The Art of War

by aprilclash, baeconandeggs

Summary

In a world of witches and fox spirits, of dying mountains and ancient curses hiding among tall skyscrapers, Chanyeol and Baekhyun are called to fight in a war against the past, against all odds and even against themselves.

Notes

Prompt #: BAE178

Disclaimer: baeconandeggs/the mods is/are not the author/s of this story. Authors will be credited and tagged after reveals. The celebrities' names/images are merely borrowed and do not represent who the celebrities are in real life. No offense is intended towards them, their families or friends. The original characters and plot are the property of the author. No money is being made from this fictional work. No copyright infringement is intended.

Author's Note: This fic is heavily inspired by Korean folklore, (especially by legends of the Gumiho, the Korean nine-tailed fox spirit, and the Samjokgu, a magical dog spirit which is said to hunt Gumiho,) but it also mentions shamanism and totem poles. Despite the amount of research I put into writing this story, I am by no means an expert of Korean folklore, and I compensated for that using my own imagination to fill the gaps. So please remember that anything you could read in this fic might be made up by myself, except for the most generic Gumiho information you can find on Wikipedia, the legend of Daji and the Samjokgu and the legend of the Fox Sister. You can also go to Wikipedia for information on the jangseung and shamanism, even though I reinterpreted a lot of what I knew. The figure of the Soothsayer does not belong to the Korean folklore realm and it’s a personal interpretation.
I also wish to point out that the Jinyoung appearing in this fic is inspired by B1A4’s Jung
Jinyoung (why are there so many Jinyoungs?), and that the name of Baekhyun’s father doesn’t refer to either VIXX’s Jaehwan or W1’s Jaehwan.
Special thanks to my beta readers, to the mods who dealt with my constant delays and to everyone who supported me through this fic! To my prompter, bet you weren’t expecting this. It might be long and boring, but I put all my effort in this fic and I hope you all like it.
♥
Prologue

I do not know
what happens to a body when it stops.
But tell me a story that did not begin with love.
—Aracelis Girmay, “Jacaranda” from Teeth

PROLOGUE
20180123

Seoul’s lights flicker feebly through the fog, little fairies dancing the night away. Mapo Bridge dives into the mist, stretching its arms towards the other side of the river. On its railings, big black words ask useless questions to lost souls.

Do you dream about love?

Park Chanyeol scoffs and exhales, releasing a puff of smoke that lingers in the cold, still air for a moment before dissipating against the grey sky. What a useless question, he thinks. Everyone dreams about love.

The boy lying on wet, cold concrete in a pool of his own thick blood must have dreamt about love too. Chanyeol wonders if he realized that the dream he was chasing was not true love, after all, that he wasn’t even a dream but a nightmare. He wonders if the boy had realized, before he died, that he had never been the one to do the chasing.

Chanyeol shifts, restless. His left leg hurts, so he leans more of his weight on the walking cane, trying to find relief from the old pain. He swallows a lump of disgust and looks down, scanning the boy’s supine form.

The boy’s arms are open, as if he was waiting for someone to run into them when he died – as if he was getting ready to fly. His chest is open too, maimed, mangled by long irregular claws and sharp fangs.

It looks like the attack of a wild animal. It is one, in a way. But in some other ways it is not, and that’s what makes it even more dangerous.

“When did they find him?” Chanyeol asks, punctuating the last word with a click of the crutch against the asphalt.

The question is addressed to a short man leaning against the police truck a few meters away from the corpse. The man’s name is Kim Junmyeon, but every magical creature in Seoul knows him as Suho, the Guardian. Chanyeol calls him Kim Junmyeon, with all the disrespect he can put in the name.

“Kim Junmyeon! Did you hear me?”

Kim Junmyeon finally looks up from his phone and grimaces. “Three hours ago.”

Too long, thinks Chanyeol. It’s been too long. The track must be cold right now, the monster who did this long gone.
“A group of college students found his body on their way to the dorms,” Junmyeon continues, slipping the phone into the pocket of his expensive tailored coat. “They tried to call an ambulance but he was already dead. They didn’t see anyone else. The police also processed the crime scene but they didn’t find anything useful.”

“Of course they didn’t.”

It’s not like Junmyeon was expecting them to solve the case either. That’s Chanyeol’s job, not the police’s.

Chanyeol’s eyes drift over the boy’s parted lips, purple, chapped and now hopelessly mute. “Come on, dude, tell me something useful,” he murmurs to the rigid corpse.

He carefully lays the crutch down on the ground and slowly, stiffly kneels next to the body to have a better look. Dampness seeps through the fabric on his knees, freezing his joints. It only exacerbates the old pain in his left knee, where the metal is keeping the bone together. Maybe he groans.

“Is everything alright?” Junmyeon asks, squinting to see Chanyeol’s face in the darkness.

“’s fine,” Chanyeol spits out through gritted teeth. “Can you make light here for a moment?”

The dull, naked glow of a flashlight flickers over the corpse, giving an unforgivingly detailed three-dimensionality to the already cold wounds.

The blood has partially dried, darkening on the clothes in a sharp contrast with the lividity of the skin.

The slashes on the boy’s chest are deep, rushed, impatient. That could mean hunger. Maybe also youth. It’s probably young, very young, if those things can ever be called young. And hungry, too hungry to control its instincts. Chanyeol knows the stories. It takes centuries for one of them to become strong enough to hurt a human. Centuries of patient, careful waiting, longing for blood and flesh. When they do reach maturity, their first hunt is a slaughter. But that was years ago, decades. The last registered case was before Chanyeol was even born. Something about this attack feels off.

“It’s fine, you can turn that off,” he says. Junmyeon’s arm falls, and for a moment light frames the boy’s face. His eyes are open, clouded. He looks like he only realized at the last moment that something was wrong. (Too late, too late).

He must have been a charming boy, Chanyeol muses. His eyes were long and thin, and the nose looks a little flat, but maybe he had a pretty smile. Pretty enough to attract the wrong kind of attention.

Chanyeol looks Junmyeon over, taking in his leather shoes, the elegant tailored suit pants and coat. He can’t see it, but he knows Junmyeon’s wearing a waistcoat and a vintage tie. He looks neat, flawless, with an undertaste of wrong. It’s the magic flowing in his veins, carried by his blood. It gives him that ineffable, quaint air that brings out all of Chanyeol’s pettiness.

“He was found three hours ago, you said. It’s been too long.” He clicks his tongue and looks away. “The track is cold now, I couldn’t trace it down even if I wanted.”

Junmyeon is staring at the tips of his polished shoes, so shiny he can probably see his perfect face reflected in them. An elegant eyebrow shoots upwards. “I did my best, Chanyeol, but the psychic warned me at the last minute, so when I got here the body was already cold and the police was lurking around. It took some time to convince them to clear the scene.”
“Some time? I thought you only needed to do this.” Chanyeol snaps his fingers and scoffs when Junmyeon frowns at him.

He wonders how those police officers will report the situation. *We were looking at the crime scene but we all felt the compelling instinct to leave it unattended for two hours.* But, knowing Junmyeon, tomorrow they won’t even remember they left the scene in the first place. Sometimes, when things get too complicated, the police doesn’t even remember there was a body to begin with. Junmyeon is fussy, overzealous and sometimes too awkward, but he cleans up well. It’s a part of his duty as the Guardian of the city.

“Also, I must say, you took forever to answer the phone,” Junmyeon continues, and Chanyeol feels a pang of annoyance when he hears the reprimand lacing his friend’s voice. Since when did Chanyeol agree to be at Junmyeon’s beck and call? He came here to help Junmyeon, not to let himself be bossed around. The pettiness comes back, thick and sour on his tongue.

“It’s a fucking Thursday night, I was sleeping,” he mutters. “You know, unlike other people, I do have to work tomorrow morning.”

“Actually, it’s already this morning, look at the time,” Junmyeon replies, ignoring the jab.

His words are swallowed by the sound of three taxis rushing by, one after another. The police took the precaution of separating the crime scene with yellow tape, but they couldn’t close the bridge, of course. *The press might be here soon,* Chanyeol realizes. *It’s time for me to leave.*

Junmyeon waits until all the cars have crossed the bridge, shrugging inside his heavy black coat. “So? Can you help us?” he asks.

Chanyeol shakes his head. “Not now. I told you, it’s too late to track the thing down. It could’ve already gone anywhere.”

“We can’t wait until it kills someone else, Chanyeol! You know the rules. This is unwanted attention, and the Council of the Covens will not like it.”

Chanyeol is nice enough to keep how much he cares about what Seoul’s Council of the Covens likes or dislikes to himself. After all, he’s not a witch. Or whatever Kim Junmyeon and his friends are.

“This is your job, Junmyeon, not mine. I don’t *chase* these creatures, you do. Sure, I can take a look at the mess they did and, if we’re lucky, I can tell you where they went, but that’s the extent of our collaboration.”

Junmyeon looks dejected for a moment, and Chanyeol does feel a pang of guilt, but only a pang. It’s a Thursday night – or a Friday morning, like Junmyeon reminded him – and Chanyeol just wasted a good couple of hours of sleep examining a corpse on the side of the road in the middle of Mapo Bridge just to make Junmyeon’s life easier. Junmyeon wisely decides not to push the issue.

“The detective in charge of this case will visit a few clubs tomorrow, see if someone remembers him. Maybe he’ll find out something interesting about his date. I’ll ask Kyungsoo to keep me updated.”

Chanyeol nods, unconvinced. They can look as much as they want, but they won’t find anything. In the remote possibility that someone did saw something, they’d have already forgotten by now, just like the police officers Junmyeon charmed to leave the crime scene unprotected won’t remember him tomorrow morning. Magic speaks its own language humans can’t understand. It slips away
from their minds and memories, like the smoke leaving Chanyeol’s lips at the last drag of his cigarette.

“Is it really what I think it is, Chanyeol?” Junmyeon asks suddenly. “It’s been more than two years since we last had one of those things loose in Seoul.”

Actually, it’s been less than two months, but Junmyeon doesn’t need to know that and Chanyeol doesn’t plan to tell him any soon. “Yes, I remember. Since I, you know, helped you catch it.”

“Help me,” he asks, and Junmyeon holds a hand for him to take, pulling Chanyeol up to his feet when he catches it. Chanyeol’s knee pulses with pain as he wobbles on the spot, unable to hold himself upright without the support. He sighs in relief when Junmyeon hands him his crutch so can lean his weight on it.

Junmyeon hides his fists in the pocket of the coat and squirms, as if embarrassed. “There’s a witch living around Namsan who’s said to be one of the best healers in the country. If I asked her, she could visit you.”

Chanyeol tries to force a polite smile and fails. “I don’t need a healer, Junmyeon. I need a witch strong enough to break a millenary curse. Or a shrink, since all the doctors who visited me said the leg is fine and the pain is only in my head. But then you would have to find someone else to help you when one of these things pops out.”

Junmyeon sighs, but mercifully doesn’t add anything else, which is good, because Chanyeol is not in the mood.

“If that’s all,” Chanyeol then says, hitting the ground with his crutch to emphasize his point, “I’d go. Call me next time you find something.” None of them doubts that there’ll be a next time. “Possibly before the track disappears.”

Junmyeon sighs and stuffs his hand into the pockets. “Kyungsoo is coming to get me once his shift is over. If you’re willing to wait, say, half an hour, we could give you a ride.”

But Chanyeol yawns and fishes his phone from the jacket. “Nah, it’s too late already I’ll just take a taxi, as soon as it’s not in front of a crime scene.”

He’s already heading towards the mouth of the bridge when Junmyeon stops him again. “Chanyeol! You never answered me.”

“Oh, I thought it was a rhetorical question.”

“So I was right? It really is one of yours?”

Chanyeol turns and just stands there for a moment, on the side of the road. A lonely, lanky figure emerging from the fog, slim and tall, standing on his two legs and the crutch. The legends talk about a mythical creature, a magical three-legged dog, who can see through the illusions of the spirits and possesses divine powers to fight evil. Samjokgu, they call him. But the legends are wrong, and Park Chanyeol is just a cursed, crippled young man, who can somehow recognize magic when he sees it.

“Yes, the trail is unmistakable. It is one of them, for sure,” he says. “It’s a Gumiho.”

At least the legends were right about one thing. Not even Junmyeon, the Guardian, one of the four witches powerful enough to protect the entire capital, can find a fox spirit on his own. Only the Samjokgu can see through a Gumiho’s illusion. And that makes Chanyeol the only one in the
whole capital – in the whole country – who can help Junmyeon.

“I’ll call you,” Junmyeon promises, just before Chanyeol disappears.

“See you, hyung.”

The fog closes around his limping figure and what’s left is only the dull, heavy sound of his footsteps and the crutch hitting the concrete. That too disappears soon.

On the bridge, Kim Junmyeon lifts the spell he had casted on the crime scene and waits for the police to come back. When they get there though, still confused as to why they had left in the first place, nobody is there. Nobody but the dead boy, thick, eerie mist and a few words printed on the railings of Mapo Bridge to keep people from jumping down into the river below.

Do you dream about love?

*

A few hours of distance away, somewhere in the woods around Yeoju, the whiny voice of a gayageum playing downstairs rouses Byun Baekhyun from a fitful, restless sleep, and a dream about love.

He pulls himself up, slowly, still suspended in that funny place between sleep and reality. A warm laughter rings in his head, impossibly close, and Baekhyun tries to hold onto it, to close his fingers around the last tendrils of the dream just before it disappears. It’s a useless effort. The lament of the zither is real, while the dream is just a fading memory, and the music easily disperses it, like wind blows away a spiral of smoke.

The wind does blow, outside, suddenly rattling the window and startling Baekhyun. He can hear its angry howl as the storm shakes the branches of the gaunt trees around the resort, rattling and rocking them like straws, trying to tear them from the frozen ground.

The notes of the gayageum accompany the storm, growing faster and more frantic as the wind howls louder, following the wrath of nature in its momentum only to fall back to a slower tempo when the wind is at its strongest, as if refusing to culminate with the storm.

Baekhyun looks at the time. It’s four in the morning, a bit too early to play any kind of instrument, even for someone as eccentric as his mother.

He rubs his eyes and then his hair, whining low in his throat in annoyance. A puff of cold air weasels its way through the drought and under his loose t-shirt, causing goosebumps to erupt on his skin. He blindly finds a jacket and stands up, slowly, sliding the door open to see an orange glow at the end of the corridor. Yawning into his palm and dragging his feet on the warm floor, he follows the light and the rhythmic song of the gayageum in the darkness.

Something must be wrong, he realizes, as the music curls over his shivering skin, on his forearms and around his knees and behind his neck, only to lose itself in the empty cold of the house. The melody is shapeless, erratic, indulging in tepid languor and nervous fits, losing and finding its rhythm like a leaf shaken by the storm – like a woman in front of a choice. It’s typical of his mother to play when she feels conflicted about something, but it’s been a long time since Baekhyun has heard this kind of desperate sound from her.

The song stops, abruptly, and then starts again, angrier now, frantic, and then goes back to a
nervous, slow plucking of the strings. Baekhyun pushes the door open and tiptoes into the living room.

In the farthest corner of the room, in the light of a candle, a beautiful woman is sitting cross-legged on the wooden floor, balancing a heavy paulownia gayageum on her lap. Her fingers fly on the strings of the zither as she tilts her head to the side, chasing the music instead of following it. She doesn’t acknowledge Baekhyun’s presence, but she knows he’s here. Baekhyun can hear it in the way the music softens, barely so, doused with a fondness that Sunmi only shows for her son and her husband.

He blinks, wondering whether he should join her on the floor and wait until she’s done or ask her why she’s playing freestyle traditional music at four in the morning. Thankfully, the inn is on the other side of the hill, far enough from the family house that their guests can sleep without being bothered by Sunmi’s song. Even Jaehwan, Baekhyun’s father, is away on a work trip, and that makes Baekhyun her only and sleepy audience.

This time, the silence between one note and another lasts a beat too long, and Baekhyun finally realizes what is missing. The music sounds so capricious and inconsistent because no one is leading it. He gets up and takes the small, lonesome janggu, one of the traditional drums they keep exposed in the living room to impress the guests, and looks at his mother. She never stops plucking the cords of the gayageum, eyes closed, brows furrowed in concentration, but it seems like she’s nodding, giving him a silent permission to join her.

The janggu is old and probably needs maintenance, the sound not as clear as Baekhyun had hoped, but it’s fine. It’s been years since Baekhyun has played the janggu, or any other instrument – the last time was before he left to attend university, five, six years ago? – but the sticks feel familiar in his palms, and the sound the old drum makes is strong and lively.

_We both haven’t performed in a while, my little friend_, Baekhyun thinks, twirling the sticks in his hands before he starts playing. _Let’s do our best._

Baekhyun’s mother has always loved traditional instruments and she can play most of them, a passion she passed down to Baekhyun since he was really young. He’s not as good as she is – he’s lacking several centuries of practice to be at her level – but he can hold his ground if he wants to. After all, he is Sunmi’s son. With that in mind, he starts playing.

It feels a little strange to join the performance when the gayageum is already heading towards the end of the song, almost like trying to rein a wild horse before a precipice, but that’s also the general feeling Baekhyun gets whenever he tries to argue with his mother. Sunmi is a strange, rustic creature, averse to trust, fiercely protective, hopelessly stubborn and utterly defenceless against her son’s charms. Baekhyun plays the janggu like he would talk to her when she’s angry, or worried, or restless, eyes flickering towards the door like a trapped animal. He plays with a smile, with shameless flattery and a lot of gall, and Sunmi gives up, after a moment, letting him lead her to a somber peacefulness. (Like only Baekhyun can do.)

The last notes of Sunmi’s melody seem to linger in the room, unwilling to leave the warmth of the house for the cold of eternal silence. Baekhyun lays the janggu on the floor and watches his mother do the same with the big gayageum. He gives her the time to collect her thoughts before he asks, “So, what happened?”

Sunmi doesn’t answer his question. Not now. She will, eventually, later, or tomorrow, or in a week, or in a few years, often when the other person has given up all hope for an answer.

She’ll answer out of the blue, like she always does. But for now, she ignores Baekhyun’s question.
and leans over to ruffle his hair.

“Minseok called me. He will probably come by tomorrow morning to ask a favor from you.”

Baekhyun’s face lights up, before scrunching up again in confusion. It’s been a long time since he last saw Minseok, and he can’t deny he misses him, but...

“What kind of favor?” he asks.

“He’ll ask you to go to Seoul with him.”

Baekhyun’s eyebrows arch up but other than that he doesn’t show his disapproval in fear of upsetting his mother. There’s a reason people like Minseok, or like Seulgi – people like Baekhyun, in some ways, except Baekhyun has a completely different reason, – don’t go to Seoul, if they can avoid it. It is not wise to cross path with the Samjokgu.

“We have a family booked for tomorrow morning,” he reminds her. Canadian tourists, interested in the tiny temple on top of the hill, the beautiful mountain paths and the wildlife sanctuary, willing to challenge the snow still covering the top of the mountain. Baekhyun is supposed to help Sunmi with the check-ins and bring their luggage to their rooms, if needed. “You’ll need someone who can speak English.”

She snorts.

“I do speak English. Not as well as my cheeky son does, maybe, but enough to greet the guests and show them to their rooms.”

He almost smiles, thinking about how much she hates speaking foreign languages. She even took evening classes at the local Culture Community Center, but she never got past the obstacle of pronunciation, the Korean too thick on her tongue when she speaks.

“Still, that group from France is checking out too. It’s thirteen people. You’ll need me home.”

The truth is, Baekhyun doesn’t want to go to Seoul. He doesn’t like the city. Too alien, too dirty and too smelly and too full of people and negative energy, and also too loud, in a way that gets to his head and leaves him weak and confused. Too full of memories. Too big, big enough you could look for something for years and never find it, but strangely enough every time Baekhyun goes to Seoul he always manages to cross paths with the very last person he can’t allow himself to see – the person he wants to see the most.

His mother doesn’t listen. She pulls on his cheek, like she did when he was a child. “You can stay here if you want, but he’ll ask and you’ll say yes. You can’t say no to Minseok.”

Baekhyun bites his bottom lip. He can’t imagine what someone like Minseok needs to do in Seoul, but he knows why it would be dangerous for him to go alone.

“Do you know why he’s going to Seoul? Did something happen?”

There’s silence, and Sunmi steals a longing look at the *gayageum* again, as if playing it some more could help her sort out her feelings. Something happened and she doesn’t want to tell Baekhyun. He can count on the fingers of one hand the times his mother wasn’t honest with him. Something happened, and Baekhyun still doesn’t want to go to Seoul. At all.

“The wind called to me tonight. It sounded like a ghost from the past.”
She looks at her hands, clasped on the fabric of the night gown she’s wearing, then back at Baekhyun, almost imploring him to drop the subject. He does. He’s a good son, the best son any mother could wish for. And she owes him one.

“Don’t worry, mom. For now, we should go back to sleep, it’s already too late.”

He walks her to her room, holding the door open as she slips under the duvet. She looks so tiny, shipwrecked in the middle of the big bed as it’s dark and the wind howls outside.

“Shall I make some tea?” he asks, still a little concerned, but she waves him away.

“Go to sleep, little rascal. I’ll be fine. If I can’t sleep, I’ll text your dad.”

And he’ll probably reply. He’d answer her texts through a natural disaster. She smiles, for real this time, and Baekhyun smiles back, a little tight but natural enough to convince her, as he says goodnight and closes the door. He frowns as soon as she can’t see him anymore.

It’s been two months since the last time Baekhyun went to Seoul. Two months since he broke the promise he made to himself, again, two months since the last time he saw Chanyeol. He bites his bottom lip, like he always does when he’s nervous.

Going to Seoul? With Minseok? Oh, it won’t end well. Alone, maybe, it could’ve been doable, but he has a feeling the Guardian will find them as soon as they step foot in the city. And then he’ll have to meet Chanyeol, and then…

The window rattles, again, and Baekhyun shivers. Tomorrow he’ll worry about what scared his mother, what forced Minseok to visit the capital, what face Chanyeol will make when they meet again – will it be disgusted? Will it be sad or angry or melancholic? Will it be eager and fond? It’s tomorrow already, but it’s early, still too early.. The wind is still howling, the trees are still rustling. It will probably rain soon.

Baekhyun curls up in the cocoon of blankets and falls asleep as soon as his head touches the pillow. He dreams about love.
Chapter One

You wanted happiness, I can’t blame you for that, and maybe a mouth sounds idiotic when it blathers on about joy but tell me you love this, tell me you’re not miserable.
— Richard Siken, from ‘Seaside Improvisation’

That’s the thing about heartbreak. It’s the smallest of worlds ending. Everyone goes around you smiling, like it’s nothing to close a door.
— Clementine von Radics, The Wedding

hyunie ♥
you sounded good
[Sent: 23:57, 27.11.2017]

I’m like TT, sings the alarm clock, somewhere on the drawer, barely out of reach, just like TT, and Chanyeol groans, tasting a curse at back of his throat when he can’t find the phone at the first try.

He stretches more outside the covers, shivering when the cold morning air hits his naked shoulders, but he catches his phone this time, slides a finger across the screen and stops the song in the middle of a cheerful, tell me that you’ll be my baby.

He rubs his eyes, resisting the urge to fall asleep again. The alarm clock is set to ring again in ten, fifteen, twenty-five and forty minutes anyway. It’s seven in the morning, and Chanyeol has both the morning and afternoon shifts at the café. He thinks about calling in sick, but Jinri is on the leave for the long-awaited trip with her boyfriend, leaving them one staff member short, and Sooyoung has promised to stab Chanyeol and Jongin with a cake knife if they as much as thought about leaving her alone for the busy afternoon. Someone would argue that a cake knife is not an appropriately dangerous murder weapon, but Chanyeol knows Park Sooyoung to be the kind of woman who keeps her promises, and he’d rather not take any risk with her.

There’s nothing he can do about it, in the end. He gets up, curses his aching left leg and shakily makes his way towards the shower, ready to begin another day.

At least it’s Friday, he thinks, when the jet of hot water hits his shoulder blades, untying the knots in his back. Friday means the weekend is just a couple hours away, and that’s a good thing. But it’s also Friday, which means Chanyeol has spent the whole week juggling between his job at Jongdae’s café and following Seungwan around to help her find potions smugglers around the capital, and he’s fucking tired, thank you very much, and that’s definitely not a good thing.

The last thing he needed yesterday night was a two in the morning call from Junnyeon, inviting him to see a corpse. The last thing he needs this morning is... another call from Junnyeon, at half past seven, as he mechanically eats his breakfast while browsing the news

Chanyeol only answer after the third missed call, and it’s a tight-lipped, grumpy, “Hello?”
He wonders what Junmyeon wants, because if it’s another corpse…

“We might have found another victim,” Junmyeon says and, unseen, Chanyeol takes a moment to look at the ceiling and collect his patience, “I’m sending Kyungsoo to pick you up in ten minutes.”

“Hello to you too, Chanyeol,” Chanyeol replies, all falsetto and venom, “sorry to be bothering you on a Friday morning, when I’m obviously aware you have work, to ask you to do some impossible thing I know you can’t do.”

“Chanyeol, it’s really important.”

The voice on the other side of the phone sounds so crestfallen Chanyeol feels guilty for a moment. Then he remembers that Kim Junmyeon is a motherfucking manipulative son of a bitch, who only became Chanyeol’s friend through blackmail and deception, and every time Chanyeol swears it’s the last time he lets Junmyeon use him only to fall for the same tricks over and over again.

“I have to work, Junmyeon. You know, that awful thing people like me do.”

“People like you? I don’t understand,” Junmyeon says, and Chanyeol can already picture him, standing in front of a Starbucks in his expensive coat, expensive shoes, with his expensive haircut, wondering why people work.

“People without magical powers, I mean. People who can’t just solve their problems by a quick snap of their fingers. People with responsibilities, Junmyeon. And the funny thing about responsibilities is that you have to take them, or people won’t trust you.”

“That’s silly. You have magical powers too, have you forgotten?”

“I’m doing my best to forget, it would be easier if you didn’t remind me every five minutes.”

There’s a moment of silence, and Chanyeol uses it to turn the TV off, clean the table and head towards the bathroom with the phone still glued to his jaw.

“I could always charm your coworkers into thinking you didn’t have to work today,” Junmyeon suggests after some thinking, but they both know it would only work if Jongin is not at work. You can’t charm a psychic, not even a messy one like Jongin. And if Jongin knows, Jongdae will know too and even Junmyeon knows better than to mess with Kim Jongdae.

“Or you could call Kyungsoo and tell him there’s no way I’m going monster hunting on a Friday morning. That’s what the weekends are for.”

“This afternoon,” Junmyeon bargains, “right after lunch.”

“It’s just bad luck, Junmyeon, because I have to work after lunch today too. You’re gonna have to wait until my shift is over.”

“Chanyeol…”

Chanyeol feels the beginning of another tirade. “Listen, it’s not like we’re in a hurry. This Gumiho seems really young and hungry, so it’ll be more likely to make mistakes. It should be easy to catch.”

Junmyeon grumbles a little, but it’s not like he can force Chanyeol to do anything. He might have been chosen by the Council of the Covens, or whatever, as the Guardian of Seoul’s Metropolitan Area (with capital letters because it’s an Important Job) with unlimited powers over all-the-
creatures-living-within-the-capital, blah-blah-blah, but Chanyeol is the Samjokgu, and not even the Guardian can tell him what to do. It’s a part of the magical contract signed a thousand years ago, when the first Guardian asked for the help of the first Samjokgu, and it’s probably the only reason Junmyeon has never brainwashed Chanyeol into helping him with a snap of his fingers and the smug, elegant smile of one of the most powerful witches in the capital.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Junmyeon finishes, completely unaware that Chanyeol spent the last two minutes of his tirade brushing his teeth instead of listening to him.

“Sure, my shift ends at six. I’ll be there,” Chanyeol mumbles. He grabs his wallet, his coat, the scarf. Everything? No, no, the transportation card. He comes back to rummage through the pockets of yesterday night’s coat.

“Chanyeol, another person died today, you know.”

Chanyeol stops, his right hand on the phone, the left one grasping the crutch. It is easy for Junmyeon to talk about responsibilities. His responsibilities, as heavy as they are, come from his own choices. Chanyeol’s responsibilities come with a price, and the crutch he’s holding is there to remind him about that everyday. What’s even worse is, the crutch isn’t even the highest price he’s paid for these powers.

“I know,” he says in a tired exhale, as the door falls closed at his back and the automatic locks lets out a shrill jingle. “But there’s nothing I can do for them, or for any other victim this morning.”

Chanyeol never asked for this. The curse just came and took things away from him: his dreams, his grandfather, his left leg, the eyes he used to see the world. Byun Baekhyun. One too many. And Chanyeol can’t let the Samjokgu take anything else from him.

“I’ll help you if I can, but I still have a life to live, I have a job and it’s very important to me. I have the right to tell you no, and I won’t let you guilt trip me into giving it up.”

“Chanyeol, I...”

“Sorry, Junmyeon, I need to go. See you later.”

He hangs up before Junmyeon can reply, takes a deep breath to calm himself and tries not to think about the young boy whose life ended just a few hours ago. About the other victim he still knows nothing about.

Not my fucking fault, Chanyeol thinks, before he leaves his apartment to dive into Seoul’s frenetic morning traffic.

As he heads towards the subway station, fastening the coat to keep the cold January wind away, he checks his phone one last time. On a whim, he browses through his contacts to find Baekhyun’s name. He opens the chat. The last message was sent fifty-three days ago. Almost two months. It’s not the longest they’ve gone without talking to each other, but it still hurts.

The last message on the phone is a shaky, pixelated photo of a tall boy sitting on a badly lit stage, a guitar in his hands. The quality of the picture is too low to clearly see the boy’s features, but Chanyeol has no problem recognizing his own face. One of his last live performances in a live pub in Sangsu-dong, only a few minutes from the subway station. Just the kind of place where Baekhyun would end up finding him by instinct with his eyes closed, without even having to look.

There is a small message attached to the photo.
You sounded good.

No punctuation, no usual flurry of emojis. Chanyeol frowned when he’d received that message, almost two months ago, the day of his birthday, and he frowns now again, suddenly remembering why he never replied in the first place.

(His last meeting with Baekhyun happened in a small library tucked into the corner of the back alley between Edae and Ahyeon, six months ago. It was raining, Baekhyun had an umbrella but Chanyeol didn’t. He remembers Baekhyun’s light scoff, him saying, “You haven’t changed at all. One day you’ll even forget to bring your head.” He remembers Baekhyun walking him to the subway station, and then getting on the train with him. He doesn’t know if Baekhyun took him home, or if he took Baekhyun home, just that, like all the other times, none of that was supposed to happen. Mostly, he remembers the cold, empty bed the morning after. Not a message for four months before the stupid photo taken at that stupid live. That fucker. And still, it’s not the way Baekhyun left, like he does every time, it’s him taking the damn picture and leaving without even meeting Chanyeol that last time that hurts the most.)

His fingers linger on the screen while the words billow inside his mind. In the end, he decides to keep things short.

I need to talk to you.

He types fast and hits send before he can regret it. Afterwards, he mutes the conversation to spare himself the nerve-racking torture of looking for a new notification every five minutes and slides the phone back into his pocket.

He wonders where Baekhyun is, what is he doing, if he’ll answer his text. If he’ll come to Seoul to meet him. He wonders whether this, meeting Baekhyun again, especially now that Junmyeon is already on the edge, is a good idea. He takes a moment to realize he fucking misses that asshole. In the end, it doesn’t matter if Baekhyun will be gone the morning after. Chanyeol would definitely take him home again.

The clanking of the oncoming train swallows every other thought.

bosssdae  
if you find nini sleeping on the counter  
scold him 4 me yeol  
i can only trust u  
[Sent: 08:36, 23.01.2018]

The bleak, cold light of the early morning strips Seoul of all the mysteries that cover the city during the night. Magic doesn’t disappear during the day. Sometimes it sleeps. Sometimes it hides. Sometimes it dances before the eyes of oblivious people, making of familiarity the best disguise.

On Chanyeol’s way to work, a witch gives out flyers that steal people’s energy – not enough to hurt them, but enough to make them cranky, tired and more likely to catch a seasonal flu. She smiles at Chanyeol behind her heart-shaped bangs, and the color of her lips – crimson, as if she’s just drunk a cherry-ade, – shines through the grey veil that covers Chanyeol’s eyes. She hands him a flyer for Korean BBQ buffet, seven thousand won for lunch and nine thousand for dinner, drinks not included. Chanyeol would’ve taken it out of reflex, but magic flurries dangerously around her, a hint of hazel hiding behind her circle lenses. Charming spell. This bitch. He ignores her extended hand and scowls at her. In a moment, she recognizes him, too, and bows quickly, murmuring an
apology. Good, Chanyeol thinks, as he goes on his way. Getting jinxed by an illegal sorcerer is the last thing he needs this morning.

Being the Samjokgu comes with a lot of contraindications, neverending responsibilities and a big load of hassle. The only good thing Chanyeol got out of his mess is that at least everyone with magic in the whole city has learnt to keep their distance from him. He’s a well known face around the magic community, the Samjokgu who often accompanies Son Seungwan on her night patrols and, sometimes, even endures Kim Junmyeon’s presence.

Out of all the guardians of the city, Chanyeol probably likes Seungwan best. She’s very mindful of his commitments, never calls him randomly at two in the morning to see a corpse together, and has a nice habit of treating him to breakfast after they spend the whole night chasing magical drug dealers and smugglers of rare magical creatures that only Chanyeol can find. Well, she chases them, Chanyeol mostly limps behind. Seungwan is a nice person overall, and Chanyeol wishes she could take care of Gumiho, too, but apparently she’s not strong enough to deal with a full Gumiho on her own.

“Vampires, I can do,” she said when Chanyeol asked. “Werewolves, they’re sweet, like puppies. Necromancers are a bit tricky, but still manageable. Young fox spirits are really easy and even kinda cute, but a Gumiho? Oh, Chanyeollie, a Gumiho is basically a self-made divinity. I think, out of all the guardians of the city, only Junmyeon could take one down in a fight. Well, only Junmyeon and you.”

Chanyeol is not eager to prove her wrong, but he doubts he’ll ever be able to take a Gumiho down in a fight. Not again, at least.

(Only once, five years ago, when Chanyeol had just received these powers and he didn’t know what he was capable of doing with them, when he was a young university student who shared the tiniest one-room apartment with his boyfriend and dreamed of becoming a composer... Only once, Chanyeol tried to kill a Gumiho and he almost succeeded. He has no wish to try again.)

Luckily for him, there aren’t many Gumiho left in Korea, and they’re wise enough to avoid the capital like a plague. In his five years as the Samjokgu, Chanyeol has only dealt with young fox spirits, barely able to turn humans and a bit sly, but not cruel. Usually, when he works with Junmyeon, he only needs to find them for him, and then Junmyeon takes care of the rest.

He does it because it’s his responsibility – he’s the Samjokgu, he’s the only one who can find them easily, – and he does it because he has a debt to pay – to Junmyeon, in theory, but mostly to Baekhyun, and to Sehun – but he doesn’t like it. The only thing he wishes to do, for now, is to get to work and to force Jongin to make coffee for him, so he can start his shift off well.

Jongdae’s café is a small, cozy hole tucked between an ahjumma hairdresser slash dormitory slash seolleongtang restaurant building and a pink, cakey Etude House store. There is no sign on the street, no address on their Facebook and Instagram pages, and no map of the place anywhere. You have to walk into the narrow space between the two walls the adjacent buildings for a few meters, jump over the gutter and ignore the extremely illegal gambling club on your left to find Aneuk Café, in a corner so hidden and difficult to notice that people say the place is spellbound and you can only find it by chance, or if you really, really need a cup of good coffee.

Of course, it’s all an urban legend. The place is secluded because the rent is cheaper, the address is available on both Facebook and Instagram, but it’s slightly wrong, so it’s easy to get confused, and the sign was there, but it fell during a summer rainstorm and Jongdae has always been too lazy to replace it. Nevertheless, the myth of the magical coffee shop where the barista can guess your favorite drink for you is what keeps the business open, and Jongdae shamelessly milks every
tourist who comes his way with ridiculously high prices and his most charming smile.

Of all the things people say about Aneuk Café, only one is true.

When Chanyeol opens the door to enter the small, cozy room, it’s ten minutes to eight, the place is empty and Jongin is sleeping on the shiny counter, his mouth open and a string of saliva stretching from the corner of his mouth. A lonely cup of coffee is already on the counter, almost as if it’s waiting for someone. Chanyeol smiles to himself and quietly, quietly closes the door, tiptoes towards Jongin and takes the coffee. Double Macchiato, low fat, extra foam. Just what Chanyeol needed.

Jongin twitches and sniffs next to him. He opens one eye, staring at Chanyeol like a big, lazy cat.

“Do you like it, hyung?” he asks, stifling a yawn against his sleeve.

Chanyeol tastes the coffee. It’s still warm. A lot of sugar, just like he likes it. He moans in appreciation.

“It’s perfect,” he says, shooting Jongin a thumbs up. “But you have to get up from there now. If your brother finds you sleeping on the counter in my presence he’ll scold you and nag at me for ages.”

“He won’t have time to nag at you today,” Jongin says, his voice velvety and amused. He sounds sure of it, and it’s probably because he is. The perks of always telling the truth. “It’s going to be a really busy afternoon, a lot of unexpected guests.”

Chanyeol sends him a sideways glance, but doesn’t comment Jongin’s cryptic words. It wouldn’t do him any good. Jongin only talks when he needs to.

“Come on, lazy ass,” he says instead. “We’re opening in five minutes. Help me set everything up.”

joy

sorry oppa ill be late
[Sent: 11:52, 23.01.2018]

True to Jongin’s words, the café does get really busy in a few hours. There are tourists and people who found the place by chance, but most of the customers are regulars, students from the private university a block away who like to come and ogle Jongin and Chanyeol while they work on their assignments. Sooyoung also has her personal fanclub, but they’ve memorized her shifts well, and Chanyeol knows he won’t see any of the rowdy boys, who usually sit in the back and look at her with stars in their eyes, until she gets here before Jongin’s lunch break.

Chanyeol winks at Sejeong, a bioengineering senior who often stays until it’s closing time, and asks her if she’s sleeping well. “You look tired, Sejeongie.”

She hides her giggle behind her hand and shakes her head in a flurry of long hair. “I might die if they give me one more assignment, I swear!” she whines, and Chanyeol nods and adds a cookie on her trail. On the house.

“Fighting, Sejeongie!”

“Oppa, you look tired too! Take care of yourself!”
She waves before picking up the trail and giggles all the way back to her seat. Chanyeol can see her tell the story excitedly to her friends and he finds himself smiling. She’s cute.

Junmyeon doesn’t understand why Chanyeol keeps working at the café when he could earn so much more just by playing guard dog for the Council of the Covens. The Samjokgu can track almost any magical creature, a very rare and expensive talent to find in the magical community and one that only Chanyeol possesses, and yet he uses it to help Seungwan for free and only lets her treat him to breakfast every now and then. He does, however, take money from Junmyeon, but only because Junmyeon has the uncanny ability to be one of the most fastidious and inopportune witches of the capital, especially when he’s working. “My powers are for free, it’s my patience that you’re paying for,” Chanyeol said to him once, when they started working together. And Junmyeon did pay for it, enough that Chanyeol doesn’t really need to work to get by.

What Junmyeon – like Chanyeol’s parents, and his sister and probably his grandmother, too – fails to see in the great scheme of Chanyeol’s life, is that working at the café makes him happy.

When Jongdae had offered him the job, five years ago, Chanyeol had just almost killed someone, broken up with his childhood-friend-slash-boyfriend, dropped out of university with only a few exams left, fought with his favorite family member and lost his least favorite family member. All of this on top of having acquired the power to see magical creatures and all the responsibilities that came with it. All at once. It was not his best moment. Scratch that, it really sucked. (Not that it doesn’t suck anymore, it just... sucks a bit less.)

And then Jongdae came, and he was one of Baekhyun’s friends, and Chanyeol really didn’t want to accept help from any of Baekhyun’s friends, but the alternative would’ve been going back home, to a family he didn’t want to face, and listening to their talks about his new responsibilities as the Samjokgu and learning how to control his new powers he didn’t even want. Learning how to hunt monsters, in a world where the line between monsters and people is too thin for him to tread.

He never thought it would last, mostly because he didn’t have any experience as a barista nor any interest in working in a café. Also, there was still the problem of his left leg. Being crippled is not the best condition for a job that requires standing for a long time, but Jongdae insisted, so Chanyeol ended up accepting the offer.

For him, it was just another way to get past the slump, the only thing he could hold onto when everything else seemed to fade away in a wisp of smoke.

Despite his dreary predictions, it worked. In no time, he fell in love with the café, its obscure location, its fake leather seats and the soft, subdued lights, the wooden tables, the smell of the lavender Sooyoung grew in big planters hanging from the window of the staff room. (She scolds everyone, even Jongdae, if they forget to water them when she’s not on her shift. In spring, Jongin plucks them and ties them in tiny posies that Chanyeol leaves on every table.)

Chanyeol likes Jinri, who taught him how to draw raccoons on milk foam. He likes Sooyoung and the way magic clings to the roots of her hair and nails, changing their colors according to her mood, red and blue and vibrant green. They remind him that not all witches are bad, that some of them just want to go on dates, hold hands with their lovers under the cherry blossoms, put on a nice dress and dance the night away at the club. Fall in love.

Chanyeol likes Jongin, who could guess the way you’ll die by touching your heart, and your most terrible secret through as little as a handshake, and only uses this power to guess his customers’ favorite coffee. Chanyeol came to like Jongdae, even if he’s friends with Baekhyun on top of being one of the most powerful witches of the city, because the only thing Jongdae cares about is keeping his tiny café going.
*Aneuk* means cozy, and that’s what the place means to Chanyeol. A shelter, a safe haven, a hug when he feels down – which, for Chanyeol, is most of the fucking time. *Aneuk* means family, and it helps Chanyeol deal with the fact that he hasn’t visited his grandmother in years. So he comes here every morning, without fail, even when he can feel magic pounding at his temples, insistent and poisonous, so strong it makes him want to retch, especially then. He comes here to recharge, to joke around with Jongin and to tease Jongdae about his failure of a love life, to make coffee until the dull pain in his bad leg is due to fatigue and not guilt or the curse of the Samjokgu. And, of course, he comes to the café to be ogled at by university students.

“*Oppa,* will you guess our favorite drink?” A small girl asks, blushing softly, her voice high and sugary. Chanyeol pretends to think about it, but in the end just shakes his head.

“Sorry, Mina, for the favorite drink trick you should ask Nini when he comes back from his break. But you can tell me what your favorite drink is and I’ll make it for you.”

He can feel Sooyoung’s arrival even before the door opens suddenly, bringing forth a gush of cold winter that makes everyone shiver and a gush of magic that smells like lavender and lemon soda. Her cheeks and nose are rosy from the cold, her hands buried in the pockets of her oversized coat and her hair all messy from the wind. It’s red today, so vibrant that the rest of the world seems gray in comparison – it must be a magical illusion. She shakes her head when she enters, scattering sparkles of magic everywhere. Chanyeol is the only one who can see them roll on the wooden floor like glass beads, vanishing with a fizzle when their momentum ends.

“Good morning! Wow, it’s really busy today! Let me hang my coat, it’ll be just a moment.”

She disappears in the staff room before Chanyeol can greet her, and when she comes back she’s tying her apron already, speaking at the speed of light. “I’m really sorry, I was caught in a phone call with my mom and I didn’t realize until it was too late. I really need a coffee now.”

Chanyeol ruffles her hair, making her giggle, and points towards the coffee Jongin left for her. “He put a little more sugar than usual in there, said you’d need it.”

She smiles, relieved. “Nini is the best. Second best, after our Chanyeollie,” she says with a wink before greeting one of their usual customers, a young boy doing his military service at the police station nearby, who comes every day for lunch break to buy coffee for all his coworkers and stare dreamily at her.

Chanyeol just shakes his head, takes the payment for the last order and leaves Sooyoung to fill in for him.

In the backroom, he finds Jongin draped on the small couch, his legs sticking out and his neck oddly bent. Jongin spends most of his breaks on that couch, napping. Chanyeol silently makes his way around him and goes straight for his bag. He resists the urge to check his conversation with Baekhyun to see if he’s answered because he knows he won’t be able to keep his cool for the whole day if Baekhyun did, even less so if Baekhyun didn’t. He looks for his lighter instead.

Transportation card, phone, charger, wallet, glasses, eye drops, painkillers for his leg that pulses weakly even now. He doesn’t find the lighter, only cigarettes that are useless without it. Before he can curse, Jongin stirs weakly, rolls on his side and fishes something out of the pocket of his discarded apron. It’s a lighter.

“Since when do you smoke?” Chanyeol frowns. “Does your brother know?”

Jongin shakes his head, eyes still closed. “I brought it for you, *hyung.* I’ve had it since last week,
just didn’t know when you’d need it.”

Chanyeol scoffs. Typical Kim Jongin, too nice for his own good. Of course he would never smoke and disappoint his worrywart of a brother.

“Thank you, kiddo.”

He throws his coat on and lets himself out into the small back alleyway where he usually smokes during breaks, sometimes joined by Jongdae.

“Hyung,” Jongin continues, startling Chanyeol. He didn’t realize the boy had followed him outside, “weren’t you trying to quit?”

Chanyeol leans against the wall, closes his eyes and enjoys the taste of smoke on the roof of his mouth. He was trying to quit, that’s true, because Baekhyun asked him to, many times – he complained about the smell and about the taste and, “We have such a short lifespan, why would you want to reduce it further?” he would ask. “To savor it more,” Chanyeol would answer, and Baekhyun would tilt his head to the side and look at Chanyeol, fully unconvinced yet so, so endearred. But Chanyeol has not heard from Baekhyun at all in the last two months (officially, he hasn’t heard from Baekhyun in years, and Baekhyun might have ignored his message today and that would be very difficult to accept), and he feels petty enough to smoke in spite of Baekhyun’s warnings.

“Your lunch break ended three minutes ago,” he answers, after taking a long drag of his cigarette.

“Yours has barely started, but you’re going to go back in a moment, right? My brother will nag a lot today.”

“You said it would get too busy for him to nag at me.”

Jongin looks down and shrugs. “I just said he’s going to nag, not that he’s going to nag at you. Stop making everything about yourself.”

“Well, stop being so vague then.”

“I am very detailed, thank you very much. You’re just bad at picking up my clues.”

Chanyeol refuses to answer and smokes in silence, savoring the moment with his eyes closed. When he opens them anew, Jongin is staring at him. Something flashes in his eyes, a shadow of doubt.

It’s the kind of face Jongin only makes when he knows something and he’s wondering whether to tell people or not.

“Does it make any difference?” Chanyeol asked once, too tired of seeing him struggle silently within himself. “Can your words really change the future?”

“My words are the future,” Jongin had replied. “Sometimes they don’t make any difference because what happens needs to happen anyway, but sometimes what I say, or even the fact that I said anything, is the reason things happen. Sometimes I don’t say anything and things happen all the same.”

“Then how do you know when to talk and when to stay quiet?”

“I don’t. I just do what I want. It doesn’t matter, because the future will happen anyway, just like I
predicted it. Destiny can’t change, that’s why fighting against it is terribly unfair.”

A lot of things are unfair. And Chanyeol doesn’t want to hear what Jongin has to say. “We should go back inside,” he says instead, putting the cigarette off under his heels.

“Hyung,” Jongin asks, “are you, by any chance, going back home tomorrow?”

Chanyeol pauses, eyes narrowing.

“No that I know, no.”

Jongin hums. “Not that you know, of course. Future is really a curious thing. Let’s go back inside.”

**Kim Junmyeon**

I’m coming to pick you up.
[Sent: 12:04, 23.01.2018]

When Chanyeol comes back inside, Jongin in tow, the coffee shop sounds uncharacteristically silent. Gone is the chattering of the customers, Sooyoung calling for a green tea latte, Bolbbalgan4 asking their lover to say I love you. The air glistens with magic.

One glance at Jongin and Chanyeol realizes that the other boy already knows what’s happening. He shrugs. “I told you, it’s going to get really busy tonight. My brother is on his way. He’s not happy.”

“Which brother?” Chanyeol asks, not sure he wants to hear the answer.


Wonderful. Chanyeol hopes he’s not the one who will have to pick up the pieces once they’re done fighting.

He pushes the door of the staff room open, hesitant at first, and then harder when he realizes there’s no need to be cautious because no one would hear it anyway. Time has stopped inside the coffee shop. Everything stills in vivid color, brighter than it has any right to be.

Sejeong is at the counter again, probably buying cake and coffee for the two juniors who have joined her at the table. Her hair has fallen in front of her face, a curtain of curly strands escaping the cage of bobby pins and standing unnaturally still, frozen. At the front table, two students wearing a Yonsei University varsity jacket have been caught mid-laugh. One is helplessly looking at the screen of his phone, the other is leaning forward to get a better view of a youtube video that is paused, just like they are, just like everything else in the room is. Even the coffee machine has been caught under the spell. The stream of hot water has stopped mid-air, as if crystallized. The smoke has stilled too, spyrals of hot vapor caught outside of time.

Chanyeol meets Sooyoung’s eyes. She’s a witch, too, so the spell works on her only partially, because even unable to move she seems perfectly aware of what is happening and she also looks mildly terrified.

The bell at the door rings weakly and Chanyeol looks up, eyes narrowing when the door swings open and Kim Junmyeon enters the coffee shop in his expensive coat and leather shoes and fucking cashmere waistcoat, bringing forth all of his pompous, awkward glory.
He looks at Chanyeol, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “Well, hello. You guys don’t look all that busy to me.”

Chanyeol groans, because of course... Of course, Junmyeon ignored him and his request to be left alone until he finished working.

“Are you crazy?” he hisses, pointing towards his petrified customers and Sooyoung, who’s trying to get rid of the spell so hard she’s shaking. “Let them go, you can’t do that.”

Junmyeon’s gaze doesn’t waver. “I can and I will, if that’s what it takes for you to help me.”

“I thought,” Chanyeol says, his voice thin with repressed anger, “we agreed on you not interfering with my job. That was the rule, Junmyeon, you can’t just come here and... what? What did you even do to them?”

Junmyeon doesn’t even have the decency to look guilty. In fact, he looks as offended as Chanyeol is.

“Another corpse, Chanyeol, this thing is going through some kind of involution and I need your help, now. So be smart, tell your friends you’re so sorry but you have more important plans and then we can go and deal with this thing. Kyungsoo is already waiting for us in the car.”

Chanyeol’s hands ball into fists.

“Do I have a choice?” he asks, and he hates the way Junmyeon’s eyes harden, hates that Junmyeon can intrude on his little sanctuary of peace so easily and desecrate it. He hates Junmyeon’s alleged moral high ground and the fact that he thinks he has the right to judge Chanyeol’s way of living just because he doesn’t want to spend the rest of his life chasing ghosts and monsters.

“You can choose to ignore your responsibilities and let more innocent people die, or you can come with me and help me solve this mess as fast as possible, so that you can go back to wasting your talents by serving coffee to university students and stressed salarymen.”

The way he says it makes Chanyeol’s stomach twist with guilt. He doesn’t care what Junmyeon thinks, he doesn’t want to care. And yet, it took so little for Junmyeon to disrupt the little peace Chanyeol has managed to collect in this place. Now, even if he stays, he’ll just feel awful.

The café is still suspended in time, locked in a magical bubble, when the bell at the door rings again. The door opens and time washes over the place like a riptide crashing against the reef. Water flows into the cup Sooyoung has been holding, and the laughter of the boys at the front table fills the air, so loud it even covers the love song blasted again by the speakers. Sejeong tilts her head to the side and blinks at Chanyeol, surprised to see him standing in front of her. “Oppa, when did you get here?”

Chanyeol tries to school his expression into something more neutral than the deep scowl he only reserves for Junmyeon, but his attention is attracted by the open door and the figure standing against the grey alley.

Kim Jongdae is a cheerful, overexcited little man but right now he’s so angry even Jongin takes a step back. Sooyoung looks even more terrified than when she was under Junmyeon’s spell.

In Junmyeon’s defence, he doesn’t back off. Not even when Jongdae marches inside like he owns the place – which, in fact, he does – walks towards Junmyeon and, with the fakest, coldest smile Chanyeol has ever seen, says, “Get the fuck out.”
Junmyeon’s face contorts in a pained grimace, something between a prune and an angry young witch. “I only came to pick Chanyeol up.”

“Weren’t you on break?” Chanyeol turns his expression back to Sejeong and realizes he still hasn’t answered her question.

In the background, he can hear Jongdae hiss against Junmyeon – “You fucking charmed all my customers and one of my employees, who also happens to be a witch, you dimwit, so much for being the righteous Guardian-” – but no one else seems to hear them except for Sooyoung, Jongin and Chanyeol. And the high school werewolves at the back of the room, who are doing an awful job at being subtle at eavesdropping. Chanyeol frowns at them and they cower down, ashamed.

He manages to smile at Sejeong and tells her he’s still on break. “I just heard a sudden noise and thought Sooyoung had dropped something. There’s a lot of people, and she’s here all alone.”

“I don’t fucking care,” Jongdae is outright screaming at this point, bright magic surrounding him like a halo. Jongin looks pained, like he wants to stage an intervention but is too afraid to do anything. Sooyoung is taking an order trying to ignore the commotion, and the rest of the coffee shop mercifully doesn’t hear anything. “You don’t have any right to come here and do whatever you want!”

“But Chanyeol...”

“Chanyeol is my employee, and you can’t kidnap him from here like this, you fucking-”

“Of course, but you should rest more. You look so tired.” Sejeong keeps chatting, completely unaware of the family feud unfolding right next to her. From the corner of his eyes, Chanyeol sees Jongin sigh and pick up the broom from the staff room.

It only takes three minutes before Jongdae makes the first cup explode.

---

kyungiesoo
where are thou park
[Sent: 12:26, 23.01.2018]

Chanyeol doesn’t know what Junmyeon and Jongdae talked about after they locked themselves in the staff room. He has a feeling Jongin might know – Jongin knows everything – but it feels impolite to ask. He doesn’t want to intrude on their family matters.

He waits until Junmyeon storms out of the place in silence, only stopping to tell Chanyeol he’ll be waiting for him in the car. After Junmyeon has left, Chanyeol joins Jongdae in the staff room. The back door is open and Jongdae is smoking outside.

Chanyeol knows what he should do. He should change out of his work uniform, put his coat on and join Junmyeon. He should do his job as the fucking Samjokgu, not work in a stupid coffee shop.

What Chanyeol does is, in order, open his bag, find his phone, unlock it, check his chat with Baekhyun in a fit of pettiness. His fingers tremble as he slides them on the screen. Baekhyun hasn’t even opened the message. The fucker.

“Wonderful, amazing. Trust him to fucking go missing when I really need him.”

Still shaking, he rummages through the pockets until his fingers close around his emergency pack.
of cigarettes and the lighter Jongin brought for him. It’s the second one today, and Jongdae will probably nag at him, but Chanyeol can always say Jongdae is not supposed to smoke either. Besides, Jongin said Jongdae won’t nag at him today and everything Jongin says comes true.

Chanyeol gets out and silently slides next to Jongdae, leaning over to light the cigarette from his.

“I thought you decided to quit,” Jongdae mumbles.

“You quit months ago,” Chanyeol replies, “and yet you are.”

Jongdae puffs the smoke out and, for a minute, they just enjoy being angry and childish, wasting time and smoking while Junmyeon waits in the car.

“He makes me so damn mad. Always acting like the entire world is his playground, what an entitled asshole. Did he at least say hi to Jongin on his way out?” He didn’t, but Chanyeol doesn’t want to tell him that. It’s best to stay neutral whenever Jongdae and Junmyeon fight. Which is every time they meet. Every single time.

Jongdae growls at Chanyeol’s lack of response. “Whatever, whatever. You should still go with him anyway.”

Chanyeol nods and smokes.

“It’s not like I want you to go, but if there’s a Gumiho killing people you should.”

“I know,” Chanyeol says, softly. It’s not that he doesn’t realize what he should do. It’s just that it’s never about what he wants.

“Go, do what you have to do, come back on Monday.” Jongdae groans, puts out the cigarette off with a flick of his fingers and rubs his temples. Chanyeol, despite his dark, dark mood, smiles.

“We’ll have to update your ‘days without smoking’ table. How long did you last this time? Two months?”

The last time Jongdae smoked was, coincidentally, also the last time Junmyeon visited.

Jongdae glowers at Chanyeol, pouts and, with a finger snap – so familiar, he and Junmyeon are brothers, after all – makes Chanyeol’s cigarette disappear too.

“This is what you get for being a smartass, Park Chanyeol. Now let me go check up on Sooyoung. Leaving her alone with Jongin is too much of a punishment.”

Once they’re back in the staff room, Chanyeol unties his apron and folds it carefully, while Jongdae puts his own on. He doesn’t leave, however, even after he’s ready, and just waits at the door, looking at Chanyeol.

“Hey Yeol...” he says, voice low. “Take care of him, okay? Junmyeon is a dick sometimes, but he’s my brother.”

Actually, if there’s someone who needs to be taken care of, that’s probably Chanyeol, and surely not Junmyeon, the Guardian of the City, powerful witch extraordinaire, blah-blah-blah. Still, Chanyeol nods to reassure Jongdae.

“Did Jongin say anything?” he also asks, worried.

Jongdae sighs. “He didn’t say anything about Junmyeon, but I can see he’s worried.” He looks at
his phone, and Chanyeol can see his eyes widen. He almost opens the door, then stops again.

“Is something wrong?” Chanyeol asks him.

Junmyeon bites his lips, steals a look at Chanyeol for a long moment, then at his phone again. He smiles.

“No, not really. Don’t worry, Chanyeol, just an old friend who messaged me out of the blue.”

Chanyeol clicks his tongue. At least one of them has friends who actually reply to their messages.

kyungiesoo
no really where are you
[Sent: 12:42, 23.01.2018]

A pale, stern winter sun greets Chanyeol outside. Junmyeon is standing next to a black sedan with tinted windows and leather interiors, so big it takes up most of the narrow driveway. The driver rolls down the window, showing big eyes and heart-shaped lips. Ah, so he didn’t come alone, after all. It makes sense, because Do Kyungsoo rarely leaves Junmyeon to wander alone and unsupervised. Thankfully.

“Yo,” Chanyeol greets him.

Kyungsoo cracks a smile at Chanyeol’s frown. “Yo. What’s with the long face? Is it because he forced you to come along? Do you really hate our company that much?”

“I’d probably enjoy the company more if it wasn’t imposed on me, you know.”

Kyungsoo snorts. “You have to forgive him. He just doesn’t know how to ask nicely.”

“I noticed. “ Chanyeol opens the door and slides in the backseat.

“Did he fight with Jongdae again?” Kyungsoo asks, as Chanyeol closes the door.

“What did you think he was doing back inside all that time? Being nice to me? No. Being considerate of my feelings? If only. No, he was screaming at one of his brothers and ignoring the other.”

“You know I’m still here, right?” Junmyeon says, frowning. “I can still hear you talking about me.”

“That’s the whole point.” Chanyeol fumbles with the seatbelt before asking, “You said there was another body?”

The engine comes to life with a soft purr and the screech of the tires against the unpaved road as Kyungsoo steps on the gas and they start moving, almost crushing three people in the process. It is not a good moment for Chanyeol to remember Kyungsoo always drives like he’s in the middle of an action movie chase, an occupational disease that comes with his job as a police detective.

“Slow the fuck down!” Chanyeol screams when they barely avoid slamming into a street food stall. Kyungsoo ignores his plea.

That’s when Chanyeol feels it. Kyungsoo brakes, Junmyeon draws a shaky breath, the food vendor screams at their car. The make-up store next to them is blasting a song that says as if it’s the last,
as if there’s no tomorrow, when something touches Chanyeol’s soul. It’s the softest, fluttering touch, so familiar he barely feels it. He could’ve missed it, if not for its previous absence.

He turns around, trying to find the source of the magic tingling in his chest, but Kyungsoo is already driving away, his foot heavy on the gas pedal. For a moment, Chanyeol sees colors. Bright silver and golden amber and the faintest pink, like cherry blossoms unfolding way too early. The connection breaks before Chanyeol can fully grasp it, and the world plunges again into the usual flat greyness of rainy days.

“Chanyeol, are you still with us?”


He shakes that strange feeling away to focus on the envelope Junmyeon hands him. It contains some pictures and the report of the officers who examined the second crime scene. Chanyeol’s eyes linger on the face of the second victim. Unlike the first one, this boy’s eyes are closed.

“Did they find him like this?” he asks.

Junmyeon frowns. “Like what?”

“His eyes. Were they already closed?”

The car stops abruptly at the red light. Kyungsoo meets Chanyeol’s eyes on the rearview mirror. “Yes, they were.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why does it even matter?” Junmyeon asks, turning back to frown at Chanyeol some more, but Chanyeol ignores him. The car starts again with a jolt.

Two victims in such a short time. Their wounds look similar, maybe less rushed on the second corpse. But deeper. And the eyes. Closed.

The wounds on the first body were rough, irregular, impatient. That means hunger. The monster attacked him and left him there to die. Then left, in a rush. In a rush for what? To find more food, of course. To look for another victim. And when it found a suitable boy, the monster killed him quick and fast, ate his heart and liver, sure, but took some time to close his eyes after killing him – after feeding from him. That means control. That means care. That means it might have a routine, some sort of ritual. A newborn Gumiho can’t already have a ritual.

Junmyeon keeps talking, unaware of Chanyeol’s inner turmoil.

“They died only a couple of hours apart,” he explains. “The second victim’s name was Lee Seunghoon. This poor guy was closing the bar yesterday night, and one of his coworkers found him at the door this morning.”

“Already dead, I guess.”

Junmyeon nods. “Slash wounds on his abdomen, just like the other one. Heart and lungs partly missing. Want to see?”

Chanyeol looks up from the pictures. “Am I not looking at it right now?”

“Well, yes,” Kyungsoo replies, eyes still focused on the street as he navigates through the traffic.
“We need to wait twenty-four hours for the autopsy, so both corpses were sent to the nearest hospital. We’re driving there right now.”

Chanyeol leans back against the backseat.

“Alright guys, this is where I draw a line. I’m not letting you two drag me into a morgue. What if someone sees us? How are we supposed to explain our presence in front of the corpse of a murder victim?”

Kyungsoo snorts. “I’m a detective, I don’t have to explain anything.”

Junmyeon rolls his eyes. “We have magic, Chanyeol. We’ll just erase their memories like always.”

“Still not doing it,” Chanyeol says, with a click of his tongue. “I can’t find any tracks, and it’s been hours. I’ve already saw this creature’s handiwork yesterday in person, and it was more than enough. We have the pictures, and I can confirm: yes, it is a Gumiho, and yes, it is killing people.”

The car stops again and Kyungsoo turns to Junmyeon with a mellow smile that doesn’t match his mean words. “See? I told you he would whine like a baby.”

Junmyeon pointedly refuses to answer. “Keep driving. He can whine as much as he wants, we’re going there anyway and he’s coming with us.”

“Oh, really?” Chanyeol says with a snort. “I wanna see how you are going to force me to help you, Kim Junmyeon. I’m anticipating that moment. I won’t get off this fucking car, and you are going corpse-watching without me!”

Contrary to popular belief, which depicts him as a werewolf or at least a half-pixie, Do Kyungsoo is one hundred percent, completely human. His mother and sisters are all witches from one of the Jongno-gu covens, but Kyungsoo himself doesn’t have any remarkable powers other than a mean right hook, years of taekwondo practice and a glare so strong he doesn’t really need magic to make people freeze. Oh, and then there’s the gun he was given, together with his badge, when he was promoted to a detective of the Seoul’s Metropolitan Police Agency. The gun is, actually, a lot more effective than the glare and the right hook. And most magical powers, to be honest.

Why someone like Kyungsoo, who has a brilliant career ahead of him, a career that involves neither witches, nor werewolves, and not even pixies, wants to hang out with a walking hassle that is Kim Junmyeon, is actually out of Chanyeol’s grasp.

“Childhood friends,” Kyungsoo explains, leaning against the wall. “My sister used to have a crush on him, so I befriended him out of spite and then I spent like a week holding it over her just like she’s always held her powers over me.”

“Well, congratulations. That doesn’t really explain why you’re still friends with him, though.”

Kyungsoo shrugs. “Well, someone has to keep him from making a fool of himself.”
They both turn to look at Junmyeon who’s awkwardly trying to speak to one of the nurses. That’s usually Kyungsoo’s job, but Junmyeon argued that he was more than able to speak to non-magical beings and went ahead before anyone could stop him. Chanyeol watches him gesticulate, trying to explain something to the woman, when a sudden pang of pain forces him to look away. He shakes his head with a grimace. The lights are too naked bright in this hospital. They hurt Chanyeol’s eyes, sending spikes of pain like golden needles into his brain. He might need more painkillers if this goes on.

“Does he ever talk with someone who is not...” he asks, looking at Kyungsoo instead.

“Magical?” Kyungsoo supplies.

Chanyeol nods.

“Well, there’s me. And there’s you,” Kyungsoo counts on his fingers. “And that’s enough. Ah, wait, you’re magical, too, even if you like pretending that you aren’t. So, there’s only me.”

At the end of the corridor, Junmyeon scratches his head and laughs awkwardly at something the nurse said. Her uniform is so pristine and white it’s almost annoying. Chanyeol’s head throbs again and he tries his best to ignore it. He should’ve brought some sunglasses. Maybe next time he will. The curse made his eyes awfully sensitive.

Junmyeon scratches his head, confused. He looks almost cute like that, not like the stuck-up snobbish young man Chanyeol usually has to deal with.

“Shouldn’t we go and save him?” Chanyeol asks. “I don’t think this is getting him anywhere. Also, I have this mad headache, so I’d like to get this over with.”

He doesn’t need to ask twice. The nurse leans towards Junmyeon, a little too close for a stranger, and Kyungsoo leaves the wall with a frown.

“Stay here,” he blurts, and before Chanyeol can stop him he’s already striding towards the couple. He says something to the nurse, his voice particularly quiet and overly polite, and the next thing Chanyeol knows he’s coming back with a stunned Junmyeon in tow. The nurse bows to them and turns to leave in her white vest.

“Come on, this way,” Kyungsoo says, heading towards the staircase. “I don’t know why you decided to talk to the nurse. I’ve been here countless times, I could have led you there, you know?”

Junmyeon scoffs. “You said I don’t know how to talk to girls.”

“Yes, and I stand my case.”

“I know how to talk to girls,” Junmyeon insists, pouting.

“You don’t know how to talk to people, Myeon.”

Chanyeol follows them without a word, straining to resist the urge to roll his eyes at their antics. He’s glad Kyungsoo came with them. It’s not that he likes him more than he likes Junmyeon, it’s just that he likes Junmyeon more when Kyungsoo is around. Kyungsoo makes Junmyeon... less stuck up, less serious. Less prone to remind everyone that he’s the one of the most powerful witches of the city and to talk about moral duties and responsibilities. Less Suho and more Junmyeon. When the Guardian becomes too much, Kyungsoo scoffs and brings Junmyeon back.

“Stop being uncool,” Kyungsoo says in the end, and Junmyeon, miraculously, does.
They open the door of the morgue and Junmyeon snaps his fingers to make the two doctors inside the room leave without asking any questions. They’ll never remember anyone else was there, either.

“Go ahead,” he gestures for them to come in. “I’ll be here, just to make sure no one else comes in.” At that, he turns away and closes the door behind him, leaving them alone in the cold, vault-like room.

Kyungsoo whistles, and the sound bounces from the white walls of the room. “Seems like it’s just me and you, Park. Come on, let’s do this.”

Chanyeol covers his mouth and nose when Kyungsoo opens the first trail. The boy from yesterday night can’t stare at him with his eyes closed, but Chanyeol can still feel his judgement. He was supposed to be the Samjokgu, after all. He and no one else. He was the only one who could’ve protected that boy and what did he do? Nothing.

“Put him back, I’ve already seen him,” he tells Kyungsoo, swallowing a lump of guilt. “Show me the other one.”

Kyungsoo complies quickly and uncovers the second corpse. Chanyeol tries not to focus on the evident signs of lividity marring the pale skin. He examines the shape of the wounds, scooting closer to see better.

“Can you give me those gloves?” he asks. “On the table, the surgical gloves.”

Kyungsoo complies. The latex slides on the back of Chanyeol’s hand and snaps against his wrist after he’s done putting it on. He does the same with his other hand and, when he’s done, he quickly grabs the edges of the wound, forcing it open.

The inside is cold and damp, and Chanyeol tries not to think about the smell or he’d just might faint.

“That’s disgusting,” Kyungsoo comments. You tell me, Chanyeol almost answers, but he just keeps looking.

“Are you looking for something, or are you just doing this for the sake of being thorough?”

“Not sure. I haven’t dealt with a lot of Gumiho before, a couple at best. Mostly we hunted fox spirits with Junmyeon, very young ones. We caught them before they could actually hurt someone or turn into Gumiho, and Junmyeon brought them back to be judged by the Council of the Covens.” Chanyeol licks his lips. His hands are clammy and hot inside their latex shell. “But sometimes Gumiho leave part of them inside the bodies of their victims. Almost like a signature. That’s what I’m looking for.”

“Wait, shouldn’t there be one on the other body as well?”

Chanyeol shakes his head, too focused on his task to look back at Kyungsoo. “Not really. The other time was more... rushed, unplanned. The Gumiho was too hungry to stop and think about a signature. I thought it was young and inexperienced, but it’s not. If it has a ritual, it’s definitely not, so maybe it was just in a hurry the first time.”

His knuckles hit something hard and pointy. He forces his hand inside, a little deeper, until his fingers close around it. When he pulls back and opens his fist, a claw falls on the table, right next to the sink. It’s long and curved, like a crescent harvest moon, with mother of pearl glint, like a jewel. And it’s huge, the same length of the lifeline on Chanyeol’s palm. This Gumiho is old, older than
anything Chanyeol has ever met.

“Is that bad?” Kyungsoo asks, looking at Chanyeol’s nervous face with a frown.

“Kinda, yes. Maybe you should call Junmyeon. It’s worse than we thought.”

And maybe Chanyeol should call Baekhyun. And hope Baekhyun takes the call. Because they’re all in danger.

**seungwan**

have you killed suho yet? lol

[Sent: 14:42, 23.01.2018]

Their most urgent problem is, Junmyeon is not answering.

“What do you mean he is not answering?” Chanyeol asks, more than a little pissed, with a hint of fear. “We have a situation here.”

Kyungsoo frowns, bites his bottom lip and calls again, and then they both wait as the phone rings, rings and... rings. Until the line cuts off.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Chanyeol says, frantically looking inside his bag for his own phone. “He didn’t contact me either.”

He and Kyungsoo stare at each other for a moment.

“Would he ever just leave like that while we’re in the middle of illegally opening the corpse of a murder victim?” Chanyeol asks, but Kyungsoo only shakes his head.

“Not like this. Maybe if there was a big scale emergency, but he would tell me he was leaving. He would.”

“And he didn’t,” Chanyeol concludes for him, “so the best case scenario is we have a big scale emergency waiting for us outside that door. In the worst case the guardian of Seoul, one of the most powerful magical being living in this city, has just been kidnapped by a thousand years old fox divinity of some sort. Fantastic, amazing.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes widen and he brings a finger to his mouth. “We might have another problem,” he whispers, gesturing towards the door.

Now Chanyeol hears it, too. Voices. Footsteps. A stretcher being rolled towards... the morgue.

“Fuck, people are coming,” he whispers, missing the way Kyungsoo rolls his eyes at his late reaction.

“Shall we run?” Kyungsoo proposes, but Chanyeol points to his bad leg and the crutch he needs to walk. “Right, no running, no fucking running. Fuck, fuck, fuck, there’s no time. Let’s improvise, okay?”

“Wait, that’s not okay,” Chanyeol tries to say, but the door is already swinging open and the two men wearing scrubs and carrying a stretcher, with probably another body on top, enter the room.

It takes only a moment for them to notice Chanyeol and Kyungsoo, followed by the longest awkward silence ever, before one of them asks, “What is going on? Who are you?”
It’s over, Chanyeol thinks. They’re fucked. Without Junmyeon to snap his fingers and cover their asses they’ll both get arrested. Fuck.

That’s when Kyungsoo takes his badge out and shows it to one of the men.

“Do Kyungsoo, Seoul Metropolitan Police,” he says. He points to Chanyeol. “He’s Park Chanyeol. He’s here to confirm the identity of the victims.”

The two doctors exchange a worried look, taking a moment to examine Kyungsoo’s badge.

“Who let you in? You’re not supposed to be here alone with the corpses,” asks one of them.

“Two of your colleagues brought us here. Mr. Park here asked if he could have a little time alone with one of them. He’s the brother of the second victim, you know. I was just coming in to tell him it’s time to go.”

The doctors don’t really look convinced by the explanation. Chanyeol tries to look as shaken as he can – which isn’t difficult, considering he’s inwardly dying a little more at every second of silence.

“Can you tell me your names again?” the older man asks.

“Do Kyungsoo and Park Chanyeol. And now, I’m afraid we need to go. This is my business card, just in case you need to contact me.”

For a moment, Chanyeol can only feel admiration for Kyungsoo. If the two doctors let them go, it’s only because of his eagerness to provide his name and a means to contact him.

“The fuck, have you ever thought of becoming a professional actor?” Chanyeol asks, as soon as the door closes at their backs. The corridor is too bright, again, and he winces, almost unable to look at Kyungsoo in the blinding light.

In a different situation, Kyungsoo would’ve smirked. Now he only frowns. “We need to find Junmyeon,” he says.

“No, we need to get the hell out of here before they realize we totally lied to them and get us arrested.”

Kyungsoo is not big, but he looks positively scary right now.

“Junmyeon might be dying and you’re worrying about getting arrested?”

Easy for him to say, Kyungsoo chose this. He had a choice, a perfectly reasonable choice, he could’ve gone home and forgotten all about magic and Gumiho. Chanyeol never had a choice.

“We won’t be able to find Junmyeon if they arrest us,” Chanyeol croaks, his voice unusually high and loud. “And they’re gonna arrest us, because I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there are cameras every-fucking-where, and...”

Kyungsoo turns so fast Chanyeol doesn’t realize what’s happening until Kyungsoo has him in a chokehold.

“We need to find Junmyeon so he can work his magic and erase their memories with a snap of his fingers, but we can’t do that if you’re panicking. Are we clear?”

Chanyeol nods, eyes wide and pupils blown up.
“Well, with that out of the way, let’s assume Junmyeon was kidnapped by the Gumiho we’re looking for, okay? It must have charmed him.”

“Yes,” Chanyeol answers, weakly, “yes, and to charm someone like Junmyeon, it’s incredibly old. And powerful. Fuck, how can we face something more powerful than Junmyeon?”

He starts shaking when he realizes that, yes, this fucking thing must have been a Gumiho since the dawn of time. They’re dealing with a god, and their best chance at killing it has just followed it meekly to get killed, like, with blood and internal organs being eaten and... Kyungsoo slaps him. It hurts.

“Fucking focus, Chanyeol! To charm him, the Gumiho must have met him, am I right?” He waits for Chanyeol’s stupefied nod. “Okay, and they must have met in this fucking hospital, am I right?”

Chanyeol thinks about it. There’s no way Junmyeon has been put under some kind of Gumiho spell before, or he would’ve been already dead. So it happened in this hospital, under their eyes, under...

“Under our fucking eyes,” he whispers. His eyes have been hurting since they entered the hospital. He thought it was the bright light, but it was magic. In Chanyeol’s world of subdued tones, only magic is bright. He slaps Kyungsoo’s hand away and starts limping towards the elevator. “The corridor in front of the parking lot! The nurse, Kyungsoo, the fucking nurse!”

Kyungsoo said it himself, Junmyeon hardly interacts with people he doesn’t know, but he went to talk to that nurse and... Chanyeol feels the moment Kyungsoo collects the dots because he dashes, not towards the elevator, but down the stairs and into the corridor where they saw Junmyeon talking to the nurse not even half an hour ago.

Chanyeol lets him run. They won’t be there anymore, of course, but the track will be. And it will be a fresh track. A track that will lead them straight to the Gumiho. And to Junmyeon.

“kyungiesoo
where r u
fuking hrry
[Sent: 15:38, 23.01.2018]

Silence is omnivore. In the big square box of metal, wires and glass door that is the elevator, Chanyeol’s mindless panic – like red scraping at his temples, confusing him and spurring him on – disappears, eaten by silence. What is left is just cold, rational thought.

Chanyeol’s fingers drum on the handle of the crutch. His left leg hurts. His chest hurts. Junmyeon might be dead.

Chanyeol hasn’t entered a hospital since the accident, five years ago. It was a different hospital, but it smelled the same. Antiseptic, anticipation, life and death. The red light on the little buttons on the wall moves, three, two, one, why is it going so slow? It is a minor blessing that no one else has called it, but it’s still too slow. Junmyeon might be dead.

An impersonal, mechanical female voice announces the third basement floor and the doors finally open. Kyungsso is already there – out of breath, isn’t that a first for him? – scanning the surroundings with a focused face. He turns towards Chanyeol as soon as the doors close with a ding. He has his gun out, Chanyeol realizes. Silly boy, what could a gun do to a Gumiho?

“What took you so long?” he growls.
“I can’t run,” Chanyeol merely replies, shutting him out when he looks like he’s going to complain again.

Ssh, silence. Silence is omnivore, but also fragile. Chanyeol’s crutch breaks it so easily, step after step. One, two, three, he counts, before he stops. No one ever taught Chanyeol how to summon the powers of the Samjokgu, but he never needed to. The curse is always clattering inside his heart, pushing to be let out. In moments like these, when the threat of magic hangs heavy in the air, the curse wails louder, scratches deeper at Chanyeol’s ribcage, reaches out without his permission. The world is already losing its colors, the pale beige of the hospital walls, the red blinking light of the elevator button, the washed out green of the floor, everything fades to grey, darker and darker, plunging into the shadow.

Chanyeol closes his eyes, lets the magic of the Samjokgu wash him away, drowning him. He sinks, to a dimension where reality doesn’t matter. When he opens his eyes again, it’s to a world of blacks and blues, of faint luminescent trails and pale ghosts, a negative of reality. He can barely see Kyungsoo, standing next to him, a faint shadow. He sees opalescent butterflies of magic, the souls of the people who are passing to the other world after dying in this hospital. He sees the last shreds of Junmyeon’s magic still floating in the air. And then, at the end of the corridor, he sees the track, shining clear like sunlight, so bright the rest of the world falls into an impossibly darker black by contrast, and Chanyeol doesn’t know how he could’ve missed it before.

He blinks, and the world capsizes again, a negative of a negative. The hospital reappears in front of his eyes, in shades of grey first, until the first colors start to appear again. Like this, with his powers subdued and limited, it’s more difficult to see the track, but he can still feel it, like a shiver, a restlessness, an itch in his limbs. Like a headache, which explains the dull pain pounding in his temples. It makes him feel uneasy, a merely instinctive reaction to danger, Chanyeol thinks, because following this track means almost certain death. And yet, they’re going to follow it. Even if Junmyeon might be already dead. (Because Junmyeon might already be dead.)

“This way,” Chanyeol says, and Kyungsoo follows him down the corridor and towards the parking lot. “Stay behind, and don’t look at the woman. Whatever you do, don’t look at the woman.”

The parking lot looks empty. It’s cold and silent. Silence eats everything, Chanyeol thinks, but that’s not true. The Gumiho will eat everything if they don’t stop her.

Chanyeol swallows a lump of anxiety. Even walking has become difficult. They might be close.

“Give me the gun,” he says.

“What? No-”

“Kyungsoo, give me the fucking gun!”

That’s when they hear a blood-curdling growl – not animal, not human, something in between.

“Chanyeol, it’s behind that car.” Kyungsoo’s voice is shaking and that, more than anything else, gives Chanyeol the strength to act. He takes the gun from Kyungsoo’s hands and he lets him.

The weapon is big in Chanyeol’s hands, too heavy. It’s useless against a Gumiho, but it’s a solid, substantial weight in his palm. It’s somewhat comforting. It can shoot bullet at a speed of three hundred meters in a second. It can’t kill a Gumiho, but it will scare it, at least. It’s the best they have got, since using Chanyeol’s Samjokgu powers is out of the question.

All his human instincts are telling him to run away, go home and hide. There are other instincts –
chase, bite. He doesn’t know what to make of the instincts that gnaw at his mind, clouding his head, but Chanyeol takes a deep breath and goes against them. He needs to stay lucid.

He turns around, summoning his powers again. Lights disappear, the cars disappear, Kyungsoo disappears. Everything turns black except one single corner of the parking lot. There, behind a black SUV, Chanyeol catches a glimpse of color, a flurry of spun gold.

Tails, he realizes, the Gumiho’s nine tails. He steps forward, dazed, as if under a spell, circling around the car until he gets a clear view of the giant, wild fox standing on all fours in the middle of the parking lot, so out of place, so alien, like a harbinger of chaos. In its figure, Chanyeol can see colors. Gilded fur, red eyes. Its fangs are bloody. Its claws could eviscerate a human like a doll. It’s so big that its head presses against the harsh concrete of the ceiling. And yet it’s regal, its magic shining like a rainbow in Chanyeol’s black and white world.

“Hey,” he calls, voice cracking as if he were a teenager. He winces, but the creature doesn’t look like it heard him. It’s too focused on Junmyeon, thankfully still unharmed and waiting to be slaughtered with a silly smile on his face. That dumb idiot.

Chanyeol raises the gun and takes a deep breath. What did Baekhyun use to say? Ah. *You miss the target because you’re always rushing. You should’ve taken a deep breath and then maybe, just maybe, you could’ve come close to hit me.*

Stupid Baekhyun who was always better at his stupid shooter games, who could beat Chanyeol six times in a row, with his nervous fingers and his professional gamer mouse. Stupid Baekhyun who wanted a kiss for every time he won. Chanyeol is going to use his stupid advices to hunt him down and demand a kiss someday, but first he has to save his stupid friend.

A deep breath, *don’t shake, don’t fucking shake, go for the head.* He pulls the trigger.

The gunshot explodes in the confined space, closer than Chanyeol would’ve imagined. The sound cracks through his ear, bounces off the walls, melts together with the Gumiho’s scream of pain, surprise and rage. The creature wails, turning towards her assailant with a growl, and for a moment it’s not a fox, for a moment it’s a woman, for a moment it’s both and no one, just a monster ready to jump Chanyeol. She snarls and her magic peaks, gold like the snow at dawn, red like spilled blood, smelling of old flowers and wet stone, of corpses and smoke and mold growing in the crawl space of old tombs. Chanyeol feels Kyungsoo falling on his knees on the ground, unable to withstand the charm of a Gumiho – of this Gumiho, – but Chanyeol is the Samjokgu, and her power breaks against him like a tide against a rocky shore. She looks at Chanyeol, at the crutch in his hand, at his face. Into his eyes, full of magic. A light of awareness flashes over her face, and Chanyeol knows she’s recognized him for what he is. The three-legged dog of the legends, the only one who can kill a Gumiho.

They stare at each other, the Gumiho and the Samjokgu. And this is the moment Chanyeol was most afraid of: he’s not ready to take down a Gumiho, not now. If she finds out, she’ll just kill him on the spot. He takes a step towards the creature, and she’s not ready either, because she takes a step back, then another. Chanyeol looks at her chest, where the heart of a Gumiho’s magic is, but he can’t see anything. He blinks, looks deeper, and she covers her chest with a clawed hand, as if suddenly afraid.

That’s when the white headlights of a car entering the parking lot blind them both. The spell in Chanyeol’s eyes shivers and fractures before shattering like colored glasses and he’s forced to blink and protect his eyes with a hand. When he looks up again, the creature has already disappeared, and Chanyeol hears her last growl as she runs towards the exit of the parking lot, jumping onto the hood of the oncoming car to disappear into the darkness of the winter afternoon,
taking all her magic away with her.

Chanyeol remains still on the spot, almost petrified, head still ringing, gun still fuming in his hands. He’s barely aware of the car’s brakes screeching in front of him, the door slamming open and the driver rushing out to ask him, “Did you fucking see that? Was that a wolf?”

“What?” he asks. Oh, gods, his ears hurt.

“ Fucking shit, you have a gun, man, you fucking... What the fuck was that, it was...”

“Nothing,” a third voice interrupts them, “that was nothing. You have a very bright imagination, Lee Kwangsoo. Now, you’ll park your car on the fifteenth spot in the third row, like you always do, and you’ll get ready to begin the evening shift. Nothing ever happened here today.”

There’s a snap of fingers, and Chanyeol doesn’t even need to turn around. The man’s eyes become vacuous and empty, and he rushes to do what he was told to.

Chanyeol collapses on the cold concrete. “I’m fucking glad you didn’t die,” he murmurs.

Leaning on Kyungsoo’s shoulder, Kim Junmyeon smiles. “I’m glad too.”

seungwan
what happened do you need support?
don’t get in trouble oppa ヽ(´Д`)ノ
[Sent: 17:55, 23.01.2018]

It takes more than Junmyeon’s typical finger snap to make things right, this time. In the end, Kyungsoo is so shaken Junmyeon even has to drive. It feels like it’s his first time behind a steering wheel, and he almost crashes into the car in front of him at the first red light.

“Do you even have a license?” Chanyeol asks, holding onto the car door for dear life.

“Doesn’t matter,” Junmyeon says, with a thin, choked voice. “No one is going to stop us anyway.”

Just like no one stopped them when they left the hospital. They took Junmyeon back to the morgue to erase the memories of the doctors who caught Kyungsoo and Chanyeol with the corpses. Then, they took care of the cameras and got rid of every single sign of their presence in that hospital. Junmyeon’s magic didn’t waver, and for once, just once, Chanyeol was grateful to have him at his side, even if Junmyeon dragged him into this mess in the first place.

They’re passing Hyochang Park when Junmyeon suddenly pulls over next to a convenience store and steps out of the car. He has Kyungsoo in tow, who’s looking at him as if Junmyeon is going to disappear any time, turning into smoke under his fingers.

“Wait here for a moment,” Junmyeon asks. He comes back a few minutes later with bottled soju, plastic cups and a firmer voice, gesturing for Chanyeol to come out.

“Don’t worry about the car,” he says, “Taeyeon charmed it against both thieves and parking tickets.”

Chanyeol shrugs and follows them through the gates of the nearby park.

They share three bottles of soju, the classic, unflavored one that tastes like shit and burns your
tongue and throat when it goes down, sitting on a bench in Hyochang Park and watching people walk their dogs while darkness takes hold of the sky. No one says anything.

No one says anything, until Kyungsoo looks down at his still shaky hands. His voice is glacial when he says, “I can’t believe you fucking followed her like a fool.”

Junmyeon, for once, doesn’t answer. He hunches down at Kyungsoo’s words, as if each and every one of them is a heavy burden on his shoulder.

“I mean, are you an idiot? Are you a fucking idiot, Kim Junmyeon? Does it take that little to take you down?”

He doesn’t even raise his voice. He’s not screaming, and that might be even worse. It’s a bit unfair, because it’s not that Junmyeon could’ve stood up against that kind of spell. That Gumiho was old and sly. And hungry, immensely hungry. Junmyeon is powerful, Chanyeol will give him that, but he’s still but human, and only the Samjokgu could’ve borne that kind of power without falling at her feet like a fool.

Chanyeol lets Kyungsoo rage out, nevertheless, because he sounds like he needs it, and when he’s done Chanyeol lights up a smoke for himself, offering one to Kyungsoo, too.

“Weren’t you trying to quit?” Kyungsoo asks, breathless. He hesitates, but refuses the offer.

“What’s with everyone asking me if I’m trying to quit,” Chanyeol murmurs, taking a long drag. “I was... I am. I can’t help it, living such a stressful life.”

“You tell me,” Kyungsoo nods, stealing a glance at Junmyeon, who looks away, as if burned when their eyes meet. More silence follows as Chanyeol smokes in peace. Night has fallen on the city, fast and cold. The Gumiho is somewhere, licking her own wounds. And they still have nothing on their hands. Well, almost nothing.

“So,” Junmyeon starts, tentatively, but Chanyeol stops him before he can continue.

“No,” he shakes his head. “No, no, no. We’re not talking about this until we’ve eaten, and possibly drunk some more. And you’re paying. Definitely.”

“He’s right,” Kyungsoo agrees. “You almost died on us. Dinner is on you, man.”

Junmyeon raises his arms in surrender, muttering that dinner is always on him. He gets a glare from both Chanyeol and Kyungsoo.

“Come on,” Kyungsoo says, standing up first. “It’s a jjajangmyeon night, because I fucking need some comfort food.”

Well, it sounds like a plan.

“So,” Junmyeon tries again an hour later, and this time no one stops him. They’re hunched in a private room of some random Chinese restaurant, their bowls empty and their shot glasses full again. It must be the third round of cheers they do, and Chanyeol’s head feels light enough to fly. His thoughts float inconsistently, bumping softly into each other and against his skull when he shakes his head and gulps down another shot of soju. He’s drunk too much.

“Please, order another beer,” he whispers to Kyungsoo, but it comes out louder than he meant it because the waiter hears him anyway. “I’m not drunk enough for this.”
“You’re more than drunk enough,” Junmyeon complains, hiccupping when the beer arrives. His face is red and he’s already tried to levitate everything on the table three times, only stopped by Kyungsoo’s strategic pinches. “Now, can someone tell me what the fuck happened today?”

“Apart from you being seduced by that bitch?” Kyungsoo hisses and, wow, he doesn’t look drunk at all, but he is, he is. He must be really drunk if he’s acting all jealous and grumpy when he usually pretends any moment spent with Junmyeon is unnecessary torture.

“Guys.” Chanyeol clears his voice, but they’re too busy frowning at each other to notice him. “Guys, focus. Kyungsoo, I know it sucks that the only time your boyfriend decides to cheat on you he almost dies trying and you can’t even try to kill him yourself—”

They freeze, and Chanyeol is almost sure Kyungsoo will hit him for daring to imply he and Junmyeon might somehow be together (which they are, because Chanyeol is not stupid, so he knows they are, but for some obscure, silly reason they’re never drunk enough to acknowledge it), but Kyungsoo glares at the bottom of his shot glass and downs it down in one gulp. The way he looks at Chanyeol afterwards is pretty easy to understand: don’t toy with my patience or I’ll roundkick you.

“Okay, okay, stop the glaring. Anyway, don’t be too hard on him. There was no way he could’ve avoided getting charmed by that Gumiho.”

“And why is that?” Junmyeon asks, confused. “I thought you said it was young, hungry and easy to catch. You said it would make mistakes. What exactly, about today, was a mistake?”

Nothing, Chanyeol thinks. Nothing was a mistake. Except for Chanyeol, who is the worst Samjokgu in the history of Korea.

“I... What I said before... I was wrong. The thing we met today... She was not young, not inexperienced and she definitely didn’t make any mistakes. I think she was there because she knew we would’ve gone to see the corpse and she wanted to get rid of us. Of you, probably. She was expecting the Guardian to come, but she was surprised to see me.”

“Did you see her magic? How strong was she?” Junmyeon asks, leaning over the table, but Chanyeol shakes his head, confused.

“That’s the thing. I didn’t. I couldn’t see the source of her magic. I don’t know if she was hiding it or if she really didn’t have one, but that’s impossible. A Gumiho without a fox bead... can’t exist...”

An awkward, tense silence falls over the table, only broken when Junmyeon exhales a faint, “Fucking fuck.”

“The thing you found in the corpse,” Kyungsoo asks, looking at Chanyeol blankly, “what was it?”

Chanyeol turns around to see if any of the waiters are looking at them and then takes the claw out of his pocket.

“What the hell is this?” Junmyeon says.

“My biggest source of worry.”

Chanyeol lets him take it in his hands, weigh it. Junmyeon’s eyes are wide. “I think there are some people in Seoul who would pay you your weight in gold for one of these things. It’s definitely something you don’t see everyday, and I see a lot of strange things.”
Chanyeol ignores him. “When my…” He hesitates. “After I became the Samjokgu…” He sees both Junmyeon and Kyungsoo straighten up, looking at him more closely. It’s maybe the first time he talks about the curse. They know about his accident, of course, and they know that, for him to become the Samjokgu, the previous Samjokgu had to die. “I inherited all of the Samjokgu’s diaries. Not only the ones that belonged to the Samjokgu who came before me, but… all of them. Since Goryeo era.”

There were actually more, a long time ago, but part of the archive, as his grandmother explained to him, was burned during a fire at the beginning of the Joseon era.

“You have the diaries of the Samjokgu?” Junmyeon asks, eyes shining. The witches of the Council of the Covens have wanted to put their hands on the diaries for ages, but all the Samjokgu before Chanyeol refused.

“Technically, I am the Samjokgu,” Chanyeol provides, feeling a little too hazy for this conversation. Normally, he would die before admitting he really is the Samjokgu.

“And did you read them?”

Chanyeol stills.

“No.”

He looks down, acutely aware of both Junmyeon’s and Kyungsoo’s stares. He doesn’t feel like explaining, but he’s dug his own grave.

“I mean, not all of them… I am not… on the best terms… with my family. As you might have guessed, I didn’t exactly want to become the Samjokgu…”

“No shit, you just bitch about it all the time,” Kyungsoo says.

“Well, so… I read some of those diaries when I was younger, but not all of them. After the accident, after I became the Samjokgu… I didn’t want to do this, so I never bothered to learn how to use my powers or… stuff about Gumiho. And I never came back home, where the diaries are, there’s also that.”

Junmyeon doesn’t say anything, but Chanyeol can feel the disapproval radiate from his stiff shoulders. In a moment, all of Chanyeol’s annoyance with him comes back in full force. Chanyeol never wanted this. He would be in his cozy café, pretending to flirt with college students, if Junmyeon hadn’t involved in this mess again. He doesn’t need his judgment. Junmyeon doesn’t know shit about him.

“So, the records,” Kyungsoo says to break the glare challenge between them. “How can they help us?”

“In those records, there are mentions of the oldest, most powerful Gumiho. Some of them turned human.” He pauses, thinking he called one of them auntie for years. “Some of them have been found and killed by the Samjokgu, across the years. Some of them have found and killed the Samjokgu.”

“You think our Gumiho could be in those diaries,” Kyungsoo says, resolutely.

“I’m almost sure. Grandfather left notes on the different Gumiho he met in his life and I think I remember something about one of them leaving her claws inside her victims, but it’s been a long time.”
Junmyeon pours some more *soju* for everyone.

“Okay,” he says. “If she’s that old, how come did she only pop out now? What was she doing until now?”

Chanyeol shrugs. “Sleeping, hibernating, I don’t fucking know.” He pauses, memories flooding his brain, Baekhyun’s melodious voice, broken and angry and accusing. “Someone once told me old Gumiho spend most of their time in hiding. We’ve destroyed their forests, confined them inside the oldest trees. Some of them merged with humans, but others only wake up to eat in order to survive. Maybe this is what happened with this one. Maybe she was too weak… Maybe someone else stole her powers and she somehow survived, so she was looking for… food.”

He grimaces as he says it. Gumiho need to eat humans if they want to stay alive. If they don’t, they gradually lose all their powers, their knowledge and the ability to turn into people, slowly reverting to foxes. For them, it’s simply survival. But their food… their food is people. Hearts and livers and souls.

She closed his eyes, he thinks. She closed the eyes of the boy she had killed – of the boy she had chosen. He must have had a great smile. Enough to make his own killer linger around to close his eyes for the last time. Enough to make her realize her own humanity. He died so that she could retain that humanity. In some ways, she stole it from him. And Chanyeol allowed her to escape.

She will definitely kill again.

Chanyeol rubs at his temples. “I might have to go back to Andong, to my grandparents’ house” he says. “Tomorrow.”

“What? What if she kills someone else?” Junmyeon asks, so angry he stands up, but his legs give up and he falls back on the chair. Kyungsoo puts a hand on his sleeve to calm him down.

“Well, do you have a better idea? I don’t even know what that thing was, or where her magic is, there’s no way I can kill her by myself. And you’ve proven yourself to be completely useless against her powers.”

Junmyeon doesn’t look happy, but there’s nothing he can say.

“What if we involved another witch? All the other guardians of the city are women, maybe they’ll be able to resist,” he suggests.

“Useless,” Chanyeol shoots him down before he can finish. “I’m asking for a day, Junmyeon. I’ll leave tomorrow morning and will be back before night.”

“She’s already killed two people, what if she kills again?”

Oh, she will, but if Chanyeol dies then either his mother or sister will have to take his place as the Samjokgu, because the curse will find a new host, and they’d be too overwhelmed by their new powers to do anything. If Chanyeol dies, everything will be lost.

Kyungsoo slams his fist on the table and they both stop to look at him.

“She almost killed you, too,” he says to Junmyeon, and that seems final enough for the both of them. The owner opens the door of the private room to warn them they’re going to close up soon, and they all scramble up to their feet, putting their coats on while Junmyeon pays.

“Will you be alright?” Kyungsoo asks. “What you said before, about those old, powerful Gumiho.
Some of them were killed by the Samjokgu."

“Some of them killed the Samjokgu,” Chanyeol finishes for him.

“She ran away when she saw you,” Kyungsoo says as he zips his bomber up to his nose. “She must have been afraid of you.”

“Actually, I don’t think she was afraid of me. She just looked… surprised.”

She didn’t recognize him at all, in the beginning, and she looked surprised when she realized he was the Samjokgu. She probably knew the previous Samjokgu, Chanyeol’s grandfather.

“Don’t worry about me. If she really is after me, then my family house in Jung-maeul is the only place I should be. It’s one of the safest places in Korea. Thousand of years of protective spells and a lot of totem poles and guardian gods to keep Gumiho away. Also, we got the best defense in the world.” Kyungsoo blinks, a mute question in his big eyes, and Chanyeol smiles.

“You know how the Samjokgu usually works with a witch? Well, my grandmother is the witch who worked with the previous Samjokgu. And she’s one of the most experienced witches in this country. She can deal with a Gumiho better than Junmyeon can. So don’t worry, Kyungsoo, don’t worry about me at all.”

halmeoni
you brat
you never call
i’ll be waiting
[Sent: 22:02, 23.01.2018]

Comforting Kyungsoo is easy. Fooling himself into thinking things will be alright is more complicated. The truth is... Chanyeol has no idea how to deal with a Gumiho on his own. In the past, he’d merely found fox spirits and let Junmyeon deal with them.

The curse that chose him after the death of his grandfather didn’t grant him any special powers other than the ability to see magic and, sometimes, to steal it from a Gumiho, though he still struggles with the mechanics of that. But Chanyeol is nothing like Junmyeon, he can’t snap his fingers and make things go his way, magically. He’s not like the Samjokgu of the fairytales. The legends talk about a magical dog who can kill a fox with its bite. But Chanyeol is not a dog. Chanyeol is a boy. A boy with a crutch, a boy who can’t even walk on his own. A tall, lanky boy, who refuses to grow into a man, even after all these years. A scared boy. And maybe the fox didn’t realize it, in that parking lot. She looked at him and saw a threat, but Chanyeol isn’t one. And, next time, she won’t be surprised. Next time, she will kill him.

This time, Chanyeol accepts the ride from Kyungsoo. He crashes against the backseat, closes his eyes and feel the weight of the claw in his pocket. The Gumiho ate the heart and the liver of that poor boy, leaving a part of herself instead, like a token.

Like Daji or Sooyeon, he realizes. In his halmoni’s stories, Daji killed men and ate their hearts and livers, leaving flowers inside their empty chests. Chanyeol doesn’t remember Sooyeon’s legend, but he’s sure both of them died a long time ago.

His fingers skirt around the claw to close around his phone instead. A red light tells him he has less than five percent of his battery left, but it’ll be enough for what Chanyeol needs to do now.
In the front seat, Junmyeon has fallen asleep. Kyungsoo drives in silence, his eyes fixed on the street. He asked for a shift tomorrow, even if he was actually on leave. “This way, I’ll be free on Sunday,” he explained. “I won’t leave you two alone to face that thing.”

But Chanyeol doubts both him and Junmyeon will be of any use. He probably won’t be of any use himself. He’s ninety percent sure they’re all going to die. (But, in retrospect, when is Chanyeol not complaining about dying?)

Baekhyun still hasn’t answered, but Chanyeol doesn’t open the chat to muse about his silence again. He looks for his grandmother’s contact instead.

