

A Lotus Flower, Flourishing in the Dark

a *The King's Affection* fanfic

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for *ConvenientAlias*

SOMETIMES, DAM-YI WONDERED about what might have been. What would have happened had anybody ever noticed her resemblance to the Crown Prince? Well, besides Bok-dong and Prince Jaeun, of course. Both of them had known for ages, and nothing had happened. But Bok-dong was the Prince's man through and through, and Prince Jaeun would never harm a soul. Dam-yi had to admit that at one point, when she had been thirteen, she'd had a bit of a crush on the kind and handsome prince. Then she'd grown up, and grown used to her station in life: she was a court lady now, one who served the Crown Prince. Everybody admired him for this bit of magnanimity. To disguise their similarity, he had come up with a ruse – they had pretended that Dam-yi had injured her face, and to conceal the scars, she had worn a veil ever since. If the Crown Prince hadn't insisted on taking her in, an injury such as hers would have been enough to have her dismissed from the palace – a fate much better than what could have awaited a woman who dared to look like a prince. At least she still got to be with I-wol sometimes, who now served the Queen Dowager, and she had the truest friend one could wish for in Bok-dong, who shared her worry and love for the Crown Prince.

“Again?” Dam-yi asked when the Crown Prince called her to him that evening. “But it's only been a week. I hope this time, it's more important than skipping a lecture because you've got a hangover.”

Nowadays, the Crown Prince did his best to act the way his station in life demanded, and not like the capricious Prince Hwi she'd met all those years ago. His jaw was a little more square, and he could grow a beard if he wanted to, but apart from that, they still looked the same. Dam-yi couldn't help but wonder why the gods had gifted her with this face. Or cursed her with it. Or maybe it was the Crown Prince who had been cursed or blessed.

“I promise it's important this time,” the Crown Prince said, and Bok-dong nodded uneasily at his side, making a face that their master couldn't see. “There's something I have to investigate for myself. I will be gone for a couple of days at least.”

Resigned to her fate, Dam-yi prostrated herself before him. When the Crown Prince had made up his mind, there was no talking him out of it. Bok-dong knew that as well, which was why he only sighed and saved his complaints for later, when they were alone. Sometimes, Dam-yi agreed with him. But more often, she thought that there was probably more to the Crown Prince's seemingly irresponsible decisions. She got glimpses of his life when she pretended to be him, and was glad she could hide behind her veil for most of the time. His grandfather was the scariest person she had ever met, and the rivalry between him and Lord Changcheon was legendary. She knew the Crown Prince did the best he could. She only hoped it would be enough.



Hwi sighed and stretched his arms. Or rather, Dam-yi did. Her neck was stiff from listening to another lengthy lecture by the royal preceptor and pretending her mind wasn't elsewhere. The Crown Prince should have returned days ago, yet here she was, still pretending to be someone she was not while reciting Confucian literature to the best of her ability. The eyes of all her attendants were on her, scrutinizing her every movement. There were things she liked about being – or rather pretending to be – a prince, but that wasn't one of them. Sometimes, she liked the anonymity of her uniform and her veil. They allowed her to watch without being watched, and no doubt that was what the Crown Prince liked about disguising himself as her as well.

Dam-yi squared her shoulders and started to walk at a brisk pace. There was nothing for it. She would have loved to enjoy the sunny weather on her own and disappear for a while, but as it was, she was followed through the palace grounds by Bok-dong and the court ladies, exactly five paces behind her. It was no accident that she ended up slowing her steps the closer she got to the hidden door, basking in the sun for a while. She loved that garden and would have loved to slip inside. It was where she had made some of her most cherished memories. She wondered what had become of that boy too, sometimes. The one who had given her a name she hadn't dared tell anyone, not even Bok-dong. Her life was full of so many questions, so many what-ifs, that it felt like she was getting lost in them. What if the prince never returned? That was the one haunting her right then.

A soft sigh reminded Dam-yi that she wasn't alone. It hadn't come from one of her attendants, as she first thought. In front of the secret door, she spotted a young woman, maybe a little younger than her, staring at the vines and flowers covering the wall. She was the very picture of beauty and innocence, and she was about to uncover Dam-yi's biggest

secret. Without thinking, Dam-yi marched towards the woman – the daughter of one noble or another, judging by her pretty hanbok – and cleared her throat, just as the woman was about to brush aside the vines to discover the secret door.

She hadn't expected to startle the woman so badly that she stumbled over her own skirts. It was pure instinct when she reached out and grabbed her hand, drawing her close and preventing her from falling into the dirt. Dam-yi was tangentially aware of a scandalized gasp from one of the court ladies as she gazed into the most beautiful pair of eyes she had ever seen blinking up at her in surprise. The woman was beautiful enough to be a princess, she thought, dumbfounded. The moment until she drew the woman back to stand upright must have lasted mere seconds, but they felt so much longer to Dam-yi. Half an eternity of being caught in a situation she didn't understand while she felt like the world was turned upside down. Then she helped the woman find her feet and the moment ended in awkwardness. For Dam-yi, at least. She saw the same star-struck look in the woman's eyes that must have been in hers and didn't know what to say.

