

White Fire (and Golden Locks)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/9722240) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/9722240>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	INFINITE (Band)
Relationship:	Kim Sunggyu/Nam Woohyun
Characters:	Kim Sunggyu , Nam Woohyun , Lee Howon Hoya , Lee Sungyeol , Lee Sungjong , Jang Dongwoo
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Royalty , historical fantasy? only a bit , prince soon to be king!woohyun , knight!sunggyu
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2017-03-11 Updated: 2017-12-25 Words: 42,039 Chapters: 8/?

White Fire (and Golden Locks)

by [kingyu](#) ([tyullip](#)).

Summary

Sunggyu is more than a knight, and certainly even more than the prince's lover.

Prologue: White Flames

Sunggyu's standing on the grass. The sun over him is so strong he can even feel it under his skin, warming up his blood. He's looking at the ground, which is not that far away from his eyes, and a hand comes into his eyesight. He grabs it without thinking twice, for some reason. Sunggyu's steps are sloppy, but somehow he manages not to fall with any of them. They (he, and the stranger who's holding his tiny hand) walk in the grass into the forest and Sunggyu is getting nervous. The hand gives him a reassuring squeeze and just with that, all his fears vanishes.

The smell of mud is slowly calming him as Sunggyu's tiny boots get dirty with the fallen leaves. He finds them amusing by the sound they make, and the soothing sound of a stream nearby. But he makes sure to not get distracted, he's about to get an important lesson.

After a not so long walk, the stranger sits Sunggyu over a fallen tree trunk. Excitement goes through his veins as the stranger takes off his right glove. He doesn't know much of this world yet, doesn't know why things are like they are, why does the clothes he's wearing have to be itchy if he's too much under the sun or why does his stomach make a grumbling from time to time. But there's something he knows.

He knows the white flames that appear in the strangers palm is nothing but magic.

They're calming, extraordinary and they gently shine in a way red flames will never do.

Sunggyu knows about flames. If you rub a piece of wood in the right way, red flames will go out of it, but never white flames. White flames only come out of this person in front of him. That, he knows well.

"Do you want to try it?" he hears. He nods as his hand unconsciously gets closer to the stranger's hand, ready to touch it.

The white flames disappear in a moment when the other closes his palm and Sunggyu gets a tiny bit disappointed. The stranger smiles mockingly and Sunggyu yelps as the other takes his hand and cleans the bit of sweat Sunggyu had on his palm.

"Don't get disappointed if they don't come out, Sunggyu" Sunggyu pouts and the stranger laughs. With that smile on his face, he doesn't look so strange. But Sunggyu still can't pinpoint a name on him. "I want you to close your eyes, and think about the fire you just saw."

Sunggyu does as told, and a silly little smile appears on his face.

"Think about what it makes you feel. Happiness, excitement... and put all those feelings onto your hand. Concentrate them there, imagine that same flame running down your veins until they touch your palm." The stranger moves a finger through Sunggyu's arm as he explains, and the kid grimaces as he firmly tries to do what the voice tells him, but nothing happens

yet. "Relax, you need to let the feelings move with you, naturally. Don't try to push it too hard or it will never work."

Sunggyu breathes a few times before trying again. He feels hot on his heart, and it spreads to his entire body before it starts gathering on one point in his chest. He feels the heat moving through him and it frightens him as much as it excites him.

"Open your eyes."

There's a tiny white flame sitting on top of Sunggyu's palm, nothing compared to the one he saw before. This one was quite small, occupying just a few inches of the core of his hand, and it was not as outstanding as the stranger's. As the excitement grew within him, the flame grew with its color. It shined differently, letting Sunggyu know that it meant this was his.

He looks up to see the stranger's smile again, just like before, waiting to be praised. But instead of a smile, he sees red.

His flame die as his eyes register the tip of a sword emerging from the abdomen of the stranger, just like the blood coming out from his mouth that's falling onto his face. The stranger has a calm expression that's ironically everything but calming. With his last strength, he pushes Sunggyu to the side, screaming "run!", as he chokes with the blood that kept coming out of his mouth.

Sunggyu runs as fast as he can, trying to ignore the sound of steel against steel behind him. He falls a few times on the process and dirties his face with the mud. But he raises up again, and runs. He hears someone walking behind him and even though every part of him wants it to be the stranger of white flames, he knows it isn't him.

His tiny feet take him far away from everything and he hides inside a crooked tree trunk, hoping, for the first time, that the darkness would be his only companion. Sunggyu feels the tears streaming down his eyes and he covers the sobs from coming out.

At some point, the sound of feet die down, and the sun isn't there anymore either. Sunggyu is finally alone.

He comes out of his hiding spot, looking afar, trying to find a reason to hide again, but he finds nothing. He runs again, worried that someone might be looking for him, worried he might be making someone get worried.

He runs, always looking at his feet to make sure he doesn't fall, and he doesn't notice the moment he's not in a forest anymore, but in a village, And inside someone's embrace.

He cries his eyes out clenching on the clothes he was holding. He is still scared to what happened before and the arms around his tiny body begin to calm him. He feels at ease and his heart stops beating so fast. It makes him feel relaxed, warm, and the embrace makes him see nothing but white flames.

I. Boohyun the tenderhearted

Chapter Notes

quick note, this is not based on royalty from Korea's history, but more like... The Lord of the Rings or Game of Thrones kind of thing, just in the scenery anyways. There won't be too much violence, at least I don't plan it that way hahaha. (this is my first time writing this type of AU, so really ANY opinion or comment would be a really great help) enjoy!

“Come on Sunggyu, finish him off!” someone screams.

The crowd of sweaty men cheer in agreement, lifting fists and swords as they watch both of the knights fighting with each other. Sunggyu feels the drops of sweat going down his forehead, his eyes steadily fixed on the guy before him. The other growls at him almost like a wolf, spitting blood before grinning.

“Did it hurt you? That I misspoke about your *boyfriend*?”

Sunggyu is no troublemaker, that is the first thing you must know about him. He was actually the opposite, being more of the ones who kept an eye on the troublemakers and always holding them on line. Which is why, even if he got to the point to be beheaded because of this fight, he'd say he did not start it.

Oh, but he *will* finish it.

He runs, crashing his shoulder against the other's torso and making him fall at once. Sunggyu positions himself on top, throwing punches over punches. The guy under him tries to defend by scratching his shirt and trying to reach for his neck (or any place actually) that would make Sunggyu to stop.

Sunggyu throws one last punch, but this time at the ground just a few inches besides the other's ear. He takes his neck, strangling him enough to not let him move, but not enough to kill him. Sunggyu was sure the guy was a step away from crying for mercy, he could see it on his expression. It was vaguely there, but *still* there; the fear of being finished off for once and forever.

“I dare you to repeat it again, do it” Sunggyu mutters with smirk on his face, completely feeling the power he had over the helpless guy.

“Enough!”

The cheers die at once and only the man's attempt to reach for air were heard, and probably Sunggyu's teeth clenching with the same force he was applying on his hand around his neck.

A hand tugs the back of Sunggyu's shirt and throws him away from the man under him, landing his ass off in the ground.

The heat of fight is still on the air, and without a second thought, Sunggyu tries to stand up. Two pairs of arms take him soon enough, leaving him on throwing kicks to the air like a 10 year old would do.

"This is no fuckin' behavior of a knight!" the lord knight yells forcing the other man to stand up too, not caring about his current condition.

Sunggyu growls just like the other guy had done before, but this time, the guy instinctively tries to move backwards almost in submission. And Sunggyu smiles, finally ceasing his attempts on getting off his friend's grips.

The smile dies in seconds, as his gaze meets the lord knight Kwon's eyes. "I'll be talking with you later"

∞

He's been in the cells just once. And no, he was not the one sitting inside with a throbbing pain on his back, mouth and- well, most of his body. It had been to visit his younger brother, Howon, who had almost broke someone's jaw out of anger as the younger tended to enrage over most of things.

He expects to be scolded. No, he expects to be punched, or even to make a night watching over the city, an old and over-the-manual punishment. But he got none of that, at least not yet anyway. Instead, as he waited on the dirty cell that smelled like someone peed on it before puking and Sunggyu doubted it had ever been cleaned at all, the only visitor he got was Howon, for his surprise.

"Do you want me to leave and call lord knight Kwon?" the younger jokes as he sees his brother's shocking expression.

Sunggyu shakes his head rapidly and Howon chuckles, getting inside the cell and moving a stool in front of him. He means to clean his older brother's wounds, but if he was a stubborn man who believed everything was better done if he did it himself, Sunggyu was just twice as much, so he's not surprised when the older grabs the rag to clean himself.

"You're never like this hyung"

"You know why I did it" Sunggyu growls. There was a good reason for that fight, at least it was good enough in Sunggyu's eyes.

He had walked into the training pit when he heard the guy badmouthing the prince and rightful heir of the throne who had died just two days before, in a battle hundred of miles away from the citadel. A battle that wasn't even his to begin with. A friend of the crown had

asked for men to fight in his name, and, Sunggyu heard, the prince himself had offered to lead the men they were going to contribute.

Some said it was stupid decision, others admired the prince's braveness. Sunggyu was from the latter.

He respected and admired the prince just as much as the king. He would've given his life for the prince if he only got the chance to. So Sunggyu, (not really) politely, asked the guy to shut up. But as the other even had the nerve to respond, Sunggyu couldn't control himself from crashing a punch against the guy's jaw two seconds after his bad-taste joke has gotten out.

Punches do not start fights, words do.

Most of the times.

"The guy was screaming at me to just punch him."

"And was it worth it?" Sunggyu hears a tiny bit of concern in his brother's tone, but he chooses to ignore it. He nods, grimacing as he cleans off the dirtied dry blood off his mouth. "Still, I think it was dumb, it's not like defending his name like this will bring him back. Lucky you I was ready to break you two off if things got nastier."

Sunggyu chuckles in disbelief, "Lee Howon, if you ever break one of my fights I swear in our mom's name tha--"

"So it sounds that you're quite alright." Howon smiles. The older brother is about to continue his threat, but decides that it wasn't worth it anyway. If Sunggyu is stubborn, Howon was just twice as much. "But I would've really killed him if he ever got you hurt."

Sunggyu frowns. "Didn't I get hurt?" he points at his bleeding lip, for not pointing out every place he's sure he has a bruise.

"But I mean like life threatening hurt, this is baby hurt. You actually kind of deserve it." Sunggyu makes an attempt to grab the younger's collar but Howon dodges him with ease, walking back a few steps. "Anyway for now, as your punishment, you'll stay here for the night."

"I thought I'd get something worst" Sunggyu laughs and frowns with the pain.

"You probably are, but not today." Howon says, going out the cell. "Oh, tomorrow we'll be going to the prince's funeral." He adds, trying to make it sound like it wasn't a big deal but Sunggyu's fallen smile tells him it didn't really work.

"I still can't believe he's dead" Sunggyu sighs when his brother leaves and there's no one in the room but himself.

Before becoming a knight, as a kid, Sunggyu had worked as a blacksmith with his father. At first he just wanted him to watch, but the more he saw, the more he got eager to take part on the process, forcing his old man to let him try. He had the lucky hand, some said. Sunggyu was very good at crafting swords, as if it was as natural as breathing.

The room where he worked was a bit small and the heat coming from the forge made it a bit uncomfortable to work with sometimes. But he didn't mind the heat of the flames or the hot steel mere inches away from him, making him sweat from parts he didn't know he could sweat. He actually loved it. Loved every part of the task of making a sword. There was something on the flames that oddly made him feel at ease and most of times loose track of time as he stared at it.

Howon, on the other hand, never actually had an interest on the matter, always watching from the door frame of the workshop only for a few minutes when Sunggyu was molding the steel before going out to play with his mini sized bow.

The word of a kid making swords had flew across the city pretty fast, and somehow, it reached the royal ears. And when the men in the fancy armor came to his shop, Sunggyu thought it would be some royal guards that probably came to make fun of him. What he didn't expect, was the young prince himself taking off his helmet in that same room he had been working inside for a few months.

There wasn't much of an age difference between the two boys, the prince being 17 years old and Sunggyu 12; but their aura *was* tremendously different. While the prince had already matured physically and emotionally and stretched enough to leave Sunggyu not even at the height of his neck, Sunggyu still had his baby fat, and even sometimes wet his bed when a nightmare in particular came around.

Sunggyu had 'wow'-ed to the point he almost dropped the current mini sword he was working on, but he caught it on time before it touched the ground.

"What's your name, kid?" the prince asked, and Sunggyu turned his head to both sides to confirm that *yes*, he indeed was the only kid in the workshop and *no*, he was not dreaming. The first born prince was really before him, smiling so warmly it felt surreal.

"Le-e Sunggyu, your grace." Sunggyu stuttered, leaving the sword on the crafting table, not trusting his shaking hands to hold it well.

The prince hummed in agreement, leaving his helmet somewhere in the tiny room before leaning on the table of the opposite side. "Well, Lee Sunggyu, show me your talent."

Sunggyu had showed him his technique that afternoon, crafting a simple dagger for the young man. The prince thought Sunggyu would have trouble when he tried to pick up the hammer, but by his surprise, the young boy had gotten used to it, moving it carefully before letting it fall on the steel to mold it.

He left that night praising Sunggyu while ruffling his hair and taking with him his brand new dagger. But before he opened the simple wooden door, he said “come to me if you ever want to be more than a blacksmith.”

At first he didn’t understand his words. Sunggyu had worked as a blacksmith merely for a few months, but he didn’t see himself doing anything else but that. What was there to do anyway? He pictured himself growing old and still crafting swords, even in his deathbed. His world had always been small, narrowed and always focusing on one thing at a time. And despite his long hours working on swords, Sunggyu never thought about raising one, not even a few weeks later after his father had told both of his children that they would practice with wooden swords that afternoon.

Howon had been excited for the idea, having now his bow broken, and, sitting besides him but far away from sharing the excitement, Sunggyu was shaking with his spoon on the soup.

Sunggyu didn’t come out that afternoon, faking a cold and having his mother to back him up. Everyone knew he wasn’t sick, but no one wanted to address the elephant in the room.

Sunggyu didn’t like blood.

It was the number one reason of why he liked being a blacksmith, because you never bleed while crafting a sword. Not unless you’re stupid. But Sunggyu’s father only let him skip practice on the first week, saying something like ‘*no child of mine will live his life without knowing how to fight!*’.

“But I don’t want to bleed!” Sunggyu had whined.

His father chuckled. “That’s the idea”

It took a few days for Sunggyu to get used to the wooden sword in his hand, and even more time to dodge most of Howon’s attacks, but he was a fast learner. He learned to read his opponent (his younger brother in this case) and in no time, Sunggyu was the one leaving Howon with his knees on the mud and not the other way around, as it tended to be.

He also worked on his fear for blood, well, he was forced to work on it. His father was a proud person, and maybe he saw something in Sunggyu, for which he made the now young boy to cut himself his palm.

“What? I won’t do that!” Sunggyu had said, throwing the knife away, disgusted.

“Sunggyu, when you fight, you’ll see a lot of blood. You’ll end up killing people and maybe sometimes injuring yourself too. If you can’t deal with your own blood, how are you going to become a knight?”

“Who said I wanted to become one in the first place?” Sunggyu’s cheeks got pink with the lie, as he actually wanted to be one, enjoying now his time around a wooden sword fight. But he didn’t want to give his father the satisfaction.

“Don’t lie, hyung” Howon intervened, eating an apple from over the table in the other side of the room. Sunggyu scoffed, eyeing his brother to shut up, but it didn’t work. “I have even seen you practice on your own these days.”

“But there must be another way... I can become a great knight, one who never bleeds!” Howon laughs out loud and shuts up seconds later, being eyed by his father this time.

“And what will you do when you kill someone?” his father was serious. “And you’ll do Sunggyu, in this life is always kill or be killed.”

Sunggyu sighed in defeat, taking the knife in his trembling hands. The seconds felt like hours passing by before Sunggyu actually passed the sharpened blade through his palm. He didn’t like the sight of it and it was hurting in an annoying way, but after looking at it for a few minutes, he noticed that there was nothing to fear. This was normal (well, not the cut yourself part but to bleed part) and he had to get used to that idea.

Everything else fell in place like rings of a shackle, and both of the Lee children became knights years later, protecting the realm (or a part of it) like Sunggyu had started to dream at some point in his training.

He never forgot the prince’s words. He thought about them at night, when everyone else was asleep but him, as he seemed to have a lot to think about though everything ended on that same thought. Would the prince still remember him? Would he say something if he ever saw Sunggyu again? The younger had already changed, he was nothing like his 12 year old self. His cheeks had gotten less fat (though they still were a bit chubby for his liking), his body had formed in the right way and fortunately, he had stopped peeing his bed.

∞

But as Sunggyu walks inside the main salon and sees the prince’s body lying over the table with his best uniform and two pebbles on his eyes, he sees his dream of being recognized as a great knight burning in the flames. His heart aches with every step he takes, and for once in his life he would like to be patrolling than being inside the castle.

Boohyun the tenderhearted.

It was a good title, it fitted him perfectly even though Sunggyu would've used a different word (Brave, fearless, merciful, just for mentioning some).

People from all around the realm are here. Sunggyu was a curious kid, so the bedtime stories about the other kingdoms his mother told them fascinated him, about people with dragons, people who lived selling other people and even people who was three times more vain than Howon. He easily recognizes the different houses that had come to give their condolence.

The house of Jang's have a darker tone of skin and extravagant colors in their clothing, using jewels not only on their necks but on their head and even on their hands, and they were talking far back in the salon. There was also the Yoo's, whose hair was famous for being the most beautiful for which they don't normally cut and it tended to be sometimes even feet long. There were also the Wang, Seo, Kim, Jung, Im, Byun and probably more houses than he could count with his fingers.

"I didn't know prince Boohyun had this many friends." Howon whispers on Sunggyu's ear.

"He didn't" Sunggyu whispers back, "they come mostly for formalities. I reckon even some of them are happy for his death."

"Hyung" Howon hisses.

"What? It's true! He was the heir of the throne and had interest in none of the princess that were offered to him to marry."

"Do you think he was..?" Howon motions a circle with his hand, pushing Sunggyu to the obvious end.

The older lightly chuckles, "Maybe, who knows? He rejected prince's confessions too."

Sunggyu eyes the room and secretly points at the house chatting on the left side of the salon "Look at the Park's. They previously sent their first daughter for a marriage offer, but none of the royal family came today, only a few of their knights and they're talking and laughing as if this was a bar rather than a funeral. But some other houses do care like- oh, look at the Kim's talking with the queen, their daughter and second son came."

"That's odd. Didn't they have a rivalry of some sort?"

The queen is sitting a bit far away from the lying prince, with the king and the second prince sitting besides her, and Sunggyu thinks she looks vulnerable. Her eyes are swollen and still red from all the crying she must've done the past days, and the prince's younger brother looks ironically more dead than him.

"Well, I think they can relate."

"What do you mean?" Howon asks bluntly, and it's now when Sunggyu reminds himself his younger brother originally had no interest in anything about royal families. He still doesn't because judging by his face, he's probably asking out of boredom.

But the older's attention fall on the young prince and he wonders for a moment how must it feel to be him.

"Hyung?"

In one side, heartbroken. His older brother was still very young, barely 27 years old, and he had died to leave him with the huge weight of the future with a crown over him. On the other, he should feel... excited, right? Probably not right now, but later. He was not only raised with

a golden spoon (and golden everything), but he was now going to be the king of all the kingdoms.

“Hyung, you’re staring” Howon whispers besides him elbowing him, and Sunggyu looks back, not realizing he was holding his gaze with the younger prince.

The prince was younger than Sunggyu by merely two years, turning 21 years old this winter. Even though because of the harsh lifestyle Sunggyu has had these past years, he looks a little bit older than he actually was. Sunggyu had seen him a few times, not as close as he had with his older brother but more as anybody had seen him. Feet away from everybody in between royal guards that kept him protected every hour of every day. The prince tended to be very smiley, more than once called a happy virus as he kept his smile while saying hi to the public.

But the memory of a smile in his face seemed like a joke now.

He had a cold expression, as if he didn’t want to be there- no, as if he wanted to be the one dead instead. But after his older brother’s death, his individual value got even higher. He was the heir now.

“Come, it’s our turn.” Sunggyu follows his younger brother and both kneel before the royal family. They stay in place until the king mutters ‘thank you’ and both knights stand up together.

“We’re so sorry for your lost.” Howon says.

“And it’s not just your lost, your grace” Sunggyu adds without thinking, “it’s the realm’s lost- it’s everybody’s lost. Prince Boohyun was an exceptional swordsman, he will always be an unreachable inspiration for a lot of us, and we will admire him even if he’s not with us now. His name will not be forgotten, we were lucky to even have him as our prince.”

Everyone is looking at Sunggyu, including Howon who didn’t expect such comment. A tear is running down the queen’s eye and the young prince is serious; with an indescribable expression and it makes Sunggyu feel uneasy. Did he say something wrong?

“Thank you” the queen whispers, choking a sob and the king pats her back. “Just… thank you.”

“What are your names?” The king asks, adjusting on his chair.

“Lee Sunggyu, your grace. And this is my brother, Lee Howon.”

“Brothers? How interesting.” he laughs lightly, “People come here with nice words, Sunggyu. But they don’t mean anything by them. They’re not sincere, not like you at least. And I want to thank you for such words.”

“It’s the very least I can do, your grace.” Sunggyu says, feeling the heat on his cheeks. The prince besides the queen scoffs, muttering something over his breath, and even though it’s lightly, it doesn’t go unnoticed.

But no one says anything.

Two minutes later, Howon is taking off his glove to show his older brother his shaking hands. Sunggyu laughs, out of nervous mostly, as he was about to pee himself. It's his first time being in front of the king this long, and even being actually acknowledge by him. He's excited, but the prince's response bugs him in the back of his head.

His laugh dies as his eyes meet lord knight Kwon's in the distance and his mind panics. He contemplates all his potential opportunities to run away but they all die as he sees there is nowhere to run. Instead of lord Kwon, one of his personal pupils (which happened to be a friend of the guy that Sunggyu was choking just merely 24 hours ago) approaches with big steps, as if he owned the room; which he clearly didn't.

"So, so, it seems like we meet again, Lee's" Sunho says, grinning at him with that stupid smile that got his friend into trouble in the first place. His confidence made Sunggyu snort, for it made him almost comment about it too, but lord knight Kwon's stare from the other side of the room stopped it.

Again, Sunggyu was never a troublemaker. He had learned to keep himself away from trouble, but trouble seemed to look for Sunggyu in every corner.

He didn't know how Kwon ended holding him a grudge- a grudge about what? He had been a great knight, the best of his unit and probably the best in the whole city. Funnily enough, he was quite fond of Howon, Howon who sometimes wanted to rather stay at the fighting pit than patrolling like he should, so it must've been that the world was simply plotting against Sunggyu.

"Why are you so persistent on making me want to break your nose too?" Sunggyu whispers really lowly. He twists his head to the side, an unconscious movement he does when he's getting frustrated, but as he sees the young prince still staring at him, he freezes.

It's the first time Sunggyu feels noticed in the whole day, and it's not a nice feeling.

The prince was harshly looking at him like if he was his prey, or if any moment he would stand up and condemn him to die.

Howon wants to laugh, until Sunho says "lord Kwon wants to speak to both of you"

"Both? Why both?"

"Yeah, why both?" Sunggyu questions too, going back to the men with him, half worried for his younger brother and half amused, even though he could still feel the eyes on him.

"Do-do I look like a messenger to you?" Sunho scoffs as he stutters, he was scared, and that draws a little smile on Sunggyu's mouth.

"You look like a fuc--"

"Okay, thanks, we'll talk to him." Sunggyu fakes a really good convincing smile, cutting off Howon's threat.

"Why me? What did you do?" Howon asks as soon as Sunho leaves.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Sunggyu retorts.

“Well, I’m not the one picking fights left and right!”

“Neither am I! It’s my first time! Whatever that he’s telling us, it must not be bad, since he loves you.”

“But not so good ‘cause he hates you.” Howon remarks.

Both of them walk through the salon, dodging houses here and there, until they finally get where lord Kwon was. He was talking with another lord, one Sunggyu has never seen but seemed oddly familiar. His cape was high quality and whatever that he was, had to be higher than his position. He’s old but younger than lord Kwon. Well, almost everyone was younger than lord Kwon. (Sunggyu wondered how the older managed to still be a lord of the knights)

“Howon,” lord Kwon says with a smile before it dies down as he mutters “Sunggyu” with a groan. Sunggyu doesn’t mind, he’s way too used to this.

“Did you want to see us, my lord?” Sunggyu asks politely, but the lord’s frown doesn’t go away.