As his fingers linger over the familiar number – a number he hasn’t called in ages – Chanyeol feels an unfamiliar vise of guilt fastening around his lungs. When was the last time he visited her? Two, three years ago? Did he even come back to Jung-maeul after Grandfather’s funeral? After the accident?

He’s not sure. Maybe it’s really been five years. He spent so long actually loathing the curse of the Samjokgu that he turned his back on his grandmother, leaving her alone when she needed him the most.

It’s too late to call now, but he takes a deep breath and, before he can regret it, he sends a quick string of messages.

halmeoni
it’s chanyeol
i’m coming over tomorrow
pls make jjimdak

It’s the first thing he’s said to her in five years, and yet he feels foolish and hopeful. To his surprise, it doesn’t take long for his grandmother’s reply to come, despite the late hour.

You brat. You never call. I’ll be waiting.

Chanyeol almost feels tears pooling in his eyes. It’s been so long. It’s overdue, really. Yoora will kill him.

“Is everything alright?” Kyungsoo asks, their eyes meeting on the rearview mirror. Chanyeol looks down immediately. His eyes fall on Baekhyun’s name and, fuck it, he opens the chat. For a moment, he can’t believe his eyes.

He saw it. The fucker read the message, a few hours ago, and didn’t answer. He didn’t fucking answer. Chanyeol swallows a bit of rage, disappointment and the will to write something petty and totally stupid to him.

Luckily, Kyungsoo chooses that moment to pull over in front of the shabby building where Chanyeol lives in a small one-room apartment.

“Your stop, Park.”

“Thanks for the ride,” Chanyeol mutters, struggling a little to get out of the car.

“I’ll walk you to your door.”

Chanyeol snorts. “Oh, come on... What am I? A damsel in distress? I just need to get home. And you need to get him home.”
Kyungsoo hesitates, but in the end he gives up. “Ok. Just, remember, if…”

“If something happens I’ll call you. You’re already on speed dial. Just go, Kyungsoo.”

He starts walking towards the front door, well aware that Kyungsoo won’t leave the driveway until he’s sure Chanyeol is safe in his the building. Only when the door closes at his back with a tiny ring and he waves at Kyungsoo from behind the glass, does the boy start the car and leave.

Chanyeol limps towards the elevator, waits until it arrives and the teenager of the second floor leaves it with a polite bow directed at Chanyeol. It’s a short ride of flickering lights, in the small cubicle that smells like stew and marinated meat and some very strong perfume. It’s only three floors, but Chanyeol lives on the last, closer to the sky.

Finally, he steps out, follows the corridor until he reaches the last door and... hesitates.

Something is wrong, he realizes that as soon as he turns the key.

The apartment is dark, as he expected, but there’s something foreign in this darkness, something familiar at the same time. There’s a depth to the black, a hue of purple and blue and the light coming in from the window shines orange. Colors so deep he could drown in them. Magic.

If he could, he’d run away. But he can’t. Chanyeol can’t run. He tries to call Kyungsoo, frantically slides his finger across the phone screen, but it remains unresponsive. He spent the whole day outside without charging it, it must have died during the elevator ride.

FUCK.

Whoever has been inside his apartment could still be there – is still there, Chanyeol can feel it, the air electric and tense and foreign, colors dancing in front of his eyes, taunting him – and there’s no way they haven’t heard the sound of the door opening, Chanyeol’s first steps inside, the crutch hitting the ground.

Fuck fuck fuck.

If this is how it ends, there’s no reason to delay the unavoidable. The dull thump of the crutch on the ground as he steps forward is deafening, but still somehow less loud than the sound of his heart running thousand miles inside his chest, thumping against his ribcage, begging for mercy.

Blindly, Chanyeol reaches for the light switch. He turns it on.

Fluffy, soft tails flur in front of his eyes. There’s nine of them, white, silver under the right light, with a hint of pink not even the yellow glow of Chanyeol’s cheap light bulb can take away. They fluctuate, as if underwater, just for a moment, but then the boy lying on the bed stir and they disappear, suddenly, just like his fluffy ears. He yawns. His eyes blink open. Sharp teeth and golden eyes, and how could Chanyeol have ever found him less than otherworldly is still a mystery to him.

Baekhyun looks at Chanyeol, his face pink and soft from sleep, the tiniest hint of pink still visible in his black hair, too. His eyes light up. He smiles and says, “You’re late.”

Chanyeol might be six months too late to see this smile, but right now he doesn’t care. He limps to the bed and wraps his arms around Baekhyun.
So in war, the way is to avoid what is strong, and strike at what is weak.
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War
Of his childhood, Chanyeol has vivid, although somehow flaky memories.

He doesn’t remember that time he placed within the top ten of his school grade rankings and his mom took him to the park to celebrate, or when he got a pet ferret on his seventh birthday, or that Christmas when his grandmother had a heart attack and they had to take her to Seoul on a big, shiny helicopter that landed on top of the hospital, a story Chanyeol’s father never fails to tell again every Chuseok, to his wife’s dismay.

What Chanyeol remembers is: the feeling of the wet grass bending under his tiny feet in the park. The taste of the popsicles he ate after playing with the other kids of the neighbourhood, beads of sweat cold on his neck when he opened the freezer to choose one. Yoora’s small face flushing with rage every time she found Chanyeol loitering in her room. The smell of sesame oil lingering in Auntie Kim’s kitchen, so strong he almost forgot he was there after a while, only to feel it even more strongly at the following visit. Grandmother’s soothing voice, singing along to old folk songs, scolding her daughter for being too stern with her children, complaining about ants invading her pantry and her nephews bringing dirt in her living room after they played in the mud, telling Chanyeol that it was okay to hate school and telling Yoora it was okay to love it. Grandmother’s voice telling stories.

Chanyeol’s most powerful, recurring childhood memory is a moment stolen from a sweltering, wet summer, right in the middle of the monsoon season. He remembers walking to the marketplace, hand in hand with his grandmother, under a curtain of thick grey clouds. He’s four or five years old and he’s wearing flip flops, a blue raincoat and a yellow hat. The sides of the road are flooded with yesterday’s rain and water has filled the bumps, turning them into shallow murky puddles where young Chanyeol would jump with extreme delight, but he can’t – he can’t because halmeoni is telling him the legend of Daji and the Samjokgu, Chanyeol’s favorite story. Grandmother’s hand is warm, her voice even warmer.

“A long time ago, the nine-tailed fox Gumiho turned into a beautiful woman and became Daji, consort to King Zhou of ancient China. After having charmed her way into King Zhou’s heart, the Gumiho used her position as the royal consort to kill many men and eat their hearts and lungs to stay forever beautiful and human. If she had stopped killing men, she would’ve lost her powers.”

Chanyeol knows this story so well he could be the one telling it to his grandmother, but he still stops and listens, while the sky gazes at its own stormy frown reflected in the stagnant water.

“Having won the king’s affections, Daji asked the king to build her a house out of beads, and when the king asked who was capable of building such a house, Daji answered that it was Grand Duke Jiang, the great strategist, so she told the king to ask him to do it.”

Chanyeol’s grandmother, who was born and raised in Jung-maeul, only forty minutes away from Andong, and has lived there her whole life, visited Seoul for the first time for her only daughter’s marriage to a young lawyer, and she has no plan to go back there. (She would, eventually, by helicopter, years later, but that’s another story.)

Given her mother’s reluctance to visit, Chanyeol’s mom has no other choice than to be the one who visits her parents every year, without a fault, two weeks during summer and one for Chuseok.
She packs empty boxes her mother will fill with homemade kimchi and clothes that need to be mended, something she’s never learnt to do, while her husband packs a gift for his in-laws and thankfully decides to leave all his work at home, because, as he says, Jung-maeul’s atmosphere makes him feel more relaxed, almost like all his worries were lighter. (“It’s the magic in the air,” says Chanyeol’s grandmother. “It makes everyone feel safe, even your worrywart of a father.”) Chanyeol and Yoora simply pack a change of clothes and a lot of enthusiasm, and the family is ready for the three hours ride that separates Seoul from Andong, plus the additional forty minutes hike in the mountains, on narrow roads haunted by mountain ghosts and angry looking totem poles, until they reach the village.

In Jung-maeul, the children spend their days playing chase and hide-and-seek in the dusty streets of the little settlement and running barefoot on the wooden floors of the old house, their footsteps and laughter ringing from one room to another. And, of course, they listen to their grandmother’s folk tales - on their way to the marketplace like Chanyeol vividly remembers, or in the kitchen while they help her make kimchi and rice cakes, or lying on the wooden floor of their house, huddled together in a pile of limbs, toys and cushions while their grandmother sits next to the coffee table and folds laundry.

“Daji was frightened by Jiang and planned to kill him as per king’s orders after proving that he was incapable of building a house out of beads. When Grand Duke Jiang was summoned to the court, he saw right away that the woman standing next to the king was the nine-tailed fox, so he answered that he could build the house as the king commanded, then ran away. After Jiang’s disappearance, Daji’s evil deeds increased, as she killed more and more men to eat.”

Chanyeol’s parents disapprove of the stories with cold, frustrated politeness. “They need to study for their tests, not listen to these old stories. They’re too violent for them and keep them awake at night,” they complain in hushed whispers, their voices carried through the rice paper doors into the kids’ room, and Chanyeol’s grandmother nods, smiles and waits for the following day to tell her nephews a new story, or an old one, again and again.

Their parents might think folk legends are too violent, but Chanyeol and Yoora love them precisely because of that, and sometimes grandmother makes them sound like horror tales, adding gory details that make the children scream in delight during the day and wake up in cold sweat during the night.

When it’s dark, before sleep, they like to reenact the stories and whisper the most gruesome details. “Like when she ate that man’s heart from his own chest,” Yoora giggles, while Chanyeol imitates the sound of blood splattering everywhere.

When they play pretend around the house, Yuura is always the Gumiho, thirsty for human blood, hungry for human flesh, beautiful like only a god or a spirit can be.

“But who won in the end?” he replies, but not too loud, because in the legend the Gumiho might have lost, but in reality Gumiho-Yoora always wins. Well, almost always.

Chanyeol plays Grand Duke Jiang, and he thinks he was way better than the Gumiho. “For starters, he was the greatest strategist in the kingdom. And he traveled across the country, so he had more fun than some fox woman who was trapped inside the palace,” he tells Yuura, who crosses her arms in front of her chest and pouts.

“But she controlled the king! She could go out if she wanted!”
“She couldn’t! The Samjokgu would kill her! Halmoni! Tell her the Samjokgu would kill her!”

Hong Garyung raises her eyes from the book and sighs, then she tells them the story from the beginning, once again, until the end.

“Then, one day, Grand Duke Jiang acquired the three-legged dog Samjokgu and returned to the court, where the dog leaped out from inside Jiang’s robe and attacked Daji’s neck. Bitten by the dog, Daji turned back into Gumiho and died.”

The story ends there, but, like grandmother always says, it’s only the end for the Gumiho. The Samjokgu survived and lived on to protect us from everyone from the evil Gumiho.

“And now you really need to sleep, kids. It’s the third time I find you still awake.”

Chanyeol pouts and rolls on his bed, squirming. “Grandma,” he whispers, “is grandfather the Samjokgu? Mom said it’s just a story!”

“You’re too young, Chanyeol, just enjoy the stories for now. Maybe one day they’ll turn to reality, but it’s still too early for you.”

Chanyeol sniffs because the bed smells old and stale and the rough sheets tickle his nose. “One day,” he says to his grandma, low and hushed, as if he’s telling a secret, “I’ll become the Samjokgu. And I’ll hunt all the evil Gumiho!”

She smiles. “Sure, my puppy, but now sleep! If you keep this up, your mom won’t let you visit next year.”

It’s an empty threat, but it always works. Chanyeol sleeps and dreams about being the Samjokgu, powerful and fearless, cleansing the world from evil.

(Once the kids are sleeping, Garyung turns towards her husband and blinks innocently at him. “Don’t look at me like that, dear, this story is part of them. They need to know it.”

He sighs and sends a worried look at the two kids sleeping messily together on the big mattress rolled out on the floor. Then, he offers her his arm and they walk back to their room together.

Chanyeol is already asleep and he’ll never know any of that. He will never see his grandfather act kindly or look worried for him. Most of the time, he won’t see him at all. His grandfather is often busy working in Seoul, but he never comes to visit his daughter’s family. Chanyeol only remembers his heavy footsteps and the dull thud of his crutch on the wooden floor. A wound he had received during the Korean War had left him crippled, unable to walk more than a few steps without his cane. His face was always grim, his eyes too stern, and the way he looked at Chanyeol and Yoora was troubled, as if he was expecting something horrible to happen to one of them.)

Chanyeol is eleven years old when his grandfather falls sick for the first time. Eleven years old, short and plump. He wears ugly glasses and struggles in Math classes. Like every child his age, he hates school, but he still has friends there. He cries when his family moves to Jung-maeul to help his grandmother take care of his grandfather.

“It’s only for a couple of months,” his mom says with a note of exasperation in her voice, and Chanyeol scoffs and says his first bad word. He receives his first scolding and his Gameboy is confiscated for the first time. He spends the whole ride sulking and fighting back tears. Only his grandmother’s jjimdak manages to make him smile again.
In Jung-maeul, at his grandparents’ old house, Chanyeol’s mother and grandmother fight. A lot. Chanyeol hears them shout from the kitchen through the closed door and tries to understand what they’re saying, but can only discern fragmented sentences and lone words.


It’s dark and late. He should be sleeping, but he gets up, the duvet falling on the ground with a rustle, and he tiptoes towards the door, well aware that if his mother catches him awake he’ll get scolded. He doesn’t dare to slide the door open, but he leans his ear against it, trying to hear better through the thin sheet of rice paper, but the door slides open anyway and he loses his balance, falling on the ground at Yoora’s feet.

“You’re an idiot,” she says, from her sixteen years old position of self-importance, but she enters the room and slides under his covers anyway. He joins her.

“Do you know what they’re fighting about?” he asks, voice small and unsure. She has to know. Yoora is smart – so much smarter than him. Yoora knows everything.

“Grandfather is the Samjokgu. If he dies, either me or you are going to take his place. Or mom. That would be a fun sight.”

“You mean, the Samjokgu? The real Samjokgu? Like, in the legends?” Chanyeol jumps up, suddenly excited, and Yoora hits him until he sits down again.

“Yes, the Samjokgu. Mom says it’s stupid, but she knows it’s true. She hears the whispers too.”

“The whispers?” he asks.

Yoora looks at him funnily. “You mean you don’t hear them? The whispers of the guardian gods.”

Chanyeol looks outside. From the window he can see some of the totem poles peeking from behind the plants of the garden. Jangseung, they’re called. They’re the guardians of the village, put there to protect the house.

“You can hear them?” He half-shrieks, and Yoora pinches him.

“Ssh, they’ll hear you. Yes, I can hear them. Mom can, too. And grandma.”

It’s because they’re witches. They must be witches! Like in grandmother’s legends, the Samjokgu always fights together with a witch.

“You can be the witch, I’ll be the Samjokgu!” he says, but Yoora scoffs, annoyed, and hits his head lightly.

“You really are an idiot. This isn’t a game. We don’t get to decide what we are. But if we could, I wouldn’t want to be either of them. It sounds like a giant load of hassle, if you ask me.”

She gets up to leave. In the other room, the voices rise and fall. They invade the room when Yoora opens the door – “It’s not up to you to decide,” Garyung says. “Yes, it is!” is Chanyeol’s mom reply, – and fade away when she closes it at her back.

“Can you tell me why mom doesn’t want us to become the Samjokgu?” Chanyeol asks his grandmother the morning after. His mother has left the house together with Yoora to go to Andong and buy something for the house – at least that’s the formal excuse. Chanyeol knows it’s because she wanted to get away from the fight and vent to Yoora without their grandmother hearing. The
silence is heavy, even in their absence.

“Because it’s dangerous,” his grandmother says after a short pause of surprise. “Because fighting Gumiho is dangerous. Your grandfather almost died, so many times."

“But grandfather can’t fight! He’s too slow!”

“Do you remember the legend of Sooyeon, my little puppy?” she asks. “Once upon a time, there was an evil Gumiho named Sooyeon who plagued the capital. She was the strongest and scariest and oldest Gumiho of the country, so the other Gumiho started to call her Queen. The Queen of Gumiho.”

Chanyeol nods. Of course he remembers this story. Sooyeon lived for four thousand years, killing humans and other Gumiho alike, and was strong enough that not even the Samjokgu could kill her. When she killed her victims, she always left a token inside their bodies so that everyone could know it was her doing. It’s one of the bloodiest stories his grandmother has ever told them, so gruesome it gave Chanyeol nightmares. Chanyeol’s mother complained and Garyung never told him this story again, until now.

“Do you remember how it ends, Yeollie?”

“Yes. Sooyeon was so powerful she killed all the Samjokgu who tried to stop her, until one day the Samjokgu was too smart for her. He pretended to be defeated and, while she ate his leg, he stole the fox bead from her heart and she lost all her powers. And then she died.”

His grandmother hesitates, then nods.

“Do you know who that Samjokgu was, Yeollie? That Samjokgu was your grandfather. He got his leg wound in war, sure, but it wasn’t the Korean War. It was a war against the Gumiho. That’s why your mother thinks it’s too dangerous. But she knows nothing. The curse of the Samjokgu is not something you choose. It chooses you. And if one day it chooses you, you will have to bear it, like grandfather did before you.”

Chanyeol lets her word sink. For once, he’s speechless. He thinks about his grandfather, stern and scary, limping along the floor. He doesn’t want to be like him. Maybe Yoora is right, maybe being the Samjokgu is a big load of hassle.

“Yeollie, come on! Do you want to help me make *kimchi*?” his grandmother asks from the kitchen. He darts after her, nodding excitedly.

“Only if you tell me another story! A nice one this time! A story that ends well!”

“A story that ends well, you say… Well, I might have one! A long time ago, under a young juniper tree, there lived a fox.”

A long time ago, under a young juniper tree, there lived a fox. She had eyes like amber, sharp white teeth and thick, luscious fur. She was young, and brave, and foolish, often scampering beyond the pond and into the rice paddies to observe with her golden eyes the humans who worked there. Some of them fed her scraps from their table, some of them threw stones at her to keep her away from the fields, and some of them, the worst in the young fox’s opinion, tried to hunt her down and kill her for her fur. But none of them noticed she had more than a tail. Two, in the beginning, and then three, four, five, growing like her curiosity towards humans, growing like her hunger. Until, one day, she had nine tails and the men of the village started to disappear.
A thousand years passed, days flourishing and blooming and withering and dying and blossoming again like new flowers peeking from the cold ground. Under the juniper tree, old, wrinkly and hunched, there lived a girl. Sometimes she had black eyes, black hair, the softest pink smile and thousand years hidden inside her heart. Sometimes she had amber eyes, silver hair and silver tails, sharp white teeth and still thousand years hidden inside her heart. She was always sly, and strong, and proud. She was always beautiful. She had survived countless wars, countless famines, living through three dynasties, until one day there were no more dynasties, only invaders with sharp voices and no pity for a woman living alone at the edge of the woods. (She had no pity for them either.) She lived through the invasion and through the civil war, and every man who who crossed pathways with her fell, one way or another. Until, one day, she fell, too.

There was a beautiful girl living in the little house near the old juniper tree, a long time ago. Now there’s a woman, with wrinkles around her eyes and her mouth that deepen when she grimaces, holding her heavy belly with one hand and wiping the sweat from her forehead with the back of the other. To her husband, who’ll never really know how close he came to following all the men who came before him – gone with the wind, with the moon, through the cold paths of the dead, – she smiles and says only, “It’s going to be a boy.”

The night Baekhyun was born, the juniper tree Sunmi had called home for more than a thousand years, was struck by lightning and died. When Sunmi – now Byun Sunmi – gives birth to a tiny, screaming baby, who looks through and through human, she looks at him and heaves a sigh of relief.

“Isn’t he pretty?” she asks to the friends who came to visit her at the house behind the hill where she has given birth, with no doctors or nurses, only the quick pacing of her husband in the other room. “I’m so happy he came out human. I wouldn’t have known how to explain it to the nurses if a little fox had come out.”

Minseok and Seulgi exchange worried glances.

“You mean, you don’t see it?” Minseok asks. At her panicked eyes, his face falls. “Oh, noona, I’m sorry. You must’ve lost that ability when you became human. But to us, it’s obvious that your son is one of us, a Gumiho.”

“Not completely,” Seulgi adds, trying to cheer her up. “There’s something... different about him. He’s not like us, but he’s one of us.”

Sunmi only sighs, conflicted. She balances the baby on her knee, watches him grimace, a sign he’ll start to cry soon, and lays him against her chest again, where he feels most comfortable.

“Look outside,” Seulgi says, pointing towards the garden. “Your tree is dead. That means we must find a new one for the little puppy here.”

“Baekhyun,” she answers, “his name is Baekhyun.”

And so, two days after giving birth, Sunmi goes to her garden in front of the house she has spent a thousand years building for her family, and plants a tree for her son. Not juniper, not her tree, but paulownia, a tree that grows tall and blossoms at the end of spring, just like she hopes her Baekhyun will grow up to be.

(Byun Baekhyun will not grow tall like the tree his mother has planted for him. But, like Sunmi before him, he will be smart, witted and curious. And loud, something she had never been. He will take his silver tongue and cheeky attitude from his father, and the argentine laugh and the ability to wrap people around his fingers from his mother, and no one will be able to resist him. For now,
though, he just burps, pouts and looks for his mother’s warm chest.)

There aren’t many children in Gumiho communities. There isn’t even the concept of children, because fox spirits are not born, nor are they created. It’s more like a realization, coming into being, a fulfilment of potential. Gumiho aren’t born, they become, they transform. Someone calls that evolution. Someone else calls that aberration.

That’s what Minseok told Baekhyun, at least, and that’s the extent of what Baekhyun can try to understand. Unlike Minseok, Baekhyun was born, flesh and blood and powerful screams, during a stormy night, and that makes him different. That makes him special. (Baekhyun might be a human child, but he still has magic, even if he cannot feel it at all. That’s his own unfulfilled potential, waiting for its owner to realize it.)

Being the son of a Gumiho-turned-human is, Baekhyun soon finds out, quite uncommon. Other than him there are only other two half-fox babies in the entire country, both younger than him, which makes Baekhyun the first half-blood Gumiho in over two centuries. Which also leads to an incredible number of magical creatures coming to visit his mother, weigh her firstborn like a turnip on the market, judge his inexistent magical abilities and, of course, tell the little baby stories of the Samjokgu.

For Gumiho, the Samjokgu is the ultimate enemy, their only natural foe. Every one of them knows his story, a horror fairytale in which a beautiful, innocent fox maiden is brutally torn apart by hunt dogs. It’s the perfect bedtime story to tell children, a tale of predators becoming preys, of ancient gods punishing the unruly Gumiho for her arrogance, the big and scary hound looming in the darkness and waiting to devour little cubs in their burrows if they don’t behave.

“It’s a good story for a baby fox,” everyone says, and Sunmi scowls, shoos the guests away and puts her son in his crib.

“He’s not a baby fox,” she says with a scoff, but her complaints that the baby doesn’t even need to know what the Samjokgu is – “He’s human, the Samjokgu would never touch him!” – are promptly ignored.

“This is the story of our people,” Seulgi says, as she takes little Baekhyun from the crib to rock him on her lap. “He’s half Gumiho, he needs to know this.”

Baekhyun watches the exchange with big eyes, laughing when his mother scoffs and asks for Minseok’s opinion, but Minseok just shrugs and says, “It’s fine if you don’t want him to know about the Samjokgu, there are so many others fairy tales that talk about foxes.”

Before Sunmi can stop him, he begins.

“A man had three sons and no daughter. He prayed for a daughter, even if she was a fox.”

“Not that one! It’s bloody, and the fox dies,” Seulgi screams, while Yesung, who came from Busan appositely to see the baby, cackles in a corner and Sunmi, too tired to fight an entire skulk of fox spirits, glares at her husband, mouthing send them away.

“But they’re your family,” Byun Jaehwan says with a shrug, “and I kinda like them.”

Baekhyun sometimes can’t believe how someone like his mother – one of the oldest, one of the most powerful, one of the prettiest Gumiho in the entire country – could decide one day to leave everything behind and call it evolution. Thousands of years of power, building inside her year after
year, victim after victim, and for what? The love of her life, Baekhyun’s father, is short and plump, can’t hold his alcohol, tells the worst jokes and laughs at them too loud, crazy and embarrassing – both traits Baekhyun inherited from him, sadly, – and looks like the most generic, unassuming man in the entire country.

(“He was the first man who’s ever made me laugh,” Sunmi will tell Baekhyun, years later, with a secret smile on her lips and a mischievous wink. “And you were the second.”)

“So,” says the first man who ever made Sunmi laugh, “will you go on with your story, Minseokkie, or not?”

Minseok grumbles, probably at being called in such an informal manner by a man who is one thousand years too young to drop the honorifics with a Gumiho, but Jaehwan is Sunmi’s husband, and Sunmi has always been an elder for all of them. For her sake, Minseok’s probably ready to tolerate even this silly human’s disrespect.

“His wife gave birth to a daughter, but when the girl turned six, the cows on their farm started dying, one by one, every night.”

Baekhyun is three, maybe four years old. He remembers the heat of Seulgi’s lap, the way her nimble fingers carded through his hair and the way the entire world shook and quaked when she laughed. He remembers the smell of food made by his mom, and the laughter and the howling of the wind, so far away, back in the mountains. Minseok’s voice was steady and soft, like he had spent his long, long life preparing to tell stories just to amuse Baekhyun.

“One night, he sent his oldest son to watch the barn. The boy watched, and told him that his sister was the one killing the animals, by pulling the liver out of the cow and eating it. His father accused him of falling asleep on the watch and having a nightmare, and kicked him out.”

Sunmi had many friends in the Korean Gumiho community, but her favorites are definitely Minseok and Seulgi. They often come to visit her, taking care of Baekhyun while his parents work and telling him all they know about Gumiho.

When Baekhyun goes to school, six years old and all bright-eyed wonder, Seulgi tutors him in Korean and English, Minseok in Mathematics and History. Sunmi makes him sit down and do all his homework and talks with the teachers who tell her that the child spaces out a lot, maybe it’s some kind of ADHD. She looks at Jaehwan, too busy staring at a butterfly to work on the broken car. She doesn’t know what ADHD means, but it must be inherited. She takes Baekhyun to the candy shop where he can distract himself long enough to let her read the car manual on her own and patch the problem so that Jaehwan can go to work tomorrow. Sometimes, she goes with him to help, even if Jaehwan goes quiet and mutters that he didn’t marry her to make her live like the wife of a farmer.

She giggles in his ear. “My love, but that’s exactly who I am.”

“Next, the second son was sent to watch over the cows, and nothing happened until the moon was full again. Then, the sister struck, and the second son was also thrown out for his lies.”

“What a dumb family,” Baekhyun says under his breath. He’s now seven, and he spends his winter afternoons spread on his belly on the floor, enjoying the warmth of the ondol and drawing in his school notebooks with colorful Crayolas. Next to a mathematical formula, he’s drawn a family. Baekhyun, his mama and his papa first. Next to his mom a cherry red fox, Seulgi, and two orange red foxes, Minseok and Sehun. A yellow sun hangs from the blue line of the sky, and Baekhyun has scribbled flowers everywhere.
Minseok caresses his hair and continues his story.

“Following this, the youngest son was sent to the watch; he claimed that their sister had gone to the outhouse, and that the cows must have died from seeing the moon.”

“What happened to the other two brothers?” Baekhyun asks, even if he already knows the answer.

“The older brothers wandered until they met a Buddhist monk, who sent them back with three magical bottles: a white one, a blue one, and a red one. Once they arrived, they found their sister living alone; she told them their parents and the youngest brother had died, and implored them to stay. Finally, she persuaded them into staying the night and even made a rich meal for them.”

Baekhyun is nine when he realizes there’s something wrong with his family.

“Why don’t you ever get old?” he asks Minseok, suddenly, as they watch television. “Is that because you’re a Gumiho?”

“It might be.”

“Like the one of the stories?”

“Kinda.”

“Do you also eat cow liver in order to become human?”

Minseok laughs and ruffles his hair.

“In the night, the older brother was woken up by the sounds of chewing. He rolled over and froze with terror: his sister stood over his dead brother, eating his liver raw. She told him that she only needed one more to become a human.”

“Wait, wait, wait, that’s not how you become human! She only ate cow liver for years! This doesn’t make any sense, hyung. And how could she have been a Gumiho if she wasn’t even a thousand years old?”

Baekhyun is ten and he’s tiny, a little tanned kid who screams the loudest and runs the fastest and tries to climb all the trees he can find.

“He fled, throwing the white bottle behind him, and it became a thicket of thorns. As a fox, she made her way through it. He threw the blue bottle behind him, and trapped her in a river, but as a fox, she swam ashore. He threw the red bottle behind, and she was trapped in fire. It burned her until she was no more than a mosquito.”

“Okay,” Baekhyun says. He’s eleven now, old enough to call bullshit when he hears it. “This was really stupid, you know? We all know a witch or a monk can’t simply defeat a Gumiho. This story is bullshit.”

“Language,” Minseok warns him softly. “Stories don’t have to be accurate, they have to teach something. So, what have you learnt from this story?”

Baekhyun thinks about it for a moment. “That humans would kill a poor, defenseless Gumiho who just wanted to be like them?”

Minseok smirks. “No, that sisters suck and they will kill you, so stop asking your parents to make one. You’re driving them crazy!”
Baekhyun pouts. “Your storytelling sucks too!”

Before he can add anything else, Minseok has him pinned to the floor, mercilessly tickling his sides until Baekhyun is begging for mercy. “This is what you deserve for being such a little brat,” he says. “Now do your homework and stop saying bad words, or your mom will nag at the both of us...”

“No, please...” Baekhyun pouts, pulling at the hem of Minseok’s sleeve. “Just one more story...”

“Okay, okay. Then, I’ll tell you... How about your favorite story?”

Baekhyun’s eyes shine and he scrambles to sit down again so he can hear Minseok better.

“The nine-tailed fox Gumiho turned into a beautiful woman and became Daji, consort to King Zhou of ancient China...”

When Baekhyun is twelve years old, a tall man with a crutch and a stern face comes to the family house to talk with his mother. Sunmi plays the gayageum that night, and the following day, and she talks to her husband in hushed tones for days. A couple of weeks later, Baekhyun’s family moves to Seoul, where Minseok can’t visit him anymore. When Baekhyun asks his mother why, she tells him it’s dangerous. “Gumiho aren’t allowed in the capital. If the Samjokgu finds one of them, they have permission to kill on the spot.”

Baekhyun didn’t even know the Samjokgu, his boogeyman, the faceless monster waiting inside the closet when the lights went off and Baekhyun shivered in his bed and dreamed of big jaws ready to maul him, was real. It couldn’t be real. Monsters aren’t real.

When he tells Sunmi about it, she smiles her saddest smile, but he doesn’t understand why.

(That was, of course, before he learnt that the big jaws ready to maul someone could belong to Minseok or Seulgi as well – and they had belonged to his mother in a remote past he never knew. That was before he knew the name of the Samjokgu, the taste of his lips or the sound of his voice when he called Baekhyun’s name. Life was easier when it was all in black and white. Easier, but a lot more boring.)

“Monsters are real, my little puppy. And the Samjokgu is real as well, but I really hope you never meet him in your life.”

Baekhyun doesn’t meet the Samjokgu in Seoul when he’s twelve years old. Instead, in a dusty courtyard, under a cursed sun, Baekhyun meets Park Chanyeol.
Chapter Two

I don’t feel like
a flesh and blood girl.
Even my bruises are translucent.

Try putting your hand
through my skin
and you will reach right through
where my heart should be.
— Zoë Lianne, “Floating”

I just miss you, in a quite simple desperate human way.
— from Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, 21 January, 1926

C H A P T E R 2
2 0 1 8 0 3 2 3
B A E K H Y U N

yeollie ♥
i need to talk to u
[Sent: 08:20, 23.01.2018]

Winter in Yeoju is pungent and unforgiving. The mist falls from the mountains in rivulets of white, draping silver frost over the fields and over the tall trees of the forests. It flits at the height of the shortest branches of the pines, the oaks, the maples, like a veil suspended mid-air, impalpable and wet. It’s the breath of the heart during the coldest days, a cloud that has lost its way and ended up wandering too close to the ground. It’s Baekhyun’s wake up call – the call of the mountain, the sweetest, the harshest of the calls.

It makes Baekhyun want to run outside, to chase the rising sun and seize it before it can take fly, like a bird caught before it can leave its nest. It makes Baekhyun want to hunt, to fight, to claim the wild power roaming the woods as its own.

“It’s the call of our kin, the reason we exist,” Sunmi told him the first time she woke up at dawn in the middle of the winter, her heart filled with dread, to find her son gone, the house door open and a trail of tiny, faint footsteps on the white veil that had covered the world during the night. She found him on the edge of the woods, barefoot and wearing only an old tee and gym shorts, six or seven years old. He was listening, his eyes blank, but bright and still like fragments of glass. She took him in her arms and shook his tiny, cold body until he came back to her and cried because it was cold.

“Why do I feel it?” he asked later, at home, wrapped in a blanket and drinking warm tea, trying to stop the clattering of his teeth.

“Because you’re my son. And I might be a woman now, but for the longest time I was a Gumiho and I belonged to the mountain and the mountain belonged to me,” she said.

“And then what happened?”

“You happened, Baekhyun. You happened.”
(Even now Baekhyun can’t fathom whether she had been wistful or relieved at the thought.)

They say Gumiho were foxes who lived for a thousand years, too smart for their own good, too curious, too hungry. Refusing to die, refusing to give up, refusing to relinquish their power over the woods. They became spirits, demons, gods. They became a legend, but only because they became reality. A few of them, the luckiest of them, became human.

“So what am I?” Baekhyun asked, too young to understand the scale of his question.

“You’re my son,” she replied, and she said no more on the matter. Baekhyun never ran to the woods again, and the story of that night escape became a joke, something Seulgi would drunkenly tell after family dinners while leaning on the table, red faced and happy, to make everyone laugh with her.

Baekhyun can still feel it, sometimes, an energy crackling through his limbs, a fire within his bones, some kind of thrill. He felt it on the edge of the woods in Yeoju when he was young and he felt it in Seoul, when his family moved in the house next to Chanyeol’s, at the end of the city, at the foot of the mountain. He felt it during his university years, faint and deformed by the dirt of the capital, knocking at the only window in Chanyeol’s tiny one-room apartment, like a puff of breath on the cold glass, a muffled whine. And he felt it while he served in the army, at the border, where the woods are deep and sick with radiations and the ghosts that inhabit them are quick-tempered and always angry. He feels it now, every morning, the call of the wild, claiming him as its own.

Gumiho come from the mountains and will forever belong to the mountains, even now that the mountains are broken and tamed, and Gumiho are even more broken and more tamed. However, Byun Baekhyun is not a Gumiho. He’s just Sunmi’s son, who likes to crack jokes and play games and wants too much but always gets too little. When the thrill comes, he does the wisest – the only – thing he can do. He ignores it.

He ignores it and waits for the alarm to ring, like it does every other morning, a monotonous, dull beep-beep-beep, before he opens his eyes, rolls out of his blanket and onto the heated floor. He stays there for a moment, enjoying the contrast between the warmth on his back and the cold air against his stomach. Somewhere outside the few birds that still haven’t left the fields to migrate towards warmer skies chirp weakly, drowned out by the occasional gush of crisp wind.

It’s still early, even his mother is still sleeping after staying up almost the whole night. The door of her room is shut and Baekhyun tiptoes in front of it, careful not to wake her up.

The entire house is cold and wrapped in silence. It almost feels like a day of snow, the perfect day to stay in bed and cuddle, playing Overwatch or some shooter game – oh, Baekhyun is really good at those. Or, even better, to watch anime, legs intertwined, fighting for snacks, Baekhyun’s head on Chanyeol’s shoulder, eyes fluttering closed after the third episode, falling asleep on each other and wasting the day away. Baekhyun left all of his One Piece DVDs at Chanyeol’s place five years ago, and he’s sure Chanyeol kept everything like the hoarder that he is, but Baekhyun would never call him to ask them back – nor for any other reason. Days like these, all crisp air, lingering loneliness and the smell of snow, are for missing Chanyeol and nothing else.

Baekhyun ends up wandering to the kitchen, where he stretches his rigid limbs for a moment and starts setting the table for breakfast, plugging the rice cooker in and taking the side dishes out of the fridge. He turns the TV on when the silence of the room becomes too heavy, shifting from peaceful to oppressive. On the news broadcast, the anchor smiles a plastic, unnatural smile as she goes through the main news of the day. A politician’s recent embezzlement scandal, the usual North-South tensions and the diplomatic visit of a European State Secretary. Baekhyun only half listens while he waits for the soup to boil.
“Turn that off, I hate politics.”

The voice takes him by surprise and he jumps, startled. He turns towards the door, raising the ladle in his hands as if ready to use it against the intruder, but he only gets a laugh for his ridiculous defense attempt.

“I didn’t know my hate of politics would gain me so many enemies, Hyunnie.”

The man standing at the door looks young, but a life among Gumiho has taught Baekhyun to never trust appearances. Minseok – Kim Minseok on the official reports, but he changes it every thirty years – is short, pale and pretty, with almond shaped black eyes, short, dark hair and a foxy smile. He’s also, like all Gumiho, older than a thousand years, but only by a few centuries, still quite young by Gumiho standards.

His eyes twinkle in amusement as he takes in Baekhyun’s improvised weapon again, but Baekhyun only groans, sullen and exasperated. “Oh, it’s only you. Don’t laugh, hyung, you scared me to death.”

Actually, his mother scared him to death yesterday night, with all her nervous gayageum playing and cryptic words. Baekhyun had completely forgotten about that, until this particular guest showed up uninvited at his doorstep.

Unaware of Baekhyun’s uneasiness, Minseok laughs a short, high pitched laugh and enters the kitchen, sitting at the table like he owns it. “Wow, you even made breakfast for me too! Our Baekhyunnie, so caring.”

Baekhyun rolls his eyes. He only prepared for his mother and himself, but you can always trust Kim Minseok to try and bum some food off him. “Did you really come here to leech on our food? This is a house, not a hotel!”

Minseok laughs. “Actually it is a hotel, darling. And even if it wasn’t, I earned my right to dine at your table long before you were born. A lot longer before your mom even met your dad, so shut up and give me some rice.”

“How did you even enter?”

“Rice!” Minseok repeats, drumming on the empty bowl with the chopsticks and pouting.

Shaking his head at Minseok’s antics – he doesn’t even need to eat rice, he’s just a glutton – Baekhyun does serve him a few scoops of rice and a bowl of soup. He adds another one for himself while Minseok browses through the TV channels until he ends up on the reruns of some popular survival show. His eyes glisten in interest, but he sends a rapid glance at Baekhyun and changes again. The last time they watched an idol show together, Baekhyun said Minseok’s television tastes were childish and he’s still holding a grudge.

Baekhyun steals the remote control from his hands and switches back to the survival show again. “Oh my god, I love this. We’re watching this!” he says.

It’s a blatant lie and they both know it. Minseok is the only one who wants to watch that program, but now he gets to do it without losing his face and Baekhyun can mentally high-five himself for his daily good deed.

“Okay, we’re watching this, but let me just say your taste in television is sooo childish, Hyunnie.”

“Whatever you say,” Baekhyun answers, hiding a smug smile.
They eat in a silence colored only by the clinking of their chopsticks against the plastic bowls, the droning of the refrigerator and the dying wails of one hundred trainees trying to sing a song too high for them.

“Did your mother tell you what we’re going to do today?” Minseok asks.

Baekhyun shakes his head. “She didn’t want to talk about it. Want to fill me in?”

Minseok sighs and carefully lays his chopsticks on the side of the bowl, looking at Baekhyun with his deep, black eyes. Except now they don’t look black, they look... amber and orange, the color of the sun looked through an autumn leaf.

“We’re going to Seoul to save a Gumiho from the Samjokgu.”

It’s, really, an instinctive reflex, the one that makes Baekhyun tense, grimace and say, loud and clear, “You can fucking forget about it, hyung.”

Minseok smiles. It’s a foxy smile. Baekhyun hates those so much.

“I’m sure I can make you change your mind.”

kjwae
yes im at the cafe rn
you’ll miss yeol tho
he’s leaving
[Sent: 12:27, 23.01.2018]

Baekhyun squirms, restless, inside the bullet of metal, glass and plastic whizzing at full speed between Ahyeon and Edae. Next to him, Minseok grimaces, holding onto the handle and shaking at every sudden noise.

He looks a little green, and Baekhyun watches him as he tries to move away from the small group of high school students next to him, only to end up bumping into a middle-aged woman who’s reading a book behind him. She raises her eyes from the book to glare at him. He winces and closes his eyes.

Baekhyun wants to laugh at his uneasiness, but he’s not faring that much better himself. He’s too used to the mountains closing on Yeoju, the open woods looming over the inn, waking up every morning to the howl of the wind and the call of the mist, to be here. Seoul smells and looks like a scrap yard. Chanyeol always knew how to make it mildly tolerable, but he’s not here now to distract Baekhyun from the heaviness of this city, from the physicality of the crowd closing on him like a human vice.

He tries to focus on the smell of soil, still lingering on the collar of his coat, but it’s not enough to ward off the stench of exhaust fumes and fine dust, of burned gasoline, cold asphalt and Friday night’s euphoria. It’s the smell of progress, infecting the city like a virus. It makes Baekhyun’s head spin and his nose itch. He feels the dirt in his lungs whenever he breathes.

Next to him, Minseok wiggles again, in a useless attempt to break free from the hold of the people around him. This time, he bumps into Baekhyun.
“Sorry,” he mutters, when he catches Baekhyun’s eyes. “It’s been a while since I’ve taken the subway. Also, this city fucking stinks.”

That earns him another glare from the middle-aged woman and he almost snaps at her, stopping only when Baekhyun’s fingers clamp on his forearm.

“It’s our stop,” he says. He drags Minseok towards the exit, barely managing to get out before the doors close.

“Thank god, I thought I was going to die in there,” Minseok says. It sounds choked. Baekhyun is sure that Minseok’s tails would be whipping the floor if they were visible. For a moment, he’s afraid this is going to be too much for him. It’s been a long time since Minseok came to Seoul.

“Are you okay?” Baekhyun asks, just to make sure. “You look shaken.”

“Don’t worry,” Minseok says, “I’m fine. Remind me why we couldn’t have taken the car?”

Baekhyun smiles and pats Minseok’s back. “You wouldn’t find a parking spot in Edae if you were willing to pay your own weight in gold.”

They follow the herd of people heading towards the exit, resurfacing in the middle of Seoul under a cloudy, grey sky.

“So, who’s the person we’re going to meet?” Minseok asks, as they walk through a famous shopping street, surrounded by foreign tourists and cute girls heading towards the women’s university at the end of the road. Before Baekhyun can answer, they have to jump out of the way as a big, black car with tinted windows that would probably fit well in a spy movie curbs in front of a food stall, barely missing it.

Baekhyun can hear Minseok bite back a curse and pats his back. “Be careful. Seoul people can’t fucking drive.”

They turn to the left into a smaller side street of streetwear and food stalls and Minseok finally loses the stiffness and starts snooping around, a little intrigued. It’s been more than thirty years since the Council of the Covens officially banished Gumiho from the capital. And of course Minseok, like most Gumiho, sometimes sneaks into Seoul for a quick trip, but he would never get too close to the center of the city, or to the Samjokgu’s workplace. Thirty years is a lot for a city like Seoul, where a store can change owner three times in a week and entire buildings disappear overnight only to reappear a few days later, with a new face. What Minseok is seeing must be completely new for him.

“They added a lot of stuff around here,” Minseok says, softly. “But something didn’t change. Still a lot of cute female students around here.”

He winks at a short girl who’s bargaining for a pair of shoes in one of the stalls and she loses track of what she was saying. Baekhyun rolls his eyes and drags Minseok forward.

“Hyunnie, you didn’t tell me where we’re going,” singsongs Minseok.

“I told you, to meet someone.”

He stops, scanning his surroundings. There are at least three different Etude House stores in sight, if only he could remember the right one. Jongdae’s indications are, as usual, useless and Minseok’s nagging doesn’t help either.
“Who’s this someone?”

“A friend from university, the Guardian’s younger brother and one of the Samjokgu’s coworkers,” he says, trying to surprise Minseok and get him to shut up.

To Baekhyun’s disappointment, Minseok doesn’t even blink. And doesn’t stop asking.

“And in which order are we meeting them?” he inquires, trotting after Baekhyun like an obedient puppy.

Baekhyun finally spots the right Etude House and smiles to himself. He found the way. Baekhyun, one, Jongdae’s directions, zero.

“We’ll meet them all at once,” he mutters. Then, before Minseok can ask more, he slides into the little back alley that leads to Aneuk Cafè, Minseok following him soon after.

“Wait, how do you know the Samjokgu won’t be there? You know I’m not supposed to be here, right? What if he arrests me?”

Baekhyun scoffs at the sudden fear in Minseok’s voice. “Do you think I want to meet the Samjokgu? Of course I asked beforehand. Jongdae told me he left a couple of minutes ago.”

“He’s probably looking for our Gumiho,” Minseok says, frowning. “We need to find her before he does.”

That’s what Baekhyun plans to do. Find the Gumiho, take her away from Seoul, go home and don’t come back. Stay away from the Samjokgu, he repeats to himself. A simple plan.

Minseok falters again and Baekhyun sighs. “Come on, stop being such a whiner, he won’t be there at all. And even if he were, he wouldn’t arrest you while you’re with me. Isn’t that the reason you wanted me to come with you?”

Finally, Minseok agrees to follow him inside, but Baekhyun stops again, in front of the closed door.

“Just one thing, hyung. Jongdae doesn’t know I’m half-Gumiho. I never told him and I doubt Chany- the Samjokgu would’ve told him either. So don’t tell him. Don’t let him recognize you as a Gumiho either, if you can.”

“Wait, if he doesn’t know about you, how can he help us find the Gumiho we’re looking for?”

Baekhyun’s hand is already on the handle and his reply arrives a beat before the door opens, only for Minseok to hear.

“Because we didn’t come here to talk to Jongdae.”

A bell rings, announcing their entrance to the coffee shop. A bright girl with cherry red hair and cherry red lipstick shouts a “Welcome!” and a couple of customers turn towards them, but Baekhyun ignores them all. He also ignores Jongdae’s excited scream as soon as he recognizes his roommate from freshman year, suddenly visiting uninvited after at least six months of absence from Seoul.

Baekhyun looks straight at Kim Jongin’s face and smiles at the big paper cup of iced americano sitting on the counter next to him. It is, undoubtedly, Baekhyun’s favorite drink.
Minseok told me you’re in Seoul!!!
Don’t get in trouble :<<<<
[Sent: 13:05, 23.01.2018]

Kim Jongdae didn’t change much since the first time Baekhyun saw him. He’s still the same small guy, with a voice too loud for his height, cheekbones strong enough to cut you in half and magic swirling around him in powerful waves. Baekhyun was not supposed to know his roommate was a witch, but Jongdae slipped and turned the student living next door into a desk lamp for blasting Girls’ Generation at one in the morning the day before a presentation – it wasn’t on purpose, he said afterwards, and as of today Baekhyun still doesn’t know whether he meant doing it at all or doing it in front of Baekhyun specifically. The incident cemented their friendship and they were joined at the hip for the rest of the course, even after Baekhyun decided to move into a small flat with Chanyeol, and even after Baekhyun broke things off with Chanyeol, dropped out of university and left Seoul to help his parents with the hostel in Yeoju.

Baekhyun goes for a hug, but Jongdae punches him on the shoulder instead, hard enough to hurt.

“Eight months, you fucker! And you didn’t even say goodbye last time! Did you enjoy being a stranger?”

Baekhyun shrugs, uncomfortably remembering the last time he and Jongdae met was eight months ago, during an alumni-event at their university. Chanyeol had been there too, all shiny and pristin, with his walking cane and newly-cut hair. Their eyes had met, Baekhyun at the entrance and Chanyeol at the buffet table, and Baekhyun had freaked out, turned on his heels and left without a word. Now, he sends an apologetic glance at Jongdae, a silent plea to drop it, and Jongdae does, for now.

His eyes fix on Minseok instead. “And who’s this?”

Thankfully, a thousand years around humans have taught Minseok a little manners.

“Kim Minseok. I’m a family friend,” he says with a gummy smile. “At your service.”

“Oh, I’m Kim Jongdae, the owner here. Baekhyun’s roommate from freshman year, before he ditched me to move in with Ch-”

“Shouldn’t you let us seat down, Dae?” Baekhyun says, before Jongdae can scream their entire life in front of the whole coffee shop. Jongdae chuckles and takes them to the only empty table.

A couple of young werewolves hiss nervously when they walk next to them, only to cower when Minseok sends them a pointy, sharp smile. Baekhyun swears he hears him mutter, *toddlers* under his breath.

Jongdae comes back a moment later with Baekhyun’s iced americano and a double espresso for Minseok, who blinks, surprised. Jongdae stifles a laugh. “My little brother sucks at getting to work on time and he keeps falling asleep on the counter. But I keep him because he’s good at guessing people’s tastes. Is it your favorite?”
Judging by Minseok’s smug smile, it is.

“It’s on the house. Now tell me, Byun Baekhyun, why didn’t you warn me you were coming?”

“Would you have let him leave if you had known I was coming here?”

Jongdae doesn’t even think about it. “No, I wouldn’t have.” He frowns. “Do you know how hurt he’ll be when he finds out you’ve been here and didn’t even bother to say hi to him? Like you did last time?”

Of course Jongdae wasn’t going to drop it.

“I actually talked to him, that time,” Baekhyun says, meekly. “We met after the event ended.”

“I know, he told me. That doesn’t change anything, what you did was shitty, Baek…”

“He told you?” Baekhyun asks, surprised. Then he remembers he’s not here to talk about Chanyeol. As a rule, it’s better to avoid talking about Chanyeol at all. “I’m here on an errand for my mom, Dae. I’m not in the mood for fighting with him, again, over stuff both of us can’t change. I just came to get coffee and say hi to you.”

He ignores Jongdae’s scrutinizing eyes on him and takes a sip of his americano.

“He’ll be devastated,” Jongdae says, as if he didn’t even hear what Baekhyun said. “And guess who’ll have to collect the pieces?”

“Dae,” Baekhyun says, as a warning.

“Yes, exactly, me!” At Baekhyun’s glare, Jongdae finally raises his hands in surrender and sighs. “Look, I don’t know what kind of problem you and Chanyeol have, considering how hard you try to avoid him and how hard he pines for you, all the fucking time, but Chanyeol is my friend.”

“I’m your friend too,” Baekhyun protests, under his breath.

“Yes, but he works here. I can’t have him brooding over his lost love all the time, it’s fucking pathetic and unbecoming and I won’t stand for it.”

“Well, I’m really sorry my past relationship with him doesn’t fit your standards, Dae, but it’s not all my fault. Sometimes things just don’t work out. Sometimes things end. Incompatible difference of opinions is a thing.”

“Sometimes you just decide to unilaterally end things, hurting the only person you used to care about, only to run away to the other side of the world to avoid dealing with the mess you left behind,” Jongdae says, and Baekhyun was expecting hostility, but he sure wasn’t expecting the meek sadness.

“I don’t want to talk about it, Jongdae. Not with you, not with anyone else.” Sometimes the love of your life hunts people like you. Sometimes the love of your life almost kills one of your best friends. That tends to ruin things for everyone. “We broke up, that’s it.”

“Is that why you keep having sex with him every time you meet?”

His voice is so low Baekhyun struggles to catch it, but when he does he almost chokes on his drink. He’s not alone. Next to them, Minseok almost spills his espresso on his new coat, saving
himself only because of centuries of sharpened reflexes. He stares at Baekhyun with eyes as wide as saucers, but Baekhyun is glaring at Jongdae.

_Thank you for exposing me like this_, he thinks. _Thanks for nothing._

They’re interrupted by the sharp clash of glass shattering coming from behind the counter and Jongdae turns around to see his little brother holding half of a milk jug in his hands. Next to him, Sooyoung looks half-terrified and half-resigned.

Jongdae sends Baekhyun a wary look that probably means, _we’re gonna talk about this later_ and goes back to the counter to nag at his brother.

Baekhyun takes another sip of his americano, waiting for the unavoidable jab.

“So,” Minseok says, “you’re fucking the enemy.”

Baekhyun sighs. Maybe if he ignores him, Minseok will let this drop. The chances are slim. In fact, Minseok scoots closer.

“You’re fucking the enemy behind our backs.”

The first instinct is to answer that Chanyeol is not the enemy, Chanyeol is… Many things, but he’s never been an enemy. Except Chanyeol is the Samjokgu and Baekhyun’s words couldn’t be farther from the truth. Chanyeol is not even an enemy, Chanyeol is the enemy.

“It only happened a couple of times,” he says, in the end. He looks down, refusing to meet Minseok’s disbelieving gaze.

“How many times?”

“Three? Four?” Twelve? Every time he met Chanyeol since they broke up five years ago? It’s not like Baekhyun has kept count. He prefers not to think about it. It makes things easier.

“I didn’t hear the question but the right answer is sixteen. Twenty-one if we count multiple rounds.” Baekhyun feels himself blush, but he makes space for Jongin. The boy slides on the chair in front of him and waves at Minseok.

“Kim Jongin, resident psychic. I already know who you are.”

Minseok turns towards Baekhyun. “Is he the person we’re looking for?”

“The one and only. Jongin is one of the most… peculiar psychics in Seoul. If someone can help us, that’s him.”

Jongin’s smile is tiny and unassuming, but the way he straightens his back speaks of pride. Unlike his brothers, Jongin is not a witch. He can’t cast spells, summon magical creatures from other realms and he’s really, really bad at potions. All his power is catalyzed into one thing. Being always, painfully right.

“If Jongin says it’ll happen,” Baekhyun explains to a mesmerized Minseok, “it’ll definitely happen.”

Jongin giggles and waves his hand to shut Baekhyun up, a little self-conscious. “Come on, Baekhyun, you’re making me blush.”

“How does it work?” Minseok asks. “Do you have visions or…”
“I don’t have any visions. I just... know things. For example, I don’t know what you are, Kim Minseok, but I know you like melon pan, even if you don’t eat human food. I know you don’t have a social ID number and that you like soccer. I could guess your favorite player if I wanted.” His eyes shine. Minseok’s eyes, too, are shining.

“I like this kid, Baekhyunnie.” Then he clicks his tongue. “So, what’s the catch?”

Jongin looks a little guilty, like a child caught with his hands in the cookie jar. Baekhyun answers for him.

“The catch is that he can’t know everything. You know how seers and gazers have visions, prophets have prophecies, clairvoyants are just a little better than others at realizing logical links between events so they’re able to predict them, right? They all get a general idea of a situation, but that situation is not written in stone. It could still change. Jongin’s powers are a little more... singular.”

“I’m a soothsayer,” Jongin says, simply. “I only speak the truth.”

“It means everything he says will come true, eventually, at some point. Or it has already happened. He speaks the truth of the world. Hella annoying, if you ask me. But he only knows specific things, the little details. Never the whole picture.”

Jongin pouts. “It’s not something I can control, hyung.” He turns towards Minseok, excited to talk about his power. “For example, I don’t know what will happen to you tomorrow or what happened to you yesterday, but I know what will happen to you today. That’s why I knew you would come.”

Minseok’s gaze is brilliant and so focused. “I can’t believe you’ve known a soothsayer all this time and you’ve never introduced him to me,” he says, in a daze. “I’ve lived many years and it’s the first time I’ve met one of you. Fascinating.”

The fashion wears out pretty quickly when said soothsayer predicts your own doom, Baekhyun thinks sourly. Especially if you’re one hundred percent sure everything he says will come true, no matter what you do, no matter how you try to stop it.

“It’s not that great. I’m just aware of random bits of information. Sometimes I know the answer, but not the question, like a few minutes ago when I decided to sit with you. Though in Baekhyun’s case, it’s usually the opposite. He’s so difficult to predict. With him, I know the questions, but never the answers.”

“What kind of questions?” Minseok asks, making Baekhyun cringe. “Oh, come on, he said he doesn’t know the answer. It’s not spoiler if he doesn’t give you the right answer.”

It is a spoiler. It’s still called cheating. And it’s dangerous. After all, all the mess with Chanyeol started with a single question that came from Kim Jongin, the first time they met. Jongin ignores Baekhyun’s uneasiness – maybe he doesn’t know, because he doesn’t know everything, but maybe he’s just a manipulative little shit.

“The next questions Baekhyun will ask himself,” he murmurs, in his low voice, sounding like a child who grew up too much and by mistake. “It’s easy! Taking the car or going by foot? Go with the yellow light or stop and wait for the red? Run away or stop and help?” He tilts his head to the side and lets out the shakiest, most hesitant breath through his nose. “What are you doing here? What do you want the most? Who is the master of this war? Who can you really trust? Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom?”
His words drown out the music of the coffee shop and the chattering of the customers. Baekhyun knows the last question already, because Jongin already asked him. It’s the first thing Jongin ever said to him when they met, five years ago, before he asked him if he really knew who Chanyeol was. He pinches the bridge of his nose. *Disengage, disengage.*

“It’s too early for this, Nini.”

“It was too early five years ago, but every question needs to be answered sooner or later. You’re suffering, he’s suffering. My brother is worried for you both.”

Even now, Baekhyun is painfully aware of Jongdae’s worried gaze, skimming over them. He’s probably seen Baekhyun’s pained grimace and wants to come over and check on them, but the café is too busy. Jongin chose the moment well.

“And you? Are you worried?” Baekhyun asks, suddenly annoyed.

“Why would I need to be worried? I already know how everything ends and there’s nothing I can do to change it. Might as well buckle up and enjoy the ride.”

Baekhyun sighs. “I’m glad you’re having fun being this cryptic and everything, but I don’t need questions, Jongin. I need answers. We’re looking for something.”

Jongin doesn’t let him ask. He just thinks about it.

“Severance Hospital. I don’t know if what you need will be there, but that’s where my brother and Chanyeol went.”

Severance Hospital. It’s not much, it’s vague at best, but it’s not a prediction of doom at least. Baekhyun puts the empty coffee cup on the table and starts fiddling with his coat, trying to get it back on his shoulders. Before he can get up, Minseok leans across the table, towards Jongin.

“Wait,” Minseok says, “you said you know what will happen to me today.”

“Are you sure you want to know?” Jongin asks.

“No, he doesn’t,” Baekhyun replies, just as Minseok says, “Surprise me.”

They look at each other and Minseok beats Baekhyun to it. “It’s my future,” he says. “If I’m going to waste my entire afternoon following the only two people in this city who could hope to hurt me, I want to at least know if I’m going to be safe.”

Jongin leans back against the padded back of the chair, musing to himself. “Well, no matter what I say, you’re still going to do the right thing, so I guess it’s safe to tell you.”

Minseok’s eyes shine with curiosity and Baekhyun wants to drag him away, but Minseok is a Gumiho and a lot older than him. He has seniority. Still, Baekhyun can’t suppress the feeling of panic filling his chest like smoke. It itches in his lungs, making him want to cough nervous words.

“You’re going to save more than one person today and you won’t have any regrets.” Jongin frowns. “Also, if you have something you want to say, do it today, or you’ll never get another chance. I think you should go now. My brother will be done soon and you can’t afford to lose any more time here.”

Minseok frowns as he takes in the information, clearly wanting to ask for more, but Baekhyun’s eyes find Jongdae, who’s dealing with the last customer of the line. It’s time to go, before Jongin
can announce any other bad news.

He drags a reluctant Minseok up and they make their hasty way towards the exit. Jongin walks them and Baekhyun stops at the door.

“Thank you, Jongin, I owe you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Jongin says, and Baekhyun has a horrible feeling he’s going to say something else, something Baekhyun won’t like. Jongin keeps the door open and leans over. “Before you go…”

“No, Jongin, I don’t want to hear it,” Baekhyun hisses, trying to move past him, but Jongin pulls him back and whispers in his ear.

“All the questions I asked you before are choices you need to make and every choice will bear consequences and shape your future. I can’t tell you what to choose, Baekhyun. What I can tell you is to trust yourself, no matter what happens. You’re going to make the right choice.”

seulgi-noona
How is it going?
Staying out of trouble?
[Sent: 14:12, 23.01.2018]

In the end, Baekhyun decides he doesn’t care – he doesn’t want to care – about Jongin’s silly warnings. They need the car, so they make a detour to retrieve it. The tin can, like Baekhyun affectionately calls it, is Sunmi’s first car, an old Matiz that can barely contain both Baekhyun’s and Minseok’s personalities at the same time and struggles at the ignition. They stop near the entrance of the parking lot of Severance Hospital, but neither of them makes any move to leave.

Baekhyun didn’t talk to Minseok on their way back to the subway station, nor during the twenty minutes they spent on the subway train. Now, the silence has lasted too long to be comfortable anymore. Baekhyun drums nervously on the driving wheel and steals a worried glance at Minseok, who’s too busy struggling with the seatbelt to notice. He pulls it away from his chest a moment, almost as if it was too tight, then he lets it go. It snaps back in position, whipping him against the seat. He winces and closes his eyes.

“So, are we going to go in or not?”

Baekhyun makes no motion to leave the car. “Do we have a plan or are we just going to barge in a hospital and turn us over to the authorities? Give me a heads up if I have to meet my ex, so I’ll try to look like I’m actually over him.”

He regrets those words as soon as he meets Minseok’s sarcastic smile.

“Too over him to fuck him again? Like it already happened other – what did the soothsayer say? – sixteen times? Or was it twenty-one?”

Suddenly, the car is too small for the both of them. It has always been too small, but now it feels painstakingly suffocating. Baekhyun finds breathing difficult. Next to him, Minseok pulls on the seatbelt again, in a useless attempt to breathe freely.

“Well, now at least I know why you’re so sure the Samjokgu won’t arrest me.”
“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Well, I don’t want to talk about it either, Baekhyun, but we will have to talk about it someday. You said you ended things with him! This thing you’re doing…” He scratches his nape and lets out a frustrated whine. “Okay, not now. For now we just check the situation at the moment. And if your boyfriend-”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Baekhyun mutters. Minseok’s eyes flash red.

“If your fuckbuddy finds us, you’ll just have to get me out of trouble.”

Baekhyun wants to threaten him to leave him to rot in the hands of the Guardian if he calls Chanyeol his ‘fuckbuddy’ again, but it would be pure, undiluted hypocrisy. He and Chanyeol aren’t boyfriends, they aren’t fuckbuddies and they aren’t enemies. They’re just a big fucking mess.

Minseok frowns, suddenly, his back straightening while he smells the air. “Fuck,” he says. “The Gumiho we’re looking for must be inside too.”

“Where?” he asks, lowering the window as if he could smell her like Minseok did, but he’s too human and the only thing he can smell is pollution. “Did you recognize her?”

He shakes his head. “No, the smell is really unfamiliar.”

“Are you serious? I thought you knew every Gumiho in Korea! Why are we here then?”

Minseok sighs. “I don’t know, why don’t you get inside to check?”

And risk running into Chanyeol? Baekhyun is definitely not doing that. Not at all.

“Because I’m just here for the emotional support! You want to save her, so why don’t you go inside yourself?” he suggests.

“Oh, sure, and then they think I am the Gumiho who made all this mess and they kill me on the spot. And then Sunmi kills me, too, because I left her precious baby all alone in Seoul with his ex-boyfriend. Fuckbuddy. Ex-fuckbuddy.”

“I’m twenty-five, not a baby!” Baekhyun hisses, ignoring the fuckbuddy part because at this point it’s just easier to let it go.

“Oh, the baby is twenty-five. You want a prize for that?”

Baekhyun looks away and doesn’t answer. This is why he doesn’t hang out with Gumiho. They’re impossibly annoying and they’re all older than him, which gives them the perfect excuse to bully Baekhyun into doing anything for them. Also, now that Minseok knows about him and Chanyeol, he’ll hold it against Baekhyun forever. Nice.

Fuck this, thinks Baekhyun, fuck family. Fuck everything. Fuck Minseok and his empty ideals and his stupid idea of saving a Gumiho he doesn’t even know. Fuck obligations and fuck Baekhyun’s good heart too, for good measure. After Sehun he had promised himself, swore on his own heart he would never get involved in this mess again, and here he is. In the eye of the fucking storm, Chanyeol so close Baekhyun can almost feel his presence like a punch to his gut.

He drums with his fingers against the wheel of his mom’s small city car, again, just to annoy Minseok as much as he’s been annoying him, and checks the time again.
“Are you sure she’s inside?” he asks, looking at the massive figure of the hospital emerging from the coppery mist, its lights shining like buttons in the control console of a giant spaceship, symmetrical and bright.

Minseok clicks his tongue. “Can you really not feel it?”

Baekhyun shakes his head, feeling a frustrated pull in the pit of his stomach. It could be annoyance or it could be magic, who knows?

“How would she be in a hospital?” he asks.

“Maybe she wanted to take a last look at the corpses.” At Baekhyun’s skeptical glance, Minseok shrugs. “I don’t even know who she is, how would I know how she thinks? I surely don’t take a second look at the mess I leave.”

That’s because you don’t leave a mess, Baekhyun thinks, but he doesn’t feel like complimenting Kim Minseok for his ability to kill people. Not here, not now. Not when Chanyeol is this close. Not when on his phone, there’s still an unread message, the notification still visible on the upper side of the screen, the little pop-up preview enough to show the entirety of the message.

*I need to talk to you.*

Oh, Baekhyun has no doubts, not even for a moment, about the reason Chanyeol wants to talk to him. Not because he missed him, that’s for sure. If Chanyeol had wanted to talk to him, he would’ve answered Baekhyun’s message two months ago. But he didn’t, and that speaks volumes. Maybe Chanyeol really wanted to end this… this whatever, this thing between them. Maybe Jongdae has every right to be sad. Maybe Baekhyun is keeping Chanyeol from being happy. He took his happiness away and now he doesn’t want him to move on… Maybe…

Baekhyun groans. This is why he didn’t want to come to Seoul and risk running into Chanyeol. He hates not knowing where he stands, and he hates even more because he spent half of his life knowing exactly where he stood. (Next to Chanyeol.)

If they’re lucky, he and Minseok will manage to take the Gumiho out of the city before the Guardian can kill her, everything will end tonight and Baekhyun will not have to meet Chanyeol and give him a chance to hurt them both. Again. (He doesn’t want to give that chance to himself either, but he knows that, if he meets Chanyeol, he won’t be able to control himself. He just misses him too much.)

“Stop pining at the phone, it doesn’t suit you.”

Blushing, Baekhyun turns the screen off and glares at Minseok. “What is wrong with you? I’m three seconds away from going back to Yeoju, so stop getting on my nerves or…”

“Shut up!”

Baekhyun stills, surprised by Minseok’s sudden outburst and even more by the way Minseok’s features seem to morph, becoming more feral, rougher around the edges. Baekhyun can see the outline of his fox ears, not really there, barely hinted as Minseok loses hold of his power.

“Shut up,” Minseok repeats, “something is happening.”

That’s when they hear it. A gunshot. Coming from the parking lot.

Minseok growls, deep in his throat – Baekhyun can see his pale profile reflected in the window,
eyes blown up and wide, golden and black, long, sharp teeth showing.

“Baekhyun,” he says, as low as he can, “start the car.”

“What?”

“Start the car!”

He doesn’t say anything else, just opens the car door and jumps outside, tagging behind a car that’s entering the parking lot right now. His orange tails flurry behind him as he jumps over the safety bar and disappears in the darkness of the underground parking lot.

Baekhyun turns the key, once, two times, cursing against the old engine. “Come on, don’t fail me now,” he mutters. He shivers, closes his eyes and finally feels the growl of the car coming to life, its vibrations shaking the tiny cabin. Minseok comes out of the parking lot, followed by the Gumiho, in her animal form, more beast than goddess. Her fur is fair, spun gold, smelling like dead leaves and old blood. The stench invades Baekhyun’s car as soon as Minseok pushes her inside, joining her on the backseat.

“We need to go!” he growls, and Baekhyun is so nervous he slams on the clutch and almost cuts the engine again. The car moves with a yank and Minseok growls, so scared. Baekhyun can feel nervousness radiating off him, a seething, ancestral fear that only dissipates when the hospital is only a luminous tower in the distance and both the Samjokgu and the Guardian are too far away to catch them anymore.

He stops at the first intersection and he feels the car gasp and shriek under him. His hands are clasping the wheel too hard, twitching imperceptibly. The cabin is full with the Gumiho’s presence.

Baekhyun looks at her through the rearview mirror. The fox is gone. In her human form, the Gumiho looks like a young girl with delicate features, incredibly beautiful. Her eyes meet Baekhyun’s through the mirror and he’s forced to look away. She looks old and somewhat cruel. Baekhyun has never seen in her life and, judging from Minseok’s slightly horrified and lost face, neither has he.

This, Baekhyun thinks, was a fucking terrible idea.

seulgi-noona
Tell Minseok to answer his phone :
[Sent: 16:38, 23.01.2018]

The car seems to move at a snail pace in the heavy traffic congestion. Baekhyun fidgets with the gear changes and almost accidentally cuts the engine off two times. He curses softly, trying to keep the car moving.

No one says anything, but both he and Minseok can feel the Gumiho studying them. Minseok squirms under her gaze and Baekhyun keeps his eyes trained on the road and away from the rearview mirror, trying to pretend he’s not fretting because of her.

He takes the fastest route he knows leading outside the city, all the while feeling her keen eyes trained on his back. She tilts her head, at some point, as if she doesn’t know what to make of him. That seems to be the general reaction when it comes to Baekhyun meeting a Gumiho, and he tries
not to sound nervous, but the blood... The car is too small, it smells of blood. It’s not hers.

He follows the car in front of him and watches it turn left, but the traffic light turns yellow before he could follow it. For a moment, he’s tempted to just go faster and pass the intersection before it turns red, but he ends up braking at the last moment and regretting it as soon as he’s done it, even if it’s too late. The car stops with a quiet rumble. The traffic light is red. They wait.

“Where are we going?” the Gumiho asks. She has a thin voice, unnaturally graceful, that matches her facial features. A girl made of glass and legends, thinks Baekhyun. Hiding a fox made of magic, of nightmares and blood and one thousand years of waiting.

“We’re taking you out of Seoul,” explains Minseok. Baekhyun glances at him through the mirror. He’s intimidated. It’s the first time Baekhyun sees him like this. Minseok is one of the youngest among Sunmi’s friends but despite that he’s always held himself with a confidence Baekhyun has often envied. But this time Baekhyun can see the rigidity in his shoulders, the way he seems to shrink in the small space, trying not to touch the new Gumiho.

“I cannot leave. I still have something I need to do,” she says, still looking at Baekhyun. “What are you, exactly?”

Baekhyun looks at Minseok, who imperceptibly shakes his head. When no one answers, she continues. “You are a fox, but you’re also human.”

“I could say the same thing about you,” he murmurs, eyes trained on the street, trying to resist the temptation to meet hers.

She laughs, as if it was a joke. Maybe it was, because there’s nothing human about her. Even her human appearance is otherworldly. She looks fake, like a glass doll among paper dolls. Alien.

“Fascinating,” she muses, her eyes twinkling in a way that has Baekhyun shivering, again.

The light turns green, again. Baekhyun hesitates. He only starts the engine when a car behind him flashes its lights at him, to remind him it’s time to go, but he doesn’t take the road that leads out of the city. The car moves slowly, shakily, for a few meters.

“Okay, we’re far enough,” he announces shakily, as he pulls over at the side of the road.

“We’re not far enough,” Minseok hisses, but Baekhyun doesn’t let that stop him. They came to save this Gumiho, they saved this Gumiho. He doesn’t want her in his car, in his house or in his life, smelling of murder and eternity.

“We are not far enough,” she says, smiling gently, eerily. “Though I do not understand why you brought me here.”

Baekhyun opens the car door and steps out into the empty street. It’s evening already. Winter evening, the kind that claims the world too early, stealing precious hours of sunlight with long blue fingers, cold and foggy. He walks around the car and opens the door for the Gumiho. She leaves the cab in a single graceful, fluid movement. Minseok does the same on the other side.

They’re only a couple of streets away from the major traffic artery that leads out of the city, but the neighborhood is desolate and quiet. It’s a secondary road in a mostly industrial area, the kind that turns deserted after it gets dark, when all the people walk fast to reach the closest bus station and go home. It’s the perfect place to get rid of their guest. She looks up right then, as if she could guess his thoughts.
“We want to help you,” Minseok says. “My name is Minseok and I’m a Gumiho, just like you. Can I ask for your name?”

“You can, if you want.”

“What’s your name then?”

“I never said I would tell you.”

He blinks, taken aback. “I can help you,” he says. “I can give you shelter, protection. If you stay in Seoul, you will be in danger. How long have you been a Gumiho? Where do you come from?”

She clicks her tongue, ignoring Minseok and focusing her attention on Baekhyun instead. “You’re a strange child. What are you, exactly?”

“I’m Sunmi’s son,” he says, in reply to her question. He doesn’t even think about it. Baekhyun never considered himself human or Gumiho. He’s always been his mother’s son, nothing less and nothing more. He sees understanding flash in her eyes at Sunmi’s name, together with something else he can’t identify. Maybe anger, but it’s gone too quickly to say for sure.

“The son of a Gumiho? Bizarre.”

Baekhyun meets Minseok’s eyes. His nervous expression mirrors Baekhyun’s own.

The Gumiho stares curiously at the asphalt, at the guardrail, at the lamppost shakily lighting the service area. Twilight has merged with the clouds and the yellow street lights, violet and orange and grey, so much grey, the city is drowning in fog. She smells the air and they both feel the shift in energy as she collects her power, the streams of magic creeping around her in rivulets, coloring the mist purple and gold.

“Thank you for helping me,” she says, softly. Her tails start showing, pale and fair, pink gold, like her long hair floating eerily in the wind. “But it is time for me to eat.”

“You can’t,” says Minseok, and almost grabs her. Baekhyun is glad he didn’t. She looks like she could scorch him with a single touch. “Listen, I don’t know where you came from and how things worked there, but you can’t do this in fucking Seoul, of all places. There are rules now. We all follow those rules. It’s either that or death.”

The way she looks at him is blank. Not necessarily empty, but devoid of any interest in what he’s saying. Baekhyun feels a chill in his bones, and it’s not from the cold evening wind. He wants to grab Minseok, get in the car and run away from this woman as fast as he can. Maybe saving her was not the right thing to do, to be honest, but that’s what Minseok and Seulgi, what Baekhyun’s mother and Baekhyun too sometimes, do. She’s a Gumiho, in the end. She’s kin. Blood is thicker than water. It can be even thicker than magic, sometimes.

Except Minseok didn’t come to save this Gumiho. He came to make sure one of his friends wasn’t in danger. None of his friends is in danger, case closed. Time to get away from this creepy, bloody girl.

“Death?” she asks, tilting her head to the side in a curious, owlish way.

“You can’t hunt in Seoul,” Baekhyun explains, his voice a little shaky. Next to him, Minseok nods frantically. They’re like children in front of a wild animal. “If you do that, the Guardian of the city will come looking for you. And if they think you might be a danger, and you are, they will kill you. We can’t save you forever.”
She snorts, softly, under her breath.

“The Guardian of the city? A simple witch, too full of himself to understand true magic. He cannot kill me if I kill him first. I would’ve done it today, I almost did it… If only the Samjokgu didn’t meddle…”

“You did… what?” Minseok asks, in disbelief.

“It’s easier than you think, when none of them can resist my charm. We’re Gumiho, not lowly spirits. We are way above them for a reason, have you forgotten?”

There’s a hint of annoyance now in her voice, like an out of tune note that disrupts the harmony of the entire song. She’s looking down on them, Baekhyun realizes. He ignores his self-preservation instinct and takes a step closer, laying a hand on Minseok’s back, as if to draw him away without her noticing.

“Maybe they can’t, but the Samjokgu can,” he says, and her eyes snap back to him. “You know, the Samjokgu? Terrible attitude, zero sympathy or compassion, and, oh, did I mention he can fucking kill us?” He’s lying. Chanyeol would never kill anyone, but maybe just the idea of him will be enough to scare her. “He won’t allow you to murder people in his city. If you go back to Seoul and attack someone else, it’ll be war.”

To his dismay, she laughs, an argentine sound, like thin daggers cutting the air, cutting through Baekhyun’s throat, sliding between his ribs to get to his lungs. It steals his breath away.

“Even the Samjokgu can die, if he’s not careful. In fact, I don’t think this Samjokgu will last long. He’s soft and weak like an overripe fruit. It’s about time it falls down, don’t you think?”

Chanyeol’s face flashes in Baekhyun’s mind and he blanks out. He might have gasped, he might have almost tried to attack her – he, a human child, against a Gumiho, but he would’ve done it, like a knee-jerk reaction, at the mere thought of Chanyeol being hurt. Something holds him back – Minseok’s hand on his, stopping him from launching himself at her.

“If you do that, we will be enemies,” Minseok says, and when Baekhyun looks at him he’s not Minseok, the family friend who would babysit Baekhyun, who would let him pull on his tails with short, chubby fingers when he was a rowdy four years old brat, who would listen to Baekhyun talking about his crushes, who would buy him fried chicken after his exams. Minseok who drove to Seoul to pick Baekhyun up after he broke up with Chanyeol, even if he sucked at driving and he was kind of banished from the capital. Minseok who made sure to punch Chanyeol, while he was at it.

That Minseok is gone. The one looking at the Gumiho is a Gumiho himself, ruddy hair, ruddy tails, a red fox with golden eyes and dagger-like claws.

“If you do that,” he repeats – and Baekhyun can feel he’s hesitant, because he’s Minseok, and Minseok is a pacifist, a mediator, he’s not someone who would ever initiate a conflict, but he’s still challenging her because he knows that if he doesn’t Baekhyun will, and a runt he is, as a runt he will die – “we will have to stop you.”

“You are not the masters of me,” she says, calm, unbothered by Minseok’s show of power. “You are agi, children. You have no power over me.”

Minseok falters, but he doesn’t budge.

“I’m telling you one last time, girl,” he says, and Baekhyun could swear he saw something sinister
at the bottom of the eyes of the Gumiho, like a smug sparkle of amusement. “You can’t stay here. You either leave on your own or I’ll make you, but I won’t stay here and watch you destroy everything we’ve built in the last twenty-five years.”

She giggles.

“Twenty-five years? That’s curious. The last time I have been in this country was twenty-five years ago. Many things can change in twenty-five years.”

“What do you mean?” Minseok asks, but she doesn’t answer. Not with words. Her nine tails start showing one by one, until the girl is gone and the fox is there, all teeth and glassy eyes and long, sharp fangs.

“Baekhyun,” Minseok hisses, his voice choked, barely recognizable. “Step back!”

“What, I…”

It’s not the first time Baekhyun sees a Gumiho. He’s seen Minseok’s fox countless times, and Seulgi’s, and Sehun’s, and Yesung’s. He’s played with them when he was a child, tiny, soft fists pulling at tufts of their fur. They’re family friends and sometimes even strangers, when Sunmi decides to house runaway fox spirits with nowhere to go, or Gumiho who broke the law of the Covens and went into hiding.

Still, this is the first time Baekhyun sees a Gumiho fighting another Gumiho. This is the first time he sees a Gumiho fighting at all. It’s fascinating, glorious and daunting, all at the same time.

Minseok is so fast Baekhyun barely catches his movements. He barrels against the Gumiho like a freight train, aiming for her throat, once, twice, while she growls and fights back. There’s a snap of broken bones and a cry before the two figures separate, panting harshly. Baekhyun is still frozen on the spot, unable to move.

For a moment, the two foxes study each other, too wary to break the impasse and make a move.

“Baekhyun!” Minseok’s voice is distorted, as if coming from a faraway place, from the depth of a deep cavern. “Leave!”

And Baekhyun should go, he really should. This is a titan’s fight and there’s no place for him here. What did Jongin say? Stay or leave? What was the questions? Baekhyun can’t remember.

“Fucking go, Hyunie!”

The Gumiho takes advantage of that split moment of distraction to attack him again and they both disappear, shrouded in a flurry of golden and red tails that hurts Baekhyun when he tries to step closer.

He takes a step back, yelping, hands covered in blood and smoke, but then he hears Minseok wail, a cry of a wounded, dying animal asking for help. Baekhyun doesn’t even think before he goes for them again. Jongin did say he was going to make the right choice, after all, so he just jumps straight into the fight.

-seulgi-noona
Baekhyunnie?
Is everything alright?
I’m kinda worried here :<<<<
[Sent: 16:56, 23.01.2018]

The swirling of magic bites, stinging hot, searing. Baekhyun can feel it on his arms, chest, around his neck. Pain explodes like fireworks in his forearm, but his fingers close around Minseok’s fur and he pulls, pulls him away from the magic. There’s an explosion, a silent, dark explosion, but an explosion nevertheless, and Baekhyun is blasted out, against the car. It hurts, the car solid and unyielding, his body too soft and weak against it.

When he opens his eyes, the Gumiho is standing in front of him. She’s a woman again, but her tails are still visible, sweeping the floor nervously, and one of the fluffy ears on top of her head is bleeding. Minseok was driven away by the explosion too, but in the opposite direction. He looks a little battered, but overall fine. It’s difficult to realize if he’s cursing or coughing – probably both at the same time – but he gets up with a groan, still glaring at the Gumiho.

She looks at him too – a calculating, hungry look. Then, suddenly, she looks at Baekhyun. She’s exactly between the two of them. Baekhyun realizes what she’s going to do a moment too late. Minseok realizes too, and tries to stop her, but she’s fast, faster than him, and too close.

(Baekhyun should’ve left, after all.)

The Gumiho is on him in a moment. She’s in her human form, but she’s still stronger than any normal human and certainly stronger than Baekhyun. She holds him in front of her, pulling him against her chest like a human shield.

“Let me go,” he screams, trying to wriggle free, but she doesn’t. Instead, she sinks her claws into Baekhyun’s forearm, piercing the soft flesh so deeply that Baekhyun thinks, for a moment, she’s going to break all the way through it and emerge on the other side. He screams, a pained wail he barely recognizes as his own.

“Step back,” Baekhyun hears her voice through the red fog of pain clouding his mind. Her voice shatters in countless angry voices when she speaks. His arm feels cold, as if it was made of ice, and it’s going to break into tiny little pieces as soon as he tries to move it. He opens his eyes and almost retches at the sight of the soft flesh pierced, impaled on the razor sharp claws of the Gumiho, like a trophy.

“Step back!” She shrieks again, and this time he realizes she’s talking to Minseok, who’s staring at them with wide, terrified eyes.

“Let him go,” he says. “He didn’t attack you, I did.”

“Yes, and you will not do it again as long as he stays with me, am I right, son of Sunmi?”

Her claws dig into his arm and Baekhyun chokes on the pain, the world fading away in a red cloud. He feels dizzy, like he could pass out any moment now. He would’ve fallen if the Gumiho wasn’t holding him up.

“The boy has nothing to do with this. If you attack him, I will not let you walk out of here alive.”

“Oh, you will not, you will not, you will not,” she mutters, low enough that only Baekhyun can hear her. “But you are too strong. *agi*, too strong, too strong. We need to become stronger. We need we need. We need this boy to become stronger.”

She takes her claws out of Baekhyun’s arm, with no warning, and he screams out all the air that was left in his lungs, so that no voice is left for what she does afterwards.
She lays her hand on his chest, above his heart, her long claws tickling at Baekhyun’s throat, threatening to slash through it. Baekhyun feels his blood, sticky, hot, dripping down his arms and on his leg and on the asphalt with a wet, sick sound. Her hand too, is bloody, sticky – I’m gonna die, he thinks, she’s going to kill me. It’s too wrong, too early… There are so many things he hasn’t done yet – questions he hasn’t yet answered.

The Gumiho leans over, her voice like nails on glass in Baekhyun’s ears, her claws like daggers on his heart. “Don’t fight it, it will just hurt more the more you fight.”

“What? No, you got it wrong, I’m just a human!”

Baekhyun can hear Minseok growl, he can hear himself gasp, a voiceless, liquid sound of surprise, and he can hear the sound of traffic still flowing only a couple of streets away, on the brightly lit streets crowded by shiny cars. He can hear the voice of the city. The hand of the Gumiho, when it rips a hole through his chest, does it quietly.

The pain, though, the pain screams.

It’s nothing like Baekhyun has ever felt before. It’s grounding, it’s powerful, it’s alive. The world shrinks until it can fit in his heart, in that fragment of himself that the Gumiho is now holding in her hand, then it expands. Then, it explodes.

It’s like Baekhyun had been whole, up until that moment, tiny and useless but whole nonetheless, and now he’s fractured, he’s broken, but at the same time he’s more – he’s projected in the firmament like cosmic dust, he’s in the air, in the wind, he’s in the dirt and in every laugh and he’s in himself again. He’s more.

It’s like a realization, a coming into being, the fulfilment of a potential. (Gumiho aren’t born, they become, they transform. Someone calls that evolution.)

Baekhyun opens his eyes, expecting to see blood, his own blood, he expects to see his own heart, exposed and barely beating. The claws of the Gumiho disappear inside his chest, but there’s no blood, no hole, only pain. And magic.

That’s what she wants. There’s something inside of him, something else, something more, something that is Byun Baekhyun but is not Byun Baekhyun – not at all, – and the Gumiho is trying to tear through him, to take it away.

Stop it, Baekhyun thinks. It’s mine!

“Where is it, agi? Where is your fox bead? This fox needs it.”

Baekhyun doesn’t know what she’s talking about. This is not a legend, or a fairytale. He’s not a Gumiho, he doesn’t have any fox beads. He’s human. But she doesn’t know, so she pulls and pulls and pulls and breaks and he expands, he becomes.

He dies.

She didn’t find what she was looking for, so she’s stealing him, his life, the magic he wasn’t supposed to have, everything.

She’s close enough he can smell her breath – blood, stronger than ever, and he realizes, with a churn of his stomach, she killed two men and ate their hearts with that very mouth – and then he can feel her claws delving within his soul even deeper, probing, greedy fingers looking for the source of Baekhyun’s magic.
A fox bead, she said. Joke’s on her, because Baekhyun, son of a Gumiho turned human, doesn’t have one. He’s never needed a fox bead to be human, because Baekhyun was born human. But she doesn’t know that, and what she doesn’t know will save him.

He can feel her power expanding – she probably thinks she needs more power because he’s protecting his fox bead too well – and while she’s too focused on finding his powers – again, joke’s on her, Baekhyun has tried finding his powers for years and he always failed, – he yanks himself back. She barely realizes he’s moving, too engrossed in her magic. She lets him go.

When it happens, Baekhyun collapses. For a moment he can’t hear, he can’t see, he’s not even sure his heart is beating. Then he realizes he’s lying on the wet asphalt, and it’s hard and raw against his face, under his hands. He’s moving, his eyes burn when finally the first images start appearing.

The Gumiho is curled on herself, next to the car – maybe she’s hurt, – and someone is pulling Baekhyun up to his shaky feet. He’s in the car now – Minseok has thrown him inside. Baekhyun sees him walk around the car through a curtain of tears and blood. He sits at the driver’s seat and closes the door in the Gumiho’s face, just as she comes to her senses and lets out a screech of rage.

She jumps towards them, a fox again, bigger than Sunmi’s tiny Matiz, and all Baekhyun can think is that Minseok fucking sucks at driving and the car throws a tantrum more often than not so they’re basically dead, but in a stroke of good luck the engine doesn’t betray them this time. The small Matiz comes to life and Minseok slams on the gas pedal, almost running over the Gumiho. (She fucking deserves it.)

She dodges at the last moment, and they can feel her claws screeching on the old chassis, but Minseok is already speeding away, back onto the street, ignoring traffic rules and almost running into another car coming from the opposite direction.

**mom**
My little puppy
When are you coming home?
[Sent: 17:03, 23.01.2018]

Baekhyun keeps his eyes fixed on the Gumiho’s through the wing mirror as the car coughs out dark smoke and chokes on the wrong gears, but *moves*, leaving the dark side alley for the yellow light of the main street and the relative protection of busy traffic. It’s like leaving a parallel dimension and stepping back into reality, through the white and red lights of the cars, under the orange cast of the streetlights. Were they really just two streets away? Did they almost die there? The Gumiho doesn’t try to follow them. A glance at Minseok, a little bundle of fury and fear, his hands shaking on the steering wheel, and Baekhyun is suddenly aware he doesn’t know when he breathed last.

His chest still hurts and he touches it, out of instinct, his fingers curling over his sternum, where the claws of the Gumiho sank into his body without meeting any resistance, like a knife cutting butter. The skin is intact, unbroken. There is no visible wounds, but it still hurts, like a hole was bored inside his chest.

“What the fuck just happened?” He manages to ask, more a death rattle than a question.

Minseok doesn’t answer. He’s driving in the wrong lane and he almost crashes against an
oncoming car before he realizes it. Baekhyun hopes no one tries to stop them, because they would realize immediately what Minseok is, and even more what he isn’t.

He doesn’t look human, not anymore. Though his fox tails and ears are still mercifully hidden, his eyes have lost the depth and warmth of humanity for the unnatural shine of glass and the bright amber color of supernatural beings. His teeth are sharper than usual, his nails longer. His human appearance is stretched thin, pulled at the seams, barely keeping the fox in.

Some Gumiho wear human bodies better than others. Minseok is especially good at looking human, to the point that only the Samjokgu or another Gumiho could sense the trick, but now his power is too distraught, his spell in a disarray. It feels like he’s trying to wear a dress two sizes smaller than it should be.

Baekhyun has to fight back a wave of nausea when he realizes he feels like that too, an invader inside his own skin. His body is too tight, too snug, it’s choking him. His insides, his soul, his self… everything is threatening to flood out, flowing through his ribs. His scarred flesh is the only dam keeping him whole.

“What did she do to me?” He asks, his voice barely audible over the growl of the car. “She… She…”

“She was looking for your fox bead,” Minseok says. The source of a Gumiho’s power.

“Which I don’t have, as far as I know…”

“Of course you don’t! It takes a thousand years for a fox bead to form. And you’re human.” He slows down as they approach the Olympic Bridge and anxiously scans his surroundings. There’s still no trace of the Gumiho. “She didn’t know what you were… She must have thought you were a young fox spirit, or some other impure Gumiho, but it doesn’t explain why she would try and steal your powers. She must be out of her mind.”

He brakes to avoid colliding with the car in front of him.

“Come- the fuck-on!” he screams.

The car stops, caught in the traffic jam like a bug in a spider’s net. Minseok’s hands are still shaking. His eyes dart towards the car mirrors to spot the oncoming dangers, but there aren’t any. Whatever that Gumiho wanted, she’s probably gone to look for it elsewhere. Someone is going to die tonight, and the only thing Baekhyun can feel is relief, because it’s not going to be him.

“Where are we going?”

Minseok doesn’t answer – he doesn’t even look like he heard it, – so Baekhyun asks again. At the third time, they’re leaving the bridge, and Minseok finally acknowledges him.

“Somewhere, anywhere. I’m just trying to dilute our track. I don’t want that crazy bitch to attack us again, or worse, follow us home. I’m just… I don’t know how to deal with this either, Baekhyun.”

He moves up a gear as they leave the crossing. “It’s been decades since the last time I’ve heard about a Gumiho stealing magic from another Gumiho. We don’t do that. Not anymore.”

“A first drop falls on the windshield, splattering on the dirty glass before falling down like a tear. Soon it’s joined by another, and another, tiny raindrops, carried by the wind. It’s not really rain, but drizzle, clinging to the glass and blurring down everything else. At least, with the rain covering
their tracks, Minseok feels calmer, calm enough to start explaining.

“It used to be a common practice a long time ago, stealing fox beads. A fox bead is… It’s like our soul. It contains all of our powers, so we must protect it at the cost of our lives. That’s why you never saw mine or Seulgi’s. But it still can be stolen. Many humans in the past have tried to steal from a Gumiho, and those who have been successful have acquired incredible powers, you know the stories.”

Yes, Baekhyun knows the stories. Smart boys beating an evil fox spirit at a game of riddles and winning a pearl with magical powers; little kids pushing the evil Gumiho who wanted to eat them inside her own caldron, but only after they stole her pretty golden marble; the beautiful and terrible fox maiden who falls in love with a prince and gives up her powers to save his life, placing her shining bead on his lips to keep him from dying; the Samjokgu biting Daji and stealing her fox bead, turning her into a fox again, just before she died. Baekhyun knows the stories, but in the stories it’s always a human stealing or receiving a Gumiho’s power and Baekhyun cannot understand why a Gumiho would do it. Why would a creature that powerful, that scary, need more power? It’s beyond his imagination. She was already terrifying as it was.

“Things were different back then. We were different, Baekhyun. Maybe not me or Seulgi, because we’re young, and things were already changing when we came around, but all those old Gumiho who lived in a world of kings and wars were ruthless, lonely creatures who loathed company and hated their own kin. They fought for power and they were not scared to attack another Gumiho. They were not scared to kill.”

Minseok stops too late and touches the car in front of him. An angry middle-aged woman comes out, demanding his insurance number. He looks at her, eyes flashing red, and she leaves immediately. When he looks back, he looks so tired, old, and, ironically, despite his feral appearance fighting to emerge, more human than he ever did.

“Was my mother like that, too?”

“Your mother was smarter than most,” Minseok says. “She was not the strongest, but she had a reputation. She kept to herself and didn’t look for trouble. When the Japanese came with their miko priestess and exterminated most of our kind, I took Sehun and Seulgi with me to Yeoju. We went to look for Sunmi. No one else would have helped us, but she did and thanks to her we survived. Me, Yesung, Minhyun, Chaeyeon, Jisoo… Most of the Gumiho who live now in Korea only survived the occupation thanks to her. Those who wanted to fight died at the hands of Japanese witches, and those who survived were killed by the Samjokgu. Now, there’s only a handful of us left in a world that hates us, why would we attack each other?”

“Then what the fuck happened tonight?”

Minseok finally stops in front of a large CU convenience store, parking under its familiar lime green and violet light. Baekhyun doesn’t recognize the area, but he spots a couple of foreign tourists in the crowd, so they’re probably not far from some popular touristic spot. Minseok takes his hands off the steering wheel and waits until they stop shaking. In the silence, they can only hear the clicking of the rain on the glass, each drop reflecting the entire city in its mirror.

“I might have made a mistake,” Minseok says. “I put you in danger and I’m so sorry. I thought… I came here because Seulgi told me there was a Gumiho in Seoul and I thought she was one of us. But she wasn’t. I know every Gumiho in this country and she’s not one of us. I don’t know who that wench was, Baekhyun. And I don’t know what to do now.”

“Oh,” Baekhyun murmurs, “that sucks.”
“We should- Oh, flying dragons! Your arm! What happened to your arm?” Baekhyun looks down and has to fight away another wave of nausea: blood has soaked through the scarf he used to roughly bandage the wound and he’s bleeding on the dirty passenger seat of the small Matiz. “We need to get that cleaned and bandaged, immediately.”

From: Sunmi-nim
To: Minseok
Did something happen?
Why aren’t you answering the phone?
Where is my son, Minseok?
[Sent: 17:09, 23.01.2018]

Not even the threat of an unknown, eerily powerful and murderous Gumiho can temper Minseok’s inner babysitter, forged by the years he spent taking care of Baekhyun, a notoriously rowdy kid with a passion for climbing, jumping and bothering dangerous animals.

“You should’ve told me you were bleeding out! It could’ve gotten infected! What will your mother say?”

“We were attacked by a literal demon and you worry about this scratch?”

Alright, he’s bluffing a little. The scratch is a hole in his arm and Baekhyun has an inkling he might lose a limb, if he doesn’t die for the loss of blood first. Minseok growls something that sounds suspiciously like *don’t move, rascal* and swings the car door open, dashing into the convenience store.

Baekhyun watches him go for the pharmacy aisle and chuckles to himself as the college student at the counter has the scare of his life when a bruised, bloody and bordering on otherworldly Minseok throws a package of bandages, antiseptic, a triangle of tuna kimbap, a melon bread and a handful of coins on the counter.

The bandages, antiseptic and tuna kimbap are for Baekhyun. The melon bread is for Minseok himself. Gumiho don’t need human food, but Minseok loves it, especially bread and rice. He says it tastes like victory.

“When I was young,” he tells Baekhyun, when he comes back to the car and receives a skeptical look for what he bought, “I used to sneak into the villages to steal rice cakes. I waited until humans were making *injeolmi*, hid behind those big jars and stared at them as they hammered on the rice until it was ready. And then I stole it.”

What an asshole, Baekhyun thinks. He wonders how young Minseok is talking. Was he already a fox spirit? Or was he still just a fox? Can Minseok even remember a time when he was nothing more than animal?

“Foxes can’t even eat rice *tteok*, how did you survive poisoning or accidental choking?”

Minseok grins, his first real grin since they arrived at Severance Hospital a couple of hours ago.

“I didn’t eat the rice cakes. I just licked them clean from the bean powder and then left them in the woods.”

“What an asshole,” says Baekhyun, aloud this time, and Minseok smiles wider.
“I couldn’t wait to become human so I could eat them. You know, among foxes, only one in hundreds can become a spirit fox, and among spirit foxes only one in hundreds becomes a Gumiho... But I wanted to become human so much, because I wanted to eat tteok, and so I did. And now I can turn to human and eat all the tteok and melon bread in the world and I don’t care if you judge me.”

Baekhyun chuckles softly, and Minseok takes advantage of his distraction to loosen the knot of the scarf and peel it away from the wound. It should hurt when he does it, because the fabric has stuck to the bloody skin, but his arm is too numb even for that. Baekhyun closes his eyes though, afraid of what he could see under that scarf.

He hears Minseok whistle and murmur something in Old Korean.

“What?” he says, opening his eyes. “Oh, that’s disgusting.”

“Not really,” Minseok says, studying his arm with wary eyes. “It should be so much worse, but I think she might have triggered your powers when she looked for your fox bead...”

“What does it mean?”

“A normal human would’ve already lost his arm, but yours is... Well, it looks like it went through a meat grinder, but I think you’ll be fine. Your mixed blood probably has something to do with it. You might not look the part most of the time, but you really are Sunmi’s son.”

“Hey, what do you mean? Ah!”

Baekhyun yelps when Minseok spills half of the antiseptic bottle on the wound as a precautionary measure and bandages it quickly and efficiently while Baekhyun looks away.

“So, I’m not dying. That’s a relief. Now what’s the plan?”

“You eat, first,” he says, stuffing half the kimbap in Baekhyun’s mouth. “Then we go home, immediately.”

“What about that Gumiho?” he asks. “She’s still out there.”

“Not my business.”

“You came here for her.”

“Wrong, Baekhyun. I came here in case one of my friends was in danger. And it was a mistake. Not only did I put myself in danger for nothing, but I also put you in danger. Sunmi will want my head off.”

“But what if she kills other people? Aren’t you the one who’s always going on about how we need to clear our image and prove we’re not the soulless monster the Council of the Covens makes us to be? Didn’t you always say we have to start acting as a community, be responsible for each other? This will affect us all!”

Minseok turns to look at him, the corners of his mouth a little curled. Baekhyun recognizes that face. It’s the face Minseok makes when he doesn’t want to deal with something. It used to be his favorite face during Baekhyun’s teenage rebellion phase.

“And when did you become a Gumiho, Baekhyun?” he hisses. “I missed the memo.”
“I’m-”

“No, Byun puppy. Whatever you’re going to say, you are not a Gumiho. And you are not a human. You’re just Sunmi’s son, and today you were involved in something bigger than yourself, because of me, and the gods know how long I will feel guilty for it. Let the Council of the Covens deal with this crazy, psychotic mass murderer who almost killed us both. Come on, kid, we’re going home.”

Baekhyun gobbles the last piece of kimbap in silence while Minseok circles around the car, checking for any damage. Judging by the consternated look on his face, the old tin can is a mess, but it survived the attack of a Gumiho. Not many modern cars could have done the same.

Baekhyun waits until Minseok comes back inside and starts fiddling with the keys before he speaks, certain Minseok is not going to like what he’ll say.

“Hyung,” he starts, and Minseok’s head turns so fast Baekhyun is afraid he’ll get whiplash.

“I’m not sure I want to hear it, Baekhyun.”

Well, Baekhyun is not sure he wants to say it, but he needs to do it.

