

CASTLE OF GLASS

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“But even so, every now and then I would feel a violent stab of loneliness. The very water I drink, the very air I breathe, would feel like long, sharp needles. The pages of a book in my hands would take on the threatening metallic gleam of razor blades. I could hear the roots of loneliness creeping through me when the world was hushed at four o’clock in the morning.”

– Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*

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CHAPTER 1

He had been awake for quite some time already. But opening his eyes, that meant facing reality. It meant seeing the fancy white stucco ceiling with the ornate crystal chandelier that was as unnecessary as it was fucking ugly. His only reason for not ripping it from the ceiling, while babbling some idiotic excuse, had been the silent hope that the thing would fall on top of him while he slept and neatly end his life for good.

You're not lucky. You're never fucking lucky, Hoseok.

Groaning loudly, he ripped his eyelids open, letting the light blind him for a few seconds before his eyes adjusted and focused on the stupid chandelier. Grabbing one of the hideous silk pillows from the side he threw it at the ugly thing. Much to his distaste, he only succeeded in creating a melodic response as the crystals tinkled, instead of eliminating the hateful sight.

When can you finally move somewhere else? You're old enough by now.

Jumping up, he threw the perfectly white blanket to the side and slipped out of the uncomfortable silk pajamas, making sure to lock his door beforehand. Looking at his body, he examined the black lines, loving how the dark color spread over his extremely pale skin. Watching his reflection in the huge mirror calmed him down. He needed these few minutes before he had to dress up again and stuff his face with expensive food while looking elegant and satisfied, all according to the proper rules of conduct.

Pulling out a white button down, made out of thick cotton fabric, he

slipped his arms through the sleeves and closed the buttons one by one, watching how his tattoos disappeared behind the white. He hated white, so much.

At least your hair is black.

It was poor comfort as he stared into the mirror some more, determining whether there was a hair or two on his chin he had to shave, but there was nothing. He was lucky, more time to calm himself.

Slipping into the black cotton trousers, he closed the leather belt around his hips, keeping it a few centimeters lower than he needed, as a sign of silent rebellion. Leaning in, he examined his own sea-blue eyes staring back at him before lifting both hands to his head and creating a huge mess out of his black hair. After a few deep inhales, he took the hair brush and styled it back into its original form, accentuating the perfect fuck-face he had to present outside of his room. Looking through his phones, he made sure to take the right one and opened the door, walking down the flight of stairs to the dining room.

His parents were already sitting at the huge mahogany table and were sipping on their tea or whatever they considered appropriate to drink on a Monday morning.

“Good morning, Hoseok, you must be hungry, we have good news for you, but eat first.” His mother smiled her fake smile which meant that it would be terrifying news he would need weeks to recover from.

Which company did they sell you to? The gas one? Or the munitions one?

Eat the stupid breakfast and let yourself be surprised.

Swallowing and smiling in reply, he sat down on the chair across from them and waited until the servers brought breakfast. It took a few seconds before food started appearing in front of his face, table getting ridiculously full. It was way too much for three people to eat and there was no way that he would've been able to eat all of it.

They'll throw it away. Like they always do, lavish assholes.

Chewing on something he didn't know the name of and also couldn't identify the rawness of, he burned his tongue with hot coffee to keep himself from saying something and risking getting even better news than what his parents had prepared for him.

“So, as you are aware, we were looking into your future and you know how important it is to us.”

Yeah, and by your future we mean getting rid of you as soon as possible, preferably for shit tons of money.

“We have met the king's family a few times, as we are rather influential in politics nowadays, and we have made an arrangement for you and Yewon

to get married in a year at the latest. Isn't it amazing? She is such a beautiful girl and you two would suit each other perfectly. You're so lucky to have the blue eyes from your father and be so prettily pale at the same time, they were immediately intrigued and signed the agreement with us. Congratulations, Hoseok." His mother talked about him marrying the worst bitch in the capital city as if it was something absolutely amazing. He wanted to choke on the food mass inside his mouth and die on the spot.

Don't say anything, don't. You won't be able to go out if you do.

Swallowing instead of choking, he gulped more of the boiling hot coffee into his mouth, feeling the pain spread and forcing his thoughts to the back of his head for a few seconds.

"So, I will be marrying Yewon? I thought it would be the daughter of some company owner," he murmured, taking the next sip more carefully. "Why so rushed? Do they need to marry her off quickly?" he asked with a nice smile, trying to hide the fact that he was talking about the princess being a fucking monster nobody liked, despite her doll-like fuck-face.

You'll be falling apart faster than you thought.

"She turned twenty and you're two years younger, so it's acceptable, and it's the best opportunity you will ever have. Of course, we had to think about your benefit, and they will be dependent on us a lot regarding heavy industry, so being in-laws is the most natural thing. We don't have a daughter for the prince, that would've been okay too, but being there will give you the opportunity to influence on our behalf. It's not only about having fun now, Hoseok. You are also responsible, you're an adult now." His mother rolled her eyes in the same way she had when he stained his white shirt as a kid.

You've been sold there to push their interests through while being married to this bitch which makes you the princess' husband. What an amazing life, Hoseok.

Suddenly, he really wished for the chandelier to bury him. Putting the last piece of whatever had been on the plate in front of him into his mouth, he nodded politely and smiled with every resource he could muster.

"I know, mother, I will do my best. I will be at the university until six and then visit Lucy to study for the math exam. It will probably get late, so I will stay over." He made sure to present his rote sentence perfectly with a nice smile on his face.

