

대군부인이 될 채비를 하라

MBC 금토드라마

# 21세기 대군부인

아이유

변우석

# PREFACE

This English translation of Perfect Crown Royal School Version is created primarily for archival and accessibility purposes. It is a rough, unedited translation and has not undergone professional proofreading or localization. As such, readers may encounter errors, inconsistencies, and awkward phrasing throughout the text.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Dormitory

Huiju's heart kept leaping restlessly at the thought of the upcoming dormitory assignment. At Royal School, there was a tradition that students began dormitory life from 7th grade, when they turned fourteen, and this old-fashioned tradition was practically an unrefusable royal decree. The moment one refused, they had to leave the school.

Dormitory life continued for a total of six years, from 7th through 12th grade, and it was infamous for its strict and conservative regulations to the point that students giving up midway was not uncommon.

It was nothing unusual. At an age full of youthful vigor, being controlled from one's manner of walking to the time one lay down in bed was no easy matter. Moreover, most of Royal School's students came either from noble families or households that possessed enormous wealth. Compliance could not have come easily.

But for those who endured it, there was a definite reward. The pride of studying under the royal family's patronage, and schoolmates who shared that pride. They were active throughout society while carrying a sense of community as

elites raised by the royal family. Not only in political and business circles, but also in the medical field, the legal profession, the arts, and somewhere deep underground.

Thus, in their respective spheres, they pulled one another up, pushed one another forward, and supported one another. Some criticized such behavior as collective exclusivism, but the more they did, the more solid that closed academic culture became. After all, a sense of belonging originally grew stronger through the hostility of other groups.

In that sense, Huiju looked forward to the dormitory assignment. She wanted to know what a sense of belonging was. She was curious what it felt like to feel kinship with people other than herself and win together, lose together; what it felt like growing together and becoming frustrated together.

Usually, people learned that at home, but Huiju could not. Of her parents, her mother was gone, and she was not on good terms with her father. She did have an older brother with whom she only shared half her blood, but...

“Better if he didn’t exist.”

Huiju, frowning between her brows, headed toward the central library. Passing through the unnecessarily splendid campus grounds, past the fountain where statues of the Four Guardian Deities stood, and climbing the marble stairs, various noises reached Huiju's ears.

“Hey, where do you think Seong Huiju will get assigned?”

“White Tiger Palace, probably.”

“White Tiger Palace?”

“She's good at studying. And has no manners.”

Laughter burst out among the whispering students.

“If she goes there, won't she be 100% ostracized? Where else is there a place as obsessed with family background as White Tiger Palace?”

“True. It's not a dormitory a bastard child should go to.”

“If you put it that way, what dormitory even suits her? She's a commoner and a bastard.”

One male student clicked his tongue and shook his head as if it were absurd, and another cut in.

“Why, still, she's rich though.”

“If money were enough, why would the term *nouveau riche* exist?”

The expressions of the students continuing their mockery stiffened not long afterward. It was the moment Huiju’s small head appeared above the stairs.

Then her pitch-black eyes came into view, and when the trail of her long hair fluttering behind her appeared, someone swallowed hard.

One guy had tripped Huiju and ended up with a broken leg; another had mocked her for being illegitimate and had a history of getting choked by her. Learned fear was truly that reliable.

Each time, the school had been thrown into uproar, but nothing happened. In that sense, having money was a good thing. It could not prevent people from forcing you to bow your head, but it could at least stop expulsion.

“W-what.”

One male student raised his voice. It seemed he wanted to act tough despite not even being able to look her in the eye.

Though even so, it was hard to hide that he was nothing more than a frightened son of a bitch.

*Pfft*—Huiju let out a small laugh and leisurely moved her steps forward.

“Ryu Minseok.”

“...Why, what.”

“Which dormitory do you want to go to?”

“Huh...?”

“I hope we end up in the same dormitory.”

When Minseok frowned instead of answering, Huiju whispered quietly.

“There are no CCTV cameras in the dormitories.”

“.....?”

“Over there, even if I killed you, wouldn't nobody know?”

“...You crazy bitch!”

Minseok shouted belatedly, but by then Huiju had already walked into the library.

With her long hair fluttering behind her.

Enjoying other people's fear.

“Vermilion Bird Palace...”

Checking the notice posted on the wall, Huiju muttered. Like Ryu Minseok had been saying, she had thought it might be White Tiger Palace, but her dormitory was Vermilion Bird Palace instead.

The guardian deity of the south, symbolizing fire and summer.

Huiju draped the red over-robe she had received from the administrative office over her uniform and headed toward the dormitory. The dormitory locations matched the directions represented by the Four Guardian Deities: Azure Dragon Palace to the east, Vermilion Bird Palace to the south, and so on.

The farther south she walked, the more students wearing red over-robos appeared. They all had different faces and names, ages and personalities, yet somehow, they looked similar.

As though... siblings.

“Seong Huiju!”

At that moment, Seong Taeju’s voice rang out. He was her older brother, three years older than her, and they shared only half their blood.

Sometimes the subtle resemblance between them disgusted her, yet at completely different moments it brought relief. Unlike his neat and refined appearance, the things he did were so foolish they were almost pathetic, and he was constantly getting suspended.

As a member of Azure Dragon Palace, he was wearing a blue over-robe, but considering he also walked around the house wearing blue pajamas top and bottom, it was inevitable that the sight irritated her every time she saw it.

“Why.”

“What do you mean, why.”

Grumbling, Taeju glanced at Huiju’s over-robe. He frowned as though the red robe bothered him, but the smile that soon appeared on his face made his thoughts obvious.

“Happy?”

“Huh?”

“Happy I’m not in Azure Dragon Palace, I mean.”

“What, would it be nice if we were in the same dormitory?”

Taeju, who had raised his voice in protest, suddenly opened his mouth as if realizing something.

Then, acting perfectly casual—

“You... what, wanted to come to Azure Dragon Palace?”

“Me?”

“No, I mean...”

“If it’s a dormitory you’re in, then it’s definitely trash. Why would I?”

“Fine, fine.”

Shaking his head irritably, Taeju headed east.

To Azure Dragon Palace, where idealists gathered.

After unpacking in the dormitory, Huiju picked up her phone. No matter where her dormitory had been assigned, it felt like he probably would not care, but she thought she should tell him anyway.

After all, he was her father among her parents.

As the ringing started with the call button, Huiju unconsciously rose from her seat.

Whenever she talked to her father on the phone, this level of tension always accompanied it.

Even though she knew there would be nothing beyond curt reactions and an indifferent voice, perhaps she was imagining something else.

—What.

“It’s me.”

—Speak.

“I got assigned to a dormitory. It’s Vermilion Bird Palace.”

“This time too, I ranked first.”

At her father’s lack of response, Huiju grew anxious and darted her eyes around. Should she talk about how small the dorm room was? Should she promise that she would continue ranking first from now on? As she searched here and there for something to say, her father’s voice continued.

—So.

“Huh?”

—There must be something you want.

Huiju bit her lip, and her heart twisted crookedly.

Her father's question was not particularly strange. Every time she accomplished something, saying she wanted something had become Huiju's habit. When she was younger, it was mostly things like the snacks her older brother ate or the bicycle he rode, and sometimes it would even be her father's fountain pen.

But those had only ever been excuses.

What she had really wanted was her father's acknowledgment.

Even if she was illegitimate, even if she had not been a child he wanted...

Recognition such as *you did well, excellent*.

“The watch Oppa was wearing looked pretty.”

.....

“Buy me that too.”

Saying she wanted praise wounded her pride.

And saying outright that she wanted her father's acknowledgment made her feel pathetic for wanting it.

So, she simply acted the way her father wanted.

Like a greedy, insolent, materialistic illegitimate child.

After ending the call, Huiju sat on the window frame.

Suppressing the heart that belonged nowhere, and the desire to set it down somewhere, anywhere.

**Article 5, Clause 1:** The dormitories shall bear the names of the Four Guardian Deities and shall not be changed after assignment.

**Article 5, Clause 3:** Dormitory assignments shall be based on all records from 1st through 6th grade, including assignment performance, behavioral development, and evaluations by faculty and staff.

**Article 5, Clause 4:** Competition between dormitories shall be permitted; however, mutual slander and defamation shall constitute grounds for severe disciplinary action.

## CHAPTER 2

### Student Council President Min Jeongwoo

A sense of belonging was not something one could feel simply by belonging somewhere.

7th grade passed, then she became an 8th grader, and then a 9th grader, yet Huiju was still on the outside.

In the classroom too, and in the dormitory as well.

Compared to the lower grades, where blatant bullying was everywhere, things had certainly improved. Whatever people muttered behind her back was none of her concern as long as they could not say it to her face, and if they cursed or hurled insults behind her back, that mattered even less.

Still, sometimes she wondered.

Was the fact that she was not noble born, that she was not the wife's child, really enough reason to be rejected this much?

Neither of those things was her fault.

Of course, those two things might not even have been the reason she was ostracized. Like many outsiders, perhaps

things would have been better if she had shown a timid side or forced a servile smile.

If she had admitted defeat.

If only she had given some sign that she would submit.

Then perhaps they might have softened.

But—

“Hey, aren’t you opening this?”

Seong Huiju was not that kind of person.

The more she was bullied, the tougher she became.

The more she was rejected, the more fiercely her competitive spirit burned.

So maybe that was why.

Today, the day of the final exams, Huiju ended up trapped inside an elevator.

No wonder there had been nobody in the hallway.

Huiju wondered who the culprit was. Was it those Azure Dragon Palace bastards she had clashed with in the library yesterday? Or the senior from Black Tortoise Palace whose shoulder she had bumped into this morning?

There were too many suspects to pinpoint anyone.

“Is nobody outside?! There’s someone in here!!!”

After banging on the firmly shut elevator doors for quite a while, Huiju finally dropped to the floor—

She finally sank down onto the floor.

The exam was soon.

She had to take first place again this time.

It was the only way to show them: *I won’t lose to you people, and so I have no reason to submit.*

When it was not a battle with fixed answers like an exam, it was difficult to defeat the noble bastards. Those nobles who had been interacting family to family since childhood possessed a solid belt of trust connecting them to one another.

It did not distinguish between seniors and juniors, nor even between teacher and student.

So, she had to win everything she could.

To endure the moments where she had no choice but to lose.

At that moment, footsteps sounded from outside the elevator.

As though seeing a glimmer of hope, Huiju got to her feet and listened carefully.

“Teacher?”

Huiju called out cautiously and waited for a response.

When nothing came, she frowned and shouted again.

“Hey, you’re Ryu Minseok, right? Open the door! Open the door!”

Even then, no answer came.

Huiju quietly steadied her breathing.

It was a day she absolutely had to win, and she was furious at being forced into a situation where she had no choice but to lose again.

Just as the hand clenched into a fist began trembling—

The closed doors opened.

The person extending a hand from outside the half-sunken elevator was not a teacher—

“Sunbae...”

Nor was it one of the guys she had fought with.

Wearing a red over-robe—

“Take it.”

It was Jeongwoo, the student council president of Royal School.

Unlike Huiju, who had been the shame of Vermilion Bird Palace before becoming its pride, he was at every moment the pride of Vermilion Bird Palace. Even at Royal School, where only outstanding people gathered, he was always someone viewed with awe.

As the firstborn of the Min family, known as a prestigious political lineage, he attracted attention wherever he went, yet as was often the case with people who drew attention, he paid little mind to it.

Perhaps because of that, some called him cold, but it was never seen as a flaw.

With a handsome face yet not showing even a speck of interest toward the opposite sex, and despite carrying the title of student council president, never pretending to be a model student—it was inevitable that eyes gathered on him.

Whenever she saw Jeongwoo, Huiju thought this:

If there were ranks among nobles, Jeongwoo would stand at the very top.

His father and his father's father had both served as prime minister, and Jeongwoo also had deep ties to the royal family.

It was said he had been chosen from childhood as the Grand Prince's companion and entered the palace regularly, so unless he sold out the country, his prestige would never disappear.

Which was why he was someone who would never become involved with her.

He was a noble among nobles.

And she was a commoner and an illegitimate child.

“What are you doing? Aren't you taking it?”

That was why she could not take his hand immediately.

But at Jeongwoo's urging, Huiju grabbed it, and following his pull, came out of the elevator.

It was already twenty minutes after the exam had started.

“Let’s go together.”

Without time to think any longer, Huiju grabbed Jeongwoo’s hand and started running.

“Hey, where are you going?!”

Jeongwoo’s startled voice came from behind, but Huiju paid no attention.

She thought only of the exam.

Even if she explained she had been trapped in the elevator, even if she insisted she was the victim, she imagined the teachers who would not listen.

“You tell them.”

“What?”

“That I was trapped. That’s why I’m late.”

Even if they would not listen to her—

“They’ll listen to you!”

They would listen to Jeongwoo.

Understanding the situation, Jeongwoo started running ahead of Huiju.

He tried to remember who today's exam proctor was.

It did not come to mind well, but it did not matter.

His role was simply to clear the injustice and make sure the girl holding his hand could take the exam safely.

And that was not particularly difficult.

Returning to the dormitory lounge, Jeongwoo sat on the sofa.

Even after opening the book, he had been reading for an assignment, he could not focus.

*Did she do well on the exam?*

He remembered the girl who had run so desperately, only to bite her lower lip silently in front of the exam room.

When he knocked on the door for her, the ethics teacher came out looking annoyed.

The teacher's gaze toward the girl had been fairly sharp, but they were someone capable of reasonable judgment.

Throughout the explanation, the girl had not let go of his hand.

As if it were a lifeline.

“Do you know Seong Huiju?”

Closing his book, Jeongwoo asked casually.

Sanghyeon, who had been struggling alone in front of a chessboard, looked puzzled.

“Seong Huiju? Who doesn’t know that mad dog?”

Shaking his head as though talking about a troublesome child, he started listing a few things about Seong Huiju.

From the fact that she was Castle Group’s illegitimate child to the fact that she had never once lost first place since enrolling.

“I know that much too.”

Jeongwoo answered curtly.

No matter how little attention he paid to people around him, there was no way Jeongwoo would not know who Seong Huiju was.

A girl who had enrolled alongside an enormous donation and fought with someone practically every day—how could he not know?

“Then what are you curious about?”

Moving the queen on the chessboard, Sanghyeon narrowed his eyes and asked.

“You don’t mean...”

“What.”

“You fell for her?”

“What nonsense are you talking about.”

“She is pretty, though. There are probably a ton of guys who confessed to her and got rejected.”

*A pretty mad dog.*

Jeongwoo smiled as though amused and recalled the mad dog’s back as she ran with her long hair flying.

...She *was* pretty.

He admitted it to himself.

“How do you know so much? You interested too?”

“In Seong Huiju? Ugh, no way. No matter how pretty she is, not her.”

“Why?”

The question was so indifferent it did not sound probing at all, and Sanghyeon shrugged.

“I’m scared of her.”

“Why?”

“I once saw her shove a guy before. On the stairs.”

“On the stairs?”

“Well, not shove. She kicked him.”

“And even then, she wasn’t expelled?”

“Her dad’s the chairman of Castle Group. He probably buried it with money.”

The more he listened, the more curious Jeongwoo became about that girl.

The girl who had money but lowly origins, who was small and thin but never knew how to lose.

It was also amusing that there were many guys who had confessed to her and been rejected.

The same people who acted like they wanted to tear her apart in public had apparently been trying to get close to her behind the scenes.

“Want me to introduce you? I know a lot of people in 9th grade.”

“No need.”

Putting his earphones in, Jeongwoo shook his head.

*‘I’ll repay this favor.’*

Remembering what the girl had said before entering the exam room.

### **Royal School 64th Student Council President Inauguration Oath**

“I, Min Jeongwoo, as the 64th Student Council President of Royal School, solemnly swear to protect the school’s honor and traditions.

I promise to look ahead with the ideals of the Azure Dragon, act with the will of the Vermilion Bird, judge with the reason of the White Tiger, and be prudent with the patience of the Black Tortoise.

I will not take honor lightly and will think of responsibility before authority.

Thus, I, Min Jeongwoo, swear upon my name.”

## CHAPTER 3

### One Who Cannot Even Have a Name

“Grand Prince.”

When Wan came out of the lecture hall, the attendants waiting in the hallway bowed their heads.

If someone asked what was so special about royalty in the 21st century, there would be no answer to give. But royalty was originally something regarded as great even when it was not.

As long as they existed, they fulfilled their value simply by existing.

Even at Royal School, famous for its conservative traditions, Wan received special treatment.

For example, he did not have to live in the dormitories.

In fact, Wan had been assigned to Azure Dragon Palace and received a blue over-robe when he entered 7th grade, but now, even as a 12th grader, he had never used a dorm room even once.

“Grand Prince, His Majesty commands that you enter the palace.”

At Chief Court Lady Choi's words, Wan's expression hardened.

Wan had left the palace early and been raised in a private residence, and unless something special happened, he had no reason to enter the palace. Even after leaving, as royalty, it was proper etiquette to enter the palace every morning and pay respects—

*'There is no need for that.'*

His father had not wanted it.

He was not particularly hurt by it anymore.

His father had always been wary of him.

When he was young, he wanted to know why, but after realizing it was meaningless, he had simply continued rebelling.

*Be an example, yet do not shine.*

When such commands were given, going astray became inevitable.

Unlike him, his older brother, the Crown Prince, was the type to obey their father's words first.

The problem was that it had made him ill.

His brother was a sensitive person.

In crowded places, he suffered from anxiety and fear, and even the smallest sounds startled him enough to make him tremble.

The more disappointed their father became in that brother, the stronger his wariness toward Wan grew.

As though his brother's weakness were somehow Wan's fault.

So his father summoning him to the palace was certainly not a good thing.

Either Wan had done something *too well*, or his brother had done something *too poorly*.

Or perhaps both.

“I heard you summoned me.”

Wan bowed his head.

“Come closer.”

One might expect some warmth toward a son he had not seen in a long time, but the king spoke indifferently.

As though accustomed to such coldness, Wan stepped forward, knelt, and sat.

The king handed a royal decree to his son.

“What is this?”

“You can find out by opening it.”

Frowning slightly, Wan unfolded the sealed decree.

It stated that his princely title, *Grand Prince Ishin*, would be changed to *Grand Prince Ian*.

“This is your new princely title.”

Instead of answering, Wan quietly looked up at his father.

His title had already been changed once when he was ten.

So why again...

“What did I... do well this time?”

Unable to bear the injustice, Wan asked.

The king looked down at his son with indifferent eyes, as though even the complaint itself was insolence.

“Do not question it.”

“Father.”

“It is the king’s command.”

Not as a father—

But with the royal voice of a king, he silenced his son.

Leaving the throne hall, Wan quickened his pace.

Though he tried not to show the turmoil inside him, his rough steps fully revealed his twisted mood.

“Grand Prince! Grand Prince!”

Just as sweat began gathering on Chief Court Lady Choi’s forehead from following him—

“Iwan.”

A voice called Wan’s name.

One of the few people is allowed to do so.

Hwan.

“Where are you rushing off to like that?”

“...Hyungnim.”

With no choice, Wan stopped and quietly steadied his breathing.

“I pay respects to Your Highness the Crown Prince.”

Only after the redness had faded from his face did Wan bow.

Habitually checking his brother's complexion, Wan narrowed his eyes.

Had he lost more weight again?

His cheeks were deeply hollowed.

“I heard your princely title changed.”

“It did.”

“Do you like it?”

“Of course not.”

“.....”

“I hate it enough to die.”

At that blatant defiance, silence fell everywhere.

“Your Highness...”

Chief Court Lady Choi shook her head as though asking *how could you say that*, while the attendants of the Crown Prince's palace exchanged glances asking *what in the world is happening*.

But the Crown Prince's lips curved gently upward.

“Did you say that to Father as well?”

“Yes.”

“You really are...”

As though amused by his younger brother's curt response, Hwan laughed for a long while.

Only then did the attendants' tense expressions ease.

“What would you know?”

After entering the Eastern Palace, Wan said it.

He used honorifics when others were around, but when alone they were no different from ordinary brothers.

Lying sideways on the sofa, Wan propped his head on his arm.

If Chief Court Lady Choi saw him, she would surely scold him for his lack of decorum, but Hwan loved that unrestrained side of his younger brother.

“*Grand Prince Ian... Ian...*”

Muttering the name, Hwan tilted his head.

“It doesn’t roll off the tongue well.”

“Forget it. Grand Prince Ishin or Grand Prince Ian —it’s all the same. It might change again anyway.”

“At least you have a name.”

“You have one too.”

No one can call it, so what kind of name is that?

Replying lightly, Hwan turned his gaze toward the window.

Hearing the chirping birds, a small smile appeared on his lips.

Whenever Hwan wore that expression, Wan became irritated for no reason.

It was a smile filled with resignation, as though he might disappear at any moment.

The fact that he resembled their late mother so much only made it worse.

With a face like hers, smiling like her—

What if he died like her too?

“Ah, I’m getting married soon.”

At that moment, Hwan said casually.

“Huh?”

“I’m getting married.”

He said it as casually as if he were talking about going for a walk somewhere.

“You have a woman you’re seeing, Hyung?”

Seeing him quietly blink his eyes, it was clearly not a joke. To begin with, he was not someone witty enough to make this kind of joke.

Which meant it was true.

“Who is it? Is it someone I know too?”

“She said she attended Royal School, so you’d know her.”

“Crazy.”

“It’ll be next year.”

“Wow.”

Flopping back and covering his mouth, Wan abruptly sat up.

No matter how much he had spent his life learning dignity and restraint, Wan was nineteen.

He was curious enough about even strangers' love lives, so hearing about his stone-faced brother's romance? There was no way his interest would not be piqued.

“Since when have you been dating? Did Father approve? Is she pretty?”

As Wan poured out questions one after another, Hwan shook his head.

“You like this kind of thing?”

“Uh...”

“Uh?”

“I do. So tell me. Who is it?”

Letting out a sigh, Hwan opened the document file on the desk.

He looked as though searching for something with his eyes, then—

“Yoon Yirang.”

He said the name.

“Huh?”

“You asked who. Yoon Yirang.”

Wan’s expression twisted.

It was not as though he did not know Yoon Yirang.

She was the treasured daughter of a family that had produced four queens.

But she was also Wan’s longtime friend.

The fact that Yirang was the person his brother was seeing meant she would become his sister-in-law.

And the future queen consort.

Just imagining it made him cringe.

“Wow, how could neither of you say a word to me? You’re my brother, and she’s my friend.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“No, you should’ve said it earlier. If you’re thinking of marriage, then you must’ve been dating for a long ti—”

“We met for the first time today.”

“What?”

Instead of answering, Hwan handed him the file.

Reading the documents containing Yirang's personal details and family genealogy, Wan quickly understood the situation.

If it had been a relationship that began with love, there would not be countless agreements written in the documents.

“Did Yoon Yirang agree to this too?”

“Does that matter?”

“Then what about you? Did *you* agree?”

“It doesn't matter.”

At Hwan's answer, carrying firm resignation, Wan lost his words.

He did not even know where or how to begin objecting.

He had never learned how to stop someone being dragged toward a future whose unhappiness was already obvious.

“Refuse.”

“You know I can't.”

“Why can't you? Just do it.”

“.....”

“Hyung, this is marriage. Marriage is supposed to be with someone you love.”

Wan pleaded with desperate sincerity.

He could not let the brother who resembled their mother walk the same path as their mother, who had withered away in a loveless marriage.

He was already wasting away day by day.

How could he endure more...

“I’m the Crown Prince of this country.”

“Hyung...”

“Don’t live like this.”

But Hwan had already given up.

### **Annals of King Huijong, Volume 4**

**September 1999:** The legitimate eldest son, Hwan, was appointed Crown Prince.

**February 2000:** Grand Prince Iyeong Wan’s princely title was changed to *Ishin*.

**October 2009:** Grand Prince Ishin Wan's princely title was changed to *Ian*.

## CHAPTER 4

### The Tiger Behind the Fox

After finishing checking her answers, Huiju smiled.

She had been anxious because she entered the exam hall thirty minutes late, but if her self-grading was correct, first place would belong to her again this time.

Whoever had trapped her in the elevator, it would be news enough to turn their insides upside down.

“Bastards.”

Huiju muttered pleasantly as she organized her test papers.

The exam had ended well, so now it was time to repay her debt.

Snatching up the over-robe she had thrown onto the bed, Huiju left her room.

Her steps toward the 12th-grade lounge were light.

Entering with a knock, she ignored the seniors staring at her and looked for Jeongwoo. People said he was usually either in the library or the lounge, but not even a strand of

that illustrious hair could be seen. Just as she thought maybe she should go to the library—

“Taeju’s little sister?”

A familiar senior girl greeted her.

Han Dayeong, was it?

She was supposedly Seong Taeju’s girlfriend, but she was a strange woman.

Though she was the eldest daughter of a prestigious family, she spoke casually; though she dated Seong Taeju, her grades were quite good.

And her looks were... not bad.

No, she stood out quite a bit and was popular.

But why date Seong Taeju?

That was strange.

“What brings you here? Came to see me?”

“No. I’m looking for Sunbae Jeongwoo.”

“Why Jeongwoo all of a sudden?”

“.....”

Huiju looked at her with a face saying *why would I tell you that*, and Dayeong chuckled.

“Jeongwoo’s probably at the archery grounds. The friendly match is coming up.”

“Ah, okay.”

Nodding in a way that was neither greeting nor not, Huiju left the lounge, ignoring the other seniors’ gazes just as she had when entering.

That once-a-year friendly match—

Huiju was scheduled to participate too.

“Sunbae!”

“Seong Huiju?”

Practicing archery, Jeongwoo turned at the voice calling him.

Huiju was running toward him, her loose hair tied high.

By the time she reached him, she was too busy catching her breath to speak.

“Someone chasing you?”

“It’s almost nine.”

Looking at her watch, she frowned.

“I have to get back before then.”

Students below 10th grade were not allowed outside the dormitories after 9 PM.

Jeongwoo handed her his tumbler.

“At least drink some water.”

Taking it immediately, Huiju hesitated.

“Why?”

“Can I drink from it?”

At the unexpected question, Jeongwoo laughed and nodded.

Only then did Huiju begin gulping down the water.

After finishing the entire tumbler, she looked up at him.

“I’ll wash it and return it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“...Thank you for helping me before.”

“You came just to say that?”

“I said I’d repay the favor.”

Jeongwoo’s lips curved again.

He had remembered her saying she would repay him, but he had not expected *this*.

“How are you going to repay me?”

“That’s for you to think about.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

Jeongwoo frowned at the shameless answer, then smiled again.

Usually, people buy meals or coffee in situations like this.

“You did well on the exam?”

“Yes.”

“You sound confident.”

“It’ll prove your help was worth it.”

Answering smoothly, Huiju glanced at Jeongwoo’s bow.

Not missing the look, he said—

“You’re the 9th-grade representative, right?”

“You’re the 12th-grade representative?”

“We’re on the same team anyway. Want to practice together?”

Huiju moved her lips awkwardly, then shook her head.

