general kim

by vonseal

Summary

general kim was bin's first love. prince myungjun was his second love. kim myungjun is his eternal love.
667 AD

He was a general, young and ruthless and brave. Bin fell for him one day, and from that day on, his life became a cycle of pain and heartbreak and love and affection.

With his ponytail high and his stance confident, Bin watched him, eyes constantly shifting to his figure once training began. If the other soldiers noticed, they said absolutely nothing.

Bin approached him one evening, when his feelings were too strong to forget for even a second. General Kim, hunched over writings on his desk, glanced up at him briefly before nodding his head, allowing Bin entry.

Bin shut the doors behind him and hurried forward, bowing in order to show respect.

“You're here rather late, Moon Bin,” General Kim commented.

Bin swallowed nervously and clasped his hands together in front of him. He was anxious and unsure. General Kim surely would never like him back, and then Bin would be doomed. Still, he figured being doomed, perhaps sentenced to death for his feelings, was a better fate than living in this agony.

“I...have something to confess to you, General Kim.”

General Kim seemed interested. In any case, he leaned forward and raised his eyebrows. “What's that?” he asked.

It was now or never. He would learn of his future after a few simple words were uttered. With fear gripping at his chest, Bin took a deep breath and then stated, “I'm in love with you, General.”

General Kim blinked in surprise. He said nothing, however, and Bin felt the need to fill the silence with talking. “I...I know it's...a little unorthodox, and perhaps it is...against every portion of the law to love your commanding officer, to love another male, but I tried my best to push these feelings down, General. I could not. And I understand completely if you wish to dismiss me of service, or even have me punished for my words, I understand. I just felt you ought to know – you should know. More than anyone, you, at least, need to know just how much I love you.”

Still, General Kim said nothing, and Bin felt his fortune slipping quickly away. No doubt, he would be killed. He had seen it before with young men who had committed such adultery and sexually-pervasive thoughts or actions. He had been able to keep his own thoughts hidden until he met the general.

Now, they had overtaken his body.

General Kim stood from his seat. Bin was scared, but he refused to take even one step back. He stood his ground and faced his fear. He would allow the general to make whatever decision necessary. He would kill himself, should General Kim order him to, and he should do so happily.
Instead of any punishment, however, or any harsh words, General Kim suddenly grinned, the large smile overtaking his features. It was such a different image of General Kim, who liked to remain stoic in front of the other soldiers.

“So it's not just me, then,” General Kim breathed out. He stepped closer to Bin; he was much shorter than Bin was, and he looked up with joy shining in his gaze. “I thought you seemed attracted to me – and it seems I managed to hide my own feelings well enough, didn't I?”

Bin was ecstatic. He had never felt such joy, and as he smiled back, he realized his feelings were reciprocated. He hadn't expected it. He hadn't even experienced it. It was all brand new, and Bin didn't even know how to react next.

General Kim helped him through everything, fortunately enough. While General Kim claimed he had never been in a relationship with a man before, either, he seemed to know just what to do. He took things slow with Bin. He ensured Bin was comfortable, first and foremost, before doing anything at all.

They could only meet in secret. Hidden spots of forests or hillsides were their domain, or else locked away in General Kim's extravagant home.

The only issue, Bin was beginning to realize, after weeks and weeks of blissful love and peace, was the war that was growing and spreading and reaching into their territory. General Kim trained his soldiers for long periods of time. He ordered them and bullied them and reminded them all that their only duty in life was to serve the prince.

(“Not you,” General Kim would whisper to Bin during breaks. “Your duty in life is to love me.”

“Consider it done, General,” Bin would tease, and he delighted in seeing the general blush.)

War was messy. War was unkind. Bin hated seeing his fallen friends and comrades in the mud, bleeding out and crying for help. He was unable to stop, unable to save them. He could only fight on, as per his orders from the general.

General Kim was doing well enough on his own. Bin kept a close eye on him, stayed by his side, but General Kim dodged well and attacked well. He didn't allow his enemies a chance to near him; he was a force to be reckoned with, small and deadly. Bin felt proud of him, but anxiety grew in his chest as he realized their own numbers were dwindling by the second.

And then one of the soldiers of the Silla army cried out, “Reinforcements are coming!” and, in turn, rallied all his men together.

Over the roar of the battle, Bin could hear General Kim curse, and then he gathered his men. “Stand your ground!” he ordered, determined and steely-gazed. “Don't you dare let them through!”

He could say no more. As he led his men, arrows suddenly flew at them, seemingly from nowhere. Bin raised his shield just in time, but the surprise volley had killed many of the soldiers.

The arrows brought down General Kim, as well.

“General!” Bin screamed, stepping on bodies and sliding across blood before falling down to the man he loved.

His body was ravaged with arrows. At least five stuck from his chest, and one in his neck. Still, he remained alive, blood dripping from his mouth, as he stared at Bin.
“Myungjun,” Bin sobbed out, shaking his head in horror. “Myungjun, please...”

He knew, though, General Kim could no longer hear him. The life had left his eyes. A bloodied hand, gripping onto Bin's clothes originally, fell slack.

Myungjun was dead.

Bin could hear the army behind him, but he made no move. He simply cradled Myungjun's body and asked the heavens why they took from him the person he cherished more than his own life.

He pleaded with the gods. He begged for them to return his happiness.

Bin was slashed down by swords. He was bleeding out, just like all the men around him, but his grip on Myungjun remained strong. He didn't dare move, lest the soldiers come back for him, but he realized he wasn't dying.

His wounds, while fatal, had not yet killed him.

When the battle was over hours later, when the field was silent save for the cries of dying men, Bin was finally able to stand. He glanced down at his torn clothing, pushing the fabric aside.

He was alive. His wounds were gone.

Myungjun, though, remained dead at his feet. Myungjun would not awaken again.

Bin knew this; however, his love for Myungjun couldn't die, and it wouldn't die, and so right then and there, as Bin struggled to deal with his sudden immortality, he made a promise.

“I'll find you,” he whispered to the cold body before him. “In your next life, I'll be there. For every new beginning you experience, I will be right by your side. I won't let you die like this ever again.”

938 AD

He bowed deeply, on his hands and knees, to the man before him. He promised his servitude for the rest of his life. He promised he would never budge from the prince's side.

The prince, pleased with this oath, allowed him to raise his head, and the prince smiled warmly down at him. “I expect the best, then, Moon Bin,” the prince said.

Bin returned the smile, feeling an abundance of relief and happiness as he stared upon the man he loved. “I will not disappoint, Prince Kim.”

Chapter End Notes

written for day one of myungbin week

if you guys hated it, let me know and i wont continue it. but if you'd like more, PLS
tell me, and i'll definitely start writing some more! this version is unedited, but if it gets enough love (love me yall) i'll edit this chapter and add on moreeee.

come find me on my tumblr or my twitter!
Bin didn’t quite understand how reincarnation worked. He had heard of it and believed in it, but he thought it unlikely that people would come back to life in a very similar form to the one they left life in. He had assumed souls would be placed in other bodies; perhaps a woman soul would instead become a man, or a fish, or even a small worm that would arise when rain pelted into the ground. Then again, he had always been taught that life after death was not as important as life currently was.