“Hyung, I can’t come. Not right now, at least.” He ducks his head low, refusing to look at Minseok.

“I have to talk to the Samjokgu first.”

The response is immediate. “No.”

Baekhyun was expecting Minseok’s disapproval, but at this point he doesn’t care anymore.

“She said she’ll kill him. I have to warn him!”

“Then call him!”

“He wouldn’t answer!”

“Send him a fucking message!”

“Knowing him, he wouldn’t read it…”

Minseok punches the steering wheel and the horn squeaks under the rain. “Why do you have to be so damn stubborn? I swear, you’re impossible!”

“Blame yourself, you fucking raised me.”

“Watch your mouth, kid,” Minseok says, but there’s no conviction in his voice. He looks restless and tired at the same time, and Baekhyun doesn’t even want to think about the kind of effort it was for him, to go against another Gumiho. Minseok is… Minseok. He’s not strong and independent like Seulgi or petty and prideful like Yesung. He’s soft and curious and non-threatening. He wants to create a Gumiho class action against witches, he likes melon bread and rice cakes and he cooperates with Korea National Park Service for the rescue and protection of endangered wild species in his free time. Minseok is not a fighter, he’s never been one, but he became one today. He did it for Baekhyun.

“Listen,” Baekhyun says, heaving a deep sigh. “I’m not asking you to wait for me. If you want to warn mom, take the car and go first. I’ll join you tomorrow. But I have to do this, you know? I’ll never forgive myself if something happens to him.”

He watches Minseok cover his face with his hands as he takes a deep breath and leans his head
onto the steering wheel. At least he’s thinking about it. It’s probably more than Baekhyun could hope for.

“It’s just... I don’t like the idea of you with him, Baekhyun. If she’s really targeting the Samjokgu, you could be in even more danger.”

“That’s exactly why I need to go. If she’s going after him, I need to... make sure he’s okay. You would do the same for Sehun.”

Now, this is playing dirty, but Baekhyun has never been above playing dirty in order to win. He sees it in the way Minseok’s shoulders sag, his body immediately relaxing as he admits defeat.

“Okay. Okay, if that’s what you want,” he says, shaking his head. “But you’ll have to tell your mother yourself.”

Baekhyun nods fervently and Minseok sighs again.

“Come on, lead the way.”

It’s not even seven o’clock. Minseok shifts up a gear and enters the flow of Seoul’s night traffic. He doesn’t stop until he’s in front of Park Chanyeol’s house.

From: Minseok
To: Sunmi-nim
dont freak out noona
we were attacked
hyun is alright
im calling u
[Sent: 17:22, 23.01.2018]

Baekhyun never expected Chanyeol to be the Samjokgu.

It’s one of those things that are just not supposed to happen. Chanyeol was... many things. He was the first person Baekhyun met in Seoul. His first best friend. His first real person crush (Gong Yoo doesn’t count), his first heartbreak. His first boyfriend, his first time. He wasn’t his first kiss, but he could’ve been his last. Except he’s the Samjokgu and doesn’t the Samjokgu always end up killing the evil Gumiho?

(Maybe, if Baekhyun had told him beforehand, if he had been honest, things could’ve been different. But you don’t just walk up to the most important person of your life, someone you’ve known since you were twelve years old, and tell them, “Oh, by the way, mom used to be a thousand years old man-eating fox goddess. Don’t worry, she quit before I was born, or something like that.” It’s the kind of thing that’s not supposed to come up – not at family dinners, not ever.

Sure, it’s not like Chanyeol could’ve told him anything, either. “Look Baekhyunnie, my maternal grandfather is a cobbler, but he also hunts Gumiho on the side. And, even better, it’s a curse, so either me, mom or Yoora is going to follow in his footsteps someday, isn’t it great?”

Except it was the truth, and then Chanyeol almost killed Sehun, and Baekhyun called him a murderer, and Chanyeol called his mom a monster, and they fought, and Chanyeol was run over by a car and almost lost a leg, so they broke up. And that’s the end, isn’t it? That’s the end of the
Tiny raindrops create mazes of water and light on the other side of the steamy window. Baekhyun writes the syllables of his name with numb, shaky finger. He doodles a heart next to them, but it’s a little crooked and looks more like a bad circle. He doesn’t dare to write Chanyeol’s name.

“Is this the place?” Minseok asks, as he parks the car under the streetlight in front of a low building in red bricks and narrow windows. He sends a dubious glance at the discolored walls and old entrance door before turning back to Baekhyun. “Is the Council of the Covens not paying him enough?”

“He’s the Samjokgu. I’m sure he’s fine,” he says with a shrug. Knowing Chanyeol, he probably gave up a nice apartment in a luxurious complex for the glorious aesthetics of living in a tiny hole of a flat with no heater, no television and no wifi only because it fits better with his broke melodramatic musician concept. That, in short, is the kind of person Park Chanyeol is.

Baekhyun looks up, at the cloudy sky, blurred by the insistent drizzle. He misses Chanyeol like hell. He misses his smile, he misses the way he read poetry out loud in the middle of the night when he studied for his Literature exams. He misses their monthly One Piece marathons and the talks about the names they would give to their future pets. He misses Chanyeol, the boyfriend, the best friend, the singer in small pubs, the worst shooter game player in the whole country. He misses Chanyeol, and there’s nothing he can say or do, because Baekhyun himself was the one who ended things with him. He’s the one who drifts towards Chanyeol, like an asteroid pulled in by gravity, burning through the atmosphere at impossible speed, consumed by its own need before he can touch the ground in the best case, turning into a fucking catastrophe in the worst.

And sometimes Baekhyun hates himself because he left Chanyeol for the sake of his family, sure, but now he’s unhappy and Chanyeol is unhappy and everyone seems unhappy, and it was a necessary sacrifice, but also a stupid one.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright?” asks Minseok. “What if he’s not home?”

“I know the password,” Baekhyun replies, but Minseok doesn’t seem satisfied. He lingers there, reluctant to leave, almost as if waiting for that evil Gumiho to jump from the shadows and attack them again.

“I’ll be fine, Minseok. I promise.”

“Your promises have no value here, pup,” Minseok says, using everyone’s favorite term of endearment for Baekhyun. Fox puppy. “Do you have your charger? Remember to charge your phone, and if there’s a problem, any problem...”

“I’ll call you, mom and Seulgi exactly in this order,” Baekhyun finishes for him.

“Of course you will, or you’ll have to face my wrath.”

“Be careful with the car, okay? Don’t crash her,” he says, and Minseok scoffs. It’s not the best time to remind him that he, unlike Baekhyun, doesn’t even have a driver’s license. 

“You too, Baekhyun. Be careful. And I’m not only talking about the Gumiho. You’re old enough to have your life, you know? And we all know you miss Chan-”

“You should go, hyung,” Baekhyun says softly, trying to cut off whatever Minseok was trying to say, but Minseok doesn’t let him.
“You’re sad, Baekhyun. And I have reasons to hate the Samjokgu, but I hate seeing you like this even more.”

Baekhyun bites his bottom lip and doesn’t answer – he wouldn’t know how to. The truth is, Baekhyun doesn’t want to talk about Chanyeol, nor does he want other people to talk about Chanyeol in his presence. It just... makes things more difficult. And things are already difficult as is. Things already suck.

Baekhyun wanted a clean, neat cut. He wanted to go home, to cry for a couple of days, to eat ice cream and hide in his room and throw everything that reminded him of Chanyeol away. He wanted some closure.

There was no closure. A couple of days turned into weeks, months, because everything, everything reminded him of Chanyeol. How do you recalibrate your life around an absence big enough to swallow you? It wasn’t like losing a compass, the earth’s magnetic field never disappeared. Baekhyun’s inner needle never turned, crazy and lost, trying to find its North. Baekhyun has always known where his North is. It’s here, in Seoul, and if he could, he’d break the compass on his own so that it finally stops telling him to come here. But he can’t. He can’t.

He watches his mother’s car disappear around the corner, Minseok flashing him the headlights two times as a greeting.

The building feels familiar, and not only because it reminds him of the equally tiny, equally dirty, equally old and cold and low-quality building where he and Chanyeol used to share a one-room apartment during their university years, but also because he’s already been here enough times to know that the front door is almost always open.

In fact, it is open now. Chanyeol lives on the last floor, and Baekhyun is too nervous to wait for the elevator, so he takes the stairs instead and tries not to think about what he’ll say when Chanyeol answers the door. There’s only cotton in his brain, and longing for Chanyeol.

(He might regret the lack of planning later, when he’ll say something completely inappropriate that will cause another fight, or, even worse, when he’ll have nothing left to say and he’ll only be able to stare at Chanyeol and feel stupid and in love.)

Chanyeol, of course, doesn’t answer the door. He must have not come back yet. Baekhyun opens their kakao talk chat and almost asks him where he is, but he realizes he doesn’t need to ask him anything, in the end. One of the perks of being someone’s best friend first and boyfriend later (arch-nemesis with benefits only in the last five years) is that he knows Chanyeol too well.

When Chanyeol’s sister’s birthday doesn’t work, Baekhyun inputs his own birthday and the door opens with a musical jingle. Predictable, Park Chanyeol. Very predictable. Baekhyun, who uses Chanyeol’s birthday as his phone password, is equally as predictable.

The apartment is dark, cold and smells faintly of spicy ramyeon, a scent Baekhyun has learnt to associate with Chanyeol since their childhood. It’s the first thing he remembers about him – the hot, dry summer, the dust under his feet as he ran barefoot in the courtyard of their new house, and the boy next door sitting on the steps of the short staircase in front of his house, eating packed shin ramyeon. They were maybe twelve years old. For the longest time, Baekhyun thought their meeting was fate. Well, maybe it still is. Ill fate, star-crossed lovers, if this was a drama they would make the perfect angsty plot.

He sighs as he inspects the rooms. He’s already been here, but it’s difficult to think when Chanyeol’s hands are everywhere, when he himself is busy undressing them both so that they can
crash on the bed and consummate their sordid little secret. Now though, now he doesn’t have anything distracting him from the bare walls, the lack of photographs, the inexorable loneliness that Chanyeol’s apartment exudes. The same loneliness that crowds Baekhyun’s room in Yeoju.

In a corner of a tiny storage room, Baekhyun finds all of his One Piece DVDs, perfectly wrapped, still packed in the same box Baekhyun had left them in. Was it this morning that he thought it’d be a perfect day to have a One Piece marathon? It feels like ages ago.

Somewhere, out there, a bloody ancient fox is getting ready to kill someone and there’s nothing Baekhyun can do to stop her. He thinks about calling his mother – he really should call his mother and tell her what happened, because she’ll worry if he doesn’t come back. He should also call Seulgi. He doesn’t dare to call Sehun and tell him he’s in the city, but he should do that too.

When he picks up the phone, he finds a long string of messages from literally everyone, asking where he is and what is happening. He ignores them and rereads Chanyeol’s message.

*I need to talk to you,* it says. It sounds angry. It’s just a message, so it doesn’t really have a tone, but Baekhyun has known Chanyeol for half of his life and the message sounds angry. He reads it in Chanyeol’s voice over and over again, feeling uneasy at the angry tone his mind is conjuring. *Come home, I’m here. I need to talk to you too,* is his last thought before he dozes off, exhausted.

He sleeps well. For once, he doesn’t dream about love – broken love, hurtful love, long lost love. He dreams about friendship, playing video games together, sharing fried chicken, Chanyeol convincing him to try spicy *ramyeon* and cracking up when Baekhyun ends up crying and panting, feeling like his tongue just got burned. Chanyeol kissing it better. It is, in some ways, still a dream about love, just a happy one.

The *beep-beep* of the keypad, followed by the short jingle that announces the opening of the door, tugs at the hem of Baekhyun’s dreams. He groans into the pillow, rolling over softly and frowning when the light of the lamppost, coming from the window, hurts his eyes. He faintly realizes he’s awake, but at the same time everything still feels like a dream. It just feels too familiar, being in Chanyeol’s bed, wrapped in his smell, waiting for him to come home – not a dream, a memory; it feels like he went back in time. When Chanyeol’s tall figure appears at the door, Baekhyun pretends he’s not angry at Chanyeol and Chanyeol is not angry at him and smiles sleepily like he would’ve done a few years ago.

Chanyeol’s face twitches into a grimace that is half anguished and half relieved. That’s when Baekhyun is hit by the realization that this is not, like he naively thought, a dream. That’s when Chanyeol catches him by his collar, tugging him up and Baekhyun only has the time to let out a drowsy, confused moan before he’s enveloped in a desperate, tight hug.

-Seok-hyungie
sry hyunie
your mom is truly frightenin
i had to tell her abt u an the samjokgu
she’s not angry just worried
[Sent: 22:19, 23.01.2018]

Chanyeol looks sharper than Baekhyun remembered. Sharper and stronger and more desperate and haunted. His arms tighten around Baekhyun’s shoulder with the urgency of a drowning man
grasping for safety.

It takes a moment, just the time for Baekhyun to breathe against Chanyeol’s chest, in and out, the wool of his sweater tickling his nose. Chanyeol smells like gunpowder, jjajangmyeon and blood, and even more like sweat and fear. Underneath all that, he just smells like Chanyeol, like home, and Baekhyun’s hands itch and shake, balled into fists so tight he can feel the nails dig into the soft skin of his palm as he tries to keep himself from hugging Chanyeol back. Then Chanyeol exhales around Baekhyun’s neck, his whole body enveloping Baekhyun’s, and something clicks, a puzzle piece snapping into place. Baekhyun closes his eyes and hugs back just as fiercely, burnt fingers clasping at Chanyeol’s jacket to bring him closer, digging into his shoulders, trying to feel beyond the numbness the Gumiho’s touch left on him.

Chanyeol’s good leg gives up and they collapse on the bed, an uncoordinated creature made of too many limbs and not enough breath to talk, not enough breath to kiss. Chanyeol’s weight is pinning him down but Baekhyun doesn’t care, not when they’re finally close enough to share the same heartbeat.

Baekhyun lets himself calm down.

“You smell like magic,” Chanyeol whispers against Baekhyun’s neck, softer than a sigh. Baekhyun closes his eyes and shivers. He doesn’t know who’s keeping whom from sinking, just that, together, they’re still floating somehow.

“You smell like stupid,” he blows back against Chanyeol’s ear. “I’ve heard you had a tragic rundown with a Gumiho in the parking lot of a hospital. Guns were involved. I would’ve paid to see it. You must have been such a sight.”

Chanyeol chuckles, low and fond, and curls his fingers on Baekhyun’s shoulder. They’re still pretending they’re not actually angry at each other and Baekhyun likes this. He likes that he can burrow his nose in Chanyeol’s sweater and drown the sound of the rest of the world. For a moment, he forgets about their deal of never talking about the Samjokgu and the Gumiho when they’re together.

“News do travel fast... How do you know? It happened less than a couple of hours ago.”

Baekhyun tries to laugh, but it’s just pushing air out with his nose. He’s still too tense for it to be a real laughter.

“I was outside of the parking lot, waiting for her to come out.”

“What the fuck?”

Just like that, the magic is gone. Baekhyun can feel the space between them blow up, like an explosion of distance that leaves his ears ringing.

Chanyeol pushes himself up, slowly, trying to keep his weight away from his bad leg and failing. He winces, but the pain only lasts for a moment before he goes back to scowling at Baekhyun.

“What the fuck were you doing out there?”

“Trying to save someone’s life,” Baekhyun mumbles, drawing his knees to his chest to hug them.

“What else?”

Chanyeol pushes himself up completely, rolling a bit away to put even more distance between him and Baekhyun. “What does that mean?”
“A family friend asked me to come to Seoul with him to save a Gumiho from you.”

“I don’t kill Gumiho,” Chanyeol tries to say, but Baekhyun blocks him before he can start making everything about his hurt feelings.

“To save a Gumiho from the Guardian, then. You’re still involved, so don’t get all prissy on me, Yeol.”

Chanyeol winces, as if physically hurt by his own name, and Baekhyun pauses, because he wasn’t ready either. It feels like ages since the last time he said Chanyeol’s name out loud, but he still manages to feign indifference.

“Why would you still help that psychotic murderer, though? No, don’t give me that frown. Don’t fucking... That bitch already killed two people. Almost killed a third today.”

Chanyeol is glowering and Baekhyun shrinks a little.

“I didn’t want to save her,” he says, defeated. “I definitely didn’t come to Seoul for that, you know me better than to think I would do that.”

Chanyeol scoffs, and they’re so close Baekhyun can almost taste the poison on his tongue when he speaks.

“Do I really know you, Baekhyun? Because I thought I did, and then you decided to spring this whole Gumiho thing on me; so no, I don’t know what your stand on setting murderers free is, and there was nothing in my ancestors’ diaries about what to do when your boyfriend is a fucking Gumiho.”

“Ex-boyfriend,” Baekhyun says, with a wry smile, and he can see rage explode in Chanyeol’s eyes as soon as the words are out, but he can’t even bring himself to regret them. It’s only the truth.

“Sure, ex-boyfriend. Thank you, Baekhyun, I needed the reminder. You’re my ex-boyfriend who only comes for sex, doesn’t answer my messages, doesn’t tell me anything, not even when we’re in mortal danger, but still finds the gall to sneak into my house and refuse to tell me what the fuck he’s come for.”

This is new. Chanyeol never screamed before. Not in anger, at least. He shouted for puppies on the streets and fried chicken and good grades. He was loud in bed, too, but never loud-angry. Always loud-endearing somehow.

Baekhyun flinches away from him, feeling suddenly small and cold and so, so tired. The room is too big and too empty, this bed too is too big and too empty, like a sea at storm, and he and Chanyeol are castaways on different islands, shipwrecked too far away from each other. The distance between them, barely enough that they’re touching when they shift, is unbridgeable.

Baekhyun didn’t cry when the Gumiho hit him – his arm pulses softly under the sleeve of his sweater, a painful reminder – and he didn’t cry when the Gumiho scavenged his soul, looking for something he’s never had. Pain keeps him lucid and focused, but doesn’t shatter him.

Baekhyun cried when he and Chanyeol fought in third grade and he cried when they took a break during freshman year. Nothing comes close to how much he cried when he broke up with Chanyeol, five years ago, but Baekhyun hasn’t cried since that day. Until now.

“Why would I want to come to Seoul, Chanyeol? To visit my ex-boyfriend, who definitely doesn’t like me anymore and never replies to my messages either? To be called a murderer by the most
important person of my life? Try and guess, Yeol. Or maybe, just maybe, maybe I came here to
warn you. Maybe I came here to make sure you were alive!”

“I’m the Samjokgu, I don’t fucking need your-”

The room spins around them. The lamp, the wall, Chanyeol’s old closet, everything is drowning in
Baekhyun’s eyes, slowly sinking underwater.

“She said she’d kill you. She said it, to my face, and then she attacked Minseok and then…”

He gets up. He needs to get away. *What am I doing here? What was I thinking?*

Chanyeol’s hand latches on the hem of his sweater, pulling Baekhyun back before he can slip
away. His rage morphs into something else as he realizes the state of Baekhyun’s clothes, the
bandage on his arms, the dirt and blood on his face.

“She attacked you?” he says, paling. “Baekhyun, are you an idiot?”

“She said she’d kill you,” Baekhyun says again, voice low and crushed. “And even if she didn’t,
do you really think I wouldn’t come? I know you, I know you don’t hurt Gumiho, but any Gumiho
could hurt you! If I can take them away, if there’s a way to keep both you and my people safe, do
you think I wouldn’t take the chance?”

_Can’t you see it, Chanyeol? I came here for you._

**mom**

Byun Baekhyun you’re in big trouble.
Call me as soon as you see this message.
[Sent: 22:25, 23.01.2018]

Chanyeol’s fingers are delicate and cold on Baekhyun’s neck, their touch unsure, unfamiliar. It’s
not that they don’t know their way – Chanyeol’s fingers claimed all of Baekhyun, a long time ago
– they’re just too scared to touch now. Baekhyun wants to pull at Chanyeol’s wrist and splay his
palm all over his neck, like it belongs there – it does, it did.

The bathroom of Chanyeol’s one room apartment is so narrow they can barely fit inside together.
Baekhyun has to sit on the closed toilet while Chanyeol looms over him to clean the scratches on
his neck that Minseok neglected. It’s a cramped fit and neither of them knows where to look or
where to touch and their heads keep bumping whenever one of them suddenly looks down to avoid
the other.

“Can you move your head?” Chanyeol asks, and the hesitancy in his voice reverberates on the tiled
walls, sounding even louder in the box-sized room.

He tilts Baekhyun’s face to the side himself when Baekhyun doesn’t react, his touch featherlight
and reluctant as he dabs antiseptic to the wound. It stings, and Baekhyun’s breath hitches, and their
eyes meet, only for a second, because none of them can stand it. They quickly look away.

“Will you tell me what happened?” Chanyeol asks, close enough that Baekhyun can feel his voice
caressing his lips.

“We didn’t know her,” Baekhyun says, eyes trained on a spot of mold growing between the tiles and the doorframe. “We didn’t know anything. Minseok received news of a Gumiho being stuck in Seoul, and he thought she was one of ours and that she needed help, so I came here with him. To help. But she wasn’t one of us and she clearly didn’t need any help.”

Chanyeol frowns and pulls back to plaster a band-aid on Baekhyun’s neck. “She’s a Gumiho,” he says. “She is one of you.”

Not really, Baekhyun wants to say. But then he would have to explain why, and how can he explain the struggle of a dying race, of lonely, wild creatures huddling together because they have no choice. How can he explain that kind of bond to their most dangerous enemy?

Baekhyun is no Gumiho, but he is the son of Sunmi and he has spent his entire life around Gumiho. He could tell Chanyeol that the woods are shrinking and the foxes are almost gone. Fox spirits are slowly losing their powers, nothing more than ghosts howling with the wind in the woods, and Gumiho... Gumiho are decaying, their powers dimming gradually as they mingle with humans. They rarely hunt, rarely fight, they hide and pretend they can be human and sometimes they become human. There hasn’t been a new Gumiho in the last twenty years and there probably won’t be any in the future either. Those who are left protect each other with a fierce desperation. All of them, without any exception.

“She’s not one of us,” Baekhyun repeats, stubborn. “Minseok knows every Gumiho living in Korea, but he’s never met her before.”

“You said she attacked you?”

Baekhyun weighs the question in his mind carefully and weighs the answer on his tongue even more so.

“We had an... altercation. A divergence of opinions. So Minseok attacked her first.” Chanyeol’s eyebrows shoot upwards. “She... She didn’t care that she put our entire community in danger with her reckless actions.”

“Why does it matter? All the Gumiho kill people, why was she different then?”

Baekhyun wishes Chanyeol could step back, let him breathe, let the both of them breathe. He’s still too close, and Baekhyun is still too angry, too sensitive. They both are. Raw and angry, picking at each other and waiting to see who’ll draw the first blood. Baekhyun wants it to be him.

“I know you think Gumiho are all cruel man-eating monsters-”

“Because that’s what they-”

Baekhyun slaps Chanyeol’s hand away. From the surprise in his eyes, Chanyeol probably hadn’t even realized he was still touching Baekhyun.

“Yes, I know what you think, but you know nothing about Gumiho, oh great Samjokgu, and I don’t accept reprimands from someone who’s using a three thousand years old legend to make a point against an entire race. Now, you can think whatever you want and I honestly don’t care at this point, but we’re not monsters. We have rules. And Gumiho who don’t respect the rules are a threat to the whole community, not a part of it.”

Chanyeol’s frown deepen as he talks. It’s not an angry frown, just a confused one. “You’re not a
Gumiho,” he says, when Baekhyun is done.

“What?”

“You keep saying we, we, but you’re not a Gumiho.”

“I’m not totally human either, but it doesn’t matter. I know where I need to be.”

Chanyeol flinches at these words. One of his hands comes up, quickly grabbing Baekhyun’s bandaged wrist and pulling. It hurts, and Baekhyun yelps and raises his eyes to glare at Chanyeol.

It’s a mistake. Their eyes meet, and there’s so much, so much disappointment, so much resentment, and so much hurt in Chanyeol’s eyes. And so much more. He looks at Baekhyun like he wants to tear him apart and then fix him. (And, amidst all of that, he still looks at Baekhyun like he wants him.)

“Oh, I’m sure you know where you need to be,” Chanyeol says, under his breath. He turns his back and limps quietly out of the room before Baekhyun can stop him. The ghost of his touch tingles on Baekhyun’s wrist.

The bathroom somehow feels even tinier now that Chanyeol is gone, just four walls closing over Baekhyun, suffocating him. He catches his reflection in the mirror. A disheveled, pale boy, even paler under the white neon light, with scratches on his neck, on his arms, on his collarbones, his eyes bloodshot and puffy and the swollen bottom lip – not from the fight, but from biting on it way too much.

What are we doing here? he asks his own reflection silently. The reflection looks back, equally lost.

Baekhyun splashes water on his face, dabs at it with his own sleeve because he doesn’t want to dirty Chanyeol’s towel, turns the tap off and looks up again, absentmindedly. His reflection looks back with a smile and golden eyes.

It lasts only for a moment. Baekhyun blinks and his reflection blinks back, looking a little dumbfounded and quite disappointed. He stares at it a little longer. Dark eyes, no sign of a smile whatsoever. Baekhyun blinks again but the face staring at him doesn’t change. He blames his tired mind for playing tricks on him. Maybe he should just go home.

Chanyeol is smoking when Baekhyun comes back to the other room. The only window of the apartment is open and the chilly night air is flowing inside together with the orange light of the streetlamp.

Baekhyun shivers and Chanyeol turns. Their eyes meet, from the opposite corners of the room. This time, only Baekhyun looks away.

What am I doing here? he asks himself again, face heating up. What is he doing, indeed? He promised himself, the last time he ended up here, in this same apartment, with Chanyeol, that it would be the last. He promised it the last time, and the time before that, and every other time, and he always comes back, he falls towards Chanyeol, a shooting star against the dark sky. And it hurts. It hurts him, it hurts Chanyeol, because how can they ever move on from this, how can one of them stop, when the other is always ready to pull him in?

“Maybe I should get going,” he says, pausing to pull at his bottom lip with his teeth. “I mean, I came to warn you and I did, so…”
His voice trails over, fading to silence. He gets up and goes for his jacket, turning his back to Chanyeol’s unreadable eyes, to his shaky legs, to this angry ghost of a man hiding the boy Baekhyun had loved.

“Thank you for helping me,” Baekhyun says when he’s done. He could call Sehun, borrow his car. He could be home in a few hours.

He turns to leave. The door is just a few steps away. But he hears Chanyeol’s footsteps, slow and uneven, and he feels Chanyeol’s hand close on his sleeve, not harsh and cruel like before, not a punishment but a plea, and he stops. He feels pathetic, because he doesn’t even try. He doesn’t want to try, he never wanted to try.

“Why did you come, Baekhyun? You never answered. Why did you come to Seoul? What are you doing here?”

What are you doing here?

Chanyeol’s voice is too close, low and raspy and tired, and that’s what gets to Baekhyun, in the end. He can’t deal with Chanyeol when he’s angry, when he hates him, when he wants to hurt him. He wants to run away from his unforgiving words, his cold hands, his eyes full of betrayal. Baekhyun feels like a coward, but he’d run to the end of the world to escape Chanyeol’s furious hold.

But this, this Chanyeol who’s tired and sad, this Chanyeol who’s full of longing, who struggles with his own anger and wins and loses every time, this Chanyeol who just wants and wants and doesn’t care, this Chanyeol who hurts and doesn’t know how to make it better. Baekhyun doesn’t know either, but this is his Chanyeol.

“Do you really want me to say it?” Baekhyun asks in a short sob.

This time, when Chanyeol reaches for him and tilts his face up, towards his own, Baekhyun only feels warmth.

Chanyeol really looks thinner, his jaw more defined, the bags under his eyes more pronounced. Baekhyun wonders briefly how they would look like if he smiled. Chanyeol is not smiling now. He just looks at Baekhyun, like he used to look at him before, when it was just Chanyeol and Baekhyun, no Gumiho, no Samjokgu, no looming silence.

“What am I doing here?” Baekhyun asks himself again.

His eyes flutter close when Chanyeol kisses him.
Hunnie

whta is happenign
minseok just tried to call me??
hELP
[Sent: 23:36, 23.01.2018]

All it takes is the feeling of Chanyeol’s lips. All it takes is Chanyeol’s sigh, against Baekhyun’s lips, as if he too was waiting just for this. It’s like the curtains close and the show is over, this puppet show where he and Chanyeol have to hate each other, this cold war of attrition, of misunderstandings, not a fairytale but a tragedy of sworn enemies and star-crossed lovers, of barricades and trenches.

Baekhyun can lie to himself, he can curl up in his bed and stare at the rain knock on his window for hours and fool himself he’s doing well, Chanyeol is doing well, wherever he is. They’re going to be alright, just not together.

Baekhyun is good at telling lies, but Chanyeol is good at breaking them, at unfolding them with his hands on Baekhyun’s jaw, holding him still – as if Baekhyun could run away, as if Baekhyun would want to run away.

The curtain falls, and Baekhyun can finally kiss Chanyeol back like it’s the only thing he’s ever wanted to do. (It is.)

“I missed you,” Chanyeol says, against his lips, and his fingertips are cold – his hands are always cold when he’s nervous, – but they warm up just fine against Baekhyun’s skin. Chanyeol’s words, too, are warming up, and soon enough they’ll be too hot, feverish, and breathless against Baekhyun’s throat, words that bite and bruise and kiss.

Baekhyun can lie to himself, but Chanyeol is not alright, Baekhyun is not alright, they’re never going to be alright.

“I missed you, too,” he says, and Chanyeol pins him against the door and kisses him senseless, kisses away the longing, the fear, the distance. “I missed you so much, Yeol,” Baekhyun sighs, when Chanyeol’s lips let him go to breathe.

“You could’ve called. Why didn’t you call? Why didn’t you come?” He doesn’t ask why Baekhyun left in the first place, but laces their fingers together and hold his hand between their chests, close to his heart, bowing down to lean his forehead against Baekhyun’s.

Baekhyun shakes his head – he’s trying, he’s trying, trying to set Chanyeol free, trying to set himself free. They’re not made to be together, he and Chanyeol, the son of a Gumiho and the Samjokgu himself. They have no future.

“You never answered my message,” he says, and his eyelids flutter close as he hides in face in the crook of Chanyeol’s shoulder. “I thought you didn’t want to see me.”

“I didn’t want to see you, Baekhyun. You came to Seoul, close enough to see my performance, listened to my song and ran away before I could see you. You’re a coward, a childish, selfish and petty coward. And an idiot. I always want to see you, Hyunie.”

“I’m sorry,” Baekhyun mutters back, again and again, because he feels sorry for too many things to name them.
Chanyeol circles him with his arm, drawing him closer to his chest. He wobbles a little, and Baekhyun realizes his leg must be hurting. It’s been five years, but it still hurts. What a mess of a man. He’s suddenly overwhelmed by the need to kiss this stupid man, but Chanyeol kisses him first. It’s a chaste, lingering kiss, lips on lips, no more than panting on each other’s mouths.

“Bed,” Baekhyun says, and Chanyeol nods, grimaces when he has to walk, but doesn’t let go of Baekhyun’s hand.

“You fucking scared me,” he says, when Baekhyun pushes him onto the bed. He lands on his back, splayed on the bed like a starfish, and Baekhyun unzips his jacket and lets it fall on the floor before he climbs on top of him.

“Did I?”

“When I found you here,” Chanyeol’s hands wander on his back, slipping under the hem of his shirt. “When I realized you were hurt. When I thought you were going to leave. Always scaring me...”

Baekhyun sighs when Chanyeol’s hands pull at the sweater and then at the shirt underneath, until it’s falling open, the buttons giving up at the pressure. It carelessly slides down his shoulders, bunching up on his nape when Baekhyun arcs his back and grinds down on Chanyeol, hard. Electric stars explode behind his closed eyelids as he throws his head back and moans.

“I should’ve left,” he says, when there’s enough air in his lungs, and the words are still choked and breathless. “Even now, I should leave. You know I can’t stay. You know why.”

“You should’ve left when you had the chance. I’m not letting you go now.”

Until the sun rises again, Baekhyun thinks bitterly.

“Tomorrow...”

“I don’t care about tomorrow,” Chanyeol says, pulling him down to kiss him again, the friction not enough to give them real pleasure, not with all the fabric still keeping them apart. Chanyeol moans, low and exasperated, trying to pull both at Baekhyun’s blue jeans and his own.

“Wait, let me...” he mutters, palming Baekhyun’s dick through the fabric, sending jolts of excitement through his spine. Baekhyun’s eyes flutter shut as he goes down, boneless against Chanyeol’s chest. He moans, dazed, almost on autopilot, because this, the slide of his chest against Chanyeol’s, Chanyeol’s fingers curled on the small of his back, his hips twitching to ride Chanyeol’s thigh, this is easy. It’s the easiest thing in the world, since the first time Baekhyun tried it, seventeen, sweaty and bored and awfully horny, on the heated floor of Chanyeol’s house, after a particularly disastrous cram session, a couple of days before Christmas. It was sticky and awkward and easy like falling. Baekhyun never stopped falling after that time.

“Fuck, Hyunie, Baekhyunnie, pants off,” Chanyeol says in a long exhale, pulling at Baekhyun’s hair to get him up. “Pants off, come on,” and Baekhyun wiggles in his lap one last time – Chanyeol tugging at his hair again, a mild warning – before he kicks his pants and underwear away, not caring where they land.

“Here,” Chanyeol calls, curling his fingers on Baekhyun’s shoulder. “Come here.”

His skin shines like gold under the soft light of the bed lamp and his eyes are hooded and black, beckoning to Baekhyun.
Baekhyun hooks a hand on his hip, his palm smooth against the rough surface of a scar Chanyeol got when he was fourteen. He knows this body, its planes and its curves, the secret places where Chanyeol’s skin is tender and white like milk and the harshness where his bones jut, stretching the skin. He really got thinner, Baekhyun thinks, tickling his ribs, playing them like piano keys, going down and down, raking his nails on his stomach, taking a hold of his cock – and Chanyeol’s moans do sound like music.

“You’re a menace,” Chanyeol says, when he’s got enough breath in his lungs to talk, and Baekhyun giggles, exhilarated, pumping him slowly, lazily. He drags his nails on the underside and Chanyeol grits his teeth, twitching in Baekhyun’s hands.

Baekhyun takes him in his hand, jerks him fast and messy, like Chanyeol has always liked it. He swats Chanyeol’s hand away when he tries to reciprocate the favor.

“Not yet,” Baekhyun pants, in reply to Chanyeol’s mute question. “It’s been a long time. I’m not sure I’d be able to hold on with your hands on me...”

“How long?”

“Since the last time with you, of course,” Baekhyun says, feeling his face heat up. “What, do you think I go around hooking up with strangers? I don’t want to have sex with other people, Chanyeol. I just...”

He feels too hot already, so he lets his voice trail over before he says something even worse. Chanyeol snorts and pulls him up for another kiss, tilting his head to lick against the roof of his mouth, thrusting up against him. When he lets go, he smiles, crooked and brilliant, just a hint of a dimple. He smiles from under his bangs and says, low and yearning, “I’d really like to flip you over right now.”

And Baekhyun wants Chanyeol to flip him over, too. He wants Chanyeol to hold him down, one hand on his hip, one of his throat, not quite cutting his air, just putting pressure because he knows Baekhyun gets off on the idea. He wants Chanyeol to pound into him until he forgets how to ask for more, like he used to be before the breakup, before the curse, before the accident. Before. He takes a quick look at Chanyeol’s left leg, conscious that some things will never be the same, and it’s partly his fault. He and Chanyeol aren’t even together anymore, he remembers, and he tenses at the thought, squeezing Chanyeol’s thighs.

“Hey, Hyun, Hyunie, Baekhyun, look at me, come on.” Chanyeol pulls himself up and locks his hands on Baekhyun’s back, caging him. “Stay with me, Baekhyun. You’re here with me now. I told you, you should’ve left when you had the chance. I’m not letting you go now.”

“I don’t want to go,” Baekhyun murmurs, letting his head loll on Chanyeol’s shoulder, kissing the skin with his words. “I want to stay here.”

He always wants to stay here, with Chanyeol. He wants to believe Chanyeol’s words when he says you can. He wants... he wants...

“What do you want to do?” Chanyeol asks.

Baekhyun turns his head to kiss behind his ear, whispers against his hairline. The curtain has fallen and they only have until the morning before it rises again. One last ball, before Cinderella comes back. Let it be worth it.
“Get down, I want to ride you.”

**Hunnie**  
i think somethings wrong baekhyun  
pls answrt the phone  
please  
[Sent: 00:12, 24.01.2018]

The curtain doesn’t wait for dawn to rise, like the sun on the horizon, at East.

It’s still dark when Baekhyun comes to consciousness slowly, to the notes of a famous pop song. It’s not his alarm – he prefers dull, stern *beep-beep* when he needs to wake up, – but it’s still familiar. He opens his eyes, confused and disoriented because this is not his room, not his bed and even the arm carefully thrown over his hips isn’t his own.

He pushes it away and the bed shifts, the man next to him – Chanyeol, still warm and pliant and smelling of sex and safety – groans in his sleep, but Baekhyun ignores him to get off the bed and tiptoe barefoot on the cold floor. He bumps into the drawer, the wall, the bed and the wall again as he follows the sound, his mind still too hazy to process what is happening and his body too warm and sluggish from sleep for him to control it fully. His everything hurts, but it’s a good burn.

Finally, his hands close on the hem of his coat, carelessly thrown on the table, and he blindly brushes his palm against the fabric until he feels his ringing phone in the pocket. He swipes right to answer the call as soon as he reads Sehun’s name on display.

“Hello?” Baekhyun asks, trying to get his voice out when it gets stuck on the back of his throat.

“Hyunie, where are you?”

Sehun’s voice is... frantic. Worried. Baekhyun shakes his head, trying to wake up.

“Sehun, fuck, it’s... what time is it?”

He has no idea, but it’s too early for a phone call.

“Are you home?” Sehun asks.

“No, I’m... I’m in Seoul.” Even talking is difficult, his mouth too dry. The words pile up like cotton balls on his tongue. “What’s wrong?”

There’s a short, heavy pause on the other side of the line.

“I don’t know... I think something’s happened. Minseok-hyung, he called earlier and said some strange things, but the line was cut off.”

“There you tried calling him again?”

“He didn’t answer. I called Lady Sunmi, but the phone at your house isn’t even ringing. I’m worried, Baekhyun.”

Baekhyun’s hands scramble on the screen. It’s three in the morning.
“Mom is probably sleeping, Sehun.”

“No, it’s not ringing! At all! Not even the telephone at the inn! And Minseok said...”

“What did Minseok say, Sehun?”

The boy on the other side of the phone hesitates until the silence between them is thin enough it could cut.

“Listen, you need to go back to Yeoju,” Sehun says. “Like, right now.”

Chanyeol stirs again and Baekhyun shivers. The bed is warm and inviting, Chanyeol’s arms a safe haven. Sehun is probably overreacting anyway. It’s three in the morning, of course no one is answering the phone. People sleep at this time of the night!

And yet...

“Baekhyun, I can’t go! You know I’m stuck here, I can’t leave Seoul. You need to go, please...”

Baekhyun closes his eyes. He knows where he needs to be. Even if he’s here, no matter how many times he comes here, it’s not where he needs to be.

“Okay, just... Calm down. I fucking hope it’s nothing serious, even if you’re making me drive in the middle of the night.”

He’ll get to whine at Sehun later if this is a false alarm, but for now he just sighs and rubs his tired eyes. “You’ll have to lend me your car though, Minseok took mine back home. Wait, I’ll send you my location so you can pick me up...”

“There’s no need to... You’re with him. You’re with the Samjokgu, aren’t you?”

Baekhyun bites his lip. Oh, this is awkward...

He wants to apologize, but Sehun cuts him off.

“It doesn’t matter... Give me twenty minutes, I’ll be there!”

He hangs up before Baekhyun can even muster an answer.

Baekhyun sighs. He tries to call his mother, but it doesn’t ring, just like Sehun said. Minseok’s phone is turned off. He calls Seulgi and it does ring, but she doesn’t answer.

“What is going on?” A voice asks. He looks up and finds Chanyeol propped on his elbows, squinting at him in the orange light of the streetlights outside.

“An emergency at home, apparently. I think I need to go.”

Chanyeol’s frown is nothing short of accusing.

“You said you’d stay the night. You said,” he says, slowly, “we’d talk about this tomorrow morning.”

“We’ll talk next time,” Baekhyun replies, tired. He starts gathering the clothes he lost, scattered all over the floor, a trail of fabric that leads to Chanyeol’s bed. Chanyeol doesn’t say anything, but Baekhyun can feel he’s angry.

“I’ll text you?” He offers, but Chanyeol shakes his head.
“You’re unbelievable,” he says under his breath.

“Chanyeol...”

“Leave! Get your stuff and leave, Baekhyun...”

“Chanyeol, listen to me...”

“Leave, I said!”

Baekhyun flinches and ducks his head. He wants to stop, he wants to explain, but Chanyeol is angry, and Baekhyun doesn’t know what to do to make him less so. He shimmies his clothes on as fast as he can. Maybe he forgets his shirt and one of the socks, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t look at Chanyeol again, not even when he says, “Bye, Yeol,” and doesn’t receive any reply. He dashes outside with Chanyeol’s smell lingering on his skin, his shoes untied, the coat balled in his left hand and the phone in his right, going down the stairs so quick he almost falls.

Sehun is already waiting for him in front of the house, leaning against the car. He looks different, more human than Baekhyun has ever seen him look, but when he spots Baekhyun his eyes light up, golden amber, and a flash of sharp teeth appears under his upper lip. Sehun is young, just a thousand and twenty-three years old, a toddler in Gumiho standards, and he’s the closest thing to a brother Baekhyun has ever had.

He takes a look at Baekhyun, at his disheveled appearance, his messy hair. In normal circumstances, he would’ve said something – something low and teasing and suggestive, because Sehun is the one who has most reasons to hate Chanyeol, and yet he’s the only one who doesn’t mind that Baekhyun is still fucking the guy who almost killed him, – but he doesn’t, and that speaks volumes on his state of mind.

“Get in the car,” is the only thing he says. Baekhyun scrambles to get inside.

“Did you manage to contact someone?” he asks fastening the safety belt. Sehun shakes his head. He’s rubbing his wrists, where the Seal of Detention that keeps him from leaving the capital was branded five years ago. He looks moments away from trying to leave anyway, even if seal will only give him pain if he does.

“Okay, don’t worry, Seunnie. I’m going. It’s gonna be alright.”

He swallows, and Baekhyun can see the faintest ghost of his tails floating weakly in the moonlight, barely visible. It lasts for a moment, before Sehun realizes what he’s doing and he hides them again.

Baekhyun starts the engine. The small Hyundai comes to life quietly. He tries flexing his wounded arm, but it doesn’t hurt enough to stop him from driving. He’s ready to go.

“Please, be quick, Hyunie. I have a bad feeling. Like, the worst feeling.”

“What did Minseok say, Sehun?”

“He called me a couple of hours ago, said he had something to tell me. But the conversation was cut off too soon... I tried to call him again, but he didn’t answer. I think he was attacked. I’m worried, Baekhyun...”

“Focus, Sehun, what did he say?”
Sehun shrugs in his fluffy winter coat, looking too young and too lost. When was the last time he saw Minseok? Three years ago? Two? Sehun was sentenced to fifty years to spend in Seoul, but Minseok is a Gumiho and he can’t even set foot in the city.

“He said he loved me, Baekhyun.”

Sehun’s voice reverberates on the wet asphalt, lost in the drains with the rest of rainwater.

This is something Baekhyun wasn’t expecting, not even in his wildest dreams. This is worrying, really worrying. One look at Sehun, who’s on the verge of tearing up, is all it takes for Baekhyun to straighten his back and plaster a hopefully comforting smile on his face.

“Don’t worry, Hunnie. Everything will be alright. I’ll call you when I get there, okay?”

Sehun nods. The pale, shaky glow of his tails is the only thing Baekhyun sees before he turns the corner and joins the main road, heading towards the exit of the city.

We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.

[Sent: 05:28, 24.01.2018]

It’s snowing lightly when Baekhyun arrives in Yeoju, small flakes lazily swirling in the air, taking their time before they land on the windshield of Baekhyun’s car. At East, dawn has already grazed the sky with its bright fingers, pulling at the curtain of mist and frost to peek at the frozen fields. It’s not pink or golden, but grey, filtered through the veil of snow falling from the sky. Through the graceful embroidery of snowflakes twirling mid-air, in the distance, on the other slope of the mountain, Baekhyun can see a thin trickle of black smoke.

His head hurts, his left arm hurts, his chest hurts and everything is cold. There’s a tightness in his chest, like a feeling of anticipation, like a feeling of dread – like the beginning of doom. It’s like the world is shrinking, coiling inside him, drawn inside his chest at the speed of light, a reverse big bang waiting to happen. He speeds up, just a little, barely enough for the car to keep its grip on the frozen ground, and for a moment, his eyes catch a movement in the woods, a dash of red, like a big animal dashing through the trees towards the mountain. He brakes suddenly to take a better look, but the woods are still and silent, so he restarts the car again.

When he reaches the small mountain road that takes to his family land, the world is starting to drown in white, white, white everywhere, except at the North, beyond the hill. The dark trickle of smoke has become a black pillar, thick and large and tall, standing proudly in the middle of all that white. That’s when Baekhyun realizes it’s coming from his family’s inn. That’s when Baekhyun realizes his house is burning. That’s when the Gumiho called Sooyeon recovers half of her powers and the world Baekhyun thought he knew shatters around him.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know
neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War
Interlude

July 17th, 2004
Seoul

[Two tanned boys standing in a dusty courtyard, under the midday sun, holding hands. One of them is leaning towards the other, almost as if he’s telling him a secret no one else is supposed to know.]

Chanyeol’s mom takes their first picture together, the day Baekhyun’s family moves to Inheon-dong, in Seoul. Of that day, Baekhyun remembers the sun glistening through his lashes in rainbow hues and the chirping of cicadas. He remembers Chanyeol, a soft kid with glasses and the cutest, grumpiest pout. He remembers the dry heat of Korean summers.

They leave at dawn, Baekhyun and Sunmi in her old, tiny Matiz while Jaehwan rides with the moving truck. It’s the first time Sunmi tries driving out of Yeoju and she and Baekhyun get lost twice on their way to the new house. Their little car doesn’t have air conditioning and the heat is almost unbearable, sweat gleaming on Baekhyun’s collarbones and over his brow.

Sunmi pulls out after their second wrong turn, rummaging in her purse for a map of the city.

“It’s been more than a century since the last time I’ve been here,” she explains, sheepish and a little embarrassed. Baekhyun lays his tiny hand on her elbow and smiles, cheeky and bright.

“Don’t worry, mom, it’s not your fault. You’re just old.”

She pretends to be offended and pokes his nose, carefully pushing the sweaty hair away from his forehead. Her eyes turn serious and for a moment she looks different, not just old, but ancient.

“Baekhyunnie, you have to promise me you’ll be careful with your jokes from now on. This is not Yeoju. No one can know about us.”

“I’ll be careful, mom, I promise.”

She smiles back at him and stops a passerby to ask for directions and that’s the last they talk about it.

Baekhyun’s first impression of Seoul – and the second, and the third, and every other impression Baekhyun will ever have of Seoul – is of dirt and clutter, of gasoline-stained streets and houses tripping over each other, of garbage laid bare in front of the shops, waiting for the trash collector to come and sweep it away. Of an unforgiving, cursed sun and no places to hide from its vice. It’s a city that closes around him like the luscious lips of a Venus flytrap, ready to swallow him whole, and he doesn’t like it one bit.

Sunmi feels it too. He can see it through the cracks in her composure, in the way she looks around her shoulder, skittish and tense, like a wild animal caught by accident on the highway.

The new house is situated at the feet of the mountain, in Inheon-dong: a drowsy, residential
neighborhood. It’s made of brick walls and tiled floors, so different from the traditional house where Baekhyun was born, all stone, wood, paper and all the things Sunmi had collected during her long life. This city house is small and bare, devoid of furniture and memories, but it has the tiniest garden where Sunmi and Jaehwan plan to plant flowers, medicinal herbs, a cherry tree and maybe a plum, but for now it’s just a small patch of dry, white dust, gaunt tufts of weeds and the blistering summer heat.

“We share it with the family living next door,” his mom explains, “but they have no use for it. Mrs Park told me we can do whatever we want. She sounded like a nice woman on the phone.”

Baekhyun nods distractedly. To be quite honest, he doesn’t care about the house, or the garden, or the neighbors. The only thing he wants to ask is why they had to move. He liked his school, he had friends, piano lessons and plans with the baseball team. He had his favorite arcade, his favorite restaurant, his favorite movie theater. He had Minseok, Seulgi and Sehun. And now everything is one or two hours away, virtually unattainable.

He sits on the stairs in front of the main door, under the sun, waiting for his dad to arrive, until suddenly the door of the other house slams open and a kid – half baby fat, half awkwardness – comes out and slams the door closed again. He’s holding a cup of spicy ramyeon in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other and everything wobbles dangerously in his hands as he lets out a frustrated, choked scream. Then he sees Baekhyun and stops mid-complaint, eyes going wide behind the lenses in a comical expression of stupor before he tilts the ramyeon cup way too much, spilling half of it on his own shirt.

To his credit, he doesn’t scream, not even considering the water must have been boiling hot. He just goes red all over, turns around and runs into the house, while Baekhyun stares, unsure of what has just happened.

Mrs Park, who lives next door, comes out a few minutes later to offer Baekhyun and his mom iced tea and sweet rice cakes she probably bought specially for their arrival. She’s a nice woman with a kind, motherly smile, and she doesn’t seem intimidated by Sunmi’s beauty. Her daughter, Yoora, only stops to greet them before she has to go to her swimming classes. Her son, Chanyeol, stays, but he barely says a word in front of Baekhyun, doing his best to disappear into the wall.

“Isn’t it nice, Chanyeollie? You and Baekhyunnie here are the same age,” Mrs Park coos, while her son pretends to be deaf. “Did you enroll him in the neighborhood middle school?”

Baekhyun tries to look at Chanyeol. Chanyeol pointedly looks away. Their mothers keep chatting amicably, the best market in the neighborhood, the best hair salon, the best schools, the best way to make their sons become friends.

“Why don’t you take a picture together?” Mrs Park asks, in the end. And that’s how Baekhyun finds himself standing in the backyard of the house, the sun pouring strongly on his neck and shoulders, blinding hot, Park Chanyeol shuffling awkwardly next to him in the dusty courtyard their family share.

“Closer,” Sunmi calls, sounding like she’s enjoying this.

Their elbows touch, and Chanyeol almost jumps away, but Baekhyun suddenly grabs his wrist, sends him his nicest smile and whispers, under his breath, “If you don’t stay still and take the pic they’ll never let us go.” That’s when they hear the click of the shutter.

(Chanyeol’s mom makes a copy and gives it to Baekhyun, who will put it in his wallet and lose it together with the rest of the wallet, during a camping trip six years later. Chanyeol’s copy is
framed and they hang it on the wall where it still is as today.

October 12th 2007
Seoul

[Two boys standing inside of a purikura booth, holding a Pikachu plushie and doing peace signs and making funny faces. In the first picture of the batch, someone has pasted heart shaped stickers on their cheeks. In the last, someone else wrote ‘best friends’ in broken, shaky english. They’re smiling in every picture.]

Baekhyun realizes he likes boys when he’s fifteen and he jacks off to the image of Gong Yoo in Coffee Prince. When he’s done, he lies on his bed with his eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling without really seeing it, his heart beating furiously inside his chest because he doesn’t know how to tell Chanyeol. He doesn’t know how to tell anyone. He feels dirty and guilty, like a criminal, like a liar.

Baekhyun lies everyday – well, not really, it’s more like omission of truth, – but this somehow feels worse than not telling Chanyeol that he’s half Gumiho.

They’re waiting at the level crossing on their way to school, one clear morning of October, when Baekhyun tells Chanyeol he’s thinking of quitting the baseball team.

“Why?”

At fifteen years old, Park Chanyeol has shed the glasses and most of his baby fat, but he’s still a small bean of awkwardness, all big doe eyes and neverending smiles. Yesterday night, he climbed the railings under Baekhyun’s window and sneaked into his room to talk about all the songs he’s writing until they both fell asleep, one earphone each, listening to mixtapes and late night radio podcasts. Sunmi found them in the morning, huddled together on the floor, a heap of warm skin, swollen eyes and hair sticking everywhere. She made breakfast for them and unlocked the front door so that Chanyeol could go back to his own house and change into clean clothes. Baekhyun waited for him in front of the gate so they could run to school together.

“Just because,” he answers, feeling his ears burn at the thought of showering with thirty other boys. He steals a glance at Chanyeol and it lasts only a moment, but it’s enough to catch him with his brows furrowed, lost in an expression of intense concentration. The siren signaling the arrival of the train wails around them, but to Baekhyun it sounds like a personal warning. He feels like he’s already standing on the tracks, the train is coming and there’s nothing he can do to avoid it.

“Is someone bothering you?” Chanyeol asks, finally, his voice incredibly clear despite the warning warble.

Baekhyun flushes harder and shakes his head. “No, Yeollie, just... Just drop it, okay? It’s nothing serious.”

Chanyeol doesn’t say anything back, but Baekhyun knows he won’t drop it. He’ll think about it, chewing on this information for days until he finally figures Baekhyun out. Chanyeol is many things. He’s transparent and eager, and there’s something in the way he trusts Baekhyun with his everything that is half endearing and half exhilarating, but he’s also insanely sharp and he doesn’t like secrets.

Baekhyun fears the moment he’ll realize what is going on. In the best case scenario, he’ll be angry
with Baekhyun because he thought Chanyeol could ever hate him. In the worst case, he’ll really hate Baekhyun. Won’t Baekhyun lose anyway?

They both stare at the railway in front of them just as the train, filled to the brim with commuters, arrives and leaves in a flash with a clatter of metal on metal. When the wailing sound stops and they can finally start crossing, Chanyeol takes Baekhyun’s wrist, keeping him still.

The sky above them is impossibly blue, the asphalt under their feet grey and dirty. Chanyeol’s eyes are big and sure. He looks... he looks cool.

“Let’s ditch,” he says.

“What?”

“Let’s not go to school today. Let’s go to the arcade. I still have the money my grandma gave me from Chuseok. I’ll win a Pikachu plushie for you.”

“Chanyeol, I don’t think…”

Chanyeol tugs, yanking Baekhyun back from the now empty level crossing to his chest. He’s lanky and angular, but he’s already taller than Baekhyun. He’ll grow more, into a person big enough to shield Baekhyun from the rest of the world. (And who will shield Baekhyun from him?)

“I don’t care,” Chanyeol says. “I don’t care if you have secrets, but I don’t want you to be this scared around me. I’m your best friend, Hyunnie, am I not?”

“You are,” Baekhyun manages despite the lump in his throat.

Chanyeol pulls, leads Baekhyun through the drowsy streets, slowly waking up and getting ready for today. Baekhyun follows him and feels so stupid and so relieved and so lucky all at once.

They go to the arcade and Chanyeol does waste his entire Chuseok allowance, but wins Baekhyun a Pikachu plushie in the end. They claim a purikura booth and take stupid pictures holding their stupid plushie and making stupid faces, and when they come out and it’s time to decorate the pictures Chanyeol puts heart shaped blush stickers on their cheeks. On the last picture, with a shaky handwriting, Baekhyun only writes best friends.

* *

June 24th, 2008
Seoul

[A grainy picture of a boy sitting on a swing in a small park. He’s wearing a discolored t-shirt and his flip-flops are dangling from his naked feet as he idly swings his legs back and forth.]

In the middle of spring, Chanyeol stops coming to school.

One morning, Baekhyun knocks at his front door, like he does every other morning, ready to scream at him if he’s still asleep because they’re going to be late for school, but it’s Yoora who opens the door.

She looks at Baekhyun, from head to toe, then sighs and opens the door. “That fool didn’t tell you anything.”

“What?”
“Upstairs,” she says, making finger guns at him. “Tell him to be quick, mom wants to leave in an hour.”

Baekhyun follows her directions and indeed finds Chanyeol in his room, sitting atop a pile of unfolded clothes and one open, half-empty suitcase.

His eyes widen when he sees Baekhyun.

“Hey,” he says, but Baekhyun interrupts him.

“You’re leaving.”

It’s not an accusation, just an observation, but Chanyeol still looks down and pouts like a kicked puppy.

“My grandfather is sick,” he says. “It’s not life-threatening, but grandma can’t take care of him alone, so mom decided we’re all going, even Yoora. We might stay a while.”

That makes zero sense. Like, completely, absolutely zero sense.

“And what about school?”

“Special permission for family emergencies. I’ll have to study on my own.”

Baekhyun swallows in silence, not knowing what to say. He’s going to be late for school, he realizes. He should go. Chanyeol is not coming.

“You’re leaving in an hour, when where you going to tell me?”

“I only found out yesterday night.”

More silence, more time lost as Baekhyun stands on top of mismatched socks and washed-out t-shirts.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad, Hyun. Maybe he’ll get better soon and I’ll be back before you even realize I’ve left,” he says.

“That’s impossible, stupid, I already miss you.”

Baekhyun wouldn’t tell something this cheesy to anyone else, but Chanyeol is Chanyeol, and he blushes and smiles and almost starts crying.

“You’re an idiot,” he says. And Baekhyun is an idiot too, because for a moment there’s something fluttering in his stomach and he thinks he might cry, too, even if he’s Byun Baekhyun and he never cries.

“I’ll send you lots of pictures,” Chanyeol says, flashing Baekhyun his new phone.

Baekhyun snorts. He doubts Chanyeol will find a good internet connection in his village on top of the mountain, at the edge of fucking nowhere, but he appreciates the thought.

“Please do, I’ll miss your ugly face.”

There’s this moment of empty awkwardness between them. Baekhyun almost leans over for a hug, but Chanyeol is still sitting on the floor, and wouldn’t that be awkward? In the end he waves, even more awkward than the hug, and runs away without looking at Chanyeol’s face. He doesn’t greet
Mrs. Park, or Yoora, or Chanyeol’s dad. He runs until he reaches the school, never stopping, ignoring the warble at the level crossing, tears pooling at the corner of his eyes.

Chanyeol sends him a message that only says, *Please wait for me.*

The desk on Baekhyun’s left stays empty for the rest of the term. From the window Baekhyun looks at the clouds chasing each other against the impossibly brilliant sky and wonders if they look different to Chanyeol, or if they’re staring at the same white dragon diving into the blue.

Chanyeol does send pictures, but more than pictures he sends long audio messages. His grandmother has a small dog called Sam and her name alone is impossibly amusing to Chanyeol, even though Baekhyun doesn’t get the inner joke. He tells Baekhyun about his grandmother’s cooking and Yoora secretly dating her summer holidays childhood friend after seeing him for the first time in six years and immediately falling for him again. He tells Baekhyun he misses him.

Baekhyun writes back in flurries of emoji, memes and dog pictures. He sends Chanyeol *good morning* and *good night* messages, but doesn’t talk about Son Byunsik from class 2-C and the way he stares at Baekhyun across the halls. Baekhyun stares back, sometimes.

Byunsik is just Baekhyun’s type. He’s tall and lanky and he has dark, big eyes that get even bigger when Baekhyun agrees to go out with him. He takes Baekhyun to the park and to the cinema and he walks him home afterwards, walking close enough for their hands to brush but far enough that people could still mistake them for good friends. Byunsik is tall enough that Baekhyun has to tiptoe to kiss him. He is a good kisser and he looks like a sweet boy, but Baekhyun doesn’t want to date and live with the fear of being discovered, and so Kim Byunsik goes back to watching him from afar.

News that the Samjokgu is sick reach the capital and Minseok, Sehun and Seulgi dare to venture into the city, squeezing Baekhyun’s cheeks and complaining that he grew up too fast. He visits them every summer, for Chuseok and for the Lunar New Year, but he still misses them so much. Sehun has bought a phone just to text him (a phone Minseok sometimes uses, despite his confusion on modern slang) and Seulgi sometimes sends Baekhyun letters, old-fashioned and smelling like sandalwood and expensive paper, but it’s not the same as meeting them in person, foxy smiles, glowing eyes and the ghost of power surrounding them like a halo.

(At night, Baekhyun overhears them talking to Sunmi and Jaehwan about going back to Yeoju. “Yesung also agrees with me. The Samjokgu is old and sick, *noon*,” Minseok says, his voice just a hushed whisper. “You’ve only got this life left and you’ve sacrificed so much for it, don’t let that arrogant man dictate your life.”)

When they leave, Sunmi plays the *gayageum* for a long time. She looks at Baekhyun, asks him if he wants to leave. He thinks of Chanyeol, who left. Chanyeol, who asked Baekhyun to wait for him. He says no.

Days pass and spring melts into a summer of puddles and cold wind. Rain season lasts for weeks and Baekhyun breaks three good umbrellas under the weight of the tropical storm. Sometimes it rains so hard he gives up on the umbrella and just runs around in flip-flops and a t-shirt, holding his phone in a plastic bag so that it doesn’t drown.

Chanyeol sends more pictures now. Flowers still wet after the rain, Sam the dog jumping on his lap, the totem poles surrounding his grandparents’ house, a shaky picture of the super moon. When the rain stops and a sultry, dusty heat falls like a cape over the city, Chanyeol sends Baekhyun a grainy picture of a boy in a blueish shirt sitting on a swing in the small park behind the elementary
Baekhyun takes a look at his discolored blue t-shirt – it’s not even his own, actually, he just stole it from Chanyeol - his flip-flops, dangling from naked feet as he idly swings his legs back and forth, the hair that grew up so much in the last two months.

He raises his eyes and turns back, trying to find the angle from where the photo was taken and... Chanyeol is standing at the entrance of the park, phone still in his hands. There’s something wrong with him, something Baekhyun can’t quite figure out as he gets up and runs towards him.

It’s only when he’s thrown himself in Chanyeol’s open arms – and really, he has only a moment to register his brilliant, wide smile, all teeth and happiness – that Baekhyun registers what’s different. Chanyeol is now almost a head taller than him, tall and lanky and sweet, with big, dark eyes, just Baekhyun’s type, and as soon as he realizes it he’s fifteen years old again, lying on his bed and staring at the ceiling in the darkness, weighed down by a lurid, guilty pleasure, lost. He’s fifteen and he needs to quit the baseball team, the sky is blue and brilliant, the warble is whining to warn him that the train is going to run all over him, but Baekhyun can’t move, petrified.

Baekhyun is sixteen when he realizes he likes Chanyeol.

May 4th, 2003
Seoul

[Two kids arguing on a pier in front of the Han River.]

They take the picture before Baekhyun falls into the river. Wait, that’s incorrect, they take the picture before Chanyeol pushes Baekhyun into the river.

There’s no way it’s not Chanyeol’s fault, but at the same time it’s not Chanyeol’s fault. It’s just... Baekhyun is so annoyingly likeable. He’s loud and eager and polite, all at the same time. He holds the door open for his mom and kisses her on the cheeks and ugh, ugh, Chanyeol wouldn’t touch his mom with a pole.

Baekhyun is not good at school, not like Chanyeol is, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t care about English and math tutoring classes and he doesn’t care about being a regular in the baseball club, or about getting the best spot at the choir showcase. He has no ambitions and he doesn’t excel. And yet, everyone likes him more than they would ever like Chanyeol. Chanyeol’s mom can’t stop singing him praises, all of Chanyeol’s friends at school took to him so fast Chanyeol almost felt insulted. Heck, even Yoora likes Baekhyun, and Yoora doesn’t like anyone, but she always stops to flick Baekhyun’s forehead and ask him how his day went when she finds him playing in the garden.

Baekhyun faces Chanyeol’s silent hostility with a shrug, and Chanyeol tries to pretend Baekhyun’s indifference doesn’t hurt him, especially since he’s the one who started it. Most of the times it works. Other times, Chanyeol gets angry. Not rightfully angry, but petty-angry and childish-angry. Today is one of those days.

They’re at the Southern banks of River Han, because it’s Baekhyun’s birthday in two days and his family wanted to celebrate, so Baekhyun’s mother told Chanyeol’s mother, and oh, what a lovely idea, we should all go together, and so they all went together, except for Yoora who managed to
bail out with the excuse of club practice, the traitor.

It’s not a good day. It’s windy and a bit cloudy with the first stirring of a storm at the horizon. Moreover, it’s too late for the flowers, so there’s nothing to look at. Chanyeol wanders close to his mom and watches Baekhyun’s father take pictures of him and his mother, and then Baekhyun’s mother do the same for her husband and son. Baekhyun looks more like him, plain and annoying, but when he smiles Chanyeol can see something of her in his eyes. She’s incredibly beautiful. It’s not fair.

“Why don’t you take a picture with Baekhyunnie?” his mother suggests suddenly. Chanyeol gapes at her, horrified. “It’s almost his birthday, you should take a picture. It’ll make a good memory.”

Chanyeol turns to Baekhyun to see what he thinks about it. Baekhyun feels... uneasy.

“Maybe it’s not the case,” he says with a shrug, with his stupid, annoying shrug and the shadow of a fake smile on his mouth and that, more than anything, makes Chanyeol snap.

He marches towards Baekhyun with a courage he didn’t think he had and grabs his wrist, like Baekhyun had grabbed his own almost a year ago, on the day they first met.

“What? Are you too good to take a picture with me?” he says under his breath as they make their way towards the pier. The light sucks and not even Chanyeol’s dad’s expensive reflex can change the fact that this photo will suck too, because the two subjects are too busy glaring at each other.

“Why are you being such an asshole?” Baekhyun says through gritted teeth.

“Why are you being such an asshole? It’s just a picture! Do you dislike me that much?”

Baekhyun snorts, a disbelieving laugh that feels foreign on his face because he’s always smiling. He seems angry this time. Good, because Chanyeol is angry, too. He’s not usually angry, except when his mom doesn’t let him play video games after lunch, but something about Baekhyun makes him so angry.

“You’re the one who disliked me first!” Baekhyun shoots at him. And it’s true, okay, but Chanyeol doesn’t want to admit it.

“You’re the one who never even looks at me!” he shoots back.

“Because you’re always glaring! What did I do to you? What the heck did I ever do to you?” Baekhyun turns to look at him and they distantly hear the voice of Chanyeol’s mother telling them to smile, but Baekhyun takes a step closer and he’s suddenly too close, crowding Chanyeol’s personal space. He’s a bit taller than Chanyeol and he has this dumb bowl haircut and pimples and he’s just a stupid kid, and he’s too close, and Chanyeol really likes him a lot so he panics, he panics and he pushes him. His eyes widen in horror when Baekhyun trips back, and trips, and trips, and he keeps tripping until he disappears into the river.

Chanyeol hears a scream and footsteps and doesn’t stay to face the consequences of his actions – he fucked up, he fucked up big time. He takes a deep breath and jumps into the cold water to save Baekhyun.

(Chanyeol can’t swim. Baekhyun can. In the end, Baekhyun saves them both. To their parents, they tell they were just playing. They eat jjajangmyeon for dinner and everyone forgets about the photo until Chanyeol’s dad gets it printed and gives it to his son.)
Chanyeol stares at the jangseung and the jangseung stares at Chanyeol. The angry face of the guardian god seems to twist into a mocking smile. A draught moves the tall, dry grass around the totem pole and its carved face twists once more.

“Yeollie, my puppy, do you want something to eat?” a soft voice calls, before the door slides open.

Chanyeol’s grandmother didn’t change with the years. She’s always the same plump woman with eyes like slivers of moon when she smiles. She doesn’t look like her daughter at all, except maybe for the way they smile. Chanyeol’s mother took her beauty from her father, but her kindness from her mother – for her father is not a kind man.

“Yes, I’ll come in a moment.”

“Is the guardian god whispering to you?” she asks, curious, taking a few steps towards the open window. “They do that, sometimes, for those with the blood of the spirits.”

Chanyeol’s grandmother would know, for she was the only daughter of a mansin, a shaman of thousand spirits, and she would’ve been a shaman, too, had the Samjokgu not stolen her heart.

“Ah, the blood of the spirits must be too weak in me, then,” Chanyeol says with a grin.

His grandmother’s eyes are veiled by age, but she can still look sharp sometimes. “Perhaps, my dear. Perhaps. But maybe the gods are just shy around you. They used to talk to me, a long time ago, before your grandfather came along. But then he scared them all.”

Chanyeol laughs. He doesn’t have a hard time picturing it. His grandfather is scary. He was scary, now he’s just a bed-ridden old man who loves to complain and grumble under his breath.

*Will I be able to scare them too, if I become the Samjokgu?* he thinks, but he doesn’t dare to say it, not with his grandfather lying sick in the next room.

“Don’t stare at the totems too much, puppy. They’re here to protect us, but they’re also tricksters. They like to make fun of humans. And they’re incredibly petty. My mother told me to always be wary of them.” She hums something, lost in her memories, before leaving the room with soft steps. “Don’t be late, Yeollie, I made jjimdak for you.”

The door slides closed and Chanyeol sighs and collects all the old books in front of him. With his grandfather sick, the possibility that the curse of the Samjokgu will pass onto him is too real. It’s either him, his mom or Yoora, the great legacy of the Samjokgu.

He stares at all the records in front of him, diaries of the past Samjokgu, annals and memoirs written by the witches of the Joseon era. There used to be a lot more, his grandmother had once told to him, but they were gone in a fire more or less a hundred years ago. Most of what is left is rubbish.

He reads a note about an old Gumiho called Sunmi, who used to live in Yeoju and built a small pack there under the Japanese colonization. There’s an entire shelf on Grandfather’s studio on one of the oldest Gumiho who ever lived, Sooyeon, who was the first concubine of thirteen kings,
killed a lot of Samjokgu and even some other Gumiho before Chanyeol’s grandfather ended her life. They’re all characters in the stories his grandmother used to tell him when he was young, but it feels a little strange to find records on them, like they were real people and not just familiar monsters. Chanyeol pretends he can’t hear the little amused giggles of the guardian gods, who know the past, the future and everything-in-between, when his eyes linger on the two Chinese characters of Sunmi’s name. Sun. Mi. Like Baekhyun’s mother, he thinks, absentmindedly.

In front of his tired gaze, names and dates, sightings, portraits, all kinds of evidence disappear in a blur of fatigue. Most of these Gumiho are already dead, but only the Samjokgu has access to the updated list of Gumiho still living in Korea and Chanyeol is not the Samjokgu. (Not yet, and the possibility alone is frightening.)

“Yeollie! It’s ready!” His mother’s voice comes from the kitchen.

Chanyeol frowns, closes the book and stands up, stretching his stiff limbs before joining his family for dinner.

When his grandfather feels well enough to talk, he asks either Yoora or Chanyeol to join him, and he tells them about his work as the Samjokgu.

“Can you tell me about the curse instead?” Chanyeol asks, but his grandfather shakes his weary head.

“You will find out on your own, if you become the next Samjokgu. Just know,” he says, “that you can’t escape this curse if it chooses you. It will find you wherever you go, whatever you do, and you will have to carry it until the next Samjokgu is ready to take over.”

When Chanyeol was a child, he dreamed of being the Samjokgu, like a secret superhero ready to protect the city. But now, seeing his grandfather, who never smiles, never just lets go, who spent his life protecting the world from evil Gumiho just to end up tired and sick, in his bed, Chanyeol is not sure he wants to become the Samjokgu. Yoora was right, it seems like a weight too heavy to carry around. A big load of hassle.

As if reading his thoughts, his grandfather clicks his tongue. “It’s best if you accept it now. And it’s best you study, to make sure you know how to use this power, if you will be unlucky enough to obtain it, because the moment a Samjokgu receives the curse is also the moment they’re the most vulnerable and weak.”

Chanyeol nods and bows, grazing the floor with his forehead before leaving the room. He picks up Sam – Sam, like Samjokgu, his grandma sure has a wicked sense of humor – from the garden and lets her play with the hem of his shirt while he sends a message to Baekhyun, telling him that he’s so sorry he missed his birthday, that his grandfather is getting better and better every day, that today it rained, but the sky was clear at the horizon, like a promise of summer.

The days Chanyeol’s grandfather has to go to the hospital for rehabilitation and check-ups, Chanyeol’s grandmother takes the role of a teacher in his place. She teaches Chanyeol about spirits and magic, about ancient spells and how to avoid being charmed by a vampire. She teaches him that being a Samjokgu is more about politics than real Gumiho hunting.

“Since the end of World War II,” she says, “Korean witches organized their ranks and founded the Council of the Covens, choosing a couple of Guardians to protect the city. Then they banished the Gumiho from the city, allowing them to live in this country provided that they never set foot in Seoul again and do not bother the witches. Nowadays, the Samjokgu’s job is just to collaborate with the Guardians and help them find the Gumiho who trespass into the capital, but nothing more.
The Council of the Covens take care of the rest.”

“Aren’t they like, uhm, stealing our job? Dealing with Gumiho is the Samjokgu’s duty, not theirs.”

She smiles. “Your grandfather hasn’t been able to do his duty properly since he almost lost his leg in an accident twenty years ago, before you were born. The witches simply took over when he couldn’t, and he let them, because only by doing that he was able to come home and finally spend some time with your mother and me.”

“Was it a temporary thing, or things have changed for good?”

Garyung shakes her head. “Whether the next Samjokgu will be a hunter or they’ll just be happy being the hound of a hunter, I cannot know. That’s for them to decide.”

Outside, the rain has stopped. A rainbow appears between two of the jangseung, the magical totem poles that protect this house and the entire village from evil spirits, agma, gwishin and Gumiho. It feels like a bridge. The faces of the guardian gods, carved on the totem poles, whisper and whisper, about secrets hidden under the nose of humans who are unable to see them, but Chanyeol is not listening. He takes out his phone, snaps a picture of the rainbow and sends it to Baekhyun. He captions it with I miss you.

*

12th October, 2009
Seoul

[All black, probably taken by mistake.]

Baekhyun kisses him first.

Chanyeol should’ve expected it. Things have been tense since his return from Andong. Not tense bad, not tense angry or tense uncomfortable or tense malicious. Tense electric. Tense coiled, wound up and bound to snap – like a violin string, if you touch it at the wrong moment the sound will be sharp enough to cut you.

Chanyeol should’ve expected it, because it’s such a Baekhyun thing to do, to dive head-first into danger despite being scared shitless, without planning, without thinking about the consequences of his actions. And yet, it still surprises him when Baekhyun looks up from where he’s leaning his head on Chanyeol’s shoulder, stares at him like he always stares at him, intent and focused and with the shadow of a smile tucked at the corner of his lips.

“Do I have something on my face?” he asks, hands automatically going up to rub at his tired eyes, but Baekhyun intercepts it, props himself up on Chanyeol’s chest, pushing him against the cushion of the sofa instead, and lands a soft kiss at the corner of Chanyeol’s mouth, off-center enough that it could be a mistake, but too slow, too deliberate, too much, even for Byun Baekhyun.

And Chanyeol is not stupid. He knows about Son Byunsik – it wouldn’t take a genius to guess what happened, not with the way Byunsik stares at him in the alley, his gaze full of longing, melancholy and jealousy at the same time. Chanyeol knows about Baekhyun. He probably knew before Baekhyun realized himself, because Baekhyun wears his feeling on his sleeve and lets his eyes linger always a moment too long on pretty boys and never on pretty girls. Baekhyun doesn’t know how to conceal, how to disguise. Baekhyun doesn’t know how to keep secrets.
Chanyeol, on the other hand... Oh, Chanyeol is too good at keeping secrets. He’s been keeping the biggest secret from Baekhyun – from Baekhyun, who’s always been so transparent, so eager to share, so sincere with him, that it hurts to keep the whole Samjokgu business from him, but what can Chanyeol do about it? What can Chanyeol do now?

This is a bad idea, his grandfather told him months ago. *Don’t get too involved. Don’t let people too close to your heart. You never know when and how the curse of the Samjokgu will hit you, Park Chanyeol. Be smart, be strong, be better than the man I’ve been*, those were his grandfather’s words.

But it’s too late, because Baekhyun has been too close since day one and Chanyeol never stood a chance against him. It’s too late, because Baekhyun is drawing back, his eyes fluttering shut to avoid Chanyeol’s, and if he waits a second longer, it will be a second too late. Baekhyun will pull back completely and the moment will be gone, the chance will be lost, it might never come back.

And Chanyeol is so good at keeping secrets, but he’s been in love with Baekhyun since the first time he saw him, during a hot, dusty day of summer, under the glistening of the sun and the chirping of cicadas. It would take him years to realize that all his dislike, all his aversion for Baekhyun were just a self-defense mechanism. It would take him years, watching Baekhyun slowly find himself, crushing on other boys, falling and getting up and falling again, smiling, smiling, smiling, before Chanyeol could realize he loved Baekhyun. It would take Baekhyun a little more to realize he loved Chanyeol back.

But now that they’re here, now that Baekhyun is in Chanyeol’s lap and his lips are on his skin, now that Baekhyun has jumped, blindly, trusting Chanyeol to catch him, does it even matter that Chanyeol is good at keeping secrets? Is it still a secret if they both know it?

Chanyeol catches Baekhyun’s wrist and pushes it against Baekhyun’s chest, pushes and pushes until Baekhyun hits his back against the sofa with a *poof* and a soft, surprised exhale. Baekhyun’s eyes flutter open and Chanyeol can see himself above him, reflected on the dilated black of his irises. He looks as surprised as Baekhyun is and desperate and fucking sure.

He doesn’t kiss the corner of Baekhyun’s mouth. He kisses Baekhyun, slowly and awkwardly and intently, lips on lips, like he’s only seen in Western teenage movies and those stupid romantic webtoons Baekhyun reads during class breaks. Something, probably his phone, his digging against his hip bone, and the angle is awkward and Chanyeol really should’ve thought this through because he only kissed one girl, a junior from the same school, last year, while Baekhyun kissed Son Byunsik and now he must think Chanyeol is a loser and a bad kisser and... and Baekhyun is giggling against his lips and pulling at his hair to drag him down and kiss him better, angling his head and opening his mouth and breathing with his nose against Chanyeol’s cheek, and the angle changes nothing and everything and it’s fucking fantastic and Chanyeol could do this for years. (He will, he must.)

“How long?” Baekhyun asks, breathless, when Chanyeol lets him go.

“Halfway through middle school, the trip to Namsan. When you climbed that tree and fell on me.”

“Three fucking years,” Baekhyun murmurs. He sounds impressed. “I only knew three months ago.”

“I know,” he says, and Baekhyun makes this petulant, annoyed face at the thought that Chanyeol knew for all this time and he didn’t.

“Stop gloating and kiss me again, Yeol.”
Chanyeol’s lips are on his before he can finish the sentence.
Chapter Three

That is the saddest part when you lose someone you love — that person keeps changing. And later you wonder, is this the same person I lost?
— Amy Tan, The Kitchen God’s Wife

if I never see you again
I will always carry you
inside
outside

on my fingertips
and at brain edges

and in centers
centers
of what I am of
what remains.

Chanyeol saw magic for the first time when he was twenty years old.

Somewhere, in a house in the center of a small mountain village near Andong, the Samjokgu closed his eyes. Somewhere, in the middle of Seoul, the Samjokgu opened his eyes. For a moment, all both of them could see was light. White light. Some of it was the lamp of the operating room at the nearest hospital. Some of it was the headlights of an oncoming taxi. Some of it, most of it, was magic.

When Chanyeol opened his eyes as the Samjokgu for the first time, the world was black, white and everything in between. It was deeper, sharper. It tingled within the borders of a whole new dimension Chanyeol could barely perceive, even with his new powers. It was like, for his whole life, he’d always lived over a frozen lake, and suddenly the ice had shattered before his eyes, plunging him into darkness. Only magic could show him the way. Only magic could drag him deeper. And even now, Chanyeol despairs to distinguish between the bottom and the surface.

He can barely remember how it was like, to see the world before the curse moulded his eyes, allowing him to see the magic burning brightly under the surface of reality, swirling in lazy wreaths invisible to humans. Electric blue, bloody red, golden and silver fire, rising like waves before they’re gone again, chasing each other, disappearing when he blinks, like whales diving
deep under the surface of the water. Every other color feels duller in comparison, dimmed to washed out grey. It’s overwhelming. The deeper he goes, the more focused he is, the more the real world disappears in front of his eyes, leaving only colorful magic.


In the past five years, Chanyeol had to learn how to tune out his curse, to summon it when he needs it and shut it out when he doesn’t, to avoid living into a world of greys where only magic shines, where only magic sings, but Baekhyun always makes it so difficult for him. When they’re together, Chanyeol can’t control his curse – he doesn’t want to control his curse. When they’re together, he wants to look look look Baekhyun, all of him, the human boy and the magic flickering under his skin, to drown in his light until the rest of the world has disappeared and the only thing he can see is Baekhyun.

His fingers graze Baekhyun’s nipple and Baekhyun shudders, his magic cascading around them like a shroud of silver light, his pink lips blooming like cherry blossoms as Chanyeol kisses the pulse on his neck. He doesn’t know, Chanyeol realizes, watching his silver tails flutter with every kiss, every caress, he doesn’t know he shines like a beacon in the darkness. He doesn’t know he’s drenched in magic, tinkling everywhere he goes with invisible silver bells. Only Chanyeol can see how pretty, how lovely it is. How lovely he is. He could spend centuries just watching Baekhyun shine, unaware of his own magic.

(But when he leaves, it’s a tragedy, because he takes all the light, all the colors, away.)

Chanyeol wakes up to an obnoxious pop song blasting somewhere around the apartment and Baekhyun paling as he talks on the phone, his magic darkening and cooling with his expression, his ghost tails sweeping the floor nervously. Chanyeol can see the dread in his eyes in technicolor, orange on one side, where the blade of light coming from the lampposts outside hits his face, blue on the other side, hidden by the darkness of the room.

He watches the colors disappear one by one, when Baekhyun leaves with a rushed apology. The last are the red of his shame and the silver of unshed tears.

Chanyeol almost runs after him. Almost.

He hears the automatic lock closing the door again at Baekhyun’s back, his hushed steps down the stairs. He’s running, Chanyeol thinks, as a feeling of unfair rage swells in his chest. He’s running away, again. And Chanyeol is left alone, again, to wonder who is this person, this person who keeps secrets and flees like a wild animal, this person who’s not too afraid to come but too afraid to stay. This person who carries the shadow of magic curled around his back, gleaming tails only Chanyeol can see. Sometimes he can still feel his Baekhyun of quick laughter and neverending aegyo, his prodigy child who didn’t need to do anything special to be special. Sometimes he can touch him, he can kiss him. He can hold him at night, but never for too long. Like a wisp of smoke, like a ghost or a spirit, like something that doesn’t belong to Chanyeol or to this world, something underworldly and dangerous and incredibly alluring, Baekhyun slips through his fingers. He disappears with the dawn and Chanyeol still cannot say whether he was a dream or a nightmare, whether he was the same Baekhyun Chanyeol had lost.

There’s a car waiting downstairs, in front of the building. Chanyeol can hear the low rumble of the engine, too loud in the silence of the night, like a single stroke of color on a black canvas. The car door slams closed, the engine purrs. The display of Chanyeol’s phone lights up with an incoming message from Baekhyun. He says he’s sorry. He says he’ll explain.

Chanyeol laughs, sourly. He’s tired. He’s so tired. He closes his eyes, dives into the pillow, trying
to drown in the softness of his bed, in the warmth Baekhyun left behind. He sleeps, but he doesn’t dream.

**Kim Junmyeon**

Can I call you?
[Sent: 07:52, 24.01.2018]

When Chanyeol opens his eyes again, his alarm is blasting *I’m like TT, just like TT*, it’s seven in the morning, snow has covered the city like a shroud and Baekhyun’s message on his phone is still waiting for an answer Chanyeol cannot give. Not now. He ignores it, because he can’t afford to mope in bed for the whole day. He needs to get up and go to Jung-maeul. He needs answers.

His limbs crack when he tries to move. Gritting his teeth, Chanyeol tries to stand up anyway. He wobbles without the crutch, the pain in his left leg unbearable, and almost falls back. He can feel the bite of metal inside his flesh, sharpened by the cold, right where the clamps are keeping his bones together. (The doctors said the pain must be psychosomatic, they said the leg healed well and it shouldn’t hurt anymore, but the doctors know nothing about the curse of the Samjokgu and how you can’t escape it if it chooses you.)

Outside, the city is only starting to wake up under relentless, cold kiss of the snow. A snowflake lands on Chanyeol’s cheek when he looks up on the threshold, like a whispered welcome. Everything is so grey he can’t even see where the sky ends and the snow starts.

He walks to the station slowly, paying extra attention to avoid slipping on the white ground. The snow crunches under his feet and swallows the sound of the crutch, but not the laughter of the children running to school or the chattering of the commuters near the station. Most coffee shops are already open and bubbly pop songs come out of their doors. Chanyeol almost stops for a hot espresso, but then decides against it, in the not-so-far-fetched case Jongin tells Jongdae their best barista ditched them for cheap Ediya Coffee.

Inside the station, a cold, robotic voice informs the travelers of the possibility of delays due to snow, but Chanyeol doesn’t care. He’s not in a hurry. Jongin said he’ll go back home and everything Jongin says comes true, whether Chanyeol wants it or not – and Chanyeol is still trying to understand whether he wants it or not.

It’s been five years, more or less. *Since grandfather’s funeral*, he realizes. No, wait, not the funeral. He missed the funeral because he was still in the hospital, in surgery, fighting against time to save his leg. When he finally found the time to go home, it was too late. Sehun had almost died and Baekhyun had left. Chanyeol was broken. There was nothing worth saving.

He takes the escalator, huddling to the side to let two university students brush past him in a desperate attempt to reach the platform before their train arrives. They’re wearing matching Yonsei University jackets and, as they disappear behind the corner, Chanyeol thinks they look exactly like he and Baekhyun did five years ago, before the accident, before everything changed, young and careless and free. He closes his eyes and hopes they manage to get on their train before he reaches the platform. He doesn’t want to see them again.

The two boys are still there when he steps onto the platform, leaning on each other and yawning. Chanyeol does his best to ignore them and the rush of nostalgia they conjure in his chest. He busies himself by playing with his phone and booking the bus ticket to Andong and he doesn’t even hear...
the short jingle announcing the arrival of the train, but he feels the cold wind coming from the
gallery before the lights appear from the darkness.

Chanyeol takes a step back to allow the other passengers to enter first, but he steals one of the
reserved seats from a combative old lady with a terrible perm and a purple coat, who gives him the
stinky eye until he shows her his walking crutch. She frowns, disappointed, and goes to bother a
tourist who quickly gives up his seat for her.

Only when he finally settles does he see the magic. It’s rosy and pale, weak, intermittent, like a
tiny firefly – but all kinds of magic feel tiny and weak for days after Chanyeol meets Baekhyun and
his ethereal, impossibly bright silver tails. Chanyeol scans the coach before the doors close,
looking for the source of the spell and finding it almost immediately. One of the girls on the left is
a witch, though not a strong one. Her power shines around her face like a delicate halo, barely
there, and Chanyeol smiles against the wool of his scarf when he realizes she must have charmed
her hair to look pretty in front of the person she likes. It’s the kind of magic he likes the most, the
kind Sooyoung or Jinri would cast, bubbly and light like sparkling ade, making him feel
lightheaded and giddy. The witch bobs her head to the music in her earphones and her magic
echoes around her, pale and translucent, and Chanyeol can’t help but to wish her well when he
walks past her to reach the door. It’s something he doesn’t do often because, even though
Samjokgu are supposed to be really good at bringing good fortune to people, he never really
learned how to do it. He never really learned anything, since he always refused to come home after
grandfather’s death.

Despite his poor blessing abilities, the young witch acknowledges his effort, because she looks up,
just before the train doors close, her eyes going wide as she recognizes him. Thank you, she
mouths, waving as the train leaves again. It’s not much, but it’s enough to lift a little bit of the
weight Chanyeol always carries on his shoulders.

His phone rings while he’s transferring to the train station, and he doesn’t need to look to know it’s
Junmyeon. Aside from evil villain main theme (in 8 bit) he set as ringtone specifically for him,
Junmyeon is the only one of Chanyeol’s acquaintances who’d ever try to call him before eight in
the morning, and also the only one who can ignore Chanyeol’s grumpiness right after he woke up.
(Chanyeol doesn’t even bother showing hostility at this point, it’s just wasted on him.)

“Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?” Junmyeon asks, in lieu of a greeting.

“I don’t know what we’re fighting against, Junmyeon. This thing, this Gumiho... is different. She’s
not in our records. I don’t think she belongs to any Gumiho community here in Korea.”

He regrets his words as soon as Junmyeon asks him, “And how would you know?”

How does he know, indeed. Baekhyun told him. And what best inside source than him?

“I just know, okay? I don’t have to explain anything. What I do know is that she could be really
old.”

Old enough that Kim Minseok, one of the most notorious Gumiho in the entire country, social
activist and rallies organizer, doesn’t know her, he thinks, recalling Baekhyun’s words from
yesterday night. But it doesn’t make sense, if she was that old, wouldn’t it have been easy for her to
defeat someone like Minseok and even more so someone like Baekhyun? Wouldn’t it have been
easy for her to defeat someone like Chanyeol?

Junmyeon is still talking, blissfully unaware that Chanyeol hasn’t heard a single word of his last
tirade. (It’s not like he needs to, after all. He knows how it goes. Responsibilities, blah-blah, duties,
“I need answers, Junmyeon,” he says, cutting his monologue short. “I need answers in order to protect you, and Kyungsoo, and whoever meets that crazy fox.”

And Baekhyun, even if Baekhyun left him. Again.

“Well, then I hope you can find your answers quickly, Chanyeol,” Junmyeon says, his voice typically stern. “Because Kyungsoo just messaged me. There was another victim yesterday night.”

Yoora

are you really coming to visit?
what happened?
are you dying?
lol i’m sending jimin to pick you up
[Sent: 11:16, 24.01.2018]

The journey towards Andong is slow and quiet, cocooned in white.

Snow keeps falling, heavy and relentless, unstoppable, white against the white sky, white against the white ground. Chanyeol leans his head against the window and closes his eyes, letting the soft rumble of the engine lull him to that limbo between rest and wake, where memories can be vivid and misty at the same time.

It was snowing the last time he visited his grandmother, just like today, slow and unhurried, almost as if the snow knew it had all the time in the world to smother the ground, almost like summer was never to come back again. (Summer belonged to Chanyeol and Baekhyun, but this endless winter belonged to the Samjokgu and the Gumiho and their endless lies.)

Yoora drove and Chanyeol sat at her side in silence for almost the whole ride. The signal disappeared halfway but none of them bothered turning off the radio, too afraid of how empty the silence would’ve turned out without its white, static noise.

Chanyeol remembers the stiffness in his sister’s shoulders, the way her long, painted nails ticked on the steering wheel, the look of pity in her eyes as she helped him get in the car. He remembers thinking why didn’t this happen to you?

Yoora would’ve made an excellent Samjokgu. She would’ve been ruthless and terrible and methodical. She wouldn’t have been broken.

He remembers the tears she refused to let go, glistening at the corners of her eyes, when he had woken up at the hospital. She was crying for both Chanyeol and their grandfather. (She had always been grandfather’s favorite, just like Chanyeol had always been Grandmother’s favorite.)

“Did you know?” he asked her, as they drove slowly on the slippery slopes of the mountains around Andong. “Did you know Baekhyun was the son of a Gumiho?”

She nodded.
“I heard them talking about it, once.” There was a long pause, before she continues. “Not even
mom knew it. They fooled everyone.”

“Why didn’t they tell me?” Chanyeol asked. “Why did no one ever thought to stop me before
things got serious… Why did they even come to live next to us?”

But Yoora had no answers. Grandfather had all the answers and he died, taking them all away. And
grandmother... Chanyeol wasn’t sure he wanted to talk to his grandmother, but it was too late to
regret coming to Jung-maeul.

Of that journey, Chanyeol only remembers the cold.

His slippers were still in the foyer, where he had left them only a couple of months earlier, when he
had visited for Chuseok. Everything was still in the same place. When he lived there, nothing
stayed in the same place for long. The house moved, breathed, changed every day. It was hectic,
messy on its best days, and finding something, anything, was impossible. When he came back
though, it felt like nothing had changed since the last time he was there – like nothing would ever
change again.

“I didn’t move anything,” His grandmother said when they arrived, in response to his silent
surprise. She was standing in front of the kitchen door, clasping her hands together, like a child
cought red-handed. “I couldn’t.”

And Chanyeol immediately understood why the house had felt so eerie, so frozen in time. She had
left everything as it was when her husband passed away, trapping herself in a photograph of his
memory. His favorite mug still on the second shelf in the library, his plaid jacket on a chair of the
kitchen, the cushions of the living room organized just like he liked them. He was gone, but he was
still here, lingering. And they had left her here, in the old family house, alone with her ghosts.

Chanyeol’s parents had stayed for a few weeks, after the funeral, to help her settle. Chanyeol
knows they asked her to come home to Seoul with them. Yoora asked her too, after they got there,
to come to Seoul with her, to live in her small apartment. But Hong Garryung had lived in that house
for fifty years, only going to Seoul three times in her life. To attend her only daughter’s wedding
ceremony, to be treated at the hospital after a heart attack and right after she buried her husband, to
hold her grandson’s hand as he laid, unconscious, on a hospital bed, after a collision with a car that
almost killed him. Chanyeol’s parents insisted, but she had no intention to live in Seoul with them,
away from her home, and in the end they simply left without her. Yoora returned to her small
officetel in Sillim, close enough to the law firm where she was interning before she could join her
father’s own firm. Chanyeol’s parents went back to their cozy apartment in Inheon-dong, next to
the house with a blue gate where Baekhyun’s family had lived for eight years, now empty and
cold, the beautiful garden a mess of weeds and vines.

Maybe Garryung would’ve come to Seoul, if Chanyeol had been the one asking. She’d always had a
soft spot for him. But he didn’t ask her to come. She asked him to stay.

“Your training is still incomplete,” she said, as they stood in front of the mound they had erected
for his grandfather, next to the ones erected for his ancestors. “There’s so much you still have to
learn. Your grandfather left everything ready for his successor. Everything you need is here.”

Everything Chanyeol needed was to wake up and find out that all of this was just a nightmare. That
his grandfather was still alive and the curse of the Samjokgu had never found him. He needed to
finish university. He needed to walk on his own. He needed to hold Baekhyun, like he always did
when he felt lost and he curled on Baekhyun’s side, his head on the crook between Baekhyun’s shoulder and neck. He needed...

“The Samjokgu has always lived here, Yeollie.”

She looked at him with big, lost eyes and Chanyeol almost caved in. But everything he needed was Baekhyun and Baekhyun was gone, stormed away with his angry eyes and his beautiful ghost tales no one, not even Baekhyun himself, could see – only Chanyeol could, because he was the Samjokgu. No matter how much he wanted to forget about it, Chanyeol couldn’t unsee the fox spirit hiding at the bottom of Baekhyun’s soul. Baekhyun wouldn’t even be able to cross the two totem poles at the entrance gate, home of guardian gods, blessed by shamans to banish the supernatural away.

“You lied to me,” he said slowly, to his grandmother. It was cold. It was cold and grey and his leg hurt. Walking with the crutch to the tomb had been so difficult, on the rough terrain, the ground frozen and harsh and unforgiving on Chanyeol’s wobbling legs. He was too weak after the hospitalization, after the rehab, after the days spent in his room just looking at the ceiling and conjuring the memories of someone he couldn’t see again, languishing between unanswered calls and the emptiness of the distance between him and Baekhyun. He had come here, hoping to find – he didn’t even know what he was hoping to find – some sort of closure maybe, an apology, any explanation. What he found was a hollow, angry rage, chewing at his chest from the inside. “You and him both, you sat there, in your cozy little house, while I talked about my best friend in Seoul for hours, you sat there and smiled and asked me about his family and you knew, you knew, he was one of them! You knew and you didn’t tell me anything!”

“Chanyeol, let me explain…”

“I don’t want your explanations! You should’ve done something before I…”

Before he dreamed of a future with him, before he fell in love with him, before he befriended him… Before he knew him, because it was fate and it was unavoidable, since the moment Chanyeol first met Byun Baekhyun under that cursed sun of July. Meeting Baekhyun had been like falling. It doesn’t matter what you do, you’re bound to go down, down, down. At one point, you hit the ground and the impact hurts.

“What am I going to do now? How am I going to… deal with this? I almost killed his best friend!”

Chanyeol remembers the wind more than the snow. They were outside. His teeth were chattering. His grandmother looked so tiny. He wanted to fight her, to shake her, to ask her why she never told him anything, why the Samjokgu decided to make a deal with a Gumiho, with the enemy. Why they let him fall for Byun Baekhyun. They set him up for failure and heartbreak. Maybe this is the curse of the Samjokgu his grandfather told him about. If that was the case, Chanyeol didn’t want it. Screw the curse. Screw the Samjokgu. Screw Baekhyun, too.

“I am not the Samjokgu,” Chanyeol told his grandmother before he left.

“It’s not your choice, my puppy.”

“I don’t want to be the Samjokgu and I can’t be the Samjokgu.”

He left the house, telling her he would never come back. It was a lie and they both knew it, but she
let him go anyway, while the guardian gods whispered and murmured he would come back anyway. He didn’t.

Not until today.

Hyunnie ♥
yeol
call me back
it’s urgent
pls
[Sent: 12:08, 24.01.2018]

Chanyeol opens his eyes as the bus stops at Andong Bus Terminal, in front of a shiny building standing tall basically in the middle of nowhere. He limps off the bus, refusing the driver’s help, welcomed by a powerful gust of wind and snow.

“Amazing,” he mutters, as the cold sneaks past his scarf and under his collar. “Do you know when bus 34 leaves?” he asks the driver. The man scratches his head and points towards the entrance of the terminal.

“Ask inside, I have no idea.”

Well, helpful. Chanyeol bows to thank him anyway and turns towards the terminal, but he’s tackled by a short girl wearing the fluffiest caterpillar coat Chanyeol has ever seen.

“Don’t worry, you won’t need the bus, after all. Park Chanyeol! Long time no see.”

The girl grabs his shoulder before he can shy away and shakes him vigorously.

“Jimin,” Chanyeol says, when she finally lets him go. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to retrieve the prodigal son – or grandson slash brother, whatever. Your sister was worried you’d have trouble reaching the village on your own.” She steals a look at his leg and then at the crutch and for a moment Chanyeol is afraid he’ll see pity in her eyes, but she just grimaces, disappointed. “You’re not nearly as sexy as your grandfather used to be on a walking cane.”

“I’ll take this as a compliment.”

“It wasn’t one.”

She makes way towards a blue pickup parked on the side of the road, her hair bobbing around her neck with every step. She doesn’t offer to help Chanyeol get in the car, thankfully, but does wait until he’s comfortably seated.

“Seatbelt on,” she says. “Safe drive and all that shit.”

He snorts and she blanks, suddenly reminded he’s crippled because of a car accident.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realize...”

“Come on, noona, you were doing so well. Don’t go all sympathetic on me, it creeps me out.”

She puffs her cheeks – she’s always hated being called noona, ever since they were young, because they’re only one year apart – and starts the engine. Chanyeol buckles up.
Yoora sent him a message to warn him about Jimin, but he obviously saw it too late. There are also a couple of missed calls from Baekhyun and even some message notifications, but Chanyeol doesn’t even look at the previews. He’s still so angry and hurt and it doesn’t help that he’s going to see his grandmother soon and the last he’s seen her they fought because of Baekhyun. He locks his phone and finds Jimin stealing glances at him.

“So, happy to be back?” she asks, eyes fixed on the road. Chanyeol waits for the jab. He doesn’t have to wait long. “I mean, after running away like a coward?”

Wow, that hurt. “Time didn’t make you nicer.”

“Time didn’t make you braver. Avoid my question, if you want. At least you’re back. Do you know how much your poor grandma waited for you?”

He looks outside, suddenly uneasy. “I can imagine.”

“Can you? Many things changed, Park Chanyeol, and you sure weren’t here to see them.”