“I can’t.”

“You said you’d repay me.”

“I told you. Ninth graders can’t use the archery grounds at this hour.”

“Ah.”

Jeongwoo sighed and shrugged.

“Then forget practice. Just run errands for me.”

“Errands?”

“After class, it’s too much to carry everything here.”

Gesturing toward the pile beside the shooting stand, he spoke.

School bag, sports bag, bow case, tumbler—countless things.

“You want me to be your porter?”

“Don’t want to?”

After thinking briefly, Huiju shook her head.

It was a little annoying, but easier than she expected.

“Fine. Starting tomorrow?”

“Meet me in front of the lecture building at seven.”

Jeongwoo nodded, seemingly satisfied.

Despite his cold appearance, he smiled easily and even walked her to the archery grounds entrance.

“Thanks. Go on.”

---

One week into carrying Jeongwoo’s things—

Huiju thought the time with him was not bad.

To begin with, she did not carry much.

Among all his belongings, her share was only the bow.

As long as she carried it properly, she could do whatever else she wanted.

“Can I study vocabulary?”

Pulling out flashcards—

“Can I listen to music?”

Whenever she asked, Jeongwoo nodded readily.

“Do whatever you want.”

Some days he bought her drinks.

Other days he helped with correcting mistakes.

He played the role of a good senior.

“Isn’t that Seong Huiju?”

“Why is she with Min Jeongwoo?”

Perhaps because the pairing looked so mismatched, the surrounding gossip grew noisy.

*From Seong Huiju must have some dirt on Min Jeongwoo to Castle Group invested political funds into the Min family.*

The rumors multiplied endlessly.

Even the exam-day incident had grown exaggerated.

*Seong Huiju, who was never late, and Min Jeongwoo running while holding her hand—or something like that.*

Huiju knew the rumors were growing, but she did not bother correcting them.

No one had enough guts to ask directly.

And the rumors involving Jeongwoo were surprisingly useful.

Like fearing the tiger standing behind the fox—

People no longer openly despised her like before.

“Sunbae, did you hear that rumor?”

One day she asked him.

Whether he knew and pretended not to.

Or simply did not know.

“I know. Someone asked today too.”

“About what?”

“Whether we’re close.”

“And?”

“I said we are.”

“Can’t I?”

Jeongwoo asked so casually that Huiju faltered.

*Close.*

The word felt strange.

All she did was carry his bow.

Could that really count?

As she thought for too long, Jeongwoo smiled again.

“Don’t want to be close with me?”

“It’s not that... but why?”

“Do I need a reason?”

Somehow, it felt as though *he* was the one clinging to *her*.

Huiju became a little pleased.

It felt strange—and nice—that Min Jeongwoo, admired by the entire student body, wanted to be close to her.

“Then can I speak casually to you?”

So, she teased him on purpose.

“Do whatever you want.”

Jeongwoo accepted it again.

Easily.

---

“Why are you practicing so hard these days?”

After practice, Sanghyeon asked.

“The friendly match is coming.”

“Since when did you care about things like that?”

Even when teased, Jeongwoo did not answer.

Seeing that, Sanghyeon became certain something was up.

They had been friends for years, but he had rarely seen Jeongwoo work *hard* at something.

He had always been good without trying.

And yet Min Jeongwoo was practicing archery for two hours every day.

Every day.

“Trying to beat the Grand Prince?”

“What?”

“The Grand Prince is representing Azure Dragon Palace.”

Among all the 12th graders, only Grand Prince Ian could match Jeongwoo.

Not only in archery—

Almost everything.

Their matches always drew attention.

But Jeongwoo already knew who would win.

The Grand Prince was someone who was not allowed to shine too brightly or make too much noise.

He would lose appropriately.

And what Jeongwoo could do for him—

Was winning with everything he had.

So that he would not become a shameful loser.

## **Royal School Regulations 4**

**Article 27, Clause 3:** Students in 10th grade and below are prohibited from leaving the dormitory during the *hae-si* period (21:00–23:00). Violation of this regulation shall result in **20 demerit points** being assigned to the student.

# 은혜 같은 희주



## CHAPTER 5

### The Gentleman and the Petty Person

“So, it’s that bitch again.”

Checking the name written on the posted rankings, Minseok grounds his teeth.

Because Seong Huiju had taken first place again despite arriving thirty minutes late to the exam hall.

Getting out of that elevator in the first place had already been irritating enough.

*Should I just lock her up somewhere for real?*

It had started as a joke, but Minseok had poured considerable effort into making it the perfect crime.

The security guards’ shift changes.

Huiju’s movements.

Even deleting the elevator CCTV footage.

There had not been a corner he left untouched.

But—

He had never expected Min Jeongwoo to interfere.

Was she lucky?

Or just vicious?

If someone got trapped in an elevator on exam day, their mentality should shatter.

But that bitch Seong Huiju still showed up and took the exam.

No—even without the elevator, losing thirty minutes of exam time should have been enough to ruin someone.

What kind of mind did she have to still take first place in that situation?

At that moment, Seong Huiju appeared.

Wearing her red over-robe.

The way she smiled from the end of the hallway made her look like someone who already knew the result.

“You said you’d win, but you lost again?”

“They say fools rejoice and despair over little things. Isn’t struggling like that exhausting?”

Pretending his insides were not churning, Minseok smiled and looked down at her.

He was bigger than most boys his age and waited for Huiju to shrink back.

But she did not.

Instead, she merely snorted as though amused.

“Was it hard?”

“What?”

“This exam. It wasn’t hard for me.”

While Minseok lost his words, Huiju leisurely closed the distance.

Then, in an absurdly gentle voice—

“If you lost, accept it. Stop running your mouth and embarrassing yourself.”

She crushed his pride.

Unable to contain his irritation, Minseok’s voice turned rough.

“You’re not even noble-born and yet you dare—”

Minseok thought status was Huiju’s weakness.

“Watch your mouth, noble bastard. Want disciplinary action?”

Huiju knew how to use her weakness as a weapon.

This school clearly had status differences—

But it was also a school that taught discrimination was a crime.

The moment Minseok used status-based insults, he had more to lose.

“This little—”

So even if he growled like he wanted to hit her—

That was all he could do.

Even if she gave him time.

Huiju smiled leisurely, savoring the loser’s humiliation.

“Try harder. How can you not beat me even once? And you’re supposed to be a noble.”

Standing at the shooting platform, Huiju took her stance.

Everyone should have been asleep by now.

But if not now, she could not practice.

During the day she was busy with assignments, and whenever she barely managed to find time, seniors took the space.

The annual archery competition was called a *friendly match*, but rivalry between dormitories was fierce.

The school culture considered openly showing competitiveness vulgar—

Except in archery.

Perhaps because of that, the cheering wars between dormitories were intense too.

Especially Vermilion Bird Palace and Azure Dragon Palace—

And Black Tortoise Palace and White Tiger Palace.

They could not stand each other.

As a Vermilion Bird member, Huiju naturally had to care about Azure Dragon Palace.

And among their representatives—

Was Ryu Minseok.

It was strange how someone who hung around trash every day still ranked highly in both academics and archery.

There was no way that idiot was simply talented.

So, she wondered if there was some trick.

*'I have the archery grounds key.'*

She had heard Minseok say it during dinner.

The way he bragged about that filthy privilege was ridiculous.

If he had known she was nearby, he should have kept his mouth shut.

Huiju immediately got up and headed to the academic building.

If Minseok had the key—

If that meant he practiced more than her—

Then she needed that key too.

And the practice time it guaranteed.

Because that was fair.

Passing through the empty halls, Huiju entered Azure Dragon Palace's classroom.

She found Minseok's desk and successfully stole the key.

She felt no guilt.

Rather, because it happened so easily—

She became certain.

Certain that even heaven was helping her victory.

So naturally practice should proceed without interruption—

“Who are you?”

A voice came from behind.

Wearing blue *cheollik* robes—

It was Grand Prince Ian.

They had never spoken before, but she knew instantly.

He was too tall, too beautiful to mistake for anyone else.

This was bad.

If it had been a teacher, she could have appealed for sympathy.

If it had been Minseok, she could have punched him.

That would have been better.

Grand Prince Ian—

Was the worst possible person Huiju could have encountered.

She had heard he did not use the dormitories.

So why was he here now—

Why him—

“Your name.”

She tried to run.

But his calm voice wrapped around her legs tighter than chains.

“If you committed a wrongdoing, accept the punishment it deserves. Do not stain your honor further by fleeing and being caught.”

Forced to stop, Huiju turned toward him.

Her eyes were openly defiant.

Wan ignored it.

Stopping had already been surrender.

And so was his approaching her.

“Name.”

“...Seong Huiju.”

“Affiliation.”

“Vermilion Bird Palace. Ninth grade.”

“You know you violated school regulations.”

“I lacked practice time. The friendly match is right around the corner...”

“Are you a gentleman, or a petty person?”

Wan frowned.

He had no intention of hearing excuses.

Whether she lacked practice time or not—

If one commits wrongdoing, one accepts punishment.

And a gentleman did not make excuses.

“Students below tenth grade are forbidden outside the dormitories after *hae-si*. Violation: twenty demerit points.”

He continued.

“Using sports facilities outside training hours requires the principal’s approval. Violation: ten points.”

“In total, you—”

“What about Your Highness?”

Defiance rose in her eyes again.

“You’re here too.”

“Will *you* receive demerits too?”

At the blatant suspicion, Wan let out a hollow laugh.

Did she truly think he had broken the rules too?

Her glare said yes.

“Do you think I came without permission?”

He took out the approval form from his robe.

Her glare immediately weakened.

“H-how did you get that?”

“They told me students’ passions would become excessive before the friendly match.”

“That the archery grounds weren’t for individual training...”

Her voice trailed off sadly.

Wan stayed silent.

Every expression she made pulled his gaze.

The drooping brows of injustice.

The widened eyes of disappointment.

The lip she bit when upset.

The cheeks reddening with anger.

Breathing furiously, the girl pulled out a key with a blue tassel.

“It belongs to Ryu Minseok. Azure Dragon Palace, ninth grade.”

“Ryu Minseok?”

“Yes. He bragged shamelessly about having it, so I stole it.”

Not only sneaking into practice—

She had stolen the key.

Depending on interpretation, it could even mean expulsion.

“I don’t know why an individual possesses the key to an archery ground that supposedly isn’t for individual training.”

“And seeing how easily Your Highness obtained approval...”

“It seems only the standards for me were high.”

Only then did Wan realize.

This was *that* Seong Huiju.

Castle Group’s illegitimate child.

The mad dog of Vermilion Bird Palace.

“So don’t lecture me about demerits.”

“I’ll enjoy every opportunity my enemies enjoy.”

“Exactly the same.”

“So, you’ll become dirty too?”

“I’m saying I’ll win dirty.”

“Better than losing cleanly.”

Like a hedgehog with every spine raised, the girl turned and strode toward the door.

The steps were too proud to be called fleeing.

Then she suddenly returned.

And bowed deeply.

As though *she* were the gentleman.

As though she were not the one being dirty and underhanded.

It was an upright protest.

## CHAPTER 6

### Personal Feelings

Early in the morning, Wan went to the principal's office and said,

“Please consider fully opening the archery grounds.”

“The archery grounds?”

The principal asked with a puzzled face.

He had been slightly expectant upon hearing that the Grand Prince—who had never once sought him out since enrollment—had a personal request.

After all, before being his student, he was the Grand Prince of this nation.

It was tradition for members of the royal clan, including Grand Princes, to study at Royal School, but from enrollment to graduation it was an unspoken rule not to stand out.

If they were too outstanding, they risked becoming the talk of others; if they were too lacking, the dignity of royalty suffered, so finding moderation was the task.

In that sense, Grand Prince Ian was a somewhat... unusual case.

Though he was the king's second son, he shone conspicuously.

It was absurd to expect someone with great height and refined looks not to shine, but he himself was not afraid of standing out.

He consistently ranked at the top academically and also excelled in arts and athletics such as archery and calligraphy.

As though he wished to announce his talents to the entire world.

That did not mean he was arrogant, however.

It could not be said he lacked the pride unique to royalty, but he was not the type to belittle or look down on others.

He was simply born noble and carried the ease of someone who did not concern himself with his surroundings.

So how strange would a personal request such as opening the archery grounds seem?

“Grand Prince, may I ask the reason for such a request?”

The principal asked, using honorifics so formal they hardly suited a teacher-student relationship.

Grand Prince Ian tilted his head slightly before speaking calmly.

“Confucius said that while a gentleman does not contend, in archery he must surely compete.”

“And so...”

“The students are burning with enthusiasm for the upcoming friendly competition.

Would it not be all the more pleasing if the principal were to support that enthusiasm?”

It was a clear answer, yet none could have been more vague.

Still, he could not ask further.

He could not disappoint the Grand Prince, who already wore the smile of someone who had received the answer he wanted.

“Since Your Highness says so... I shall consider it sincerely.”

Knowing those words already meant acceptance, a small smile formed on the Grand Prince's face.

Not too bright.

Not too deliberate.

Just enough.

Leaving the principal's office, Wan crossed the corridor with his usual gait.

Though his effortless posture carried an orderly and noble elegance, his thoughts were complete chaos.

At a school meant for learning—

And because of one girl—

To make a personal request.

It was impossible.

“You really said that? To the principal?”

Hwan asked after visiting Wan's residence.

“What, why.”

Unable to hide his irritation, Wan grumbled.

No matter how quiet the request had been, he knew every one of his actions was reported to the palace.

Sooner or later, it would reach Father's ears.

He had only confided in his older brother because he was worried after the fact—

He had not expected him to come running over.

“My little brother having a crush...”

“It's not like that.”

“Then what, pity? Charity?”

“What?”

“That girl's Castle Group's illegitimate child, right? In that damned school, if you're a commoner and illegitimate... isn't it a miracle just staying alive?”

It was an outdated thing to say, but Wan could not deny it.

Officially, the nation pursued equality, but status still existed.

As long as royalty existed and noble bloodlines continued, classes would remain.

Considering people's tendency to gather with their own kind and reject those unlike themselves, discrimination would never disappear.

“It's not that...”

“It's not?”

“There's nothing wrong with what she said.”

Shrugging, Wan remembered Huiju's words.

“She said she'd enjoy every opportunity her enemies enjoyed.

That she'd become just as dirty.

Was I supposed to just watch that?”

“Ahh, so that's why you helped? So she wouldn't become dirty?”

The teasing tone was obvious.

Wan threw a cushion.

Struck squarely on the head, Hwan cried, “That's treason!”

The court lady standing outside the door immediately asked if everything was alright.

The two brothers instantly stiffened their expressions, but—

“It is fine, pay no mind.”

Hwan’s quick thinking came naturally.

“Court Lady Park’s got her ear against the door right now, doesn’t she?”

“Probably. She does it often at the Eastern Palace too.”

Unlike Hwan, who seemed unbothered, Wan grimaced and waved his hand.

“Ugh, just hurry back to the palace. Before Father scolds you for no reason.”

“Father doesn’t scold me.”

“Ah right. Guess I’ll be the one getting scolded.”

Wan’s expression remained calm despite the absurdity of his words.

Pitying his younger brother but unable to comfort him, Hwan changed the subject.

“So, is that girl pretty?”

“What?”

For the second time—

Hwan got hit in the head with a cushion.

At that same time, Huiju was suffering from anxiety.

She could not stop thinking about her exchange with Wan last night.

Though Huiju had lived as Vermilion Bird Palace's mad dog and fighting rooster, boasting a record of victory after victory without shame—

Her opponent being royalty was somewhat burdensome.

No—

Very burdensome.

“I won't get expelled, right?”

In the end, unable even to eat dinner properly, Huiju sat on a bench and repeated her regrets.

“I'm not going to prison for insulting royalty or something, right?”

Replaying what she had said to Wan, Huiju eventually imagined terrible possibilities.

Expulsion.

Or expulsion.

Or expulsion.

While she sat there yanking at her hair in self-reproach—

“Hey, hey. Get up. A notice went up.”

A Vermilion Bird Palace friend she had met through Jeongwoo shook her shoulder.

“A notice? Why?”

“Just get up already.”

It was not the season for announcements.

The exams had ended only recently, and this semester’s schedule had been shared long ago.

Then—

Could it be?

Terrified her imagination had become reality, Huiju ran toward the central building.

“What...”

Pushing through the murmuring students until she reached the hanging notice, Huiju could not hide her empty feeling.

## **Full opening of the archery grounds.**

“Isn’t it great? Fully open for a month. You kept whining that you didn’t have enough practice time.”

It *was* good news.

Full opening meant she could practice all day without an approval letter.

But somehow—

She did not feel happy.

The more she read the clause—

**“The only conditions for entry to the archery grounds are courtesy and decorum.”**

—the more her pride hurt.

There was no way not to realize Grand Prince Ian himself had stepped forward after hearing her grievances last night.

“Annoying.”

Muttering lowly, Huiju turned sharply.

She wanted to exhaust every favor the great Grand Prince Ian had shown her.

Until none remained.

Huiju knew her heart was ugly.

She could admit he had found a better solution than punishing her.

That he was quite an admirable senior.

But the fact that he stood in a position where he *could* grant such favors was humiliating enough to be unbearable.

And the fact that all she could do in return was feel gratitude was equally unbearable.

It felt as though he were saying:

*There's a way to win cleanly.*

To someone who had already decided she would gladly become dirty to win.

*How dare he.*

Someone living a life where he never needed to fight to win—

How dare he say that to her.

So Huiju immediately grabbed her bow and went to find Jeongwoo.

“Let’s go practice.”

“Suddenly? It’s not even seven yet.”

“From today, special training.”

“You fight with that Ryu Minseok guy again or something?”

Huiju shook her head at Jeongwoo’s worried question and said only one thing.

“I really hate losing.”

## **Royal School Regulations**

**Article 50, Clause 1:** Every autumn, the school shall hold friendly competitions to promote friendship among the dormitories.

**Article 50, Clause 2:** The competition events shall be traditional archery, horseback riding, and calligraphy.

**Article 50, Clause 7:** Representatives for each event shall be selected individually by each dormitory.

**Article 50, Clause 8:** In the friendly competitions, victory and defeat are secondary; the representatives of each dormitory shall regard preserving dignity and honor as their foremost duty.

**Article 50, Clause 12:** Students who win the friendly competition shall be awarded the *Eosahwa* in place of royal commendation.

## CHAPTER 7

### Someone Who Could Not Lose

On the day of the friendly match, Huiju woke up without an alarm. She could not hide the excitement fluttering inside her like a child. When preparation was perfect, what surged was not nervousness but anticipation.

The past few days had been little different from those of an athlete. Morning and evening, she cut down meal times to practice real matches with Jeongwoo, and whenever she moved between lecture buildings she ran around without caring about dignity. It was all to build the stamina needed so she would not tire even after drawing a bowstring for an entire hour.

One day, Seong Taeju saw her like that and mocked, “*Is becoming a national representative your dream?*” But she did not expect understanding from that idiot older brother who knew absolutely nothing about competitiveness.

Anyway, whether it was Seong Taeju or Ryu Minseok, every guy she disliked belonged to Cheongryong Palace. Ah, even Grand Prince Ian.

Clicking her tongue as she took out a red *cheollik*, she heard a knock.

The person greeting Huiju when she stepped into the hallway was none other than Dayeong.

“What is it?”

“I came to cheer you on. I’m the cheering captain of Jujak Palace.”

Dayeong spoke innocently, and phoenixes were painted on both her cheeks.

“Ah.”

“So? Do you think you’ll win?”

“Well, everyone except Oppa Jeongwoo is good at it...”

Huiju muttered quietly and sighed.

She had definitely heard rumors that he had talent in traditional archery, but Jeongwoo’s skill during their first joint practice had not been impressive.

*‘Did the twelfth graders pick players through a popularity vote or something?’*

When she asked after getting exhausted from correcting his posture, Jeongwoo laughed loudly and made excuses.

*“The twelfth graders have no time to practice because of university entrance prep.”*

At least one fortunate thing was that he learned quickly. The more training they repeated, the more his arrows headed toward the center of the target.

“Why Jeongwoo? He shoots well though.”

Dayeong asked with a puzzled expression. It seemed she believed the ridiculous rumor that Min Jeongwoo could not do things poorly.

“He’s... not bad.”

Huiju answered obediently. She did not particularly want to embarrass him, the pride of Jujak Palace.

As with everything in the Royal School, the friendly match was especially closely tied to the royal family.

Every year, His Majesty the King visited the school personally to watch the competition, and personally bestowed *eosahwa* flowers upon the winners. It was also tradition for students who received *eosahwa* to be selected as scholarship students the following year.

The students lacked nothing when it came to money, yet they still wanted the scholarship title for one reason only—honor.

A scholarship student chosen by the royal family. That reputation alone.

Today was no different.

Appearing in the upper seats of the archery field, His Majesty the King slowly took in the appearance of the hot-blooded students. The students, who had remained silent as if bearing that quiet gaze, finally burst into thunderous cheers once the standard-bearers carrying the Four Guardian Beasts' flags ran past the cheering section.

“The students’ enthusiasm is truly remarkable, is it not? Since Your Majesty is coming, they have been so diligent...”

The principal sitting beside the King spoke proudly.

“I have already heard. They opened the archery grounds twenty-four hours a day.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It was a request made personally by Grand Prince Ian.”

“.....”

Instead of answering, the King nodded and looked at his son standing below the upper seats.

The figure in blue *cheollik* looked dignified. With his exceptionally tall stature and broad shoulders, his son drew attention even standing among a crowd.

Perhaps sensing the gaze, the son standing on the shooting platform raised his head.

The King looked into his son's eyes and deliberately wore a stern expression.

A silent command: *Do not be too outstanding, and do not be too lacking.*

Breaking away from the gaze coldly, the son drew the bowstring.

The bow curved into a crescent shape. When the wind quieted and he held his breath—

“Bullseye!”

He struck the exact center of the target and scored ten points.

The cheers of Cheongryong Palace students swept through the entire archery field.

“Looks like Cheongryong Palace will win this year.”

“Who knows.”

The King answered dryly as he looked down at his son.

He had youthful fire in his eyes, but the King knew he could go no further than that.

“Until it ends, it is not over.”

His son’s tender heart—which burned like fire yet sank like water—was something the father knew best.

The final contestants of Hyeonmu Palace and Baekho Palace scored nine and eight points respectively and stepped down.

Huiju, the final contestant of Jujak Palace, steadied her breathing.

“It’s okay. Just do what you always do.”

Jeongwoo lightly grasped Huiju’s wrist as he spoke.

Because the Cheongryong Palace players were performing better than expected, it had become a difficult match.

Huiju nodded and stepped onto the platform.

Steadying her breathing and reading the wind's direction, she drew the bowstring and stared at the target.

“This isn't a target. It's Ryu Minseok's philtrum.”

Huiju muttered and focused.

When she released the tension gathered at her fingertips, the arrow shot forward and struck the target.

The attendant standing before the target waved the flag and shouted:

“Nine points!!!”

Disappointment crossed Huiju's face.

They were tied with Cheongryong Palace, so if Cheongryong's final contestant shot ten points, they could not win.

Suppressing her frustration as she stepped down, Huiju looked toward Cheongryong Palace's final player.

It was Grand Prince Ian, who until now had not made a single mistake and had scored only tens.

Unlike someone holding the key to victory, Grand Prince Ian's face was calm as he quietly stepped onto the platform.

Staring at the blue dragon painted on the target, he held his breath and drew the bow with the flawless posture he had shown until now.

*This will be another perfect ten*, she thought—

At that moment, his fingers twisted slightly.

The result was seven points.

“What...”

Everyone in the archery field turned to look at Grand Prince Ian.

Their expressions said they could not believe it.

In contrast, the person at the center of the commotion descended from the platform without the slightest change in expression.

“The Vermilion Bird of the South!!!”

And thus, victory went to Jujak Palace.

Even Jeongwoo, who rarely got excited, brightened with joy, but Huiju’s heart sank.

Even while standing on the podium receiving the *eosahwa*, the heaviness in her heart would not lift.

“Seong Huiju, congratulations!”

Even when students who usually acted distant patted her shoulders, it was the same.

Returning to the dormitory with a stiff face, Huiju threw off her sweat-soaked *cheollik* and fell into thought.

The moment Grand Prince Ian’s long fingers bent. The trajectory the arrow drew. The relieved face he showed only after confirming defeat.

She could not forget them.

Because of that, the *eosahwa* she received did not feel glorious.

It did not feel honorable.

She felt none of the exhilaration that came only from defeating an opponent who had done their utmost.

If only he had been someone who fought by any means necessary... someone who desperately wanted victory even if it meant playing dirty... perhaps she would not feel this rotten.

“What bad luck...”

Unable to suppress the boiling anger, Huiju finally stormed out of the dorm room.

She felt like she had to either run around the field or hit Seong Taeju to feel better.

Of course, students were not supposed to leave the dorm at this hour, but it was fine. Everyone would be busy with the post-match celebrations anyway.

After running several laps from the dormitory building to the lecture halls, Huiju finally reached the archery field and was able to steady her panting breath.

As she caught her breath, the sound of wind being cut rang out rhythmically.

It was coming from inside the archery grounds.

“.....”

Drawn inside, Huiju lost her words at the sight before her.

The prince in blue *cheollik* was repeatedly practicing archery with perfectly upright posture.

Just how long had he been shooting?

He was drenched in sweat, and countless arrows were embedded in the target painted with the blue dragon.

Only after seeing that could Huiju finally admit it.

He had not wanted to lose.

Just like everyone else, he had wanted to win.

And yet he had no choice but to lose.

And he was deeply frustrated by it.

## **Results of the 64th Friendly Competition October 2009**

**Traditional Archery** — Jujak Palace representatives: Min Jeongwoo, Kim Dahye, Lee Daeyong, Seong Huiju

**Horse Riding** — Baekho Palace representative: Yoon Yirang

**Calligraphy** — Jujak Palace representative: Han Dayeong

## CHAPTER 8

### A Royal Marriage

Yirang carefully hung up her white *cheollik*. Remembering the sensation of the reins still lingering in her palms, Yirang quietly savored the beating of her heart as it trembled softly.

Having learned calmness from a very young age, Yirang could only become noisy while atop a horse.

The hair that became more disheveled the more she cut through the wind, the breathing that grew rougher the tighter she pulled the reins—everything.

That was why Yirang loved horseback riding.

The pleasure of moments when she was allowed to fall apart was as beautiful as the joy she felt while playing the piano.

But only up to that point.

Even if she wanted to run faster, even if she wanted to win more, she had to endure it.

*“Do not reveal what you desire.”*

It was her father's long-standing teaching.

The most frightening person in the world was someone who wanted nothing.

So whatever she desired, she must never let it be discovered.

Thus Yirang always wore a tranquil face.

Like someone who wanted nothing.

“Did you see Seong Huiju earlier?”

Coming into the lounge, Yirang heard the name that had become the topic of the friendly competition.

“Seong Huiju?”

“Yeah. She practiced herself to death even at dawn and ended up receiving an *eosahwa*.”