His mother nodded while looking dissatisfied.

"You have to be careful starting now. You will be officially engaged to Yewon in two weeks, after that you can't be staying over at other women's houses. I know Lucy and you are friends and not romantically involved, but it will still have to stop. Yewon would be sad if she heard of you spending time with other girls, am I right?" His mother's delicate hand eased the cup

onto the plate and settled on the table next to it.

As if. That bitch doesn't care about anyone and she's sucking face at every fucking party. What sad? You will have to find a way to still see Lucy and go out or you can just jump out of the fucking window.

Nodding once again, he folded the white napkin neatly and put it on top of his chair after he stood up.

"I will make sure to be careful about that, mother. See you tomorrow." Bowing once, he walked a step back before turning around and making his way up the stairs that led to his room on the second floor.

There's not much time and not much left to enjoy. Your life hasn't even started and it's bound to end just like this, in the fucking palace, tied to a person you can't stand.

But he couldn't do anything about it, not directly and not without creating a revolution, which he couldn't know the impact of.

Nothing. Just be satisfied with nothing.

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"They what? Yewon? Really? That's like dipping your hand into a container and pulling out a piece of dog shit," his best friend exclaimed and threw her head back, letting the black, tiny locks fly in all directions. It looked funny.

Letting his math book disappear inside his designer leather bag, he kicked the thing to the side, looking at it as if it had been responsible for all the bad things that happened to him.

"I wish I had your pretty skin color, then the racist trash people wouldn't have picked me for their monster daughter, damn it." Hoseok reached out and stroked over Lucy's forearm, creating a contrast between his own and the girl's skin. It looked so pretty. There was no beauty in similarity, variety was what made things beautiful in the first place.

"Are you stupid, Hoseok? Do you even know what you're talking about? Do you know what kind of shit life I have here because of that? Don't say that, you noob." She slapped his hand and stared at him, eyes serious and somehow also vulnerable. It was true, he had no idea, getting only a tiny glimpse of the discrimination his best friend had to go through only because she looked different from what was considered 'normal' by arbitrary standards. Standards that were defined by crack smoking idiots if you asked him.

"I'm sorry, I just want the stupid chandelier to fall on top of me already, it would solve all my problems. The engagement is in two weeks, I need the thing to bury me before then," he murmured and stood up from the black chair he was sitting on and started unbuttoning his shirt while imagining

being killed by a crystal chandelier. Lucy chuckled, before doing the same, pulling her brown silk shirt over her head and rummaging through the shelves until she found a black t-shirt with a ‘bitch you thought’ slogan which she pulled over her curvy upper body. She looked so cute.

“You look like a cute little bread roll,” he commented and started laughing while dropping his white cotton shirt to the ground accidentally.

“Shut the fuck up, Hoseok, you spoiled milk. Get dressed, we’re late. Who knows, maybe you’ll meet your fiancée if you’re lucky enough.

Putting and staring at Lucy as if she had done him dirty on so many levels, he took his clothes out of his leather bag and slipped into the black silk shirt with a ridiculously low neckline and white ripped jeans. His favorite ones, with knee cuts so big that you could see almost half of his thigh along with his knees, but it didn’t show his tattoos, so it was still kind of okay.

“I thought you were my friend. A few years ago, I thought I would be marrying you as an alibi and everything would be disgustingly amazing. You could have your girlfriend and I would get my hot boyfriend and we would live together in happiness and perfect harmony. I hate my life,” he whispered before brushing back his black bangs and pulling the silver ring through the tiny hole in his bottom lip.

“You what? You didn’t really think that your parents would ever allow anything besides ‘Lucy is good in maths, so she can help you’, right? If you did then you’re definitely way dumber than I thought. Don’t you know this society, Hoseok? I’m dark-skinned and my parents don’t have a company. Learn about the way it works here, you’re going to be part of the king’s family and all that jazz. Who knows, you can kill the king and the handsome prince and then you can become the ruler of the country and change everything.” His pretty friend bowed down while holding a middle finger in front of his face. “Your majesty.”

Hoseok slapped her hand away and groaned, angry at the reminder of how his near future was probably going to look. He didn’t like it.

“I just want them to leave me alone, why do they suddenly show so much interest in me, huh? They didn’t give a single shit, they never did, no matter what I had to go through, but now that I’m eighteen, they suddenly ‘care’. Did a dollar sign suddenly appear on my forehead? I don’t understand,” he hissed and slipped into his chucks, spraying his favorite perfume and leaning against the white door that led out of Lucy’s room.

“Because you have those handsome eyes and milky skin, just like the perverts like it. You’re like this high-class whore, you made it, Hoseok.” Lucy chuckled, trying to comfort him by being mean. “But seriously though, will you have to sleep with her and everything?” Her brown eyes appeared in

front of his as she looked up at him, curiosity apparent on her features.

Oh god.

“What? Oh my god, I won’t, never ever, she’s everything I don’t like and she’s a woman. What am I supposed to do with her?” His eyes widened and he started gesticulating wildly.

“You don’t know what to do? Ask me, I’ll teach you, baby,” Lucy purred and licked her lips tentatively.

Holy shit. You’re going to die. You need to cut your dick off or something.

“Isn’t there, I don’t know, an illness where you can’t fuck? Can’t I suddenly get it?” Hoseok asked and grabbed his belongings, stuffing them into the pockets of his jeans before putting on his fabulous sunglasses and opening the door. “Let’s go, we’re late.”