Many things changed, but Shin Jimin didn’t change. Maybe only a little, on the outside. She wears her hair longer, a light-colored bob, cherry blonde, so different from the unruly mop of black hair she used to have as a child. For years, Chanyeol had thought she was a boy and called her hyung, until that summer of his sixteen years, when his grandfather fell sick and they had to move to Jung-maeul to take care of him. That was the first time Chanyeol saw Jimin wearing a dress. He laughed in her face and she blushed and darkened at the same time. She kicked him in the balls and refused to even look at him for the four months he stayed at his grandparents’ house. In hindsight, he probably hurt her feelings. He was a foolish little boy, back then. (He’s still a foolish little boy even now, sometimes.)

“Tell me, then,” he says, surprising her. “What has the great Shin Jimin been up to?”

“Oh, so there’s still something in you besides all the moping. I work with Kim Nari.”

“Kim Nari?” Chanyeol asks, confused. “Seokmin’s grandma?”

“The one and only.”

“You mean the shaman? Wait, are you... are you a shaman now?”

She winks at him, turning into a small mountain road, with the forest surrounding them on both sides, the mountain looming over them like a silent guardian. “I was haunted by a ghost a couple of years ago. It was... nasty. I couldn’t sleep and I couldn’t eat and I didn’t know what to do. I thought I was going crazy. Seokminnie was the one who realized. He took me to his family and they helped me. Then, Mrs. Kim asked me if I wanted to stay. She said that once the door is open it can’t be closed again. And here I am.”

“What about the ghost hunting you?”

“Oh, her. She was my boyfriend’s previous lover. She died in a car accident right after discovering he had cheated on her. She just wanted to warn me he was an asshole, but ended up growing fond of me.”

“That was cute of her,” he says, not knowing what to answer.

“She says thanks.”
Jimin is still driving and Chanyeol can’t see her eyes, so he doesn’t know if she’s just playing with him or if she can still see the ghost for real. At this point, after being manhandled and scolded, he doesn’t know if he cares.

“I know, I can see her. She’s been in the car with us all this time.”

He turns to the back seat, where a young girl wearing a white funerary hanbok is combing her short hair with long fingers. She waves at him when their eyes meet, but doesn’t try to come any closer. He is the Samjokgu, after all.

“So, you really are the Samjokgu, huh?” Jimin asks, after a moment of silence.

“I guess. And you really are a shaman now.”

“I am. What a couple.”

The first *jangseung*, the traditional totem poles erected to guard and protect the village, start to emerge from the thick barricade of trees, staring at Chanyeol with their angry eyes, shouting at him silently through their open mouths. They’re subtle, dotting the woods in an apparently casual manner, as if someone had forgotten them there, but Chanyeol knows magic well enough to feel the shift of power in the air as soon as they cross the first pair of totem poles.

It’s like walking into a bubble, like taking a breath of fresh air and realizing you had been holding your breath until this moment. In Seoul, magic is flashy and loud, blinking lights and pop songs blasting from every corner. It hides between the shelves of convenience stores and in the mildly lit *noraebang* buildings, in the missing buttons of fourth floors in the elevators and in the last subway ride of the day. Jongdae once told Chanyeol that magic evolves and learns, like a supermind, more likely to control humans than humans are likely to control it. It grows with and like the city, wildly and out of control.

But here in Jung-maeul, magic is limpid and clean, so rarefied it actually makes Chanyeol feel lightheaded. The totem poles lead it, channelling it through the evergreen pines curved under the weight of the snow, the bulky oaks, the twisted ash trees, tributary paths that converge on the streets of the village. It’s like a river of light, flowing among the handful of houses pocketed between the woods and the snow before it parts again, in little streamlets that reach every door only to regroup and circle the old sandalwood tree at the exact center of the village. On its left, the house of the shaman, Kim Nari. On its right, the house of the Samjokgu, where Hong Garyung lives.

That’s where Jimin takes Chanyeol, braking in front of a familiar courtyard signaled by two tall totem poles.

“Your stop, I guess,” she says with a shrug, putting the parking brake on.

Chanyeol gets out slowly and watches the ghost disappear from the back seat and reappears again, this time on the passenger seat next to Jimin.

“Thank for the ride, Jiminnie,” he says. “Have a nice day, miss ghost.”

“You’re welcome. And, Yeol, from now on, don’t be a stranger.”

She leaves before he can answer that, actually, he’ll leave before night falls. The totem poles seem to laugh at him. There’s two of them, one male and one female, standing at the sides of the gate. He bears the carved title of General of All Under Heaven and she bears the carved title of General of the Underworld.
When Chanyeol passes between them, he can hear their satisfied hum. *He came back, just like we said he would.* He wants to go back to Seoul just to prove them wrong, but he can’t, because he’s not the only one who can hear them.

The door is already open and a young woman appears on the threshold, still in her slippers, without a coat, alerted by the whispers of the totem poles.

“Look what the snow brought! *Halmeoni,* he really came!” She punches Chanyeol when he’s close enough, and when she hugs him, immediately afterwards, he makes sure to hug her back for the first time in his life. She smells like *gochujang* and sesame oil, like Grandmother used to smell when she spent too much time in the kitchen. She smells like family. “Welcome back, Yeollah.”

“I missed you, Yoora.”

**Hyunnie ♥**

chanyeol
its about the gumiho
i know yur angry but
pls
[Sent: 12:45, 24.01.2018]

Yoora moved in with their grandmother right after Chanyeol decided he didn’t want to live with her.

When Chanyeol expressed his desire to leave Jung-maeul, she took him to Seoul, dropped him off at their parents’ house and then drove to her small apartment in Sillim. She showered, packed her few things, wrote a resignation letter she would submit the morning after to the law firm she was interning at. When morning came, she called her parents and told them she was going to stay at grandmother’s house for a while, to keep an eye on her. Then she left. Just like that. She didn’t tell Chanyeol – she probably didn’t think he deserved to know, – but he was still living with his parents back then, and the news reached him, too. Three months later, she found a job at a rental company in Andong. Six months later, she announced she was dating her childhood best friend from all the summer holidays she spent in Jung-maeul, a lanky kid called Myunghoon – news that surprised no one, considering they had been going out on and off for the past five years. Five years later, she’s still here, greeting Chanyeol at the doorstep as if she now owns the place.

“Was it snowing in Seoul too?” Yoora asks, from the kitchen.

The smell of food permeates the house, reaching even the foyer. Chanyeol’s stomach rumbles and he smiles to himself as he wobbles against the shoe rack, trying to take his boots off with only one free hand and one functioning leg.

“Yeah, it started yesterday night. You think the roads will be blocked? I have to be back in Seoul before it gets dark.”

Yoora replies, but Chanyeol’s not listening anymore. His slippers are gone. The entire shoe rack is empty.

“Hey, where are the slippers?” he shouts. A couple of moments later, Yoora throws a couple of new fuzzy slippers at him from the corridor.
“I threw everything away when I moved here,” she says. “Too many memories can’t be good for anyone. Though, I had to buy back a lot of stuff.”

“Wait! So where’s all my stuff?”

She just shrugs and goes back to the kitchen. “Can you survive on your own for a moment? Grandma made some side dishes, but I need to get the actual lunch started if we want to eat before evening.”

Chanyeol sighs, puts the slippers on and grabs his crutch again, joining his sister in the kitchen. Yoora is wearing a cute pink apron and a puzzled expression as she stares at the ingredients in front of her. The clock on the wall is ticking and the fridge lets out a dull buzz, but other than that the room is silent. Their grandmother is nowhere to be seen, but Chanyeol is glad he’s given the time to breathe before he meets her again. His rage has long melted after their last fight, leaving behind shame and guilt he doesn’t know how to process and a lot of unanswered questions. For now, though, he focuses on Yoora, whom he hasn’t seen in months.

“How’s your boyfriend?” Chanyeol asks, sitting down at his usual spot at the table.

“My fiancé, “ Yoora corrects him with a glare, “is working today. They have a performance at the traditional village, so he won’t be able to make it. It’s a pity, he wanted to meet you.”

“Did you warn him not to come because you were going to cook? Ah, I see. You want to keep him alive.”

She threatens him with the spoon and Chanyeol ducks at the last moment, when he realizes she would’ve really hit him with it.

“Be careful, pest. I won’t go easy on you just because it’s the first time I see you in five years. You should be apologizing on your knees for not coming to visit, not even once.”

“I can’t get on my knees, I’m an invalid.”

“You’re a brat,” Yoora says. “Now shut up if you want to eat. I need to concentrate.”

The kitchen is exactly the same as before, but it looks different at the same time. Yoora scattered blotches of pink everywhere: her apron, animal-shaped pot holders, a lacy dish rag hanging from the handle of the oven. The oven is not pink but it’s new, just like the coffee machine.

“Did you renovate?” Chanyeol asks.

Yoora mumbles her a distracted yes as she tastes the sauce.

“Did grandmother let you renovate her kitchen without complaining too much?”

“I’ll let you know that she was ecstatic about the coffee machine,” she says, which means they fought about everything but the coffee machine. Amazing.

Yoora brings the spoon to his mouth, holding it over her open hand to keep the sauce from trickling on the floor. “How’s this?”

Chanyeol tastes it under her questioning gaze. It’s hot. And it tastes good. The smell of soy sauce and gochujang invades his nostrils, and for a moment he’s stepping back in time. He’s six years old and hungry. Yoora is eleven and wild, with dirt in her face and on her hands from playing outside the whole day. Mom will scold her soon because this is not how a proper young lady behaves and
halmeoni will butt in to tell her she was never a proper lady herself. Their dad will ignore the argument too preoccupied with the news on TV and grandfather will simply frown, until all of them shut up.

“So?” Yoora asks, and the memory disappears, blown away like the smoke rising from the pan.

“It’s good,” Chanyeol replies. “Really good.”

“Of course it’s good, it’s my secret recipe.”

Hong Garyung has changed. She looks somehow shorter, thinner, as if she shrunk in the past five years Chanyeol didn’t see her. There’s more white than grey in her hair now, but her smile is the same. She still looks at Chanyeol like he’s the most precious thing in the world.

Something expands in Chanyeol’s chest, a giant bubble of relief, growing and growing, bouncing against his lungs and stomach, against his heart, against his throat, squeezing everything. He thinks he might cry.

He ducks his head low, and the surface of the table quivers before his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he says. Sorry for yelling, for fighting. For not visiting. Especially for not visiting. He gets up and tries to drop on the floor, ignoring the pain in his leg, but a firm hand tugs him upwards again.

“Get up, you silly boy. Your leg must hurt. Aren’t you like your grandfather? He also used to get on his knees, you know? To apologize, whenever he did something wrong.”

The idea of his proud grandfather begging for forgiveness is so ridiculous Chanyeol almost smiles, but that would ruin the whole dramatic effect of the apology. It is ruined anyway when Yoora snorts.

“Get him out of here, grandma! I’ll burn the sauce if he keeps distracting me.” She helps Chanyeol up and gives him his crutch. “Go, shoo! I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

With that, Chanyeol is unceremoniously thrown out of the kitchen, into the dark corridor.

He looks at his feet, still not daring to look at his grandmother.

“Do you want to visit grandfather’s altar?” she asks, softly, and he raises his head and nods.

“I would really like to.”

It’s time to pay his respects.

Hyunnie ♥

she’s coming to your house
not in seoul
the house of the samjokgu
chanyeol you need to be careful
[Sent: 12:57, 24.01.2018]
living room. He blinks when he enters, as reality overwrites the memories in his mind. Grandfather’s things – his books, his jacket, always haphazardly thrown over the armchair, the stashes of newspapers he read and amassed over the coffee table, his glasses on the cabinet next to his pipe – are all gone. Instead, Yoora has scattered her stuff here, too, as if she was trying to overcompensate, to fill a void. Her laptop is open on the coffee table, the screen all black and at least four different lights blinking on and off. There are a couple of manhwa books and fashion magazines on the old broken piano Chanyeol’s mom used to play when she was young. Chanyeol can spot some nail polish bottles and a phone charger next to grandmother’s sewing kit.

“Things really changed here,” he says, slowly. The room is still the same, even if it seems smaller from what he remembered, it just feels like someone has overlaid a contrast filter over everything.

“Yoora did all of this, little by little,” Garyung says, almost pouting. “She thinks I shouldn’t dwell on the past so much. But it’s difficult, you know? We got married when we were so young, me and that idiot. I only had him, all my life. I kept most of his things, of course, but not having them around helped, just a little.”

Before he was Chanyeol’s grandfather, he was the Samjokgu. But before he was the Samjokgu, he was Garyung’s husband, and he left her alone. And then Chanyeol did the same.

Jimin was right, he left like a coward. He ran away, because he was too scared and sad and betrayed and he ended up pinning all his rage on his family, loathing their schemes, loathing the curse of the Samjokgu his grandfather passed onto him. The only other option would’ve been to blame himself and Baekhyun, but Chanyeol wasn’t strong enough for that. Like a child, he refused to acknowledge the truth. Like a child, he threw a tantrum because no one would tell him. Like a child, he ran.

“I’m sorry,” he says, again, because apologizing once is not enough to make up for how stupid he’s been all these years. “I’ve been an idiot, a selfish prick. I was angry, for the longest time, and after that I was afraid. I don’t even know if I deserve to be here.”

“Chanyeol, my puppy, you will always deserve to be here. And not because this is the house of the Samjokgu, but because it’s your house and we’re your family.” She walks towards the altar and kneels in front of it, patting the cushion for Chanyeol to join her. “We all made mistakes. Your grandfather and I lied to you, and I regret it everyday, but we meant well, I promise. I’m sorry, we never wanted to hurt you.”

Chanyeol has so many things to ask her, about Baekhyun, about the Samjokgu, even about his grandfather. He was always too intimidated by him to have a chance to know him well.

Garyung claps in front of the altar, and Chanyeol does it too. The photograph she put on it is so old Chanyeol can barely recognize the smiling face in it.

“It’s from before we got married,” grandmother says, following the line of Chanyeol’s gaze. “He used to smile a lot, you know? He got grumpy with age.”

“I’ve always thought it was the accident,” he says. “When he lost his leg.”

“Oh no, dear, your grandfather was just naturally grumpy. But the accident…” She sighs. “He wasn’t quite the same after that, and I can’t blame him. Neither of us could go back.”

“He never really told me what happened when he lost his leg. You said he was during a fight against a Gumiho, right? I think I deserve to know now,” Chanyeol says, eyes dropping to his useless left leg.
“I will tell you, if you wish to know. I will tell you everything. About the Samjokgu, and about your grandfather, and how they were the same person, but not always.” His grandmother’s eyes look at the photograph with a fondness that makes Chanyeol’s heart ache. “He really loved you. He loved your mom, you and Yoora. He would’ve wanted to be there for you all the time. But his life wasn’t just his own.”

She doesn’t sound angry, just sad. Chanyeol doesn’t understand. He would be angry if the curse forced him to stay away from his family, from the person he loves. (He is angry, because the curse is already keeping him apart from the person he loves.)

“Don’t you think it’s unfair? Didn’t you want to have him all for yourself? To not have to share him with the Samjokgu?”

“Oh, of course I did. But, Yeollie, I wasn’t sharing him with the Samjokgu. He was the Samjokgu. When I married your grandfather, I was aware he was the kind of man who would always try to do the right thing. I fell in love with him because he was that kind of man.”

“You set yourself up to failure, then.” It’s not the right thing to say. It brings back so many memories, of Baekhyun and the way his lips curled in anger and helpless sadness as he left. Chanyeol thought it was unfair, because he and Baekhyun were set up to fail. They let them meet, they let them become friends. They let them become enemies.

His grandmother doesn’t seem to notice his grimace though, too engrossed in her own memories, a tiny smile on her lips. “I set myself up to happiness, Yeollie. That’s what happens when you’re with the person you love. Every second we were together, he made me happy. Even if I didn’t have all of him, I had what mattered the most.”

Chanyeol doesn’t understand – he can’t understand, but he nods. In some ways, he’s jealous. He wanted Baekhyun to trust him like that, to believe in him like that. At some point, he dreamed of Baekhyun telling him that it didn’t matter that Chanyeol was the Samjokgu, that they could still be together.

(He needs Baekhyun to do it, because he can’t do it himself. He can’t go to Baekhyun and tell him it doesn’t matter if he’s part Gumiho and Chanyeol is the Samjokgu, that even what happened with Sehun doesn’t matter, that they can be stronger despite everything. Chanyeol feels too guilty for that – even if that’s probably what Baekhyun wants to hear the most. Sometimes, it feels like they live in completely different worlds, he and Baekhyun. Other times, it feels like they’re so close it would only take a step to find each other, only the tiniest step, but neither of them has ever tried to take it.)

They clap their hands again, before his grandmother tells him, “He knew it would’ve been you. Of course, there was no way to know for sure, but I think he was hoping it would be you. Yoora is too harsh. She’s inflexible, like her mother.”

Chanyeol snorts. “Like her grandfather, you mean.”

She snorts, too. “Yoora reminds me of him too much, sometimes. That’s the only reason I haven’t throttled her when she sold my collection of signed folk music albums on YES24 to buy the coffee machine. That, and because I actually like the coffee machine.”

“Do you two fight a lot?” Chanyeol teases, and she laughs softly.

“Enough to keep her from always having things her way. But I’m too soft-hearted to fight anyone. I’m just like you, Yeollie.”
Chanyeol sighs. “I wish I was more like grandfather. I’m too soft-hearted to be the Samjokgu.”

Grandmother flicks his nose, like she used to do when he was young. There’s more white than grey in her hair now and the wrinkles around her lips and eyes have deepened, but she still looks so pretty when she smiles.

“Since when is being soft-hearted a flaw?”

“Since it keeps you from doing your job, I guess,” he mutters. “You know, I wasn’t joking when I said I’m not the Samjokgu. I can’t… I can’t just kill Gumiho. I tried. I failed. And I only learnt… I can’t. Since I was young, you taught me they were monsters, but they’re not. I can’t see them as monsters. And I don’t want to be a murderer. I’d rather not be anything.”

Unexpectedly, she laughs at his words and opens her arms, so welcoming. Chanyeol hugs her, carefully, not too tight. Under the faint spicy trace of magic Chanyeol was only able to detect when he became the Samjokgu, she smells exactly like she did in his memories. Gochujang, onion and sesame oil, from all the time she spent in the kitchen getting everything ready for the family dinner. She smells like family.

“Oh, Chanyeol, it’s a pity your grandfather isn’t here right now,” she says against his chest. “It took you so little to understand something he took decades to accept.”

“What do you mean?”

“My family has lived in this village for generations, and from the stories my grandmother told me I can assure you we’ve already had a few hundred generations of stubborn, inflexible Samjokgu. And if they were all like your grandfather they were all hot-headed idiots who refused to change their views until they were broken by them. Maybe it’s time we get ourselves a Samjokgu who can bend, instead of breaking.”

Hyunnie ♥
dammit yeol you idiot
you fucking bastard
you prissy bitch
fuck you
don’t say i haven’t warned you
[Sent: 13:46, 24.01.2018]

“Did you really teach Yoora your jjimdak secret recipe?” Chanyeol asks, when they come back to the kitchen.

“Well, someone had to. She wasn’t going anywhere with that boy of hers,” she says, sweet like honey. “Now, wash your hands and help me with the rice.”

The same table that always seemed so small for six people looks too big for three. For a moment, Garyung seems tempted to sit Chanyeol at the head of the table, in the seat that had always belonged to her husband, but he takes the bowl away from her hands and puts it where his own seat had always been. He puts her bowl front of his own and Yoora’s by his side.

“Do you need any help?” he asks, but his sister just looks at him, frustrated.
“Sit down, stop hovering. You take too much space.”

Chanyeol tries to get closer to at least help her with the side dishes and she hits him with the spoon.

“Sit down, Yeollie,” his grandmother repeats. “It’ll be ready when it’s ready. If you want to make yourself useful, why don’t you tell me about yourself? You never call, I don’t know what you’re doing with your life anymore.”

“Yes, tell us,” Yoora interjects, the traitor.

“I… I’m working at a café now,” Chanyeol says, slowly.

“Is it a good job?”

He nods, a bit unsure. Well, it’s just a coffee shop. It doesn’t even pay that well, but it’s homely, and funny, and he likes the people there. He likes working there.

“It’s a really good job for me. You know, there aren’t many places that would hire someone… someone like me...” Chanyeol says, letting his voice trail over.

“Well, that’s because you were never meant for a normal job, or were you?”

For a moment, Chanyeol thinks he’s imagining the teasing note in her voice, but he’s not – it’s definitely there. His grandmother is making fun of him, like she knows full well he’s been working with the Guardians.

When he left Jung-maeul to go back to Seoul, Chanyeol told her he was done with magic, done with fairy tales, with Gumiho and Samjokgu and curses. Well, he wasn’t exactly done with the curse – that’s the point of curses, they don’t just go away because you think they’re inconvenient, – but he was as done as he could get. He started working at Aneuk Café and pretended he couldn’t see magic floating around him in golden threads. He pretended he didn’t know he was working with a bunch of witches. He pretended he didn’t recognize werewolves, ghosts and banshees in their customers. He even saw some Gumiho, occasionally, but it wasn’t his business.

Then Junmyeon arrived, with his blackmails, his self-righteousness, his expensive, shiny shoes, his tailored coats, his pristine, infuriatingly beautiful magic and his relentless, annoying requests. And with Junmyeon came phone calls before eight in the morning (something Chanyeol really loathes), Jongdae’s bad moods (something Chanyeol loathes even more), and Kyungsoo’s soft voice to keep him from snapping. And, before he knew, Chanyeol had agreed to help Junmyeon once, twice, three times, and then every week. He started to help Seungwan in his free time and his reputation spread around the city, to the point that all the witches of Seoul knew who he was. Before he knew, the curse had won. Chanyeol is the Samjokgu. And the chances of his grandmother not knowing anything – when the magical community in Korea is only made of blabbermouths – are quite slim.

But there’s no need to tell her and confirm that the mocking grin she’s sporting is totally justified. He won’t give her the satisfaction.

“And tell us,” Yoora asks, suddenly, as she places the big plate with the chicken between her bowl and Chanyeol’s – it looks so inviting, he can’t help but pluck a piece of meat and stuff into his mouth, even if she glares at him, – “how is Baekhyun?”

Chanyeol chokes. It’s the sauce of course, it’s too hot and much spicier than he thought, burning down his throat. It stings. He coughs a couple of times, accepts the water his grandmother patiently offers him, blinks a few times to will away the tears.
“What about Baekhyun?” Chanyeol asks, horrified. For a moment, he wonders if his sister might be some kind of clairvoyant like Jongin, but worse because she’s his sister and she gets off on humiliating him. Maybe she knows everything – that he met Baekhyun yesterday night, that he slept with him and that it wasn’t even the first time, maybe she’s always known-

“Haven’t you made up already? Or are you still pretending to be angry with each other?”

“What, that’s not… I mean…” He can feel their eyes on him and he knows he’s flushing so hard and this won’t help his case at all, but at the same time he has no idea how to answer this kind of question. He coughs once more – damn, the sauce must have been really strong if he still has to clear his voice – before he replies, shakily. “Ah, actually I don’t know. I mean, we kinda lost each other?”

“Did you? Why are you asking us?” Yoora says. “I mean, I get that you were angry, but the boy would have hung the stars on the sky for you, so why have you not made up yet? Are you an idiot?”

“I… It’s complicated, okay? And none of your business, anyway!”

Yoora looks suspicious, but at least their grandmother takes pity on Chanyeol – whose face is now so red it looks like it’s going to explode anytime soon.

“Eat, Yeollie, make your poor grandmother happy.”

“Yes, eat, little brother,” Yoora coos, though Chanyeol knows she’ll corner him about Baekhyun as soon as they’re alone. She always liked him, since the beginning, and when they started dating she was the only member of the family who knew. Chanyeol’s parents still have no idea their son dated another boy, or that said boy is actually half Gumiho. Chanyeol isn’t even sure his father ever believed the whole story about the Samjokgu and magic.

For now, the only thing that matters is that Yoora’s jjimdak is delicious and Chanyeol finds himself smiling as he eats. His grandmother smiles back.

“You look thinner,” she says. “Are you eating well? All alone in Seoul, I bet you order takeout all the time.”

“Not all the time,” he protests. “Sometimes I force the Guardian to take me out to dinner at expensive restaurants and stuff myself with food. That pompous man is so loaded, anyway.”

He realizes exactly how much he slipped when both his grandmother and sister grin together, looking, for once, extremely similar.

“The Guardian, mh?” Yoora says, in her best sirupy voice. “So you’re working with the witches now? What happened to I’m not the Samokgu, Chanyeol?”

Oh, no, caught red-handed and dead to rights.

“I’m not working as the Samjokgu,” he mutters. “I’m a waiter in a café. I just… sometimes… help the witches. Out of my good heart.” Or because Kim Junmyeon is a fucking nagger, who was willing to blackmail Chanyeol into helping once, twice and forever. The thing with Junmyeon is that he’s so uptight and awkward at the same time that after a while you can’t help but feel a tiny little bit of fondness towards him. The thing with Chanyeol is that he’s always been so fucking lonely since Baekhyun left that even spending time with Junmyeon is a sweet relief from being on his own and moping all the time. “I just… It’s a long story.”
“Well, we have time, don’t we?”

“Actually no, we don’t.”

Chanyeol lays the chopsticks on the table, propped against the edge of the bowl. One of them tries to roll away, but he stops it with his finger. When he looks up, his grandmother and sister are staring at him, ready to hear exactly what brought him back.

“There’s an... emergency in Seoul. It’s the reason I came back here. Other than seeing you, of course,” he adds quickly at Yoora’s raised eyebrow. “But like, this really is urgent. People have died.”

The atmosphere at the table changes in an instant. Yoora’s smile drops and Hong Garyung’s back straightens as she looks at Chanyeol. “An emergency? What kind of emergency?”

Chanyeol rummages the pocket of his hoodie until his hands close around the claw he extracted from the corpse back at Severance Hospital. When he shows it to his grandmother, her face pales.

“Where did you find this?” she asks, her voice breaking. “And when?”

“Yesterday. I took it out of the chest of a dead boy, at the morgue. It was the second victim of the night and the Guardian asked for my help.” Chanyeol rolls the claw in his hands, careful not to cut himself against the sharp edge. “I remembered reading something about an old Gumiho who used to do something like this to her victims. I think it was in one of the books grandfather made me read when he was sick, but I don’t quite remember. That’s why I’m here, I was hoping to read it again and find something on her.”

His grandmother is quiet. She still hasn’t looked away from the claw in Chanyeol’s hands, as if she can’t believe it’s really there. When she opens her palm, Chanyeol gives it to her. Yoora blinks, looking between the two of them, her expression strangely focused.

“Did you see the Gumiho who did this?” Garyung asks.

“I did, briefly. She attacked us. She almost killed the Guardian, but ran away as soon as she saw me. I... I kinda shot her with a gun.”

That really takes his grandmother aback. She blinks a couple of times. “With a gun? Really?”

“And you didn’t shoot yourself?” Yoora sneers, very out of place.

“I didn’t know what to do, okay?” Chanyeol snaps. “She was trying to eat one of my friends in front of me.”

His grandmother sighs, defeated, and when she speaks again Chanyeol can hear reprimand lacing through her voice for the first time in his life.

“This is why I told you to stay here. You should’ve stayed and studied your powers. Do you know what you risked? She could’ve killed you, do you not understand that?”

“You know, I just-”

“What was her name?” Grandmother asks, interrupting him. “The name of the fox?”

“I don’t know? She didn’t stay long enough to talk...”

“The color. What was the color of her tails?”
He shakes his head, hazy memories coming back. “Some kind... of fair color... Like, golden, a little lighter than that, maybe? But she was strange. I looked for the source of her magic, inside her chest, to see how powerful she was but... she didn’t have any.”

Hong Garyung sags, literally, on the chair. Yoora is at her side in a moment, helping her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, and the old woman in her arms shakes her head frantically and whispers something in her ear.

“Keep an eye on her for a moment,” Yoora tells Chanyeol before she leaves the room. He holds his grandmother’s hand, sighing in relief when she squeezes back.

When Yoora comes back, she’s wearing glasses and holding her phone in one hand and a slip of paper in the other.

“What are you doing?” Chanyeol asks, but she ignores him as she types the number written on the slip of paper and waits for the phone to ring. It doesn’t.

Grandmother and Yoora look at each other with an urgency Chanyeol doesn’t understand and that honestly makes him nervous too.

“Wait,” Yoora says, disappearing in the room at the end of the corridor – grandfather’s studio. She comes back with an old black notebook Chanyeol recognizes as one of grandfather’s diaries. It’s an address book, he realizes, as she frantically turns the pages until she finds the number she was looking for.

She calls, but it doesn’t ring, either. A prerecorded voice tells her the number she’s trying to call has been disconnected. She tries with another. It rings, but no one picks up. The fourth number, too, is disconnected. Then, she and grandmother exchange another glance, and Garyung closes her eyes, clutching at her chest, the wrinkles around her eyes deeper than ever.

“What is going on?” Chanyeol asks, quietly. He’s terrified, but he’s afraid that his panic will only worsen the situation. He can’t afford his grandmother to panic with him, or he’ll be left alone and without answers.

“We made a mistake, a long time ago. And I think someone might have just paid for our mistake.”

“Someone? Who?”

“A Gumiho called Sunmi. Or, I should say, a human called Byun Sunmi.”

**010-1***_****
Chanyeol, it’s Sunmi. Baekhyun’s mother.
Tell your grandmother to leave the house immediately.
And to take the gem with her.
[Sent: 14:47, 24.01.2018]

Chanyeol looks for his phone first. His grandmother hasn’t even stopped talking yet, but Chanyeol hears the name Sunmi – Byun Sunmi – and he’s already fishing for his phone in his pocket – what for, he doesn’t know himself yet. Call Baekhyun to warn him? To know if he’s alright? To check the messages Baekhyun sent him, all those missed calls he refused to take? He doesn’t know,
really, and it doesn’t matter, because his phone is not in his pocket.

“Byun Sunmi,” Garyung says, and Sunmi smiles in Chanyeol’s memories. Byun Sunmi, Baekhyun’s impossibly beautiful mom, who made the meanest tangsuyuk in Korea. Byun Sunmi who taught Chanyeol how to play the guitar one afternoon when Baekhyun was down with a fever, and asked him to play a duet together one day – “Gayageum and guitar, it could be amazing Yeollie!” Byun Sunmi, who was a Gumiho.

Byun Sunmi – no, just Sunmi – and the Samjokgu, Byun Baekhyun and Park Chanyeol, Hong Garyung and the Gumiho who almost killed Suho. Pieces of the same puzzle Chanyeol doesn’t know how to place. They’re all around him, scattered like snowflakes in a storm, ready to melt on his palm if he tries to catch them.

“What does Baekhyun’s mom have to do with any of this?” He asks, his voice hoarse, his throat dry like sandpaper.

“Everything.”

Chanyeol has to remind himself to breathe when he realizes the light is flickering in front of his eyes, pain pounding deep at his temples. He needs to calm down, but he feels a little like he felt five years ago, the last time he talked to his grandmother, trapped in a room of mirrors. All the mirrors are questions and all the questions are different, but he believes the answer to all of them would be the same. (A single answer hidden in a labyrinth of mirrors. You don’t know where it actually is, but it’s reflected everywhere at the same time.)

Chanyeol has been running away from this answer for five years. And it would be so easy, to go back to pretending, serving coffee to college girls in short skirts and smoking in the back room of the café and refusing to help Junmyeon because he’s not the Samjokgu – he doesn’t want to be the Samjogku.

(He wanted it, more than anything else, a long time ago, when he lived in a world of fairytales, of heroes and monsters. Before the heroes became murderers and the monsters became people – people who hugged him, people who kissed him, people who took him and Baekhyun to baseball games and made him food when he stayed over. Before the heroes became monsters and before Chanyeol realized he was one of them.)

Chanyeol doesn’t want to be the Samjokgu, but Baekhyun… Baekhyun might be in danger, right now, in this moment, and Chanyeol can’t help him, but maybe the Samjokgu can.

He takes another deep breath.

“Okay, first of all,” he says, “I need to use your phone.”

His grandmother blinks, confused, but he doesn’t wait for an answer. He knows Baekhyun’s number by heart, so he types it quickly, fingers shaking, but Baekhyun doesn’t answer. Baekhyun doesn’t fucking answer. And Chanyeol needs to talk to him, to know he’s safe. He needs to know what Baekhyun wanted to tell him with such urgency.

He calls again, his own number this time. He’s aware he looks like a madman and his grandmother and sister are both staring at him, too worried to say anything, but he can’t help it.
His phone rings, once, twice, before someone answers. “Hello?”

Chanyeol lets out a sigh of relief as he hears Jimin’s voice. “Jiminie, I forgot my phone in your car.”

“I know, I’m talking on it.”

“Can you bring it back to me? Like, now? It’s really urgent.”

Jimin hesitates. “Can’t it wait? It’s snowing really hard now...”

“It’s life or death kind of urgent. Where are you? I’ll come pick it up.”

She snorts. “With your leg?”

Yoora takes the phone from him. “Jiminie, it’s Yoora. Where are you? I’ll come to pick my stupid brother’s phone. Yes, don’t worry. Thank you, I owe you one...”

She puts the phone down, and the way it hits the counter is too loud for the silence of the house.

“Okay, I’ll go and bring back your phone, silly brother. It’ll take a couple of minutes. Don’t do anything stupid until I come back, okay?” She turns towards their grandmother. “This madness has lasted for too long. Tell him everything, because if you won’t I will, as soon as I come back.”

She leaves in a rustling of coat fastening and heavy footsteps, leaving Chanyeol alone with grandmother and secrets so heavy they’re even changing the gravity of the room, making silence shift towards the center, heavy and viscous. Chanyeol’s head pounds, the beginning of a migraine stemming between his eyes. He rubs it with his fingers, but it doesn’t do much to soothe the pain.

“You know who this Gumiho is, am I right?” he asks.

Hong Garyung nods. “You know her too, I believe. Her name is Sooyeon,”

Sooyeon. Soo-yeon. He rolls the name on his tongue once or twice, until something clicks in his mind. Of course, he remembers a Sooyeon. The books on the shelf in grandfather’s studio, first concubine of thirteen kings. And earlier. Earlier. The story that kept him awake at night. Once upon a time, there was an evil Gumiho named Sooyeon, who plagued the capital. She was the strongest and scariest and the oldest Gumiho in the country, so the other Gumiho started to call her Queen. The Queen of Gumiho.

Chanyeol blinks.


“I don’t know, you’re the one who saw her.”

He frowns. “That’s impossible, she should be like, what, four thousand years old?”

“Give or take.”

“No!” Chanyeol’s vehemence surprises him too. Pain flashes in his head again and he winces. He’s been getting so many headaches lately. At the hospital, too. “I’ve... I’ve met this Gumiho. I’ve met her and I can assure you – she was nowhere close to the level of power a creature that old should have. Like, four thousand years old? As old as Korea is? That’s not even a monster, that’s... a goddess.”
“But even gods can be defeated,” his grandmother reminds him. “If you’re ready to pay a high price.”

“High price?” Chanyeol growls, too tired for riddles. “What kind of…” He begins, annoyed, but suddenly freezes, lips set in a tight circle as his mind works on what his grandmother has just said. “The accident,” he murmurs, as the pieces of the puzzle swirl all around him and the winter wind howls. “When grandfather almost lost his leg.”

Grandmother nods.

“But how?”

“With luck, mostly, but also with training and good preparation. And with help. You actually lack all of these things, which makes me wonder how can you still be alive.”

“I told you, it can’t be her. She would’ve destroyed me. With that kind of power…”

“She doesn’t have her power anymore,” Garyung says. “We took it from her when we defeated her, just like you did with the Gumiho you fought in Seoul, after you became the Samjokgu.”

Chanyeol clenches his fists so hard they hurt, an instinctive reaction. He closes his eyes, trying to chase away the haptic memory of magic scalding his fingers, the little bead of power held tightly in his palm as the monster – the boy – fell to the ground clutching at his chest, his eyes impossibly human and betrayed.

“You think I didn’t know?” Garyung snaps. “Of course I knew. He was part of Sunmi’s family. Why do you think they left?”

There’s venom dripping from Chanyeol’s words when he talks. “I am aware of what I did.” Of course he is, his traitorous mind reminds him everyday. “But now is not the time for this. You fought Sooyeon and took away her fox bead… That’s why she didn’t have one when I met her. But why didn’t you just kill her?

“Oh, we tried, but she was too old and too strong. Taking away a Gumiho’s token of power is cruel, it’s like tearing their entire soul apart, but it was also the only way to stop someone like Sooyeon. Your grandfather should’ve killed her – he almost did, – but she ran away and he couldn’t hunt her down, not with that leg. We thought she was done for anyway. She had lost her fox bead, all her powers were gone. We thought she wouldn’t hurt anyone else again.”

Something still doesn’t add up. Talking about Sooyeon is like... like talking about Daji, the mythical fox spirit of the legends his grandmother told him when he was young. Sooyeon, who was the consort of thirteen kings, who was worshipped like a goddess, who wiped out entire villages just for fun. Many Samjokgu tried to kill her in the last four thousand years and all of them died.

“How did grandfather do it? It’s... impossible. You might have been a strong witch, and you probably still are, but a four thousand year old Gumiho? I don’t think there’s been, there is or there will ever be a witch strong enough to defeat a monster like that. So what the hell did he do? And why should it involve Baekhyun’s mother?”

It dawns on him, as soon as he stops talking. The pieces stop dancing. They freeze, all around him, and for a glorious moment he can see it. He can see the picture they form, through the haze of pain clouding his senses. “Wait a minute…”

His grandfather clearly knew Sunmi was a Gumiho, he even made a deal with her. He must have
known her for so long, and yet he let her live... He let her live as a human.

“There’s something you have to understand, Chanyeol. Sooyeon was cruel, ruthless, and so, so dangerous. She didn’t just kill humans. She killed both humans and fox spirits alike. She killed her own kin. She was like a queen, a despotic, capricious queen who was ready to behead all her subjects. She needed to be stopped.”

“Sunmi stopped her.”

Hong Garyung nods once.

“I never liked Sunmi. She almost killed your grandfather, once. He almost killed her, one other time, because that’s how it used to be, how it’s supposed to be, between Gumiho and Samjokgu. But Sunmi was...” She frowns, looking for the right words. She’s bitter, and melancholic, and plain sad, and Chanyeol has never seen his grandmother show this much emotion for someone who wasn’t her husband.

“She was smart,” Garyung says, in the end, “smarter than most other Gumiho, at least. She kept to herself, killed only when necessary and covered her tracks so well we could never track her down. She had her little pack in Yeoju, on her mountain, and she protected them from the Samjokgu and from other Gumiho. She shielded them from the Japanese, when they came with their miko priests, and from the witches of Seoul, after the Japanese left. Then she fell in love with that farmer.”

“Baekhyun’s father?”

“I suppose. She came to us, one day, disarmed. She said she wanted to become human. Of course, we didn’t believe her, so she made a proposal. She would betray Sooyeon for the right to live as a human.”

And Chanyeol can almost imagine her, the woman who woke him up in the morning, smirking when she found him sleeping next to her son, who spoke like a sageuk drama sometimes and quoted Chinese Classics randomly in the middle of every conversation. He can imagine her with glowing eyes and shiny tails, hair swept by the wind, going into the den of the enemy, fearless – just like Baekhyun, who jumps into the void and trusts the world to catch him. Chanyeol’s head hurts so much, the entire world is spinning.

“Did you accept?”

“Of course we didn’t, at first. Would you have believed her? A witch, the Samjokgu and a Gumiho, fighting together. We didn’t think she would really do it, but we had to try. Sooyeon was killing too many people, drawing too much attention. The Council of the Covens gave the order and your grandfather, as usual, accepted. Many Samjokgu had died before him. And he would’ve died, too, just like them, without her help.”

She looks down, at her intertwined hands.

“We fought in the mountains near Yeoju. It was winter. It wasn’t snowing anymore, but there was snow everywhere. It had to be very cold, but none of us felt it. I was so scared. Sooyeon was... on another level. Your grandfather was probably more scared than I was, because he was the one who had to get close to her, after all, and she was like a wall, my spells broke against her magic like raindrops on stone. She would’ve killed him if Sunmi hadn’t attacked her at the last moment. She distracted Sooyeon long enough for your grandfather to find the heart of her magic and pull, pull it away from her. She was strong, but he was the Samjokgu, the hound of the gods. He didn’t let go until he eradicated the magic from her body.”
“Why would Sunmi risk her life like that?”

“She was pregnant.”

Baekhyun. It’s always Baekhyun. The only piece that fits the puzzle, the only gear able to make the wheel of destiny turn. Sometimes, it feels like Chanyeol’s entire life revolves around Baekhyun.

“Sooyeon was, at that time, the strongest Gumiho in Korea. She was like a queen. And Sunmi was…I don’t know their relationship, but they were close, like sisters. But Sooyeon hated humans. She hated hybrids. She would’ve hated that half human child. I didn’t trust Sunmi and with good reasons, but even I was forced to acknowledge the length that vixen was willing to go for in order to protect her child.”

Chanyeol looks at the phone still lying face down on the table. “Before, you were trying to call Sunmi, right?”

“I called her house number, her phone number. I called her husband and the hotel they run in Yeoju.”

No one answered. Yeoju is where Sunmi has lived all these years – and now Chanyeol remembers, from his grandfather’s notes, an old Gumiho called Sunmi who used to live in Yeoju and built a small pack under the Japanese colonization. He remembers from his grandmother’s stories, a fox that lived under a young juniper tree, a long time ago. Sooyeon probably knew where to find her.

“I need to go to Yeoju, I need…”

He takes the phone in his hands and tries to call Baekhyun again, but it rings and rings and Chanyeol feels his own heartbeat, a syncopated rhythm that takes his breath away, he feels pain pounding inside his head from the inside, digging its way towards the surface. He closes his eyes, wincing.

Baekhyun doesn’t answer and even the last sliver of Chanyeol’s hope twitches and dies.

“You should’ve told me!” he says. “You should’ve told me all of this years ago!”

“Were you willing to listen, Chanyeol?”

He should’ve come back, a long time ago. He should’ve recognized the signs, he should’ve been able to do something… He was supposed to be the Samjokgu. But, like a small voice reminds him, he gave up his responsibilities first. He didn’t want to be the Samjokgu.

His grandmother doesn’t say anything. Maybe they were both scared, too nervous, too guilty, too similar to take the first step. They both thought things would’ve sorted themselves out with time, and even if no one solved them it didn’t matter, it wasn’t so important after all. Except it was and they’re both equally guilty and Baekhyun is not answering his phone and Chanyeol’s head is going to explode soon.

Somewhere, faintly, outside, they hear the sound of a crash, swallowed by the snow, and the highlights of Yoora’s car filter through the windows, showering the kitchen in white light, but Chanyeol is too frantic, too desperate, blood running past his ears, pounding in his temple, to notice anything. There’s just pain and fear. And, suddenly, a pressure in his chest. It tastes like fear, but it’s not, and Chanyeol fails to realize it.

The front door opens, but Chanyeol doesn’t notice that either.
“Do you think Sunmi will be alright?” he asks, still facing his grandmother, and what he really wants to ask is, *do you think Baekhyun will be alright?*

“Oh, she will be alright, but not for long. We do not forget.”

The pressure in Chanyeol’s heart explodes, pulling at his lungs from the inside. It’s not fear. It was never fear. It was color, washing all over the room. It was magic, and suddenly it explodes in front of his eyes, bright and vivid, and Chanyeol doesn’t care. His head snaps towards the door so fast it hurts, while Hong Garyung chokes on her scream. There, in their foyer, in all her spun gold glory, nine tales swaying slowly like jellyfish tentacles in the sea, stands a pale, golden woman.

**Kim Junmyeon**

*When are you coming back?*

I’ll send Kyungsoo to the station to pick you up.

[Sent: 15:15, 24.01.2018]

She appears like thunder in the middle of the kitchen, like a rip into the fabric of reality, magic bleeding through the walls and into Chanyeol’s home – into Chanyeol’s chest.

There are places that are supposed to be safe, a haven in the middle of a world of monsters and nightmares. Home is holy, it’s sacred, and the Samjokgu’s home must be the most sacred of homes. Built with holy wood, surrounded by tall, ancient trees and protected by the two jangseung at the entrance, gods of the gates, to keep the evil away, the house of the Samjokgu has never been violated by a Gumiho before.

Here is where Chanyeol where he made moved his first steps, where learned how to read and to write. On the lawn outside he rode a bike for the first time. This is safe, this is *home*, and war is not supposed to be looming in the middle of their kitchen. And yet here she is, smug and pompous, her tails sweeping the floor with ill-concealed glee.

In the parking lot, Chanyeol had caught nothing but a glimpse of her, But now she stands before him, tall and proud, just like a queen. She’s powerful and she’s beautiful, though her beauty doesn’t do much for Chanyeol.

He gets up, takes a step, standing between her and his grandmother. It’s a slow step – he’s crippled and she knows it, she can see it, and her eyes narrow, the corners of her mouth tugging upwards, but Chanyeol doesn’t care.

“How did you get in?” he asks. This time, his voice does not shake.

“I have waited to do this,” she replies, “for a long time. The guardians blocked my way.”

“And how did you get rid of the guardians?”

She smiles and throws something on the ground, between the two of them. Chanyeol can recognize the Zootopia phone cover Jongdae got him for his last birthday and see the blinking light of the Kakao notification of Baekhyun’s message. His heart falls in his chest and it doesn’t reach the bottom.

“Where’s my sister?” Chanyeol asks, slowly.

“I have no interest in her. She will live, probably, if someone finds her in time.”
Sooyeon’s smile is curving more now, more pronounced, more sinister, stiff, like a porcelain doll. Her eyes are too glassy to look human. There’s something different about her, something Chanyeol couldn’t get the first time he met her, leaving some kind of bad aftertaste in her wake.

It’s her magic, he realizes, thick and stale on the tip of his tongue. It has a heaviness it didn’t have before, something poisonous, dangerous. Chanyeol looks out into the garden. Yoora’s car is crashed against the male jangseung. The second totem pole, the female one, is on the ground, broken. Their faces, carved into a perpetual, mute cry of anger, seem even more furious than usual. Chanyeol can almost hear their angry, helpless whispers.

But his sister is safe inside the car, probably unconscious, and Chanyeol can breathe through the pain, a mouthful of relief.

“You were looking for me,” he says, “I get it. I’ve been told you have every intention to kill me.”

“And who told you?” she asks, taking another step. Her eyes flash behind Chanyeol, meeting Garyung’s, and her smile grows larger, sharp teeth showing, and for a moment she doesn’t even pretend to look human, her entire being just a set of jaws ready to close over them.

“Is it important?” Chanyeol asks, and her attention snaps back to him.

“Oh, it is. Was it the little runt, Sunmi’s son? Did he warn you? Half-blood and a traitor, just like his mother. He should have worried about himself first.”

“What did you do to him?”

A twinkle of amusement appears in Sooyeon’s eyes.

“You too should worry about yourself, even though it will do you no good. You will die today, and my only regret was that I was too weak to do this while the previous Samjokgu was still alive. I would have made him grieve greatly for what he did to me. At least I will get the witch.”

She looks at Chanyeol’s grandmother again, her eyes red and too bright.

“She is old, you have no reason to take it out on her,” Chanyeol tries to reason, but the Gumiho is not listening to him anymore. She probably can’t even see him.

“You do remember me,” she says, her eyes fixed behind Chanyeol’s back, on Hong Garyung’s placid expression. “I’m glad, because I didn’t forget about you for a single instant of the past twenty-five winters, living like a beggar in the woods because some ungrateful little whore stabbed me in the back so she could pop out her disgusting half-blood child, and a dirty human witch with her lapdog were kind enough to finish off the work.”

Chanyeol can see the rage emanate from her in waves, the same red of blood, and, though his grandmother cannot see it, he knows she can feel it too. And how could she not? The Gumiho’s magic shines like a beacon, fulgid and cold, ice that burns.

But Hong Garyung just laughs. It’s raspy and breathless and so old, and Chanyeol turns around to see her clutching at her chest, her eyes closed and the smile drawn out and tired.

“You really took your sweet time, Sooyeon, queen of the Gumiho,” she says, weakly. Sooyeon growls and Garyung’s smile grows wearier and wider. “Wasn’t that how you used to be called? The queen. And look at you now. You used to be so strong that even the mountains bowed in your presence. Every king would’ve died for a single glance from you. Now you’re nothing more than a ghost killing boys in dirty back alleys.”
Chanyeol shoots his grandmother a panicked glance and stands closer to her, expecting the Gumiho to lash out, but she doesn’t.

“No, you’re wrong. Now I’m here. A queen always gets her revenge, in the end.”

“You’re here, but you took too much time. Look what’s left of your revenge. These old bones and a lot of regrets. Did you kill Sunmi?”

Sooyeon doesn’t answer, but everything in the room shakes, the light flickering under her anger. Hong Garyung laughs again, out loud. It turns into a fit of coughing halfway.

“I’m guessing you didn’t. She’s always been too smart, that Sunmi. Way smarter than you. That’s why she only kept half of your gem and left the other to us. That’s what you came for, am I right? What we stole from you all those years ago.”

Sooyeon takes a step closer and the room seems to shrink, falling into her like a black hole.

“I will get it after I kill you,” she says, and her voice doesn’t even sound human anymore. It comes from far, far away, back from a time when Gumiho ruled the earth and the gods punished them for their sins. Her magic is so strong, even broken, washing over Chanyeol like a tsunami wave. He feels his grandmother shake, but she doesn’t move.

“You won’t.” Garyung says, too calm for someone who’s going to die today. “Your fox bead has been sealed away and is protected by magic. Only I can unseal it. If you kill my grandkids, or me, you will never find what you’re looking for, not even if you keep searching for the rest of the eternity.”

“Then you will give it to me,” she says, boring a hole in Garyung’s face. “And I will let your precious grandson live. For now.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

The Gumiho growls and for a moment the fox overlaps with the human, a monstrous hybrid ready to jump on them.

Hong Garyung gets up, slowly. She’s a tiny woman in a shiny kitchen, smelling of jjimdak and soap and family, but Chanyeol feels – no, he sees – the sparks of magic around her, burning. The red of fire against the red of blood.

“We can’t give it to her,” he tells her, “she’s already powerful enough to almost kill the Guardian! Who will stop her, if she becomes even stronger?”

“You will,” his grandmother replies, simply, and the Gumiho laughs, but Garyung ignores her, clutching Chanyeol’s shoulder like she did when he was young. “You’re the Samjokgu. We can give her what she wants now, but you must survive. Trust me, puppy.”

She turns towards the Gumiho, who’s just listening, not saying anything, tall and thin, too pretty to be human, too pretty not to be a monster. “Promise on your magic,” Garyung says. “Promise you will not hurt my grandson today. Promise you will leave without shedding his blood and I will give it to you.”

“Wait, what about yo-” Chanyeol tries to ask.

“I promise,” Sooyeon says, talking over him, her voice no more than a low hiss, “on my own magic, that I will not hurt the boy. But your life, Garyung, your life is mine.”
Hong Garyung laughs again.

““My life, as brief as it was, is almost over.”

“That’s what they always say. Will you be this calm while I eat your heart out?”

“Why don’t you try me?”

They stare at each other, the witch and the Gumiho, only the Samjokgu between them.

“No.”

They both turn to stare at Chanyeol.

“We’re not going to do this, halmeoni. You’re not sacrificing yourself for me. I won’t let you-”

He doesn’t even see the tail dashing towards him, but he feels the shift in the magic around them. He hears it, like the sound of something shattered in little pieces. It hits him like a slap of pure, undiluted power and pain. Sooyeon’s tail snaps his crutch in two and sends him crawling on the floor with a scream.

Garyung tries to reach for him, but she can’t even take a step towards Chanyeol before the magic of the Gumiho stains the air, thick and strong like winter mist. It smells of ancient and decay, of smoke and blood. Her claws are out, her fangs protruding. She will kill them at the first attempt of treason.

“You will find the fragment of my fox bead,” the Gumiho says, “and you will bring it to me. And if you trick me, I will kill him.”

Chanyeol tries to get up, but she whips him back in place, her magic strong enough to pin him to the floor.

He searches for his grandmother’s eyes, for reassurance, for hope, something. Anything. She doesn’t look at him. Her magic floats around her ankles, ghostly hands wrapping around her knuckles. He wonders if the Gumiho can feel it too.

“It’s going to be okay, Yeollie. Trust me.”

The snicker of the Gumiho haunts her as she leaves the room.

**Kim Junmyeon**

Chanyeol?

Why aren’t you answering the phone?

[Sent: 15:34, 24.01.2018]

The floor is warm against Chanyeol’s cheek, the heat of the ondol seeping through his skin. He tries to get up, but the Gumiho’s tail falls on his back again, like a hammer, whomping him onto the polished wood.

“I must confess,” she says out of the blue, schooling her voice to a delicate whisper, so unlike the growls she’s let out until now, “I expected someone more... challenging. Your sister would have made a fine Samjokgu, but you...”
This time, when Chanyeol tries to look up, Sooyeon lets him. He glares and she smiles, too wide and too cold. She looks so out of place in the middle of the kitchen, like a sticker glued to the wrong page of the album. She’s sickly thin and too tall for the low ceiling. Her pale, ethereal glow makes her look almost livid next to the fridge covered in bright magnetic letters and Yoora’s new, shiny coffee machine. Her tails sweep the air nervously, trapped in the small room. Her hair floats lazily around her shoulders like a halo. Chanyeol would’ve sworn it was blonde, but now it looks black. She’s trying to look more human, he realizes, and she’s failing miserably.

“You’re broken, useless,” Sooyeon continues, studying him as he’s studying her. “When I’m done with the witch, I will kill you too. Not today, maybe, I promised. Tomorrow.”

“I didn’t peg you for someone who keeps her word,” Chanyeol spits out, and she shivers wordlessly, maybe laughing, maybe snarling.

“Not even gods can break magical vows, but unfortunately for you I am only bound by my promise until the end of this day. Tomorrow, then. Tomorrow I will end your wicked bloodline forever.”

Chanyeol shakes under the weight of her magic. He’s angry. He’s always angry, but in a dull, mind-numbing way that leaves him hollow and aching. He doesn’t feel empty now. He feels his heartbeat quickening, blood pumping hormones and adrenaline and fear and rage through his veins. It’s an instinct, he realizes. The instinct of the dog in front of the fox. Hunting, biting, tearing apart. He’s full of it, to the brink.

“And after that? What will you do? Do you really think the witches will let you do as you please?”

“Maybe I will kill them too,” Sooyeon says, with a giggle. “You don’t understand, do you? I am a queen. I ruled this land before this country had a name! I can do anything I want! You, on the other hand, you will die, and I will never even know your name.”

“Chanyeol,” he says, like a challenge. “My name is Park Chanyeol. And I will kill you.”

“Park... Chanyeol? Where did I hear your name?” Her eyes narrow with something akin to triumph. Her mouth opens in a sharp, feral smile. “Yes, you were in Sunmi’s little runt’s mind. What a little cunning bitch, falling in love with the Samjokgu.”

“What did you do to Baekhyun?” Chanyeol asks, as fear surges again in his chest. She notices, and she laughs at him.

“Didn’t I tell you to worry about yourself first? You really are weak, a pathetic excuse of a Samjokgu. Maybe I should keep him alive and have him watch as I kill you, what do you think?” Sooyeon is closer now, crouching down to smile sweetly in Chanyeol’s face. “Maybe I should steal his heart and his will and turn him into my little puppet. Make him kill you.”

“I think,” Chanyeol whispers, his voice low and breathy, and she gets closer with a giggle, close enough to hear what he’s saying, her clawed hand moving the hair out of his face with something akin to fondness, like he’s some kind of pet, amusing to watch, even more amusing to crush.

“I think,” he repeats again, lower, making her come even closer. To be honest, Chanyeol is not thinking. Maybe he’s just out of his mind with rage, pinned on the floor, hurting everywhere, completely crushed mentally and physically by a four thousand years old fox spirit who just promised to kill him while his ex-boyfriend watches – or to force his ex-boyfriend to kill him. Maybe he’s just following instinct.

He waits until she is close enough, until he can smell the blood under her claws, the snow clinging
to her dress and the magic simmering under her skin.

Like a chained dog, beaten but not tamed, his head snaps up and his teeth clamp down on old skin as he bites the hand petting him with everything he has.

The Gumiho tastes like magic and death and an ear-shattering scream. She tries to take her hand back, but Chanyeol doesn’t let go, not even when her tails whirl and thrash around him in rage and pain. He feels... power, flowing through him, inside of him. He feels her magic, toxic and poisonous but so, so delicious. He feels himself reaching for it, wanting more and more.

He doesn’t really know what he’s doing. The only time he has ever used his Samjokgu powers, he almost killed someone. He didn’t want to, but he almost did. This time, though, he wants to kill. He wishes he could kill. Everything else turns dark as color slips from the Gumiho to him, filling the hollow in his chest with gold.

He only lets go when he sees her claws shine and he rolls over, away from her. When he looks back up, her human form is gone and the giant beast is back, the golden fox with red eyes. She’s snarling at him, in the middle of his fucking kitchen, tall as the entire room, her muzzle feral and scrunches up.

Chanyeol laughs in her face and she almost throws herself at him.

“Remember your promise, Sooyeon.” They both freeze as Garyung reappears at the door. She’s carrying a small box in her hands and she frowns at them both as she enters the room.

“You promised not to touch my grandson,” she says, again, the box firmly held in her hands. “And you will not touch him.”

The fox growls and curls on itself until Sooyeon looks like a woman again, even though there’s something vulpine about her, something out of place.

Garyung puts the box on the table and goes back to Chanyeol.

“Are you alright, dear?” she asks, kneeling next to him. Her fingers slide around his wrist, caressing his palm.

“I... feel dizzy,” Chanyeol sighs. His head is not hurting anymore, but he feels confused, overwhelmed. He tries to get up, instinctively, and his body braces itself for the pain, but there’s none.

No pain.

His eyes widen. Magic flows in front of his eyes, in his fingers, in his leg. The doctors always said that his pain was psychosomatic, like a block in his mind, but Chanyeol never believed them. It was magical. And magic, apparently, was the key to solving his problem.

He sends a lost glance at his grandmother, but she doesn’t detach her eyes from the Gumiho. “Your fox bead is there,” she says, pointing towards the box on the table.

Sooyeon looks at it, her eyes greedy and haunted, while Garyung takes a step back, pushing Chanyeol away, closer to the door.

“You need to go, Chanyeol,” she whispers, barely audible, even though the Gumiho is not really
paying attention to them. Her eyes are fixed on the box.

“I’m not going without you,” he whispers back. He could run now, yes, but he’s not leaving her here.

She doesn’t answer, just squeezes Chanyeol’s palm again, and when she draws her hand away she leaves something there.

It’s the pendant she always wears, a small piece of crystal that looks like a broken marble. Chanyeol saw it countless times, hanging from the small chain on her neck. It never looked precious, it just looked broken. She taps Chanyeol’s shoulder and he closes his hand instinctively. The glass tingles in his hand – ice that burns – and his eyes widen with realization of what it is – what it has always been, where it has always been. Half of the power of the greatest Gumiho in the country, and his grandmother wore it on her neck for the past twenty-five years, like a common trinket.

But if he has the bead, then what’s in the box? There’s magic reverberating around it, squiggles of power rolling lazily inside, he can see them – purple and green and orange, a slithering, deceptive magic. Garyung looks at him again. She doesn’t say anything, but there’s a desperate plea in her eyes. Trust me.

“Where is the key?” Sooyeon asks, fixing her attention on them again.

Garyung’s left hand opens to reveal a small key. She slides it across the table. The Gumiho takes it, just as Garyung takes Chanyeol’s wrists – the magic inside the box crackles and pops, almost excited, anticipating, – tugging him up, dragging him towards the door.

Chanyeol tightens his hold on the half of the glass bead so tight he almost cuts his palm. He doesn’t know what his grandmother did to it – what kind of magic can conceal such great power? – but he can’t even feel it himself and he’s the Samjokgu. What he knows is that they need to get out of the house and run, before Sooyeon realizes they did indeed trick her, which might happen in a moment or two.

They retreat, slowly, towards the door, as Sooyeon turn the key inside the lock and opens it, restless and triumphant. The box opens with a whistle and the last thing Chanyeol sees is her triumphant, victorious expression twist into a confusion, disbelief and monstrous rage. Then, the box explodes.

**bossdae**
did something happen?
myeon called and said you’re ignoring him
told him it’s on purpose bc he’s an ass but he seems worried
call me back
[Sent: 15:55, 24.01.2018]

Chanyeol hoists his grandmother onto his shoulder and runs.

For the first time in five years, his left leg doesn’t hurt. For the first time in five years, the pain that had clung to him, despite the rehabilitation, in spite of the opinions of the best doctors of the country and the efforts of the most powerful witches of the capital, subsides long enough to clear his senses and let him feel. He feels the cold, first, dry and pungent. The snow reaches up to his knees, grey on grey. It’s only early afternoon, but the sky is already too dark, wrapped in thick,
ominous clouds. Away from the Gumiho, there’s no other color but the black of the sky and snow, and for once it’s a relief.

“Where to?” Chanyeol asks.

“Kim Nari’s house. The totems around her house should be able to keep her out.”

It’s only a couple of minutes – they just have to reach the sandalwood tree at the center of the village – but the distance multiplies in front of Chanyeol’s eyes. Snow has piled up on the village, wrapping the roads under a white shroud, making it difficult to run, and he can already hear Sooyeon’s pained growl coming from their house. They’re never going to make it before she catches them, unless...

_The car_, someone calls. He turns around, looking for the source of the voice, eyes widening when he realizes it came from the two totem poles thrown haphazardly on the ground after they were hit by Yoora’s car. _Take the car, you idiot._

“Do as they say,” Garyung says. “They’ve protected this household for centuries, we can trust them.”

The car is open and the keys are already in the ignition. Chanyeol moves Yoora’s unconscious body to the passenger seat while their grandmother climbs in the backseat. It’s been five years since he last drove, and even then he never really got a license, he was just playing around with Baekhyun in his dad’s old car. He manages to start the engine at the third try, leaving in reverse gear just as the giant golden fox jumps out from their kitchen, breaking through the window.

Their eyes meet, for a moment. She’s furious and their pact is broken. If she catches them, she will kill them.

The road is slippery, both for their car and for the fox. The car swerves as he turns around and crashes against the Gumiho so hard Chanyeol almost smashes his head against the wheel at the impact. He steps on the gas pedal, trying to run her over, and the collision almost sends Yoora’s small hatchback flying against the trees.

He doesn’t know how they manage to get to the sandalwood tree in one piece. Probably thanks to _halmeoni_, who keeps muttering spells under her breath. The forest opens for them, all the _jangseung_ of the village channelling her power to stop the Gumiho. Chanyeol drives on the razor’s edge, on the frozen road, skidding on snow, almost crashing against every tree he finds on his way. Finally, they see the gates of Kim Nari’s house and behind it the three small pagoda in the garden where Chanyeol played with the shaman’s grandchildren during summer holidays.

“Faster, Chanyeol,” his grandmother begs, “we’re almost there.”

The car strays, one last time, and it doesn’t matter because even if they break through the gate they only have to make it between the two totem poles at the entrance to be free. Almost there, almost there.

Sooyeon tackles them when they’re right in front of the gate, before they can cross it. She hits them from Chanyeol’s side, with all her weight, a golden fox built like a truck against a small, dented city car. Something explodes in Chanyeol’s face – the fucking airbag, he realizes, when it punches him in the nose, pushing his head against the seat, a mouthful of rubber and pain, – and then everything is whirling and hurting as the car rolls down the hill for what seems like an eternity, its race only slowed down by the trees.
When it finally stops, in a clearing in the middle of the woods, the world is upside down and Chanyeol is a giant human bruise.

Yoora groans something, probably still not fully aware of what’s happening around her.

Chanyeol curses, trying to turn despite being stuck between the airbag and the seat. “Is everything alright?” he asks, but there’s no answer.

What he does hear, though, is the sound of footsteps on the snow. Slow, assured, like she has all the time in the world. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he whispers, trying to break free. He’s going to fight this Gumiho, even if he has no idea how to fight a Gumiho. Even if he has to die. He’s going to fight her, at least until Yoora can run away with Grandmother and...

The car moves, again, pulled the right way by the Gumiho’s supernatural strength. She lets it go, and the shattered fragments of the windshield fall over Chanyeol and Yoora like a shower of glass. He struggles to get out, but he’s stuck. There’s nothing he can do as Sooyeon tears through the backdoor, throwing it away with a cry of mangled metal. There’s nothing Chanyeol can do as she drags Garyung out. His door is stuck, he’s stuck, no matter how much he struggles.

It’s over.

Chanyeol’s grandfather sacrificed his leg and his life as the Samjokgu in order to stop her, but it was useless. She’s going to win now. Again. Because Chanyeol was too selfish, too childish, stupid enough to throw away the only power that could have saved him. He did this.

Sooyeon’s eyes meet Chanyeol’s through the shattered window of the car. *Look*, they seem to say. He wants to tear his eyes away, but he can’t. He watches the Gumiho loom over his grandmother, her claws out, her fangs revealed in a snarl, and Chanyeol pushes, pushes, pushes until the door gives out under his weight and he rolls onto the snow, feeling it burn against his naked arms, the cold so strong it bites.

Sooyeon watches him cough and struggle to get up. She laughs, her shoulders shaking with mirth. Twenty-five years, she waited for her revenge. But what are twenty-five years, a small part of a human life, compared with the four thousand years of a Gumiho? Nothing.

“You will have to kill me first,” Chanyeol says – anything to make her walk away from his grandmother. It works, because Sooyeon lets her fall and advances, barefoot, on the frozen ground. She’s not even leaving footprints of the snow anymore, but floating like a ghost. The wind sweeps her hair in front of her face, not black anymore but shining golden in the livid light of the upcoming afternoon, covering her now expressionless face.

Chanyeol crawls on the ground, slipping, shivering, until he can finally get up on shaky legs. He charges against the Gumiho in a last, desperate attack, but this time she doesn’t let him get close enough to touch her and steal her magic. One tail trips him, one lashes against his stomach. Chanyeol finds himself on his back, sinking into the snow.

It’s silent, like only the woods in winter can be. When she kicks him, Chanyeol whimpers, but the snow swallows that sound too. Above him, the Gumiho draws out her claws. He can feel their kiss on his chest. The smallest pressure and they’ll pierce his flesh like butter.

He thinks of unbearable heat, impossibly blue skies. A cursed sun.

He opens his eyes, sees the grey sky, the grey snow, the grey stars. He feels awareness slip from his fingers, like magic. The only color he can see is the Gumiho’s golden glow and the red of his
own blood, but black is advancing at the corners of his eyes, invading his field of vision.

Suddenly, the pressure on his chest is gone and someone is growling, someone is screaming. Color explodes again in his eyes – not a brush of magic, not Sooyeon’s dash of golden and red, but the entire world diving in blue and purple, in the pale azure of the fallen snow and the dark green of the trees and the metallic red of Yoora’s battered car. In pink light that makes the falling snowflakes look like cherry petals.

The silver fox is the last thing Chanyeol sees before he blacks out. It is beautiful.

From: Park Yoora
To: Shin Jimin
call the shaman
we’re in the woods
chanyeol and my grnamdoher are hurt
[Sent: 16:13, 24.01.2018]

Chanyeol doesn’t know for how long he wanders in the dark alleys of his own mind. He sinks, down, into the abyss, and when he looks up he can see the world distorted by the surface of the water. Breath escapes him in big, pearlescent bubbles. The voice that calls his name is muffled, watery.

“Yeollie, Yeollie! You need to wake up, wake up!”

He resists, burrows deeper into the darkness, tucking his head between his knees, but the hand on his shoulder shakes and shakes, and the shadows around him shake too, dissolving quickly until he opens his eyes and finds Yoora staring at him, wide eyes, pale face, dirt on her cheek. A snowflake lands delicately on her nose.

Chanyeol instinctively tries to wipe it away, but moving even an inch makes him want to throw up.

“We have to go,” she says.

“Where’s halmeoni?” he asks at the same time.

“She’s safe, let’s go!”

Yoora tries to get him up, but his head pounds and he winces at the pang of pain, expected and unwelcome. He’s still seeing colors everywhere. The snow glows pink.

“Where’s the Gumiho?” he asks, again. Yoora tries to get him up, but they both slip on the snow. He looks for the fox bead in the pocket of his jeans and realizes with relief that it’s still there. It’s still there, and he’s alive, and Sooyeon... “Yoora, what happened?”

“Jiminnie!” Yoora calls, ignoring his question. “He’s here!”

He wriggles free from her grip.

“Where’s the Gumiho?” Chanyeol repeats again. “What happened?”

And then he sees it, light rising at East, pink and gold, like dawn, a clash of titans, so bright that
the rest of the world darkens in comparison.

Jimin joins Yoora and they both try to drag him away, but he doesn’t let them. He can’t let them.

“Chanyeol, it’s dangerous,” his sister says, “we have to leave before...”

He shuts her up with a raised hand and walks to the edge of the clearing, where the hill dips sweetly towards the valley. He grits his teeth and holds onto the frozen trees. It’s too cold, but he feels like he’s burning.

Beyond the crest of trees, in the frozen bed of the stream, he sees a golden and a silver fox, fighting desperately, attacking and countering and attacking again, their nine tails tangling in the air, their claws shining, their maws wide open as they pant, not ready to give up.

Chanyeol slides on the ground and the golden fox sees him, her red eyes singling him out at the edge of the woods. She growls and launches herself at him, trying to get past the silver fox, only to be grabbed by her tails and pushed back.

The silver fox looks at him, too, amber eyes, pale fur with the tiniest hint of pink, and oh, oh, Chanyeol would recognize him anywhere, in any form, be it human or spirit, be it god or monster.

It’s Baekhyun, like he’s never seen him, exuding power, growling and snarling, his ears flattened against the side of his head as Sooyeon corners him against the hill, trying to bite at his throat.

He doesn’t know what happened to him – the Baekhyun Chanyeol knows couldn’t control the magic inside him, the Baekhyun he knows didn’t even know he had magic hidden somewhere inside him. And now, his power blooms and flourishes, like flowers in spring, as breathtaking as it’s terrible.

Jimin finally manages to make Chanyeol lose his grip on the closest tree.

“There are Gumiho in these woods, Yeol. We need to leave, now, before they stop fighting and decide to come for us.”

She’s scared, Chanyeol realizes. She can’t see what’s happening. In the eyes of the Samjokgu, magic is light. The clearing is lit up by endless fireworks, bright, like a sunny midday. But for Jimin there are only shadows flitting through the woods, growls and snarls and the smell of the hunt filling the air.

“I know, I can see them.”

“Then you know it’s not safe! Come on, to the shaman’s house.”

“I can’t leave him alone,” he whispers. “He’s fighting for us...”

And he’s going to lose. Baekhyun is strong, stronger than Sooyeon, but there’s no control in him, no rationality. Like a newborn Gumiho, all instinct and rage and hunger, but while Gumiho are awkward in their new human bodies, he’s awkward in this animal body, his movements inaccurate and slow, all bark and no bite. He’s fighting like a boy in a beast’s skin.

“He’s going to lose,” he says, the finality of it sinking in.

“Who the fuck cares if one of them is going to lose? They’re Gumiho, they’re...”

Chanyeol doesn’t hear her finishing the sentence. His head never leaves the fight. He sees Sooyeon
curling on herself, as if too hurt to move, and he hears the silver fox’s triumphant snarl. He sees Baekhyun launching himself at her.

*It’s a trap,* he wants to scream, but it’s too late.

Chanyeol sees, clearly, the moment she stops pretending she’s wounded and sinks her fangs into the soft skin of the silver fox’s belly, again and again, while Baekhyun cries out in pain and fear. Chanyeol sees her throwing him under a tree and slowly walking towards him in her human form. He’s switched too and Chanyeol can barely recognize the boy holding his wound in the snow, with amber eyes and silver hair, so different from his Baekhyun. He looks wild, he looks furious. He looks like a beast in a boy’s skin and a boy in a beast’s skin at the same time.

They exchange some words and Chanyeol can’t hear them, but Baekhyun tries to launch himself at her again, only to be kicked to the ground.

And Chanyeol doesn’t even realize what he’s doing as he slips through Jimin’s fingers, limping down the slope.

“If I can’t have my fox bead,” Sooyeon says, “it’s fine. I’ll take your mother’s. Together with your life.”

“I have it,” he hears himself saying, and Sooyeon looks at him, suddenly realizing he’s still there. The fox bead is in the pocket of his jeans. She can’t have it, he thinks, but she can’t have Baekhyun’s life either.

“I have it,” he repeats, fully aware that he’s handling her victory on a silver platter. With both the halves of her fox bead, what chances do they have to stop her?

Baekhyun growls something that sounds like *stupid* and *I’ll kill you* at the same time, but Chanyeol doesn’t care. He doesn’t care. It’s not his choice to make anymore. They all chose – his grandfather, his grandfather, Sunmi, and now Baekhyun. They had a chance and they made their choices. But this chance, this moment, this choice is all on Chanyeol.

He’s held the fox bead so tightly that his hand is bleeding, sticky with the blood dripping from his palm, down his fingers to the ground. He looks at Sooyeon, ready to pounce on him, and then he looks at the stream flowing between them, a small river of dirty, half frozen water. Before she can stop him, he throws the bead as far as he can. Baekhyun and Sooyeon both watch the pale arch drawn by the small piece of glass as it falls into the water of the small river and is drawn away by the flow.

Sooyeon hesitates, for a moment. She looks at Baekhyun, then at Chanyeol, tired and broken and defenseless. She looks at the rushing stream. Revenge or power, power or revenge. Then she turns into a fox and disappear in the darkness, following the course of the river.

010-1***.****

Take care of him.
[Sent: 16:52, 24.01.2018]

There’s blood on Baekhyun’s chest, under the thin fabric of a shirt Chanyeol swears had been his, at some point in their lives. There’s blood on Baekhyun’s lips, at the center, just under the cupid’s bow, like a macabre touch of lip tint. There’s blood in Baekhyun’s eyes, in the way he growls
when Chanyeol draws close. Fury and fear.

Sooyeon could come back at any moment now, but Chanyeol forgets about her. He forgets about Jimin, about Yoora, about Kim Nari, the shaman of the village, and the people she sent into the woods to save Hong Garyung and her grandchildren.

Chanyeol forgets about the night and the day, about the war, about the pain, about the Gumiho and the Samjokgu. He lays his hand on Baekhyun’s cheek and doesn’t flinch when he growls.

You’re so cold, he wants to say. And then, what happened to you? and why are you here, fighting my wars for me? The last one is a stupid question. Baekhyun has always fought Chanyeol’s wars. And Chanyeol has always fought Baekhyun’s. That’s how it’s always been, how it was always supposed to be.

Baekhyun looks up, but he doesn’t see Chanyeol. He’s in front of him, in his arms, and so far away at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” Chanyeol says, tracing his face with shaky, dirty fingers. “I’m sorry, but I need you to come back to me now. Because I can’t do this alone. I need you, Hyunnie.”

Baekhyun doesn’t answer. Chanyeol is not even sure he can. Magic cascades around him, like water breaking a dam, and Baekhyun is somewhere, at the bottom of the abyss, drowning.

Chanyeol clears his head. He can see Baekhyun’s tails, a nervous tangle of silver. He lays his hand on Baekhyun’s shoulders, slowly, like he would do for a wild animal or a small child, and summons his power.

The world turns black around them, as he excludes everything but magic. He focuses on Baekhyun’s power – pale and translucent, like a rainbow of colors shining only for him – and follows it back to the source, to that prism that turns Baekhyun’s white magic into such a rich kaleidoscope of colors. He wanders, touching the edges of Baekhyun’s soul, feeling his power, focused in the small pink bead in his chest. When Chanyeol touches it, it resounds in the darkness, the song of a gayageum, and Chanyeol sighs when he realizes it’s Sunmi’s power, Sunmi’s fox bead, Sunmi’s voice talking to him through Baekhyun. But Chanyeol doesn’t need Sunmi, not her power. He only needs Baekhyun.

“Come back,” he says. “Come on, you’re stronger than this. You’re the strongest, my Baekhyunnie.”

There’s a war inside Baekhyun. Against the Gumiho, against Sunmi, against himself. Against Chanyeol. (And Chanyeol is the battlefield, the weapon, the enemy and the ally, the spark starting the war and the ruins at the end.)

“Who is the master of this war?” Chanyeol asks, and he feels Baekhyun shake under him, from cold or from rage or from Chanyeol’s closeness. “You are, Baekhyunnie. I think it can only be you.”

He tugs at Baekhyun’s magic, hears it tear under his fingers when he pulls. He could steal it, like he did with Sooyeon – like he did with Sehun, only once, a long time ago – but he simply makes his way around the knot of translucent magic, undoing the tangles one by one, until the cluster unravels and, just like that, Baekhyun’s lips open in a mute cry and he crashes against Chanyeol’s chest, a hug and a shiver and a kiss against his collarbone.

The darkness collapses around them and slowly the contours of the woods become clear again in
Chanyeol’s eyes. The snow emerges from the blackness, yellow under the light of the torches. Some dogs are barking. It’s cold. Baekhyun shakes in his arms, gasping, fighting for air like someone who almost drowned. In some ways, he did.

(Drowning in magic, in his mother’s magic. Sunmi must have given him her fox bead, the power she gave up when she decided to become a human. What was she thinking? Baekhyun is no fox. Baekhyun is no human. Baekhyun is just Baekhyun and all that power almost smothered him to death.)

His hold on Baekhyun’s shoulder tightens.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take you home.”

*Attack him where he is unprepared, appear where you are not expected.*
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War
Garyung doesn’t like Sunmi. She doesn’t like any Gumiho, but among all the Gumiho Gyunsang fought, she dislikes Sunmi the most.

Garyung is twenty-two when she meets Sunmi for the first time. She’s the most promising witch of Jung-maeul, the one chosen to fight together with the Samjokgu. She’s young and powerful and stupid. She grew up with legends of Daji and the Samjokgu, of soulless monsters with blood on their hands and on their lips, of fighting for justice, of putting down the beasts.

Except Sunmi is not a beast.

She’s pretty. No. She’s beautiful. She laughs loudly and unabashedly, hums to herself when she thinks no one else is listening, runs in the woods barefoot and smells like paulownia flowers and poetry. Garyung falls for her like the flowers fall at the end of spring, caught in her charming spell like a rookie. The last thing she sees is Sunmi’s smile. She doesn’t know what happens next, but when she comes to her senses, she’s still alive, Gyunsang is still alive and Sunmi is still, regretfully, alive. The incident leaves them grumpy and wary for weeks. It is the first and the last time a Gumiho manages to charm Garyung, and it was scary and terrifying and horribly liberating and just unfair.

When they meet again, Garyung is thirty-five. She’s older, she’s stronger, she’s a more experienced witch. She’s a mother. Sunmi didn’t change. She could live twenty springs, or thirty, or forty, or two thousand, and she would still look the same. Impossibly pretty, a free spirit, like the wind playing with your hair or the first flower of the year.

They’re chasing a young Gumiho who killed a man in a southern village. He was a gambler and a violent husband, but he didn’t deserve to die.

“And even if he did,” Gyunsang says, his face drawn and angry, “they have no right to play judges and executioners with the lives of people.” And what he really means is that Gumiho should just be cold-blooded killers, soulless monsters, because if they aren’t, if they have morals, if they have scruples and feelings, what does that make the one who kills them? (A cold-blooded killer. A soulless monster.)

Gyunsang chases the young Gumiho through the woods, pushes her right into Garyung’s trap. Garyung’s entrapping spell almost closes on the Gumiho – Garyung has a confused impression of a long, cherry red hair and wide eyes, skin like white celadon – before it shatters like glass against stone. Garyung only has a heartbeat to wonder what went wrong – her spell was perfect, after all – before Sunmi jumps into the middle of the clearing, her eyes shining gold in the colors of the sunset, silver tails catching the last light of the day.

Time seems to stop.

She’s so close, close enough that Garyung can count her lashes, and when she looks at Garyung she’s more fox than human, waiting for her to move, to decide whether it’s time to attack or flee.

Garyung can see Gyunsang only a couple of meters from her. He’s not moving, and when she raises her hands to summon her magic, he shakes his head. Don’t attack her, he seems to say. But
Garyung has her pride too. She ignores him, summons her magic and sees Sunmi’s nostrils flare in indignation, but she doesn’t stop.

Attacking Sunmi is like attacking a mountain. She just doesn’t budge and when she attacks back, Garyung feels the ground crumble beneath her feet. She finds herself on her back, open and vulnerable, and waits for the final blow.

It doesn’t come.

Sunmi doesn’t do anything, even if it could’ve been easy to attack Garyung as she laid defenseless on the ground. She walks towards the center of the clearing, and Garyung and Gyunsang can only watch as Sunmi puts an arm around the young, terrified Gumiho. When she looks at Garyung again, there’s curiosity, maybe a little of amusement for the silly witch who thought she could defeat her. She looks at Gyunsang, too, tilting her head to the side, studying him, before both she and the other Gumiho turn to foxes in a puff of smoke and disappear into the wild.

They don’t see Sunmi again, for many years, but they hear about her, always. She has a pack of her own, in Yeoju.

“They’re pacific,” tells them Eunseok, one of the witches from the capital who sometimes visits Gyunsang to relay the orders of the Council of the Covens.

“Or maybe they’re just good at covering their tracks. Gumiho are killers, after all,” Gyunsang answers. Garyung doesn’t say anything. Two times she has met Sunmi and two times Sunmi has let her live.

The third time she meets Sunmi, Garyung has already seen her fifty-second spring and she’s on her way to becoming old. She’s at home, making soup for Gyunsang as they watch the television. On the evening news, the anchor talks about a series of gruesome murders in Seoul. They know who it is – everyone knows. The witches have already sent at least six different messengers trying to convince the Samjokgu to take her down and Gyunsang has always refused, but Garyung can see the conflict inside him, because Gyunsang has always been about responsibilities and duties. Except Sooyeon, the Queen, is too strong. Too strong, too cruel, too old. Too powerful. They have no chances.

Sunmi calls before she visits. The phone rings, Gyunsang chokes. Garyung wonders about an ambush, but there’s none.

They meet under the sandalwood tree at the center of Jung-maeul, the witch, the Samjokgu and the Gumiho, and the first thing Garyung notices is that Sunmi looks pale and tired. She’s wearing baggy clothes, her hair is a mess. Like this, a couple of meters away, she’s no different from the daughter of a farmer, the impossibly beautiful daughter of a farmer, on her way to the fields for another day of work. Then she looks up and Gyunsang freezes and for a moment Garyung wants to see what he can see. She wants to know the color of Sunmi’s magic, the beauty of it, its heart-shattering loneliness.

But Garyung is just a witch and the only magic she can see is her own. Is she really that pretty? she wants to ask. How much of this – of feeling breathless and lightheaded and on the verge of tears – is because of her magic, the charm of a two thousand years old spirit of the woods, and how much is just because she’s simply beautiful?

She cannot ask. One day, Gyunsang will tell her that Sunmi was just simply beautiful, but it is not that day, so Garyung unsheathes her magic and waits for Sunmi to talk.
“I’m here to make a deal,” she says. No greeting, no explanation as of why she would suddenly come here, looking for her natural enemies, begging them to trust her. She treats them like they’ve always known each other, not like they’ve only met two times and almost killed each other both times.

“We don’t make deals with monsters,” Garyung says.

Sunmi looks at her, and Garyung feels strangely vulnerable and self-conscious under her gaze. Her daughter already had a daughter. The wrinkles around her eyes and lips have deepened. Her bones creak in the winter.

But, for the first time since she met her (for the first time in two thousand years) time seems to have touched Sunmi too. Her face looks thinner, older. Her lips are cracked. Her eyes, though, her eyes didn’t change. They never will.

“I am not a monster,” she says, looking at Garyung. “I am a predator. Aren’t you the same?”

She takes a step closer and Gyunsang steps between the two of them.

“How many Gumiho has he killed?” Sunmi asks, pointing at Gyunsang, though her eyes never leave Garyung’s. (Later, Gyunsang will tell her Sunmi never used her magic, but then Garyung could swear she was being drawn, charmed like she was twenty years old again, a helpless, naive young girl.)

“Why is he allowed to kill to defend his own and we are not allowed to kill to defend ourselves? A Gumiho who doesn’t eat dies. We just want to survive.”

“At our expense.”

“You want to survive at ours, isn’t it the same?”

“I didn’t come here to hear you wax on about morals,” Gyunsang says. “What kind of deal, Sunmi?”

“I am willing to help you take Sooyeon down,” she says.

“In exchange of what?” Gyunsang asks at the same time as Garyung asks, “Why should we believe you?”

They must look amusing to her, because Sunmi smiles again.

“To answer your question,” she says to Gyunsang, “I am going to give up my powers and live the rest of my years with the man I love. If I help you, the only thing I want is to live the life I chose for myself.”

“And how is that fair,” Garyung starts, but Sunmi interrupts with an impatient gesture her before she can continue. She brings her hand to her belly, covered by the baggy salopette, and smiles, old and young at the same time.

“And to answer your question, I need to stop Sooyeon too, before she stops me. You see, I’m pregnant.”

* 

The Samjokgu comes to visit when Baekhyun is eleven years old and winter is just starting to
Jaehwan takes him to the living room, where Sunmi is sitting in a corner, lazily plucking the strings of her gayageum. She played it for hours while she waited for her guest, with Baekhyun silently beating videogame after videogame next to her, with the volume down to zero not to disturb her melody.

“Why are you playing, mom?” he had asked, without raising his eyes from the small screen, and Sunmi didn’t answer, as she didn’t know how to answer. The Samjokgu had called her the day before, to say he was going to pay her a visit, and she had worried, walking restlessly from one room to another, until she found her oldest companion among the instruments she owned – the same one she had been playing when she had met Jaehwan for the first time.

To human eyes, Hong Gyunsang might look old and broken. The fight with Sooyeon eleven years ago left him callous and crippled, brittle like a dead leaf ready to crunch under someone’s shoe, but Sunmi has lived for two thousand years and she’s seen too many Samjokgu come and go to believe that the outer shell really means anything. The only thing that counts is inside, where magic festers and grows, and the Samjokgu has enough magic to take a Gumiho’s life, if he wants. Sunmi is wary of him, more than she’s ever been before. Now, as a human, she has no magic to defend herself or her family.

The Samjokgu limps towards the cushions on the ground and flops down ungracefully, chewing on his tongue as he scans the room with curious eyes. That’s when he notices Baekhyun, and Sunmi bites her bottom lip – she should’ve sent him to his room.

“Hyunnie,” she calls, her voice thick and sweet like honey, the voice she uses to make him do his homework and set the table for dinner. “Mommy needs to talk to her old friend, can you please go to your room?”

Baekhyun nods excitedly, still not looking up from the game in his hands, and walks backwards towards the door without falling. He even manages to bow before he leaves, tiny fingers moving quickly on the small buttons.

Only when the door behind him closes can Sunmi finally breathe.

“He looks like a nice child,” the Samjokgu says, easy, conversational. Two can play this game.

“He’s a little rascal, but I love him very much.”

“Oh, I can believe it. You gave up immortality for him.”

“And I don’t regret it,” she says, curtly. “Now, can you tell me why you’re here?”

Gyunsang chuckles, like old men usually do, all spit and guttural scratches.

“Can’t I just visit an old friend? That’s how you called me, Sunmi.”

“But I lied and we’re not friends. We never were.”

“We weren’t friends, but we once were civil enough to make a deal.”

He looks serious. He looks old. Sunmi knows she’s getting old too. She can see wrinkles on her face that had never been there when she looks at her reflection in the morning. She can feel a weariness in her bones she’s unfamiliar with. But this is what she wanted. To grow old together with Jaehwan. To watch Baekhyun go to school, grow up, make his own family. To live without
regrets, before her time comes. To leave without regrets, when her time comes.

“The boy, what’s his name?” Gyunsang asks.

“Baekhyun,” she replies, before she can stop herself, because she loves him so much. He’s her pride, her joy. She brings pictures of him everywhere and shows them to people when they ask about her son. She’s gross and embarrassing and Baekhyun only pretends to hate her affection, but he loves her so much too. She’s happy.

“Baekhyun, mh?” the Samjokgu says. “I have a grandson, too, same age as him. A little rascal. His name is Chanyeol.”

Sunmi nods politely, waiting to see where he wants to go with this conversation.

“I think he’ll be the next Samjokgu, once I retire,” he says, with a laughter that sounds like coughing. “Our Chanyeollie. He took everything from my Ryung, you know? She’s well, by the way. She sends her kindest regards.”

Oh, Kim Garyung. Or Hong Garyung. That small, amusing woman. Sunmi almost smiles at the thought of her and how easy had always been to rile her up, in the few occasions they had met. They could’ve been friends, in another life, because Sunmi liked her very much and it wasn’t difficult to see how much little Garyung liked her back.

“I hope you can send my kindest regards back,” she says, and then they’re both silent again, for an uncomfortable stretch of time. The Samjokgu sips his tea, Sunmi resists the urge to drag the gayageum onto her knees, not to play, just to soothe her nerves, the wood familiar and comforting under her fingers.

She’s on the verge of telling Gyunsang that it had been such a nice visit – it hadn’t – and that he was free to come back another time to catch up – he wasn’t – when the Samjokgu talks again.

“The boy, Baekhyun,” he says, slowly, carefully pronouncing every syllable of his name. “You know he’s half-Gumiho, right?”

Sunmi’s smile cracks, too tight at the edges. She knows. Of course she knows, he’s her son. She has no power left to see it for herself, but she’s his mother and she knows, she’s always known, even before he was drawn to the mountain. Baekhyun is her son.

“And you know that, according to the regulations of the Council of the Covens, he should be registered as a hybrid?”

Oh, she knows what the Council of the Covens does to registered Gumiho. The registration comes with a tracking spell that would allow the witches of the Council to always know where the Gumiho is, so that they can kill the creature at any given moment. Like a wild animal that needs to be controlled and, eventually, put down. This is not the life she ever wanted for her son.

“I thought we had a deal,” she says through her teeth. She’s still smiling, but somewhere inside her, the Gumiho she has killed is growling. Her fox bead, hidden in a sealed box inside her bedroom, tingles with her rage. “I helped you, you promised I would be able to live my life freely. You promised.”

“I did, and I will not go back on my words. A promise built on magic is something not even the Samjokgu can break, but our deal included you alone. Not your son.”

Sunmi flares up, trying so summon her power and beat down this arrogant little man, but it’s
“Please, Sunmi,” he says, trying to calm her down. “I’m not here to make an enemy out of you. I came to propose you a deal.”

“That’s what you said, but you never said what kind of deal.”

“Move to Seoul.”

It takes her aback. Among all the things he could’ve asked her, she didn’t expect this particular request, so she only blinks, speechless.

“There’s a house next to the one where my daughter is living with her family. Move there with your husband and your kid, that’s all I ask of you.”

“Seoul?” she hisses. “Under the nose of the Council of the Covens? Should I just throw my child to the wolves and watch them tear him apart? Why are you so keen on insulting me today, Gyunsang?”

He flinches when Sunmi says his name like this. She almost killed him once, before he even met Garyung, when he was just a kid who didn’t know how to use his power and she was too beautiful to resist. The rush of seducing the Samjokgu, oh, she would never forget that. She didn’t love him – not like she loves Jaehwan – but she was fond of him enough to let him live.

He almost killed her once, too, when she put Garyung under her charming spell and he was so furious he lashed at her with all his power. He let her go, in the end, because, as dangerous and lethal and beautiful as she was, Sunmi was not evil. She was curious, she was smart and naughty and full of pride, but she had never been evil.

They both let each other live, back then, but now Sunmi feels close enough to smashing the gayageum on his grey head.

“Don’t be silly, woman, no one but me knows he’s part Gumiho and I have no intention of revealing this secret.”

“Then why?”

He looks down, at his intertwined hands.

“Things are changing. Or maybe they have always been different and I have just been too blind all my life to realize. My eyes can see many things, but I have failed to see the truth all these years.”

Sunmi narrows her eyes, unable to understand.

“Sometimes, at night, I think how things could’ve been different if we had been friends instead of enemies. I think of how we managed to defeat Sooyeon, how strong we were together. And I met Kim Minseok, three weeks ago.”

Sunmi pales and takes a mental note to scold Minseok, that little stupid brat who was brave enough to go and meet the Samjokgu.

“He gave me a petition signed by the majority of the Gumiho living in Korea. Made a serious little speech over Gumiho rights and prejudices in the magical community, and how unfair it is that I can hunt fox spirits down, but they don’t have the right defend themselves against the witches, can you believe? Twenty years ago I would’ve killed him on the spot. Two weeks ago I actually listened at
what he had to say and, may lightning strike me, I think he’s almost got a point.”

“He’s always had one hell of a silver tongue, our Minseok, but what does this have to do with me and my family?” sighs Sunmi.

“All the arrows in my life pointed towards the same direction and I’ve always thought it was the only direction, but I don’t want the next Samjokgu to be like me. It took me too much time to realize Gumiho aren’t monster. It’s too late for me, but I want my heir to see it with his own eyes.”

“You want my son, who is half Gumiho, and your grandson, who is going to be the next Samjokgu, to be friends?”

Even to her own ears, she sounds more shocked than angry, and even a little intrigued.

The Samjokgu, a Gumiho’s only natural enemy, nods.

“I want to give our children a chance for a better future.”

It’s stupid and crazy, but Sunmi has always been a little stupid and crazy, from when she was still a fox, a long time ago, and one day she suddenly decided she wanted to be human. And here she is, as stupid and crazy as she was the first day she realized she had a self of her own.

“Do we have a deal?”

* *

Minseok doesn’t get to say goodbye to Sehun.

He’s in Busan when it happens, talking to Yesung. He feels... like a yank – not even a pull, just a tug, short and strong, and then nothing.

It’s not Baekhyun who calls him – something that Minseok could resent him for, if Baekhyun hadn’t been the one who saved Sehun’s life. It’s not Sehun either – and how could he be? He can’t even take his human form anymore. It’s not Sunmi, because Baekhyun didn’t tell her anything either.

When Minseok looks at the screen, at that stupid photo of him and Sehun with fox ears stickers, it’s Seulgi’s name flashing under his eyes, and her profile picture of a bear holding a heart.

“Yo?” he asks, gesturing for Yesung to wait a second.

Minseok is not prepared for the seriousness in Seulgi’s voice. He’s not prepared for the hesitation. He’s not prepared for the news.

“It’s Sehun. He went to the capital. He met the Samjokgu. There was a fight.” There’s a moment of silence and maybe Seulgi is collecting her thoughts as much as he is. “He’s alive. Baekhyun found him in time.”

“The Samjokgu is an eighty years old man who can barely walk, let alone chase Sehun around, Seulgi.”

She hesitates.

“The Samjokgu died yesterday night. There’s a new Samjokgu now. Well, there was a new Samjokgu. We don’t know if he’ll survive.”
“What do you mean?”

“Apparently, Baekhyun pushed him into the street trying to save Sehun and a car ran him over. He’s in surgery right now.”

She’s serious, too serious, and Minseok doesn’t understand. Sehun is alive and the Samjokgu got what he deserved even before he could really hurt one of them, they should be celebrating. But they’re not.

“What’s happening, little bear?” he asks, using the nickname Sunmi always used for Seulgi.

“Hyung... The Samjokgu... He’s Park Chanyeol.”

Minseok doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know if there’s an answer. He’s met Chanyeol, once or twice. He seemed like an okay guy. He looked at Baekhyun like he was his everything. Baekhyun looked at him like he was his everything. *We don’t know if he’ll survive*, Seulgi said.

“How’s Baekhyun?”

She doesn’t answer. Minseok is aware of Yesung’s curious gaze on him and he shakes his head. Yesung’s eyes widen as worry crosses his features.

“Hyung... Sehunnie...”

“What about him? Is he well? I want to talk to him!”

“He can’t talk. I... He’s... The witches apprehended him, but...”

Vertigo. That’s the only thing Minseok can feel right now. He knows how the Council of the Covens works. They have prisons and binding spells. And Sehun broke the law that forbids Gumiho from entering the capital.

“...Lost all his powers,” he can faintly hear Seulgi say.

“What?”

“Did you listen to me at all?”

No, he didn’t. He can barely hear what she’s saying through the high pitched ringing in his head. “What did you say?”

He hears Seulgi take a deep breath. “I said I managed to talk with one of the witches of the Council of the Covens on the phone. When the Samjokgu attacked him, he stole his fox bead. He’s... He can’t turn back to human unless the Samjokgu gives it back. He lost all his powers.”

Minseok has known Sehun since he was a fox spirit barely aware of himself. He watched over him for centuries, saw his powers grow and flourish, from a magical fox to a spirit of the woods, into a Gumiho, the youngest Gumiho in Korea, one thousand and eighteen years in a few months. He witnessed his first transformation into a lanky boy, pretty and tall and with the most delicious pout that ever graced this earth. He stole his first kiss.

Foxes are simple beings. They don’t need love or hate to exist. They know hunger, they know summer and winter, the whisper of the rain, the warmth of a burrow, but feelings like love or hate belong to humans, they must be learned, found, discovered like treasure or curses. Minseok learned the meaning of the word *love* in the centuries he spent trying to get rid of a young fox spirit called
Sehun only to accept, in the end, that he wanted him to stay. He learns the meaning of the word *hate* now, as he realizes Sehun might be gone forever. He hates the Samjokgu, hates the witches, hates humans. He wishes they could all die, the Samjokgu first, but he can’t, he can’t even wish for the Samjokgu’s death, because the Sehun he learned to love might fade away if the Samjokgu doesn’t return his fox bead soon, because Baekhyun would be devastated if Park Chanyeol died.

Years ago, Minseok talked with the Samjokgu, tried to convince him to change things, for the sake of everyone. Everyone – Sunmi, Yesung, even Jieun and Suji – told him it would be a waste of time, but Minseok tried anyway. He thought it worked. Now he knows it didn’t.

*Is this what you wanted?* he thinks. It’s a futile question. Hong Gyunsang is dead and nothing has changed. The new Samjokgu, like every other Samjokgu, is an enemy. Their enemy.

Minseok closes the call with Seulgi and calls Baekhyun. When he doesn’t pick up, Minseok calls again, and again.

When Baekhyun does answer, it’s with the most tired, lifeless voice Minseok has ever heard.

“Hello?” he says, and Minseok wants to growl in his ear, wants to shake him. Baekhyun sounds like he’s going to cry soon, but Minseok doesn’t care about his feelings. He’s allowed not to care about Baekhyun and his hurt feelings for today.

“Where is he?” Minseok asks, short and to the point.

“I don’t know,” Baekhyun says in a tiny, scared voice.

“Baekhyun!”

“There was a commotion. The witches got involved. I… I don’t remember much of what happened afterwards.”

“You let them take him away?”

He can hear Baekhyun shake on the other side. “I don’t know what happened,” Baekhyun repeats, voice breaking. “I just know that suddenly he disappeared, as if time had stopped. And people around us had seen everything, me pushing him, but no one remembered anything.”

Witches and their rotten spells, may all be damned. They probably erased everyone’s memories, but it didn’t completely work on Baekhyun, who’s half Gumiho.

Minseok takes a deep breath. *Calm down,* he tells himself, *you can’t help anyone if you’re panicking.*

“Hyunnie, I need you to listen to me now.”

He can hear Baekhyun sob on the other side, crying so hard he can barely breathe, and normally Minseok would feel something, some kind of sympathy or need to comfort the child he raised for twenty years, but there’s only space for one emotion at a time inside a Gumiho, and right now Minseok is already juggling between blind rage and the bite of worry in his gut. He waits until Baekhyun’s sobs subside.

“The Samjokgu stole something from Sehun. He has to give it back. You have to make him give it back.”

“I don’t want to talk to him, I don’t want to see him ever again,” Baekhyun says, between sobs.
“Sehun will never return if he doesn’t give it back, do you understand me, Baekhyun? He’s your friend, one of your best friends! So I don’t care if it’s difficult, okay? Move your ass, go to the hospital and as soon as that bastard can speak confront him and make him give it back.”

Baekhyun is silent, but Minseok can’t let it go. Not this time.

“Promise me, Baekhyun. Promise you will do everything in your power to help Sehun.”

He doesn’t care what Baekhyun will have to do to convince Chanyeol. He doesn’t care about their relationship at all. Someone needs to take responsibility. Someone will.

The last thing he hears is Baekhyun’s shaky, weak, “I promise, hyung.”