“Your Highness!”

The call had come from a eunuch serving the King, and Dam-yi didn't remember ever being that grateful for an interruption. She nodded curtly at the woman and went to talk to the man, never turning back. Soon, the woman would be forgotten, when the Crown Prince returned, pale and tight-lipped, and Dam-yi would once again be a court lady with other worries, an almost anonymous servant of the palace. For now, mortification reigned in her heart.



“I hate her!” the Crown Prince cried dramatically as he let himself fall onto the table in front of him, toppling the small cup and splattering rice wine over the floor of the small pavilion he had chosen to drink away his sorrows. Dam-yi and Bok-dong exchanged an exasperated look. The Crown Prince had been in a mood all week; they feared what awaited the Crown Princess on her wedding night.

“You haven't even met her,” Prince Jaeun pointed out with a raised eyebrow and a bemused look. He'd only returned the week before from his travels to Ming.

“I don't have to!” the Crown Prince growled while Dam-yi picked up the cup – thankfully not broken – and towelled away at the spill. “She's one of my grandfather's pawns. What more is there to know?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Dam-yi saw Prince Jaeun tilt his head and look at his cousin with a mixture of worry and sadness. “Her personality, maybe?” Prince Jaeun asked. “Or even whether she’s pretty? She’ll be your wife. Who knows, maybe she doesn’t want to be judged by her relations, just like you.”

Dam-yi stepped back to her place in the shadows next to Bok-dong just as the Crown Prince lifted his head to glare at Prince Jaeun. “You don’t know what it’s like,” he explained. “Your maternal relations never bothered with you, ever since Father became the crown prince. Grandfather made sure of that.”

Other princes might have taken this statement as an insult, factual though it was. Not Prince Jaeun, who just sighed and emptied his own cup. He never minded that his place in the royal family had once been that of a future king’s son, while now he was relegated to being a royal cousin with no hope of ever ascending the throne. Once, he’d confessed to Dam-yi that it didn’t bother him – he didn’t like politics very much, but he did like travelling. His new position suited him very much.

For the rest of the evening, the Crown Prince proceeded to drown his sorrows to the best of his abilities until Bok-dong and one of the other eunuchs had to carry him to bed. The next day, during the wedding ceremony, his face looked even grimmer than Dam-yi had expected. Half of that was probably due to the hangover – she had even had to borrow some of I-wol’s make-up to bring a little more colour to his complexion, to the Crown Prince’s consternation.

The bride was another matter altogether. Even from a distance, at the fringes of the festivities, Dam-yi could tell that she looked radiant and exuded a giddy happiness that was the polar opposite of her husband-to-be’s mood. She also looked familiar, although Dam-yi couldn’t say why. She didn’t see any spark of recognition in Bok-dong’s eyes, so at first, she thought she had imagined it. Maybe she just reminded her of someone else. Then the bride stumbled slightly under the weight of the heavy wedding headdress, and suddenly, it came back to her – this was the woman who she had met near the secret garden, when she had been dressed in the Crown Prince’s clothes. Dam-yi wondered if the girl remembered, if she thought it had been the groom who caught her. It may be for different reasons, but finally she shared some of the Crown Prince’s misgivings about this marriage. The feeling of unease that settled on her heart as she watched the ceremony spoke of worry for the future.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Dam-yi couldn't remember ever having been this angry with the Crown Prince before. Oh, she'd been angry plenty of times, even if she'd mostly kept it to herself. But this time, he had outdone himself.

If Prince Jaeun and Bok-dong had hoped that the Crown Prince would warm up to his bride, they had been disappointed. Dam-yi hadn't hoped, and so she had not been surprised when the Crown Prince had done everything in his power to avoid conjugal visits with his wife. He had bribed the royal astronomers to delay the auspicious day as long as possible, had pleaded illness that had the entire palace worried when the astronomers had finally caved to his grandfather's pressure, and when even that had failed in the end, he had simply ordered Bok-dong and Dam-yi to bring another set of bedding to her quarters. Dam-yi had hated looking at the tears and confusion in the Crown Princess's eyes. She was a kind woman, all the other maids and court ladies agreed. Beautiful, agreeable, eager to do her duty... if the Crown Prince wasn't careful, there would eventually be rumours about his failure to consummate the relationship.