And his current life was-

Not that great.

Death was necessary. Death, as a soldier, was expected in great battles. And when General Kim had fallen, Bin expected to fall with him. He hadn’t wanted for them to be apart, even for a second, and so he knew, when he held the dead general in his arms, he had made his choice. He had chosen death.

Death was necessary, and death evaded him.

On the battlefield, in the midst of the fallen bodies and screams and blood, Bin lay there, wondering why he wasn’t dead. He could feel the pain tearing apart his body, ripping even into his soul, and yet he just lay still, as liquid crimson surrounded him and as Myungjun’s body steadily turned more cold.

He reached out at one point, grasping onto his shield. He wanted to cover Myungjun’s body. He wanted to ensure no one desecrated it. When he moved, however, an opposing soldier noticed him, and he drove a spear into Bin’s side.

Bin had choked on blood that rose to his mouth, had coughed and gasped for air. He was left for dead, once more, but he wouldn’t die.
Silence was his answer, and Bin felt his entire body convulse with the pain it was forced to endure.

He had to wait for healing. He couldn’t move from the agony he was in, and so he waited. He stayed with Myungjun as night fell and as the groans of the men around him grew quiet. He waited into the next day when he heard noises and rustling and talking.

Bin picked his head up and glanced over at commoners nearby, picking through the bodies of the dead soldiers. They tore apart clothes, gathering fine linen that had been untouched by blood. They reached into pockets, taking any valuables the soldiers might have on them. They ripped off headwear and shoes. Some men with clothing that remained in better condition were stripped naked. Bin could only watch in horror, and then he looked at Myungjun.

As the general of their army, Myungjun was dressed better than the others, and with him were more valuables, fancier items. They would leave Myungjun out here to rot, alone in a field, naked and vulnerable.

Bin felt anger surge through him, and he grabbed Myungjun pulling him close.

Someone took notice. They called out, “There’s someone alive!”

He heard them rush over, but Bin didn’t spare them a second glance. Instead, he used what strength he had left to scoop up Myungjun in his arms as he stood, shaky on his feet.

There was a sudden, sharp pain in his back, and Bin cried out, stumbling forward. He heard the same man yell, “I got him!”

Bin refused to fall. He didn’t want to fall, to leave Myungjun to looters. The man he loved deserved a proper burial, away from the despicable people who were grabbing things off of dead men, men who ought to be respected.

He stayed upright, struggling to breathe now. He was bloodied and felt weak, but he held tightly to Myungjun and slowly turned to look at the man who stabbed him.

“Do it again,” he egged him on, raising his eyebrows. “Keep going.”

The man looked confused and a little scared, but he stabbed Bin again, this time through the stomach. Bin gasped and nearly stumbled, but his desire to keep Myungjun’s body safe won through. He stayed on his feet, even as blood, once more, dribbled down his chin. Some of the blood splattered onto Myungjun’s neck and rolled down his chest. Bin could wipe it later. He could clean Myungjun later. For now, though, he stepped forward, grinning despite the pain.

“Again,” he repeated. “Stab me all you wish.”

This time, the man stabbed him through the neck.

It finally caused Bin to falter and to fall. He couldn’t handle the intense pain of that wound, and he dropped to his knees, though he still held Myungjun tightly to him, cradling his body as if he was the most precious thing in the world.

He was, to Bin, the most wonderful and beautiful. Even when dead, when covered in the blood of both Bin and himself, he was still gorgeous.

The man knelt beside him, a smirk on his face. He tugged his knife out of Bin’s neck, allowing
him to bleed profusely. “I guess you can’t survive everything, hm?” he mocked, and Bin sat there, staring down only at Myungjun as he struggled to breathe.

He noticed a hand, not his own, grabbing at Myungjun’s clothes and tugging. He pulled Myungjun away and shook his head, but the hand was persistent. It was grabbing jewelry and accessories, tearing them off Myungjun’s body, and Bin watched on helplessly. He tried to move, to pull one hand, at least, away from holding onto Myungjun, but he was too weak to stop them. He just waved his hand and the man smacked it away.

The man ripped Myungjun away from Bin’s loose grip. He laughed as he dragged the dead body away from Bin. However, Bin followed, crawling across the ground and trying to call out Myungjun’s name.

When the man ripped off Myungjun’s armor, Bin felt panic hit him. He refused to allow Myungjun’s body to fall under the same, pitiful state as the others would. He refused to let the looters disrespect the man he loved. He grabbed a nearby sword, fallen and stuck in the body of a horse, and he tugged it loose. The man had yet to notice, too busy taking off Myungjun’s vest, nicely ornate and decorated. When he reached for the final piece of garment Myungjun had to cover his upper body, Bin struck.

He stood, grasping onto the sword with both hands, and swung it, cleanly and quickly. He sliced at the man, and as he fell, Bin wasted no time in pulling him off of Myungjun’s body. He stuck the sword deep into his belly, waiting until he felt the tip of it touch the ground, and he pushed even deeper, listening to the man gasp out for help, listening to the sounds of metal tearing skin.

He refused to lay the final blow. He wanted the man to pay for what he had planned to do to Myungjun, and so he drew his hands away, leaving the sword where it was and turning back to his general.

“Don’t touch him,” he warned to another looter nearby, he had been watching the spectacle with shock. The looter nodded fearfully, stepping back, and Bin piled Myungjun’s torn clothing on top of him before scooping him back into his arms and carrying him as gently as he could.

He had to walk a little bit away from the initial battlefield, away from the bodies strewn across the ground, to get somewhere cleaner and untouched. It was there he fell again, dropping Myungjun on his way down. The man’s body was limp and lifeless, and Bin whimpered as he stilled Myungjun, stopping him from rolling down a hill or else turning on his side.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered as he struggled to fit Myungjun’s clothing back on him. “I couldn’t protect you.”

Tears began to roll down his cheeks. He worked hard, despite the pain in his own body, pulling Myungjun’s arms through the armholes in his vest, tightening his sash properly, combing his fingers through matted and bloody hair in an effort to straighten it and set it up in its tight bun. He added on Myungjun’s headgear lastly, his helmet that marked him as a general, but after closer inspection, he frowned and took it off.

He was General Kim, leader of their great army. He was a fierce warrior, a force to be reckoned with, a bringer of death and destruction.

More importantly, he was Myungjun, the small man with a brilliant smile. He was humble and kind. He was insecure and unsure and often needed to lean on Bin for comfort. He kissed well and he hugged well and, above all else, he was the love of Bin’s entire life.
He needed no helmet.

So Bin set it aside, slowly, and bent down to kiss Myungjun’s forehead. He sobbed as he held onto Myungjun one last time, and if he tried his best, he felt that he could pretend - just for a second - that Myungjun was alive and hugging him back.