“You finally did it boy, you almost killed one of our own. How did that feel?” The lord mocks, and Sunggyu is just about to answer when Howon grabs his hand. Eyeing him to calm down.

“I did it for a reason.” Sunggyu still answers. “He was-”

“I don’t care what was the reason, it doesn’t justify what you did. And the punishment won’t be mild. How does a month night patrolling in the sector D sound?” He laughs, as if he just said the best joke of the year.

“Kanghun was disrespecting the prince’s name, my lord.” Howon says, and both Sunggyu and the lord look surprised at him. Howon had never been a suck-up for the lord, but he hadn’t backed up Sunggyu in front of him either. “He was making filthy jokes, and not only about him but our 2nd prince too, my lord. My older brother was just defending the prince’s name.”

“You two are brothers?” The unknown lord asks, and it’s the first words Sunggyu has hear him say, but then again, he feels a tingly feeling that they aren’t either.

“Yes, my lord...”

“Jungyeop” he answers.

“Jungyeop.” Sunggyu repeats. “My actions were reckless but I couldn’t control myself then, not after knowing what had happened to our deceased prince.”

Lord Kwon’s cheeks get red in embarrassment and Sunggyu is slowly savoring the sight, ready to come back to this memory for the rest of his life.

Lord Jungyeop hums in agreement, and the topic ends there abruptly as lord Kwon tries to change it. “Well, we’ll still talk about that later. You can leave, Sunggyu.” the older brother bows in respect before turning around with a little smile slipping through. “Jungyeop, this is the kid I was talking to you about, Howon. I think he would make a magnificent knight in--”

“No.” Jungyeop says. “Sunggyu, stay.” Mentioned knight turns around, confused. “I want Sunggyu instead.”

Both of the Lee brothers don’t understand what that means, but lord Kwon does, and he doesn’t look pleased at all.

“But here Howonnie is--”

“I am sure he’s just as much as qualified as Sunggyu, but I have made my decision.” Jungyeop says.

Sunggyu still doesn’t understand, but it doesn’t sound like something good. At least for Howon who’s clenching his fist.

“What do you mean?” Sunggyu asks tentatively.

Seconds later, he wishes he didn’t.

“After Boohyun’s prince death, we’re scouting qualified *and* loyal knights for our prince.”

Sunggyu hears him, but he doesn’t get it.

Unless he does. He understands that he’ll get promoted, promoted in a way no one has ever been promoted before. And that he just took this promotion off of Howon’s hands.

“What?” He asks again, understanding, but at the same time unable to. He looks at his younger brother who had his sight steadily fixed somewhere on the ground, and then back to the prince who was oddly looking towards his direction.

“That I want you to be the knight for our prince Woohyun, Sunggyu.”

II. Burned

Chapter Notes

ok this is really really long and it's because I don't know where to cut it, so I'm posting the whole thing together

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Howon doesn't talk to Sunggyu the next days. And Sunggyu doesn't push him to do it either. It's normal, he didn't expect anything different after walking out of the main salon without saying a word to each other.

He didn't mind Kwon's punishment, cleaning the restrooms, their dogs' shits and having to night watch their fortress. It's a tough work, since the lord makes sure to barely let him sleep sometimes, but really, he doesn't mind. What he minds, is Howon's silent treatment. The younger passes a week without speaking to the older and Sunggyu is getting enough of it.

"What do you want me to do?" Sunggyu asks, maybe a bit harshly, with the mup and a bucket in his hands. Howon eyes him, even chuckling as he sees the things he's carrying, but he doesn't stop from sharpening his sword. The sun is in its best point and with such force Sunggyu can already feel the sweat in his body only from standing under it. "He made the decision, not me."

The older understands his brother's anger, but it's been a week. A week of *'can you pass me my pants?'* and having them thrown at his face instead, of having to arrange the shields and swords twice as Howon pushed them off their place, a week of Sunggyu trying to make any type of conversation before Howon walks out the room.

"You could've said no" Howon mutters under his breath, loud enough for Sunggyu to hear.

"Would you have done it?" Sunggyu asks, and Howon stops his motion, but he doesn't answer. "If things were the other way around, would you have rejected such offer?"

"No" he whispers, continuing.

"Then why are you still acting like if I did it on purpose?"

"Because you did." Howon yells suddenly, leaving his sword down. "Even if you didn't plan it, you're still doing it. And in your place, I'd take the punishment of you don't talking to me as well." Howon clenches his fist.

"It's stupid, how fucking old are you?" The younger walks towards him with big strides and finally punches him. It's not as strong as Sunggyu thought it'd be, and Howon is surprised he

didn't move. Sunggyu would've totally dodge that. Sunggyu would've returned the punch just twice as hard.

But again, he's mad. "You know how much I fuckin' wanted that."

"And you know how much I wanted it too." Sunggyu mutters, not afraid to get punched again. If this is what it costs for him to have Howon back, he will pay for it. He will deal with his brother's anger but he will not lie.

Howon looks lost in thoughts, probably wondering whether to hit him again or not. But he knows better than to do it twice. He walks back to the wooden bench, not without kicking it while he's at it.

Sunggyu sighs, 'cause again, he understands. He has had enough fights with the younger over the years, knowing very well Howon's type of personality when being mad. It happened once, when they were kids and Sunggyu was learning his way around with the sword and he had finally won over Howon for the first time. Their father had praised Sunggyu that afternoon, ruffling his hair with such love, while Howon stared at him from the ground, covered in mud. His enrage and avoidance had only lasted a day, as Sunggyu managed to make him laugh the morning after, tricking their dog as if they were going to feed them.

This wasn't different from then, but at the same time, it was.

Because back then, Howon still had his days where his hyung was the one in the mud instead, and they had both laugh, sometimes even fighting on the ground; but now Howon can't compete against him, can't beat him, as this was someone else's decision.

Still, Sunggyu always had his own way to Howon's heart, Howon's forgiveness.

"You know," Sunggyu speaks after a few minutes of silence, sitting down besides Howon. "Maybe I won't get picked. I get to do the trials first, and they're only choosing one in the end." he tries to console the younger, and even if Howon doesn't talk, Sunggyu knows it kind of works. "A lot of knights from all over the realm are coming over just to have this position."

Sunggyu sighs after Howon keeps quiet, and he's ready to stand up, when Howon does it first.

"Don't you dare." Howon says, giving the older his back. "If you're getting this opportunity, you better win it hyung."

Sunggyu smiles a little.

"I'd rather get the opportunity, of course" Howon sighs, "but if it's not me, might as well be you."

"I'll really try. And if I do, I might get you in too, who knows" Sunggyu scoffs now, lying on the back of the bench, spreading his arms on it and feeling the tension between them dying down.

Howon snorts, this time looking back and confirming to Sunggyu that his anger is long gone, “if I get in there, it’s because of my own skills, not your strings.”

Sunggyu is about to reply, but Howon cuts him back with, “Get up, let’s get you prepared for those tryouts.”

The older laughs, walking inside the armory for his sword. When he’s back, Howon is already using his breastplate for practice, and offering one to him.

“So...” Howon says as he helps Sunggyu to put it on. “When are you leaving?”

“In two days, at dawn.” Sunggyu says, and hears a deep sigh from his back.

“Can I drop you off?” Howon asks hesitantly. “To the castle, I mean”

He smiles. “Of course.”

Sunggyu doesn’t get to hear ‘I’m sorry’ from Howon that afternoon, but it’s not necessary. They know each other like the palm of their hands, and Sunggyu knows he’s sorry and this is his way to making up to him. He’s sure of this just like Howon is sure Sunggyu means no harm by using this opportunity. Sunggyu never does.

They practice until the sun sets and they’re physically forced to stop. For a moment it feels like they’re twelve and eleven again, playing with each other with their wooden swords and ready to go back inside to eat dinner at the call of their mom. He can feel the excitement just like back then, and almost smell the just baked breads from the bakery just two streets down.

But this is a grown up version of those days.

Their mom is obviously not around (but she probably still calls their father for dinner like she used to do with them), and the dinner they get afterwards is not the tasty bread they (Howon, actually) sometimes stole. But overall, it’s a good day. And Sunggyu only then realizes he’ll kind of miss this if he gets chosen.

He’s sure of his skills and he’s ready to prove it to anyone anytime, but self-pride was a double edged sword. He’s never heard of these tryouts (they’re the first time they’ve done it in a while) so there’s not much information for him to use in practice. Nevertheless, he worked on his technique with both sword and bow. Howon helped him, but there’s only so much he can do when Sunggyu doesn’t really get along with the arrows.

Hopefully your loyal action will buy you some points, Howon had said with a mocking tone, and even if Sunggyu had smacked him on the back of his head right there, he actually hoped it did.

He had not meet the prince yet, barely seen him in person (not counting their out of context staring contest in the funeral) but he wanted to protect him. He was devoted to his king, to his prince. He had wanted to protect Boohyun, kneel before him, tell him his sword as well as his life was his and only his, but it was impossible now. Although it was just stupid to keep on

dwelling on it, hoping for something that was not going to happen, and even after his dead, his objective was still the same.

He would protect prince Woohyun over everything, doesn't matter the cost of it.

∞

There is a lot of things he'll miss if he gets chosen. On top of the list, there's his brother who, even though annoys him almost all the time, has always been there for him. The older cannot imagine any single good (and bad) memory where Howon is not there to smirk mischievously at him. He will probably not say it outloud, but he will really miss the younger.

Then, there's the sex. Oh, the sex.

Sunggyu moans, reaching his orgasm sooner than expected, releasing everything on top of his stomach. The guy over him, Junhyung, follows a few seconds after as he strokes his shaft, mixing his own cum with the other. They stay like that for a moment, panting and coming down from their high.

The older carefully looks at Junhyung, trying to memorize his post-sex expressions. It's not like he's going to war, and even though there's a chance he won't come back, that's not the reason why he wants to fully enjoy this moment.

"What?" Junhyung asks with a smirk, leaving a sticky kiss on the corner of Sunggyu's mouth. He always kisses him after sex, but not directly on the mouth. Everywhere, but never there.

"Nothing" Sunggyu smiles a little. "but, there's something I have to tell you."

Junhyung moves from on top of Sunggyu, and lies down on his back.

They met a few years back, when Sunggyu had received new guards and Junhyung had been one of them. They got along well, *pretty* well. It was not only the sex, it was the comfortable conversations in the middle of the night, the laughs and the sincerity of it. It was a good friendship. Sadly, not long after, Junhyung got assigned to a different section of the citadel on the other side of it, hence, leaving Sunggyu's unit. But they still saw each other for a casual fuck in this rented room away from everyone where the world forgot it existed.

Cause this is what it was. Casual fucking with a friend.

"I know what you'll say." Junhyung says, taking a rag and his beer from under the bed.
"You're applying for the royal guards."

“How’d you know?” The older asks, snatching away the beer to take a gulp of his own as Junhyung cleans off his abdomen.

“Everyone knows hyungs.” Junhyung laughs, standing up.

“So..” Sunggyu starts, looking at the end of the cup rather than Junhyung “you know what this means, right?”

“That it’ll be harder to fuck?” the younger laughs, but Sunggyu doesn’t join him.

“This will be the last time.” Sunggyu whispers loud enough for the whole world to hear. If only the whole world was quiet as their room became just now.

Junhyung stops putting on his pants, and looks back. “What?”

Sunggyu is never ashamed of his decision, he’s always sure of what he wants and not even all the mockery in the world will make him change. But right now, under the gaze of Junhyung, he feels so little. And it’s because he knows what the other thinks, he always knew. A part of him actually wanted to avoid this last meeting, leave him a letter explaining everything, but he wasn’t a coward.

“Why does this have to be the last?” Junhyung laughs in disbelief. But soon the crooked smile became a frown.

“I cannot be there and still do this with you.”

“Why? You’re not becoming a fuckin nun. You’re just changing places.” there’s suddenly an uncomfortable tension in the room, and Sunggyu takes it as his cue to leave.

“It’s different, once I’m in there I can’t suddenly come out and get a fuck with you.” he says, taking his own pair of pants.

“Why not? We could manage to meet elsewhere. Or is it because I’ll be less than you? Because you’ll get a higher position?” Junhyung asks.

“You know me very well to know it’s not that.” Sunggyu growls.

“Oh, yes, of course,” the younger hits his forehead in a playful manner, faking surprise, “it’s because your duty is in the way. But where was *that* same duty the other night? Or right now?”

“Because I’m saying goodbye now. Goodbye to this.” Sunggyu says, covering his naked chest with his shirt and putting on his leather breastplate.

“Hyung..” Junhyung pleads.

Truthfully, it’s not only that. The older has very well defined the line between his job and his love life. The thing is, was this supposed to be a love life? Where was the love in this? He had always been two seconds away from confessing to the younger, but he knew very well that it wouldn’t end like he wanted. Right now Junhyung was not trying to hold on him like a

lover, he was trying to hold on him like a baby held onto his toy. In a few weeks he will find someone else, Sunggyu knows, so it's better to cut it off now that it barely hurts.

"I'm sorry." Sunggyu closes the door behind him, and hears a breaking glass from inside the room. He sighs, clasping on his sword as he walked down the pathway towards the fortress.

∞

Sunggyu writes a letter to his parents the night before the trials. He wanted to do it before, but between constant practices and his purpose evasion with everyone and everything that wasn't his unit, he did it in the last minute. He didn't want to give them the chance to visit him to add more pressure on his back, everyone else's stares and lord Kwon's had been enough.

The next day, Howon is there to accompany him towards the entrance of the castle. The sun is still hidden and Sunggyu feels the tension in his shoulders after a sleepless night. Howon, on the other hand, was dozing off on his horse, always two seconds from falling onto the ground.

"We're here" Sunggyu announces, and Howon tries his best to pretend he wasn't falling asleep.

He takes his belongings from his horse before tying him on Howon's and patting his head.

"Live well, nurungie."

"I still can't believe you gave the horse a name" Howon snorts.

"Shut up."

Sunggyu gives two deep breaths, and he's ready to leave.

"Wait," Howon says, "Do well hyung."

For once, Sunggyu hears something else than a tease from his younger brother. He smiles, and nods.

"If you don't, I'm changing my last name. Don't wanna be related to you."

Honestly, Sunggyu wonders why are new knights being recruited. Doesn't the crown have more than qualified knights already? Sunggyu didn't like them, nor their personalities making all the non-royal knights feeling like they shouldn't be considered knights in the first place, but at least they did their job correctly, right?

His hand tenses over the handle of his sword as he crosses over the halls of the castle, admiring the expensive furniture and never ending paintings. Even though the scenery for each one is different, the royal's expression is kind of the same. He tries to not stare much at them, catching up to the handmaiden that was walking him to his accommodation, but as he reached the end of the hall, he notices the most recent painting hanging on one side.

The king didn't look as young as the other paintings, his hair was white and his eyes, even if they were eyes full of experience, looked the most tired. The queen was sitting besides him, with one of her high class dresses and besides her, their third child was barely standing up.

Everyone loved the princes maybe just as much as they wanted to have a princess. But it was fine if there was no princess, with Boohyun's marriage they could get a princess anytime-though it became a marriage that never happened. For years and years, people hoped he would finally set his mind on a princess, someone they could love as much as the queen.

But before that could happen, the unexpected occurred, and on autumn the queen gave birth of a beautiful blue eye rounded girl, Soohyun.

Sunggyu smiles, remembering well enough the day of her birth. Everyone in the citadel had a big party, and perhaps only half of the people was really celebrating for the girl while the other half only did it for the free beer, but it was still a great day.

The king's smiles had been missing these past few years, each time making his sickness and age a little bit more obvious. But he remembers the king smiling that day, from ear to ear, announcing with a loud voice that Soohyun had been born, and everyone screamed back, happy.

But she hadn't been the first miracle. There was prince Woohyun, with his-

"Are you following me?" the handmaiden snaps from the corner of the hall and Sunggyu rushes to be by her side again.

She accommodates him in a room near the back of the castle, where the garden was. She takes (more like snatches) Sunggyu's sword and signs to the inside of the room.

The room was originally for two people, but they had arranged three more beds inside. A few knights are already there, and before Sunggyu can even say 'thanks', the handmaiden is walking away, closing the door behind her.

The silence is awkward, but more than that, it's tensed. Some of them might die today, or maybe tomorrow, competing against each other. He's not surprised they're not even trying to start a conversation.

He walks to the far end where a bed is unoccupied, and lays the little of belongings he brought with himself on top of it.

There are three more knights with him. One, sitting on a chair and looking at his hands, has the most sharpened features Sunggyu has ever seen in his life, and his skin is soil color; a rough dark. Sunggyu guesses he's from the other side of the sea, Mersun, a city where the

rays of the sun had not clemency over the people. There's a scar on his left eyebrow, but Sunggyu doesn't even think about asking, so he limits himself to guess he was a Bang.

The other two look like twins, if Sunggyu is actually seeing well and there are indeed two instead of one. Their hair is blonde brown-ish, and in contrast with the Bang guy, their skin looks smoothly clear. They're sitting down, but by the length of their legs, Sunggyu knows he wouldn't stand a chance against them if they had a height contest.

The silence turned comfortable for a few minutes as everyone was minding their own business, going through their sword techniques in their minds and wondering what laid in the future for them. Every passing minute felt eternal, and Sunggyu was slowly drifting away to sleep, until the door opens with a quick motion and the handmaiden scream 'not so fast!'

There's a knig- no, *boy* (because there's no way he's a knight, Sunggyu thinks) with a wide smile on his face looking everywhere, admiring the room with a 'wow' as if it was the best room he had ever been into. It was nice, yeah, but not that nice.

"Which one is my bed?" He asks, and no one answers. The Bang guy looks at newcomer, making holes on his scalp and the twins eye each other, probably having the same thought that this guy was just not normal.

"You choose" Sunggyu whispers with a sigh (even though it's sarcastic since there's only one bed left), and he hopes to be ignored, but as the guy's eyes lay on him, he knows it's just not happening.

"Wah, this is really a good room" The boy exclaims, walking to the bed besides Sunggyu. He has a big bag with himself, and Sunggyu doesn't understand what the guy must have there.

"I need your sword!" The handmaiden snaps, panting lightly with her messy hair. It's weird, she wasn't like this 10 minutes ago.

"Ehh, Jisoo, I thought we liked each other." The guy says with a smirk, and he doesn't look too young now. The handmaiden, Jisoo, gets red with the comment, but that doesn't stop her from stealing away the sword. It's a little heavy and she groans annoyedly, closing the door behind her.

The guy goes back to his belongings, and Sunggyu takes a moment to look at him.

He was tall, not as much as the twins, but a slightly bit more than Sunggyu, and judging by his accent, he was from north. Up north there's only Normdile and Erapen, both sections ruled by the house of Lee's. His accent sounds like Sunggyu's father when he gets a little bit too drunk, and Sunggyu hopes he's not anyhow related to him, leaving just their last name as a simple coincidence.

It takes another hour until they're finally out of that not really spacious room. At first Sunggyu is relieved there's only 5 of them looking for the position, until they are out of the castle and he sees easily another 10 knights waiting.

“Wow, a lot of people came” the weird guy whispers to Sunggyu, and a part of him wonders why is he talking to him, but the part that was more preoccupied of what’s going to happen now didn’t let him think much of it.

“Yeah” He hears himself answer.

Sunggyu’s vast imagination starts to take a control of his head as they are walking away of the castle, and into the immense meadows. The sun is starting to get in it’s best moment of the day, painfully roasting their skin under clothes. The smell of the muck, for once, brings an uneasy feeling, but he tries to brush it off, he needs to focus.

“What do you think we’ll do, hyung?” The boy from before asks.

“*Hyung?*” Sunggyu snaps from his thoughts. “We don’t even know each other.”

“But you look older and we’re bunk mates,” the boy pouts “well, if we don’t die today” he laughs.

Sunggyu doesn’t find it funny. “What’s your name?”

“Sungyeol, Lee Sungyeol.” Sungyeol offers him a hand for a shake, but Sunggyu only acknowledges the answer with a nod. “And hyung’s?”

“Sunggyu.”

“And surname?”

“Does it matter?” Sunggyu eyes the front of the long line of knights walking, hoping they were reaching their destination anytime soon. He sees a big fortress in the distance, but they were still too far from that.

“Of course it matters!” Sungyeol exclaims, grabbing Sunggyu by the shoulder. “A surname says a lot about a person.”

Sunggyu frowns. “Well, if it does, then what do you think I am?”

Sungyeol hums in thought, continuing the walk. He eyes the older from head to toe, taking a lot of time even Sunggyu starts thinking he gave up on even trying to guess.

“You’re definitely a Kim.” The younger says with a grin, satisfied with his answer, but it dies down when Sunggyu laughs.

“Why do you think that?” The older asks curiously.

“Well, starting from your body language, you stand in such a tensed position, you’ve been thoughtful the whole time, and always observing everything. Well, at least I think you’re doing that, I can’t really tell with those eyes of yours.”

Sunggyu stops at once, glaring at Sungyeol, but the younger doesn’t pay him much attention, “And you seem to have a short temperament. Though that’s an attribute for a lot of houses.

But! Do you know what gave you away?” Sunggyu shakes his head. “Your skin.”

“What?” Sunggyu snorts, unconsciously touching his cheeks, “how can you tell someone’s surname by their skin?”

“Because yours is like a doll’s, hyung! You know, those toy rags the girls run around with. And there’s always the expression ‘pretty as a doll’, and you’re totally that. Aren’t the Kim’s famous for their skin?”

Sunggyu side smiles at the attempt of compliment, looking down at his feet getting lost under the long grass.

“So? Did I get it right?”

“Nope” Sunggyu answers triumphantly, “I’m a Lee.”

“Eh?” Sungyeol scowls. “No you’re not, *I’m* a Lee and you’re totally not a Lee. I know every type of Lee there is and you’re definitely not one.”

“Of course I’m a Lee! I totally fit!” Sunggyu exclaims.

“Someone has been lying to you, hyung” Sungyeol laughs, patting his shoulder. Sunggyu is about to protest but- “Oh! We’re here.”

They finally reach their destination which was the royal’s training pit. It was a lot like the one he had in the citadel, but everything there seemed less worn off and more shiny. There are guards all over the place, eyeing them with despise.

A very familiar lord appears from between some guards, and Sunggyu’s hands start to shake, instinctively looking for his sword in his waist, but he’s annoyingly reminded that he gave it away before.

“So,” lord Jungyeop says with a smile, “it looks like a lot of you want to be part of the royal guards. I’m flattered, really, but you should know there is only one spot open and most of you won’t walk out alive.”

“We will have 1-1 combats.” Jungyeop explains. “We will be holding two at a time and you can choose whichever weapon you’d like. It is not necessary to kill your opponent, you can spare but that is everyone’s own judgment. You knew what you were dealing with when you offered yourselves to this position.”

Sunggyu swears he hears Sungyeol’s *gulp* besides him, but he’s not so sure if it’s only his. The royal guards around them smile mockingly.

“Tonight, we will be going back to the castle with only 5 candidates. The rest of them, alive or dead, will go back home.” Jungyeop says.

People start murmuring, and the lord smirks.

“Well then, without much further ado, we will start the tryouts.” A esquire comes near the lord and gives him a parchment. He begins reciting names for the combats, and Sunggyu waits eagerly to hear his name.

“Lee Sungyeol,”

“That’s me!” Sungyeol whispers to Sunggyu, raising his hand.

“Against... Ryu Daehyuk”

A guy from the other side of group of knights raises his hand, looking at Sungyeol with deadly eyes. He’s a little bit shorter than Sunggyu, but a lot more strong than him. Sungyeol only smiles, saying goodbye to Sunggyu with a ‘fighting!’ in the end. The older is not sure Sungyeol would have a chance to beat that guy.

“Lee Sunggyu,” The lord announces.

Sunggyu gulps, and raises his hand.

“Against... Bang Yongguk.”

The guy back from the room they were staying at raises his hand. A little part of him feels satisfied to have guessed the other’s house, but that part gets long forgotten with the thought of having to fight him. Both of the knights eye each other, walking to opposite sides of the fortress.

The Bang guy doesn’t stop looking at him, not while the lord is finishing to announce the combats and not even when they go to the second floor, where they were going to be observing the combats. Sunggyu tries hard to ignore him, not letting him get into his skin. The first combat starts and finally the guy looks somewhere else.

Sunggyu has done this several times, back at his other unit, and he always won. But the thing is, he hasn’t killed; not skilled knights anyways. What he did kill was a few thieves or rapist in the moment of the act, people who didn’t actually had a chance of beating him.

There’s no way I’m losing this. Sunggyu thinks, letting out a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

A few combats later, and it’s Sungyeol’s turn. Sunggyu eyes the younger with a little bit of worry in his eyes, resting both of his arms in the wooden fence in front. Truthfully, he had found the younger more annoying than charming, and this was a competition at the end of the day; both of them were reaching for the same goal, but he still wanted Sungyeol to not die at the very least.