“She works hard.”

Giving an appropriate response, Yirang sat on the sofa and opened a book.

It was her way of saying she did not want to hear more.

She could not understand why she had to listen to stories about a commoner girl who was also illegitimate.

Apparently she had some decent talent, but it seemed she was running wild relying on that alone.

That was what the rumors always said.

One day she fought someone.

Another day she made someone cry.

And another day she won in the end.

Yirang was tired of hearing such stories.

Pretending to focus on her book, Yirang recalled the conversation she had with her father several days ago.

*The Crown Princess must be you.*

Those were his words as he handed her a photograph of the Crown Prince.

The royal family was preparing the Crown Prince's marriage, so she had to become the Crown Princess.

And later, the Queen of this country also had to be her.

Since her father's words had not been a question, Yirang had not answered either.

She knew it was not something she could refuse.

She did not particularly want to refuse, either.

She had expected a day like this would come someday, and it was not difficult to imagine herself as Queen.

Rather, it was harder to imagine herself *not* becoming Queen.

As a child she had once dreamed of becoming a pianist...

But dreams were only dreams.

“I heard the news. You received an *eosahwa*.”

“It is not a talent worth boasting about.”

Yirang said as she set down her teacup.

Ever since first meeting the Crown Prince during his birthday banquet, she had visited the Eastern Palace about once a week.

The adults hoped that if they spent time together, affection might grow.

Even if it did not, it was not a bad thing.

If they later held a royal marriage, they would gather these boring hours and package them as *dates*.

“Your Highness, do you like horseback riding?”

“I do not.”

At the plain answer, Yirang nodded.

He was two years older than her and had a somewhat indifferent disposition.

No matter what the other person said, he listened sincerely.

Yet no matter what they said, he paid no interest.

As if he had no time to spare for such trivial matters.

She had no complaints.

His indifference was proof that he was not difficult or was generous in his own way.

She thought married life with him would be boring, but she had never expected it to be exciting anyway, so she was not particularly disappointed.

“Ah, my younger brother likes it.”

“Pardon?”

“Horseback riding.”

“Ah...”

“He likes animals, and he likes sweating.”

Warmth seeped into the Crown Prince's otherwise even voice.

It was the same when Grand Prince Ian spoke about his older brother.

“I heard you are acquainted with my younger brother.”

“We are classmates, so we occasionally take the same classes.”

“Did he not resent it?”

“Resent?”

“Our marriage, I mean. He was so angry that we had not told him beforehand...”

He spoke with a smile at the corner of his lips.

It was the first moment she truly felt that he and Grand Prince Ian were brothers.

Until now she thought they shared little resemblance besides their height and build, but the playfulness in his face reminded her of Grand Prince Ian.

“There was nothing like that.”

“Is that so?”

“His Highness is not someone who shows his feelings over personal matters.”

The Crown Prince’s face turned thoughtful.

Whatever he was thinking, the silence that followed as he tilted his head lasted a long time.

Then suddenly—

“I understand why Father chose you.”

“...Pardon?”

“You know how to distinguish what should be said from what should not, do you not?”

“.....”

There was a sharp edge hidden in his gentle voice.

*Did I look too careful choosing my words?* she wondered, her face stiffening—

“It is praise.”

He added.

“It is something neither I nor my younger brother can do.”

Even that added remark carried an edge.

A vague sense of humiliation rose within her.

As if he knew that feeling, yet did not care, the Crown Prince's eyes were straight and merciless.

That day, Yirang realized for the first time that mercilessness could be cruel.

---

Having been summoned again by the King and scolded, Wan dragged his feet as he walked.

He had no idea why his father had been so angry.

The King had said something, but Wan had been too busy staring at the floor patterns of the main hall to listen properly.

As he walked kicking lightly at the dirt path, a familiar figure entered his sight.

“Yoon Yirang?”

The face standing by the pond reflecting Bukaksan was unmistakable.

She was one of the classmates he felt relatively comfortable around, but ever since hearing she would

become his brother's partner, interacting with her had become awkward.

So he intended to just pass by—

“What's with her looking so gloomy again?”

Her dark expression bothered him.

Clicking his tongue, Wan lengthened his stride.

The maple leaves reddening toward their peak swayed above his head.

“What are you thinking so deeply about?”

“Ah!!”

Startled, Yirang cried out and blinked her large eyes.

He had not even tried to hide his presence, yet she seemed not to have noticed him at all.

“What are you doing appearing so suddenly?”

“Sorry.”

Giving a half-hearted apology, Wan looked toward the attendants from the Eastern Palace standing behind Yirang.

“Did you come to see my brother?”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Did you have a pleasant time?”

“Of course, Grand Prince.”

“Really...?”

Wan frowned as if he could not believe it and tilted his head.

The slant of his lips and round rise of his cheeks showed he was in the mood to tease someone.

“Court Lady Park.”

Lowering his voice, Wan called the senior court lady from the Eastern Palace.

“Yes, Grand Prince.”

“I shall personally escort Yoon Yirang to the palace gates, so you may return to the Eastern Palace.”

“Pardon? No, Grand Prince. This servant shall personally—”

“What, are you worried I’ll get lost?”

“It is not that...”

Seizing victory, Wan cast Yirang a glance with a stern face.

To people who did not know better, he might have looked imposing, but Yirang had to try her hardest not to laugh.

Entering the western annex, Yirang's eyes brightened.

A grand piano—something she had never expected to see inside the palace—stood there with elegant beauty.

“Is this tuned?”

When she asked after dropping her stiff manner of speech, Wan answered uncertainly.

“My brother takes lessons too... so probably?”

“His Highness takes piano lessons too?”

“He does.”

“He *does*?”

“I don't think he has talent.”

Yirang chuckled softly and sat before the piano.

Wan nodded at the face looking at him as though asking permission and sat on the stool beside the piano, preparing to listen.

Only then did Yirang create a beautiful melody with careful hands.

When the short performance ended, Wan spoke lightly.

“Are you okay?”

“With what?”

“Marrying into the royal family.”

As she looked at him as if asking what he meant, Wan shrugged.

“The royal wedding is next year, right? That means you’ll only be twenty. Isn’t that a waste?”

“Does my opinion matter?”

At those words, Wan frowned.

“You and my brother say the exact same thing.”

“...What?”

“I want my brother to be happy. You too.”

“.....”

Speechless, Yirang remembered her father’s advice.

*Do not reveal what you desire.*

That old teaching.

So Yirang answered indifferently—

“In a royal marriage... is there any place for happiness?”

As though she were someone who did not want a happy marriage at all.

## CHAPTER 9

### Jealousy, or Admiration

Wan loitering outside the archery grounds was an utterly pathetic sight.

To suffer this much just to find one person. If he told his brother about this, he would definitely tease him again like last time.

*“My little brother having a crush...”*

But the reason he wanted to see that girl again was absolutely not the kind his brother imagined.

It was simply that her performance during the friendly match had been impressive—he wanted to praise her.

She had stubbornly pushed through even while arguing with him and had ended up receiving the *eosahwa*. He found that determination admirable.

As a senior, and simply as a person.

The problem was that the girl was nowhere to be seen.

He had definitely heard she spent over half her day in the library, yet not even a strand of hair was visible.

An ordinary person would have given up by now.

But Wan became stubborn.

*“Huh? She was just here a moment ago though...?”*

It was because he had heard those same words several times already.

At this point, he wondered if she was deliberately avoiding him.

The thought made him feel wronged.

Wasn't he the one who kept her from getting demerits? The one who let her practice in the archery grounds all day?

Thus, with his mood twisted, Wan resolved that when he saw her again he would show the dignity of a senior—

“.....”

The moment he saw the junior practicing, every resolution disappeared.

When he searched for her she was nowhere to be found, yet now the sight of her standing on the shooting platform stole his gaze.

Her burning eyes.

Eyes openly desiring victory.

They were beautiful.

He envied the confidence of someone who did not hide her wish to win even a little.

Perhaps that was why he wanted to take her side.

Pretend not to notice her mistakes, grant the things she wanted.

That did not mean he felt pity, as his brother had suggested.

Rather...

It was admiration.

Just then, the junior finished practicing and began packing her bag.

Startled, Wan unconsciously stepped back.

He did not want it to look like he had been waiting.

Wouldn't it seem most natural if *he*, who had come to practice, happened to run into *her*, who had finished?

“.....”

The insolent junior merely lowered her head slightly and walked past.

Wan had expected at least acknowledgment, if not a long conversation, so he hurriedly called out.

“Hey...!”

The junior turned back with an expression that said she was annoyed.

If he had something to say, hurry up and spit it out and get lost.

His mood twisted once again, but Wan wanted to show the magnanimity of a senior.

“About that friendly match. You did well.”

Trying to smile as gently as possible, Wan carefully chose his words.

But the junior’s expression showed no sign of improving.

Rather, it crumpled further in displeasure.

“Are you... trying to take credit now?”

“Take credit? Can you not distinguish praise from taking credit?”

“If not, then forget it.”

And with that, she simply left as though she had no attachment whatsoever.

Wan had only wanted to give her a compliment, offer some encouragement, maybe become friends eventually.

Instead he stared blankly at her cold retreating back.

Then the junior suddenly stopped.

She turned around and strode back toward him.

Judging by the momentum alone, it looked as though she could punch him.

Yet what she actually did was bow.

Just like that day she was caught secretly practicing.

Only then did Wan burst into laughter and shrug.

The insolence of a well-mannered junior was cute.

Still smiling to himself, Wan only froze when he saw Jeongwoo standing inside the archery grounds.

“You were here?”

Embarrassed, he asked.

Jeongwoo nodded indifferently.

“Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Since before Your Highness started wandering around?”

Realizing Jeongwoo had seen him lurking around just to catch sight of one girl made Wan want to die of embarrassment.

But as the Grand Prince of a nation, he decided shamelessness was the better path.

Pretending nothing was wrong, he touched his bow casually and asked—

“Are you close with Seong Huiju?”

That sounded natural enough.

“We are. Same dorm too.”

Min Jeongwoo answered naturally as well.

“What’s she like?”

For that unnatural question...

“She’s pretty.”

...he gave an answer Wan absolutely disliked.

---

Returning to the dormitory, Huiju replayed her encounter with Grand Prince Ian.

Ever since the night of the friendly competition—when she learned about his competitiveness—she had been avoiding him, so running into him had thoroughly startled her.

There was no particular reason for avoiding him.

It was just...

A little uncomfortable.

Avoiding him had not been difficult.

He was so tall that he stood out whether at the end of a hallway or in some corner of the school grounds.

And yet they had somehow run into each other in front of the archery field.

“.....”

Even seeing his face again annoyed her.

He had been forced to lose a game he had practically already won, so why was he smiling like that?

Wasn't he upset?

If it were her, she would be so angry she would not even want to look at the other person.

That was why she wanted to just pass by.

She did not want to pity some high-born prince.

Though it did not go the way she wanted—

“.....”

Shaking her head as though to throw away the conversation, Huiju sat at her desk and opened her textbook.

No matter what, she simply had to avoid getting entangled with him in the future.

Not that they were entangled enough to call it that even now, but the face that kept popping into her mind bothered her.

Those cool eyes that looked down on people—

How hot they became when they burned...

It was almost a relief that only she knew.

When the weekend came, Huiju headed to the family home with Taeju.

After getting in the car, both kept their mouths shut.

Anyone looking would think they did not get along.

Yet anyone looking would also know they were siblings.

Though they were half-siblings, Chairman Seong's genes seemed absurdly strong.

Huiju lowered the window and let the wind in.

Unless it was vacation, she never liked going home.

She already felt suffocated.

“Hey, did you prepare a gift for Father?”

Taeju asked while continuously texting Dayeong.

“What did *you* prepare?”

Huiju answered curtly and looked at the shopping bag tucked beside him.

It was obvious he had prepared some strange gift again for their father's birthday.

Unlike his appearance, he had a sentimental side.

Last year he gifted a portrait of their father that he painted himself.

When he was younger, he even folded paper cranes as presents.

*What did I prepare again?*

“‘You’? Brat. Can’t you call me *Oppa*?”

“Act like an older brother first.”

“You little—!”

“What? What!”

Just as Huiju reached to grab Taeju by the hair, his phone rang.

“Time out.”

“Time out, my foot. Are you scheming?”

“Hey, it’s Father calling!”

Taeju shouted while showing her the phone.

Only then did Huiju withdraw her hand and fold her arms.

No point getting scolded before even arriving.

Muttering resentfully, Taeju answered in an absurdly sweet voice.

Already predicting the conversation, Huiju naturally put in her earphones.

“Yes, Father.”

The way Seong Taeju addressed their father.

And the father waiting for Seong Taeju—

“We already left, so we’ll be there soon.”

And—

“We’re buying a cake on the way. What do you want? Chocolate instead of whipped cream, right?”

The relationship where the two could behave shamelessly with each other irritated her.

She absolutely refused to think she was jealous.

She was too smart to envy foolish Seong Taeju.

And she did not like their cold father enough to admire him.

Because if you envied someone, you lost.

By then, Taeju had finished the call and was rummaging through the shopping bag.

She tried not to look, but his noisy movements caught her eye.

The familiar logo on the green box made it seem like a watch.

“A watch?”

She asked as though uninterested.

Taeju nodded.

“Father gave me the one he used to wear.”

Only then did she notice the watch on Taeju’s wrist.

She had thought it looked old-fashioned.

Apparently it had been their father’s.

“What did you prepare?”

“I didn’t prepare anything.”

“You didn’t?”

“I ranked first again this term, and I got an *eosahwa* too... no need to prepare more, right?”

Though there *was* a gift prepared inside her bag—  
Huiju answered like that.

기웃기웃 힐끗힐끗



## CHAPTER 10

### The Beloved Child

When Chairman Seong Hyeonguk's birthday arrived, the PR department of Castle Group became busy.

As befitted Castle Group's status as the number one conglomerate in business rankings, many people paid attention to it.

Whether for good reasons or bad.

Thus, the employees at Castle Hotel, where the party was being held, put forth every effort to avoid even a single mistake.

The music was adjusted so it would not be too loud, the flowers were chosen so their fragrance would not be overwhelming—there were countless things to care about.

Yet despite all this effort, Chairman Seong Hyeonguk's birthday parties never escaped the criticism of being vulgar and extravagant.

Their obsession with *not seeming vulgar* only added more weight to that vulgarity.

*A chaebol from commoner origins.*

Hyeonguk frowned as he read a newspaper containing commentary about himself.

He was sick of the title attached before his name.

No matter how hard he worked, no matter how high he climbed, he could never shake off the label of *common-born*.

*Remarkable for a commoner.  
What can you expect from a commoner?*

All of it.

It was a status that existed mostly in name.

It was not as though the nobles openly displayed privilege or elitism.

To begin with, there were very few nobles.

But that small number occupied most positions of social leadership.

There, they solidified their class.

Recognizing people of other classes while drawing lines.

Associating with them while excluding them.

If they openly despised him, at least he could fight back.

Swallowing the bitterness, Hyeonguk stood before the mirror.

He was already accustomed to their subtle contempt.

When he had been young, class discrimination had been even worse.

In fact, the higher his status rose, the more strongly he felt the nobles' restraint and disregard.

Sometimes he thought about it.

*If I had not become a chaebol... if I had not intruded into their territory... perhaps I would never have experienced this quiet contempt.*

“Father!”

A cheerful voice rang out.

It was Taeju, who had only stopped by home to change clothes before coming.

Behind the son smiling while handing over a large bouquet stood his daughter, whose face looked exactly like his own.

Huiju looked at her father surrounded by executives offering congratulations.

Then she imagined herself standing in that place.

Considering her appearance like her father's, her talent like his, even her personality like his—

It felt only natural that his position would someday become hers.

Just then their eyes met.

The face smiling proudly felt unfamiliar, but her father waved as if telling her to come over.

Huiju unconsciously swallowed and stood up—

“Seong Taeju, what are you doing? Come over and greet everyone.”

The person her father called was Seong Taeju sitting behind her.

Huiju had been about to sit down again but changed her mind.

She walked straight toward her father.

He looked briefly flustered, but quickly composed himself.

Apparently, beyond the disgrace of fathering an illegitimate child, he also did not want to be called a father who mistreated his children.

Huiju bowed politely toward the executives.

“Hello. I’m Seong Huiju.”

A brief silence passed.

Then awkward laughter spread through the crowd.

After that came insincere pleasantries.

That they had heard much about her from the chairman.

That they had no idea his daughter was so pretty.

It was obviously a parade of lies, but watching her father’s expression was entertaining.

It seemed his insides were twisting at the fact that the attention and goodwill meant for the child he loved had been taken by the child he did not.

“You’ve arrived!”

The retainers at the private residence welcomed Jeongwoo.

Grand Prince Ian’s private residence was not a place that often had guests.

Even if there was a family gathering, it was usually Wan who entered the palace.

And due to Wan's position, where he could not casually keep companions by his side, he had very few friends.

As a result, Jeongwoo was almost the only outsider who could enjoy the beauty and abundance of Grand Prince Ian's residence.

As Jeongwoo crossed the central courtyard and stepped onto the wooden veranda, the retainers moved busily.

Carrying figs, crackers, and flower tea that Jeongwoo liked into the study.

“Thank you for the meal.”

Jeongwoo had not forgotten his thanks.

Just as he tilted his teacup—

“You came early.”

Wan entered the study with a bored expression.

The moment the noisy retainers fell silent.

At times like this, Jeongwoo was reminded that Wan was the Grand Prince of this nation.

Jeongwoo had known Wan since they were eight.

He had to speak formally in front of others, but when alone they exchanged rough words like ordinary boys their age.

The times Wan got irritated memorizing multiplication tables.

The pitiful childhood days when he cried after falling while playing soccer.

Jeongwoo knew all of it.

That was why, whenever he felt Wan's status as Grand Prince, it seemed strangely unfamiliar.

As though he was not the friend Jeongwoo knew.

Of course, those moments never lasted long.

“Ugh, sweet.”

Because his expression now while eating sweets was not much different from when he was a picky child.

“Did you work out at this hour?”

Jeongwoo asked while looking at the water dripping from Wan's hair.

“It was hot.”

“It’s October.”

“I talked with Father from morning and my whole body’s burning.”

“Ah.”

Apparently he had been scolded again.

“What was it this time?”

“No idea. He was making a fuss about me not getting too close to Yoon Yirang.”

“Yoon Yirang?”

“.....”

Wan had been speaking freely but suddenly closed his mouth.

Judging by the way he fanned himself with his folding fan, he looked frustrated to death but uncertain whether he could say more.

“You can say it. I know too.”

“Know what?”

“That Yoon Yirang is the Crown Princess candidate.”

“How do *you* know that?”

“Did you forget my father is the Prime Minister?”

“Ah...”

Only then did Wan nod and snap his folding fan shut.

“But are you close with Yoon Yirang?”

“Close? Hardly. We just exchange a few words.”

The more he thought about it, the more annoyed he seemed.

Wan frowned.

“They say if I get too close to someone who’ll become my sister-in-law, people will talk.”

“They’re just being careful in advance.”

“No, but if we’re going to become family anyway, isn’t it better to be close?”

Jeongwoo unconsciously smiled.

It was cute how Wan—who looked like he would not bleed even if stabbed—thought in ways that were warm to the point of being almost delicate.

“Hey, can you marry someone you don’t love?”

“Suddenly?”

“My brother and Yoon Yirang are doing it. Without love. Could you?”

“Hmm...”

Watching the unusually serious Wan, Jeongwoo dragged out his answer.

He had never really thought about it before.

“If it’s something I have to do, then I’d do it.”

Wan’s mouth fell open.

“You were that kind of person?”

“What, do *you* want a marriage with love?”

“Of course!”

Wan was shocked that even Jeongwoo believed a loveless marriage was possible.

He knew Jeongwoo was a cold-hearted person pretending to be kind, but he had not expected him to be *this* lacking in romance.

What exactly had made the adults choose him as a study companion?

“Just accept it. It’s easier once you do.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Then it’s treason, I guess.”

“.....”

Wan fell silent.

As Jeongwoo said, obedience was the fate of royalty.

Preserving the honor and dignity built by their ancestors was their only reason and duty.

But protecting the dynasty—

That was Father’s job.

Or his brother’s.

“It’s okay. I can do it. A love marriage.”

“Your dreams are big, my friend.”

“My brother’s different. Father loves him, so he meddles in everything—marriage and all. But not me.”

Wan said with an innocent face.

“He probably wouldn’t care who I married.”

“Why are you saying something like that while eating figs?”

“What would *you*, the beloved eldest son, know?”

“Hey.”

“Don’t make that face. I’m saying it because I’m happy.”

Wan smiled brightly as if proving he meant it.

Father had failed to build a happy family.

But Wan was confident.

If protecting that happiness meant abandoning royal duty, he was confident in that too.

Because he would never tell his own person to sacrifice themselves for the royal family.

If that was the only privilege granted to the royal family’s second son—

Then he was perfectly satisfied with it.

## CHAPTER 11

### The Campus in November

November, when the air carried a colder chill.

The Royal School campus had become tense.

It was because the sensitivity of the twelfth-year students preparing for university entrance exams grew sharper by the day.

Most students at Royal School aimed to enter Royal University, but only a minority succeeded in turning that goal into reality.

“Ah, I’m just going to study abroad.”

“You’re asking me to do a long-distance relationship with you right now?”

“No, Dayeong. How many suspensions have I had? There’s no way I’m getting into Royal University. You should study abroad too, huh?”

“Tsk!”

Dayeong smacked the back of Taeju’s hand.

There were only two weeks left until the entrance exam.

“You said you’d inherit the company. Doesn’t that mean you’ll do business in Korea?”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“Then obviously you should get your degree from Royal University. Don’t you know how important academic background is in this country?”

“Ah, I know. I know *too* well...”

Taeju knew that no matter how hard he tried, Royal University was impossible.

Unlike Seong Huiju, his grades were not good, and he had no talents outside studying that stood out.

If there was one thing he had over Huiju, it was probably that his relationships with people were decent.

At least he was not a fighting rooster like Huiju.

But he was late as often as eating meals, skipped assignments as often as eating meals, and snuck out without permission just as often.

Because of that, he had survived countless threats of expulsion.

If not for his father's enormous donations, he probably would have been expelled long ago.

“You know?”

“Well...”

As Dayeong stared at him with dead eyes, Taeju's voice shrank.

Taeju knew too.

Unlike him, Dayeong would enter Royal University.

It was not because he overestimated her.

That was simply reality.

Even while playing around just as much as him, Dayeong had excellent grades, was skilled at calligraphy, and even served as dorm leader because of her good relationships.

And Royal University had a special practice.

If someone in your family had graduated from Royal University, extra points were given—a kind of legacy privilege.

It was not openly written as a regulation, but it clearly existed.

And Dayeong was fully qualified to benefit from it.

Her father, the Minister of Justice.

Her mother, a law professor at Royal University.

And both her older brothers studying law there as well.

“Ah... I want to go to university with you too. But you know realistically it’s hard.”

Taeju muttered gloomily.

“Oh dear. Why doesn’t our Taeju use what he has?”

“What I have?”

“Yeah.”

“I have something like that?”

Dayeong gently cupped Taeju’s face, which looked genuinely confused.

“You have money.”

“Money?”

“A lot of it.”

Dayeong knew Taeju’s grades were nowhere near Royal University.

She knew he would not benefit from the legacy system.

She knew he would not receive teachers' recommendation letters.

But she also knew there was no one in this country richer than Taeju's father.

“Get in through donations.”

“Ah, no!”

Taeju immediately shook his head and raised his voice.

“Why not!”

“Seong Huiju's obviously getting into Royal University too. Why would I go?”

“You're doing this because you don't want to attend the same university as your sister?”

Dayeong asked incredulously.

“No, it's not that...”

“Then what!”

“It's embarrassing. She'll get in with grades, but I'll get in by paying donations...”

No matter how high Taeju's self-esteem was, he did not want to prove that he was inferior to his younger sister at everything.

At that point, Dayeong gave up persuading him.

Not because she understood his feelings.

She simply did not want to pressure Taeju any further while he looked so dejected.

“Seong Taeju.”

“Hm?”

“If you study abroad, are you confident you won't cheat on me?”

Realizing that was her permission, Taeju brightened instantly and jumped up.

“Hey, Han Dayeong. I'm Seong Taeju. Do you think any woman besides you would even catch my eye?”

“Your mouth should learn restraint.”

“Hey? You don't trust me?”

As their bickering turned into flirting, Huiju—who happened to be passing by—slowly let her expression rot.

How did *failing school and studying abroad* become a conversation like *that*?

And why was that senior liking it so much?

“Do her parents know their daughter is dating my brother?”

For the first time that day, Huiju worried about a middle-aged couple whose faces she had never even seen.

“Maybe sociology or political science?”

“Royal University?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that really your dream, Oppa?”

“Hm?”

“What department are *you* going into?”

Huiju asked while studying with Jeongwoo in the library.

Perhaps because of Taeju and Dayeong’s conversation earlier, she could not stop thinking about university all day.

“Suddenly?”

Jeongwoo lowered his voice to a whisper.

Even after they had become fairly close, Huiju never asked personal questions.

He had wondered whether she simply kept boundaries well.

Or whether she lacked curiosity.

But seeing her wide eyes now, it seemed she had just never been curious before.

“Yeah. Suddenly.”

“Your father’s the Prime Minister, right? So aren’t you just following him?”

Leaning in with a serious face, Huiju asked.

Jeongwoo stared at her, then burst into quiet laughter.

Everyone accepted his future as obvious.

Huiju alone questioned it naturally.

“So what about you?”

“Hm?”

“You’re inheriting your father’s company too, right?”

“I guess so?”

Accepting it easily, Huiju returned to her math problem.

But before long she put down her mechanical pencil.

Noticing the irritation hidden in that small action, Jeongwoo removed one earbud.

“What?”

“Will you repeat a year for like... three years?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. If you graduate, I’ll be alone again.”

She knew it was ridiculous.

She knew it was not something to say to someone preparing for university entrance.

But thinking about Jeongwoo graduating still made her mood sink.

After becoming close to him, school life had undeniably become easier.

“Repeating a year isn’t happening.”

“So annoying.”

“...Want to go to the school store?”

“Instead of repeating?”

“Instead of repeating.”

Huiju glared at him quietly, then snorted out a laugh.

The fact that *the school store* was his chosen comfort made further sulking seem silly.

The two left the library and headed straight to the main building store.

The cold wind was enough to make their bodies shiver, but Huiju, who liked cold things, immediately chose ice cream.

The path back to the dormitory was quiet.

“Huiju.”

Because of that, Jeongwoo’s voice sounded clear.

“Hm?”

“Graduate early.”

“.....”

The silence stretched.

Huiju frowned as if wondering what he meant, then burst out laughing.

“Come on, now I can’t even joke. Earlier was a joke.”

“I’m not joking.”

“No, how am I supposed to suddenly graduate early?”

“If you prepare now, you can move it up by a year.”

Jeongwoo answered without smiling.