Naturally, the Crown Prince hadn't heeded her warnings any more than he had listened to Bok-dong's cajoling or Prince Jaeun's gentle reasoning. No, quite the opposite. Whatever they said, it only drove him to commit even more to his schemes to bring down his grandfather, which meant investigations outside the palace with Prince Jaeun, which meant Dam-yi once again had to don his clothes and pretend.

"Everything's going to be fine," Bok-dong assured her. "She hates you – him. There'll be different beddings, as usual. Everything's going to be fine."

He was nervous, infecting Dam-yi with his doubts. So far, she had never had to pass for the Crown Prince in a setting quite so... intimate. She felt the inexplicable urge to adjust her hat even though it sat on her head perfectly and never slipped ever since the Crown Prince had had some clothes tailored to her slightly more delicate measurements.

When she arrived in the Crown Princess's chambers, the servants had already set a small table with rice wine and sweets for them before retreating to give them privacy. Bok-dong hurried away to bring the second bedroll while Dam-yi sat down awkwardly and nibbled on a rice cake to avoid saying anything. The Crown Princess didn't even bother with the pretence. She sat as still as a statue, hands folded beneath her *dangui*. Dam-yi dreaded the conversation that lingered behind her determined eyes. But first, she took a sip of the wine as she listened to Bok-dong spreading her bedding behind the screen. Usually, Dam-yi would be helping him. She wished she were now as well, and once again cursed the Crown Prince and his recklessness. He would never win against his grandfather if he didn't think things through before he disappeared for weeks on end.

Once Bok-dong was gone, Dam-yi cleared her throat and pitched her voice lower to sound more like the Crown Prince – with a bit of a sore throat. “I think it’s time to retire.”

But the Crown Princess wouldn’t let her; when Dam-yi got up to go bed, she grabbed her wrist with a strength that belied her delicate frame. Her eyes were burning into Dam-yi’s when she got to her feet as well. Under Dam-yi’s confused and terrified gaze, she puffed up like a small bird and squared her shoulders.

“I know you hate me, Your Highness,” the Crown Princess began with a huff. “You have made it very clear. But you have just as much a duty to the kingdom as I do, yet you refuse to do it. Well, I refuse to let you do so any longer. If I cannot expect your love, the least you can do as a husband is to let me do my duty to the kingdom and bear an heir.”

Dam-yi gaped at the Crown Princess. She had no idea what to do, and yet for once, cursing the Crown Prince didn’t even cross her mind. The Crown Princess looked formidable. She was everything she should be, and there was no doubt in Dam-yi’s mind that she and the Crown Prince deserved the Crown Princess’s anger. She had done nothing wrong, and yet here she was, and her husband was nowhere to be found. All she had was a pale imitation dressed in a prince’s robes.

“I do not hate you,” Dam-yi finally said, trying to placate her.

“Oh, so you simply lied to me on our last night together?” Now the Crown Princess seemed downright furious.

“No, I—”

But the Crown Princess had had enough. She grabbed the ribbons of Dam-yi’s robes and Dam-yi wasn’t fast enough to escape her. The tie was undone. Dam-yi tried twist away, at least, but the Crown Princess wouldn’t let her. Somehow, they tumbled to the floor and struggled, each wordlessly trying to win her own fight – the Crown Princess fought for her dignity, and Dam-yi for her secret, and the Crown Prince’s. She huffed and grabbed her coat, trying to hold it closed, but to no avail. She lost the outer robe, tangling up her arms in them while the Crown Princess moved to undo her undergarments as she half-knelt, half-lay on top of her.

“Please, don’t...” Dam-yi begged, but it was too late. She knew the exact moment the Crown Princess discovered her secret – the bound breasts beneath her undergarments. Dam-yi pressed her eyes shut and didn’t dare look. This was the worst thing that could have happened to her. Maybe it was the worst thing that could have happened to the Crown Prince as well, if he had been right and the Crown Princess was his grandfather’s pawn. If only...

“What—” the Crown Princess cried, before abandoning the robe and Dam-yi. Dam-yi heard her sit back, still on the floor. The wind screen scraped across the floor as she did. In an effort to save her dignity despite her blushing cheeks, Dam-yi gathered her robes around herself and felt as lost as she had when she lost her first home, before coming to the palace.

“Who are you?” the Crown Princess asked breathlessly. When Dam-yi finally dared to open her eyes, she saw that she was staring at her in disbelief, as if she was a shapeshifter who had come to her in place of her husband. She wasn’t even entirely wrong, if that was what she thought.

And so Dam-yi did her best to explain. “My name is Dam-yi,” she began. “I serve His Highness as a court lady. He noticed our similarity years ago, when we were still children, and whenever he wants to leave the palace, he orders me to take his place.” At this point, Dam-yi finally placed her hands on the floor in front of the Crown Princess and bowed deeply, begging for her forgiveness. “I apologize for this deception, Your Highness. I assure you, I do not hate you and think you are a good choice for a crown princess, no matter what His Highness says.”