The previews combats were fierce. Most of them had their opponent dead, not sparing their lives, not even if the other would cry for mercy. Sunggyu gulped at that. Would that be him later? Face against the ground, with the other’s boot on top of his head and-

No.

He shakes his head, focusing on Sungyeol down there instead.

The younger's match ends in less than five minutes, and Sunggyu feels goosebumps going down his body. Sungyeol had decided to use his sword, something not a lot of the previews men had chosen, surprisingly. The royal guards were offering a large variety of weapons, more than Sunggyu has ever seen. But just as the younger, he had already mentally decided to still go with his sword. He wasn't familiarized with his other options, so it was not time to experiment.

The other guy, Daehyuk, had chosen an axe to use against Sungyeol, and even though he was very skilled with it and more than once he was about to chop an extremity from the latter, Sungyeol had been better. Surprisingly. It's not that Sunggyu didn't have faith in him, it's just that it was hard to believe that the same guy who approached him so mindlessly moments ago was now in front of him taking his opponent's head with his left hand as his right hand passed the sword through his throat, killing him in a moment. There was a sly smile on his face, tiny yet still visible, and it was alarming.

Sungyeol didn't even watch the other die, walking back to where the other guards where to return the sword.

The body was taken away, and a few moments later, another combat started.

"How was I hyung?" Sungyeol comes to Sunggyu in seconds with a smile that didn't look anything like the one from before. This one was like a puppy's, waiting to be praised.

"You were great, kid." Sunggyu pats his back hesitantly, turning back to watch the fight seconds later.

"Was I really? Wah, I wanted it to last more but the guy was no fun! I thought he would be faster to dodge me." Sungyeol talks and talks, and Sunggyu eyes him, nodding every once in awhile.

Was he getting nervous? Yes. Why? Because if this kid had just surprised him more than once in less than two hours, what could the Bang guy do to him? Was he good enough for this? Could he really beat the other? His hands trembled under his gloves, and he tried really hard to fight against it.

"Don't take the sword, take the bow, hyung."

"What?" Sunggyu finally snaps out from his thoughts, and Sungyeol laughs.

"The other guy is definitely stronger than you, so a sword fight might not be the best for you. So use the bow, you'll get the chance to at least have a gap between you two and he won't have a chance to crush you with his arms." Sungyeol's expression is serious, and he sounds so sure of his explanation.

Just before Sunggyu could answer, a guard calls his name, proceeding with his combat.

Sungyeol smiles again, "You'll do well hyung, you're a Kim after all."

He's about to say he's not a damn Kim, but the others start pushing him and he's down there in the pit, in front of the diversity of weapons.

The problem here is, he is not good with the bow. Not even after years of trying to learn from Howon or every archer of his unit, he could not get along with the damn thing. *It's because you think too much about it*, Howon had said. But how can he not think about it? He needed to analyze his target in order to hit it, how could anyone do it otherwise?

Sunggyu looks up to Sungyeol, who kept moving his arms as if he was holding a bow, and then he looks back down. Could the younger be trying to sabotage him? Trying to get him killed? But he doesn't know Sunggyu is bad with the bow. Still, what were the odds that he was right on this one? The place wasn't actually that big for one to use a bow skillfully.

Yongguk takes his time to decide between a mace and a flail, choosing the latter in the end, gifting Sunggyu a not-so-friendly smile.

"Choose already" the guard rushes him with annoyance.

Sunggyu sighs, and follows his instincts.

∞

The bow trembles under his grip, only making him take it with more force. He decided to follow Sungyeol's suggestion, and even though people murmured seconds after he took the bow, he stick with his decision. He could do this, he only needed to aim and shoot until the other was full of arrows, simple as that.

Worst case scenario? The other breaks his bow and Sunggyu is forced to start a one-vs-one fight.

Three minutes into the combat and Sunggyu had already used seven arrows and was currently hiding behind a barrel, catching up his breath. Yongguk had dodge four of those, but the others barely touched him, making simple cuts rather than the severe wounds Sunggyu was hoping for.

"Come on, Sunggyu, come out from wherever you are~" Yongguk says mockingly. "I'm getting tired of playing this cat and mouse game~" the voice gets near and near.

He hears the barrel behind him getting shattered, and he runs towards the other side of the fortress, escaping from Yongguk's flail. He curses under his breath, feeling stupid for running away so much from the other. But what was there to do? He needed space between them to let the arrows hit him with force.

Sunggyu turns around and is ready to throw another arrow when Yongguk's flail greet him, hitting his bow and the hand that held it. He feels his knuckles bleeding, and what came next happened so fast he wasn't actually conscious of the situation. Not until he was on top of

Yongguk hitting his chest, there where the heart was situated, with the palm of both of his hands. Each hit is stronger than the last one, and the latter hits Sunggyu side with his flail again, but that doesn't stop him from hitting, and hitting.

The other could easily move Sunggyu from on top of him, throw him to the side and finish him. But instead, he's looking afar towards the sky and blood start to come out of his mouth. Sunggyu is focused on his face, just as his hands are focused on hitting on that same spot. He was angry for some reason, raging inside as he felt like flames were boiling every part of his body. The feeling is addicting, and Sunggyu smiles cruelly when he feels the ribs getting broken under his touch.

This is not himself, he knows. It's like watching someone else take control of his body in front of his eyes. However, he also knows that this is him. These are his hands doing the dirty job of killing the man, and he likes it. He shouldn't, it's against the belief of the Lee Sunggyu ten minutes ago who was planning to spare the life of his opponent, but in this mere moment is like there was another Sunggyu sitting there on his chest.

Whichever Sunggyu was there, he got thrown off to the side by another guard, and suddenly everyone else's screams were finally heard. Some were praising him, some cursing him for keeping on the hits when the other was obviously dead, and Sunggyu finally feels like himself.

It's scary. How Yongguk's chest is bent to the inside and his face is painted red.

The face of the guard in front of him is judging him, but more than that, is fearing him. He looks away, focusing somewhere on the dirt when he sees the same redness on his hands, and surely there's more on his face.

He tries to hold onto the dry heaves from coming out, but his stomach is dancing inside so hard, seconds later he's looking at the ground letting everything out. At some point, his tears join the vomit.

∞

Sungyeol approaches him until he's clean from the blood and his hand has taken care of- well, if taken care of meant clean it with water and wrap it around with a rag. He didn't see the remaining combats, and judging by his current weak stomach, he's actually glad. He keeps thinking about what happened back there. He knows he did all that, he can still feel his hands palpitating. But it's surreal. Impossible. He's not like that.

"You were..." Sungyeol starts.

"Scary?" Sunggyu finishes with his eyes on his feet.

The younger chuckles. "I was going to say fascinating."

That makes Sunggyu look back in question.

“It was scary, truth to be told. But... interesting too. I thought I was looking at an animal rather than hyung.”

“I don’t know what happened to me.” Sunggyu confesses. Sungyeol stares back at him, analyzing his expression before he sighs and pats his back.

“It’s the heat of a fight, hyung.”

Sunggyu frowns. “It wasn’t that. I’ve felt that heat hundred of times and it never felt like this, so... hot.” he says, and snorts at his poor vocabulary.

They stay in a comfortable silence for a few minutes, and closing his eyes, Sunggyu can pretend for a moment this is only a dream and he’s rather back at his chamber with Howon besides him.

“How are your palms?” Sungyeol asks, turning them around for him to see.

“Ehm, fine?”

“Weird...” Sungyeol hums. “Yongguk’s chest was burned. I thought your hands would be red.”

Sunggyu’s eyes get wide. “What? How did that happen?”

“I don’t know, the other guards took off his leather breastplate and found his skin burned under all the blood.” Sungyeol explains, standing up from the bench. “We need to get going now, we’re going back to the castle.”

The older is about to ask about the burning thing, when Sungyeol cuts him off and says, “Jungyeop says tomorrow the prince will choose one from the five remaining.”

He wants to ask about that too, but his mind is so busy right now, thinking about everything he only nods, and follows the younger outside of the nursing station.

∞

Burned.

What does that meant? Were his hands so fast he actually created friction and- Sunggyu sighs. He’s not good with this type of stuff, but he knows it’s simply not possible. Punches do not create burning spots, so what does?

The answer is in the back of his tongue but he refuses to acknowledge it.

“I hope he chooses two.” Sungyeol says while they walk back to the castle.

“What do you mean?” Sunggyu asks, seeing the younger look at his feet.

“Rather than one guard. I hope he chooses two, and I hope we’re those two.”

Sunggyu thanks it’s night and too dark to see his cheek get pink. He’s awkward with this kind of stuff. Affection. He rarely got moments like this with Howon, or Junhyung, not even after hours of sex. But he tries anyways, and passes an arm around Sungyeol’s shoulders and side hugs the younger the rest of the walk.

Sungyeol eyes him. “What? It’s because I’m feeling weak.” He lies, and Sungyeol smiles.

Sunggyu likes the smell of nature. Every step releases odor from the grass and he makes sure to take it all in. His stomach grumbles with Sungyeol’s and both of them laugh together. For a moment he lets himself forgets what just happened before, and talks with the younger about his life up in the north. It’s comfortable, and more than anything, soothing.

That, until he hears his name get called.

Both knights turn around, and see Lord Jungyeop jog towards them.

“Can I speak for a moment with you, Sunggyu?” Sungyeol doesn’t need a more direct order to know he needs to give them their space, and he walks with the other knights.

“Is everything alright?” Sunggyu asks, and that makes the lord laugh.

“That’s what I should be asking you. Are you okay? You seemed... really concentrated on your task back there.”

Sunggyu clenches his fist and regrets it in a second, feeling the sting pain on the back of his hand where Yongguk’s flail had hit earlier.

“Yeah... I just, got over excited, I guess.” he laughs nervously, and Jungyeop smiles in return.

“Well, I need someone that intense to take care of our prince, Sunggyu.” the older says, “I’m glad you won.”

“What will we do tomorrow?” Sunggyu asks hesitantly. The lord has been really nice to Sunggyu for some reason, and even if he doesn’t understand why, he might as well take some advantage of it.

“The prince saw the combats.” The lord confesses simply, as if he was just saying hello and not something worth freezing in the spot. “So he’ll make the decision tomorrow.”

“He-he did?” Sunggyu stutters.

But, from where? Sunggyu made sure to see everyone standing around the fortress just to make sure that nothing funny would happen later. And he didn’t see the prince anywhere, nor

his golden cape.

“It’s fine, he liked it. And he wanted to remain hidden, so you could all focus on fighting rather than showing off.”

That only meant one thing. That Woohyun saw him run around and get his useless bow broken, that he saw him beat the other’s chest as if he was an animal. That Woohyun saw him vomit moments after and- fuck.

“Hey, you okay?”

They’ve reached the castle, and Sunggyu gets dizzy at the bottom of the steps that divided the garden from the tiles. He feels hot again, and his stomach is simply fucking with him, he figures. Just moments ago he was perfect- well, not *perfect* per se but definitely not like this. Jungyeop sits him in one of them, and looks at the younger worried as Sunggyu fought with the need to throw up a bit more.

“Do you want me to call a maiden?” Sunggyu shakes his head. “then stay here for a bit.” Jungyeop says, “take some fresh air and come inside when you’re feeling better. And you should go take care of that hand again.”

∞

Seconds feel like hours while Sunggyu is sitting down there, head between hands looking down at the ground. He hears his beating heart and he’s not sure if it’s calming him or just making things worse, but it brings him back a memory he doesn’t want to recall.

He has felt like this once. It’s been such a long time from that he almost forgot it even happened- unless he didn’t. Unless that’s all he thinks about every time he’s fighting against someone, and he does his best to suppress the need to just- *kill*.

He was barely nine years old when he experienced it for the first time. At the time he didn’t have such a good relation with Howon. They fought more than they played, and there was always a frown in someone’s expression when the two were in the same room. Howon never respected him, not entirely. Sunggyu was his older brother yet the other still made him feel like an outsider, someone who didn’t matter for him.

It was a kid’s long quarrel, but it didn’t feel like it back then. Howon felt the constant need to annoy him, make him mad, and Sunggyu was in the same need to make the other understand his position as older brother. So when Howon proposed him to steal some tangerines from Taek’s fruit shop, he didn’t think about it twice. He did steal them, just as he got a punishment that night.

His father had smacked him on the ass with a wooden board while Howon peered from the top of the stairs. Sunggyu didn’t want to say why he did it, and his father wouldn’t stop until

he'd say. At some point, he stopped feeling Howon's stare behind him, signaling him that the younger had ran away to their room, and with the last smack, he had enough.

There's stuff you don't remember from when you were a kid. And Sunggyu doesn't remember much of his childhood. There's always isolated fragments of memories for him, making him a headache if he thinks too much about it, so he doesn't. But this memory in particular is vivid and realistic, so much he can still remember his father's scream when Sunggyu had turned around to grab his wrist and make the old man stop, somehow burning him in the process. And he feels like killing, touching the other again and burn him alive.

The trance of the fury lasted a few seconds only, enough to scare Sunggyu too and fall with his naked and spanked ass onto the floor. Both males stared at each other in fear, and it wasn't until Sunggyu started crying that his father realized that this was still his child, and it had been just an accident.

He won Howon's respect that night, just as he won another nightmare for himself.

And to this day, they haven't found an answer to as how that happened.

Sunggyu thought he was over it. It had been so long since that he could sometimes pretend it never happened. But now, how could he? When his hands burned and killed someone this time. Would he ever find an answer to this? And if he did, would he like to hear it?

Sunggyu hears a thud on his right side, and he jerks his head instantly, trying to look for the source of the sound. His hand looks for the mangle of his sword, only to be reminded he doesn't have one now.

The night is dark, so much he needs to squint his eyes. There's no one else outside he even thinks for a moment he just made this up too. But that's before he sees a vague dark cape on the corner of his eye, and he turns towards it. He doesn't know who that is, but anyone running around in a cape in the middle of the night is no innocent.

Despite his discomfort of the previous combat, he manages to run and jump on the other's back. Both fall onto the floor and a dagger leaves the hand of the mysterious man. Sunggyu sits on top and grabs the stranger's neck while his other hand reaches for the dagger. His eyes widen in surprise as he recognizes the dagger.

It has been so many years from that moment, but he will never forget the dagger he made for the prince Boohyun. The mangle is not fancy, but it shines just like when Sunggyu gave it away, and he's sure that's his work.

"Get the fuck up from me!" the stranger groans, actually throwing the other to the side while Sunggyu was distracted. "Give me that!"

Sunggyu stands up, trying to look at the other's eyes but the hood makes it hard to see something else that's not his lips.

"How did you get this?" he asks, gripping on the dagger.

“It’s mine!”

“This is prince Boohyun’s, thief!”

The stranger tries to snatch the dagger from Sunggyu’s hands, but the latter moves faster and instead wraps an arm around his neck, taking off the sheath of the dagger and positioning under the other’s jaw.

“Give me one good reason to not kill you with the same dagger you were about to steal” Sunggyu whispers with annoyance.

The other pants with a smirk, liking his lower lip. “I could say it if you just let me go for a moment.”

Sunggyu pushes him away, but still keeps the dagger near his neck area. The stranger lifts up his arms slowly, taking off his hood.

And Sunggyu lowers the dagger when he recognizes the face, and the golden hair lightening up the dark night.

“Prince Woohyun.” he whispers.

Chapter End Notes

ok, don't hate me too much ;; i know you want more interaction already (me too tbh), but we'll get there, so bear with me
again, comments are highly appreciated so typetypetype!

III. Trust

Chapter Summary

Woohyun doesn't understand, he's angry. He wants answers.

And so does Sunggyu. But first, he'll have to prove his loyalty to the prince.

Chapter Notes

at this point you should already know this will be a long fic

(took me more than a month to update so here's a summary on what happened before: sunggyu is in good terms with howon, arrives at the castle and meets an annoying ~~but~~ ^{wise} boy named sungyeol. sunggyu kills ~~and burns?~~ yongguk in combat, apparently woohyun saw that, and while sunggyu was down to memory lane on how weird he is, he catches someone sneaking out from the castle, who ended up being woohyun)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“What did you just say?” The brown haired prince clenches on the feather he was holding.

The boy around 17 years old standing before him fidgets on his spot, and with a nervous voice he repeats, “Commander Jungyeop i-is asking for your presence at the knights’ house, yo-your grace.”

“What for?” Woohyun’s tone is rather rude, but he doesn’t really care.

He doesn’t really care about anything these days.

“There will be combats.. To-to decide who will be your guard now... now that-”

Woohyun snorts. “Now that my original guard is missing.”

The boy nods his head, not daring to look at the prince’s eyes. There was a time Woohyun would play with this servant, joke around and even sat together with him at his table and teach him how to read or count. Just like Boohyun had taught him once first.

Woohyun had spend a lot of time with him and the younger became the closest he had as a younger brother. He would play with him in the castle, sometimes being looked down cause when does princes play with their servants? Woohyun never cared, though. Not the judging stares for his hair and definitely not for this.

But Woohyun is not in the mood. Not for him, not for anybody.

“Get out.” Woohyun orders. The boy instead of doing so, walks towards him and Woohyun snaps. “Get out Sungjong!”

The boy doesn’t back away, not until he leaves a wrinkled piece of paper on his table. He walks out and shuts the door behind him. Woohyun is tempted on burning it without reading it, just for the sake of his anger. Anger not towards the boy in particular but everyone. Anger towards himself.

Something about the paper makes him read it in the end, though. The fabric feels neglected under his touch, dirty. Long were the days where they gave each other notes like these, and it didn’t look like it was something official. He opens up the piece of paper and inside there was written, *‘meet me after the sun sets. You know where.’* and if it wasn’t because he recognized the handwriting, he wouldn’t have even considered on doing it.

He burns the paper before going out of the room, clenching his fist on his black coat.

∞

For once, people don’t pay him much attention.

Now that he has no one following him it's much easier for him to move around without making a fuss anywhere he'd go.

He hides between some guards in one of the corners of the fortress with a clear view on what was going on down there. He had no intention to make a decision on who was going to be his next guard, it was going to be Jungyeop’s choice anyway. But the older still wanted him to attend, to see. The men down there were fighting against each other, harshly giving their everything to be chosen.

It’s funny for Woohyun. A joke even. Will they really sacrifice their life in order to protect him? Just like Boohyun had been ‘protected’? They wouldn’t. People are loyal to a certain degree, and he knew none of them were as loyal as they swore to be. It's a world where you live or die, and people liked living so in the end nothing mattered more than yourself.

His last guard, Minho, had swore to protect him and be loyal just like everyone swears, and he believed him. The older had been with him for more than a decade, but where was he now? As soon as his brother had gone to battle, Minho had banished. No note behind, nothing at all.

A new combat starts and Woohyun recognizes one of the men down there.

“Didn’t think you’d come.”

Woohyun looks between Jungyeop who just approached him, and the guy down there with a bow between his hands.

“Who is he? I think I’ve seen him before.” The two guys start their fight and everyone gets excited again, shouting and moving around. Woohyun fixes his hoodie and pushes his back more against the cold concrete.

“Who? Oh, Sunggyu. He came to the funeral, did you see him there?”

“Probably.” Woohyun doesn’t like being around so much people, not so close like this.

“If he doesn’t die today, he’ll be your next guard.”

Woohyun laughs. “Look at this nepotism. You are not even considering the others.”

“It’s not that.” Jungyeop answers. “He’s loyal Woohyun. He’s good at his job.”

“What do you mean?” the prince asks, eyeing Sunggyu hiding behind a barrel. “He doesn’t seem good at his job.”

“He was the leader of several units in the citadel, there hasn’t been a leader as young as him for decades. And only a few days before the funeral, he got in a fight with another guard.”

The prince frowns. “And that’s your definition of ‘good at his job’?”

“He got in a fight because the other one was bad mouthing your brother, my prince.”

Woohyun stays quiet for a moment, before a silly smirk comes out, hiding his real reaction.

“So what? He was probably faking it. Like everyone does.” Jungyeop sighs, but doesn’t answer back. “If he’s that good, then he should lead armies. Not spend his entire life protecting me. It gets boring after a while.”

Jungyeop smiles, “You’re the most important now.”

Woohyun scoffs, “*Now.*” he remarks. “Where is my father?”

“You know he’s busy.” Jungyeop whispers with a slightly tone of sadness.

“Or he’s pretending to.” Woohyun answers under his breath.

Jungyeop had been the Commander ever since his father had climbed to the throne, and sometimes he was a more of a father to him than the real one. The king doesn’t have time for Woohyun. Or more like he doesn’t make time for him, doesn’t want to see his son. Woohyun expected to at least see him more these days ever since Boohyun died. Expected that he realized how important he was, just like Boohyun, and he needed to make more memories together. It was a naive thought and something that definitely wouldn’t happen.

“Why don’t we look for Minho instead?” Woohyun asks in a whisper. “instead of... this.”

“We are” Jungyeop answers with his eyes fixed somewhere else. “but even if we find him, I’m afraid he won’t be your guard. Not anymore.”

Woohyun scoffs, not happy with the idea.

He can't get his eyes off of Sunggyu. He doesn't want to. He wants to see something in his face, anything at all that would tell on his real intentions that this was just another job for him, that there was no pride involved in his decision of wanting to serve Woohyun. Sunggyu is on top of the other knight, and he starts to punch his chest with the palm of his hands, the bow long forgotten in the ground. People start to get quiet, and Woohyun sees a glimpse of a smile in Sunggyu's face and malice on his eyes as the other's chest starts bending to the inside, flooding blood.

He is about to make a comment, when Jungyeop moves forward and screams to someone to stop him. It's very late though. By the time the guy reaches Sunggyu, the guy underneath is very long gone with his gaze somewhere in the sky. Sunggyu gets thrown away and his eyes are different. They are scared now.

The sun is starting to hide beneath the mountains, and Woohyun knows he must go back. He fixes the hood over his head and walks out.

∞

Woohyun manages to reach his chambers before it's completely dark, and he's thankful for that. He doesn't want to see anyone else, not while his head is turning. In his silvered glass mirror, he looks at himself, at his hair more precisely. Each hair dying itself naturally everyday when the sun sets, from brown to blond. Though nothing about this was natural.

This hair, it is beautiful, he knows. Sometimes he even thinks this color suits him more than brown, but he can't make himself love it. Not when the color meant magic, and magic was the one thing he had been taught to hate. Magic was no good, so this wasn't either, no matter how good it made him look. So he grew to hate it just like everyone else did.

It's a curse, he thinks. It is when he's not allowed to go outside of his room at night, not in that state. It is when his father, the one and only king, wouldn't look at him for more than 5 seconds without scowling. His mother is more understanding, but she can't hide her distress. Soohyun, well, she was still too young to comprehend the problem, so her acceptance over his yellow hair was pure ignorance. Boohyun had been the only one who wasn't bother about it, not at all.

"A change of color in your hair doesn't make you different, Woohyun." Woohyun whispers to himself, reciting his older brother's words he once told him.

"But it does." he laughs dryly.

Woohyun is mad at him for leaving him. He had begged him not to go to the battle, stay with him and teach him that sword move he always wanted to master but couldn't, and Boohyun had laughed, telling him that he'll teach him when he gets back.

It's not that Woohyun is childish, but everything Boohyun related made him feel like he was seven years old again and the other thirteen years old and he looked up to him like he was the best person in this world. Because he was. Because Boohyun always did his best on protecting Woohyun from the judgemental stares and anything that could harm the younger.

So Woohyun is mad. The older had always thought about everyone else first, and this gained him a lot of friends. But it directed right to his death too.

A knock on his door.

“Come in.”

A handmaiden comes in with Woohyun's supper in her hands. She doesn't look at him as she steps in, she's not allowed to. Anyone who looked at him or even had the audacity to talk about it was doomed to spend the night in a cell. Logic? None, but that's how things were for him. At first he had been hurt about it, when he was a boy. He didn't understand the unspoken rule of being ignored at night, didn't like it either. But time made sure to get him used to it.

She goes out without saying a word and Woohyun laughs to himself. Not even looking what was on the menu for today, he takes his dark cape from behind his drawer, the cape he uses sometimes when he sneaks out. But this time he also takes his dagger, the one Boohyun left for him.

He's not preoccupied for someone noticing his absence, apart from the handmaiden who left the supper for him, no one is allowed to visit him at night. Not even her later on the night, having to pick up the things the morning after.

His chambers have a balcony towards the back of the castle, and the rooms under his are unoccupied, salons used for unique purposes, so it's easy for him to climb down the creeper plant. He's skilled with climbing, he has done it since he was a child and he was forbidden to play outside if the sun wasn't out.