★

The Guardian is younger than Chanyeol expected. Maybe because the only witch he had ever met was his grandmother, Chanyeol expected all witches to be old and kind. The witch he meets is young, around his age, horribly powerful and extremely awkward.

He shuffles next to Chanyeol’s bed, licks his lips before he talks and says the most insensitive thing anyone could have ever said to Chanyeol.

“When they told me to meet the Samjokgu I wasn’t exactly ready for this,” is what he says, taking a long look at Chanyeol’s leg still wrapped in the cast.

Chanyeol hates him almost immediately.

“Well,” he says in what could have been a snarl, hadn’t Chanyeol been so tired and cranky, “I’m sorry I didn’t live up to your expectations.”

“I’m Kim Junmyeon.”

“And I’m tired, you can leave now.”

Junmyeon looks a little taken aback, like he doesn’t really understand what Chanyeol has just said to him.

“What you did the other day was really remarkable,” he says, as if nothing happened. “Although, might I add, a little stupid. You should’ve waited for the Council of the Covens to send you a partner before throwing yourself at the enemy like this. We could’ve avoided the broken leg.”

“Remarkable?”

“Yes, you’ve managed to subdue the Gumiho on your own. I’m impressed. I can’t wait to work with you.”

Chanyeol feels nausea swell at the height of his diaphragm.

“What happened to Baekhyun?” he asks.

Junmyeon blinks. “Who’s Baekhyun?”

Chanyeol blinks back. Baekhyun was there, wasn’t he? Baekhyun, he... He shouted, he punched him. He looked so lost and heartbroken and scared and angry at the same time, so beautiful with his nine tails floating around him...
A pang of pain pierces through Chanyeol’s head, right in between his eyes. He winces, as the colors shake in front of him, fading to a dull grey as his body tries to adjust to his new powers. (His grandfather had warned him this could happen, but he never expected it to happen to him. He didn’t expect a lot of things to happen to him, like Baekhyun being a Gumiho.)

“Was the... Gumiho I fought... the only Gumiho at the scene of the accident?” he asks, as something throbs inside his head. He tries to ignore it, but it’s like his brain is trying to synchronize with every tiny speck of magic in the neighborhood. It’s excruciating.

Junmyeon sends him a worried look. “There was another Gumiho?”

Right, they don’t know. They can’t know, as only Chanyeol could see it. Was it even real or was it a dream he had while in surgery? A side effect of the anesthesia? Baekhyun can’t be a Gumiho. Chanyeol has seen him grow up. He has a mother, a father. He’s not a millenary spirit of the woods. (Is he?)

“Nevermind, I’m... I think I’m still quite confused.” He lets himself fall back against the cushion, wanting only for this Junmyeon person to leave. His magic is so strong it’s annoying.

“What happened to the Gumiho?” He asks suddenly, just as Junmyeon turns to walk towards the door. “Is he... is he alive?”

“Oh, yes, yes, the Gumiho survived, we could say.” At Chanyeol’s raised eyebrow, he continues, “I don’t know what you did, but the prisoner has not taken its human form again since when we found it after your accident. We don’t think it can. You might have taken too much magic from the Gumiho, after all, but it’s not a problem for us. It’s easier to keep it contained, like this.”

Keep it contained...

Somehow, it doesn’t feel fair to talk about the Gumiho like that. Sure, he was in the city grounds, so he was breaking the law, but... He wasn’t really doing anything bad. Chanyeol doesn’t know what came into him. It was like an instinct, to chase, to hunt, to feed on the magic of the Gumiho.

“He was just a boy,” he says, suddenly remembering the way the Gumiho’s nose scrunched as he laughed under his breath, eyes fixed on the comic manhwa in his hands before Chanyeol attacked him.

“He wasn’t just a boy,” Junmyeon says. “Have you forgotten? He’s a Gumiho. A thousand years old, at least. Who knows how many people he’s killed, wearing the face of just a boy.”

Chanyeol sighs. “You might be right.”

He relaxes against the pillow. Even standing on his elbows is difficult.

“How are you holding up?” Junmyeon asks. “Do you have any problems dealing with your new powers?”

“Everything feels a little grey-ish. I have trouble recognizing colors. My grandfather says...” He shuts up, as he remembers his grandfather can’t say anything anymore. Chanyeol even missed the funeral because he was still in surgery after he let a car run over him like an idiot. He shouldn’t have gone after that Gumiho. His whole body hurts, but his head hurts more than everything else and the world in front of him is made of grey shapes, with random flashes of colors.

“Anyway, it should all go away as soon as I adjust to my new powers.”
He blinks a couple of times for good measure and smiles, relieved, as color floods his vision, and he can finally see the washed out robin’s egg blue colors of the walls, the green uniforms of the nurses. Kim Junmyeon is wearing a dark red coat. Chanyeol heaves out a sigh of relief. He can do this.

“Park, you have another visitor. Should I let him in?”

“This is my cue to leave,” Junmyeon says. “We’ll see each other when you feel better.”

Junmyeon leaves the room just as Baekhyun enters, puffy red eyes, messy hair, nine silver tails and everything else.

Chanyeol meets Junmyeon again more than a month later. He limps through the center of the city, into a tall, abandoned building only a couple of streets away from Dongdaemun Culture Park. To normal people walking there, it looks like it’s in the middle of renovations, but no one ever stops to realize it’s been in the middle of renovations for the last fifteen years. Magic always hides in the most unsuspectable places.

Junmyeon opens the door for Chanyeol and welcomes him inside of one of the offices of the Council of the Covens. They’ve talked on the phone, a couple of times. Okay, maybe Junmyeon called enough times to warrant a restraining order, trying to convince Chanyeol to work with him as the Samjokgu, but Chanyeol feels queasy at the mere idea. He even refused to meet him, until today.

The Gumiho – Sehun, Baekhyun had called him Sehun – is still in his fox form, laying on the floor with his eyes closed and his ears flattened against his head. Honestly, he looks miserable. He growls when Junmyeon lets Chanyeol into the cell, tries to bite Chanyeol’s hand when he lays it on his head.

Giving Sehun his powers back is difficult. Chanyeol has, admittedly, no idea of what he’s doing, what he needs to do and how to do it. He should’ve stayed home, he should’ve learnt, he should’ve listened to his grandmother. But he promised Baekhyun. He promised he would help his friend. He promised he wouldn’t be a monster. (He told himself he wouldn’t be the monster, between the two of them.)

When he’s done, when the small still of power is back in Sehun’s little body, he watches magic paint the fox’s fur with the colors of autumn, orange and red, and his nine tails appear, one after another, and a moment later he finds himself staring in the eyes of a very confused, very naked young boy.

“Why would you do that?” Junmyeon asks later, as they go back. “He’s a monster.”

Chanyeol doesn’t answer. He doesn’t know how to answer, without explaining Junmyeon he spent half of his life being in love with the son of one of those monsters.

“Does it have something to do with you not wanting to be the Samjokgu? Do you have any idea how terrible these creatures are? Why would you want to protect one?”

There’s heat in Junmyeon’s voice. One of the witches who talked with Chanyeol after the surgery told him Junmyeon’s grandfather died, killed by one of the last rogue Gumiho in Korea, when he was barely a toddler. His hatred is understandable and Chanyeol could’ve shared it, a few months ago, but things have changed for him.

“What will happen to him now? Will he stay there? In that cell?” he asks, looking at the door

...
Junmyeon locked between them. It’s *kyerim*, holy wood, made specifically to keep a Gumiho trapped inside. Even being inside that room must hurt.

“That depends,” Junmyeon says, sounding too speculative for Chanyeol’s liking.

“On what?”

“On what the Council of the Covens decides. Which depends on what I decide. Which, in turn, depends on what you will decide.”

Chanyeol stills. “What do you mean?”

“Help me. Be the Samjokgu. That Gumiho might get a lighter sentence, with the obligation to stay within the precincts of the city and work for us for, like, fifty years.”

“He won’t be able to go home,” Chanyeol says, slowly.

“For only fifty years, it’s not much. He will live forever. And maybe he’ll learn his lesson and he’ll respect the rules next time.”

“What about... eating? Won’t he die if he doesn’t kill anyone?”

“It will weaken him, but it won’t kill him.”

Junmyeon doesn’t care about the Gumiho, but Chanyeol does. There’s a weight on his chest, and not just because Baekhyun hates him. He feels guilty. And stupid. He feels like the bad guy. And maybe it won’t bring Baekhyun back – he’s afraid it might be too late for that – but he did something wrong and he’s willing to do what he can to make it right again.

“I might accept your proposal,” he says, slowly. “But I have some conditions.”

It hails as Baekhyun comes back to Seoul.

It’s been three years since the last time he set foot inside the city. It feels like a lifetime, like the months he spent in university with Chanyeol were just a dream, a photograph faded away under the sun.

His hair is too short, his back feels too broad, his wrists too thin. He feels... stringy, to say the least, trapped in a body too small for him, as if his soul is taking too much space, too much energy, consuming his body and asking for more.

It started when he was serving at the border. No, it only worsened during his time in the army. It actually started when Chanyeol became the Samjokgu and started looking at Baekhyun like he was a ticking bomb, ready to explode. And isn’t it ridiculous that Chanyeol hated him for it when he was the one who triggered it in the first place?

The train stops and Baekhyun picks up his backpack. He checks his phone for the time and walks faster to get to his bus on time, protecting his head from the sleet with his backpack held over his head.

He’s not really watching where he’s going, just trying to find his way out of the hailstorm and into the station, where he hopes to find an umbrella and a cup of hot mocha somewhere, so he doesn’t see the little kid trying to sneak under his legs, nor the other little kid trying to chase him. He takes
a step back, trying to avoid stomping on the children, and bumps into a giant standee of a famous actress advertising skin care, and then he feels himself falling backwards, dragged down by the heavy backpack, and he closes his eyes, preparing for impact, but...

“I got you.”

Chanyeol’s voice sounds exactly the same, since that day of maybe eight, seven years ago? when he suddenly woke up one morning sounding like he had swallowed a hotline operator. Baekhyun hiccups, startled, and almost sends them both flying down the stairs because Chanyeol wobbles, winces and barely keeps them both still standing.

The hail is still hitting them really hard, like small, nasty pebbles of ice raining on them from above. Chanyeol’s hair is black and he looks at Baekhyun like he’s terrified of him and he wants to kiss him in the middle of the bus station at the same time. Baekhyun doesn’t know how he looks, but probably the same. It’s been three years.

“Long time no see,” he says, feeling stupid and dazed and unable to look away. If he runs now, he might still catch his connection. The bus for Yeoju leaves in six minutes, he might barely make it. A grain of sleet hits him on the nose and he puffs down an ouch, and something shifts in Chanyeol’s eyes as he grabs Baekhyun’s wrist and tugs, gesturing for Baekhyun to follow him inside.

He’s still limping, Baekhyun realizes, as he eyes the crutch warily. Just like Jongdae told him. He looks taller and thinner, or maybe it’s just Baekhyun who feels shorter and broader.

“Are you coming?” Chanyeol asks, and Baekhyun shakes, startled, and he’s following Chanyeol inside before he can really think about it.

They end up sitting at the Dunkin’ Donuts inside the station. Baekhyun orders something warm with caramel, Chanyeol an americano. The table is too small, their knees keep bumping – Chanyeol’s fault – and they’re not really looking at each other. It looks like Chanyeol already ran out of bravado after inviting him here.

“Jongdae told me you’re working at his café,” Baekhyun says in the end. He takes a quick sip of his drink afterwards, to avoid looking at Chanyeol, but it’s too hot and it burns his tongue.

“You say that, as if you weren’t the one who asked him to hire me.”

“Who told you that?”

“Not him, but it was clear. Also, Jongin confirmed.”

Trust Jongin to never mind his fucking business under the excuse of being an instrument of the fate.

“How was the army?” Chanyeol asks. “Did you have fun?”

Baekhyun scoffs. “They almost discharged me early. Apparently, I don’t really deal well with authority. It was annoying both for me and for everyone else. I’m glad it’s over.”

“Did you come back for good?”

This is wrong. There shouldn’t be any lingering trace of hope in Chanyeol’s voice. They shouldn’t even be here, together.
“I... Yes, it’s over for me. I was going home,” Baekhyun says, softly.

“Did your family go back to Yeoju, after all?’”

Baekhyun feels the blush heating up his cheeks. He wonders if Chanyeol looked for him or if he was too angry. After the incident with Sehun, Sunmi took Jaehwan and Baekhyun and they left in a matter of hours. Jaehwan came back later, alone, to clear out the house, but Sunmi refused to go back. Baekhyun didn’t go back either. After Sehun was discharged and sentenced to fifty years of containment in Seoul, Baekhyun simply dropped out of university and joined the army.

“Yes. I was supposed to take the bus ten minutes ago.”

“I’m sorry for keeping you,” Chanyeol says, not sounding sorry at all.

“Thank you for what you did, for Sehun. I know you helped him. It was... nice, I suppose.”

His drink is still fuming when Baekhyun gets up to leave. Chanyeol grabs his wrist, again, keeping him there.

“Wait, I... I still have some of your stuff at home, don’t you want to get it back?”

It sounds like a plea. Baekhyun is not stupid, he already knows what he’s getting into – he knew it since the moment he fell and Chanyeol caught him. (Not today, five years ago, when he dared to kiss Chanyeol. Or even earlier, when he fell into the Han River. Since then, Baekhyun has only fallen and fallen, and Chanyeol wasn’t always there to catch him, but he doesn’t know how to stop.)

“You could ship them to me,” he says meekly, but still follows Chanyeol. They ride the subway together, Chanyeol sitting on the reserved seats and Baekhyun standing in front of him. They chat, mindless conversation to keep their minds full while their heart race.

“How’s the leg?” Baekhyun asks.

“Apparently it healed just fine, but it hurts like a bitch. According to the doctor it’s some kind of psychosomatic shit. The pain is not really there, it’s just in my head.”

*And where else would it be?* Baekhyun wants to ask. Pain only exists in our heads. It’s nothing more than electric stimuli for our brain to interpret, like everything else in the end. The pressure on his chest, like a hand squeezing his lungs, is in his head too. The loneliness, the sadness, the feeling of estrangement... They don’t really exist. They’re there because he wants them to be there. Almost three years and he still suffers at the thought of Park Chanyeol and what could have been.

They turn towards the window as they cross the river, watching the hailstorm break in the North, a thin blade of light falling on the water. Baekhyun wants to apologize, but he can’t bring himself to do it.

He follows Chanyeol home in silence, feeling the hold on his lungs tighten like a vice at every step. He wants to run away, he wants to stay. He never wants to see Chanyeol again. He wants Chanyeol so much it hurts. It’s all in his head, the most terrible of the prisons, the most terrible of the punishments.

Chanyeol types the password in and holds the door open for him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, “everything is a mess.”
As if Baekhyun wasn’t used to Chanyeol’s mess. As if Baekhyun was a normal guest, a simple acquaintance. As if... as if...

Chanyeol pushes him against the door as soon as he closes it and Baekhyun lets himself be pushed and pulled. Chanyeol’s hold is rough, but not strong. His left leg shakes as he lets the crutch fall and roll away with a clicking noise. Baekhyun could easily overpower him like this, push him away, throw him to the ground, kick him until he bleeds, until they’re both bleeding.

He pulls him down, instead, not daring to kiss, just staring into his eyes.

“Baekhyun, I... I’m sorry, okay? I’m fucking sorry and... I didn’t know. I didn’t know you where a -” Stupid Chanyeol, endearing Chanyeol, the Chanyeol Baekhyun fell in love with.

Baekhyun silences him with a finger on his lip.

“Listen to me, Yeollie, Chanyeol. I came, because I missed you, I missed everything about you to the point that I was going crazy inside my own head, okay? Because I love you, and I’ve always loved you and nothing you will ever do will make me stop loving you. But if you talk about what happened again, if you bring up... what we are, what we did, what happened, again, I’ll leave, you understand? I’ll just leave, because I shouldn’t even be here. I should’ve never come here, but I did, so please, please, don’t say anything stupid, just come here and kiss me.”

Just for tonight, to sate this madness, to scratch this itch, just one night, is all Baekhyun is asking. He wants so much more but this is the only thing he can ask of Park Chanyeol, the only thing he can ask of the Samjokgu. The only thing he can ask of himself.

Chanyeol’s kiss closes the deal.
Chapter Four

*I cannot keep still; I am on the edge; the dream comes to taunt me in the morning sun.*
— Sylvia Plath

*Come windless invader*
*I am a carnival of*
*Stars, a poem of blood.*
— Sonia Sanchez

*I don’t know how to stay tender*
*with this much blood in my mouth.*
— Ophelia, Act IV, Scene V

When the Gumiho recovers her powers, something breaks inside Baekhyun.

It’s like the world crackling under the weight of a snow that lasted forever, it’s like the moon, it’s a flower blooming and withering and dying untouched, it’s the mountain singing. Magic flows through Baekhyun, across the hole the Gumiho had opened in his chest, filling the emptiness he felt since she put her hands on him. Magic flows through Baekhyun, past him, around him, howling at the mountain. It sounds like it’s laughing.

Baekhyun raises a hand to his chest and closes his eyes, trying to keep the car from swerving as an entire universe implodes, coiling tighter and tighter inside his chest, before it explodes, from inside to the outside, all around him, blanketing the earth. Suddenly, he feels, he feels, he feels tiny, tinier, the tiniest, as the world deepens and shatters, a giant world, a loud world, a heavy world, ready to crush him under its weight. He only has the time to wonder if this was what Chanyeol felt when he became the Samjokgu before he crashes the car into a tree, only a few meters from the gate of the family property.

The impact rings in his ears, but he barely feels it, his senses – the old and the new ones – all focused on what’s happening behind the hill, where he can see – where he can feel – magic blistering and fire burning. His mother is there. Minseok is there too and the Gumiho, the Gumiho they met in Seoul, she is there too, and Baekhyun can smell her power, the danger she carries around herself, he can almost see it, as if a veil has just been lifted – he can see colors at the end of the spectrum he didn’t know existed, he can see magic for the first time and he is afraid of it.

The car rumbles, once, twice, its lights flickering feebly, before it gives up and dies against the tree. Baekhyun struggles with the seatbelt, almost falling down in his haste to get it off. He crawls out, sinking into the snow – even cold feels different – and he gets up on shaky legs. The smoke is
still rising at North, in a dark, thin column, barely visible against the incoming dawn, black on grey, grey on gray, eerie, ghostly shades. Magic is still rising, not like smoke but like a storm, coming from their house. The sun is rising, red like blood, shredding the darkness of the night. Baekhyun too is awakening, as if roused from a deep slumber.

The gate of the family property is open. They always leave it closed at night, even if Sunmi thinks it’s stupid, because it makes Baekhyun’s dad feel safer. Tonight – today – the gate is open. No, not open. Unhinged, broken and deformed, as if some superhuman power held onto the old wrought-iron, crumpling it in its claws before tearing it away like a piece of paper.

Baekhyun passes the gate and runs past the small traditional houses of their inn, all lined up and white under the snow. All the lights are off. The guests are probably sleeping soundly, blind and deaf to the magic storming around them, but Baekhyun doesn’t think about them. His eyes are fixed on the soft golden glow shining beyond the slope, on the heat coming from the house. (He feels it in his gut, with senses he didn’t know he had, he feels himself reaching for that magic and straining to crawl away from it at the same time.)

In the silence of the heavy snowfall, he can hear every snowflake falling on the ground with a sound of silver bells. He can hear the fire crackling in his courtyard, in his home, only a few meters away. He can hear the laughter of the wind. His chest hurts – it’s been hurting for hours, since he met the Gumiho, and even more after meeting the Samjokgu, but now it’s different. It’s like all the magic he can feel in the air is reverberating through him, shaking something inside him, something that’s twitching and shifting and pushing, restless, inside of him, begging to be let out. (Something other than him and yet something that belongs to him at the same time.)

His legs shake as he half-runs, half-crawls, until he’s on top of the hill, where the ground curves down, a sweet slope, creating the vale where Sunmi was born, two thousand years ago, where she dug her burrow and rested in the shadow of her juniper tree, the laver where she built her house, where she married, where she give birth and where she planted Baekhyun’s tree, where she raised her only son. Her home.

In the East, the red sun is rising against a grey sky, against a white world, against a pillar of spicy, black smoke that tickles Baekhyun’s nose, filling his eyes with tears. The house is burning.

It’s the only thing Baekhyun can see, for a moment. The house of his childhood, the house of his memories, his safe nest, lit up from the inside, with smoke thickening against the windows, darkening the glass and escaping from the smallest crannies. It’s not only fire. The house is burning with magic, thrumming with power.

There was a fight, Baekhyun realizes, and the air is heavy with it. Minseok fought against the Gumiho. And he lost.

He runs down the slope on the white road like he’s done countless times as a child, catching butterflies under the trees surrounding the house, the grass golden and red under the flaming sunset – except now it’s not the flaming sunset but a pale, cold dawn, fighting its way through the smoke and the snow. The air smells of the hum of the fire and the kiss of snow, of fear and blood. The air smells of magic. Baekhyun runs faster than he’s ever run, feeling the pressure in his chest grow with every step, resounding through his bones, like an ancestral fear. Instinct tells him to flee, run away, towards the woods, to hide, to wait. Instinct tell him to fight for his nest. Baekhyun just keeps running.
The entrance is dark and overrun with smoke and scraps of burnt wood chasing the snowflakes. Wind sweeps the courtyard, chasing the smoke away long enough for Baekhyun to clearly see what’s happening, the devastation that fell over the house. There are gashes on the woods and on the ground. The paper walls have disappeared, the glass has shattered. Lacerations everywhere, like wounds on the house of his memories.

Baekhyun can’t see the Gumiho yet, but he can feel her. Her magic shines through the fire, golden and bloody red, sharp and hungry and unforgiving. There’s something wrong with it, he realizes. No matter how powerful it is, it feels broken, crippled. There’s a sense of wrongness emanating from her, like a truncated sentence, like an unfinished melody.

Baekhyun sees his mother first, slumped against the small round table they keep on the courtyard, holding onto its surface to keep upright in the middle of the chaos. She’s leaning forward, as if trying to grasp onto something that is barely out of her reach, and Baekhyun follows the line drawn by her hand until he sees Minseok next, curled on the ground on the other side of the courtyard. He’s coughing, his magic bleeding from the wounds on his chest, on his arms, his tails in a disarray, shaking wildly against the pressure of magic holding him down. Then, the Gumiho emerges from the smoke, right in front of him, fair hair, fair skin, fair golden tails filling the courtyard as she stands taller than Baekhyun remembered her to be, draped in golden circles of magic like a queen. They hiss and seethe as they circle around her like planets around the sun.

She leans down, long golden hair falling like a veil in front of her eyes as she hovers over Minseok, tilting his head up with pale, ghostly fingers, so delicate and gentle, as if she was touching a flower. Minseok looks at her and growls and cries in pain at the same time. He’s shaking in the attempt to move, but he can’t – her magic pins him down, whirring as it crushes him into dirt and ash. Sooyeon laughs at his pitiful attempt, such a joyful, smug laughter, and yet it sounds strangely like a hiss too, like nails on glass and like hollowness. She laughs, and Baekhyun is lost, he doesn’t understand what is happening, until suddenly her nails grow into claws, long and razor sharp and shining against Minseok’s throat, and realization hits him like a freight truck.

It’s an execution.

From: doli
To: seok-hyungnim
i’m coming
resist
just a little longer
i’m bringing help
[Sent: 07:38, 24.01.2018]

It’s funny how a single moment, a single word, a single glance, can change an entire destiny. Jongin would say destiny never changed, that it was already meant to go down like this, if you were able to see the whole picture you’d know, Baekhyun.

But Baekhyun doesn’t want to see the whole picture. He was never that big on the idea of fate, of predestination, to be honest. “What about free will?” he would ask.

He doesn’t think Jongin would have an answer for him. There is a very simple difference between them. Jongin believes in a world where free will and predetermination can exist at the same time. He believes people only have one choice, and they would keep making that choice over any other
choice in all the different universes, because that’s how people are and that’s how destiny works. Jongin believes, or, rather than that, Jongin knows

Baekhyun doesn’t know. He can’t see the whole picture, he doesn’t know what he’s doing, nor what he’s supposed to do. He doesn’t know that, just by being there, just by stepping into this courtyard, he’s saving Minseok’s life. He’ll never know he was always meant to do that, just like Minseok was always meant to step between Sunmi and the Gumiho which led to this situation in the first place. Baekhyun doesn’t know if he’ll survive this dawn. He will, but he doesn’t know that, and he chooses to risk his life anyway, like he would do in ten thousand other universes, because this is who Baekhyun is.

Baekhyun is not fearless, he’s just too brave and too foolish, so he steps into the courtyard and the Gumiho stops right before she can slit Minseok’s throat with her claws.

Sometimes saving someone’s life is not a matter of strength or cleverness, of luck or power. Sometimes all it takes is destiny and the right word from Jongin. Something all it takes is just one more moment.

The Gumiho stops and looks at him, her red eyes trailing his figure at the entrance.

“Look what the morning brought us. Sunmi, my dear, your son came home.”

Sunmi lets out a choked sob the moment she turns and spots her son standing on the entrance of the courtyard. Baekhyun can hear it, but doesn’t look at her. He just takes another step forward. That’s all it takes. Minseok’s life has already been saved, just like that.

The Gumiho stops, confused, her pupils reducing to thin slits of black on red, her ears twitching as she senses an unknown danger. She tilts her head, smelling the air, and before any of them can say or do anything, something else hits her first, a flash of red, barrelling into her left side.

She crashes inside the house, where the fire is burning, in a havoc of golden threads falling down, letting out a metallic scream as her magic collapses and her spell is finally lifted, allowing everyone to breathe freely again. Minseok coughs and rolls over, while a hand curls around Baekhyun’s forearm, helping him get up. He raises his eyes, meeting Seulgi’s face, worried and angry at the same time.

“Take your mother away from here,” she screams, cherry red tails drifting around her like wings as she turns towards Minseok. “Hyung, get up, come on!”

Minseok whines – “Leave me to die!” – and Baekhyun has never felt more relieved to hear his nagging voice before.

Seulgi’s magic flares around her. “Get the fuck up! We need to take her to the woods.”

“Why are you so late?” Minseok says, as he rolls to his feet, shaking his head. His ears twitch and he blinks. “I almost died!”

And he almost did. He almost died. They all almost died. And maybe Minseok is joking, but he’s still shaking. Almost imperceptibly, Seulgi is shaking too. Her hair is red, like cherries in summer. Her tails are red. Her eyes, too, are red. For the first time in his life Baekhyun sees fear in her eyes. And a blind fury, a blistering power surging from within.

“Can you really do that?” he asks. He can already feel the Gumiho getting up with a buzzing of golden wheels. The fire couldn’t have stopped her for long and soon enough she’ll be onto them again. “Can you really face her?”
“I’m not alone,” Seulgi says. “Sungjae is on his way here, Yesung-hyung is in the woods. If it’s the four of us... we can’t defeat her, but maybe we can chase her away.”

She takes a look at the burning house, while Minseok helps Sunmi up. “This place will collapse soon. Take your mom and leave, Hyunnie. I’ve already called 119, someone is coming from the city to rescue you, but we need to take her away from here before she inhales too much smoke.”

Baekhyun nods. This, he thinks, he can do.

Seulgi is not looking at him anymore. Her face scrunches up in a growl, more beast than human at this point. Minseok growls too, as the Gumiho appears in the doorway among the flames in the form of a giant golden fox, so powerful the space bends and burns around her, filaments of gold floating around her body. She growls, ready to pounce on them.

The impact of their clash is deafening, and it’s immediately clear who’s winning as Seulgi begins sliding back, unable to stand her ground against the bigger, more powerful foe, but then Minseok hits the golden fox from her open side and she wails in pain. She struggles to get free as the two red foxes bite every piece of her they can reach. When she finally gets rid of them with a gilded blast, she just takes a long, hateful glance at Sunmi and then at Baekhyun, and for a moment he’s afraid she’ll try to attack them, but she just leaps onto the roof of the burning house and, from there, disappears.

Seulgi gets up and shakes her head, still a little dazed, and immediately dashes after her. Minseok takes a moment longer. He looks at Baekhyun, nodding towards Sunmi. Take care of her, kid, he seems to say.

“You too take care,” Baekhyun murmurs, but Minseok is already gone, chasing the shadows into the dark, gloomy morning. Baekhyun is at his mother’s side in a moment. She’s coughing, just like he is. There’s smoke everywhere. He doesn’t think the house can still be saved, but it doesn’t matter.

He lifts Sunmi up – it’s like holding a paper doll, she feels so light and thin, so human in his hands – and carries her outside, just before the entrance of the courtyard collapses in a crash and a surge of smoke.

As soon as they’re out and he can feel the cool morning air, he lets her down on the snow, kneeling at her side, taking her hands and rubbing her wrists as she catches her breath.

“Come on, mom,” he says, “breathe, breathe, everything is fine. Seulgi will take care of her, it’s fine, we’re all safe.”

Sunmi tries to nods, shaken by coughs, maybe sobs. She’s crying, Baekhyun realizes, or maybe it’s just the smoke.

“I’m sorry,” she says, when she has enough air in her lungs to talk. “It was my fault. I put you all in danger.”

No, she’s wrong. Baekhyun did. They knew each other, that Gumiho and Sunmi, and he was the one he told her he was Sunmi’s son. In some ways, he led her to their home. It’s his fault.

He shakes his head. “It’s over mom, don’t worry. She’s gone. She can’t hurt us anymore.”

“She will,” Sunmi says, her voice faint. “She won’t stop. She only regained half of her powers, if she were to regain the other half I don’t know what she could do... I need to call Garyung, I need to warn them... She’ll go there next. I need...”
She’s breathless, pupils blown up, choking on her own words, and Baekhyun rubs soothing circles on her back. “Later, we need to make sure you’re alright first.”

She looks like she wants to scold him, but in the end she just coughs some more, struggling to keep her consciousness. Baekhyun strips his jacket off and wraps it around her shoulders. Disorientation, respiratory distress. She inhaled too much smoke, but her pulse is stable, albeit faint.

They just need to sit down and wait until the fire department gets there, so he holds her against his chest and looks at the house, their house, slowly go down in whiffs of smoke.

That’s when he sees the fox.

**Hunnie**

what happened
no one is telling me anything im scared
[Sent: 08:01, 24.01.2018]

The fire must have started in the living room, devouring the hand-painted screens first, the collection of instruments Sunmi loved to play – the *gayageum* and the old *janggu* she and Baekhyun played no more than twenty-four hours ago, even if it sounds like an eternity – then the paper doors, the hardwood floors, the heavy beams in the ceiling. Baekhyun holds the jacket against his mouth and runs around the house before he crashes against the window of his parents’ room with his shoulder. The tempered glass shakes at the impact, but holds, and he groans in pain.

The window is searing hot. Inside, Baekhyun can see smoke thickening at the ceiling of the room, darkening the glass and trying to escape from the smallest openings. The structure won’t hold up for long, he realizes, and he launches himself against the window again and again, until the first cracks start to appear.

When the glass finally gives up, Baekhyun rolls inside, landing on the carpet of sharp shards he’s just created. They cut his palms, but the heat hurts more. Tall flames lick at the door, just for a moment, before the door – made of paper and thin wood, disappears, and there’s only fire.

He sends one look at the open window, wondering how long it’ll take the flames to reach the wardrobe, full of the precious, inflamable silk robes Sunmi collected through centuries of life, and from there to the beams. If the beams fall he’s done for, because the window is his only escape route.

The fox is waiting for him next to his mother’s dressing table. It stands in the middle of the flames, supremely unbothered, staring at him. Baekhyun blinks, shakes his head, convinced it’s a mirage, an illusion of smoke, but when he opens his eyes again the fox is still there.

It’s smaller than Baekhyun ever thought it would be. He’s never seen a real fox in his life – not that this fox is real, appearing from nowhere in the middle of a burning house – but he’s seen Minseok, Seulgi and Sehun turn into their animal form multiple times. He’s seen many Gumho and some lesser fox spirits, and they were all big and slender, with majestic tails, soft fur and gleaming eyes. This fox, though, it really is just a fox, tiny, with copper fur, a coarse tail and big orange eyes.

It leans against the dressing table, looking unbelievably corporeal, and looks at Baekhyun, tilting its head to the side the same way Sunmi does when she’s curious and a little dumbfounded. She
rubs against the drawer while staring at Baekhyun and Baekhyun thinks he must have finally gone crazy. This is probably just some side effects of what the Gumiho has done to him the day before, when she pried his heart open – he’s sure it’s her fault if now he can somehow see magic and fox ghosts – but he trusts this fox, for some reason. He’s trusted it since the first moment he laid his eyes on it and decided to follow it inside the burning house, as if lured in by a spell.

The fox points towards the dressing table again and Baekhyun burns his hands against the drawers, opening them one by one. He rummages between the silk scarves and precious hair pins, until he lays his eyes on the side of a big box stuck at the very back of the drawer.

“Is this what we’re looking for?” he asks. Heat licks at his left side. The flames have reached the wardrobe and he doesn’t turn to see it burn like a torch. He has no time. Instead, he pulls, pulls until something gives up and the laquered box comes out. He throws it on the floor and it opens, scattering delicate jewellery everywhere on the floor.

The fox shakes his head, looking supremely offended he would think a bunch of gold would be of any interest to her.

Baekhyun hears a hiss and a crack above his head and he knows – he can hear it, he can smell it, he feels the heat on his skin – that the fire has reached the beams.

He turns, looks at the window, for a moment – he could make it if he runs now – but the fox looks at him with some kind of mute urgency, so he keeps looking inside the drawer, scanning the back with his fingers, touching only scorching heat until they close around something cool – too cool, considering everything else is burning: a small wooden box.

The moment Baekhyun’s hand closes around it, something reverberates inside him, like a wave washing away all the sounds, all the feelings, until it’s only Baekhyun and the little case in his hands, reacting to his touch like it was waiting for him. It pulses against his palm and Baekhyun’s soul tingles in response, like a call and an answer – like spring coming after winter.

He doesn’t feel the heat, but he hears the crack of the lintel breaking under the attack of the fire. The echo of power he felt disappears, outweighed by the crackling of the flames eating at everything that stood in their way. Baekhyun turns to leave, the box still tightly held in his hand, but the moment he gets up, the lintel falls, right in front of him, occluding any path to reach the window. The torrid wave of smoke and ash raised by the collapse hits him in the face and he coughs, feeling the dirty, searing air scratch at his lungs when he breathes.

He turns, looking for a way out, but there’s none. The door is already a gaping hole of flames, while the house crumples and shrivels up, walls darkening and curling on themselves, the ceiling collapsing, and Baekhyun stands there in the middle of that desolation, feeling strangely calm as darkness advances at the corner of his eyes and air evades him. The box, safely held in his hand, is still cool, an anchor in the storm of fire, and Baekhyun holds onto it, focuses on the feeling of safety, of power, emanating from it. He tries not to think he’s going to burn alive in the span of a few minutes.

He can faintly see the walls collapsing at the corner of his eyes, but the fox hops around the flames and toddles towards him, curious but hesitant, nuzzling his leg before turning towards the open door.

“We can’t go there,” Baekhyun whispers, “the fire!”

The fox bites his leg softly, and he feels it – not a ghost, not a ghost. It hurts, and Baekhyun jumps, startled. She catches a flap of his shirt between its teeth and pulls him towards the door. Baekhyun
holds the box against his chest, close to his heart, covers his mouth with his sleeve, trying to breathe through the fabric, and follows the fox through the flaming hole that was once the door of the room.

The flames lap at his ankles, at his wrists, at his face. He feels the smell of burnt hair, he feels the heat – he feels the cold of the box cooling him down. He doesn’t feel any pain.

The fox whines, urging him to follow its steps, to walk faster, through the graveyard of ruins and fire that used to be his home. The corridor looks endless and dark with smoke. Baekhyun holds his breath as he makes his way towards the main door. He walks by his room, now a furnace of burning manhwa. The more he walks towards the entrance, the darker everything becomes, smoke clogging his lungs. And it’s hot, impossibly so. It doesn’t hurt, no, but he feels faint, his head spinning in a struggle to keep his consciousness.

One step, two steps, he focuses on the lazy swinging of the fox’s tail. Three, four, five, the tails swing in front of him, and they grow – the fox grows – and it shines, bright silver, stars and moon – and when it turns to look at Baekhyun it doesn’t look corporeal anymore, but a little like a spirit, a little like a god.

Baekhyun extends a hand, to touch it, to make sure it’s real, to catch it, but the fox disappears in a whiff of smoke between his fingers and, without realizing, he falls, right in front of the main door, a couple of steps from the getting out.

Through the tears, through the curtain of black fumes of the fire, he can see outside. The sun has risen somewhere in the East and the sky is lightening up. Ashes mix with the snow and slowly fall on the courtyard, white and black flakes in the throes of the wind, and behind the smoke – the fox, again, waiting for him, urging him to keep moving. Just a few more steps, Baekhyun thinks, one last effort, but when he tries to get up his legs give up and he falls, coughing and coughing, enveloped in flames that won’t hurt him.

The house shakes in one last effort to keep upright. Baekhyun can feel it crack under the pressure of the fire. He opens his mouth, to shout that he’s here, he’s almost outside, he almost made it, but he coughs again and this time he struggles to breathe.

Shaken, tired and probably intoxicated, he collapses on the ground and the house collapses with him, eaten from the inside, consumed by the fire. In the distance, he can hear the sirens of the firetrucks, he can hear voices, he can hear his mother’s soft humming, in a memory or in a dream. He closes his eyes and everything turns black.

In the darkness, the fox talks to Baekhyun. It doesn’t have a voice, but Baekhyun knows exactly what it wants. It is neither big or small, nor male or female, and it’s both a fox and a Gumiho and it’s none at the same time. It’s just magic, and it talks to Baekhyun and asks him what he wants the most.

“What do you want?” magic asks, but Baekhyun is drowning, in smoke and in doubt, and he can’t answer. Not yet.

He’s not awake when Minseok and Seulgi, bruised and battered but still alive, manage to get him out of the wreckage of the burning house. He wakes up a few hours later inside a spare room at the inn, covered in soot and dirt, not a single burn on his body, a small wooden box held tightly in his hands and a small fox sitting on his stomach.
The hospital just called me
Where are you
[Sent: 08:41, 24.01.2018]

The fox disappears without a sound, almost like it’d never been there, when the door swings open
and Minseok enters the room slowly, looking grumpy and battered.

“Look who finally woke up,” he says, half sardonic and half relieved. There are bruises and
scratches marring his arms and collarbones, rapidly healing bite scars on his neck. He looks worse
for wear. Baekhyun tries to get up to greet him, but he falls back on the bed with a groan and a
whistle trapped in his head. Definitely a bad move. Even breathing hurts.

Minseok frowns and walks towards the bed. “Don’t move, idiot. You’re lucky you’re still alive.
What the hell were you even thinking, jumping inside the fire? You could’ve died!”

Baekhyun would like to answer something snarky, but his throat is too dry for talking. He gestures
towards the jug of water on the dresser and Minseok sighs, pulls him up again and holds him there
as he helps him drink, small sips. The water feels like a balm on his throat.

“You’re alive,” is the first thing Baekhyun says, as soon as he can talk without sounding like his
throat is lined with sandpaper. Minseok looks defeated and scarred, but he is alive. Alive enough to
let out a small half-smile.

“I’ve seen better days, but thankfully I still have a chance to see even better days in the future. If
Seulgi had come just a minute later I would’ve died. We could barely fend her off, even with the
four of us.”

Baekhyun cannot even imagine how strong she must have been. Minseok is no good in a fight, but
Sungjae is smart, Yesung is old and experienced and Seulgi, despite her young age, is one of the
strongest Gumiho in Korea. If the four of them together couldn’t defeat that Gumiho, probably no
one else can. (Let alone that flimsy excuse of a Samjokgu that is his ex-boyfriend.)

“How did we get here?” he asks, trying to lick his lips. He gestures for more water and Minseok
indulges him. It helps disperse the red fog in his mind, just a little.

“Seulgi and I brought you here. We managed to take you out of the house moments before it
collapsed.”

“Is she alright? What about Yesung? Or Sungjae?”

“All fine. Well, a bit bruised, but they’ll live. Yesung left for Busan and Sungjae went home to his
girlfriend, but they’ll come back if we need their help. And we might need their help in the future.”

“Did she really leave?” Baekhyun asks, and there’s no need to specify who she is.

Minseok grimaces. “I don’t think she was that interested in fighting us. She came for something
and she got in, in the end.”

“Her fox bead,” Baekhyun says, under his breath, and Minseok nods, surprised.

“How did you know about that?” he asks, but Baekhyun struggles to pay attention to what he’s
saying. There’s something different and he can’t realize what it is, but it’s pressing at the edges of
his attention, barely there, not close enough for Baekhyun to catch it among all the thoughts coming to him all at once and hissing at him.

The Gumiho came for her fox bead containing her powers, but why would Sunmi have it?

Then, he gasps. “Where’s mom?” he asks suddenly.

Minseok was clearly waiting for that question.

“Hospital,” he says. “She was still in the garden when the firefighters arrived and she was unconscious. Seulgi went with them to check on her, but she hasn’t woken up yet. She inhaled a lot of smoke and she has symptoms of hypothermia, but she’s not in a critical condition. Your father is on his way back too.”

“Dad is coming home?” Baekhyun repeats, suddenly worried. “He knows what happened?”

“He knows that there was a fire and that you might all be homeless. He knows no one got hurt, kinda. But no, he doesn’t know a wild Gumiho attacked our house and tried to kill all of us, we thought it would be better to keep that kind of information from him. Your father is... you know... quite dramatic.”

Baekhyun lets himself lean back against the pillow. He can still barely feel his limbs. Now that his throat isn’t hurting that bad and the scratch in his lungs is fainter, he can realize how tired he is. Beaten, every limb in his body turned to jelly, like he run to the other side of the world and came back. He tries to get up, but with no avail. It hurts when he tries to move.

“Easy, boy,” Minseok says, watching him squirm. “You just survived a near-death experience, stop overworking yourself. To be honest, we should’ve taken you to the hospital too, but we couldn’t... It would’ve been difficult to explain why you don’t have a single burn on your body even though you were inside a burning house. What the hell happened and what were you doing there?”

Baekhyun winces, trying to remember why he was so dumb to get into the house. Someone is shaking the thoughts inside his head and the result is a headache flavored milkshake that sometimes screams.

“Hey,” he asks, suddenly remembering something that feels a lot like a dream. “Did you see a fox when you found me?”

“A fox?”

“Yes! There was… this fox. And it was asking me to take something from the house, that’s why I... It was just a fox, in the beginning, like, a real animal. I mean, I don’t know if it was real, it seemed pretty solid to me, except that it was standing into the fire, but then it turned into a fox spirit. A silver fox. A nine-tailed fox. I thought it could’ve either you or Seulgi, but you’re both red.”

Minseok looks at him funny, as if he can’t actually figure Baekhyun out.

“You’ll never stop surprising me, Byun Baekhyun. You followed a fox into a burning house? You could’ve burned alive, you know?”

“I’m kinda aware... I don’t know why or how I did it,” he tries to explain, and it really doesn’t explain much.

“A silver fox, you said. Silver was Sunmi’s color. And gold was Sooyeon’s,” Minseok murmurs.
“Or that’s what I heard a long time ago.”

“Sooyeon?” Baekhyun asks, faintly remembering the Gumiho of one of the scariest stories Minseok used to tell him when he was a child. “This is not a legend, hyung.”

Minseok shakes his head, his voice dull and ponderous, so unlike him. “No, I’d say it’s not. Since she almost killed us all a few hours ago.”

At his words, Baekhyun’s body seizes in a long shiver. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what you heard. The Gumiho we met yesterday is Sooyeon, The Sooyeon, Queen of the Gumiho and all that jazz.” He looks increasingly frustrated with every word, but Baekhyun shakes his head.

“No, that’s impossible. That’s a fucking legend, hyung. Now what will you tell me? Is Daji waiting to come out of the closet? This doesn’t make any sense.”

“Sooyeon wasn’t a legend. She died a few months before your birth. Or, at least, that’s what everyone thought. Apparently, the Samjokgu didn’t do a good job with her.”

Baekhyun has heard Sooyeon’s story from Minseok and from Yesung and once from Jinyoung and Sehun, but never from his mother. If what Minseok is saying is true and they really met the Sooyeon of the legend, she and Sunmi must have known each other, and, judging by what happened, they didn’t part on the best terms.

“Are you telling me we faced a four thousand years old Gumiho twice yesterday and we survived?”

Minseok nods slowly. “I’m as surprised as you are, but I think we all got lucky. When we met her in Seoul, her powers were still weak and she wasn’t even able to beat me, but we risked a lot yesterday night.”

Baekhyun snorts. What an understatement. “What the hell was she doing at our house?” he asks. “Why did we have her fox bead?”

“And that… I think we need to talk to your mother as soon as she wakes up. But first…” Minseok’s phone beeps and he takes a look at the message before immediately calling someone. “Get up and take a shower, okay? We’re probably going to leave soon.”

Baekhyun nods stiffly and Minseok disappears next door, fidgeting with his phone with a nervous, “Hello?”

His voice fades behind the closed door, but the ring surrounding Baekhyun’s head doesn’t disappear. It just grows tighter and louder, until suddenly it’s like a lid just came off and he can suddenly feel. It’s all the magic of the mountain attacks him at once and he shrivels under its weight. Everything is loud for a few minutes, until his mind gets somehow used to it.

“What did she do to me?” he murmurs. He can feel magic. He can almost touch it. He wonders, briefly, if he would also be able to use that magic now. His fingers itch as he tries to move his numb hand and it takes a moment to unfurl his fist and to remember what happened yesterday, the reason he entered the burning house.

In his spread, charred palm, still lays a small wooden box.
Baekhyun showers quickly, scraping off the last traces of soot and ashes from his skin. The water is set at the coldest temperature, but he barely feels it because his skin is still burning, as if retaining the last memories of the fire even now. He distractedly rubs at his shoulder, stealing a short glance at the box on the sink.

Yesterday night it was throbbing with unsung magic, but today it’s silent. On the other hand, the rest of the world is so loud. If Baekhyun focuses he can feel the low hum of the trees hidden under the snow, and the reverberation of every single snowflake falling on the ground, rippling through reality. And deeper, deeper than all of that, like an underground river, he can feel magic flowing under his feet, an echo of the breath of the earth. For a moment, he can feel everything and nothing at once, then it becomes too much once again and he winces, desyncing before his tired mind explodes.

Minseok left him some clean clothes, a t-shirt and pants obviously too big for him. Baekhyun can’t complain, since his whole wardrobe is now ash and smoke. He puts the clothes on, towels at his damp hair and looks outside, at the falling snow. On the other side of the hill, coming from the house – or what used to be the house – a thin thread of black smoke is still ascending to the sky, like the proof of a sacrifice. The rest of the world is wrapped in white.

“Seulgi messaged me! Your mother woke up,” Minseok calls from the other room. “They said she’s okay and she can receive visits! Are you ready to go?”

“I am,” Baekhyun shouts back, limping towards the entrance. He pockets the wooden box before Minseok can see it and opens the door of the cabinet to look for his shoes.

“Oh, they’re here,” says Minseok, bringing him a pair of sneakers so burnt they’re almost unrecognizable.

“Wow,” Baekhyun nudges one with his foot, surprised it’s not disappearing in ashes. “And here goes my last paycheck, in smoke...”

“Everything you owned is in smoke and there’s a crazy legendary murderer obviously holding a grudge on our household somewhere out there, but you’re still worrying about clothes... Wait, did you go back to the house to look for clothes?”

“Of course I didn’t,” Baekhyun says, in the most pedantic tone he can muster.

“Then what were you thinking?”

The truth is, Baekhyun was not thinking. It was like the whole world had coiled and expanded around him, telling him what to do. It was a bit like when he was a child and his mother had found him barefoot in the snow at the foot of the mountain, creeping into the woods, following the song.
of the wind as if hypnotized. Instincts, Sunmi had said then, and maybe it was instinct that compelled Baekhyun to follow the fox inside the burning house. The idea scares him. He doesn’t know how much of his decisions earlier were really his own.

“I wasn’t exactly thinking,” he admits. “How did I survive, though?”

“You’re Sunmi’s son. Go figure... Maybe your mother will finally have an answer to this question too.”

Maybe she will. In the end, Baekhyun steals a pair of old shoes left by an absent-minded guest and joins Minseok outside.

“Are you sure you can drive?” asks Minseok, but Baekhyun clicks his tongue and takes the driver’s seat. It’s not a long ride, but he’d rather drive without arms than letting Minseok take the wheel. It’s not that he’s a bad driver, but he tends to forget what the street signs mean sometimes. No one has ever fined him – the perks of being a Gumiho – but Baekhyun doesn’t want to risk it today. He’s in a hurry.

“Is that Sehun’s car?” Minseok says as they drive through the pathway leading to the gates. He’s pointing to the Kia Baekhyun drove to Yeoju, still parked on the side of the road, towards the peak of the hill.

“Yes. He was really adamant about me getting here as fast as possible. He literally kicked my ass until I came back home to check on you. He said he had a bad feeling.”

“Of course he had a bad feeling. I can’t believe I told him I love him on the phone. I’ve never told him in one thousand years.” He pretends to grimace, but Baekhyun doesn’t miss the way his expression also softens.

“Why would you do that?” he asks.

“Your friend, Jongin. We should all thank him, because his prophecy really came true, after all.”

Jongin’s prophecies always come true, so it’s not surprising.

“What do you mean?” Baekhyun asks, as they leave the gate behind and start their slow drive towards the city, through the snowy hills.

“He said that, if I had something I wanted to say, I should have done it within the day, or I would never get another chance. It was true, after all. If I hadn’t talked to Sehun, he wouldn’t have been worried... He wouldn’t have called you... Without you here, I wonder how many things would’ve changed. Sooyeon would’ve probably killed me before Seulgi got there. That prophecy saved my life. You saved my life. Although I don’t know whether I should thank you, myself, Sehun, your friend Jongin or just destiny. But I’m alive and I’m grateful.”

They drive in silence for a couple of minutes, sneaking among heavy trucks and lazy cars trudging through the light snow. Minseok is waiting for the question, but Baekhyun has too many of them and he doesn’t know how to start.

“You said you didn’t know her, the Gumiho.” He hesitates. “Sooyeon.”

“I didn’t know who she was when I saw her in Seoul. I mean, I knew about Sooyeon, but I never met her before. Sunmi made sure to keep all her friends away from her, and with a good reason. Like you probably noticed, she was a little insane.” His voice turns serious, low and firm, like Minseok seldom is. “You remember the story, don’t you? Nothing of it was a lie. Sooyeon was...
infamous, among our kind. For centuries, she was the oldest Gumiho of this country, even older than your mother. She was the strongest and the most wicked and vicious. And she was always hungry. For blood or magic, human or Gumiho, it was all the same for her.”

“She killed Gumiho too? For real? But why?” Baekhyun asks, the confusion evident in his voice. He had never believed any of the terrible fairytales of cruel, evil Gumiho killing everyone Minseok used to tell him when he was young. He just thought Minseok was teasing him or trying to teach him a lesson. After all, the purpose of fairytales is to teach lessons to naughty children.

“Our kind is wild, Baekhyun,” Minseok used to say. “We come from the earth, from the law of the stronger, from predators and preys, from life and death. From harsh winters and impossibly sweltering summers. As a fox, I only knew traps, hunger and fear. Things now are changing, but for centuries we were nothing more than hungry animals trying to be more than that. Sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding.”

Baekhyun never believed him, until the monster of a fairytale attacked his family and set fire to his home.

“Sooyeon killed the ones she thought too weak, I’ve heard,” Minseok continues. “That’s why... your mother never let me meet her. Seulgi did, once, and she never forgot about the fear she felt. Now I kind of understand the feeling.”

He looks up, staring at Baekhyun, looking tired and young and old at the same time. “If I had known, I would’ve taken you and run as far as I could. And I would’ve warned your mother. But I didn’t know she was still alive, no one knew. I don’t think Sunmi knew either.”

Sooyeon was defeated, she lost her powers. She almost died. Now that Baekhyun thinks about it, there was, in fact, a hungry look in her eyes, in her claws, in the way she had scavenged through Baekhyun’s chest, looking for the source of his magic.

He slows down as they approach the residential area. The hospital isn’t that far, but the lazy morning traffic slows them down. When they stop at the intersection, he turns towards Minseok, ready to continue his interrogation.

“So, the Samjokgu who killed her was Chanyeol’s grandfather?”

Chanyeol’s name slips out and Baekhyun’s too jittery to realize it. Didn’t she say that she wants her revenge? She said Chanyeol was a fool, just like Baekhyun. She said they would both die.

Baekhyun’s everything hurts. The Gumiho they met in Seoul was alive enough to scrape his soul with her nails, to promise revenge. But not enough to beat Minseok. And yet, the Gumiho who came to Yeoju was strong enough that Minseok and Seulgi together with two others could barely fend her off. And none of this makes sense, because a four thousand years old Gumiho should be way stronger than that, incredibly strong. Unstoppable. Just... how did Chanyeol’s grandfather do it?

Minseok nods. “Yes, it happened before you were born, before Sunmi became a human. They... Of course they knew each other, your mother and Sooyeon. They could have even been friends, if Sooyeon had been able to have friends.”

He looks outside, clearly uncomfortable. For a fox, Minseok is terrible at lying. It’s always been his curse – Baekhyun’s curse too, because he learnt his own kind of clean innocence from Minseok. (Baekhyun doesn’t lie. Baekhyun keeps secrets. That’s different. It must be different.)
“Oh, they could have been great friends,” Baekhyun murmurs, as the hospital finally comes into view. “Since she... you know... set our house on fire. And tried to kill her, you and even me.”

“Oh, now you’re sassing me?”

Minseok shrugs, brows furrowed as he maneuvers to park the car. Focus, he needs to focus. There’s something escaping him, something really important.

“How did she get so strong? She wasn’t that strong when we met her. No wait,” Baekhyun shakes his head. “The real question here is, why isn’t she dead?”

“That’s the question Sunmi will have to answer, I guess,” says Minseok, closing the car. He nods at Baekhyun. “Are you ready?”

Before they can leave, they hear a familiar voice, right behind them.

“I can’t believe I left for three days and someone set the house on fire!”

Baekhyun turns and smiles immediately, feeling like a big weight has just been lifted from his chest.

“Dad! I’m so happy you’re here, you have no idea.”

dad
I’m waiting for you in the parking lot of the hospital
Section C
[Sent: 10:11, 24.01.2018]

It takes Byun Jaehwan a look at his son to scrunch up his nose in the most familiar way and declare they all need breakfast.

“Technically, I don’t”, Minseok tries to argue, but Jaehwan links their arms and resolutely leads the both of them towards the small Lotteria tucked in an alley behind the hospital, orders fried chicken, fried potatoes and fried water.

When Minseok tries to say they’re in a bit of a hurry, Jaehwan glares at him and pushes the food towards him. Minseok takes it without another word, because, despite being a millenary fox spirit, he’s also terribly soft for Sunmi’s husband, almost smitten. Technically, he could snap Jaehwan in half just by batting his eyelashes, but he’s always been too comically intimidated and flustered by the man who managed to seduce his Sunmi-noona to do anything more than nodding and stuttering and doing everything Jaehwan asked him to.

Jaehwan sucks on his fried wing and stares at Minseok and Baekhyun. He’s still in his work suit, a little too tight on his soft belly, too lucid and expensive and out of place both in the small, greasy fast-food store and on him. He looks like he’s been gift-wrapped, such a contrast with his usual farmer clothes and straw hats. Baekhyun would make fun of him if the situation were less dramatic, like he actually did the day he left for his trip to some fair in Jeolla.

“So, I guess no one is going to tell me what happened in the,” he stops, for dramatic effect, “three days I was away from home?”
“It’s a long story?” tries Baekhyun, and his dad sticks a fry inside his mouth.

“I’m not asking for a real answer, Baekhyun, it’s a rhetorical question. And even if I were looking for an answer, you, my son, would be the last person I would go to, since you clearly lack the gift of clarity. I know, since I made you.”

“Mom also made me,” Baekhyun says, low, but his father still catches it.

“Do not talk to me about that despicable woman. Three days, Baekhyun, I left her alone for three days. Were you at home when it happened?”

“Well, no...”

“You see? She can’t be left alone for more than thirty minutes. Sometimes I wonder how she survived on her own for...” He lowers his voice, thankfully, before the entire neighborhood knows his wife is two thousand years old.

Baekhyun, used to his parents’ violent quarrels, finishes his chicken wings and attacks Minseok’s – he doesn’t need to eat anyway. He eats until the food is over and then looks at the menu with pleading eyes until his father buys more. He doesn’t know where this sudden hunger comes from, he wasn’t even aware he was hungry until he saw the food, but now it feels like there’s a bottomless hole in his stomach, and no matter how much he eats he’s always hungry.

“Okay, I think that’s enough. You still look a bit pale though, but maybe it’s the shock.”

Baekhyun nods. “I almost died one too many times yesterday, so it could definitely be the shock.”

“Wow, you survived incredible perils, my son. I’m proud of you.”

They pay and walk back towards the hospital, shrugging in their jackets when the wind blows tiny white snowflakes in their direction. Baekhyun is still hungry, but at least putting something in his stomach helped him find some sort of clarity.

They meet Seulgi in the lobby, frowning at a nurse who’s trying to tell her she needs a drip. She looks too tired to even use her proverbial charm and only smiles in relief when she sees them.

“See? I didn’t run away from one of the wards, I’m here to visit a patient,” she explains, probably for the sixth time.

“They all exchange an alarmed look, not exactly eager to know what a real doctor would have to say about Seulgi’s health, considering this is not even her real body but just a magical projection she uses to interact with humans.

Jaehwan quickly steps between Seulgi and the nurse and flashes her a blinding smile.

“Don’t worry Miss...” he squints to read her tag, “Seo. We appreciate your dedication, but Seulgi really isn’t a patient. She came in to accompany the woman who was caught in a domestic fire a few hours ago.”

The nurse nods, suspicious, steals another worried look at Seulgi and an even more worried one at Baekhyun and Minseok, before giving up. “If you need me I’ll be in that room,” she says.

“Thank you oppa,” Seulgi exclaims, linking arms with him. If Minseok blushes and stutters and
pretends he’s fine, Seulgi never bothered to hide her sympathy for Sunmi’s husband. “My knight in a shining armor.”

He laughs and ruffles her hair and Baekhyun swears he sees a hint of cherry red fox ears under his hand for a moment.

“Control yourself,” he mutters, but Seulgi just looks at him as if he’s out of his mind.

“What?”

“Third floor, first room on the left,” says Jaehwan, snapping his fingers to get Baekhyun to listen to him. “You’ll easily find it.”

“You’re not coming?” he asks, a little confused.

“Oh, no. I think she wants to talk to you only. Also, I’m angry with her. She’s been giving me the ‘you’re just a measly human, be thankful I love your pathetic existence’ angry look for a while before you got here. Let her pout. Minseok and Seulgi and I are going to the Paris Baguette on the other side of the road and we’ll try every kind of bread we find, what do you say?”

Seulgi claps her hand once and smiles, while Minseok wiggles his tails, his suddenly very visible tails, right there, in the middle of the hospital lobby, where everyone could see them. Baekhyun quickly looks around, scanning people’s faces for some sort of reaction, but no one seems to have noticed, no one but him. And it wouldn’t make sense, after all. Even tired, Minseok has always been extremely good at hiding his supernatural nature.

“See you later, Hyunnie,” Seulgi says, her red ears twitching, and Baekhyun feels a bit sick to the stomach when he realizes he can see them because he’s able to see magic now. No one else can see her tails and her ears and her magic, shining faintly in her chest like a flower of red light.

That’s when something attracts his attention. It’s a fox, the small red fox he saw earlier this morning, sitting on the teal floor of the hospital, the only still figure in a room where everyone is running here and there. They stare at each other for a moment, until a cart is dragged in front of it and when it leaves the small red fox has disappeared. This time, a giant silver fox peers at Baekhyun with its amber eyes before turning around and disappearing behind the corner of the stairs. Baekhyun follows the pink hue of its shining tails down the corridor and up the stairs, three stores of stairs, and he doesn’t even realize where the fox is leading him until it suddenly disappears and he finds himself in the middle of an empty corridor that smells too much of antiseptic and silence.

On the door in front of him, the first room on the left, he reads ‘Byun Sunmi’. In his pocket, the small wooden box feels heavier than it really is. He sighs. He knocks.

“Come in, Hyunnie,” comes a muffled voice from the room.

He lets himself in.

kjwae
r u ok?
jongin told me you were involved in a fire
[Sent: 11:36, 24.01.2018]
The room is too white. The walls and the bedding are white. From the wide window that takes up almost the whole wall in front of Baekhyun, white snow falls from a white sky, drowning the room in a ghostly, white light. For a moment, Sunmi’s black hair and red lips are the only stains of color Baekhyun can see in front of his eyes, like minimalistic, accurate brush strokes on a white canvas.

Sunmi is pouting. Of course she’s pouting, thinks Baekhyun, as amusement finds his way on his face, relaxing his tense jaw for the first time since yesterday night. Sunmi’s husband and her son are the only two people who could make this two thousand years old goddess among mortals pout. They’re also the only two people who could calm her down, and Baekhyun finds himself smiling back at her in an instinctive attempt to soothe her anger.

“He didn’t come, didn’t he?” she asks, scooting to make space for Baekhyun.

“He went to PariBa with Seulgi and Minseok. He said he’d let you pout.”

“I don’t pout,” she says, pouting some more. “Come in, close the door. Hurry.”

Stepping into the room feels surreal, like being the only three dimensional figure inside a painting, but then Sunmi is smiling at him and patting the space next to her on the bed, and there’s purple blossoming on the other side of her face, the one that Baekhyun couldn’t see before.

“A concussion,” she says, following the line of his gaze. “And smoke intoxication. They’ll try to keep me here for a couple of days, but I want to leave today. Your father wasn’t happy.”

“I heard about it,” Baekhyun says, softly, his voice barely overpowering the monotone beep-beep of the machines next to the bed. “I think he was trying to hide it, but he seemed very worried.”

She takes his hand. Hers is warm.

“What did you fight about?” Baekhyun asks, reluctant to talk about the fox and the small box, about Sooyeon and about Sunmi and about the Samjokgu. He wishes they could just go home, all of them, he and Sunmi and Jaehwan, and maybe even Minseok and Seulgi, and she could cook her best kimchi stew and everything could be fine. They could pretend they’re a perfect family. It’s impossible, he knows. The house has burned down and they all almost died, one way or another, but there’s comfort in knowing that Sunmi’s first source of stress is and will always be her husband.

“That despicable man,” she says. The pout is back in full force, but there’s also some kind of glow in her voice, like every word is shining from within. She doesn’t know he said the same exact words when talking about her, but Baekhyun does and it makes him smile. “He doesn’t want to use my money to rebuild the house. I proposed and he straight up refused. I have more money than those chaebol from those morning drama Minseok likes so much, but no! He wants to earn the money with his own blood and sweat.”

Oh, the old money debate. They have it at least once a week. Seulgi once told Baekhyun they started having it even before they started going out, when Jaehwan was just a poor farmer and he could barely afford to treat Sunmi to dinner. (Once Sehun said she probably thought he was the dinner and he and Baekhyun fought for weeks because of that, and when Jaehwan found out he just had a good laugh. That’s how he is, Byun Jaehwan, a man of many words and big laughs.)

“Isn’t it cute that he wants to be the one who can provide for you? I think it’s pretty romantic, mom.”

Her expression softens for a moment, before it stiffens again.
“Not when it keeps us from enjoying a comfortable life just so he can prove something to himself. It’s not like he has to. I chose him. Isn’t that enough for him to understand he already has my love and respect?”

Baekhyun lets her ramble, knowing better than to interrupt one of her tirades. For thousands of years, Sunmi was not used to be interrupted.

“I didn’t spend half of an eternity trying to become human only to spend my short human life in poverty. Not after I made sure to prepare for it in advance.”

She’s pouting, again. She’s human, in the wrinkles at the sides of her mouth, in her first gray hairs, in the glasses she started to keep in her purse for when she needed to read the ingredients at the supermarket. She’s so human it hurts.

“Why did you want to be human?” Baekhyun asks. It sounds silly, now that he thinks of it, but he’s never asked this question. “How did it happen?”

She looks at her hand. Her mouth is still pursed and her expression is distant, so far away.

“Why wouldn’t I want to be human? In this short life, I felt more than I’ve ever felt in my two thousand years as a Gumiho. Wanting to be human, it’s not something that just happens. It’s an urge, stronger than life and death, it’s a dividing line. Our entire life existence as Gumiho is defined by this urge, we feel it like hunger and thirst and lack of breath at the same time. We spend one thousand years just trying to understand how human works so we can imitate them better, so we can look more like them. Bending the rules of reality, so we can be them.”

Baekhyun frowns. “I’m not sure I understand.”

“Oh, Baekhyunnie, what are Gumiho if not foxes trying to be human? Everything, every wisdom, every kind of power we might acquire, it’s just a means, never the end. The end is, I think, happiness.”

“But Minseok doesn’t want to be human. Seulgi doesn’t want to be human. Aren’t they still happy, even as Gumiho?”

Sunmi smiles at him, smoothing the lines of the frown on his face. “You’re missing the point, my dear. They already are human. Minseok has a job at the wildlife sanctuary. He can drive, he goes to the cinema, he takes part in the book club at the Community Center. Seulgi is going to university for the sixth time in her long life because she just wants to be with people. She texts with her friends from the EXO group chat all the time. She eats ice cream and she cries for love movies. They both seem human enough to me.”

“Except for when they kill people to survive, you mean.”

Sunmi’s smile falters, but she doesn’t let go.

“And when was the last time either of them killed someone? You might not know, but I do. Years ago. They raised you, Baekhyun, they met my husband, they went to school, they made friends. Yes, they’re still Gumiho, they still have their powers and they don’t want to lose them, but that doesn’t make them monsters.”

“I never said they were.”

“But you don’t think they’re human either. So let me ask you, my son, what defines humanity? Witches have magical powers too, and yet aren’t they still human? The Samjokgu has the instinct
to hunt and kill our kind, and isn’t he human? You too, Hyunnie, are part Gumiho, and aren’t you the most precious human of them all?”

The snow is still falling, slowly, and time seems to have slowed down too. Baekhyun used to try and catch the snowflakes, when he was a tiny boy, but it always melted as soon as it hit his open palm. It’s a little like how he feels right now. The words melt before he can fully grasp them.

“If you didn’t need to give up on your powers to be human, why did you do it?”

“I wanted to grow old with your dad. I wanted to... live, not hide. I wanted to be human, not a Gumiho. I wanted to have a son and to be his mom.”

“Is that why you betrayed Sooyeon?”

The snow keeps falling, turning everything white. Silence, too, is white.

“How did you know?” Sunmi asks, her words like strokes of black on a white canvas.

“I felt it, while I came home. I felt the moment she recovered her powers. When we met her, in Seoul, she was weak and hungry. She killed two boys, did you know? Maybe even more. She even attacked me, looking for my fox bead. And I thought, what kind of Gumiho needs that kind of power? One who doesn’t have any. You kept half of her fox bead, didn’t you? That’s why she came here.” His mother is still looking at him, her mouth open in an expression of soft stupor. “I’m smart enough to collect the dots, mom.”

She closes her mouth and frowns. “You’re smart enough, indeed. After all, you’re my son. Everything you said is correct.” Her eyes turn sad. “Sooyeon... She told me she met you. She also told me she did something to you, on purpose. Somehow, she managed to awaken your powers. She thought it was only fitting, that after I tried so hard to keep magic away from my family, even going to the length of killing her, she would be the one to ruin my son for me.”

Did she ruin him? Baekhyun doesn’t feel ruined. He doesn’t know how he feels. Yesterday he felt magic like a tsunami wave running over him, dragging him for miles against the cliff. Today, magic is a buzz, quietly settled at the edge of his awareness. He could focus on it, if he wanted, but it doesn’t manifest if not in small details – Minseok’s ears, Seulgi’s tails, the little fairies dancing with the snowflakes.

“Is it… permanent?” he asks.

“That isn’t the first time you can perceive magic and it won’t be the last, but any door that is opened can be also closed. Your new powers will subside, if you let them.”

“What did Sooyeon tell you? What did you tell her that made her lash out at you like that?”

“Other than me betraying her all those years ago? Well, she had a very strong opinion on your existence and I had a very strong reply for her. She wasn’t happy to hear it.”

The bruise on the side of her face seems to darken under Baekhyun’s gaze as he thinks how she got it.

“You see, every Gumiho craves, all the time, for things even before we can understand what those things are. We crave blood and we crave flesh, we crave the thrill of the hunt and at the same time we crave love, we crave intimacy, we crave trust and warmth and humanity. We are the makers of our own destiny, we can choose which urge to follow, we make our own way. But Sooyeon... I think she lost the way a long time ago. She was already lost when I first met her and she wasn’t...
less lost yesterday night. Denying her humanity she’s denying her entire existence."

“Aren’t you angry at her?”

“I am. Terribly angry. She almost killed me and Minseok. She almost killed you. I’m angry. And I pity her at the same time. And more than anything I am afraid of her, because Sooyeon is a monster and she won’t stop until she finds what she wants.”

“And what does she want?”

“Everything.”

Revenge, of course. Power, respect. But first...

“Where is the other half of her fox bead, mom?”

Sunmi watches out of the window. Her face is white, just like the snow. She doesn’t answer, but she doesn’t need to answer. Baekhyun is smart. He can connect the dots.

You have reached the voice mailbox of 010_****_****.
Please leave a message after the sound signal.
[Sent:05:28, 24.01.2018]

Baekhyun tries to call Chanyeol. Multiple times.

Chanyeol doesn’t answer.

Of course he doesn’t answer. Chanyeol and his impeccable timing. Chanyeol and his resentment. Chanyeol and his pride.

Baekhyun hates the curse of the Samjokgu every day, for keeping him and Chanyeol apart. Sometimes, though, sometimes he’s glad for it. Without it, he would never had the chance to see how implacable, how utterly inflexible and rigid and stubborn Chanyeol can be when his feelings are hurt. How petty, like an oak refusing to bow to the wind, and there’s a storm coming and he’ll be eradicated and he has to know, but he still won’t answer the phone.

Baekhyun calls again.

“Stupid fucker,” he murmurs. “We need to warn them.”

He thinks of calling Yoora, but then he remembers he deleted her number in his pitiful attempt to get rid of everything that reminded him of Chanyeol. (A noble intent, really, if only he had deleted Chanyeol’s number first.)

“Don’t you have their house number?” he asks, but Sunmi shakes her head.

“It was at home, but it burned down with everything else.”

Baekhyun keeps trying, but Sunmi shakes her head.

“This is not a good sign, Baekhyun. She might already be there, and if she is...”

“It’s not over!” he screams, and a nurse peeks from the door to glare at him. Baekhyun glares back, but Sunmi just asks her to leave, politely.
“Stop making a scene, Baekhyun. If she’s already there, it is over and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“No.” He shakes his head, refusing to entertain this possibility. “There’s still a lot we can do. We need to tell Minseok. If he warns Yesung, he could send someone from his community. If they go there together they might be able to stop her before she...”

“No.”

“But-”

“I said no, Baekhyun. I said no and that’s final. I won’t risk the life of my people to stop her. Not only do I not have any right to do that, but I don’t want to either. I’ve already done my part. I put everything I had on the line in order to stop Sooyeon and it didn’t work. Now we need to think about our own safety first, because she will come back for us if she manages to retrieve her full powers. We’re moving, as soon as these nurses let me go. The house is gone, everything we had is gone. There’s nothing tying us to this place, where she can easily find us.”

“Running away?” Baekhyun’s voice comes out meaner than he wanted it to be. It sounds – not even angry – it sounds poisonous, but he can’t stop it. He can’t stop himself. “Your solution to this mess you created is running away?”

Her nostrils flare and her eyes narrow.

“Oh, now I made this mess alone? There were three of us, twenty-five years ago. And I paid my price today. My home is gone, my family was threatened and hurt. We all risked our lives. Let the Samjokgu deal with this, Baekhyun. Let the witches deal with this. Didn’t we already do enough to try and stop her? It’s the Samjokgu’s responsibility now, not ours, let alone yours.”

“But the Samjokgu is Chanyeol!” Baekhyun screams, and this time he doesn’t care about keeping his voice down. “Don’t you have a single shred of shame? You know him! You fed him! You taught him how to play guitar, you can’t just...”

“Yes, I did, and I love Chanyeol, but he’s not my son. You are my son, and you will do as I say!”

When Baekhyun looks at her, he’s not looking at his mother, with her tired smile and mood swings violent and capricious like the rain in April, he’s not looking at the beautiful woman who taught him how to play the gayageum and the janggu. Now he’s looking at Sunmi of Yeoju, a two thousand years old Gumiho, who’s not used to be interrupted, nor contradicted.

But Baekhyun is none other than Sunmi’s son, the only one who can make her laugh, the only one who can make her this angry.

“You’re a coward,” he says, and what hurts her are not the words, but the finality of them, the way he believes in what he’s saying the way he once believed in her. She would’ve slapped him, had she been able to. He can feel her vitals flare, both through the machine monitoring her pulse and the magic in the air. She’s human now, she’s forsaken her powers, but magic still clings to her frail human bones, to her soft human skin, like fire on silver wheat. For a moment, Baekhyun can see the Gumiho she must have been, silent, careful and trustworthy. Oh, Sooyeon might have been the queen, but all the Gumiho of Korea chose Sunmi as their leader. And Sunmi protected them. She was the one who dethroned the despotic queen, in the end, and she did it for them. (And for him.)

“I protected my people for thousand of years and we survived,” she says, eyes storming, red lips thin with anger. “We all survived. I betrayed my friend, my sister, I put my life on the line to
protect the life of the people I loved, and what did you do, Baekhyun? You have no right to judge me!

“I left Chanyeol because I’m your son,” he spits back, wishing every word burned her as much as it burns him. “I did it for you! For us. And I loved him. He made me happy. I don’t think I’ve ever been able to be happy since I did it. But you told me it was the best for everyone, for me and for him both, and I did it.”

He did it and he made both of them miserable. But he did it anyway, because he’s always been raised to trust his mother blindly and do whatever she tells him to do, believe whatever she says. I’m a Gumiho? Okay. Let’s move to Seoul? Okay. Befriend the neighbors’ kid? Consider it done, mom. Forget about Park Chanyeol if you can? Well, there was an if, wasn’t it? Baekhyun couldn’t, but he tried. He’s always tried his hardest for his mother, but this... this is not something he can do, not even for her.

“She will kill him,” he says, his voice shaking. She’s already told him, when they met in Seoul, she said she will kill him. “And I can’t let that happen. I will not stay here while Chanyeol dies because you like the perfect world you built too much to care about what I want. And I want him! I wanted him before, I still want him. And I’m ready to fight this battle alone, if I need to.”

He waits for her to say something, anything. It’s not like he needs her approval – he’s already taken his decision anyway – he just needs some sort of acknowledgment before he leaves.

Sunmi just sighs and crosses her arms.

“Go, then. Go and get yourself killed.”

“Maybe I will,” he says, slamming the door on his way out. He sends a message to Chanyeol as he walks down the stairs, already calculating how long would it take to get to Andong by car. He jumps the last three steps and dashes through the door towards the parking lot when suddenly someone grabs him from the collar of his shirt, yanking back before he can enter the car.

He turns and his eyes meet Seulgi’s.

“Oh, you didn’t think she would let you go so easily, did you?”

Well, fuck.

From: seok-hyungnim
To: doli
im going to take care of it
c u later
♥
[Sent: 12:52, 24.01.2018]

“Yes, in a few hours I believe. You too take care.”

Seulgi’s voice comes muffled by the door, the words almost too soft to be perceived. She’s talking to Yesung in Busan and before him she talked to Suji and Jieun, to Baekhyun’s mother and to Minseok. They’re deciding what to do, but Baekhyun is ready to bet none of their plans include actually doing something to stop Sooyeon. What a bunch of freaking cowards.
He stops eavesdropping and lays his back against the door, letting himself slide down on the warm floor. On the wall, the smiley faces of Baekhee and Chanyeon, Seulgi’s favorite singer and rapper from a popular girl group, beam at him, as if they’re making fun of his situation.

He would’ve thrown himself out of the window, but Seulgi locked him in her room, where there’s no balcony and no emergency stairs in sight. The six stories of jump into the void to land on harsh concrete are too much even for Baekhyun’s despair.

If only it’d been Minseok. It wouldn’t have been easy, with Minseok. It’s not like Seulgi doesn’t love Baekhyun, but Minseok is too soft, too weak for Baekhyun to keep telling him no after the first six or seven times. Seulgi didn’t let him go past the third. She brought him home, locked him in her room and told him to be quiet and wait there.

“Minseok is going to Yeoju to retrieve the last few things and close the inn,” she said, as she drove him to her place. “As soon as your mom gets discarded we will all leave for Busan, we’ll stay at Yesung’s place for a while.”

It’s not like he hasn’t tried to get away. In the beginning, he screamed and punched the door and threatened to call the police.

“Let me go. You can’t keep me here.”

“Not only I can, Baekhyunnie, but I will. Try calling for help and I’ll charm every human who comes my way to believe they never heard anything. Try running away and I’ll hunt you down and bring you back here, so spare us both the hassle. You can keep your phone, though,” she had said, her gaze softening. “Keep it and call Chanyeol. I hope he answers. I liked him.”

She liked him, sure, like she could’ve liked a pet she met only once or a colorful flower she saw on the street on her way home, but she doesn’t care about Chanyeol, not like Baekhyun does. Seulgi only cares about her family and she would do anything to protect it. In that, she learnt from Sunmi.

Baekhyun closes his eyes and messages Chanyeol again. He receives no answer, of course. It hasn’t even been read. He messages Sehun, even though there’s nothing the boy can do. First, he’s in Seoul, second, Seulgi would kill him in zero point five seconds, and third, Sehun would do what Sunmi said. With Sooyeon’s exception, there’s not a Gumiho in Korea who wouldn’t do what Sunmi says.

Baekhyun lets out a frustrated growl and kicks the wall. Seulgi scolds him from the other room.

Somewhere on the other side of the country, Chanyeol might be dying. Maybe he’s even already dead, and Baekhyun is stuck in this room, unable to do anything. No, he reasons with himself, Chanyeol cannot be dead. Baekhyun would’ve known it. He doesn’t know how or why would he be supposed to know stuff about Chanyeol, but he would. If he only could believe one thing out of all the things happening in the world, he’d believe in the bond between him and Chanyeol. He’d know.

But that doesn’t change things. Even if it didn’t happen yet, it could happen anytime soon, and Baekhyun has no freaking way to stop it.

He bangs his head against the door in a fit of rage and closes his eyes. Somewhere around the house, Seulgi had turned the TV on. They’re talking about their house on the local station. Fire breaks in a mountain hostel around Yeoju. No victims. Probably a wiring. The entire area has been evacuated.
The words get farther and farther away, lost in a daze. In the darkness of his closed eyelids, Baekhyun can feel magic wrapped all around the city. Seulgi’s power flares in the other room and not far away he can feel Minseok and the dim lights of... maybe a couple of witches?

His mother said it was temporary. He doesn’t know if he wants it to be. When he was younger, he entertained the idea of inheriting just a bit of her magic and now that he has it he doesn’t know if it’s a good or a bad thing. It hurts when he uses it, like it’s scratching at his chest, eating him from the inside and leaving him jaded and worn out, fraying at the edges, but it also makes him feel safe. Losing this, he thinks, it might be like going blind. How can he go back knowing there’s this entire world around him?

He can’t control it well yet. The only thing he knows is that he’s been drifting in and out of a vortex of magic since yesterday night, feeling it so vividly that sometimes it seems like magic is really touching him, pulling at his hand, licking at his wrist... Licking?

He opens his eyes, startled, and sees the small fox.

It’s a fox again, not a Gumiho. A little dirty, with traces of dry leaves stuck in the matted fur of her belly and mud on its feet. It’s looking at Baekhyun, almost with a daring expression.

“Oh, it’s you,” he says, because what else is he supposed to say to a fox who’s been following him since yesterday night? He leans forward to pet it with his hand, trying to establish a contact, but the fox slips away from his palm, reluctant to be touched. It seems real. It felt real yesterday night too – it touched him, it led him to safety – and this morning too, but Baekhyun knows it’s not. It can’t be. No one in the hospital could see it, didn’t they?

“That doesn’t mean it’s not real,” Baekhyun says, mostly to himself. “Magic doesn’t stop existing just because people can’t see it.”

The fox’s ears twitch in some kind of agreement, or maybe it wasn’t listening to his rambling to begin with, because it scampers to the other side of the room, nosing at Seulgi’s posters.

“Did you come here to help me or you’re just making fun of me?” Baekhyun asks, in a fit of frustration, and that’s when the fox closes the distance between them and jumps on his chest. He tries to yelp, but the weight on his chest chokes the sound and he just lets out a strangled exhale and slams his head back on the door.

Seulgi tells him to stop, but he’s not listening to her. He opens his eyes, wincing, and finds the fox right in front of his face, close enough that its fur is tickling Baekhyun’s cheeks.

It smells like the wood, like the mountain, wet earth and musk and mist. It stares into Baekhyun’s eyes for a long moment – its eyes are orange like the sun shining through autumn leaves and so, so deep, and it doesn’t feel like he’s staring at an animal, it feels like the fox can understand him.

He doesn’t know for how long he stares at the fox, not even daring to breathe, too afraid to break the spell. The fox just stares back at him.

Then, suddenly, Seulgi lets something fall on the floor – maybe a bowl or a glass – and it shatters and she curses and the fox jumps on the floor again.

“Wow, that surprised me too. Did you find what you were looking for?” he asks. “Were you even looking for something? Can you understand me?”

The fox tilts its head to the side, like Sunmi always does when she doesn’t understand something – like Baekhyun, too, does, a habit he took after her.
Then, the fox walks towards him, noses at his shirt and claws at the pocket on his pants.

“Here, you say?” Baekhyun follows its whine and rummages inside the loose pocket until his fingers close on the small wooden box. Oh, that’s where it was. He was so focused on trying to save Chanyeol and then trying to convince Seulgi to let him go save Chanyeol that he had forgotten about the box, even after almost losing his life to retrieve it. He takes it out and the fox sits in front of him and stares at it, as if waiting.

“Is this what you wanted? I guess it’s important since you risked my life to get it.”

The fox looks at him, waits for him to understand, scratches its neck while it’s at it.

“Will you tell me how to save Chanyeol if I give you this?” Baekhyun asks, as he lays the box on the floor between them. The fox’s eyes narrow and it pushes the box back towards Baekhyun.

“Is this for me? You led me to it because you wanted me to have it?”

The fox can’t answer, but what else should Baekhyun think?

He takes the box in his hands again and tries to open it, even if he knows he won’t be able to. He already tried, this morning before and after he showered, as he and Minseok waited for any news from the hospital. He tried and it didn’t work. It’s just a stupid box, like a mini sized coffer. There is no lock, no key needed, Baekhyun should be able to break it with just his fingers, but he can’t.

“You scammed me,” he says to the fox. “You know I can’t open this!”

Just as he says that, he raises his eyes and realizes the fox is no longer there. It disappeared while he played with the box. He only has a moment – just the time to wonder what had just happened and whether he’s finally going crazy – that the door opens again and Baekhyun, who was leaning into it, falls back against Seulgi’s legs.

He winces.

“Get up kid,” she says. “There’s someone who wants to talk to you.”

She moves aside, revealing Jaehyun’s fidgety figure.

“Hi, dad,” he says, still upside down.

Jaehwan gives him a shaky wave. “Hi, son. Is everything alright down there?”

“Maybe. Did you come to save me from this evil Gumiho?”

Jaehwan snorts and opens the door to enter the room.

From: seok-hyungnim
To: doli
we might have a problem
its not here
[Sent: 13:46, 24.01.2018]

“You have to get me out,” Baekhyun says, as soon as the door closes.

Jaehwan doesn’t answer. He just steps inside the room and takes a look around, silently scanning
Seulgi’s EXO posters until his face opens into a wide, relaxed smile.

“Look at that,” he says. “Baekhee is also my favorite!”

“Dad, it’s important! I can’t waste my time here!”

“I am aware, Baekhyun,” he replies, turning towards him and flopping down onto Seulgi’s carefully made bed – she probably doesn’t even use it, since Gumiho don’t really need to sleep. “Just for future reference, I think your mother is an idiot. If this is the kind of wisdom you acquire in two thousand years of life then I really don’t want to grow old. Let me die young and foolish.”

“Then tell her! She will listen if it’s you!”

“Did she listen to you?” he asks. Baekhyun’s silence is more than eloquent. “Well, then you already know the answer to your question. I already tried. Not now, we already had this argument before you were even born. You think I didn’t tell her backstabbing the most powerful magical creature in the country was not going to be a good idea in the long run? Of course I did. Did she listen? Of course she didn’t. Think about this moment again the next time she says you got all the dumb stubbornness from me, because it was a fifty fifty, maybe even a seventy thirty, with the seventy being hers.”

He takes a big, frustrated breath.

“I tried, Baekhyun, but your mother is scared out of her wits because she doesn’t want to lose you. And even though I don’t agree with many things she did in the past or many things she’s doing in the present, and I probably won’t agree with her many times in the future, I agree with her this time. There’s nothing more important to us than our son.”

“So you’ll let Chanyeol and his family die without even trying to help them?” Baekhyun asks, trying to bite back his tears. For a moment, he’s a child again, throwing a tantrum because he doesn’t want to move to Seoul and leave Yeoju.

It’s funny because, when his mother decided to move back to Yeoju again, he didn’t say anything, and yet the things he was leaving behind were far more important.

His father frowns.

“Why are you assuming no one cares about your best friend? Do you really think we’re that heartless?”

“She said-”

“She said she can’t let you go and that she won’t waste human lives in a suicide mission, but Baekhyun, the other half of her fox bead is in the Samjokgu’s house and for thousand of years no Gumiho has ever managed to get inside that house. Your mother tried too and failed. We still have time.”

“Sooyeon can still go after Chanyeol,” he says, gritting his teeth.

“And we’ll warn him. We might even be able to help him. Minseok went back to the house to retrieve your mother’s fox bead. With your mother’s power, Seulgi might be able to face Sooyeon. Yesung is willing to send help from Busan too, but we must keep you and Sunmi safe, do you understand?”

Baekhyun opens his mouth, closes it again.
“Why didn’t she say anything? She just... she could’ve told me!” he says, his eyes breaking while tears well in his eyes. He’s still trapped, restless, he still feels like it’s not enough – it’ll never be enough, they should be on the other side of the world helping Chanyeol, why are they still talking – but everything is drowned out by relief. His mother is not planning on leaving Chanyeol alone. Maybe they can still help him.

His father pats his head, a little awkwardly. “Oh, Baekhyunnie, even if she had told you, would it have been enough?”

No, it wouldn’t have, but it would’ve been... better. He wouldn’t have called her a coward. He wouldn’t have fought with her. They never fought, not even when he was a child. Sometimes she scolded him, or she got Minseok – or even worse, Seulgi – to do it for her, when he was a brat. But they never got into big arguments. She let him do anything he wanted, mostly because she trusted him enough to know he wouldn’t do anything dumb. She was a good mom and he’d always been a good son. He was her son, after all.

“Your mother is too proud for her own good,” Jaehwan says, shaking his head. “She doesn’t want you to be unhappy, Baekhyun. She just wants you to be safe. She’s trying to do everything she can just to keep you safe. And maybe it’s frustrating that she doesn’t care if you end up hating her, but you can only hate her if you stay alive.”

“Do you agree with her? Do you think she’s right?” Baekhyun asks.

His father shakes his head. “You know, when I met her... I knew immediately she was the one. And then I found out she was a Gumiho and she still was the one. She could’ve killed me, but I didn’t care. I wouldn’t have cared, even if she had kept her powers, even if she had lived longer than me or if she had left me behind. I wake up every day next to the most beautiful woman in the world and I think she gave up immortality just to live her life with us, but I would have given up my mortality for her too. And, it’s fine, you’re Sunmi’s son, you’ve always been Sunmi’s son, but you’re also my son, Baekhyun. And my son doesn’t give up.”

Baekhyun would like to have his father’s confidence. He would like to have his mother’s strength.

“I don’t want to give up, I just don’t know what to do.”

“For now, the only thing you can do is come with us to Busan. Seulgi will take care of the rest. Your mother is smart, Baekhyun. You don’t live two thousand years without being smart like her. She renounced her powers, before you were born, but she held onto half of her fox bead, just in case something like this was to happen. Sooyeon has only recovered half of her powers too, we can still stop her.”

“No, we can’t,” Seulgi says, suddenly entering the room unannounced. An emotion Baekhyun struggles to recognize flashes on her pretty face. It could be fear or anger or a mixture of both. Her eyes stop on Baekhyun and – yes, definitely anger more than fear.

“Where is it?” she asks.

“What?” Baekhyun says, when she glares at him in gelid fury.

“Sunmi’s fox bead,” she said, to a confused Jaehwan. “Minseok just called. He searched the ashes of the entire house. It should’ve been in her cabinet but there’s nothing there. Where is it, Baekhyun?”

“How would he know?” Jaehwan asks.
Baekhyun is faster at connecting the dots than Seulgi is at talking.

“Because he went back to the house, yesterday,” she says, eyes narrowed, a hint of tails showing at her back. “We found him on the porch while everything was burning. What did you take, Baekhyun?”

He tries to shield his thoughts, but he’s not fast enough. His eyes instinctively go to the small wooden box, still laying on the floor since the last time he tried to open it and Seulgi follows his gaze until she sees it too.

She snatches it in a moment, before Baekhyun can stop her.

“What the hell were you thinking?” she says. “Do you have any idea how powerful, how important this is for your mother?”

“What the hell were you thinking?” Jaehwan echoes her. “Entering a burning house? For what? What possessed you to do something this dumb? You could’ve died-”

That’s true. But he didn’t. For some kind of miracle, following a silver fox in the darkness, he got out of the fire alive and unscathed.

“Mom put her magic inside that box, am I right? That’s how I got out alive... Her magic helped me. The silver fox I saw.”

Seulgi stops and looks at him like he’s a puzzle to be solved. It’s the same way Minseok looked at him, this morning. It’s full of wonder.

“A silver fox led you to the box?” she says, her voice soft and careful. She exchange a worried glance with Jaehwan.

“Is it bad?”

“Not bad, just... it doesn’t make any sense. Can you do something for me?” she asks, for once forgoing the honorifics she always uses with Jaehwan, keeping up her pretense at being a human girl younger than him. “Can you open it?”

He takes the box in his hands and for a moment Baekhyun closes his eyes, expecting it to tingle, to resonate within his soul like it happened yesterday. It doesn’t, but when Jaehwan takes it in his hands, magic blooms on the wood, covering the box in magical runes.

“It’s a magical protection,” explains Seulgi. “I guess you couldn’t open it on your own, am I right? No Gumiho could’ve opened it and you’re still part Gumiho. Only a human can.”

The runes glow under Jaehwan’s fingers when he finds the mechanism and pushes until it clicks. The box falls open without a sound in front of their hungry eyes.

Inside, it’s completely empty.

That’s when Baekhyun sees the fox again. It’s a Gumiho this time, big and silver and looking at him with deep, amber eyes. Then, the entire world capsizes.

From: seok-hyungnim
To: doli
i think i know what happend
dont open it
keep it away from baekhyun
he must not touch the gem
[Sent: 13:46, 24.01.2018]

The night is young. The world around him is young too, Baekhyun realizes, untainted. Before glass and concrete, before guns and swords, a world of greens and blues, of dark woods, of sweltering vines and deep roots, thick mist and fire and gods and magic. A world where a wish can make a difference.

In this world, under a juniper tree, Baekhyun meets a fox. It is neither big nor small, neither male nor female, and it’s not a fox and not a Gumiho, but it’s all these things and none at the same time. It’s just magic, and it talks to Baekhyun’s heart without a voice and asks him what he wants the most.

“Does it really matter?” he asks back.

“It is the only thing that matters,” answers the fox – answers magic. “What do you want?”

What does Baekhyun really want to find, at the end of the fall?

“Everyone wants something,” magic explains, circling around Baekhyun, shapeshifting. It becomes a fox, a thunder, a dragon, a moon rabbit and a breath of wind, and then a pond where Baekhyun can only see his reflection. When he looks at the mirror of water, he sees himself, with golden eyes and silver tails, another Baekhyun, a powerful Baekhyun, simpering back at him from the bottom of the pond, so similar to the glimpse he saw in the mirror of Chanyeol’s bathroom yesterday night.

“Everyone,” says the reflection with Baekhyun’s voice, even though Baekhyun has never opened his mouth, “craves power. Sooyeon wanted it to be feared. Sunmi wanted it to be loved. Gods want to become more like humans and humans just want to be more like gods.”

“I’m neither a god nor a human.”

“Then what are you?”

“I’m Baekhyun,” he says, because he’s tired of being Sunmi’s son. “Just Baekhyun.”

Magic nods and it storms around the pond, water overflowing and lapping at Baekhyun’s ankles. It’s raining, he realizes. The world is crying. The water ripples with every tear and the reverberations shine and sing, echoing among the trees, white voices.

“And what do you want, just-Baekhyun?” whispers the water, clinging at his skin with every wave, pulling at his ankles with cold fingers.

Baekhyun wants many things. He wants to apologize to Chanyeol, for leaving, for coming back, for leaving again. He wants to finish university. He wants to pick up playing music again. He wants Sehun to come home. He wants to go home, to Chanyeol – Chanyeol, who might die today.

“To save Chanyeol,” he says, “is the only thing I want.”

And magic hums, magic breathes, magic considers his words, as it keeps raining and the world sinks underwater. It’s cold. Baekhyun shivers and the entire world shivers with him.
“Are you strong enough to bear the power you chase, just-Baekhyun?” magic asks.

“I’m just a boy,” he answers, but magic doesn’t know what boy means. Magic doesn’t know words, but concepts. Power, strong and weak, gain and loss, pain, happiness. Life. Death. Victory and defeat. Magic sings and burns, flashes in front of his eyes, bright silver, like the moon, with a hint of pink, like cherry blossoms falling with the rain. It floats in front of Baekhyun, luminous and tiny, like a pearl – like a fox bead.

“You’re my mother’s magic,” he murmurs, and magic hums in agreement as it coils around his neck like a mortal caress.

“I am magic and I am no one’s, but everyone who can master me belongs to me. You could be mine, if you want, my master, like your mother was before you. Can you be the master of this war, Baekhyun?”

“I will,” he says. “I have no other choice.”

Baekhyun doesn’t know, but for Chanyeol he’s willing to find out.

Magic hums, pleased with his answer. It shines for a moment like a little star, floating in front of Baekhyun’s eyes, and dives into the water.

For a moment, the only thing Baekhyun can hear is the sound of the rain hitting the surface of the pond as the small light dims and disappear like dying ember. Then, water starts bubbling, simmering with an energy that comes from deep inside and distorts Baekhyun’s reflection – that other-Baekhyun. The face in the pond quivers and disappears.

“Wait, don’t go! You never said what I should do! How can I save Chanyeol?”

The voice comes from underwater, muffled, and Baekhyun doesn’t understand what it’s saying. The water level keeps rising and rising, soon enough the entire forest will be inundated and Baekhyun needs to find a shelter before he drowns, but he can’t understand what the voice is saying. It might be important. It might be the key to save Chanyeol’s life.

Stay or flee. The water is dark now, deep, stormy. The sky is dark too. Baekhyun doesn’t know where one begins and the other ends. Thunder lights up the sky just as Baekhyun takes a deep breath and plunges his head underwater.

It’s cold. Then it’s hot. Then it’s nothing but dark, down there, dark and calm. It’s so bizarre, even if the surface is boiling, the water is strangely still. Baekhyun blinks, trying to get used to the darkness, until something finally comes into focus.

Silver hair, glowing amber eyes.

“You want to save Chanyeol?” the other-Baekhyun asks. His teeth are sharp and long and his eyes shine gold even underwater. He looks at Baekhyun, waiting for an answer, nine tails floating lazily around him like a cape. And Baekhyun is desperate, he would do anything to save Chanyeol. He nods, once, twice, and other-Baekhyun finally comes closer, close enough to whisper into Baekhyun’s ear.

“Then take all of this power.”

That’s when a clawed hand reaches for his collar, yanking him down until his feet lose hold of the ground and he falls forward, precipitating into the abyss.
Caged. Trapped. Hurt. Baekhyun opens his eyes and he sees... He sees his father, but he doesn’t really look at him. He’s not a threat. Seulgi. He sees Seulgi. And she’s a threat.

She’s a friend, Baekhyun thinks.

She’s an enemy, Baekhyun thinks.

For the longest moment they stare at each other and Baekhyun waits for her to do something, anything, to prove him wrong, but then Seulgi growls and unsheathes her magic and her nine red tails appear, one by one, as she prepares to attack.

Enemy, whispers the magic inside Baekhyun. It acts on its own, before he can realize it. He only has to raise his hand – in defense, he just wanted to protect himself from Seulgi’s attack – but the moment it’s up in the air a wave of magic gushes out from... from him.

Seulgi slams against the wall with a soft, pained moan before she sags on the ground. Baekhyun takes a look at his hand. His own hand. The power it unleashed is still inside of him. He can feel it, bubbling, boiling, like the water of the pond in his dream, searing with magic – with his mother’s magic. With his magic.

When he takes a step closer, Seulgi curls on herself, in defensive position. She hisses at him. She’s afraid, Baekhyun realizes. She’s afraid of him.

Someone is shouting. His father, maybe. But why doesn’t he get any closer. Why is he afraid of Baekhyun too?

It doesn’t matter, he thinks. We’re not here for them, we’re here for Chanyeol. Are we going to save him or not?

Yes. Yes, they’re going to save him. Baekhyun takes a step back. He can see the door, the two windows. His father is talking to him, asking him to calm down. Seulgi doesn’t dare to move.

She faced Sooyeon yesterday and she barely scraped by and she wasn’t even alone. Now she’s on her own, tired and hurt and facing a power that could rival Sooyeon’s in the hand of someone who can barely control it. Baekhyun can feel it buzz at his fingertips, ready to explode at the tiniest pressure, coiled tight and ready to spring. And he’s still underwater, holding his breath. Magic is not inside him. He’s lost inside magic.

He takes another step back. Chanyeol. He uses the name as an anchor, holds onto it. Chanyeol. Everything he’s doing, he’s doing it for Chanyeol.

Let’s go save Chanyeol, he thinks, and he can feel magic purr in agreement.

“Baekhyun, please, don’t let it control you! You’re stronger than this! Baekhyun!”

They’re the last words he hears from his father, as his body crashes against the glass of the window
shattering it in countless crystal pieces. He lands on the street, and he’s not a human anymore, he’s a fox.

Shape-shifting is not painful, like he expected. It’s confusing. It feels like the axis of the world has just changed. The colors are different. The shapes are different, as if everything is bent, crushed by a pressure too big for this world to withhold. Baekhyun can see it glittering everywhere, invisible rivers of power, like the arteries of the world. He sees the cracks in reality, where magic leaks into this universe. Even time seems to crackle under its pressure. The traffic around Baekhyun is stuck, cars moving in slow-motion, and he can count every single snowflake around him, like he’s the only one moving at normal speed in a world caught under a spell. Everything is silent.

It lasts only one glorious moment, then a car almost crashes against him, someone honks and the bubble of pops. Suddenly, time speeds up, two or three or four times faster. Everything is frantic, everything is dangerous. Only his thoughts are sticky and heavy, still trapped in golden syrup. He slams against a taxi in his haste to leave the street, drunk, like a cornered animal, blinded by the lights. He trips, he falls on the snow. He gets up again. Walking on four legs is different. Everything is tinier. Everything is louder and brighter and wilder. Baekhyun is wilder.

From the broken window, he can see Seulgi’s face looking at him. She’s saying something.

Don’t listen to her. Let’s go. Let’s save Chanyeol.

Yes. They will save Chanyeol.

They will.

If he closes his eyes, he can feel Sooyeon’s magic, shining like a golden sun at South. She’s so far away that for a moment Baekhyun despairs to reach her in time.

No, murmurs magic, in a laughter that feels like a shower of spring rain. You wanted power. You have power now, all the power you need. Be faster, stronger, be braver. Let me lead you.