“You’ll be part of the king’s family soon, you can invent an illness. They do stuff like that all the time.” Lucy straightened her lovely leather mini skirt and slapped his ass for no fucking reason. “Let’s go, your majesty.”

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It was fucking loud and Hoseok had his fourth beer, flirting inconspicuously with the bartender. Lucy was dancing, like always, she could move so well and he had to keep creepy dudes away from her. Doing that he kept wondering how men failed to learn the concept of ‘yes’, ‘no’ and ‘appropriate distance’.

Maybe you’re different because you’re gay?

As if. Sighing loudly, he downed his drink and winked at Lucy, making sure that she was okay before he went to the bathroom.

When he finally managed to push his way through the mass of people, dancing to a mediocre beat, his eyes fell on familiar almost platinum blonde hair, reflecting the minimal light like a sore spot in his vision. There she was, the reason for his misery, standing right next to the men’s restroom and laughing loudly at something one of her admirers whispered into her ear. It earned the poor guy a kiss on the cheek until Yewon turned to the side and met his gaze. It was almost disgusting how quickly a fake smile spread over the princess’ features, pulling her thick lips into a wide grimace while her eyes remained the same, showing no emotion.

“What a pleasure to see you, Hoseok,” she spoke and left her poor admirer behind, stepping towards him and lifting her right hand, like she expected him to fucking kiss it in the middle of a club.

Crazy bitch.

“Oh, wow, your royal highness, I’m so honored,” Hoseok commented and ignored the hand, grinning brightly. “I thought we would see each other next week, but it seems as if my karma sucks.”

There was a brief frown that instantly melted into a grin, like the princess was amused by his indirect insult. She pulled her hand back and let it rest on her hip, fitting right in with her ivory dress. It only added to the pretense, innocence personified.

“I am surprised to see you on your own, usually your sidekick accompanies you everywhere, even to the bathroom it seems,” she pronounced teasingly and lifted her equally blonde eyebrow.

“Ah, you mean my friend, yes she’s here too. I’m surprised to see your face not being connected to some misogynistic dude, or are you practicing being a faithful wife?” Hoseok licked over his lips and crossed his muscular arms in front of his chest.

“I believe that I correspond to that image better than most of the women around you, dear Hoseok. I do not need to practice something that is already in my blood.” Smiling briefly, Yewon lifted her delicate hand to her lips and kissed it before pressing the soft skin against Hoseok’s mouth. The action forced a gasp out of a few men that were on their way to the bathroom, fascinated by the princess gifting somebody affection. “I hope you will enjoy your evening filled with freedom, it might be your last.”

“Guess you won’t be able to go out either, what a sad story.” He licked over his lip piercing and smirked at the crazy bitch. “Go impress one of your delusional admirers, that shit doesn’t work with me.” Chuckling, he walked past the blonde woman and entered the restroom, taking care of his business and washing his hands thoroughly.

It will be a shit show, won't it?

If he was honest, he couldn’t imagine what marrying the princess really meant for him. Right now, he was wearing revealing clothes and piercings at some club, using it as a balance for his otherwise strongly coordinated and heteronomous way of life.

Right now, it was okay, but he would have to move from his parent’s place to another house, the king’s house, the glass castle in the pretty park around the huge pond with fat fucking swans swimming in it. He knew how to arrange his life around his parents’ expectations, but the king’s family would have different rules and something told him that he probably wouldn’t be able to get around them as easily.

Pulling Lucy from the dance floor, he curled his arms around his best friend and buried his face in the crook of her warm neck.

“I’m so fucking terrified that this shit will break me, Lu. I have no idea

what they will want from me and I won't be able to see you for a while and I really feel like dying right now. You're the only person that keeps me sane at this point," he whispered desperately, before feeling the girl's hand stroking over his hair in a gesture of comfort.

"It will be fine, bunny, I know that it will be hard, but you've been through so much shit, it would be a bummer to give up now, don't you think? If you give up, then there's one person less existing in this world who sees how fucked up this is and who wants to make a change. If you're alive you have the choice, even if it might seem as if you don't. You do, Hoseok. You can do it." His best friend patted his head before leaning back and smiling her gorgeous big smile, plump lips spreading and white teeth showing.

"I love you, Lucy. I sometimes wish I was never born at all but then I remember that you exist and reconsider. Thank you so much." Pressing a quick kiss on top of her black locks, he loosened his grip, gesturing towards the dance floor. "Let me get us another drink and let's have fun, don't think I'll be able to do it again anytime soon."

He watched his best friend mingle in the crowd, making sure that she was safe, before he turned around and walked towards the bar, ordering another two beers, while examining the scratched over surface of the counter.

There was movement on his side as the ivory dress he had already learned to hate appeared next to him.

"You should be more careful," Yewon hissed, lips barely moving as she reached for her virgin drink, long fingers curling around it carefully as the bartender added a shot discreetly, only increasing the pretense.

"About what?" he asked, turning to the right slowly. The blonde woman's face appeared in his sight gradually as he lifted his gaze.

"Your rather extensive skin ship with your sidekick." The princess spoke quietly as her lips continued to appear like they didn't move. It must have been a skill to avoid lip reading, but it made the blonde woman look fake much like everything else. A glance to the side revealed a few men in black suits watching the two of them, sticking out among the crowd of young people even though they stood off to the side.

She's with her dogs. What if you won't be able to leave the house without having them attached to your ass?

"Don't talk about her as if you have any clue. We just hugged, I saw you sucking face so many times, my math skills are bad, so I can't count that far. Also, so far there's just my parents' signature, I'm not engaged to you. Not yet." God, he hated admitting to it so much, admitting that he indeed would have to follow the will of his parents, not able to say or do anything against it.