Then he set to work digging a grave.

It was difficult without proper tools and utensils. He dug with his hands for a while before the dirt became too deep and too hard, and then he took off a piece of his armor, using the tough metal to scoop out clumps of earth and dump it aside. He didn’t know how much time was passing. It turned night at some point, and still Bin dug, slowly but surely making a dent within the field.

The moon hung high in the sky when Bin lay Myungjun down to rest. It was deep enough that his grave wouldn’t be unturned, deep enough that Bin would never have to worry of his body being found.

Deep enough that Bin would never see him again.

His heart was breaking. He had never felt a loss such as this one before, and when he scooped the first bit of dirt to cover the grave up, he cried again. The dirt splayed over Myungjun’s chest reminded him that Myungjun was dead. Myungjun was gone.

He loved Myungjun, and yet-

“I’m sorry,” he gasped out, hands shaking as he grabbed more dirt to throw over the dead body of his beloved. “I’m s-so sorry!”

He couldn’t apologize enough. The words kept spilling out of his mouth as he cried and when the grave was complete, when Myungjun was hidden from the world, Bin screamed.

On his knees, he bent over, his head touching the ground and his hands grasping at the dirt over Myungjun, and he screamed amidst his sobs and wails, crying out for the heavens to hear just what they had done to him.

If the heavens heard, they cared very little. They seemed content to take from him the one man he loved more than life itself - and then they took from him the ability to join that man in the afterlife.

938 AD

Silla was no more. Bin could only watch with growing anticipation as the kingdom General Kim had fought so long and so hard to ward off had slowly dismantled over the years. Politics had ravished it, and soon Silla was but a distant memory, a kingdom that had been destined to fall.

Through it all, Bin remained alive.

He never stayed in one spot for too long. After a while, people would become suspicious. He didn’t age, he didn’t grow sick, and his body remained in the same shape it had been hundreds of years ago. It garnered far too much negative attention, and so Bin shifted from place to place, taking with him only vital necessities.
He acquired wealth over the years, and studied relentlessly in order to give his tired and weary mind some form of amusement and interest. He could keep nobody by his side for too long; he feared they would learn of his immortality, and he wasn’t sure what society would deem necessary for him. He envisioned horrors of being buried alive, trapped forever in a tomb, or, equally revolting, revered and held up as a god.

He wanted to live alone. He wanted to be alone. His only companions were the slaves he bought upon settling in a new town, or else the poor women nearby who performed any sexual acts in exchange for a chicken or even a handful of eggs. Bin wasn’t picky and he never grew attached to any of these women. They were good for a few short hours, though upon their departure, he found he would miss Myungjun more than ever before.

It had been three hundred years, more or less. He supposed by that point, he ought to have moved on with life. He could find a lover to last him a decade or two, and then continue to a new town to get a new lover.

Yet, when he tried, all he could think of was Myungjun. Myungjun was ingrained into his mind, a memory not soon forgotten, and pretending to love anyone else seemed like a betrayal.

So he stuck, instead, with the whores around town, the poor ladies and occasional young boy who were so willing just to feed their family. He was disgusted with himself but lustful thoughts did not exit the mind so easily.

Neither did Myungjun.

He wondered what Myungjun would say if he saw him now, wallowing about in immortality, sleeping with whichever man or woman cost the least and opened their legs the widest. Would he be disgusted? Would he have pity? Would he take Bin in his arms and say, “No more?”

Bin longed to know. He wanted Myungjun to come back to life; or, else, he wanted to finally fall to death and visit the afterlife with Myungjun by his side. He was certain, no matter what fate would befall upon him in death’s grasp, if he was with Myungjun he could overcome anything.

He thought of Myungjun far too often. He remembered little things about him; the soft curve of his cute nose, the prominent cupid’s bow of his lips, the roundness of his cheeks, and the sharp taper of his eyes.

Myungjun, who screeched when he found something funny, who was inexperienced but enthusiastic with love, who had asked Bin to always stay with him, forever and ever.

Myungjun.

“-is the heir to the throne, I’ve heard.”

Bin glanced up from his rice that he was picking at, staring at the slave nearby, who was drawing open the curtains in the room. “Pardon?”

The slave glanced back at him. “It seems the new king has already named an heir to his throne. It’s the son of one of his consorts - Imperial Prince Myungjun. I’ve heard from others in town that he is unimpressive. His elder brothers are far more fit to govern, and yet-”

“His name is Myungjun?” Bin questioned, placing his chopsticks down.

The slave, seemingly unaware why the news was so important to Bin, nodded his head, eyes trained upon his master.
“What is he like?” Bin asked. He had met one or two men who shared the same name as his great general back during his strong rule. None of them were anything like Myungjun; one man was round and portly, rich and wealthy, quite ugly. The other was older with a stooped back and had a face vastly different from Myungjun’s unique features. He had given up the search and had simply assumed he would be immortal forever with no chance of escape and no chance of ever seeing Myungjun again.

If Imperial Prince Myungjun was anything like General Kim, however, then maybe Myungjun had been reborn. Bin hoped so.

“I have not seen him,” the slave said, “but I’ve heard he’s small and slightly compared to his brothers. Much thinner of a build. He has a nice face, though, soft and delicate, with lovely lips and sharp eyes.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Or so the ladies in the town have told me. They seem quite taken with him.”

Bin didn’t want to get his hopes up. While it sounded like an accurate description of Myungjun, it was likely that it wasn’t the same man. Bin was certain that the gods wouldn’t allow him a sliver of happiness, not after how much pain and torture they had been willing to put him through. Yet, he couldn’t shake the thought that perhaps this was his Myungjun. The description was far too similar, and the role would fit him well. Myungjun had been a leader in his previous life; perhaps his deeds were so good that this life saw it fit to make him an even stronger leader.

Days passed and Bin finally realized there was only one true way to ensure that this was his Myungjun.

He packed his belongings. He sold his slaves off. He boarded up his house, and then he left, taking only his vital necessities on the backs of his many horses and mules.

He made his way to the capital city, anticipation blossoming in his heart, and he prayed that it would be his Myungjun wearing the title of Imperial Prince.

Bin woke with the sun peeking in through the windows of Myungjun’s home. He heard movement outside the large room, but he chose to ignore it. Likely, it was a servant preparing breakfast. They were given strict orders to never enter Myungjun’s bedroom, and they obeyed his command to the last.

Beside him lay Myungjun, curled up in a little ball and hogging most of the blankets. He seemed so small like this, outside of his strong general persona, devoid of the robes and weapons and armor. To Bin only, he was the sweet and passionate Kim Myungjun, regardless of his stature and fame within the Baekje Kingdom.

Bin leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to Myungjun’s cheeks. That roused his lover. Eyes blinked open blearily and squinted with the bright morning sun, before he glanced up and looked at Bin.

Instantly, Myungjun brightened.