For him something restricted meant fun. So this, in some measure, is fun.

Or it was, until he steps wrongly on the plant and falls down. He makes noise, enough to catch the attention of someone sitting a few feet away from him. Woohyun stands up and runs before the other could know what happened, or that's what he thought, until the same someone jumps in his back, making both of them fall.

His dagger slips from his pocket and the person on top of him takes it. Woohyun panics.

“Get the fuck up from me!” he screams, “give me that!”

He does his best on covering his face and hair, and it seems like it works as the other asks “how did you get this?”

“It's mine!”

“This is prince Boohyun's, thief!”

Woohyun should've probably asked how did he know that, but his brain was calculating on how to get the dagger back. He tries to take it, but the other is more skilled as he places himself behind Woohyun with the unsheathed blade under his neck.

"Give me one good reason to not kill you with the same dagger you were about to steal." the guy says.

Woohyun finds this whole thing funny, how could he steal something that was his? So he thinks of a way to make this even funnier.

"I could say it if you just let me go for a moment."

"Prince Woohyun."

Sunggyu stares at the prince's hair and he can't believe his eyes.

The last time Sunggyu saw the prince, at the funeral, the young prince had brown hair. A color so ordinary he had gotten used to see in official announcements or celebrations. A color that at night turned into gold, a color that everyone had been murmuring about for years but no one had actually seen in person (or if they did, they always said otherwise in the end, as it was prohibited to spread 'false' rumors about him.)

(The color is not exactly blonde- it was a lighter tone, and it's beautiful. That's the only thing Sunggyu can say about it.)

It's not until Woohyun covers his head with the hood that he finally remembers where he is.

Woohyun snorts. Yeah, this definitely makes it funnier.

"The expression is always the same" He chuckles to himself. "Anyway, can you give me that now?"

The prince points at the dagger, and Sunggyu takes a very few good seconds to process his request.

"Oh! Yes, yes!" The knight covers the dagger, and gives it back to the prince. Everything is suddenly happening so fast and there's a lot of questions he wants to ask, but as soon as the prince takes the things, he's trying to leave, again.

"Hey!" Sunggyu calls, then remembers who he is calling. "I mean- your grace, where are you going? Are you even allow to be here at this hour and- why are you using that cape?"

"Just do as if you didn't see any of this, okay?" Woohyun answers, turning around. A hand around his wrist stops him.

Both of them look at Sunggyu's hand around it.

“What are you doing?” The prince asks, eyeing Sunggyu, then his hand.

Sunggyu let the other go. “I-I can’t let you go.”

“Excuse me?”

“What if something happens to you? You can’t be alone at night, your grace.”

“*I’m* your prince” Woohyun obviously states.

“Yeah, and that’s why-”

“And if I tell you to mind your own business, you do as told. What kind of guard are you?”
Woohyun snaps, taking a better look at the other.

He can't really see the man before him, not the moon being his only source of light. He stares at his brown locks and the sharp jawline, along with those little eyes that were nervously looking back at him.

“I am not yet your guard” Sunggyu answers in a whisper.

“I can see why” the other mocks. “Wait, are you the one from-” the prince stops talking as he hears someone approaching. “Fuck, cover up!”

But Sunggyu doesn’t react so fast and the prince covers up before him. Jungyeop comes out from the door and sees the knight standing awkwardly besides a pillar.

“Oh, there you are Sunggyu.” Jungyeop says. “Are you feeling better? Come, you should eat something while they’re still serving.”

Sunggyu looks besides him where the prince is hiding, and their eyes meet for a second. He doesn’t want to leave, he is still skeptical on what was the prince doing outside, and with a dagger on top of it. But would it put the prince in trouble if he said anything?

“Yes, let’s go.”

He eyes the prince a last time before following Jungyeop.

∞

Woohyun runs away as soon as the knights go inside. The moon has been out for a while now, and he doesn’t want to keep the other waiting.

On his way to his destination, he thinks about the knight. Sunggyu, was it? There were no torches outside but the light of the moon so he couldn’t really make up his face, but if he’s

not wrong, he's the same guy who he saw fighting today. The one Jungyeop worships so much.

He laughs at his own remark, until he remembers. Remembers what he didn't remember when he was in the knights' house or when he was talking to the other. Remembers that once Sunggyu had kneel before him and his parents, showing his condolences over his brother's death.

Woohyun can't understand Sunggyu's severe loyalty. What has Woohyun done for him? What has Boohyun done, that he really looked conflicted over his dead back at the funeral? Everyone is loyal, *of course*, but no one seemed so sincere about it. More than a flatter, it bothered him. People didn't know them, not at all.

He arrives to his mother's garden. Her *beloved* garden. A place no one but her or people authorized by her could step into. So, of course, at night there was no watchmen around there. Woohyun used to like coming here as a kid, hide between bushes and make Boohyun find him. He also used to like coming to play on his own when no one watched him, tearing a few flowers from the garden and imagining himself giving them to his future princess.

"Took you long enough!" someone hisses behind him.

Woohyun turns around. "I made you a favor by coming here, don't complain. You know how hard it is for me to come out at night."

Kibum rolls his eyes. "I don't have time." he says. "Hair looks good, though, as always."

Woohyun had befriended Kibum a few years back when he started his sword training. Kibum, being the same age as him, was a servant who wanted become a squire, and practicing with the prince was a huge opportunity that Jungyeop was offering him at the time. He took it, of course.

Woohyun wanted to be treated as himself, not a prince, and Kibum had been the first one to do so. Now he was more than just a squire, making his way up until joining the royal troops who served the most for the family. He looks different, less sloppy and more full of himself, confident- well knowing his position in life. They don't see each other much now, but it always feels comfortable when they do.

"What is so important that you have to tell me now? And here, on top of everything." Woohyun asks, faking annoyance. When Boohyun grew enough to get involved into more important matters or, in other words, to have no time for Woohyun, Kibum became his new best buddy and partner in crime, playing together in the gardens when no one was around.

"I have information." Kibum whispers, pushing Woohyun towards a rock bench. "About Minhoo."

Woohyun widens his eyes. "What?"

Kibum laughs sarcastically. "Now who's making who the favor?"

“Just talk!”

“You’re not gonna like this.” Kibum’s smile banishes. “But you still should know.”

“Minho,” Kibum starts after sighing, “has been imprisoned.” Woohyun is a second away from snapping a hundred questions, so Kibum signs him to shut up. “Seems like he was in that same battle your brother went to. Just not on the right side.”

“What are yo-”

“Let me finish!” Kibum grunts. “I heard it when some of the guys who collected the dead bodies came back. Your brother died that day, but the battle wasn’t lost. The second batch of soldiers arrived too late. Minho was seen fighting against our own. The ones from our army, I mean. Anyway, some people knew him as your former guard and instead of being killed like he should’ve, he’s now in prison down at Hadong. Some say he’s the one who killed your brother, but the only witnesses of that are all dead. He will still be beheaded in a few weeks, though.”

“Few weeks? Why?” Woohyun asks. “Does my father know?”

“Who do you think imprisoned him in the first place?” Kibum chuckles dryly, resting his arms over his knees. “He’s being questioned but he’s not saying anything. Thought you’d like to know.”

Woohyun mirrors Kibum’s position. “Do you believe them? What those guys say?” Kibum eyes him. “You knew Minho like I did, it doesn’t sound like him.”

“But even if he didn’t do that, he was still there. And he’s not defending himself. So yeah, probably those guys exaggerated some stuff but Minho is still there, in prison.”

Woohyun sighs. It couldn’t be the truth. In any other day he would’ve laugh off this entire thing, but it’s serious now. Minho isn’t the one Woohyun thought he was and-

“I’ll go to Hadong.” Woohyun says, standing up.

“What?” Kibum follows. “I didn’t tell you this to make you go down there!”

“I need to know!” Woohyun answers, raising his voice. Kibum covers his mouth.

“Calm down!” Kibum whispers, “there must be another way to-”

“There is no other way. I’ve been asking around about Minho these days and no one wants to tell me anything. You’re the first one, and I need to know more. Why my brother? I mean, if he really was planning to kill him or- why... why leave in the first place? Why treason?”

“How are you planning on doing that, though?” Kibum asks, resting a hand on Woohyun’s shoulder. “As much as I’d like to help you, I can’t. I’m not directly serving you anymore.”

“I can figure something out.” Woohyun answers, not believing himself. His father would never let him go to a prison, say less question the man who apparently might have killed his

brother. But he needs to do this, he needs to know the truth, doesn't matter whatever it takes.

∞

Sunggyu doesn't sleep entirely well that night. There's too much on his mind to be thinking about, but the prince takes most part of it. He should be thinking about tomorrow, about whether he'll become a guard or not and- will the event even take place? What if the prince was running away? Would this be Sunggyu's fault because he didn't stop him?

He looks around the room. Everyone is sleeping soundly. On Yongguk's bed there's another man sleeping, and Sunggyu can't stop himself from feeling guilty. One of the twins had also died that day, and the other one tried hard to cover up his tears but he didn't do an amazing job on it. No one said anything though, only pats on the shoulder and pitiful gazes.

Weirdly enough, Sungyeol's light snores calm him.

The prince is fine, he tells to himself. He doesn't know what was the prince doing outside, but what he knows is that everyone would be freaking out if he wasn't in his chambers by now.

He also knows he feels weird. He didn't really expect anything from the prince, but perhaps he had made enough of a character in his head that he can't really understand why would the prince be outside. And the attitude he had. It's not like he can't take the comments, he had never mind people talking shit to him, it's actually an occupational hazard. But the prince of nice words, nice smile and... well, nice everything was not the one he met just now. His voice sounded duller and not once did he smile if it not was to laugh at him.

Sunggyu covers up his injured hand with his healthy one and turns on one side of the bed, trying to reach dreamland and hoping everything would be alright tomorrow.

∞

Everything *is* alright the next day, but not the alright he expected.

"Woah, hyung, how did your hand got better overnight?" Sungyeol exclaims, taking the older's hand to look at it.

His injured hand was no longer injured, and the place where Yongguk's flail had hit him was now healed to the point you wouldn't believe yesterday was bleeding. This is nothing normal, he knows.

"Hyung," Sungyeol whispers sitting besides him, even though there's no one else in the room. "tell me the truth, are you a wizard?"

“What?” Sunggyu laughs.

“I won’t tell anyone! I can keep secrets, I swear! It’s actually fascinating and I’m in.”

“You’re ‘in’ to what?”

“To whatever that you do” Sungyeol moves his hand, “to this! Do you heal? Can you heal me too? You know, I’ve been having this back pain for months and it’s starting to-”

Sunggyu pushes the other to the floor before he can finish taking off his shirt.

“I’m not a wizard, all wizards are gone, magic is illegal, and if I was I would still not heal you.”

“Why?” Sungyeol scowls from the ground.

Sunggyu smiles. “Just because.”

He looks back at his hand, and the smile fades away. He should be glad that there was no wound now, but how could he explain this to anybody if he can’t even explain it to himself? He covers it up with the bandage.

“Why are you covering it again?” Sungyeol asks, standing up while rubbing his ass.

The older sighs. “You can’t tell anyone about this.”

“Okay...” Sungyeol says, and thinks. “But what is ‘this’?”

“I have no idea, but really. Just... shut your mouth, please?”

Sungyeol shrugs and nods before finishing up on getting dressed. The older doesn’t understand how could Sungyeol be okay with this. He is still amazed by how fast he started to trust Sungyeol, too. For all he knows Sungyeol could stab him in the back any moment now but that doesn’t seem to be the case.

He looks at Sungyeol choose between two equal plain shirts and the serious thought he must be having, and he just knows Sungyeol isn’t like that.

“Why did you apply for this job?” Sunggyu asks bluntly.

“Hm? Oh, hm...” Sungyeol thinks for a moment. “Because I was bored, I guess.” he laughs nervously.

“Really? I thought northerners didn’t like being anywhere else than north.”

“Well, you shouldn’t stereotype everyone you know.”

Sunggyu snorts. “Says the guy who believes I can’t be a Lee.”

“Because you can’t!” Sungyeol answers while changing his shirt. “You’re just definitely not one.”

Sunggyu rolls his eyes. He already had this conversation with him more than once, actually, making the younger get red and yell at him while they were eating last night.

“Really though, why did you come?” Sunggyu’s tone is more serious and for once the other knows not to play around now.

The younger eyes him hesitantly, sitting on his own bed. “You must know my dad, right?”

Sunggyu frowns. “Hm, let’s say I do.”

“Lee Wonyoung.” Sungyeol explains, and the other’s expression changes up immediately.

Wonyoung had been, and still is a great war strategist. He had been helping the Nam’s exclusively and there was no war or battle they didn’t win, not without Wonyoung’s counseling. For a long time he had been in the citadel far southwest, but just recently he had gone back up north, saying he couldn’t be away from his homeland anymore.

“Well, yeah, I’m his son.” Sungyeol sighs. “Since he’s getting old and all that stuff, he wants me to start and take care of things like a lord should do.”

“Why you?” Sunggyu sits besides him.

“Because I’m his first child.” Sungyeol explains. “And, of course, the first one is required to be the next lord. But I don’t want that. I’ve seen what my father does and I don’t want that for myself, my younger brother can have all that. He’s good at making plans and actually taking care of things. That’s how the last few years have been without my father.

“I actually want to fight. Feel the rush of fighting with another man, and maybe even killing him.” Sungyeol laughs. “Daeyeol can have all that planning thing, I don’t mind giving it to him.”

“But how did you manage to come here, if you’re saying you’re supposed to take care of things up there?”

“Oh, right, well I managed to convince him to give me a few years off and be here instead, protecting... whatever that I’m supposed to protect.” He sighs. “It’s just buying me time to think about what can I really do to avoid that responsibility.”

“You shouldn’t avoid it.” Sunggyu says and Sungyeol turns around to him. “Sooner or later you’ll have to do what’s required from you.”

“But it sucks!”

“Even if it sucks. And you’re not that bad of a planner either. You told me yesterday to use a bow instead of a sword and- well... that isn’t the best example but-”

“See! Even you know I’m bad at it.”

“But I’m still here!” Sunggyu answers with a smile.

“But because you got all animal-like on the other guy” Sungyeol laughs. “What was that, though?” he frowns.

Sunggyu sighs. He can see how curious and confused the younger is, and he can’t blame him. Putting all the pieces together, you normally end up in one explanation.

There’s something different on Sunggyu.

Before he can answer, or well, before he can give another excuse because he doesn’t even know the right answer to that question, the door opens and they greet one of the other living knights.

“Get up, Jungyeop says we’re listening the announcement now.”

∞

Their way down to the main salon feels eternal, and it’s perhaps because they get lost. Twice. And every passing minute they’re walking down halls and corridors, he can feel himself sweat on his hands.

Only one will be chosen, and he wants so badly to be the one, but now he thinks about Sungyeol. Without even wanting, he got attached quite fast and now he wanted to stay with the younger too. There’s a lot of stuff he could learn from the latter and now even knowing his story, Sungyeol seemed to need someone nagging him. Sunggyu was good at that.

(And maybe, *maybe*, Sunggyu would need Sungyeol too. He had always had a familiar face around him, on every phase of his life and every step of the way. And now that Howon was not around, he could only rely on Sungyeol.)

When they finally find their way down the salon, it only takes them a few seconds to arrive and see Jungyeop standing besides a brown-haired person. The other two knights are there too, but Sunggyu doesn’t really acknowledges them. He looks at the prince instead. At the *brown-haired* prince.

It’s weird, how the aura has changed and this Woohyun doesn’t feel like anything from the one of last night. Sunggyu even thinks last night’s events are a product of his imagination, that until the prince focuses on him, and frowns.

“We’re gathered here to choose my next guard.” Woohyun announces when the knights get in formation, and makes sure to avoid Sunggyu’s eyes. “I saw you five, along with the other knights, fight yesterday. And I’m delighted to see the braveness you have used to prove you’re worth of this position.”

Sunggyu looks at Woohyun. Stares at him. He has heard this type of speech a lot of times, damn, he has even given some of them when he had to choose men for his unit. And he can well see how hard Woohyun is trying to sound sincere, which he doesn’t really. Not for

Sunggyu at least. His smile doesn't reach his eyes and it twitches on one side as his left foot taps on the floor, impatiently.

"But, as you know, only one can have it," he continues with a sigh. "I have taken Jungyeop's advice into my consideration, and made my decision..."

Jungyeop gives Woohyun a parchment and the prince is about to read it, that until he locks eyes with Sunggyu, and smiles.

"But before that, I still have another test left for you. One that can make your fate change." Jungyeop frowns, and the knights eye each other. Sungyeol looks at Sunggyu with a questioning expression, but the older is as lost as him.

"Sungjong," Woohyun calls. A boy from a corner of the salon steps forward, surprised to be called. "Bring me my blade, please."

The boy runs to Woohyun's chambers and arrives within minutes. More than the speed of the boy, it's more surprising he knew where it was hidden. But Sungjong knows everything, Woohyun related that is. He had been serving the prince for a few years now and he had been in the list of the few people Woohyun really trusted (that list seemed to get shorter as the days went by).

"Yesterday your bravery and strength was tested. But I think we're missing another important factor. Anyone knows which one?"

The rooms stays silent. There's at least twenty people there aside from the knights, Jungyeop and the prince. Lord, ladies and handmaidens are there too.

"Oh, please, it's not that hard," Woohyun laughs. Sungjong, the kid who was standing up again in his corner, clears his throat to get noticed. "Oh, yes, Sungjong?"

"Loyalty, your grace."

"That is correct," Woohyun snaps his fingers. "But, how can I test your loyalty? How can I know that you are really going to do *anything* to protect me, like you claim to do so?" he looks at Sunggyu again and the other is sure this one is directed to him.

"Fear no more," Woohyun laughs, "because I have found a way to test that."

Sunggyu feels Sungyeol fidget on his place. "Calm down" the older whispers.

"Well, it's actually a rushed test, because this mostly proves you'll do anything I'll tell you to, but if you do pass this test and still want to serve me, I cannot doubt your sincerity." Woohyun explains.

"I am," Sungyeol whispers back, "I want to pee."

"I want you to cut a finger off your hand," Woohyun says playfully but still seriously, and a few ladies gasp from behind. "Whichever you like, I'm not picky."

"Oh fuck." Sungyeol whispers.

Jungyeop steps forward "My prince, I think-"

"I make the decision here." Woohyun cuts him off. "And I'll judge them based on this." his tone is severe, and no one dares to complain more.

"So?" The prince continues after a few seconds of silence. "No volunteers? Any lord can try too, whoever does this will be my guard. I give you my word on that." Woohyun smiles.

"Loyalty is something you can't buy, and if you show me your true loyalty-"

"I'll do it." Sunggyu voices out.

All eyes are him, including Woohyun's.

"I'll do it." he repeats.

Chapter End Notes

for complains or anything really, i'm in twt @ sinagyu

IV. (Some) Secrets

Chapter Notes

along with the recent events i've found myself anxious cause there's nothing i can do-but this. so i literally spent the last day writing and writing to cool off my head, and it worked... kinda. anyway, i hope this update helps y'all too.

All eyes are on Sunggyu, including Woohyun's.

"I'll do it." he repeats. "I'll cut my finger off."

Woohyun's smiles twitches. "Alright."

Some servants bring a table forward, and Sunggyu takes off his left glove, looking at every and each of his fingers. He was trembling slightly, still not even sure of what he was about to do and choosing which one would be the lucky one (or not so lucky, however you wanted to see it). People start murmuring and Woohyun looks nervous on his spot. He moves forwards and leaves his dagger on the table, a few inches away from Sunggyu's hand.

"Which one will it be?" He asks.

Sunggyu moves his left ring finger, and Woohyun frowns.

"Why that one? Don't you wanna get married?"

"I'm already married to my job, your grace." Sunggyu answers steadily. "Does it have to be the whole finger or just half of it?"

Woohyun cannot believe what he's hearing, but then again, this is a game he started, and a game two can play. So he instead of scowling, he smiles.

"However you want it, you can keep a part if you want."

Sunggyu nods and draws out the knife. He positions the blade between the middle and proximal phalanx, calculating the exact place and force he'll have to use. His hand sweats, and his breathing increases. Is it worth it? Yeah, it is- it had to be. He had been dreaming about this job most of his life, and something like having less of a finger won't stop him.

The room grows quiet and everyone is waiting for it. Ladies are covering their eyes and lords are frowning but still focused on the knight who is about to lose a finger over a high position. Sunggyu raises the blade, looking between his right and left hand and-

“STOP!” Woohyun screams and Sunggyu stops his motion. “Okay, I’ve seen it all.” he sighs. “You have proven to be loyal, and from now on, my knight.”

Everyone cheers and claps, Jungyeop steps forward to hug Sunggyu, but Sunggyu still looks at the prince who looked more troubled than pleased for the whole thing. The table gets taken away and another guard brings a giant sword to make official his position. Sunggyu kneels before Woohyun, the prince says his speech and it’s done.

“How did you know?” Sungyeol asks when Sunggyu walks back, and the older looks at him with a question mark on his face. “How did you know that he’ll say ‘stop’?”

“I didn’t.” Sunggyu answers.

Sungyeol gasps and pushes Sunggyu. “Look at this hyung, he was really going to take off a finger.”

“I have 9 more.” Sunggyu laughs nervously.

“Well, I guess this is where I say goodbye.” Sungyeol says apologetic.

“What?” Sunggyu answers. “Ah, but- no, there should be a-”

“It’s fine,” the younger answers. “I knew you’d get it. You deserved it the most. And I should probably focus on what’s expected of me, as you said.” he laughs nervously, and Sunggyu frowns.

He’s about to protest again, but people start coming, congratulating the new royal guard by patting his back and saying heartless compliments. Sungyeol steps back and bows before finally walking out of the room with the rest of the knights.

∞

Sunggyu’s hand trembles as he writes a letter to Howon and his parents, sharing the good news. He doesn’t know what to say, so he keeps it simple for both. Howon’s the most.

I got in, you jerk.

- From your beloved, great and now royal guard older brother, Lee Sunggyu.

∞

Now that he is officially inside, there's a lot of things he must do, and things he must learn.

A handmaiden explains him how things are arranged around there. The royal family eats first, everyone else after in a different room. He is not allowed to interact with the handmaids if it's outside of official matters (he doesn't have a problem with this one), and she teaches him which floors and rooms were prohibited as much as which where the rooms used the most by the family.

Sunggyu gets accommodated in a new room, one that is actually just for himself, with a huge bed, a crystal table for his own usage, a bathroom with his own bucket that will be checked and changed twice a day and a lot of new, shiny and expensive clothes. Sunggyu finds the whole thing quite funny, since he won't be spending too much time there anyway.

Jungyeop introduces him to Woohyun's previous guards, Doojoon and Jinyoung.

Both of them are nice, they explain Woohyun's schedule to him (breakfast, then sometime classes or sword practice, lunch, free time then dinner), and this is when he learns the most important rule.

"You must never enter his room, and less at night." Jinyoung warns.

Sunggyu looks between the two knights before him.

"Why?" He asks, even though he hints the answer.

"You just don't." Doojoon answers. "And if you ever do in an extreme situation, you won't ever look at him in the eyes."

"But-

"And if you ever do," Jinyoung cuts him short, "you won't ever talk about it. Keep it to yourself."

∞

The first few days as Woohyun's knight were a bit boring, truly. He followed the prince from room to room like a little duck following its mother. It's not that Sunggyu expected something different, but the prince didn't even want to acknowledge his presence, ordering him to bring him letters or needed books without looking at him.

Maybe it had to be like that, maybe this coldness towards him was normal. He stayed with that idea for half a day until he saw the queen talking side by side with one of her knights, instead of having them follow her around like Woohyun did to him.

"Is it normal?" he asked Jungyeop when he found him one day coming out of the third floor rooms.

Jungyeop chuckles besides him. “Give him some time. He’s just... adjusting.”

“To me?”

“To everything.” the older sighs. “It’s not that he’s like this with you, he’s like this with everyone. So don’t take it the wrong way.”

Both knights walk down the corridors towards... well, Sunggyu doesn’t really know his way around the castle yet, as he keeps getting lost every time he’s on his own, so he walks towards whichever place Jungyeop is going to.

“Has he always been like this?” Sunggyu knows where he should stop asking questions, but he’s too curious about the prince. Everything about that brown haired heir is mysterious, from what he does at night to as why everyone just swings along him.

“No, just since Boohyun’s incident.” Jungyeop explains, apparently arriving to his destination. “He’ll probably be in a worst mood the next days so, just try... actually, try to put him in a good mood if you can.”

“What? Why? What will happen in the next days?”

“Nothing important” Jungyeop pats his back. “Now go look for him, I’m a little busy right now. Oh, and tell him he will have to meet the king tomorrow before lunch.”