“You don’t seem to understand. If you want to step into the palace you have to be a bit more careful about-” there was a pause as the princess threw a distasteful look to the crowd, “who you surround yourself with. The engagement will be public in a few days and that’s when every step you take will suddenly become important, so don’t- fuck- up.”

Swallowing, so he wouldn’t say out loud the really bad curse words that were just waiting to spill from the tip of his tongue, Hoseok nodded at the bartender and took a sip of the beer that was placed in front of him.

“I don’t want to step into the palace, but I guess your parents really want me to. I’ll take care of who I surround myself with and you take care of your own business,” he hissed while taking both drinks and making sure to not lean into the woman’s personal space. “Your royal highness.”

“You know nothing, Hoseok, absolutely nothing. People won’t forget what you did two days ago just because you’re not engaged yet.” Licking over her lips quickly, Yewon kept up the distance and plastered a smile on her face, almost like they were having pleasant conversation. “I always take care of my business, it comes with becoming an adult, Lee Hoseok.”

He wanted to tell her to fuck off so badly, but he was going to enter her territory soon, one he wasn’t familiar with at all, so he didn’t. Instead he smiled politely.

“You should’ve gotten someone who’s older then,” he commented and nodded, turning around to spot Lucy in the crowd, but it was more difficult than expected.

“Too bad that wasn’t my choice,” was the quiet reply behind him as the princess slipped off her chair and made her way through the crowd, easily parting it as people stepped to the side to make way.

Maybe she’ll find someone who’ll pity her.

The parting of the crowd finally enabled him to recognise Lucy’s pretty black locks and he made his way to the dance floor to have fun.

For one last time.

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The crystal chandelier lit up and covered his room in a bright yellow light, crystals reflecting and dancing along the white walls as he observed the reflection of his naked body in the huge mirror.

Fine black and grey lines covered his sides, moved down his vline and spread over his thighs. He loved his tattoos, but made sure to not make them visible in anyway, it was like a taboo, a stigma that stuck to his perfectly

white, marble-like skin, not removable and reminding him of his double life, double standards and of how much he hated all of it.

You'll have to sleep with her, won't you? Maybe she won't want to when she sees all the ink on your skin.

Hoseok really hoped that he wouldn't have to touch the blonde woman. It wasn't only that he wasn't attracted to her, or to women in general, but also the knowledge that the skinny princess probably felt the same. He was some random man who was chosen for her against her will, and Hoseok didn't want to add to the pressure she must be feeling.

Since when do you care?

Shaking his head at himself, he pulled new, white underwear out of the package and slid the fabric over his hips, letting the black suit pants and a thick white silk shirt follow, emphasizing his paleness even more in contrast to his hair. He took a little of the makeup foundation to cover the tiny piercing hole in his lip. It was barely visible, but those fuckers were attentive.

Maybe they'll throw you out, would be nice.

He would've gone for it, if he hadn't been more afraid of his parents than of the king.

Brushing his hair, he kept staring at his face, trying to find the person that he was, hiding somewhere behind the marble face, the curved pink lips and the sea-blue eyes he learned to hate.

He felt like he was going to his own execution when he slowly made his way down the stairs, when he stepped into the fancy black car with tinted windows and even after the vehicle had stopped in front of the huge building. It was modern architecture, big glass windows sustaining the illusion of transparency and permeability.

Wiping over his trousers in a nervous gesture, Hoseok inhaled once and kept the air inside his lungs for a few moments, feeling his body struggle to breathe against his will to hold it in. As it got painful, he exhaled and inhaled again, just in time as the car door opened and he stepped out, following his parents to the entrance, huge doors already open to welcome them.

You can't run away, can you?

He couldn't. Instead he looked up and watched how the shiny surfaces of the building reflected the blue color of the sky, the rays of sunlight trying to bend the truth, hiding what it really was, covering up the spoiled insides.

It's rotten. And you'll be part of it.

It began with awareness, a feeling that resembled drops of water bedewing his forehead and pulling him from the depths of sleep. It was the same every morning. He embraced the calm knowledge that the large clock above his bed had not sounded yet, that the time to leave the comfort of his canopy bed had not arrived.

It must have been just past dawn. The light behind his eyelids barely caressed his iris, hinting at shortly before six in the morning. At six precisely the familiar melody of the musical clock was going to play, starting with soft tones that became faster, resembling a whirlwind that continued throughout his day. His grandfather had composed the melody for his birth, a gift, something that was supposed to carry value and positive emotions. He struggled to feel that way about a device that was created to pull him from the land of dreams, returning him to responsibilities and the coldness outside of the silk sheets surrounding him.

The five minutes of being awake before the melody started were his favourite. It was in those five minutes that responsibilities appeared to be gone, not his to solve as it was not time for him to rise yet. Before the daily routine of going to breakfast and various lessons followed by political conversations and polite chit chat with important figures of society. It was those five minutes during which he was just Hyungwon, lying on a soft duvet and tracing the outline of the intricate wooden patterns that were carved into the bedpost. His index finger followed the lines all the way to the middle, creating a spiral, a sun, the sign of the royal family until it dissolved into lines again, curling and turning all over the Padauk wood. He loved the dark red color of it, standing in contrast with everything else in his room.