“Good morning, Bin,” he murmured, pulling the blankets up further on his body, hiding even his chin within the warm confines of the fabric. “Did you sleep well?”
“I did, but I’m cold now,” Bin commented. He tried to steal some of the blanket to at least cover his chest, but Myungjun kept a tight hold onto it. “Myungjun!” Bin exclaimed, pulling and tugging. “You don’t want your handsome lover to freeze to death, do you?”

Myungjun scoffed and finally relinquished some of the fabric. Bin quickly darted underneath, now nose to nose with Myungjun. Myungjun stared at him before kissing Bin’s lips, humming into the embrace. He whispered, “I have something for you.”

“A present?” Bin asked. “You’ve already given me too many presents. You can’t keep lavishing me, darling, or else the other soldiers will start to notice that I am swimming in wealth and riches.”

Myungjun pouted, sticking out his lower lip in order to portray his faux sadness at Bin’s rejection. “This gift is better than the others,” he assured. “And it’s far more inconspicuous. No one will notice if you hide it correctly.”

“So it isn’t a herd of swan, then?”

“I admit, that was a mistake on my part. I didn’t think things through.” Myungjun was untangling himself from the covers, shivering when his body was now exposed to the cold. “I’m still sad you decided to cook those swan. They were very pretty.”

“They were delicious, though.” Bin laughed as Myungjun slapped his shoulder. “Sorry! I just had nothing else to do with them. I don’t live lavishly, as you do, and having a herd of swan in my house was bound to draw attention. People would ask questions. I don’t think our relationship needs to be scrutinized, correct?”

Myungjun gave a resigned sigh. He nodded his head, wrapping his arms around himself as he scurried across the room. “That’s why I took more thought and care into this gift.” He opened his dresser and began rifling through the drawers before exclaiming, “Why do seasons exist? Why can’t it just be warm all year?”

“Put some clothes on, then,” Bin said to him, unhelpfully. He didn’t want clothing, however; he was busy admiring Myungjun’s back side, and he frowned when Myungjun turned back to glance at him, holding something in his hands.

“I will,” Myungjun promised. “I’ll get dressed shortly. You ought to be leaving soon, anyway, and I should go eat breakfast so as to not alarm the slaves.”

“They probably assume you’ve been sleeping around,” Bin pointed out as Myungjun hurried back to the bed. “You keep them out of your room completely on the nights I’m over, and I know you’re not the least bit quiet when we have sex.”

Myungjun seemed unbothered. “No one will believe their talk if it spreads,” he assured Bin. “And if they do think I’m sleeping around, there are plenty of excuses I can make.”

Bin knew better than to worry about their relationship. It was unlikely to get out in the open, and if it did, he was sure Myungjun was at a high-enough standing that he could stifle any rumors. People would surely refuse to believe that their great and powerful general was engaging in homosexual behavior with a soldier beneath him; or, if they did believe it, they would likely ignore it and focus on his accomplishments instead.

Regardless of what people thought, Bin had always been more interested in the here and now aspect of their relationship, and so he propped himself up on his elbows and smiled at Myungjun.
“So, what’s my gift?” he asked.

Myungjun curled up underneath the blankets again before holding out a necklace for Bin to take. It was simple, yet beautiful, a golden necklace with a jade pendant dangling from the end. Bin marveled at it, even as Myungjun pushed it into his hands. “Here,” he murmured. “This is for you.”

Bin had to swallow past a lump in his throat. “This is-is what I was referring to, Myungjun. You gift me with such beautiful things - I don’t think—”

“This one is relatively easy to hide, though,” Myungjun argued. “Wear it underneath your clothes. No one will ever find out.” He smiled softly, brushing a hand over Bin’s unshaven jawline. “It’s a promise, though - promise me that you’ll love me forever and ever? Promise me that, even when I die, we’ll always be together?”

Bin grasped onto the necklace, holding it tightly against his naked chest. “I promise,” he whispered to Myungjun. It wasn’t a promise that even needed to be verbalized; Bin wanted to stay with Myungjun until the ends of the Earth. “We’ll be together forever.”

Myungjun smiled again and kissed Bin deeply, pouring forth all his love and affection.

Bin held the necklace in his grasp.

It was easier than Bin thought it would be to become accepted into the Grand Palace. When other government officials learned of his skill and talent and wealth, they were quick to discuss the next steps with the king, who apparently longed for someone intelligent and trustworthy to watch after Crowned Prince Myungjun.

“Tensions are high at the moment,” one of the officials told him, pouring drink into a few cups. He placed these onto a tray in front of Bin, who blinked at them curiously. “Prince Myungjun is heir to the throne, but there are many in the palace who are not satisfied with this arrangement. The king fears for Prince Myungjun’s life, and has ordered that whoever accepts this position must be comfortable with placing their life in extreme risk.” The man pointed at the cups. “One of these drinks contains poison. Is it possible for you to identify which one it is?”

Bin turned his gaze to the drinks and he hovered over them. They each looked the same. There was no discoloration, no lumps, no powder, no leaves. They looked like normal drinks. He bent over the table, however, and inhaled deeply.

One of them had a different scent from the others.

He separated the cups so as to smell each one by itself. The first two were both wine and smelled like wine, but the third had a distinct smell. Bin pointed at that cup and glanced up. “This one,” he said. “This one is poisoned.”

He knew he was correct, but he felt his own suspicions confirmed when the man’s eyebrows raised.
Still, the man said nothing. The man continued to stare at him, as if expecting something else, and Bin slowly realized what he had to do.

“I am willing to lay down my life for Crowned Prince Myungjun,” he swore, and with that said, he grabbed the cup and gulped it down.

Apparently, he hadn’t been supposed to actually drink anything. The man was supposed to stop him before he consumed any poison, but Bin had moved far too quickly for that, and so he was overcome with the poison’s effects.

He couldn’t die, of course. He had never once been able to die. He had administered poison to himself on various occasions for a chance to finally pass, and yet it was to no avail. He only suffered the consequences, and so he spent several days by the side of a physician, vomiting and heaving and seizing. It was painful and horrible, but he couldn’t help but feel pleased. Perhaps in this position, perhaps with this power he held, he could protect Myungjun. He could ensure Myungjun survived.

As his health grew better, he was asked multiple times how he managed to overcome such a deadly poison. He tried to laugh it off, claiming, “From an early age, my father forced me to consume many types of poisons in an effort to become immune.” That answer seemed to work, though he was happy enough they didn’t question him further to wonder why he still suffered the effects, despite being immune.

Once he was healed of his ailments, he was taken to meet Crowned Prince Myungjun. His heart hammered with anticipation as he looked over his fine robes and made certain his hat covered his hair; it would be unsightly to meet the love of his life after nearly three hundred years and look untamed while doing so.

He was finally ready, and with another government official by his side, he strode forth into the room where Myungjun awaited.

His heart felt ready to burst.

It was his Myungjun. It was General Kim Myungjun, dressed in beautiful clothing and wearing the same, bright smile upon his face. Bin’s knees nearly gave out, and he took the opportunity to bow deeply, falling nearly flat to his face as he struggled to maintain his composure.