The silence stretched between them until Dam-yi’s knees hurt and her forehead felt as if the pattern of the wooden floor had been imprinted upon it. Her heart was beating in her throat all the while, but there was nothing she could do.

“I need to think,” the Crown Princess finally said. Then Dam-yi heard her get up and go behind the screen, to her bed. Dam-yi didn’t dare to follow her, and she didn’t dare to leave either – the Crown Prince was supposed to stay the night.

So she had no choice but to spent an uncomfortable night curled up on the floor cushions. She barely slept, and what sleep she got was fitful. Bok-dong glanced at her with worry when she marched back to the Crown Prince’s quarters the next morning, looking like a ghost.



It had been too much to hope that Dam-yi being unmasked by the Crown Princess would make the Crown Prince act more cautiously, but when the Crown Princess didn’t breathe a word of what had happened that night to anyone, he only got bolder. Dam-yi sourly noted that it didn’t soften him on the Crown Princess at all, even if Prince Jaeun seemed convinced that his fears were unfounded, much like Dam-yi. But even he was powerless against the Crown Prince’s single-minded pursuit of his one and only goal: bringing down his

grandfather. And so Dam-yi increasingly found herself in the Crown Prince's literal shoes, attending lectures, court, and once again, the Crown Princess in her chambers.

This time, the Crown Princess eyed her carefully when Dam-yi entered, while her maids were still present. The tension between them was palpable and Dam-yi did her best to avoid the Crown Princess's gaze. Luckily, none of the others seemed to think anything about the scene was unusual. They continued their tasks, serving wine and cakes before bowing and walking backwards, out into the hallway.

"You are Dam-yi, yes?" the Crown Princess asked when everyone was gone.

Dam-yi was still standing and bowed awkwardly. "Yes, Your Highness."

The Crown Princess stared at her for a moment, then she sighed. "Do sit down, please. You make me uncomfortable, the way you're standing there."

Dam-yi felt her cheeks blush and obeyed. It felt strange, being dressed in a man's clothes in the company of a woman who knew. That had never happened to her before. She was so used to being surrounded by men when she played the prince – eunuchs, soldiers, ministers, the other princes and the scholars – she must have come to associate wearing her female dress with being around other women. She wore them when she joked with I-wol, when she worked with the servants or gossiped with the other court ladies. Neither felt more natural or unnatural than the other to her. The fear of being discovered was a constant in her life, no matter the dress she wore, but this strange crossing of streams left her floundering. Did she square her shoulders? Did she fold her hands? In the end, she took one of the rice cakes. The Crown Princess smiled at her awkwardly and did the same.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what my husband is up to?" the Crown Princess inquired carefully.

Dam-yi felt sorry for her, but she had no choice but to disappoint her. "No, Your Highness."

"Can't tell me or won't?"

Dam-yi pursed her lips. A court lady wasn't supposed to reveal the Crown Prince's secrets, not even to the Crown Princess. "Can't," she answered. It was the truth, even. The Crown Prince trusted her, but she was not the one he revealed his plans to – that was Prince Jaeun.

The Crown Princess sighed. It was a long and dreary thing, touching something deep inside Dam-yi.

"I know you don't have the best opinion of His Highness," she began. "But he is a good man. A kind lord who treats us with respect. With friendship, even. I have faith that eventually, he will become the husband you deserve. Just give it time, Your Highness."

The Crown Princess hummed and looked past Dam-yi's shoulders at nothing in particular. "You may be right," she finally agreed. "He was kind to me once, when we first met. I almost fell and he caught me, back when I was visiting my father in the palace one time."

Dam-yi felt herself blush deeply. The Crown Princess noticed, of course. Dam-yi watched as her face fell and she swallowed her disappointment. "Oh," was the only sound she made.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness."



The next time Dam-yi met the Crown Princess, they were both taking a walk in the palace gardens, near one of the many ponds. It was a sunny day, and the trees along the banks allowed for some shade. The meeting hadn't been planned, and so their entourages were there to witness their awkward sizing up of each other. It was no secret that the Crown Prince was not fond of his wife. Only Bok-dong was aware of the fact that Dam-yi wasn't the Crown Prince, and that the Crown Princess was aware of them switching places. So most of the servants tensed when they stood across from each other, Dam-yi trying to stay carefully neutral while the Crown Princess seemed to calculate some complicated sum in her head.

In the end, the Crown Princess relaxed and stepped forward until only a few steps separated her from Dam-yi. "Would you care for a walk?" she asked.

