, okay, I'll stop, so please don't reach for your sword! So, *ahem*, the price is that I stay with you good folks? Even after your journey to the village ends?"   
  
SooYeon considered it, her eyelids drooped, and with hooded eyes she speculated the worth of the deal. She involuntarily flinched when a touch landed on her sensitive palm. It was MiYoung, and her fingers gingerly caressed the gash on her hand. She whispered into SooYeon's ear.  
  
"I don't think it's a bad deal at all. You should take it."  
  
SooYeon failed to retract her hand from the warm brushes. A grumble escaped her lips, but her arm stayed where it was.  
  
"There's no need to touch my hand - "  
  
"Oh, but I won a challenge, didn't I?"  
  
MiYoung then slipped her fingers between SooYeon's, and whispered in a cheeky voice filled with ease.  
  
"And I wished for it to be held for a day. I don't think I need to remind you how long a day is, do I?"  
  
SooYeon blushed at the friendly taunt, and became aware of HyunA's suspicious stare. The merchant cocked her head, and mumbled as she shifted her eyes back and forth to the two girls.  
  
"Are you two together - "  
  
SooYeon tore her hand away from MiYoung and yelled.  
  
"I'LL ACCEPT YOUR BARGAIN!"  
  
"Ah - good! You can load six bullets - see how you pull this little fin only halfway out like this? And then you snap this out, and put in the bullets into these chambers. Snap the rolling thing back on, and pull this fin all the way back to fire. Here are the oils to clean the parts, and you also have to disassemble a few things to make sure all of the bullet shells empty out - I'll explain all that in more specific detail later! Go ahead, why don't you try it? But make sure to cover both your ears. I hear the sound is something else!"  
  
SooYeon merely glanced at the loaded gun and its boxes, she swiveled her head to study her surroundings. HyunA rolled her bundle back up, and set it to her feet. She rubbed her hands together, and hummed thoughtfully, as she helped SooYeon look for a target.  
  
"How about... no, no, there's no way you can hit that... even with that gun..."  
  
SooYeon heard the judgement, and felt a prickle of indignation flare up at having been gauged of her skills. She asked coldly to the other girl.  
  
"What can I not hit?"  
  
HyunA looked back to SooYeon and frowned innocently.  
  
"I mean, no offense to your skills, but there's no way you could hit that nut over there, eh?"  
  
HyunA directed everyone's gaze to a single nut hanging over a remote tree. The winter breeze traveling over the land rocked the little shell's body from the branch it hung. HyunA surmised as she squinted her eyes.  
  
"I mean there's no way - "  
  
A deafening sound ripped through the area.   
  
HyunA fell flat on her face in the snow, and JiYong tumbled backwards in paralyzed shock. A sliver of smoke was flying to the clouds, its origins traced back down to the barrel of a gun, the owner of the gun being a smug - faced SooYeon. HyunA stuttered in an appalled state, while JiYong shakily drew up to his knees.  
  
"W - what - "  
  
"I got it."  
  
HyunA and JiYong snapped their heads to the tree at the composed remark, and saw the branch completely intact, but missing of its small fruit. JiYong looked back at SooYeon, as he checked for MiYoung, and frantically admonished.  
  
"That sound could have damaged the GongJu's... ears..."  
  
SooYeon had her right arm extended, the gun lifted before her eyes, and had her left arm wrapped protectively over MiYoung's head. Her left hand clamped firmly over MiYoung's left ear, as the right ear was pressed up against her chest. SooYeon blinked then lowered the gun, she grinned crookedly, and loudly confessed.  
  
"Sorry... I can't hear a thing right now."  
  
She let go of MiYoung, and the GongJu slipped back to worriedly whisper.  
  
"What about your ears - "  
  
"Can you hear?"  
  
"W - what?"  
  
SooYeon kept her slanted smile, and questioned, twisting her mouth as she cupped her own damaged ear.  
  
"I can't hear a thing you say right now, but I just want to know if you're able to hear - just nod if you can."  
  
MiYoung nodded, a little awestruck at how nonchalantly SooYeon was handling her temporary loss. HyunA stepped forward to explain to MiYoung.  
  
"She should actually get her hearing completely back after some time. You folks don't need to worry too much."  
  
Hyuna gave a convincing smile, and SooYeon shouted to the group.  
  
"Let's get going again!"  
  
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They were in a small room, much smaller than the one they had occupied last time, but this was perhaps for the better, as it did conserve heat. They had arrived at dusk to a village, and had cooked up a hot and nourishing dinner. It was enough to stuff their stomachs, and although SooYeon hated to admit it, HyunA livened their meal times considerably. The food was effective in tempting the team into sleep, and they each went off to undress and retire for the night.  
  
SooYeon had her hearing back for a while now, but kept quiet about it.  
  
She heard HyunA's snore, heightened to its peak by the day's long walk, and JiYong's rustling, as he tossed wood to a furnace. SooYeon's mind was swimming towards sleep when MiYoung's query floated over her ear.  
  
"SooYeon, can you still not hear?"  
  
SooYeon was loyal to the pretense of sleeping and of not hearing. Her eyelids did not flutter when her blanket rose, and MiYoung's icy toes touched her heels. She suppressed a shudder when a nose pressed pleasantly over the nape of her neck.  
  
"If you don't say anything, then that means you're allowing me to sleep next to you."   
  
The memory of the red room flashed in her mind when MiYoung edged closer, her breath shallow behind SooYeon's ear. The bloodied snow made an appearance behind her closed eyes, as MiYoung's kiss tickled her shoulder. It was painstaking, yet SooYeon feigned her act of slumber. Fingers clasped around the pulse on her wrist then became lax. The breathing on her neck took on a moderate pace, and the toes grazing the soles of her feet gathered heat; MiYoung was asleep. A soft scoff expelled from her mouth as SooYeon whispered.  
  
"Using such cheap tactics to win..."  
  
The moon was bright for the night, and SooYeon stared at it in her talk.  
  
"First a hit to win my smile, then a deal made when I'm supposedly deaf... you didn't do either fairly."  
  
MiYoung mumbled and nuzzled her face closer. SooYeon froze when the hand on her wrist slipped under her shirt, she bit her lower lip to stifle a yelp. Her stomach became taut with every brush of the fingertips, they played over her abdomen, as MiYoung's breathing produced their movement. SooYeon sharply inhaled and hissed.  
  
"And now this. If you're going to win unfairly... at least look at me..."  
  
SooYeon rolled over with difficulty, scared that the constant fidgeting might wake MiYoung in her unconscious state. She hovered her lips over the bridge of the sleeping girl's nose, and grinned with a raspy voice.  
  
"You're so weak..."   
  
She chastely kissed between MiYoung's eyebrows, then struggled internally for a dwindling moment before kissing her cheek. She rolled over to return to her former position after having stared at MiYoung's face for an hour. Guilt - ridden as she was, SooYeon leaned back, stopping when she felt the other girl's teeth mark her bare neck, and aligned her torso to match behind MiYoung's chest. She said a whisper and snorted softly, thinking at how ironic it was for MiYoung to be sleeping, momentarily deaf to what she had to say.  
  
"You're so weak for someone who could easily have all of me."  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 9**

"Can I have some?"  
  
HyunA lifted her chopsticks into the air, and hungrily eyed MiYoung's bowl. The GongJu had been given a pricier dish, and was in the act of sharing it, when SooYeon's swift hand brought the bowl back. The bowl teetered to a stop as SooYeon glowered.  
  
"Eat from your own."  
  
HyunA whined and spoke under her breath.  
  
"Your favoritism is so obvious - "  
  
"I can see your lips moving."  
  
The merchant sighed, and finished the last of her rice. She furtively glanced at JiYong's plate, eyes shifting back and forth, and asked him.  
  
"So this person you're looking for... he's not at the village you're heading towards?"  
  
JiYong nervously watched HyunA's greedy eyes, and handed over his plate with a sigh.  
  
"Yes."  
  
HyunA squealed and wore a smile, she shoveled the combined tray of food, and chewed through her question.  
  
"What are you going to the village for then? A waste of time, isn't it?"  
  
JiYong cringed as he searched the air for an answer, and leaned back as he replied.  
  
"We think it would be best to start from where he was seen last, and ask around from there. We're hoping someone could give us information on where he went?"  
  
A burp burst out of HyunA, and she lazily hung over the back of her chair. She turned her face to the direction of MiYoung, looking past the GongJu's head to observe the fast - moving crowd behind them, and wiped the corner of her mouth with a thumb. She spoke in a drawl.  
  
"I guess we should get going then, eh?"  
  
SooYeon got up from her seat, her bowl already emptied, and picked up her swords. She slipped the straps of the weapons over her head, and counted the coins in her palm. She dropped the money onto the middle of their table, silently pressuring everyone to prepare and leave, then stalked away. Steering clear of the bustling people lining the open street, she heard her team jog to her with clumsy steps.  
  
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"I'll catch your entire family! All fifty - thousand of your brothers and sisters!"  
  
HyunA delightedly proclaimed, as she jabbed the dried fish hanging on JiYong's satchel. SooYeon refrained in rolling her eyes, and hopped down from a large rock. She dusted off her hands, and instructed to JiYong and HyunA.  
  
"It looks like you could fish a quarter of a mile from here."  
  
The equipped duo nodded, and began walking down a trampled path. HyunA whirled her head, and teased in an impudent tone.  
  
"While we catch a family, don't go and make a family of your own!"  
  
SooYeon snarled back, defensive at the remark.  
  
"What's that supposed to mean?"  
  
HyunA grinned widely, her pointer finger carefully stroking her chin, and tilted her head back to slyly speak.  
  
"Don't underestimate me just because I'm young! I know far more than you two think - "  
  
JiYong pulled the merchant towards him, and scurried off, not liking the way SooYeon had glared. He sighed as HyunA giggled and ran ahead of him, gloating in triumph at having seen SooYeon's flabbergasted face. She looked over her shoulder to JiYong, and suggested with an impish grin.  
  
"Maybe we should take longer in fishing today? Give them some time to make love - "  
  
"I beg of you, let us walk in silence, please."  
  
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An hour, and SooYeon watched the fire before her in turmoil. She had built it in a frenzy, her mind refusing to cooperate with her body. MiYoung had quietly brought a log and sat on it, perpendicular to SooYeon, as the other girl created the flames in madness. SooYeon watched the embers now with the GongJu, still distraught over HyunA's blunt statements.   
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
SooYeon jerked her head up and was about to answer, prepared in putting up a facade, when the frightened glint in MiYoung's eye made her reconsider. MiYoung was looking past her head, at something behind her. She asked the petrified girl in a composed voice.  
  
"Is there someone behind me?"  
  
MiYoung barely nodded, her tongue stuck over the edge of her teeth, and looked at SooYeon, terrified. SooYeon smiled, reassuring MiYoung, and ordered her as she stood.  
  
"Go down the path JiYong and HyunA took. Run."  
  
The other girl was frozen in place, as SooYeon unsheathed her swords,. She brandished them as she turned to face the intruder, and told MiYoung again.  
  
"Go."  
  
MiYoung unsteadily got up from her seat, leaving SooYeon with the masked man. She turned, a panic starting to take control of her mind, and vanished into the trees ahead.  
  
"Who are you?"  
  
SooYeon asked then snorted loudly at her own question - did she really expect an honest answer? He whipped out his own weapons, and ran to her, his sword swinging then ringing with her keen blocks. He slid back and barked a laugh, liking the way her eyes glazed over with an impassive smirk, then reached back and tossed an object high into the air. SooYeon reared back as it hit the ground, its explosion rippling out rings of acrid dust and smoke. She coughed violently, then covered her nose with the crook of an elbow, squinting tearfully as the dust rose. She cried out as a kick connected to her right arm, it sent her flying to the side, and she skidded across the cold ground. The man walked to her, taking off his mask as he leered. He cocked his head and hooked the disguise over his neck, as he held up his sword, and primed to end SooYeon's life.  
  
"STOP!"  
  
MiYoung interjected into the fight, rushing forth from where she had hidden.  
  
"STOP - "  
  
SooYeon had quickly stood up and caught MiYoung's arm. She thrust her back, and growled sternly, furious at the girl for exposing herself to such danger.  
  
"GET AWAY FROM HERE!"  
  
She whipped her head back to the assassin, and awkwardly held up her swords, blinking back the stinging in her eyes. He was pleased at the potential of killing both the girls, and sprinted to SooYeon, using her afflicted condition as advantage. SooYeon tried to deflect the on - coming assault, but wheezed and shut her eyes. She haphazardly shielded herself with a sword, and yelped when the man's weapon managed to taste her skin. His blade retracted and its tip shined with her blood.  
  
It hurt immensely. She gasped wordlessly and dropped one sword, as she clutched her torso. Her wound open and throbbing, no longer numb from the shock of it all. She stumbled onto one knee, her footing becoming weak to the pain in her body, and a dark hue painted over her whitened knuckles. She shut an eye, the image in front of her blurring in spasms, and forced herself up. SooYeon understood that the enemy knew she was injured, but just how much, she hoped he would never find out. Her arm lashed out and she struck against his sword. The metal clapped harshly against its own kind, and she cringed as the hit reverberated throughout her body. Beads of sweat rolled down to her chin, and she hoarsely responded to his sneer.  
  
"I've been pretty accepting of foul moves lately... but that one... I don't think I can accept that one peacefully."  
  
She clutched at her injury and swung her weapon again. The man adroitly dodged her attack, and was rearing back to gain another hit. She dug her toes into the watery ground, and was expecting his flight when he suddenly changed his path. He was dashing towards MiYoung, and SooYeon, for a brief second, saw the color red in her mind.  
  
Losing friends, then a parent of some sort, was enough to hollow a space in her heart. Losing MiYoung would make life unacceptable.  
  
She raised her sword and pulled back her arm, throwing it as she locked onto her target. It drove straight through the man's back, eliciting a strangled cry from him, and she sauntered to his sinking form. Her whisper as icy as her eyes, and her mind completely detached from morality.  
  
"Don't touch her."  
  
She palmed the end of her sword's handle, and rammed the weapon deeper into him.  
  
"No one touches her."  
  
She hadn't noticed the hand clinging onto her wrist until a palm touched her cheek. Her sanity slowly coming back into place, as MiYoung stood by her and tearfully repeated.  
  
"SooYeon, SooYeon, he's dead! Stop, please!"  
  
SooYeon uncoiled her fingers from the sword's end, and focused her eyes to the man, his head lolling to the right. She dismissed the pang of pity as arms coaxed her to turn away.  
  
"You're bleeding - lay down, please!"  
  
She did as she was told, and swallowed the raw discomfort in her throat, her body registering the injury near her ribs. MiYoung proceeded to tear the hem of her dress when a shadow fell over the crown of her head. The enemy had been feigning his death, and with his last ounce of strength was ready in taking revenge. SooYeon cursed as he staggered to their side.   
  
"HEY, SHISH KABOB!"  
  
Her body jumped off the snow when a shot rang out. The man had been standing still, but then slumped down into a puddle as the noise died out, his face colored crimson and indistinguishable.  
  
"Are you guys, okay?"  
  
HyunA went scrambling down to SooYeon, and a tightly - lipped JiYong followed suit. He hissed at her cut and opened a pouch by his sash. HyunA laid a gun down by her feet, and set a hand over MiYoung's shuddering shoulder. The merchant quietly whispered.  
  
"I guess we'll have to delay our trip, eh?"  
  
SooYeon had a lot in mind to ask. Where did HyunA learn to shoot like that? Would JiYong be able to patch her enough to resume their journey? Why is MiYoung still crying? Why did she have to cry? What would have happened if she had died? Would MiYoung also have died?  
  
SooYeon bit on her tongue and scrunched her nose in pain as JiYong wiped away her blood with a stinging cloth. He whispered apologetically, and ducked his head as he pulled out a needle.  
  
"The nearest village from here is about five miles off. I'm sorry if this will hurt, but we can't afford to have you lose more blood..."  
  
SooYeon, despite all the ache, chuckled and replied in a frail tone.  
  
"I'm fine. Do what you have to do."  
  
JiYong bit his lower lip and breathed out through his nose, despondent at knowing how much pain SooYeon will experience. He looked up hopefully to HyunA and asked.  
  
"Do you by chance have any sort of alcohol?"  
  
HyunA laughed nervously and sheepishly answered.  
  
"I, um, I drank it all before meeting you folks..."  
  
SooYeon snorted at the shy admittance, and JiYong sighed heavily as he explained to SooYeon.  
  
"I was hoping to ease some of your pain."  
  
SooYeon wryly smiled and shut her eyes as he lowered his needle. She had tried to ignore MiYoung's woeful eyes during the whole ordeal, too afraid that she might break down and comfort her, but it seemed pointless as a pair of arms held her head. A hand covered her eyes and a coo comforted her.   
  
"It'll be over soon."  
  
SooYeon trusted JiYong in his dexterity. He worked nimbly under pressure, but he could not prevent the shots of agony coursing throughout her nerves. She gritted her teeth and felt MiYoung hug her tightly. She was whispering and tracing her lips over SooYeon's ear.  
  
"I love you."  
  
The suturing was torture, every puncturing from the needle and pulling of the string sent waves of agony up her spine. But SooYeon listened to MiYoung's words, affected by them more than anything else.   
  
"SooYeon, I love you."  
  
---  
  
HyunA and JiYong muttered amongst themselves about the mysterious man. They had cleaned the area his body had stained, and had given him a proper burial. There was nothing on him, except for a pouch of coins, which HyunA had claimed to be wound fees.  
  
No one objected as they did need the extra cash in buying more medical supplies for SooYeon. They would have to restock at the next village, for now they rested inside a shabby cabin, which HyunA had spotted earlier on the way to the fishing hole. JiYong had removed SooYeon's sword from the man's back. He had taken a full hour in extricating it, and he grimaced at having tangibly felt her murderous determination. JiYoung propped the swords against a wall, and quietly announced.  
  
"I'm going out to find some herbs."  
  
HyunA also chimed in.  
  
"I'll be outside to keep watch!"  
  
They both left in a flurry of steps, silently assigning MiYoung to SooYeon's make - shift bed. She attended to the sweating girl and sponged her forehead with a damp cloth. SooYeon played back the fight in her mind, and remembered all the emotions from it.  
  
So weak.  
  
Her stance to remain apathetic to MiYoung had been dissolving, SooYeon knew this, and was infuriated at her disintegrating resilience.  
  
What happened along the way?   
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
That happened along the way.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
That voice happened along the way. It carried a drop of caution, a smile full of love, and a timid request for attention. It wasn't just the voice. It was the obstinance that accompanied it.   
  
"Are you feeling better?"  
  
SooYeon turned her face to the right, and drew the blanket up to her chin, setting a barrier in place. Her words were a notch above a whisper, but she couldn't muster a tone of indifference.   
  
"Stop asking."  
  
They were alone, which was probably why MiYoung sat down next to her on the heated floor. They were both sick of all the questions in their head, which was probably why MiYoung whispered into her ear.  
  
"What are you hiding from me?"  
  
MiYoung's fingers parted over the back of her hand, and slid between her fingers, trapping her onto the thin bed. The GongJu was always a little foolhardy, crossing lines just to get SooYeon's smile. It wouldn't have mattered if JiYong and HyunA were to have entered the room, she would have still placed her lips over SooYeon's icy ear.   
  
"Is it something difficult to understand? Try me, perhaps I'll be more understanding than you think?"  
  
"Let me go - "  
  
SooYeon gasped at the tongue that swirled over her earlobe, she pulled at her caught hand, triggering another whisper from MiYoung.  
  
"I don't want to. I never did."  
  
Her toes curled as MiYoung bit below her jaw. SooYeon was abashed at the way she writhed helplessly, squirming under the strong and resolute hold. Strained noises bubbled out of her throat, as kisses were showered over her neck. She eyed the window, scared of being found in such a position, but only saw dripping icicles. An indication of winter's end for the day, and perhaps, a foretelling of her own present predicament.  
  
Afterall, everyone knew ice melted under fire.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
MiYoung pleaded, her bottom lip threatening to quiver.  
  
"Love me?"  
  
MiYoung's mouth was hovering over her cheek, going down a path until breathing hotly at the corner of her mouth. SooYeon stiffened, as the other girl pressed forward with a searing kiss, her trapped hand fisted the blanket underneath. She sat up, breaking the kiss with a wet and soft pop, her chest heaving with her arms' wavering support. Her side inducing a splitting pain as she stretched her wound. She gazed directly at MiYoung, and tensed uncomfortably, realizing how close truth dangled off her tongue.  
  
"I - "  
  
She sucked in a breath, her eyes watering at the burden she kept chained to her soul.   
  
"I'm not in a position where I can accept your love."  
  
She was supposed to stop there, it was, afterall, all she had planned to say. But the confession had been earnest, and SooYeon was tired with the heaviness of lies.  
  
"I'm not good, and you..."  
  
Her jaw hurt from all the grinding, and she pried apart her teeth.  
  
"You deserve someone better than good. You deserve someone who could protect all their loved ones. I couldn't do that..."  
  
SooYeon looked up, exhausted at revealing the small bit of herself, tongue darting nervously over her lip. She expected, but would never comprehend the way MiYoung kissed her, silencing her faults. SooYeon spoke through the bruising lips, she wanted MiYoung to reconsider.  
  
"I'm wretched and damned. My friends have died because of me. I have nothing to offer you - "  
  
MiYoung pushed her hand through the opening on her shirt, and made SooYeon hiss, as she trailed her nails over the bandaged area. She gently laid her lover back down, and kissed her fevered cheek. MiYoung's mouth dragged over to her swollen lips, she admitted fervently.  
  
"I don't need much..."  
  
SooYeon's eyes widened. She twisted her mouth into a frown and narrowed her eyes, it made her sore to hear such candor. The GongJu had steadfastly nursed her throughout the whole journey. And she was nothing but a mere servant. A horrible servant. SooYeon decided it was time to finally cure her weeping master of all the harm she had inflicted.   
  
Passion overwhelmed her fatigue, as SooYeon craned her neck and kissed hard. She pushed her tongue through the other girl's lips, and swiped at the soft flesh inside tentatively. She listened when MiYoung whispered, voice light from all the happiness she was receiving.  
  
"I don't need much. Your heart is enough."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 10**

"Nasty, isn't it?"  
  
SooYeon smirked at JiYong's plastered grin, the corner of his lip twitching at the healing gash. He unscrewed a bottle of ointment in hand, and sighed as he covered a cloth over it, soaking the garment with the dark liquid. He set the bottle down and began cleaning SooYeon's stitches, barely holding off an apology as the girl flinched violently. Barely, because MiYoung was cradeling her head, and nothing JiYong could ever say would ever soothe her as much. He begrudgingly smiled and gruffly answered her.  
  
"It looks like the way here didn't open it too much, but you'll need to heal in bed for a while longer."  
  
JiYong and HyunA had set up a humble but durable gurney, shaved branches strewn together with ripped cloth, and had dragged SooYeon through the snow with it. Needless to say, it was much to her complete dismay. The soldier had vehemently insisted on walking to the village on her own two legs, but was given dismissive stares in return as she was strapped onto the straw - filled stretcher. SooYeon had fumed throughout the first half of the trip helplessly, and then to MiYoung's glee, cooled down after receiving a kiss.   
  
"Make sure to swallow this powder with this drink - "  
  
JiYong abruptly bit his tongue and stared hard at SooYeon's stomach. The end of her shirt still held in the air, as he halted his ministrations. He gulped audibly then shook his head as rouge filled his cheeks, SooYeon eyed him dubiously. She barked at him, as MiYoung hunched forward to peer down on her stomach.  
  
"What?"  
  
This time it was MiYoung's turn in turning weird, as she sharply jerked back and ducked her head. SooYeon lifted her chin and saw the other girl's shy demeanor, eyes half - lidded with a blush creeping below them. She was about to inspect her own stomach when HyunA barreled through the room, a stringed piece of meat dancing in her fist.  
  
"Hey, look what I bargained - what's with the awkward looks?"  
  
She scooted to where the others sat, and followed JiYong's frozen gaze.  
  
"Is there something on her stomach - WHOA!"  
  
HyunA shrieked then exploded into laughter. SooYeon, tired with the mystery, sat up on her elbows. She pulled her shirt's hem from JiYong, and checked her naked abdomen before asking roughly.  
  
"What's everyone staring at - "  
  
There, above her navel, to the right of her wound, were a dozen red splotches. Some were adorned with darker hues, while a few were decorated with teeth marks. HyunA's shoulder trembled with compressed snickers. She swatted JiYong across the back, and announced boldly.  
  
"It looks like she *could* have walked here on her own - I mean she was energetic enough in getting some love, eh?"  
  
SooYeon roared at the young girl.  
  
"YOU WILL TASTE DELICIOUS WITH THAT HAM - "  
  
MiYoung pulled SooYeon back by her shoulders, and stroked the discomposed girl's cheek with the heel of her hand. JiYong coughed into his fist, and got up from the floor. He went over to close the door HyunA had stormed through with a sigh.  
  
"I will... prepare the food."  
  
He stole the hanging meat from HyunA's hand, and went into a corner, skewing the tender pork in hopes of erasing the sight of MiYoung's ardent love. HyunA wiped a tear from the corner of an eye, and stooped down to eagerly ask MiYoung.  
  
"Could you give me any tips on being a fantastic lover - "  
  
SooYeon growled at HyunA's audacity.  
  
"Don't ask her that - "  
  
HyunA clamped a hand over SooYeon's mouth, and shined a smile to MiYoung. She would risk a bite from the snarling wolf to learn the secrets of the cunning rabbit.  
  
"I mean you must be great to tame someone like SooYeon - tell me all the goods! It doesn't matter how dirty!"  
  
MiYoung's fingers quaked over SooYeon's neck, an angry rumble emitting from her lover's throat. The GongJu quickly removed HyunA's hand, and nervously spoke with haste.  
  
"We can talk about this later, I promise."  
  