“No need for that,” Myungjun said, hurrying forward. “Not until I’m the king, anyway; right now, I’m merely a prince.”

“You’re the prince I will give my life for,” Bin swore, voice muffled from his close proximity to the floor. He shook with excitement, with happiness, then looked up. He felt tears in his eyes, and they rolled down his cheeks as his voice, quivering, repeated, “I will give my life for you if you ask of it, Prince Myungjun.”

Myungjun stared at him, confused, then glanced at the government official. “Is he alright?” Myungjun asked.

“He...has been very ill for a while,” the man muttered. “He has only recently been well again. It is not contagious. It was just something he ingested.”

“Did you make him swallow poison?” Myungjun sighed, as if already predicting the answer. “I won’t be poisoned. Perhaps there is some strife over my accession, but no one will poison me for it.” He gestured for Bin to stand; Bin did so willingly, scrambling up to his feet, though he bowed
his body once more. “I assume if you’ve consumed poison then you will certainly be loyal,” Myungjun commented. He still smiled brightly. “It’s rare that I’ve been given a male aide, however. I assumed it would be a female.”

Bin’s heart hammered in his chest. “Would...would you like for me to be a female?”

Myungjun didn’t answer that. Myungjun just laughed, then said to the other man, “If you will excuse us, I will show Bin to his bedroom.” He didn’t give the official a chance to respond before he whisked Bin away, grabbing his hand and tugging him out of the room.

Bin felt elated. When was the last time he had gotten a chance to touch Myungjun? What century had it been when he and Myungjun last embraced each other? He thanked the gods greatly for allowing him this opportunity, and he prayed that it would last. Perhaps now that he had found Myungjun, his immortality might end. Perhaps now he could finally become mortal.

He would live out his days by Myungjun’s side. He longed for that life.

“This is my bedroom,” Myungjun said, gesturing to one door, and then he pointed at the room right across. “And this is where you will be sleeping. Would you like to look inside?”

“Please,” Bin whispered. He hardly trusted his own voice. He wiped his face free of tears as he followed Myungjun into the room.

Things were simple, yet it was clear he was to live richly. He already had a wardrobe of a few clothes and some accessories nearby, which, Myungjun said, “I ordered them to put into your room.”

“That’s kind of you, Prince Myungjun.”

Myungjun stared at him, expression unreadable, and then suddenly slid the door shut behind them. They were alone in this room together, and Bin willed himself not to cry again out of excitement.

“I don’t...I don’t have any friends,” Myungjun blurted out, once Bin’s attention was trained solely on him. “No one in the palace wishes to befriend me. They all believe one of my brothers would be far more suited for the role of king. They’re older and have more military prowess than I have. They’re far more commanding, as well. Of course, the queen consorts all wish for their sons to become king. My own mother passed away when I was very young, and so for the longest time, I’ve only had a few of the female servants and my father to befriend. There aren’t many people who like me.” He took a deep breath and looked at the ground, focusing on Bin’s shoes. “So I had hoped, upon receiving word of your arrival, you could treat me as a friend. You wouldn’t be just an aide or—or a servant, but I would really appreciate having a friend here.”

“You’d...like me to be your friend?” Bin asked.

“If you want to!” Myungjun looked a little panic. “It isn’t necessary! In fact, it’s probably rather silly of me to ask, so we could just ignore—”

“I’d love to be a friend to you,” Bin interrupted him. He smiled, willing it not to shake and quiver underneath the immense flood of emotions coursing through him, and promised, “I’ll always be your friend, Prince Myungjun.”

“Good!” Myungjun looked much more confident now that he had Bin’s agreement. He straightened up and cleared his throat and said, “Because if you had refused, I could just demand it of you, but demanding friendship doesn’t make it true, does it?” He shook his head, answering his own question. “No, it doesn’t.”
Bin longed to be more than a friend to Myungjun, but he knew he could make do with this relationship. They were close now, together again, and so he didn’t care at the moment that Myungjun had yet to fall in love with him. He wanted love, but for the time being, he could make do without. As long as he had Myungjun by his side, that was all that mattered to him.

Confessing to General Kim had been one of the most difficult things Bin had to do. He had been to battles and had seen war and yet saying a few, simple words to his commanding officer scared him to death, more so than anything else probably ever would. He stood, stark and serious, even as Myungjun made a joke to lighten the mood.

“Anyone would think you’ve done something awful. Tell me, Bin, what’s the matter?”

Bin swallowed thickly. He assumed keeping his own feelings a secret would be the best route to take. He could continue loving Myungjun from afar, and he wouldn’t be rejected, nor put to death for his feelings. Things would go about normally, as they always had, and Myungjun would remain a close friend.

Still, those feelings were eating him alive. Day and night he was tormented by his own thoughts and he realized he would rather die than have Myungjun never aware of how he truly felt.

And so he found himself in Myungjun’s private home, standing nervously by the desk as Myungjun stared up at him.

“Is it something awful?” Myungjun asked, growing suspicious.

“No.” Bin shook his head. “Or...perhaps. Maybe. It will depend on how you view what I have to say.” He took a deep breath and Myungjun leaned forward with interest. “I...I love you,” Bin whispered. He didn’t dare look over at Myungjun now. “I understand it’s...unorthodox to love you, especially in our positions in life, and perhaps it’s...against all laws and religions. I know men and women have separate tasks in life, and it’s not a man’s task to love another man, but I really can’t help it. If you wish to dismiss me of service, I completely understand - or if you wish to have me killed for my insolence, I also understand. I will respect your command, General Kim.”

Bin knelt to the floor, hands shaking with the anticipation of hearing Myungjun’s response.

He had known of a homosexual man once. The man lived near him and was considered the scum of the area. He took in a number of young boys who worked as prostitutes, and was finally killed by a father of a boy he had seduced. Bin heard the talk the next day from various neighbors: “He was unusual, anyway, and did not adhere to any religious text,” one lady murmured to Bin after telling him the story. Bin understood; sexual pleasure ought to only be derived from the opposite sex, and even then it should only be used sparingly.

This knowledge hadn’t helped Bin when he was faced with General Kim, unfortunately.

General Kim was of small stature with a well-shaped face and a brilliant smile. He was strong, quick-witted, and not someone to be trifled with. Bin first found admiration for the general, but when they became friends, his feelings quickly progressed. Late at night, in the privacy of his own small house, he would masturbate to the image of General Kim. His guilt and disgust threatened to
overtake him as he would clean up his own mess, but those feelings couldn’t cut through his desires.

Then, he realized, they weren’t just sexual desires. He felt romantic feelings for the man. He would hear of the weddings in town, between soldiers and young girls nearby, and he would feel jealousy surge within him.

He imagined, at one wedding he attended, becoming a groom, yet the only person he could think of spending the rest of his life with was Myungjun.

He knew, from then on, he was in love with Myungjun.