Dam-yi cleared her throat and nodded. To the bemusement of all, she offered the Crown Princess her arm, and the Crown Princess took it gladly. Together, they followed the path along the pond at a sedate pace, as if they were a happily married couple, and not two strangers who barely knew each other. The sight was so unusual, their servants now followed farther behind in an effort to give them some privacy. When Dam-yi cast her gaze backwards, she locked eyes with Bok-dong, who nodded at her slightly. As long as they kept their voices low, they could speak freely.

"It is a nice day, isn't it?" Dam-yi said, watching the fish play in the sun.

"It is," the Crown Princess agreed. After a pause, she continued, "I am sorry things always seem to go wrong when we meet. I like it better when things are as they are now. I would like us to be friends, Dam-yi."

When Dam-yi turned to face her, she saw that the Crown Princess seemed a little embarrassed to ask this of her, and for the first time, Dam-yi really thought about how

lonely she must be in the palace. Was she even close to one of her ladies? She had left her old life behind when she had married the Crown Prince, and between his indifference and the power struggles in the palace, there must be few people she could trust. At least Dam-yi had always had I-wol and Bok-dong. And now, maybe...

"I would like that too," she said. She didn't regret doing so one bit when she saw the Crown Princess's face light up.

And so things changed. Whenever the Crown Prince left and Dam-yi took his place, everyone was amazed at how well the royal couple got along. They went on walks, took tea together and even spent their nights together without seeming cross in the mornings after. On those days, the court dared to hope that there might finally be an heir. On every other day, the Crown Prince treated his wife as cruelly as before. Dam-yi heard the rumours when she was herself, yet none dared to broach the subject with either the Crown Prince or the Crown Princess. Except for Dam-yi.

"I've seen the looks, of course," the Crown Princess told her with an impish smile. "I like to imagine how much they annoy His Highness. I know it's not very nice of me, but you know very well that he isn't very nice to me either."

Dam-yi nodded. "I really don't understand why, to be honest. He isn't like that, usually."

The Crown Princess grinned so much her nose crinkled as she shook her head in disbelief.

"It's true!"

"Tell me about it then – a real story, not just assurances and platitudes. Let me see him through your eyes, for once."

"Very well," Dam-yi said, before telling her story.



Quite some time ago...

"What the hell happened?" Prince Hwi asked. His face was full of worry and Dam-yi wondered how anyone could think he was her. He held himself so differently with his shoulders puffed up. And his chin stuck out. The Prince carried himself as if the world lay at his feet. It was little wonder. After all, it did. But it seemed a court maid's dress alone was enough to fool most into thinking a prince was a maid, even if he barely bothered to hold himself differently. Behind him, Prince Jaeun stood and watched her with apprehension as well as a shadow of guilt on his face.

“What happened?” Bok-dong cried. He’d been agitated ever since Dam-yi had collapsed on the floor of the Prince’s room when she got back. “What I warned you would happen. Dam-yi is no prince. It had to go wrong eventually.”

The Prince silenced Bok-dong with a single, well-placed glare. Dam-yi felt sorry for him. He meant well. Then those piercing eyes turned to her.

“Prince Wonsan asked to spar,” she explained. Prince Jaeun inhaled sharply. She wondered how often he’d been on the receiving end of his brother’s cold and precise sword cuts. “It went sort of well, at first, but then he started mocking me for being so bad at the sword today, and I lost my patience and said something mean. During the next bout, he hit me in the ankle. It’s not so bad – I could walk all the way here and only limped a little.”

The pain had been excruciating. The only reason she hadn’t crawled was that she knew she was as good as dead should anybody take too close a look at her. Bok-dong knew that as well, but having been on the receiving end of the Prince’s glare, he only stared at the floor and grabbed his robes in silent frustration.

“Do you think you’ll be alright?” Prince Hwi asked. “Or should we call for a doctor? We’ll think of something to tell him, don’t worry.”

Dam-yi smiled at him gratefully. Then she sighed and took stock of her ankle again, moving it carefully. She hissed when it hurt, but she could move it, and while it was swollen and bruised, it wasn’t too bad.

“I just need to rest, I think,” she told him.

“Very well. Then you’ll stay here a little while longer – we’ll say you’re feeling a little ill – they usually only take your pulse for it. If it’s a little off they’ll put it down to you being sick. And once you’re better, we’ll teach you how to fight.”

“Pardon, Your Highness, is that really a good idea? Wouldn’t it be best if you just... stopped? Other princes sneak around without someone taking their place,” Bok-dong pointed out with a nod at Prince Jaeun.

“He might not be wrong,” Prince Jaeun agreed. “It seems a bit much, to put so much on a girl’s shoulders. Don’t forget the danger she’s in every single day, just because she looks like you.”

But Prince Hwi wasn’t having any of it. He shook his head and kept looking at Dam-yi, who felt drawn to the certainty he exuded. “Don’t you want to hit the bugger the next time you spar?” he asked her. “I’ll understand it if you can’t do this any more. But it would be best to leave the palace so nobody notices...”