HyunA stuck out her lower lip, a protest about to slip, when JiYong shouted over his shoulder.  
  
"HyunA! Help me with cooking this!"  
  
HyunA drew up a blank stare and crept to where he sat, her brain no longer concerned with MiYoung's details as the thought of the coming food plagued her mind. The other two girls released their anxiety, SooYeon by spouting an exasperated puff of air, and MiYoung by easing her hold over SooYeon's knuckles.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
MiYoung dipped her head and kissed the flushed forehead. She repeated the affectionate act, sweeping away a strand of hair, savoring the heat emitting from the brow. The GongJu nestled her lips on the tip of the other girl's right ear and whispered.  
  
"I'm sorry, I should learn to control myself."   
  
SooYeon denied, her voice reduced with a blush.  
  
"It doesn't hurt at all."  
  
---  
  
"What are you?"  
  
HyunA stopped twisting a contraption, and gave SooYeon a sidelong glance.   
  
JiYong was tying together bundles of sticks outside, and MiYoung was resting to the side of SooYeon, fatigue having left a toll on her body. HyunA toyed with the instrument a minute longer then put up a wagging finger, which irked SooYeon greatly. The merchant chuckled and quickly confessed as SooYeon sat up from her bed.  
  
"I'm just a merchant - you know that!"  
  
"You're more than just that."  
  
"Eh, well..."  
  
HyunA sighed and combed back her bangs. She pursed her lips, SooYeon's hard glare effectively bringing out a surrender.  
  
"You're right, I'm more than just a simple merchant. I guess my shooting yesterday gave it away, eh?"  
  
"Yes."  
  
"And I guess you don't want me near you - well, *her* now, eh?"  
  
"That's not exactly true."  
  
HyunA's hair tossed in excitement as she shrieked with joy.  
  
"YOU MEAN YOU LIKE MY COMPANY - "  
  
"You saved us yesterday. I owe you, but don't think - "  
  
"Yeah, yeah, *don't think too much of it*, I know."  
  
SooYeon scowled at HyunA's impertinent grin, and reminded the other girl of her question.  
  
"So what are you really?"  
  
"An ex - soldier, I suppose."  
  
The younger girl picked up a sullied dish and began scraping a dried speck, the squeaking unnerved SooYeon, and she barked at the grating noise.  
  
"Stop doing that!"  
  
HyunA winced and laid down the plate, as the other girl pushed back her covers and glowered.  
  
"So you're an ex - soldier. Why?"  
  
"Eh... I mean... it just got *tiring* listening to all the rules - I just wanted a comfortable life. They paid me well, but it was almost as if I was trading my life for the money."  
  
SooYeon snorted and muttered under her breath.  
  
"It looks like there is an operating brain behind those eyes."  
  
"Did you say something - "  
  
"So I take it that you're enjoying your life as a merchant?"  
  
"Well it pays less, and sometimes searching for food can be a pain, but for the most part it's great."  
  
"Whose kingdom did you serve?"  
  
"That... *er*... it's not something I like to talk about yet - if you know what I mean?"  
  
Sadly enough, SooYeon did, but MiYoung's safety meant more to her than her own sympathies.  
  
"Your personal history isn't worth much to me, but I need proof that you don't intend to hurt anyone on my team."  
  
"You have a sharp wit, if anyone, you, yourself would know that by now I'd have killed you all if I was an enemy."  
  
"True."  
  
HyunA stopped and parted her lips, scrunching her eyebrows in ponder.  
  
"But it's strange, eh? Why would a man try to kill either of you? He seemed like a classed soldier as well..."  
  
SooYeon chose to ignore the question, and lied down, a clear dismissal to their conversation. HyunA shrugged off the disregard, and tinkered with the object in her hand. She shifted her attention back to SooYeon, and bluntly asked, unafraid of the consequences.  
  
"So what are you two exactly?"  
  
SooYeon struck back with a cool gaze.  
  
"I don't think I need to answer that for you to know."  
  
HyunA raised her eyebrows then gave a low wolf - whistle. She whispered, as if discretion was of any importance.  
  
"I can tell she's a feisty one - "  
  
"Could we not - "  
  
"She probably ravages your body - "  
  
"Please - "  
  
"It's obvious she appreciates your stomach - "  
  
"I'm going to sleep - "  
  
"You're like a human sacrifice - "  
  
"I can no longer hear you - "  
  
"Do as you please, I won't lift up your blanket - "  
  
"GOOD NIGHT!"  
  
---  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"It's time to clean your wounds and change your bandages."  
  
"Where are the others?"  
  
"They left while you were napping."  
  
"I should sit up, shouldn't I?"  
  
"I'll help you."  
  
MiYoung knelt next to SooYeon's head, and gingerly cupped the other girl's neck in order to help. SooYeon grunted while pushing her torso off the floor. She raised both her arms, a procedure JiYong had taught, to let MiYoung unravel the white strips.   
  
"This isn't so bad. It's like we're given two chances in loving each other again. Most people only get that kind of chance once."  
  
MiYoung mumbled with a smile, and wrung a wet cloth in hand. SooYeon kept her arms parallel to the floor, and inhaled, her ribs sensitive to the towel's fuzzy texture. She dryly spoke to MiYoung, distracting her mind from the alleviating caresses.   
  
"I'm sorry."  
  
"You don't have to be."  
  
MiYoung dabbed a tender area, and cringed when SooYeon's face convoluted. She hurriedly held SooYeon's cheek and apologized in an afflicted tone.  
  
"I'm so sorry."  
  
SooYeon reassured with a pained smile.   
  
"You don't have to be."  
  
MiYoung lowered the towel, and edged her face slowly forward. SooYeon held her breath and steeled herself for the kiss. Her arms gave a small jolt as her lower lip was nipped, blood was hammering in her ears, and she inadvertently grinned when MiYoung grinned.   
  
"You're smiling."  
  
SooYeon broke out of her reverie, and stared with dumbfounded eyes at the statement. A smile? Well, SooYeon thought, frowns were hard to conjure after a kiss. Her hands touched the floor, she could have raised them again if she had wanted to, but that would have meant an intention to end the intimacy. She had no such intention.  
  
"I suppose I am."  
  
MiYoung brushed the tip of her nose to SooYeon's cheek.  
  
"Does this mean I won't have to challenge you for your smiles anymore?"  
  
SooYeon ducked her head, closing her eyes to the smirk pressing against her ear. Such arrogance, from anyone else, would have SooYeon tearing at their throats, but with MiYoung, she simply nodded with humble defeat. The GongJu rolled on a fresh ribbon of gauze, kissing the other girl's cheek at every spin of the bandage. Her hands placed themselves tentatively over the covered injury, and she whispered with her lips lingering over SooYeon's jaw.  
  
"That's good, because even though it made me happy to hold your hand after the challenge, it also made me a bit sad to know your affections were forced."  
  
MiYoung's mouth glided down SooYeon's bare neck, and she gently bumped her forehead to the other girl's chin. She managed a weak complaint.  
  
"You're so stubborn, SooYeon."  
  
SooYeon slumped her shoulders forward, giving a firm kiss to MiYoung's lips, and confessed, the time spent together inducing a vulnerable sort of honesty.  
  
"I am."  
  
"But I'm also attracted to it."  
  
"Is that so?"  
  
"Not everyone can be so defiant to royalty."  
  
A hint of amusement was laced into the answer, and SooYeon tipped her head back to catch MiYoung's gaze. She whispered monotonously, hoping to flaunt what was left of her ego.  
  
"But I've been faithful."  
  
"You must have been all right without me after some time."  
  
"No."  
  
"So you never even smiled?"  
  
"I didn't."  
  
MiYoung smiled, delirious with the frank words SooYeon had given, and nestled her neck over the other girl's shoulder. SooYeon turned her head to the left, and softened her eyes to the grinning face. She dipped her chin to kiss MiYoung's ear, then listened to the question that sounded almost like a plea.  
  
"How are you so sure you never smiled?"  
  
She *should* be thinking about SeungHyun and TaeYang. She *should* be more guilty than this. She *should* be.   
  
But happiness is so tempting when it's smiling.   
  
And MiYoung smiled beautifully.  
  
SooYeon dragged one arm slowly over MiYoung's back, her fingertips familiarizing themselves with the contours of the other girl's spine. She settled her hand over the nape of MiYoung's neck, and answered with her nails lightly sinking into her skin.  
  
"Because you weren't there."  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 11**

"Oh, you're back!"  
  
An elderly woman rushed to where MiYoung was, hung her arms over the younger girl's neck and gave a strong embrace. She drew back and cast upon her worries.  
  
"Where have you been? Where is your brother? I thought he was looking for you? Are you all right?"  
  
SooYeon leaned her back to the wall of the restaurant, as MiYoung did her best in explaining. HyunA marveled at the various dishes laid out on a nearby table, and JiYong hurriedly pulled out his coins as they all sat down restlessly.  
  
It had been a turbulent journey, both physically and mentally draining, but coming here to this little inn, SooYeon couldn't dwell on the past - they were making progress.  
  
She looked over her shoulder to check on the neighboring stores. Their fires being doused in a listless manner, a ritual done to urge loitering customers to go home. MiYoung had led them to this store for a particular reason, being that it was one of the few stores that served food at nights and closed in the mornings. It also belonged to an old woman who had taken care of MiYoung and DaeSung when they had first arrived to the village.  
  
SooYeon folded her arms over the table, and saw a bug flitter through a crack on the wall. She grimaced at envisioning MiYoung having slept on the same grounds - not that their journey together had been any more luxurious, but at least she was there for the other girl. She certainly did not let any hideous bugs or vicious animals approach MiYoung.  
  
"SooYeon!"  
  
And speaking of pests.  
  
"What?"  
  
The growl in SooYeon's throat reduced considerably since their first encounter, perhaps largely due to her constant fatigue, but she still glared at HyunA with skeptical eyes. Skeptical, because even if the merchant meant well, HyunA fitted the role of a mischievous brat perfectly.  
  
"MiYoung has a brother?"  
  
"Don't concern yourself with that."  
  
"Is that who we're looking for?"  
  
"You never do stop the questions, do you?"  
  
"I would if you'd answer me!"  
  
"Would an expensive dish silence you?"  
  
There was a pause, just so HyunA could fool others into thinking that she was considering the deal. JiYong ducked his head to count out the extra coins, HyunA's feigned ponder futile, as everyone knew her intentions.  
  
"Maybe."  
  
A "maybe" was obviously an "yes", and SooYeon rolled her eyes before beckoning over a scurrying waiter. Her gaze drifted back to where MiYoung and the woman conversed avidly. She took note of the way MiYoung fretted with her hands, unaccustomed with lying to loved ones. Her sigh bounced off the tabletop and JiYong smiled knowingly.  
  
"We'll all be able to get rest after this."  
  
SooYeon nodded to his words, and watched HyunA eat her meal voraciously, her appetite had been whet from the day's morning hike. She mumbled, slightly out of care and mostly out of irritation.  
  
"Chew your food slowly. I wouldn't save you if you were to choke."  
  
HyunA looked up from her bowl, food still in mouth, and gleefully chuckled at SooYeon's half - hearted concern.  
  
"You're actually very soft in the inside, SooYeon."  
  
SooYeon scoffed loudly at the other girl. She bore a cross frown and narrowed her eyes to the unwavering smile.  
  
"You're making assumptions - "  
  
"Not true!"  
  
There was something vaguely annoying with the way HyunA held her bowl close to her face, a smile full of protruding meat and vegetables, something akin to aggravating.  
  
"You don't know much of me - "  
  
"That's true... but I do know what MiYoung's said of you!"  
  
SooYeon sharply breathed in through her nose and exhaled slowly, her nostrils flaring as she clenched a fist upon the table. The whisper was more of a caution than a question, but HyunA detected the tiny curiosity.  
  
"What has she told you?"  
  
"That's a secret."  
  
"How is it a secret? I'm the person involved, therefore I should already know."  
  
"That's right, but I got her to spill the beans on some dirty details. And you always get so mad whenever I talk about your love life - "  
  
HyunA reared back from the table as SooYeon's palm slammed the surface. Her fingers wide - spread and stiff, as she smoothed her voice.  
  
"I would appreciate it if you would stop involving yourself with our... personal matters."  
  
SooYeon leaned forward over the table, confident in having her eyes do most of the intimidation, but was not able to properly convince as a hand obscured her gaze and pulled her back. Her eyebrows lowered and she clucked her tongue in disappointment at having to let HyunA off this round. She was no match to the owner of the hand, MiYoung, when it came to persuasions.  
  
"Don't be so angry at her, SooYeon. It's also my fault for telling her."  
  
MiYoung's thumb delicately brushed over SooYeon's right temple, a gesture she learned that readily pacified the short - tempered girl. SooYeon relaxed under the touch, and soon the wrinkles on her brow vanished, her anger completely dissolved by the time MiYoung uncovered her eyes.   
  
After a brief moment, JiYong carefully picked his words and asked.  
  
"Was there any word on the Wang - y - your brother?"  
  
HyunA raised an eyebrow at JiYong's uncharacteristic stutter, but shrugged it off and worked on finishing her plate. MiYoung, who had sidled next to SooYeon, was lazily rubbing the other girl's back in wandering circles as she answered with an unperturbed smile.  
  
"Yes, a little, but I think it would be best if we were to discuss this after our rest. We've been given a place to stay."  
  
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"It's almost fully healed."  
  
SooYeon faintly shuddered as MiYoung traced her lithe fingers over her scabbed torso. She applied the necessary ointment and studied SooYeon's face, lips tightly drawn to cover gritted teeth. Her hand gently stroked the other girl's tense jaw, before she nimbly rolled out a strip of gauze, wrapping it gingerly around her waist.  
  
"It hurts a bit, doesn't it?"  
  
MiYoung gave a forlorn whisper, distraught with the notion that every worthwhile thing, like healing, took so much in time. She drew together the parted flaps of her lover's shirt and tied the strings along the inner edge. Once her chest was clothed, SooYeon was pulled into a hug, she fumbled with her words at feeling MiYoung's wet cheek on her shoulder.   
  
"It - it'll heal soon. There's no need to feel badly for me."  
  
A quick sniff and a penitent sigh later, MiYoung picked her head up and kissed below SooYeon's chin. She dragged her mouth to SooYeon's collarbone, and blinked several times, her eyelashes tickling the other girl's sensitive neck.  
  
"We can have you fully rest for one more day - we've gotten a lead from the woman about DaeSung, so there's no need to push yourself any more than - "  
  
"This village isn't the best place to stop at. You're not safe here."  
  
"I'm never going to be safe at any village, but I think having you makes a difference."  
  
"I - "  
  
"*And*... in order to protect me, you should heal as quickly as possible."  
  
It was best not to argue against the sound logic.  
  
SooYeon sucked in a corner of her lip, her eyelids lowering in hesitance, and was silent as MiYoung got up from kneeling.  
  
"This woman took care of us, and thought of us as her own children. She knows I am in trouble, and insisted that we stay here at her home - "  
  
"She might - "  
  
"She won't betray us. She's promised to keep us safe."  
  
MiYoung dolefully cast her eyes to SooYeon and spoke quietly.  
  
"I told her we needed her help in this because you're injured."  
  
SooYeon unconsciously edged her fingers to her ribs and dipped her head when she saw the other girl turn away. The GongJu put her hand flat against a sliding door, and insisted adamantly.  
  
"I'm going to tell JiYong and HyunA about spending the night here. There will be no disputes about this decision."  
  
MiYoung whirled around and opened the door, sliding it shut as she left behind a bemused SooYeon.  
  
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"It looks like he took this route..."  
  
JiYong glimpsed at the map and swiveled his eyes to SooYeon's alerted gaze. She followed the path drawn by his finger and shook her head slowly.  
  
"We can't go that way, and there's no way he would have made it across there. He would have most likely taken this route."  
  
She pointed to a darkened region and wrinkled her nose in thought. JiYong refuted as he saw where her finger had landed.  
  
"But - "  
  
"I'M HUNGRY!"  
  
HyunA cried from under a bundle of wool. She kicked off the blanket and groaned as a rumble erupted from her stomach.  
  
SooYeon's fingers wrinkled the map underneath as she cringed visibly. She glared over her shoulder, warning evident in her hard frown, and spoke with disgust.  
  
"Can you not see us trying to deliberate on a plan here?"  
  
"But you guys have been planning it for *hours*, and nothing's been decided. We should at least go and eat breakfast!"  
  
SooYeon hissed indignantly.  
  
"Keep your voice down. You'll wake up MiYoung with your animal - like shrieking."  
  
"It's not my fault you kept her up all night - "  
  
The verbal scuffle went on as JiYong carefully constructed the plans on a paper to his side, his brush flowing with their unrelenting argument. He set the brush daintily over an inkstone and coughed into his fist, both girls snapped their heads to him, SooYeon with a vexed scowl and HyunA with a clueless pout.  
  
"You must both quiet down."  
  
He motioned with his hand to where MiYoung slumbered, the girl stirred lightly in her sleep, and JiYong brought his hand back onto the map. SooYeon clamped her mouth shut, her frown softening around the corners, and got up from the floor. He asked the stoic girl as she gathered her swords.  
  
"How is your wound?"  
  
"It's fine."  
  
She mutely walked to where MiYoung softly snored, and crossed her legs as she sat down. She looked down to the serene face and whispered with her profile to JiYong and HyunA.  
  
"We'll depart once she wakes up."  
  
---  
  
"You walk too fast!"  
  
"You have no excuse, you're the only one trailing behind."  
  
"But that's because JiYong's a man, and you're holding MiYoung's hand - it's not fair!"  
  
HyunA groaned loudly and rammed her walking stick to the moist ground. Her hands dangled over the stick's end while she hung her head in weary surrender. She heard the rage boil in SooYeon's order.  
  
"STOP COMPLAINING OR I WILL GLADLY LEAVE YOUR A - "  
  
SooYeon halted as MiYoung pressed a thumb onto her wrist. She blew out a stream of hot air through her nose, and spoke with a twitching grin.  
  
"It's just a little further. Try to keep up until then... please."  
  
HyunA sighed and threw back her head, a whine emitting from her throat. She plucked her stick out of the ground, and slowly hobbled forward to where the rest stood. JiYong chuckled empathetically at the sulking yet obedient act. He turned his head to MiYoung, the quiet girl leaning in to kiss SooYeon's neck, and offered the GongJu a thankful smile.  
  
The sun was getting brighter, the snow melting; winter was ending. JiYong inhaled the strong scent of pine, the crisp air helping him in dealing with all the sores in his body. He needed this. And he should question the change in SooYeon, but he needed that as well, so he refrained from asking. He didn't want to jeopardize her transformation with harmful doubts or unnecessary reconsiderations. Especially with all this light finally shining down on them. He eyed SooYeon, struggling with discretion in her endearments, and repressed a laugh when he saw her throw caution out into the wind, catching MiYoung's hand firmly in hers as they started to walk over a hill.  
  
Men and women want love. Girls need it. Soft words, random displays of affection, thoughtful gifts - girls appreciate it.  
  
MiYoung deserves it.  
  
And while SooYeon was still rough, her movements creaky and affections at times calculated, MiYoung understood that not all pretty words equated to love - that sometimes the coarse ones could mean just as much. The way SooYeon shakily whispered into MiYoung's ear was an example of many.  
  
"Hold onto me if you don't want to fall."  
  
---  
  
"Finally!"  
  
HyunA flopped onto a shaded rock and fanned herself with her right hand. She sighed as she slipped off her shoes, dunking her bare feet into the icy stream below, and turned her head to chuckle at JiYong.  
  
"This is exactly what I needed."  
  
JiYong sneaked a glance to his left. The other two girls were wading near the bend, SooYeon opening her mouth to caution with inaudible words, as MiYoung silently laughed at her lover's stricken face, splashing the freezing water around with a carefree ease. SooYeon somehow managed to dissuade the other girl into stepping out of the water, and she took off her weapons before drying MiYoung''s feet on a sun - soaked stone. HyunA smirked and elbowed JiYong with a sly whisper.  
  
"She knows how to treat a girl, eh?"  
  
JiYong furrowed his eyebrows to HyunA's wriggling ones, and shook his head in exasperation. He called out to SooYeon before standing up.  
  
"SooYeon! We're going to prepare - "  
  
JiYong held his tongue as he saw shadows shift along the encompassing trees. He knew SooYeon saw them as well, as she protectively pushed MiYoung behind and served as her shield. HyunA sucked in her breath and steadily rose, droplets rolling down to her toes as she extricated three guns from within her knapsack. She handed two to JiYong and he accepted them grimly.  
  
It was one man, another, then twenty, and SooYeon's heart pitted to the bottom. She would save MiYoung, that much was for sure, the same couldn't be said for her friends. She slowly backed MiYoung to where the others readied themselves, accepting the gun JiYong offered. HyunA checked on MiYoung out of a corner of her eye and teased amiably.  
  
"Here we are, guarding you like pillars... you're no ordinary civilian. If I get out of this alive, you have to tell me who you really are."  
  
MiYoung nodded, her heart beating wildly.  
  
"I will."  
  
"You should also cover your ears."  
  
MiYoung took heed and pressed her palms flat against her ears. She was trembling, but she thinned her lips and composed herself, it would be selfish to be the only one outrightly scared. HyunA smiled warmly and turned her attention back to the approaching men. She whipped her head to SooYeon and exclaimed.  
  
"I get first shot!"  
  
The impulsive girl shot a man square in the chest, and pulled back her trigger. SooYeon reminded herself to obliterate HyunA if they were ever to get out of this alive, and winced for a split second before pulling her own trigger, hastily firing off shots as the men had begun to run. Strangled groans ripped from their throats at each perfected fire, and JiYong cursed loudly when his gun began clicking to an empty chamber. HyunA threw him an extra cartridge, and he fumbled with the metallic pills, adrenaline causing a shake in his hands. SooYeon ran out of ammo as well, and hissed when she looked to see JiYong still struggling in loading his own gun. HyunA eventually took her last shot, and snatched the cartridge from JiYong's hand, adroitly popping the bullets into their slots. A number of men were slain, their blood washing down into the creek, clouding the water a pale pink, and yet more adversaries emerged from within the woods. SooYeon wondered if they had been waiting near the village all along, steadfast in their hopes for MiYoung or DaeSung to show up.   
  
She shoved her emptied gun to JiYong and pulled out her swords. A man was running to them as HyunA quickly tried to reload her weapon, he planned to reach them before she would finish. SooYeon dove forward and met him with a clash, her ears numb to the grating scrapes as her hands tingled to the unending assaults. His mouth opened into a breathless gasp when she swung her sword to his neck, ending his life with a single twist. A second man was reaching for her, and SooYeon looked back for help. HyunA was jerking the gun in her hand, a frustrated snarl on her face, whimpering occasionally because of agitation.  
  
"It's jammed!"  
  
The words were lost to SooYeon's deafened ears. HyunA slapped her hand against the side of the barrel, and flashed the other girl an apologetic look. SooYeon would have scoffed if the situation had been different, HyunA had never looked so earnest, but currently she had threats to deal with, contemplating could be done on a later date. She made sure to grin at MiYoung before changing her stance, targeting her eyes to the charging danger, and lifted her arms to lung at the man before her. From her peripheral vision she saw a few more men start to close in, fearless without the projectiles aimed at them. SooYeon blinked away her stinging sweat, and grunted as she stabbed the enemy in front. She heaved as she pulled out her sword, sinking him to the ground, and swiftly side - stepped to the left.  
  
One, two, three - ten more to eliminate. SooYeon panted and used the heel of her palm to wipe away her matted bangs. She could feel MiYoung's anxious stare, and was about to confront the rest when a blast of air streaked past her cheek, another wisp brushed her left. SooYeon watched as two assailants dropped limply to the ground, arrows stuck to their chests. Eight more arrows expertly stopped the lives of the rest, and SooYeon didn't have to hear to know that everything had fallen silent. She hesitantly looked back and froze. Her hands released her blades, as blood drained from her face, a low buzz going off in her head.  
  
A few meters away stood TaeYang, clad in a sleek uniform, strapped with a well - crafted bow.   
  
She was deaf, but SooYeon read his lips, the smile on his face stretched and pleased.  
  
"SeungHyun and DaeSung are waiting. Missed me... stupid? Because I missed you."  
  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 12**

"You have a lot of explaining to do."  
  
JiYong whispered to TaeYang, his voice was tremulous as his face had gone pale. TaeYang merrily hopped from where he was perched and made his way to them.  
  
"I can kind of tell."  
  
The archer squinted an eye as he aimed his steps, the blood from the fallen enemies mingling then dispersing into waves, as he waddled forward. He winked at JiYong, smiled at MiYoung, raised an eyebrow at HyunA, and opened his arms to SooYeon.  
  
"C'mon, give me a - "  
  
He tripped over his own feet and quickly regained his balance as SooYeon picked a sword and held it threateningly close to his chin, water dripping off its sharp point. Her arm was locked stiffly and her voice seethed.  
  
"All this time you were alive, and you couldn't bother in telling me this?"   
  
TaeYang swallowed, his saliva echoing down his throat as he nervously backed away from the sword, his hands drawn to the air.  
  
"W - we tried to, but we had our own problems as well! Look at my uniform!"  
  
SooYeon inspected the shirt, a vaguely familiar emblem patched onto his right shoulder. She cocked her head and let her sword go down an inch.  
  
"You've been at another kingdom?"  
  
TaeYang nodded and he sighed as she pulled her weapon away.  
  
"Seo's. We've been training an army. And it looks like the Queen of our former Kingdom has heard of us..."  
  
He frowned at the men sprawled on the ground. SooYeon slitted her eyes and asked.  
  
"An army for what?"  
  
TaeYang answered in an edged voice.  
  
"We know the Queen is headed for war on the Seo Kingdom - "  
  
"You were preparing war for another kingdom? You left us for that reason - "  
  
"It's complicated - "  
  
"And you have the Wang. How is this possible?"  
  