Light touches sent flames running down his skin. Brief smiles made his heart pound quickly. Even Myungjun’s voice was enough to send Bin’s mind into overdrive, and there was no cure for this illness that had befallen upon him.

He was madly and completely in love with Myungjun, and only by expressing these feelings was he able to finally release some of the guilt that had built up within him.

“It’s not just me, then,” Myungjun said, exhaling all his breath at once.

Bin’s head shot up in surprise. Myungjun was smiling down at him, having now stood from his desk. “I thought you seemed attracted to me. All those glances, all those touches - and yet it seems I hid my own feelings well enough, didn’t I?”

Bin could hardly believe what he was hearing. He had to question it, to make sure of the accuracy. “Do...do you love me?”

“We’ve been friends for over two years,” was Myungjun’s answer. He reached over and pulled Bin up from the floor. Now, Bin stood taller than Myungjun, staring down at him with wide eyes, and Myungjun lingered close to him. “In those two years, I have felt a love for you blossom like I’ve never felt before. I love you, Moon Bin.”

Bin was ecstatic. He grinned widely, which made Myungjun laugh, and then they embraced. It started out as a simple hug, but soon Myungjun, standing on the tips of his toes, reached up and planted a kiss onto Bin’s lips. Bin froze in place, marveling at the feel, thinking to himself, ‘finally.’

Myungjun drew back, a little nervous suddenly. “Was...that alright? Was it too bold? I apologize-”

Bin hushed him by drawing him in for another kiss, this one more passionate. They were both a little innocent, both a little unsure, and so the kiss was awkward and clumsy. To Bin, though, it was still perfect, still a testament of love between himself and Myungjun.

Friendship was easy with Prince Myungjun. After all, in Myungjun’s previous life, he had been Bin’s best friend, as well, Bin’s closest friend. This was hardly much different. Myungjun still enjoyed the same things; he liked finding beautiful, obscure locations nearby and he liked playing games, and he seemed to really like Bin.
He inquired for Bin to be close to him at nearly all times. He enjoyed when Bin lavished him with attention and praise, and he soon sought out such compliments. He wore the clothes Bin liked, the jewelry Bin was fond of, and even went so far as to let Bin brush and comb his hair at night because Bin mentioned how much he enjoyed doing such.

Myungjun told Bin almost all his secrets; how he hated the other queen consorts for treating him so terribly, how he was greedy and longed to best his brothers and become the king instantly, how the king was sick and dying and thus the high tensions within the palace walls.

“I’m really glad I have someone like you by my side.” Myungjun would always say at the end of each day, smiling bashfully over at Bin. “You do make me so, so happy.”

He was the same as General Kim; a powerful leader to the public, but insecure and sweet only to Bin.

Bin loved him so much, and he was reminded of his confession all those years ago to his general, given at a time when he felt as if he might explode if he were to contain the secret within him for any longer.

He felt that way upon the first time seeing Myungjun’s face. He always felt it. He just learned how to better control it.

However, it was growing increasingly difficult, and when Myungjun suggested they head down to the hot spring together to bathe, Bin realized it would probably be impossible. His face felt flushed even before they had arrived at the spring, even before Myungjun began to shed himself of his clothes.

Myungjun, robes laid aside and hands poised to pull off his trousers, glanced over at Bin in confusion. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Hm?” Bin looked at him. “What am I doing?”

“You’re not getting undressed. Don’t you want to enjoy the spring?”

Bin realized just standing around in his clothes wouldn’t be possible. Myungjun required a friend, not an aide. Friends and family bathed together without the underlying sexual connotation. It was common. Yet, all Bin could think about was Myungjun naked next to him.

He took a deep breath. He hadn’t lived nearly three hundred years just to panic over the natural state of someone’s body, so he nodded his head and began to remove his own clothing. He laid his robe alongside Myungjun’s clothes, and soon enough, he was naked and Myungjun was now the one standing there.

He recognized the look in Myungjun’s gaze; desire. Myungjun’s eyes raked over his body without any premise of friendship left. Myungjun was admiring him, and Bin could hardly hide his smile.

Myungjun, seeing that Bin had stilled, quickly glanced up at Bin’s face. He had been caught in his shameful examination, and he shook his head and apologized. “I’m so sorry! I wasn’t...I-I mean, it’s...I was...you’re v-very muscular, for...for a scholar.”

“Hard labor might be seen as the fate of the less fortunate, but there is good within it. If I work hard, my body feels better. Trust me, I’ve had plenty of time and plenty of experience.” His weight had fluctuated over the years until he finally found a routine that worked best for him. He looked good, and he felt good, and that was all that mattered.
Now, of course, realizing that his body was desirable to Myungjun, he felt even better.

“Are...you older than me, then?” Myungjun questioned. He looked as if he was having difficulty keeping his gaze trained solely onto Bin.

In lieu of explaining his entire past and history, Bin simply nodded his head. Myungjun gave a small, “oh,” in response, then slowly removed his pants. He was blushing; even in the dying light of dusk, Bin could tell. Myungjun was embarrassed.

The roles had switched, then. Bin found within him a surge of confidence, and he stepped forward and whispered, “I like you.”

Myungjun was frozen in place.

“I love you, Prince Myungjun. I realize it’s unorthodox, and it does go against the Buddha's teachings on sexual behavior, but I love you. So much.” He felt transported back in time suddenly, like some inexperienced soldier standing before the great General Kim. Still, he continued; he had already stated obvious facts and he couldn’t back away now. “I understand if you don’t feel the same way, and if you-”

“Sexual?” Myungjun repeated. His eyes were wide and he was gripping his pants close to his chest.

“Well...yes.” Bin laughed at Myungjun’s expression. “You do realize that people who are in love have sex, correct?”

“Men?”

Bin had to remind himself that this wasn’t General Kim, who had lived with the masses and understood that prostitution was rampant between all sexes. This was Prince Myungjun, who had only grown up in the palace under strict Buddhist teachings and was probably not aware that men even had sex with other men.

“It doesn’t happen often,” Bin assured him. “Sexual relations between men, I mean. There is a problem with prostitution in many places, especially with younger boys and older men, but there’s not many lovers. At least, I haven’t met any.” Three hundred years was a long time to go never knowing if he was immoral and different due to his preference or if other men just kept it secret.

“Anyway, you don’t have anything to worry about. I understand my confession is...sudden. If you do not feel the same, that is fine. If you wish to send me away, I completely understand. I just can’t keep hiding it. I love you, Prince Myungjun.”

“You...you love me how a-a man would love his wife?” Myungjun questioned.

Bin nodded his head.

“So...have you thought about marrying me so we could spend the rest of our lives together?”

Once again, Bin nodded, though he added, “Of course, we cannot, but it’s been lingering in my mind. If I were the only person in your life you would love, I would be so happy.”

Myungjun was silent, regarding him curiously for a few seconds, and then he whispered something. Bin couldn’t understand. Bin had to step closer and ask, “Can you repeat that, Prince Myungjun?”
Myungjun bit nervously down onto his lip and glanced aside, but a bit louder he said, “I’ve...thought the same. About...marrying you.”