As another minute passed, he finally opened his eyes, blinking a few times to get used to the way the white walls, floors and ivory decoration reflected the first rays of sunshine. It was bright, beautifully bright. He would have loved to glance outside his window, to watch a few of the palace workers scurry up the marble stairs, chit chatting and giggling as they hurried to prepare breakfast, the day's first meeting and a bath for his mother as she loved to start the day with it. But there was not enough time, the five minutes must have been almost over by now, each tick echoing through the spacious room and evoking goosebumps that spread along his arms and the back of his neck. The sensation was strange, unfitting to the way he felt as soon as he left the confinement of his bed. As soon as his naked feet touched the marble floor, his reluctance disappeared. There were only those five minutes, a brief time of disorientation and calm, concerns and dissatisfaction that eventually disappeared as soon as Hyungwon dared the first step.

A soft tone sounded above him, accompanied by another and another, speeding up and resembling rain drops on leaves in the garden after the rain, beautiful but breaking the moment at the same time. The melody was unstoppable, playing until it finished. Hyungwon removed the soft blanket from his body and stared at his own long legs for a few seconds, examining the way his silk pajamas covered most of them. Inhaling deeply, he slid towards the edge and tapped the beautiful, white marble with his naked feet.

The last tone rung through his bedroom as a heavy knock interrupted the quiet. The transitions were fluent, there was never a moment of silence or emptiness. Everything was perfectly planned out.

As every morning, a few of the palace ladies that aided him entered his room quietly, bowing briefly before closing the door behind them. It was only a moment until they began unbuttoning his pajamas and preparing the clothes he was meant to wear for the day. It never varied much, a light color, the symbol of the royal family. His arms were guided into the sleeves and the iridescent buttons were closed by skilled fingers, dressing him quickly and efficiently. Only when his feet had entered the smooth leather shoes did Mary look up, one of the ladies that Hyungwon remembered the longest, as she had been there since his birth.

“Everything has been set as requested, your royal highness,” she whispered and bowed again. Her helpers quickly did the same before turning around and preparing to leave the room. “Unfortunately, his majesty and the queen are prevented from being here, so they will not be joining you for breakfast, my prince.”

“Thank you, Mary,” Hyungwon muttered but it drowned in the shuffling of cotton shoes on stone. It wasn’t unusual. The king and queen rarely joined him for breakfast, no matter how early it was. A lot of affairs had to be taken care of and various company owners and counts were of much more political importance than joining Hyungwon for breakfast. It was reasonable and perfectly understandable.

And lonely.

The lack of royal family members joining him for breakfast explained the lack of makeup on his face. There was no powder, no cream that corrected what nature had not given him. He was left plain.

He avoided the mirror on his way to the door, aware that he wouldn’t resemble the image he was supposed to represent. His skin was not the color it had to be, but it was just him at the table in the morning, him and servants that were aware of the drop of sludge that must have been mixed during the creation of his skin tone.

As soon as he left his bedroom, he wasn't alone anymore, accompanied by guards that ensured his safety. They stayed close but did not speak, they never did.

Like shadows.

Sometimes at night, while taking a walk through the royal garden, Hyungwon watched the ground and observed whether their shadows would melt into his, become one and create the impression of ghosts that follow him at each step. But the shadows never disappeared, remaining stuck next to his own, close but never really touching. He didn't mind them, they were meant to be there, present for his protection. Since the attack on the royal family fifteen years ago security was a must, a part of their everyday life. Hyungwon didn't remember what it had been like before that, he had been too young.

The palace was familiar, the only place he knew by heart with all its many corners and rooms. He could safely say that he had been everywhere, every hidden staircase, room, dungeon, cupboard. It almost felt like he was part of it, melting into the walls if he really wanted to, like he wasn't really there. The two guards next to him would do the same, remaining quiet like ghosts.

The way to the breakfast hall wasn't long. It led from the private chambers, decorated with white, gold and ivory to hallways of glass, showing the ground below them, gardens, other rooms and special chambers that were opened to the public once a year if they wished to see the palace. It was open and appeared like one could just melt through the transparent surface and be anywhere. But the glass was much sturdier than it looked.

Only parts of the palace were constructed of glass, everything else was made of thick walls, white but impenetrable, swallowing each sound behind them, keeping secrets where they were meant to be, behind closed doors. It was for safety, everything was.

The breakfast hall was decorated extensively. The room was lit by chandeliers, the window sills were covered in candles and it contained ornate chairs that would remain empty. Hyungwon nodded at the men and women standing at the side and ready to serve before he sat down at the head of the table, a little surprised to see his sister at the other end, chewing on fruit while keeping her gaze fixed on her porcelain plate.

"I feared that it would be only me today, sister," Hyungwon spoke quietly to not surprise the princess who appeared in deep thought, pushing a cherry with her fork. His voice caught her off guard as she looked up quickly and smiled.

"No reason to fear, I believe that I will be joining you for breakfast more often as soon as the engagement is settled," Yewon replied and finally pierced

the cherry with her fork, placing it inside her mouth. Her response reminded Hyungwon of the engagement, the agreement that the king and the queen had settled on to improve their financial standing and have more influential contacts in case of war. It was smart, like covering every open wound and allowing it to close before further protest arose.

“It is a very beneficial agreement,” he remarked and glanced at his own plate, positively surprised to see his favourite type of pancake, filled with blueberries and drizzled with honey. It looked delicious. Smiling briefly, he glanced towards the cook in approval who bowed with a small smile on his lips.

“‘Beneficial’, of course, it is an ingenious decision, Hyungwon, just in time before I get any older and might be considered unfitting,” Yewon hissed, contempt obvious in her voice despite the smile she kept up, eating her fruit quicker than she had before Hyungwon’s arrival. She had always acted childish towards the idea of engagement and marriage.