"We set them here - DaeSung and MiYoung. We were the ones who put them in this village - we even left a note! And we were about to get them when word got out that the Queen sent an assassin. We were able to get to DaeSung since he took a route we were heading - we were at a loss when he wasn't with MiYoung. There was no need for our worry though, huh? I mean it looks like - "  
  
"You set them here..."  
  
"The day the fire happened - we should explain this all back at our place, DaeSung and SeungHyun are probably worried about me."  
  
SooYeon bit a corner of her lip and turned her head to the side as she sighed heavily. She heard the water start to slosh again from nearing footsteps, and looked up to meet MiYoung's gaze. The other girl regarded the weariness in SooYeon's eyes before declaring softly.  
  
"We're all very glad to see you alive and well, and we'd all like to hear what you have to say. Please lead us to your place."  
  
MiYoung went back to mumble a favor to JiYong, he bobbed his head and reached back into his pack to pull out whatever she had asked. She accepted the the thin cloth in his hand and carried it to SooYeon.  
  
"Lift your arm..."  
  
SooYeon followed the gentle command and allowed MiYoung to tightly wrap the cut on her arm. She scrutinized TaeYang as the other girl delicately tied the ends to her bandage. He put his hands behind his head and commented as he viewed the doting care.  
  
"Hey, I guess some things are the same as ever."  
  
SooYeon tilted her head back, an eyebrow arched in disinterest. She grabbed MiYoung's hand and walked past him. Her remark belittling despite being hushed.  
  
"Yes, you still have an uncanny resemblance to a turtle."  
  
TaeYang smirked and hooked an arm around her shoulder, resisting SooYeon's shove. He lifted his head to the clouds and chuckled at her following remark.  
  
"And yes, you were missed... idiot."  
  
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Blubbering. It was perfect in describing DaeSung's state when seeing MiYoung's elated smile. Blubbering and stuttering, almost touching his knees to the floor.  
  
DaeSung sank into his sister's embrace, blithered on and on about many things, things no one else could understand.   
  
The inn was well - lit and cozy, a complete change from her encounter with the throng of enemies. Clothes hung on strings stretched across the low ceiling. SooYeon guessed they had occupied the housing for a while in wait of MiYoung's return.   
  
She returned her attention back to the boys before her: SeungHyun and TaeYang. It was hard to cement her frown with their radiant smiles. SeungHyun spoke in a higher than usual pitch, his happiness lifting his voice by an octave.  
  
"We're so glad to see you here - you look better than we imagined!"  
  
He must have meant her emotional condition, because her physical could improve considerably. She brushed a finger over her encased arm, and listened further.  
  
"That night we... it's hard to tell you everything because even we have trouble remembering, but it was an odd night."  
  
He laid a hand over her right kneecap, his fingers weighing down as he spoke with gravity.  
  
"SooYeon, that night, you saved us that night."  
  
She felt her face freeze at his words. No, he was wrong. She abandoned them that night. She opened her mouth, a bitter laugh coming out along with her refusal.  
  
"I left you two that night. You must have seen my empty side when you woke up. Why are you trying to lie - "  
  
"No, you don't understand."  
  
He stuck his nose to her face and insisted in a small voice.  
  
"Didn't you find it funny how everyone was killed that night? A whole legion of a special force wiped out completely in a single night?"  
  
She never specifically questioned. She had been too caught up in her own guilt and grief to have pondered over it. She agreed hesitantly.  
  
"It is a little strange now that I think about it."  
  
"That's because they were drugged."  
  
"When - "  
  
"We thought about it for a while, but there was something we *didn't* do that day that everyone else did. Remember? That day we were all given drinks by the court?"  
  
SooYeon remembered. She still saw the liquid in her memory, and how TaeYang had almost scooped the potion. TaeYang waved his hand over her face to snap her back to reality, he grinned and chuckled.  
  
"Yeah, well, it turns out that drink put everyone in the HwaRang to a deep sleep. We were awake that night you were slipping out, you know? We just pretended to be asleep so that you could go and do your thing."  
  
He winked at her and hastily continued before she could talk back.  
  
"And we stayed up after you left, not sure how long... and then the attack happened."  
  
He tugged a corner of his lip downwards, and shook his head as he rubbed the back of his neck.  
  
"It was eerie. The guys were being stabbed on their beds, but no one could get up. I think a few tried to fight back, but they dropped to the floor as soon as they got up... and us... well, we were fighting to our best and escaped."  
  
He glanced around, DaeSung and MiYoung were still hugging to their left, and to their right JiYong and HyunA were making a drink. SeungHyun picked up the end of TaeYang's explanation.  
  
"We knew you'd be at the forest and we were going to you... but we saw a small fire starting at the palace... and the forest was so far off."  
  
He apologetically whispered.  
  
"We should have gone to you, but we were in a rush. It would have been impossible to get you and reach the fire in time."  
  
SooYeon weakly smiled and assured.  
  
"You did the right thing."  
  
He was grateful for her sincere words and went on.  
  
"When we reached the fire, no one was there yet, just figures behind the smoke. The door fell apart and we saw the Wang, WangJa and GongJu on the floor. TaeYang and I both took the WangJa and GongJu, but we couldn't get the Wang... there was just so many obstacles..."  
  
He screwed his eyebrows into a grimace.  
  
"And that's when your master came to us."  
  
SooYeon widened her eyes. All these years she had figured that he had left her because of her disobedience. She dreaded what SeungHyun had to say next.  
  
"He came in and told us he'd save the Wang. He wanted us go out first, and we did successfully... and he... the room was too unstable, SooYeon."  
  
She stammered, confused with the new information.  
  
"B - but that's not possible... it was announced that only the Wang was found in the fire - "  
  
"SooYeon... they were also the ones who gave us the drink."  
  
"Then my master..."  
  
SeungHyun struggled and briskly looked down onto the floor.   
  
"I don't know what happened to him to be honest - he might - he might still be alive... like us."  
  
He heard SooYeon's breath hitch and he guiltily turned away to his right, allowing her to gather herself. She shook her head and cleared her throat.  
  
"Did he say anything to you two during the fire?"  
  
"He told us to go to the Seo Kingdom..."  
  
He whisked his head away, as if the memories burned him inside.  
  
"It wasn't easy. Stealing the horses, riding to safety... along the way we both decided that taking the WangJa and GongJu to the Seo Kingdom might be a risky idea. I - I know dropping them off at a village isn't the epitome of caution either, but if your master told us to go there, we figured other sources would discover the information as well."  
  
SooYeon realized with dread, that perhaps everything she knew was a lie, and the truth was instead cracked into pieces. She whispered in a frail tone.  
  
"Then... about that night... I'm guessing those three were drugged with the same drink?"  
  
TaeYang thinned his lips into a frown and raised his brow with his answer.  
  
"It would make sense. DaeSung can't seem to remember anything."  
  
"But why would the Queen conspire against them?"  
  
SeungHyun rubbed his right temple with the tips of his fingers and mumbled.  
  
"Power? Wealth? Land? There could be a lot of reasons - who knows honestly? One thing for sure is that she wanted it all to herself."  
  
This was too much in too little time. She opened her mouth to probe more into the details; there was so much that needed to be answered. But it seemed it would have to wait because at the moment HyunA hovered over them with drinks.  
  
"JiYong wanted me to give you guys this. It's supposed to revive your strengths or something. I already gave MiYoung and her brother their share."  
  
SooYeon took a cup and stirred the content with a whirl of her wrist. HyunA's lingering presence made her speak dully.  
  
"You may join us, but you may not talk."  
  
Afterall, there were certain things that should come undisclosed to HyunA. Her role as a menace was fading, much to SooYeon's chagrin. She might even be labeled as an aid, the keyword being "might".   
  
"Oh, you don't have to tell me that for me to know!"  
  
Already HyunA had spoken up, but SooYeon merely sniffed in disdain. HyunA happily got down on her knees and looked up to the other new faces. She lowered her tray to the floor and drank from her own cup while slurping noisily.   
  
The skill of a prized fighter, and yet the manners of a prepubescent girl. SeungHyun and TaeYang doubtfully looked at one another and introduced with polite words and grins. HyunA mentioned her name as well, but watched SooYeon warily as she spat out a question.  
  
"What's MiYoung?"  
  
SeungHyun raised his eyebrows and whispered.  
  
"Why, she's the GongJu, of course - "  
  
"ROYALTY?"  
  
"Yes..."  
  
HyunA held up her mug and placed her lips over the brim as she shifted her eyes in quiet contemplation. SooYeon caught on to the aloof stare and said swiftly.  
  
"You may not run off with her and ask for a ransom. We will hunt you down in every possible way. And kill you."  
  
HyunA gulped, but not because of the drink. She smiled and swatted a hand across SooYeon's knee.  
  
"Ah, c'mon, I wasn't thinking that!"  
  
She shrank back from SooYeon's glare and hid beneath her cup. SooYeon shook her head dismally, but said nothing of the slap to her knee.  
  
SeungHyun and TaeYang quickly looked at each other and smiled slowly. It relieved them to know that SooYeon had made a friend in their absence.  
  
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SooYeon threw the covers over her head, allowing her breath to bounce off the silky material, warming her face to her insomnia.  
  
Everything changed in a single day, yet again.  
  
She bit down hard and slid her hands over her eyes, veiling them as she scowled at herself and her thoughts. She had deserved the burden of the guilt at having left her friends behind that night, but MiYoung hadn't, and she bit her tongue at her nagging conscience. Suddenly her cover was lifted, a familiar body settled next to her right, and an arm snaked over her slim waist as a kiss was pressed over her hands. She pricked her ears to the comforting voice.  
  
"There you go thinking to yourself again."  
  
SooYeon snorted below her hands and lowered them to stare at MiYoung. She felt a finger trace languidly over her jutting hipbone, brushing across with nails that tickled, they came to a rest over her navel.  
  
"If you can't talk to me about some things. You now have TaeYang or SeungHyun available, I'm sure they'll both listen to your problems."  
  
SooYeon would normally roll her eyes to such statements, but this was MiYoung, and SooYeon never rolled her eyes to MiYoung. She forced herself to be sincere.  
  
"Perhaps."  
  
"I like that you agree."  
  
"Why are you not sleeping?"  
  
"Shouldn't you know?"  
  
SooYeon knitted her eyebrows and examined MiYoung's face for an answer. She was given a coy smile, and was about to ask again when fingers slipped under her waistband, rendering her speechless. Yes, she knew why MiYoung was not asleep; the other girl apparently intended on making SooYeon blush plentifully. The kiss under her chin was chaste, then a tongue licked a corner of her lip before teeth gently bit over her pulsating neck. Fingers splayed across her stomach and dipped teasingly in and out of her pants. MiYoung gasped below SooYeon's ear.   
  
"Let's not make too much noise."  
  
SooYeon's coherency was rapidly thinning, and she whimpered when MiYoung's tongue pressed hotly behind her ear. She began pulling apart the knots on the other girl's shirt, impatient for the warmth underneath. She slitted her eyes with a hiss as MiYoung clawed her sides delicately, the slight pain heightening her hunger. Her palm slid down to the base of MiYoung's spine, then quickly traveled up to cup the nape of her neck. She heard a rustle, but chose to ignore it as she nibbled on MiYoung's lower lip, pushing her tongue in to lick over the roof of her lover's mouth, tasting the sweet drink from earlier. A second disruption, distinctly the soft padding of feet. SooYeon pulled back to peck MiYoung's flushed cheek. This time the noise sounded like a jostle, and she stopped to whisper.  
  
"Wait... sorry, I'm so sorry, but wait..."  
  
SooYeon panted and briefly kissed MiYoung's closed eyelids. She carefully brought a hand up and grabbed the hem of the blanket, popping her head out to inspect the darkness. She suppressed a scream when she saw hovering and gleaming eyes. TaeYang and HyunA were both crouching, one to the left, the other to the right. TaeYang hurriedly held up a hand and assured SooYeon.  
  
"We won't disturb you guys - go on."  
  
He flicked his wrist twice to emphasize his consent then crossed his arms over his knees, enraptured and totally focused. HyunA assented as well, and smiled encouragingly. She added in an excited voice.  
  
"It seemed like you guys were going to, you know, *do something magical* - don't mind us."  
  
It killed her libido.  
  
MiYoung knew SooYeon would not be able to continue, not with the pair of eager faces peering down on them, and sighed with great disappointment. She heard SooYeon whine with displeasure, and drew up the covers over them, sparing the disgruntled girl of any more woes.   
  
"Maybe tomorrow."  
  
She whispered hopefully into SooYeon's ear, and permitted a small chuckle at HyunA's child - like enthusiasm.  
  
"You hear that, TaeYang? They might go at it again tomorrow - "  
  
SooYeon growled, an angry snarl that made TaeYang and HyunA crawl quietly back to their beds.  
  
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"Your eyes are bloodshot."  
  
"Blame your monkey of a partner."  
  
"TaeYang? What'd he do?"  
  
"Him and that stupid merchant - soldier - whatever the hell she is."  
  
"You mean HyunA as well?"  
  
"Yes, the stupid monkey, and the stupid whatever - the - hell - she - is."  
  
"What'd they do?"  
  
"They ruined my sleep."  
  
SeungHyun pulled up his lower lip and nodded solemnly, wise enough in not questioning further of SooYeon's grouchiness. He heard her grumble feverishly as she paced the room, pausing as her eyes landed over MiYoung's face. The GongJu was still sleeping right next to the spot where SooYeon had been. It was barely dawn, which meant everyone else still had an hour to slumber peacefully. SeungHyun brushed his bangs back with the flat of his palm and stood up from the ground. He chuckled at the softening of her eyes.  
  
"We just came back from the dead, and you seem to be more intent on her existence."  
  
SooYeon blushed and mumbled as she walked away from MiYoung's side.  
  
"I'm sorry about that - "  
  
"No, I like it that you're concerned about her. It's what I want from you."  
  
"You... all this... it came as a surprise. I still don't know what to make of it."  
  
She turned around her eyes sharp but puzzled.  
  
"I still don't believe you're in front of me. I stopped hoping even when I hated hearing about your deaths. I wish I could show a better welcoming, but I think the time spent apart might have changed me - "  
  
"Just give us a hug, you chicken."  
  
TaeYang had crept behind SooYeon and was pushing her forward with a strong arm. She yelped when her nose pressed firmly against SeungHyun's chest, and SeungHyun himself gave an unsure stare, but laughed when TaeYang encircled his arms around them.  
  
"See? Isn't this nice to just have a group hug, and admit how much we missed each other?"  
  
SooYeon bit her tongue, an insult lounging at its end, and let TaeYang's outburst remain undisturbed. She was smothered between the two boys, but somehow, it was not suffocating. Their arms tightened around her and she ducked her head. She felt a burning in the middle of her throat, and shut her eyes to the on - coming stinging. It would be stupid to cry on such an occasion, yes? TaeYang did not think so.  
  
"Oh, just cry, you big baby. No one's going to judge you! Look, I feel a tear coming on myself..."  
  
SeungHyun thought the same as well, but showed his accord by gently pressing SooYeon's sniffling nose onto his shoulder.  
  
Her muffled voice escaped their embrace.  
  
"You owe me your lives."  
  
The two boys chuckled as she continued adamantly.  
  
"And when this is all over, you both will get a well - deserved punch from me."  
  
TaeYang piped curiously.  
  
"We don't deserve one at the moment?"  
  
She pushed them away with her elbows and walked to MiYoung's bed. Her voice was stern but light.  
  
"You both need to be in the best of conditions. Who knows when we'll get an ambush again like yesterday? So, no, not right now, but it will happen."  
  
TaeYang clucked his tongue and shook his head.  
  
"Sheesh, you sure know how to make a guy uneasy. That reminds me, we're to meet another kingdom's Queen today."  
  
SooYeon quirked her eyebrows and tilted her chin back.  
  
"Oh?"  
  
SeungHyun affirmed and gently strode to DaeSung's side.  
  
"It was the reason we picked this village: it's the middle point to the Seo Kingdom and Park Kingdom."  
  
SooYeon narrowed into the conclusion.  
  
"And so I suppose we are to greet the Park Kingdom's Queen... in a few hours?"  
  
TaeYang nodded and advised happily.  
  
"You should wake up your GongJu."  
  
SooYeon furrowed her brow but knelt down to lower her hand on MiYoung's upturned shoulder. TaeYang muttered under his breath.  
  
"I hear kisses are great in getting people up..."  
  
He heard her scowl and scampered away before she could turn her head to him with an insult. Once reassured that TaeYang was out of sight, and SeungHyun was busy in waking the others, she bent her head and planted a small kiss on MiYoung's temple. The GongJu made a pleased sigh and grinned into her pillow. SooYeon squared her shoulders and swiveled her eyes to any possible on - lookers, then leaned forward again to graze her lips over MiYoung's warm cheeks.  
  
"If you keep doing that, I don't really want to get up."  
  
MiYoung had her eyes closed, but faced SooYeon with a drowsy smile. Her hair was sticking to the side, the result of having slept on one side for too long, and her lips were chapped from the night's passionate kisses. God, SooYeon thought, how could anyone make her heart so weak with such a disheveled appearance? SooYeon sucked in her breath and asked breathlessly.  
  
"Do you need more sleep?"  
  
MiYoung blearily shook her head, her hand lifting up to stroke SooYeon's red cheek. She gripped the back of SooYeon's head and brought her down to nuzzle her neck with a whisper.  
  
"That's all right, I'd like to wake up and enjoy the day together now."  
  
She noticed MiYoung's other hand sliding up and down her arm, a finger drawing over her fresh wound. If not for the sympathetic touch, SooYeon would have found the act to be possessive, perhaps it still was despite its tenderness.  
  
She, herself, felt like a bee, a strong but simple bee. A bee that guarded over a delicate flower - a one of a kind truly. She had to protect this so - called flower and raid off other possible insects and foes. Enduring the snow and heat, just so that she knew her flower would not be alone. A bee also susceptible to harm, and when she bruised a wing, or even hurt a leg, she could see from the corner of her eye, that her flower wilted in remorse. So as a bee, one who benefitted from nothing else but the flower's sweetness, she got up today with in mind of her flower's happiness. What could she do better for her flower? Many things, she thought, a great number of things.  
  
SooYeon cast aside her musings, and gingerly pushed MiYoung up. She kissed her smooth neck, not caring that TaeYang saw, and replied against her curved lips.  
  
"I'm a stupid, plebian, and luckless bee."  
  
MiYoung did not have the ability to see through SooYeon's head, but she did understand her better than anyone else. Which was why she kissed SooYeon back with a pleasant laugh.  
  
"But you're mine. Whatever you are."  
  
SooYeon gave a brief nod, accepting, and replied.  
  
"I'm yours."  
  
She watered her flower with grateful kisses.  
  
---  
  
"Is the breakfast ready?"  
  
HyunA gurgled and yawned shamelessly into her sleeve. She blinked and haphazardly stumbled over a blanket, before slamming her knee onto a small table.  
  
"Ow!"  
  
She yelped and clutched at her throbbing leg. MiYoung crouched and consoled HyunA. SooYeon tensed her jaw but snapped her head back to the ladle in her grip. She hoisted it to an empty bowl and filled it with the morning's meal, she repeated this three more times and went to the table on the floor.  
  
SooYeon scolded in a mild voice.  
  
"Be more alert. It would be a shame if an accident of yours were to ruin our meal."  
  
HyunA huffed and pulled in her leg, she smiled up at MiYoung, and limped to a filled bowl. JiYong and TaeYang came carrying various little dishes, and the latter proudly laid his down to proclaim.  
  
"I made these!"  
  
SooYeon snorted and commented dryly.  
  
"We should pray before we eat. For many things - "  
  
"Hey, they'll taste fine!"  
  
"We'll see."  
  
The two boys sat down as SeungHyun and DaeSung approached with the utensils. DaeSung sat across from MiYoung and motioned her closer. The GongJu craned her neck forward and heard him whisper.  
  
"I still want to trade crowns - I hear you get a jewel on yours when you marry."  
  
MiYoung pulled back and sputtered.  
  
"Y - you get a jewel too!"  
  
DaeSung playfully smiled and grabbed his chopsticks. He scanned everyone's faces and joyously yelled.  
  
"Let's eat!"  
  
---  
  
"Are those the last of the dishes?"  
  
SooYeon asked SeungHyun.  
  
"Yes."  
  
She picked herself up and took the emptied plates to a bucket. JiYong told her that he would later carry it to a nearby stream, and wash them with TaeYang, which relieved her as she hated the thought of flies accumulating in their lodge.  
  
"WHAT?"  
  
SooYeon whipped her head back to see HyunA's slackened jaw, her eyes reflecting horror. MiYoung looked uncertainly to SooYeon while DaeSung and SeungHyun nodded in affirmation. TaeYang and JiYong paused in wiping the table clean.  
  
"WE'RE MEETING WITH THE QUEEN OF THE PARK KINGDOM?"  
  
HyunA screeched then scrambled up to hastily pack her scattered clothes and belongings. SooYeon watched with fascination at the objects sailing through the air, perfectly fitting inside HyunA's large pack. MiYoung stepped up to hold the frantic girl back, but her insistence was drowned out by HyunA's crazed yell.  
  
"YOU GUYS SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME - "  
  
The door to their dwelling burst open with a blast. HyunA gave a shrill squeak to the figure standing at the entrance, a cloud of dust billowing under her feet. The woman came in with a devious smile and raised both her arms high up into the air. Her fingers curled with each step taken.  
  
"Here I come to offer my help - and what's this?"  
  
The woman was dressed extravagantly. Her hair was put up and braided with fine pieces of jewelry, and her arms were clasped with polished bracelets. Her attire was full of rich and dark colors, and her shoes were embroidered with beautiful detail. No one had to mention that she was a Queen, her presence alone spoke that clearly. DaeSung drew up to MiYoung's side and gawked without shame. The Queen put her arms akimbo and merrily chirped.  
  
"I hear a familiar voice. A voice that I thought had left the face of the earth, because afterall, if it were to still exist, it should be at my side."  
  
The Queen crept even closer to HyunA. She explained an inch away from the younger girl's bloodless face.  
  
"A voice that belonged to my *faithful* bodyguard."  
  
HyunA's mouth was open, her teeth painfully clenched, and her eyes wide with fright. The Queen patted HyunA's shoulder and whispered with a playful smirk.  
  
"So good to have you back, HyunA, my cherished servant. You can gather your uniform outside by my guards. You must have missed it."  
  
She petted HyunA's head, and side - stepped to give a slight bow in front of DaeSung and MiYoung.  
  
"I am here to help you on your war."  
  
She raised her head, and tipped it back. A glint shining brightly in her eyes, her teeth gleaming white with perfection. She held herself daintily, but her manners indicated that she carried an impenetrable soul.  
  
"You have my gratitude in finding my..."  
  
She gestured to HyunA.  
  
"Precious warrior. "  
  
HyunA jerkily staggered towards the door with a squeal.  
  
"I'll... go... put on my uniform... now..."   
  
The Queen chuckled and replied in a confident tone.  
  
"That you shall, and now, let me introduce myself."  
  
SooYeon sidled to MiYoung's right, while SeungHyun and TaeYang slid behind DaeSung's left. JiYong quietly accompanied HyunA's stiff walk, it looked like the merchant was about to faint. The Queen crossed one arm over her waist, and threw the other up into the air.  
  
"I am Queen HyoJin of the Park Kingdom, and I am here at your service!"  
  
Everyone gaped at her flair, and she brought her hand back down with a grin.  
  
"But you may all call me Narsha - even the lackeys may. A foreign ambassador bestowed me that name, and I am quite taken with it."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 13**

"It doesn't bother you? Standing out here?"  
  
HyunA sighed at SooYeon's inquiry and slumped her shoulders while sliding the back of her head against a wall. SooYeon cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes to see that HyunA had her mouth still closed, perhaps she would have to question more for an answer.  
  
"Does your Queen do this often? Hold meetings in such... places?"  
  
HyunA groaned and the white headband around her forehead slid down to cover her eyebrows in her despondency. The former merchant mumbled mechanically.  
  
"She prefers to be called Narsha now, and she likes to show her guests a fun time... also likes to show her power as a woman in the royal court."  
  
SooYeon peered over her shoulder to the iron - clad doors painted with a gaudy red dye, then shook her head helplessly as she heard another roar of laughter from behind the doors. HyunA pulled out her lower lip, and blew her bangs back as she pushed her headband away from her vision. She raised her shoulders and wriggled her fingers as she stared up into the star - filled sky with SooYeon.  
  
"Sometimes it's nice to watch the stars, eh?"  
  
Well, what else could two soldiers do on a night like this? Guarding a door that held a meeting with their kingdoms' rulers was an expected duty for them. Although, a meeting that had men who danced, fed, and fanned their guests was unexpected.  
  
SooYeon felt a trickle of curiosity, and asked HyunA in an apathetic tone.  
  
"I guess your Queen - Narsha... likes the show provided?"  
  
HyunA brazenly scoffed and pushed the door ajar so that a crack was available for SooYeon's viewing pleasure. MiYoung and DaeSung were working hard in concentrating on their food, ignoring the men who complimented their every move. And Narsha, Narsha was currently being fed by a smiling male servant. She had her chin tipped back so that the man could dangle and appropriately drop whatever morsel of food into her mouth. SooYeon frowned, but not in a displeased manner, the very opposite, in fact, as she found the whole thing to be nothing less than amusing.  
  
"It looks like your ruler does indeed. Although, I can't say the same for my rulers."  
  
SooYeon smirked at MiYoung's blushing discomfort, and closed the door as quietly as possible while she repositioned herself. HyunA sighed again, a soft whine following right after it, and complained aggressively.  
  
"I don't get why TaeYang and SeungHyun get to guard the doors up in the front instead of this one!"  
  
SooYeon arched an eyebrow and looked at the other girl.  
  
"It doesn't please you to be picked here? Afterall, it shows that Narsha has some obvious faith in your skills. - "  
  
"No! *Aish*! At least let me in and enjoy some of the fun! This is torture to be put right in the front of the doors, but not allowed in!"  
  