Huiju’s expression also became serious.

Because what he said was not entirely impossible.

“Still... it sounds really hard...”

“I’ll help.”

“You?”

“I have lots of old exam records.”

“No, that’s not the issue...”

“If you need teachers or seniors for recommendation letters, tell me. I’ll get those too.”

Huiju fell into thought again at Jeongwoo’s immediate response.

“Why are you being so proactive?”

“You said you don’t want to be alone.”

“I never said that.”

“.....”

Instead of answering, Jeongwoo shrugged.

He did not want her to notice how desperately he had searched for a solution—from the moment she suggested he repeat a year to arriving at *early graduation*.

Especially because the person who brought up being alone looked perfectly calm.

But—

“Feels nice.”

“What does?”

“That you’re on my side.”

Those words filled him with pride again.

Enough to want to support her more actively.

More often.

“I wish you were really my older brother.”

“I hate that idea, Huiju.”

“What?”

“I should at least get to watch you beat up Seong Taeju.”

It was a peaceful, cold November campus.

## CHAPTER 12

### Nightmare

Entrance exam season was an unavoidable gateway even for Wan, the Grand Prince of the nation. Though the privileges enjoyed by royalty were many, academic ability and educational background were not among them.

If they received even the smallest favor in that area, they would be branded royals who could not even study properly.

So if one wanted an excellent education at an excellent school, there was no choice but to prove oneself.

Members of the royal family, including the royals themselves, usually chose between SeonggYoongwan and the Royal School, but Wan naturally ended up attending the Royal School because he could not go to the same school as Hwan.

If the two attended the same school and something happened, there was a risk of the royal line being cut off.

For that reason, Wan could not ride planes or cars together with his family either.

Since he was very young.

The same was true on that day four years ago, when Wan was fifteen.

It was Children's Day, and the event was being held at an orphanage sponsored by the royal family.

In place of the King and the Crown Prince, who had other official duties, Queen Uihyeon and Wan attended. Queen Uihyeon, who cared deeply about child welfare, ended the campaign long after the scheduled time had passed.

As a result, Wan spent the entire day using up his energy playing all kinds of games with the children at the orphanage.

Head Court Lady Choi whispered beside him not to overdo it, but Wan shook his head.

He was enjoying it even more than the children.

In the palace, they would not even let him run, but here he could run and shout as much as he wanted.

The children liked Wan as well.

By the time the royal ceremonial vehicles lined up in front of the orphanage, there were even children clutching his sleeves and crying.

Holding those children's hands, Wan promised them.

That he would come again next year.

And the year after that too.

After exchanging farewells for quite a while, Wan finally got into the car.

Checking the message from his older brother, Wan called Queen Uihyeon in the car ahead.

“Royal Mother, should we buy fried chicken on the way back to the palace?”

—Fried chicken?

“Hyung texted that he wants some.”

As he grumbled that his brother always made him do things like this, his mother's laughter came through the phone.

—Shall we, then?

“Yes.”

The moment he answered—

**Bang—**

A huge crashing sound rang in his ears.

Head Court Lady Choi, who was sitting beside him, pulled him into her arms.

Only after regaining his senses did Wan realize he himself was trembling.

He belatedly thought of his mother, but—

“Royal Mother...”

Head Court Lady Choi did not loosen her hold.

“Let go of me!”

“Please stay still, Grand Prince.”

“Let go, I said!”

“You must not look.”

Even though he had seen nothing, Wan’s instincts realized that something had gone wrong.

Only after hearing Head Court Lady Choi crying, the royal guards speaking over their radios, and finally the sound of sirens, was Wan able to push her away.

“Grand Prince!”

Ignoring her cry and getting out of the car, Wan froze at the sight before him.

He tried to understand the situation, but nothing made sense.

His mother’s vehicle, crushed beyond recognition.

And a truck that no one knew where it had come from.

“Royal Mother...”

“Grand Prince!”

The moment he reached his hand toward where his mother was, Head Court Lady Choi, who had followed him out, embraced him again.

As if determined not to let him see anything, she pressed down hard on the back of his head and shouted:

“Take His Highness to the hospital at once. Hurry!”

“Yes!”

The louder the voices around him became, the weaker Wan’s body felt.

Only after quite a long time did Wan realize it had been fear.

And only much later did he realize that when he was afraid, he did not cry.

“Ahhh!”

“What—what is it?!”

At an hour when the blue of dawn had not yet completely faded, Hyeon rushed into the detached residence in shock at Wan’s scream.

Seeing his pale face and sleepwear soaked in cold sweat, it was obvious he had had another nightmare.

“Are you alright?”

“Get me some water...”

“Yes, just a moment.”

Hyeon skillfully turned on the lamp and handed him water.

Being woken in the middle of the night by Wan’s screams happened often enough.

In the first place, the reason Hyeon’s room was not in the servants’ quarters was because of this.

“Did you take your medicine yesterday?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess the medicine doesn’t work anymore.”

“Hasn’t this been going on for years?”

“What about seeing the royal physician tomorrow—”

“No.”

Wan lay back down as if annoyed.

Even though Hyeon knew he would not be able to fall asleep again.

There was nothing Hyeon could do, and it upset him.

If Wan disliked seeing the royal physician, Hyeon wished he would at least go to Royal Hospital.

But Wan disliked both.

Even the herbal medicine said to help with sleep seemed ineffective now, perhaps because he had built resistance to it.

“Hyeon.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“You should hurry back and sleep too. That way you’ll grow tall.”

Despite looking exhausted, Wan still spoke gently.

Hyeon puffed out his lips.

Because hearing that from someone who had grown as tall as a refrigerator despite never sleeping properly was a little funny.

With a sigh, Hyeon sat on the sofa beside the bed.

Using a cushion as a pillow, he lay down.

Wan’s stern voice came.

“Hyeon.”

“I’ll sleep here just for tonight.”

“You’re not a child. Go to your room.”

The sharp tone was a little scary, but Hyeon stubbornly held his ground.

“I don’t think I can absorb bad luck for you, but I can try reflecting it.”

“...Where did you even learn that?”

“From a drama.”

“I told you to stop watching things like that.”

“You watch them too, Your Highness.”

Wan sighed as though annoyed and said nothing more.

Relieved that he was not being kicked out, Hyeon quietly closed his eyes.

At times like this, being fourteen years old felt nice.

Things not allowed to anyone else were permitted to him alone.

Hyeon had long ago been an abandoned child.

He had been left wrapped in swaddling cloth in front of the residence.

The beginning of their connection was when five-year-old Wan took him in.

Of course, Wan had still been living in the palace rather than the residence then, but it was unquestionably *his* residence.

*“Let him live there.”*

After hearing the report about the baby abandoned in front of his residence, Wan had said that.

Pitying a newborn he had never even seen.

The King and Queen had expressed concern upon hearing it, but they had not been able to bend Wan's stubbornness.

That was how Hyeon came to live at the residence.

The first time Hyeon actually saw Wan's face was much later.

Wan was ten, and Hyeon was five.

Wan had come out with Hwan, the Crown Prince.

The first thing he said upon seeing Hyeon was:

*"Hyung, say hello. This is my younger brother Hyeon."*

Those words shocked not only the Crown Prince beside him but even the attendants.

It caused such a stir that it reached the King.

They said Wan got thoroughly scolded and even had to write a reflection letter.

But even after that, for a long time, Wan still called Hyeon his younger brother.

Perhaps because of that special treatment, the attendants at the residence never treated Hyeon carelessly either.

Not as an abandoned child—

but as a child who had been taken in.

Not as a child without parents—

but as the Grand Prince's child.

After that too, Wan would occasionally visit the residence to see Hyeon.

Whenever that happened, Head Court Lady Choi would sometimes wipe away tears.

She said it hurt to see someone who had never received a father's love trying to imitate a father's love.

So to Hyeon, Wan was like a father.

And like an older brother.

The fact that they were only five years apart did not matter.

Hyeon simply wished for Wan to be happier than anyone else in the world.

Because of that, Hyeon sometimes resented Queen Uihyeon.

Thinking that if she had not left so tragically, Wan's long nights might have been more peaceful.

Thinking that if she had not passed away like that, Wan's lonely life might have been warmer.

So bad luck was not frightening.

If it meant Wan's nights could be safe, he could endure that much.

### **Annals of King Huijong**

*May 2005 — The Queen Consort passed away at Royal Hospital.*

# 억한사

현아.



자카!



제가 나쁜 꿈을  
꾸지 않게  
지켜드릴게요!



## CHAPTER 13

### The Impossible

“So basically, it’s a formal family meeting.”

When Wan answered irritably, Head Court Lady Choi looked at a loss.

“They said it was an inspection of Royal Hospital.”

“That’s just an excuse. The hospital chairman is Yoon Yirang’s father.”

“Royal Hospital is operated through the support of the royal foundation. The royal family must continue to show interest—”

“That’s exactly why—”

Cutting her off, Wan frowned.

“Why are they dragging *me* to such an important event?”

The more important the occasion, the more his father excluded him.

So whenever that father deliberately summoned him, there was always a reason.

Either there was something to scold him for, or a family atmosphere was needed.

But lately, he had done nothing worthy of being scolded for.

Well, he *had*, but he had not been caught.

Besides, exam season was a good shield.

No matter that he was the King, his father was still a parent; it seemed he did not want to interfere with his son's entrance exam preparations.

And in the middle of that, an inspection of Royal Hospital.

He could not help feeling openly displeased.

It was not that he disliked Yoon Yirang.

Nor her father.

He just hated these staged performances.

Even without occasions like this, Wan's entire life was already a performance.

Yet judging by how they summoned him with excuses he had never heard of before, they had no intention of stopping.

“Ha...”

Letting out a sigh, Wan looked at the anxious Head Court Lady Choi.

If he refused to go, only she would suffer for it.

He had no choice.

“I’ll go, so stop making that face.”

“Truly?”

“An excuse about being busy preparing for exams won’t work anyway.”

“I suppose not.”

“Then I’ll go. What choice do I have?”

Only then did Head Court Lady Choi relax and begin selecting clothes.

The wardrobe of a Grand Prince who was still only nineteen contained many neatly tailored suits.

Arriving at Royal Hospital in the suit she had chosen, Wan bowed deeply to his father, who had already arrived.

The King looked at his son with displeasure and only said:

“You’re late.”

Only the Crown Prince standing beside him expressed welcome, if only with his eyes.

“Your Highness, thank you for gracing us with your presence.”

A gentle-looking man greeted him politely.

The chairman of the hospital.

The future father-in-law of the Crown Prince.

Wan stared at him openly, not hiding his curiosity.

It was a familiar face he saw at every royal event.

More than anything, his eyes resembled Yirang’s.

“I’ve heard a lot about you from Father.”

The reply contained not even one gram of sincerity.

Looking at his father, Wan shrugged.

He would probably receive five pages of reflection writing for being insolent.

He did not care.

The hospital inspection, which he had expected to be nothing but boring, turned out to have meaning in its own way.

Encouraging patients and their families in the children's ward, then visiting the research center and promising support—

there was not a single unnecessary moment.

Dozens of photos had been taken during the process, so public attention would surely increase as well.

Thanks to that, Wan managed to shake off the feeling that he was merely putting on a show for people.

But the expression of his brother, walking one step ahead of him, seemed unusually pale.

His already fair face had gone even whiter.

It did not look good.

“Hyung.”

Calling softly, Wan examined his brother's complexion.

“Are you okay?”

The Crown Prince did not answer.

Instead, he slowly opened and closed his reddened eyes.

His brother had never liked crowded places.

Not photographs.

Not noise.

Schedules like this were obviously painful for him.

“Father.”

In the end, Wan called out.

“I think we should take a break.”

The King’s gaze resting on him was cold, but Wan continued anyway.

“It’s already been over three hours.”

“Ian.”

Ignoring his father’s warning call, Wan turned to the chairman.

“Is there somewhere quiet to rest?”

“Of course, Your Highness.”

Following the chairman toward the office, Wan thought:

*Today's reflection writing won't be five pages. It'll be ten.*

But—

*Thank you.*

The expression his brother wore as he whispered it looked no different from a rabbit that had escaped death.

So it could not be helped.

If his brother collapsed in the middle of the hospital and it made the news, that would be worse.

The break in the chairman's office did not last long.

The awkward tea gathering had not even passed thirty minutes when Yirang arrived.

Dressed in a neat one-piece dress, she greeted them flawlessly.

Seeing her, Father's expression looked exactly like that of a man looking at his daughter.

If Hwan and Yirang became husband and wife in the future, today's event would surely become one of those romantic anecdotes people repeated.

*“They nurtured love while volunteering at Royal Hospital—”*

Something like that.

More than anything, today’s story would spread by word of mouth.

Who the Crown Prince met.

How well he suited the chairman’s daughter.

How satisfied His Majesty looked while watching them.

People would talk endlessly.

It was probably Father’s plan.

He worried royal marriages looked too political.

“Please return safely, Your Majesty.”

That was why they were receiving farewells in front of the hospital where everyone could see.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the suffocating feeling, Wan headed toward his car at the very back.

He wanted to return to the residence and rest as soon as possible.

But—

“Ian.”

His father stopped him.

Suppressing the urge to pretend not to hear, Wan turned around.

Then came the thunderbolt.

“Follow us. I have something to discuss at the palace.”

“I’m tired today...”

“Do not make me repeat myself.”

“...Yes, Father.”

The atmosphere felt like he would die if he resisted any further.

Wan backed down.

The Crown Prince, standing between them, watched cautiously before getting into the car.

Wan had not expected help from him anyway.

His brother feared opposing Father as if it would kill him.

What could he possibly do?

Honestly, sometimes it was impossible to tell which one of them was the older brother.

Clicking his tongue, Wan got into the car.

After telling the driver they were heading to the palace, he rested his head against the headrest.

The suffocating feeling climbed all the way to his throat.

He wanted to scream.

But he knew that one movement would create another wave and tighten around him again.

No matter how desperately he fought...

At that moment, a vivid red memory flashed through his mind.

A memory of a girl who made the impossible possible by fighting desperately.

He remembered the voice that had snapped back at him without shrinking even in front of him.

And the pride that never became humble even after becoming the victor.

“...Seong Huiju.”

Muttering the name softly, Wan suddenly started laughing.

He imagined what it would be like if his brother's match had been that underclassman instead of Yoon Yirang.

Even Father would have struggled with such a daughter-in-law.

But another thought came.

Would that underclassman still be so fiery when she grew older?

Would she begin choosing her words and people like the perfectly poised Yoon Yirang?

Would she accept the impossible and live while compromising and giving up appropriately?

Like himself now.

The thought made Wan feel a little depressed.

It was ridiculous that he was worrying about the future of an underclassman he barely knew.

But he could not stop.

He hoped she would not change.

And if he could help her stay that way, he wanted to help.

But that too was impossible.

His father was a man who ordered him to keep his distance even from Yoon Yirang, someone who would become family.

He did not want to place another hurdle in the path of that underclassman, whose life already had enough obstacles.

So—

he would just cheer for her from afar.

After making that resolution, he felt lighter.

But soon another gloomy thought arrived.

He remembered he would graduate soon.

That underclassman was only in ninth grade.

There were not many chances left for them to meet.

“Why does she have to be so damn young...”

Muttering under his breath, Wan rested his chin irritably on his hand.

“Isn’t she doing early graduation or something?”

It was just him saying anything because he felt regret.

## CHAPTER 14

### The Flower of the Inner Chambers

Rumors that Yirang would become the Crown Princess spread in an instant. Especially at the Royal School campus, filled with hot-blooded teenagers, no one wanted to miss any detail of that gossip. At that point, one would expect some sort of reaction, but Yirang alone remained calm amid the noisy campus.

During the day, she prepared for the university entrance exam, and in the evenings, she practiced performance skills in the music room.

But there was a limit to appropriately ignoring it. The students who had been whispering among themselves and letting their imaginations run wild started coming to Yirang directly and asking.

“What are your plans after graduation?” Some asked subtly.

“Is that rumor true?” Others were more blatant.

With a smile that looked neither too arrogant nor too innocent, Yirang picked the things she could answer and responded appropriately.

“I don’t know either. Just because you major in something doesn’t mean you’ll live as a performer.”

“Is your dream still to become a pianist?”

“Why?”

“You’re not changing your major?”

“Do I have to?”

Jaegyeong, who had been preparing piano performance exams together with Yirang, could not hide her flustered expression. If she had already been designated as the future Crown Princess, Jaegyeong thought she would change majors, but Yirang’s face asking *Do I have to?* looked strangely displeased.

“No, I...”

Watching the embarrassed Jaegyeong, Yirang let out a small sigh.

“...I did think about theory.”

Giving her a way out. Even if the visible checks and restraints were unpleasant, she could not react too sensitively. A benevolent nature was also one of the virtues a queen had to possess.

“Ah, theory?”

At the moment Jaegyeong’s expression brightened and she echoed her, a girl wearing a bright red **durumagi** entered the music room. Jaegyeong frowned as if she knew who the girl was.

“Why is she here?”

As though answering the mutter that sounded like talking to herself, the girl strode over and spoke.

“Are you going to keep staying here?”

“What?”

“It’ll be cleaning time soon.”

“The music room is Baekho Palace’s responsibility, so why is someone from Jugak Palace here?” Jaegyeong asked as if staking territory. It was because students from different dormitories rarely got along. Even if Jugak Palace’s rival was Cheongryong Palace and Baekho Palace’s rival was Hyeonmu Palace, it was only a difference in degree.

“It’s punishment. I hit someone from Baekho Palace.” The girl answered bluntly.

Yirang, who had said nothing the whole time, furrowed her brows. Even while talking about hitting someone, there was no sign of guilt or remorse on the girl's face.

“Name?”

“Huh?”

“Your name.”

“Ha...”

When Yirang asked, the girl openly let out a sigh. She did not seem to have any intention of hiding that she found this annoying to death. Jaegyeong laughed in disbelief, but Yirang waited patiently.

“9th year, Jugak Palace. **Seong Huiju.**”

Ah.

Yirang let out a small sigh of realization. It was a name she had heard countless times because it was so famous. If she counted only the times she had seen her from afar, it was not exactly a shallow connection. But since she had no interest in odd species like that, she had no impression she remembered.

Yet to see her this close.

“So you’re that Seong Huiju.”

Huiju found Yirang’s face extremely irritating. She knew the rumors going around school. Baekho Palace’s pride, supposedly designated as the future Crown Princess—the Flower of the Inner Chambers who was said to remain elegant even on horseback.

Everyone spoke of her with praise, but in Huiju’s eyes she was nothing more than a pathetic senior.

*You have so much talent, so why get married?*

With noble status, a good family background, and outstanding abilities of her own—why exactly?

It was puzzling, but not enough to ask. What she was really curious about was—

“So when am I cleaning?”

—how long they were going to keep sitting in the music room.

Still slightly bewildered, Yirang smiled and stood up. Then the senior beside her who had been chattering—Jaegyeong or Jagyeong or whatever—also got up.

*Are you a lackey or what?*

“Sorry for taking your time.”

“Yes.”

Huiju, not denying it, began cleaning. She was already short on study time, and she still had a mountain of volunteer hours to fill, so she was in a hurry.

“Isn’t she seriously weird?”

The whole way out of the music room and toward the dormitory, Jaegyeong did not stop criticizing the insolent junior. Yirang did not particularly agree, but she did not think it was wrong either. She had wondered why someone with a slightly unusual background was so famous, but there seemed to be a reason.

Beside things that do not know how to bend, there are always those who want to break them.

“Hey, Yoon Yirang!”

A lively voice came from the opposite end of the corridor. It was Han Dayeong, an oddball just as much as Seong Huiju who was probably still cleaning the music room. She was the daughter of an old prestigious family, yet had no elegance, looked like she played around all day, yet got good grades.

“Are you going home this weekend?”

Dayeong, taking large strides until she stood right in front of her, asked.

Dayeong and Yirang did not like each other, but their mothers were close enough to have gatherings every weekend. The two women often enjoyed bringing their daughters along.

Dayeong hated that time.

Because of her mother’s nagging comparing her to Yirang, who was the very image of the Flower of the Inner Chambers.

“I can’t go this week. I have lessons.”

“Great. Then I’ll go this week. You go next week.”

Dayeong openly brightened and forced the arrangement. Not wanting an unnecessary argument, Yirang readily nodded.

Dayeong’s lightness was irritating, but as far as being straightforward without twisted intentions, she was worthy of praise more than anyone.

“Ah, right!”

Dayeong, who had been running off happily, suddenly came back as if she had forgotten something.

“Do you meet His Highness the Crown Prince?”

“Uh...?”

When the flustered Yirang could not answer immediately, Jaegyeong stepped in.

“Why are you asking something like that? She’ll tell us herself when the time comes.”

After scolding her primly, Jaegyeong looked at Yirang like a child waiting for praise.

But the praise she was waiting for never came, and instead a sound came from Dayeong.

*Pfft.*

A mocking sound was still a sound.

“Jaegyeong.”

Dimples formed deeply in Dayeong’s cheeks as she smiled brightly.

“Did I ask you?”

It was not easy for such a cheerful face to be scary.

But Dayeong was someone who could do that.

To begin with, Han Dayeong had been famous as the mad dog before Seong Huiju. A mad dog born in a noble family—just not a noisy one.

Wasn't it obvious, considering she was both dorm leader and cheer captain in Jugak Palace, which was full of kids famous for fiery tempers?

“Stop it.”

If Yirang had not naturally mediated, Dayeong would have bitten Jaegyeong that day.

While straightening the scattered chairs and organizing the music stands, Huiju's eyes landed on Chopin sheet music.

Following her father's belief that she should know at least one instrument, she had taken piano lessons, but she did not particularly have talent for it.

Rather, the one with musical knowledge was Seong Taeju. It was not easy for the heart of an idle nobleman who liked useless things *not* to like music.

He especially liked Chopin, and even that differed from Huiju.

Rather than Chopin's romance, Huiju preferred Beethoven's passion.

“Taeju's little sister!”

As if on cue, Dayeong opened the music room door and entered.

Though it annoyed her that Dayeong always called her *Taeju's little sister* despite clearly knowing her name, Huiju just nodded roughly in greeting.

“Do you know where Taeju is? He hasn't been answering his phone.”

“Did my brother perhaps not tell you we don't get along?”

Dayeong burst out laughing as though she had heard some great joke.

Then she looked at the sheet music in Huiju's hand and brightened.

“Still, I guess you really are siblings. You like Chopin too?”

“No.”

“I should ask Taeju to play this later.”

*Then do that yourself and please leave already. I have cleaning to do.*

“Ah, sorry.”

With a bright face, Dayeong picked up the sheet music and nodded.

“Please leave the sheet music. It belongs to the music room.”

Huiju stopped Dayeong, who was about to leave.

“Couldn’t you just pretend not to notice?”

“Me?”

Shrugging her shoulders, Huiju looked at Dayeong with an expression asking if that even made sense.

If supplies went missing while she was in charge of the music room, she would be the one in trouble.

“Tch.”

Grumbling in a cute nasal voice, Dayeong put the sheet music down.

“So cold, so cold.”

Watching Dayeong leave while pretending to be hurt, Huiju thought once again.

*Why is that unnie dating my brother?*

## CHAPTER 15

### Snack Fairy

Huiju's face was bright after finishing the final exam of 9th year. Even the composition exam she had usually been anxious about had gone more easily than expected. Jeongwoo's help had been significant.

A few days ago, he had given her a file and said, "*Just look at the topics in here.*" And it had really been true. One of the topics inside had come out as the composition subject.

Feeling much lighter, Huiju headed back to the dormitory. She put down her bag and took out the outing pass she had kept in her drawer. She needed to buy snacks like chocolate.

The school store sold various things too, but that felt too thoughtless.

The reason she started thinking like this was because of Seong Taeju, whom she had met about a week ago.

"Hey, Seong Huiju! You don't even give your brother chocolates or anything?"

"What nonsense are you saying first thing in the morning?"

“Do you understand the heart of a 12th-year?”

“How would I? I’m in 9th year.”

It was the day she had run into Seong Taeju in the library corridor and he had started spouting nonsense.

She already knew well enough that Taeju’s state had been awful with university entrance exams and graduation exams approaching. Their father, who never spoke regretfully, had even personally called.

— *At least give Taeju a word of encouragement. He seems pretty anxious.*

Even their father sounded awkward making such a request.

Still, the concern in that awkward tone had felt genuine.

*He isn’t even the type to study hard in the first place, so why is he so nervous?*

Anyway, he was an annoying person.

Clicking her tongue, Huiju immediately went to the faculty office and got an outing pass.

It was not for Seong Taeju.

Her father asking for something had been unusual, but that did not mean she intended to listen.

The more their father cared about her brother, the less she wanted to do anything.

Unable to control her crooked feelings, Huiju thought of Jeongwoo.

Like how their father cared for Seong Taeju, he was someone who cared for *her*. But saying thank you felt a little embarrassing.

So she decided to give him snacks under the excuse of cheering him on for entrance exams.

During exam season, even complete strangers exchanged chocolates.

“Did I buy too much...?”

Huiju muttered while looking down at the snacks inside the bag.

She had picked whatever caught her eye and ended up buying much more than planned.

But there had been candy beside the chocolates, and jelly beside the candy, so it could not be helped.

Besides, she did not know what Jeongwoo liked.

*I'll just tell him to eat it until next year.*

Shrugging, Huiju headed toward the lecture building.

Arriving at the seventh floor where the 12th-years had classes, she quickly walked through a corridor so quiet it felt almost vicious.

Maybe because exams were approaching, many students remained in their classrooms despite it being evening.

Among them, Jeongwoo was in the emptiest classroom.

His back, solving questions with a stopwatch running, was not merely upright but orderly.

Worried belatedly that she might disturb him, Huiju approached on tiptoe.

“Oppa.”

When she called and lightly tapped his shoulder, Jeongwoo lifted his head with furrowed brows.

The sharpness in his eyes, tense until now, softened only after seeing Huiju.

“What is it?”

“Eat this.”

Huiju handed him the bag with an awkward motion and scratched the back of her head for no reason.

Thinking again that doing things she normally never did was not good.

Seeing the pile of snacks inside, Jeongwoo smiled brightly.

“You bought these for me?”

“Well... thanks to you, I did well on the composition exam.”

Huiju nodded.

“Hope you do well too, Oppa.”

Why was saying that one sentence such a big deal? Huiju twisted awkwardly and looked elsewhere.

Jeongwoo, maturely holding back his desire to tease her, stood up.

“Let’s go out.”

“Huh? No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“The exam’s tomorrow.”

“It’s fine for a little while.”

“Forget it. Study.”

Huiju pressed down on his shoulders.

Then she lowered her head and whispered in an especially threatening voice.

“You know the top graduate has to come from Jugak Palace, right?”

“Usually people say to take it easy.”

“I’m not normal.”

Jeongwoo nodded while looking at the shameless expression on her face.

For a *not normal* Seong Huiju, bringing snacks in an ordinary way was already enough.

“Me?”