Baekhyun is still trapped underwater, drowning in magic. He closes his eyes, lets himself be carried off by the current, swept downstream, castaway.

He starts running.

From: jaeejae
To: mimi
call me back
something crazy happened
it’s baekhyun
[Sent: 13:57, 24.01.2018]

Traveling in fox form is... fast. Fast and confusing, or maybe that’s just Baekhyun, struggling to adapt his human mind to a body that is part animal and part god. Rational thoughts escape him. He thinks in shapes, colors, in instinct and need. He thinks Chanyeol’s name – he repeats it in his mind like a mantra, because the moment he loses it he knows he won’t be able to get it back again, so he grasps it with the power of despair, holds onto it with claws and fangs. Chanyeol. Baekhyun knows he needs to save him, knows he needs to run, knows he’s running in the right direction.

Sooyeon’s magic is getting closer. Baekhyun can see it in the air, golden strands lulled by the
wind, invisible to the human eye. He dashes through the field, following his inner compass, immune to fatigue. He encounters some humans, farmers in the fields and travelers on the streets and a couple of hikers in the mountain, but they don’t see him passing through. Maybe he’s too fast. Maybe he’s just invisible. Maybe the human mind is not ready to see a giant silver fox with nine tails and amber eyes sprinting towards the mountain.

How long has it been since he left Yeoju? Baekhyun has no idea. Time is a human concept. Baekhyun only knows that he was in Yeoju, where the light of Sooyeon’s magic shined dim and wan, like a star veiled by the clouds, and now he’s somewhere else and he can see its blinding light, he can feel its warmth and smell the blood hidden behind its flow, crusted blood between Sooyeon’s nails and fingertips.

The sun is falling, but he doesn’t need light to see. Sooyeon’s magic is more than bright enough for him, as he gets closer to the village. He slows down, mindful of his surrounding, his senses alert.

The snow has stopped but the village is still wrapped in white. It looks asleep, but Baekhyun doesn’t trust the apparent calm. He can’t trust it, because this is the home of the Samjokgu, where Gumiho aren’t allowed to enter. He can feel Sooyeon, somewhere among the houses. He can feel the sandalwood tree in the center of the village – a holy tree, a millenary tree, so much older than Baekhyun but not older than his magic, he can feel...

The first *jangseung* starts screaming as soon as Baekhyun steps inside the village, the sound so high-pitched and sharp it cuts through Baekhyun’s brain, freezing him. It takes him a moment to realize what’s happening, shaking his head to get rid of the persistent screech scratching at his sanity. That’s when he sees it, the *jangseung*, just a wooden totem pole with an angry face painted on it, its mouth open in what Baekhyun has always thought to be a silent scream, except it’s not silent at all. He can hear it, he can feel it inside his brain, driving him mad.

He ignores it and tries to advance, but the power of the guardian god stops him. It’s like there’s a barrier, an invisible, magical wall keeping him from going forward. The totem pole, no, the totem poles, because there’s more than one of them, all screaming at Baekhyun, are forming a barrier to keep the evil outside. And the evil is Baekhyun.

He takes a few steps back, getting farther enough that the totem poles stop screaming. He can still feel their painted eyes. They’re studying him, waiting for him to take another step towards the village.

He can feel Sooyeon on the other side of the barrier, and if she managed to get in then Baekhyun should be able to get inside too, so he steps towards the totem pole again. That’s when he feels the explosion. It comes from the center of the village, near the sandalwood tree, and it’s both magical and physical. For a moment, Sooyeon’s light flickers. Baekhyun feels it go down and then snap up again. She’s hunting, he realizes. Chanyeol.

*You have to let me go*, he hisses, he growls, at the totem, and the guardian god carved on the wood whistles, a warning. Baekhyun wishes he could talk, wishes he could explain. He doesn’t know if the guardian can understand him, but he doesn’t know how to go back to his human form either. He’s been under for too long, right now he doesn’t even know when the surface is. More than that, he doesn’t know if he can go back to being a fox after retrieving his human form. It’s too scary, too confusing, too out of his control. He doesn’t want to lose himself. Maybe he’s already lost.

*Let me in*, he repeats. *I need to save him. Only I can save him.*

He doesn’t know what’s inside the totem poles, what kind of ghost, spirit of god protects this village. Baekhyun bows his head and begs – *please please please* and the guardian lets him go.
The barrier quivers and disappears.

Baekhyun launches himself towards the village, sprinting towards the houses, past the sandalwood tree. He can see smoke rising from one of the houses – the explosion, and magic magic magic – and he can hear the rumble of an engine, sputtering and dying.

Beyond the hill, the sun is setting, hidden behind the clouds. Beyond the hill, the sun is rising, golden magic drifting among the trees, cobwebs of light, decadent and poisonous and broken.

Baekhyun’s magic reacts to it, surging forward, surrounding him. Power escapes from his body, overflowing, like a river in flood, and Baekhyun is in the middle of the whitewater, bounced around by the flow.

The car is upside-down, crashes between two birch trees. Inside, Baekhyun can perceive a human being – Yoora, his confused brain supplies, her name is Yoora, he knows her. Another one is lying down, only a few meters of distance, in the snow. An old woman. Her life energy is so tiny, like a firefly dying in winter, but her magic is so strong.

And yet it pales, in comparison with Sooyeon’s power, lighting up the night like a small sun, long hair flitting around her shoulders, her claws ready to pierce Chanyeol’s chest.

From: Minseok
To: Sunmi-nim
I can’t catch him anymor hes too fast
[Sent: 15:32, 24.01.2018]

Pale blossoms fall from the sky, right into Sooyeon’s open palm.

“Isn’t it pretty?” she says, as they shatter against her hand into fine diamond dust before they disappear into the night. “Moonlight and flowers. Your mother’s magic has always been pretty.”

It was meant to sound melancholic, but it comes out as cold instead.

“You’re different now, son of Sunmi,” she says, and she sounds intrigued, almost pleased. “I was the one who did it.”

She flicks her fingers at him and he feels pain flare in his chest. He falls on her knees, right in front of her. The sight seems to please her immensely.

What did you do to me? he asks.

“I opened the door. Not for you, of course, I was looking for your token of power, except I didn’t find any because you’re a little useless runt. But I decided to leave the door open. Don’t you feel better now? You’re still a runt, but you’re a runt who can use magic now, at least. Even though you had to steal your mother’s.” She clicks her tongue. “It’s wasted on you, but it doesn’t matter. I will still get what I wanted.”

She doesn’t only feel different. She is different. When they first met her, there was something childish in her, something primal. She talked like an old lady or a small child, her voice stiff and slow, careful to pronounce every word as if it was the first time in years. Whatever she got back from Sunmi, it didn’t just affect her magic, but also her mind. She sounds smart now, and cruel.
And amused.

And what is it that you want?

“Revenge. I wanted to kill your mother, but isn’t this much more fun? I won’t kill you. She will kill you. Her magic will do it for me.”

He growls, but it’s weak. He can feel fear seep through his fury. Sooyeon’s eyes glint with malice.

“Did you think you could control it? You, a little half-blood child? Look at you, little kit, you’re drowning. It’ll pick at you slowly, dragging you deeper and deeper, and then it will digest you. And you won’t be anything more than an animal. A pet. And you’ll be my pet.”

Baekhyun’s magic shakes in defiance. It hits her in shards of power, but she sweeps them away with a simple gesture and takes a step closer, her features slowly morphing in front of Baekhyun as she takes her fox form.

“I was betrayed, stabbed in the back, deserted by the one I loved the most. My little sister threw me to the dogs, and for what, for this little, pathetic runt…” Her saccharine sweet, sticky voice turns darker and darker with every word, until she’s hissing, shaking with barely repressed fury, sounding like a thousand voices whispering together, inhuman. “If only she could look at me now. Should I kill you? Or should I let you live, as my slave?”

Baekhyun doesn’t wait for her to finish talking. He attacks first, his magic breaking against Sooyeon’s golden ringlets, shattering and falling in the shape of pale blossoms, silver with a hint of pink. She growls and dances around him, golden magic growing like vines around her.

The village is waking up. Humans with torches and branches of holy wood, to banish the evil are coming out of their houses, but Baekhyun pays no mind to them. They’re here to save Chanyeol – please save Chanyeol. He can take care of Sooyeon, not enough to defeat her, but enough for them to take Chanyeol away. She’s strong. Way too strong for him. Even Sunmi’s magic – now Baekhyun’s magic – can feel it. It prickles at Baekhyun’s skin, hardening inside his veins to protect him from her attacks, but she’s ruthless, implacable.

He attacks her under the dark sky, biting at her throat, at her sides, wherever he finds, but she’s strong, so strong. Minseok said he’d never forget her and now Baekhyun can understand what he meant.

Sooyeon is old. The oldest Gumiho left. She’s a relic of an ancient time, made of countless wars, of hatred, of hunger. And Baekhyun has nothing but himself and despair. His magic shatters under hers like glass under a golden whip, falling down like shiny petals on the white ground.

It’s not enough, not enough.

I need more, he pleads. More magic, more power. More. I can do it.

He can’t. He knows, and magic knows it too. If he overdoes it, if he summons even more magic, he’ll just get lost in it, deep down, where no one will ever be able to find him. Magic will eat him, just like Sooyeon said, consuming everything down to his bones, not leaving the smallest memory of him. Baekhyun will be gone and only the fox will stay, hungry and angry and murderous and ready to fight anything, forever.

He takes a look back, to where Chanyeol was lying – did the humans save him? did they take him away, to a safe place? – and what he sees fills his heart with dread. Chanyeol is up, holding onto a tree. He stands, pale and disheveled.
Their eyes meet and Chanyeol recognizes him. (Of course he does, he’s Chanyeol. Chanyeol would recognize him anywhere.)

Baekhyun turns, just in time to avoid another powerful attack. Magic shields him, splinters and cracks under Sooyeon’s golden thorns, her golden claws, before it explodes, falling around them like cherry blossom petals.

Isn’t it ironic? It was summer when Baekhyun met Chanyeol, a cursed summer. It was winter when Baekhyun left Chanyeol, a cold, lonely winter. Their love was a fall, but there was no spring for them. This is their spring, flowers of magic falling from the sky.

He sees through Sooyeon’s intentions when she launches herself at Chanyeol. She dashes past him, but he manages to bit down on one of her tails, holding her down. It’s like biting on soaring fire, but she stops and turns towards him. She’s so old and so powerful and Baekhyun is tired, his bones crackling under the pressure of his own magic.

*It’s not enough, not enough. More.*

Everything blacks out. He’s in the pond, curled on himself underwater, hugging his knees.

*Are you sure?* asks magic. *You won’t be able to go back if you sink deeper.*

If it can save Chanyeol... If it can save Chanyeol Baekhyun must try.

Baekhyun wants to be fearless. He wants to believe in miracles and happy endings. Sometimes, he wants to be like Jongin and know what will happen in the future. Maybe if he had known... If he had known things would’ve ended like this, would he have left, five years ago? If destiny can’t be changed, if our choices are fixed moments in time, if future can’t be rewritten... But Baekhyun doesn’t believe in *what ifs*. It’s too late to believe in *what ifs* now.

He feels the wave of magic, coming from inside him. The fox has already taken control and Baekhyun doesn’t know if he’ll ever see the surface again, but it’s not that bad, down there, in the darkness. It’s peaceful, it’s quiet. Dying is a quiet affair. It’s not like falling, more like drifting away.

*Please, save him,* he begs, just as magic explodes from inside out, like a giant wave, and he drifts deeper, deeper.

---

From: Mrs. Byun
To: Park Chanyeol
Take care of him.
[Sent: 16:52, 24.01.2018]

When Baekhyun was... twelve, or thirteen years old – he doesn’t really remember – his parents took him to the river for his birthday. Chanyeol was there too, with his family. They fought on the dock. Chanyeol’s hand was sweaty, too hot around Baekhyun’s wrist.

Baekhyun doesn’t remember the words Chanyeol said. He didn’t use to listen to Chanyeol, back then. All he needed to know was that Chanyeol hated him. Or maybe hate was too strong of a word for what they had. Park Chanyeol merely disliked him.

It was an uncanny feeling. No one had ever disliked Baekhyun before – and now Baekhyun can probably say it was partly thanks to his Gumiho heritage – but Chanyeol seemed persistently
stubborn on disliking him and no twelve or thirteen years old child likes being disliked, not even by an unremarkable, bland kid like Park Chanyeol.

It was too late for cherry blossoms, too early for summer sunshine. It was just a so-so day and Park Chanyeol was annoying and the sky was darkening at North, a storm closing onto the capital, and at some point Chanyeol’s hand had slipped from Baekhyun’s wrist leaving an icky trail of sweat and they were both screaming and...

And then Baekhyun was falling, down into the water.

He remembers the impact, like a slap, and he remembers the cold hitting him so hard it didn’t even feel like a temperature, it felt like a punch to his whole being. He remembers the sound of the water splashing everywhere, and then... He remembers the silence.

Everything was slower underwater, floating in space. Even sound got stuck in the waves at the surface, unable to reach the bottom of the river. It was like another world.

When Baekhyun dies, it feels a little like that. That single moment of surprise, after you hit the surface and the water closes around you like a tomb, excluding the rest of the world, trapping you underneath. You can see the sun, refracted and distorted, patches of silver sunshine moving at the pace of the waves, and it seems so close, beaconing you home, but it’s also so far away. Your mouth opens in surprise, a little ο, and breath escapes you in shining bubbles. Panic has yet to kick in, you haven’t realized yet that was the last of your breath, fire is not consuming your lungs, you’re not spasming or convulsing, you’re just frozen in a state of perfect peace. Heaven.

What happened next?

“I’m sorry,” Chanyeol is saying, from far, far away. “I’m sorry, but I need you to come back to me now. Because I can’t do this alone. I need you, Hyunnie.”

Ah, now Baekhyun remembers. He had jumped too. That idiot had jumped into the water to save Baekhyun. He couldn’t even swim, that fool. Chanyeol. That flailing, stubborn fool.

What would he do without Baekhyun? He got so thin, so serious, so angry all the time. Baekhyun wants to smoothen all the wrinkles on his forehead and pull the corners of his mouth upwards like he did when they were young and silly and everything was easier.

“Come back,” Chanyeol is saying. “Come on, you’re stronger than this. You’re the strongest, my Baekhyunnie.”

And Baekhyun would’ve been fine just drowning by himself, disappearing into the abyss of magic, but Chanyeol would drown with him and he can’t, he just can’t let Chanyeol drown.

He writhes in the hold of magic, flailing in a weak attempt to reach the surface again. He can see the moon in the sky, so far away, a circle of light, not bigger than a firefly, and magic everywhere, but the moon is telling him where to go, clearing his way home.

Magic is too strong, too big, too hungry, and Baekhyun can only be its master or its prey, but Chanyeol takes his hand and he’s not alone. This time, he lets Chanyeol take him home.

Begin by seizing something which your opponent holds dear; then he will be amenable to your will.

― Sun Tzu, The Art of War
Yeoju

The house had always been there, at least according to the records, but when Baekhyun asks about it, Sunmi smiles and tells him not to be silly.

“It wasn’t always the same house. I rebuilt it a couple of times.”

“Did you?” Jaehwan asks without raising his eyes from the newspaper.

Sunmi purses her pretty lips. “Well, maybe I had someone else doing it from me. What would the meaning of having magical powers be otherwise?”

Jaehwan pretends to be offended and the conversation evolves into a mock argument that will probably end with the both of them being overly cheesy. Baekhyun makes a face and steals the last omelet, leaving before he can see that happen.

It’s a nice house, even though it’s a little different from the houses of all his classmates who live in the city. Baekhyun likes the smell of wood and paper and the swing in the courtyard and the beautiful paulownia tree in the courtyard and his pale flowers. He likes the path that leads to the mountain and the trees and he likes the song of the wind, even if he’s not allowed to follow it.

He doesn’t mind that the closest bus stop is twenty minutes of walk in the woods away. Every morning, Seulgi comes to pick him up and they walk together to the bus stop and wait for the small bus that will take him to school. Minseok will be waiting for him when he comes back.

“It’s because he’s lazy,” Seulgi explains. “He always sleeps in.”

Sometimes, Minseok brings Sehun too. Among all his mother’s Gumiho friends, Baekhyun likes Sehun the most. Sehun is the youngest Gumiho of the country and the only one who would play with Baekhyun for hours. They play tag in the woods and sometimes Sehun turns into his animal form, a ruddy fox with a playful glint in his amber eyes, and chases Baekhyun, tickling him with his big tongue when he finally catches him after pretending he couldn’t see him for half an hour.

Seulgi says Sehun is childish, but he just laughs in her face. “I can be mature too, but where would the fun be in that?”

Seulgi clicks her tongue. Minseok doesn’t say anything, but he would silently approve of whatever Sehun wants to do, that’s how whipped he is. When Sehun slips back into his human form, he looks eight or nine years old, the same age as Baekhyun, and Baekhyun shrieks in happiness and drags him away to play with toy cars and draw on the paper door with colorful crayons.

Sometimes Sehun’s human form is older, a twenty-something young boy who hoists Baekhyun up onto his shoulders to help him reach the branches of the tree in the garden.

“Age doesn’t really matter to Gumiho,” he explains, when Baekhyun asks him how old he is. “I’m a thousand-something, so I’m really young for our standards. I’m like a Gumiho baby. But I’m still so much older than you, Hyunnie.”
“So what is your real appearance? Old or young?”

Sehun smirks and turns into a fox. He climbs the tree easily and joins Baekhyun on the notch between the trunk and a branch.

*This is my true form,* he says. Baekhyun feels his voice in his head. It’s young and old at the same time and it sounds like Sehun.

When Sehun comes back, he’s a teenager this time. “You see, I can choose any age I want. But you like when I look your age the most, right? Because we can play together.”

Baekhyun thinks about it. “I think you like that age the most too, because you can play with me without people thinking you’re childish. Though Seulgi thinks you are, anyway”

Sehun pretends to be offended and pushes Baekhyun off the tree. Baekhyun doesn’t even scream. He knows Sehun will pick him up again. And that’s what he does, of course. It’s not the first time he pulls this kind of trick on him.

“Very mature, Oh Sehun,” Seulgi says, her hands on her hips.

“Ah, our Seulgi is angry. Maybe it’s time for you to find yourself a boyfriend,” Sehun suggests.

“Like yours?” She scoffs. “By the way, where is he?”

“Minseok went to Busan yesterday to talk with Yesung-hyung,” Baekhyun explains.

Seulgi’s face darkens.

“Is he really doing that, then?” she asks Sehun. He only shrugs, but his expression darkens, too.

“I’m not that happy either, and neither is Yesung, but you know how he is. He nods, listens to your point of view and...”

“And he ignores it,” she concludes for him. “Sunmi is worried too, even though she’s not doing anything to stop him. Let’s just hope he doesn’t get in too much trouble.”

Baekhyun patiently waits for them to finish talking. They think he’s too young to know what’s going on, so they’re not telling him anything and they just expect him to... not know anything.

Gumiho can pretend to be children – Sehun is very good at doing that – but they’ve never been children, so they don’t have the slightest idea of how a child’s mind works. Sometimes, Baekhyun has the distinct impression they think he’s a bit stupid, like newborn kits who can’t hunt and can’t walk and have to rely on their parents completely. But Baekhyun is a little smart thing and he’s eavesdropped enough conversations to know what is going on.

Minseok-hyung is trying to petition to the Council of the Covens in Seoul to acknowledge the rights of the Gumiho. And, to do that, he wants to talk to someone, someone really important, who lives in Andong. Someone really dangerous, apparently, because his mother has been really restless nowadays, playing the *gayageum* at random hours, night and day, and frowning and forgetting important stuff like Parent’s Day at Baekhyun’s school. (Sehun had to go at the last moment in a thirty-something years old attire, pretending to be Baekhyun’s uncle. That had been a funny day.)

“Anyway, what are you two up to?” Seulgi asks. “Wanna get inside? I brought cream bread from the city!”
“Yes!” Baekhyun screams, soon mirrored by Sehun, again in his nine years old body.

They run to the house, tripping at the entrance to kick their shoes away. Sunmi is listening to the news in the kitchen. She smiles. It feels like home.

*Inheon-dong, Seoul*

Inheon-dong is a drowsy residential neighborhood at the edge of the capital, closer to the countryside than to the shining maze of skyscrapers that is Seoul.

The house with the blue gate is big, old and a little cold. It originally belonged to Chanyeol’s grandfather on his father’s side, but at his death his son thought it was too big for their small family of wife and two children and split it in two, kept the left wing and decided to rent the right wing out to cover the renovation costs. And that’s how Baekhyun’s family ended up living in Inheon-dong.

The garden is too small, the kitchen is cramped, and there are suspicious mold stains on the ceiling of the bathroom. Baekhyun’s room is in the attic and it’s dusty and there are spiders sometimes. Neither Sehun, Minseok and Seulgi, nor any of the other Gumiho who used to be a regular at dinner for the past ten years cannot visit anymore. But Chanyeol lives there and, after the terrible incident at the river, Baekhyun has kinda grown to like Chanyeol.

Chanyeol is... volatile. He laughs easily and he gets melancholic even more easily. He plays to win or he doesn’t play at all. He’s soft, easy to please and easy to trick. He’s jealous sometimes, his chubby baby fingers digging into Baekhyun’s wrist when someone steals Baekhyun’s attention from him. He tells Baekhyun his secrets and he wants to know Baekhyun’s. He shares his *kimbap* with Baekhyun and lets him copy his homework. He would lie for Baekhyun – and he’d probably do a terrible job since he’s so transparent, but he would at least try. It’s like he’s chosen Baekhyun, out of all the boys he plays with, to be his best friend, and it’s so easy to choose him back.

Baekhyun has never had a best friend other than Sehun, who was more than one thousand years old and who could go from acting like an adult to a child even more childish than Baekhyun himself in a matter of minutes. He had friends at school, but there weren’t any other kids living close to his house at the foot of the mountains, and it was too impractical to have someone taking him back and forth between the city and the old house every day just so he could play with other kids his age. The concept of a best friend was foreign to Baekhyun before Chanyeol.

He struggles, sometimes, because Chanyeol is a little bit like a puppy. His affection is absolute and overbearing, and Baekhyun was used to long silences and a little bit of loneliness, but now he has Chanyeol following him everywhere like Baekhyun is the only person he likes in the entire world, and sometimes it gets a little too much. But Chanyeol is also endearing, and loyal, and funny. Chanyeol is extra nice and super talented and he and Baekhyun click like they were always meant to.

Baekhyun’s room is next to Chanyeol’s, only a thin wall separating them, and they invent their own communication system made of taps against the wall and they spend hours talking instead of sleeping at night. Then they wake up the following morning with their eyes swollen and lined red from the lack of sleep, their faces lighting up when they see each other because they have so many things they still need to say.

Baekhyun doesn’t like Seoul, but Chanyeol was born and raised in the capital, and when Baekhyun complains he takes his wrist and they hop on the first bus they find and go exploring.
They’re fourteen the first time they Chanyeol drags Baekhyun to watch his childhood friend Byunghun perform with a crew in Hongdae. Byunghun is one of the youngest within his crew and he only performs for a couple of minutes, but they stay for the whole show and one of the older dancers buys all of them dinner in a cheap wannabe-Japanese *udon* place.

There’s too many people and too many little lights and the cacophony of different songs coming from the various live performances is electrifying and a little confusing, and Baekhyun loves it.

“Let’s come back,” he tells Chanyeol, pulling on his wrist to make a point, but Chanyeol only laughs at his eagerness and, when he looks at Baekhyun, all the lights of the busy street are encased in his eyes.

“Mom won’t be happy if we waste too much time in Hongdae,” he says, but still promises Baekhyun they’ll come back next week.

They buy ice cream from a convenience store afterwards and slowly wander towards Sinchon, following the old, abandoned Gyeongui Line, now a construction site. The sky is clear and the stars have that polished shine they only take sometimes during hot summer nights.

“I love Seoul,” Chanyeol says. “It’s so full of life and things to do, things to see. Everything you need to be happy can be found here.”

Baekhyun scoffs. He hates Seoul. It’s dirty and loud, and the air smells like fine dust and exhaust fumes and drunk people, but he’d never tell Chanyeol, who loves the city like it’s a part of his soul.

“I suppose it’s not that bad,” he says, and Chanyeol rewards him with another blinding smile.

“I’m really happy you moved here,” Chanyeol says, looking at his feet, and Baekhyun can’t help but come closer, bumping into him to cover the fact that he feels warm and gooey and sappy all over, or that he was looking at Chanyeol for so long that his ice cream melted into a sticky puddle slowly trickling down his palm and onto the pavement. He finishes it in three licks and bites on the wood stick, feeling like some sort of dumb, fourteen years old spaceship captain with a pipe.

“Race to the bus stop?” he says, already bouncing on his heels, ready to spring.

“Loser pays for popsicles next time?” Chanyeol asks, but Baekhyun takes off before he can finish.

“Hey, that’s unfair! That’s unfair, Byun! See if I take you places next time!”

“Come on, Yeol, let’s go home!”

*Yonsei University, Seoul*

Baekhyun’s room is on the fourth floor of one of the two big dormitories at Yonsei University. It’s tiny and messy and it smells like boys, stress and black magic. Baekhyun is only responsible for two of the three.

Jongdae studies marketing. He never cleans up his half of the room, he sometimes falls asleep in the shower and his voice is six octaves higher than any human being should be allowed to talk. He’s like a tinier, louder, cooler version of Baekhyun. How can he look cool while also being one of the nerdiest little nerds Baekhyun has ever known is a mystery. Might be the black magic.

Baekhyun was not supposed to know about the black magic. Or about any magic at all. It just...
sort of happened. One minute they’re both cramming for midterms and the minute later Girls Generation are blasting *here comes trouble!* for the sixth time in the last forty minutes, and before Baekhyun can stop him Jongdae is getting up and marching towards the door of the room next to theirs and telling their neighbor – a tall boy who probably needs sleep more than the two of them combined – to turn the music off, all with a creepy, hysteric, absolutely polite smile on his face.

At his refusal, Jongdae simply turns him into a desk lamp with a snap of his fingers. Super effective.

After that he just rubs his hands together and, turning on his heels to come back to their room, he sees Baekhyun, who’s staring at him like he’s just witnessed to an act of illegal witchcraft – which he has, – and makes the most sheepish, half-assed guilty face someone could ever muster after being caught red-handed.

“So... you saw that?”

“I kinda did, man.”

“And you’re not freaking out.”

Now, Baekhyun has two choices. Coming clean and confessing he is half-Gumiho and kinda used to people turning into giant nine-tailed foxes or... pretending to be clueless.

“I think I’m waiting for the shock to kick in,” he says in the end.

Of all people. Rooming with a witch. It was exactly the kind of thing that would make Chanyeol crack up, except Chanyeol doesn’t know anything about magic and witches and Gumiho, so Baekhyun can’t tell him anything.

Jongdae looks at him, sizing him up. He’s probably deciding whether he should wipe away all of Baekhyun’s memories or not. Baekhyun hopes he doesn’t because it probably won’t work on him, being half-Gumiho and everything. That and his mother has been more than clear, no one can know he’s not completely human.

Thankfully, Jongdae doesn’t see him as a threat and just makes Baekhyun promise he won’t ever tell anyone about what he saw.

“If you do,” he warns Baekhyun, “I’ll just erase your memories together with everyone else’s.”

“Why don’t you just... do that?” Baekhyun asks, because he’s dumb and he likes to play with fire.

“Because I’m shit at memory spells,” Jongdae confesses. “Too much finesse needed. My older brother is so good at those, you know? But I’m a blast, all explosions and stuff. I’ll probably become the next Guardian of the city.”

There’s some kind of pride in his words. Baekhyun only knows that the guardians of the city are the people who hunt Gumiho who trespass into the capital, so he mentally pats himself for choosing not to reveal anything to Jongdae. One day in the future they might even be enemies.

But this is not the future. This is the present, and Baekhyun and Jongdae hit off pretty well. They’re similar, in a way, with similar interest and similar attitudes, both tiny, loud and hyperactive. They become good friends, even if Baekhyun is annoying and tends to scrounge lunch off Jongdae every three days and Jongdae whines all the time and clogs the shower and Baekhyun has to go down and ask the dormitory staff to send someone to unclog it. Sometimes they find themselves drinking together at four in the morning under the tarp of a shabby street cart because
that’s how college is.

Of course, Baekhyun introduces Chanyeol to Jongdae.

“So,” he says one day, looking up from a desperate message from Chanyeol. Jongdae looks up too, his eyebrows rising in a mute question. “Can my boyfriend stay the night?”

Jongdae splutters.

“You have a boyfriend?”

Baekhyun shrugs. “The tall guy who always carries my books to class?”

Jongdae takes a moment to remember, eyes narrowing, until he opens them out wide and says.

“That is your boyfriend? You? Byun Baekhyun? How did you get that... that Adonis there? We could pile up and we still wouldn’t be as tall as he is.”

Baekhyun leans back against the wall, smirking. “Childhood friends. I got him to fall in love with me before his growth spurt.”

“So you didn’t even need a ladder when you confessed?”

“He confessed first.”

For the first time since they met, there’s real admiration in Jongdae’s eyes. “Wow, bro, respect. He’s like. Hot.” Then his eyes narrow again. “I forbid you from having sex with him in this room, Byun. I’ll set you on fire. You know I can do that.”

Baekhyun tries to not act smug. “Relax, Dae. He’s not coming to get freaky with me. He forgot his keys at his sister’s house and it’s too late to go back now. He’ll just sleep on the floor or something.”

He waits for Jongdae to go back to the last episode of Heirs before he delivers the final blow.

“Besides, he has his own one-room. We usually go there to have sex.”

He tries not to laugh in his roommate’s face as Jongdae pauses the drama again, looks at him and shakes his head.

“He has his own one-room apartment? For real? Is he loaded? I can’t believe you, Byun Baekhyun, hot, tall and loaded. I hope he’s like horribly awkward or has smelly feet because you don’t deserve all this goodness.”

Chanyeol arrives a couple of minutes later, drenched and cute and he shakes his head like a small dog as he steps out of his shoes. He lingers for a moment in front of Jongdae’s bed, his soaked coat dripping rain on the floor, before he finds the courage to introduce himself.

“Hello,” he says to Jongdae. “I’m Park Chanyeol.”

“Kim Jongdae. Nice to meet you.”

Sinchon-dong, Seoul
After two months of begging, whining and restless convincing Chanyeol’s parents cave in and rent him a one-room apartment close to the university.

Chanyeol doesn’t really need an apartment, to be honest. He lives in Seoul, he could easily commute everyday back and forth from his home, but Baekhyun – who somehow still legally resides in Yeoju – was eligible for the dormitory and he moved there as soon as the semester began, leaving Chanyeol to do the commuting part everyday alone.

Besides, like Chanyeol told his parents countless times, it’s not like the Parks can’t afford to rent a room for him. They did the same for Yoora when she started attending university and moved out, so he demanded the same treatment for him and finally his father caved in.

It’s not that great of an apartment. Just one wide room with a tiny bathroom and the kitchen tucked into one corner. There’s no space for a real bed, so he buys a flimsy futon and decides he likes the ‘broken student living away from home’ aesthetics more than he likes getting homemade food and sleeping in his own bed. (That’s a lie, he still loves homemade food and his own bed more, but he still comes back home every three days or so, and when he can’t go himself his mom uses her newfound free time to personally bring him homemade food and complain he’s getting too thin.)

It’s not that great at all, and it’s kinda expensive, but there are three chicken places on the same street, which means he won’t starve, and it’s just two minutes from the subway station and ten from the university. More than everything, it’s close to Baekhyun.

Chanyeol moves in at the beginning of May, a few days after Baekhyun’s birthday. His dad wanted to bring his stuff over with the car, but there wasn’t enough stuff to move so it’s just Chanyeol and Baekhyun, two backpacks of clothes and homemade food and a plastic bag of toiletries they picked up from the Daiso store on the subway station. It’s not summer yet, but the air is sweltering with humidity and Chanyeol can’t look away from the way sweat makes Baekhyun’s flimsy shirt cling to his collarbones even after they’ve found shelter in the foyer, the cool air prickling his skin with goosebumps.

“What are you looking at?” Baekhyun asks, biting his lips to keep a giggle in. He knows Chanyeol is looking at him, but he likes acting coy and Chanyeol likes it when he acts coy. Chanyeol just likes him, coy or not.

He scoffs and types the secret code of the room, ignoring the way Baekhyun peeps at the numbers.

“My birthday?” Baekhyun says. This time, he does laugh.

“You’re acting like you didn’t argue with your roommate to set my birthday as your room’s access code.”

“My roommate doesn’t even know you exist. I don’t trust him enough for that.”

Good, Chanyeol thinks. He hasn’t met Baekhyun’s roommate yet, but he already doesn’t like him. No one allowed to spend that much unsupervised time alone with Baekhyun is going to escape being on Chanyeol’s blacklist.

They lay all the bags down on the floor and then they flop onto the floor themselves, too tired to even heat up the food or get down three floors to get fried chicken. Outside, the city is lazily bathing in the heat, just as tired as they are. It’s almost sunset and from the only window light floods the room, painting everything red. Chanyeol closes his eyes, watches the dying sun reverse printed on his eyelids.
He has a half intention to lay there forever, when Baekhyun’s hand lands on his chest. When he opens his eyes, he finds Baekhyun looking at him, looking sweaty and disheveled and so pretty and ethereal, bathed in red light.

“Hey there,” Chanyeol says, softly.

“Hey,” Baekhyun answers, just as softly. He’s smiling and his hand travels the expanse of Chanyeol’s chest, rising to his shoulders and curling on his neck. He winds a leg over Chanyeol’s thighs, straddles him to reach his mouth. There’s a promise of fire lying at the bottom of his eyes, dying embers ready to flare up and burn at the first kiss of the wind.

The house smells new, unfamiliar, crispy clean. It doesn’t smell like Chanyeol and Baekhyun, it doesn’t smell like home, so Chanyeol draws Baekhyun closer, sinks into his warmth, into the salty taste of sweat pooling at his collarbones. He pulls at the shirt, bunching it up around Baekhyun’s neck and Baekhyun takes it off, emerging from the fabric with messy hair and glassy eyes. His skin is golden and the frame of the window draws a black edge on his cheek, shoulder and hip as he leans down to kiss Chanyeol again, slowly, like they have all the time in the world.

“I was thinking,” he says. His voice so low, barely a whisper, like when they were back home, talking in hushed murmurs so that no one else could hear, stifling their moans and biting off their cries, their movements jerky, stiff, hasty, chasing pleasure on each other’s skin before someone else could interrupt them. Except there’s no need to be quiet now. There’s only them in the small flat. Baekhyun, Chanyeol and a sea of burning light, and Chanyeol wants to bite Baekhyun until he screams.

“What were you thinking?” he asks, instead, sneaking his hands down Baekhyun’s sides, toying with the waistband of his jeans, teasing but not daring to go further. Baekhyun sighs, eyes fluttering shut before he answers.

“I was thinking, there’s only the two of us here,” Baekhyun murmurs. He bites his bottom lip when Chanyeol’s hand cups his ass, grinding down and dragging a moan out of Chanyeol’s lips too.

“Funny. That’s what I was thinking too.”

Baekhyun stills. They’ve never come this far. They have touched each other, and they have come together, and Baekhyun has tried sucking him off only once and Chanyeol has come embarrassingly fast and promised to reciprocate someday but there was never the chance to do anything more. The house was never empty, and even when it was, there was always the lurking danger of someone coming back and finding them together, but now...

“Do you want to?” Chanyeol asks. Because he does want to, he wants so desperately. He’s jerked off desperately to the thought of Baekhyun so many times he’s surprised his dick didn’t fall off yet.

Baekhyun pretends to think about it, but he’s smiling too hard and blushing too much to be convincing, so Chanyeol pinches his hip until he shrieks.

“Okay, okay! Of course I want to!” He’s trying to act so brave, but Chanyeol can feel him shake in anticipation under his hands. Or maybe Baekhyun is still and Chanyeol is the one who’s shaking.

“Do you have anything?” Baekhyun asks.

Chanyeol gapes and flounders and pathetically shakes his head and then he groans because, of course, of course! He should’ve thought about it.
Baekhyun leans down to kiss the corner of his mouth and giggles against it.

“Don’t worry, since I was sure you wouldn’t have thought about it, I brought it myself.”

Chanyeol could kiss him. Scratch that, Chanyeol can kiss him. Chanyeol kisses him.

Samseong-dong, Seoul

Kim Junmyeon is so predictable he lives in Gangnam. Of course. In one of those tall buildings with a concierge at the entrance, cameras, a private parking lot and a beautiful city skyline view. Of course.

“What do your parents do?” Chanyeol asks, taking a look at the shiny table top. His family has money, he’s aware of it, but here we’re talking drama villain level of money.

Junmyeon shrugs.

“My grandmother is the leader of the second most powerful coven in the capital,” he says. “My mom helps her with the coven. My dad is the son of a witch but he doesn’t have any magical abilities. He’s a lawyer though. But all the money comes from my mom’s side of the family.”

He shows Chanyeol around, leading him towards the couch.

“My parents don’t live here,” he explains. “We own three floors of this building and they live right under us, so you don’t have to worry about them coming home and finding you crashing here. It’s just me and my brothers. Not that it would be a problem for them. You crashing here, I mean.”

Chanyeol hums, reminding himself why he’s there, on Junmyeon’s super expensive leather couch. They were out patrolling together, looking for a banshee because, like Junmyeon said, “I think you’re the only one who can find it easily and, like you know, I’m still the one who will ultimately decide what to do with that Gumiho.”

That Gumiho being Sehun, Baekhyun’s best friend. Chanyeol went to visit him a couple of times. It was awkward and the Gumiho – Sehun – refused to acknowledge his presence.

It was a little strange, looking at this tall, feral boy who sometimes looked too young and sometimes looked too old and trying to overlay his image to the things Baekhyun had told him about Sehun, who was Baekhyun’s cousin but was more like a brother to him. Sehun, who kinda grew up together with Baekhyun.

And Chanyeol doesn’t know if he’s doing this for Baekhyun or for himself, but he finds himself accepting Junmyeon’s proposal to hunt down this banshee together, just this time, if it means he can get Sehun out of that cage where they locked him.

Patrolling with Kim Junmyeon is neither fun, nor pleasurable. Junmyeon is self-righteous, utterly convinced he’s always right and, on top of that, he lacks any social perception, so their nightly walk is mostly awkward. At least they do find the banshee. Junmyeon manages to stun it with his magic and they bring the creature back to the base. After that it’s too late for Chanyeol to catch any bus back home, so Junmyeon offers his place for him to crash, so here they are.

“Can I get you something to drink?” Junmyeon asks, opening the minibar to show him an expensive collection of french wines.
“Do you have soju?” Chanyeol asks back, almost desperate. “I’d use a drink. My head is killing me.”

“You’re not really used to your powers, aren’t you?”

Junmyeon frowns as he sits next to Chanyeol. A bottle of soju levitates towards them together with small glasses. Chanyeol waits for the bottle to magically pour the alcohol before he grabs one and gulps it down in one shot.

“No, I’m not. Because, like I’ve told you many times, I gave no intention to use them.”

“Why? You have a chance to save so many lives.”

But Chanyeol has already had his chance and he doesn’t know how many lives he ruined by attacking just one Gumiho.

“Why is it so important for you?” he asks.

Junmyeon purses his lips.

“My grandfather was killed by a Gumiho when I was really young. I can’t even remember him. The previous Samjokgu managed to kill her, in the end, but it was too late to save him.”

He doesn’t look hurt. He looks angry. So, it’s a personal tragedy. That would at least explain why he always acts like he’s on a mission against the world. Chanyeol can picture him really well. A small Junmyeon, listening to stories of the legacy of his family, of evil Gumiho who can take the people you love away from you. A small Junmyeon who wants to defeat the evil. It’s so easy to understand him. It’s so difficult to agree with him.

“I’m just trying to do the right thing, Chanyeol. It might be too much to take in, but you should try doing the same. Mostly because there are many witches, so it doesn’t matter if one of us doesn’t want to kill Gumiho, but there’s only one Samjokgu. And that’s you. You can’t run away from your responsibilities.”

Junmyeon keeps talking and talking, but the bottle keeps refilling Chanyeol’s glass and after a while he stops listening, drowns out Junmyeon’s voice in alcohol and the weight of his own thoughts.

Even if he hates doing this, being here, forced to listen to Junmyeon’s guilt-tripping speeches, he’s glad he’s not home. He hates that house, he hates the way his mom keeps asking him what he wants to do with his life. What does she want him to do? His leg hurts. His chest hurts. Everything hurts. He hates that Baekhyun is gone and he could spend the entire night knocking I love you into the wall and not receive any answer.

“You’d get along with my brother though,” Junmyeon is saying, and Chanyeol perks up, vaguely interested. “He’s a little like you. He doesn’t like responsibilities. You know, he should’ve become a Guardian too, that was the plan, but lately he’s been saying he doesn’t really like the idea. He wants to open a coffee shop... Can you believe it? What a way to waste all his talent.”

Whoever this mysterious brother is, Chanyeol already likes him more than he likes Junmyeon. Out of spite.

He closes his eyes just for a moment and when he reopens them Junmyeon is gone and tall, pretty boy is perched on the other side of the couch and staring at him.
“You’re gonna drop that glass if you’re not careful,” he says, and Chanyeol turns around to see what he’s talking about and, in doing that, he drops the glass. The boy frowns and sighs.

“Well, thank you,” Chanyeol says.

“You’re welcome. I’m Kim Jongin. And you’re going to receive a job offer in five minutes. Make sure to say yes.”

“What?”

Chanyeol blinks, not sure how to react. He must be a little drunk because the cute boy’s words are not making any sense.

“You need to say yes if you want to see Baekhyun again,” Kim Jongin says, and Chanyeol’s eyes widen, but before he can say anything the boy in front of him shushes him, closes his eyes and brings a finger to his lips. “Wait, wait, just a little more. Okay, your destiny is going to come in in three... two... one...”

The main door opens and they both can hear a whine coming from the entrance.

“I swear to God, this is the last time I drink...”

Even Junmyeon peeks up from another room, carrying a blanket, a pillow and clean clothes for Chanyeol.

“Oh, you’ve already met my youngest brother, Jongin. The timewaster at the door is my second brother, Jongdae.”


The newcomer enters the room, looks at Jongin, then at Junmyeon, then at Chanyeol. He looks confused, then his eyes widen, then he looks even more confused.

“Care to explain what is my ex-roommate’s ex-boyfriend doing, clearly wasted, on our couch, dear brother?” he asks, looking at Junmyeon.

Chanyeol’s eyes widen as he finally recognizes his ex-boyfriend’s ex-roommate.

There’s a beat of awkward silence, then Jongin smiles.

“He’s here because he’s going to work in your café, hyung.”

*S

**Sinchon-dong, Seoul**

It doesn’t really feel like home until Baekhyun steps through that door, with his too short hair and broad shoulders and delicate fingers clutching at the strap of his camo backpack – and a halo of magic surrounding him like a shroud. He’s drenched – they both are, and his eyes keep flashing towards the door like he’s a wild animal caught in a trap, and Chanyeol can see the way his lips move imperceptibly, as if he’s giving himself a pep talk, as if he’s trying to convince himself he should leave.

He always comes in like this, skittish and hesitant, and Chanyeol can see with his Samjokgu eyes the way Baekhyun’s fox ears flatten as he takes that final step into Chanyeol’s home. Baekhyun is
not aware he’s doing it, forever oblivious to the powers pulsating just above the surface of his conscience. It’s instinct, atavistic and overpowering instinct, the prey and the predator and all that shit, but Chanyeol likes to believe they are so much more than that. After all, Baekhyun said it, the first time they met after he returned from the army, that here they are just Chanyeol and Baekhyun. No Samjokgu. No Gumiho. No magic and crazy supernatural stuff. Chanyeol and Baekhyun, for the little time they have.

“How long are you staying?” he asks. The room is dark, but Baekhyun’s magic fills it with light, silver with a hint of pale pastels, like flowers under the moonlight. His tails flutter – in guilt, probably, and it’s difficult to know whether it is towards his family or towards Chanyeol.

“I’m leaving with the first train tomorrow morning.”

Chanyeol tries not to let his disappointment show. Baekhyun always leaves first thing in the morning, not even giving him the sweet illusion of waking up together, lazy and soft and toasty warm, of morning cuddles and kisses that taste of coffee. Everything they used to have. All they have now is sex, and Chanyeol would take that over nothing at all.

He draws Baekhyun into his arms, maps his body with nostalgic hands. Baekhyun feels different – thin and wired and solid, broader and tinier at the same time, and then there’s the magic swimming under his skin, ghosts of translucent power dashing through Chanyeol’s fingers like shy goldfish – but the way he moans when Chanyeol bites on his bottom lip sounds exactly the same. The way he smiles in the middle of the kiss, eyes fluttering shut as he loses himself in Chanyeol’s lips, is also the same, but there’s a note of urgency, of despair in his eyes now, something liquid and scorching hot like molten metal burning Chanyeol when Baekhyun looks at him from under his eyelashes. It feels like longing, but tainted by something darker – a hunger, a craving – and Chanyeol only recognizes it because he might feel the same.

“Come here,” he says, tugging on Baekhyun’s wrist, leading him towards the bed, and Baekhyun follows, pliant and tense at the same time, always torn between letting go and just going away, far, as fast as his legs would take him.

It doesn’t really feel like home until Baekhyun’s voice echoes in this silence, branding the space with every word, carving his presence into Chanyeol’s life with a scythe of memories, carving his touch into Chanyeol’s shoulders, short nails leaving streaks of red in their wake.

They have sex in hushed whispers, like when they were teenagers and they had to hide, giggling into each other’s mouths, chasing every breathe like it was the last, faster, faster, hurrying up before someone could interrupt them. It feels like they’re still hiding, from a world that doesn’t allow them to be together – or from themselves, for not allowing each other to be together. It feels like they’re running, the farther away from each other the deeper they fall into each other – tangled limbs and tangled hands lying on the pillow next to Chanyeol’s head and yet they are so distant, as if trapped on different plans of reality.

Chanyeol can feel when Baekhyun is about to come. He can almost taste the energy coiling up in his body before he does, tighter and tighter, like he’s ready to implode and then explode, lighting up like a little supernova. He basks in it, in Baekhyun’s magic, in the physicality of Baekhyun’s body clenching around him. He tries to hold on, to prolong the heat, biting back the pleasure at the back of his mind, but it’s impossible. He rides the wave, grinding up against Baekhyun, his thighs burning with liquid fire until they collapse together.

“Again,” Baekhyun asks, after a while. He’s barely collected his breath, and Chanyeol can see his chest heaving up and down, still slick with sweat. He lays a hand on it to feel it moving.
“Aren’t you tired?” he tries to say, but Baekhyun shakes his head.

“I have to leave tomorrow morning and I don’t know when I’ll come back, so... Again.”

“Give me a break,” he murmurs, but he’s already rolling next to Baekhyun to find his hand in the darkness, kissing the wrist, just where he can feel his pulse.

It doesn’t really feel like home until Baekhyun giggles, kicking at Chanyeol’s calf with his sweaty foot, and rolls over with a yawn to stretch, his shoulders cracking with the movement as he curls next to Chanyeol like a lost kitten.

“How’s work going at the café?” he asks, under his breath, as if he’s not allowed.

“Good. We hired a new girl, a witch.”

“Is she cute?” He leans his forehead against Chanyeol’s forearm and closes his eyes.

Chanyeol smiles and pats his short hair. “She’s cute, really popular with our customers. But not as cute as you are, of course.”

“I know, I’m the cutest.”

“You really are.”

Despite all his good intentions, Baekhyun falls asleep like this, curled against Chanyeol’s side, chasing his body warmth, shivering because he didn’t slip under the covers. Chanyeol pulls on the duvet and spreads it over their bodies, pats Baekhyun’s head one last time and enjoys Baekhyun’s presence until he, too, falls asleep.

When he wakes up, the rain has stopped, the other side of the bed is cold and the apartment is empty and quiet. A yellow post-it stuck to the fridge with only a bye scribbled onto it is the only sign of Baekhyun’s presence here yesterday night.

It doesn’t really feel like home after Baekhyun leaves.
You run in me
a tang of salt in the creek waters of my blood,
you sing in my mind like wine.
— Marge Piercy, from My Mother’s Body

How can I teach her
some way of being human
that won’t destroy her?
—Margaret Atwood, Excerpt of Solstice Poem from Two-Headed Poems

mom
how is it going?
did you fight with grandmother again?
[Sent: 18:32, 24.01.2018]

Silence falls gently onto the forest like a veil of silk, so soft to the touch, so easy to tear apart.

Park Chanyeol is the only one who can see the light of Gumiho magic wane slowly, flitting around the trees like a ghost haunting the forest, before disappearing completely. It leaves behind only darkness and a lingering sense of dread.

He picks Baekhyun up, tensing when the boy in his arms groans in pain. The wound on his side is bloody and deep, but Chanyeol can feel the work of magic on it, slowly stitching the flesh back together.

“Chanyeol!” Jimin’s voice sounds shrill and unnecessarily loud, echoing eerily in the sudden stillness of the forest. Her flashlight is mercilessly shoved on Chanyeol’s face, blinding him for a moment before moving onto Baekhyun. “Who the hell is that?”

“Where’s the car?” Chanyeol asks instead of replying, drawing Baekhyun closer to his chest. He doesn’t know how he did it, but he somehow managed to subdue the magic within him. For now. “We need to bring him inside, to my house. Or the shaman’s house, I don’t know if my house is still standing.”

“Wait, wait! Who’s him?” Jimin asks again, but Chanyeol simply walks past her, trying to find his way in the maze of trees.

They’re not far away from the village. He can see the lights of the houses shining through the branches. Even brighter, he can see the red lights of the totem poles, like beacons in the night, on the side of the mountain, a lot higher than where they are now. There’s no way he can walk there, Baekhyun needs help now.

“Yeollie!” Yoora calls from the woods. Chanyeol hears her footsteps on the snow and the rustling coming from a skeleton line of bushes before his sister, bruised and battered and shivering, all
bundled up in Jimin’s caterpillar coat, emerges from the darkness, bringing more light. Chanyeol closes his eyes before her flashlight can blind him too. She stops and stares at him for a moment, speechless. “Oh my, you’re walking... You’re really walking!” Then, she sees the lump in his arms. “Wait, is that Baekhyun? What’s Baekhyun doing here?”

“Saving us, I think,” Chanyeol mutters, but Yoora is not listening, eyes zooming on all the blood splattered on Baekhyun’s abdomen. She gasps, bringing a hand to her mouth. “He’s hurt! I’m calling an ambulance, I’m calling...”

“There’s no need to call anyone. He’s already healing on his own. But we need to take him inside, there’s something wrong with his magic. I need to talk to grandmother...”

“Wait, is that a Gumiho?” They both turn towards Jimin, who’s holding onto her flashlight as if it could turn into a weapon and protect her from the evil monster. Her eyes flicker between the blood on Baekhyun’s chest and his shiny, silver hair. Chanyeol instinctively brings the unconscious boy closer to his chest, but it’s Yoora who talks.

“This is my brother-in-law,” she says, stepping between Jimin and Chanyeol, “and we’re taking him home, no matter what.”

Jimin looks at Yoora, her mouth hanging open for a moment, before she raises her hands in surrender and nods. “Okay. Okay, come here.”

Her ghost friend, clad in white funerary robes and sporting bright red hair this time, leads them through the woods towards the pick-up, stealing curious glances at Baekhyun.

“Are you okay?” Chanyeol asks, looking at his sister. “Where’s grandma?”

“She should be at the Kim Nari’s house. I called Jimin as soon as I woke up, and she warned the shaman. They sent some of the novices to pick us up, but Jimin and I stayed behind to look for you.” Her face is bruised, dirty. She has a spirited look in her face, like she’s going to pop a blood vessel from the stress. It’s the same face she made in university when she had a very important project to finish, half adrenaline and half murder and one hundred percent the will to kick every problem in the ass. She’ll be okay.

“She was going to kill you,” Yoora says, under her breath. “When I woke up, I saw her, the Gumiho, and she was going to kill you, but the other fox jumped in and saved you. And it was Baekhyun. I don’t know how the fuck he did that, but of course it was Baekhyun. Who else could’ve been?”

Yes, who else? Only Baekhyun would be so stupid and so reckless and so, so brave. Only Baekhyun can be so dumb. The most glorious, empowering, blinding bright kind of dumb, the one that leads you to die a terrible, so heroic death. The dumb that is bound to be remembered and honored throughout the centuries. The kind of dumb that leaves blood drying on Chanyeol’s hands.

“Oh, yes,” he says, barely above a whisper. “He jumped into the fight and she almost killed him too. I’m going to kick his stupid ass once he wakes up.”

“But he’ll be okay... right?”

Chanyeol doesn’t answer. His hand instinctively finds Baekhyun’s hair, leaving a faint trail of blood on his cheek and temples. Chanyeol threads his fingers between strands so fair they’re almost white. Even Baekhyun’s skin is unnaturally pale. He still looks like he’s glowing, burning from within despite the freezing weather. Magic is still raging inside him, splashing against his chest
like the swells of a sea at storm.

“Can you save him?” Yoora asks.

Chanyeol doesn’t know if he can, but he will. He has to. After all that happened, he won’t let Baekhyun die on his watch. It’s only fair.

“So, let me get this straight,” Jimin says from the driver’s seat. “One of the foxes we saw before fighting in the woods was that guy. And you both know him.”

“You know him too,” Yoora says, “kinda. By proxy. He’s Chanyeol’s infamous boyfriend. The one who dumped him five years ago.”

Jimin lets out a voiceless gasp. “I’m speechless, Park Chanyeol! You’re the Samjokgu! What are you doing... frolicking with the enemy?”

“Jiminnie,” he begs, “this is not the time...”

“No, this is the time. We need to discuss this now, because we’re almost at the Nari’s house and the guardian gods will never let a Gumiho enter.”

“Oh, they will,” Chanyeol says, under his breath. “I’m going to make sure they will, should I knock down every single totem pole in this village.”

Jimin just shakes her head at his stubbornness as the car starts moving, slowly, treading carefully on the thick layer of snow, its light flickering against the violet, bare trunks of the oaks and the skimpy branches of pine. Something screams from a hollowed-out log. It’s probably just an animal which had hid in there during the fight and is now wondering whether it’s finally safe to go out, but they still all jump, startled. The car swerves a little, but Jimin turns the wheel barely in time to avoid a large ash tree by a whisker. When they’re finally back on the main street, she whispers something to the pretty ghost sitting next to her on the passenger’s side.

“I’m sending her after the Gumiho, the other one,” she explains. “If it decides to come back we’ll receive a warning, at least.”

“Wait, you’re sending who?” asks Yoora, just as Chanyeol exclaims, “Why would you do that? Sooyeon is dangerous! Tell her to come back!”

“Don’t worry, Choa is a ghost. I mean, she’s already dead... What else could happen to her?”

“A ghost?” Yoora says, but again everyone ignores her.

“Just tell her to be careful,” Chanyeol insists. “I don’t know what that Gumiho can do, especially if she regains all her power. Not even a ghost might be safe.”

The ghost, Choa, murmurs something in Jimin’s ear before disappearing quietly like a wisp of smoke.

“She said she’ll just stay around and check the borders.”

Yoora snorts at them for ignoring her, but there’s no time to explain because Jimin is already circling the sandalwood tree and braking in front of the house of the shaman. She steals a look at Baekhyun, bloody and pale and feverish.

“I’m still not sure the totem poles will even let him enter. If he’s a Gumiho... You know they
protect the house from monsters, and he technically is...”

Chanyeol doesn’t let her finish. He kicks the car door open and gets out slowly, still holding Baekhyun. He summons his Samjokgu powers and reality turns to darkness in front of his eyes.

The two totem poles in front of the house of the shaman gleam a faint red, like a shadow of dying ember, but they light up like torches as soon as Chanyeol takes a step towards them, Baekhyun still held tightly in his arms.

And then, they start screaming. If that can even be called screaming. It’s like someone is piercing Chanyeol’s head with red-hot iron needles. He winces and he can feel Baekhyun’s body tense in his arms. Even unconscious, he can feel their magic drilling a hole in his mind. Chanyeol grunts and takes a step back, trying to get away from the piercing cries. Next to him, Yoora and Jimin just look between him and the couple of totem poles at the gate, completely unaffected.

“See? I told you,” Jimin says, but Chanyeol growls at her – he doesn’t even know where it’s coming from, he just growls – and turns towards the two guardians again.

They’re not really speaking any language, just screaming and screaming and their voices grow louder, like nails on blackboard and rusty metal on glass when Chanyeol tries to get closer, to the point that his head starts spinning and Baekhyun starts whining in his arms, still unconscious, and Chanyeol almost drops him.

“He’s with me,” he says, but the totem poles just screech louder, and that’s when Chanyeol loses it. “I’m the fucking Samjokgu,” he shouts back, loud enough to overpower them, “and you are bound to obey me! If you don’t let me in with my guest, I will eradicate your poles and suck your magic out until not even a ghost remains of you. You know I can.”

The guardian gods shut up immediately, only the echo of their screams still ringing in Chanyeol’s ears. Oh, the perks of being cursed by the gods. He tries to take a step towards them, but they remain quiet. They only whisper – angry, bitter whispers, – when he finally crosses the gate, entering the courtyard of the Kim household, but it takes an angry look from him to shut them up again.

“Guard the gate,” he says. “No one else must pass through you.”

He sees Yoora and Jimin exchanging a look. “I have a favor to ask,” he says, turning to them. “I left my phone at my house, in the kitchen probably. There’s something wrong with Baekhyun, and I need to contact his mother or any other Gumiho as soon as possible. Could you maybe go...?”

“I’ll go,” Yoora says.

“No, wait, you need to rest and call Myunghoon and tell him you’re fine,” Jimin says. “I’ll go.”

“We’re both going,” Yoora insists. “I’ll take grandfather’s contact list too. The Byun’s contact numbers are in there, they might be useful. It’s not even three minutes from here, we can do this.”

He sighs. “Just be careful. If your ghost tells you Sooyeon is nearby come back here immediately, okay? And tell everyone to stay indoors. The totem poles at every house will protect us if she comes back...”

Chanyeol watches them hurry towards the sandalwood tree for a moment, before he walks towards the house.
The door is open, so he carries Baekhyun into the house, kicking his shoes away before he steps in. A couple of members of the household steal curious glances at him and at the boy in his arms, but he ignores them and proceeds towards the front room, where the head of the household receives her most eminent guests.

There, two women are waiting for him. One of them, Kim Nari, is the first shaman of Jung-maeul. The other, grumpy and shaken, pale and a little bruised, is Hong Garyung. They both let out a relieved exhale when they see him, before their attention focuses on the boy in his arms. Chanyeol would’ve liked the timing to be a little different, but beggars can’t be choosers.

“Grandmother,” he says, “this is Byun Baekhyun. My boyfriend.”

bossdae
not to worry you but
if you don’t answer the phone myeon will come to andong to look for you
hes going to do it
[Sent: 18:49, 24.01.2018]

They lay Baekhyun down on a mat in a spare room and both the women take a long look at him and ask everyone else to leave.

“What did you bring into my house?” Kim Nari asks when they’re alone, glaring at Chanyeol. There’s an edge of reprimand in her voice and a couple of years ago it would’ve made Chanyeol’s legs turn to jelly, but now he’s the Samjokgu and his magical rank is technically the highest in the room, in the prefecture and in the entire country too, so he dares to glare back.

“Is this Sunmi’s son?” Garyung asks, studying the boy’s features. “He doesn’t look anything like her. But he smells like her magic. Moonshine and...”

“And wildflowers, yes, I know, I’m the Samjokgu, if there’s someone who knows how Baekhyun’s magic smells like, that would be me.”

“How did he get here?” Kim Nari asks. She’s a middle-aged woman, really tiny, somehow really imposing. Chanyeol hasn’t seen her in years, but now that he’s the Samjokgu he can see the halo of power around her, subtle and discreet, like the tiniest, glittering quiver surrounding her figure.

“And what, exactly, is this boy?”

“He’s the son of a Gumiho turned human, but as far as I know he never showed any powers,” Garyung says, but Chanyeol shakes his head. That’s not fully correct. Baekhyun has always had magic, even if he wasn’t aware of it, nor was he able to master it. But this... This is a whole other level.

“I think he stole his mother’s token of power. I don’t know what happened or how he was able to do it. He was already unconscious when I found him.”

Garyung clicks her tongue. “What a dumb kid. Even if he’s Sunmi’s son, he’s still half-human. His body can’t withstand this terrifying amount of magic all at once.”

“What do you mean?” Chanyeol asks.

“Magic corrupts, Chanyeol. The body and even more the mind. The boy has summoned too much
magic and he lost control. He’s lucky, he could’ve lost so much more. What was he even thinking?”

“He was trying to save me,” Chanyeol says. His grandmother’s lips disappear in a thin line.

“You have to take Sunmi’s fox bead out, before it kills him. It wasn’t made for him.”

Chanyeol shakes his head, again. “I can’t. I’ve already tried. It was the first thing I tried to do, as soon as I realized magic was hurting him.” He looks into Baekhyun’s chest, where the flux of his magic is intertwined with the one coming from Sunmi’s fox bead, both knotted around his ribs, ribbons of power keeping him whole and stifling his breaths at the same time. “But the magic of the Gumiho is tangled with his own, and when I try to pull, I end up pulling Baekhyun’s too.”

“Can’t you pull them both?” Garyung asks, but Chanyeol shakes his head.

“I can’t. Baekhyun doesn’t have a fox bead. He never had one. The magic he has in him… it’s his own.”

He bites his lips, trying to find the words to explain to someone who cannot see magic pulse inside Baekhyun’s chest, echoing the soft swelling of his lungs, the throbbing of his heart. In some ways, Baekhyun’s magic is him. His soul, his magic, his memories, his feelings, his whole life, they all flow together. Chanyeol doesn’t know how to pull the magic apart from everything else. He doesn’t even know how to pull Sunmi’s magic away from Baekhyun’s. He could tear Baekhyun apart so easily, like plucking a flower and picking all the petals out, the world’s cruelest will-they-won’t-they.

“Sunmi,” Garyung says, looking at the ceiling, “you gave birth to a fool. And I am the grandmother of another fool.”

Kim Nari shuffles closer, kneeling in front of the boy and laying a hand on his forehead. “It’s somehow similar to an exorcism.” she says, turning towards Chanyeol. “Sometimes, if the entity haunting the human is too strong, rooted too deep inside, the only way to get rid of the hostile entity is to sacrifice the host too.”

“Yes, that is not an option,” Chanyeol says, not looking from Baekhyun even once. There’s like an entire ocean of power storming inside of him, Chanyeol wouldn’t even know where to start.

“Then, I’m afraid, we cannot be of any help,” Chanyeol’s grandmother says. “You’re the Samjokgu, Yeollie, you’re the only one who can do this. I’m just a witch, and I was trained to hunt Gumiho, not save their lives. Besides, he’s half human, so he’s different. You should ask Sunmi, but I don’t even know if she’s still alive and at this point, with the boy winding up here with all her magic, I doubt she is.”

Chanyeol closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Think, think, think. He needs to contact someone. Sunmi. Or Minseok. Maybe Joonmyeon would know what to do.

“Did Jimin come back?” he asks, suddenly realizing the girls should already be back. “I sent her to our house, to pick up my phone. I can call the Guardian and ask him to help us. We should also warn the Council of the Covens. If Sooyeon recovers her powers, she will probably go there first. To hunt.”

There’s a moment of tense silence, before Garyung speaks, her voice thin and firm.

“What do you mean, recover her powers? I thought you had her fox bead.”
Chanyeol stops, like a deer caught in headlights.

“Well... What did you do?”

His grandmother has never ever been angry with him. Not even after he stormed out, angry and hurt and stupid, after their fight at grandfather’s grave. But now she’s angry, her magic blistering and popping like lava bubbles around them and he doesn’t know how to react. He refuses to answer and the silence grows even more tense, until Kim Nari has had enough and gets up.

“I will check the barrier,” she says, suddenly. “Seems like your grandson terrified my guardian gods.”

She slightly bows in front of Chanyeol, eager to leave, and he bows back as she leaves the room, leaving them alone. He hears his grandmother’s slow footsteps getting closer and he’s expecting her to say something, but he feels her touch on his forehead instead. It hurts. There must be a bruise there.

“You should get someone to patch you up,” she says. “She roughed you up pretty well.”

“Later. I need to help Baekhyun first.”

“Chanyeol,” she says, and her voice is so serious he’s compelled to listen. “The boy is the last of our worries now.”

Chanyeol almost laughs out loud, sour and desperate, because that statement couldn’t have been farther away from the truth. The world out there could burn and he’d only care about Baekhyun.

“Now,” Garyung continues, “did you really give Sooyeon the fox bead?”

Chanyeol scratches his head and, again, doesn’t say anything, but his silence is quite eloquent anyway.

“Do you realize,” she sighs, “that your grandfather sacrificed his leg to stop her? That we all risked our lives to stop her and you just... gave her anything she needed to become unstoppable again?”

“She was going to kill Baekhyun,” he answers, simply. “I couldn’t let her do it.”

In the end there’s nothing else he can say.

“Do you realize how many people she killed? How many people she will kill if she recovers her powers? This is your duty Chanyeol, these powers are your responsibility…”

“These powers are my curse!” he snaps, and the lights flicker with his rage.

“Maybe they are! But you can’t simply ignore them like a child!”

“I’m in love with him!” Chanyeol says, punching the floor and leaving the imprint of his fist on the wood. “What did you want me to do? Let him die? After he saved my life? I love him, I fucking love this stupid idiot who’s willing to challenge a four thousand years old goddess just to help me…”

He’s shouting now and everyone can probably hear him, but he doesn’t care. Loving Baekhyun has been his only certainty for the last ten years, what did his grandmother expect?

“You put him on my way,” he says, voice suddenly dropping. “You did this. You and grandfather, you laid him right in front of me, and we became friends, and then we fell in love, and now you’re
telling me he doesn’t matter? He does to me!”

He bites his bottom lip to stop himself from screaming out loud. How can he explain Baekhyun and the way he laughs? How can he explain his love for pizza and his hatred for cucumbers and his stupid voice imitations and his ridiculous talent at shooting games and his lowey obsession with corgi puppies and the way he smiles, like someone had lit up the Christmas light in the black of his eyes. How can he pack thirteen years of friendship, of love, into a single sentence, to make his grandmother understand why even the thought of letting Baekhyun die is blasphemous?

“I just love him... so much.”

She doesn’t know what to answer and he doesn’t know what else to say. He shivers in the warmth of the room, looking his grandmother in the eyes before he asks the question he’s always wanted to ask her.

“Why did his family move next to us? Why did you suddenly decide we needed to become friends?”

She looks down, at Baekhyun’s unnaturally pale hair. He wishes she could’ve seen him awake, deathly charming and beaming like the sun. Not like this, corrupted by magic, in the throes of the waves.

“Your grandfather asked Sunmi to move there,” Garyung says. She doesn’t look at Chanyeol. “Well, he probably blackmailed her somehow, since I’m sure Sunmi wasn’t eager to move to Seoul either. He organized everything himself.”

“But why?”

For years, Chanyeol thought it was just a petty, cruel joke. A punishment, maybe. A curse. Things would’ve been easier, if he had never met Baekhyun. Things would’ve been duller, endless days of gray without Baekhyun’s laughter, without Baekhyun’s crazy ideas and soft, elegant hands wrapped around Chanyeol’s wrists.

“Because he was full of regrets. All his life, he had hunted Gumiho. And many of the Gumiho he hunted probably deserved death, but there were others, like Sunmi’s community in Yeoju, or the Gwangju community, who were trying to coexist peacefully with humans. It took him years to acknowledge this possibility. I was against it, but then one day he met a young Gumiho called Minseok, one of Sunmi’s kids., who came to our house and almost got himself killed. But Gyunsang didn’t kill him. He talked to him. He listened.”

“I know Minseok. He’s Baekhyun’s… I don’t know, Baekhyun called him uncle, but…”

“Minseok is an activist for Gumiho rights. He managed to convince Gyunsang that times are changing and we should change too. That’s why he did it. He wanted to give you a better chance, for a different future. He hoped that, maybe, you could’ve changed things, since it was too late for him.”

“Well, nothing changed in the end,” Chanyeol says. It’s bitter, even to his own ears. “I still almost killed a Gumiho. Baekhyun still left me because I’m the Samjokgu.”

Garyung doesn’t know what to say back.

A soft knock interrupts them and Jimin tiptoes into the room and hands Chanyeol his phone back. The screen is cracked, but it still works. He has about three hundred unread messages.
“You should rest,” he says, to his grandmother, after thanking Jimin. “I’ll talk to you later.”

She leaves wordlessly, helped by the young shaman.

Chanyeol looks at the phone, scrolling through his contacts until he finds Kim Junmyeon. Before he can start the call though, the phone starts vibrating and ringing with a famous girls group’s title track.

The name on the display is one Chanyeol would never think he’d see.

Sehun

[INCOMING CALL]

[19:01, 24.01.2018]

Sehun’s name flashes on the screen of Chanyeol’s phone.

There’s no picture – of course, he’s never taken a picture of Sehun or with Sehun because they’re not friends. They’re not even acquaintances, seeing how Sehun constantly ignored Chanyeol’s attempts to talk to him during the last five years and only gave him his number after Chanyeol insisted, for emergencies.

Well, if this isn’t an emergency...

Chanyeol slides his finger on the screen and answers with a shaky, unsure, “Hello?”

There’s a beat of silence, before a boyish voice exclaims, “I can’t believe it worked!” Then, lower, “Is Baekhyun with you?”

“Yes.”

“Is he okay?”

Chanyeol hesitates. He takes a quick look at Baekhyun. His lips are barely parted and he still hasn’t let out even one of the usual puppy noises he makes when he’s sleeping, but a bit of color has come back to his face. Magic is still sparkling through him, back and forth, a tide of power, a constant threat.

“Well, not really but... I’m working on it.”

A breath of relief. “You better! Can he talk?”

Chanyeol shakes his head, before he remembers Sehun can’t see him anyway. “No, he’s... Unconscious. But he survived.”

Sehun hums. “What about her? Sooyeon?” he spits out, as if even saying her name is difficult.

“She ran away...” Chanyeol hesitates again, but what’s the point of hiding it? “With her fox bead... Soon, she’ll have all her powers back.”

“Well, good job, oh, the mighty Samjokgu. At least you kept Baekhyun alive,” – well, more like
Baekhyun kept him alive – “and you survived. We might need you both if she goes on a killing spree. Now, listen to me, this might sound a bit strange, just...Don’t freak out, okay? What is the color of your underwear?”

“What does that even... Why?”

There’s rustling on the other side of the line and then someone else takes a hold of the phone. Chanyeol’s recognizes Jongin’s deep voice. “Please tell him, so he can stop being so suspicious of my powers!”

Jongin? What is Jongin doing with Baekhyun’s Sehun?

“It’s black,” Chanyeol says, slowly. He faintly hears Jongin’s I told you! over the phone, but Sehun just snorts.

“Black is a common color for underwear, I’m calling a fluke!”

“Why are you so distrustful? Ask him the color of his shirt!”

“Maroon,” Chanyeol answers, slowly. “Was that all? Anything else I need to disclose?”

“No,” Sehun mutters. “That was too much information, but I had to check. This strange guy tackled me on the subway and told me a bunch of stuff and asked me to do a couple of things in order to save Baekhyun. I was desperate enough to try, but I really can’t believe it worked.”

Chanyeol can hear Jongin whine something to Sehun, probably a complaint about being called a strange guy and not being believed, but it’s obscured by the sound of a car, maybe a bus, given by how loud it is.

“So,” Sehun continues, clearing his throat. “I have a message for you from Sunmi.”

“Did you talk to her? So she’s alive! My grandmother tried contacting her, but she didn’t answer and we were afraid she was...”

“Sooyeon attacked them too, yesterday night. Luckily, there were no victims. A couple of other Gumiho joined the fight and they were able to push her away, but she also stole something.”

“Half of her fox bead.”

“Exactly. And then she started looking for the other half and Baekhyun went a little crazy and stole his mother’s magic and came to you.”

Chanyeol nods, as all the pieces fall together forming the image of Byun Baekhyun’s stupidity.

“He saved my life,” he says.

“Did he actually fight her?” Sehun asks, the apprehension in his voice is evident, together with disbelief and even a little of admiration. “How bad did he lose?”

“Pretty bad.”

Sehun lets out a curse colorful enough to make even Chanyeol blush. “Of course he did. What was he thinking?”

Chanyeol can hear him take a couple of breaths through the phone, trying to calm himself. He can’t deny this is marvelous. He’s having a full-on conversation with Sehun, despite his previous
reluctance to even look in his direction. The small talk might be nice, but he has no time for this.

“Listen, I’m sorry to interrupt you, but I really need Sunmi’s number. There’s something wrong with Baekhyun, I think... all her magic... might be a little too much for him. It almost killed him earlier. I managed to stabilize him, but I don’t know what to do if it happens again so I need to talk to her.”

Somewhere next to Sehun he can hear Jongin murmur, “You can’t talk to Sunmi, she’s in Busan.”

“Strange kid is right. She left as soon as I called her, to talk to the leader of the Southern community as soon as Baekhyun left,” Sehun continues. “I don’t exactly know what they’re trying to do, since I’m bound to stay in Seoul and even among Gumiho I’m kinda young, you know? So no one ever tells me anything. Anyway, I called her as soon as this strange…”

“The name’s Jongin!” Jongin exclaims, and Sehun grumbles a little in protest.

“As soon as Jongin found me! Are you happy now? I called her as soon as Jongin found me and told her what he told me – he predicted everything, you know – and she left a message for you. She said Baekhyun probably won’t be able to control her powers, since he lacks at least two thousand years of experience, so the only way to keep all that wild magic in check is to get rid of it. You have to take it away!”

Oh, well. Useful. It’s the same thing his grandmother said.

“I can’t do that. The fox bead is too deep inside, and it’s stuck, if I pull I might kill him,” he protests, but Sehun clicks his tongue to stop him.

“No, you’re getting it wrong. You don’t have to take away all his magic at once, like you did with me,” he adds, a little poisonous – well, it’s not like Chanyeol doesn’t deserve it. “Don’t go for the fox bead inside of him, go for the magic. Just the magic.”

“I have no idea how to do that,” Chanyeol protests, but then something clicks in his mind as he remembers the moment he bit Sooyeon’s tail when she was in his kitchen, at the power that had surged through him, golden light. It still throbs at his fingers, when he flexes them in disbelief.

“Are you sure you’re the Samjokgu?” Sehun asks on the other end of the line. “Wow, millennia of evolution wasted. How can you not know how to take a Gumiho’s magic? You... like... have one job. That’s it, that’s the job. You were like... born to do this, how can you say you don’t know how to do it?”

“I wasn’t born to do it! It’s a curse, a curse!”

“You were born to receive the curse,” Jongin says, unhelpfully, and Chanyeol groans. It’s like talking with children.

“Listen, I don’t know my powers. I never even used them,” Chanyeol protests. “Except with you,” he adds then quickly, anticipating Sehun’s biting reply. “And it traumatized me to the point that I never wanted to do it again, and now you want me to do it to Baekhyun? It’s just not happening!”

“Forget what you did to me! Take just enough to stabilize him. Small bites, Park Chanyeol. You have to help him control it, make the process as smooth as possible.”

Chanyeol nods imperceptibly, his attention stolen by something else. Baekhyun’s fingers are twitching as his breath gets more restless and in a moment Chanyeol forgets about the phone and the call, and he runs to Baekhyun’s side, kneeling next to him and caressing his wrist slowly.
“Sunmi said something else,” Sehun adds, after Chanyeol’s prolonged silence. “She said magic can be stolen, but she also said magic can be gifted. It doesn’t have to be a violent, painful process. She also said Gumiho and the Samjokgu don’t have to be enemies, and that she hopes you can take care of her son well.”

Before Sehun can end the call, Chanyeol stops him. “Wait, there’s something you need to do for me. Can you please warn the Guardian of Sooyeon’s possible presence in the city?”

Sehun’s laughter is dry and full of fake humor. “That bastard can choke,” he says.

“Hey!” Jongin protests. “That bastard is my brother!”

“Your brother can choke!”

“Hey!” Chanyeol’s booming voice interrupts the both of them and for a moment he can almost hear them pout. “If you don’t want to, it’s okay, but can you ask Jongin to do it? It’s important... They need to know about Sooyeon.”

But Sehun just scoffs. “And what if they know? They have no chance to beat her without you.”

Before Chanyeol’s eyes, Baekhyun’s mouth opens in a deep, breathy whine and his eyes open and blink, slowly, his pupils so dilated it’s just black on black.

“That’s why they must wait for me before they try to go against her. I’ll think of something, okay? But I’ll worry about that later, Baekhyun is waking up! I need to go.”

He watches Baekhyun blink again, slowly, slowly, adjusting to the sudden brightness of the room, to the pain – Chanyeol can see it flare through him, magic running down his spine like an electric shiver – and to the fear.

He can barely hear Sehun’s last words – “Take care of him, Park Chanyeol, or I’ll crush any magical seal and kick your puny ass!” – before he hangs up, and finally, finally, Baekhyun looks at him. He lets out a relieved, tired noise, and smiles his brightest smile.

From: Hunnie
To: Seok
he woke up
[Sent: 19:06, 24.01.2018]

“Oh my god, the colors are so strange,” is the first thing Baekhyun says. His voice is choked up and raspy and when his lips smack a strange sandpaper-y sound comes out, and his hair is a mess and there’s drying blood on his side and chest and on the mat and on the floor and he looks like an absolute mess, but Chanyeol would kiss him right now.

He almost does it, but in the end he settles on, “Well, welcome to the world of magic.”

“Is this what you see all the time? It kinda sucks.”

Chanyeol almost laughs in his face. There’s a balloon in his chest, growing bigger and bigger with every passing second, and soon enough it’ll start pressing against his ribcage and lungs and it’ll pop, because something has to give, and all the fear and the worry and the utter despair and the
tiredness and the pain will wash over Chanyeol and he’ll probably fucking collapse, but right now the only thing he can see is Baekhyun. Baekhyun awake, Baekhyun alive. Baekhyun joking. Baekhyun.

“Dude, you said it,” he says. His hands haven’t left Baekhyun’s and he can see the muscle tense as he tries to firm a fist. “Hey, wait, don’t...”

Baekhyun doesn’t listen. The moment he moves, he screams. For a moment he stays like that, suspended, in tension, then he falls back against the mat.

“Fucking fuck,” he hisses, swallowing thickly.

“Are you crazy? Stay down or I’ll knock you down myself.”

Baekhyun, the idiot, has the audacity to pout.

“I’m just really fucking tired to wake up like this. This morning too... Was it this morning? What day is it? Wait, where is... where is the bitch? The Gumiho?”

He almost tries to get up again, but this time Chanyeol helps him, holding him up against his arm.

“Gone,” he says. “Are you happy now?”

Baekhyun tries to squirm. He’s still in pain, but at least he can’t hurt himself trying to get up on his own. “Immensely,” he says, scrunching his nose.

“Good. Now be a good boy and don’t move, if the wound reopens you’ll never hear the end of it from me.”

“A good boy? Isn’t that your job, Park Chanyeol. You’re the doggo. I’m a fox. We’re smart, malicious and kinda evil.”

“And stupid,” Chanyeol says. “Really fucking stupid.”

Baekhyun, the gods help him, pouts again. He probably doesn’t know, but he looks like his mother when he does it.

“This is the part where you don’t scold me even if I did something dumb because I almost died, right?”

“Baekhyun...”

“I’m dying in your arms, Park Chanyeol, how can you be so heartless and scold me? Don’t you have compassion? Empathy? Where is your humanity, Samjokgu?”

He’s smiling. Chanyeol doesn’t even need to look at him to know that he’s smiling but he does it anyway. His eyes travel upwards and, oh, Baekhyun always looks so young when he smiles. And it’s like the last five years haven’t happened. Chanyeol hasn’t seen one of these precious smiles – clean and light and contagious, like red balloons and cotton candy at the amusement park – in the last five years. Chanyeol hasn’t felt happiness and fondness and liquid, sticky love tug the corners of his lips upwards in the last five years. Not like this. Not like this.

“We’re on the verge of a fucking nuclear-scale magical war with the most powerful Gumiho in this country, a war we’re kinda responsible for, you and I, and maybe my grandparents and your mom, and we’ve almost both died too many times to count them in the last two days and the magic inside
of you could kill you any moment now and we broke up five years ago and I’ve missed you every
day since then. Byun Baekhyun, where do you find the strength to joke?” he asks, and Baekhyun
just smiles wider, until the smile breaks in a laugh.

“I love you,” he says, and it’s like his magic sparkles when he says it, his everything sparkles, the
whole world is sparking for Park Chanyeol to see. It’s blinding.

“And I’m so happy to see you again. I’m like, so, so-”

Chanyeol kisses him, soft and short and chaste, lips on lips, he kisses his smile and the pout that
comes later, and the choked, “Hey, I wasn’t done,” and he kisses Baekhyun’s breathy moan, and
kisses the way Baekhyun closes his eyes in bliss and lets himself be kissed.

“You scared me to death,” he says, softly, and Baekhyun’s eyelashes flutter as he breathes, and his
magic flutters around him, like the faintest halo, moonshine and flowers. “I thought you were going
to die and the last thing I would’ve told you was to leave and...”

“I couldn’t die before telling you again. That I love you.”

“I love you too,” Chanyeol says back, tripping on every word. He’s held them on the tip of his
tongue for so long that now they almost feel foreign in his mouth, so he says them again. “I love
you, Byun Baekhyun. And I don’t care, I don’t care if you’re a Gumiho or a dragon or a freaking
Tokkaebi, and I don’t care if I’m the Samjokgu, if you leave me again I will hunt you down and
put you in my pocket and never let you go, okay?

Baekhyun laughs again and leans against Chanyeol’s chest, head lolling in the hollow between his
neck and shoulder. He exhales softly against Chanyeol’s throat.

“I’m not leaving again. I’m... so tired. And sad. Being without you sucks.”

“Honestly, same. I wish it didn’t take us a couple of near-death experiences to figure this out.”

Baekhyun giggles and snuggles closer.

“Well, considering we’re still alive, I’d say we’re doing amazing, sweetie. Except for the part
where I...” He freezes and shivers and his eyes widen, his fox ears twitching and his eyes flashing
amber. And that’s when Chanyeol feels it too, a shift in the equilibrium, and all the magic being
drawn back, like an undertow, like the world is inhaling and holding its breath, and even the wind
ceases for a long moment.

Then, it ruptures.

Magic washes over him, over them, golden and bloody red and echoing of a cruel laughter, howling
with the wind, soaring in the sky, and all the totem poles of the village start screaming at the same
time as Sooyeon recovers all her powers.

The halo of Sooyeon’s magic merely darts through Chanyeol’s body, like a dull pain or a grave
foreboding, but Baekhyun’s body spasms when it touches him.

Chanyeol can see what’s happening to him in slow-motion, as magic erupts uncontrolled from the
fox bead in his chest and he lurches, panting with the effort to keep it contained. Baekhyun looks at
him with panicked eyes, unable to explain the feeling of fullness inside him, the magic sloshing at
his chest, pushing against the limits of his body, trying to escape his hold, forcing him to fight,
fight, fight.
“No, no, no, Hyunnie, hey,” he says, trying to make Baekhyun focus on him, his hands on the sides of Baekhyun’s face. “Hey, I got you. I’m here, stay with me, stay with me Baekhyun!”

It’s instinct, he realizes. It’s Sunmi’s magic reacting to Sooyeon’s magic, magic against magic. What did Jongdae say? Magic has a will. Magic has pride. Magic thinks and grows and wants. What did his grandmother say? Magic corrupts. The body and the mind.

“Baekhyun, you have to stay focused, don’t let it take over. I know it’s scary, but…”

“Be careful, it’s my mom’s magic you’re talking about,” Baekhyun, says, more like pants, and sweat is collecting on his brow and there’s a glow shining from inside him, the fox pushing to take control.

“Well, your mother is scary,” Chanyeol says, tearing a smile out of Baekhyun’s pained face.

“True.”

Baekhyun tries to swallow and Chanyeol feels the tide change inside of him as magic grows and grows and threatens to drown him again.

“No, no, no, Baekhyun, listen to me, focus on me. It’s okay, I promise. I’ve talked to... Sehun,” he ignores Baekhyun’s surprised face and continues, “who talked to a lot of other people, including your mother. Apparently, I can help you. I have no idea how to do it, but I can help you.”

That seems to take Baekhyun back, at least for now.

“It’s difficult,” he says, “like, to stay here, to stay focused.”

Chanyeol knows. He can see it. The fox inside Baekhyun is growling, clawing at Baekhyun’s chest for a way out. It’s hurt and wounded and scared and it’s in the house of a shaman, with the Samjokgu – enemy enemy enemy – and surrounded by Sooyeon’s magic – enemy. The natural reaction is to fight and flight, to attack and run away as soon as possible, but Baekhyun can’t succumb.

“I know, I know, but you can’t give up. Don’t let it control you, Baekhyun… We’ll figure this out, okay? Together.”

Chanyeol holds Baekhyun’s hand and squeezes it. “Stay with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Baekhyun says, closing his eyes to fight against yet another wave of magic.

Good, because Chanyeol really has every intention to hunt him down if he leaves again.

From: 010-0***-****
To: 010-1***-****
It’s Hong Garyung.
I don’t know if you can read this but your son is safe now.
[Sent: 19:26, 24.01.2018]

The thing, with Chanyeol’s power, is that he has no idea how to use it.
There’s instinct and there’s practice and he suppressed the first and never got to the latter and the only thing he has now is a vague impression of how this thing is supposed to work.

And then there’s Baekhyun, who’s a sea at storm, a drowning island, flooded, quaking, Baekhyun who’s both the underwater volcano and the tsunami and every other force of nature combined into this giant vortex of power swirling inside of him.

Baekhyun swallows around the pain and crushes Chanyeol’s palm and Chanyeol grits his teeth through the pain and doesn’t let go. Magic slithers under Baekhyun’s skin, following the green path of his veins, curling in white waves. He can see it with his Samjokgu powers, pushing and pulling and howling, and he doesn’t know what to do.

“How does it work?” Baekhyun asks, his voice thin and tense, and Chanyeol has no answer to offer, so he pretends he cannot hear him as he takes measurements, feeling magic flow between his fingers, impalpable like smoke. It burns without leaving scars, the pain mostly projected into his mind. It really does recognize him as the enemy.

No, he thinks, I’m not the enemy. He follows the river of power from the source, from Baekhyun’s chest, where the fox bead pulses, hidden within his heart, spreading its power everywhere in his body. Magic travels through Baekhyun’s flesh. The heart, his delicate collarbone and the hollow of his throat, the broadness of his shoulder, and then down, down, on the soft, fair side of his arm and forearm, to the tips of his fingers. They’re burning.

Chanyeol spreads them apart, one by one, feeling knots of magic between Baekhyun’s fingers, like drafts of mist.

“I only did this once,” he confesses, “a couple of hours ago,” and Baekhyun lets out a disbelieving, nervous laugh and lets his head fall back against Chanyeol’s shoulder, closing his eyes.

“Wow, this is reassuring. What do you need to do, exactly?”

“Take your magic? But not the fox bead.”

He can see Baekhyun wince at his words as his magic grows defensive, tightening his hold onto him.

“Yeah, that’s why I can’t take your fox bead,” he explains, frowning sympathetically. “It must really like you, I don’t think it’ll let me touch it.”

“I don’t really know how to feel about that. So, how are you going to do it?”

How is Chanyeol going to do it? That’s... a good question. With Sooyeon, the only thing he did was bite. He bit her tails and magic flowed through him. It might actually make sense, he realizes, thinking back to the legend of Daji and the Samjokgu. How did it go? The Samjokgu bit the Gumiho and she turned back into a fox and died. It sounds crazy, but it’s the only hint he has.

“Hey,” he says, and Baekhyun blinks, struggling to keep focused. “Okay, hear me out, I might have an idea. It’s kinda crazy, but bear with me. Let’s see if this works.”

Baekhyun just nods and swallows, closing his eyes again. “Just do it quickly, Chanyeol, because the next wave is coming and I’m not sure I can stop it... It’s tearing me apart.”

“Okay, okay, can you warn me when it’s going to hit? Can you do this for me, Baekhyun?”

Baekhyun nods, scrunching up his nose. He tries to smile, but it comes out a little too tight.
Chanyeol takes his hand and brings it up, kissing the knuckles and the junctures of his fingers and his fingertips, feeling Baekhyun’s breath grow fast and frantic.

“Chanyeol, I think it’s...”

He gasps, stopping mid-sentence, but he doesn’t need to finish. Chanyeol can see it, silver light, traveling through Baekhyun’s body, lighting him up from the inside.

He pulls Baekhyun’s wrist until it’s in front of his mouth and bites.

It’s terrifying and powerful and fulfilling. It’s magic, and Chanyeol has only personally touched magic twice in his life, when he stole Sehun’s fox bead and when he bit Sooyeon, and none of that could’ve prepared him to the blinding turmoil that is Baekhyun’s magic.

He sees the moment the universe was born and the moment it will die, genetic information ingrained in every minuscule particle of power. He sees memories – two kids holding hands on their way to school, late baseball practice, Baekhyun’s university books, all scribbled and with the pages’ corners curled and frayed. He sees the house in Yeoju, the house that burned, and he didn’t even see the fire but he knows it burned like he had just been there, smelling ashes and burning wood and dying memories. He hears the call of the mountain, how it lured Baekhyun in – how magic, pure, undiluted magic, somehow developed a will and called Baekhyun, led him into the burning house, offered itself to him. Magic chose Baekhyun and it won’t let him go, but Chanyeol chose Baekhyun too – and, most importantly, Baekhyun chose Chanyeol – and his pull on Baekhyun is universal, incomparable. Absolute.

Small bites, Sehun said, but there’s just too much magic, so Chanyeol takes and takes and takes, feeling magic fill him like his mouth was a furnace of universes, every thought a small beginning and a small ending. He takes until Baekhyun whines and he has to let go.

They collapse, together, sweaty and dead tired and breathing frantically, on the floor, but when Chanyeol looks at Baekhyun he can see that the worst has passed. He’s still carrying magic, an insane amount of it, but now it’s calm and docile in his hands, safely stored inside his body.

He heaves a sigh of relief.

“I can’t believe you actually bit me,” Baekhyun says, under his breath, and Chanyeol can feel the reverberation of his feelings run through him, an invisible link between them.

“Well, it worked! Did you have another idea?” he mutters back, but Baekhyun merely sniffs and curls on his side towards him.

“Well, that was a bit extreme. There’s still a good chance you’ll improve the next time,” someone else says from the threshold. They both get up and turn – well, they try to get up, but Baekhyun falls back immediately and Chanyeol only manages to raise his head. His grandmother is standing at the door, looking at the both of them like they’re stupid.

“It seems like you made it, Yeollie. Your friend should be safe now.”

“Oh gods, thank you. I want to sleep for a week, at least.”

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to. There’s a Gumiho at the gate. I think it wants to talk to you.”

From: Seokkie
The guardian gods are still muttering among themselves, venomous whispers that fade at the first whistle of the wind. Chanyeol stops at the gate, inside the invincible barrier created by the totem poles. The Gumiho is sitting quietly on the white carpet of snow, bathing in the yellowish lights of the old lamp posts. It seems to be waiting for him, for when Chanyeol comes into its view, the creature’s ears perk up and it looks at him with big amber eyes. Then, it walks towards the gate, stopping shy of the distance that would make the guardian gods scream like emergency sirens. It’s slender and strong, its fur a ruddy red and its magic cold and damp, like a carpet of fallen leaves slowly deteriorating under the rain. It is by no means Sooyeon.

Then, the Gumiho blinks and slowly morphs into its human form. Slender and strong, with red hair and big, dark eyes. Minseok – or, like he’s registered in the human records, Kim Minseok – is the kind of Gumiho who would pass for human even at the eye of the most experienced witch. Only the Samjokgu can see through the magic fitting around him like a glove.

“Is this how you welcome guests here?” Minseok asks. Then, before Chanyeol can answer, “Where is he?”

“Inside. He’s okay.”

“Of course he is. Your Soothsayer friend said it. I wonder for how long he’ll be okay because, I swear over my dead honor, I will beat him to death as soon as he comes out.”

“You gotta wait in line, man,” Chanyeol says weakly.

Minseok shakes his head and crosses his arms. He’s not that different from the first time Chanyeol met him, when he went on a journey with Baekhyun after graduating high school, their big vacation trip. They wanted to go to Jeju, but Baekhyun forgot the backpack with all their documents and money in the toilet of a small drive–in in the middle of nowhere and that’s when they decided it was time to ask for adult help. Chanyeol wanted to swallow his shame and call his sister, but in the end Baekhyun had called Minseok.

“Because,” he’d reasoned, “Minseok has a non-violent solution to every problem. Seulgi can do that too, but her solutions are always violent.”

And so they had called Minseok and he had come to pick them up on his ugly pickup. “You’re lucky I was done with my shift at the sanctuary,” he had said. Chanyeol had thought Minseok looked like a yoga trainer with a perky butt, not someone with a solution to every problem. The thought had lasted for a grand total of two minutes, the time it took Minseok to open the boot of the car and pull out Baekhyun’s backpack, the documents and money still inside.

(“How did he do it?” A bewildered Chanyeol had asked Baekhyun, a couple of hours later, on the ferry, headed to Jeju island.

Baekhyun had laughed, loud and unabashed against the orange light of the sunset.

“Magic.”)

Chanyeol’s second memory of Minseok wasn’t so positive. It was Minseok, punching him in the
face with all the strength his human form could muster – and it wasn’t little – before he told Chanyeol to stay the fuck away from them and dragged Baekhyun away, back to Yeoju. That was also when Chanyeol found out Minseok was also a Gumiho and the boy he had almost killed a couple of weeks earlier was the love of Minseok’s life.

(Punching Chanyeol hadn’t certainly been non-violent but, in retrospect, it hadn’t been a solution either.)

“So,” Minseok says, “from what your Soothsayer friend said, we all messed up and inadvertently unleashed the most powerful and bloodthirsty Gumiho of all times.”

“You make it sound very catastrophic,” Chanyeol says, wincing.

“Because it is. You’re the most useless Samjokgu of the last four hundred years and our only weapon strong enough to beat Sooyeon is trapped in the body of a half-human puppy whose powers have been sealed until two days ago. Defeating Sooyeon? It’s a miracle he’s still alive!” Minseok’s tails sweep the ground in outrage as he talks. “We wanted to give the fox bead to Seulgi, one of our strongest fighters, but it was too late. Magic chose him and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“What happened exactly?”

“No one knows, but it wasn’t a fully conscious choice on his part. Like I said, magic chose him even before he knew what magic was. And Sunmi’s magic was strong, so we can only assume he’s strong too.”

More than Baekhyun being just strong, he probably had a strong will. Chanyeol could feel it through him when he took his magic, the will to live, and the will to protect.

“So if Baekhyun can’t do it, who will defeat Sooyeon?”

Minseok tilts his head to the side, a gesture that Chanyeol has learnt to associate with Gumiho by now.

“If you can’t, no one can. So you will.”

“What? No! He can’t possibly do that.”

Minseok scoffs. “You will. With our help.”

“Me? Did you even see me? I’m a crippled barista,” Chanyeol says, shaking his head. Minseok’s eyes find his leg and that’s when Chanyeol remembers he can walk now. But still, he doesn’t know how to be the Samjokgu. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, or how he’s doing it. He can’t go to war.

“Besides,” he adds, “Baekhyun can barely stand. He almost died today.”

“We all almost died,” Minseok says. “Sunmi is just a human now and she survived the fury that was Sooyeon alone, and yet is she resting? No. She went to Busan to speak with Yesung – I think you know who Yesung is, do you?”

Chanyeol knows who Yesung is. He almost took his grandfather’s eye, a long time ago. And if Hong Gyunsang think someone is strong, then that someone must be strong.

“Sunmi wants to convince him to go to war. She wants to convince all the Gumiho to help you.”
This makes Chanyeol pause.

“Is that true? Would you really help us?” Then he shakes his head. “No, the witches would never accept your help. You know how the Council of the Covens work.”

“Yes, I am, unfortunately, very well acquainted with those brutes… But the truth is that they can’t defeat Sooyeon alone. No one can. Especially not you, with your inexistent experience, or the Guardian – wasn’t he almost eaten alive by her not even two days ago?”

Well, Chanyeol must admit, Minseok has a real point there.

“Not even your grandfather was able to defeat her, alone or with his witch,” Minseok continues. “He only succeeded with the help of a Gumiho. This is what you need. The help of a Gumiho. Or of a group of Gumiho.”

“And what would the Gumiho want, in exchange for their help?”

Minseok smirks. This is the heart of this whole exchange. He takes out a list, written in shaky, nervous calligraphy over old rice paper.

“The original request of rights presented by the Association of Gumiho of Korea to the Council of the Covens twenty-five years ago.” Minseok says, squaring up his shoulders, his chest full of pride. “The one the Council of the Covens completely refused back then. We want all the requests to be granted. Access to the capital, end of hunt, acknowledgment as magical creatures. Everything is here. In exchange, we can promise to help.”

*And why would the Council of the Covens trust a Gumiho?* Chanyeol wants to ask, before he realizes there’s no need to. It’s not up to the witches, it’s up to the Samjokgu. This is the change, the chance at a different world, and it all started, a long time ago, with a Gumiho called Minseok.

There’s something naughty and wild in Minseok’s carefully fabricated human appearance. A glint in his eyes, the vulpine shape of his grin. Twenty-five years ago, he has been among the ones who originally presented the document to the Council, only to see it rejected and ridiculed. Minseok was also the Gumiho who, a long time ago, went to talk with Chanyeol’s grandfather, the reason behind Chanyeol and Baekhyun’s meeting.

Indeed, Minseok has a non-violent solution to every problem.

---

From: *Yoora*
To: *Yeol*
I’m staying with Myunghoon tonight
Be safe
[Sent: 19:52, 24.01.2018]

---

The totem poles hiss and fall into a resentful silence as Minseok turns back into a Gumiho and edges back into the woods, leaving Chanyeol alone at the edge of the courtyard. He doesn’t leave any footprints, he doesn’t make a noise, but Chanyeol can track his magic and watch it leap among the trees, the piece of paper Minseok gave him crumpling in his fist.

It’s late. Midnight has come and passed and the magic fires are burning inside the house of the shaman. Among them, Baekhyun’s magic burns the brightest.
Cool whispers drift through the wide rooms of the house, bringing forth the last hushed words of the day. Protected by the guardian gods, the household is going to sleep.

Chanyeol can spot Jimin, tired and disheveled, talking with one of the nephews of the shaman in one of the secondary buildings. They both stop when Kim Nari herself opens the door and steps out, wrapped in a puffy caterpillar coat and heavy boots. They’re quick to bow, but she dismisses them, looking around until her eyes find Chanyeol’s. She jumps down the raised wooden platform of the house, still agile despite the age, and her boots make a fuzzy sound when they hit the soft snow.

Chanyeol offers her his arm but she slaps it away and pushes a jacket onto him.

“Cover yourself, boy,” she says. “Not even the strongest magic can cure a common cold faster than its natural course should be and you’ll have a war to fight tomorrow.”

The jacket is old and smells like humidity and hay, but Chanyeol is thankful for the extra warmth.

“Where are my grandmother and sister?” he asks.

“In bed. Garyung collapsed immediately after talking with you. Her magic is still strong and her mind sharp, but her body feels the burden of time. Stopping Sooyeon drained her. Your sister is sleeping as well. The shock of being charmed by a Gumiho takes a while to wear off, I’m surprised she lasted this long.”

“You should sleep, too,” Chanyeol says, bowing to show his respect. “It’s quite late.”

“I will, little Park, don’t worry,” she says. “I just wanted to make sure you sent your guest off properly. One half Gumiho under my roof is one half Gumiho too many.”

Chanyeol can only bow again, a half-hearted apology.

“I am grateful for your help,” he says. “I’m sorry to have brought war at your gates.”

She laughs. “War would’ve come anyway, be it here or somewhere else. My family has lived here as long as the Samjokgu did. Our duty has always been to protect the home of the Samjokgu, but for years there hasn’t been a Samjokgu to protect in the village. I’m glad I could be of use one last time before my daughter takes my place.”