SooYeon sucked in a corner of her mouth and nodded, not necessary in agreement but for the sake of listening. HyunA sulked and whined to no one while the other girl smiled at another shriek of laughter. SooYeon was not familiar with HyunA's snappiness, but she did not feel irritated by it, partly because she enjoyed it. It was about time HyunA tasted a bit of her own medicine. By no means was Narsha a whiny little kid, but she did serve as a hindrance to HyunA's heedless ways, and for that SooYeon would excuse all of HyunA's brooding.   
  
She was about to ask HyunA's true reason for leaving Narsha when the doors opened in a hurry. Both soldiers looked back to see an overly - relieved MiYoung, a tight - lipped DaeSung, and a drunk but strangely coherent Narsha.   
  
MiYoung strode forward and hooked her right arm over SooYeon's elbow as she bent her head to whisper desperately.  
  
"Get us out of here, please."  
  
"Ah..."  
  
SooYeon quickly turned then bowed her head low before DaeSung.  
  
"I am sorry, but it seems we have matters to talk about within our own troops, if you could please follow me back to discuss the problems..."  
  
DaeSung fervently agreed before she could wink, and ran down the hallway to SeungHyun and TaeYang before Narsha could interject. MiYoung curtly bid the Queen a warm farewell, but walked - dragged - SooYeon down DaeSung's path. SooYeon swiveled her head back, and saw HyunA seize up rigidly as Narsha draped an arm over the soldier's waist. Her voice echoed down the whole corridor while she pulled HyunA into the room.  
  
"Come hither, HyunA! We shall get our money's worth from this place!"  
  
SooYeon heard a distant whoop of cheer from HyunA.  
  
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"I pity HyunA sometimes."  
  
MiYoung snapped her head to SooYeon, and stared on incredulously as the other girl remained unfazed with her statement. MiYoung immediately lit into a smile and scooted closer to SooYeon who was studying a map by their shared bed. Her whisper tickled the inner - shell of SooYeon's ear.  
  
"I thought you'd be happy with her absence."  
  
SooYeon snorted and folded the map into a small square, tossing it a few meters away to a sack beside her swords.  
  
MiYoung also felt sympathy at HyunA's situation - who knew what could be going on in the room with Narsha - but, of course, she felt a greater joy in spending the night alone with SooYeon.  
  
The room they occupied was large, it had an evenly matted yellow floor, and a very fine candle - holder that stood to the right of SooYeon. Narsha had invited them all to bask in the glory of her palace, and SooYeon appreciated the luxuries it held, even if her male concubines ran it enthusiastically. She saw the servants' shadows fly by the paper doors as they brightly accepted orders and completed them. JiYong and TaeYang were in the room to the left, while SeungHyun and DaeSung were in the room to the right, and judging by the flight of the servants, TaeYang had requested a midnight snack. SooYeon saw a skinny but tall male carry over a small desk holding a large bowl over to the adjacent room, the liquid in the bowl sloshed noisily as the man did his best in being prompt. She hoped the bowl was not filled with something alcoholic, although she could not blame DaeSung's wish for it after having witnessed Narsha's carefree ease. She tore her eyes away from the blue and black figures to answer MiYoung resolutely.  
  
"I'm happy she's away, but I do feel sorry - "  
  
MiYoung licked the spot below SooYeon's ear and bit it, she was rewarded with a gasp. She slid her hands over SooYeon's toned stomach, and began untying the other girl's shirt, teasing her in a light chuckle.  
  
"You seem to be getting closer to HyunA. Should I be worried about this?"  
  
They had all gone into the palace baths when they had first arrived, and SooYeon blissfully took in the flowery scent of MiYoung's hair. Her body clearly wanted indulgences, thus demanded that the brain participate as well. SooYeon murmured, intoxicated with what was being given to her senses.   
  
"HyunA, who?"  
  
MiYoung laughed gently as SooYeon's eyes fluttered closed, the warm hands now stroking against her ribs and near her naval, fogging her mind gradually. She sucked in a breath, a hiss going through her teeth, and stifled a groan when MiYoung nipped her throat. The GongJu was slowing her caresses but frantically implored.  
  
"Put out the light."  
  
SooYeon haphazardly stuck out her arm and began patting down to her right, searching for the cup of water a kindly servant had brought in earlier. She found it and dipped in two of her fingers before pinching the air to snuff out the tiny flame next to her. She knew she succeeded in extinguishing the candlelight when the room fell into one dark shade. She brushed off her wet fingers onto the hem of the blanket under them, and shrugged off her shirt as she clasped MiYoung's chin to kiss longingly.  
  
It never was the same when she touched others. The gesture could be as small as a brush to her hand, but it was only MiYoung's touch that burned her. SooYeon's tongue grazed over the other girl's soft lower lip then cautiously slipped into her welcoming mouth, swiping against her tongue with lazy strokes. She never got tired of kissing MiYoung, she loved being able to communicate her love into action. And this time, *she* was the one who lowered MiYoung onto the bed. SooYeon pressed one hand over MiYoung's shoulder, guiding the other hand up her thigh, pulling off the last of her clothing.  
  
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The ribbon to MiYoung's dress was in SooYeon's hand. The silky material a stark contrast to her rough palm, and SooYeon smiled as she raised her fingers to let it slip silently to the floor. She was laying onto her left, MiYoung's right arm wrapped loosely over her collarbones, breaths blowing across the nape of her neck. Her hair was mussed, and she should take in all the sleep she can get, but she woke up to a cricket's chirping thirty minutes ago. And it wouldn't be a bad idea to soak in the pleasantries of the beautiful night. She tucked both her hands back under the blanket and rolled her body over to face the sleeping girl. SooYeon grasped MiYoung's wrist and brought it to her face, kissing the other girl's knuckles gingerly.   
  
"Ever since I've met you..."  
  
She said it with a yawn before wrapping MiYoung's arm over her waist. She glided her lips down MiYoung's pale throat, raking her teeth against the birthmark on the right of her neck.  
  
"I've stopped wanting more from anyone else."  
  
She embraced MiYoung passionately, the heat of their bodies scorching and satisfying.  
  
"I'm in love with you."  
  
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By the time SooYeon tied the knots to her belt, a third bird's chirp sang through the early morning's light. She fixed her hair into a secure bun, catching all the wispy strands around her ear and on the back of her neck, then adjusted her sleeves accordingly to their lengths.  
  
She had washed a couple of hours ago, a bead of water still hanging on her left earlobe as evidence. She rubbed the droplet off with the back of her hand, and knelt down to MiYoung. The blanket's end was settled over the other girl's chest, but SooYeon drew it up until it touched MiYoung's chin. She snapped her head and tensed her jaw when she heard a creak. A shadow was quivering beyond the screen, and SooYeon strained her ears to the scratchy whine.  
  
"SooYeon? It's me, HyunA..."  
  
That brat. Was she trying to spy on them again?  
  
"Let me in... I need some sleep..."  
  
Oh.  
  
SooYeon rose up to her feet, careful with her steps in order to not wake up MiYoung, and tugged the door handle surreptitiously. HyunA stood with her arms crossed and shivering, her hair parted in a different angle, she obviously had been running around aimlessly.  
  
"What brings you here - "  
  
"Let me in!"  
  
SooYeon frowned at the hiss, but allowed HyunA to come inside the room. The disorientated girl waddled a few steps before sinking down next to MiYoung, SooYeon bit back a yell and cautioned HyunA stiffly.  
  
"There's a separate bedding available, you ingrate - "  
  
"Where? You don't understand - you don't - I've been running around trying to shake off this guy... I'm so tired... men after men after men... it just gets so tiring after a while..."  
  
HyunA let a soft wail, and SooYeon slid down to clasp her mouth.  
  
"Shh! I'll set up the bed, now stop whining."  
  
HyunA blinked back then stared wide - eye as she nodded obediently. SooYeon removed her hand and stood back up. A knock on the door echoed throughout the room.  
  
"We know where the Queen's troops are stationed at! Gather at the council room!"  
  
SeungHyun's voice boomed against the paper - thin door, and he sharply turned on his heels. He had an obligation to be the first in the meeting. HyunA's head wilted with her shoulders, and she buried herself across SooYeon's side of the bed, muffling her sob somewhat effectively. MiYoung heard the dejected cry reverberate through her shared blanket, and she shifted blearily.  
  
"S - SooYeon - *AIE!*"  
  
MiYoung jerked the blanket protectively over her bare shoulders while HyunA snapped her head up, stunned and no longer thinking of her complaints. MiYoung fumbled with her words, her fingers twisting around the hem of the blanket, her cheeks flushing with a deep red.  
  
"HyunA, u - um, what are you doing here?"  
  
"Wow... I missed out on the fun stuff - "  
  
"Hey, hey! Did you guys hear? We have to gather up in the council room!"  
  
TaeYang flung open the door to their room, popped inside with a smile stretched across his face, then froze, his jaw slacked to the girls in the room. He whispered lowly, his right hand going up to cover his mouth in feigned prudence.  
  
"My, my, SooYeon... is one girl not enough for you?"  
  
He deftly blocked the pillow thrown to him, then went behind the door, letting it act as a barrier. He tapped the frame playfully before leaving with an impish chuckle.  
  
"You guys have until breakfast. Make sure to make the most of your free time, if you know what I mean?"  
  
SooYeon snarled as he fled down the empty hallway, evading her lashing, as well as a male servant around the corner. HyunA hung her head, and whimpered as she began sliding her heels along the floor.  
  
"I want to go to sleep..."  
  
SooYeon scowled then focused her attention back to MiYoung, gathering the other girl's clothes before walking brusquely over to her side. She offered the clothing gently, keeping a sharp eye on HyunA and instructing.  
  
"There's no point in feeling sorry for yourself right now. It would be best to go to the meeting right away, and finishing our duties. Perhaps then you will be given time to sleep."  
  
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"Couldn't they at least offer us breakfast before we leave?"  
  
HyunA grumbled to SooYeon, her stomach echoed her hunger, and she adjusted all her gear accordingly.  
  
"HyunA!"  
  
HyunA cringed but allowed her eyes to look back to her caller. Narsha waved at her leisurely from where she sat high in her throne, and beckoned her forward. The younger girl gulped, waited until a few men cleared her way, then trotted up a small flight of steps. She bent her knees and bowed low before Narsha.  
  
"Yes, Narsha?"  
  
"Here, my underling!"  
  
SooYeon watched as Narsha snapped her wrist once, ushering forth a servant. The lackey carried to her a large bowl in hand, a small steam snaking out into the sky, provoking a drool from HyunA. Narsha smiled, pleased with HyunA's response, then announced a little too proudly.  
  
"I saved some just for you. I am a good ruler, yes? Yes."  
  
SooYeon snorted as HyunA mindlessly nodded before consuming the bowl, using both of her hands to drink the rest. SooYeon had better things to do than to see a soldier obey her master, and decided to stalk away quietly, squeezing past other warriors to go to her assigned post. She repressed a startled gasp when she saw MiYoung near it, apparently arguing with a perplexed SeungHyun.  
  
"GongJu, we will be right back! You cannot come with us - your safety is the reason for all of this!"  
  
"But - "  
  
A grin was working its way up SooYeon's face, but she shook it off, as she went and grabbed MiYoung's elbow. SeungHyun opened his mouth as if to say something, but shut it when he saw SooYeon's beseeching eyes. Just let me handle this, she seemed to silently ask him. He nodded curtly before merging into a throng, his commanding shouts were the only things indicating his presence. SooYeon felt the other girl tense in her grip, her obstinance ready to appear to aid in her rebuts, but SooYeon would have none of that.  
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
"He's right, I'm sure you know this."  
  
"But - "  
  
"And the Queen from the Seo Kingdom. I hear she's going to be here today?"  
  
"Yes..."  
  
"It'd be for the best if you were here and ready for her."  
  
MiYoung twisted her mouth, her dissatisfaction squirming within, and SooYeon sighed before warily glancing over her shoulder. She saw a shadowed corner up ahead and began dragging the other girl towards it. A stocky soldier in the distance bellowed an order into the air; it was nearly time to depart. She pressed MiYoung into the angled space, cooing softly into her ear.  
  
"You need to stay here and help us with making plans with the Seo kingdom."  
  
SooYeon heard MiYoung part her mouth, stubbornly trying to come up with a negotiation, and she silenced it with a kiss. Her hand traveled up to brush against MiYoung's temple, combing past her hair to settle below her ear. She pulled away when she could no longer inhale properly, and gazed into the other girl's eyes.  
  
"Be here when I return... please?"  
  
---  
  
"No, *I'm* the better archer - "  
  
"No, I am!"  
  
"What - even SooYeon will tell you that I'm the top at archery!"  
  
HyunA snapped her head to her right in disdain, while TaeYang gawked at her utter refusal to acknowledge his claim.  
  
"W - well, how are you so sure?"  
  
"Because women have better aim than men."  
  
"WHAT?"  
  
"Don't you even know that?"  
  
"Stop squabbling we're almost at the target!"  
  
JiYong admonished them, juggling with his own medical supplies as the troop went over a cumbersome hill.   
  
"I can squabble all I want! I'm sleep - deprived, and I'm young!"  
  
HyunA was whinier than usual, surlier than usual, and it was all because of her lack of sleep, which was not unusual.  
  
SooYeon kicked a small stone as they continued their march towards the enemy. The weather was fine for the afternoon, but sweat made its way on her brow, disturbing her as she had to wipe it off every so often along the journey. SeungHyun was leading the group, lips thinned as he never liked the idea of his men in danger. She fixed her ears back to HyunA, hoping to lessen some of the tension felt in the atmosphere.  
  
"Let's make it match then - whoever takes out the most in today's battle is the winner - "  
  
As if on cure, an arrow as well as a cry erupted from behind them. SooYeon brandished her swords, held her breath, then ran when she saw a charging group of men emerge from their left. SeungHyun leapt to her side, covering all of her blind - spots, as he swung his sword to defend her. He talked to her, perhaps as an odd way of easing the anxiety around them.  
  
"SooYeon - *urgh!* - I'm a little lost in our attack plan against the Queen!"  
  
SooYeon gritted her teeth as she leaned her back against his, and answered before assaulting an enemy.  
  
"Lost?"  
  
"I don't get how we could... lure her out! The Queen, I mean!"  
  
He was intent on figuring this strategy out *now*? SooYeon couldn't help but scoff, and threw a man to the ground as she pondered on the solutions. SeungHyun grunted as he forced his sword through an opponent.  
  
"The area's tightly secured... and guards will most likely be expecting our arrival!"  
  
How can one force something out of its home? She craned her neck back to confirm on JiYong's well - being, the doctor was vulnerable without any weapons, and she smiled at seeing TaeYang sticking to his side. Then it hit her - TaeYang and SeungHyun. They had been driven out of the palace because of many reasons, but one in particular struck SooYeon now.  
  
She hissed when a blade narrowly missed her cheek, taking a step back to slash at her opponent's neck.  
  
"You're forgetting something, SeungHyun!"  
  
SooYeon wheezed as she twirled and deflected a blow to her right. SeungHyun quickly parried off another enemy.  
  
"What am I missing?"  
  
He slid behind her and shook back his fallen bangs at her reply.  
  
"You're forgetting that they have a fort, and we're the ones arriving!"  
  
SeungHyun could not comprehend, namely because of all the chaos and noise.  
  
"I don't think I'm getting what you're saying! If she has a fort, and we're the ones charging - *ugh!*"  
  
He felt an arrow clap against his armor, and looked to its direction. A man stood high up on a cliff, and had another arrow drawn. SeungHyun frantically looked around for help, then let out a sigh of relief as a thin blur whizzed past him and shot the man on the cliff. SeungHyun checked over his shoulder to see HyunA smiling proudly and swinging her bow in victory before running away to TaeYang.  
  
"SooYeon, I really wish we could be planning this at another time - but as I was saying, I don't see how having a fort could serve as a disadvantage..."  
  
SooYeon plunged her sword into the last man in front of her, then let him fall to the ground, too weary in collecting her stuck weapon.  
  
"Luring her out... isn't it obvious when she has a fort?"  
  
"What's obvious?"  
  
"We just have to burn it."  
  
"Burn it?"  
  
"The fort. We have to burn it."  
  
SeungHyun's eyes widened at the answer, and a thrill went up his spine.  
  
"Of course! We just have to burn it! A - and it'll bring chaos!"  
  
He ran along the possible sequences.  
  
"First we gather up all the archers in a formation - that might take a bit of training, but it can be done in a night. After that we map out the teams... the fire will surely cause a disorganization to erupt... which will gain us an access to the palace - would it be all right to burn our own kingdom's palace?"  
  
SooYeon bent down to pluck out her sword and slurred tiredly.  
  
"Why not? Let's ask the WangJa for permission. I'm sure if you spare him his crown and jewels, he'll be fine with the idea."  
  
SeungHyun chuckled, slapped a hand over her back, then hurried away to assist the remaining soldiers. SooYeon tipped her head back, nothing but clouds in her view, and breathed laboriously in her exhaustion. This was contentment, to see SeungHyun and TaeYang fighting by her side, not dead but alive. Sometimes SooYeon saw them as ghosts, but her guilt was losing its foothold, allowing her to return to her former self before they were gone. It allowed her to be bolder with MiYoung, and smile randomly throughout the day. And watching HyunA flaunt mercilessly to TaeYang, JiYong kindly advise to SeungHyun, her loss of guilt made her friends solid slowly.  
  
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She would have gladly fixed her attire for today's guests, but such little could be done right after an attack. Her arms weighed, aching with dull throbs, to stretch them would mean a rip in her muscles.   
  
What a life, and yet as she climbed the stairs listlessly, her heart soared at the thought of MiYoung's welcome. It would probably be a smile, which will quickly dissolve into a worried frown. She will get chastised, even though she did do her best in defending herself, but she will not argue against MiYoung's scoldings. She will instead be jubilant at being home - being with MiYoung.  
  
HyunA crossed over from her formation to walk along side - by - side with SooYeon. She had been surprisingly adept at archery, enough to have TaeYang sulk in the back of the line. She swung her quiver to her chest, flaunting its emptiness, celebrating her win against TaeYang.  
  
"Hey, SooYeon? That was a successful battle, eh?"  
  
She was giddy for proving TaeYang wrong. How expected of her. But SooYeon rolled her eyes to the side, and answered with what the other girl wanted to hear.  
  
"Yes, it was, and you were a help... surprisingly."  
  
HyunA chortled, hummed, then switched lanes to boast to another. SooYeon sighed, and SeungHyun, who was behind her, laughed gently at her expense. He had a cut lip, torn probably from a small blunt force. She ascended the final step and surveyed the palace's entrance. New carriages, and along with them, numerous soldiers.   
  
"So they're here..."  
  
JiYong whispered and inhaled, hunching his shoulders as they approached closer. The doors to the main room were obstructed by four guards, they raised their weapons and proceeded to clear the doorway. The doors swung open, and a male council member announced loudly.  
  
"The WangJa and GongJu from the Hwang kingdom are asking for their personal guards! And Queen Narsha is asking for you, HyunA!"  
  
TaeYang strode forward from the back, shrugged at SooYeon and replied.  
  
"Guess that's us five."  
  
SooYeon nodded and parted her tousled hair before going through the door.  
  
---  
  
"Are you hurt?"  
  
MiYoung whispered as she trailed her fingertips over SooYeon's left kneecap. SooYeon shook her head, keeping her eyes on the guests up front. A tall and serene looking Queen sat with her hands daintily clasped over her lap. A woman, a soldier, kept her forehead parallel to the ground to the new Queen's right. A man, a doctor, kept his arms folded over his chest to her left. SooYeon wordlessly urged MiYoung to focus her attention back onto newcomers, pressing her thumb over the other girl's wrist as she sat down next to her. Narsha raised her arms into the air, and explained in a hearty voice.  
  
"These are our personal assistants! Please consider them as one of your own! Although I'm sure you've seen a couple of them before."  
  
The Queen across from Narsha nodded, flickering her eyes to SeungHyun and TaeYang, then laced her fingers together over her stomach. She spoke in a strong but benign tone.  
  
"If that is the case, please, let me introduce myself and those by my side again."  
  
She gestured to the woman on her right.  
  
"This is my most esteemed soldier, YoonA."  
  
She let her hand fall to the left.  
  
"And this is my most esteemed physician, WooYoung."  
  
She folded her hands again in respect, and her eyes sparkled as she stated.  
  
"I believe most matters can be solved through peace, but there are times when exceptions must be made. I, Queen SeoHyun of the Seo kingdom, will assist you for the peace of this land."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 14**

"Why did you leave?"  
  
HyunA whisked her head to SooYeon and knitted her brows in curiosity. The young girl was honest with her emotions, you had to give her that.   
  
"Huh?"  
  
SooYeon sighed in agitation, but asked again, still in the same tone.  
  
"Why did you leave Narsha?"  
  
"Oh."  
  
HyunA shuffled her feet, and looked over at Narsha. The carefree older lady was talking amiably to MiYoung, DaeSung, and SeoHyun. SooYeon caught the word "entertainment" amidst the garbled conversation, and presumed there would be another round of guarding closed doors. She pondered on how the new Queen, SeoHyun, would like that.  
  
"It was a small and stupid fight."  
  
SooYeon snapped her head back to HyunA.  
  
"You fought with your Queen?"  
  
"Well, no. I guess I ran away before we could fight."  
  
HyunA guiltily looked over her palms, checking for escapes that weren't there. SooYeon pressed her lips together and kept silent, surprised that she was no longer impatient with HyunA on anything. The younger girl started again, trying to defend herself from SooYeon's piercing gaze.  
  
"It was nothing, really, I just got tired of doing the same thing over and over again."  
  
"That's our job as soldiers - "  
  
"I - I know, but sometimes, like guarding the doors... it gets annoying."  
  
SooYeon caught the way HyunA averted her eyes. She was about to end the whole conversation with a farewell, when HyunA blurted in a small voice.  
  
"I said something really stupid too..."  
  
"What?"  
  
HyunA frowned with slanted eyebrows and confessed dryly.  
  
"I said I liked her - I don't know... I ran away after... I didn't want to hear what she had to say about that..."  
  
SooYeon asked quietly.  
  
"And now?"  
  
HyunA hung her head and answered.  
  
"I don't know... she's acting like nothing happened... so I'm acting like nothing happened."  
  
"Yesterday, when we were guarding the doors, you weren't only frustrated at being outside... am I right? There was more to your frustration?"  
  
HyunA grumbled incoherently and SooYeon grinned in pity.  
  
"She's a Queen... I think maybe you were too young when you confessed to her - "  
  
"When I was away with you guys... I thought I would do fine with never seeing her again. But now that I'm here... I'm stuck... I don't have a desire to leave again. I sound crazy, eh?"  
  
"No, you - "  
  
SooYeon then felt someone pet her shoulder. She looked over to see MiYoung's warm grin. She also saw the others start to walk out of the room. Night had fallen, and outside the doors, fires was lit atop posts and in lanterns. The hand on her shoulder slid down her arm, and grabbed her fingers. SooYeon softened her eyes at MiYoung, but talked back to HyunA.  
  
"We had a long day. You could afford an early night's sleep."  
  
She followed MiYoung and stepped out of the door. She knew without looking back that HyunA stood rooted to her spot.  
  
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The next morning everyone was up, and SeungHyun was in front of the palace delegating soldiers of their responsiblities. SooYeon had no idea why she was there with him, but it seemed he wanted her there for support, most likely for emotional support. She was on a higher plane than the soldiers, which gave her a view that oversaw everything. She watched as HyunA and TaeYang stood in front of two troops, inspecting the ranks and skills of various men.   
  
"Well, that's one way to lose my voice."  
  
SeungHyun wheezed as he climbed his way to where she stood. He grunted on his final step, and unceremoniously threw his heavy sword down as well as his shield.  
  
"It was a bad idea to carry this around while ordering them. What was I thinking..."  
  
SooYeon rolled her eyes. It was evident that he did it to appear proper; every warrior was to always be in charge of their weapons. She straightened her shoulders back, letting her swords hit upon one another, and clasped her hands behind.  
  
MiYoung had given her a few kisses in the morning, and therefore everything felt light, even her swords. She smugly grinned at the memory, but was woken out of it when SeungHyun whispered to her.  
  
"Look... it's Queen Narsha..."  
  
"She likes to be simply known as Narsha."  
  
"You know I can never get used to that."  
  
SooYeon shrugged in response, but looked to where he had pointed on the opposite side. Narsha was heading towards them with a few escorts of her own. She made her steps slowly, rounding the corners as she kept her eyes locked on HyunA below. SooYeon stifled her snort, and put her arms in front as Narsha stood before her. She shooed away her men, and they scattered to the side. SeungHyun uncertainly kept by SooYeon's side, but let out an air relief when Narsha dismissed him gently. It was now just the two of them on those high steps. Narsha cooly asked SooYeon.  
  
"Lackey, tell me, what do you think of my kingdom?"  
  
SooYeon could feel this was simply a question asked to get to another question. So she replied quickly, pretending along with the other woman that nothing else mattered.  
  
"It's well - maintained. I can see that your people love you as a ruler. I think that is essential for any kingdom to prosper."  
  
Narsha barked a laugh in pride. SooYeon wished for this as her cue to leave, but along came the inquisitive whisper.  
  
"You... "  
  
Narsha raised her eyebrows.  
  
"What will you do when your kingdom comes together with DaeSung and MiYoung in their proper thrones?"  
  
"I will serve them, of course - "  
  
"Of course? Can you really serve your GongJu without drawing suspicion? Without the kingdom finding out about your relationship?"  
  
SooYeon froze, and Narsha's eyes twinkled as she explained in a light voice.  
  
"Your eyes are different when you look at her."  
  
SooYeon controlled her tone, but her words were curt.  
  
"I will do my duty properly, and stay by the GongJu."  
  