This was the first time the Prince had ever offered her a different life. Perhaps she should take him up on the offer, even if it meant leaving I-wol and her friends behind, her life. But though it was wrong of her – there was a part of her that wanted to put Prince Wonsan in his place. That was the part that had made her insult him in the first place. She'd reminded him that Prince Hwi was closer to the throne than he was, and she had known it would sting. It would feel so much better to hit back with a sword. Also, if she had to leave, she would no longer be able to learn from all the books Prince Hwi kept in his quarters, or from his teachers.

Dam-yi nodded, and a wide grin spread on the Prince's face.

It took weeks for her ankle to fully recover. It took the princes even longer until they had the time to sneak away with her. And when they did, Dam-yi had one of the most wonderful days of her life, chasing Prince Hwi and Prince Jaecun around the trees in a deserted part of the palace, parrying their blows.



“What’s it like, pretending to be a man?” the Crown Princess asked when they were lying on their bedrolls, facing each other. It reminded Dam-yi of her youth, back when she was a young court maid that shared her room with several others. Back then, they used to talk all night about everything and nothing.

Dam-yi thought about the question for a while. “Different, I suppose. It’s hard to describe. For me, at least, it’s a bit like being a different version of myself. When I’m wearing the Crown Prince’s clothes, I can do things I otherwise couldn’t and act in ways that wouldn’t be proper for a court lady. But it’s still just me, in a way.”

The Crown Princess giggled, but not in a mean way. She just seemed to be happy. “I bet you’re really good with a sword, after all that training.”

Dam-yi blushed. “Well, I get by, I suppose. But I’m still not as good as Prince Wonsan.”

“So you haven’t thrown him in the mud?” The Crown Princess seemed disappointed.

“No, but I saw the Crown Prince do it once.”

“That’s not the same.”

Dam-yi agreed. It was not. But she had enjoyed learning how to fight. “Do you want to know a secret?” Dam-yi asked her. “I haven’t even told Eunuch Hong.”

In the murky candlelight, she saw the Crown Princess’s eyes widen as she nodded vigorously.

“I like it. Dressing up as the Crown Prince, I mean. I wouldn’t want to do it all the time, and sometimes it’s really not that much fun, and it’s dangerous, but once I got used to the madness of it all, I started to enjoy it.”

The Crown Princess stared at her. In her large eyes, Dam-yi could see the flickering of the candles. The more she got to know her, the more she liked her. Dam-yi should be worried, really, that her loyalties were going to be tested one day. Slowly but surely, the Crown Princess had become one of her best friends, but Dam-yi couldn’t regret it. She liked her too much.

“I would like to try it once,” the Crown Princess admitted. “But I don’t think I’m brave enough to.”

“You’re braver than you think.”

The Crown Princess smiled sadly. “Thank you.”

With that, the evening ended on a strange and melancholy note. When they were about to blow out the candles and go to sleep, the Crown Princess turned to Dam-yi one last time, a serious look in her eyes.

“I keep calling you Dam-yi,” she said. “And you’re one of my closest friends. When we’re in private, you can call me Ha-kyung. I would like it if you did – I miss having friends who call me by my name, and you have earned it.”

“Your Highness...”

“I mean it,” the Crown Princess said, blowing out the candle next to her. “Good night, Dam-yi.”

“Good night, Your— Ha-kyung.”



“Oh, I’ve missed this so much!” Dam-yi watched as Ha-kyung twirled through the busy street, almost knocking over a middle-aged servant and her shopping, not that she noticed. She was too busy smiling, basking in her temporary freedom. Dam-yi could feel her happiness well up in her own breast as well. Initially, she’d been hesitant to go along with Ha-kyung’s idea. But that smile was worth it.

Ha-kyung wore one of her old dresses – the ones she wore as a young lady, before she’d become the Crown Princess. Only her pinned up hair told the world that she was no longer an innocent young girl. Dam-yi, meanwhile, had borrowed one of the Crown Prince’s robes. There had been no reason to tailor a nobleman’s robes for her when all she had to do to slip away was wear one of her dresses. Not that the Crown Prince used these

robes very much. Dam-yi knew that while he preferred to change into a different disguise once outside the palace, he often used something a little less distinctive than these clothes that clearly marked him as a nobleman. For now, these robes suited their purposes just fine. Dam-yi had even brought a sword to round out the disguise, and to protect Ha-kyung. Just in case.

“Look, aren’t these pretty?” Ha-kyung pointed at a display of hairpins.

Dam-yi nodded. None were as luxurious as the ones that Ha-kyung already owned, the ones that were fit for a queen. But they were the kinds that pretty young ladies wore when they had only just married their husbands, with pretty flowers fashioned from silver and gold wires and semi-precious stones. Dam-yi had always wanted one like it, but they were a luxury – one that a court lady had no use for anyway.