He walks her around the courtyard, following the shape of the house until they reach the last door of the compound.

“Will you keep my sister safe tomorrow?”

She doesn’t need to ask why. If something happens to Chanyeol, Yoora will be the next Samjokgu.

“You don’t need to worry about that, Chanyeol. You’re not fighting this war alone. You have us, you have the help of the witches in Seoul and, if the visit of the infamous Kim Minseok is anything to go by, you might have the help of the Gumiho too. Times are changing.”

Times are changing, indeed. A couple of decades ago, war would’ve meant fighting a Gumiho. Tomorrow, Chanyeol will have to get up and go to war and the Gumiho he’ll have to fight is the last of his problems. He doesn’t know how to convince Junmyeon to trust Kim Minseok and accept his help, overcoming all the hatred the Guardian has collected since the death of his father. He doesn’t know how to convince Baekhyun to stay at home, where it’s safe, where nothing can hurt
him. He doesn’t know how to keep the people of Seoul from realizing a massive battle is being fought under their nose. This is his job, he realizes, this is what the Samjokgu has done for centuries, and Chanyeol doesn’t even know where to start.

The shaman pinches his cheek, like she did many times when she was young.

“Go to sleep,” she says. “You have a long day tomorrow, but we are safe here, and we all need rest.”

The door gently slides closed, just as another opens.

Chanyeol turns to see Baekhyun peeking curiously at him. Someone has lent him a clean shirt and sweatpants, so he’s not covered in blood anymore. He jumps down into the courtyard, landing softly on the snow. He’s barefoot, Chanyeol notices, and incredibly pale, glowing softly from inside. His hair shines, silver with a hint of pink and maybe lavender, moon shine and flowers. His tails curl softly around his body, like leaves shaking at the lightest breeze.

He walks towards Chanyeol in soft, hesitant steps, and wraps himself around him.

Chanyeol’s first instinct is to tell him to go back inside, the second is to ask him if he’s not cold. He follows the third and hoists Baekhyun up on his shoulders, feeling his arms locking around his neck and his legs clamping on his hips.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asks, but Baekhyun just giggles in his ears.

“Don’t worry, I have magical fur now. Perks of being a Gumiho. Are you cold, though?”

“How could I? You’re so hot, baby, riding me like a pro,” he says, jumping to make Baekhyun bounce on his back. Baekhyun has to stifle a loud laughter on his shoulder. Chanyeol hushes him before he can wake up the entire house.

“Where are we, by the way? Your grandma’s house?”

“Nope, that’s on the other side of the village. But we kinda blew it up trying to escape Sooyeon, so we had to rely on the hospitality of the local shaman.”

“Oh, that’s why the air is so clean here.”

It is. Crisp and transparent and pure. Like a white canvas ready to be filled by Baekhyun’s magic.

“So, you’re walking,” Baekhyun murmurs, pensive, against his ear.

“And you’re not.”

Baekhyun tries to get off him out of pettiness but Chanyeol doesn’t let him go.

“I told you, the doctors said it was mostly psychosomatic. I think it was half guilt, half magical block? It broke the moment I stole Sooyeon’s magic.”

“Yes, I can still feel it on you.” Baekhyun doesn’t sound happy. Chanyeol can’t see his face, but he’s sure Baekhyun is pouting.

“Don’t worry, yours tasted better.”

“I still can’t believe you bit me,” Baekhyun says, shaking his head.
“I didn’t know how to make it work, okay?” He sees Baekhyun’s magic floating around him, filaments of silver light. He can see them and he can touch them, but when he tries to hold them they disintegrate in his hand, flying away like dandelion seeds. “I needed to establish a contact. The legend said to bite, so I bit.”

“Bad dog.” Baekhyun waves a hand in front of his face, where the red imprint of Chanyeol’s teeth is stamped like a tattoo, and Chanyeol grabs it and kisses it. “Okay, good dog.”

He can feel Baekhyun’s head resting on his nape as he kisses his fingers one by one, tracing the hollows between them with his lips until he finds Baekhyun’s pulse, slow and steady, blood and magic. He can taste Baekhyun’s power on the tip of his tongue, sticky and heavy like cotton candy, tasting like the nectar of those purple flowers growing at the side of the road – Chanyeol plucked and ate them just to taste that still of honey hidden among the petals.

He lays Baekhyun down, overpowered by the urge to kiss him again, but Baekhyun beats him to it, both his eyes and his mouth closed, his lips landing at the corner of Chanyeol’s mouth, like quicksilver. Magic thrums under his skin and Chanyeol can taste it at the back of his throat.

*Take it,* Baekhyun seems to say. *It’s all yours.* Like an offer, like a gift, the first flower of the year, all for Chanyeol to take. And he wants to take, he’s wanted to take Baekhyun for the last five years, not in the way he wanted to attack Sehun, like a hunter craves a prey, but like a conqueror craves glory, like a slave fighting for freedom, like a lover. Magic or not, Chanyeol has wanted Baekhyun as a human, he wants him as a Gumiho.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Baekhyun asks, his eyes glinting liquid amber, his hair like silver fire, his smile the same, after thirteen years, as that kid Chanyeol met in the garden of his house in Seoul.

“What are you thinking?” he asks back, drawing Baekhyun closer, speaking through a smile.

“I’m thinking there are too many people in this house and I’m terrible at keeping quiet.”

Chanyeol kisses the smugness out of his mouth. They’re going to war tomorrow, but Baekhyun is here. Chanyeol has already won.

“I might have a solution for that.”

---

From: 010-0****-****
To: 010-1****-****
It’s Hong Garyung.
I don’t know if you can read this but your son is safe now.
[Sent: 21:18, 24.01.2018]

Baekhyun has delicate, birdlike wrists, his hand so light the bones might as well be hollow. His dainty fingers drown in the ridges between Chanyeol’s fingers, but his hold is unexpectedly strong and solid.

They walk together towards the entrance of the property, leaving a confused path of deep imprints and the crisp sound of trampled snow. When they cross the totem poles, with their suspicious whispers, Baekhyun stops for a moment to wave at them.
“Don’t tease the guardian gods,” Chanyeol says, tugging Baekhyun and making him stumble, catching him before he falls.

“It’s not teasing, it’s called being polite. They were nice to me. They let me enter the village.”

Did they? Chanyeol turns to glare at the totem poles for giving him shit after they gave Baekhyun a free pass and they whisper sheepishly.

“Where are we going?” Baekhyun asks, walking faster to keep up with Chanyeol’s long legs.

“My grandmother’s house.”

“Didn’t you say it blew up?”

“We messed up the kitchen, but the rest should be alright.”

Baekhyun steals curious glances at the house while Chanyeol assesses the damage of the explosion. The kitchen has seen better days, but most of the explosion only happened on a magical plane, so the remainder of the house is intact.

“I wonder what would’ve happened,” Baekhyun says, “if you had really invited me here when we were in high school.”

They had talked about it sometimes, when Chanyeol was in Jung-maeul with his family and he missed Baekhyun too much. He thought of inviting Baekhyun over for a weekend, introduce him to his grandparents.

“You wouldn’t have been able to cross the gate,” he says, and Baekhyun steals a furtive look at the totem poles in the garden, eradicated by Sooyeon. “It would’ve been a giant mess.”

“Bigger than this one? I don’t think so.”

Maybe it would’ve been better, to know everything from the start, to learn about everything, about Gumiho and Samjokgu, together. Or maybe they wouldn’t have lasted that long. What ifs are made of dust.

Hong Gyunsang’s altar in the living room is still standing, thankfully, though a little crooked. Baekhyun waits shyly at the entrance of the room while Chanyeol walks inside and straightens the framed photograph, lifting the fallen candles and repositioning them in front of the altar.

Baekhyun takes a cautious step inside and looks at Gyunsang’s black and white face.

“He doesn’t look anything like you,” he comments.

“I look more like my grandmother. Except the height.”

“You know, I talked to her earlier,” Baekhyun mumbles. “She asked me how my mom is and told me she’d like to have us for lunch someday.”

“Wow, that’s character development. She was kinda angry with me for, you know, giving Sooyeon all her powers back.”

Baekhyun’s smile turns sour. “Yes, she also said we’re both idiots.”

They stare at the previous Samjokgu’s picture for another moment, until Chanyeol breaks the silence.
“Did you know that they organized everything because they wanted us to be friends? My grandpa and your mom.”

Baekhyun heaves a tired sigh. “Yes, I kinda knew. She told me, after what happened with Sehun. It made me even more angry, to be honest. Their plan sucked.”

“Well, they reached their goal, in the end.”

Baekhyun scoffs. “Their intentions were good, but they could’ve just sat us down and told us everything. And then you wouldn’t have attacked Sehun and we’d still be together, don’t you think?”

Chanyeol doesn’t really know what to answer. He closes the door at his back and leads the way towards his own room.

“Here,” he says, holding the door open for Baekhyun. The light flickers twice and dies when he hits the switch. He tries again, but it’s useless. The magic his grandmother unleashed to stop the Gumiho must have burnt all the wiring.

“It seems like we’re bound to spend the night in the darkness,” he says, a little defeated, and Baekhyun just laughs and shuffles past him to enter the room.

“Don’t be silly, I’m a fox,” he mumbles, as he swirls around the room and stops in front of the comics books lined up on the shelf. “I can see in the darkness. Worry for yourself.”

Chanyeol doesn’t even bother with an answer. Baekhyun is shining so bright it’s like standing before the moon. His magic is like liquid silk flitting and swirling through the room. Who needs light, when Baekhyun is there.

“Come here,” Chanyeol says, flopping on the bed and patting the space next to him. Baekhyun jumps on his lap instead, a handful of smiling boy and ethereal fox tails. Chanyeol’s fingers pass through them like they’re nothing more than colorful light when he tries to touch them, but it would take a flick of Baekhyun’s fingers to materialize them, and so he does, with a glint of amusement in his eyes.

Chanyeol’s hand sinks in soft, silver fur and Baekhyun lets out a satisfied purr.

“How does it work?” Chanyeol asks, as he pets him.

“No idea,” Baekhyun says. “It’s amazing, but a little scary. I need to stay focused, always. If I’m not careful, I can’t think. It’s too overwhelming.”

He closes his eyes, sagging against Chanyeol.

“The first time I saw you like this, I thought you were an angel. We were in the middle of the street, do you remember?”

“You were trying to kill Sehun.”

Chanyeol grimaces and rubs tiredly at his face. So, they’re really doing this.

“I was, yes. I’m not trying to justify it, but I wasn’t really thinking when I attacked him. I just saw a Gumiho and I was the Samjokgu, I was just following instinct. But when I saw you, it was like...”

*Like the rest of the world had gone dark so that you could shine. Like you were already the*
When Chanyeol first realized he was in love with Baekhyun, he was too short and too plump, too nerdy, too jealous and lame, and how could someone like him aim for someone like Baekhyun? With time, he learnt how to be comfortable in Baekhyun’s presence – and now it’s so easy, Baekhyun makes everything easy – but sometimes, sometimes he looks at Byun Baekhyun and the right words just don’t come out. Sometimes Chanyeol wonders how could he ever think Baekhyun was anything but otherworldly, really... He’s too much, light and magic, colorful stars collapsing at his hands, the milky way wrapped around his sternum, constellations shining on his skin. He moves galaxies in his wake and Chanyeol has no words to describe him.

“If I wasn’t the Samjokgu, I’d think you charmed me with your magic,” he only says, under his breath, and he swears he can see a flash of doubt in Baekhyun’s eyes. Ah, so he had thought about it, too. Chanyeol wonders if Baekhyun doubted his feelings, their relationship, all the things they had always thought to be absolute. Maybe he thought nothing was real. Chanyeol thought the same, sometimes, and it would’ve been easier, if there had been only magic between them, but...

“But I am the Samjokgu,” he continues. “I’m the only person in the world you wouldn’t be able to charm with magic and I fell for you anyway.”

“Jongin would say it was destiny,” Baekhyun says, and they both roll their eyes. “I don’t really believe in destiny, but I believe in us. Do you think it’s stupid?”

Baekhyun squeezes his hand and looks up at him from under soft, pale hair. “I think you’re stupid,” he says, “but I believe in us too.”

They lean back on Chanyeol’s bed and watch the sky clear out, showing pale winter stars. Chanyeol’s phone keeps buzzing and lighting up with notifications coming from everyone he knows. Junmyeon, Kyungsoo, Seungwan, his parents, Jongdae, Jongin, Sehun. All the names twirl and fall to pieces as if they’re in a giant mixer, so he simply mutes everything, throws the phone into the first drawer and goes back to playing with Baekhyun’s hair.

“I think it’s time we have a talk,” he says.

“Where do I start?” Baekhyun asks, his lips curling into a nervous pout.

“Start from the beginning.”

So Baekhyun starts from yesterday morning and Chanyeol shakes his head and kisses the crown of his head and tells him to start from the real beginning.
“You start then, since you think you’re the shit,” Baekhyun says, so Chanyeol starts from the beginning.

He tells Baekhyun how he loved the story of the Samjokgu when he was young, how he wanted to be one, how he discovered he had a very good chance to become one, and Baekhyun in turn told him about the mountains around Yeoju, about Seulgi who was never afraid and Minseok who was too patient and Sehun who turned into a kid just to play with him.

They go back, talking about Sooyeon, who died before either of them were born, and the things they discovered complete each other, like pieces of a puzzle coming together to finally form a clear image of what really led to the madness they lived in the last two days.

Chanyeol tells Baekhyun about the boys at the morgue and Baekhyun tells Chanyeol about the hole in his chest, where Sooyeon lifted the seal from his magic, allowing him to see it just like Chanyeol, the Samjokgu, does. They talk about broken homes, about secrets that waited too long to be unveiled.

Baekhyun’s magic flushes as he tells Chanyeol the way the fox lured him inside the burning house, leading him among the flames to the small box containing the token of his mother’s power. It blisters as Chanyeol tells Baekhyun how he tried to eradicate the fox bead from inside him before it killed him and failed, because magic clung to Baekhyun too hard, with stubbornness and despair.

“It’s like it’s trying to become one with you,” he complains.

“I think it’s because it chose me.”

And it’s true. Magic chose him. Magic wants him, hissing in jealousy at Chanyeol when he tries to come too close, but Chanyeol wants him too.

“I can see that, but it’s not safe. We managed to stabilize the situation, but we’ll need to find a more sustainable solution in the future. You can’t live your life constantly risking to be swallowed by your magic.”

“We’ll find a solution, but first we have to stop Sooyeon.”

Chanyeol rolls over, facing the ceiling. His chest feels heavy. Baekhyun’s tails have faded again from the physical plane of reality, but he can still feel them, evanescent and glittering, wrapped all over him.

“You mean I have to stop Sooyeon,” he says. Like he expected, Baekhyun’s tails mirror the annoyance in Baekhyun’s voice.

“I meant exactly what I said, we are going to stop Sooyeon. There’s no way I’m letting you go against her alone. You’ll only get yourself killed.”

“Because you clearly know what you’re doing. You’ve known magic for, how long, twelve hours?”

“Well, I’m still better than you and you’ve had magic for the last five years.”

Chanyeol slaps his thigh, even if he knows Baekhyun has a point.

“Minseok said the Gumiho will help us. If we manage to convince the Guardian, we might have a chance.”
Baekhyun lets out a non-committal hum and shifts closer, half-spooning Chanyeol and half-straddling him at the same time. “Will we manage to convince the Guardian? He doesn’t have a nice reputation.”

That is true. Junmyeon holds a personal grudge against Gumiho, but after all the speeches about taking responsibilities and protecting human lives, he can’t just decide to back off and prioritize his own personal feelings. Chanyeol would never let him live it down. Sooyeon would never let any of them survive, if they don’t join forces.

“If he accepts and the Gumiho help the witches, things might change,” he says slowly, feeling the way Baekhyun nods against his chest. “And maybe it won’t be so strange, if the Samjokgu and a Gumiho are friends. Or something more.”

Baekhyun shifts, shuffling to get up and Chanyeol panics and tries to catch his forearm to drag him back, suddenly afraid he’s said something wrong and made Baekhyun angry.

Baekhyun pushes him down before he can say something, an apology, an explanation, anything. He pushes him onto the bed with a hand on his chest and keeps him there, pouting, all glowy and magical.

“Does it even matter?” he asks, his pretty face all furrowed.

“What?”

“Does it matter, if things change or not? What if the witches decide to refuse?”

Then they’re all dead, Chanyeol almost answers, but he doesn’t think that has anything to do with the point Baekhyun is trying to make, with the way he rings with nervous energy.

“What if nothing changes?” he continues, and his fingers curl in the fabric of Chanyeol’s shirt, clawing at the skin over his heart. “What would happen to us then? What are we, Chanyeol?”

“What do you want us to be?” Chanyeol asks, and he means it as a statement, not as a real question, but Baekhyun’s pout deepens at his words.

“I asked you first, didn’t I?”

And Chanyeol has to stifle a laugh, because it’s not everyday that Baekhyun chooses to play obtuse with him, but he’s so endearing when he does, even as he shakes, waiting for Chanyeol’s final words.

He slowly detaches Baekhyun’s hand from his chest, intertwining their fingers – Baekhyun watches him with a nervous, hopeful expression, his mouth open in a silent oh – and then yanks him down, reverting their position until he’s looming over Baekhyun, watching him bounce and fall back on his pillow with some sort of warm satisfaction.

And there’s some sort of revenge in the way the fall leaves Baekhyun soft and breathless, caged in Chanyeol’s arms. Baekhyun wanted to break up and so they broke up. And Chanyeol waited years to get him back, only on Baekhyun’s conditions – always on Baekhyun’s conditions. Chanyeol is only going to take everything Baekhyun offers, and yet Baekhyun is here, biting his lips, as if Chanyeol is going to tell him no. As if Chanyeol would ever want to let him slip away again. (He would, if Baekhyun asked, but Baekhyun didn’t. Baekhyun asked what they are, as he asked if Chanyeol would still want him tomorrow.)

“I literally couldn’t care less about the witches and their rules,” he whispers, pulling Baekhyun’s
hand up to his mouth and kissing the pulse on his delicate wrist, tasting magic on his lips. 
Baekhyun’s hair is spread over the pillow like a halo of white gold and he looks mesmerized, just like Chanyeol feels. “And I don’t care about what the rest of the world thinks. Had it been for me, you would’ve never left. I would’ve never let you go. I’m not letting you go now.”

Baekhyun’s bottom lips quivers, his evanescent tails flutter, magic in him ripples and echoes in concentric rings as he yanks his hand back from Chanyeol’s grip only to curl it on Chanyeol’s nape and pull him down. Chanyeol lets himself be pulled, and it’s like jumping off a cliff, feeling your heart jump with you, pressing against his cage of bones, weightless, all excitement and anticipation, just for a moment, before his lips find Baekhyun’s and they both stop breathing.

From: Seokkie
To: Hunnie
I fucking mis yuo
[Sent: 22:01, 24.01.2018]

Kissing Baekhyun always felt a little like drowning, but kissing him as a Gumiho feels like resurfacing. It’s like every time their lips touch, every moan, every mouthful of magic Chanyeol can take from him is a breath of fresh air after he spent too much time underwater.

Chanyeol can taste magic on his lips and he can feel it under his palms, throbbing under Baekhyun’s skin, pulsing inside his chest, stardust and moonshine and night flowers. Magic blooms everywhere they touch, echoing from Baekhyun inside Chanyeol, and he finds himself reaching for more, licking inside Baekhyun’s mouth, pulling more and more power from him just for the thrill of feeling it sparkle through his veins, iridescent euphoria.

He wonders if it’ll always be like this in the future, Baekhyun’s magic spilling, out of control, like a rogue wave, every time Chanyeol touches him. Maybe one day Baekhyun will learn to control it, and it will stop reverberating through him like a pure, colorless note every time their lips meet.

Chanyeol slips his legs between Baekhyun’s and grinds down, enjoying the dry friction, the drag of fabric between them, the anticipation and the way Baekhyun keens in response, canting up his hips – magic flairs turning everything a white that contains every other color, blinding Chanyeol for a moment – and falling back on the mattress again.

And Chanyeol had missed this, being able to reduce Baekhyun to breathless moans and high-pitched whines, to pin him down, to hold him there – so that he can never escape again. Every time they had sex after the breakup, Chanyeol always let Baekhyun lead, but now he can finally push him down and cup his jaw as he kisses him again, shallow and quick, while Baekhyun shifts, restless, under him.

Underneath the onslaught of magic, Baekhyun feels just like Baekhyun. Too fast, too much teeth, too much tongue, too much hands grasping at Chanyeol’s shoulders to keep him there where Baekhyun wants. Too much noise. Bratty, demanding, laughing through his despair as he asks Chanyeol to get rid of his shirt, constantly trying to shimmy out of his clothes, rutting against Chanyeol’s thighs like a vixen in heat.

Chanyeol can’t help but smile, at the impatience, at the disarray of movements – at the way Baekhyun shakes and rattles, already at his limit, tense and strung up like the silver string of a bow. In everyday life, Chanyeol is the one who can’t control himself, who gets angry and petty and who gets restless. Chanyeol is the one who gets insecure and impatient. But when they’re like this, on the bed, when he has Baekhyun in his hands, Chanyeol likes to dictate the pace, firm and sure,
and slow, so slow, maddening. He likes to make Baekhyun see stars.

He ignores the hands clawing at his clothed shoulders and pushes Baekhyun down, kissing him again, drawing back for a moment when Baekhyun tries to coax him into something frantic and lost. Instead, he kisses Baekhyun deep and sure again, and decadent, biting on his lips when Baekhyun whines.

“No, no, you have to wait,” Chanyeol says, slowing him down and stopping to take a good look at him. His pupils are so blown the black has devoured everything and his lips are swollen and spitt-slick and pink. His face is flushed. His chest, half-uncovered from where he pulled on his shirt trying to pull it off – unaware he was tugging on the wrong direction – is flushed too. Chanyeol too must be flushed because he feels way too hot. “We’re going to take it slow.”

“What?” Baekhyun huffs, slapping Chanyeol’s hand away and going back to pulling on the strings of his shirt. Chanyeol has to capture his wrists again, pinning them on the sides of Baekhyun’s head to keep him still.

“Oh, come on,” Baekhyun whines, struggling against Chanyeol’s hold. Chanyeol distracts him by kissing him again.

“Why are you in a hurry?”

“Why are you not in a hurry,” Baekhyun asks, glaring at him, thought the effect is ruined when Chanyeol licks a long stripe down his neck. He shivers and chokes.

“We’ve been in a hurry for the past three years,” Chanyeol says, punctuating every pause with a light bite to Baekhyun’s neck. “Always in a hurry, doing the deed in the dark because someone,” – he makes sure to bite extra hard this time and Baekhyun’s whole body jolts and his dick presses against Chanyeol’s thigh, so hard it must be painful for him – “needed to leave the morning after. I’m tired of quickies, Baekhyun.”

“Aren’t you being petty right now?”

Chanyeol bites extra hard and misses the way Baekhyun struggles to glare at him and gives up when Chanyeol licks a long stripe down his neck. He shivers and chokes.

He soon realizes he’s fighting a lost battle. The more he tries to slow down, the more Baekhyun speeds up. His pulse, his breaths, the way his magic inhales and exhales around them, faster and faster. His legs wrap around Chanyeol’s hips, trying to drag him closer, starved for contact.

“Arms up,” he says, and he has to repeat it again because Baekhyun is still screwing his eyes closed, dazed. “Come on, Baekhyun, arms up.”

“Now who’s in a hurry?” Baekhyun asks, giggling when Chanyeol pinches him after he gets rid of his shirt.

Baekhyun’s chest is soft. It was firmer when he came back from the army, and Chanyeol watched it lose its tone through their illegal, secret meetings, as Baekhyun switched from working out everyday to lazing off at the counter of the family hostel. Chanyeol doesn’t mind the change. He really likes Baekhyun every way he can get him.

He mouths at his throat, to his nipples – Baekhyun’s hand clamped in his hair, pulling hard enough that the burn on his scalp is pleasurable – to his bellybutton, where he dips his tongue, making
Baekhyun squirm, and down, lower, until he reaches the outline of Baekhyun’s cock.

“Can I?” he asks, enjoying the impatience in Baekhyun’s face – the pout, the way he frantically shakes his head up and down and follows the movement of Chanyeol’s hand on the elastic band as if hypnotized.

His cock springs free when Chanyeol pulls his pants and underwear down in one go, leaving a small dollop of precum on his stomach. It’s half-hard and warm and perfect in Chanyeol’s hand and Baekhyun’s eyes flutter close and magic clogs the air, thick and heavy, clinging to their skin like summer heat. Chanyeol pumps Baekhyun’s dick lazily and Baekhyun goes boneless in his hands, all the haste forgotten in favor of leaning back and panting, open mouthed and loud.

Chanyeol tightens his grip and Baekhyun’s body goes tense, all his magic fracturing and bristling, as he bucks in Chanyeol’s hand.

“You’ve never been so... responsive,” he says, steadying Baekhyun’s hips with one hand as he lets him fuck into the other.

“It’s the magic,” Baekhyun pants. “It’s really fucking me up...”

It is. It’s like everything Chanyeol does to Baekhyun reverberates in waves around them, crashing on the walls of the room and back into them.

“I wonder what happens when you come,” Chanyeol says, in a speculative tone, and even the words have Baekhyun twitching.

“Say, can you go all the way?” he asks, and Baekhyun shakes his head, desperate and too wound up and already on the verge of coming. “Yeah, I guessed as much.”

Baekhyun looks like he really regrets not being able to go all the way, but it’s fine. Chanyeol was never picky about what kind of sex they had, as long as they were doing it together. He hoists one of Baekhyun’s legs onto his shoulder and presses a blind kiss to his face, barely missing his mouth as he jerks him off fast and rough.

Baekhyun links his hands on his nape, dragging him down for another messy kiss, and the angle is awkward, Chanyeol’s wrist is straining between them, but Baekhyun shudders, and everything coils around them, magic reeling in hot, white flashes, faster and faster, as everything tightens and time slows down, just for them, the implosion before the explosion.

Chanyeol is forced to close his eyes when magic ruptures through the room. He still sees the blast, fireworks like flowers on lights splattered on his closed eyelids. He still feels the blast, echoing through him before it spreads across the room, the rest of the house, the forest. He still hears it, like the toll of a silver bell. Magic claims the world in a plume of stardust as Baekhyun comes quietly, unlike everything else he does, biting his lips and hiding his face in Chanyeol’s neck.

From: Hunnie
To: Seokkie
fucking miss u 2
[Sent: 22:01, 24.01.2018]
“When you told me you’re terrible at keeping quiet I was imagining you’d be at screamer. Not this.”

Baekhyun’s chest is still heaving up and down, swelling and contracting with every harsh breath. He opens one eye, then the other. He suddenly looks worried.

“Do you think your grandmother heard us?

“I don’t think there’s a single magical creature in the whole country who couldn’t feel you coming, sweetie.”

Baekhyun blushes, whines and tries to roll over, almost falling from the bed. Chanyeol grabs him before he tips over the edge and pulls him back.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at Minseok or Seulgi in the eye.”

“If we’re lucky, no one will know all that magic came from us having sex. Just that there was a lot of magic.”

Baekhyun doesn’t look convinced, but he’s too tired to press further.

“Well, at least we solved the problem of keeping your magic under control,” Chanyeol says. The small storm inside Baekhyun seems to have placated for good now. Sunmi’s fox bead glows faintly somewhere inside Baekhyun’s chest and the tendrils of power simmering around Baekhyun have disappeared. His tails, still intangible, no more than projections of magic only Chanyeol can see, curl lazily around the both of them.

Like this, Chanyeol could take the fox bead if he wanted. If he acted fast enough, he could pull it out of Baekhyun’s chest before the magic inside him has a chance to hurt Baekhyun. There would be no fight for him tomorrow. Also, he would never forgive Chanyeol. One of Baekhyun’s fox tails suddenly materializes on his lap and he strokes it, eliciting a content hum from Baekhyun.

“You’re thinking too much,” Baekhyun says, trying to lift himself on his elbows. Chanyeol pushes him down again and dips down to lick the sweat from his collarbones. Baekhyun squirms under him, languid and flushed, and Chanyeol jolts, suddenly remembering he hasn’t taken care of his still half-hard dick yet. Watching Baekhyun come washed away the edge of his urgency, and for now he’s content enough just lying on top of Baekhyun and enjoying his warmth and the slight hoarseness in his voice.

“What are you thinking about?” Baekhyun asks. He threads his fingers through Chanyeol’s hair, scratching at the roots, and Chanyeol closes his eyes and rests his head on Baekhyun’s shoulder.

“I was thinking I don’t want you to come with me tomorrow,” he says, low, like it’s a secret.

“Well, I don’t want you to go either,” Baekhyun whispers back. “But we’re both going in the end.”

“Are we?”

“So we have any other choice?”

Running away. Together. Be free. From responsibilities, from duties, from prejudices. From magic. From the war. Running away, spending the rest of their lives being free. But would they be happy, always on the run, weighed down by guilt and shame? Would they be happy?

“Can I ask you a question?”
He regrets his choice of words when Baekhyun’s lips curl into a teasing smile, and he already knows what Baekhyun is going to say.

“You already did.”

“Ah, ah, very funny Byun Baekhyun. Smartass.”

“You love this ass,” Baekhyun says, wiggling a little under him, and Chanyeol bites back another moan. “Ask me all the questions, Chanyeol.”

Chanyeol doesn’t have all the questions. He only has one.

“If you could choose, would you choose freedom without happiness or happiness without freedom?”

He feels the way Baekhyun’s body tenses under his own, magic curling protectively around him.

“Did I say something wrong?” Chanyeol asks.

Baekhyun shakes his head. “Nothing, it’s just... Jongin asked me this question, the day you became the Samjokgu. And yesterday morning, when I went to Aneuk Café with Minseok, to ask him if he knew where the Gumiho was. He asked me the same question and said it’s time for me to find an answer.”

“It’s just... I was thinking. Even if we manage to defeat Sooyeon and miraculously survive, what if the witches decide they don’t want peace, after all? What if they say you’re a criminal? You and your mother hid your Gumiho nature, so you still could be prosecuted by the Council of the Covens. And if you had to choose between staying with me and being free, what would you choose?”

Baekhyun bops his nose.

“I was right, Yeol. You really are thinking too much. Why would I have to choose between you and my freedom when I can have both? You’re the Samjokgu, and I’m the second strongest Gumiho in this country. You’re the only one who could stop me and the only one who never would. Don’t let the witches decide for you. You’re the Samjokgu. You, and no one else. You’re the master of this war. Stop playing like a pawn, when you’re the King.”

“If I’m the King then what are you, the Queen?”

Baekhyun rolls them over, reversing their positions until he’s laying on top of Chanyeol in the middle of the small bed. There’s a malicious glint in his eyes.

“Well, since I’m obviously the most powerful here. The smartest, the fastest, the prettiest... Ouch!”

Chanyeol bites his bottom lip and smirks. “The loudest, too!”

“At least I’m not the lamest.”

He winks and Chanyeol shakes his head. “One day that dirty mouth will get you in trouble,” he says, making Baekhyun laugh out loud.

“Do you know what else my dirty mouth could do? You haven’t come yet and the night is still young.”

This time, it’s Chanyeol’s turn to laugh. “Aren’t you tired? You came so hard they probably heard
you in the neighboring country and you’re still asking for more? What a vixen...”

He choking on the last word as Baekhyun’s devilish hand sneaks past the band of his jeans and his half-erection suddenly turns into a pressing problem.

“You’re really underestimating me, oh mighty Samjokgu. You know what else I gained, together with incredible powers, the constant threat of mental annihilation and the most explosive orgasms I’ve ever felt?” He leans down until he’s talking into Chanyeol’s ear, making him shudder. “Endless stamina, apparently.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“So you wanna try?”

Tomorrow, Chanyeol thinks. Tomorrow they’re going to war. But Baekhyun’s laughter is contagious and his body too warm, his magic too welcoming. Let there be peace, tonight. Let there be love.

*Ponder and deliberate before you make a move.*
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War
“Okay, I’m gonna need you to change the song now.”

“We’re not changing the song, Chanyeol.”

“We are.”

“We’re not, I said.”

Chanyeol tries to get a hold of Baekhyun’s small iPod only to retreat quickly once he sees Baekhyun’s teeth snap too close to his forearm.

“Did you just try to bite me?” He asks.

“I need to defend myself against your long, long arms.”

He scoots towards the window, glaring suspiciously at Baekhyun.

“You really tried to bite me! I can’t believe I like you!”

Baekhyun rolls his eyes to the ceiling of the bus. “You’re so dramatic.”

Says the one who forced Chanyeol to listen to Genie in loop for the last forty minutes.

“There are so many songs we could listen to. Like, I don’t know, 2NE1’s-”

Baekhyun stops him with a hand on his lips. “We. Don’t. Talk about other girl groups.”

“But I like- ouch!”

The bus stops suddenly and they both almost crash into the seats in front of them.

“Oh, toilet break!” Baekhyun yells. “Are you coming?”

Chanyeol shakes his head. He’ll use these five minutes to delete all Girls Generation songs from Baekhyun’s iPod, even if Baekhyun dumps him afterwards.

Baekhyun slips the backpack on his shoulders. “Do you want anything from the convenience store?”

“Honey crisps?”

“Honey crisps it is.”

It takes approximately two hours, three packets of honey crisps and four Girls Generation almost-fights for Baekhyun to realize that something is missing. And that something is the backpack with all of their money and documents. And their phone chargers. Which leaves them with one phone with enough credit and battery for exactly one call.

“We could call Yoora,” Chanyeol says, well aware that he’s literally offering her blackmail
material on a silver platter, but Baekhyun shakes his head.

“We’re calling Minseok-hyung,” he says.

Chanyeol bites his top lip as he considers the idea. He has a faint idea of who Minseok is, though he still doesn’t know how exactly Baekhyun is related with this mysterious cousin slash uncle slash family friend slash lost brother. What he knows is that Baekhyun looks up to him and believes him to be capable of doing every kind of marvelous things.

(To be honest, Chanyeol might even be a little jealous, because this Minseok has Baekhyun’s unconditional respect, something Chanyeol had to gain through a dive into the dirty waters of Han River a couple of years ago.)

“And why should we call him?” he asks.

“Because,” Baekhyun answers, waving a dainty finger in front of his face, “Minseok has a non-violent solution to every problem. Seulgi can do that, too, but her solutions are always violent.”

They wait for Minseok at a small service station on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere, a small plastic canopy their only shelter against the sweltering sun. Baekhyun bobs his head to the music and drums absentmindedly on Chanyeol’s knee, and Chanyeol wraps an arm around Baekhyun’s shoulders as they listen to Radiohead and watch the clouds chase one another against the blue sky.

“I might need to warn you about Minseok,” Baekhyun says, suddenly, his voice lazy and sticky in the midday heat. “He’ll try to embarrass me and at some point he’ll succeed. If you laugh, I’ll personally murder you and hide your body here, where no one will ever be able to find it.”

Well, that’s reassuring.

Minseok arrives fifty minutes later on a ugly, muddy pickup. Chanyeol doesn’t know what he was expecting, but it was certainly not this. Kim Minseok is a tiny, solid man with dark, almond-shaped eyes, big guns and the perkiest ass Chanyeol has ever seen. (After Baekhyun’s, of course.) He’s wearing khaki shorts, a yellow WWF shirt and a camouflage cap, and he looks like he’s pretending to be angry, but he’s actually seconds away from laughing at them.

He circles the pickup, opens the boot, and he immediately becomes Chanyeol’s favorite person in the world.

“Is that our backpack?” Chanyeol asks under his breath, but Baekhyun is not listening anymore. He launches himself at Minseok and hugs him tight while thanking him so much for coming.

Minseok nods and pats his head, then he turns to look at Chanyeol. Despite his short height and the relatively friendly smile, there’s something challenging in him, something imposing. He looks like he’s going to give him The Talk, if you hurt him I will hurt you and all that shit, and Chanyeol finds himself swallowing a lump of nervousness.

“You must be Chanyeol,” Minseok says instead, extending a hand to help him get up from the bench. “It’s a honor to meet you. Baekhyun only speaks well of you.”

“Does he?” Chanyeol says, scratching the back of his head nervously.

Minseok doesn’t say anything for a moment and even his silence feels threatening, but then his face opens in a smug smile as he says, “Oh yes, he thinks you’re really hot, like, eighth wonder of the world hot,” and Chanyeol blushes and chokes and blushes some more.
“Are you done embarrassing me?” Baekhyun asks, his head poking from the window on the passenger side. “There’s no need to take out my baby pics, mom already got that covered.”

Minseok laughs. He has a delicate, childish laugh. He also sounds like he could snap Chanyeol in half with those big arms of his. He’s small but packed. And he doesn’t look related to Baekhyun at all, except when they smile. They have the same naughty glint in their eyes, and they’re both unfairly pretty when they laugh.

“Come on kids, all aboard,” he says, patting the hood of the pickup before he climbs inside with the agility of a cat. Chanyeol takes Baekhyun’s hand and hoists himself up, joining him. They squish themselves in the passenger seat as Minseok starts the car again.

“Are you taking us back home?” Baekhyun asks. He sounds a little worried.

“What am I? Your babysitter?” Minseok whines, scrunching his nose. “I’m not driving you back to Seoul.” He steps on the gas pedal and shifts up three gears all at once. The pickup coughs and sputters and holds on. “Come on kids, the ferry leaves in forty minutes, and I promise you’ll be aboard before it does.”

They arrive to the dock in time for them to hop on the ferry, but Minseok spends the last fifteen minutes of ride scolding Baekhyun and pretending he’s not enjoying every moment of it.

“Make sure to not lose anything else, okay? I can’t come to Jeju to save your ass, Byun Baekhyun, so glue your wallet to your hand and make sure it stays there.”

Baekhyun rolls his eyes. “Yes, yes, we’ll be careful, okay? Just don’t tell mom, or she’ll tell Chanyeol’s mom and we’ll never hear the end of it.”

“I already texted her on my way to pick you up, brat!”

“Well, then we’re fucked,” Baekhyun mutters, slumping against Chanyeol again. It’s a tight fit, sharing the same seat, made even more difficult by Chanyeol’s height, but Baekhyun is small enough to tuck himself in Chanyeol’s lap and he only elbowed him in the gut twice.

“Not until we get home, babe,” Chanyeol replies, just as Minseok stops the car and looks at them for a moment before they go. His eyes narrow dangerously, lingering on their joined hands. Chanyeol realizes he just called Baekhyun babe in front of a relative in a way that could’ve been twenty shades of inappropriate and tries to drop Baekhyun’s hand, only for Baekhyun to hold it even tighter.

Minseok only stares, then gently, politely, reminds them to use protection. “We’re not going to Jeju to have sex!” Baekhyun screams, so embarrassed his voice cracks.

“No, of course you’re not. But later, when you do, just use protection!”

Baekhyun hides his face in his hands and groans.

(“How did he do it?” Chanyeol asks Baekhyun a couple of hours later, on the ferry, headed to Jeju Island. “The backpack thing, and then how did he know where to find us? We were pretty much in the middle of nowhere.”

Baekhyun laughs, loud and unabashed against the orange light of the sunset.

“Magic.”}
Seungwan meets Seulgi for the first time in a dirty back alley behind a club in Sinchon. The first thing she sees is her ass. It’s a pretty ass. On a pretty body. It’s a pity she’s really busy kneeling in front of a bloody corpse.

“That was my prey,” Seungwan says when the pretty girl in front of her gets up and licks the blood from her fingers with a dazed expression. Her hair shines yellow and red from the neon lights of the chicken place on the other side of the street. She has the dumbest kokeshi doll bangs, but it looks adorable on her.

“You mean my prey,” the girl says. It’s only a murmur, but Seungwan hears it as if it had been whispered right in her ear. If she had been human, her voice would’ve been drowned out by the heavy bass coming from the underground club Seungwan just left to chase the warlock.

She looks human, but with magical creatures it’s difficult to say. It’s a pity Chanyeol is not around, he would’ve been able to tell Seungwan what the cute girl with a pretty ass is made of. On her own, Seungwan can only assess how nice her ass looks, wrapped in tight leather.

“No, I’m pretty sure he was mine,” she replies. She tries to smile, but it comes off as too tight. She had been tracking the warlock for months, following the bodies of the girls he killed. A soul thief, and a nasty one at that. He could’ve been worth a promotion, but now he’s dead. And it wasn’t Seungwan who killed him, which is a problem.

The mysterious girl smiles back. “Well, you were too late cutie.”

That’s when Seungwan sees a hint of red tails behind her. A fox spirit, she thinks first, but then she counts, seven, eight, nine tails. A Gumiho. A full Gumiho. She might be in trouble.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she says, taking a step back. She steals a quick look at the entrance of the club, but no one is looking in their direction. Of course, Gumiho magic.

The Gumiho raises her hands in surrender. “Don’t be afraid of me, I don’t kill cute girls. I don’t kill, period, but this guy got on my nerves.”

Seungwan can’t really say anything to that. She hated him too. It’s just that she should’ve been the one who killed him. Now, not only won’t she get a promotion, but she will also have to deal with a Gumiho trespassing into the capital, a major offense, which in turn means a lot of paperwork. She should call for backup and inform her direct superior, Kim Junmyeon. And she should leave before she falls for this Gumiho’s charm.

Except maybe she’s already fallen because she doesn’t want to leave. She doesn’t leave.

“You really need to go,” she says, feeling an electric shiver go down her back at the thought of flirting with a Gumiho. “If you don’t, I’ll have to call the Samjokgu.”

The Gumiho doesn’t look too impressed. “Oh dear, the Samjokgu and I go way back. He is basically my son-in-law at this point.”

Seungwan frowns. Chanyeol? That’s an obvious lie. Chanyeol is the anti-love. In her life, she’s never met someone as allergic to romantic feelings as Park Chanyeol. Every time they talk about dates, he shuts her out and proceeds to mope for hours.

Before she can reply though, the Gumiho disappears, right under her nose.
"The name is Seulgi," she hears coming from above, and when she looks up the Gumiho is perched on top of the street lamp, her nine tails waving in the winds like alerting red flags. The Gumiho – Seulgi – tucks a strand of runaway hair behind her ear. “See you around, miss Guardian.”

Seulgi, she discovers through the next few months, usually doesn’t kill anyone – the warlock truly was an exception, because he had attacked her first – but is guilty of sneaking into the city way too often.

“Fan events?” Seungwan asks, scandalized, the fifth time she catches Seulgi strolling through Sangam at dawn waiting for a pre-recording to start.

Seulgi frowns. Her hair is black today and the terrible but cute bangs are gone. She looks human, unbelievably pretty but pretty much human, and only Chanyeol at this point would be able to tell the difference.

“I’m sorry, but EXO doesn’t come to my apartment, it’s not my fault they do this kind of stuff in Seoul only.”

“Are you really risking a capital execution in order to see a couple of pretty girls dancing in high heels?”

Seulgi hits her forearm and pouts. “Then what are you doing here?” she snaps back, pointing an accusatory finger to the cute Baekhee plushie doll poking from Seungwan’s tote bag. “Is this what the guardians of the city do in their free time? They come to... fan events?”

Seungwan doesn’t really have a good answer. She is guilty, the guiltiest. They shuffle for a moment, unsure of what to say, until Seungwan decides she’s off duty, so there’s no reason to be uncivil.

“So, how many albums did you buy for next week’s fansign?”

Seulgi’s eyes light up. By the end of the day, Seungwan knows Seulgi’s favorite album (it’s Exodus), Seulgi’s favorite member (Chanyeon) and Seulgi’s number. She saves her as Little Bear – “Because that’s how all my friends call me!” Seulgi said. “You’re free to do the same, if you want!”

Seungwan is still not sure the heat blooming in her face every time she looks at Seulgi is genuine, or a result of a charming spell, but when she voices her concerns Seulgi just laughs and tells her, “I surely don’t need a charming spell to be your friend, Seungwanie! You were pretty smitten with me from the beginning,” and that’s the end of it.

Seungwan ends up accompanying Seulgi to the bus station and watches her cross the street towards the bus, her heels clicking on the asphalt. She waves at her when the bus leaves. Her face feels hot. Her cheeks hurt from smiling so much.

“Do you think I’m under a spell?” Seungwan asks Chanyeol the following day, during their nightly patrol. He looks at her like she’s crazy.

“How would I know?”

Of course, he doesn’t know anything. How silly of her to ask him. She thanks him anyway, and they keep walking. Later, as she drives Chanyeol home, her phone lights up with an incoming message from Little Bear.
See you next week!

She smiles to herself and answers, Of course!

The runes of power branded on Sehun’s wrists itch and pulse and he scratches them absentmindedly against the back of his jeans. A couple of people send him curious glances – a tall boy with orange hair walking down the streets near H University in a tee and ripped jeans in the middle of winter, they must think he’s an idol. When he meets their eyes, they immediately look away, as if they never saw him in the first place. His wrists itch a lot more, like they always do every time he uses his magic, but Sehun has learnt to accept the pain, even use it to his advantage. Magic made him what he is, he will survive magic.

He passes by a group of high school students coming back from their tutoring classes, wrapped in fluffy caterpillar coats, and decides to ditch the crowded entrance of the subway station for the narrow stairs that lead directly to one of the stores next to the ticket machines.

The train is packed but the crowd unconsciously parts around him. It’s part his Gumiho power, part the effect of the runes carved into his skin. Normal people are reluctant to be around magic. They don’t even realize, but they slowly drift away from him, until the only other person on the train is a young boy who looks just about Sehun’s age – although Sehun is at least one thousand years older than him – who’s staring a little and trying to be subtle about it. He smells like witch magic, though the air around him doesn’t bristle and fizzle like it would if he was a real witch. If Sehun cared enough about him, he’d be annoyed for not being able to pin the boy’s exact smell down and guess what he is, but the thing is he just doesn’t care enough. He has enough problems already to be worrying about strange strangers in the subway. When the boy tries to make eye contact, Sehun fiddles with his phone and purposefully ignores him.

The speaker announces Ahyeon’s stop and Sehun leans his head back against the tampered glass window and closes his eyes, not bothering to listen to the metallic voice as it reveals their next station. He doesn’t really have a direction anyway, today or in general.

Seulgi called him earlier to ask him if he had heard from Baekhyun, and Sehun could only sit back and listen as she told him what had happened – the way that stupid fox puppy stole Sunmi’s fox bead, lost control and attacked Seulgi, only to disappear in pursuit of the millenary Gumiho who had almost killed his mother. Sehun could only promise Seulgi he’ll call her back if Baekhyun contacts him, but of course Baekhyun didn’t contact him. Baekhyun could already be dead.

Sehun hates being so helpless. He hates being so stupid. He should’ve been out there, getting his ass beaten by Sooyeon, helping Minseok, helping Baekhyun. Not here, trapped in a giant metal pill launched like a sky rocket through underground tunnels, going nowhere, always taking him back to where he started.

There aren’t many things you can do when you’re trapped in Seoul for the next fifty years, powerless and alone. Sehun doesn’t need to eat, doesn’t need to sleep, doesn’t need to work. Even seducing closeted college boys to pass the time has lost its charm after the first three years or so. And there’s no Minseok here to keep him entertained. It’s like being jailed, bored to death in one of the biggest cities of the world, the only thing he wants so close and yet so far away. (Minseok sneaks into the capital sometimes, but not too often, because Sehun’s seals can sense the presence of a Gumiho and hurt him, a deterrent against any escape attempts.)

When Sehun opens his eyes again, the first thing he notices is the strange boy, who’s still definitely looking at him. The second thing he notices is that they’re the only ones in the car. The third is that
they’re close to Jamsil, early afternoon, on a Saturday. He takes a quick glance on the adjacent car, where people are so jammed that a middle school boy is squished against the door. There must be some big game today and the Green Line is going to be packed until night, and yet there’s no one in their car but them.

The train stops, and a metallic voice announces Jamsilsaenae’s station. Sehun lays his hands on his knees and finally meets the boy’s gaze. He could be a hunter, for what Sehun knows, and Sehun is pretty much unable to defend himself unless he wants to fry his brain out, but no one has ever dared to touch Sehun, knowing he is under the protection of the Samjokgu. Except, from what Seulgi said, Park Chanyeol might be dead now as well. And they might all be in trouble, starting with Sehun.

“See anything you like?” he asks, spreading his legs and cocking a brow at the boy, who only shrugs and shows him a tiny silver ring.

“Sorry, I’m taken. And you are too, though not for long if you don’t listen to me.”

It sounds like a threat. The train leaves again with a clang of metal, leaving behind the lights of the station. The light inside the car start flickering too, as magic takes shape in Sehun’s palms. The seals bite at his flesh and he ignores them. He might not be able to turn into his animal form and run, but he can still stun the boy, if he must.

“Wait, wait! What are you doing?” The boy raises both his hands up in surrender. “I’m not a witch, I don’t even have magical powers!”

“And how would I know?” he asks back.

The boy clicks his tongue, annoyed. “Okay, stop flashing your magic at me and listen. We don’t have a lot of time. Baekhyun is in trouble right now and we need to help him. If Baekhyun dies, no, worse, if Baekhyun loses control, we’ll have to deal with two deranged monsters instead of one.”

Sehun hesitates.

“What do you know about Baekhyun? And who are you?”

The boy exhales, relieved.

“My name is Kim Jongin and I don’t know much, but the things I know are really accurate and, unfortunately, bound to come true.”

Baekhyun almost meets Kim Junmyeon three times.

The first time, he’s in university and it’s raining. Wet season shower, fast and vicious, with cold, fat raindrops clinging to Baekhyun’s neck and forearms, invading the gutters on the side of the streets and then invading the streets, splashing against his ankles when he tries to cross the street.

His sneakers are drenched, his clothes are drenched and the wind has broken his umbrella, so now he is drenched. He stops at the next red light and takes out his phone to message Chanyeol, but then he remembers Chanyeol is back home for a family dinner. He’s thinking about messaging Jongdae to ask him if he’s up for a quick dinner, some dumplings maybe, at that place near the Ediya coffee they both like so much even if the food is greasy, when he looks up and actually sees Jongdae, through the glass wall of the small Food Café on the other side of the street.
He’s there with someone else and Baekhyun cranes his neck to see better. A secret girlfriend, maybe? No, Jongdae would’ve immediately told Baekhyun the great news. Besides, he doesn’t look too happy about the way the conversation is going.

The traffic light turns green and Baekhyun crosses the street almost automatically, following the flux of people hurrying to reach the other side. He knows he shouldn’t snoop, but he can’t help but check the situation inside the restaurant. It’s the first time he sees Jongdae so troubled.

He reaches the sidewalk, zigzagging through the puddles, just as Jongdae gets up, throws a paper napkin on the table and leaves the restaurant, opening the door right in Baekhyun’s face.

There’s a moment of impasse in which they just stare at each other, equally surprised, until the person sitting at table with Jongdae – a shorter boy wearing a coat that screams too expensive – gets up too, looking at Jongdae with a disappointed expression. He has to stop at the counter to pay, so Jongdae just grabs Baekhyun’s arm and starts running.

“Wait, Dae!” the boy calls, but Jongdae doesn’t stop. He leads Baekhyun through the maze of side alleys behind the shopping streets of Sinchon, only stopping when he’s panting so harshly he can’t breathe. He lets himself fall on the wet ground. Maybe he’s crying. Baekhyun doesn’t say anything, just stands next to him in silence under the relentless rain.

“That was my brother,” Jongdae says, later, as they wait for their dumplings to arrive.

“I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“I usually pretend I don’t.” He thanks the waitress and attacks a meat dumpling first. “We don’t really get along, Junmyeon and I. I have another brother though, Nini. You’d like him. Or maybe not. He’s always right, he’d drive you mad.”

Baekhyun sneezes and scoots a little farther from the air-conditioner.

“Can’t you dry my clothes? I’ll catch a cold if this goes on.”

Jongdae laughs. “I don’t want to accidentally set them on fire.”

“You’re the most useless witch I’ve ever seen,” Baekhyun mutters, and Jongdae’s smile widens.

“That’s what my brother always says, but I like it better when you’re the one saying it.”

They order a second round of dumplings, and when they come home the rain has stopped and streets are wet and melancholic.

The second time Baekhyun almost meets Junmyeon is also the first time Baekhyun meets Jongin.

It starts with Jongin – Nini, like Jongdae calls him – standing in the middle of the room Baekhyun and Jongdae used to share before Baekhyun moved in with Chanyeol. He’s a tall boy, Jongin, graceful, like a dancer. He has deep eyes and he frowns prettily, like he’s trying to understand beauty.

“I’m Jongin,” he says. “I’m here for Jongdae’s ID.”

“No, I’m here for Jongdae’s ID,” Baekhyun says, confused. Jongdae messaged him thirty minutes ago and asked him to go to his room – “You know the password anyway!” – and pick up his ID card for him.
Jongin shakes his head. “He actually left it at home, but I knew he’d send you here so I came here too, to give it to you. Nice to meet you, by the way. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

He hands Baekhyun the small card and when Baekhyun’s hand moves to take it Jongin touches it, for the shortest moment. Baekhyun doesn’t feel anything, but Jongin jolts and takes it back immediately, as if Baekhyun’s skin burned him. Jongdae’s ID card falls between them.

Baekhyun blinks, realizing he was staring, and kneels down to pick the card up. When he gets up, Jongin is pinching his lip with a troubled expression. He’s also standing in front of the door and he jumps, startled, when Baekhyun clears his throat to be let out.

“I’m sorry for keeping you,” he says. “You should hurry, but you’re going to be late anyway. Your friend Sehun is waiting for you.”

Baekhyun freezes on the threshold. The question must be clear in his eyes, because Jongin shrugs. “I’m a Soothsayer. Everything I say comes true.”

“Oh. Wow, congratulations.”

Except Baekhyun has a date with Chanyeol, not with Sehun. This Jongin seems like a nice kid, but he’s giving Baekhyun the creeps.

“Hey, Baekhyun,” Jongin asks, before Baekhyun can turn the corner and bail. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes?”

“Would you choose freedom without happiness or happiness without freedom?”

Baekhyun stops at the first step of the main staircase, caught a little off guard. “I don’t know?” He frowns. “Aren’t they both important?”

Jongin nods to himself. “They are, indeed. It was a pleasure.”

Thirty minutes later Baekhyun will realize he had never told Jongin his name. It’s a fleeting thought and it easily gets lost in the panic he feels when he sees Chanyeol, his Chanyeol, attacking Sehun in broad daylight, in the middle of fucking Seoul. Then, everything gets fuzzy and confused. Baekhyun will never remember seeing Jongdae’s brother – not Jongin, the other one, Junmyeon – from the corner of his eye. He only hears a click, a finger snap, and the memory spell drapes a veil over the entire day. He will find himself at home, tears running down his face and his phone ringing with a call from Minseok.

The third time Baekhyun almost meets Kim Junmyeon, he’s leaving Chanyeol’s apartment in Seoul, carrying three of Chanyeol’s band-aids on his foot and Chanyeol’s kisses all over his skin.

They broke a mug perched on top of Chanyeol’s night drawer while they kissed messily in the darkness and of course Baekhyun stepped on it and they had to waste a good fifteen minutes to clean the wound and band-aid it, but at least Chanyeol’s hands were warm and tender and the way he kissed Baekhyun afterwards tasted like starvation and impatience.

Baekhyun doesn’t know for how long this push-and-pull can last. He already feels like shit for always leaving in the middle of the night, but now his mom has started asking questions. He mentally reminds himself to ask Sehun to cover for him, just in case Minseok or Seulgi decide to snoop around.
The elevator finally arrives and he slumps against the mirror after pressing the first floor button. He probably shouldn’t have come. No, he definitely shouldn’t have come. And he’s seconds away from going back up, knocking at Chanyeol’s door and begging to be let in again. They could cuddle until morning and then Chanyeol might make ramyeon for breakfast, like the good old times.

The doors the elevator open with a ding and Baekhyun shakes his head. Dawn is shining through the yellow glass of the door of the building, turning it a delicate peach. Baekhyun presses the button that opens the door from the inside and steps out, almost crashing into a short boy.

He bows, apologizing, even though he wasn’t the one standing in front of the door like a tool, but the stranger just frowns at him, as if offended by Baekhyun’s rudeness. The nerve. He regrets not saying anything, but when he turns back to demand an apology, the stranger has already entered the building and closed the door at his back, as if he owned the place.

Baekhyun frowns at the closed door, takes out his phone to message Sehun, and leaves towards Sinchon under a grey and pink dawn.

The first time Baekhyun meets Kim Junmyeon, for real, he’s in Jung-maeul, in Chanyeol’s devastated kitchen. It’s early morning, maybe a couple of minutes before dawn, and the sky is clear enough to show the colors behind the clouds, indigo melting into pale blue towards the horizon at East.

The light wakes Baekhyun up and he disentangles himself from Chanyeol’s suffocating hold, rolling onto the floor with a soft thud. He yawns and scratches his head before getting up and rummaging in the closet drawer for something to wear that is not his dirty clothes scattered on the floor. He chooses an old pair of sweatpants, a little too long for his short legs, but large enough to fit his hips.

Chanyeol is still snoring, dead to the world. Baekhyun looks at him softly, touching his shoulder where Chanyeol bit him yesterday. He can still feel the imprint of Chanyeol’s teeth on the skin. So much for being a good boy, he thinks. Bad dog, bad dog. Chanyeol sniffs and turn to the other side, as if disturbed by Baekhyun’s thoughts. Baekhyun stifles a giggle against his palm and leaves the room.

The house is silent, as if caught in a spell. Baekhyun tiptoes through the empty corridor, reaching the kitchen to pour himself a glass of water. The window is shattered and the cold mountain wind invades the room, but Baekhyun is immune to his gelid whisper. All the walls are dark and a little burnt and the coffee machine clearly didn’t survive the explosion – it lies, upside down, on the floor under the table, but the tap is still working.

Baekhyun is at his second sip of water when he hears heavy footsteps coming from the garden. He puts the glass on the table and waits until someone knocks at the door.

For a moment he just stands there, unsure of what he should do. What if it’s the postman? What if it’s Chanyeol’s grandmother or sister? They live here too. But they probably would enter without knocking. Sooyeon definitely wouldn’t knock. (Also, Sooyeon is in the mountains near Seoul now, so powerful it takes nothing for Baekhyun to faintly feel her magic.)

The knocking resumes, angrier and firmer and faster than before, and Baekhyun sighs and goes to the door, because it seems important.

He opens the door to two young men.
One of them is wearing the uniform of Seoul’s police. The other, elegant and smelling like magic, looks strangely familiar. When he sees Baekhyun, he smiles, forced and polite, then he bows curtly. When he comes up again, though, he’s not smiling anymore.

“So, you must be Baekhyun.”
Chapter Six

*It’s safe to speak here. To call love by a name other than vengeance.*
— Mary Jo Bang, from “Electra Dreams,” Apology for Want

*This is the end, isn’t it?*
*And you are here with me again, listening with me: the sea*
*no longer torments me; the self*
*I wished to be is the self I am.*
— Louise Glück, from Meadowlands

---

**C H A P T E R 6  
2 0 1 8 0 1 2 5  
B A E K H Y U N**

From: **Kim Junmyeon**  
To: **Samjokgu**  
See you tomorrow then  
[Sent: 00:46, 25.01.2018]

The kitchen lies open and wounded like an abandoned battlefield under the first light of the day.

From the broken window, light pours inside the room, highlighting the large fissure in the middle of the floor, the dark ghosts burned in the wall where the heat of the explosion has painted the wood black and grey, and the dust still floating weightless around the room like golden powder. The sun rises over the ruins of Hong Garyung’s kitchen, digging the silhouettes of spilled bowls and fragments of glass out from the darkness, the new coffee machine lying broken on the floor next to the counter, like a memorial of chaos. It almost feels like a dystopian setting, like entering a house that has been abandoned for decades, framed forever in a polaroid of domesticity while the rest of the world was torn to pieces and destroyed. It’s only been hours since Sooyeon’s visit.

Baekhyun steps aside to let Kim Junmyeon and the police boy, who introduced himself as Do Kyungsoo, enter the room before him. It feels a bit strange to be chaperoning around in a house that not only isn’t his, but he himself has entered for the first time yesterday night. Yet it would be rude to just let them wait at the door and Sunmi didn’t raise a rude boy.

“Do you want something to drink?” he asks, in the politest tone he can manage considering Kim Junmyeon’s stance on Gumiho rights.

The Guardian just frowns at him, but Kyungsoo asks for water and Baekhyun pours him a glass from the tap, then there’s silence. Junmyeon drums his fingers on his knee and stares at Baekhyun, eyes lingering on his exposed collarbones – where, Baekhyun knows, the signs left by Chanyeol’s lips are still quite visible, swollen and purple on his tender skin – and on the the way the pants fall low on Baekhyun’s hips. Baekhyun wishes he was wearing a shirt, but only for a moment. He was invited here. Kim Junmyeon wasn’t.

“Where is Chanyeol?” Junmyeon asks, when he realizes Baekhyun won’t speak to him first.
“His room, the third on the left. But I wouldn’t recommend going to find him. He sleeps naked.”

There’s no challenge in his eyes and he purposefully keeps his tone neutral, but the words taunt Junmyeon and he glares just a little harder. The air throbs and thrills around him, almost imperceptible, like the flickering of invisible butterflies. It’s barely there, but Baekhyun can see it. Or, rather, he can perceive it, the same way he knows how high the sun is and how many birds are flying over the woods now that Sooyeon has left. Instinct, Baekhyun has come to realize in the twelve hours he’s spent as a Gumiho, is a marvelous thing.

“And how do I know that you haven’t charmed him?”

Baekhyun scoffs, out loud. What a whole new level of entitled.

“Someone didn’t do his homework, I see. I cannot charm Chanyeol. Well, I wouldn’t even know how to charm you, or your tiny little friend there.”

The police boy raises his glass in a fake cheers and says, “You’re not much taller than me, you know?” with a scary, deadpan face. He has a point but Baekhyun will never tell him.

“Chanyeol is the Samjokgu,” he continues, looking straight at Junmyeon. “He’s literally the only one person in the entire world a full Gumiho could never charm, let alone a half-blood runt like me.”

“Well, how do I know you haven’t charmed him before he became the Samjokgu? According to my sources, you’re childhood friends. You would’ve had enough time to set your trap.”

Witches, Baekhyun thinks. He never really understood what the deal was with them. His mother used to despise witches with a passion, but Baekhyun didn’t think that badly of them until this Kim Junmyeon came here to ruin the whole kind for him.

“Wow, what a smart conclusion,” he taunts, clapping his hands. “Except I wasn’t a Gumiho yet, and I’ve been one for less twenty-four hours, so your argument is invalid. And, by the way, I never needed to charm Park Chanyeol, he was foolish enough to fall for me even without the whole magic thing.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound suspicious at all. You’re half-Gumiho and somehow, coincidentally, you move next to the grandson of the Samjokgu and, out of all people, he falls in love with you. Forgive me if I’m distrustful of your good intentions, it almost feels like...”

“Destiny.”

They all turn towards the door where Chanyeol is standing, tall and lanky and with his eyes still half-closed, in only his underwear and pink slippers three sizes smaller than his large feet. He winks, just for Baekhyun, and magic sloshes inside him, whether in reluctance or eagerness – he doesn’t know. The Gumiho in him fears the Samjokgu’s touch. The human in him craves it like a ship craves the mainland after a storm.

“It almost feels like destiny, doesn’t it?” Chanyeol enters the room and plants a quick kiss on Baekhyun’s forehead. He’s still warm from sleep and he smells like Baekhyun and magic – like Baekhyun’s magic. “Good morning, my love. Who let that witch in?”

“Uhm, I did?” Baekhyun mutters, and Chanyeol flicks his forehead.

“We’ve been together for less than three hours and you’re already betraying me like this.”
“They said they were your friends,” Baekhyun counters with a pout and Chanyeol dives down to kiss it briefly. Magic tingles inside Baekhyun and echoes between them, argentíne, and crystal clear.

“They clearly lied. Anyone willingly standing between me and slow morning sex with you cannot be my friend,” Chanyeol murmurs, and Baekhyun finds himself smiling. And people say he’s the dramatic one.

“I’m a little confused here.”

They turn, together, suddenly reminded that they aren’t the only ones in the room. The police boy, Kyungsoo, who just interrupted them, is staring at them with eyes as wide as saucers, half confused and half suspicious. The Guardian is glaring so hard Baekhyun is lucky he’s not on fire yet.

Chanyeol scrunches his nose. “Why are you two still here?”

Kyungsoo puts the glass on the counter with a shaky hand. “You must forgive me, but I spent the best parts of the last five years thinking Chanyeol was the archnemesis of romance, only to find out he has a significant other he calls baby and likes to have slow morning sex with. I feel betrayed and I need a moment. Also, when did you start walking again? It’s been a day, Park. I leave you alone for one day and...”

“I’m even more convinced he’s been charmed now,” Junmyeon mutters, and Baekhyun laughs out loud.

“Sure, certainly,” he agrees between giggles, but Junmyeon doesn’t stop staring at him, eyes narrowing and lips curling as he bites his bottom lip.

“Wait, I remember you! We’ve met before!” he says finally, pointing an accusing finger at Baekhyun’s nose.

“I was Jongdae’s roommate for all of freshman year, we might have met at some point.”

“No! Not that!” His eyes narrow even more. “That’s suspicious too, but not that! I met you outside Chanyeol’s flat months ago!”

The expression on his face changes from suspicion and anger to... betrayal and anger. His accusing finger moves slowly to the side until it’s pointing at Chanyeol.

“You knew there was a Gumiho in the city and you didn’t tell me because you were too busy...” He sputters like a broken engine, face all red, before he finally lets out a shaky, “shagging it?”

“My entire life is a lie. Park Chanyeol was actually getting more action than me,” Kyungsoo whispers with an incredulous scoff. He doesn’t seem to care that Junmyeon’s face is slowly turning purple.

Baekhyun turns to Chanyeol. “Wow, you must have been the soul of the party in my absence if they’re reacting like this. Was it that bad, living without me?”

He meant it as a joke to lighten the atmosphere, and Chanyeol leaps to take the chance, nodding and letting out his best wicked smile. “Of course, you’re the only one who can bring a smile to my face, my angel, my spicy teok, my strawberry mochi. The only love of my life.”

Kyungsoo shakes his head, defeated. Junmyeon looks at Baekhyun, then at Chanyeol and finally at Kyungsoo. “We should’ve brought a shaman. He clearly needs an exorcism.”
“There’s one next door!” an excited voice says, from outside. And Baekhyun knows only someone who could be this random and at the same time absolutely right.

“Didn’t you lock your brother in the car?” Kyungsoo asks, to Junmyeon, who looks equally confused. “Who opened the door for him?”

“I did.”

Kim Minseok jumps through the broken window and sits on the windowsill, happily ignoring the glass fragments fallen like pieces of shattered stars on the rack. His black and orange fox tails are perfectly visible in the light of the morning. Baekhyun knows this time he’s not the only one seeing them because of the way Kyungsoo takes a step backwards, scared, and Junmyeon’s magic buzzes and snaps around him.

Minseok gives the Guardian a fleeting look. “There’s no need to get defensive. I’m only here to talk to you, Kim Junmyeon, but first I might need to have a couple of words in private with my nephew.”

He’s smiling his angry smile. Baekhyun might be in serious trouble.

“Nice hickey you have there, Baekhyun!” Minseok says, too cheerful to be real, his smile widening and tightening at the same time. “And look at that nice fox bead you got yourself! I see you’ve managed to control it. Impressive, I mean it. Congratulations on being still alive despite doing everything, and I mean everything, you could have done to change your status to deceased.”

“I can explain,” Baekhyun starts, but Minseok’s smile has too many teeth and all are sharp.

“Oh, yes, you will.”

---

From: Seulgi-bear
To: Seok-hyungnim
They agreed
Your turn now
Keep me updated
[Sent: 06:22, 25.01.2018]

Not many things can scare Seulgi and not many things can anger Minseok. Not many things can make Sunmi of Yeoju negotiate a war. And Baekhyun seems to have done all of them in the span of one afternoon.

“Let’s look at the bright side. At least I didn’t die!” he tries to say, and Minseok’s expression seems to tell him to shut up because he’s literally seconds away from dying at Minseok’s own hands.

“Did you know how worried we all were? Seulgi cried because she couldn’t stop you! Your mom...”

Baekhyun’s face immediately falls at the mention of his mother. He tried to contact her yesterday, but she’s didn’t take his call. Whether it is because she was still busy trying to negotiate the Gumiho’s involvement in this war or she was still trying to temper her anger towards him, Baekhyun doesn’t know. It scares him a little. He’s always being Sunmi’s son, the boy-in-between, the son of a Gumiho turned human, but now, with magic thrumming in his veins, he doesn’t know
what he is. A Gumiho. A human who can’t control all this power. A thief. He just wants his mom.

Minseok stops, looks at Baekhyun’s guilty expression. He bristles, magic sparkling around him and spreading through the white garden of Garyung’s house. “Don’t look at me like that, Baekhyun, you have no right! You know she loves you more than anything else, of course she blamed herself for what happened! She thought you were going to die, far away from home, at the hands of someone she has betrayed to save your life. What were you thinking?”

“I wasn’t thinking. That thing... Mom’s magic,” his magic now, and he can feel it flapping inside him as he speaks, delighted, “chose me. It asked me what I wanted and I just... I wanted to save Chanyeol. So I did.”

It’s as simple as that, and he would like to say he has some regrets, but he doesn’t. If he hadn’t risked everything, Chanyeol would be dead now.

“You still almost died! I felt it all the way from Yeoju, as I ran here to try and stop you! I felt you disappearing and I thought you were dead!”

_I thought I was dead too_, Baekhyun thinks, but he only ducks his head low. “I didn’t want to make you worry, I didn’t even want to die, though I was sure I would. But I did the right thing, didn’t I? Chanyeol would be dead without me.”

He remembers, in a moment of lucid clarity, Jongin’s words. _You’re going to make the right choice._ Jongin was right, as usual.

There’s nothing Minseok can say to that, so he simply shakes his head and gives up.

“Yes, okay. But don’t expect me to take your side when Seulgi scolds you. Or when your mom grounds you forever. Park Chanyeol will have to visit you in jail.”

Baekhyun grimaces at that. “I don’t think mom can keep me grounded anymore.” His magic laughs at the thought, with the voice of tiny silver bells.

Minseok clicks his tongue at that, and studies Baekhyun for a minute. His eyes linger on Baekhyun’s chest, focusing on the thick knot of power curled lazily inside Baekhyun’s ribcage.

“It’s so strong... I’m surprised you can keep it under control. It feels like it could overpower you any moment now.”

“Chanyeol... helped. He took a lot of the edge away, yesterday night.”

Baekhyun hopes he’s not blushing and Minseok rolls his eyes. He doesn’t comment, but it’s clear he knows exactly how Chanyeol did it. “I’m glad he did. That magic was never meant for you.”

“I know.”

He knows now, he can feel it. This magic is ancient and hungry and bottomless. The more it gives, the more it takes. It could give Baekhyun the world, and there would be no one at the end to receive it.

Minseok kicks a lump of snow. “Your mother’s magic was our best chance at defeating Sooyeon.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” he says again.

A gust of wind sweeps the courtyard. Baekhyun doesn’t feel the cold, but he shivers anyway, as
instinctive reaction, and Minseok sighs. “Come on, let’s go back. I really need to talk to Kim Junmyeon.”

They shuffle towards the main entrance when Minseok stops, looking like he’d just remembered something important. “Wait!” he says, taking Baekhyun’s phone from his pocket. “You left this at Seulgi’s house. I thought you might need it.”

A quick look at the screen shows an impressive amount of unread messages, the last coming from Sehun. Baekhyun smiles. “Thank you, you’re the best!”

They slip inside and tiptoe around the living room – where Chanyeol and Junmyeon are still bickering, their voices filtering through the closed door and filling the corridor – and slowly make their way towards the kitchen. They find Jongin sitting at the table and typing furiously on his phone, while Do Kyungsoo tries to make the coffee machine work again.

“There’s no electricity anyway,” Baekhyun tells him softly. Choked and distant, they can hear Chanyeol shout that he’s the Samjokgu and he can do what the fucking ever he wants thank you very much. “Have they been at it all this time?”

Kyungsoo snorts. “Oh, they’ve been at it for the last five years. Let them be, they’ll get tired of screaming at some point and then we can have the rational conversation instead of them.”

Jongin waves excitedly when he sees Minseok. “Thank you for opening the car, it was getting kinda stuffy in there,” he says, and Minseok’s eyes shine gold in glee.

“You’re welcome. And let me thank you back, your prophecy kinda saved my life.”

Jongin beams. “Sehun is right, you’re really cute.”

And no one is ready for the way Minseok’s smile opens in a shy, delicate way that makes him look a lot younger than he really is. “You met him? How is he?”

“Bored, cranky. He misses you a lot. Not for long though, we’re all going to Seoul today, after my brother is calm enough to make rational decisions.”

“You mean we’re not going to Seoul,” Chanyeol says, peeking inside the kitchen to find them all slumped on the chair around the table. He turns towards Baekhyun. “I asked Junmyeon to take care of the electric system for us, so could you make us some coffee? I really, really need it. Arguing with him at the crack of dawn is infuriating enough.”

“Tell him to fix the coffee machine too!” Kyungsoo asks, as Chanyeol leaves the room, and as soon as he’s done talking the coffee machine levitates above their heads and comes back in its place, as if new. Kyungsoo claps his hands together excitedly and turns towards Baekhyun. “Do you know where the coffee is?”

Baekhyun, in fact, doesn’t. They all look at him like they’re expecting him to pull out an apron from the drawer and start making breakfast for everyone, but he doesn’t have the heart to tell them that he entered this house for the first time a couple of hours ago, and the only room he’s more or less acquainted with is Chanyeol’s bedroom.

“Third cabinet,” Jongin supplies. Baekhyun thanks him and hands the coffee pads to Kyungsoo. For a moment, the sound of the coffee dripping into the pink cup is the only sound filling the room.

“So, how long it’s been?” Kyungsoo asks. “You and Chanyeol, I mean.”
Baekhyun turns to stare at him, surprised, and Kyungsoo immediately raises his hands.

“I’m not trying to snoop, I just... It’s nice, to see Chanyeol like this. He’s always so gloomy and tense and angry at everything and everyone.”

He hands Baekhyun the first cup and watches Baekhyun taste the sugar to make sure it’s really sugar before he drops three teaspoons into the coffee. Chanyeol has always liked it extra sweet.

Minseok crosses his arms and swings back on the chair. “I’m curious too. But you don’t have to tell us if you don’t want, Baekhyun.” He shrugs, thumb pointing towards Jongin. “We can just ask him if you don’t answer!”

Baekhyun rolls his eyes and hands Jongin his own cup of coffee.

“We’ve been together since high school,” he tells Kyungsoo. “More or less.”

“He never mentioned you. Actually, he never mentioned anything regarding his past. I often wondered what happened to make him so... snappy and bitter.”

Now that the light is back they can hear the soft purr of the fridge, drowning out the awkward silence of the room. Baekhyun tastes the coffee and smacks his lips together to get rid of the bitter taste. It needs more sugar.

“I was the one who broke his leg,” he says, and every word tastes like black coffee. Bitter. “The accident, when he became the Samjokgu. I pushed him and he fell and then the car hit him. It was my fault.”

Kyungsoo’s eyes widen. “Why?”

“Because he was trying to kill one of my best friends, who is a Gumiho. And I was trying to stop him. The rest was just... bad luck.”

“You met him,” Jongin says, softly. “Baekhyun’s friend. The boy who asked to talk with Junmyeon.”

“Oh,” is all Kyungsoo says. In the other room, the sound of Chanyeol and Junmyeon’s argument has toned down. They can still hear them talk in low, hushed tones, but it’s less tense. They’ll come back soon.

“You see, it was a little hard to pretend nothing had happened after that,” Baekhyun continues. “So we decided to take a break. I decided to take a break. Chanyeol... I guess he didn’t want me to leave, but I didn’t ask for his permission. I just left.”

“You decided to take a break,” Kyungsoo repeats, sounding skeptical and judging at the same time.

Baekhyun smiles weakly. “It was meant to be permanent, but we really suck at staying away from each other. I decided to enlist after I left university, to forget about him.”

“But it didn’t work.”

Baekhyun laughs at his past naivety. “I met him at the train station the day I came back from the service. He asked me to come home and pick up my stuff. And I told myself it would be the last time, but we just... met again. And again. And again. And every time I would tell myself it was the last time, but no matter how big that city is I always seemed to run into Chanyeol.”
Chanyeol wasn’t wrong when he said it felt like destiny. The way they met, the way they always drifted towards each other, like a positive and a negative. It could be destiny, if Baekhyun believed in it.

“So this is why you kept coming back to Seoul,” Minseok hums from the table, where Jongin is trying to read his hand. (Jongin doesn’t know shit about hand-reading of course, but it doesn’t matter because everything he says comes true anyway.) “I thought you were visiting Sehun. Wait, did Sehun know?”

Baekhyun shrugs. “I never actually told him but there’s no way he doesn’t know. He never said he approves, but he has said he doesn’t disapprove.” Maybe it wasn’t a permission, but it was close enough. And Sehun’s opinion was the one that mattered the most to Baekhyun, since Chanyeol had almost killed him.

“And he never told me.” Minseok pouts. “I’m hurt.”

Baekhyun lets the conversation stray towards other topics after that. Jongin says something cryptic and witty and Kyungsoo asks Minseok if he can touch his tails and Minseok wiggles his fox ears and Baekhyun closes his eyes and tunes everything out. Inside him, magic purrs and stretches, remodelling itself to fit inside his body.

He doesn’t hear the door opening, but his magic reacts to it anyway. Baekhyun wills it quiet. An arm wraps around his shoulders and he looks up from his cup of coffee, to Chanyeol’s smiling face.

“Hey,” he says, smiling as if Baekhyun is the most beautiful thing in the room, the only thing that matters in the entire world.

“Hey,” Baekhyun says back, leaning into him. “What’s wrong? Got tired of fighting with the Guardian?”

Chanyeol sighs. “Oh, yes. Dead tired. That man is nasty.”

Baekhyun takes a sip of coffee. It’s sweeter now, but maybe he’ll add a little more sugar next time.

“I never thanked you,” he murmurs. “For, you know, keeping my secret. And my mom’s. Even after becoming the Samjokgu, you never told anyone about us. So. Thank you.”

Chanyeol ruffles his hair and they lean back against the counter, watching the people at the table. Junmyeon just got back and he’s already frowning at Minseok – is that wrinkle on his forehead permanent? Baekhyun wonders – and Jongin is now pretending to read Kyungsoo’s palm. Somewhere in the mountains surrounding Seoul, a millenary Gumiho is getting reacquainted with her powers, ready to tear the city down, and they’re the only ones who can stop her. When Baekhyun’s hand curls around Chanyeol’s fingers, Chanyeol squeezes back.

From: Seok-hyungnim
To: Seulgi-bear
im this close to killinh this withe istg
tihs cloes
[Sent: 07:35, 25.01.2018]

Junmyeon, Baekhyun realizes five minutes into the discussion, is a good man. In a zealous,
pompous way maybe, but he really is a good man. He sounds like he cares. He cares about the people of Seoul, who are under his protection, he cares about the good name of his family, he cares about duties and responsibilities and he cares about rules. He cares maybe a little too much, in Baekhyun’s opinion, but when they talk about Gumiho, he suddenly turns blind.

“We’re not asking for permission to hunt in the capital, or anywhere else. We just want witches to stop considering us animals,” Minseok says, slamming his fist on the table. No one else seems to notice, but Baekhyun can see the legs of the table shake every time he does that. He tries to make eye contact but Minseok is looking at Junmyeon intently, frustration clear in his face. Baekhyun has known him for his whole life and he can see how close he is to snapping, which is something they really don’t need at the moment.

“Gumiho are animals,” Junmyeon says, and Kyungsoo puts a hand on his forearm, looking a little panicked. “Did you see the boys this Gumiho killed in Seoul? Ripped apart. She almost killed Chanyeol too. And me. She would even go to the lengths of killing her own kin for power, and you want me to believe Gumiho are to be trusted?”

“But not everyone is like her,” Baekhyun says. “My mother was a Gumiho and now she’s human.”

“Yes, and you’re an unregistered hybrid who could go berserk at any moment. Don’t think I forgot about that, Byun Baekhyun.”

Baekhyun opens his mouth to bark a nasty reply, but Chanyeol squares up, as if to shield him from Junmyeon, and talks first.

“We have already talked about this. Stop threatening my boyfriend, Junmyeon.”

Junmyeon shakes his head and crosses his arms on the table.

For a blessed moment, there’s silence.

It doesn’t last long. Minseok snorts and leans back against the seat, crossing his arms. “So, tell me then, how exactly you’re going to defeat Sooyeon without our help. I’m curious, come on. Because I don’t like you one bit, Kim Junmyeon, and I’m not above watching you get slaughtered. Maybe your successor will be more… accommodating.”

Junmyeon jumps up, almost throwing away the chair in his haste, and Baekhyun doesn’t see magic like Chanyeol does, but he can still feel it, like the tickling of tiny clockworks all working together around Junmyeon, ready to close like a trap around Minseok. His own magic surges, wild and untamed, like a river testing the shores, threatening to overflow and flood the fields, following the instinct to protect his family, his pack. Before he can do anything though, Chanyeol clears his throat and everyone falls silent.

“I thought we were trying to find a solution. I know you don’t like them and I understand why, but they offered their help and we need it,” he reminds Junmyeon, who lets out a frustrated little sigh and sits down again, his magic acquiescing.

“You’re crazy! Trusting Gumiho is crazy! There’s a reason no one has ever done it and it’s because they cannot be trusted!”

There must be some kind of personal tragedy behind all this hatred, Baekhyun realizes. There’s no other possible explanation. He sends a nervous look at Minseok, whose nostrils are dilating with every breath he takes, and hopes he doesn’t explode.

“Actually it has been done already,” Chanyeol says, attracting everyone’s eyes on himself. “I don’t
know how much Sehun and Jongin told you, but coming here has actually been useful. I know who this Gumiho is. She’s already been defeated in the past, by a Samjokgu, a witch and another Gumiho.”

“This is impossible,” Junmyeon says. “No one would ever make a deal with a Gumiho. And I don’t think a Gumiho would make a deal with us either.”

“Well, it happened,” Chanyeol insists. “It was the only way, since this Gumiho was too strong for two humans. Or three, or four, or sixty. We’ve faced that thing, Junmyeon, and she didn’t even have half of her original powers, and she was already stronger than me and you combined. And I can feel how strong she is with her full powers even now. She’s on the other side of the country but I can feel her as if she were here. Trust me, Junmyeon, we could summon all the covens of the city and we still wouldn’t be able to beat her.”

His words float in the heavy silence of the destroyed kitchen, apparently weightless. For a glorious moment, Junmyeon seems convinced. Then he shakes his head. “No, this doesn’t make sense. If the Samjokgu joined forces with a Gumiho to defeat this Gumiho, why is that Gumiho still alive? It was a failure.”

“She’s still alive because the Samjokgu, not the Gumiho, made a mistake.”

It’s almost midday when Hong Garyung comes back to her house only to find it invaded by a bunch of tired, nervous young men and one and a half Gumiho.

She enters the kitchen and everyone immediately scrambles to give up a chair for her, but she ignores them and checks the conditions of the room first. Her eyes scan the huge crack in the floor and the smaller cracks in the wall, paired with dark burns. She flips the light on and off a few times, probably recognizing Junmyeon’s magical handiwork on the electric system and, in the end, she pats the coffee machine. Then, satisfied, she turns to look at her grandson.

“You could’ve at least swept the floor if you wanted to have a party in my kitchen, Yeollie. There’s glass everywhere.”

“Give me a break, we’re in the middle of a war meeting,” he mutters.

After that, Garyung zeroes on Junmyeon, who stutters and bows so low his forehead almost touches the floor. “It’s a honor Lady Hong, I’m Kim Junmyeon, son of Kim Heejung.”

She frowns. “I remember your mother. And your grandfather too. The Gumiho we’re trying to fight was the one who killed him.”

She says it calmly, conversationally, as if she hasn’t just given out information that could change everything.

Junmyeon freezes for a moment, and then shakes his head, looking like all the blood had just been drained from his face. In the silence Baekhyun feels the clacking of his magic, a metallic, frantic sound.

“I thought she was dead,” Junmyeon says, slowly, looking at the floor so that no one can see his face.

“We all thought so too, but like I said – the Samjokgu made a mistake and we’re all here today paying the consequences.”

She turns, leaving him to come to terms with this new revelation, and introduces herself to Jongin
and Kyungsoo. Then, she looks at Minseok with something between hostility, exasperation and the tiniest hint of amusement. “I see you’ve found your way in, at last.”

Minseok smiles, sharp and mocking, his tails fluttering around him. “The window was broken and the totem poles were down. You should improve the security around here. I can’t believe you lost your half of Sooyeon’s fox bead.”

“Don’t act all cocky around me, Sunmi lost the other half,” she retorts, and he raises his hands in surrender.

“And that’s why I’m here. We’re going to take responsibility and help in the battle, if this distressed young man is willing to trust us.”

Junmyeon’s scowl deepens and he looks ready to counter, but Garyung frowns at them both.

“If you’re going to fight do it in the garden. This house has already withstood too much damage. Chanyeol,” she calls, “take your guests somewhere else. I have to make lunch.”

---

**Hunnie**

im so happy you have your phone back
minseok never tells me anything
[Sent: 08:14, 25.01.2018]

Baekhyun tries to bail, silently, when Chanyeol leaves, but Chanyeol’s grandmother stops him with a soft, “Would you mind helping me, Baekhyun?” that has him freezing.

It’s unfair, because Baekhyun has always been good with ladies. He has that kind of childish, shameless charm that makes all the aunties at the market pinch his cheeks and give him food and it’s always, always worked, except it seems to vanish in front of Chanyeol’s grandmother.

Hong Garyung is a tiny woman with plump cheeks and grey hair, and Chanyeol has told Baekhyun countless times how sweet and lovely and soft she is, but Baekhyun is terrified of her. Something in the way she looks at him tells him she must have known his mother well and they must have not been the best of friends.

He sends a help me look at Chanyeol, but his boyfriend is too busy trying to play mediator between Minseok and Junmyeon and he can only stare at Baekhyun helplessly as Garyung closes the door between them.

“Don’t be so shy, I don’t bite. My grandson is the one who does.”

Baekhyun flushes crimson and that at least seems to amuse her.

“Can you start by sweeping the floor? All that glass… I’d use a spell to repair it, but I can’t afford to use magic that liberally after yesterday.”

Baekhyun nods and hurries to catch the broom from behind the door. “How are you feeling?” he asks temptatively, to fill the awkward silence, as he carefully sweeps the glass fragments towards the dustpan.

“Better than yesterday, for sure. Thankfully, Sooyeon didn’t hurt me and my magic absorbed the impact of the car crash.”
It’s not the first time they talk. Yesterday night, while Chanyeol was outside talking to Minseok, Garyung thanked Baekhyun for coming to their aid, but that short conversation doesn’t make today’s interaction less awkward.

Baekhyun empties the dustpan in the trash and washes his hands mechanically, straining his ears to listen to Junmyeon and Minseok’s discussion. They must have moved into the living room again, but he can still hear everything they say, if he focuses. Judging by how it’s going, Junmyeon seems convinced they need the help of the Gumiho, but he has no intention to make promises in the name of the Council.

“You said Kim Junmyeon’s grandfather was killed by Sooyeon?” Baekhyun asks, as he cleans the anchovies for the broth.

Garyung nods. “It was one of the reasons we decided to accept your mother’s offer to take Sooyeon down. Kim Sangjoong was a good man and a good Guardian, but more than that he was one of the strongest magical wielders in the country. A lot stronger than me, for sure. And yet he died, like nothing. He couldn’t even put up a fight.”

“Is that why Junmyeon hates us so much?”

“Partly. But it’s not only a personal grudge. Witches never really liked Gumiho. You can imagine why.”

“Because Gumiho are way stronger than witches,” he answers, with a scoff. “But things have changed. Gumiho today are not as wild as they were in the past. They’ve stopped hunting humans and they’ve started to blend with them.”

“And look at what happened to them. Their race is decaying. Their magic is fading away without a tribute of blood. Their time is almost over.”

No, Baekhyun thinks. A new time has only just started. Gumiho are not like other creatures. They aren’t born and they don’t die. They come into being. They evolve. It’s what they’ve always done, since they were just mountain foxes, into creatures above everything else. Now, if the time requires it, they will evolve again, to new and unexplored possibilities.

“Gumiho might be weaker now,” Garyung continues, “but they could be stronger again, and every witch is aware of this. The Guardian is especially aware of this. A desperate animal would do anything to survive, so why would he trust you?”

“If Sooyeon attacks the capital and we can’t defeat her, it won’t be the end of the Gumiho. It’ll be the end of the witches. And we are willing to help them, that’s why you should trust us.”

He doesn’t know why he’s so hung up on making Garyung understand, but he doesn’t think he’ll have a real chance at convincing Junmyeon if she can’t convince her first. Garyung dries her hand on the dishrag and sighs. On the other side of the house, the discussion is also stalling, as if the entire house is taking a collective breath to think.

“You are right,” Garyung says, in the end, “to some extent. But you can’t change a past of blood and war with good intentions.”

“Then tell me how to do it! You’re a witch, you know how witches think. You know we need to do this together, because you’ve done it once before! How can we convince Kim Junmyeon to side with us?”

She throws the last ingredients in the pot and Baekhyun covers it. They watch the steam cloud
against the glass lid in silence.

“Your mother charmed me once,” she says, her voice low and nostalgic. “Just to prove herself she could. I was young and naive and Sunmi was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. You know what the saddest thing was? She didn’t even need to use her magic to get me, because I already trusted her. But she did, and as today I still haven’t forgiven her for that. After that, I decided I would never trust a Gumiho again. It was my husband, the previous Samjokgu, who decided to accept your mother’s proposal, not me.”

She looks up at Baekhyun and he knows she’s trying to find traces of her in him. She won’t find many in his face. He got the looks from his father’s side. From his mother he got his stubbornness and the way he makes people’s heads turn when he smiles, a charm that transcends magic. He wonders if Hong Garyung ever had a chance to see one of his mother’s true smiles. If she ever met the woman and not the fox. He doesn’t know. He only met the woman and never the fox.

“What convinced him, then?”

“The fact that she was doing it for you. The fact that she was ready to do it on her own if we had said no. And the fact that she would’ve most certainly died trying.”

He doesn’t know what to answer and Garyung too is silent. The truth is they have nothing on their hands that can convince Kim Junmyeon – or any other witch – to trust them. And like this, they’ll fall.

“The thing is, Baekhyun, that you might be looking at this from the wrong perspective. Sunmi never really tried to convince me because she couldn’t have cared less for the approval of a witch. She tried to convince the Samjokgu. At the end of the day, when it comes to Gumiho, the Samjokgu is the one who gets the last word.”

Who is the master of this war? Jongin asked Baekhyun, two days ago, in a small, niche café hidden in the alley surrounding Ewha University. There are many wars. Baekhyun doesn’t know who’s the master of the war within himself, but he knows who’s the master of the war against a Gumiho.

“Can you finish here on your own? I have to go there and at least try to convince Kim Junmyeon to accept our help again. There’s no way they’re going to defeat someone like her without help.” Just like there’s no way the Gumiho can do it on their own either. Why does no one seem to understand?

Garyung nods and goes back to her broth. “Go, don’t worry. I just have to set up the stew.”

He’s at the door when she talks again. “When everything will be over, I would like you to come here and learn how to cook Andong’s jjimdak.”

“It’s Chanyeol’s favorite dish,” he murmurs, and when she smiles proudly he continues. “When we were in Seoul and we went to eat it, he always complained it wasn’t good enough compared to the one his grandmother could make.”

“They say the way to a man’s heart comes through his stomach. I think you’ve already found your way through our Chanyeol’s heart a long time ago, but if you’re going to be part of this family I will have to teach you my special recipe anyway.”

Baekhyun’s expression is one of genuine joy, the one, the one he took from Sunmi. “It would be my pleasure,” he says.

Garyung smiles back.
Hunnie
minseok told me you had sex with pcy i dont want him to tell me things ever again
[Sent: 08:26, 25.01.2018]

Chanyeol is waiting for him in the corridor, leaning against the wall and pretending he wasn’t
eavesdropping.

“Were you snooping?” Baekhyun asks, fighting back a smile.

From the way Chanyeol shrugs, not inconspicuous at all, he totally was.

“I was just waiting for the right moment to save you. You looked kinda panicked earlier.”

“Oh, my knight in a...” – Baekhyun looks at Chanyeol – “Radiohead tee. What would I do without
you? Don’t worry though, your grandma is nice and I think she would’ve adored me right away, if
not for the whole Gumiho thing.”

“I think she’ll adore you anyway in the end,” Chanyeol says, melting into one of those soft,
gummy smiles. “How could she not?”

His arms find Baekhyun’s shoulders and he draws him close, squishing him in a tight hug.

“Are you going to be this enthusiastic every time you see me?” Baekhyun asks, speaking against
Chanyeol’s chest.

“Maybe? I’m sorry, I’m just so... happy. You’re here, in front of me. It’s morning and you haven’t
left and you’re here, in my grandma’s house, and you met her. And you’re staying.” He loosens his
hold and leans down so that his forehead is leaning against Baekhyun’s. “I can hug you how many
times I want.”

“Yes, you can.”

Baekhyun tiptoes up and steals a kiss, quick and light, and when he draws away Chanyeol follows
him.

“We should go back,” Baekhyun murmurs, as Chanyeol inches closer to kiss him again.

“Only a moment,” Chanyeol whispers against his lips. They can hear soft voices coming from the
living room, the clanking of pots in the kitchen, the wind sweeping the trees outside. They can also
hear the graceful tinkering of Baekhyun’s magic when Chanyeol touches him, pushing until
Baekhyun’s back hits the door of the bathroom. They struggle to open it and stumble inside.
Baekhyun trips against the tiny bathtub and curses and Chanyeol shushes him, “Come on, they’ll
hear us!”

“Dude, Minseok is a Gumiho, he can hear us. And Jongin knows everything anyway.”

“I hope they both know I think they’re creepy stalkers,” he says, before he kisses Baekhyun long
and sweet, cradling his face and tilting it to deepen the kiss.

“We should go back,” Baekhyun says, when Chanyeol lets him go again. “They’ll probably kill
each other with no one controlling them.”

“Kyungsoo is there, he can karate-chop the both of them. Let me just take a break for a moment.
You have no idea how tiring it is, trying to make a Gumiho and a witch cooperate.”

“They still haven’t found a compromise?”

Chanyeol shakes his head. “Junnyeon could drown in all his prejudices and your friend Minseok would rather cut both his hands than give him one. We’ve reached an impasse, and I don’t know what could get us out of this mess this time.”

Baekhyun sighs and sits on the edge of the bathtub and Chanyeol leans down on him again, caging him with his arms. His lips find Baekhyun’s temple and descend, delicate, on the curve of his cheek, and when Baekhyun exhales the rest of the world disappears behind the door.

“I dreamed of you like this,” Chanyeol says, tracing Baekhyun’s mouth with his fingers.

“Sitting on your bathtub?” he asks, making Chanyeol snort.

“No, like, just having you with me. We spent so much time together that, when you were gone, it took months for me to accept it.”

The words bounce against the white tiles of the walls and the immaculate ceramic of the bathtub before they come back to Baekhyun again, amplified, a little distorted. Baekhyun is stunned by how familiar Chanyeol’s pain feels, how well it echoes through his own

He thinks of cold morning nights and drowsy summer evenings, and how easy was to miss Chanyeol in the littlest things. He thinks about waking up in the morning, in that short window of time when dreams blend with reality and it’s easy to steal a couple of minutes of bliss, to believe nothing had happened and Chanyeol is going to trample in the room in a few moments, in just his boxers and that stupid friendship bracelet he wears on his left wrist, to sing some television jingle at him. In the beginning it was difficult. Too raw, too confusing, too early, the wound still open and bleeding the day away. Baekhyun would read something funny on his phone and turn around to show Chanyeol, a silly smile on his face, before reality crashed on him, like a bucket of ice cold water, leaving him frozen and disappointed, his phone extended towards someone who wasn’t there. He kept buying that terrible spicy cup ramyeon by mistake. Like spinning in circles, always coming back to the same place, in the beginning it was difficult.

It got easier with practice. Not less painful, but easier. Baekhyun went to the army, and through endless drills and cold, lonely nights, with nowhere to go, nowhere to run, Chanyeol’s absence somehow became solid, consistent. Baekhyun learnt to nurture the pain, to tuck it in his heart and carry it with him everywhere he went, a weight caged by flesh and bones, soaked by his own blood. He taught himself how to turn a moment of heartbreak into a condition, into a sickness. He dreamed about love, sometimes. He dreamed it wasn’t a dream. He dreamed of not waking up.

He looks up, at Chanyeol’s face, at those eyes that see things Baekhyun can only now vaguely perceive. He wonders if their dreams were the same.

“Are you afraid this is just a dream?” Chanyeol’s fingers tighten on his jaw, almost as if he’s really afraid Baekhyun will turn to dust and fog at dawn. But dawn has come and passed. It’s morning. This is real. “You’re awake, Chanyeol. And i’m here. I’m not going anywhere, not anymore.”

“I missed you,” Chanyeol only says, still cupping his jaw, keeping him there, like he can’t believe Baekhyun is really there.

“Me too,” Baekhyun replies. “I missed you so much.”

Day after day, after day, falling asleep listening to the CDs Chanyeol mixed for him in high school
in loop, finding him in lonely, forgotten t-shirts and in the opening of his favorite anime playing on TV by mistake.

“You don’t know how many times I had to talk myself out of driving to Seoul in the morning,” Baekhyun says, eyes fluttering shut, lolling his head in Chanyeol’s hands. “Or all the times I sat down on the stairs outside your apartment and told myself to leave.”

“I do.”

“You do?”

The right corner of Chanyeol’s mouth lifts a little. “I could see your magic through the door.”

Baekhyun’s eyebrow burrows. “You never came out.”

“I didn’t want to pressure you.”

Would Baekhyun have stayed, if Chanyeol had insisted? Probably no. Probably, it would’ve made him angry and back then Baekhyun wanted nothing more than an excuse to be angry at Chanyeol. What Chanyeol gave him instead was space, enough that Baekhyun almost drowned in it. Then he waited. And waited, and waited. In the end, he won. Baekhyun came to him on his own, but it’s easy to wonder if there could’ve been an easier way. One that didn’t involve magic at all.

“I don’t want to leave again,” Baekhyun says. “Not now that we found each other. I don’t want to fight, Chanyeol.”

Baekhyun doesn’t want to die. And he will, they all will die if they can’t stop Sooyeon. Sooner or later she’ll take her revenge and everything else. But Baekhyun is not afraid of Sooyeon and her tic-toc magic that, even so far away, sounds like a countdown to death. As terrifying as she is, there’s worse than risking death at her golden claws.

Baekhyun is afraid of flowers and moonlight reflected on the surface of a well of magic so deep he can’t even fathom to see the end of it, hidden inside his mother’s fox bead. He’s afraid of darkness and whispers, of being dragged to the bottom of that well, so far away he won’t ever be able to come back. Not even one day has passed since he felt the pressure of Sunmi’s magic – in his lungs, in his blood, a high tide of magic leering at him dragging him away from the shores. And he’s feeling it too, deep down, he’s carrying it with him, deeply intertwined with his soul, like a disease, growing inside him. And from the look in Chanyeol’s eyes, he can feel it too.

“I don’t want you to fight either,” Chanyeol says slowly. “But last time your mother defeated Sooyeon. I don’t know if there’s another Gumiho with magic just as strong in this country.”

There isn’t and they both know, but...

“Maybe there isn’t someone as powerful, but there are many other Gumiho. And witches. And then there’s you. If we join forces, we can do it. You have to convince everyone to cooperate, Chanyeol, there’s no other way.”

“I know, but…” Chanyeol throws his head back and exhales, frustrated and angry. “I don’t know how to make them listen to me. I’m not the Samjokgu, Baekhyun.”