"You haven't answered my question. What if they find out? Will you stand by her as her reputation crumbles?"  
  
---  
  
"You seem pensive about something tonight."  
  
SooYeon jerked out of her meditation and looked up to see MiYoung gazing down at her. She had not noticed that the other girl had come into their room. She abruptly stood up, trying to escape MiYoung's intuitive stare, but slender fingers clutched her wrist stubbornly.  
  
"Don't leave..."  
  
MiYoung moved closer as SooYeon remained in her position. She trailed her hands up to SooYeon's neck, stroking her throat soothingly, guiding her to their bed.  
  
"I don't like how you looked at me just now... like you didn't belong here..."  
  
MiYoung tilted her head and kissed SooYeon's cheek, she kissed again as she coaxed the other girl onto the soft blanket.  
  
"You're bothered by something. Tell me."  
  
SooYeon writhed and gasped as MiYoung bit, harder than usual, on her throat, perhaps a way of punishing her for keeping secrets. She dug the heels of her feet into the rumpled blanket, as MiYoung clamped her mouth over her neck, licking the sore spot before sucking on it. How was she supposed to answer with all this happening to her? She could barely stay focused as MiYoung slid fingers behind her left ear, tracing the tip, as she sucked on her neck with varying intensity.  
  
"I... *ngh*..."  
  
SooYeon swore she would kill anyone who dare interrupt them now. She swore this with every ounce of strength in her body.  
  
MiYoung pulled back from SooYeon's neck, and began nibbling the other girl's lower lip. Kissing her softly, then deeply as she traced her thumb along the dip below SooYeon's collarbones.  
  
"*Hah*..."  
  
SooYeon tilted her head away, and haggardly took in her breaths, as she tried to refrain from kissing back. Narsha's words still echoing somewhere deep inside her mind. MiYoung noticed this and whined, pitifully, when Sooyeon didn't return another kiss. She connected her forehead onto SooYeon's and pleaded.  
  
"SooYeon... why aren't you speaking?"  
  
SooYeon winced at the tremor in MiYoung's voice. She gritted her teeth as a little voice in her mind spoke to her in exasperation.   
  
Can't you see you're hurting her again, you nitwit?   
  
Sure enough, MiYoung was looking at her with a wounded pair of eyes, her lips starting to quiver at SooYeon's silence.  
  
Narsha had meant well, and was thinking of what was right for both of them.   
  
But SooYeon would be damned if she were to hurt MiYoung again.  
  
She wrapped her arms over MiYoung's neck and pressed her close. A pleasant heat encasing them as she stroked MiYoung's back, brushing her lips over the other girl's forgiving smile. She slowly pulled off the rest of their clothes, and whispered raspily.  
  
"Sorry..."  
  
She kissed away the fading hurt on MiYoung's face tenderly, and whispered again before trailing one hand down the curve of her hip.  
  
"Sorry..."  
  
---  
  
"When did Narsha tell you that?"  
  
"In the morning when I was overlooking the troops with SeungHyun."  
  
"We'll make it through, even if our love gets exposed."  
  
SooYeon nodded in affirmation as MiYoung's teeth grazed over her bare shoulder. She tilted her head forward, and nestled it along the crook of SooYeon's neck. She sighed as she continued her thoughts.  
  
"I think Narsha wants us to be wary and careful. Her concern shows that she wants us to find a solution in making our love last."  
  
SooYeon nodded again. She contemplated while MiYoung's hand went up to wipe the sweat on her brow, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.   
  
It seemed Narsha was purposely holding back on herself with HyunA, and for unselfish reasons surprisingly. It would be detrimental for HyunA if her love was to be uncovered; she would get banished from the kingdom. And if they found that Narsha reciprocated the feelings, she could quite possibly get dethroned as a result. And then how would they live? They would have nowhere to go, and Narsha would no longer have any power left.  
  
MiYoung kissed SooYeon's back chastely, and pulled the blanket higher over their bodies. SooYeon felt an arm slither under her neck and another curl over her stomach.   
  
She drifted off to sleep with MiYoung's fingertips drawing over her skin, wordlessly writing to her of love.  
  
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A few birds began chirping as the sun broke into dawn.  
  
SooYeon groaned as she peeled open her eyes, shutting them once again to clear away the haze in her vision. She felt arms cling onto her waist as she stirred, and turned her head to groggily to look at MiYoung. After staring at her for a couple of minutes, SooYeon tentatively pried off the other girl's arm and wearily sat up from the bed.  
  
She swiftly put on her clothes as she stood up, and stretched her arms before getting ready to go out. The first breath of air outside was delicious, and SooYeon ventured on further to a cobbled pathway.  
  
A quick shower would be wise. She would have to haste in order to attend breakfast with MiYoung. Yes, SooYeon thought, this will be a good morning. She then started her stroll down to the palace baths.  
  
"See? They always go at it."  
  
SooYeon froze at HyunA's voice. She looked back to see no one, gulped in dread, then raised her head slowly to the edge of the roof. YoonA, HyunA, and TaeYang were on it, crouched and eating what looked to be rice cakes in their hands. YoonA nodded gravely with her mouth open, as TaeYang waved down at SooYeon.  
  
"Hey, SooYeon! This is YoonA! You guys haven't talked yet, right?"  
  
SooYeon tensed her jaw and spat back.  
  
"Right."  
  
She curled her hands into fists to keep from exploding. MiYoung was still sleeping beyond the paper - thin doors, and she wouldn't want her to wake up in this shame. YoonA grinned gregariously to her and greeted with sincere enthusiasm.  
  
"I'm YoonA, pleased to meet you!"  
  
YoonA lingered her eyes over SooYeon's disheveled state, and a blush crept up to her cheeks. Its red color screamed to SooYeon of her violated privacy, and she stiffened while flushing with her introduction.  
  
"Hello, and I'm sure you already know who I am by now..."  
  
YoonA nodded and the duo beside her smugly smiled.  
  
The snow melted long ago, and SooYeon wished for the grass on the ground to grow tall enough to engulf her, but alas she faced her on - lookers without a wall.  
  
Her lips swollen from bites and kisses. Her eyes half - lidded and bright. Her hair tousled and soft. She self - consciously pulled the flaps of her shirt closer together, trying to conceal the mark on her neck which MiYoung had left hours ago. TaeYang caught the furtive act, and leaned over to whisper indiscreetly to HyunA.  
  
"I think I see teeth - marks on her neck."  
  
HyunA pulled down her lower lip, and her nostrils widened in fascination. SooYeon saw the other girl narrow her eyes and squint tactlessly. Why did the damn snow have to melt?  
  
TaeYang cheerily yelled down to her reddened face.  
  
"SooYeon, I hear eating figs can increase your stamina for sex - "  
  
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"I suppose you're the one who gave TaeYang his limp? He wobbled his way over here, you know?"  
  
SeungHyun mumbled amusedly as SooYeon sniffed disdainfully to her right, self - consciously pulling her shirt's collars closer together. She had pulled TaeYang down after his comment about the figs, and had beaten him silently on the fresh grass.  
  
They were at the horse stables. SeungHyun was there from time to time to relieve some of his stress, and SooYeon, well, she was there to avoid most of humankind.   
  
SeungHyun went over to a lone horse, petted it absentmindedly, and grinned.  
  
"You should have been gentler though, SooYeon. He's a troublemaker, but he's still a top archer. It wouldn't be to our aid if we lost him before the upcoming war."  
  
SooYeon rolled her eyes, crossed her arms tightly and sauntered away. She heard the horse snort softly as she trudged back to the palace grounds. Great, she thought, even the animals mock me. Her pace slowed, however, when she saw the new Queen, SeoHyun, out of her room and observing a pair of birds. It would be rude to turn back and pretend not to have seen, therefore SooYeon walked on quietly, hoping to pass her without being detected.   
  
"I have heard good things about you."  
  
SooYeon was almost past SeoHyun when the whisper broke her cautious tip - toeing. She bowed respectfully as SeoHyun tilted her head and stated with a composed and polite grin.  
  
"Your GongJu cannot stop talking about you whenever we chat."  
  
SooYeon normally would not have a difficult time staring into someone's eyes, but while SeoHyun's eyes were soft, they were also sharply alert. This made SooYeon feel terribly naked. She straightened her posture and modestly replied.  
  
"What you've heard were probably exaggerations, especially if they were from the GongJu."  
  
SeoHyun shook her head in refusal and spoke up.  
  
"I can tell you live up to what everyone's said."  
  
Everyone? Who exactly was everyone -   
  
"Your highness!"  
  
A young man, the one named WooYoung, scurried over frantically to SeoHyun and gently admonished.  
  
"Your highness - you - you must stop getting up early without anyone's notice!"  
  
SeoHyun held her head back, and struggled for a moment before woefully gesturing to the pair of birds on the ground.  
  
"But these birds rely on me for their food."  
  
SooYeon peered down to see that the birds had crumbs between their yellow toes, and bit the inside of her cheek to withhold a laugh. WooYoung gawked then shook his head forcefully, as he begged SeoHyun.  
  
"Your highness, I shall wake up every morning to feed them. Therefore, please, *please*, sleep in more for your mornings, you're body is still recovering from your cold."  
  
SeoHyun sighed wearily, and a crease formed on her brow.  
  
"Although the Queen is their stepmother... it is a pity that they have to fight her, isn't it, WooYoung?"  
  
"It is, your highness, but good things come with a price. We may be shedding blood, but it will end a wrongful ruler. We are only doing this for our people to live in peace, as ironic as that may seem right now."  
  
SeoHyun smiled gratefully at WooYoung's concerned frown.  
  
"I really would like to have you constantly by my side, WooYoung."  
  
WooYoung bowed low, very low, and muttered.  
  
"Forgive me, your highness, but I do not wish for the life of a eunuch..."  
  
SeoHyun was empathetic but sighed with her reply.  
  
"Yes, but it still is a pity to not have you by my side."  
  
He led her down the walkway, and chimed good - naturedly.  
  
"But your highness can have YoonA by her side constantly."  
  
SooYeon caught SeoHyun's faint but warm smile.  
  
"Yes, I do have her."  
  
SooYeon was left unsure of what to feel as they vanished around the corner.  
  
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"AIM!"  
  
SooYeon yawned as SeungHyun belted out his orders. She scanned her eyes over the numerous heads in the crowd, before taking her place above the steps, leaning her head against a pillar. The sun was shining down on her back as she surveyed the archers.  
  
The whisper behind her made her almost jump a mile.  
  
"Lackey, have you thought about what I've said yesterday?"  
  
Narsha sidled up next to her, and waved her hand back, motioning to her escorts to allow them some space.  
  
SooYeon watched as the archers drew back their arrows in unison. They all paid heed to TaeYang and HyunA's terse commands. Narsha was also paying attention, although her eyes were only concerned for HyunA. She cleared her throat and looked on as she answered boldly.  
  
"I have. I'm staying with her."  
  
Narsha looked at SooYeon in mild bewilderment.  
  
"I see. And you've really thought about this?"  
  
It was strange to hear Narsha's usually playful voice take on a somber tone. Her question was a near whisper.  
  
"Why do you choose to stay with her?"  
  
"I have already tried shunning her before. It was no good. It hurt her every day to feel my coldness."  
  
She gave a sidelong glance to Narsha.  
  
"At least now I can be by her side... comforting her when no one else can."  
  
Narsha was silent, and SooYeon turned her head back to the archers. HyunA was scolding a fellow soldier, her sweat dripping down to her chin with her shouts. She added delicately.  
  
"I learned not to ignore someone's love, and yet greedily keep them by my side."  
  
Narsha went rigid at this. SooYeon grimly looked to the floor and whispered.  
  
"If you cannot let them go... at least protect them."  
  
She bowed low, then spun on her heels, leaving Narsha alone in her thoughts, just like she had left HyunA days before. Her footsteps were loud and consistent as she found her way back to her room. Her hand grabbed the room's door handle, and it was then that she noticed her shaking fingers. She shook her head in dismay; her talk with Narsha had brought back her own guilty feelings with MiYoung. SooYeon parted the doorway and went inside, halting when MiYoung's smiling face welcomed her.  
  
"You're back..."  
  
SooYeon gaped and closed her mouth as she closed the door. She asked as she laid down her weapons.  
  
"I thought you would be in a meeting with Queen SeoHyun."  
  
MiYoung crossed her arms from where she sat and feigned a dissatisfied frown.  
  
"This is hardly the greeting I was expecting. You did not join me for breakfast, although I did hear from DaeSung that you were involved with TaeYang on something. Still... it almost seems like you don't want me."  
  
SooYeon approached softly and knelt in front of the other girl. She cupped MiYoung's face suddenly, taking her by surprise, and leaned in for a kiss. SooYeon pulled back to see MiYoung staring back deliriously. She slitted her eyes, then kissed again, curling her tongue inside MiYoung's hot mouth. Nails dug against her back and scratched down erratically, as she slid her mouth across MiYoung's cheek to whisper hoarsely.  
  
"I want you."  
  
She planted a wet kiss over MiYoung's earlobe.  
  
"You... you don't know how much I want you..."  
  
MiYoung whimpered as SooYeon lowered her onto the floor, hungrily slipping her hand through the opening of MiYoung's shirt, rubbing her thumb below the other girl's ribs. She squirmed and listened helplessly through SooYeon's heated kisses.  
  
"I want you so much... it scares me at times."  
  
An inconsistent beat started strumming against the rooftop; rain was taking over the night. The world outside thundered and roared as SooYeon concentrated on MiYoung's tiny gasps. She hovered over MiYoung's body, trapping her, making sure she had nowhere else to go.  
  
And MiYoung smiled as SooYeon told her breathlessly.  
  
"I belong here more than anyone else."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter Fifteen**

"Do you think the archers are ready?"  
  
SooYeon bit her cheek as SeungHyun rolled back his shoulders. He answered in a weary but confident tone, his deep voice leaving no room for doubts.  
  
"We leave soon to invade the palace. They all know this, and know we cannot afford to slacken. They are ready."  
  
SooYeon thinned her lips and nodded.   
  
He sighed, and the tension around his shoulders released as he stepped back to enter the roof's shade. The sunset casted an orange glow everywhere else.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"You can't ever leave me in a battle."  
  
"You can't either."  
  
"I won't."  
  
SeungHyun puffed up his cheeks then blew out his tension.  
  
"How is the GongJu?"  
  
"She's..."  
  
SooYeon brushed her palm over her right shoulder, her fingers pressing over a clothed bruise, a love mark.  
  
"She's sleeping."  
  
SeungHyun gave a crooked smile, it was a relief to see, and SooYeon liked it enough to let his comment slide.  
  
"You should let our GongJu sleep peacefully during the nights, SooYeon."  
  
"I do let her sleep-"  
  
"Peacefully?"  
  
SooYeon flushed to her ears and muttered as she averted her eyes.  
  
"After a while."  
  
He chuckled and clapped the small of her back. She glared at him as he stepped out of the shadows, and walked briskly to the archers with a command.  
  
"MEN, GO TO THE FIRST FORMATION!"  
  
SooYeon felt another pat, a rougher one, on the top of her head.  
  
"I found the perfect place to plant a fig tree."  
  
She clenched her teeth and snarled back at TaeYang. The boy accepted her growl with a grin, and slid his arm down to her shoulders.  
  
"So how's our little love doctor? Is she curing all of MiYoung's diseases at-"  
  
He twisted away from a punch and scampered down a hallway, shooting back looks of mischief to SooYeon with every other step. He stopped at the end of the corridor, and shouted to her with a more serious and appropriate expression.  
  
"By the way SooYeon! Tell SeungHyun to meet at Narsha's room to finalize all the plans!"  
  
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"How would we create a barricade, so that the Queen does not escape?"  
  
SeungHyun pushed a wooden figurine along the map's surface with his finger.  
  
"If we block this area, they would simply slip through this exit..."  
  
He pushed another little block down to the left.  
  
"We *could* block here..."  
  
He scowled as he held up another piece.  
  
"But that wouldn't take care of the last exit. So in other words, the Queen's army could escape through three places. And if we were to divide our army in that many places, we would be endangering our men."  
  
SeungHyun brought his head back up, his eyes beseeching a response from SooYeon.  
  
"What do you think, SooYeon? Any ideas?"  
  
SooYeon had been leaning against a wall, arms typically crossed and chin raised, as she had listened wordlessly. TaeYang was next to her, fiddling with the many foreign ornaments decorating Narsha's private room. Narsha had affairs to settle with SeoHyun, and therefore was not in the room with them but in another across the hall outside. SooYeon stuck one leg back and pushed herself off, lips thinning while she approached the map on the desk. TaeYang watched as she cocked her head, eyebrows arching as she contemplated on the options. She curled over the table, then jerked back with a pleased smile.  
  
"The river."  
  
SeungHyun pulled back and frowned at SooYeon's suggestion.  
  
"A fire and now you're suggesting a river - Oh!"  
  
Something lit in SeungHyun's eyes and he shouted at TaeYang.  
  
"SooYeon's right! We can use the fire - surround them with it - and force them to go to the river! That way even the Queen can't escape!"  
  
TaeYang gaped and nodded slowly as he strode to the table. SooYeon wasn't sure if the two boys remembered the river as clearly as she did. It had been one of the places she had searched when SeungHyun and TaeYang's bodies were found missing that fateful night years ago. She briskly asked.  
  
"Are we done now?"  
  
SeungHyun snapped out of his awe.  
  
"Huh - yeah... where do you get these plans?"  
  
She answered his question with a smirk and headed out the door. TaeYang called out to her, his eyes roaming over the map.  
  
"Where are you going?"  
  
SooYeon crossed her arms again as she stepped out of the room.   
  
"Back to the training ground. I'll most likely go to my room after an hour of practice."  
  
---  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
SooYeon turned around to the hoarse yet friendly voice. DaeSung beamed at her from the steps with a crooked smile.  
  
"Could you give me some of your time?"  
  
What an absurd question for a Wang to ask. Yes, she had trained all day and night. Yes, she was sore and weary. But a Wang is given unlimited rights. Honestly, both MiYoung and DaeSung asked the most absurd questions -   
  
"If you need to retire for the night, I will understand your decision to do so."  
  
SooYeon shook her head, her bangs swinging over her beads of sweat.  
  
"I am at your service."  
  
---  
  
"You've gone through so much because of us. What would our kingdom do without you?"  
  
"You say such kind-"  
  
"What would MiYoung do without you?"  
  
And just like that, SooYeon's ears flared up instantly. She clamped her mouth shut, and stared hard at the floor, her legs crossed and hands placed carefully over them. DaeSung smiled and tilted his head.  
  
"She would do nothing without you."  
  
He looked to the small table set in front of him, lifted a round rice cake off of a dish, and offered in a light voice.  
  
"Care for a midnight snack?"  
  
A draft of wind slipped into the warm room, flicked the small flame lit on the candlestick over his desk, then curled below SooYeon's feet. She politely bowed her head and refused the small gift with an apologetic grin.  
  
"I am trying to keep my body in shape to be the best in battle-"  
  
"Ah, I understand."  
  
He put down the rice cake, and the wind swept over SooYeon's bangs. She felt a small cramp start to set in around her feet, but ignored the numbing sensation as DaeSung took a deep breath.  
  
"It was no secret that the Queen - our stepmother - did not like us."  
  
DaeSung sadly whispered with a wry grin. He shifted and settled his hands down on his lap, looking for once, like an old Wang.  
  
"I always assumed it was because we were not of her blood. But there was more to it than that..."  
  
DaeSung chewed a corner of his lower lip, then dismally slid his hands to his temples, his fingers massaging them in circles as he sighed.  
  
"I have never told MiYoung this, but perhaps it was because even I was not to know of it. She hates us, but not for the reasons we all think."  
  
The night smelled like the trees surrounding them, a crisp and fresh fragrant, a good mixture with the candle's fire. She wondered if MiYoung was able to smell the same scent in their room.  
  
DaeSung's grave frown and slumped shoulders told her she would be in the room longer than expected.  
  
"The Queen especially hated MiYoung."  
  
SooYeon bore her knuckles into the floor; her flesh meeting the carved lines etched in the wood. She slackened her jaw and thought of MiYoung, thought of Miyoung's constant smiles, and asked while closing her eyes.  
  
"Was she treated harshly?"  
  
"She... treated MiYoung coldly..."  
  
SooYeon cringed inwardly; she had done the same not too long ago.  
  
"You were the only person who was able to make MiYoung happy."  
  
DaeSung chuckled knowingly.  
  
"And it still looks to be that way."  
  
She turned her head away, her eyes averted and lowered. He inhaled through his nose, released it, then explained slowly. His voice low and barely reaching her ears.  
  
"The Queen is the first wife, meaning, if she had she given birth to a son, he would have rightfully inherited the throne. And we, the children of the Wang's second wife, would not have been entitled to it."  
  
He dropped both his hands and folded his arms, studying SooYeon's alert eyes while continuing.  
  
"Our mother was not able to pull through after giving birth to us. She was able to give us life, but unfortunately that meant an end to hers."  
  
DaeSung kneaded the back of his neck, scratching at a particular spot that did not itch.  
  
"What I did not know is that on the same day, the first Queen had gone into labor as well."  
  
SooYeon felt the wind die slowly.  
  
"She went into labor earlier than expected. And so while our mother was giving birth to us, the first Queen was also giving birth in the next room."  
  
She saw DaeSung drag his teeth over his lower lip.  
  
"I was always told the Wang, our father, favored our mother more out of his two wives. She was actually chosen by him, instead of by others. And the favoritism was visible even to that day."  
  
He scoffed, mildly in disbelief and guilty gratitude.  
  
"Both the deliveries were in complications. With the first Queen, it was with the baby, and with our mother, it was with her life... in the end our father chose our mother over the first Queen’s child."  
  
SooYeon dipped her head in grim realization, and DaeSung spoke quietly.  
  
"The first Queen lost her child, a son, and our mother lost her life. It was a grievous day for our father..."  
  
DaeSung suddenly brightened into a grin.  
  
"But he adored MiYoung. Spoiled her. People outside of the council could never see his joy with her, but I was at his side whenever possible. He loved her."  
  
SooYeon lifted her eyes, her deep frown relaxing.  
  
"He always doted on her... setting her up with fine Wang’s from across the nation – she always rejected, of course! And instead of scolding her, he kept mum with his despair as she repeatedly gave the rejections. He never knew her heart was already taken. Well, I’m sure he knows now and is happy with it.”  
  
SooYeon’s whole face flushed at DaeSung’s chuckle.  
  
“But that, his doting on MiYoung, could have cemented the bitterness in the Queen though... anyway, I never planned on telling anyone this - I never thought the Queen could hate us so much. But I heard from JiYong and MiYoung that you had been sent to kill us, and when I look back at it all, it really is no surprise that our mere presence angers her."  
  
He bit his cheek then sadly explained.  
  
"I remember when we were young MiYoung had brought her flowers from the palace fields. She had watered the plants every day just to show the Queen their beauty. When she presented the flowers, vase and all, the Queen simply accepted them with a nod."  
  
DaeSung sullenly finished.  
  
"They were thrown away the next morning."  
  
SooYeon's frown resurfaced and she gritted her teeth in indignation. DaeSung appeased her with a smile and gently told her.  
  
"If MiYoung knew about the act, she never let it show, for she was busy the next day talking happily about you."  
  
DaeSung pulled away from the table and suggested sheepishly.  
  
"Perhaps you should go to her now. I'm sure she is missing you."  
  
---  
  
SooYeon walked in a hurry. A cricket accompanied her fast pace with consistent chirps. She hopped down steps, and skimmed corners as she made her way to her room, MiYoung's room, their room.   
  
"MiYoung."  
  
She said the other girl's name before opening the door. She did this because she knew MiYoung liked being called by her name, and today she wanted to be extra attentive and agreeable.  
  
"SooYeon... where were you?"  
  
MiYoung turned around to face SooYeon, her back to their bed, and her feet tucked under her body. The blanket was untouched; MiYoung had been awake and sitting for SooYeon's return.  
  
"I-"  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"Why are you holding flowers?"  
  
SooYeon looked down at her hand, a few brightly colored flowers dripping with dew and filling the air with a sweet smell. She went up to MiYoung and bent down to kiss her forehead.  
  
"I thought you might like them."  
  
---  
  
"I'm sorry to keep you up like this. You must be so tired from the day... go to sleep now, SooYeon."  
  
MiYoung kissed under SooYeon's chin and melded their bodies to diminish any open spaces between them. Her eyelids fluttered to a yawn, delicately brushing SooYeon's damp throat with her eyelashes, and mumbled.  
  
"I lack so much self-control around you..."  
  
She kissed the side of SooYeon’s neck, lingering her lips over the salty skin, as she whispered hoarsely.  
  
"You mustn’t get hurt while traveling. So sleep."  
  
---  
  
"How are you?"  
  
The ends of SeungHyun's headband whipped around his face, and he kept his chin up as SooYeon took her time in answering. She looked down at her horse's head, its impatience felt as it clacked its hooves against the hard earth. A several hundred men were behind their commands and direction. Her stomach was in discomfort as the wind around them blew to their destination.  
  
"I'm feeling ready."  
  
She cast one long glance over her shoulders, to MiYoung who was in a heavily guarded carriage with Narsha. Next to it was the other carriage holding SeoHyun and DaeSung along with their personal attendants, YoonA, JiYong, and WooYoung.   
  
"You may go to her, if you are worried."  
  
SeungHyun whispered empathetically, as he saw SooYeon forcefully pry her eyes away.  
  
"No... we need to guide the soldiers. And my location will not matter in the battle, whether I am in the front of the line or at the back, I will protect her."  
  
She snapped the reigns to her horse, and began trotting forward. SeungHyun followed her example before shouting loudly and clearly.  
  
"FORWARD!"  
  
---  
  
"Would you like to ride alone?"  
  
Narsha inquired with a tilt of her head. MiYoung disagreed with a shake of her own head, strained her eyes to see through the slits in their carriage, and answered when she saw SooYeon's figure in the distance.  
  