For a moment, they stood next to each other, eyeing the pins. Then Dam-yi heard the rustle of Ha-kyung’s sleeves as she took out her purse.

“This one,” she said to the woman behind the table. She pointed at the one with the lovely pink blossoms and the gold inlay that Dam-yi thought was the prettiest. The tradeswoman handed it over gladly, likely because Ha-kyung didn’t bother to haggle and ended up overpaying.

“What do you want the pin for?” Dam-yi asked later, when they had found a quiet place near the riverbank to eat some rice taffy. “You already have so many, and they’re much more beautiful anyway.”

Ha-kyung shrugged. “I just wanted it. It’s pretty.”

“It is,” Dam-yi agreed a little wistfully as she stared at the hairpin in Ha-kyung’s hand.

“So it is,” another voice agreed, a deep, male one with a rough accent. Dam-yi’s head turned when the man had barely finished the sentence. She spotted him as he lounged against a wall behind them, flanked by his friends – or maybe cronies. The two others carried a staff and a club, but the leader had a sword. He smirked when he saw Dam-yi’s eyes flick over it. On instinct, Dam-yi put herself between the men and Ha-kyung. This wasn’t what she’d expected to do this day. Ha-kyung’s hands were clutching her sleeves.

“What are you?” the man asked. “A scholar out with his sweetheart? A young nobleman? Have you ever even used that little toy at your hip?”

Dam-yi hadn’t, not in earnest. But she still gripped the sword. “Promise me you’ll run,” she whispered to Ha-kyung.

“But what about—”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured her. “Just run until you find a guard.”

Ha-kyung didn't reply – she didn't have time. The men were stalking closer now. The two cronies fanned out to the sides. If Ha-kyung was to get to safety, she'd have to move. Soon.

“How about you hand over all that money you were flashing about in the market, then, young lady?”

Dam-yi didn't hesitate. She drew her sword and went for the leader. He hadn't expected her to act so brazenly, but he was fast. He drew his own sword just in time to block a cut to the upper chest.

“Run!” Dam-yi screamed. She couldn't turn to see if Ha-kyung did, but she heard the man with the club move to follow her. With a roar, she pushed the leader backwards and turned, moving as fast as the Crown Prince and Prince Jaeun had taught her. She didn't bother trying to fully engage Club. Instead, she drew her sword across the back of his calf. The man cried and stopped pursuing Ha-kyung, and Dam-yi had only just enough time to dodge Sword's blow; it ended up tearing her sleeve. Staff was coming at her now too, from the opposite direction. Staff would go first, she reckoned while she stared into Sword's incensed eyes. That's how it had always been when she'd trained with the princes.

The sound of a foot on gravel alerted her to Staff's move. Without taking her eyes off the leader, Dam-yi stepped backwards and to the side, dodging the blow on pure instinct. She raised her sword again and swiftly held it to Staff's neck. The world froze. After that much sudden movement, it felt entirely foreign to her.

“If you don't want to end up in even more trouble than you no doubt already are in, take your men and leave,” Dam-yi told the leader in her best Crown Prince's voice. “Or try your luck with the guards, but I don't fancy your chances.”

The leader was burning with anger, but he only pressed his lips together and twisted his face into a grimace of hatred and disgust. The moment the first cries of guards reached their ears, he nodded at his cronies and together, they hobbled away. When the guards reached her, Dam-yi felt herself shaking like a leaf.

“Are you alright?” Ha-kyung asked, voice quivering.

Dam-yi nodded, then shook her head. She hadn't even noticed Ha-kyung approaching and could barely point the guards in the direction the robbers had fled.

“We shouldn't tell His Highness about this, I think,” Ha-kyung said as she took one of Dam-yi's hands in hers. The touch felt grounding, somehow, as if it was the only thing that was real. Finally, her heartbeat recovered a little as she clung to Ha-kyung's hand, tightly. Then she remembered the ruined sleeve and wondered if they could come up with a good excuse as to why the Crown Prince's robes were ruined. Preferably one that didn't involve armed robbers.



“You wished to see me, Your Highness?”

Dam-yi was in Ha-kyung’s quarters again – only this time, everything was different. For once, she was wearing her regular clothes and the veil that obscured her face. She had never faced Ha-kyung as a woman before, except when she’d been following the Crown Prince, hiding in a group of other court ladies. She felt naked somehow, as if everyone was watching her, even though the servants were merely preparing tea and two small trays with dried fruit. It was broad daylight too. Dam-yi couldn’t remember the last time she had been this confused by a situation.

“Yes. I wished to talk to you,” Ha-kyung told her in distant, measured tones.