After delivering the snacks and returning toward the dormitory, Huiju was stopped by her homeroom teacher and given an unwelcome request.

“Wait in front of the lecture building tomorrow morning and hand these out one by one when the seniors come.”

The tacky basket her teacher held out was filled with chocolates.

“I wanted to rest tomorrow...”

“Come on. If Jugak Palace’s top student goes to cheer them on, the seniors will get strength too.”

“There are top students from other grades too.”

“They’re going too. You’ll get volunteer hours.”

“How many?”

Only then interested, Huiju asked bluntly while pretending not to care.

“Two hours?”

“Three.”

“Tsk.”

“Then I won’t do it.”

“Ah, alright. Fine.”

Only then did Huiju take the basket.

As if trying to express Jugak Palace identity, a red ribbon was tied to the handle.

“But the teacher didn’t make this, right?”

“I did. Why? Is it strange?”

“Yes. Next year ask the art teacher.”

Thinking she had softened it enough, Huiju bowed and left the office.

The next morning, she woke before dawn and put on her uniform.

She also remembered to wear the red **durumagi** so the Jugak Palace seniors would recognize her.

Though she doubted there were people who did not know she belonged to Jugak Palace, it was her teacher’s request.

Carrying the chocolate basket to the lecture building, Huiju looked at the students brought in from the other dormitories.

Cheongryong Palace students were waving banners and making fools of themselves, while Baekho Palace students carried boxes of glutinous rice cakes.

“This was the better option.”

Distributing these quickly and leaving seemed better.

It somehow felt colder today than the entrance ceremony.

About ten minutes after lining up in front of the lecture building, seniors gradually started appearing.

Everyone looked nervous.

Among them, Dayeong appeared in a red padded jacket, looking oddly excited.

“Taeju’s little sister!”

“You didn’t come with Oppa today?”

“I think he’s nervous. He said to go ahead because he couldn’t leave the bathroom.”

“Ah, seriously. Information I really didn’t want...”

Dayeong burst out laughing at Huiju’s expression that looked ready to vomit.

Wanting to send her away quickly, Huiju hurriedly handed over chocolate.

“I’ll enjoy it,” Dayeong replied cheerfully.

“So you’re this year’s snack fairy?”

Jeongwoo arrived next, and his complexion did not look bad either.

“Yeah, it’s me. Want one too, Oppa?”

“No thanks. I got some yesterday.”

His face as he headed inside telling her to work hard looked completely relaxed, without any tension.

The other seniors were all similar.

Every one of them looked pale and silently accepted the chocolates.

As the chocolates rapidly disappeared, murmuring began around them.

It was because Grand Prince Ian was walking over expressionlessly.

Even if one tried not to look, eyes naturally turned toward him.

Huiju could feel the students from Cheongryong Palace becoming tense.

Without realizing it, she clenched her fist.

It felt like the tension around her had spread to her too.

That oddly hurt her pride, so Huiju unnecessarily rummaged through the basket.

“.....”

But the moment she looked up, their eyes met.

Grand Prince Ian, apparently recognizing her, raised his eyebrows and walked straight toward her without blinking.

His strides were as wide as his long legs, and he arrived in front of her instantly.

Looking down as if he had something to say, he casually held out his hand.

“Give me one too.”

“Huh?”

“That.”

Grand Prince Ian gestured at the chocolate.

Startled, Huiju looked toward the Cheongryong Palace students.

Their banners and candy suddenly looked pointless.

“I’m from Jugak Palace.”

“So?”

“.....”

Still wearing an unwilling expression, Huiju finally held out the chocolate.

No one had said she could only take care of seniors from her own dormitory.

*Pfft.*

Grand Prince Ian smiled and took the chocolate.

The touch of his fingertips brushed against her palm.

Watching his back as he left without even saying thank you, Huiju thought:

“What a jerk.”

It was her consistent evaluation.

달콤살벌한 간식 인생



## CHAPTER 16

### Winter Break

Half of winter break had already passed.

Which meant that Huiju had been staying at the family home for over three weeks. Filling most of her days with advanced studies, Huiju was starting to get restless.

No matter how much she liked studying, being shut up in her room all day was boring.

Not leaving her room had been her own choice.

It was not because she was watching her father's mood.

Though he looked like an evil boss, her father was actually a fairly diligent CEO. It was normal for him to leave before sunrise and return only after the sun had gone down.

So even living at home, it was rare for Huiju to run into him.

The problem was Seong Taeju.

“Hey, Seong Huiju!”

“Ah, what now?!”

Startled by Huiju's irritation, Taeju shrank back.

“Why is she angry every single time?”

Muttering while looking around the desk, Taeju glanced here and there.

It looked like he was searching for something again.

Having seriously begun preparing for study abroad, Taeju was doing his utmost to pack perfectly.

The problem was that he wanted to bring *everything* while not remembering where *anything* was.

“Uh... have you seen the fountain pen I bought last year?”

“No, and I'm not looking for it, and even if I see it I won't tell you.”

“What's wrong with you?”

“What's wrong with *you*? Is this your first time going overseas?”

After receiving dozens of questions already today, Huiju asked with an exhausted expression.

He had clearly caught some disease where he would die if he did not overreact.

It was not like he was leaving Korea forever, yet he was panicking over forgetting even one thing.

If only Seong Taeju were like that, it would have been fine.

Even their father, who looked like he had never taken care of anyone in his life, had become obsessed with making sure nothing was forgotten.

Emergency medicine to single socks.

Han Dayeong, who came over every other day, was the same.

After sticking to him like a cockroach and acting lovey-dovey, she would suddenly tear up at incomprehensible moments and become a tragic heroine.

“Taeju! I’m here!”

Right then, Dayeong’s voice came from the first floor.

She had come yesterday too, yet she was here again.

Excited, Taeju shouted, “I’m coming down!” and ran out.

“I’m leaving too.”

Huiju sprang up and grabbed her coat.

She could not watch Seong Taeju and Han Dayeong practicing their tragic farewell scenes for two days in a row.

After leaving the house, Huiju immediately called Jeongwoo.

After listening to her laughing for quite a while, Jeongwoo asked,

“Want to come over?”

“Right now?”

— *Aren't you already outside?*

“I am, but... can I really come?”

— *Of course.*

Firmly refusing his offer to come pick her up, Huiju headed to a nearby department store.

It was because she remembered Han Dayeong always bringing fruit baskets whenever she visited.

But she knew nothing about Jeongwoo's parents.

Other than the fact that his father was the Prime Minister.

Looking between dried tea leaves, cookies, fruit, and rice cakes, Huiju finally picked a cookie set of moderate size.

Not too extravagant, but not too cheap either.

Arriving in Bukchon, Huiju started walking along the stone walls.

The tiled-roof houses carrying the dignity of aristocratic families were impressive.

*I think Dayeong's house was around here too. Has Seong Taeju come here as well?*

Thinking such pointless thoughts as she walked, she spotted Jeongwoo waiting ahead.

The sight of him wearing a coat over a hoodie felt slightly unfamiliar.

Maybe because she had only ever seen him in uniform.

“I told you not to bring gifts.”

Running over, Jeongwoo looked apologetic when he saw the shopping bag.

“It's nothing. Just cookies.”

“You always give me sweets.”

Naturally taking the bag, Jeongwoo smiled.

“At this rate, I could start a business with the snacks you give me.”

“You still haven’t finished them?”

“With how much you gave me, how could I finish already?”

After teasing her thoroughly and adding that he had been eating them sparingly, Jeongwoo started walking ahead.

Only after climbing quite a steep hill did he stop.

“This is it.”

“Wow...”

Huiju lived in a luxurious mansion herself, but even she could not hide her admiration before the elegant form of the *hanok*.

She vaguely understood what *the glory of a family* meant.

And why people described huge tiled-roof houses as *houses with backs like whales*.

---

At the same time, Wan was resting at Onyang Haenggung.

After safely finishing both university entrance exams and graduation exams, there was no gift more fitting than Onyang's hot springs.

More importantly, His Majesty was abroad on an overseas tour.

Happiness like this could not be enjoyed at any other time.

His Majesty always said:

*“Royal outings should be avoided unless for treatment.”*

So the moment His Majesty boarded the plane, Wan immediately asked Hwan for permission.

Hwan worried Wan might be scolded, but Wan did not care.

He had even threatened to lie on the floor of Donggung Palace until permission was granted.

Once Hwan agreed, Wan gathered Hyeon, Chief Court Lady Choi, and all the retainers from his residence before heading to the palace.

He had expected to rest for about a week.

Instead, he packed earlier than planned and got into the ceremonial vehicle.

— *Please come to Donggung and soothe the Crown Prince's heart.*

It was because an urgent message had arrived from Chief Court Lady Park.

Wan looked anxiously out the window.

Unless it was serious, they would never ask him to come to Donggung.

“Your Highness, perhaps we still do not know what happened.”

Reading Wan's thoughts, Chief Court Lady Choi spoke gently.

“Please do not worry too much.”

Though she said so, she herself was uneasy.

As Wan's former nursemaid, she also knew Hwan's childhood.

Unlike Wan, who plucked every flower he liked and kept them in his room, Hwan had been a boy who cried even over a single wilting flower.

If only someone had cherished that soft heart.

But unfortunately, his father had been the king.

And the king wanted his son to become a king too.

So Hwan had never been allowed to live according to his nature.

Though he liked quiet things, he lived under constant attention.

Though he hated standing out, he always stood at the front.

And little by little, Hwan withered.

It began as simple insomnia.

But as days passed, his sleeping hours increased until they could no longer be controlled.

Eventually there were frequent times when he could not even attend meals.

Then the king ordered it:

Make the Crown Prince stay awake. Even by force.

After that, Hwan slept less and worked more.

Yet day by day he became more sensitive.

And weaker.

Like someone forcibly awakened from sleep, he always carried dazed eyes.

Not many people knew about Hwan's condition.

Only the king, Grand Prince Ian, a handful of court ladies serving him closely, and the Royal Hospital physicians.

That was why it was hard not to feel anxious whenever urgent messages like this arrived.

“Your Highness, Grand Prince Ian has arrived.”

As Wan reached Donggung, Chief Court Lady Park reported in a trembling voice.

“Your Highness. It's Wan.”

Receiving no answer from inside, Wan hurriedly announced himself again.

Still there was no response.

Wan let out a quiet sigh.

“Chief Court Lady Park. Clear the area.”

“But, Your Highness...”

“There is nothing to worry about. Brother would never hurt me.”

Left with no choice, she nodded and led the attendants away.

Only then did Wan drop the smile from his face.

Opening the paper door, he saw broken inkstones, shattered folding screens, and overturned furniture scattered before it—as if someone had tried to keep the door from opening.

“He really is strong.”

Pushing things aside with his foot, Wan walked in.

Then he found Hwan curled up in the corner.

“Brother.”

Lowering his voice, Wan shook his shoulder.

“Wan...”

Blinking his half-open eyes, Hwan smiled faintly.

Then he collapsed unconscious.

Startled, Wan hurriedly laid him down and placed his fingers under his nose.

Thankfully, he was breathing.

Judging from the overwhelming smell of alcohol, he had apparently been drinking since daytime.

The royal physicians had said alcohol was absolutely forbidden.

Yet he seemed to have no intention of listening.

For someone obedient to a foolish degree in everything else, alcohol alone was apparently beyond his control.

“If you’re going to rebel, do it against Father.”

Muttering, Wan flopped down beside Hwan.

Now that the tension was gone, he was tired.

If word reached Father that he had slept in Donggung, it would not end with an ordinary apology letter.

But it could not be helped.

He did not want to leave alone the brother who ran away because the world was frightening.

## CHAPTER 17

### From Winter to Spring

Hwan only opened his eyes late at dawn. His head hurt as though it would split apart, and he let out a groan.

“Is there no one outside?”

Perhaps because his voice was hoarse, no one answered.

After coughing dryly several times, Hwan threw off the suffocating blanket.

Only then did he see Wan asleep beside him.

The sleeping face was welcome, but the situation was not natural.

*If my memory is right, my younger brother should be in Onyang.*

“Ha...”

Blinking eyes that had adjusted to the darkness, Hwan slowly looked around.

All the things he treasured lay broken and scattered.

*I caused another disturbance.*

Self-loathing surged up at the vaguely guessed situation.

His Majesty had only been gone for one week.

He remembered enduring that week as if it were a hundred years, and the night he had finally struggled helplessly.

The desire to do nothing and the desire to do *something* had existed together.

Unable to bridge that gap, he had reached for alcohol.

That was his last memory.

“You cleaned up after me again.”

Murmuring softly, Hwan looked at the sleeping Wan.

He could still clearly picture how happy Wan had been about finally going to Onyang Haenggung after so long.

Thinking that he had come back because of worrying over him made Hwan feel pathetic.

“Hyung...?”

Wan stirred awake.

“You’re up?”

“You kept rustling around.”

Even half asleep and unable to properly open his eyes, his younger brother's tone remained gentle.

“Sorry.”

“For what?”

“You couldn't even rest because of me.”

“It's fine. Hot springs get boring if you stay too long anyway.”

Hwan knew he was acting indifferent on purpose so he would not feel guilty.

“When Father returns... he'll be angry, won't he?”

“So what? I'll just write a reflection letter.”

“I'd write a hundred reflection letters.”

“Then?”

“He'll be disappointed again.”

“.....”

“I'm terrified of seeing that.”

Lying on his side with his face propped up, Wan frowned.

“You're scared of the weirdest things.”

“What?”

“Hyung, children are originally meant to disappoint their parents. Just give up. Giving up makes life easier.”

This time it was Hwan who frowned.

It was not empty bravado.

His younger brother truly lived like that.

Getting scolded every day, rebelling every day, never fearing reflection letters.

Sometimes Hwan thought he was someone who feared nothing.

“You don’t have anything you’re scared of.”

“What are you talking about? Do you think I’m some kind of monster?”

“You do?”

“Of course.”

“What is it?”

“Hmm...”

The mischief in Wan’s eyes suddenly quieted.

Just as Hwan was thinking he looked strangely sad—  
Wan smiled again.

“It’s a secret.”

“What, brat?”

“What? What would you do even if you knew?”

“Oh? You dare insult the foundation of this nation?”

“Yeah. I insult it.”

He who did not fear his father’s or brother’s disappointment possessed an exceptional talent for making both of them angry.

And Wan—

*“Lee Wan! Aren’t you coming over here?!”*

—was happiest when using that talent.

And Hwan dearly loved that happy expression.

In Donggung, where all his treasured things had been destroyed, Wan was the only thing left unbroken.

*Please stay that way.*

Hwan prayed.

The Royal School grounds were filled with the scent of flowers.

Winter still held power before spring's arrival, but bouquets prepared for graduation chased away the cold wind.

Huiju also carried a large bouquet in her arms on the way to the auditorium.

The fact that it was meant for Seong Taeju displeased her greatly, but she decided to endure it today.

Tomorrow, Seong Taeju would leave for America.

“Taeju's little sister!”

Right then, Dayeong approached waving.

Judging by her lower-than-usual energy and swollen eyes, she seemed to have cried all night.

“Did you cry?”

“Is it obvious?”

“Very.”

Letting out a deep sigh, Dayeong rubbed her eyes.

“I have to take photos later. This is bad.”

At that moment, Dayeong's family called her.

True to their reputation as a prestigious legal family, they carried an overall strict atmosphere.

Huiju thought she understood why Han Dayeong was called the mutant of the Han family.

Especially the two men who seemed to be Dayeong's brothers.

They looked like they had stepped out of a gangster movie.

“Seong Taeju's going to have it rough.”

Shaking her head, Huiju entered the auditorium.

Beside the central seats reserved for graduates were family sections.

Finding the Cheongryong Palace area, Huiju sat alone.

Her father had messaged saying he would probably arrive around the end of the ceremony.

His business trip in Japan seemed to have been delayed.

“Our father must be disappointed.”

Muttering, Huiju remembered something from a few nights ago.

That day she had fallen asleep unusually early, then woke late at night and left her room.

The moment she stepped onto the stairs, laughter drifted up from the first floor.

It was her father and Seong Taeju.

Without realizing it, Huiju held her breath and went down.

Between them sat whiskey.

One of the bottles from the whiskey collection Seong Taeju had always coveted.

Apparently he had finally received permission.

Taeju's face was flushed red.

The look in their father's eyes as he watched his son, now an adult, could only be described as love.

“.....”

Feeling unexpectedly hollow, Huiju went back upstairs.

She hated herself for always ending up disappointed.

She hated herself for being jealous of a father's natural love toward his child.

Because she kept wondering—

*Why don't I receive that natural thing?*

So she simply decided to become greedy again.

Remembering the name of the whiskey Taeju had drunk.

Promising herself that when she became an adult, she too would absolutely receive whiskey as a gift.

Even if it was childish.

She could not help it.

“Oh my, the Prime Minister came too?”

“Of course. It's his only son's graduation.”

As her thoughts deepened, voices rose around her.

Prime Minister Min had arrived with bodyguards.

Unlike his son's sharp impression, the father had a much gentler atmosphere.

The smile he gave while shaking every hand offered to him one by one—

Even his voice as he exchanged greetings.

The elegant middle-aged woman standing beside him noticed Huiju.

“Oh my, Huiju.”

The woman with the warm voice was Jeongwoo’s mother.

Huiju had met her before when she visited carrying the cookie set.

Despite her refined appearance, she had been somewhat talkative.

She had been so curious about everything that Huiju’s throat had nearly gone hoarse answering all her questions.

“Hello, Madam.”

“I told you not to call me that.”

Scolding gently, she warmly took Huiju’s hand.

Then she marched straight toward her husband, who was surrounded by people.

“Honey, this is the Huiju I mentioned before.”

“Ah, that junior of our son’s! Nice to meet you.”

“Hello, Prime Minister. I’m Seong Huiju.”

“She’s been top student every year since entering school. Impressive, right?”

Suddenly caught in conversation with the Prime Minister and his wife, Huiju kept smiling awkwardly.

She could feel sharp gazes around them.

Envy and jealousy perhaps.

Or curiosity.

“How is that early graduation you said you were preparing?”

Linking arms naturally with Huiju, the woman asked.

“Yes. I’m preparing step by step.”

“Your older brother is graduating today too, right? Was he going abroad?”

“Yes, today...”

“If I’d known Huiju was coming too, I wouldn’t have bought flowers. Jeongwoo would probably like receiving them from Huiju more than from us.”

She liked teasing people and enjoyed seeing them become embarrassed.

Huiju was already struggling enough pretending to be a model student.

She wished anyone would come and end this conversation.

And precisely then—

“Seong Huiju.”

“Father?”

Her father appeared.

Though he had said he would be late, the moment he recognized Prime Minister Min he put on the face of a businessman.

The handshake offered with a suitable smile was smooth.

After exchanging a few formal words, the two men naturally separated.

And in that moment—

Huiju noticed the expressions of the Prime Minister and his wife change as they looked at her.

As though they had never imagined she was Seong Hyeonguk’s daughter.

There was unmistakable surprise on their faces.

## CHAPTER 18

### An Ideal Proposal

The graduation hall turned upside down.

It was not because of Jeongwoo, who had seized the honor of graduating as valedictorian after serving as student council president.

Nor was it because of Grand Prince Ian, flawless as always.

It was because Seong Taeju, fluttering his bright blue *durumagi* as he received his diploma—

“Dayeong, marry me!”

—had proposed.

The hall, frozen for an instant, erupted into laughter.

Huiju felt so embarrassed she wanted to die on the spot. Looking at the father sitting beside her, he seemed to feel the same way. The guy had only just become an adult—what marriage was he talking about?

The principal handing out the diploma and the teacher of Azure Dragon Palace standing beside him both had reddened faces.

More than anyone, Han Dayeong's face was the worst.

She had turned so red it felt like someone should dump ice water over her.

Just when Huiju thought for the first time that Dayeong was pitiful, she saw a sight she did not want to believe.

Dayeong, whom she thought was red because she was angry, was teary-eyed and nodding.

“What...”

Surely that did not mean she was accepting, right?

Huiju, dropping the bouquet she was holding, thought so.

But if it was those crazy people, it actually seemed possible.

“Father, is it really okay to send him alone to America?”

“Ha...”

Normally he would have scolded her for talking about her brother that way, but Father could not say anything.

Rather, he looked like he was using every ounce of strength to suppress his anger.

“Let's go.”

In the end Father stood up and spoke.

Huiju immediately nodded and followed after him.

Leaving the hall filled with cheers and jeers from the students was not easy.

On the stage, Wan and Jeongwoo were dumbfounded by the sudden event.

“That’s Seong Huiju’s brother?”

“Yes.”

“Is he always like that?”

“Probably.”

The gazes of the two who had been watching Seong Taeju naturally moved to Huiju’s retreating figure.

Seeing her almost running toward the door made them laugh.

Without even seeing her face, they could tell how mortified someone with that much pride must be.

“This is why ideals are scary,” Jeongwoo said softly.

“Because they only think idealistically, they end up doing things like that.”

It was a remark aimed at Azure Dragon Palace, where idealists gathered.

Wan, practically the symbol of Azure Dragon Palace, tilted his head.

“So the will of Vermilion Bird Palace isn’t based on ideals?”

“Will that isn’t realistic isn’t will.”

“Coward.”

Wan emphasized the word, and Jeongwoo looked like he was dying from how childish it was.

“What? Why? He’s a coward.”

Shrugging, Wan declared that there was nothing wrong with dreaming.

Behind the two standing like pillars in the grand hall, the banners of the Four Guardian Beasts fluttered.

The difference between Azure Dragon, which flew through the sky without wings, and Vermilion Bird, which flew with wings—

was the same as the difference between the two men.

After the graduation ceremony, Wan headed straight to his residence.

The palace had said Hwan was there.

After he had complained last night about how no one came to his graduation, Hwan must have somehow made time.

Thinking about what graduation gift he had brought was exciting.

“Hyung!”

Wan’s voice rang loudly as he crossed the gate.

“.....”

Hwan, waiting in the garden, gestured with his eyes toward the surroundings.

The attendants of the Eastern Palace and the royal guards were present; it meant to watch his words and actions.

Only then noticing, Wan straightened his posture.

“Your Highness the Crown Prince.”

Only then did Hwan smile.

“Congratulations on graduating.”

“Did you bring a gift?”

“You’ll like it.”

Hwan nodded confidently and looked toward Court Lady Park beside him.

The attendants standing behind immediately presented a lacquered box.

Seeing Wan’s eyes shine with anticipation, Court Lady Park could not hold back her smile.

“Grand Prince, His Highness the Crown Prince went to great lengths to obtain this painting. Please treasure it.”

“A painting?”

Wan’s eyes widened as he looked at Hwan.

Instead of answering, Hwan leisurely clasped his hands behind his back and stepped onto the wooden porch.

“Stop standing there and come inside.”

“A painting? Really? Really that one? Huh?”

Forgetting there were many watching eyes, Wan made a fuss asking questions.

Seeing Hwan so confident, it had to be *that* painting he had been longing for.

“Will you look at something so precious under the sunlight?”

“Huh? Ah, no!”

Wan hurriedly shook his head and followed Hwan to the study.

Though he was a grown man over six feet tall, carrying the wooden box in his arms made him look exactly like a boy.

Opening the painting, Wan stomped his feet in excitement.

For Wan, who loved folk paintings from the Joseon era and loved cats, a folk painting of cats was no different from treasure.

“Where should I hang it? The study would be better than the guest house, right?”

“Hang it later and sit down first. You’re noisy.”

“Okay, okay.”

Answering quickly, Wan sat with an obedient face.

Today, he intended to grant whatever his brother wanted.

Seeing that childlike appearance, Hwan felt a little guilty.

He did not want to ruin his younger brother's good mood, yet he had to make a request he did not want to.

“Wan.”

“Mm?”

“I have a favor to ask...”

“What is it?”

Wan frowned as soon as he noticed the apology on his brother's face.

Hwan only looked apologetic when Wan had to give something up.

“That...”

“.....”

“The royal marriage was approved by the State Council yesterday.”

“I know.”

“It's formal, but I still have to propose.”

“So what, you want help with that?”

“No, um... Mother’s wedding ring...”

At that moment Wan’s expression turned cold.

“No.”

“Wan.”

“No. Did Father tell you to do that? To propose with Mother’s ring?”

“.....”

Hwan avoided his gaze.

Wan felt his insides twist and stood up to open the window.

Even as the winter wind filled his lungs, the boiling anger would not cool.

Mother’s marriage ring was the only thing Mother had left to him.

Neither Father nor Hyung could possibly not know that.

Wan knew Father disapproved.

As if she had expected she would die in an unforeseen accident, Mother had left behind a record saying she would pass her marriage ring to her youngest son.

Father seemed unable to understand her until the end.

Wan, who had suddenly inherited a royal treasure, could not understand it either.

Then Court Lady Lee from the Queen's Palace had come to him and said:

*“Her Majesty worried for the Grand Prince who would possess nothing.”*

*“So she left me jewels?”*

*“She said that when you find someone you love, give them everything.”*

*“.....”*

*“She said that if you have someone you love, it is no different from having everything.”*

Even after all this time, Wan still did not fully understand the meaning behind those words.

But one thing was certain.

It was the only inheritance through which he could remember Mother.

It belonged to him.

Something no one could take away.

“It’s mine.”

“Wan.”

“Stay out of it, Hyung. I’ll tell Father myself.”

This was the one thing he had no intention of yielding to anyone.

Three months later, Hwan finally proposed to Yirang.

The scene of the Crown Prince presenting a ring to his lover beside him while watching an opera from a private box seat received enthusiastic applause.

Among all the interest, the greatest was what ring Yirang had received.

It was not Queen Uihyeon’s ring.

The King had surrendered in front of Wan’s stubbornness after he stopped eating and caused chaos.

Even the King could not forcibly take away a royal treasure his son had inherited.

When the King shouted in anger, “*Who in the world did he take that stubbornness from?*” Hwan did not answer.

Because no matter who looked, Wan was Father's exact mold.

In the end the King ordered the creation of a new ring for the future Crown Princess.

So it would not be inferior in status to Queen Uihyeon's ring, the King personally selected gemstones from the royal treasury.

Thus the completed ring adorned Yirang's elegant fingers.

For someone who played piano, it was excessively extravagant—

but no one thought of that as a flaw.

The Crown Prince's royal marriage was just around the corner.

## CHAPTER 19

### Chapter 19

#### Irreversible Steps

Preparations for the Crown Prince's wedding were approaching their final stage.

In the palace, the residence that would become the Crown Princess's quarters was being renovated, while the State Council calculated the national benefits the royal marriage would create.

Yirang received the attention of the entire nation.

Interest rose not only in stories from her childhood, but also in the background of the Yoon family and the Royal Hospital. Since theirs was already a family with many connections to the royal family, they could not avoid criticism that it was a typical political marriage.

But the evaluation of Yirang herself, who would become Crown Princess, was positive without a speck of blemish.

*A person born to become queen.*

Whenever the daily life of the future Crown Princess, a piano major at Royal University, was revealed, people said that.