Sunggyu nods, but doesn’t move from his place, mentally trying to remember how to find the stairs towards the fourth floor. The older knight chuckles at the sight of the younger pouting unconsciously.

“Go down the corridor, take left and then right after the third door.”

Sunggyu follows the older’s instructions but something is wrong, as he makes a turn left then right and he doesn’t find any stairs. Just another corridor that will probably get him more lost if he walks through it. He’d ask for help... if just someone had been in the floor.

The castle is always vivid, full of people walking from here to there, handmaidens running around trying to help the royal family on whatever errands and lords whispering to each other about the crown’s monetary situation or anything that had to be taken cared of. But this day on particular, and in this floor too, it seems like everyone just wanted to stay in their own chambers, leaving Sunggyu standing in the middle of rooms and salons he should not enter.

He thinks about going back to Jungyeop as he still remembers his way back and the door he went into, but the thought is forgotten as soon as something crashes on his back.

“Owh!” Something scowls behind him. Sunggyu turns around and identifies the ‘something’ as someone. A young and cute someone picking up scrolls from the floor. “Why are you standing in the middle of the corridor like this?”

The knight takes a look at the kid in front of him... or is it an adolescent? He looks tall enough to be past his 15th name day but his childish face tells him otherwise.

“Why are you running around?” Sunggyu answers with a question. The other’s clothes tells him he’s a servant, and if a lord had seen him running around he would have surely been scolded.

“I need to take these to the prince” The younger answers with a sassy tone, pushing a hair lock back with a blow. He is taking more than he can carry.

“Oh, really? Let me help you”

“No!” The servant walks back, “these are urgent, he will be mad if I’m not with him within the next minutes! But- wait a minute, I’ve seen you before.” the younger squints his eyes, looking in his head for the right memory.

Now that he mentions it, the servant looks awfully familiar for Sunggyu too.

“Oh! Now I know!” the servant smiles, “you’re the ‘cut my finger’ guy!”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah yeah, you were going to cut it off for this position, heck I would’ve really wanted for you to do it. I’ve seen people be beheaded, losing a tongue or a hand even, but never a finger. I wondered if it would’ve bleed as much...”

“Aren’t you too excited about it?” Sunggyu laughs awkwardly.

“I like when people lose an extremity” the younger explains with such a monotonous tone, as if what he just said was the most normal thing to say. “Anyway, what are you doing here? Aren’t you supposed to be with prince Woohyun too?”

“I was on my way there” Sunggyu answers confidently.

“Well then lord ‘take my finger off’, lead the way.”

Sunggyu stays put on his place.

“You know, you shouldn’t really talk to me this way. I’m a knight and I can-”

“You totally don’t know how to get to the prince’s chambers do you?” the younger cuts him off with a laugh. “Follow me then”

Sunggyu wouldn’t admit it if someone had asked him later, but he did. He totally didn’t know how the kid found the stair but somehow they were now on the fourth floor and getting nearer to the prince’s chambers. The knight takes the chance and walks a bit faster than the servant, getting first on the door and knocking on it.

“Hey!” The servant protests.

“Come on in.” The prince says from the other side.

Both males enter the room, meeting a very busy prince with some books, probably looking around for something important. The prince is about to dismiss the knight until the servant walks forward and his eyes sparkle.

“Oh, Sungjong, yes, you got them.” Woohyun smiles a little, walking towards the servant to take the scrolls from him. “Did you get in trouble?”

“Of course I didn’t Woo- I mean, my prince.” Sungjong is excited the old prince is coming back to him, and that excitement might have made him make a mistake.

“Thank you” Woohyun answers, “really. You can now go play with Koko, you’ve earned it.” the servant cheers in happiness and runs out of the room.

Between moving the books around his desk and bed to make some space to open the scrolls, the prince forgets the knight is standing a few feet away from here. It is not until a few minutes after that he turns his head back and sees him again.

“What do you want?” Woohyun asks.

“Me?” Sunggyu stutters for the sudden attention, “uh... oh... yes! Commander Jungyeop told me you have to see the king tomorrow before lunch.”

The prince groans in annoyance “What does that old man want now?”

Sunggyu knows it is not a question made for him to answer, so he stays quiet on his place.

“Okay” Woohyun snaps, still without looking at the knight directly, “you’re dismissed, go outside and guard the door or something, I don’t really care.”

“Do you need help here, your grace?”

“Not really.” Sunggyu moves his head to the side and identifies the scrolls on the table as maps of the realm.

"I'm very good with geography, your grace, if you need-"

"I need *nothing* from you, now leave." Sunggyu turns around, feeling a little humiliated when, "actually wait."

He turns around and sees the prince moving papers around his desk, looking for something in particular.

"Ah, here it is." In his hands there is an envelop and he gives it to the knight who is frowning. "Take this to the messengers' tower and tell them to send it to Geumland."

Geumland? Geumland the city? Where the Jangs resided? Why would he do such thing?

The next day Woohyun walks out the door of his room and finds Sunggyu on the same spot he was meant to be: two feet away from his door, guarding it. He's been ignoring the guard as much as he could, too ashamed about his stupid last test and even the fact that Sunggyu caught him sneaking out the other night.

He wonders if Sunggyu thinks of him as stupid or childish, or even wondering that the job wasn't worth it at the end. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. but after today he'll probably think it's not worth it, Woohyun reckons.

Today he's been called to his father's own chambers; the king's chambers. It's not something that happens very often, and it didn't matter whatever reason he was called for, he actually had some topics of his own to discuss with the king. Woohyun, for the first time, feels too conscious about his moves as he walks through the corridors with Sunggyu behind him.

"Wait here." He says when they finally reach the red door. Woohyun knocks twice on it before he hears a response from the inside.

Inside there's his father and Jungyeop, who leans back on his chair as he looks back at the prince. The king is lying down on the bed, looking exhausted from the fact of being alive, as if every breath he took was tiring enough. His skin is white, whiter than it had ever been, and though some people fancied the color, it looked more preoccupying than anything.

"Come here" the king mutters as he coughs, not looking straight at Woohyun but somewhere behind him.

Woohyun walks to them, and the next question takes him by surprise.

"Are you okay, my son?" the king asks. It's a bit ironic, since between the two, he's the sick one.

"M-me?" Woohyun stupidly asks, but it was necessary for him to voice the question. Never in his life had he heard that question coming from his father. Not even on that time he fell on his head from a tree when he was 7 years old.

"Who else could I ask?" The king laughs drily for a few seconds, still looking somewhere else behind Woohyun. He tries sitting up and after a few fruitless attempts and pushing Jungyeop aside when he tries to help, he gives up.

"I've been okay.." Woohyun answers. "I'm still... but- yeah.."

"Jungyeop told me you chose your new guard yesterday." The king smiles. "It's good. You're making decisions for yourself now."

Woohyun scoffs, but keeps the comment to himself.

"Woohyun, after the recent events-"

"Boohyun's death." the prince interrupts, drawing a frown on the king.

“You have now become the heir, as expected.” the king explains with a mortified tone. “And there are things expected from you... Like giving a queen to your country.”

This time it is much harder for Woohyun to contain the laugh.

“You can’t be serious, father.” Woohyun says with a mocking tone, despite the harsh stare coming from Jungyeop. “You should already know I’m not interested.”

“I don’t care.” The king answers back. “Your older brother was the same- and I let it go for him for a few years but now it’s not the time. It’s obvious that I’m not in my best shape and-”

“And so you want to marry me to whatever princess that could benefit the crown. Now, of course, while you’re hardly still breathing.” Woohyun scoffs with the top of his ears red, as this is his first time talking like this to the king and it’s not a pleasant feeling. Oh, well, maybe it is.

Jungyeop stands up ready to say something when the king himself cuts him off, red as a tomato.

"What gives you the right to talk to me this way?" The king raises his voice. "If I tell you to marry someone, you do as told."

"But-"

"Don't get confused," the king coughs and tries to sit up a bit better, enjoying the sight of his angered son. "Boys are for fun, but girls are to be married. And it is time for you to marry someone." Jungyeop tries to help the king again, but this one just pushes him aside.

"Tomorrow will arrive several princesses for you to meet. And you will have to make a choice. If not, I'll make it for you. Even if it takes my last breath." The king tries to laugh, but more coughs come out instead.

"Well, father," Woohyun stands up from his chair. "You'll have to find a nice cow for me, cause I'm sure as hell won't marry any of those offered whores."

Jungyeop tries to intervene, but it is indeed too late.

Sunggyu, from outside, hears things being thrown against the walls and screams on top. Not the type that hints him to come inside, but the one to avoid this room at all costs. So he stays on his place, nervously tugging on his sword as the king’s loud voice reminds him of his own father when he got into trouble.

The door besides him opens, and as Woohyun storms out, the king screams “I hope you had died instead of him!”

Sunggyu stares at Woohyun, and the prince laughs bitterly. He turns around to close the door. “That makes two of us.”

Sunggyu follows the prince as the younger walks rapidly through the corridors. Then, he suddenly stops, and Sunggyu bumps into him.

Woohyun turns around. Eyes red, trembling hands and biting onto his lower lip. “Bring me my bow.” the prince commands. “We’re hunting.”

Sunggyu wouldn’t say he had spent a lot of time with Woohyun just yet. He had seen him a lot before (before becoming his knight). He had thought the prince was cute, gloomy and positive as he used to look before everyone in the official events.

But it all turned out to be a facade. Not that he’s complaining, though. Maybe he likes this Woohyun more. Maybe he always thought the other Woohyun looked a bit too fake, being all smiles. He likes to know that the prince actually can get mad, frustrated and can make mistakes like everyone else. Just like he did just now, hitting an arrow on a tree instead of the deer.

“Shit” Woohyun mutters under his breath, scaring away the deer.

Sunggyu offers him another arrow and the prince grabs it with force.

The air feels tensed around Woohyun, more than it ever felt inside the castle. They spend another 10 minutes looking for a deer, or a pig (or any other living animal, really), and Woohyun ends up shooting the arrow to another tree, again.

Woohyun turns around to him.

“This is broken.” He complains, throwing away his bow. “Give me yours.”

“May I give you a little advice?” Sunggyu asks.

“No. Just your bow, now.”

Sunggyu sighs and reluctantly gives his bow away, picking up the prince’s. It is here when he notices, with the prince having his eyes directed to the ground, that he doesn’t dare to look at Sunggyu in the eyes.

It’s obvious that he’s still pissed off. Woohyun is applying too much force onto his arrows, as if that could help him relieve some stress. But it’s not actually working, as every missed arrow makes him get redder each time.

Some minutes after, Woohyun finds the deer again, drinking some water to recover from all the running that Woohyun has made her do. The prince shoots another arrow, and this one doesn’t end up hitting a tree, but drowning in the pond instead. The loud growling he makes next surely scares away everything else.

“My prince, maybe you should-”

“Maybe *you* should shut up.” Woohyun cuts Sunggyu off. “I saw you with the bow the other day, you suck at this too.”

Woohyun's tone is high pitched and annoying, just like Howon normally answers back to Sunggyu. So without thinking twice, Sunggyu answers back "Better than you at least."

He regrets it a second later, ready to apologize profusely, when Woohyun throws back the bow at him and instead of raging about answering back, says "well, show me then."

The prince and knight walk to a different part of the forest, where the trees were more away from each other.

"Shoot to the core of that tree" Woohyun says, pointing towards a tree a few feet away from them. The knight positions with his legs apart from each other and his eyes squinting, and shoots. The arrow perfectly lands in the middle of the tree, as the prince asked him to. Sunggyu hides a laugh as he hears Woohyun grunts loudly.

"Gimme" Woohyun snatches an arrow. He stands on Sunggyu's former place, and tries to do a similar position as the knight did. But it's too obvious that it won't work simply like that, and the arrows that totally misses the tree proves it.

The knight cannot completely hide his laugh this time, and Woohyun turns around to him, with a severe dark aura around him. Sunggyu stops laughing within seconds.

But what Woohyun says next surprises the knight. "Teach me."

It's obvious that he's embarrassed, and Sunggyu notices it now. The prince looks away every time he feels ashamed, so he knows better than to mock him. The prince reminds him of his younger brother in a lot of things, and this one is definitely one of them.

"Your shoulders are too tensed, my prince. So you're applying way too much force while shooting." Sunggyu explains, walking towards the prince. "Get on position."

With a stifled sigh, Woohyun does as said and feels the knight behind him, with Sunggyu's mouth near his ear and arms wrapping over his, forcing onto him the right position. Woohyun doesn't remember giving him the permission to get too close to him like this, but as he feels Sunggyu's gentle touch over his forearms and soft tone on his ear, he completely forgets about everything else.

"You need to lower your arm a bit more, relaxing your shoulders. And don't grip on the bow too harshly, it's not going anywhere." Sunggyu's soft chuckle tickles on Woohyun's upper neck. "Take the arrow's tail gently, and focus on your target my prince, don't think much about it." the prince doesn't think it makes sense, as he just heard before how his position had to be, but he didn't dwell much on it. "And... shoot."

Woohyun's arrow lands on Sunggyu's, cutting the former arrow in half. It's surprising for both of them. Sunggyu expected the arrow to at least land around his, but never right on it.

"I don't get it" Woohyun laughs, "you looked so bad at this on your fight the other day."

"I learned from my younger brother." the knight explains. "He's actually better than me at this, and he gave me one or two lessons, but never more. So I can shoot if I'm not moving,

but if I do... well, it kind of turns out as it did that day.” Sunggyu laughs softly, until he remember the entire thing, including Yongguk’s death.

Woohyun stands on position again, wanting to shoot another arrow, and as he follows on Sunggyu’s previous explanation, he asks, “how did you win that, anyway? The odds weren’t on your side.”

“You didn’t see it, my prince?”

“No, I had to run to-” Woohyun stutters on his own words, remembering how that night turned out. “Had some other things to do. So-so how did you do it?”

“I used physical force.” Sunggyu explains shortly, watching Woohyun’s arrow land on the tree again. “You’re really good, my prince.” Sunggyu compliments, smiling warmly.

“You could say I’m a natural” Woohyun says, making the knight laugh out loud for the first time.

Half an hour later, both of them are lying over the green grass, enjoying the nature around them and the soft sounds of the falling leafs and all the other animals who survived from Woohyun’s rage earlier. Sunggyu feels a little stiff in his side, still not used to the idea of lying besides the prince, but as minutes pass by, he can start to actually savor the moment.

It is nice and quiet, and when the knight looks towards the prince’s side, he sees the other with his eyes closed, probably sleeping through the moment. It is fascinating for him, how the prince had the worst humor just a while ago, and now he's even lying down with him. Sunggyu admires the younger's features. His lips are partly opened and a little ray of sunshine is lighting part of his face, there, where his cheeks looked the most pink after all that walking and shooting. Sunggyu doesn't realize his own thoughts, not until his eyes fall down to the prince's lips and he wonders how'd they taste.

The prince opens his eyes and turns his sight towards the knight, making the other look away, nervously.

"Be honest with me" Woohyun says with a soft tone, somehow not daring to look straight at Sunggyu's eyes but somewhere afar from them. "Do you think the same as my father? It would be better if I had died instead of Boohyun?"

Sunggyu sighs, regaining his calm after the sudden question.

"I won't get mad if you say so" Woohyun adds, though it wasn't completely truth. He was ready for a 'yes', but he didn't want it.

"I think..." Sunggyu starts talking after a minute "your brother's kindness was his strengths as much as his weakness. Hadn't he died in this battle, he would've surely did later on. You could say it was a matter of time." Sunggyu chuckles drily. "So no, I do not agree with the

king's words. I think you can be better than that, my prince. You can learn from your brother's mistakes. Though there's nothing wrong on having compassion, my prince."

Woohyun hears him out, slowly seeing the knight in a different light. He thought the other would despise him for his attitude the past days, so he expected a heartless answer. He didn't expect something so sincere, say less these words that he should've heard from his father instead.

Is this why Jungyeop grew fond of Sunggyu too quickly and wanted him to be his knight as soon as possible? The knight's presence was reassuring, somehow, and he hated to think he was taking a liking on him too. But he was.

"Woohyun." The prince says. "Call me Woohyun instead."

Sunggyu's cheeks redden up. "My prince, I can't-"

"I know, I know. But do it when it's just the two of us, Sungjong does it too." Sunggyu was about to complain again, but the prince cuts him off. "And that's an order."

The knight shuts his mouth and pouts, not entirely liking the idea of calling the prince informally. But it was a command, right?

Woohyun smiles and thinks to himself, 'cute'.

"Sorry for before." Woohyun says. "I can be hard to deal when I'm not in the mood."

"Can I ask you something my- uh... Woohyun?" Sunggyu asks after a minute or two of silence.

"How old are you?" Woohyun asks instead. "Cause maybe you should address me with 'hyung' now that we're at this." the prince holds his head on his hand as he looks at Sunggyu from a side.

The knight chuckles with his sight on the top of the trees. "My name day just passed. I turned 23."

The prince scowls. "Damn, I'd have to call you hyung."

"Your grace, this is really not nece-"

"Nonsense" Woohyun replies. "What did you want to ask, Sunggyu *hyung*?" the prince asks, emphasizing on 'hyung' and laughing at his own fun-less joke.

Sunggyu stares at the younger, admiring the smile and laugh. The one he thought had vanished but it was slowly coming back. Sunggyu liked the pissed off prince, but he couldn't deny this side was as good too.

"So?"

“Oh... maybe it’s none of my business but... why did you want me to send a letter to Geumland?” the question has been wondering on his mind ever since he basically got thrown out of the prince’s chambers yesterday.

The prince loses his smile as soon as it appeared.

“You’re right. It’s none of your business.” Woohyun stands up, cleaning the dirt left in his legs and walked towards the things they left on a side of a tree.

“I’m sorry” Sunggyu apologizes running to him. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

The prince sighs a few times with his back against Sunggyu.

“I just don’t know if I can trust you yet.” Woohyun whispers.

“What if I tell you a secret of mine?” Sunggyu offers. The prince thinks it’s a bit useless. Why would Sunggyu’s secret be as important as his? But Woohyun didn’t mind hearing him out.

“Alright.” Woohyun answers, leaning back against the tree trunk with his arms crossed.

Sunggyu thinks about what to say. It’s not that he doesn’t have secrets, the total opposite, he has too many he doesn’t know which one would be pertinent to share. So he goes with the most simple one he’s got, the one that it’s exactly not a secret, but it’s neither something he shares around.

“I used to have a trauma, with blood.” Sunggyu says. “I think it was when I was around 3 or 4 years old. My parents told me one day I came from into the forest and ran into their arms, crying as if someone had been killed.” the knight laughs at the expression. “And someone must’ve been cause I had blood stain all over me. I don’t remember anything about my childhood though, it gives me a headache if I try hard to think about it.”

Woohyun loses the grip of his arms against his chest. “I’m sorry to hear that.” It helps in some measure, but he’s not completely sure he could trust the knight. He had trusted Minho just as much as he trusted Boohyun and look what happened.

“So..?”

“What?” The prince frowns.

“Your secret.”

“Oh... I never said I would. Just accepted your secret.” The prince chuckles, taking his things. “Let’s go back to the castle... the sun is hiding.”

Sunggyu doesn’t think much of his last sentence, rather sulking for not hearing out the answer of his question. But Woohyun walks back rather fast.

V. The Many Faces of Nam Woohyun

Sunggyu dreams of screams that night. Screams that have been haunting him for years yet never long enough to let him place them in the right place of his memory. He knew he lived those screams of pain, the ‘where are you kid?’ that sounded as if it was whispered right behind his ear.

There is not a single picture in these dreams. Only darkness that felt way too familiar to just be something made up by his mind.

He feels scared inside these dreams. Scared to death. Hoping to survive yet waiting for the end that felt around him, stalking him, waiting for him to come outside and finally do what is meant to be done.

Sometimes he stays hidden. He embraces the darkness within him and waits for it to pass. On some other times, he feels too tired to keep through it. So he walks out of his hiding place, accepting whatever what was about to come.

In this time, water comes.

Quite literally.

“Get up, sunshine.” A voice greets him with a sarcastic tone.

Sunggyu cleans up his face with the palm of his hand, and sees Sungjong smiling mischievously at him with an empty bucket in his hand.

“You know, I will never understand why were you chosen. Don’t ever tell Woohyun-hyung I said this but... wouldn’t anyone cut their finger off for a high position? It doesn’t mean they’re loyal, but that they’re crazy enough to do it. And I think that's your case.”

Sungjong walks around the room, biting off a fresh apple that was sitting in Sunggyu’s desk. The younger had a lot to say but Sunggyu had nothing to hear, not in this state.

“What?” the older asks, barely comprehending a word.

“My point is,” Sungjong gives another bite, sitting on top of the desk. “You’re crazy. Crazy for offering your finger, and crazy because the sun has been up since some hours ago and Woohyun-hyung is waiting for you in the main salon.”

Sunggyu snaps his eyes open and trips on his way out of bed. Sungjong chuckles as he sees the older trying to rinse his face, fix his morning (more like afternoon) hair and wrongly putting on his pants the other way around all at the same time.

“I will pray for your ass today. You will need it.”

Sunggyu learned that, like anyone else, Woohyun had many faces. The pissed off face, the embarrassed face, the smiley face and probably many more. Between these three, he knew which one he was going to get as soon as he walked down towards the main salon.

And he wasn't wrong on his guess, as the prince was almost making holes on him by the way he severely looked at the knight arriving way too late. He was talking with some lords and the knight slowly and silently approached the prince, standing up besides him.

Woohyun dismisses the lords and before Sunggyu could apologize, says, "Save it, I don't want to hear it."

His tone feels dry in Sunggyu's ears. Nothing like the prince's happy tone from the previous afternoon. He doesn't know the prince very well yet, but it's obvious his mood won't change in the entire day. He wonders if it's only because of him, or because the daughter of the Park family had arrived to test the waters with Woohyun.

The princess is rather pretty. Sunggyu wouldn't say it out loud, but it was not the typical beauty that resided on her features, it was something else. Something more tempting in the way she smiled making her eyes hide or maybe it was the tone of her voice. Not that he would marry her if he got the chance, but he was certainly into what the princess was saying, more than Woohyun at least.

The prince smiled from time to time, having more interest on the way his feet walked around the salon and how his long coat took some dirt from the floor.

"And I don't mean to be a nuisance, but I would love to see the queen's garden and-"

"We can arrange that." Woohyun smiles.

"Really?" The princess squeals in delight, with a high pitch tone that totally turned off Sunggyu's admiration of her beauty.

"Of course." Woohyun looks around the salon and called one of the handmaidens "Jisoo! Come here for a second."

Said handmaiden walked towards the prince with her head down.

"Could you take... *this* lovely lady to my mother's garden?" Sunggyu laughs in his mind, noticing that Woohyun didn't even try to learn the princess' name.

"What? But I thought we'd go together, your grace."

"Me? No, I don't like gardens." The prince lies. "But you should totally go, it is really pretty indeed. Go Jisoo, before the sun gets too high and warm." he pushes the handmaiden towards

the princess and both of them are basically forced to leave the room.

It is not until both are finally nowhere to be seen that he lets a heavy sigh come out, and Sunggyu allows himself to chuckle silently. But not silently enough without being noticed by the prince.

“And what are you laughing about?” The prince snaps angrily. The knight’s stomach answers instead. “You haven’t eaten?”

Sunggyu shakes his head. “But it’s fine, I can-” his stomach grumbles again, and the prince sighs... again.

“Let’s go to the kitchen.” The prince says.

“It’s not necess-”

“I didn’t ask you if it was necessary.” Woohyun barks.

They walk towards the kitchen, alarming everyone in the place. Chefs are suddenly working faster on finishing up this afternoon’s dishes to feed the apparently hungry prince. In less than ten minutes a rushed plate is served for said one.

With his index finger, Woohyun pushes the plate towards Sunggyu. They’re sitting in the knights’ dining room.

“I’m telling you that I’m-”

“Do you hear me asking you questions?” The prince asks, and Sunggyu suppresses the need to laugh but a smile still comes out. Woohyun rolls his eyes. “Aside from that one. So just eat.”

Sunggyu grabs the fork and starts eating his porridge. The prince stares at him with a blank face.

“I’m not comfortable with someone looking at me while I eat.” Sunggyu comments as he munches the food.

“And I’m not comfortable with having to spend my entire morning with annoying princesses and without my personal knight because he slept over, but I guess we’re all making sacrifices today.” The prince retorts.

Sunggyu feels like being friendly with the prince today, more than before, but he can see the stress there is in his features as the prince rubs his temples. The knight wonder what’s stressing him, so he voices out the question.

“Why did the Park princess came today?”