"I need to also see that others could tolerate this confinement with me."   
  
Narsha amusedly asked.  
  
"We are kept the furthest from potential danger, and yet you see this as a form of punishment?"  
  
MiYoung, her eyes never leaving SooYeon’s body, whispered.  
  
"Yes."  
  
Narsha looked through the thin window to her side. HyunA was aiding TaeYang's somewhere in the middle of the army. She agreed ruefully with MiYoung.  
  
"I guess in a way we are confined."  
  
MiYoung glanced over at Narsha, but quickly gazed back at SooYeon as the carriage went over a bump. The older woman brought out a small fan from within her pocket, and began using it, lazily waving it back and forth.  
  
"Your soldier, SooYeon, seems to live for you only."  
  
Narsha flapped the fan once then closed it.  
  
"I'm sure all the soldiers under us live to serve our every need. But SooYeon would serve you even if you weren't a GongJu. What do you think when you know that?"  
  
MiYoung let her tongue rest for a second behind her teeth, wary that her answers will be examined and then reexamined by Narsha.  
  
"That no one else is meant for me."  
  
Narsha resumed her watch through the window. Her words were distant as she tried finding HyunA again amongst the crowd outside.  
  
"What is that below your feet?"  
  
Many would not understand the reason why uttering the answer would bring MiYoung such happiness.  
  
"Flowers."  
  
Narsha peered down at the carriage's floor to the small vase containing the flowers.  
  
"There will probably be flowers when we stop at Joh's kingdom. I don't see why you would bring them along this journey... they will most likely die without water in this heat."  
  
MiYoung held up a flask by her side.  
  
"I have brought a little water along for them. I need them for this journey."  
  
These flowers, their scent, were the only things able to lessen her anxiety. They reminded her of SooYeon's love, and of the night they had shared before departing for the long travel.  
  
Narsha did not probe further and instead told MiYoung.  
  
"I heard you once rejected the Joh kingdom's Wang. I hope going there won't be of inconvenience, but while he cannot join our war, he was willing to let our troops rest at his palace."  
  
"I do not mind meeting him, I feel I should at least apologize for turning him down."  
  
MiYoung gave a sidelong glance and saw Narsha grinning delightedly. She smiled as well and went on.  
  
"I was already in love with SooYeon when I had been given the offer from my father, the Wang-"  
  
A shrill and crazed neighing cut off MiYoung's explanation, and both women turned pale before frantically leaning into their windows.   
  
"GUARD THE CARRIAGES!"  
  
MiYoung bent down and clutched at her flowerpot, her sanity slowly crumbling as the ride turned rocky and erratic. She yelled, her frustration piling in with her worry.  
  
"No! No, stay within this area - do not go further away from the frontline!"  
  
She slapped the sides of the wall, her windows now obscured with clouds of dust and shields of men. Her orders lost as they continued to carry her and Narsha to safety. She heard Narsha's breathing die away, held in as her ashen face whispered with the clashes outside.  
  
"HyunA..."  
  
They roughly veered, evading perhaps an oncoming enemy - MiYoung would never know. She smelled the dirt being thrown in the air, and felt a silky texture slide over the back of her hand. A petal. Her flower, a flower from SooYeon, had lost a petal in the middle of the chaos. And the loss sent MiYoung's mind to a frenzy.  
  
"Guard! What is happening?"  
  
"Y - your Highness, it looks like the Queen sent another batch of soldiers to attack us in surprise - ugh! I - our duty is to get you to escape!"  
  
“Bring me SooYeon!”  
  
“S – she is fighting right now! It looks like they are winning – there is no need to worry! The enemy’s number is small!”  
  
She leaned her whole body, curling over her flower protectively, and screamed into the thin window.  
  
"Order for SooYeon to accompany our carriage!"  
  
"HyunA too!"  
  
MiYoung's eyes widened at the raised voice. She looked back to see Narsha’s face lacking color but holding up a grin. Narsha snorted and took out her fan, shrugging to MiYoung.  
  
"It looks like we truly are helpless without them..."  
  
MiYoung smoothed the pot in her hands, and shouted tirelessly at the soldiers outside.  
  
"Bring both SooYeon and HyunA! We cannot risk losing them!"  
  
MiYoung knew the soldier was hesitating.  
  
"I order you to bring them-"  
  
Then came a halt. It slammed both their bodies to the backs of their chairs. MiYoung winced, checked on her plant, then hurried to the window again.  
  
"What is it? What is going on? Why have we stopped?"  
  
The soldier outside whispered in a joyful and haggard manner.  
  
"We have won, your Highness! W - we have defeated the enemy with few losses!"  
  
Her ears rang at the words. A few losses?  
  
"What do you mean by a few losses..."  
  
MiYoung swung her carriage door open, revealing the scene that had been kept hidden to her.  
  
Several foreign men, judging from their uniforms, most likely low henchmen, littered the ground in various places. Arrows stuck and bent into their bodies. She gasped and turned her face away in time to see TaeYang emerge with HyunA by his side.  
  
"MiYoung! You can't open the door!"  
  
Narsha stuck her head out and bellowed at the two archers.  
  
"She needed some fresh air! HyunA, I order you to clean my side of the carriage!"  
  
"WHAT? I JUST KILLED US A HUGE CHUNK OF MEN! I DESERVE AN AWARD, NOT PUNISHMENT-"  
  
"Come to my side and clean it until this journey ends. I shall reward you abundantly afterwards."  
  
HyunA opened her mouth to a puzzled gape, hummed in defeat and sauntered towards Narsha.  
  
A horse's gallop was making way and MiYoung snapped her head to see SeungHyun. He asked in bewilderment.  
  
"Why is your door open, GongJu?"  
  
"SeungHyun..."  
  
"Yes, GongJu?"  
  
"Where is SooYeon?"  
  
SeungHyun tipped his head back, acknowledging the answer to his earlier question. He cupped a side of his mouth and turned back to yell.  
  
"SooYeon!"  
  
MiYoung felt her insides uncoil and melt when she heard another horse's trot, SooYeon's. She felt too limp to lift her head, staring down at her worn flowers, her blood just beginning to circulate everywhere. SooYeon's voice sounded so lovely and fresh to her ears.  
  
"The broken wheel to Queen SeoHyun’s carriage is being replaced with a new one - why is their door open? MiYoung, are you hurt?"  
  
SooYeon, a cut on her lip, but otherwise fine, hopped down from her horse and rushed to MiYoung's side. She tentatively placed her hands over the other girl's knees.  
  
"What do you need, MiYoung? Are you hurt anywhere?"  
  
"SooYeon..."  
  
"Yes?"  
  
"I'm not... feeling well... let me ride with you?"  
  
SooYeon drew back, her dissent about to slip off the end of her tongue, when she caught sight of MiYoung's wilted plant. The trembling hands that wrapped dearly over its vase. She helped lift MiYoung out of her seat, got on her horse and had MiYoung sit in front of her. SeungHyun directed his horse to them and whispered anxiously.  
  
"We could just let JiYong prescribe her some medicine if she is not feeling well. This... what you are doing now is dangerous, SooYeon."  
  
SooYeon gripped the reigns, and reached back to the satchel hanging on her horse. She pulled out a blanket, cloaked MiYoung's slender body with it, and spoke to SeungHyun.  
  
"You'll have to trust me. I'll keep her guarded. But it would be... pleasant if we could protect her together."  
  
SeungHyun shook his head in exasperation but turned his horse around to the other remaining soldiers.  
  
"Men! We have lost only a few in this attack!"  
  
He spun around and shouted.  
  
"We need to be stronger because of this though! Keep vigilance until we arrive at our destination!"  
  
SooYeon aligned her horse to the carriage. She shut the door, bowing then raising her eyebrows at Narsha inside, while smirking at HyunA grumbling to the side. SeungHyun returned and kept by her right as TaeYang accompanied HyunA's left. They all set forth in a steady pace, leaving behind the disturbance of the day. MiYoung's tremors gradually subsided and SooYeon relaxed when she heard the other girl quietly snore. Her eyes fell to the flowers within MiYoung's hold, living and standing despite the blanket's darkness.  
  
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"We are pleased to have you all here."  
  
The Wang of Joh was… well, he was eccentric. Eyebrows angled so that they sharpened the twinkle in his eyes, while his mouth was open to a constant joke. And like Narsha, he liked to be called by his first name.  
  
"Kwon has such friendly ring to it."  
  
He brightly smiled and chuckled as he walked enthusiastically down a hallway.  
  
"I'm so curious about all of you, but I think sleep is what you all would want after traveling."  
  
He pushed open a random door and gesticulated wildly to the room inside.  
  
"Make yourselves at home everyone! Go ahead and pick a room of your choice!"  
  
---  
  
"I didn't get hurt..."  
  
SooYeon weakly whispered, but MiYoung's touch rained down all over her body, gently nudging and pressing for injuries of any sort.  
  
"Miyoung..."  
  
MiYoung's hands finally ended at the other girl's wrist, clamping hard over her beating pulse, stopping the blood's flow. She sniffed, her voice garbled as she weakly confessed.  
  
"Being inside that carriage was unbearable..."  
  
She brought back one arm to run her thumb below her eyes, wiping away the tears that were close to falling. SooYeon loosened MiYoung's grip and joined her in wiping away the tears. She tugged MiYoung close so that her lips slid across her ear.  
  
"I have to ensure your right to the throne. The men need leaders to command them. It must be unbearable to be kept inside the carriage, but you need to be kept at a distance from the frontline."  
  
SooYeon tried at changing the subject.  
  
"We arrived safely, didn't we? And the Wang, Kwon, welcomed us with such provisions-"  
  
"Your life hung on a thread in the morning. I was not able to concentrate on anything else after that...”  
  
"A thread will not always break."  
  
"If you put it through enough, it will break."  
  
Fingertips caressed the small of SooYeon's back, soft and warm, as if anything more could unravel her, like a thread.  
  
"Your life is intertwined with mine, SooYeon..."  
  
The hands on SooYeon's back moved up to grip the back of her head.  
  
"MiYoung..."  
  
SooYeon braced herself for a consuming kiss, one that would push the air out of her lungs, or at least that was how MiYoung usually kissed before they made love.   
  
But today MiYoung was gentle, aware of SooYeon’s torn lip, brushing her hot tongue around it. SooYeon could feel the other girl's painful restraint as her shirt was shakily removed. She bit her lower lip as MiYoung’s trembling fingers cupped the nape of her neck to whisper below her right ear.  
  
"When I was hiding from the Queen... I was constantly in the presence of bickering couples. They would fight over meaningless things... our relationship is nothing like theirs. We don't fight over petty things, but you still stop my heart with painful things..."  
  
MiYoung's fingers carefully slid over her shoulders, carving her toned muscles; slowly, so that a stirring heat spread inside of SooYeon.  
  
"When we win this war..."  
  
MiYoung spoke into her ear, her bottom lip tracing, burning, along her lobe.   
  
"You are to no longer serve me as a soldier."  
  
SooYeon inhaled with a sharp hiss as MiYoung's teeth sank over her exposed neck, enough to cause a small pain but not enough to break the skin. She tilted her head to the left, craving for MiYoung to claim the rest of her throat. She croaked, her voice raspy from her dry throat.  
  
"Why?"  
  
MiYoung slid her mouth across SooYeon's cheekbone, leaving a wet trail, and spoke against the other girl's parted lips.  
  
"Because I hate your suffering."  
  
---  
  
SooYeon awoke with a clear mind. A faint breeze washed over her face, sweeping her bangs over her eyes. MiYoung's right arm draped over her stomach, possessively. She mindfully tilted her head up, rolled her eyes back to take in her surrounding. She had not given their room a proper inspection last night, and was doing it with a long yawn and a half-lidded gaze. Her scrutiny ended at a table near the foot of their bed. MiYoung's flowers sat upon it, its petals peeled back and facing the sunlight glowing through the doors.   
  
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The absence of SooYeon's body always woke MiYoung up, and the dissatisfaction that quickly followed never failed to disappoint MiYoung's mornings. She had forced herself to be more accepting of this over the days spent together, but she knew the unhappiness would never completely disappear. She opened her eyes one by one, tugging her blanket up closer, savoring the fading heat left from SooYeon's body.   
  
“I'd like to serve you all my life.”  
  
MiYoung paused; SooYeon was at the corner of the bed, sitting and tending to her plant. Grinning as she watered it with a small pitcher. She spoke to MiYoung's stupefied form.  
  
"Even it means getting hurt."  
  
MiYoung crawled to SooYeon, the blanket slipping down to her naked waist. She whispered, tucking herself into SooYeon's lap, her chin draped over SooYeon's right shoulder.  
  
"I do not want it if you are going to suffer."  
  
SooYeon positioned the water jug next to the glistening flowers. She encircled her arms over MiYoung, and gave a long hard kiss to her temple. Her mumble tickled MiYoung's ear as she slumped forward to wrap the blanket around their bodies.  
  
"It's not suffering, if it's not painful."  
  
  
  
**TBC.**

**Chapter 16**

"So tell me, GongJu. How do you like your meal?"  
  
Kwon smiled expectantly for a response, and put down his chopsticks in mind of having a conversation, as she finished her soup. MiYoung looked up at him, the rest of the guests busy with their own exclusive talks.  
  
"It's very delicious."  
  
She settled her chopsticks over the brim of a bowl, clasped both hands over the front of her lap, and faced him with a polite but closed smile. He whipped his head to an attendant and ordered with a gleeful expression.  
  
"Serve the GongJu our chef's best dessert!"  
  
The attendant bowed low and scurried off dutifully as Kwon turned back with a coy smile.  
  
"I actually was making rounds last night to check on the comfort of my guests."  
  
MiYoung felt an uneasy feeling surface within her chest, and she commented at his mischievous stare.  
  
"O - oh... I didn't hear-"  
  
"Of course, you didn't."  
  
His eyes laughed as he explained.  
  
"You were too busy... being with someone last night, weren't you?"  
  
MiYoung shut her mouth in red-faced mortification. He chuckled and tapped her shoulder with a good-natured smile.  
  
"Oh, you shouldn't be so shy. Really. I should have known, I mean you did reject me after all."  
  
He ended his words with a defeated shrug, and feigned disappointment as he frowned down at the ground.  
  
"A Wang of a kingdom... and yet I can do no better than a royal guard."  
  
"SooYeon is special to me… I didn't mean to offend. I just cannot accept another when -"  
  
Kwon held up a slack hand, closed his eyes and pulled up his lower lip.  
  
"No need to explain. I was merely teasing you."  
  
He reopened his eyes and smiled kindly.  
  
"I'm someone who does not mind losing to love."  
  
---  
  
"I want everyone to follow through with the last plan. We cannot afford to have harm fall on the WangJa or the GongJu."  
  
SooYeon stated with a grim look. SeungHyun and TaeYang cleared up the maps on the table as YoonA plucked the remaining maps off of a board. SooYeon made her way to the door and turned her head around to ask.  
  
"Why is HyunA not here with us?"  
  
TaeYang blew his bangs out of his eyes, and answered as he inserted a rolled paper into a tube.  
  
"I think she's with Narsha. It looked like she needed to seriously talk about something."  
  
SooYeon nodded then headed out the door.  
  
She had assumed that all of the royalty would be still having breakfast together at the moment, or at least she had seen MiYoung off for it. She remembered this because MiYoung had lured her in for a kiss just before entering the dining area. SooYeon's face went crimson as she reminisced, sliding her fingertips over her bottom lip.  
  
"It's called glasses. Do you like it? It supposedly lets the nearly blind see again - of course, with my perfect vision I do not need it."  
  
SooYeon snapped out of her daydreaming and looked around. There was a door ajar to her right: in the room were Narsha and HyunA. Narsha was sitting on a chair with a strange object over her eyes, her mouth quirked up into a smirk, while HyunA's stiff back faced SooYeon and the door. The older woman spoke again, and SooYeon stealthily leaned in to listen.  
  
"The glass pieces made me dizzy, so I had a servant remove them for my convenience."  
  
Narsha demonstrated this by poking a finger through a frame of the glasses.  
  
"I wear it because I think it accentuates my cheekbones."  
  
She smiled contently, pushing the glass up over the bridge of her nose, as she leaned back into her seat. HyunA fidgeted, sighed, and then spoke again.  
  
"You... you're trying to make me forget my question."  
  
Narsha raised her eyebrows at this, impressed at HyunA's insight, and brought a hand to her chin.  
  
"Well then, go ahead. Say your question."  
  
HyunA glanced down at her feet, frowned at her sudden desire to run, and asked before she could change her mind.  
  
"Why do you not accept me?"  
  
Narsha traced an index finger along the contour of her jaw, and gazed down at HyunA with an emotionless expression.  
  
"Aside from the fact that I am a Queen and that you are a soldier?"  
  
HyunA whispered pathetically.  
  
"A - aside from that."  
  
Narsha took in a deep breath through her nose and held it for a minute. She let it out as she shook her head with a sad smile.  
  
"You're young."  
  
"I - I'm growing!"  
  
"You're much too young."  
  
A whimper escaped HyunA's lips, and she whispered with downcast eyes.  
  
"Age is just a number..."  
  
"It is, but it accounts for something. What you feel today will probably not be the same in a year."  
  
HyunA froze, suddenly understanding more of Narsha's reluctance.  
  
"You think I'll change my feelings for you?"  
  
Narsha palmed her cheek and silently watched HyunA, her eyes unblinking and solemn.  
  
"T - that's it, isn't it? You're doubting my feelings-"  
  
"You have a whole life ahead of you. I can be a first, but I do not have to be the last."  
  
SooYeon reared back slowly. There were footsteps coming her way, and judging from what she knew, they were MiYoung's. She distanced herself from the door and began approaching the noise, a smile forming on her face as she got nearer to MiYoung's steps.  
  
"SooYeon?"  
  
MiYoung had turned a corner and was now in front of SooYeon, who was smirking and fondly cocking her head.  
  
"I heard you left the meeting to go and find – “  
  
MiYoung paused, carefully going over her words while observing SooYeon’s face.   
  
“You look so happy to see me..."  
  
SooYeon nodded mutely, her smile reflected onto MiYoung's face. MiYoung tilted her head to match SooYeon's slanted head and asked quietly.  
  
"Was it because of the kiss in the morning?"  
  
SooYeon smiled wider.  
  
"I suppose it could be because of that, yes."  
  
MiYoung stepped closer to SooYeon, raising her hand to cup the other girl's neck and bringing her forward into a hug. She planted her nose over SooYeon's temple, softly smelling her lover's hair.  
  
"Do you know how much I love you?"  
  
SooYeon dipped her head, replayed the conversation Narsha and HyunA shared earlier, then murmured through her kiss on MiYoung's warm cheek.   
  
"I don't doubt it."  
  
---  
  
"It's so regrettable to have you all leave so early..."  
  
Kwon sighed heavily, one hand clutching at his chest while the other supported his head against a pillar. He bade the guests farewell, tearful and frowning, as he passed each carriage and horse. He clasped MiYoung's hands last, and SooYeon watched as he insisted.  
  
"Please be sure to visit my kingdom again! I will provide a grander tour and with better meals!"  
  
MiYoung smiled and patted his hands, bowing her head gracefully as she backed away into her seat. SooYeon closed the door to MiYoung's side of the carriage, and was trotting away with her horse when Kwon spoke up.  
  
"Soldier?"  
  
SooYeon pulled her reigns and veered the horse around to face him. He grinned as he walked to her.  
  
"SooYeon, yes?"  
  
"Yes, your Highness."  
  
"I couldn't help but notice the flowerpot the GongJu carried into her coach."  
  
"Yes, she's taken a liking to it."  
  
"It's from you, I presume?"  
  
"Yes."  
  
Kwon hung his head with a light hum, and proceeded back to his palace. He didn't look back as he spoke.  
  
"Really... there was no way I could have beaten you. You've given her your heart as well as flowers. *Meh*. Come back next time and perhaps I can win against you on something."  
  
SooYeon watched as he entered his room, bowing low to show her respect and promise in coming back.  
  
---  
  
"Those are lovely flowers."  
  
SeoHyun complimented with a cordial smile, and MiYoung beamed with pride, glancing down at the plant on her lap.  
  
"Aren't they? I plan to have them directly in front of my room, by my windowsill, when the war is won."  
  
She trailed off and looked out of her window, SooYeon's horse galloping steadily with her ride.  
  
"SooYeon gave them to me."  
  
SeoHyun whispered to MiYoung in a delicate tone.  
  
"I heard from SeungHyun and TaeYang about her many good attributes, as well as from her master-"  
  
"You knew of her master?"  
  
MiYoung stared at SeoHyun with widened eyes, her fingers still over the leaves of her flowers.  
  
"He wrote us a letter back before your kingdom was in trouble. It unfortunately didn't arrive in time... but it did state his suspicions with your Kingdom's Queen and bleak future."  
  
SeoHyun held her hands together over her knees and apologetically replied.  
  
"I heard of what happened to her master…I'm sorry for the loss as well as the loss of your father."  
  
MiYoung grinned and let out a whisper.  
  
"I overheard from SeungHyun of her master's death... It's funny how we both lost our respective fathers at the same time. But I choose to believe that this just brings us closer."  
  
SeoHyun nodded, her smile bringing out the fullness in her cheeks.  
  
"I also find YoonA to be the only one who connects the most with my soul."  
  
As the gait of their ride became rockier, MiYoung unconsciously leaned her body to the right, closer to SooYeon who was outside. SeoHyun, her face relaxed and looking directly at the wall in front, informed MiYoung.  
  
"When we are near the destination, we will set up a camp to rest the soldiers and to go over everything."  
  
“You seem so calm about all this.”  
  
“You appear the same.”  
  
“Oh, SooYeon has never let me down on anything.”  
  
---  
  
"YoonA will be with the soldiers here, along with WooYoung."  
  
SooYeon shouted back to the others in the tent as she marched outside.   
  
The camp was set in an area some miles away from the palace but near the river that was by it. It was essential to camp around the area, as SooYeon planned to have two divisions in the fight. One at the palace, shooting arrows of fire and chasing the enemy out to the river, the other waiting in ambush by the water for the oncoming and clueless enemy.  
  
SooYeon was giving the soldiers a couple of hours of rest. A messenger soldier had alerted them earlier that the Queen's men were waiting for their attack. He revealed that the Queen’s soldiers were in a series of lines, armed and standing in front of the palace. She walked on unaccompanied in her thoughts before coming to a stop, recognizing HyunA at a distance, sitting cross-legged by some shrubs. The young girl drearily looked on to the horizon, jumping when SooYeon's voice startled her.  
  
"You don't look like your usual bratty self."  
  
HyunA moaned, her head flopping onto her shoulder as SooYeon squatted by her side.  
  
"You shouldn't be so mean to me, SooYeon. My heart is aching right now."  
  
SooYeon snorted, then went quiet for a second, raising her eyebrows after a consideration.  
  
"I know how to fix it."  
  
HyunA gasped and spun to her.  
  
"Don't tell me... you've fallen in love with me?"  
  
"NO!"  
  
"Oh..."  
  
"Of all the conceited notions - did you hear something?"  
  
SooYeon whipped her head and strained her ears while HyunA squinted her eyes and replied back.  
  
"No, do you still hear it, SooYeon?"  
  
"No..."  
  
"Maybe it was an animal. Some of them like to go use the bathroom around the bushes."  
  
SooYeon rolled her eyes and scooted closer to HyunA, cupping the other girl's ear to whisper.  
  
"Try giving Narsha flowers."  
  
HyunA pulled back, sporting a baffled expression. She sputtered with an incredulous gape.  
  
"F - flowers?"  
  
"Yeah."  
  
"What if she doesn't like them?"  
  
"Then keep trying."  
  
"With different things?"  
  
"That'd be good, yes."  
  
"Wouldn't that get her annoyed?"  
  
"I don't understand how you could get any more annoying than you already are."  
  
"Good point – *hey*!"  
  
SooYeon brushed off her knees while straightening up to ruffle HyunA's hair.  
  
"Tell me if you succeed, brat."  
  
SooYeon strolled away; her feet leading to MiYoung's tent set up in the middle of the camp, but slowed as Narsha's figure greeted her from the corner of her vision. Narsha was alone, and SooYeon imagined that the older woman had requested this to her guards in order to talk with HyunA. She explained as she bowed slightly.  
  
"HyunA is - "  
  
"I see you were talking with HyunA."  
  
Narsha was close enough for SooYeon to see the curiosity in her eyes. She leveled her stare as she responded.  
  
"You saw correctly."  
  
Narsha nodded then waved to the tent.  
  
"It looks like MiYoung will have to have a makeover. Who will ever believe she is a GongJu with such plain clothes?"  
  
SooYeon curled her lips to a smirk.  
  
"And I suppose you will take part in her makeover?"  
  
Narsha tossed her head and laughed.  
  
"Of course! I will even give her one of these."  
  
She jiggled her glasses and peered at SooYeon over the empty frames.  
  
"Although, I must say, I feel you would suit them more."  
  
She sucked a corner of her lip, scrutinizing, as SooYeon squirmed uncomfortably.  
  
"Narsha?"  
  
"Hm, yes?"  
  
"You shouldn't be scared of what others think."  
  
Narsha slowly tore away her gaze, a small grin on her lips.  
  
"All these young ones telling me such things."  
  
She looked back at SooYeon.  
  
"You are quite strong, SooYeon. You are perhaps scared of nothing now, having gone through so much."  
  
"That's not true. A lot of things scare me."  
  
"Pray tell what?"  
  
SooYeon made no reply, and Narsha chuckled, clearly amused.  
  
"Oh? Not going to tell me? You truly are scared of no one. A soldier of your class going against me in such a bold manner."  
  
SooYeon smiled, feeling a little smug and pleased with herself. Narsha started walking away, parting with a grin.  
  
"I may be old, but I am not deaf. I also am quite good at hiding myself. Let's see if HyunA will be able to find the perfect flower."  
  
This time it was SooYeon's turn to be amused. She crossed her arms, shaking her head.  
  