Her elegant speech, expressionless composure, flawless posture, and beautiful appearance—there was not a single thing lacking.

People were certain.

That Yirang would perfectly fill the role of mistress of the royal family, a seat left empty for so long.

The King, Yirang's future father-in-law, thought the same.

Unlike the soft-hearted Crown Prince, Yirang never wavered under any circumstances.

There was no room for doubt just by seeing her endure the strict training of the court ladies while keeping up with life as a freshman at Royal University without showing any signs of difficulty.

*She will become the Crown Prince's firm support.*

That was what the King believed.

But Hwan himself thought the opposite.

Yirang's endless calmness felt as though one day it would suffocate him.

Like that.

A few days before proposing, Hwan visited Yirang's home.

Yirang's father was delighted by the visit of the Crown Prince who would become his son-in-law, but Yirang looked slightly bewildered.

They had never met outside schedules arranged by the Royal Secretariat.

Looking around Yirang's room where the piano stood, Hwan quietly closed the door.

Realizing this was not a casual visit, Yirang remained silent until Hwan spoke first.

“Soon, I will propose.”

“I know, Your Highness.”

“After that... there will be no turning back.”

“I know that as well.”

For someone who obeyed the fate given to her, she felt remarkably resolute.

As though she had chosen her own fate.

Perhaps from then on, Hwan thought they would never truly be of one mind.

Still clinging to a shallow hope, Hwan spoke with difficulty.

“I will not be able to cherish you.”

“...Do you dislike me?”

“It is not your fault.”

“.....”

“It is because I am lacking.”

Hwan adjusted his collar as if suffocating and looked at Yirang.

Though it was not a pleasant thing to hear, no agitation appeared on her face.

“I am not someone fit to become king. Therefore I will not become a good king. Nor a good husband. So...”

“Your Highness.”

Yirang cut him off.

Her quiet, deep eyes looked indifferently at his slightly trembling ones.

“Your Highness is the foundation of this nation.”

“.....”

“Therefore, you must become an excellent king. As for being a good husband...”

“.....”

“It is alright if you are not.”

At first glance, it sounded gentle.

But it was cold words that held no expectation and no empathy.

It reminded him of Father’s command:

*You do not need to be a good son. Just become a good Crown Prince.*

“If I...”

“.....”

“...had someone else in my heart, would your answer remain the same?”

Strengthening his dampening eyes, Hwan asked.

He felt guilty and horrified at once that he was speaking of the beloved he had hidden from everyone to the woman who might become his wife.

“I will pretend not to know.”

Yirang answered calmly.

Hwan had expected surprise if not betrayal, but instead he was the one left shaken.

“How... is that possible?”

“I will place someone else in my heart as well, so there is no need for Your Highness to feel sorry.”

“.....”

Unable to bear the revulsion rising inside him, Hwan fled Yirang's room.

It felt like talking to an unbreakable wall.

After that, nothing changed.

The proposal proceeded at the appointed time and place.

Yirang treated Hwan as though nothing had happened.

The helplessness of realizing that his struggle to change something had not caused even the smallest ripple left Hwan in despair.

Blinking his dry eyes, Hwan stood.

With the royal wedding only a month away, severe insomnia had struck him for several days.

Behind his sigh came the sound of someone clicking their tongue.

“How foolish.”

It was Wan.

The same Wan who had been banned from entering the palace because of the wedding-ring incident.

“What?”

“How are you here at this hour?”

“Has your palace ban been lifted?”

“No.”

“Then how did you get in?”

“I climbed the wall.”

“What?”

“Court Lady Park kept saying you were dying, so I came. And wow... she wasn't wrong.”

Wan looked him up and down.

Judging by the grass caught on his robes, climbing the wall had not been a lie.

“What, are you upset because you're getting married? Marriage blues or something?”

Throwing out the words casually, Wan sat beside him and stared straight into his eyes.

What was his brother so afraid of that he was trembling like this?

He had only not seen him for a few days, yet Hwan already looked gaunt.

“I mean, you were the one who proposed. Why are you acting like this?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Regret it?”

“Should I break off the engagement?”

After thinking quietly for a moment, Hwan dropped the bomb.

“What are you talking about? Did you drink again?”

Wan frowned and leaned closer to sniff him.

“What? You don’t even smell like alcohol. Why are you saying crazy things?”

“It’s not crazy.”

Only then did Wan understand the seriousness.

He looked toward the closed doors of the Eastern Palace.

If sharp-eared Court Lady Park heard this, it would be disastrous.

Watching him, Hwan pulled out a photograph from the drawer and handed it over.

“What is this?”

Using the moonlight to see the woman in the photograph, Wan let out a sigh.

He recognized her immediately.

She was a palace attendant of the Eastern Palace.

There could not possibly be any valid reason for the Crown Prince of an entire nation to carry around a palace maid's photograph.

Rubbing his face heavily, Wan looked at his brother.

“How long?”

“Who knows. Around three years?”

“Ha...”

No one had known about a secret affair that had lasted three whole years.

Wan felt dizzy.

And yet he had proposed to another woman.

And now he wanted to break the engagement.

No matter how much he loved his brother, he suddenly wanted to punch him.

“So what? Are you really going to break it off?”

“Do you even have the courage to tell Father?”

Fear appeared on Hwan's face.

Wan snorted in disbelief.

His lips curved into a grin, but his dark eyes had turned frighteningly cold.

“What exactly are you trying to do?”

“I’m going to tell him.”

“How?”

“I told Yoon Yirang.”

“What?”

“That there was someone in my heart.”

“Are you insane?”

The last thread of reason snapped.

Wan finally exploded.

While swearing without restraint, Hwan continued calmly.

“She wasn’t even surprised. Said she didn’t care.”

“So what? You thought she’d say, ‘*Ah, I understand. Let’s break off the engagement*’?”

“I thought she would.”

“Aaah!”

Wan shouted and stood.

“I should leave. If I stay any longer I think I’ll lose my mind.”

He did not want to climb the palace walls twice in one night, but he wanted out.

Then—

“I’m going to petition for my removal as Crown Prince.”

Hwan spoke.

Wan turned around in shock.

His brother looked strange.

A body with no strength—

and eyes burning brightly.

“Planning to run away for love?”

“It has nothing to do with her. I already ended it.”

“Then why are you doing this?”

“I just want to live.”

“.....”

“You know my mental state can’t handle this. If I use the medical records as grounds... the State Council will approve it.”

Hwan had wanted to endure too.

Even if not a good husband, he had wanted to become a good king and meet everyone’s expectations.

But the more he endured, the more certain he became.

That he was breaking apart.

So he decided to gather every ounce of courage.

Just once.

His choice would disappoint everyone.

Even so—

just once.

“So, Wan.”

“.....”

“You have to become my backing.”

## CHAPTER 20

### Backing / Powerful Connections (뒷배)

Spring of Huiju's 10th year was not easy.

The extracurricular activities she had applied for to graduate early kept getting rejected, and her classmates showed their hostility more openly than before. She didn't know whether it was because someone who had taken first place every year was now trying to graduate early as well, or because Min Jeongwoo and Han Dayeong were no longer around.

Well, she didn't want to know the reason anyway.

After all, none of the obstacles she had faced until now had ever needed a clear reason.

Huiju knew exactly what she had to do at times like this.

Do well despite the dirty and pathetic interference. Eat well. Smile well.

The fact that doing just that could make her enemies miserable made it laughably easy.

So Huiju went to Royal University.

She had heard that the reason she couldn't get into an extracurricular group was because of the upperclassmen. If people blocked her path simply because they were seniors, then she would just use *their* seniors.

“Where's the building for the Department of Political Science and Diplomacy?”

Giving up on reading the map, Huiju stopped a passing student.

“If it's Political Science, that's in the Social Sciences building, so...”

The student looked around and pointed toward a tall spire rising into the sky.

“See that spire? Walk straight toward it and you'll reach the Central Library. Turn left there, and the first building is the Social Sciences building.”

“Thank you.”

After bowing her head, Huiju looked toward the distant spire.

The spire of Royal University, called the *Unfinished Tower*, supposedly carried the meaning: *Do not stop moving forward.*

Imagining herself studying beneath that tower someday, Huiju started walking.

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“That’s all for today.”

The moment the professor finished speaking, Jeongwoo stood up.

He had already had his bag on for ten minutes before class ended.

It was the first time he was seeing Huiju since the semester began.

She had been so busy that even if he sent a message, he had to wait half a day for a reply.

The moment he came out of the building, Jeongwoo spotted her immediately.

Among all the stylish university students, Huiju was the only one wearing a school uniform, sitting alone on a bench reading something.

“Seong Huiju!”

At his voice, Huiju looked up and stood with a smile.

He wondered what she had been reading so intently—it was the vocabulary book she never let go of.

“You memorize words all day, every day.”

Jeongwoo laughed at the familiar sight.

Huiju shrugged.

“This is the best time to memorize them. Setting aside time specifically for it feels wasteful.”

“You didn’t get lost?”

“I asked someone passing by. Got here fine.”

“Want to eat first? There’s a pizza place nearby that’s really good.”

All the effort Jeongwoo had spent since yesterday looking up good restaurants became meaningless when Huiju firmly shook her head.

“No time to eat. I have to go right away.”

“Right away? Where?”

“School. Midterms are coming up. I need to study.”

“Take a break today. You came all the way here.”

Jeongwoo looked visibly disappointed.

“You told me to graduate early. Don’t you know it’s over if I mess up even one exam?”

“Then why did you come?”

“Because there’s something you need to do for me.”

Huiju answered with a serious face and pulled an extracurricular activity application form from her bag.

Jeongwoo looked through it with confusion, then noticed the **REJECTED** stamp at the bottom and finally understood.

“Ah, so this is that thing? Elevator incident part two?”

“Something like that.”

She tried to act shamelessly, lifting her chin, but her face subtly checked his reaction.

Jeongwoo smiled.

“Which program do you want the most?”

“The one in the front. I arranged them in order.”

Why was even her immediate answer so cute?

A quiet laugh escaped him as he pulled out his phone.

Royal School actively encouraged outside activities starting from 10th grade, and because these programs operated in groups, there was no reason to reject a high-performing student.

*Just another pointless act of exclusion.*

Clicking his tongue, Jeongwoo solved the absurd situation in less than a minute.

He called someone and exchanged a few words.

“You’ll get contacted tomorrow.”

And it was over.

“Just like that?”

Huiju pursed her lips.

She felt relieved and frustrated at the same time.

Jeongwoo being able to solve everything so easily made her feel grateful and reassured—but it was irritating that she couldn’t solve something that simple herself.

“Must be nice. Being Min Jeongwoo.”

“So eating with that Min Jeongwoo is a no?”

“Ugh. You got so cheesy after going to university.”

Snatching the application from his hand, Huiju turned around without hesitation.

It felt cold.

But Jeongwoo felt strangely proud.

For someone as prideful as her to come to *him* when she needed help—that felt good.

And he hoped that from now on too...

Whenever things got hard, she would keep coming to him.

After finishing his Aesthetics lecture, dark circles lingered beneath Grand Prince Wan’s eyes.

There were too many things to think about to sleep.

*You need to become my backing.*

He understood exactly what his older brother meant.

If the Crown Prince were dethroned, the royal family would need a replacement.

And the only person who could take that role was him.

No matter how displeased their father might be with him, that fact wouldn't change.

The problem was—

He didn't want it either.

When he was young, he had said he wanted to become king.

But now he had no such thoughts.

The only reason he had wanted the throne back then was because there were too many things he was forbidden from doing.

After he grew older, his thoughts had changed completely.

*Why should a royal family that can do nothing except simply exist continue to exist?*

He knew it was a deeply disrespectful thought, so he had never voiced it aloud.

Only occasionally—

When the circumstances surrounding him became suffocating—

He would think about impossible things.

Even imagining the impossible brought catharsis.

Thinking today was one of those days, he raised his head—

“What...”

Grand Prince Ian frowned.

“Why is she here...”

Beneath the distant spire stood Seong Huiju.

That bright red girl who made impossible things possible.

He was about to call her name—

But Huiju turned away.

Without realizing it, Wan widened his steps, staring desperately at her retreating figure.

Suppressing the urge to run was already difficult enough—

Then Seong Huiju started running.

“Why is she running now...”

Wan’s frustration deepened as etiquette restrained him.

It wasn’t that he wanted to stop her.

They weren’t close enough to chat casually.

And Huiju certainly wasn't someone who would be happy to see him.

Still—

He wanted to stop her.

Because looking at those burning eyes again felt like all his worries might turn to ashes.

The problem was Huiju's athletic ability.

Maybe she ranked first in PE too, because her running speed was absurd.

Realizing he wouldn't catch up, Wan stopped walking.

He couldn't take his eyes off her back as she disappeared.

Only after reaching the school gates at full speed did Huiju finally catch her breath.

She didn't know why she had started running.

Just—

“What...”

Seeing Grand Prince Ian had been enough.

Even from far away, his presence was unmistakable.

Their eyes hadn't met.

He hadn't waved.

He hadn't called her name or greeted her.

Her legs had simply moved on their own.

*Who will Grand Prince Ian marry?*

Suddenly she remembered the conversation from class that morning.

With the Crown Prince's wedding to Yoon Yirang approaching, people had started showing interest in Grand Prince Wan's future spouse too.

*"He probably has high standards."*

*"Why?"*

*"The Crown Prince is marrying Senior Yoon Yirang too. They're brothers—probably have similar taste."*

*"Should I try aiming for that position once?"*

*"What did Grand Prince Ian ever do to deserve that?"*

Huiju didn't know why that boring conversation suddenly came back now.

“He’ll probably marry some equally annoying woman anyway.”

As always—

Her evaluation remained the same.

# 재수 없는 여자



## CHAPTER 21

### A Fragile, Delicate Heart

Hwan's resistance failed.

There were many reasons for that failure, but the greatest mistake of all was trusting Yoon Seongwon, Yoon Yirang's father. Because of the Royal Special Act, which prohibited the arbitrary disclosure of the Crown Prince's medical records, Hwan needed the cooperation of Seongwon, chairman of the Royal Hospital.

“Surely you also wish for your daughter to be happy.”

By ordinary standards, it was a reasonable thought. No father-in-law could welcome a son-in-law suffering from nervous exhaustion caused by years of depression and anxiety.

“Please do not worry, Your Highness the Crown Prince. I will remain by your side.”

He looked like a dependable ally.

Whenever Hwan called, he appeared and soothed his fears. Yet he never gave Hwan the one thing he truly wanted. Instead, he delayed, saying he would find another way.

Seongwon did not need a good son-in-law.

He needed a Crown Prince for a son-in-law.

Had it been before the royal marriage announcement, perhaps he would have at least pretended to make an effort. But now the entire nation already knew Yoon Yirang as Hwan's destined partner. He had absolutely no desire to help. If Hwan were deposed and the engagement dissolved, Yoon Yirang would also be forced to carry that disgrace for the rest of her life as though it were her own.

Above all else—

he did not welcome Grand Prince Ian ascending to the Crown Prince's seat.

The incident involving Queen Uihyeon's ring proved it. Even with the King's command and the Crown Prince's request, Grand Prince Ian had not budged. The royal relatives and cabinet stepped in to resolve matters, but even that failed. Instead, Ian only demanded to know whether they intended to ignore Queen Uihyeon's final wishes.

If such a man became king, Seongwon thought, difficult days would follow endlessly.

More importantly, the monarchy itself stood before the greatest crisis in its history.

The people respected and loved the royal family that had voluntarily declared itself a constitutional monarchy. Yet no one could give a clear answer to a single question:

What meaning did a royal family have in the twenty-first century?

Even so, the system had to remain.

For over six hundred years, the royal family had never fallen even once. Its history and traditions were the nation's pride, and supporting it were the noble families.

As long as royalty existed, the statement that all people were equal could never fully stand.

To prove the nobility of the royal family, distinctions in status had to be acknowledged. Even if those distinctions existed in name alone, once a name was given, they became undeniable realities.

Thus Seongwon wished for the royal family to endure forever.

Only an eternal monarchy could preserve the fading boundaries of status.

Arriving at the Eastern Palace after being summoned by the Crown Prince, Seongwon thought:

The deposition of the Crown Prince was unthinkable.

“I cannot wait any longer.”

Hwan spoke like a starving beast at death’s door.

Seongwon released a quiet sigh and lowered his head.

“Do you truly intend to commit unfilial conduct against His Majesty?”

“What?”

“His Majesty was not a Crown Prince. He was once a Grand Prince.”

“So?”

“If the late King Gwangjong had left behind an heir... His Majesty would have lived only as a royal relative.”

Hwan’s gaze sharpened.

The late King Gwangjong had been Hwan’s uncle and the current king’s only elder brother. His life had ended at forty without leaving an heir, creating a void filled with

questions. The Royal Hospital's announcement of death by overwork had never satisfied anyone.

King Gwangjong had always been healthy.

Suspicion turned toward Grand Prince Gyeongon, his younger brother. The problem was that Gwangjong's final known activity had been a hunt with him.

Queen Dowager Lee, now widowed, had looked upon him with cold suspicion.

But no evidence existed.

No connection was ever found.

Grand Prince Gyeongon ascended the throne amidst controversy and never once resented his sister-in-law. Instead, he comforted her, saying he understood the grief of a woman who had lost her husband.

But when Queen Dowager Lee herself died of illness a year later—

the suspicions rose once more.

“Do you not know what suspicions His Majesty lives under?”

“Do you dare insult my royal father?”

“I am saying that His Majesty needs Your Highness.”

Seongwon’s voice grew firmer.

“His Majesty must protect legitimacy. It is the only way for him to prove his innocence. But if Your Highness steps down from that position...”

“Enough!”

Hwan pressed his throbbing temple.

“The Grand Prince will hear the same accusations His Majesty endured.”

“I said enough!”

“Will you dishonor His Majesty and leave disgrace upon your only younger brother?”

“....”

The tears finally fell.

Thick drops slid from Hwan’s eyes.

The fragile heart had broken.

Realizing it, Seongwon softened his expression.

“Your Highness need do nothing.”

“....”

“Simply remain where you are.”

“I... I...”

“I will stay by your side.”

Daring to clasp the Crown Prince’s hand, Seongwon spoke gently.

And so—

Hwan’s first and last resistance failed.

Wan worried about Hwan.

The royal wedding day was approaching, yet not a single message came from his brother. Whether persuading their father had failed or not, he could not understand what was happening.

He considered asking through Head Court Lady Choi.

But he did not want to pressure Hwan.

*‘If you hate it, then I won’t do it.’*

He remembered their last conversation.

After asking him to stand as his support, Hwan had visited his residence only to say those words.

It seemed Hwan felt guilty for placing such a burden on him.

*Weak.*

*'Brother, with a heart like that, even things that could succeed won't.'*

*'Still... if you hate it, then I hate it too.'*

No younger brother could answer that with rejection.

Becoming Crown Prince and eventually king was not something Wan desired. Yet he wanted to stand beside his brother.

For the first time, a dream he had only vaguely imagined felt real.

Their father would resent him.

But that happened all the time.

It was nothing to fear.

What truly troubled him was Yoon Yirang.

She knew nothing of these plans.

She would be shocked.

She would be hurt.

Still, Wan forced himself to believe:

A broken engagement was better than divorce.

No marriage at all was better than a loveless one.

Until the day of the royal marriage itself, Wan never understood the truth.

He had been sent overseas to carry out official duties in Hwan's place.

Everything had been Hwan's plan.

And Wan had trusted him.

*“By the time you return, everything will be settled.”*

He believed those words.

Yet the overseas schedule kept growing.

His return was delayed again and again.

Only on the day of the royal marriage did Wan finally return to Korea.

He went straight to the Eastern Palace.

“Grand Prince, the Crown Prince has not yet—”

“Move.”

Court Lady Park desperately blocked him.

But no one could stop Wan now.

Not even Hwan.

Not even the master of the Eastern Palace himself.

Wan threw open the chamber doors—  
and froze.

Hwan stood there in wedding robes.

Only then did he understand.

His brother had deceived him.

After playing him for a fool, Hwan could not even meet his eyes.

Wan laughed bitterly and stepped forward.

“Grand Prince!”

Seongwon shouted sharply.

Perhaps becoming the future father-in-law of the royal house had intoxicated him. The way he dared raise his voice was absurd.

“The wedding ceremony will begin shortly.”

“So?”

“Please leave and return to your place.”

Wan merely raised a brow.

Then he walked straight to Hwan.

“If His Majesty learns of this, the Crown Prince will be punished for disrespect.”

“....”

“Will that truly be alright?”

Ignoring him completely, Wan seized Hwan’s collar.

For months he had agonized over saving this weak brother.

He felt pathetic.

The excitement he felt while reviving a dream he had long abandoned—

that too felt pathetic.

He had always known Hwan was weak.

“I gave you a chance.”

“Whatever happens from now on...”

“Handle it yourself.”

He released Hwan.

As he turned to leave, he looked at Seongwon.

The expression on the man’s face—as though Wan were the villain—was absurd.

“Go ahead and report everything exactly as it happened.”

“If tattling is your pleasure, then being punished for disrespect is mine.”

Wan had no interest whatsoever in what the man who held his brother’s heart truly wanted.

## CHAPTER 22

### Winter Again

Winter came again.

Looking over her report card for the year, Seong Huiju smiled arrogantly.

There had not been a single mistake. Not one gap remained.

Even her extracurricular activities, completed with Min Jeongwoo's help, were perfect. Designing everything around the triangle of leadership, creativity, and service had been worth it.

Getting approval for early graduation before entering eleventh grade was advantageous. Her homeroom teacher's recommendation would not be difficult to obtain, and the principal's approval would likely not be a problem either.

The only person who might become an obstacle...

was her father.

“Father, I want to graduate early.”

She brought it up as soon as winter break began, but his expression remained ambiguous.

He did not look proud.

Nor displeased.

If anything, he simply seemed uninterested.

“I’ve already met all the other requirements. I only need your permission.”

“Why?”

“...What?”

“There must be a reason you want to graduate early.”

Caught off guard, Huiju hesitated before shrugging.

“I want to enter university sooner and...”

“And start working sooner?”

her father asked.

It seemed he had read the career plan attached behind the parental consent form.

It had begun with her ambition to study business administration and ended with her determination to inherit his work.

There was no exaggeration in it.

It was simply the truth.

And that honest ambition seemed to irritate him.

“I do not care whether you become a business executive or a professor of business administration.”

“.....”

“If you want to work in the company... that is also fine. Creating a position for you is not difficult.”

He spoke as though making a generous offer.

“But do not say things like inheriting me.”

“...Why?”

Huiju spoke while clenching the hands resting on her lap.

“Because Taeju will inherit me.”

“Then why?”

Her voice no longer hid her frustration.

If he had said nothing was certain yet, she would have understood a hundred times over.

If he had said he could not give everything to her, she would have understood that too.

She had always expected to compete with her older brother from the beginning.

But she could not endure the fact that her father had already decided to give everything to Seong Taeju.

“At the very least... you should let me compete.”

“Why should I?”

“.....”

Huiju bit her lip.

His words cut into her like blades.

As though she did not even deserve the right to compete with Seong Taeju.

“I might actually do really well.”

“It does not matter.”

She had vaguely known already.

Whether she was capable or not had never been the important part.

Still—

hearing it from her father's own mouth was different.

“Ha...”

She let out a hollow breath and leaned back against the sofa.

She was not even asking him to let her win.

She was begging merely for the chance to fight.

And that felt unfair.

“Seong Taeju still hasn't even adapted in America. You want to give the company to someone like that?”

“It does not matter.”

It does not matter.

Her father repeated those words as though they were the only thing he knew how to say.

No matter how many of Taeju's flaws she listed—

No matter how strongly she emphasized her own strengths—

nothing would change.

Accustomed to situations like this, Huiju alternated her gaze between her father and the parental consent form.

*If I can't get it fairly, then I'll get it dirty.*

“Great. Then I won't explain anymore. Just stamp it.”

“What?”

“If Seong Taeju wins no matter what I do, then it shouldn't matter whether I graduate early or drop out early, right?”

“You little—”

Her father clearly disliked her attitude.

But Huiju decided to be shameless.

She was too angry to spare him consideration.

“Stamp it.”

She pushed the consent form toward him.

“If you don't, I'll carve the seal myself. Should I do that?”

“Seong Huiju!”

“You think I can’t?”

Even if the other person was her father—

Huiju did not want to lose.

Wan began today the same way as always.

With another letter from Hwan.

After Hwan’s royal marriage, Wan had refused to see him for any reason.

If there were official duties he had to carry out alone, he accepted them without complaint.

But any schedule involving Hwan—

or any event held in the palace—

he rejected completely.

The King’s reaction toward his youngest son, who no longer visited the palace, was not especially notable.

Aside from occasionally scolding him not to neglect his duties, he showed little interest.

Unable to bear it, Hwan had once said,

*“It is because I hurt my younger brother.”*

But even that failed to draw much reaction from the King.

If anything, he seemed relieved.

A proper distance between Hwan, gentle as grass, and Wan, fiery as flame—

wasn't that a good thing?

But Hwan did not want distance.

He simply waited for Wan's anger to cool.

That waiting continued for over six months.

Unable to wait any longer, Hwan personally visited Wan's residence.

“Tell him I have come.”

“Yes, Your Highness the Crown Prince.”

He waited at the gate for a long time.

Wan never appeared.

Unable to keep the Crown Prince waiting forever, the retainers sent Hyeon out in his place.

“His health is not good today. Please come another time.”

The awkward excuse was obviously a lie.

Still, Hwan nodded.

He could not scold the child called his brother's younger brother.

From that day onward, Hwan sent countless gifts and letters every few days.

Except for when they were very young, he had never written letters before, and it felt embarrassing.

Yet he liked being able to pour out everything.

*Forgive your weak older brother.*

*I am sorry.*

*I miss you.*

He forced every word onto the page.

“Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen.”

On Christmas Eve, Min Jeongwoo attended church with his family.

The church had always been large and crowded, but today felt twice as chaotic as usual.

It took more than thirty extra minutes just to leave after the midnight mass.

“This is my son. Jeongwoo, greet them.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Min Jeongwoo.”

Amid everyone’s attention, Jeongwoo remained at his father’s side.

He stood there naturally, as though used to it.

When he was younger, he disliked public attention and avoided outings with his father.

Now—

he accepted it quite naturally.

The family of a politician was no different from public figures.

Because of that, Jeongwoo and his mother had become people who understood better than anyone how to appear perfect before others.

It was not difficult.

They already possessed many things others envied.

They simply had to show them appropriately—

and act appropriately humble.

“Son, do you have plans? Why do you keep checking the time?”

His mother looked at him curiously as he repeatedly glanced at his wristwatch.

“Ah... I’m meeting a friend later.”

“At this hour? Who?”

“Just a school friend.”

Jeongwoo answered casually.

As though it were nothing important.

But he failed to hide the redness creeping over his ears.

And his mother was perceptive.

“Son, you know you have to be careful about the friends you keep, right?”

“.....”

Jeongwoo knew exactly what she meant.

When she first met Huiju, she had liked her very much.