“You are the princess, you are perfectly fitting in every way and should not let anybody tell you otherwise, Yewon. You are beautiful and that has been proven more than once. There is nothing for you for worry about. I am sure the king and queen have made a good choice.” He smiled to be reassuring, wondering why his sister appeared dissatisfied. She had been worried about moving past appropriate marriageable age only a few months ago. Their parents must have made a good and informed decision. Even the bloodline of the chosen young man was appropriate, everything that was necessary to become part of the royal family.

He might be more fitting than you are.

The thought was uncomfortable, so he distracted himself with a small piece of his pancake that he carefully inserted into his mouth, chewing slowly. Having a partner that shared concerns and responsibility had always been something the queen had emphasized. It was her role next to the king as a role model for women and their responsibilities. A husband was meant to be a pillar for his sister, something to break the loneliness she must have felt. It was the same feeling that Hyungwon succumbed to in the few minutes at night before he finally closed his eyes and fell asleep. Her opposition and dissatisfaction with the situation were unreasonable.

“Has there ever been a princess that left the palace after her engagement as often as she did before?” Yewon asked suddenly, wiping her mouth with a tissue before folding it and leaving it on her plate. Her blue eyes were focused on his, staring all the way across the long table between them.

“I doubt it, it is not according to proper conduct unless it is for an event that involves the fiancée. Everybody that you need to see can be invited to the

palace, so why would you require to leave it? It is safer, Yewon.” Hyungwon had spent all of his life inside the palace, not allowed to leave it for safety reasons, opposed to his sister who was not destined to rule the country.

You have been here all your life, why would it be difficult for her?

“Because I am going to rot here,” was the sudden reply, venom laced into every word as the princess stood up from the table and stalked towards the exit, pulling along the eyes of all people present. Right before leaving she turned around once and pursed her plump lips, resembling his own apart from their light color. “Just like you.”

It was dead quiet after her departure, like even the servants standing around him didn't allow themselves to breathe, prolonging the uncomfortable atmosphere. It was pointless, Yewon's discomfort wasn't going to get her anywhere, it would only make her unhappier, poisoning the advantages of the situation with her temper.

They should have married you off instead, you would have accepted it with grace instead of childish defiance.

—

His eyes were closed, waiting for his attire to be fully prepared and adjusted before he was able to dress in preparation for an important meeting. There was shuffling around him, but he focused on standing straight and stretching out his arms as pleasant fabric was attached to his body one by one, layer after layer. Hyungwon held his breath as two middle-aged servants pulled the strings of his vest, emphasizing his waist by following its form perfectly. Once the strings were tied in bows, he finally opened his eyes, glancing around his bedroom and at the servants who were so devoted to perfect his appearance. One mistake of theirs might cost them not only their job but also status.

Pressure is everywhere, one needs to learn to bear it.

He attempted to breathe, feeling how the attire restricted it a little, but he was meant to impress, to appear above human kind. He was dressed in ivory, bearing the symbols of the crown and delicate designs and embroidery that spoke of his status. It was beautiful, tailored to his body form perfectly. His hair was brushed thoroughly and arranged in soft locks that fell over his forehead. The almost platinum color emphasized the color of his lips, a blood red that didn't need any further interference. Mary smiled brightly as she carefully applied moisturizer, rubbing it over his top lip first before continuing with the bottom one. His skin looked pale, almost like it could be his real tone, resembling his sister's alabaster shade instead of the smudge

it usually had. It calmed him down, reassured him that he was doing as expected, fulfilling his role as the prince and the successor to the throne.

The people would talk if they knew.

“That should be enough,” he ordered as the fumbling with his sleeve seemed unnecessary. It was a sign of nervousness instead of genuine adjustment of his appearance. The servants were worried, aware of the importance of the upcoming dinner. The Lee family had been invited to settle the deal with the presence of all family members. The contract had been signed previously but the meeting of the families was the last step, the occasion in which both families took a last glance at the children involved. Certain criteria had to be fulfilled to become part of the royal family and this was the last possibility to ascertain that they were fulfilled. If the son of the Lee family was not in possession of blue eyes the marriage would be considered invalid according to the law, meaningless as the son would not be considered worthy of royal blood. Hyungwon genuinely hoped that there would be no problems as advisors had ensured the legitimate color of the future prince consort’s eyes and skin. He also hoped that Yewon would not let her emotions get the better of her.

The pressure was not only on his sister, but also on him. Hyungwon was meant to be a symbol for the common people, of royalty and of purity, of influence and the ability to handle it appropriately. He was the future king, not just any member of the royal family. Any mistake on his part could mean demise for the reverence towards the royal family as a whole. Several hundred years ago popularity among the common people had no meaning, none that influenced rule and decision making, but that was not the case anymore. He was considered to be a representative, upholding the rules by following them diligently.

You know it by heart, you don't need to repeat father's words for yourself.

Another glance into the mirror revealed perfection as known by the kingdom, pale skin, light hair, ice-blue eyes and soft features.

“You look deserving of the title, your royal highness,” one of the servants murmured and bowed again. Something about the phrase felt off, so Hyungwon turned towards her, examining her carefully. It was a young girl, several years younger than him.

“And before I did not?”

“That is in no way what I implied, your royal highness. Your attire and appearance only emphasize something that is already present. Please forgive my hasty words,” the girl murmured, not looking up, and sank to her knees quickly.