“The king is trying to marry me off just like a farmer selling his calf.” Woohyun explains. “Just that this time the calf gets to ‘choose’ who gets to take him.”

“Why?” Sunggyu asks biting off a carrot.

“Because I’m the heir, and we’ve got no time.” Woohyun says, then adds more to himself than to Sunggyu “I’ve got no time...”

"Something on your mind?"

"Just finish eating." The prince hisses.

They spend another half an hour there, sitting on the dining table and talking about mundane things. For some slight moments Sunggyu forgets who Woohyun was. He was constantly reminded when the younger had a serious face but when he smiled or even scowled at him, it felt more like talking to a friend than to the one and only prince of the realm.

The afternoon was too good to be real, so of course, something had to come and ruin it. Or rather someone.

"You can't go in there, princess!" Both males turn their faces to the female figure coming inside, stumping her feet like a bull would. Sunggyu is the only one who stands up once she gets near. Woohyun decides to keep on resting his head over his palm.

"I did not come here to be treated like this" The princess rages, with Jisoo and even Commander Jungyeop behind her, advising her again and again to calm down and think this through. Woohyun was from the very morning in a bad mood, and having the princess now pissed off too would only make things worst.

"Then you shouldn't have come at all." The prince laughs to himself. "There's a lot of princesses waiting in line, one less will only make things faster so I advice you to-" before Woohyun could finish up his sentence, the princess takes the porridge bowl and throws its content on top of Woohyun. It's not a lot, actually, since Sunggyu almost completely finished it up, but having even one dirtied hair would be the end of everything.

"That's my advice for you, *your grace*." The princess smiles triumphantly, but it is obvious she is as scared as everyone else, as her smiles twitches and her hand holding the bowl is trembling as much.

Woohyun finally stands up, and even Sunggyu is fearing for was going to come next. What if Woohyun grew a liking on chopping off extremities just like Sungjong? What if he sent the princess to get her hand cut off? A month ago Sunggyu would've laughed about the idea, but he wasn't so sure about laughing now.

The prince's eyes are intense, but what scared the most was the cynical smile on his face, as if he prepared the whole thing and the mouse just came into his trap. "Jisoo, please take this lovely lady back to her horse, be sure she is impeccable on her way out. We wouldn't want to send her in inadequate conditions." The handmaiden forcefully grabs the princess by her forearm and drags her out of the room. Jungyeop comes close with a clean rag on his hand, and Woohyun takes it, annoyed.

"It's the third princess today Woohyun. You can't keep on making them mad to get them away." Jungyeop says with a disappointed tone.

"If they don't want me then-"

"If they don't want you, then one of them will be literally forced to marry you. Happy or not."

Both the Commander and prince look at each other profusely, having their own quiet discussing through stares and Sunggyu feels somehow in an awkward position. But what can he do? He should be with Woohyun at all times, and the prince hasn't asked him to step out.

Woohyun ends the quiet stare discourse with a scoff. "Fine, whatever, I'll be in my room for the rest of the day. Don't bother knocking, won't open for anybody." That went towards Jungyeop as well as Sunggyu, who probably wanted to help somehow. The prince eyes both of the knights with anger and before walking out of the room, he takes a bottle of wine with him.

Jungyeop sighs, feeling defeated. "I knew he would do this."

"What? Sulk?" Sunggyu asks.

"No, mistreat the princesses." Jungyeop answers. "It's the second time the princess Park has come to Woohyun, and I kind of expected a better outcome this time but-" the older laughs to himself. "I don't know why I was expecting that."

∞

Since the prince locks himself in his room, Sunggyu now has the entire afternoon for himself. The free time doesn't really help, as he spends most of it wondering how the prince was doing, and the reasons behind all this. He understood if Woohyun didn't want to marry someone right away, but it had to be done at one point, so he could might as well go with it.

The knight spends his afternoon with the blacksmiths, begging for the opportunity to mold some steel again. Jaebum, the head blacksmith, felt a little skeptical about letting the knight get into his comfort cave, but he gave away just because Sunggyu was Woohyun's knight. If the prince were to hear his knight was denied something, well, let's just say Jaebum liked his job very much.

So that is how Sunggyu gets to grab the old tools he's been ignoring for the past years. He got to perfection his sword back at the citadel fortress, but it was only once, and doesn't matter how many times he told to himself he'd go back to molding steel again, he never got the time for it. Jaebum watched from the side, focused on Sunggyu's hits with the hammer over the sword blade, and he was surprised for the great job.

"How do you do it?" The blacksmith asks after a while, admiring the blade Sunggyu just made when it cooled off.

"I used to work on this before" Sunggyu confesses with a slight pink sneaking onto his cheeks.

"Are you making one for prince Woohyun?" Jaebum asks without tearing his sight from the blade.

"What?"

"I thought you'd come for that." Jaebum says. "You aren't?"

"Oh... no, no, just wanted to cool off my head." Sunggyu laughs awkwardly. He looks outside and sees the moon greeting him from up in the sky. He must've really spend hours inside the blacksmith's place. "I have to leave now"

"Come back later" Jaebum offers, "I'll help you make one for prince Woohyun. I think he was complaining about the one he has now."

Sunggyu nods, taking off the apron and walking outside. He felt a lot better now, between flames and the familiar heat intoxicating his body. The sweat over his forehead felt satisfactory and the idea of making one for Woohyun excited him.

"Oh, there you are!" Sunggyu turns around and sees Jisoo walking fast to him, with a letter in her hand. "Here, it's a letter for prince Woohyun."

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"Because I'm not allowed into his chambers." Jisoo answers.

"Neither am I."

"But you can sweep it under the door." Jisoo rolls her eyes, "Look, if I'm seen around his room at this hour I'll surely be fired, but if you're seen, well, it's you."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Sunggyu asks.

"Nothing, just, take the letter and sweep it." Jisoo walks back down the stairs, and seconds after she's nowhere to be seen. Sunggyu stays on his place for a few seconds, debating between delivering the letter tomorrow morning or now, like Jisoo told him to... it is indeed late, so, maybe the prince is sleeping already.

The letter feels heavy on his hands, so he decides to deliver it now, get off with it fast rather than keeping it with him the entire night. He walks slowly towards Woohyun's chambers and sees light from under the door. Could it be that he was still up? Or did he fall asleep without turning off the candles?

Sunggyu walks two steps at a time, being careful to not trip on his way up as he doesn't really sees the steps, not with only one candle with him. The whole castle has fallen into darkness, and every sound is suddenly stronger than before. His own steps resound along the corridor and then he's in front of it.

The prince's door is color gold. Sunggyu never gave much thought of it, not under the sunlight, but now under the light of the candle the door looked more outstanding than before.

The knight hesitates on sweeping the letter under the door or not, he doesn't want to hold it any second more, knowing sure that if something happened to it, it would only be his and only his fault. There's no sound behind the door, so Sunggyu takes it as a hint that he should sweep it, now more than later, when the prince is sleeping.

He crouches in front of the golden door and when half of the letter is on the other side, the door opens. Sunggyu doesn't need to lift his head to know who is standing one feet away from him, eyeing him with a candle of his own.

"What are you doing?" The prince asks, but Sunggyu doesn't dare to look up to answer.

"A letter came for you" Sunggyu whispers, with his eyes on what little he could see of the floor. He offers the letter to the prince and hopes he takes it and shuts the door before him, ending this embarrassing moment for him.

But the prince's hand never touches the letter. Instead, he grabs the knight from his wrist and pushes him inside the room, closing the door behind them. Woohyun pushes Sunggyu's back against the door, and this would all look so sexual if it wasn't because the prince was frowning two inches away from Sunggyu's face like a baby seeing something for the first time, as if he didn't know who was before him.

"Who are you?"

Sunggyu smells wine from Woohyun's breath and understands right away.

The prince is drunk.

Woohyun lifts the candle a bit more to see Sunggyu's face, when this one also lights up the prince's hair and Sunggyu closes his eyes hard as he could.

"What are you doing?" Woohyun asks.

"You-your hair" Sunggyu answers and hears a chuckle in return.

"What about it? It's just hair."

The knight hesitates on stating the obvious, afraid that the prince would a bit bipolar on this state and would get mad if he said it out loud. Junhyung was like that when drunk, all smiles and jokes until you say the painful obvious truth and then you got yourself a mad bull against you. He reckons the prince won't probably remember any of this the next morning, so he opens his eyes, slowly.

The prince is still two inches away from him, analyzing his face as if it was the most interesting thing he has ever seen in the whole world. But Sunggyu doesn't have time to think about that, not when his eyes fall on the prince's beautiful hair.

For a moment he wonder how'd feel to touch the hair. Caress it with love and maybe tug it on the back and-

"Ah, Sunggyu" The prince chuckles, finally recognizing the knight and showing the older his canine tooth hidden in his mouth as he smiles.

The prince walks back to the bed where the bottle of wine was sitting, and he takes another long sip from it. It's not a sip of someone who from time to time drank wine, but from one who did it quite occasionally. "Come sit with me" the prince says from across the room.

"I should leave" Sunggyu answers in return, but he does no effort on doing such thing. His eyes had followed the golden locks as the prince moved around, as if the hair had casted a spell on him and he was doomed to love the sight of the whole thing.

The room is quite similar to Sunggyu's, just that this one has a balcony and everything looked ten times more expensive than his stuff. The wind outside enters through the windows, dancing along with the curtains.

"Just come" Woohyun says, this time with a tone a bit deeper. Sunggyu's body stops answering to him, but to the prince, so he walks towards the bed and sits on it. "Take off your armor."

Sunggyu frowns immediately, having in his mind a whole list of forbidden things that command could take them. What it scares him is that he would follow them nevertheless.

"You're making too much noise with it, it's annoying." The prince laughs, noticing the knight's frown. "Do you know where the letter comes from?" Woohyun asks, trying to take a better look at the letter. "My eyes don't really work under this poor light, and I'm a bit too drunk to read anything anyway."

Woohyun throws the letter at Sunggyu's face and the knight squints his eyes to read the envelop. The prince chuckles and murmurs something to himself.

"What?" Sunggyu asks, lifting his head.

"Nothing, just tell me what does it say."

Sunggyu, after another few seconds trying to find a name or anything written over it, identifies the logo in one of the corners of the envelop.

"It's a letter from the Jangs." Woohyun hums in response, but his eyes are shut. Sunggyu doesn't say anything more, and the prince opens one an eye to look at him.

"Do you like my hair this much?" The prince giggles, and Sunggyu, for the second time, has to look somewhere else, embarrassed to be caught. But how can anyone not notice him staring at the locks, when he is opening his eyes as much as he can.

The silence sits peacefully between them and Sunggyu wonders if the prince has finally gone to sleep. But it's as if the prince has heard his thoughts out again, sighing before putting back the bottle of wine against his lips.

Just after he finishes it up and lets the bottle fall down with a tug, he turns around to the knight.

“Why are you a knight?” Woohyun asks.

“Pardon me?”

“Why aren’t you... I don’t know, a chef? I guess that could be easy so... why a knight?”

“Because I want to protect y-”

“Is that really your answer?” The prince chuckles drunkenly, accommodating on his side of the bed to look better at Sunggyu. “You can be honest with me, it’s not like I’m going to get mad if you say it’s for the money.”

Sunggyu frowns at the thought. “It’s nothing like that... I... I originally was a blacksmith, was going to spend my entire life crafting armor and weapons. It was the perfect road for me, having my father as mentor even.”

“What changed?”

The knight lets his body rest against the bed’s wooden poll. “Your brother” He says truthfully. “He once came to the shop and told me I was doing a great job, I also made him that dagger you had the other day, that’s how I knew it was his. Anyway, no matter how good I was at that, he thought I could do better as a knight. And I believed him, just like that, I changed my dream and started getting familiar to the idea of being on his side later on but...”

“But he died.” Woohyun answers drierly, “and now you got me.”

“And now I got you.” Sunggyu repeats and the prince starts showing his disappointment on his face, “I got a responsibility much more greater than taking care of him, and I’m more than glad to be the one who gets to take care of you.”

It’s his drunken state, Woohyun knows. He doesn’t want to believe these words but they’re so nice to hear, something different than just people making him feel like he shouldn’t be the one alive, like he shouldn’t be the one to rule the kingdom later on. Everyone liked Boohyun, he had always been the perfect fit for the throne, he was good as his job of prince, good as son and even good as an older brother. There wasn’t a single flaw in him, and that was probably his greatest one.

Woohyun sees once again the sincerity in Sunggyu’s eyes, and he for once, lets himself believe the knight.

Sunggyu is a curious person. Ever since he had memory, he always wanted to know stuff, how things worked and even if he didn’t get to take into practice some of the skills he heard of (like how Howon can shoot an arrow to the sky and make it fall on the target a bunch of meters away from them), he likes to know about it, likes to hear the explanation to everything.

So, in some measure, he always knew how much of a serious matter it was, Woohyun's hair that is. Magic was prohibited, all witches and wizards had been killed and whoever practiced magic was doomed to be burn alive. The king had despised magic ever since he was a prince, and the year Woohyun had been borned, the citadel as well as every city in the kingdom was in the process of suffering riots made by magicals. It all forever ended when in Woohyun's first name day a lord who happened to be a wizard in disguise threw a cast on him.

Woohyun's hair turns blond every night, a color everyone used to love because of the value it represented, Gold. But now, it represented magic, the thing everyone is taught to hate.

Magicals are all dead (in theory), giving the victory to the king, but Woohyun, his own son, was the living prove that he couldn't end with magic all together.

Sunggyu remembers his parents talking about it when he was younger. His father used to have a strong opinion on the matter, always saying that magicals weren't people, even if they looked like it. But after the incident where he burned his father's wrist, his opinion wasn't as strong as before.

"You were a miracle." his father had said. "And nothing will change that."

'Nothing' meant the part where Sunggyu was probably a magical, and a part of him was relief of those words, but the most part was still trying to deny reality. For him it's easier to pretend those episodes didn't happen at all. It's not that he didn't like magicals, he never encountered one before (and he wonders, would Woohyun be a magical now?), but he knew very well being one wasn't a good thing in this time around.

So now, being in the prince's chambers, with the prince himself drunk, he saw an opened door to this puzzle he never got to complete, not without knowing by first hand how it all was.

It was a risky move, maybe Woohyun could take the question in the wrong way (though there was no good way) and push him down through his balcony for him to crack his head on the asphalt. But where could he get another chance?

"So... can I ask you a question?" Sunggyu tested Woohyun's consciousness with a simple question. The prince is lying on his side, with his eyes closed and steady breathing the knight could swear he has fallen asleep.

Of course, that is not the case.

"Aren't you already?" Woohyun answers, and giggles after, making Sunggyu roll his eyes. (The more he talks with the prince, the more he can feel him as a younger friend, more than probably the most important and influential person in the 4 oceans.) "Ask, shoot, throw your question at me, fill the empty space, voice out your thoug-"

"Okay" Sunggyu cuts him off, trying to not sound as annoyed as he suddenly was. "I was curious... about your hair."

The prince sighs loudly, somehow expecting the end of that sentence. "And it all goes down to the hair. I wonder if there'd be a day where my hair wasn't the topic of anything." He opens up his eyes and suddenly sits on the bed, looking right at the knight who was now taken aback by the sudden movement.

"You know what's our problem?" The prince asks now, totally forgetting what they were talking about. Sunggyu shakes his head and Woohyun approaches him slowly. "Ah!" he snaps his fingers and looks for something under his bed.

There's a sound of bottles moving around and then Woohyun erects back up with a new bottle of wine in his hand.

"Our problem is that you're very much sober."

"How many of those do you have there?" The knight asks in horror. "I thought you only took one."

Woohyun shrugs, taking off the cork "I asked Sungjong to bring me more, and I stopped counting after five." he laughs. "Now, drink this."

"I don't want to." Sunggyu shakes his head. "I'm gonna get a headache tomorrow and-"

"Ah, don't be a baby, just do it." The knight for once doesn't follow the prince's order, folding his arms up in his chest. "If you drink I'll answer whatever question you got for me." Woohyun states, moving the bottle to Sunggyu's side once again.

The knight perks up at this and quickly grabs the wine to take a long gulp from him.

"So, about your hair." Sunggyu cleans his mouth with his forearm and fights against the need to burp. He is sitting on a better position, mirroring the prince's. "Does it do something special?"

Woohyun laughs out loud. "That was your question? No, sorry to disappoint you, but it does nothing than give me judging looks and the hate from my parents. Drink again."

Sunggyu follows his orders once again and throws at the prince another question.

They spend some time like this, asking each other questions and getting to know a bit more about each other. Like how Woohyun considers Sungjong the closest thing of a brother besides Boohyun, and he starts talking about him, as he if he didn't die a few weeks ago. And Sunggyu doesn't stop him, being himself too somehow ignorant of that ugly fact. He talks about how he really has no intention of getting married to anybody anytime soon, doesn't matter if that meant going to the throne single, and Sunggyu makes sure to remember that, even if he doesn't dare to ask more about it.

Sunggyu talks about Howon at some point, explains to the prince he kind of missed his younger brother and that he reminded him of Howon in some measure. The knight talks about how the life in the citadel is like, the fights he's gotten into mainly because of Howon or the things he did as a guard down there.

At some point Woohyun asks him to light some other candles around, and Sunggyu takes one with him and places it over some books on the bedside.

The bottle is almost finished up when Woohyun thinks of something else.

He grabs the bottle from Sunggyu's grip and moves to his side. Sunggyu is too busy laughing over something unimportant to notice the change on the room. Before he knows it, the prince is almost sitting on his lap with a faint but serious expression on his face.

"Wha-what are you doing?" Sunggyu asks, still sober up enough to realize that this is not okay.

"Finish up the bottle." Woohyun orders, placing the tip of the bottle against Sunggyu's lips and forcing him to gulp down what was left of wine, staring at his Adam's apple move quickly the entire time as he finally makes himself comfortable in the knight's lap.

Sunggyu knows the mood in the room has changed, as well as the stare he's getting from the prince is nothing more than an effect of the alcohol. Which makes this more wrong than it already is. But the moment his mouth finishes up the wine, Woohyun captures his lips in a deep kiss.

His tongue invades Sunggyu's mouth in matter of seconds, seeking to taste the wine along with the knight's unique flavour. His hands hold the knight by the neck, making sure to have him in the right angle and deepen the kiss than it already began like. For the first second, Sunggyu's hands hover over Woohyun's arms with the intention to break off the kiss, but when the prince does it himself and opens his eyes to stare at him with an intense gaze, Sunggyu forgets the reason why he lift his arms in the first place.

There's a thin line of saliva connecting their mouths and Sunggyu swallows in hunger, forgetting who he just kissed, addicted to the taste that it left on his mouth. Sunggyu can endure a few bottles of wine on his own without getting drunk, but he feels totally wasted right now, and he's not sure it's just the wine's effect.

"Kiss me" The prince whispers against his mouth.

His hands position on Woohyun's back, and this time he's the one starting the kiss.

It's slow, but strong. The lips crash against each other once again and Woohyun moves his hands to cup the back of the knight's hair, leaving a hot trail on Sunggyu's neck with his hands. The knight tilts his head and forces his tongue inside the prince's mouth, moaning at the sensation of burning.

Cause that's how he felt this entire thing. Hot. In the literal sense of the word. He felt his body on fire, and he couldn't make any other explanation than to say that it was the reaction the prince had on him. His hands move to the prince's hip and he moves a hand to the inside of his shirt, caressing the naked skin.

Woohyun was even more advanced in his ministration, having already pushed Sunggyu's shirt up to the middle of his torso. They break off the kiss and Woohyun moves to the

knight's jaw with kisses and bites, making his way down to the collarbone and leaving a trail of purple spots.

The knight obeys and lifts up his arms as Woohyun takes his shirt off. And maybe everything is suddenly happening faster than before, because in the blink of an eye Woohyun is shirtless too, staring at the knight's torso, admiring the scars he had. They were all old and Sunggyu forgot about them by then, but as Woohyun faintly caresses over them, his body responds automatically, making discharges of electricity run through his body.

"You're beautiful" Woohyun whispers with his lips over Sunggyu's, barely touching the other's lips as he pronounces the 'b'. Sunggyu sinks his mouth in the corner of the prince's neck, breathing in his scent as well as kissing and biting his way down, leaving his personal mark on the younger. Woohyun moans and gives more access to the knight's mouth as his hips start moving back and forward against Sunggyu's.

The movement makes Sunggyu groan, feeling his growing erection being rubbed against the prince's, and he secures his hands on Woohyun's sides, making the hump faster and stronger down on his crotch.

But the friction is obviously not enough, so without thinking twice Sunggyu turns the prince around and down against the mattress, positioning himself between his legs and catching his lips into another kiss. Woohyun tries tangling his arms around Sunggyu's neck, but the action is soon undone, Sunggyu grabbing both of his wrists and pinning them down on his sides.

Sunggyu starts the humping once again, this time both clothed crotches touching each other more directly. The prince tangles his legs around Sunggyu's waist, and breaks off the kiss to pant loudly, getting near his end. The knight opts to kiss the other's jaw, but he is soon mixing his moans with him instead.

He knows he must be grabbing the prince's wrist a bit too forcefully, but none of them worry about that, not when there's a wonderful feeling coming between their legs. Sunggyu is a few thrusts away from coming when he looks up to the prince's eyes. Even with the poor light he can register Woohyun's beautiful features. Their faces are mirroring each other, eyes opened with a deep stare and mouths vaguely opened as well, crashing together every thrust.

And then Woohyun closes his eyes and Sunggyu feels the hot cum against his pants. No long after he comes too, and Woohyun shuts his moan in a kiss.

Sunggyu never thought of the prince in a sexual way, but he couldn't deny the younger looked so beautiful like that (moaning and panting for air because of him), and he would kill to live it all again.

The kiss after is lazy, as both males start drifting into dreamland, but Sunggyu cups Woohyun's jaw one last time as he kisses the prince before said one finally falls asleep. The knight moves to his side and stares at the ceiling, repeating to himself that he won't fall asleep before he closes his eyes to blink, and they never open again.

VI. Sweet rain

Woohyun is sitting on a chair in front of his bed, staring at the sheets and what (or more like who) laid underneath them. He was having too many thoughts at once to mention any. His hands caressed his wrists, wrists which were sore because of last night's events. Maybe it was much more than just soreness, maybe it was a real burn injury. But he pays no attention to that, having most of his attention on the naked torso of the knight lying on his bed instead, breathing so softly and making the prince's thoughts start to cloud yet again, just like last night.

This isn't his first time. Sadly, Woohyun changes completely into a different person when he drinks alcohol, and had more than once made a move with a handmaiden or even with...

But he never went this far. Stolen kisses and hands dancing on the inside of clothes, that's all he did... until now.

He sighs heavily.

He covers both of his wrists with two thick wristbands. Fixing his hair for the third time and walking out of the room, he closes the door behind him as quiet as he could.

But not quite enough, as the knight jerks, waking up.

Sunggyu feels dirty.

No, dirty is not enough of word. Maybe disgusting? Yeah, it felt more like that.

His eyes squint with the sun hitting directly to him, and the first thing that he feels is the stickiness inside his pants. For now he doesn't even try to remember what is it that happened last night, still in the process of waking up. He opens one eye and the other one follows immediately when he doesn't recognize the room as his. He sits on the bed and soon enough he regrets doing it. His head hurts and feels the vomit slowly building up at the base of his dry throat.

He starts remembering last night's events, slowly and with isolated fragments. He remembers the letter, remembers the prince's golden hair, something about drinking wine and-

Fuck.

Maybe it didn't really happen, he consoles himself with his eyes closed. This couldn't be the first time his mind played games on him but- but why is he in the prince's room? He lifts the bed sheet and smells it, recognizing the prince's scent right away. It was a mixture of strawberries and something that could only scream Woohyun. He moves his hips a little and the stickiness make him grimace, finally embracing the crude truth.

"Fuck, fuck" Sunggyu hisses, standing up and walking towards the bathroom in a weird manner. He tries to clean the inside of his pants, but it's a lost cause and the smell couldn't be

any gross.

Now with more conscious he can think about last night. It was- it was good, truthfully. But it was bad, it was really bad. He was supposed to protect the prince, maybe even become friends at some point, if he was lucky, just like Woohyun claimed Sungjong was to him, almost like a brother. But friends weren't supposed to dry hump each other after a bottle of wine.

He blames himself. Woohyun had too much to drink and obviously didn't know what he was doing, but Sunggyu did. Sunggyu wasn't that affected by the wine, he was only affected by the younger's lips and the wonders that they made him feel every time they touched his skin and-

Sunggyu curses at the morning wood inside his pants.

But this can't be any worst at least, right?

The door opens without making a sound, and Sunggyu doesn't notice the intruder, not until said person is laughing out loud at him. He turns around and spots Sungjong on the floor.