But after learning that Huiju was the illegitimate child of Castle Group—

she never mentioned Huiju again.

He could simply say:

*She is only a junior I care about.*

That would be enough.

And it was not as though their relationship was anything extraordinary.

But he did not want to say that.

Even if he could not call her someone he wanted to cherish—

he did not want to deceive himself by calling her *just a junior*.

## CHAPTER 23

### The Family's Permission

For summer break, Taeju returned to Korea.

It had been an entire year and a half.

Because his father constantly told him not to waste time traveling back and forth, and because Dayeong bought plane tickets to America whenever she had the chance, he had not particularly missed Korea.

But this summer was different.

It was finally time to deal with the aftermath of the proposal he had made at graduation.

By now, Taeju had become the public enemy of the Han family.

Especially Dayeong's older brothers—their hostility toward him deepened by the day. Not only had he publicly proposed without the family's permission, but afterward he had immediately fled to America. They saw his actions as blatant disrespect toward the family.

Dayeong, who had been shielding Taeju from her family's fury, now wanted to resolve things.

Because when she nodded in response to his proposal— she had meant it sincerely.

She believed that if her family met Taeju properly, their feelings would change.

And even if it failed, she still wanted to try.

Whether they liked it or not, they would soon become family. Carrying resentment forever would do no good.

So Taeju arrived at Incheon Airport carrying a mountain of gifts for Dayeong's family.

Even while worrying he might get beaten up by her brothers, he could hardly suppress the excitement of seeing Dayeong again.

As expected—

the moment Taeju saw Dayeong waiting at the gate, tears burst from his eyes.

Dayeong ran straight into his arms, stomping her feet as though trying to release all the longing she had endured.

“Why do you keep getting more handsome? It’s making me nervous.”

“You should stop getting prettier. I seriously want to crumple you up and carry you around in my pocket.”

Speaking in babyish voices, unable to contain how happy they were, the two clasped hands with solemn expressions.

Now—

they truly had to obtain the family’s permission.

“Please give me Dayeong!”

Taeju suddenly dropped to his knees and shouted.

Apparently he had seen something like this somewhere before, but judging by the expressions of the men before him, he had clearly chosen the wrong time and place.

Dayeong’s father, eldest brother, and younger brother all looked displeased.

Looking at the men whose eyes seemed ready to shoot lasers, Taeju thought:

*Dayeong looks like a deer, so why do all the men in this family look like tigers?*

“Father, why don’t we just throw salt at him?” said Jaeyoung, Dayeong’s eldest brother.

“Should I drag him outside and educate him a little?” added Wooyoung, the younger brother.

“Ah, seriously!”

“Hey, Han Dayeong. Be quiet.”

“What do you mean ‘hey’?”

Dayeong snapped irritably, arms crossed and brows furrowed.

“You’re trying to intimidate our Taeju right in front of me?”

“Our Taeju? If you’re going to act like this, just leave the house.”

“You think I’d be scared of that? Go ahead and remove me from the family registry.”

“Honey, why are you acting like this...?”

The more fiercely Dayeong flared up, the more anxious Taeju became.

Compared to the raging brothers, the quiet father terrified him the most.

“Let’s eat first.”

It was Dayeong’s father, who had not spoken a single word until now.

Only then did her mother, who had been helping prepare dinner with the staff, finally appear as well.

Having seen many things in dramas and movies, Taeju suddenly felt hopeful.

He was determined to properly demonstrate what a *son-in-law who eats well* looked like.

However—

“What school did you say you attend?”

The moment Taeju lifted his spoon, Dayeong’s father fired the question at him.

Straightening his back, Taeju cleared his throat.

“I’m in America—”

“So your grades weren’t good enough for Royal University?”

“Oppa.”

“What? Did I say something wrong?”

A vicious tension surged between Dayeong and Jaeyoung.

Taeju worried a fight might break out at the dinner table, but Dayeong’s parents looked perfectly calm, as though used to this.

“At graduation, you put us in quite a difficult position.”

“I’m sorry. You must have been very shocked back then.”

Because Taeju apologized without making excuses, the atmosphere at the table softened slightly.

“Well, you’re still young, so mistakes can—”

“But, Father.”

Taeju carefully interrupted.

“I’m sorry for not telling you beforehand. And I’m sorry for putting you in a difficult position because of that.”

“What?”

“But I’m not sorry for asking Dayeong to marry me.”

“.....”

“I meant it then, and I still mean it now.”

A strange silence followed.

They were too refined to know how to deal with someone like him.

Minister Han Jeongseok, Dayeong’s father, considered himself a reasonable man despite being from an old noble family.

He knew perfectly well that status itself was a relic of the past.

And that the labels of the upper class were little more than decorations.

He also knew the social order would eventually collapse.

But when it concerned his daughter—  
that was different.

Even Taeju’s father, Chairman Seong Hyeonguk, was infamous in countless ways. Considering he had built the kingdom called Castle Group during an era when class discrimination had been severe, it was unsurprising.

Even his private life was disgraceful.

Mistresses.

Illegitimate children.

Everything.

There was no father in the world who would willingly hand over a treasured daughter to the son of such a man.

So he should have firmly rejected him and sent him away.

But—

“Seong Taeju... where did you even learn to say things like that...?”

His daughter was crying from being moved.

“Ha...”

Pressing a hand to his aching head, Jeongseok looked toward his sons.

They too were holding their heads.

“Honey, say something to him.”

Having no other choice, Jeongseok sought help from his wife while staring off into the distance.

Unlike his dark and intimidating sons, it was difficult to speak harshly to his youngest daughter.

So his wife would instead—

“Has your father met our Dayeong before?”

“Yes. My father absolutely adores Dayeong.”

“Really?”

His wife instead...

“Then does your father feel the same way about marriage?”

“He doesn’t say it directly, but there’s no need to ask. He always says Dayeong is too good for me.”

“Really?”

His wife instead...

“And your younger sister? Do the two of you get along?”

“Mom, why are you asking that?”

“It’s okay.”

Taeju lightly patted Dayeong’s arm as she nearly exploded and smiled brightly.

“She’s like Dayeong and her older brothers.”

“Our children?”

“Yes. Just like an ordinary family.”

As though reflecting deeply on that answer, Dayeong’s mother paused for a moment.

Everyone fell silent, waiting for the next question.

Finally, she spoke—

“How much must you love our Dayeong to do something like that at graduation?”

Her voice was gentle.

“You’ll inherit Castle Group... right?”

“Uh...”

The moment Taeju tilted his head in confusion, Dayeong jabbed him sharply in the side.

And Taeju instantly understood the signal.

“Of course! It’s my father’s company, so naturally I should inherit it!”

Watching Taeju nod energetically, Dayeong’s mother smiled with certainty.

“Mom, why are you smiling?”

“Father, stop Mom.”

She ignored whatever the sons were saying.

“Honey.”

“What?”

She ignored her husband too.

At that moment, Taeju quickly realized how authority was structured within this family.

“Mother, perhaps... do you like scarves?”

“Scarves?”

“I picked some out in America while thinking of you...”

Taeju unfolded the mountain of gifts he had prepared, his face bright as though already sensing victory.

Seeing the scarves arranged by color and material, Dayeong’s mother immediately changed the way she addressed him.

“Our Taeju really has good taste.”

After years of living with a principled husband and two stoic sons, she had come to one conclusion:

Serious men were boring.

At the very least, she hoped her daughter would marry someone who was not dull.

Someone who could prepare unexpected events.

Someone generous with affection.

From that perspective, the graduation proposal had not been bad.

Despite being so young, the way Taeju threw himself recklessly into love had been rather adorable.

If there was one unfortunate thing, it was his background...

“Mom, Taeju picked these bracelets so you and I could wear matching ones.”

Dayeong smiled brightly, showing the bracelet on her wrist.

Anyone could see that her daughter loved luxurious things.

Unlike herself, who had been forced to live modestly because her husband worked in government, Dayeong would probably be able to enjoy the things she liked freely.

“Dayeong-ah, try this one too.”

And—

it seemed Taeju loved even Dayeong’s extravagance.

## CHAPTER 24

### The Publicized Tragedy

Summer, 2012.

Having successfully graduated early, Seong Huiju enjoyed campus life at the age of nineteen.

While wondering how to spend her long summer break, Huiju decided to plan an overseas trip.

Her father listened to her travel plans with little interest on his face.

Then he added one condition.

Go to America—where Seong Taeju was.

At his words that he had no intention of treating her like an adult before she turned twenty, Huiju accepted without complaint.

She only had six months left until adulthood anyway.

“If Oppa had also been in America, I could’ve seen him while I was there.”

—*Exactly.*

Huiju giggled at Min Jeongwoo, who dragged out the words regretfully.

Jeongwoo was currently staying on the opposite side of the world with Grand Prince Ian. It was because of Ian's volunteer schedule as an ambassador for an international organization.

“When are you coming back?”

—*About twenty days left, I think.*

“How's the volunteer work?”

—*Who does volunteer work because it's enjoyable? You do it because you have to.*

Huiju, who had been sorting clothes into her suitcase, tilted her head slightly.

Moments like this sometimes happened during conversations with Jeongwoo.

Times when a cold side of him surfaced—one that he himself did not seem aware of.

He was generally kind.

And mostly selfless.

But perhaps he could remain that way because he was indifferent to the world.

A peace maintained because he did not consume emotions.

Sometimes she wondered if there was a side of Min Jeongwoo she did not know.

Even though she had known him for three years since she was sixteen.

It had been the same when he showed off the first car he got after obtaining his license.

She had expected a discreet black sedan.

Instead, he arrived in a flashy supercar.

The shock of that moment still lingered.

Having an unpredictable inner self meant one of two things.

Either he was not honest—

or she was not being honest about the way she saw him.

Compared to that, Grand Prince Ian...

“Is the prince adjusting well?”

—*The Grand Prince?*

“He looked like he couldn’t even sleep properly, but he still keeps volunteering.”

—*This kind of thing suits him.*

“Really?”

Huiju answered absentmindedly.

*He isn’t an easy person to predict either.*

After ending the call with Huiju, Jeongwoo stretched his neck.

The muscles stiffened by the exhausting schedule felt like they were screaming.

“How am I supposed to survive another twenty days...”

Muttering to himself, he looked out the window.

He could see Ian playing soccer with refugee children.

Hyeon, completely immersed in his role as goalkeeper, kept shouting excitedly.

As though sweating under the blazing sun did not bother him at all, he looked genuinely happy.

*I'll probably have to shower again,* Jeongwoo thought.

Just then—

his father called.

“Yes, Father.”

*Is the Grand Prince beside you?*

There was no greeting.

No asking how he was.

Jeongwoo turned his gaze outside.

Ian was still kicking the ball, drenched in sweat.

“No, he isn't with me right now. Why—”

*Pack your things immediately.*

“...What?”

*Return to Korea. Right now.*

“Did something happen?”

*The Great Palace Attendant... has climbed the eastern eaves.*

Wan looked at Jeongwoo.

He had come out wearing a black shirt and black trousers.

Wan had been wondering why someone who hated sweating more than death was dressed like that.

Then he noticed—

everyone standing behind him was dressed in black.

“Your Highness, pass!”

The ball kicked by Hyeon struck Wan’s shin and stopped.

Wan unconsciously clenched and unclenched his fists.

His body remembered the anxiety before his mind did.

“What happened?”

His voice was already strained.

Jeongwoo avoided his eyes.

“We have to leave for Korea immediately.”

“.....”

“His Majesty the King...”

“...has passed away.”

Wan inhaled sharply.

His brows drew together.

He could not understand Jeongwoo's words.

*Why Father all of a sudden?*

*I never heard he was sick.*

*Why?*

*Was it an accident like with Mother?*

*Then what about Hyung?*

*Then what about me?*

As his thoughts spiraled endlessly, a ringing like sirens echoed in his ears.

He thought he heard Hyeon crying.

Then even that faded into muffled silence.

“...Your Highness.”

“.....”

“Grand Prince.”

“.....”

“Grand Prince!”

Jeongwoo rushed over and grabbed his shoulders.

Seeing the worry filling his eyes—

Wan's ears suddenly began to hurt.

Clutching them in pain, he collapsed.

“Your Highness!”

Hyeon threw himself around Wan, crying as he shouted for water.

Everyone looked busy.

In reality, they were all panicking.

The attendants desperately tried to protect their superior.

And that superior could no longer hide his despair and terror.

On the plane back to Korea, Wan stared endlessly out the window at the clouds.

On the table before him lay a copy of the death certificate from the Royal Hospital, signed under his father's name.

No matter how far away he had been, the Secretariat's work remained swift and precise.

The cause of death was listed as cardiac arrest.

It had happened in his sleep.

There had been no time to respond.

Still—

the lack of warning signs felt strange.

The royal physicians examined him every morning.

Had all of that been meaningless ceremony?

The funeral was being arranged by the Ministry of Rites together with the cabinet and the Royal Clan Office.

“It seems... His Highness the Crown Prince is not in a state of mind right now.”

The attendant sitting across from him spoke awkwardly.

*A Crown Prince who had lost his senses.*

That was why Wan was reading all the documents himself.

They said Hwan had cried until he collapsed after hearing the news.

Wan was not surprised.

The role of Crown Prince alone had always overwhelmed his brother.

There was no way he could shoulder the role of chief mourner as well.

“How is Sister-in-law?”

“Yes. They say Her Highness gathered the inner court and closed the palace gates.”

Yoon Yirang worried him too.

She had only become part of the royal family two years ago, and already such a burden had fallen upon her.

So Wan opened the thick stack of documents without shedding a single tear.

More than grief over losing his father—

he worried for his brother and the royal family.

“Your Highness, at least get some sleep.”

Jeongwoo spoke quietly.

He himself had not slept either.

“We must decide everything before arriving.”

“There is still time.”

“You said it was fine.”

The firm reply left Jeongwoo unable to argue further.

He nodded silently.

On the bed prepared for the Grand Prince, Hyeon slept.

Or rather—

he had cried until he passed out.

“Secretary Kim.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“My father’s funeral will be held privately.”

The aide looked startled.

He glanced toward Head Court Lady Choi.

“My mother’s funeral was only seven years ago. His Highness the Crown Prince cannot fulfill the role of chief mourner.”

“.....”

“Announce only the facts through the Secretariat tomorrow morning.”

“So the people do not grieve too much.”

“...Understood, Your Highness.”

Jeongwoo looked at Wan anew.

There was no hesitation in the way he handled matters.

His heart had surely already become ruins.

Yet his concentration remained ruthless.

When Huiju arrived at the airport, she felt the heavy atmosphere hanging among the people.

It was because of the announcement made that morning.

The King had passed away.

The anchors repeatedly stated that, at the Crown Prince’s request, the funeral would be held privately.

Online, countless stories spread.

Someone claimed they had been at Gwanghwamun two days earlier and heard cries of “*Long live His Majesty.*”

Someone else, currently there, angrily questioned why the King’s funeral was private.

The unexpected tragedy seemed to have shaken many hearts.

The King had appeared in public only days earlier.

Perhaps that was why people felt such emptiness.

At the same time, voices worrying for the Crown Prince multiplied.

People said funeral rites existed for the living.

And those denied that time gathered at Gwanghwamun.

Despite the massive crowds, the plaza remained silent.

There were occasional sounds of sobbing.

Nothing more.

No one wanted the King's final journey to become noisy.

Even Huiju—

who had never cared much for the royal family, perhaps even disliked them—

felt uneasy.

People always said the royal family's purpose in the twenty-first century was national unity.

Perhaps that was not entirely wrong.

Even travelers dressed in black gathered around the monitors in the departure hall.

The screen now showed the news of Grand Prince Ian, who had just returned to Korea.

**<Grand Prince Ian steps off plane with grief-stricken expression>**

His tragedy was not protected.

## CHAPTER 25

### The Two of Them

The funeral rites were simplified.

The state funeral procession was omitted.

Inside the palace, rites continued—the funeral hall was established, the body was prepared, and ceremonies followed one after another. But beyond the palace walls, nothing leaked out.

It was only possible because of Grand Prince Ian's determination not to turn the royal family's grief into the nation's tragedy, together with the cabinet's active cooperation.

The urgent matter was the Crown Prince's stability.

According to royal law, the enthronement ceremony had to be held on the sixth day, after the five-day funeral ended.

But Hwan's mind remained clouded throughout.

Only one day remained until the enthronement.

Wan let out a sigh and headed toward the Eastern Palace.

Court Lady Park, standing guard in the corridor, bowed deeply.

“Your Highness.”

“How is Hyung?”

Unable to lie and say he was well, she answered only with silence.

Wan nodded as though he already knew.

Inside the chamber, Yoon Yirang rose from beside the bed where she had been keeping vigil with the royal physician.

“Ian.”

“Your Highness the Crown Princess.”

The two pale figures looked at one another.

Neither had the luxury of breaking down.

There were still things they had to protect.

“I will stay by Hyung’s side tonight.”

“No.”

“Sister-in-law, you also need rest.”

“I know the Grand Prince’s residence has already taken on many duties in Your Highness’s place.”

“.....”

“Please do not increase your burden further.”

Wan understood the apology hidden in her worried voice.

He could not press the matter.

Instead, he sat down.

“How is His Highness?”

Wan asked the physician.

“There is no need for excessive concern.”

Yet even while saying that, the physician’s eyes never left the needle in Hwan’s arm.

Every time Hwan regained consciousness, he cried until collapsing again.

The amount of sedatives already used to calm him had become considerable.

“Will there be problems before the enthronement?”

“We are doing everything possible.”

“If the ceremony must be postponed—”

“That cannot happen.”

Yirang interrupted firmly.

“If His Highness does not appear, the people will panic.”

“Sister-in-law.”

“There are already enough rumors because of Father’s cause of death.”

Wan frowned.

But he could not deny her words.

The royal family could not become the source of instability when the nation already needed reassurance.

The very reason enthronement followed the funeral so quickly was to prevent disorder caused by an empty throne.

“...Understood.”

“.....”

“I will make sure nothing happens.”

Only after hearing that promise did Yirang finally relax.

Thinking back to the terror she had felt four days ago—

her calmness now felt miraculous.

---

*“The King has passed!”*

The moment the palace attendant climbed the eastern eaves and cried those words, Yirang felt fear unlike anything she had ever known.

The grief of losing the father-in-law who had cherished her.

The confusion of the royal family losing its head.

And above all—

the fear that her husband would not endure it.

She had never learned any of this.

Never experienced it.

Her father arrived later and remained by her side.

Even then, the anxiety did not fade.

Her husband, who should have stood with dignity above everyone, was no better than a puppet.

The inner court waited endlessly for orders from her lips.

*“The Grand Prince has received the news. He boarded the plane immediately...”*

Only after hearing that report had she finally been able to breathe.

Even if the questions before her had no answers—  
he seemed like someone who would know them.

And in truth, once he learned the situation, decisions began to take shape.

The funeral procedures.

The roles of the royal relatives.

The enthronement preparations.

Everything.

*“Your Highness the Crown Princess, forgive me for arriving late.”*

He had gone straight to the funeral hall after arriving and stayed there through the entire night.

Then he apologized to her.

He told her she had suffered carrying everything alone.

Only then had she truly breathed again.

The complex rituals.

The difficult cabinet.

The mountains of paperwork.

He had taken all of it away.

For the first time, she understood why her husband relied on his younger brother so much.

Thinking back—

he had always appeared when needed.

Even during the years when the brothers were estranged, he had never been cruel.

*“His Highness needs you. Please stay by his side.”*

When she pleaded with him after watching their long conflict, he reluctantly agreed.

Looking at him then, she had thought:

Perhaps soft hearts were simply a family trait.

So her husband’s enthronement would be fine too.

If he remained by his side—

that would be enough.

Hwan ascended the throne safely.

At least outwardly.

He endured the ceremony in a haze.

But he neither screamed nor collapsed.

That alone counted as success.

It was the result of the excessive amount of sedatives poured into him.

Wan looked up at him and offered congratulations.

Even while shouting *manse* alongside the royal relatives, his eyes remained fixed on his brother.

The half-closed eyelids.

The pale lips.

He wondered how much longer Hwan could endure.

The funeral had been private.

The enthronement could not be.

The nation had to witness the succession.

Thus selected broadcasters and journalists stood before the palace courtyard with cameras.

Because of that, the Secretariat and cabinet prepared for every imaginable disaster.

If Hwan collapsed.

If he panicked.

Who would move?

How would statements be released?

Manuals were written from A to Z.

Therefore—

the ceremony ending without incident was nothing short of a miracle.

“I was sleepy the whole time. Now that it’s over, my mind’s finally back.”

Hwan murmured quietly.

He sank down in exhaustion.

Removing the ceremonial robes became Wan’s task.

Hwan refused Court Lady Park.

Refused Yirang.

So there was no choice.

After staying awake for nights, Wan wanted nothing more than to return home.

“Wan-ah.”

“Ian.”

“...What.”

Ignoring the heat gathering in his eyes, Wan answered.

He did not want the sorrow he had endured for six days to finally spill out.

“You can cry.”

“Ha...”

Hwan carefully touched the reddened corners of his brother’s eyes.

Moisture gathered in the cold, dark eyes that had endured everything.

His brother had borne his own grief so Hwan could mourn freely.

Filled with guilt and gratitude, Hwan rubbed his back.

The broad shoulders began trembling.

Then came the suppressed sobs.

“.....”

Embarrassed by his own tears, Wan shifted awkwardly.

But in the end—

he cried.

His heart had collapsed beneath his brother's gentle touch.

He thought he hated their father.

Yet now that he was truly gone—

all he felt was emptiness and fear.

*If only I had told him not to hate me.*

*If only I had begged him to stop worrying.*

He knew what Father had feared.

He should have told him not to carry those worries.

Instead—

he had only strayed because he envied the love poured onto his brother.

And Father had worried only for Hwan until the end.

He should have promised him not to worry.

That they would be alright.

Those small regrets carved deeper wounds than grief itself.

“You still have your older brother.”

Hwan stroked the back of Wan’s head.

After crying into his brother’s lap for a long time, Wan suddenly laughed.

“You have to act like a brother first.”

“Oh?”

“What?”

“I’m king now, you know?”

Wan let out a disbelieving laugh at the pathetic threat.

Hwan laughed too.

*Me? A king?*

*Even I think it's ridiculous.*

“Exactly.”

“I'll abdicate. Want to be king instead?”

“You're really consistent.”

Receiving Wan's disgusted look with his whole body, Hwan laughed again.

While everyone else was lost in the grief of losing their king—

only those two were united by the grief of losing their father.

### *Annals of King Huijong*

**July, 2012.**

The King passed away of cardiac arrest in Gangnyeong Hall.

The Crown Prince, who had been weeping beside the late king, lost consciousness and collapsed.

## CHAPTER 26

### The Only Existence

When the reign of Hwan had exceeded its second year, Huiju was carefully choosing “modest” clothes at a department store. It was because she needed something to wear to Seong Taeju’s wedding. Taeju’s desperate request that she absolutely not stand out could be dismissed as nonsense, but her father’s orders were absolute.

That was because her father’s rewards and punishments were clearly defined. In fact, at a meeting with the Han family, her father had promised to buy her a bright red Bugatti if she said nothing. The price of silence seemed quite generous—but—

“Taeyu will succeed after me.”

After hearing what her father said, even a Bugatti felt cheap. She was debating whether to knock over her glass when Seong Taeju’s urgent message arrived.

[Hey, I really have to marry Dayeong.]

She shot him a look that said it was none of her business, and another message arrived.

[I'll make a position for you at Castle Electronics.]

It was a rather tempting deal. Seong Taeju, who had joined Castle Electronics immediately after graduating and was now flaunting his status as the heir of the Castle Group, held considerable leverage.

The Castle Electronics—the predecessor of the Castle Group—was that important.

As for Huiju, who was about to graduate college next year, the position her father had promised her was at the Castle Foundation. If that could be changed to the Electronics division...

[If you break your promise, I'll show you what an illegitimate child is.]

[Fine, you crazy bastard.]

And so Huiju stayed silent throughout the engagement meeting in exchange for a Bugatti and a job at Castle Electronics. Her father's claim that Taeju would succeed him was nonsense anyway—she could overturn it with ability, so there was no need to care.

When the engagement meeting ended on a relatively warm note, the wedding date was quickly set.

As grand articles poured out about the union of the legal and business worlds, and the stock market shook, her father called her again and made another promise. If she behaved properly at the wedding, he would gift her a portion of Castle Hotel shares in advance.

Was he planning to announce the successor at the wedding or something? Huiju thought, but casually agreed. Regardless of her father's intentions, Seong Taeju was still just a rookie at Castle Electronics—far from ready to inherit anything. There was still plenty of time to prove herself.

“Huiju.”

Min Jeongwoo entered the store with a bright smile. Seeing his face wasn't easy—he was doing his master's degree in the United States. For him to fly in just for a classmate's wedding meant the Han family must be quite something.

“You look a bit tanned.”

“Me?”

“You've been in the U.S. studying—or just playing baseball instead?”

“No I haven't.”

Even after a long time, they spoke without awkwardness. They had always been the kind of people who called each other frequently despite a 14-hour time difference. There was always so much to talk about. Huiju, who had no friends, and Jeongwoo, who didn't particularly like having them, found each other's daily lives entertaining.

During college, Huiju occasionally had boyfriends, and each time they were unsettled by the ambiguous existence called "Min Jeongwoo." A handsome, gentle man who was too close to ignore but never crossed the line. Jeongwoo watched her changing boyfriends repeatedly with a presence that never quite disappeared.

As if he knew they could never invade his territory.

In the first place, the only men Huiju didn't ignore were Seong Hyeonguk and Min Jeongwoo.

"So what do you need me to do?"

"Help me pick clothes. Something like a proper noble lady."

"For Dayeong's wedding?"

"Yeah."

When Huiju was in difficult situations, Jeongwoo was the person she thought of. He scanned the clothes in the store and picked out a few items. He didn't seem to be trying very hard, but what he chose was appropriate—moderately elegant, moderately modest.

“You dating someone?”

“Me?”

“You're the only guy I know with no sisters—how are you so good at picking women's clothes?”

Jeongwoo shrugged and held out a pink dress.

“I've never met a woman who asked me to pick clothes before.”

“Ugh.”

Disgusted, Huiju went into the fitting room. Jeongwoo smiled as he looked at the neatly arranged shoes. While browsing for something to match the clothes he had chosen—

“Ugh, isn't this too... tacky?”

Huiju came out after changing. She looked annoyed, as if the demure silhouette of a proper lady felt awkward on her.

“It looks fine.”

“Fine?”

“Clothes are supposed to be a bit old-fashioned to be pretty.”

“Who says that?”

“Elders.”

Thinking of her in-laws’ family elders, Huiju nodded in resignation. The navy two-piece and black tweed she tried next were the same—not bad, but somehow flashy and old-fashioned.

“Is this right?”

“It is.”

Jeongwoo nodded carelessly and signaled the staff. Catching the cue, employees quickly gathered around Huiju.

“Oh my, this color suits you so well!”