You overreacted for no reason.

"You're forgiven, get up," he ordered and glanced at his hands briefly, just as white as his face was. "You may leave."

It was quiet once all servants had left him in the middle of his bedroom, preparing himself to play his part. He would be entering after the major introduction, joining for the dinner itself but not much else. According to tradition the parents would remain seated afterwards to discuss plans while the princess and her husband-to-be were given time on their own to stroll through the large gardens. Yewon would not be a good guide as she had never spent more than a few minutes at a time in the gardens, preferring to leave the palace. It was a shame that her fiance's impression of the palace would remain so superficial.

Because her knowledge of the palace just scratched the surface, no more.

The hallways were quiet, only his steps sounded on the marble floors. His guards were silent as always, fitting perfectly into the rhythm of his steps. Had they wanted to become invisible they could have, disappearing if Hyungwon turned around quickly, wondering if they really existed. All servants must have been occupied with their own tasks, preparing the extravagant menu, fitting to the occasion.

Once he reached the door of the dining room for special occasions he stopped, glancing at the king's manservant who decided when it was the appropriate time for him to enter. His heartbeat was picking up, following his mind's realization that he had to perform, to act his part and be perfect. There was not enough time for real fear to develop as brown eyes met his, followed by a nod and the announcement of his arrival. The large wooden door opened and revealed the dining room.

The servants had outdone themselves with all the gold that graced the walls. Furniture had been replaced to speak of their fortune, cherry wood with intricate designs. Paintings by famous foreign artists that painted the king's family and historical occurrences graced the walls. A large table was centered in the middle, revealing the king at the head of the table, smiling a familiar smile at the sight of Hyungwon. It was the smile he received in public, a barely present lift of both mouth corners that followed by a gesture to sit down. It appeared nonchalant but it was an order. It always was.

Hyungwon nodded politely at the king and the queen, bowing lightly before he threw his sister a polite gaze. More attention was given to the Lee family, sitting at the other end of the table. Count Lee was a sturdy man. He had a broad build and a complexion that was befitting of the royal family. He had light blonde hair, blue eyes and perfectly pale skin. As the king's advisors had made sure, he was a distant relative, keeping the traits that were considered noble. The countess looked different in comparison.

She had black hair and dark eyes, only her skin tone showed her relation to the young man that sat next to both of them. Calling their son a man felt a little strange as he looked Hyungwon's age. His eyes were a bright sea-blue, emphasized further by the raven black hair that fell onto his forehead. He must have been prepared for the event as much as Hyungwon was, not even a single strand of hair on the boy's head was off. His lips had an interesting shape, like they curved at the corners even without the presence of a smile. It seemed like someone had calculated the exact angle at which a face appeared friendly without a constant smile gracing it.

His skin is beautiful.

Hyungwon had seen masses of pale people, they surrounded him on a daily basis and emphasized the whiteness of their skin, its luminance and healthy appearance. But he had never seen anybody with such pale skin while having black hair and a broader build. His sister's husband-to-be fit in perfectly, appearing noble without any effort to do so. It seemed like he could have worn rags and still his appearance would have told the truth about his upbringing and heritage.

After a brief introduction by the king, Hyungwon smiled brightly at each individual on the other side of the table, resting a little longer on the boy to express interest, before he sat down.

"Well, it seems as if everything is settled then. I am very pleased about this outcome. We are sure that this marriage will be highly beneficial to both families," the countess summed up and nodded at the king and queen. They exchanged meaningless compliments while his sister's husband-to-be looked as if he was thinking about something entirely different, just nodding politely but otherwise not participating in the talks. He was strangely quiet, it opened up questions about his political engagement.

He will have to change that.

Being quiet was not problematic for a prince consort, as it was important to stay low and avoid any possible thoughts of wishing to take over the throne or anything similarly ridiculous. Political engagement was expected in the form of support, it would be problematic to disappear in the shadow of the princess.

"Hoseok and I had the pleasure of meeting each other previously and I am grateful for this opportunity. Am I right, Hoseok?" Yewon remarked with a bright smile, glancing towards the count's son. Hyungwon knew her well enough to see that she was acting. A slight twitch was present in her plump bottom lip, difficult to see but visible to a trained eye. She was not comfortable about having met him before.

But why?

The mention of the boy's name must have gotten his attention, as he looked up, curved mouth corners spreading in a breathtaking smile.

"Needless to say, this alliance will be a very delightful one, as her highness and I have been good friends. I am very content about this outcome," Lee Hoseok replied in his low voice. There was something intense about his eyes, about the way he had looked at the princess while speaking the words. Hyungwon couldn't read him, neither the sincerity in his words, nor the emotions he was expressing. He seemed cheerful, but the way Yewon acted spoke against it.

He must have been the only one to recognize the roughness in the exchange, as both king and queen and the Lee family appeared satisfied by it. The dinner was tense despite the attempts at innocuous conversation. It was all meaningless and did not carry any information for either side. All deals had been made in secret, without the involvement of the children and their presence was only for image, to show influence and connection.

Hyungwon calmly ate his lamb, almost melting on his tongue from how well it was prepared. There was no point in participating in the conversation, it was not his event.

"Princess Yewon will be showing you the palace after dinner, Hoseok, I hope you will become familiar with it and learn to love it," the queen spoke after a few minutes of quiet dining. She glanced towards the black-haired boy who was listening and nodding politely.

"Thank you, I am sure that I will feel comfortable in the palace if the princess will show me around, your majesty."