"Your butt is so tiny!" The younger laughs, his eyes fixed on said place. Sunggyu curses out loud and closes the door in a strong swing. "But hey," Sungjong continues a minute after, and his tone sounds like he still wants to laugh some more "what are you doing here anyway? Did you-... oh my-"

Sunggyu pulls his pants up and opens the door right before the kid could finish the sentence.

"Shut up!" Sunggyu covers the younger's mouth with his palm.

Sungjong mumbles something, and then pushes aside the hand to say it again. "Why did you do it?"

"What?" Sunggyu furrows his eyebrows.

"Why did you do it?" Sungjong looks upset now, "Woohyun is not that kind of hyung! Why did you corrupted him?"

"I- I didn't corrupt him!" Sunggyu answers. *It was actually the other way around.* "It's none of your business anyway!"

"Do you like him?" Sungjong asks now. "I care for him and you cannot play with hyung's heart like this!"

"No one is playing with no one's heart" Sunggyu answers annoyed. He had enough trouble defining the whole act to himself, now trying to explain it to someone else (to a minor on top of that) is not something he wants to do.

Sungjong pouts a bit more but goes back to his original task anyway, changing the bed sheets. Sunggyu sighs in a bit of relief when the younger doesn't say anything else. The headache

was doing wonders to his mind, so he didn't had the time to put up with whatever brother-y behavior the younger was having.

He serves himself a glass of water from on top of the table, and it is until then that he notices the opened letter besides the pitcher. The envelop is sitting besides it, clearly opened.

It is none of his business, he knows, this is not the type of person he is but ever since last night, when the letter had been in his hands, he started dying out of curiosity. Curiosity of what the letter said. So he pushes the letter with his knuckles, unfolding it open it but not being so obvious about it.

Woohyunnie!

I won't say your letter didn't surprise me,
but I won't say I wasn't glad to receive it either.
Are you better? I'm worried for you.

Of course you can come, Woohyun.
You know you are always well received here,
so don't hesitate on coming by.
My sister is dying to see you again! And you know her name day is coming up, right?
You could make it to her party, you would be very welcomed.

I crave to see you again, my friend. Until then, take care.

-Jang Dongwoo, prince of the house of Jang
(and the best friend anyone could have so visit me more you brat)

Sunggyu pushes the letter aside, not understanding what he just read. 'Of course you can come'? Was Woohyun planning any trip?

"Where is he?" Sunggyu asks, looking for Sungjong around the room. The younger is collecting the wine bottles from under the bed, so he peeks an eye to see the knight. "Where's Woohyun?"

"Shouldn't you know that?" Sungjong answers with a mocking tone, continuing his task. "It's the seventh day."

Sunggyu stays silent. Seventh day? Is there something every seventh day? It sounds like something important, and Jungyeop probably told him about this but right at the moment he can't make any proper thought without having a headache. Having no answer in return, the younger sighs loudly.

“Seventh day, *Sunggyu-ssi*. It’s council day.”

∞

He is late, he knows. How much? That, he doesn’t.

But he still makes a run for it.

He changes into a new set of clothes before running down to the second floor and into one of the salons far at the end where the royal council gathers every seventh day. Woohyun didn’t use to attend these gatherings, Boohyun did. But with the recent events Woohyun had been forced to do a lot of things he didn’t do before, like hearing a bunch of old guys raising complains about topics he didn’t know how to help on, or things the crown had to decide on. The king would look at the prince each time a problem is mentioned and after receiving nothing but silence, he would sigh, every time louder. Sunggyu, surprisingly, remembers all this from last night, as Woohyun complained for almost half an hour.

It’s an inner achievement that Sunggyu arrives at the right room on his first try, but the thought is long forgotten as he opens the door. He means not to make much sound, but his plan fails miserably as every person in the room turn their head towards him.

There’s a rectangular table in the middle of the room, and several lords sit around it along with the king, his right hand and prince Woohyun. Said prince is standing up, barely finishing his sentence when Sunggyu interrupted.

“I think it would be a fine arrangement, the crown could do much better tightening up our friendship with them.” Woohyun finishes, sitting back on his chair, not sparing an eye towards Sunggyu. Said knight knows better than to just stand in the door, so he walks in and stands far behind Woohyun’s chair, watching the back of the prince’s brown hair.

For once, the king is smiling. So warmly you couldn’t believe it was directed towards Woohyun.

“Well done, boy. I’ve heard you and I liked your idea.” the smile loses down a bit. “but I can’t let you go.”

“Why?” the prince asks, rather surprised.

“It is too risky.” The right hand answers instead. His name is Joohyuk, Sunggyu has rarely seen him around the castle, as he spends most of his time dealing with problems that require his presence outside of the castle, or inside his room, dealing with other problems that required his royal approval in letter. Joohyuk had been a close friend of the king ever since he

was a prince, so no one was surprised when he was chosen as his right hand on the king's crowning day.

"We cannot risk losing our only heir." Joohyuk continues.

"Only male heir, you mean." Woohyun answers back, serious. "I cannot think you forgot Soohyun exists and carries the Nam name just like I do."

"Of course," Joohyuk says. "n-no one forgets the princess. But we're not giving away the crown to any other prince who would be courting our princess out of pure interest."

"If I don't go, we won't be showing our sincerity." Woohyun retorts, going back to the main topic. "The crown could do great with the gold, more mercenaries would stop by the capital instead of going to the ports. And the house Jang needs more food, more people, our people who can plant and not let their yield die on them on the tenth day, like it's happening to them right now. It's a situation where everyone wins. I must mention that I have a tight friendship with their prince, Dongwoo, and you know that father."

"Sending you with our guards would catch the common eye, eyes that don't wish good on us." Joohyuk continues. "I strongly oppose to--"

The king raises a hand and Joohyuk stops talking.

"I know you go with friendly intentions, Woohyun." The king sighs, "and as you remember, the house Jang has their own princess, Petal."

Woohyun sighs, knowing where the king was going. "I-I remember. Her name day is coming up."

"More than just a talk and an agreement written on paper, I would want you to go for marriage purposes. Only under those intentions I'd let you go." The king states.

"But father--"

"The crown is fine. Yes, we could do better if we do an arrangement but we're not on desperate times. Not for arrangements that doesn't involve you getting married." The king coughs, fixing his body on his chair and moving aside the offered glass of water by Joohyuk. The king had been speaking so confident, actually showing the meaning of his position as ruler of all the kingdoms. But as he coughs, the confidence wears off and it's almost visible how much he's hurting physically. His right hand trembles slightly and he covers it with the other. "So, tell me, will you go and marry their daughter?"

The seconds feel eternal, and Sunggyu, standing on one of the sides of the room, somehow hopes for a no.

He doesn't know why.

"Yes." Woohyun answers. "I'll go with the intention to bring you back a someone I can marry

to.”

The king smiles, and this time he takes the glass of water. “Well then.”

“It is still too risky to send him, my king.” Joohyuk intervenes. “It’s a three days trip. People will see him and-“

“Not if I don’t go with a royal guard following me around. We can make this discrete, bringing the best guards with me, only a few, covering our clothes. We can send the cart of presents with different guards on a different moment.”

“It doesn’t sound like a bad idea, my king.” Jungyeop voices out from the other side of the table. “Sunggyu, his personal guard, is more than qualified to go with him and choose men to accompany the prince. It would take less time to get there too.”

“It sounds like a naive idea.” Another lord from the table says instead. It is not until now when Sunggyu gives himself the time to look at the lord and recognize him. “I believe Sunggyu is good at his job, well, he must be because I can’t find any other logical reason why he got this position, but not only a few men will be enough to protect our prince.” Lord Kwon states, eyeing Sunggyu with the same despise as before, when the younger had been serving as a guard in the citadel.

For Sunggyu, who knew the lord for years, knows exactly what he meant by those words. It is not that he is concerned for the prince’s security, (not entirely at least) but that he just doesn’t want Sunggyu to be the one having to do the job.

“I am not a little kid who doesn’t know how to spin a sword or kill a man.” Woohyun says with a mocking tone.

“I’m not trying to imply that, your grace, I just think you need more than just a few men with you.”

The king sighs, thinking over the two opinions. The room grows quiet and everyone awaits for the answer.

“Fine.” The king says at last. “You will go with at least two more guards, and send a raven to the citadel as soon as you get there. How much time would you be planning to stay? You have errands of your own here.”

“The princess’ name day is next week. At least ten days would be the right amount.” Woohyun says.

“Ten days after your departure, I’ll send a chariot to bring you back with the princess.” The king speaks. “Do not waste time and do not stain our name.”

The lords move to a different topic, and Sunggyu loses himself in his mind. He didn’t quite understand, last night Woohyun said and swore he wasn’t going to please what the king was asking for. What changed? Why is he saying yes to his request? Woohyun had no interest on

helping in these matters and all of a sudden he had a trip planned towards Geumland, to a princess' party?

There's an unpleasant feeling growing on his gut, but he refuses to acknowledge it.

Woohyun doesn't say a word when they walk out of the room, and Sunggyu doesn't try to make conversation either. Even from behind, Sunggyu can see how troubled the young prince is, but he decides this is not his concern. Because none of this is, not really. His concern is solely that the prince is well protected at all times, and for now, he is doing a hell of a job.

"Do you know how to do my brother's sword signature technique?" The prince asks when they're back into Woohyun's room.

The bed is made with brand new sheets, and there's no sign of the slave or the bottle of wines. It's like last night's events didn't even happen in the first place. But they did. The prince is using a turtle neck, too uncomfortable for the hot sticky weather but obviously wanting to hide what couldn't be hidden.

Sunggyu's marks.

"Woohyun.." The knight whispers. Maybe they should really talk about last night, because even if Sunggyu himself doesn't know what it meant, he'd like to know what it meant for Woohyun. Know if he should apologize or maybe, just maybe, allow himself to think last night is something to be repeated.

The prince stares at him with soft eyes. "Do you know, Sunggyu?"

His name sounds good under his voice.

The knight sighs. "The spin and twirl? Yes, I do. Not like your brother did, but I do."

"Excellent." The prince smiles a little. "Because you're gonna teach me."

∞

Sunggyu puts on his leather breast and it feels just right. The sun is shining over him, and the smell of the grass intoxicates his nostrils, letting his mind wander back to the memories of his adolescence period, when he was seventeen and Howon and him weren't children anymore and the tension built for their practice combats were maybe a bit too serious. They had started to use steel swords and covering their bodies with heavier armor. It was uncomfortable to move and funny to be looked at like that, but it just made the combat more exciting, more real.

He closes his eyes and enjoys the memories as he waits for the prince to come out to the

extent meadows. When he does, though, he opens his eyes and needs a moment to process what is in front of him.

Woohyun has always been smokingly hot, the good looks have been running down their family as Boohyun used to be just as handsome. But Sunggyu never let himself think about it, not before last night.

So now it's hard to not think about it. It's hard when he has seen the naked chest hiding under the royal clothes, it's hard when Woohyun looks like he was born to be using armor over him with a sword on his white cleaned gloves enfolding his hands. Sunggyu trips a bit with his feet as he gets in position, and Woohyun's gaze gets severe by the second, accommodating to the right mood for their sword session.

"Let's practice a-a bit first" Sunggyu says, intending to use a dry tone and failing in the process. But the prince nods and looks like he didn't notice.

Woohyun approaches Sunggyu to attack and the latter moves smoothly to the side, pushing away Woohyun's sword with his. Woohyun follows Sunggyu around until the older makes a move and slaps Woohyun's butt with the blade of his sword. It fires Woohyun up on the inside, and Sunggyu smirks at the sight of the prince's red ears. They get into a dance, moving around each other with their eyes fixed on each other's as their swords are the only thing touching.

The prince is good, Sunggyu must say. His movements are defined, the younger determined with every step forward he makes. He is fast too, almost a bit too much that it leaves Sunggyu with his sword pressed near his chest and protecting him from Woohyun's, and it makes him a bit flustered but not enough. Sunggyu is better, and that he knows.

He knows as ten minutes into the combat he spots Woohyun's blind spot. It's on Woohyun's left forearm, the prince is fast but always eager to move forward the right side of his body, leaving the left side to follow behind. With the right swings it could be easy to make a cut on the younger's arm. He pushes Woohyun aside and before the prince launches his attack again, the knight lowers his sword. There's surprise in the prince's eyes, but that doesn't stop him from trying to beat Sunggyu.

Sunggyu grabs Woohyun's clenched grip on the sword and shoves the arm away as he takes Woohyun's left arm and folds it behind his back in matter of seconds.

"Aagh," Woohyun lets his sword fall and cries in pain. He turns his head around to see Sunggyu's smirk inches away from him.

"You're disregarding your left side of the body, I could've killed you twice the past five minutes." The knight laughs, kicking the prince's butt and picking up his sword.

"Can't we just move to the technique?" Woohyun grimaces, flexing and extending his left arm.

"Not until you fix that."

"I'm the prince and-"

"Right now you aren't," Sunggyu interrupts. "You're just another man who needs to fix his posture."

Woohyun doesn't protest any longer and grabs the sword from Sunggyu's hand, immediately striding his sword against the knight and making a funny posture in the process by extending his legs as he only moves forward his right leg. "Ha!" The prince exclaims unconsciously. Sunggyu laughs as he lazily stops the attempt. His head has moved back, his mouth is completely opened (showing off a gold tooth on the back) and his eyes have become crescent moons.

Woohyun finds the laugh annoying and pretentious, as if Sunggyu was so full of himself knowing the prince could never beat him.

But he also finds the laugh like music to his ears, perceiving all the vibrations made within laugh. Sunggyu's apple bounces on his throat and he can't help himself but stare at it while a smile creeps up his own face too.

"Someone is having lots of fun over here" A female voice announces in the distant. Both males turn around and only the youngest of them scoffs in return.

"Yo-our highness!" Sunggyu's smile fade away and a surprised expression take its place. The queen is walking slowly towards them with a toddler clenching onto a side of her long blue dress as a handmaiden follow them behind. The little child has two braids fixed on her brown hair and a frown on her face, quickly hiding behind the queen as her eyes fall onto the knight.

"Why did you come, mother?" Woohyun asks, not sounding too amused for the sudden visit.

Sunggyu notices how the prince suddenly clenches on his sword harder, probably annoyed.

"Soohyun wanted to come and see you, is that something bad?" The queen answers, obviously not looking for an answer.

Said child comes out from her hidden place and runs towards the prince with a smile on her face. Woohyun's expression changes completely, kneeling down to receive the little girl who smelled like flowers. Sunggyu sees how Woohyun smells her hair as he caresses it. He can't help it but smile.

"You've missed me? But you can see me any time, silly." Woohyun smiles, taking a good look onto his sister's childish frown.

"I miss Boohyun" the princess answers in a whisper, her eyes fixed on her index finger drawing an infinite on top of Woohyun's armor. His smile vanishes but a little one still appear when the little girl lifts her sight to see him.

"I miss him too." Woohyun confesses. "I'll tell you what, what if you and I go to his tomb tomorrow, would that cheer you up?" Soohyun shakes her head and Woohyun laughs. "and what if we go see his paintings?" Her face lights up and that makes the prince smile. Sunggyu

is staring at the sight with a warm smile of his. The prince peeks a little glance at the older and his cheeks pink up. "Well, now go back to mama. Your brother is beating up this guy."

Sunggyu can't help but answer back with a mocking tone, "wasn't it the other way around?"

Soohyun look up at him with the same frown she had when she had hid herself in the back of her mother's dress. It looks a lot like Woohyun's, Sunggyu notices. She whispers something in Woohyun's ear, and this makes the prince laugh.

"He's a nice guy, Soohyun. Give him a chance." Woohyun answers.

"But-"

"Go, I need to continue so then I can protect *you* with my life." He pokes Soohyun's nose and the princess giggles as she nods, running back to her mother. But neither of them leave, having a little bench placed a few meters away for them to see the men fight with each other.

"Let us stay," the queen says before Woohyun complains, "everyone is eager to see your skills, son."

The prince only sighs, taking his sword again and shifting his attention to Sunggyu. He doesn't say anything, but it's understood that he just wants to finish this. They continue practicing for some time, Sunggyu doesn't really know how much. Sometimes he lets Woohyun poke his armor with his sword, and the ladies clap in delight. In others, he forgets they're even there or that some other knights have come around to watch them too, and he fixes his eyes solely on the prince. He focuses on Woohyun's breathing, on his teeth clenching with each other and how sweat has started to accumulate on the ends of his hair. Sunggyu looks just the same, but he can't help but smile every time Woohyun makes a progress and dodges Sunggyu's attack on his left side.

Neither of them notice how the clouds started to gather around, a faint mist of water dropping down on them. Soon enough, fat drops start falling from the sky. The queen runs inside with the princess and people start dispersing, leaving the two of them to fight alone like it was supposed to be. They don't stop.

Sunggyu doesn't stop cornering the prince by pressing on all his weaknesses, and Woohyun doesn't stop scoffing, every time trying harder to just disarm Sunggyu already. But the knight moves skillfully even under the rain, even with the mud that began to mix with their feet. The prince's starting to feel fatigued, and doesn't really feel any progress. Sunggyu's smiles make him feel dumb, and everything feels just like before.

Before, when it wasn't Sunggyu teaching him new techniques, when it wasn't Sunggyu who was making him a fool of himself in these practices, when it wasn't Sunggyu who made his heart beat fast just like it's beating now.

Before, when it was Minho who was around.

"I'm done" Woohyun announces, throwing the sword aside and fixing his drenched hair falling on his eyesight.

"Come, we're almost done" Sunggyu answers instead. "I'll show you the technique. You did got better at-"

"I don't fucking care," the prince barks, turning around ready to go back inside the castle, "we're done."

But Sunggyu doesn't listen. Doesn't see the signs that are almost screaming '*don't come near Woohyun!*'. He reaches the prince in a few long steps.

"Woohyun but-"

The prince turns around and his fist lands on Sunggyu's cheek. The knight moves a step back and looks back at the prince. Woohyun is breathing fast, both of his hands clenching hard with his hair yet again glued on his forehead as the tips cover part of his eyes.

"Just fucking leave me alone" The prince mutters.

Maybe Sunggyu should've, maybe he should've think this through, maybe it was the best to do what the prince was asking for. But Sunggyu will never know, because he stops seeing the prince as such, and just sees a little kid before him, throwing a tantrum. So he pushes such kid to the ground. Woohyun looks at him perplexed from the ground, and stands up to throw himself at the knight.

Woohyun lands a few hits on the knight, and Sunggyu turns them around to have the prince under him. He's about to hit too, his fist already set to make contact with that beautiful jaw. But he doesn't. Doesn't think about it either, his fist naturally lands on the ground as it makes an ugly hole on the ground.

The sky is falling. It's gray and rumbling with lightning bolts in the distance.

Woohyun doesn't try to move the knight off him, instead he just breaths hard, eyes fixed on Sunggyu. The knight is staring at the hole besides Woohyun's head, and a hundred of different results start playing on his head.

What if he hit Woohyun? What if he really injured him? What if he had done something he couldn't fix later?

"Don't fucking do that." Sunggyu mutters, but it sounds more like a whisper around all the chaos around them. "don't fucking walk away from me."

A quick memory plays in Sunggyu's head. Howon in his childhood. A fight over something meaningless. Howon walking away from him. Sunggyu's fist on Howon's cheek. Howon opening his mouth, showing off all his teeth tainted in red. Howon spitting blood.

Sunggyu crying the entire night.

"Don't do it again" the knight repeats, finally looking at the prince. He doesn't register the tears forming on his eyes, not until they fall on Woohyun's cheeks.

Woohyun's anger dies down, and he nods as Sunggyu finally moves from on top of him, sitting besides. Neither of them know what to say, Woohyun suddenly forgetting why he was mad just moments before and Sunggyu trying to calm down his inner self.

It's happening more often, Sunggyu notices. He's getting triggered more often and he hates it. This is not himself, not someone who means to injure people he cares about. But it's happening more often and it's wearing him off.

"Come" Woohyun says, standing up. Sunggyu takes the offered hand and it's ready to walk towards the castle, when Woohyun drags him to the opposite side towards the trees.

Their boots start getting dirtier as they walk, suiting their already dirty armors. There are some pieces of mud in Woohyun's hair and Sunggyu means to take them off, but he instead focuses on their hands still holding each other.

They walk into the woods, feet moving around the trees until they reach a little pond and Woohyun sits Sunggyu over a trunk.

"Why did we come here?" Sunggyu asks, looking around. The rain is no longer falling over them, having the trees over them to protect them. Woohyun walks towards the pond and cleans his hands.

"Didn't feel like going inside where everyone could see you." The prince answers without looking back.

"See me?"

"Yeah, and your ugly swollen cheek."

Sunggyu touches his cheek in automatic and grimaces at the pain. He didn't notice it until now. The prince has taken off his heavy armor and rips off a piece of cloth from his shirt. He drenches it in water and moves back besides where Sunggyu was sitting. He starts cleaning the knight's head, taking off mud from his face and hair and finally leaving the ball of wetness over his cheek as Sunggyu grabs it with his own hand.

"Why didn't you punch me?" Woohyun asks.

"It was not right."

Woohyun unconsciously makes puppy eyes as he looks at Sunggyu. "It was" He answers, "I punched you and I shouldn't have. You did nothing wrong."

"Then why did you?" Sunggyu asks and Woohyun looks at his feet.

The prince sighs. "You reminded me of someone I'm mad at."

"Boohyun?" The knight guesses and Woohyun shakes his head.

Sunggyu doesn't know what to ask anymore, or if he even wants to hear the answers.

"I hated you, you know" Woohyun laughs.

"I guessed it" Sunggyu comments.

"When I saw you in Boohyun's funeral and then again when you were fighting to be my knight, and even when Jungyeop told me to choose you. I hated you. I lost people I loved and here you were, the living prove that I had to move on from my grief. I hated it." Woohyun sighs. "Now I hate that I can't hate you."

Sunggyu's heart skips a beat. The prince is still not looking back at him, and the knight places a hand on his arm.

"Woohyun.."

"What happened last night," Woohyun continues, "I don't know why-"

"You were drunk," Sunggyu interrupts, not wanting to hear the end of the sentence. "You didn't know what you did, I knew."

"Why did you do it, then?" Woohyun looks back at him, eagerness shown on his eyes.

Should he be sincere? Should he mention that he had fallen for the prince's hair? Should he say that he, for some reason, had felt relief when Woohyun had rejected all the princesses? Should he express what his heart unconsciously feels whenever Woohyun smiles or laugh, or how he loved every single second of what happened that night? He's only realizing it now, that all of this is true. He likes the prince a bit too much for his own good. Likes how Woohyun is not cocky or pretentious, how he cares for his younger sister, how he tried to put up some walls between them but instead of really pushing him aside, he gave Sunggyu a chance.

"I don't regret it. I think I don't." Woohyun sighs as Sunggyu takes too much time to answer.

Maybe saying everything he's feeling is a bit too much, Sunggyu reckons. So his eyes fall on Woohyun's lips and his body moves without him commanding it to. The piece of cloth falls to the ground and Sunggyu moves forward, hand taking Woohyun's chin as their lips meet in a kiss. It's the same addicting taste, Sunggyu notices, with his heart beating faster than before and his hands eager to be on Woohyun's body.

Woohyun gasps a bit at the touch, but his hands move automatically to the knight's cheeks and Sunggyu groans a bit when Woohyun touches the swollen one. But they don't break the kiss, instead, Woohyun moves his hand lower to Sunggyu's neck and yanks the knight forward, their bodies melting against each other. They turn their heads to fit better and Woohyun smiles over the kiss when he feels Sunggyu's tongue poking his lips, asking to pass by.

VII. My sword is yours, Woohyun. My life is yours.

Chapter Summary

The crypts unwrap important history for Sunggyu, history that could explain things he can't yet explain himself.

But more than that, the crypts is the place where he expresses again his undying loyalty for the prince who might have or might have not finally believed him.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

Howon threw a tantrum again, Sunggyu thinks.

The drawing is halfway done when the noises start to raise again. It's his five year old younger brother crying on the other room and the slaps of his mother's palm against his ass. Sunggyu doesn't like the sound of it, never has, but he can't do a thing about it.

He clenches on his coal stick with much more force, smearing the kid's face in his drawing with different tones of black. He's trying to focus on the sun's smile rather than the noises, focus on the heat coming from the chimney. A few seconds pass by until Howon screams no more, and the older of the two brothers starts breathing again.

Sunggyu remembers his first memory with Howon. He had walked into the room with hesitating steps, not really knowing where to move. Howon was sitting by his bed, a coal stick in his grip and a frown between his thick eyebrows. He was drawing like no one's business, too immersed to notice the boy looking at him from the door's frame.