“This outfit goes well with Mary Janes—would you like to try them?”

“If you’re okay with heels, we have higher ones too...”

Overwhelmed by endless options, Huiju eventually gave up. She lost the will to shop properly and ended up—

“I’ll take this.”

She bought the first dress she tried and the first shoes she wore.

They left the department store and headed to a nearby café.

“I’m seriously crashing.”

Whether or not it was an exaggeration, Huiju’s eyes sparkled at the cakes in the display.

“You want to order one of each?”

“That’s a bit much, right?”

“You want them all?”

“Yeah.”

“Then order them all.”

Jeongwoo casually called the waiter.

“From here to here, all of them please.”

Like something out of a drama, twelve different cakes were placed on the table, and Huiju burst out laughing. She had

said she wanted them all, but seeing Jeongwoo actually order everything felt very like him.

“You really have no sense of self.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you always just tell me to do whatever I want.”

“Do I?”

Jeongwoo smiled after taking a bite of matcha cake. He had said that often—*do whatever you want*.

“You should do what you want.”

“What if I want to do something really bad?”

“Hmm.”

Jeongwoo tilted his head, his eyes deep as if thinking seriously. But his answer came more easily than expected.

“Then you should still do it. If you want to.”

“Ugh, boring.”

Losing interest, Huiju returned to her cake. Meanwhile, Jeongwoo thought it had been a long time since he’d had a question like that.

He had asked himself that question continuously for a long time.

Even when he allowed Huiju to steal Minseok Ryu's key. Even when he smiled at her saying she had a boyfriend.

When they were teenagers, he thought his feelings for her were something like pity. As they grew into their twenties and he found himself wanting to see her more often, he wondered if it was affection. Even now, he still couldn't define it—he only knew it was something deep and intense.

Whenever his desire to be her “only existence” and to stay closer to her surged, Jeongwoo had learned to settle for being “enough.” He reminded himself that he was already special to her. Huiju, who acted tough in front of others but only spoke of weakness or difficulty to him.

So, for now, it was fine.

More importantly, he wanted to see her for a long time. He didn't want to become just another of her boyfriends who “got worn out within three months and disappeared.” And he had things to do. He had to walk the same path as his grandfather and father, and for that, there could be no disturbances.



## CHAPTER 27

### The Most Peaceful Period

As the reign of Hwan entered its fourth year, members of the royal clan began to stir.

It was because there had been no news at all regarding an heir.

Since the king and queen were still young, it was not yet a cause for serious concern, but the shortage of royal family members capable of carrying out state duties was becoming a problem.

Because of this, Grand Prince Ian, as the king's only brother, had no choice but to take on more work and more responsibilities. If he did not, the royal relatives and maternal in-laws would step in instead.

Already, the Yoon family was enjoying many privileges as the royal in-laws. Beyond their pre-marriage control of the Royal Hospital, their influence within the royal household was growing day by day.

In particular, Queen Consort Lady Yoon held the position of managing royal finances. That meant the royal

household's own assets, the administrative budget allocated by the cabinet, and even the operations of royal foundations were all effectively under her control.

Even so, Hwan tolerated the Yoon family's ambition to acquire more power. It was his way of respecting his wife's authority and qualifications, even in a marriage without love.

However, by keeping his younger brother Ian's position as first in the line of succession intact, he maintained a check against them.

Occasionally, when insolent voices rose suggesting that more royals should be assigned to state duties—

“Shall I appoint my younger brother, Grand Prince Ian, as Crown Prince?”

Hwan would remind them that he had a younger brother.

Even when pressure mounted regarding producing an heir, he would argue that it did not have to be a son who succeeded him.

“I will look into finding a spouse for my younger brother.”

By mentioning marriage for Ian, he issued a subtle threat. It was as if to say they should not push too far while

enjoying unchecked influence as the only in-laws. If the Grand Prince were to have a wife, that family would also become royal in-laws, meaning the Yoon family's power would have to be shared.

Hwan, who disliked appearing in public, delegated most official duties to Wan. Because of this, Wan and the Queen Consort met frequently.

To outsiders, their warm smiles and exchanges looked like the ideal royal family. But reality was not so simple.

As relations between the Yoon family and the Grand Prince's household became strained, so too did the relationship between Queen Yoon and Grand Prince Ian.

“Ian.”

In particular, the queen could not look kindly upon her brother-in-law, who was becoming the pride of the royal family. He worked more than her husband, taking away honors that should have belonged to her husband, and always stood beside him when he showed weakness.

She felt it was irritating—like he kept creating spaces for her husband to retreat into weakness.

“Your Majesty, the Queen Consort.”

Wan's gaze toward her was also not entirely warm. Without her silent approval, the Yoon family's continued expansion would not have been possible.

He also found her attitude—prioritizing royal dignity whenever the king was unwell—repulsive at times. Sometimes she felt like a reincarnation of the previous king.

“May I ask what brings you to the inner palace?”

“I brought a small gift from my trip to Germany.”

Even so, Wan wanted to be kind to her. Not because he fully understood all her actions, but because he believed everything she did was her best effort. He knew the loveless marriage made her lonely, and that she had become strict to endure that loneliness.

So he wanted to be kind. In a place where she had no one to rely on, even one person could make things less unbearable.

“A gift?”

As her usually cold expression turned into curiosity, Wan pulled out a small box. The Queen Consort, slightly

awkward, untied the ribbon and fell silent upon seeing the gift.

It was a music box shaped like a grand piano.

“.....”

“Do you not like it?”

Seeing no reaction, Wan grew uneasy. She quickly shook her head.

“No, it’s just... very beautiful. You must have been busy, thank you.”

“I didn’t get one for His Majesty, so please keep it a secret from him.”

Wan lowered his voice playfully. The Queen Consort nodded.

After telling her stories from Germany, Wan stood up and carefully added:

“If... you encounter any difficulties, please contact me anytime. Comfortably.”

He had apparently heard about the king’s panic attacks while he was in Germany.

The Queen Consort smiled without changing her expression.

“With His Majesty present, how could there be difficulties?”

A perfect royal answer.

Wan stood for a long moment, still worried, before adding:

“Still...”

And then, more softly:

“If anything happens, please contact me. I will be on Your Majesty’s side.”

It was not easy to dislike him.

She could understand why her husband so easily leaned on weakness. With such a strong support standing before him, anyone would want to rely on it.

“I will.”

Only then did Wan leave the inner palace with light steps.

That August.

“Your Highness! Your Highness!”

After school, HYoon ran across the garden of the residence shouting.

Now twenty-two, he could no longer be called a boy, yet he remained noisy and innocent as befitting a “grand prince’s child.”

“Hey, don’t run.”

Even while scolding him, Wan could not hide his smile. With him there, HYoon would never fully grow up.

“Your Highness, did you hear?”

“What is it?”

“I just spoke with Court Lady Choi!”

“And?”

“Come on!”

Glancing around nervously, HYoon climbed onto the wooden platform and whispered into Wan’s ear.

“The Queen Consort is pregnant.”

Although it was still too early to make it official, the news had already spread.

Wan's lips slowly curled into a smile. Only then could HYoon fully rejoice.

“When is she due?”

“Isn't that wonderful?”

“Of course it is. It's a royal child.”

For someone who would become a future palace official, it was only natural to celebrate.

“And Your Majesty? When is it due?”

“Next April, it seems.”

“A good season. Lots of flowers, gentle breezes.”

“Yes.”

Wan nodded with satisfaction.

At first, the news had felt strange. Even questionable.

He had never seen warmth between his brother and sister-in-law—so how could there be a child?

But perhaps this was why one could not easily judge a marriage.

His brother's reaction had been dramatic at first—surprised even more than he was—but gradually, joy followed. It was said that he smiled more often than before.

Sometimes, when he called:

*—I will become healthy for the child.*

*—I suppose I should quit drinking to be a proper father.*

He said things like that without hesitation.

It was good to see.

The once-cold relationship between the couple had begun to warm, and the Yoon family's pressure had noticeably decreased. Of course, it was because if the Queen gave birth to a son, Wan would no longer be a threat as heir—but that did not matter.

Not having to play political games was a relief. His brother's change and the Queen's stability were both good things.

Above all, a new family member was coming.

I'll spoil them a lot.

Whenever he imagined a child who resembled both of them, his heart felt warm like spring.

Whether a boy or a girl, it didn't matter.

If such a child ran around the palace, happiness would naturally follow.

Since the king's ascension, it was the most peaceful time.

## CHAPTER 28

### New Face

While the entire nation was celebrating the birth of the king's legitimate heir, Huiju was drowning in the swamp of overtime work.

Two years after joining Castle Electronics as an entry-level employee, Huiju had recently declared independence.

She requested that her beauty business be spun off into a separate affiliate, saying she intended to grow “Castle Beauty.”

It was because she had realized that it was difficult to demonstrate her abilities inside Castle Electronics, where executives loyal to her father were already entrenched.

Watching her father effortlessly command his people, Huiju thought: *I also need hands and feet of my own.*

So she spent late nights going through resumes, searching for talent who would build “Castle Beauty” with her like a kingdom.

After selecting a few promising candidates, she marked them with colored pencils in her own system.

An X meant: worthless, not even worth reviewing.  
A triangle meant: ambiguous, not worth reviewing.  
A check meant: uncertain, but worth seeing.

Out of hundreds of resumes, only a few dozen passed HR screening. Among them, only nine had check marks.

“Excuse me... what does the star mean?”

The head of HR, Mr. Ko, asked cautiously.

Among all the resumes, only one had a star drawn on it.

“Oh, that one means jackpot.”

“Pardon?”

“It means I want to see them quickly. I’m curious.”

“Ah... understood.”

And so Huiju decided to interview ten candidates.

However, most of them were disappointing.

If they had no experience, they at least should have had boldness—but most couldn’t answer her questions properly.

Even those with too much experience were a problem. They didn’t even bother hiding their condescension toward

her as a young CEO, as if she were just a puppet and they would make the real decisions.

Others clearly had different intentions: using Castle Beauty as a stepping stone to move into other Castle Group affiliates. It wasn't wrong, but they were not what she needed.

Just as she was growing exhausted, the final candidate arrived.

Suit jacket, sneakers.

“Hello, I’m Do Hyejeong.”

It was the person she had marked with a star.

“You graduated this year.”

Huiju skimmed her Ivy League record and smiled.

“Why did you come back? You could’ve worked in the U.S.”

Normally, people would talk about vision—returning home to contribute their skills.

But Hyejeong’s answer was different.

“Because you are here, ma’am.”

“Me?”

“Yes. CEO Seong Huiju.”

Huiju’s eyes lit up with interest.

“I’m not that famous, am I?”

“You are. As the ‘mad dog’ of the Castle Group.”

“.....”

Huiju’s smiling eyes turned sharp.

Mr. Ko beside her broke into a cold sweat.

“Mr. Ko.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Please step outside.”

“Yes, ma’am. Ms. Do Hyejeong! Get up—”

“No.”

“Pardon?”

“Ms. Do Hyejeong stays. Only Mr. Ko leaves.”

Mr. Ko looked at Hyejeong pitifully but had no choice but to leave.

Now alone, Huiju resumed the interview.

“So my being a ‘mad dog’ is your reason for applying?”

“My answer was that you are here.”

Huiju raised her brows, then laughed.

“Then let’s hear it. Why is that a reason?”

“There is still racial discrimination in the United States.”

Hyejeong spoke calmly.

“Asian women are the easiest targets.”

“.....”

“There are only two options against that: be crushed, or bite back.”

“Did you bite back?”

“Yes.”

She nodded confidently.

“You don’t like losing, do you?”

“Not at all.”

“Then you think you can understand whatever crazy things I do?”

“If it’s for winning... maybe it doesn’t matter?”

There was not a trace of emotion on her face.

Huiju smiled in satisfaction.

Every line in her resume matched Huiju perfectly.

“Last question.”

“Yes.”

“I have a bad personality. Is that okay? I don’t want to get attached to someone who’ll quit quickly.”

This time too, Hyejeong thought seriously.

“Do I look like I have a good personality?”

That innocent question made Huiju laugh out loud.

Not only was she unfazed, she even had excellent self-awareness.

She couldn’t not want her.

“Accepted.”

It sounded impulsive, but Hyejeong didn't even look surprised.

As if she expected it, she simply asked:

“When should I start work?”

After that day, Do Hyejeong was always by Huiju's side.

“Yoon, stop crying already.”

Queen Consort Yirang soothed the crying baby again and again.

The newborn, not even 100 days old, was so persistent that it felt like her ears would bleed.

“Your Majesty, may I try holding him?”

The Queen's father, the Grand Minister, reached out his arms.

The baby, who had not stopped crying no matter what, gradually calmed in his arms.

“It seems the little prince recognizes this old grandfather.”

“It's a relief he recognizes even his grandfather.”

Though slightly irritated that the child did not recognize his mother, a smile never left Yirang's face.

Even while striving to be a perfect queen, she had always feared failing to produce an heir.

But logic could not ease such anxiety.

Then came Yoon—the child who soothed her restless heart completely.

“How is His Majesty these days?”

The Grand Minister asked carefully.

Hwan, who had once been joyful at the news of the child, had become hope for everyone in the palace.

In truth, he had changed in many ways.

He tried to spend time in sunlight every day, took his medication consistently, and reduced his drinking significantly.

Even Yirang, who had once expected nothing from him, was moved by his efforts.

Everyone in the palace believed it: the baby prince was a blessing.

But once the child was born, things took an unexpected turn—specifically, when the word “crown prince” was mentioned.

In this kingdom, unlike a century ago, there were no concubines, so the assumption had been natural.

When Yirang's brothers casually called Yoon the crown prince, Hwan responded coldly:

“Whether my son is fit to be king is something I will decide.”

After that, everything became unstable again.

Like a sandcastle collapsing.

“Things are not good.”

Yirang shook her head.

After Yoon's birth, Hwan had visited the queen's chambers daily—but now he had not appeared for days.

The authority that had been moved to the Grand Prince's residence during her pregnancy had still not been returned.

“Why don't you request to see him yourself, Your Majesty?”

“That will only create resentment.”

“No man would mistreat the woman who bore his child.”

“The king is a man—but first, he is the king of this nation.”

“And you are, before anything else, the mother of the heir.”

“.....”

Unable to respond, Yirang looked uncertain.

The Grand Minister placed the sleeping baby back into her arms.

“Take back all authority delegated to the Grand Prince’s household. Your power is your child’s power.”

“.....”

Her expression darkened.

At that moment, she remembered Hwan’s drunken words—saying he might appoint Grand Prince Ian as his successor.

## CHAPTER 29

### Before the Storm

Wan instinctively realized his patience was nearing its limit. The things he had begun in order to help his brother had instead driven him to the edge of a cliff.

“Doesn’t Your Highness the Queen feel uneasy about this?”

He had tried to politely refuse his brother, who kept transferring authority to him.

“I cannot let even my own son live crushed under the weight of the throne.”

“.....”

His brother was resolute.

Wan wanted to ask whether it was acceptable to use his younger brother as a shield in order to protect his own son—but once again, he swallowed his words in patience. Just as his brother loved his child, Wan also loved his nephew.

The method Hwan chose to protect his son was not limited to increasing Wan’s influence. He also openly emphasized

uncertainty about succession, insisting that being the king's son did not automatically mean one must become king. He did this fully aware that it weakened his wife's family and influence.

Then, abruptly, Hwan declared the three-year-old Yoon as Crown Prince.

The day after the Royal Secretariat announced the upcoming investiture ceremony, Hwan suddenly erupted in anger as if he knew nothing.

He behaved as though he had never issued such an order—like someone who had lost all memory of it. He shouted that someone had forged the decree in his name.

Watching this, Wan felt as if he were standing in the middle of hell.

It was true that he had once been skeptical about appointing Yoon as Crown Prince—but he was certain the decree had come from his brother. Because that night, Hwan had called him and said:

“My son will become king after all.”

His voice had sounded strangely sorrowful, but there was no way a decree like that could have been fabricated.

After that day, the relationship between Hwan and the Queen deteriorated beyond repair, as did the relationship between the Queen's household and the Grand Prince's residence.

The reason was that Hwan appointed Wan as guardian of the Crown Prince.

An unprecedented royal order immediately met resistance from the Queen's family and the royal relatives alike—but Hwan shut down all opposition with the authority of the king.

Faced with Hwan's threat that he would revoke the Crown Prince's appointment if they did not comply, the Queen stepped back and demanded one condition: that the guardianship not be publicly announced.

Thus, the people knew Yoon was Crown Prince—but did not know that his guardian was Grand Prince Ian.

At that time, Wan thought he could endure it. It was unfortunate that he had become the villain, but it would end once his nephew came of age.

Above all, the guardianship assumed the king's absence. It meant he would only step in if the king were abroad or unwell.

But as Hwan's condition worsened, things spiraled into the worst possible direction.

After the Crown Prince appointment, Hwan began to distrust even his own mind. He frequently could not distinguish dreams from reality, and even when awake, he spent most of his time intoxicated with alcohol.

The cabinet was deeply troubled.

In a modern monarchy, the king was expected to be a symbol of pride and responsibility before the people. Instead, he was becoming a liability.

The pragmatists argued for abdication. Since there was already a capable royal filling his role, there was no reason to hesitate.

But there was still a Crown Prince, and the Queen. Even in the 21st century, legitimacy outweighed practicality in royal decisions.

In the end, the cabinet proposed a compromise: declare the king unwell and appoint Grand Prince Ian as regent.

This aligned with the king's prior order naming Wan as guardian during absence.

The Queen, displeased, agreed on one condition: the return of authority that had been transferred to the Grand Prince's residence. She also demanded a six-month grace period before the regency was officially declared.

While negotiations dragged on, Wan said little, merely observing.

No one even thought to ask for his opinion.

After finishing overtime at his political office, Jeongwoo entered the palace.

He had been coming and going since his youth as a court attendant, so even the guards now joked with him comfortably.

The inner palace paths were familiar, especially Anhwadang, where Wan resided.

These days, Anhwadang functioned almost like a government office itself. Documents meant for the king were now being directed to Regent Wan.

Because of that, Wan spent more time in the palace than in his private residence.

Whenever he tried to leave, the guards and cabinet stopped him.

As regent, his security level could not be the same as an ordinary prince.

Unable to argue, Wan stayed unless he formally took leave. So Jeongwoo had to come to the palace to meet him.

“Minister Min Jeongwoo has arrived.”

“Let him in.”

Jeongwoo exchanged familiar glances with Court Lady Choi and stepped inside.

Wan looked exhausted—head in his hands, face drained.

“Minister Min.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“I’m extremely tired. I’d like to ask a favor.”

“Please do.”

Thinking it was something serious, Jeongwoo agreed easily.

Wan immediately lifted his head.

“Let me sleep for two hours.”

“...Right now?”

“Yes. You can act like we’re discussing something very important and tell everyone not to come in. Just two hours. Okay?”

Jeongwoo let out a hollow laugh and leaned back on the sofa.

“No wonder. There was no issue, but you called me in urgently.”

“Please save your friend.”

Jeongwoo was not heartless enough to refuse a friend’s request for sleep.

Wan rarely complained no matter how exhausted he was. For him to ask like this meant he had likely not slept for at least three days.

“You’re the only one I can rely on.”

Wan dragged himself toward the bedroom like a zombie. He collapsed instantly into sleep.

Jeongwoo shook his head and quietly turned off the lights.

He then looked at the stacks of documents Wan had been reviewing—papers from the cabinet, the Royal Secretariat, the Queen’s household, the Ministry of Rites, and security agencies piled like a mountain.

“This is too much...”

He picked up a novel from the bookshelf, enjoying a rare moment of calm.

But then—without warning—the door to Anhwadang opened.

Startled, Jeongwoo stood up.

A man in royal staff uniform stood at the entrance: Hyeon.

“Minister Min.”

“Ah, well, His Highness is... currently—”

Hyeon smiled knowingly.

“Sleeping, right?”

“...You knew?”

“Yes. The Grand Prince said he called you and was going to take a short nap.”

“Ah...”

Hyeon, who had been seen as a child by Jeongwoo, now looked slightly unfamiliar in uniform—but his efficiency was unchanged.

He began sorting documents on the desk with practiced ease—moving approved ones into a handcart and separating pending ones with red and blue tags.

“I heard you became a royal aide. Seeing you like this is impressive.”

Hyeon waved his hands shyly.

“No, not at all. I get scolded by His Highness all the time.”

But the way he hummed lightly while working didn't match his words at all.

“Has it been like this lately?”

“Huh?”

“I mean... the Grand Prince seems like he hasn't been sleeping at all.”

“Ah...”

Hyeon's expression dimmed.

“He doesn't have time to sleep, but even when he does...”

At that moment—

A scream rang out from inside the bedroom.

Jeongwoo froze.

Hyeon rushed inside.

Through the open door, Wan could be seen in a panic—  
ashen-faced, drenched in sweat, his black hair soaked as if  
he had been pulled from a nightmare.

## CHAPTER 30

### Sin

Yirang recalled what had happened during the day.

She had been discussing the upcoming court banquet with members of the inner court when Lady Jeong, the wife of Prime Minister Min, spoke.

“It seems His Majesty has not been seen at all these days.”

Lady Jeong, the wife of Minister Min, said it casually.

No matter how tight-lipped Minister Min was, it was impossible for his wife to know nothing. So the remark was likely meant as mockery of her precarious situation.

“I believe Your Ladyship does not know what Minister Min knows.”

“Pardon? Of course I—”

“If Minister Min does not speak of it, there must be a reason.”

Yirang fixed her gaze on Lady Jeong.

Whether to claim knowledge or ignorance would both be unfavorable choices—she must know that.

As expected, Lady Jeong faltered and lowered her eyes in defeat.

Becoming head of the inner court at such a young age brought unavoidable difficulties. There were no elders in the royal family to shield her or act as her backing.

So she was prepared to endure much—but being looked down upon because of her husband’s weakness was unbearable. If she allowed it even once, they would inevitably look down on her son Yoon as well.

The thought made anger rise in her chest.

Yirang loved everything about the royal family. Not only its power, but its history and tradition. Even if it was old-fashioned or tedious, it did not matter.

The pride of a royal family that had never fallen in hundreds of years—that was her pride.

So she could not help but resent her weak husband.

A man who could not even control his own mind, and in doing so brought misery to everyone around him—was her husband.

“Where are you going, Your Majesty?”

“To Gangnyeong Hall.”

She stood abruptly and headed there.

She had heard from Court Lady Park that His Majesty was in relatively stable condition today. She hoped they could actually talk.

“Your Majesty, the Queen Consort has arrived.”

“Let her in.”

When she entered Gangnyeong Hall, her husband was there.

The report of stability had been true—he was not drunk, and sat properly in royal robes, unusually composed.

“Yirang.”

“Your Majesty.”

She walked slowly and saw the paper he was writing.

At first she thought it might be poetry.

“What is this?”

“It is a decree to abdicate in favor of Grand Prince Ian.”

“What did you say?!”

Her eyelids trembled as she glared at him.

Even though he was her husband, the father of her child—she felt ridiculous for ever trying to talk to him.

Even when Yoon had been made Crown Prince, he had done something equally insane.

“Have you truly lost your mind?”

“Death would be preferable.”

At that, Yirang laughed through tears.

It was both rage and disbelief.

“What is so unbearable that you act like this?”

“Queen.”

“All the work is done by Grand Prince Ian, while I endure humiliation alongside the Crown Prince—why!!”

She screamed.

“Are you saying you want to die instead?”

Hwan silently looked back at the decree.

As if his opinion no longer mattered, his brush moved without hesitation.

Unable to bear it, Yirang grabbed a candle stand.

“Then die. It would be better for the Crown Prince.”

“Queen!”

But she had already set the decree on fire.

Just as he ignored her opinion, she ignored his.

At that moment, Wan was in Gangnyeong Hall.

Waiting in the corridor, he chose to remain outside when he heard Yirang was inside.

Yoon also arrived at that moment.

Wan and the Crown Prince moved into a side chamber.

While playing “car car games” with the child on his lap, he suddenly heard raised voices.

The moment Wan heard that his brother intended to abdicate in his favor, he covered Yoon’s ears.

The child, already frightened, clung to him.

Wan listened carefully.

He had often thought he would rather be king than play this role without the crown—but he had never believed his brother was serious.

It was clearly another act of panic.

*If only he understood that his childish outbursts pushed others into corners...*

Exhausted, Wan leaned his head against the wall.

By tomorrow, his brother would forget everything again anyway.

So why was his sister-in-law exhausting herself like this?

“Queen!”

At that moment, the door to the hall opened.

Yirang’s silhouette disappeared down the corridor.

“...Haa.”

Wan exhaled and looked down at Yoon.

“Your Highness, we will have to see His Majesty another time.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

The five-year-old Crown Prince understood more than he should.

Wan left the hall.

Back at Anhwadang, he took sleeping pills—something he rarely did.

He did not want to respond even if his brother called again.

But—

“Your Highness.”

Court Lady Choi entered with a large chest.

“What is this?”

“The robe His Majesty had made for Your Highness.”

“My brother?”

When Wan opened it, he stepped back unconsciously.

Inside was a crimson dragon robe.

“...Haa.”

His mind, fogged by sleeping pills, sank into irritation.

Maybe this time his brother truly meant it.

Something deep inside him began to crack.

His brother could escape responsibility whenever he wanted—but Wan had to fix every consequence left behind.

“Court Lady Choi.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“It seems my brother intends to abdicate.”

“But the Crown Prince still—”

Examples like this.

The resentment toward his brother, who always dumped everything on him too late, burned quietly.

And then—

Hyun rushed in, pale-faced.

“Something terrible has happened!”

At the news that Gangnyeong Hall was on fire, Wan ran.

Black smoke rising into the sky made his body sway with suffocating fear.

*No.*

*It can't be him.*

*It can't.*

The courtyard was already filled with the cries of palace attendants.

Still, Wan did not believe his brother could be dead.

But as if mocking that hope, Hwan was carried out on a stretcher.

A white cloth covered him, but everyone knew.

The burned crimson dragon robe said everything.

Reality did not feel real.

Wan walked forward.

As attendants crying stepped aside, his gaze never left his brother.

When the cloth was lifted, Hwan looked as if he were merely asleep.

If only I hadn't left.

If only I had stayed.

If only I hadn't left him alone.

Regret piled up endlessly.

And then one thought came.

Yoon.

The one thing his brother, who had never known how to protect anything, had tried desperately to protect.

“Where is the Crown Prince?”

At his steady question, an attendant stammered.

“My nephew—the one who will succeed my brother.”

He had no other thought.

Only one remained:

*I must protect Yoon.*

Even if he could not protect his brother.

## **Annals of Seonjong**

March 2022, Gangnyeong Hall was engulfed in flames. The royal guards and attendants attempted to rescue the king, but the chamber door was locked from the inside, causing fatal delay—an outcome deeply tragic.

— Wan

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This document is provided as-is for reading and archival purposes. Any imperfections may be improved in future revisions.

Thank you for reading.

*@wooseokfiles*