Bin’s heart skipped a beat.

“I’m expected to marry once I ascend to the throne, obviously, so as to continue the lineage and strengthen the royal family. My father has many wives; I assume I would have to be under the same position as him. The other day, though, when I passed one of the queen consorts, I thought...I thought I might just like to only spend my life with you.”

He looked so innocent, so sweet, and Bin was overcome with affection. “Oh, Myungjun,” he whispered, forgoing the title of prince, and he hurried to close the distance between them. Never minding their nudity, he swooped Myungjun into a hug, holding him close. It was like he was holding General Kim in his arms again, and he felt like crying. He buried his nose into Myungjun’s neck and said, over and over again, “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

After repeating his mantra a few times, he fell silent.

“T love you,” Myungjun suddenly whispered back.

Bin pulled back slightly, staring down at the prince with hope in his eyes. “You do?”

Myungjun nodded his head. “Or, at least, I assume this is what love is. Not wanting to be with anyone else. Not wanting you to be with anyone else. Enjoying all the time we spend together so much and hating when we have to part. Finding you a-attractive. I suppose that’s...love. Correct?”

Bin smiled. He carefully undid Myungjun’s bun, allowing his hair to fall over his ears, bangs covering his eyes for a short second before Bin brushed them aside. Prince Myungjun’s hair was much shorter than General Kim’s hair was. Bin still liked it. He still liked Myungjun.

“That’s correct,” he murmured, kissing Myungjun’s forehead. “That’s what love is.”

Finally, finally, finally he was back with Myungjun and his happiness was overwhelming. He bent over to kiss Myungjun again, this time on his lips. He was cautious and slow, understanding that this would be Myungjun’s first time kissing a man; likely, his first time kissing anybody.

Myungjun kissed back, moving his lips along with Bin’s following the older man’s stead. He was gentle and soft, willing and compliant, and as the kiss deepened, Bin slowly moved them both down to the hot spring until they were waist-deep in the water.

He continued to kiss Myungjun, darting his tongue inside the prince’s mouth, curling his fingers around Myungjun’s hair. Myungjun’s arms were reached up to grip tightly at Bin’s shoulders. His eyes were closed and he moaned into the kiss once or twice before, suddenly, his hip jerked upwards, rutting into Bin, and Bin realized Myungjun was erect.

The involuntary action panicked Myungjun. He tried to scramble backwards, apologies spilling forth from his mouth, but he tripped over the wet rocks beneath his feet. Bin caught him as he fell, splashing in the water, and laughed. “I’m not upset,” he said. “I swear, I’m not. It’s normal, Myungjun.”

“I’ve...never even heard of-of men...how would we...?” Myungjun stammered as he regained his footing.

Bin hushed him, smoothing down Myungjun’s wet hair, watching the water droplets roll down his face. “I know how to do it. It’s not something we necessarily need to do at this moment, so there’s
“I’d like to, though.” Myungjun gnawed at his bottom lip. “...I’m attracted to you, Bin. I’d like to, if you know how.” He gripped onto Bin’s arms and asked, voice suddenly quiet, “Is it painful?”

Bin supposed, for Myungjun’s first time, it would be painful. He remembered his first time with General Kim, who was used to being sore and achy and had joked, “If I was a stationary man, I might not be able to move for a few days.”

Prince Myungjun was definitely not General Kim in terms of endurance and strength, and so Bin smiled and kissed Myungjun once more.

“It won’t be.” He would be on the receiving end this time. It wasn’t his usual position, but he, at least, understood sex and how it worked, especially between men. Myungjun wouldn’t be hurt this way, and they would both still greatly enjoy it.

Bin led Myungjun over to a more shallow part of the springs, where he then helped sit Myungjun down on some of the rocks. “You needn’t do much,” he assured, planting kiss after kiss along Myungjun’s soft cheeks. Myungjun stared at him, wide-eyed and innocent, and Bin smiled. “I’ll make sure it doesn’t hurt for you. Just watch, for the moment.”

He didn’t care so much if it made him sore. As he began to stretch himself, a lack of lubrication was certainly painful, though the hot water from the spring soothed the fiery aches he was already beginning to feel. He met eyes with Myungjun, who was staring at the proceedings with slight confusion but heavy desire. “If I don’t do this,” Bin said, gasping as he curled his fingers inside of him, “-then it will be far more painful when we have sex.”

“Are...are you sure it isn’t painful right now?” Myungjun asked, eyeing Bin’s lower body appreciatively.

Bin lied and shook his head. The pain would soon be offset by pleasure, so he really didn’t mind. Regardless, no matter how he felt, he longed to be intimate with Myungjun again. It had been so long, hundreds of years, and he couldn’t believe how much he missed him.

Once he deemed himself ready enough, he moved closer to Myungjun. The moon was now out, bright and full, shining down upon his lover, whose face was a mixture of excited and frightful. Bin kissed him gently and poked his nose. “No need to worry,” he whispered, “it will all be fine.”

He prompted Myungjun to touch himself, and he felt anticipation grow in his belly with the first moan Myungjun gave. The prince was so beautiful under all the starlight, his golden skin wet and his brown eyes half-lidded.

They had sex right there in that spring, Bin towering over Myungjun, watching as the little sounds of pleasure fell forth from Myungjun’s lips. It was a serene experience, one he thought he would never again have, and he couldn’t help the tears that welled up in his eyes as he moved up and down, up and down.

He cried then, trying first to bite his fist to stifle the sobs, but they came, anyway, and Myungjun stopped thrusting up into him.

“What’s wrong?” Myungjun asked, panicked. “Did I hurt you? Bin, get off, did I-”

“Y-You didn’t,” Bin told him, brushing aside damp bangs from Myungjun’s forehead. “I’m just...I-I’m so happy.” He smiled through his tears and then kissed Myungjun. “I’m back in your embrace, Myungjun; this is all I ever wanted.”
Myungjun looked confused, but Bin continued to move, continued to elicit such lewd sounds from his lover, until they were both spent and tired.

Bin pulled himself off of Myungjun, already feeling sore, and Myungjun reached out to hold onto him tightly. They remained that way, their bodies halfway in the water, resting on the rock, and Myungjun whispered, “Back in my embrace?”

Bin hummed and buried his nose into Myungjun’s neck. His cheeks were full of dried tears, and his throat felt scratchy. “Slip of the tongue,” he murmured, “I just have dreamed of this since I met you.”

He recovered well enough from his words; Myungjun believed him, in any case. Bin could hear the smile in his voice as he answered, “I’m happy both our dreams came true, then.”

Bin nodded his head, his hair tickling Myungjun’s chin. The boy giggled, and Bin relished in the sound.

Later, as they retreated back to the palace walls, as Myungjun dressed and curled up in bed, Bin watched him, promising to stay by his side as he slept. It wasn’t until he saw Prince Myungjun’s chest moving slowly up and down, up and down, that he finally whispered, “I’m back with you, General Kim.”