Sunggyu had been too curious, so it didn't take long before he had gave a few steps in, and Howon finally looked up.

"Who are you?" The five year old asked.

"I'm Sunggyu."

"I'm Howon." The five year old said. "Do you know how to draw?"

Honestly, Sunggyu didn't know how to. But he was too afraid the younger would lose interest in him, so he nodded his head.

"Can you draw me a horse?" The younger asked. "It's really hard to draw one."

Sunggyu took a better look at Howon's bed. Behind the younger, there were at least other fifteen papers with almost the same drawing in them. A sun, a castle, something that looked like a dragon, a princess, and an empty white zone in the middle of the paper over the thin line of grass where a horse's head is normally started but never finished.

Howon gave him his coal stick and Sunggyu did his best as to not ruin the drawing. When he had finished the horse's tail, he had looked at his side where Howon was sitting. It wasn't the best drawing, this, Sunggyu knew. He felt a nervous droplet of sweat going down his forehead.

"It's amazing!" Howon had exclaimed. "You're amazing, hyung!"

The younger had looked at him with a smile and spark in his eyes. It was too soon for him to address him as 'hyung' as they've barely know each other, but Sunggyu doesn't mind. Instead, he smiles in return.

The title reminds him of another little boy running around him, black hair and cat eyes looking at Sunggyu with the same admiration as Howon is doing it just now. He sees the kid's face in his mind, but soon enough it's starting to hurt, so he stops trying to take out that smeared memory from his head.

Sunggyu takes a look at his drawing, or, what is supposed to be one.

The coal moves from the kid's completely blacked face to the cloud in this sky and ending on the inside of the sun, covering what used to be two pointy eyes and a smile. The door cracks open behind him and he turns the sheet to the other side, hiding the evidence of his previous rage.

His little brother drags a chair around until it's beside Sunggyu's. He climbs on it and sneaks a peak at his sheet.

"Are you drawing?" He asks.

Sunggyu stares at his little brother. His red eyes, puffy cheeks and the trembling lower lip that looks in a dark tone of purple under the poor light.

"Do you want to draw?" Sunggyu asks. It's his favorite coal stick, but today he doesn't mind sharing it with Howon. The younger nods without meeting his hyung's eyes, fixing himself on his chair and taking the coal stick where Sunggyu left it over the white sheet.

"Ah!" Howon moans in pain when he grabs the dark stick. "It's hot." He throws it over the paper, smearing it.

“Is it?” Sunggyu asks in surprise. Howon nods, eyes looking at his palm. “I’m sorry, I didn’t feel it.”

“It’s because hyung’s palms are always hot.” Howon confesses. “Mom’s too..” he adds, mind faintly remembering what just happened.

“Want me to draw you something?” Sunggyu offers, and his little brother’s smile makes an appearance.

“Yes! Can you draw me? An-and a horse! And you! And a sword! And a princess!” Howon requests, little hands over the table and head trying to peak from over Sunggyu’s elbow.

“Yeah, yeah, just wait a minute” Sunggyu answers, hand moving rapidly over the white paper and drawing the best he could. “Okay,” he says when he has finished, “this is you, and this is me, and this is us saving a prince.”

“A prince?” Howon asks, thick eyebrows meeting in the middle. “Why a prince?”

Sunggyu shrugs. “Aren’t princesses always getting saved? Wouldn’t it be cooler to save a prince instead?”

Howon shakes his head. “No, why would he be a prince if he can’t save himself?”

Sunggyu sighs. “I guess so.”

“It’s still a cool drawing.” The younger smiles, showing off his teeth, missing a few. “Thank you.”

∞

The sky is still gray, pouring hard fat drops landing on the trees and making their slow way down until they hit the ground. Sunggyu feels some of those drops falling over his head and on his cheeks, but his attention is more focused on the connected mouth to his lips to do something about the rain.

The prince is kissing him hard, hand holding him from behind his head and legs glued to his. Sunggyu feels a faint taste of the wine from last night, but it must be a product of his imagination. There’s no way the prince tastes the same as last night, feels the same as last night and even causes the same reaction on him as how it happened last night. The prince’s lips are soft and Sunggyu’s growing a little addiction on tasting them with his tongue.

There’s this heat on his inside. It feels like a ball of fire, accumulating over his stomach and making Sunggyu kiss Woohyun more eager than before, tongue exploring the prince’s mouth and leaving a mark behind. Something feels different now, like if something had finally connected.

Woohyun breaks off the kiss, nose resting besides his and mouth still a few inches away from his.

Sunggyu is tempted to ask. His lips are swollen from the kissing and eager to throw out the question that's sitting on the front of his mind.

What does this mean?

His eyes fall on the prince's features. On his closed eyes, his silky cheeks and plump red lips opened, catching some air to breath. Sunggyu keeps on looking at the prince with a new light. Ever since last night, he had started seeing the prince as something more than just a royal heir. But this perspective was a double-edged sword, and he knew better than that.

He wants to ask, but he's too afraid for the answer. He's afraid the prince won't give him the answer he's expecting-- although he doesn't know what he's expecting. He's afraid to find himself in the same situation as he was with Junhyung, afraid to maybe make this something much more bigger than it actually is and find himself hurting again.

It's lust, he answers himself. *It's pure lust.*

He had already realized he liked the prince more than he should, that his heart beated faster than it should and he wants more than he should. But it's the novelty of the feeling, the rush of the moment; something that, if Sunggyu forces himself to think it this way, will vanish soon enough. Feelings that have no place and are doomed to be ignored.

Woohyun smiles as Sunggyu is still thinking hard.

"Thanks, hyung." Sunggyu doesn't understand why he's thanking him when he's the one that should be thanking him instead.

"What for?" He answers, sincere curiosity in his voice.

The prince limits to chuckle, hand falling from Sunggyu's cheek.

"We should go in now." Woohyun stands up and offers Sunggyu a hand.

He takes it without thinking and Woohyun frowns at the touch when their hands connect. He places his other hand over Sunggyu's.

"You're hot." He would laugh if not were for his tone that hinted concern. "You're too hot."

"It must've been the kissing" Sunggyu answers in a nervous tone, trying to evade the actual reason. He knows why he's hot. He won't say why.

The prince shakes his head. "You must've caught something now that we're out." He tugs on Sunggyu's hand and the knight stands up. "Let's go."

Their way back to the castle is quiet, aside from the sound of the rain falling on their sides. It's pouring hard and Sunggyu hardly sees the prince walking a few steps ahead of him. The fat drops fall on his head and he looks at his feet as he walks.

He hates it when his body starts feeling hotter than it should, because he doesn't realize it until someone points it out. It happens when he is too excited, say it's for lust or anger, it didn't really matter. He just needed to feel the heat on his insides to know something was different, but to actually recognize the fervor within him was the hard part. He's normally immersed in the feeling to actually acknowledge it.

It didn't happen too often when he was a guard downtown as he normally used gloves and the only contact he had was when he was naked under Junhyung. Being hot wasn't something out of the ordinary, although he had left some hot red spots on those parts of his body Sunggyu held in the act.

Junhyung sometimes had said something about it, but it had been hidden in his flirty tone to get a round two and Sunggyu had complied easily just to avoid the actual problem. Sunggyu thinks again about what happened the night before and how he had grabbed the prince's wrists in his hands. His eyes fall on the prince walking before him, searching for his wrists but he doesn't quite see them, as they're hidden under his sleeves.

He shakes his head. Nothing happened. If he had actually hurt the prince, he would've said something. He wouldn't hide it, would he?

They arrive at the castle and a big number of handmaidens appear from nowhere and everywhere, towels in their hands to cover them both. Most go to Woohyun, but he recognizes one of them, Jisoo, who's handing him the towel with a scowl.

"You should take care of yourself more" Sunggyu doesn't really know if she's saying it because she's concerned for him or if she's just annoyed. Either way, he won't say no to the warm towel.

"Thanks."

"Who will take care of our prince if you get sick?" She reproaches, a tone too familiar to Sunggyu's mother that makes him smile again.

"It will still be me."

She grabs the knight's chin, making Sunggyu look at her. "And look at that nasty cheek! It's almost purple, just what in the king's name were you--"

"Sunggyu." The prince calls.

The knight turns to him, Jisoo's hand still in his chin. He sees that Woohyun has taken off his heavy armor and over his shoulders and thin layer of clothes there's a big towel as well as over his wet hair.

"You should go rest." He says in a dry cold tone. It's different from how he talked to him in the woods, a soft tone with a pinch of concern. This sounds more like a command rather than a suggestion and his expression doesn't look friendly. "Tomorrow will be a hard day."

“Yes, your grace.” He answers. He bows his head and when he raises it again, Woohyun is already walking down the corridor, not looking back at him.

“Where were you?” Jisoo asks. “The queen was getting worried.”

“We were just behind the meadows, in the forest.”

Jisoo hums. “You should just come inside next time.” She sighs. “Come, I’ll give you something for that cheek.”

Sunggyu wants to say that he’ll be alright, but the handmaiden has already walked away toward the kitchen. He sighs and follows her.

∞

His afternoon had been a little chaotic after that, and not in the bad sense. Jisoo was friends with almost everyone of the castle’s personnel. She had forced him down to sit on the table and held some cold bag against his cheek as other few maidens walked to them and asked Sunggyu a few questions.

It was nothing serious, they were just curious about the life outside as a guard. They were allowed to go outside but the chances didn’t come that often. It was pretty much about the gossip and to applaud him in his choice to speak up and say he would cut off his finger for this position.

Apparently, he had been quite the hot topic the past weeks. His decision at the last test had caused a big impression and everyone had secretly admired him. He had walked inside the kitchen to meet the chefs and receive another bunch of compliments, being forced to say, with hot cheeks, that the food they prepared everyday was really tasty (although he doesn’t remember if he enjoyed it much).

Just when Jisoo had left him and he was sure he made his first friend on the insides of the castle, Jungyeop had come knocking on his door. He had pulled him out of his bedroom to drag him into another floor and another room he won’t remember how he got into.

Jungyeop had called him to go through the realm maps, check all the possible roads and pinpoint spots where possible gangs could gather. They had to avoid villages so that meant go through a much more longer road than how it should actually be. It’ll be a pain in the ass, the clouds were hinting a storm the entire week, but some experts were saying it is not meant to last. It didn’t get much better after that, because Geumland had a tropical weather with rainforest all around.

“This trip is three days, tops” Jungyeop explains “that is if you keep it up until it’s dark, which you can’t.”

Sunggyu frowns.

“I think you know about our prince’s... condition.” Jungyeop talks carefully. Sunggyu has to think about it to understand. “His hair...”

“Oh” Sunggyu exclaims, “yeah, I know about that.”

“Well,” The older sighs, “you can’t ride your horses until night falls, you have to stop when the sun is halfway in through the mountains and set up his tent right away, so it will probably extend another two days.” He walks toward a chair where a big heavy bag was laying. “This is the tent for the prince. You’ll have to make your own at least ten feet away from his. Not too close to see him, but not too far to unprotect him.”

“Okay” Sunggyu says, mentally pinpointing everything.

“You will carry just enough food for at least five people, but don’t be too greedy about it. Our prince is the top priority, always.”

Sunggyu nods his head. He was picturing everything in his head, already feeling uneasy.

“Have you chosen the other knights that will be going with you? You’re going to need at least other two, and I’m going to need to meet them beforehand. We can’t let just anyone to accompany our prince. You’ll have to stay up through the night, in shifts.”

“I have some in mind,” Sunggyu smiles now. “and I don’t think they’ll be much problem.”

∞

Sunggyu woke up really early the next day, yesterday’s events still present in his head. It was really hard to believe what he did, and who he did it with, and since he didn’t talk with the prince about it, he didn’t know how to act. So he decided to go with the easiest answer: act like always. Woohyun was still the prince and he was still his knight, humping and kissing won’t change anything.

He was also feeling a lot lighter. Now that he’s thinking about it, there’s nothing special in the prince. He proved to be soft hearted but so where much people. He tried belittling everything that made his heart beat faster the day before, and he would like to think it worked, in a way.

But that’s until he met the prince again.

The morning was still early and outside was still raining, so he was surprised to know the prince had already woken up and was down at the crypts. To go to the crypts you had to cross the queen’s garden and walk ahead other five minutes before the underground stairs appear in the stretch path.

Sunggyu made his way toward the crypts anyway. He had to let the prince know about his activities today, since he had to leave toward the citadel and meet the chosen people that will

accompany him and the prince to Geumland.

His boots splashed deliciously against the little puddles in the stone path, the noise of it and falling droplets making him think about yesterday once again. He didn't get sick afterward, catching a cold wasn't something he ever experienced. But he wasn't the only one there, the prince had been there too, and he had taken off everything while Sunggyu kept his armor on when they were in the forest. Woohyun had even ripped off a piece of cloth to help Sunggyu's cheek.

So as he walked down the path and then down the underground stairs, he really hoped Woohyun didn't get sick. He would blame himself if something happened to Woohyun, and this went with sickness too.

Woohyun's ancestor rested in the crypts. Sunggyu was aware of how many kings, queens and princes had lived before him, but to actually see their statues, it frightened him a little. They were meant to look beautiful, the stones had been carved meticulously to resemble the people they represented. He doesn't remember the physical appearance of any of them, so for him, everyone just looked the same.

He walked slowly through the crypts, looking at them with respect. He might've not know them by face, but the names were familiar enough. Everyone had their own tomb under a stone arch. Woohyun's great-great-grandfather had been his own war leader about a hundred years ago. The despise against the magicals had born with him as the enemy army had been lead by one. His statue had a sword in his hand while the other pointed far away with his opened mouth, as if he were shouting the orders to his men.

The royalty women were using long long dresses, some having a bouquet of stone flowers in their hands against their chest. It pained him that they didn't die out of age, but the real disgrace didn't lie with them.

After walking across easily twenty tombs, Sunggyu reached the most painful of them all. This stone arch had been purposely modified. He stopped in track and stared.

Before him was the original Nam family. Everyone in the crypts had the same family name, but they were called like this for some obvious reasons. It was his deceased uncle's family, the king's older brother. After Woohyun's grandfather had passed away, the crown had gone to his uncle, Nam Woohyun, first of his name. He had married a princess years before, so when he reached the crown, they already had a little boy with beautiful black hair and a toddler in their hands.

But his regimen didn't even last half a year. Apparently, the deceased king had promised the Kims a part of the realm, but his son Nam Woohyun the first, when he revised his father's wishes, didn't see such promised arrangement anywhere. The Kims, aside from their gemstones that was the main product of their monetary income, were famous for their magical citizens. The promise of such lands were supposed to go to their people, more magicals. Nam Woohyun the first, didn't even think about saying yes and dismissed the lord that came to talk to him.

It was the wrong decision.

A few days after, the king's chamber had burned overnight. No one had heard the royal family's screams, the toddler resting in his crib and the young prince apparently sleeping between the king and queen. The four of them had been burned alive that night, and it wasn't until a handmaiden had walked into the room the next morning, that everyone got alarmed.

No one knew how the fire started or how the fire consumed itself after the crime was done, as it never trespassed the door that connected the bedroom to the hall. Woohyun's father had been sure it was the Kims, since they took their opportunity to take the lands that were promised to them that Nam Woohyun, the now deceased king, had denied to give them.

A war against magicals began from that day.

Woohyun's mother had already conceived Boohyun, and when the next baby was on the way, the king didn't hesitate on naming him Woohyun after his older brother. Woohyun's father always meant to do something to the Kims, maybe even revenge in the same manner and kill one of their two sons who were just as young as his deceased nephew. Woohyun's mother, the queen, had stopped him from doing such atrocity. But even so, the lord Kim who claimed to be the king of magicals, had mysteriously died with his first son on a trip in the forest near Woohyun's father side of the realm.

The arch had Woohyun's uncle family under it. The deceased king had his queen on the inside of his left arm as the queen carried the 2nd prince in her arms, the first prince tugging on his father's long stone royal coat. Sunggyu could see the innocence in his eyes and wondered if that prince had survived, would something be different? Killing children was beyond what Sunggyu thought as correct when it came with war and politics, so his heart ached as he stared at the four of them.

"I still miss him."

Sunggyu hears a voice at the end of the crypts, it echoes through the corridor and it's not hard to recognize it.

"I still miss him too. He looks good, right? Really handsome." Sungjong answers.

The knight walks carefully with light steps as to not make a sound and break what seemed an intimate moment. The prince is looking at the last statue with the slave Sungjong besides him. Woohyun is using black clothes as the Sungjong is using his everyday attire.

"Hyung.." Sungjong whispers.

They are giving their backs to Sunggyu, so it isn't hard for him to listen and watch without being perceived.

"What is it, Sungjong?"

"Do you really have to go?" Sungjong's tone sounds concerned. It's the first time Sunggyu has heard it, as the younger is always talking to him with a sassy tone.

“Yes.” The prince answers. He’s looking at the statue, and only now Sunggyu recognizes who it belongs to. Boohyun.

“Why? Why can’t you stay? Boohyun hyung just got placed...”

“Which is why we’re here.” Woohyun answers. “We’re giving him our respects.”

“But you should stay...”

“I can’t.”

It seems like they’re talking about the trip Woohyun will be making to Geumland, and Sunggyu perks an ear to hear since they’re talking quite softly.

“Then...” Sungjong stops, hesitating.

“Then, what?”

“Can I go with you?”

“No, Sungjong.”

Woohyun’s answers are too monotonous, and Sungjong stares at the prince while he doesn’t stop looking at his older brother’s statue.

“Why not?”

The prince sighs. “We’ve talked about this before.”

“And it doesn’t make sense, hyung.” Sungjong pouts. “You told me we’d go on adventures together and--”

“This isn’t an adventure.” Woohyun finally turns around to look at the younger who moves a little step back. “This is not like your pirate stories that I read to you, I’m not looking for a hidden treasure. I’m not leaving because it’s fun, it’s because I have to.”

Sungjong looks at his feet. The prince was panting as he had raised his voice to tell him all that.

“Is it... because of Minhoo?” Sungjong asks and Sunggyu barely hears it.

Minhoo? How is this related to him? Sunggyu wonders. He remembers the name, Jungyeop had mention him before.

The lights are poor but Sunggyu still sees the prince’s face turn into a white tone as his eyes widen.

“Who told you about that?” Woohyun asks in a harsh tone. “Who told you, Sungjong?!”

“No one!” The younger answers in fear. “I-I followed you the other night, when you met with Kibum hyung.”

“Sungjong-”

“I heard you both. You’re going to Geumland because it’s near Hadong, right? That’s where Minho is and you want to see him because he’s accused of-”

“Shut it.” Woohyun commands as he grabs the hem of Sungjong’s dirty shirt. “Stop talking if you want to keep living.”

Maybe it’s an empty threat because not in a million years would Woohyun dare to lie a finger on Sungjong, say less kill him. But the slave has gotten over his nerve, even danced on it, and he couldn’t take that. He couldn’t let Sungjong go without knowing how Woohyun strongly feels about this topic.

Sungjong is perplexed with the threat, nevertheless. His lower jaw is trembling as his hands are hanging onto Woohyun’s fist still on the hem of his shirt.

“I just want to help, hyung.” Sungjong confesses.

“You can’t help me.” Woohyun sighs, finally releasing Sungjong from his grip. “Leave. I want to be alone with Boohyun.”

The slave takes a step back, then two. Then his tears start falling and he lets out a little sob.

“I hate you, hyung.” He whispers, loud enough for the three of them to hear. He runs through the crypts and up the stairs where the rain will hide his tears in the endless droplets.

Sunggyu had moved back into one of the arches, Sungjong barely missing him.

Woohyun sighs, watching the teenager run. “I hate myself too, kid.”

He turns around, watching over Boohyun again, and Sunggyu comes out from his hiding stop.

The prince chuckles. “Did you hear all that?”

Sunggyu gets the scare of his life when the prince turns around and gives him a glance with a playful yet dark smile.

“Yeah.” He confesses. “You weren’t exactly that quiet...”

“Because we didn’t think someone would be eavesdropping.”

Woohyun gives him his back again, both of his hands resting on his back. Sunggyu slowly approaches the prince.

“I didn’t meant to--”

“I know.” The prince cuts him off, sighing.

“Is it true?” Sunggyu asks. He has walked up to him, standing now besides him and staring at Boohyun’s statue too.

It was a beautiful one, if Sunggyu must say. He was using his royal cape, sword in his sheath and like most of the statues, he was looking afar, as if he were actually looking somewhere. This is the first person Sunggyu did know how he looked in real life, and he’s satisfied by the details in the prince’s features.

“What?” Woohyun asks. “What Sungjong said?” Sunggyu doesn’t answer, and that’s enough answer for the prince. “Yes, it’s true.”

“What did he do?” Sunggyu asks. He feels like he’s not in a position to be asking question, but he’s supposed to look after the prince, and if he was planning something, it’s only fair for Sunggyu to know about it.

The prince turns to him, looking at him out the corner of his eye. It takes him a few seconds to answer him, probably considering if he should trust him.

“You can trust me” Sunggyu assures, but instead than the explanation, Sunggyu receives a scoff.

“How can I know that?” Woohyun asks. “I trusted Minho for years and yet...”

“Well, for instance,” Sunggyu starts, “I offered cutting a finger for you.”

Woohyun chuckles and it doesn’t sound as dry as everything he’s been saying.

“I can offer it again, so I can show you that I’m loyal.”

“But why are you loyal to me, Sunggyu?” Woohyun asks. “Is it only because I’m your prince?”

“It’s because I believe in you.” The knight answers. “You are my prince and I can do nothing about it, but I sincerely trust you, with my life, and that’s why I want you to trust me with yours. Because I would not do a single thing to have you get injured, and whatever this thing is about-- I want to know so I can follow you along. Whatever it is, I’m in it.”

The prince stares at him long enough Sunggyu doesn’t know if he actually believed him. It’s true, everything he said. It’s a job he decided to do because he believed in Boohyun, and once he reached his dreamed position, he happened to believe more in the younger brother who thought a lot of things can be changed. He’s a little moody and intense with his decision, but the prince looks mostly overwhelmed by all the responsibilities that are now sitting on his shoulders.

“You know what I think when I look at you?” The knight asks with a silly smile, this time moving to another statue. Woohyun’s aunt. She was known for her greed for jewelry, so it’s only logical she’s full of jewels even as a statue. Real jewels. The prince follows the knight with his eyes. “I think of raw steel.” He turns back and sees Woohyun frowning.

“You’re like an undone sword. The material is beautiful, I’d say it’s like the dragon steel that’s only sold at Geumland.” Sunggyu chuckles to himself, finding amazing how true this is. “You, my prince, are undone dragon steel sword. You’ve yet to receive the right hits from the hammer and feel the heat from the flames that will mold you perfectly and give you the right shape.

“It’s beautiful, my prince. Seeing how a sword is made. Your brother was already molded, he had already received his hits but he lacked things you can improve in. I think you’re a sword in process, and I would like to be every step of the way in that process, if you let me.”

Sunggyu had turned around to say the last words to Woohyun’s face before kneeling down before him, bowing his head.

“My sword is yours, Woohyun.” He says now. “My life is yours.”

The prince is quiet for a few seconds. Sunggyu can’t see his face, he can only feel his own face heating up because in his head, he has confessed in a way. Confessed that he would do anything for Woohyun, and although it has been true from the moment he decided to become a guard, feelings involved or not, for Sunggyu these words weight differently. They do not only carry the feelings a knight has for his lord, or in this case, his prince, his soon to be king. No. They carry much more things Sunggyu is against labeling just yet.

“Stand up.” Woohyun orders.

Sunggyu does. He looks at the prince, whose face is resting without showing anything in particular. He doesn’t know if the prince is moved for his words or if he’s still somehow doubting he’s saying the truth.

“Okay.” The prince says.

“Okay?”

“Yes, okay.” Woohyun repeats, this time a little smile slipping from his lips. “I’ll tell you everything.”

Something within Sunggyu falls, in the good sense. The prince carries many secrets with him and he came to only know a few when he got drunk. But this is not the drunk Woohyun saying yes. This is the prince in his right mind agreeing to share with him his plans, he’s agreeing to not only trust Sunggyu with his life, but also trust him with everything that’s hiding in his mind. It’s like a new door has been opened for him.

“But I can’t do it here.” Woohyun says now. “It’s not the right place.”

“O-of course, your grace.”

The prince frowns, but this time it’s a like a kid’s frown. “When will you drop the formalities? It’s only the two of us here.”

Sunggyu titters nervously. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.” The prince assures. He walks slowly towards Sunggyu, unwrapping his arms from behind his back. He gets close enough his lips almost touch the knight’s right ear and his chest is pressing against Sunggyu’s. “But I gotta say, hyung,” he adds with a mischievous tone “that speech really turned me on.”

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!