After the boy replied the king began discussing a current political issue with the count and Hyungwon suddenly saw the sea-blue eyes staring at him from under Lee Hoseok's raven-black hair. It was barely a second when their gazes met and before his sister's fiance focused his attention back on the king who was speaking.

The unexpected eye-contact confused him a little. It should have been the princess that Lee Hoseok was staring at and not him. After all, she was the woman he was meant to spend the rest of his days with. Only curiosity about the successor of the throne could have explained the gaze. It wasn't unusual to be looked at, but only at events that involved him, people that had never seen him before and intended to become close. Men that were his age had more fascination for his sister, as they should. She was beautiful.

Hyungwon focused on his food for a few more seconds, listening intently to the exchange about increasing security along the borders of the kingdom due to the current worries of the disappearance of certain social values. Light skin for example. It was a common topic, one that both the king and

the count agreed on, so no new thoughts were uttered. It was merely the same back and forth, agreement brought about by the deal.

The conversation was of no interest to him, so he allowed himself to glance at the black-haired boy again, wondering why he had been looking at him. Another few seconds passed before the other man focused his gaze on him once again, holding his eye contact for longer this time. Usually a person would have immediately looked away when meeting his eyes, but the black-haired man didn't appear to be one of those people.

He's not afraid of your status, is he?

Hyungwon stared back, curious about what would happen. He was not supposed to break eye contact unless he was speaking to the king. Keeping his back straight and his thighs touching, he held Lee Hoseok's gaze and focused on the way the different shades of blue connected into a whole around the iris. It really resembled the ocean, waves that crashed into each other and melted into a homogenous color.

The other man continued watching him, breaking the contact only to make sure that he appeared interested in the topic. After a few more seconds his mouth corner jerked a little, a subtle hint of a smile.

Is he making fun of you?

Hyungwon allowed his eyebrow to raise briefly in question, wondering what the black-haired boy might have considered so amusing. His curiosity about what Lee Hoseok was really thinking remained, examining his features intently whenever their eye contact was interrupted. He was in good control of his facial muscles, expression remaining perfectly idle and calm and showing signs of shock in a matter of seconds if the conversation expected him to do so. Politics should be an easy game for someone like that, going with the flow while not revealing a single card.

Another pair of eyes on his face got his attention. Glancing to the side, he met his sister's gaze, she was pursing her lips a little. She must have disliked something, but it was difficult to tell what it was as the current political topic was also not one of her favourites. Once he smiled at her to calm her possible wrath, he returned to the princess' husband-to-be. He was curious what response his eyebrow had evoked and whether it would be just as subtle as the twitch of the boy's mouth corner. He enjoyed this game.

He couldn't see the other man's eyebrows as his black hair was covering them, but he must've done something to change the way his eyes looked. The expression went from neutral to intimidating and back to the neutral staring. This time the mouth corner lifted a little higher.

Is this a threat?

There was nothing straight-out threatening about the eye contact, but

it seemed like Lee Hoseok was playing with the effect that he could bring about through his facial expressions. Hyungwon was more delicate with his, meant to keep them as neutral and composed as possible at all times. A single glitch in his expression could result in offending somebody who had major influence. Licking over his lips briefly and delicately placing another piece of meat into his mouth, he wondered about how he could respond. His lips were said to be very expressive through their natural plumpness and red color, something that was considered special.

Remembering something he had done as a child, he pulled his lips into his mouth for a few seconds, staring back. He held the gaze as he let go, adding redness and returning them to his face.

This time he could clearly see how Lee Hoseok raised his eyebrow while licking over his lips quickly, gaze gaining intensity before he broke the eye contact and nodded at something his father had said about the advantages of the royal family forming an alliance with heavy industry. It was nothing new for him, repetitions of what was probably discussed behind closed doors. Hyungwon filtered easily, perfectly aware of what was relevant to him and what wasn't. His mind was occupied with the rather confusing responses the black-haired boy sent him. It appeared to be a game that he didn't really know the rules of. Was it his turn again?

Staring back, he bit his bottom lip, narrowing his gaze as he did when he expected someone to have made a mistake or when he was forced to deal with disobedience. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to wait for a response as the king ended the dinner with a unemotional gesture of his hand.

"Princess Yewon will now show you the palace grounds, Hoseok," the queen remarked and gestured towards Yewon, who smiled brightly. Hyungwon suppressed a sign of dissatisfaction as there was no way that his sister had the ability to show the beauty of the palace to anybody. She was only familiar with the main plaza and her own room. Every other room was like a room of darkness in her mind.

"You can return to your duties, Hyungwon, I appreciate that you joined us," his mother spoke towards him while wearing the same smile. It was the end of his participation in the event. Hyungwon regretted the end of the game, especially before he had been able to figure out its rules.

But you have more important things to indulge in.

Smiling as he had before, he stood up just like everybody else apart from the king and accepted brief bows from the count and the countess. As before, his eyes met Lee Hoseok's, expecting a bow before his departure. The black-haired man held his hand under his chest and bowed in perfect politeness, before he saw the sea-blue eyes staring at him from under the boy's black

bangs, curved lips spread in a smile.

There was something strange to the gesture, like Hyungwon would have won the game easily had there not been this strange smile, inappropriate but present nevertheless.

It's teasing and you could call him out for it.

But Hyungwon didn't. Instead he nodded and excused himself, leaving the hall while listening for the way his two shadows didn't make any noise. A smile was no reason to break an engagement and a deal, nothing that was insulting enough to get involved.

If it's a game, it needs to be finished adequately, right?