He doesn’t look like the Samjokgu, like the monster of Baekhyun’s childhood stories, with red eyes and sharp fangs. He doesn’t look like someone who’d hurt Baekhyun, even if he did it in the past. He looks like Chanyeol, tall and clumsy, with big ears and cute, lopsided smiles, like someone who forgets to do his laundry and lives on cheap cup ramyun and watches way too many
mukbang channels. And the previous Samjokgu, Hong Gyunsang, didn’t look like the Samjokgu either, neither in the photograph camping in the living room in front of his altar, nor in the other pictures Baekhyun spotted around the house. He looked like a husband, a father, a grandfather, like someone who reads too many books and scribbles his thoughts on the margins and scolds kids when they throw the ball in his garden while playing on the streets. Junmyeon looks like a chaebol heir and Minseok looks a little like an idol and Seulgi looks like a college student and magic hides in the most unsuspecting places, at dead ends and in back alleys and on the first train of the day. Behind familiar smiles. If Baekhyun looks up at the small mirror of the bathroom, cracked on the edge and dotted by dried water drops, he can see himself, the most unassuming, middle-class university dropout, wearing a hoodie he stole from his boyfriend. Well, the silver hair might be a little misleading, but no one would ever think that, under soft skin and droopy eyes, he’s radioactive, a nuclear hazard, a loose cannon ready to explode.

The thing is, you don’t get to decide who you are, or what you are. You don’t choose what you can and can’t do, but you can choose what to do.

“But you are the Samjokgu, Chanyeol. Even if you don’t believe it, I do. I believe in you. And they believe in that too, and they will follow you, whether they like it or not.”

Chanyeol frowns. “What do you mean?”

Baekhyun thinks about Jongin and his questions. Who is the master of this war? Baekhyun doesn’t know which war Jongin meant, if the one against Sooyeon or the one within Baekhyun himself, but he knows Chanyeol has the power to turn the tables now.

“I mean it’s time for you to act like the Samjokgu.”

From: Kim Junmyeon
To: Seungwanie
I have a favor to ask
Like
A big favor
[Sent: 10:43, 25.01.2018]

The photograph of Chanyeol’s grandfather smiles, carefree and distant, as they go back to the room, together. Baekhyun meekly sits on the edge of the armchair with Junmyeon at his left and Minseok at his right, only separated by the low coffee table. Jongin is sitting cross-legged on the floor, bent in a way Baekhyun didn’t think was possible as he fiddles with his phone. Kyungsoo is looking outside the window, but he quickly turns towards the door when they enter.

Chanyeol pats Baekhyun’s shoulder and walks past him, to sit on the only free side of the coffee table over a flat maroon cushion, Minseok at his left, Junmyeon at his right, Baekhyun right in front of him.

“So,” he says, when he has the attention of everyone in the room. “Are we doing this or not?”

“No, we aren’t, clearly,” Junmyeon says, glaring at Minseok, who just shrugs.

“We aren’t,” he confirms.

Chanyeol straightens up his back, clenches his fists, unclenches them.
“Well, it pains me to hear that, because I am.”

“What do you mean?” Kyungsoo asks.

“I mean,” Chanyeol says, glancing yo Baekhyun shortly, “that we must act now. Sooyeon is now at her strongest, but she just received her powers back after more than twenty years. It’ll take some time to regain complete control of that amount of power. Now it’s our only chance to stop her, so you either find a way to cooperate before that or I will have to fight her on my own.”

Junmyeon shakes his head. “You wouldn’t do that. It would be a suicide.”

“It would be worse than suicide. If I die, my sister will become the next Samjokgu and it’ll take her years to get used all these powers. How many people will die at Sooyeon’s hands in the meanwhile? She’ll exterminate the witches of the capital and she’ll grow even stronger. We’ll never be able to stop her again.”

Junmyeon pales. “Exactly! Why are you doing this?”

Chanyeol sighs. “Because putting my life in danger is the only way to convince you to fight with me, apparently? You spent the last five years nagging at me about responsibilities, I didn’t expect you to back out as soon as I actually decide to do something.”

The look of disdain on Junmyeon’s face is priceless.

“So what? If I don’t help you, you’re gonna fight her alone? With your Gumiho boyfriend?”

Before Baekhyun can protest that the Gumiho boyfriend is worth more than any witch, Chanyeol does it for him.

“Baekhyun is not going to fight,” he says. There’s a moment of silence and Baekhyun meets Minseok’s eyes for a moment before he looks away. It’s childish, but seeing the relief in Minseok’s eyes makes him feel so warm.

“What?” Junmyeon shakes his head in disbelief. “Why wouldn’t he fight? I thought he was the strongest one here!”

“Yes, and he’s a loose cannon. He does have the greatest power among us, but he can’t control it without my help. Yesterday night we were lucky, but he almost died. I could barely pull him back.”

Magic hisses inside Baekhyun. Don’t listen to him, they’ll never be able to win without us, it whispers, and gurgles and simmers and it’s so, so deep, and... and Chanyeol puts a hand on Baekhyun’s arm, cutting the connection between him and the fox bead.

“See? Even now he’s struggling to keep it reined. No, I thought about this all night and I cannot let him fight. That magic was never meant for him. He could die if he uses it again. Or worse, he could lose himself, and we’d had to deal with two monsters instead of one.”

And I can’t let that happen. Chanyeol doesn’t say it, but it’s clear in the way his fingers squeeze Baekhyun’s forearm and Baekhyun can feel the thought resound through skin and magic.

“So is your boyfriend’s life more important than anyone else’s?” Kyungsoo asks, looking at Chanyeol only. Minseok hisses, but Chanyeol doesn’t look angry. He looks back at Kyungsoo, perfectly calm.
“It isn’t. But I won’t let him become a martyr just because your boyfriend refuses to fight together with a Gumiho. No one needs to die if we all work together.”

“What if it’s the only way?” Kyungsoo asks, again. “Last time the Samjogku, a Gumiho and a witch defeated Sooyeon, so this time...”

“And this time the Samjokgu, many Gumiho and many witches will defeat Sooyeon. Minseok said the leaders of the three biggest communities in the country are willing to fight beside me, as long as their conditions are met. But we can’t do this alone. We need the help of witches too.”

They all turn towards Junmyeon. “So now I’m the bad guy?” he asks, with a sigh.

“You’re always the bad guy, Myeon,” Kyungsoo says, with some sort of annoyed fondness in his voice, “and I’m always on your side anyway, but this time I have to agree with Chanyeol. He has a plan, and it seems like the only viable plan.”

“Fine, then, if there’s no other way. But even if we help you, we won’t be of any help against her. You saw what happened the last time we met.”

“That only happened because you were alone with her,” says Minseok. “With other Gumiho present, it’ll be more difficult for her to charm you.”

“We don’t need you to fight,” Chanyeol says. “We just need a spell, something to keep Sooyeon restrained long enough for me to get close to her. While the other Gumiho keep her busy, I’ll steal her fox bead and everything will be over.”

It seems so easy like this, but Baekhyun can feel Sooyeon’s magic pulse and bleed into reality miles and miles away and he knows it won’t be easy at all.

“There is a spell,” Junmyeon says, “that could help you. We’d need to ask the permission of the Council but they’ll approve it if I’m the one recommending it.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it?” Baekhyun asks.

Junmyeon doesn’t seem really convinced, but he sighs. “I’m only doing this because I trust the Samjogku, not because I trust any of you Gumiho. And I can’t grant you all these conditions, but I can promise I will consider them, as long as you can keep your end of the deal first.”

There’s a moment of silence as Minseok considers Junmyeon’s words. Baekhyun is afraid he’ll refuse. After all, they’ll only have Junmyeon’s word and nothing else. In Chanyeol’s plan, the Gumiho will take the brunt of Sooyeon’s fury, while the witches stay back and just hold the spell. It might be enough to make Minseok refuse... But what other choices do we have?

Minseok looks down, steals a look at Baekhyun. If Junmyeon refuses, Baekhyun will have to fight. If not to defeat Sooyeon, to defend himself once she comes for him – or, even worse, for Chanyeol. And if Baekhyun fights... He shudders, magic tingling inside him. If Baekhyun fights, he’ll probably die. Minseok knows that too.

“I accept,” Minseok says. “And I hope you’re a man of your word, Kim Junmyeon, because I’ve just entrusted you with the future of my people.”

Hunnie
just found out the identity of seulgi’s mysterious fandom friend
i cannot
wtf
shes the nice guardian of the city who always gives me cookies
[Sent: 14:58, 25.01.2018]

“Chance of showers at times heavy or thundershowers. We recommend you to…”

The radio screeches and the pleasant voice of the weather forecast lady glitches and dies, as a
strong gust of wind hits the pickup from the side, making it shake despite its weight. Shin Jimin
whistles. “Hold on, guys!”

Seoul howls its disappointment with the voice of the wind as they get closer and closer. This city of
glass and light doesn’t want Baekhyun and his magic of fog and wind and the deepest woods, but
Baekhyun doesn’t care. After all, being a Gumiho comes with privilege. With confusion, with
instinct and with power. And with a bone-consumbing hunger.

“Control yourself,” Minseok whispers, and his claws clamp on Baekhyun’s knees, shaking him out
of his reverie. He realizes his tails are on the verge of materializing, thick and bulky, in the
cramped backseat of the Jimin’s dirty pickup.

He turns to Chanyeol, feeling ashamed at his own lack of control, but Chanyeol is still napping, his
head pressed against the car window, his mouth partly open, fogging the glass with his breaths.
How can he sleep through the typhoon threatening to capsize them, Baekhyun doesn’t know, but he
watches his chest heave, up and down, rise and fall, swell and contract, and wishes he could be as
calm as he is.

Instead, he feels confused, pulled from too many directions, stretched thin. His instinct tells him to
attack Chanyeol – *enemy*, it whispers, sent here by the gods to hunt, to chase, to tear apart – to
eliminate him now that he’s sleeping, vulnerable and weak, peaceful. Power swells in his chest,
rumbling like the storm outside. Hunger... Hunger just hurts, scratches at Baekhyun’s belly,
demanding blood.

He realizes he has lost control again when Chanyeol’s eyes shoots open, immediately finding his
own. He has to look down, overrun by shame, but Chanyeol just reach for him, pulls him against
his chest. His touch is like balm on Baekhyun’s frayed nerves. He’s so good at this. It’s been less
than one day and he has already learnt how to soothe Baekhyun’s magic with just a touch of his
fingers. He draws power from him easily, as if Baekhyun is a river and Chanyeol can just drink
from him, how much he can, until he’s the one drunk on power and the fog inside Baekhyun
subsides, allowing him to think with his head.

“Please don’t turn into a giant nine-tailed fox inside my car,” Jimin asks, keeping her eyes on the
car in front of them, where Kyungsoo is leading them towards the place of the meeting. “I don’t
think I’m ready for that.”

Baekhyun is not ready for that either, even if Chanyeol’s grandmother warned him this could
happen, before they left for Seoul.

“What you did, taking your mother’s magic, is a crime. That is not your magic, you were never
meant to own it. You weren’t made to withstand it.”

“But it chose me,” he had replied, the softest whine, like a chastized child. “It said it would help
me.”

“Magic is not good, nor bad, Byun Baekhyun. Magic only cares about magic. It chose you not
because you were the strongest, but because it thought you were the weakest. This magic doesn’t need your strength. It needs your weakness. It needs to control you. Don’t think that, just because Chanyeol found a way to turn the tables, it won’t try to overpower you again. Magic is selfless and capricious and greedy, and sometimes desperate.”

The pickup bounces over a crest and Baekhyun falls back against Chanyeol again.

“How does it feel?” Chanyeol asks, circling Baekhyun’s waist with his arm to keep him from shaking too much. “Better?”

Baekhyun tries to answer but it’s Minseok who does in his place. His eyes have never left Baekhyun since they entered the car.

“I think he’s stable now,” he tells Chanyeol, from the other backseat.

“I could’ve told him that,” Baekhyun shoots back, a little annoyed, trapped between the two of them. He doesn’t like how they’re treating him, as if he’s a ticking bomb, ready to explode, but that’s just what he is. Like the tide, run by the moon, the fox bead inside him works in cycles, in powerful waves that pull him taut, stretching his body and his mind together, washing his sanity away.

It started when they were still in Jung-maeul, getting ready to leave. It started with restlessness, with shivers, with this fractured feeling, like his body was a prison for the stars. Chanyeol had to take him to a corner for a moment and touch him, just touch him, to keep him from shifting back to his animal form.

“Don’t worry,” Chanyeol says, squeezing his hand. “I’m here, I’m not letting you get lost like that.”

“But what if it happens again? What if it happens when we’re in the car, what if...”

What if it happens when Chanyeol is on the battlefield, in front of Sooyeon? What if no one is there to pull Baekhyun back?

“It won’t happen,” Chanyeol says, as if he just read Baekhyun’s mind. “And after everything is over, after we have defeated her, I will take that fox bead out of you, I will set you free. I promise.”

Baekhyun doesn’t know if he can really do it. Even now, the hold of magic around his chest is oppressive, heavy. He can try to chase the thought away by focusing on something else – he counts road signs and reads excited messages from Sehun – but it always comes back to haunt him. He shakes his head when he realizes his thoughts are becoming dull again, losing the sharpness of abstract concept to turn into the thoughts of the fox, to shapes and colors, to instinct and hunger. The hunger especially tortures him, picking at his sanity with slimy fingers.

“How do you cope with it?” he asks, turning towards Minseok. His shifts his legs, restless, to alleviate the pressure. “The hunger. You feel it too, don’t you?”

Minseok nods. “I do. Every Gumiho does. That’s how all of us started. As a fox, with hunger.” He purses his lips and Baekhyun remembers a story Minseok told him only a couple of days before, the story of a fox who stole *injeolmi* from humans. A story of hunger. “But hunger doesn’t define us.”

“How can you ignore it?” How do you keep yourself from sinking your fangs and claws in the pulsing heart of the small girl driving the pickup? It feels like Baekhyun could die from it.
“Because I know it’s not mine,” Minseok says. “It’s not me or you who needs to eat, it’s magic.”

Magic has a will. Magic is a living being. Magic isn’t born, magic doesn’t die, magic evolves. Magic grows. And to do that, magic requires a sacrifice. Someone’s life – someone’s death. Baekhyun groans at the thought of blood, and he doesn’t know if it’s repulsion or appetite.

“It’s all in your head, Baekhyun. We don’t really need to hunt. We don’t need to kill. We won’t die if we let other people live. For centuries we followed this instinct, this hunger. We thought that, since magic had given us birth, we wouldn’t be anything without it, but look at me. Look at Sehun… We’ve long stopped giving into our magic’s wishes. I haven’t killed in years. Your mother stopped attacking humans long before she met your father, and she still didn’t die. She became human, instead. You’re already human, so it’s going to be easier for you. You can ignore the hunger, Baekhyun.”

“Easier?” he asks. Chanyeol’s hand come to rest on his thigh, drawing out more magic from him, like a warning. He’s projecting, again.

“It’s important that you don’t let yourself be swept away, Baekhyun. We need you vigilant,” Minseok says, but he looks worried. If something were to happen to Chanyeol, no one would be able to pull Baekhyun back. It’s risky, too risky, but it’s the only plan they have.

Chanyeol’s phone rings, a terrible ringtone in 8bit, and he picks up. “Junmyeon? Are the Gumiho already there?” Baekhyun suddenly perks up. “Yes, we’re coming. To the left, Jimin, there’s an indoor car park at the end of the road.”

The car turns left and Baekhyun’s knees twitch in nervousness as he feels the presence of Gumiho nearby. He doesn’t recognize their scents – and how could he? He’d never been able to perceive it – but he knows these Gumiho. Most of them have seen him grow up. Some have played with him in the garden of the house in Yeoju, the one Sooyeon burned to the ground. But he hadn’t stolen one of the most powerful tokens of power in the entire country, together with their biggest chance of defeating Sooyeon.

Minseok lays a hand on his right knee, causing it to stop twitching. “Why are you so nervous?”

“What if they hate me?” Baekhyun asks. “I ruined all your plans. Seulgi should’ve taken the fox bead, not me…”

Minseok almost laughs at his panic, and that makes Baekhyun feel even worse. “Too late for regrets, Baekhyunnie. But don’t worry, no one would ever say anything bad to you now, now with the Samjokgu playing guard dog for your bratty ass.”

Baekhyun looks at Chanyeol and swallows a lump of nervousness. Minseok is right, it’s too late for regrets. He just hopes his mom didn’t come, because if she decides to scold him, nothing and nobody, not even the Samjokgu, will keep her from doing it.

“Chanyeol?” Jimin asks from the front seat. “Are you sure it’s here?”

They all look outside the window as she stops the car in front of the gate of a park, and it takes Baekhyun a moment to realize he knows exactly where they are. He used to come here, when he was young, to play with Chanyeol. It was close to their house and it was a quiet place to spend the afternoon when they weren’t studying. Still.

“Okay,” Baekhyun says, as soon as Jimin stops the car and they all get down right at the main entrance of the National Cemetery, where Junmyeon and Kyungsoo are already waiting for them.
“I don’t wanna sound annoying, but who fucking chose the location?”

Chanyeol looks at Junmyeon. “I can bet my Samjokgu eyes this was your idea.”

Junmyeon raises his hand in surrender. “Actually, the location was decided by the coven that will cast the spell.”

Minseok, too, grimaces. “Well, it’s a little morbid, but kinda fitting? I’d rather fight in a graveyard than in the middle of Gangnam, just saying.”

Jimin laughs nervously. “Well, guys, this is my stop. I don’t care if you have a war to fight, there’s no way I’m setting foot in a cemetery.”

She looks kinda shaken and that’s when Baekhyun remembers she can see ghosts. Entering one of the biggest cemeteries in the city must be a nightmare to her.

“Don’t worry, Jiminie. There’s nothing you can do to help us anyway and you’ve already done more than enough. Go home and stay with my sister. If something happens to me, she will need your help.”

“I will!” Her eyes meets Baekhyun’s for a moment. She swoons and punches Chanyeol’s shoulder. “Take care of that boyfriend of yours! He’s really handsome, even if he’s a Gumiho, okay? And come to visit in Jung-maeul. Don’t be a fucking stranger!”

“I will, I will.”

She waves at Baekhyun and, before she leaves, Minseok takes her hand and kisses it. “Thank you for the ride, beautiful maiden. Let’s see each other again.”

They watch her drive away in the dying light of the day.

“So,” Baekhyun says, “tonight it’s just us and the cemetery, right?”

“And the millenary Gumiho who wants to kill all of us,” adds Chanyeol.

“Right.”

Worst way to spend a Sunday night since Chanyeol almost slew Sehun. Baekhyun looks in the direction of the woods, where he can clearly feel the energy of some Gumiho. His magic shivers and preens at the idea of meeting them.

“Come on,” Junmyeon says, “let’s go.”

**Hunnie**

seulgis wicht firend is amazing
like also is minseok waitinf 4 mw?
do i hvae to look ncie?
[Sent: 15:03, 25.01.2018]

The Meeting at Seoul National Cemetery, as it will forever be known by the Korean magical community, takes place at sunset, in front of a silent, reprimanding statue of Buddha and a couple of hundred white tombstones. It starts with a slap and then with a hug and then with Baekhyun breaking down into nervous tears.
Sunmi smells like a long journey, like anguish and relief. She clamps her nails down on Baekhyun’s forearm and it hurts but she also threads her fingers through his hair and dries his tears with her knuckles.

“I’m really sorry mama,” he says. “I didn’t know what was happening, I didn’t mean to steal anything, I swear.”

He’s not lying but he’s not being honest either. He knew very well he was not supposed to keep the wooden box, but he did it anyway. And he is sorry, for disappointing her, for worrying and for disobeying her and for calling her a coward. He would do it again, if offered the chance (even if it almost killed him).

Baekhyun’s father is more laconic. He turns his only son around, back and forth, studying him with a questioning eyes, until he shakes his head and says, “Your grandmother will not approve of the silver hair.”

Baekhyun smiles weakly. “I suppose showing her my new, shiny nine tails is out of the question then.”

“If you want her to survive, you’d better lay low with the magic” he says, before patting his shoulder and leaning down. “Apparently we’re on the verge of some battle, so you won’t get scolded today. But after this mess is over, you’re grounded forever.”

Well, it sounds fair.

Seulgi is trailing behind Jaehwan, looking uncharacteristically small. Baekhyun is on the verge of yet another apology, but she hugs him before he can talk. He can feel the way she goes tense when her magic touches his own. *Friend*, it says, and Baekhyun’s magic echoes the word back and then she’s squishing him tighter, calling him an idiot, “You have no idea, Baekhyun, you stupid kid, you dumb, crazy kid.”

He ducks his head low so she can hit it.

“You could’ve died… You could’ve…” She looks away. “Magic consumed people stronger than you. And it would’ve been on me, because I couldn’t stop you!”

“It would’ve been on us,” Sunmi says. “On all of us, Baekhyun included. And it didn’t happen. Let’s just focus on staying alive, all of us, okay?”

Seulgi nods and pinches Baekhyun’s cheek. “Minseok told me you’re not going to fight.”

He looks at his feet. “Yes, Chanyeol said it would be too dangerous and…”

He stops talking as his mother walks up to Chanyeol and slaps him too, then she hugs him tight, just like she did with Baekhyun a few minutes ago. “Thank you for taking care of him,” he hears her say, and Chanyeol hugs her back like he did when he was younger and blushes and murmurs something in her ear, something that sounds a lot like *I’m sorry*.

Baekhyun quickly looks away with a smile, looking for the only member of the family who’s missing.

“Where’s Sehun?” he asks. “I thought he would be here.”

“With the witches,” Seulgi replies. “I think they’re going to officially condone him and set him free, as sign of goodwill, so he’ll get here with them. Look at Minseok, he’s literally shaking.”
“I’m not,” Minseok says, deadpan. But even though he’s struggling to keep a black face, his tails flutter in anticipation.

Someone laughs, and Baekhyun turns and throws a quick glance at the small group of Gumiho standing behind, under a circle of brownish trees. They’re not the only ones who came – Baekhyun can smell many of them, loitering around the woods or just quietly snooping in the capital for what must be the first time in decades for some of them – but only the elders of the biggest communities in Korea will take part to the negotiations with the witches and to the battle. Baekhyun recognizes Yesung, from Busan – one of Minseok’s best friends – Suji from Gwangju and Jieun, who leads the Gumiho in Jeonju. There’s also a fourth person he’s never met, a beautiful woman in traditional clothes who wears her black tails like scarves. Baekhyun stares at her and she stares back, cautiously. She looks powerful. And somehow closed off, keeping all her magic around herself on a tight leash, keeping Baekhyun from reaching for it. She makes him feel a little uneasy, so he escapes her gaze, turning to face Yesung instead.

The leader of the biggest community of Gumiho of Korea is not a stranger to Sunmi’s household. He was among Sunmi’s proteges, back when she was one of the most powerful magical beings of the country, and he often visited Yeoju when Baekhyun was younger. Still, it takes Baekhyun a moment to recognize him under the grey beard covering his face, when in the past he always presented himself like an young boy, eternal, ageless and ethereal.

From the way he stares at Baekhyun, it’s difficult to see if he’s angry or disappointed or just curious. His eyes are guarded, his face schooled in a neutral expression, but he must feel Baekhyun’s power, cobwebs of energy floating around him, lulled by an invisible wind that comes from the depths of Baekhyun’s soul. For a moment, Baekhyun feels tiny and exposed under his clinical gaze, too small for the unbelievable power sheathed inside him, too young and inexperienced and stupid enough to steal his mother’s magic and pretend he can control it. He feels judged, and magic hisses inside him, ready to attack a potential enemy.

But then Yesung’s face opens in a thin smile.

“Look at you, the baby fox has finally grown up!” Baekhyun only gets a faint impression of grey tails and grey ears before Yesung’s magic touches his own, cautiously. “How are you feeling, kid? Wow, isn’t your mother’s magic strong, even after all these years…”

“I’m… I’m fine, just a little shaken,” he manages to exhale, his voice croaking.

“You better be! You survived Sooyeon, after all. I bet you’re not looking forward to seeing her again, am I right?” He is right, and his reluctance must be clear in his face because Yesung smirks. “Don’t worry, this time you won’t need to fight. We’re here to help.”

Someone clears his throat and then Yesung is smiling at Minseok, one of his closest friend since probably the Goryeo dynasty. “Sorry, I didn’t forget about you, my friend. I’ve heard you did an awesome job with the negotiation. Now, I guess the angry looking young man here is the Samjokgu.”

“Park Chanyeol,” Chanyeol says, extending his hand. Yesung bows graciously.

“Yesung, of...”

“The Busan community,” Chanyeol finishes for him. “My grandfather told me a great deal about you.”

Yesung’s smile, usually so delicate, almost turns wicked, a little wild. “Yes, he must have. Did he
tell you how he almost took my left eye once?”

“His favorite story,” Chanyeol says back. “He also talked about how you almost took his right eye, so I guess you were even.”

“We were, in some way,” Yesung muses.

Jieun also makes her way towards them and greets Chanyeol. “We met a couple of times, at the border,” she explains, at Baekhyun’s raised eyebrows. “He’s such a polite young man, it made me regret that my magic doesn’t work on him.”

“Oh, really?”

She giggles. “Oh, but I had no idea he was Baekhyunnie’s boyfriend. I don’t play with someone else’s food.” She says it with a smile, but Chanyeol’s composure cracks just a little.

“Ignore Jieun, she just has the most terrible sense of humor.”

“Sadly, he’s right. But I never needed to actually seduce someone before, you know, with being a Gumiho and all. You know what I’m good at, though? I know a lot of stories from Baekhyun’s embarrassing childhood.”

Seulgi perks up. “Oh, me too, me too!”

Oh, well. Baekhyun was hoping they wouldn’t give Chanyeol the if-you-make-him-suffer speech, because that would’ve been superfluous and embarrassing, but it’s actually even worse than he thought, he realizes, as Suji bounces towards them too. He quickly scans the area, but it seems like the witches will take a couple of minutes more to arrive. There’s more than enough time to destroy his dignity.

“You do know I actually grew up with Baekhyun? I know how embarrassing he can be,” Chanyeol says, but it’s useless. Baekhyun turns his back to them to go back to his parents and he walks straight into the mysterious Gumiho with the black tails.

“I’m so sorry,” he murmurs, panicking a little.

“And I’m Hanee,” she replies, and Baekhyun can feel sparkles fly between them where she’s holding onto his elbow to keep him from falling, as their magics clash and break apart, “from beyond the border. And you must be Sunmi’s baby. I’ve heard wonders about you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Oh, but magic loves despair. In fact it chose you… But you should give yourself more credit, mastering Sunmi’s magic is not an easy feat.”

“I didn’t exactly master it,” he says, looking at his own feet. “In fact, I almost died. Chanyeol… I mean, the Samjokgu, said it wouldn’t be safe for me to fight again.”

Her eyes travel past Baekhyun and when her smile grows a little tighter he knows she’s found Chanyeol.

“So that’s the new Samjokgu,” she says. “His ancestors were a lot scarier.”
There’s something different in her, something dangerous. She carries herself like a princess, and her magic has spikes and thorns and flowers of blood. She’s a killer, he realizes, just like Sooyeon, and he immediately takes a step back, causing her eyes to widen in mirth.

“Don’t worry, little one, I didn’t cross the border to fight against my brothers and sisters. I respect their different... lifestyles, if we want to call it that.” The corners of her mouth curl upwards, almost mockingly, as she says that, but the teasing hint disappears as quickly as it appeared. “I came for revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“An old, heavy grudge,” she says, caressing her tails slowly, leisurely. Magic lures under her skin, like a shark’s fin teasing the surface of the water, breaking it for the shortest moment before it disappears again. “She did to me what she would’ve done to your mother, if Sunmi hadn’t stopped her first.”

“I’m sorry,” he says only. He wonders who invited this Gumiho, or if she invited herself. She’s not one of them, and Baekhyun doesn’t know if they can trust her. Frankly, she scares him a little.

She must sense his discomfort because she steps back. “Don’t be sorry, please it wasn’t your fault. Sooyeon hasn’t always been crazy and hungry. She’s been beautiful and pretty like a queen. She’s been kind, a long time ago.” She’s still smiling, but it’s just the mask of a pretty woman with a smile painted on her lips. Baekhyun can feel the ancient sadness bleeding through her. He looks down, unable to hold her gaze.

“You spent all these years... alone?”

“Oh, no, puppy, don’t be sad for me. Sooyeon might have killed the one I loved, but I wasn’t alone. I ran away with my daughter and I spent many years protecting her, then her daughters, and their daughters and their sons, until I became just a fairytale for them. Then the war came and took away all of them. Avenging my only love is the only thing I have left before I leave, that’s why I came here.” She looks at Baekhyun’s mother. “I’ve always liked Sunmi. We were never really close, but I’m glad she made it. It was nice seeing her again, after all these years.”

Sunmi interrupts the conversation with her soft voice. “The witches have arrived.”

---

From: Myeon
To: mom
Did you come here to embarrass me, mom?
[Sent: 16:12, 25.01.2018]

Actually, the witches have been there all this time. Baekhyun sensed them the moment he stepped foot in the precinct of the city. They’re standing and shining, like small stars of magic, seemingly scattered and weak, but when Baekhyun focuses he can feel the lines of energy spread thin between them. Their positions are carefully studied to form intricate designs, constellations of power, magical seals. They’re casting protection spells, scavenging for fortune in the back pockets of the city. And Seoul has a lot of lost fortune stored in its back pockets.

Now that he can see magic, Baekhyun understands why the witches wouldn’t want to fight anywhere else. Years and years of spells and curses have left an imprint that shines around the city like a halo. The residual magic has soaked the ground and haunted the river, festering and blistering, growing its own mind and will, growing, just growing. Screaming. Singing.
“How can you live here?” Baekhyun murmurs, to Chanyeol. He wonders if it’s always this loud or if the witches drawing energy from the foundations of the city have awakened Seoul’s soul, the giant sleeping on the bed of the river and under countless shiny skyscrapers. His head spins all of this magic echoes through his own.

Chanyeol shrugs. “You can learn how to exclude it, with time and experience. I don’t always succeed. But today it’s stronger than usual.”

It’s like the city is shaking in anticipation – of the storm, of the battle, of the decisions of the people who arrive with Junmyeon.

There’s six of them, three women and three young men. They appear from the path that follows the room from the Northern entrance of the cemetery to the Southern, cutting the park in half.

Minseok gasps and takes a step forward, but Yesung stops him before he can throw himself against the witches. Baekhyun blinks, suddenly realizing why Minseok is growling low in his throat. One of the three boys is Sehun.

There’s a moment of silence, with all the Gumiho going tense and waiting, waiting. Sehun sends an interrogative look at Junmyeon and then at the oldest of the three women. When she nods at him, he slowly walks towards the middle of the clearing. As soon as he’s passed the thin pathstones dividing the clearing in two half moons, Minseok dashes towards him, crushing him in a hug.

It’s not intimate. Everyone is looking at them, everyone can hear what they say, so they don’t talk. Minseok closes his eyes when Sehun leans his forehead into his own with a smile, mouthing some words at his ear without really pronouncing them. Baekhyun looks away, towards Junmyeon. He kept his promise, the first thing Minseok demanded, Sehun’s freedom. Maybe there’s hope for this alliance.

The Gumiho must feel it too, because they slowly leave the protection of the trees to walk towards the couple, whispering soft words at Sehun. Welcome back.

The witches witness the scene in silence, watching the Gumiho reach for Sehun, touching his arms to make sure he’s alright, he’s really there.

Only when Sehun has been examined thoroughly and sniffed and after Sunmi has petted his fox ears like she must have done countless times when he was just a fox spirit, the witches advance towards the middle of the clearing, only a couple of meters separating them from the Gumiho. Finally, Baekhyun can observe them carefully.

One of the women must be Junmyeon’s mother, Baekhyun guesses. Their magic smell the same, nervous and clockwork accurate and glamorous. Besides, they have the same nose.

She introduces herself as Kim Heejung. “Her mother leads the second strongest coven in the capital,” whispers Chanyeol in Baekhyun’s ear. “And she’s Junmyeon’s mom.”

Well, bingo. She looks more like a businesswoman than like a witch, pristine and elegant, wearing brand clothes and expensive perfume, a lot like her own son.

“Why send her and not the leader of the strongest coven?” he asks, and Chanyeol smirks.

“They sent both.”

Baekhyun’s eyes go back to the group of witches. The other woman is wearing an old blue vest and she’s old, great grandmother level of old. She doesn’t look any different from one of the old ladies
selling ginger roots at the corners of the streets or on the stairs of subway stations, but her magic bristles in the air just like Garyung’s magic had, powerful and controlled.

“That’s Lee Hyeja for you, High Shaman of the Council of the Covens,” explains Chanyeol. “And yes, she is the leader of the strongest coven of the city. The boy next to her, Taeyong, is her grandson, and he’s here with his own coven. They’re the ones who’ll set the barrier as soon as Sooyeon enters the city.”

“Who are the other ones?”

Chanyeol’s smirk fades to disappointment when he looks at the boy – “That’s Namjoon, another Guardian. I like him even less than I like Junmyeon, to be honest.” – only to sparkle again when he sees the last woman. “And Seungwan. Also a Guardian of the city, but she’s the nicest you’ll ever meet. I’m so glad she came, because I’m ready to strangle both Myeon and Namjoon if they start bickering during the battle. Kyungsoo won’t even be there to stop them.”

The boys both look too young to be there, Baekhyun thinks, but Junmyeon is young too. Chanyeol is young. Baekhyun himself is young. The war never looked at their age or at their face before they were dragged into it, and yet they are.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Chanyeol says, suddenly.

“Fighting against Sooyeon?”

“No.” He leans into Baekhyun for a moment, looking for comfort. “I mean, they’re expecting me to talk, I guess. I convinced Junmyeon, but I didn’t convince them. And I didn’t convince the Gumiho either and this fight could be over before it even started and what if I say the wrong thing and…”

“Chanyeol. You’re panicking.”

Chanyeol opens his mouth and closes it and then he panics some more.

“They wouldn’t have come here if they didn’t want this to work. Everyone wants this to work, Chanyeol, and not because they believe in friendship and equal rights between foxes and hunters, but because we need to do this in order to survive.”

Chanyeol nods. “Right. It’s just. I spent the last five years refusing to be the Samjokgu and now I don’t know if I’m good enough to be it.”

“You are the Samjokgu,” Baekhyun says, cupping his face. “You only have to be good enough to be yourself. You can do this. We all believe in you, or we wouldn’t be here.”

Baekhyun has believed in the Samjokgu since he was old enough to be afraid of fairytale. He has believed in Chanyeol, his bestest friend, his first crush, his first love, his first heartbeat. He still believes in both of them. There is no Chanyeol and the Samjokgu. Chanyeol is the Samjokgu.

“I believe in you.”

Junmyeon stops talking to the witches and turns towards Chanyeol, gesturing him to come closer. He hesitates, before advancing towards the middle of the clearing in long strides. The sky is darkening and the lights of the fountain draw a turquoise halo around him. He looks... terribly young and unsure and also like he was born to do this, to stand in the middle of this clearing, in front of this fountain, moderating the first peace treaty between the Gumiho and the witches in the last two thousand years.
His eyes chase Baekhyun’s, looking for support. Baekhyun joins him and they stand, next to each other, their hands almost brushing, as they make history.

“Shall we start?”

From: Nini
To: Hunnie
ill be bacl later dont worry 4 me
or for urself ;)
[Sent: 18:16, 25.01.2018]

Everything is going to change tonight.

That’s what Jongin said and Jongin is always right, but he never said exactly how things are going to change, whether it’s for good or for bad.

Baekhyun walks alone on the edge of the clearing, following the little path that leads towards the cemetery. He lasts only for the first ten minutes of boring, politic negotiations between the witches and the Gumiho. Then, with an apologetic look at his mother first and then Chanyeol, he left to stroll slowly on the plot of land that’s going to be their battlefield tonight.

Seoul National Cemetery is a war graveyard, for soldiers and martyrs, a place of peace and silence. But it’s also a park, with ponds and benches and cute trees and grass fields to spread a blanket on and watch the cherry blossoms fall during spring and maple leaves fall during after summer. Except today the people who usually walk under the trees or circle the endless rows of white stones at a lazy pace are all gone. It took just a snap of Junmyeon’s fingers for the entire park to become deserted. Now, with darkness fast approaching and not a living soul around, the graveyard looks eerie and haunted. The white stones are too sharp and Baekhyun can almost hear the whispers of the dead carried by the wind.

It must be cold – it’s still in the middle of the winter – and yet Baekhyun doesn’t feel cold. He’s burning, shivering from the surplus of energy coursing through his veins. He takes a deep breath, feeling the cold air invade his lungs, hoping it’ll cool the fever in his limbs.

He’s looking at the name on one of the white headstones when he hears a creaking coming from the bushes behind him. He looks up, senses alert, watching more with his magic than with his eyes, but there’s no trace of Sooyeon’s golden magic. He can feel it faintly, closer and closer, as she makes her way towards the city, reluctant and unwilling. She’s trying to resist, but the spell will lead her here tonight, Lee Taeyong said.

Baekhyun shivers, throwing a look at the figures talking in the clearing, next to the fountain. Everything seems to be alright. Moreover, he can’t sense any magic in the air. He turns around, nervously scratching his forearm with nails that look more and more like claws.


Except he hears it again, the crackling of timbers. And then he catches a movement from the corner of his eyes.

His reaction is pure instinct. He doesn’t even realize what his body is doing as his tails materialize out of nowhere, shielding him and pinning the enemy to the ground in the span of a heartbeat.
When the fear clears out, he hears laughter. A very familiar laugh. Then, he realizes he was just moments away from disemboweling his best friend.

“Sehun, you... You dumb...” He lets out a curse so strong even the trees shiver. “I could’ve fucking killed you!”

Sehun laughs louder. “I’m a Gumiho, I wouldn’t have died. And even if I had, it would’ve been worth it just to see your face.”

Baekhyun scoffs and pushes his knee against Sehun’s sternum a little stronger, choking the last giggle in his chest. He lets Sehun go, getting back up to his feet and cleaning dry leaves from his knees.

“How did you sneak out on me?” he asks. “I thought I was supposed to feel you come with my new powers..”

“Well, in theory. But I’m a ninja Gumiho and my *chakra* is hidden, so you can’t sense me...”

Baekhyun sighs. “Hello? I’ve had these powers for like twenty-four hours and they already stopped working...”

“Oh, come on. Of course you didn’t feel me, this place is a garbled mess of magic... The witches are messing with the founding power of the city...”

Baekhyun’s confusion must be evident in his face because Sehun taps the ground with his foot. “Can you feel that? That magic has been there since the first stone of this city was laid, and now it’s in a disarray.”

Baekhyun can feel it, but he can also feel Sooyeon. He doesn’t know if they’re strong enough to stop her. He looks at Sehun instead. The seals of confinement are gone from his wrists. He’s free.

“What are you doing here, by the way? I thought you would stick with Minseok now that you finally can.”

Sehun snorts. “The conversation was boring, you know I was never much into politics. Besides, I came to collect your thank you. Who do you think saved your sorry ass after you had the brilliant idea to charge heads-on against the most powerful Gumiho in the history of crazy, deranged Gumiho?”

“Oh,” Baekhyun says, “thank you.”

“I had to call the Samjokgu. Like, actually talk to him.” Despite acting so outraged, he’s clearly taking fun in making Baekhyun squirm. “And after that I had to talk to the Guardian and now I’m kinda friends with his brother.”

“Jongin is a nice kid, when he’s not predicting you an ominous future,” Baekhyun says.

“Where did he go, by the way?”

“He left with Kyungsoo, but I don’t know for where. He said there was something else he needed to do.” Cryptic, as usual, but Jongin knows what he’s doing. He might be the only one who does.

They wait in front of the lazy stream, watching the carps surface slowly, gape at them and then sink again in the dark water. Darkness has engulfed the cemetery, thick and quiet. All the birds took off and left. Baekhyun can feel Sooyeon getting closer and closer. There’s not much time left.
“He said he doesn’t know who’ll win,” Sehun says, and it takes Baekhyun a moment to realize he’s still talking about Jongin. “And he doesn’t know who will survive. He doesn’t know if we’ll survive, but he said we’ll be together, Minseok and I, no matter what happens. That’s enough for me.”

Being together, Baekhyun wonders if it’ll really be enough. That means doubling the bet, that means he could lose them both. Or maybe they’ll both be safe. All or nothing, now or never. Baekhyun didn’t ask about his future. Neither did Chanyeol.

“Does that mean you’re going to fight?” Baekhyun asks, and Sehun grimaces.

“No.” He pouts. “He said he wouldn’t be able to focus if I was on the battlefield. But I don’t care what Minseok says. He sucks at fighting too! He’s actually worse than me, but no one is going to question whether he’s going to fight or not.”

He has a point, but Baekhyun doubts Minseok would ever let Sehun risk his life like that. He waited too long to have happiness snatched away from him, just like that.

“Do you think the Samjokgu would let me fight, if I asked him?”

Baekhyun scoffs. “Make sure to bat your eyelashes at him and he will, probably.” He shakes his head. “Since he’s the one in charge here.”

“You mean you’re in charge here. You’ve always got him by the balls, since when you were teenagers, don’t think I forgot about that.”

Baekhyun blushes and trips Sehun with one of his tails, then he has to step back to avoid a kick to his shins. They’re both aware they could all die tonight, but Baekhyun had missed Sehun and his ability to joke about right everything, even death. Foxes like jests, Sehun used to say when Baekhyun was younger, and they love to laugh.

Then, Baekhyun thinks, they will face their death laughing. He can already feel it coming, step by step, dashing through the trees of Gwanak-san, closer and closer, powerful beyond their imagination. Jongin was right, everything is going to change after tonight.

Baekhyun turns towards Sehun. “Let’s go back. And I hope they’re done with their deals, there’s not much time left.”

From: bossdae
To: Yeol
Good luck
[Sent: 20:37, 25.01.2018]

Magic flares from the ground without a warning, at the witches’ command. It rings for a moment, like a whistle, a vibration that starts from Lee Taeyong’s hands and resounds inside the pentacle around him, not a spell, not a charm, just a thin thread of pure, undiluted, raw magic. Then, all together, the five witches surrounding Taeyong pull, and magic unfurls and burgeons, pushing against the limits of the pentacle.

Baekhyun feels it in his bones and in the hollow of his chest, his own magic responding to the call just as quickly, syncing and singing in chorus with all the power the six witches are extracting from the almost endless reserve of magic hidden under the city. He groans, almost dropping the
phone he was idly browsing. Gold flashes in his eyes as the world stretches thin and taut, closing around the flux of magic swirling inside the pentacle. He doesn’t even realize his power is leaking and his tails have appeared, his eyes burning with magic, until he sees it happen for Jieun and Seulgi, right next to him.

“What is going on?” Chanyeol exclaims, as Baekhyun doubles over, bringing a hand to his chest to stop the hollow feeling growing inside him. It’s a longing, he realizes. It’s a call, and it takes all of Byun Baekhyun to stop the Gumiho in him from resurfacing, from leaping through the human in him and running free with his body.

“Shit, I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would affect him that much,” Junmyeon says. Chanyeol is at Baekhyun’s side in a moment, solid and unmoving, a beacon in the middle of the storm.

“I thought you said we were waiting for Sooyeon’s arrival to cast the spell,” Minseok says, through gritted teeth, his eyes wilder than usual. He’s not the only ones. Every Gumiho in the clearing looks affected.

Junmyeon looks at the pentacle, somewhat reluctant to talk about one of their strongest spell to someone he would have called enemy five hours ago.

“They’re not casting the barrier,” he says, in the end, because they’re not friends yet, maybe they’re not even allies, but they’re something, and magic is burning in the capital like a beacon, magic is burning at Baekhyun’s fingers, and they all need an explanation if they’re going to fight this battle together.

“They’re summoning the magic we’ll need to cast the spell later.”

“You need this much magic?” Baekhyun asks, then he gasps and groans again.

“A barrier that bends the laws of space and time is not simple to raise. It needs an incredible amount of magic and none of us has that kind of raw power...” Junmyeon grimaces. “Except maybe my brother but he’s out of the question, so we need to take it from Seoul’s own source of magic, it’s the only way. I’m sorry, I didn’t think it would affect you too.”

“Not only us. Probably every magical creature in the entire country is feeling this tension,” Minseok says, closing his eyes as he wills his tails to disappear. “Sooyeon will come prepared to fight.”

Baekhyun looks up, at that portion of the sky where he can feel the stars, shrouded by thick, dark clouds, and wonders why he’s the only one who feels so distraught. Minseok and the other Gumiho just look annoyed, not like there are hands pulling at them from every direction, rocking their thoughts back and forth. Sehun is mostly unfazed and only Suji scoffs as she leaves, shaking her head to get rid of the ringing of magic in her ears.

Chanyeol extends his hand, touching one of Baekhyun’s tails, which now refuse to follow his orders and stay hidden. He pets one and Baekhyun leans onto his touch, lets it draw magic from his body, soothing the ache thrumming under his skin.

“It’s affecting you really bad,” Chanyeol murmurs, “because it was meant for a strong Gumiho and you are a lot stronger than Minseok or any of them.”

“I feel like throwing up,” Baekhyun replies, and it feels like an understatement. He feels like something is ripping him apart. He feels like he’s going to drown. “Just what I needed.”

He breathes and excludes every other sound, focusing on keeping himself afloat. The air around
them is too thick, charged with both electricity and magic, and it’s disrupting his hold on the magic, meddling with his thoughts. Chanyeol’s hand presses at the base of his spine and Baekhyun holds onto the feeling as if it was his anchor, until the sound flooding his ears clears up and he realizes Junmyeon is still talking about the plan.

“We’ll wait until she’s here to actually activate the barrier and trap her inside.”

“How does the barrier work?” Yesung asks, shuffling closer to hear better. “Will it also affect her powers?”

“No. Nothing like that. Well, if we had that kind of spell, we’d use it, but we don’t. Not for a Gumiho that powerful. Our magic is too different from hers... From yours.”

Baekhyun understands what he means. He’s felt witch magic and he’s felt Gumiho magic, and using one to subdue the other would be like trying to catch water with a net. The magic of the witches is too refined, too polished and subtle and shiny, sophisticated, like tailored coats and the leather shoes Kim Junmyeon wears. But you can’t hunt a lion in leather shoes and a blue pinstriped suit and you can’t fight fire with swords and bows. You cannot stop a goddess with witch magic.

“Besides, weakening her would mean weakening every other Gumiho, including you, and we’ll need you.”

“What kind of barrier are you going to cast, then?” continues Yesung.

“It’s a space-time seal,” Seungwan replies, “very complicated and powerful. It works like a barrier, but it creates a secluded space inside, like a separate fold of reality. Whatever happens inside the barrier, reality will not be affected.”

“How long will it last?” Yesung asks.

“Not much. It takes an incredible amount of energy to mess with space and time, and we’re only humans. We’re talking one hour, maybe less. As long as the spell is up no one will be able to leave the barrier, but it can only sustain a limited amount of people.”

“Sooyeon, of course, and the Samjokgu. Us three,” Junmyeon points to himself and the other two Guardians, “and no more than five Gumiho.”

They all turn to count. Excluding Baekhyun and Sehun, who are not going to fight, there are six Gumiho. Minsok and Seulgi, Yesung, Jieun and Suji and, lastly, the newcomer, Hanee. There’s a moment of awkward silence and she growls.

“You will not leave me out, I came to get my revenge.”

“But you’re not one of us,” Yesung says, and her magic flares, jagged and thorny and ancient.

“But I’m stronger than you,” she hisses, showing sharp teeth.

Yesung hisses back, and Sunmi steps between the two of them whispers something to Hanee in a language Baekhyun doesn’t recognize. The Gumiho steps back and disappears into the woods.

“What did you tell her?” Baekhyun whispers to his mother.

“That it doesn’t matter who kills her, but just that Sooyeon today will die. We all waited too long for this.” She sighs. “I understand her feelings very well, but she would just jeopardize the fight if she keeps antagonizing Yesung that much.”
“Do you trust her?” he asks, staring at the trees, right where she disappeared.

“I don’t,” Sunmi says. “I don’t really trust anyone, because Hanee trusted Sooyeon and Sooyeon ate the father of her child right in front of her. But I trust her pain. She’s the one who wants to defeat Sooyeon the most, among us. Even more than me.”

She looked sad, Baekhyun realized. Sad and angry. And tired. And Baekhyun wonders, what if his mother had been in her place, haunted and lonely and so, so old, would she have wanted revenge too? But Sunmi wouldn’t have waited, he realizes. Sunmi didn’t wait. Like Chanyeol’s grandmother told him, Sunmi was smart. She attacked Sooyeon first.

He wonders if they can do it again. If the bizarre alliance of witches, Gumiho and the Samjokgu will make the miracle happen again. They don’t have the element of surprise. Their Samjokgu is young and inexperienced. They don’t even trust each other. But it has to work. It has to work.

“And what happens when the spell ends?” Minseok asks. “What happens if it ends before we’ve defeated her?”

Junmyeon answers reluctantly, as if the words are pulled out of his mouth one by one with pincers. “That we find ourselves in the middle of Seoul, potentially surrounded by non-magical people, in the middle of a fight we’re not sure we can win.”

Minseok doesn’t look too convinced. “Why Seoul, though? Why waste all the magical energy for this barrier when we could’ve drawn her to a more remote area. That would also eliminate the risk of involving civilians in the battle in case you witches lose control of the spell.”

“Wouldn’t she be stronger in the wild? Granted, you all might be stronger too, but you’re more… civilized. She would gain the most benefits from fighting on her home turf.” Minseok nods in agreement. “Besides, we are stronger in Seoul. We wouldn’t be able to pull out this kind of spell anywhere else,” Junmyeon continues, pointing towards the pentacle, where Taeyong is slowly threading the magic and rearranging it in complicate runes of power to assemble the spell.

It won’t really make a difference, Baekhyun thinks. Sooyeon is now strong enough to have the upper hand on any battlefield. We are the battlefield, he thinks, sourly, thinking how she outpowered them in Seoul, in Yeoju and in Jung-maeul.

“Are you sure it’ll be safe?” Seulgi asks. “A spell made of that amount of magic... If something goes wrong, we’ll all be trapped in there, together with Sooyeon.”

Junmyeon frowns, almost offended that someone is doubting his plan. “I promised, didn’t I? What about you? Are you sure you’ll be able to stop her?”

The Gumiho are the most important part of the plan, because they will have to weaken Sooyeon, weaken her enough to allow Chanyeol to get close to her and pull the fox bead out of her chest. Not even three Guardians together are strong enough to face someone like Sooyeon alone.

The Gumiho all look at each other before Yesung crosses his arms. “I’m more than sure. We all have known each other for centuries. We’ve fought together, suffered together. I’d trust all of them with my life.”

“Then I hope you’re right, because you’re not only trusting them with your life, but with ours as well.”

The sky is shrouded in black, thick and heavy, pregnant with rain and light.
“The spell is ready,” Taeyong calls, receiving a nod from Junmyeon.

“Good,” Chanyeol says, “because she’s coming.”

Baekhyun doesn’t need Chanyeol’s words to know Sooyeon is close, the same way he didn’t need Taeyong’s words to know the spell was ready. He doesn’t need Jongin to tell him the battle is about to start. He can feel it on his own, swelling in his lungs, ready to explode. He closes his eyes, feel the hurricane in his chest expand. He breathes the storm.

mom

Please be careful
[Sent: 22:48, 25.01.2018]

Chanyeol takes Baekhyun’s hand before it starts raining. He intertwines their fingers together and holds him close as white light flashes in the sky and cascades on the glass windows of the skyscrapers. Thunder rolls down the mountain. The first drop hits the river, followed by one, then another one, drawing a pattern on concentric circles, thicker and thicker, goosebumps on the surface of the water.

“Are you scared?” he asks.

“Are you?” Baekhyun asks back. He is, he is so scared he can barely move, but he promised he’ll stay strong until Chanyeol comes back. They promised each other.

“Stay close to me,” Chanyeol says, as he squeezes Baekhyun’s hand, “until it starts. Junmyeon said it will take a few minutes for the spell to settle, so as soon as you see her, run away. Okay, Baekhyun? You must promise me!”

Stupid, caring Chanyeol, who’s going to fight a four thousand years old goddess in a few minutes, who’s still human and frail and defenseless, and he still worries for Baekhyun rather than for himself.

“Only if you stay close to me too,” Baekhyun answers, as lightning strikes again, on the mountain. Baekhyun feels the thrum of energy under his feet, electricity spreading through the ground as the earth rumbles.

She’s coming, he thinks.

“She’s coming,” Chanyeol says, and the witches nod and take a deep breath as Lee Taeyong takes his place at the center of the pentacle, a member of his coven standing on each point, as the spell waits patiently around him, waiting to be unraveled.

Taeyong swallows, hard, and claps his hands, once. He doesn’t even make a sound, and if he does, the rain swallows it, but magic hears him anyway, and rises. The ground shakes, a shiver that starts from the little clearing and spreads through the park, through the tombstones, through the skyscrapers and the river, like a wave, a mushroom cloud of power, spreading and spreading, slowly, straining against reality, reaching, until the entire city is engulfed in magic. It holds, for a long moment of dust and thick fog. Then, it rewinds.

The wave of magic reverts, crashing back to its source, the pentacle of witches in the middle of the clearing. It’s like seeing time turn back, wind flowing backwards, the trees bent by the spell returning to their previous position. Baekhyun can feel the stretch, he can smell the pain of the five witches standing at the five points of the pentacle when all the magic stops, compressed, between
Lee Taeyong’s palms. He holds it there, sweating, shaking. Even with the full power of the pentacle backing him up and three Guardians of the City stabilizing the spell, he struggles to keep that amount of magic contained. It’s like holding a black hole of magic in his hands. Baekhyun knows the feeling. It’s been a little more than twenty-four hours since magic almost annihilated him.

“How much more?” Lee Taeyong screams, clearly at his limit. “I can’t hold this much longer!”

But there’s no need to worry, Baekhyun thinks, as golden magic flashes around him, wisps of power, cobwebs falling from the trees, smelling of decay. She’s already here.

“Now,” Chanyeol screams, as a huge golden fox jumps in the middle of the clearing, trying to break through the pentacle. She’s bigger than last time, Baekhyun registers, faintly, at the back of his mind. If in Jung-maeul she had been bigger than a car, now she’s bigger than a truck, than a bus, than a fucking airplane probably, heading towards the center of the pentacle like a missile. She’s a fraction too late.

Lee Taeyong claps, just once, again, and this time Baekhyun hears it, a crack, like the sound of broken crystal, as the small sphere of condensed magic in his hands shatters in the most grandiose, complicated spell ever performed in Seoul in the last forty years.

Time stops, crystallized. Every single raindrop, captured in a moment, like a real life polaroid. Every shaking leaf, every handful of flying dust. The concentric circles on the stream crystallize, carved in marble.

Time stops. Spaces shrinks.

Everything disappears but the park and the magical creatures in it, as the city, the country, the rest of the world, slowly fades away. A different fold of reality, Junmyeon called it, as the spell gradually close onto the clearing.

The recoil hits Sooyeon too and she falls back, unable to touch the pentacle. She jumped as a fox but she lands as a woman, golden hair floating around her face, pale and tall and perfect like a statue, slippery like a ghost. She touches the ground easily, almost weightless, and that’s when she sees the pentacle. Something ugly flashes in her face, something between crippling fear and mindless anger. She turns on her heels, trying to run away, only to be stopped by a brown flash barrelling against her.

Suji moves too fast for the human eyes to perceive her, but magic burns in Baekhyun’s eyes and at his fingertips, shivering under his skin, eager to join the fight. He sees her, almost in slow-motion, dashing towards Sooyeon surrounded by pale green magic, like light filtering through the leaves of the thick Korean woods. He sees a flash of fangs and the way Sooyeon reassembles her shape into a fox to fight back, all in the shape of an instant.

The scary thing is that he doesn’t even realize. He doesn’t realize he’s already on the verge of turning too until he feels the bite of Chanyeol’s fingernails on his wrist. “Don’t,” Chanyeol says, and his words ground Baekhyun more than his hand does. “Go, now!”

Right, there’s a plan to follow. He’s supposed to run, he’s supposed to leave. He can’t lose himself to magic, because this time not even Chanyeol might be able to save him from the abyss inside his chest.

From the other side of the clearing, Jieun looks up, still in her human form, magic swirling around her in the colors of the sunset, red and orange, like falling leaves. At her sides, Seulgi’s cherry red
fox and Yesung’s grey fox look ready to jump into the fight. Sehun and Minseok are staying back to protect the magical circle and the witches holding the spell, together with the three Guardians.

Witches are strong but they’re also painfully human, so easily lured by ancient magic, useless in the fight against a Gumiho. They can just watch as Suji pushes Sooyeon back and Seulgi hits her from the other side, pressing Sooyeon towards the rows of white stones when she tries to counterattack. She’s strong, realizes Baekhyun, feeling all her powers, stronger than any of them, but together... The most powerful Gumiho of the country are here tonight. Together, they can corner her, together they can neutralize her magic. Together, they can win. They just have to wait a couple more seconds. The dome of magic surrounding the clearing is almost complete. Once it is, she won’t be able to escape anymore. Just to fall.

Like in a dance, heavily choreographed and perfect to the tiniest details, Jieun shifts into a slender copper fox and joins the fight, her magic swirling around her like autumn leaves at sunset. In a flurry of tales and shifting limbs and flashes of light, the four Gumiho fight, foxes against women against foxes.

In the center of the clearing, Lee Taeyong grits his teeth as magic lacerates his wrists. The spell is almost complete. Come on, Baekhyun thinks, just a little more.

Seulgi bites at Sooyeon’s side and Suji’s magic wraps around her neck like a leash as Jieun hits her legs, shifting back to her human form to tie her own magic around Sooyeon’s torso. The giant golden fox rattles and grits her teeth and growls and fall on the ground, finally, not defeated but subdued.

“Chanyeol!” Junmyeon calls. “Now!”

“Come on,” Chanyeol says, running towards the growling fox. It’ll only take a moment. The moment he puts his hands on the fox bead, it’ll be over. The Samjokgu doesn’t let go once he’s bitten. Just a moment, that’s all it takes to save a life or many lives. That’s what it takes to lose them all. It’s now or never.

No, Baekhyun thinks. It’s too easy, something is wrong. Something is horribly wrong.

Chanyeol kneels next to the fox and the creature lets out a screech so sharp it makes his ears bleed, but he doesn’t stop. He extends his hand, ready to take out the fox bead.

Jongin’s words swirl in Baekhyun’s mind. Who can you trust? Sunmi’s words follow. No one.

Chanyeol never reaches the fox bead. Surprised, he takes a step back, just when one of the strings of magic, keeping Sooyeon restrained – the copper one, Jieun’s one – snaps and disappears, as its owner falls to the ground. Jieun goes down in her human form, with a soft, betrayed moan, her eyes wide open and her pink mouth half-opened in a surprised pain, as redness soaks her chest.

It’s too fast, they barely realize what’s happening, but Sooyeon does. She turns and sinks her fangs into Suji’s shoulder, close to her neck. The difference in size does the rest and Suji flies like a ragdoll against one of the trees, blood marring her neck and torso.

A flash of grey dashes towards Chanyeol – it’s Yesung, Baekhyun realizes, Yesung who’s a family friend, who brought rice cakes for Baekhyun’s birthday and told him stories, Minseok’s best friend, who was saved by Sunmi all those years ago. He barely has the time to react, too surprised, frozen – Yesung is trying to kill Chanyeol, and Sooyeon turns towards Seulgi, the only one left, so tiny in front of the majestic golden fox, like David in front of Goliath - and Baekhyun’s magic explodes but it’s too late and...
Baekhyun doesn’t save Chanyeol. Junmyeon does.

A streak of magic, invisible to the eye and so powerful it sets Baekhyun’s instincts on edge, crosses the clearing, hitting Yesung in the back before he can pounce on Chanyeol. He lands awkwardly on his side, but before he can get up and attack again Minseok steps between Chanyeol and Yesung and growls, his tail shaking with his rage, his eyes burning, golden flames.

“I knew one of you would do something like this,” Junmyeon hisses. “Can you deal with this alone? We have to fend off Sooyeon first!”

“I can try,” Minseok says, his tone a little shaky.

Junmyeon nods and turns towards Sooyeon. Yesung tries to stop him, but Minseok steps right in front of him, barring the way. Around them, the spell shakes and shudders and cries and comes to completion. The Gumiho, the Guardians. And Chanyeol. They all disappear, like smoke blown away by the wind.

When Baekhyun opens his eyes again, the clearing is empty, except for six exhausted witches and the lingering ghosts of ancient magic.

From: Dae
To: Nini
whee are you ?
u said to come to the cemetery but i csn’t see you
[Sent: 23:09, 25.01.2018]

Panic. This is what Baekhyun feels as soon as the barriers closes and glitters, as Chanyeol fades away right in front of his eyes. The moment the barrier disappears is deafening. It’s just the sound of the water falling and the last aftershocks of thunder rolling in the distance, but it seems incredibly loud after the magic stillness inside the cage of magic.

A waterfall of rain pours on Baekhyun’s shoulder, drenching him to the bone. He tries to breathe, but air feels too sticky in his lungs, refusing to come up again.

“What the fuck?” Sehun says, under his breath, and then higher, louder, angrier, “What the fuck?”

The clicking of the rain on the muddy ground is the only answer the sky has for him.

In the middle of the pentacle, Lee Taeyong and his five witches all fall on their knees, too tired to hold themselves up.

“You betrayed,” Taeyong says, looking towards Baekhyun. “You fucking...”

And that’s when Baekhyun sees movement at the corner of his eyes. He feels the attack and steps back, dragging Sehun with him, as one of the Gumiho from Yesung’s community, Jinyoung, attacks them. Baekhyun’s reaction is immediate and uncontrolled, a wave of magic that spreads around him when he raises his hands to defend himself. Jinyoung is blasted out and he lands clumsily beyond the stone circle surrounding the clearing. Baekhyun’s magic leaves a dark mark around him, like a circular burn surrounding him, Sehun and the six exhausted witches in the pentacle.

Baekhyun’s eyes meet Taeyong’s. He looks as confused as they are, but there’s no time to dwell on that because, Baekhyun quickly realizes, they’ve been surrounded.
“We don’t want to hurt you,” Jinyoung says. “But you need to leave.”

It takes Baekhyun a moment to realize what Jinyoung has just asked him. What has just happened. Yesung. Yesung attacked Jieun. Yesung wants to kill Chanyeol.

“Why?” Baekhyun asks, his voice thinner than a thread of silk. “Why are you doing this?”

There was a deal, there was an alliance. There was a first step towards peace, for the first time in centuries. Peace between the Gumiho and the witches. The Gumiho and humans.

“Yes, you’re right, and you know why. This is not our nature. Deals with the witches, giving up the hunt.” He spit on the ground, disgusted. “We’re foxes, not pets. Baekhyun is a halfling, he can’t understand, but you should feel it too, Sehun.”

Betrayal is heavy and has tiny teeth. It eats Baekhyun’s stomach from the inside and drags it down at the same time. It mixes with magic, a lethal cocktail that makes Baekhyun see red and gold, Jinyoung’s face so blurred he can barely recognize him. (Baekhyun sees his heart instead, and his throat, and his stomach, he sees the place where death would be fast and the places where it would be slow and painful.)

“The witches are using you to fight the only one among us who could defeat them. Look what they did to you! Didn’t you deserve better than a life of subjugation and humiliation? Imagine this, Sehun! No more witches, no more rules, no more Council of the Covens... No more hunger.” He takes a step forward, with open arms, and Baekhyun doesn’t know Jinyoung that well, but he knows Sehun does. They’re both young, they’re both curious and hungry and full of life. They’ve always been friends.

“I don’t want to fight you, my friend,” Jinyoung says, his voice low and silky. “That’s what the witches would want. We are kin, we’re supposed to stick together.”

He’s hitting all of Sehun’s weak points. The truth is, Gumiho are born because they craved something. Minseok followed his hunger, Sunmi followed her curiosity, Seulgi followed her will to survive. Sooyeon followed her lust for power. Among all of the Gumiho, Seun was the one who craved a family the most. And he’s tempted – by Jinyoung’s extended hand, by his smile, by the promise of being welcome after all those months he spent as a prisoner of the witch, he’s tempted by family – and for a moment Baekhyun is afraid. But it only lasts a moment, as Sehun shakes his head slowly.

“Minseok wanted to give us peace and you’re choosing war and death,” he says, to Jinyoung, who barks out a bitter laugh.

“You’re giving us slavery, Hun, and you don’t even understand. You want peace? Well, you’ll have it, in the end. Peace can only come after a war, after all.”

“Are you willing to fight even me? Us? Would you really kill Sunmi’s son? Is Yesung going to kill Minseok, after all?”

Jinyoung’s eyes harden. “He would, yes. This is our chance to get rid of the Samjokgu forever. He
and his sister are the last heirs. We could be free.”

“Or we could be better than this!” Sehun bites back, glass-like words, pretty enough to cut.

“We’re just going to kill the witches,” says another Gumiho, Chaeyeon, and Baekhyun takes a look at Taeyong and at the members of his coven. Their eyes meet and there’s no way this is going to be a fight for them, not after they performed a spell that powerful. They’ll just be slaughtered.

“You’re just going to kill the witches,” Baekhyun repeats. “And the Samjokgu. And us, if we try to stop you. And then what? You will kill my mother? Or maybe Sooyeon will kill you.”

Chaeyeon looks at him warily and Baekhyun knows they can feel it, the turmoil inside him. He can smell their fear. For years he was human, a prey among predators, and they patted his head and cooed when he cried as he grew up. Now he’s so powerful that to him they are the prey, and they know.

“Don’t do that,” Jinyoung says, his voice soft and sweet, and it could work on any human but not on another Gumiho. “Please, Baekhyun, don’t do that. If you attack us, we’ll have to stop you.”

“Do you think you can?” Baekhyun asks, and it’s not him but the magic in him talking, proud and arrogant and overflowing with mirth in anticipation of the battle.

“Maybe we can’t,” Jinyoung says slowly, “but you will have to stop anyway. Your mother is with us and—”

The growl that stops him comes from both Baekhyun and Sehun and every Gumiho in the clearing takes a step back.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Sehun says, but Baekhyun takes a look at Jinyoung and he would. This miserable, pathetic coward would.

A long time ago, when the Japanese came, with their miko and their foreign magic and their priests, a Gumiho called Sunmi saved a group of young Gumiho and fox spirits from complete annihilation. She brought them to her nest, up, in the mountains. She fed them, she protected them, she led them like a general would’ve led her soldiers.

But Sunmi retired a long time ago and maybe this is her legacy. War and betrayal.

“I don’t want to, Baekhyun, so please... Make it easy for me and no one will get hurt tonight.”

Baekhyun thinks of Chanyeol, how he’s so far away, in another dimension, fighting against Sooyeon, alone, maybe already dead, and he needs his help, he needs Baekhyun to break this fucking spell and save it, the fuck with caution, Chanyeol needs Baekhyun. He thinks about his mother.

Don’t do that, hisses magic, and Baekhyun feels rebellion coarse through his vein as the magic within him refuses to give up, to surrender, to bow down to this betrayal. Don’t do that, she wouldn’t want that.

And memories flood his mind, of a creature so strong, so proud, she would die rather than kneel, a creature of miracles and nightmares, so strong that magic, this magic, was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

But Sunmi is not that creature. Not anymore. Sunmi wants to live. Baekhyun wants her to live.
He takes a step back – shaking, he’s shaking, no what are you doing magic howls inside him, run, bite, kill, do something! – and Jinyoung nods to Chaeyeon.

Baekhyun closes his eyes when she dashes past him and towards the witches.

I’m sorry, he thinks, thinking of Lee Taeyong and how he looked so young and nervous and eerily powerful, the heir of the leader of all the covens in Seoul. He’s sorry for Taeyong and for his coven, the girl who told him she liked his hair and the boy who shared his coffee with him before they started the spell, and he’s sorry for the things he will lose if the Gumiho kill an entire coven in the middle of Seoul, whether Chanyeol survives or not. There won’t be peace, ever.

With his eyes closed, he sees light. When he opens them, he sees only darkness, the eternal night of Hanee’s magic as she steps on the battlefield.

From: 010-5***-****
To: 119
There was an explosion near my house
It sounded like a bomb
[Sent: 23:26, 25.01.2018]

Hanee’s magic is black, like a starless night, like a lonely night, and powerful enough to sweep away Chaeyeon, Jinyoung and every other Gumiho in the clearing. It’s so heavy, so deep, like a black hole, that Baekhyun almost feels like he could fall into it. It would be terrifying, if she wasn’t on his side.

She walks slowly, untouched by the rain, between the witches and the Gumiho, keeping the crimson skirt of her hanbok raised so it doesn’t touch the mud on the ground and her tails spread open behind her like the tail of a peacock. She looks at Baekhyun and her voice kisses his ears, echoing inside his mind.

“Your mother is safe,” she says, and Baekhyun lets out a relieved breath and runs past her, towards the witches. “We can still defeat Sooyeon. I will take care of them.”

Jinyoung growls but she glares at him and her magic flits around her, black on black, making the darkness of the night thick and solid and alive.

Taeyong is so tired he’s struggling to keep his eyes open, but Baekhyun shakes him awake. “No, no, no, don’t leave me now. You saw what happened, we need to save them!”

“Can’t,” Taeyong murmurs. “Once the spell is activated...”

He shakes his head and groans and the witch who shared his coffee with Baekhyun gets up and pats him on the back. Baekhyun doesn’t know his name, but he looks young too – they all look young, too young to die here.

“The only way to break the spell would be using the same amount of magic we used to create it,” the witch says, since Taeyong looks too tired to even talk, “but no one has that kind of magic in the entire city, except maybe...”

His eyes widen and Baekhyun turn just in time to see Sehun put down another Gumiho before she can pounce on them.

“I have that kind of magic,” Baekhyun says, shaking the young witch until he’s looking at him
again. “Would you be able to use it?”

One of the girls gets up too. “We’re too tired. I don’t think Taeyong-hyung can endure another spell of that magnitude.”

*Great.*

“You have to leave,” Baekhyun says, to the two witches. “It’s too dangerous here for you and I don’t know for how long we’ll hold on against them. Wake up your friends and get away as fast as you can.”

The girl grabs his sleeve. “There are Gumiho in the woods, what if they chase us?”

She has a point, Baekhyun can’t deny it, but staying here might be even worse for them. Sehun is too young to be useful, while Hanee is old and powerful, sure, but she’s alone against an entire pack. And Baekhyun... Baekhyun promised he wouldn’t fight.

Magic simmers in his blood, humming chants of war. He doesn’t need to listen to its soothing voice to know what it wants – *attack defend bite jump breathe fight, fight, fight* – but he can’t give in to its empty promises. If he lets magic take control now, he will never get it back.

*What will you do then, Baekhyun? You can’t hide behind your friends forever. You can’t let them die for your cowardice. You’re gonna lose this war, if we don’t fight.*

It’s right. They can’t do this, he realizes, as he sees Sehun stumble under the attack of Chaeyeon, as blood drips from three irregular slashes across his chest, soon washed away by the heavy rain. He’s panting, already tired.

Then he sees light flash, and soon after thunder rolls, swallowing a scream and a pained growl. Baekhyun turns to see Hanee, surrounded by six Gumiho, all lashing at her from different directions. Her *hanbok* is ruined and her impassive expression is gone, lost in a terrifying snarl. One of the Gumiho bites at her tails and pulls and she falls on her knees, her magic flitting around her like a shield.

Baekhyun can see Jinyoung getting ready to charge at her, from behind, taking advantage of her blind spot, and he knows he needs to stop him because they’ll be overpowered if they lose Hanee.

He gets ready to use his magic – just a little, he thinks, a little won’t ruin him (or maybe it will but he doesn’t care) – but, before he can move, Jinyoung starts floating. Chaeyeon starts floating too. All the Gumiho attacking them leave the ground, like helpless puppets controlled by invisible strings of magic. They writhe mid-air, trying to get rid of the spell, under the rain, before an invisible force blasts them all outside the clearing while a protective spell closes around the pentacle.

“Just in time,” a familiar voice says, as Jongdae appears from the trees, still holding the barrier flickering around them, followed by Jongin, their mother and Lee Hyeja, the leader of the Council, who immediately looks for her grandson Taeyong and his witches.

Next to Baekhyun, Sehun sends Jongin a burning glare. “You sure took your time!”

“I arrived at the only possible time,” Jongin says, kneeling down next to one of the witches of the pentacle and helping her up. “Can you help me up? We have to take them away from here.”

Jongdae makes his way towards Hanee, who’s still kneeling on the ground, and offers her a helping. She snarls at him like a wounded animal would, but he swallows and keeps his hand there
until she accepts it. She gets up, immediately turning her back to him to fix her ratty plait and stained gown and recollect her feral expression into something a little more human.

Jongdae turns towards Baekhyun, instead. “So, best friend my ass! When were you going to tell me you were a Gumiho?”

Baekhyun shakes his head. “We have no time Dae. Chanyeol... The spell!”

Jongdae stops him before he can choke on another word. “Jongin already told me everything and my mother filled in with the rest. They fell into their own trap like two fools, didn’t they...” He sighs. “I told Junmyeon it was a dumb plan, but did he listen?”

“How can we get them out of there?” Baekhyun asks, and magic murmurs and snickers inside him. It might already be too late, they might already be...

“Calm down, Baekhyun. Nothing happened yet. The spell created its own separate space and time inside the barrier, so if we break it in the right way, we might be able to get them back here before a single minute has passed inside the barrier.”

A minute... It’s not much, but it’s enough for someone like Sooyeon to kill a Samjokgu. Baekhyun shakes his head, think positive, think positive.

“Lee Taeyong can’t perform the spell anymore, you saw him. He’s dead tired. And even if we had a witch who can do that, we’d still need enough magic to break it and Junmyeon said no one in the city has that amount of energy. No one except...” Junmyeon didn’t say it, Baekhyun realizes. Nor did Taeyong.

“Except me,” Jongdae says, “that’s why I’m here.”

When Baekhyun gapes, he scoffs. “Come on, I even told you I was supposed to become a Guardian. I’m way stronger than my brother. Unfortunately I suck at any kind of controlled spell but, raw magic? That’s my forte.”

“And who will perform the spell?” Hanee asks, turning back now that she looks human again, and stepping into Jongdae’s personal face so quickly he has to take a step back.

“I’m Hanee,” she says, and she’s wet and covered in blood and mud, but Jongdae blushes anyway.

“Kim... Jongdae,” he says slowly. “You can call me Jongdae, if you... if you want.”

He almost stutters and she’s not even using her charm against him. Baekhyun would roll his eyes in a less dangerous situation, or maybe even tease him, but they have no time for Jongdae’s newfound crush. He clears his voice, snapping him out of his reverie.

“Who will perform the spell, Jongdae?” he repeats, since his friend looks too flustered to think straight.

“I will do it,” Kim Heejung says. Her heels click against the stone path in the middle of the clearing as she walks towards them. “My son is still out there and from what my other son told me he’ll die soon if we don’t do anything.”

So, this is what they have. A soothsayer, a Gumiho too young and one too old and wounded, a half-Gumiho who can’t control his own powers, a witch who’s bad with spells and one who looks like she hasn’t casted one in at least twenty years.
“Are you sure she can do it?” Baekhyun asks, skeptically looking at Heejung’s expensive pantsuit and flawless hair, untouched by the rain drenching everyone else to the bone. Jongdae snorts at his mother and takes the expensive jacket off and rolls the sleeves of her silk blouse up to her elbows.

She turns towards Baekhyun, sizing him up. “My son talked a lot about you in the past, but he never mentioned you being a Gumiho.”

“I didn’t know, mom,” Jongdae whines, and his mother clicks her tongue, shutting him up. “You should start collecting your magic.”

He nods – “Aye, aye,” – and settles on one of the points of the pentacle, just as Sehun reappears from the woods. He’s alone, but it doesn’t matter. With him, they have all the points of the pentacle covered.

“Jongin stayed behind. He said things will blow up in a couple of minutes and he didn’t want to get caught in the battle.” He rubs his hands together, as his tails materialize around him. He’s strangely calm, even too calm for someone who might have lost the love of his immortal life, but that’s when Baekhyun remembers Jongin already told Sehun he and Minseok will be together. Dead, or alive, who knows? It seems to be enough for Sehun.

Maybe Baekhyun should’ve asked Jongin for a prophecy too, but he knows what Jongin would say and he doesn’t need more questions. He needs answers.

“What’s our goal?” he says. “What are we going to do once the spell is down?”

“Kill Sooyeon,” Hanee says, just as Kim Heejung replies, “Chase the Gumiho away.”

They both pause and Jongdae steps between them. “Our priority is to make sure that everyone is still alive. Once we have a clear idea of who’s still fighting we can improvise, but I’d say our priority is to chase Sooyeon away.”

“I agree,” Sehun says. “Yesung has betrayed us and he’s one of the strongest among us. When the spell was casted, Jieun and Suji were down. If Seulgi has been defeated too, we won’t be able to take on Sooyeon. We need to save them all first.”

“Summoning the spell back from the other dimension Taeyong created will give us a few seconds of advantage, in which time will still be frozen for them, but moving for us,” Heejung explains. “Let’s use that time to assess the situation.”

Baekhyun nods. He can do this. No magic, he repeats to himself, no magic.

As if you’re strong enough to do it without my power, magic whispers, laughing at his efforts. Baekhyun doesn’t listen. He feels Sehun’s eyes on himself and he knows what Sehun is thinking. Baekhyun should leave now, before the battle starts, before he loses control.

But what if, magic whispers, what if Chanyeol needs you? What if he needs our magic?

What if… this is yet another question Baekhyun has no answer to. He avoids Sehun’s eyes. He stays.

“Are we all ready?” Jongdae asks, and magic lights up his hand, radioactive hot, ready to nuclear fission.

Kim Heejung’s eyes return on Baekhyun. She smiles. (Junmyeon has her smug, haughty smile.)
“To answer your question from earlier, it’s been more than a decade since I performed a spell this complicated,” she says, spinning magic in her hands like yarn, “but there’s no need to worry, Byun Baekhyun. I invented this spell, after all.”

From: 010-8***-****
To: 119
I think there’s a fire at the National Cemetery
Can you please send someone?
[Sent: 23:26, 25.01.2018]

If casting the spell had felt slow, an endless process of twirling magic back and forth like wool on a spinning yard, undoing it is a quick and violent matter.

Jongdae wasn’t lying when he said he was strong. If Junmyeon’s magic is made of tiny wheels and gears fitting together inside a shiny package, Jongdae’s is a sledgehammer, heavy and rough-edged and very much uncontrolled. It rises from him like a column of fire, like lightning falling backwards back to the sky. Then, it stills. Heejung stills, struggling to contain it, to direct it towards the center of the pentacle, where Lee Taeyong had stood only minutes ago. The lines tracing the star on the ground fizzle and burn as the seal gets ready to receive the magnitude of Jongdae’s magic. Heejung takes a deep breath from her diaphragm.

She lets it fall.

(Breaking something is always incredibly easier than making it.)

Jongdae’s magic easily crushes Taeyong’s delicate, polished spell, all precision and finesse, with raw, wild power. It pierces through it and impacts on the ground like a bolt of light, burning the contours of the pentacle away – like the sea licking at drawings in the sand, like wind blowing at lines of ash.

The pentacle implodes, draining every sound out of the atmosphere, sucking everything back – dust, dry leaves, rain, and magic, as the barrier is yanked back and figures start to appear under the rain, flickering like ghosts.

They’re eerily still. Just like Jongdae’s mother said, the barrier is slowly fading away, releasing time just as slowly, and everyone under the spell is still frozen.

Minseok and Yesung are the first to appear, circling each other as they look for an opening, then Junmyeon, Namjoon and Seungwan, trying to subdue Sooyeon as Seulgi attacks her.

Chanyeol is the last to appear, and Baekhyun’s heart skips a beat when he sees how close he is to Sooyeon, stretched in the attempt to reach her fox bead – too close, too close, she only has to turn around to impale him with her claws – and Baekhyun’s heart skips, two, three more beats, it hiccups and constricts as he realizes they broke the spell just in time, right before Sooyeon could kill him.

But there’s no time to feel relieved, there’s no time to be thankful or to rejoice. It’s only a matter of seconds before time starts flowing again and...

“We have to keep her attention from Chanyeol,” Jongdae calls. “Now that she’s trapped, before time unfreezes! That’s our only chance!”
She doesn’t know they’re coming and when time restarts it will be too late.

“Then I will need your help, Kim Jongdae,” she calls back from the opposite side of the pentacle, with a wild smile. “Let’s see how powerful you really are.”

He smiles back, a different brand of wild, and magic dashes between his hands, a thunderstorm ready to explode. Hanee nods, abandoning her human form for a black fox.

She doesn’t know they’re coming and that’s their greatest advantage.

“I will help Minseok then,” Sehun says. “You have to drag your boyfriend away, Baekhyun, okay?”

“Got it!”

Sehun takes a last look at Baekhyun. “Please be careful! Don’t do anything stupid!” he says, before he turns into a fox and jumps into the fight just as the last tendrils of the spell are brushed away by the wind.

It’s all it takes as the two universes collide and blend and time starts flowing again for everyone.

Sooyeon immediately senses something is off, but there’s no time for her to do anything but take the brunt of Jongdae’s power, wild and untamed. She staggers, falling behind, and Hanee charges against her, black against gold, the night challenging the sun, soon joined by Seulgi, while the Guardians struggle to understand what’s happening and why the battlefield is suddenly more crowded.

But Baekhyun has no time for them. He only looks at Chanyeol as he runs, ignoring the sparks of magic crossing the clearing like stray bullets, ducking to avoid the rebound of Jongdae’s and Hanee’s power clashing against Sooyeon’s.

He barrels against Chanyeol, skin on skin, and they both fall on the mud, Baekhyun’s fingers clasping at Chanyeol’s arm, trying to drag him away even as they both writhe in the dirt.

“Chanyeol,” he calls, “we have to go, come on! Come on!”

“What the fuck are you doing here? What-” Chanyeol looks around, squinting against the rain, taking in Jongdae and Hanee. “What the hell is going on?”

“There’s no time! We need to leave now!” Baekhyun insists, because this was the new plan: save the Samjokgu, chase the Gumiho away. Not victory. Survival.

“Come on,” he repeats, “we’re leaving!”

But Chanyeol slips from his hold. “No, I need to do it now! I’m the only one who can!”

Baekhyun tries to catch him again, to haul him away with his own hands if he needs to, but Chanyeol grabs his wrist and pulls at the magic inside him until it’s so painful Baekhyun has to let him go.

“I’m sorry, I have to,” Chanyeol says, with a last apologetic glance at Baekhyun, before he turns back.

_Fucking stubborn asshole_, Baekhyun thinks. And then, _no, no no nonono_, as Chanyeol slips away, running towards Sooyeon, to the eye of the storm, to his death.
**Not if we save him,** calls the magic inside Baekhyun. *Let us save him, let us save everyone. Let us survive this war.*

Baekhyun ignores it. Yesterday, he would’ve listened – yesterday he listened, but yesterday was another day, a day in which he and Chanyeol were still fighting and Baekhyun had yet to receive a kiss from his lover that didn’t feel like regret and bitterness. Yesterday, Baekhyun almost threw today away.

*You will die if we don’t do anything!* magic howls, but Baekhyun wills it away. His eyes are fixed on Chanyeol, who avoids Hanee, walks past Junmyeon and arrives at Sooyeon’s back. He extends his hand between her shoulder blades, through the curtain of golden tails, and...

Sooyeon is not the only one who feels it, when Chanyeol grabs her fox bead. Everyone in the clearing feels it. Everyone in the park and in the neighborhood and in the city, and every magical being in the country and beyond the borders.

Four thousand years of magic and hunger pulsing in Park Chanyeol’s hand, and no matter how much Sooyeon tries to pull away: once the Samjokgu gets a hold of a Gumiho, he doesn’t let go, not even at the cost of his life.

Sooyeon lets out a glass shattering scream, releasing a wave of magic so powerful everyone, even Hanee and Seulgi, are forced to step back, burnt by its power, but Chanyeol doesn’t let go. He doesn’t step back.

Baekhyun doesn’t step back either. He knows, deep in his heart, that Sooyeon has always been too strong. Not too strong to be undefeatable, but too strong to die without taking away someone else with her. He knows because he’s human and he knows because, deep down, he’s a Gumiho.

Jongin told him he’ll always make the right choice, but to Baekhyun there is no right or wrong. This is not a choice. This is the only thing he can do, he thinks, as he steps between the Gumiho and the Samjokgu.

When Sooyeon raises her clawed arm to slash through Chanyeol, she pierces Baekhyun’s chest, instead.

---

*This is the National Emergency Management Agency.*
All circuits are busy now, please try your call again.
[23:46, 12.01.2018]

Water licks at Baekhyun’s ankles, soft waves washing back and forth around him. The moon is shining. From the trees coasting the pond, soft flowers fall on the water, where they float, weightless, following the whims of the flow. A small fox waddles through them, splashing water everywhere.

Baekhyun knows it’s a dream because these plum, cherry and peach trees don’t bloom together. That, and because the reflection on the clear water is not a small red fox, but a silver nine-tailed Gumiho.

*But it is not a dream,* says the nine-tailed fox in the reflection, while the small red fox simply tilts its head.

“Then what is it?” he asks.
You’re just dying.

Oh, right, Baekhyun thinks, as red blooms in his chest where Sooyeon killed him. He’s dead. Or dying. He doesn’t know how it works. He doesn’t even know where he is.

Why? magic asks, and what it really wants to know is why did Baekhyun not want to accept its help, to use all the magic smoldering inside him.

“Because I promised Chanyeol I wouldn’t lose control,” Baekhyun says, as if it’s so simple.

Then why die?

“Because it was either me or him.”

You’re stupid, just like a human.

It seems silly, that this magic wouldn’t understand sacrifice, when sacrifice has been for centuries the only language humans could use to talk to magic.

The moon is shining in the pond, but not in the sky. Baekhyun wants to get closer and touch it, see if it’s fallen underwater or if it’s just a mirage of magic, but he doesn’t dare to get closer. Even if where the small fox is standing the water seems so shallow, Baekhyun has experienced the depth of the pond. He knows it’s bottomless.

He circles the pond instead, trying to test if the moon in the water disappears from another angle. It doesn’t.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He takes the silence for approval and goes on anyway.

“Am I dying? Or am I already dead?”

Neither. You’re here with me.

“For how long?”

As long as I need you to.

That’s both worrying and reassuring, so Baekhyun sits on the shore and watches the water rock the blossom petals back and forth.

“You know,” he says, because there’s no one else to talk to here, so he might as well talk to magic. “I kinda have one big regret, aside from dying in my prime. I never got the answer to the last of Jongin’s questions.”

Which question?

Baekhyun counts them on his fingers. What are you doing here? What do you want the most? Who is the master of this war? Who can you really trust?

He’s already answered all of these questions, since Jongin asked them. The only one left is the last and also the first question Jongin ever asked him.

“Say,” he asks, “would you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom?”
The magic seems to think about it.

*Does it really matter? Can you really have one without the other?*

Baekhyun laughs under his breath. “You know what? You’re right. I guess being alive for two thousand years teaches you something about life, after all.”

The stain on his chest is spreading. Blood trickles slowly down his chest. When he reaches the pond, it paints the water red for a moment before it’s swallowed by the blue.

“What about you?” he asks, to break the silence. “What are you doing here?”

*I wait.*

“What are you waiting?” he asks, but the magic doesn’t answer. When he looks up, both the fox and its reflection have disappeared, but he can hear their voice in the howl of the wind blowing over the surface of the pond. They’re waiting for a question, he answers. They’re waiting for the right question.

“What do you want the most?” he asks. What could magic ever want. Why does magic even want something is out of his reach.

*To be alive,* howls the wind. *To be free, outside the box. To see the world.* Its voice fractures in many voices, each telling a different thing.

*To feel the grass under our feet, to pluck a flower, to feel the rain in our hair.*

It’s angry, Baekhyun realizes, and sad. Twenty-five years, Baekhyun realizes, this magic was trapped in a small box, wanting nothing more than to see the light. Is it that bad that it was ready to drown Baekhyun in its fury just to earn itself that privilege?

Flower petals trickle down his back and in his lap, landing on his open palms. The questions are there, they’ve been there since the beginning. Jongin said these were his questions, and doesn’t that mean Baekhyun is free to ask them, as well as looking for an answer himself?

“Who is the master of this war?” he asks, voice shaking, and magic laughs, wild and free.

*You, just-Baekhyun. You are.*

“I thought that was Chanyeol,” he says, confused.

_The Samjokgu can be the master of his own war, but this war, just-Baekhyun, this is our war, and only you can be the master of the war within yourself. We know. We chose you, after all._

“What do you mean?” he asks, but the magic doesn’t answer anymore. It waits for the right question.

“What can I really trust?” he asks, the last question left, and magic preens.

*Us. Me. You can trust.*

But that’s not true, is it? Magic tried to control Baekhyun, magic tried to subdue Baekhyun, magic tried to kill Baekhyun.

“And how can I trust you?
Promise, says one voice, stronger than all the others, and then they’re all talking, a chorus of please. Promise you won’t get rid of us, promise you won’t destroy us, promise you won’t lock us in a box, prisoner, forgotten.

“You want me to make a deal with you?” he asks.

If we save our life, promise you will save ours.

“How?”

Let us stay with you. Let us grow with you. Let us see the world through your eyes. That’s all we want, all we’ve ever wanted.

Baekhyun thinks about it. It’s late, the stars are disappearing one by one and darkness advances, claiming the shores of the pond. Only the moon, or its reflection, still shines in the middle of the pond, but not for long. Blood is dying the pond a deep crimson, and there’s too much now to be swallowed by the water. Baekhyun needs to hurry.

“If I promise to let you stay with me, will you promise not to hurt me again? Will you let me make my own decisions? Will you stop trying to make me lose control?”

The entire world seems to take a breath at his last words.

You really are as dumb as a human, magic says, and as cunning as a fox.

“Will you accept my conditions?” Baekhyun asks, as darkness takes over.

Magic accepts.

Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.
— Sun Tzu, The Art of War
Epilogue

I am offered the Grand Inquisitor’s choice. Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom? The only answer one can make, I think, is: No.
— Ursula K. Le Guin

E P I L O G U E
2 0 1 8 0 4 0 7

I’m like TT, sings the alarm clock, somewhere on the drawer, barely out of reach, just like TT, and Chanyeol groans, waiting for the familiar complaints and for the warm body stretching over his to reach the phone and turn off that demonic song, but nothing happens.

His eyes flash open as a cold shiver runs through his body. He reaches for the phone out of instinct, sliding a finger across the screen and stopping the song in the middle of tell me that you’ll be my baby, before he turns to the other side of the bed.

It’s empty.

For a moment, he feels so stupid. He had the silliest dream, and in the dream there was a war and Baekhyun was fighting in it and he died and...

“What are you doing?”

Chanyeol looks up and sees Baekhyun standing barefoot at the door, holding a mug in his hands, his face slightly puzzled – and this is where Chanyeol realizes he’s still feeling the pillow with a foolish, dazed expression. He lets himself fall back to his own side of the bed and groans, feeling the beginning of a blush creep up his neck.

“Are you okay?” Baekhyun asks. He puts the mug on the bedside drawer and lies down next to Chanyeol, stretching a leg over his hip. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I thought it was all a dream,” Chanyeol replies, and it comes out muffled against the pillow but Baekhyun hears it anyway. Baekhyun gets it anyway – it still happens to him too, sometimes, even if he’s better at hiding it.

“It’s not a dream,” he murmurs. “I’m here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He’s here, all black messy hair and sleepy eyes and the faintest hint of magic hidden inside him, ready to surge at his request. He’s real – he feels real, warm and soft for Chanyeol’s lips to bite – but sometimes it’s difficult to believe he’s really here. Sometimes, Chanyeol wakes up and all he can believe is the finality of Baekhyun dying in his arms, coughing blood and magic, his light dim, his skin cold. And it’s difficult to forget – it’s difficult to forgive – that Chanyeol was the one who killed him.
(And Baekhyun scoffs and rolls his eyes and tells him it’s not like that, that it was his own choice to make, but it doesn’t matter. If Chanyeol had listened to the plan, if Chanyeol had listened...

“Then Sooyeon wouldn’t be dead, either,” Baekhyun says, cupping Chanyeol’s face in his pretty hands. “Stop blaming yourself for what happened, Yeol. Come here and kiss me.”)

“Are you overthinking again?” Baekhyun asks, pinching his side.

“Just thinking. Did you have breakfast without me?” Chanyeol asks, breaking the tension because Baekhyun deserves better than this. He deserves a smile and a good morning and a kiss on his cheek. Chanyeol plants one at the corner of his mouth, loud and wet, and Baekhyun pretends to be disgusted and screams, “Brush your teeth first!”

“That’s what you deserve for not waking me up,” Chanyeol answers, and he’s quick to leave the bed before Baekhyun can playfully pinch him again.

He wander into the kitchen, where he discovers his boyfriend barely left him any rice.

“Fucking thank you for the food, love.” He only whispers, but Baekhyun hears him anyway with his fox senses and Chanyeol can hear him cackle from the other room. He scavenges the pantry for some food and ends up boiling water for shin ramyeon at eight in the morning.

“You’re a barbarian,” Baekhyun says, tiptoeing into the room quietly, only announced by the tiniest halo of magic around him. He’s gotten so good at controlling it, even Chanyeol sometimes has trouble sensing it – or maybe he’s just overexposed.

“You say that, but I know you’ll be mooching off my ramyeon as soon as it’s ready.”

Baekhyun doesn’t even reply, too busy munching on a chocopie. The extra appetite comes from dealing with the fox bead, but Baekhyun is still really sensitive about it and Chanyeol has learnt not to joke on how much his boyfriend eats, lest he receives the PS4 joypad on his head. (And Baekhyun has a mad aim, both in-game and in real life.)

They eat together and, just like Chanyeol predicted, Baekhyun steals half of the ramyeon and eats it while complaining it’s too spicy. Chanyeol ignores him while scrolling his phone and checking the work group chat.

It’s almost spring now, not warm enough to sleep with the windows open, but sunny enough for the first flowers to bloom and for the café to launch all the cherry blossom special sets. Aneuk Café has been really busy lately, especially after the hiring of the new waitress. Chanyeol still finds Hanee a little spooky, but all the customers are smitten with her. (And Jongdae might be too.) Besides, now that she takes care of the morning shifts, Chanyeol has a lot of free mornings to spend with Baekhyun in bed.

“You’re thinking a lot today,” Baekhyun says.

Chanyeol looks up, to find his boyfriend staring at him, his face cupped in his left hand while magic swirls in his right. (It’s a control exercise he learnt from a Chinese fox spirit who visited Seoul a couple of weeks ago to inquire what the fuck had happened the night Sooyeon died – and yes, they felt that even down to Changsha.)

“Aren’t you nervous?” Chanyeol asks back. “I mean, it’s today.”

“Is it today? Wow, I totally forgot!”

Chanyeol kicks him under the table. “Stop joking, it’s a serious thing!”
Baekhyun shrugs, as if he doesn’t really care, but Chanyeol knows him too well. He can feel magic stir inside him, whirlpools of power almost invisible on the surface, storming at the bottom of the well.

“I’m not really worried,” he lies. Then, his expression clears and he sends Chanyeol a naughty smile. “Besides, do you really think they’d dare to do something to me? I am, in fact, the Samjokgu’s boyfriend.”

It’s only after Baekhyun walks past the work in progress yellow stripes that the building in front of him shifts from a construction site to a shiny, brightly lit skyscraper. A bored witch at the counter asks for his ID and then stares at him in fear when she sees the Gumiho next to his name.

“I have an appointment with Lee Hyeja,” he offers, trying to be helpful. She asks him to wait and turns to take a phone call.

“Fourth floor,” she says, after that.

The offices of the Council of the Covens are modern and airy, all design furniture and wide spaces, and Baekhyun can feel Kim Heejung’s touch behind the styling. There is no fourth floor button in the elevator, so he gets off at the fifth and looks for the stairs.

“Baekhyun!” someone calls, as he wanders lost between closed doors. “Are you here to meet the Elders?”

Seungwan didn’t change much from the battle at Seoul National Cemetery. She bows to Baekhyun and he asks her about Seulgi, since nowadays Seungwan talks to her more than Baekhyun, or anyone else, does – “She’s fine! Amazing! She managed to get us both tickets for Elyxiondot and she’s coming over next week for the concert... I don’t know how she does that, even for magical creatures EXO ticketing is just... hell!” – and in the end she gives him indications for the fourth floor.

“We don’t have stairs, but there’s a magical portal you can use in the room next to the water cooler.”

“Are witches always this complicated?” he asks her, and she laughs.

“It comes with the job. We make simple things complicated.” She looks at the documents in her hands, suddenly remembering she’s supposed to be working. “I wish you good luck, Baekhyun. And you should come too, next time Chanyeol comes over for a patrolling night. He’s so boring, he only talks about you anyway.”

She waves and disappears in a clicking of high heels against the spotless carpet.

_We make simple things complicated_, Baekhyun thinks, as he opens the room of the door next to the water cooler to find the pulsing, soft blue light of a portal spell. That might be true.

Witches – with rare, blessed exceptions like Kim Jongdae – are not spirits of the wild, who draw pure magic from their heart and wield it barehanded, both as a sword and a shield. Witches rein power, tie knots around it. They trap magic in boxes of holy wood and in complicated seals, in
endless regulations and invisible cages of civilization.

But magic is not meant to be contained. Magic is meant to thrive, magic is meant to fester, magic is meant to evolve. Magic finds a way, or another.

It’s the eternal fight of man versus nature, of civilization versus the wild, in which there are not grey areas, no compromises, no indecisions. People like Baekhyun, half and half, living in the middle, are not allowed to exist. You are required to make a choice.

But this is what the witches think, and what the witches think is not necessarily right. Magic itself is a grey area and rules were always meant to be broken.

(And when the most sacred rules are broken, the rules of reality, the rules of physics and science, the rules of the empirical world then, and only then, we call it magic.)

The fourth floor is different from the others. It smells like old parchments and wax candles and ink with a drop of blood. It smells like holy wood, used to trap Gumiho.

Lee Hyeja belongs to a generation of witches who fought tooth and nail against the monsters for the right to impose their perspective of the world and, in the end, won. She’s one of those witches who had to take a step back and bite their mouths when the first Vows of Amity between the Gumiho and the Council of the Covens of Seoul were signed, only two weeks ago. In that occasion, she talked to Baekhyun, asking him to visit her. “To talk about your peculiar situation,” she said.

Her office is dark and suffocating. No windows, no other escape route other than the door Baekhyun just crossed. When it closes around him, he feels the vice of holy wood on his skin, not close enough to burn but to make every breath feel choked. Magic snarls, deep deep inside him, unable to do anything else.

(Weakened, but not defeated. If Baekhyun wanted, he could force his way out of his jail. He is now the strongest Gumiho in the country, after all.)

“Please take a seat, Byun Baekhyun,” Hyeja says, in her worn and wrinkly voice.

“I will stand, if it doesn’t bother you. I’m sure it won’t take long.”

Her eyes flash in annoyance, but she doesn’t ask him again.

“Then, since you seem in a hurry, let’s go straight to the point. Have you thought about my proposal?” she asks.

“I did.”

(“In light of your, let’s say, peculiar situation, you cannot be considered part of the Vows of Amity. Not only you’re a hybrid, which means you are unaffected by most of the protection spells we can perform against a Gumiho, you have access to a magic more powerful than any other Gumiho in Korea, and your relationship with the Samjokgu represent an influence too big on the only creature who could ever stop you.”

“Then, what am I supposed to do?”

“I am giving you a choice, Byun Baekhyun, and it’s the only thing I can do for you in this situation. You either accept to renounce to your magic and let yourself be bound by our strongest containment seal, or you leave the country.”
“And what is your answer?” she asks, leaning over the desk as she waits for an answer, for Baekhyun’s last answer.

*Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom?*

Is that even a choice? And why should it be? Who says that? Who decides what we have to give up, who even decided we have to give up anything in the first place? Is there even anyone, in this whole magical city, who can stop Byun Baekhyun from pursuing his happiness now?

Magic beats in Baekhyun’s blood, sings in his mind, magic has a will of its own, but Baekhyun has his own will too. And he doesn’t like either of those options.

He takes a deep breath.

“My answer,” he says, “is no.”

~

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!