"I thought I heard a rustle in the bushes... And you'll just reject the first flower in order to have HyunA scramble around for more."  
  
"Oh, you know me well, SooYeon. I shall see your dirt-covered face after the battle."  
  
SooYeon whispered, not sure if Narsha's sharp ears would pick up her words or not.  
  
"You'll see it after I see MiYoung."  
  
Narsha paused, but walked on, a little more airily.  
  
---  
  
"You'll come back soon."  
  
SooYeon was spending her last minutes until battle alone with MiYoung, pressed against a wall, shivering as the other girl brushed her throat with kisses. There was one particular sensitive spot just below her jaw, near her ear, and she knew MiYoung loved to pay special attention to it. She licked it slowly, biting it before sucking the sore and reddened skin, while SooYeon whined feebly.  
  
Meanwhile, outside the tent, YoonA shuffled her feet awkwardly with JiYong by her side. SeungHyun was to her right, and gripping TaeYang's collar, disabling the boy from entering inside.  
  
"TaeYang - stop struggling!"  
  
"God, if HyunA was here... this... *you* would be no problem at all! She just had to go and look for flowers at a time like this!"  
  
SeungHyun gritted his teeth and fired back.  
  
"SooYeon would *kill* you if you entered! And while that thought does not bother me now, it will later in battle when we actually *need* you!"  
  
As SeungHyun grappled with TaeYang, inside the tent, MiYoung had given SooYeon her final kiss. She clung onto the back of SooYeon's shirt, her chin resting over the other girl's shoulder, and listened as SooYeon gathered her breaths. Keeping her heart close to SooYeon's chest.  
  
"You'll come back soon."  
  
---  
  
"EVERYONE! GET READY! THERE IS NO TURNING BACK!"  
  
SeungHyun's voice was heard even as the wind blew and the army was vast; no one was talking.  
  
This was it. The palace was far from them, but not within safe distance. Not while SooYeon and the army overlooked it on a hill. A whole legion behind her, as another's, the Queen's, stood on the opposite side of the field in front of them, anticipating their attacks while glued to their positions.   
  
The archers held their bows to their sides, concealing the enflamed arrows, arms pulling on the taut string with effort. The wind flowed across their flags, the cloths flapping noisily as selected men held onto them.   
  
SooYeon’s horse neighed and bowed its head. She petted it, a chill having traveled up her own spine. HyunA and TaeYang were both to her left and right, fit in grander, stronger, armor as they gravely stood ahead of their teams. SooYeon drifted her eyes ahead, a royal carriage tied to fidgety horses, JiYong atop one of them, whispering things into the creature's ear in order to ease its skittish behavior.  
  
SooYeon took out her sword, balancing it as her horse meandered anxiously. The smell of oil burning on the arrow's tips wafted to her nose. It went along with the thick tension enveloping the restless army. Adrenaline coursed throughout her veins, preparing her for the unknown, exciting her as she waved her weapon into the air impatiently. SeungHyun galloped to her side, guiding his horse to the front of the line, he gave the army one final look then roared.  
  
"FIRE!"  
  
There was a burst of sound as the arrows shot into the air: millions of dots sailing in an arch over SooYeon's head. She watched with her mouth open as the tiny flames remained on the points, flickering as they descended faster and faster to the palace up ahead. The Queen’s men started running towards them.  
  
"FIRE!"  
  
Another round of arrows sprung up into the air as the main roof lit on fire, quickly spreading and halting the rushing warriors. They quickly turned dumbstruck and confused as their priorities changed and went against each other. Should they charge, or should they save their palace?   
  
SeungHyun sidled up next to SooYeon and gripped his reigns with a stern face.  
  
"There is still no sign of the Queen - FIRE!"  
  
This time the arrows made their way through the bodies of many men. Exploding shrieks into the air, as the injured individuals ran crazily in all directions. SooYeon grimaced, the smell of burnt skin carried with the lukewarm wind. And then, as if on a silent cue, a whole section of the enemy diverged from the mass, dashing towards them. SeungHyun wasted no time.  
  
"CHARGE!"  
  
The men behind her rushed forward as the archers continued on their own onslaught. A clash of sounds rang into the air: men yelling in anger while weapons scratched upon one another. She snapped away from the mess when SeungHyun shouted to her.  
  
"It's the main general!"  
  
A large man, bulky in size, was leading a force of men to the royal carriage in the front of their line. JiYong bravely remained rooted and tensed his jaw. SooYeon jerked her reigns and sped to his aid. SeungHyun was a foot away and yelling.  
  
"They fell for your trap - It worked!"  
  
The general swung his sword through the carriage, scaring JiYong's horse so that it scampered away in fear. The men by the general's side all helped in demolishing the carriage, ceasing when they realized in dread that no one was put in the carriage.   
  
SooYeon urged her horse away from the scene, leaving SeungHyun with the general as three horsemen had begun chasing after JiYong. She took out her other sword, kicking back her heels to increase her horse's strides. The men heard her deafening stomps and checked over their shoulders. One man deliberately slowed and faced her. She caught up to him, as he flung out his sword, missing her but catching her attack, a cut to his torso. SooYeon pried off her weapon from his waist, blood shining at its withdrawal, as his horse carried his limp body away. She raced toward JiYong.   
  
"JIYONG! KEEP GOING!"  
  
The other two men heard her cry, and skidded to a stop, letting JiYong go as they turned to her. She copied their move and pulled hard on her reigns, a cloud of dust blooming around her. She pivoted and led them back to the fight, purposely decreasing her speed, allowing one of the men to catch up to her. He aimed at her head, convinced she was unaware and blind. He shrieked when she ducked her head and impaled his thigh. She swiftly ended his life with an aim to his throat as he writhed in agony. When she brought back her sword to her side, she caught the reflection of the last man creeping up behind her. She whirled around and knocked his head with the flat of one sword, while thrusting the other into his chest. He dropped to the ground, as she yanked the weapon out, heading back to the field.  
  
"SeungHyun!"  
  
She called out his name, finding him in an intense fight with the general. SeungHyun had one arm tucked away, apparently injured and bloody. SooYeon scowled at the sight of it and tore through men, knocking enemies flat to the ground as she reached the general.  
  
"SooYeon! Step away from-"  
  
SeungHyun’s warning died as SooYeon projected one sword forward, driving it through the general's back. He screeched in pain and clutched at his wound. SooYeon went up to him, grabbing the handle of her sword before making a clean cut to his head.   
  
She panted, sweat glistening on her forehead.  
  
"Your death was visible for a moment. Don't tell me to step away, SeungHyun."  
  
“When… when did you learn such a move?”  
  
“Because of MiYoung… I’ll explain later.”  
  
She was directing her horse to the doors of the fiery palace. SeungHyun stuttered.  
  
“W – where, surely you're not thinking of going in there? The Queen is as sure as dead in - SooYeon!"  
  
But SooYeon had already taken off, sprinting and charging to the entrance. The perspiration on her back cooling her as the wind slipped through her shirt's front. She rid a number of men as she rode through the throng in the field, her hands numb and stinging from all the strikes.  
  
"SOOYEON!"  
  
She heard SeungHyun's voice rip through the roaring chaos, but gritted her teeth as her sword clashed and slid against another's in her haste. She dismounted from her horse as the heat of the fire grew, pushing her arms forward and toppling the man to the ground, knocking his sword away and slicing at his arms. Her nose filled with the smell of rust, and her sweat dripped down to her chin, spotting the ground below as she ran toward the palace gates.  
  
"SOOYEON! WAIT FOR ME!"  
  
SeungHyun's voice was close now, she knew he was coming to stop her, but she ignored his insistence. Running past soldiers as arrows - HyunA's and TaeYang's - pierced the enemies in front of her. Invisible needles starting to \*\*\*\*\* her throat as she stormed up the imperial stairs, her bangs going in and out of her vision as she approached the room with growing anticipation.  
  
*"The first Queen lost her child, a son..."*  
  
DaeSung's explanation played over in her mind, his words explaining everything about the Queen's outrageous hatred, maybe even granting pity.  
  
SooYeon jumped through the flames, they licked her skin as she leapt through the crumbling doorframes. Her swords growing heavier as the seconds passed in her search.  
  
*"I never thought the Queen could hate us so much. But I heard from JiYong and MiYoung that you had been sent to kill us, and when I look back at it all, it really is no surprise that our mere presence angers her."*  
  
The heightening fire along with the smoke began to shroud her view, yet her feet remembered the paths to take in order to reach the Queen's room. She shoved the crook of her elbow to her nose, and sucked the air desperately, coughing as the smoke stung her eyes. A giant wooden support unhinged from the rooftop and narrowly missed her as she grazed past a corner. There, at last, was the door to the Queen's chambers. She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing out the tears caused by the fumes, and used her shoulder's strength to break down the shut room. A voice, eerily calm, spoke through the roaring fire.  
  
"I should have known things would get worse. After all, I should deserve the worst possible death, wouldn't you agree, SooYeon?"  
  
The Queen was sitting at the back of the room, her feet folded beneath her dress, one arm raised over the knee of a leg. The walls of the room were already hot, the flames outside eating them slowly as SooYeon sauntered in. Her eyes dark and chin raised, her shirt clinging to her back from all the sweat.  
  
"I agree with you on that, yes."  
  
The Queen scoffed then, bitter but somewhat humored that they concurred together on something.  
  
"So I take it that you will kill me here?"  
  
"I don't know yet."  
  
"You have your sword drawn. I think you do know."  
  
"I didn't think you'd be alone in your room."  
  
The Queen faced her with a crooked and hollow smile.  
  
"I sent the guards away on an order. I thought I would do one last good thing before my death. We all know I am on my way to hell, there's no need for them to join me."  
  
She looked away to her feet, her eyelids lowering as she admitted sourly.  
  
"Although maybe I should have kept them by my side. It's already very lonely, I can't imagine how much more it'll be in hell."  
  
SooYeon had long since lost the coldness in her heart - it had thawed ever since MiYoung had reentered her life. But it rose up again as she remembered her own past pains. The Queen had taken away the lives of her own peers, the life of a Wang, the life of someone who had raised her from birth. She spat vehemently.  
  
"You deserve that pain."  
  
"So what are you waiting for? Hmm? Aren't you here to deliver my disgrace? My end as well?"  
  
SooYeon went forward, the fire now seeping through the walls.  
  
"I know about what happened to your son."  
  
The Queen snapped her head to SooYeon.  
  
"I know his life was lost due to complications."  
  
SooYeon threw both her swords down, grabbed the Queen's hand, and jerked her up. She hissed, her face an inch away from the Queen's stunned face.  
  
"Try to atone for your sins - don't die such an easy death. Haven't you ever considered meeting him in heaven?"  
  
An unreadable look crossed the Queen's face, her lips started to quiver and she swallowed with struggle.  
  
"I am already a dead woman once I get out of here, it is-"  
  
"You will no longer be a Queen, that much is certain. As for the rest..."  
  
SooYeon started dragging the older woman.  
  
"I shall decide the rest."  
  
SooYeon broke into a run, her grip on the other woman's hand becoming stronger and tighter. Her legs once again finding the way, as her eyes remained blind in the haze. A pillar to their right crumpled in its deteriorating state, and SooYeon spun the Queen clear of the collapse. She haggardly breathed in and wheezed.  
  
"Cover your mouth..."  
  
The Queen hurriedly held up a hand to her mouth, and shut her eyes as SooYeon maneuvered around the burning structure, waving away the ashes and wincing through the pops of ember. They were almost out of the blazing grounds, when the Queen suddenly tugged back her hand.  
  
"Wait!"  
  
A bearing dislodged from somewhere and exploded into splinters, landing besides SooYeon. She hissed as a lit spark burned through the hem of her pants, searing her skin painfully. A small chip cracked away from the ceiling and sliced the Queen's cheek, eliciting a scream from her. She clutched her cheek, eyes wild having experienced a rare pain, and asked, begging.  
  
"Why are you... doing this... for me?"  
  
SooYeon tensed her shoulders, pulled the Queen along the scorching ground, and hurled both their bodies out of the burning hell.  
  
SooYeon knew it was hard in changing people. This woman who had killed so many, how could anything ever change the bitterness in her heart? But SooYeon had a reason in wanting her alive, and it was obvious the reason was for MiYoung.  
  
The grass beneath her fingers felt so inviting and smelled wonderfully fresh. She inhaled between fits of coughs, cleansing her lungs with the smoke she had taken in. It reminded her of all the times she had played on the grass when young, all the times MiYoung had showered her with kisses, all the times MiYoung had shown her outrageous hope and optimism. That many things, like love, deserved a second chance. And because of MiYoung, SooYeon curled her fingers inwardly, felt the soft and damaged fabric of the Queen's garment, and hoarsely muttered into the dirt.  
  
"I'm doing this for one reason."  
  
She heard the Queen slow down her breathing. SooYeon touched her forehead to the soft earth and smiled as she closed her eyes.  
  
"I want you to grow flowers."  
  
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"Is she sleeping?"  
  
SooYeon heard TaeYang's hushed voice, along with HyunA's worried whine.  
  
"Is she going to be all right?"  
  
JiYong answered them both, a weary but relieved tone.  
  
"She's going to be fine... just needs rest for now. DaeSung had thankfully set up this tent especially for her while we were fighting."  
  
SeungHyun calmly spoke up, and SooYeon felt a warm hand glide over her brow.  
  
"When I found her outside of the palace, she was without any serious burns, but she did seem exhausted. She should be given rest for a few days."  
  
A murmur of agreement floated around the room, and from a distance SooYeon heard YoonA's question.  
  
"And... the Queen?"  
  
SeungHyun sighed and took his hand off of SooYeon's forehead.  
  
"We'll have to discuss that tomorrow when everyone is awake and coherent. It seems our rulers went into a room to discuss the matter amongst themselves as we speak..."  
  
Which explained MiYoung's absence, SooYeon thought.  
  
TaeYang asked SeungHyun warily.  
  
"What... uh... what exactly did SooYeon say about the Queen?"  
  
"She requested that I spare her life and hide her from the public..."  
  
HyunA grumbled under her breath.  
  
"It was a pain carrying that Queen across though. Do you know how hard it is to walk over fallen men? As well as evade the captured ones? *Aish*... Anyway how were the rest during the fight?"  
  
YoonA circled the room and carefully replied.  
  
"Well, as you know, none of them have taken damage, but the GongJu was quite... difficult."  
  
SooYeon would have snorted if not for her pretense of sleep.  
  
TaeYang added in exasperation.  
  
"You would think MiYoung ate *iron plates* for her breakfast - she nearly broke my arm while I held her when she heard SooYeon went into the fire alone!"  
  
JiYong exhaled with a chuckle.  
  
"It didn't help to let her know that we could not find SooYeon for a while either."  
  
SeungHyun hesitated then sighed.  
  
"I don't understand why SooYeon had to lose consciousness just as I carried her to the GongJu... "  
  
WooYoung clucked his tongue and agreed.  
  
"It took forever to convince the GongJu that SooYeon had not died, but was merely deep in sleep."  
  
TaeYang sighed.  
  
"But we do have to thank SooYeon for her plans. I don't know how many more arrows I could have shot if the army hadn't cornered the enemy to the river."  
  
He praised YoonA.  
  
"You guys did a good job in ambushing them."  
  
YoonA modestly replied.  
  
"Well there wasn't much to fight with when we got to them at the river..."  
  
The group of soldiers and doctors quietly exchanged their various moments and interests as SooYeon drifted off to sleep again.  
  
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"SooYeon..."  
  
SooYeon's dream began disintegrating.  
  
"Wake up..."  
  
Her eyelids fluttered and she blinked slowly as she woke up to hear the voice clearly.  
  
"Wake up, SooYeon..."  
  
She shifted her head, a rough bandage applied to her right temple, a warm palm cupping her left cheek. A thumb was brushing over the corner of her lip, stroking it gingerly. She parted her lips, and the thumb stopped momentarily, resuming its soothing touch when she spoke up to MiYoung.  
  
"I'm awake."  
  
She rolled her eyes up to see Miyoung's face, forehead creased and lips thinned to a distraught frown.  
  
"I slept for a while didn't I? I'm sorry if I scared you..."  
  
MiYoung took a deep breath, almost choked as she scolded in a frail tone.  
  
"Never do that again... Never..."   
  
“I heard the WanJa – Wang – set up this tent for me.”  
  
“He couldn’t just sit still in this camp while his people were out fighting for him…”  
  
SooYeon smiled, the fingers on her cheek sliding into her hair as MiYoung bent her head to kiss. She gave a soft peck to SooYeon's upper lip and asked, her lips remaining on SooYeon's flushed face.  
  
"What made you save her?"  
  
"I wouldn’t say I saved her..."  
  
"You didn't kill her."  
  
"I just wanted her to make amends. She'd only be able to do that if she were alive."  
  
MiYoung kissed SooYeon's jaw hard then buried her nose into SooYeon's neck.  
  
"Or maybe you’re just kind and felt pity."  
  
It wasn't a question, and SooYeon kept silent as MiYoung reasoned.  
  
"Maybe you got tired of killing. Of people dying. And from getting no peace in their deaths. Maybe you wanted to be an excellent soldier and start the kingdom anew by saving a lost soul, rather than killing a villain. Maybe you were thinking of what would be best for the people."  
  
MiYoung whispered into SooYeon's ear, her lips touching the other girl's sensitive inner shell.  
  
"Maybe you were thinking of what would be best for me..."  
  
She pressed her lips forward, flattening SooYeon's ear to the side of her head as she trailed her other hand down to SooYeon's hip.  
  
The bed was creaky and stiff, but MiYoung climbed atop it eagerly. Discarding her clothes hastily as SooYeon whispered faintly.  
  
"I... didn't want to die in battle... I guess that made me pity the Queen more."  
  
MiYoung deftly began untying SooYeon's shirt, her fingers briefly touching the other girl's skin with each loosened knot. She breathlessly whispered, slipping SooYeon's shirt to the floor.  
  
"Narsha came in earlier when you were sleeping... she wondered if you were still scared of many things, now having gone through a war."  
  
MiYoung lowered her bare body onto SooYeon, causing the other girl to arch with a hiss at the heat. SooYeon answered weakly.  
  
"Yes…“  
  
Her fingers trailed over the small of MiYoung’s back, stroking lazily and downward.  
  
“I was scared of dying.“  
  
SooYeon panted as she wrapped her arms around MiYoung, kissing her everywhere on her face, adoringly.  
  
“The thought of not seeing you again... "   
  
She confessed with MiYoung's smile pressed to her throat.  
  
"Scared me."  
  
  
**TBC**

**Chapter 17: Epilogue**

"It's over, huh?"  
  
TaeYang was chewing on a long piece of grass, peering at SooYeon who nodded lazily, her eyes hooded and gazing far ahead. He dusted off his pants as he got up and spat out the grass, smiling down at her as he watched her silently.  
  
“I heard… I heard MiYoung’s going to remove you as part of the HwaRang, SooYeon.”  
  
He skirted his eyes over to ground below and itched behind his right ear.  
  
“Is it true?”  
  
SooYeon tilted her head to the right, completely obscuring her eyes from TaeYang’s prying ones, and held her breath before giving a brief nod. He inhaled harshly and sucked in his lips, chewing on them before crossing his arms with a quiet question.  
  
“But where will that land you?”  
  
He shuffled his feet, his posture discontent and uncomfortable. His words told what his shoulders could not.  
  
“I don’t want you gone from us. If you’re not part of the HwaRang… you already should know… if you’re not a part of us, then you can’t be a part of this palace… You’ll just be an ordinary civilian.”  
  
SooYeon sat in her seat on the edge of a step. She faced straight ahead again, profile to TaeYang, and her bangs danced over the crown of her head.   
  
“TaeYang?”  
  
“Yeah?”  
  
“I think I grew a lot on this whole journey.”  
  
TaeYang dug his fingers into his arms, holding back on his other questions and agreed with her, not wanting to pester.  
  
“I think we all grew up.”  
  
She teased him with playful eyes.  
  
“Did you?”  
  
He flashed a smirk.  
  
“Even I did.”  
  
“Want any favors from me…before you, um, leave?”  
  
SooYeon smiled sadly and caught his gaze.  
  
“A hug?”  
  
TaeYang jerked back but he slowly recovered with a splitting grin.  
  
He offered her the hug, and hoped SooYeon would forever ask of this generosity.  
  
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“You’re leaving us, I hear.”  
  
SeungHyun cautiously muttered as he secured the reigns to his horse around a lone post.  
  
“The GongJu was discussing it today with the Wang over breakfast. She plans to have you removed as soon as you’ve rested enough from your wounds.”  
  
SooYeon was still on the steps, TaeYang no longer next to her, as he had to run an errand. SeungHyun approached her, a few steps below her feet, leveling their stares.  
  
“Have you rested enough?”  
  
“About.”  
  
“That makes me want to hurt you.”  
  
“So that I’ll stay longer?”  
  
“Yes.”  
  
“It’ll be the first time you’ve ever hit me.”  
  
“It’ll be worth it.”  
  
SooYeon said nothing until he sat down next to her.  
  
“SeungHyun?”  
  
“Yes?”  
  
“You’ll see me even after I leave?”  
  
“Yes. SooYeon?”  
  
“Hm?”  
  
“Have I also earned your loyalty?”  
  
SooYeon gave a sidelong glance to him.  
  
“You’re my friend. I’d give it even if you didn’t ask for it.”  
  
“I wish I could make you stay…”  
  
SooYeon shook her head.  
  
“You could give me a hug though.”  
  
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“Do you also watch for birds?”  
  
SooYeon heard SeoHyun’s question as she gracefully slid to SooYeon’s left on the stairs.  
  
“You’ve been sitting here for a very long time. You wouldn’t want to catch a cold.”  
  
SooYeon knew the girl by her side was younger in age, but the voiced concern was befitting, it went along with SeoHyun’s neutral features.  
  
“I missed the fresh air.”  
  
“Yes, you’ve been stuck in a room for a while. How are your injuries?”  
  
“Healed. I still need to recuperate a bit more though.”  
  
“That would be wise.”  
  
From up ahead a figure came running, YoonA, her hair tossing wildly as she sprinted up the stairs with fluid agility. She hopped, two steps at a time, and bowed as she kneeled before SeoHyun.  
  
“We have assembled all the troops together, your Highness. WooYoung is waiting by the carriage, and the Wang and GongJu are waiting to bid you farewell.”  
  
SeoHyun nodded with her eyes closed, she opened them again to glance back at SooYeon.  
  
“I guess this is farewell until we meet again.”  
  
“The next time you see me, I probably will not be a soldier anymore.”  
  
SeoHyun clasped her hands to the front.  
  
“But you will still be the person who valiantly fought for us.”  
  
SooYeon smiled.  
  
“I’ll be that person until I die.”  
  
SeoHyun went down slowly, and stopped to speak, her voice light with a smile.  
  
“Even if you are no longer a soldier, the next time I see you, I’m sure I will see the GongJu as well.”  
  
SeoHyun went down further, YoonA tagging faithfully along behind her. She loosened her grasped hands, noiselessly moving her left arm back so that it took hold of YoonA’s wrist. YoonA hitched her breath visibly, her right leg poised in the air, as she had abruptly stopped her walk in stunned disbelief.  
  
Her frozen form lasted for less than a few seconds; her muscles relaxing slowly with caution. She planted her foot back onto the cement, and gave a wary glimpse to SooYeon. SooYeon tilted her head, stuck out her right hand and flexed her fingers to the gawking girl. YoonA took the hint immediately, and whisked her head back to SeoHyun’s direction. She carefully intertwined her fingers with SeoHyun’s, pulling their hands gently forward as she took the lead. SooYeon propped her arm back onto her lap when the two exited the palace and went beyond its gates.  
  
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“Are you feeling all right despite having missed lunch?”  
  
DaeSung bent his waist and inspected SooYeon’s face, searching for any indications of pain or discomfort. JiYong hurriedly pulled out his hands from within his sleeves, and slithered a palm over her forehead. He crouched low to the floor, and flipped his hand over to test her temperature with the back of it, all the while informing DaeSung.  
  
“It doesn’t seem like she has any signs of a fever…”  
  
SooYeon tried to push JiYong’s hand, and he clucked his tongue in disapproval.  
  
“Don’t try to shun a doctor’s hand!”  
  
She sighed through her nose and DaeSung chuckled weakly.  
  
“JiYong’s just worried, SooYeon.”  
  
DaeSung took a seat next to her, disregarding the way his garment wrinkled and dirtied as he stretched out comfortably. He bit his lower lip with a pause then took off his crown with both hands. He played with the sharp ridges of its design.  
  
“Word must have reached you by now about MiYoung’s decision with your removal in the HwaRang.”  
  
SooYeon nodded.  
  
“No one has yet heard your thoughts on the whole matter.”  
  
DaeSung eyed SooYeon hopefully.   
  
“Could you tell this clueless Wang your thoughts?”  
  
He held the crown still in his grip, unconsciously biting harder into his lip as she mulled. SooYeon cast her eyes downward then flicked them up with a small whisper.  
  
“I wonder what my master would say to me now.”  
  
JiYong retracted his hand and scoffed loudly.  
  
“Good job. What else? You just helped restore this kingdom to its rightful heirs.”  
  
SooYeon arched her eyebrows at him.  
  
“You really think so?”  
  
JiYong scowled; peeved at the way her eyes sought his. DaeSung leaned back, tapped his shoes together at the toes, and answered for his flustered friend.  
  
“It certainly could not have been possible without you, SooYeon.”  
  
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“Narsha liked my flower–picking efforts.”  
  
HyunA swung her body around a pole, distractedly swaying her hair as she hummed happily. SooYeon ducked her head in time to miss HyunA’s limp arm.  
  
“But she knew it was your idea, and not mine.”  
  
HyunA slumped back against the pole and sank like a puddle to the floor.  
  
“SooYeon?”  
  
“Hm?”  
  