The actual conversation had to wait until the servants were gone, of course. The moment the doors were closed and the steps outside fell silent, Ha-kyung’s face lit up in an exuberant smile and she practically jumped to her feet and ran over to Dam-yi’s side. Of course Ha-kyung wouldn’t be Ha-kyung if her eagerness didn’t occasionally cause trouble. Instead of coming to a halt and gracefully sitting down next to Dam-yi, she stumbled over her own feet and fell. Dam-yi barely had enough time to get to her knees and catch her in her arms. They clung to each other awkwardly for a moment. Dam-yi felt her heartbeat quicken and her face heat up while she looked at Ha-kyung’s impossibly close embarrassed smile. It was just like that day when they had first met, she thought.

“I missed you,” Ha-kyung confessed when she was finally sitting properly with their skirts flowing into each other. “His Highness hasn’t left in so long.”

It had only been two weeks – hardly that long – but Dam-yi didn’t say anything. She’d missed Ha-kyung too, after their disastrous day outside the palace. They’d barely had time to say goodbye when they’d got back, and then the Crown Prince had already been pacing in his quarters impatiently... the important thing was that Ha-kyung was alright. She didn’t seem as if meeting those brutes had affected her at all.

“Here,” Ha-kyung said, pulling something out of her sleeve. It was the hairpin she’d bought that day. “I bought it for you.”

Dam-yi stared at the hairpin, then at Ha-kyung, and then at the hairpin again. She didn’t know quite what she felt, but it was something like overwhelming fondness. She could feel tears forming in the corners of her eyes. Ha-kyung was blushing and biting her lip as she held out the hairpin with a nervous look on her face. Dam-yi stretched out her hand slowly and took it, admiring the small petals and swirling inlay. She must have

noticed Dam-yi staring at it, she thought. Truly, Ha-kyung was one of the kindest people she had ever met.

“Thank you,” she said, voice choking up while Ha-kyung’s face lit up.

“Try it on,” she said. “And take off the veil. You don’t need it with me.”

Dam-yi did, and again, she felt as if stripped bare while she weathered Ha-kyung’s star-struck stare. She didn’t deserve that kind of attention, she thought. She was just plain Dam-yi, a court maid nobody paid much attention to.

“You’re beautiful.” Ha-kyung’s words took Dam-yi by surprise, and Ha-kyung as well, it seemed, judging by the way she startled and blushed even more. Then Dam-yi watched as she sat up straight and gathered her courage.

“You are,” she said as she stared straight into Dam-yi’s eyes. “And wonderful and brave and the best friend I could ask for. Whether you wear His Highness’s clothes or your own, you are always extraordinary, Dam-yi. And, I mean, what I want to say is — I like you. The way you saved me that time in the city, it opened my eyes. I like you, Dam-yi.”

Dam-yi didn’t think she quite understood what Ha-kyung was saying. She didn’t know what she was supposed to say either, but she had to say something. “I like you too, Your Highness.”

Ha-kyung huffed and seemed to deflate in front of Dam-yi’s eyes. Apparently she’d said the wrong thing, and more than anything, Dam-yi wanted to take her words back. She hated to see Ha-kyung unhappy.

“That’s not what I mean,” Ha-kyung said.

“What do you—”

Before Dam-yi could finish her question, Ha-kyung leaned forward and took her hands in hers. This close, her eyes seemed large and luminous and Dam-yi could see her own reflection in them, twisted but recognisable. She was mesmerising, and she leaned in even closer, until the tips of their noses touched and Ha-kyung’s eyes fluttered closed. Dam-yi’s did as well, and so she couldn’t see Ha-kyung’s lips, only feel their gentle touch against her own. It was merely a brushing of skin against skin, but it sent her blood roiling as her heart burst with joy. Oh, Dam-yi thought. She suddenly had all the answers to a great many questions she hadn’t even thought to ask, not just the one she hadn’t finished asking. Slowly but surely, the confusion in her heart began to untangle itself.

Ha-kyung seemed unsure again when she leaned back again, and she refused to meet Dam-yi’s eyes. Instead, she suddenly found the embroidered screen in the corner very interesting.

“I like you,” Ha-kyung said again. “I wish you were my husband, not the Crown Prince. Even if you can’t give me children. When I’m with you, I’m happy, and I know what it is

like to have a husband and care for him. When you fought those men... I knew it was you who was in my heart. And I hope you feel the same. If you do not, can you at least accept my eternal friendship?"

"I do. Feel the same, that is. I think," Dam-yi mumbled. The confusion was still there, but when she saw Ha-kyung smile with pure joy, she forgot all about it. There were more important things in this world, like Ha-kyung's happiness, and the way her hands clutched Dam-yi's. Later, there would be reality, troubles and the court to deal with, but for now, all that mattered was that they were happy.

The next time, Dam-yi leaned forward for a kiss.

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