“Say something, eh? You’re making me uneasy.”  
  
SooYeon snorted.  
  
“My yells never bothered you, but my silence does?”  
  
“I like it when you yell at me.”  
  
SooYeon cupped her cheek and regarded HyunA, studying the way the other girl knit her eyebrows.  
  
“I guess I’ll never fully figure you out.”  
  
“But that’s what makes me so fun!”  
  
SooYeon didn’t assent with the remark but her smile said enough. HyunA unsteadily got up from her spot and neatly adjusted her clothing.  
  
“I should get back to Narsha–”  
  
SooYeon monotonously interjected.  
  
“Don’t bother. She’s been watching us this whole time. You can come out now, Narsha.”  
  
A shadow quivered near SooYeon’s shoe, most likely in trying to suppress a laugh, and grew as it came up from behind.  
  
“And to think your days as a HwaRang is numbered.”  
  
Narsha amusedly commented as she fondly petted HyunA, who was gaping and trying to twitch up a smile. SooYeon smirked and dipped her chin.  
  
“Everyone has been trying to give the news to me in an almost apologetic way, but I see you hold no such restraints.”  
  
“What’s done is done. I’m more interested in how you will be handling the situation.”  
  
“You didn’t come here to leave with HyunA? Your carriage should be ready.”  
  
“I did, but I could have ordered a soldier to fetch her. I’m here mostly to know of your decisions on your removal. I need to feed my curiosity.”  
  
SooYeon blankly stared at Narsha’s unwavering shadow.  
  
“MiYoung has already told me she would be doing this.”  
  
“So you knew before any of us.”  
  
“Yes.”  
  
“And you know that you will not be permitted to be within her sights once released from this place?”  
  
“Yes. I trust whatever it is that MiYoung wants of me, and I will do whatever she asks of me.”  
  
Narsha inclined her head and watched as SooYeon hooked a strand of hair behind her ear. She also pretended to not see how HyunA had inched closer to her side. Her tone was hesitant, faltering slightly as she eyed both HyunA and SooYeon.   
  
“I have checked on the Queen.”  
  
SooYeon froze then looked back at Narsha.  
  
“How is she?”  
  
“They’ve put her in a special cell; granted it is still a confinement, but certainly better than the cells I have seen in the past. She also made a great show of ignoring me.”  
  
“Ah…”  
  
“And she seemed to be tending to the dirt by her window.”  
  
SooYeon craned her head around in interest.  
  
“The dirt?”  
  
HyunA crept up forward to SooYeon’s face and hissed.  
  
“I went down there too to spy on her, but all she was doing was playing with the dirt next to her window.”  
  
Narsha pulled HyunA back by her shirt’s collar and grinned down at SooYeon.  
  
“It seemed she was planting something. Tell me SooYeon, do you plan on having flowers sprout all over kingdoms? I’ve had HyunA give me a dozen this morning.”  
  
HyunA sheepishly smiled and blushed as Narsha, still holding her by the collar, dragged her down the stairs with her. HyunA wriggled out of Narsha’s grip and chuckled as SooYeon gave her a warm smile.  
  
“Bye, SooYeon!”  
  
She bounced down the step and waited for Narsha to descend to her level, then took her hand forcefully. SooYeon snorted, it was clear to her and to everyone else that Narsha was not avoiding HyunA anymore.  
  
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The sun was setting and SooYeon sighed against the quiet surrounding her.  
  
“SooYeon.”  
  
Finally, the voice that was privy to all her answers, MiYoung’s.   
  
SooYeon eased her shoulders apart; they had drawn in together through the long and dragging hours. Hands traveled down to her waist, and MiYoung’s soft mumble vibrated against the curve on her throat.  
  
“Come inside now.”  
  
She brushed her right arm down to cuff SooYeon’s wrist, pulling her up gently as she stepped back and bit a corner of her lip.  
  
“You must be tired from having not eaten anything the entire day – I heard from DaeSung how long you’ve been sitting here. Come inside before you get sick.”  
  
SooYeon heeded to MiYoung’s guiding hand, her fatigue unfurling as she moved her stiff joints.  
  
TaeYang and SeungHyun were at the front of their room’s door, guarding it vigilantly. They mutely watched her through the corners of their eyes, as she was escorted to the bed. TaeYang mumbled something to MiYoung, earning a nod from SeungHyun before soundly closing the door. Their shadows diminished, and SooYeon felt their aura disappear entirely. She knew they were giving her an exclusive sort of privacy for the night.  
  
She felt a little more awake in her own room with MiYoung. She fell back against the bed and closed her eyes. Fingertips fell over her brow, gingerly dancing along her clenched jaw, persuading it to lose the tension.  
  
“Are you going to sleep, SooYeon?”  
  
SooYeon dug her right elbow into the soft bedding below and got up with a slow shake of her head.  
  
“Not yet.”  
  
She grazed her lips over the bridge of MiYoung’s nose, and draped her arms over the other girl’s shoulders. Lowering her lover, and speaking into her ear as she laced their fingers together.  
  
“Am I really leaving the HwaRang?”  
  
MiYoung barely mumbled out an answer.  
  
“Yes.”  
  
“I don’t-”  
  
“Trust me, please...”  
  
SooYeon sighed and burrowed her nose below MiYoung’s ear.  
  
“I do.”  
  
MiYoung beseeched with kisses.  
  
“Just wait, please, wait, I’ll give you the reasons at the end.”  
  
Her fingers traced up SooYeon’s spine, discarding the shirt covering the other girl’s flushing skin. The air around them was suffocating, or so it seemed to SooYeon, who was panting and receiving all of MiYoung’s kisses. A thumb was circling her hipbone, tickling it as she writhed and disrobed MiYoung eagerly. She wanted to take her time, but prudence fled as lust freed itself to do whatever it wished. SooYeon flipped MiYoung over, raised her left hand to tangle her fingers weakly over the other girl’s hair and nipped her collarbone. MiYoung winced, but whimpered when SooYeon pulled away.  
  
“My nights here are ending…”  
  
She sucked hard on the blemish she had made, and scratched blunt nails down MiYoung’s quivering stomach. Her voice a rasp as she edged her hand down delicately.  
  
“So let’s not sleep tonight.”  
  
MiYoung whined as she pressed SooYeon’s face close to hers and arched into her body.  
  
“Whatever you – ngh!”  
  
SooYeon made another mark, this time below MiYoung’s naval then continued to keep her lover awake throughout the whole night.  
  
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The place beyond the palace, where SooYeon had first met MiYoung, had grown over the time spent apart. SooYeon stuck out her hand and scraped a slit against a tree, remembering how she had made the mark with an arrow years ago. She kicked a small pebble, watched it skip and get lost in a tall patch of grass over a yard away. The same patch where MiYoung had pinned her to the ground and demanded her soul. The memory spread a blush down to her neck. She coughed and cleared her throat to announce loudly.  
  
“You can stop holding your breath, you two.”  
  
She heard a meek chuckle from SeungHyun accompanied with a frustrated sigh from TaeYang. SeungHyun jumped down from the tree.  
  
“We’re sorry for intruding.”  
  
SooYeon looked at him like he had eaten a bug and frowned as she corrected.  
  
“No one said you had to be sorry.”  
  
SeungHyun smiled and the tree branches rustled again as TaeYang jumped then rolled once on the ground. He picked himself up and swatted away the leaves stamped all over his back.  
  
“I’m glad you called us out though. I was fighting a squirrel for that space on the tree branch.”  
  
SooYeon snorted, crossing her arms as she pawed the dirt with her foot.  
  
“Which one of you knows the way to the Queen’s cell?”  
  
SeungHyun and TaeYang exchanged uncomfortable glances, and she spoke up to ease their query.  
  
“I’d just like to see how she’s doing.”  
  
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“One hears so many things when one becomes invisible.”  
  
The Queen smirked as SooYeon stood at the other side of the bars, quietly assessing the cell and its bearings. There was a slim horizontal window on the right wall, enough to let light and air in, but not enough to have someone escape through. Below the window and a foot away was a lengthy box, full of soil and directly underneath the stream of light jetting through the window. SooYeon arched an eyebrow and asked, scrutinizing the petite and bare garden.  
  
“And what would one hear?”  
  
“A departure for example.”  
  
She shrewdly pierced her gaze at SooYeon, satisfied when the other girl returned the look without a flinch. SooYeon flipped her bangs back with a whip of her head and whispered.  
  
“At least you won’t have to see your captor anymore.”  
  
The older woman gave an unreadable expression and shifted her eyes to the pouring light from her window.  
  
“I’m not bitter at you for putting me here, if that’s what you think.”  
  
“How is it here?”  
  
“Can’t you see?”  
  
SooYeon bit her tongue, afraid that her smile would reveal her amusement at the Queen’s exasperated tone.  
  
“I can see… I’m surprised to see you adapting well to it.”  
  
“It’s actually a relief to wash away my sins. This place does that well.”  
  
SooYeon rocked on her heels to lean against a wall.  
  
“I’ll be leaving tomorrow.”  
  
“I never asked when you were going to leave.”  
  
“You were asking this whole time.”  
  
“You’re too smart to be a mere soldier.”  
  
SooYeon bit the soft flesh of her cheek, and managed to ask without faltering.  
  
"How could you kill someone? Why would you want to? You could have had a grand life if you hadn't."  
  
The Queen bristled then, and her eyes glazed over with a cold emotion.   
  
"You have killed as well, SooYeon."  
  
"It was my duty, and I did it to protect. My reasons were not the same as yours. And the people I aimed to kill always saw me coming. The same cannot be said for you."  
  
"Yes, my reasons were for revenge, and I gave death without a warning. I'm sure the poison hurt as much as a sword. Try to imagine why I would do that?"  
  
"For your son."  
  
The Queen sneered then.   
  
"No mother forgets her child's murderer."  
  
"The late Wang only did what he thought was for the best. I'm sure the weight of that decision haunted him-"  
  
"No one should have to see a coffin so small."  
  
SooYeon had opened her mouth to protest, but gave an apology, one that would never properly convey her sympathy.  
  
"I'm sorry..."  
  
"I don't understand why I'm admitting all these things. It's too bad your allegiance is to MiYoung. We would have had some interesting conversations if you had stayed by my side."  
  
“It wasn’t my allegiance you lacked from me.”  
  
The Queen perked up her head. Her grin unnerved SooYeon.  
  
“Ah, yes, it wasn’t allegiance… but love I never had from you.”  
  
SooYeon stiffened against the wall and stared to her right.  
  
“Restless, SooYeon?”  
  
“I don’t like it when you mention-”  
  
“You love her too much. She’s making you leave such a high position. Let her go if you want to strive forward.”  
  
SooYeon aimed her glare to the Queen, and scathingly hissed with narrowed eyes.  
  
“It was because of her love that I saved your life.”  
  
The Queen went into an unnatural silence. SooYeon righted her body from the wall and slowly exited with a mutter.  
  
“Your garden looks well.”  
  
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MiYoung didn’t question the way SooYeon was more aggressive in bed that night. She simply thought it was because SooYeon was leaving the next day, therefore was most likely making lasting impressions. Sweat dripped down her brow as she kissed SooYeon’s shoulder. She yielded to every one of SooYeon’s possessive embrace and struggled with keeping her whimpers low. She clutched to SooYeon’s back, leaving dull red trails as she listened to the repetitive whisper.  
  
“I’ll never let go first.”  
  
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TaeYang bawled, JiYong refused to call it a goodbye, SeungHyun did not look into her eyes, and DaeSung strained to smile. It was everything SooYeon had expected and therefore was able to walk away from it in one piece while the rest crumpled behind her.  
  
Only one person watched SooYeon through a window, faraway from the others: MiYoung. She stroked a flower’s leaf, as SooYeon passed the palace gates, trying to calm herself as she held her breath.   
  
Everyone within the palace was mindful of MiYoung after SooYeon had left, ready and anxious to please her if she was to give an order. But MiYoung did not speak a word to anyone that day.  
  
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[A month later]

“It’s rare that we get a new neighbor around these parts. A rich one at that! Come anytime if you need to borrow equipment!”  
  
SooYeon smiled politely at the elderly woman’s kind offer. She bowed. then tucked the tool under her arm and began heading her way back to her… not so humble home.  
  
It was perhaps the best in the small village. DaeSung had personally picked it for her.  
  
She frequently went to the village market, eating at various restaurants with her saved up allowance from when she was a HwaRang. It wasn’t really the food that lured her, but the gossip constantly floating around the villagers. They talked about a lot of things, but mostly about the new Wang. DaeSung was making quick progress in rebuilding the fallen kingdom, and it seemed the people were all glad of his return from the dead. She tried not to be distraught the days when she heard no word about the GongJu, which was the case most of the times.  
  
“Is your name SooYeon?”  
  
She raised her eyebrows and slowed, a person was in standing erectly by the door of her home. A month had gone by in quiet with no visitors, so his appearance startled her greatly. She identified his uniform and realized that he had come from the palace. He bowed then hurriedly brought out a small pouch from his pocket.  
  
“This is for you.”  
  
SooYeon eyed him suspiciously even as she knew he was from the kingdom.  
  
“I have been ordered to give you this.”  
  
He handed her the tiny bag and bowed again to leave. She watched him scurry off and glanced down at the item in her hand. It weighed close to nothing as she lifted it to her eyes. She frowned and went through her door to prop the tool in her other hand against her home’s wall, and exited through the backdoor.  
  
The backyard was riddled with stones and tall grass, the result of having no occupants for over a year. SooYeon sat on a log she had cut in the morning, dropping the pouch over her lap. She untied it and unraveled the item while repressing her excitement. She froze, then smiled. There were seeds inside the wrinkled sack. She tentatively touched the seeds, desiring to absorb whatever touches MiYoung had left on them.  
  
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“Did you hear, SooYoung?”  
  
“Hear what?”  
  
“The GongJu is getting married to someone!”  
  
“What? This better not be one of your tricks, HyoYeon! Your last one almost made me fire off a gun!”  
  
“No, really, she is!”  
  
“Which kingdom?”  
  
“Word has it that she’s marrying a foreigner but none of us will be able to see the ceremony – not even the people within the palace, except the Wang, of course.”  
  
“Eh, a foreigner? One of our lands?”  
  
“No, some Wang from Thailand.”  
  
“Hey, neighbor, did you hear that? The GongJu is getting married – Hey! Where are you going? Your food just arrived!”  
  
But SooYeon could not eat. She blindly pushed through the busy restaurant, intent on running home until her legs were unable to carry her burdened heart any longer. She collapsed onto her bed, sweat wetting the floor, her tongue dry and throat choked with a growing pain. She attempted to wipe away the sweat from her face, miserably biting her lips when she realized that they were in fact tears.  
  
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SooYeon rose early the next day to start raking the soft soil. She dug into the earth and picked up all the rocks and weeds decorating her soon–to–be garden. When the dirt was smoothed out and an appropriate size was made for planting, she stopped her labor and walked back inside her home. Bringing out two wooden buckets and a new set of clothes, she ventured to a nearby stream. She shed her smudged shirt and pants before washing herself. Then grabbed the buckets, filling them up with water, and set them aside to put on her fresh outfit.  
  
She wondered if MiYoung thought about her because she did constantly. It kept her sane. She had put the GongJu through so much hurt earlier, surely she could show her own trust for all that MiYoung’s withstood for her. Surely she could allow MiYoung happiness for whatever path she chose to pick.  
  
SooYeon briskly wiped away the remaining droplets beaded on her brow, and sauntered back to her garden with the buckets. The sky was shading to a dimmer color, and SooYeon sped up her walk. After having eaten with a group for such a long duration, it was lonely now to eat alone. She found it was easier to not dwell on her loneliness when the sky was still light. And it would be a while before she went back to the market square for a meal. Her thoughts halted when her senses gave off a warning. She was not alone in her yard.  
  
“SooYeon…”  
  
SooYeon tensed, positive in having heard wrong. Assured that she might have gone mad, and was now hearing voices - MiYoung’s voice to be exact - but her ears did not deceive. MiYoung stood at the foot of her garden. A flower was in her in hand.   
  
She was not wearing any of her royal attire; instead she was wearing what closely resembled the clothes she had worn during their grueling journey. Except these were of fine quality, and were not exhibiting any of the hardships they had once endured. She weakly whispered to SooYeon, holding out the flower.  
  
“The Queen does not talk much in her cell, but she gave me this before I left. She said it was your doing more than hers…”  
  
MiYoung’s shaky smile snapped SooYeon out of her shock, and she gasped to the other girl.   
  
“MiYoung… you should return to-”  
  
“I’ve given up my title.”  
  
SooYeon swayed a little in her footing.  
  
“You-”  
  
“It took a while with DaeSung to approve and for the matter to be hushed to those outside of the kingdom’s trusted circle…”  
  
MiYoung set the flower down onto the garden, and straightened to explain with bright eyes.  
  
“Narsha is able to not care if whispers are said behind her back as she chooses to have HyunA. SeoHyun is still young, I know she will find a way allow YoonA’s constant presence for the rest of her life. And I can do what both will, but that’s not possible with you, SooYeon. You care about everything that is said of me. You wouldn’t be at ease if you were to hear whispers, or see me turmoil over making our love accepted.”  
  
MiYoung wrung her fingers.  
  
“I made DaeSung spread the lie about my marriage to a Thai Wang. It’ll keep the people from guessing of my disappearance. And they’ll never consider that I’m wandering among them as a normal civilian. And so… you should understand why I did all this… I thought it would be the best for us… I want to live together with you in peace and happiness. It doesn’t matter to me where… as long as I can see you smile and be happy with me…”  
  
SooYeon swallowed. She nodded, knowing it was approval that MiYoung sought. But MiYoung’s lips quivered as she whispered timidly.  
  
"I must be useless now without my power..."  
  
MiYoung tried to laugh it off, but SooYeon vigorously shook her head. She dropped the buckets, water slashing all over her shoes, and ran to the other girl. Her hands gripped MiYoung’s waist as she showered her with kisses. She denied with a hoarse voice to MiYoung, pressing her lips to the tears.  
  
"No..."  
  
She slid her hands up and clutched MiYoung's cheeks.  
  
"You're not useless at all..."  
  
She grazed her teeth over MiYoung's parted lips, curling her tongue around MiYoung's tongue. She tasted the sweetness of MiYoung's mouth and the saltiness of her tears, before leaning her forehead against the other girl’s temple.  
  
"You loved me even when I hated myself."  
  
SooYeon kissed MiYoung's cheek, ears, chin, brow, then returned to linger on her mouth. She smiled with her lips brushing over MiYoung's trembling ones.  
  
"You're the only one who deserves everything that I can give. You're not useless at all."  
  
She whispered, closing her eyes and smiling.  
  
"I need you more than this breath."  
  
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SooYeon had woken up early, begrudgingly when she had to disentangle from MiYoung’s arms, and dressed to start the day on the garden. Her ears pricked up suddenly when she heard a slew of noises outside her home. She reluctantly craned her head out the back door and refrained from screaming.  
  
“What is all this…”  
  
Horses, cattle, chickens, flour, grains – everything needed for a decent agricultural life, all in her backyard. Luckily the ground outside was expansive enough to fit in all the animals and crops. MiYoung stepped up beside her at the door, and sleepily yelled above the mooing and clucking.  
  
“DaeSung was inconsolable the day I left, and he swore he would provide us with everything we would ever need! Even when I protested! This is his way of showing love to us!”  
  
MiYoung cautiously added, hoping the whisper would go unheard.  
  
“He also insisted to visit every week…”  
  
SooYeon sighed then surveyed the grand gift. All of the animals were starting to roam around the land near their home. When had DaeSung dropped all this?   
  
“Hey, SooYeon!”  
  
SooYeon bristled at TaeYang’s voice and saw him emerge from behind a horse. She summoned up a tight-lipped smile as she asked MiYoung with clenched teeth.  
  
“Did you invite him?”  
  
MiYoung faced her with incredulous eyes.  
  
“No…”  
  
TaeYang galloped to her, clapping her shoulder and beaming.  
  
“We’re your neighbors!”  
  
SooYeon tensed with a small squeak and listened to his ramble.  
  
“Yeah, so, DaeSung thought it’d be a great idea if we watched over this part of the kingdom! We can report back to him for duty every month, so it’s not exactly like we left the HwaRang to rest…”  
  
He huffed in dismay and frowned helplessly. SooYeon moved her mouth again and asked with a weary tone, the hand on her shoulder heavy but warm.  
  
“You said we and neighbors… who else is with you?”  
  
He lit up and chirped.  
  
“SeungHyun’s out somewhere getting wood, he’ll be back soon though!”  
  
SooYeon rubbed her aching temple and felt MiYoung brush her knuckles, reminding her that she was not alone. She groaned but smiled up at TaeYang.  
  
“Help me with tying the cattle.”  
  
He broke into a smile and slung his arm over both MiYoung and SooYeon. Leading them into the scattered herd and chattering all the while.  
  
“By the way, Jo Kwon sends his love – oh, and he might have found a lady too! A GongJu in the Son Kingdom. Oh, and Narsha and HyunA came back again – something about Narsha leaving her glasses behind…”  
  
After the two girls patiently took in all his news, smiled when Narsha and HyunA dropped in on them, persuaded DaeSung that no one would rob them, and helped SeungHyun tie up the last horse, they clung to each other and drowned into a deep and sweet sleep.  
  
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Their newly acquired rooster woke them up the next morning, and SooYeon blearily lied in a daze, murmuring content noises as MiYoung draped the blanket tighter over their bodies. The day before had been exhausting, but apparently not enough for MiYoung, who had woken SooYeon up in the middle of the night to make love.  
  
MiYoung thumbed SooYeon’s lower lip, admiring the way it had become swollen, and kissed her tenderly.  
  
"Perhaps in the next life... I'll be a soldier and you'll be the GongJu?"  
  
SooYeon brought MiYoung’s hand to her mouth and kissed her wrist. She suggested as she bit the tip of MiYoung’s finger affectionately.  
  
"Or perhaps you'll be a man?"  
  
"Then you'll be the GongJu that I will have to rescue."  
  
"Perhaps."  
  
"There are these things called musicals and plays being brought in by Westerners. Narsha wants to do a play about our story."  
  
SooYeon raised her eyebrows.  
  
"Would you like to join a play?"  
  
MiYoung shook her head, and yawned sleepily.  
  
"I'd just like to see one if it's ever to happen. For now, I would like to go to sleep."  
  
"Ah."  
  
SooYeon drew her arms around MiYoung. Her calloused fingertips gently sweeping over the other girl's back, traveling up on her spine then back down to its base, pressing her palms against the warmth of MiYoung's skin. She felt MiYoung kiss her neck, along with a lazy nip, and she smirked as she brought her closer. She murmured, soft and comforting words, as she pulled MiYoung to nestle on her shoulder.  
  
“Don’t let me sleep if you’re awake.”  
  
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[Many years later in a different life]

“Who the hell wanted plays for schools?”  
  
Jessica snorts and bitterly grumbles.  
  
She never wanted to be an ugly mirror in a stupid play that had her painfully beautiful girlfriend.   
  
Tiffany is a shining prince. And she, Jessica, is an evil dictator's subservient talking mirror.   
  
Jessica shifts the weight in her legs. The balance in them teetering as she holds an oval wooden frame in front of her body. Her shoes barely sticking out from underneath, and her toes crushed by the frame’s weight.  
  
"*Pst* - Jessica!"  
  
Jessica snaps her head to her twin brother, SeungHyun. She arches her eyebrows and tilts her chin. He's hissing at her and jerking his hand to motion her forward.  
  
"C'mere!"  
  
She cringes and waddles to him. The princess make-up caked on his face is gaudy and glittery. God, who did his eyebrows and-   
  
He yanks her into a darkened corner, and starts undressing mindlessly. She stares at his frenetic act, and uncertainly questions.  
  
"Hate it that much?"  
  
SeungHyun's explanation is muffled by his dress as he tries to pull it off over his head, the tight collar choking his throat. Jessica sighs and snaps off the top button, allowing him to breathe and remove the entire dress with ease. He gasps to her, panting and tearing off her own ridiculous outfit.  
  
"Quick! Wear the dress! We’re going to switch places!"  
  
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"Hey."  
  
"Hey. You're here to wake me?"  
  
“Yup.”  
  
“With a kiss?”  
  
"Yeah, it's in the script."  
  
“So you’re purely following a script?”  
  
“No, I’d have kissed you either way.”  
  
Jessica smirks as Tiffany leans down and kisses her. The other girl’s mouth is warm and her tongue is rough against Jessica’s soft lips. Jessica licks between Tiffany’s parted mouth tenderly, as she locks her body – Snow White is supposed to be sleeping after all. She knows she should be stopping, but who exactly has the power to stop their-  
  
YuRi's voice booms over them.  
  
"SNOW WHITE IS TO WAKE UP FROM THE KISS."  
Stupid YuRi. But Jessica ignores her friend’s strained wish, and smiles at Tiffany into their kiss. She mumbles, a deja vu swimming then vanishing around a corner in her mind.  
  
"Maybe we did live a fairytale life once. With princes and princesses."  
  
"Maybe…"  
  
"Maybe in one life I’ll save you from thugs who want your father's money."  
  
"You sound like a bodyguard."  
  
"I could do that too... be like a secret agent."  
  
"Or maybe in another life I’ll save you instead... from yourself."  
  
"I think I'll do most of the saving."  
  
"So you'll always rescue me? What if I'm already bound to marry someone else?"  
  
"You won't want to marry anyone else after seeing me. I'll make you doubt your arranged marriage."  
  
"True, you-"  
  
"SNOW WHITE *WILL* WAKE UP FROM THE KISS."  
  
Jessica stares deeply into Tiffany’s eyes. She brushes her forehead over Tiffany’s, and rests her lips over Tiffany’s cheek. She whispers, promises, and presses her wide smile against Tiffany.  
  
“We’ll always catch each other.”  
  
They pull away, ready to end the play, and to live their own lives, together.  
  
  
  
**The End.**

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