“Dart quickly right!” Bin ordered, thrusting his pole out as fast as possible. Fortunately, his opponent moved quicker, dodging the attack with ease. “Block!” came Bin’s next command as he swung his pole upwards. His opponent blocked properly, repeating trained techniques he had been taught. “Down!” Bin exclaimed, pulling his pole off of his opponent’s and swinging at knees.

His opponent wasn’t fast enough then, and Bin’s pole smacked his legs harshly. Myungjun stumbled back in pain, then fell onto his behind.

“Myungjun!” Bin knelt by his lover, pulling his helmet off in order to better read his expression. “Are you alright, darling?”

Myungjun nodded, though he winced when Bin felt his legs. “I think they might be bruised,” he murmured.

Bin began to tug off Myungjun’s boot in order to slide his trousers up and figure out what damage he had caused. It did seem just like a bruise. The bones weren’t out of place and the skin hadn’t broken. It seemed fine, and Bin gingerly touched it. Myungjun didn’t pull back this time, though he did grit his teeth down. “The physician should have some remedies to help with the bruising,” he said. “If not, I know of some myself. We’ll place a cool cloth over it to calm the swelling—”

“It’s just a bruise,” Myungjun responded. He pulled away from Bin’s examination and pulled his boot back on. “I was too slow. I deserved it.”

“I was too careless,” Bin retorted. “I’ve trained for battles, and I expected you to have the same skill I do.”
Bin had been concerned with Myungjun’s lack of fighting skill. Considering everyone was against his accession, there was bound to be trouble and strife, infighting within the royal family. Myungjun’s elder brothers had trained relentlessly, whereas Myungjun had spent all of his time devouring political and religious texts. Myungjun was far more intelligent and capable of leading Goryeo, but he wasn’t safe from attacks in the palace walls. Knowledge could only get him so far if one of his brothers dared to brandish a weapon. Bin was determined to fix that.

He just couldn’t get over how much Prince Myungjun reminded him of General Kim. They shared the same face and same personality, but there had been such large differences due to upbringing and chosen life path. General Kim was far more strong, far more witty, far more capable, and Prince Myungjun was weak and unsure and nervous. Still, with the armor on his body, Prince Myungjun was a near-perfect replica of General Kim.

At least, to Bin he was.

Bin had to remind himself that this Myungjun was simply born to a different family. He was General Kim, had General Kim been of royal lineage. He was still the man Bin loved, regardless of how well he could fight.

Myungjun, frustrated with his lack of progress, snatched his helmet away from Bin and stuffed it back onto his head. “Let’s try again.”

“I’d rather we get your leg looked at first and foremost.” Bin offered him a small smile. “I don’t want you to push yourself too hard.”

“It’s just a bruise,” Myungjun repeated himself from earlier, trying his best to ease Bin’s worries. “And bruises are nothing to be concerned over. My brothers - when they practice, they often get hit and they continue. I’d like to continue, then, as they would.”

Bin decided against mentioning that all of Myungjun’s brothers were built differently than he was. They had muscle, or else plenty of fat, to protect themselves and to go on even when slightly hurt. He knew Myungjun was too stubborn to back down regardless of what Bin had to say, anyway, so he just sighed and helped Myungjun back to his feet.

He noticed, then, two figures stepping into the small, outdoor rink, dressed in fine armor and regarding the scene with amusement.

“Oh, hello, Myungjun,” one of the men greeted, giving him a mock bow. “Or should I say, Your Majesty.”

Myungjun scowled, gripping tightly at his wooden pole. “Bin and I have the training rink,” he snapped. “Don’t the two of you have something better to do, anyway? Like imagining the rest of your lives with the title of Prince and never King?”

That certainly wiped the grin off their faces, though Bin was sure that riling them up further would only bring more damage later.

“It’s not like this training is doing you any good,” Myungjun’s eldest brother commented. He was large in the belly, but still rather strong for his build. His face was constantly red, and he hid his baldness well with many extravagant hats or helmets.

The other brother had Myungjun’s more slight build, though he was far more toned and far more tall.

Neither of them could ever rival Myungjun’s brightness, however, nor could they ever hope to
replicate Myungjun’s cheerful demeanor. Bin disliked them, if only because he knew of the horrid things they liked to say about Myungjun, even when they knew he could hear.

“The training is doing me just fine,” Myungjun snapped. He grabbed Bin’s arm, thus gaining his attention once again. “Let’s keep going.”

“Why not train with me, Myungjun?” the eldest brother questioned, grabbing one of the wooden training poles. “If your aide truly has taught you well, then it should be no matter to best me in a friendly duel.” He grinned, mockery filling his every movement as he asked, “Or perhaps you’re too cowardly to try?”

Myungjun frowned, then stepped forward. “I’ll accept,” he said. “You would be surprised how much Bin has taught me already.”

Bin tried to intervene. He shook his head and stated, “This isn’t a great idea. I accidentally hurt Prince Myungjun’s leg. We ought to get that looked at before-”

“Quiet,” the eldest brother ordered. “If Myungjun wishes to fight, then he doesn’t need you to speak for him. The two of you have been unnaturally close, anyway, and if you continue to act like some worried wife, people will get the wrong idea.”

“Bin isn’t involved.” Myungjun readied his weapon, standing as Bin had taught him, and he waited for his brother to do the same. “Let me know when you’re ready, Wangwi.”

Wangwi struck first. He said nothing beforehand to let Myungjun know he was ready, but Myungjun, fortunately, managed to dodge the hit at the last second, just as he had for Bin. He played fine as the defense, body small and quick enough to dart and weave away from all attacks, but when he switched to offense, Bin already noticed many shortcomings.

He struck too hard and heavy, swinging his stick wildly without any plan. He had no grace on the field as a soldier; only when he defended himself did he use techniques properly. Bin watched, with baited breath, as Myungjun blocked each and every hit Wangwi delivered.

Then Wangi struck lower, aiming for Myungjun’s hurt leg. Once more, Myungjun was too slow in blocking, and the pole struck his leg with a loud crack. Myungjun fell in a crumpled heap, his clumsy movements causing his helmet to fall from his head.

He still held onto his pole, and Wangi seemed to take that as an initiative to strike again, seemed to think that even though Myungjun was down, he wasn’t done. Bin tried to move forward to stop Wangi, but he wasn’t fast enough; Wangi’s pole swung again, hitting Myungjun in his face.

“Stop!” Bin cried out, grabbing onto Wangwi’s pole. He tugged it out of the man’s arms and tossed it aside. “What’s wrong with you? He was down; the battle was over!”

“The bastard still wanted to fight. I could see it in his gaze.” Wangwi seemed unbothered by the damage he had caused. He simply raised his eyebrows and asked, “Might my brother and I have the rink now? King Myungjun probably requires medical help.”

Bin glanced down at his lover, who was bleeding from his lip, which was busted and split open, and it was obvious his face would soon be bruising. He bent to the ground and quietly asked, “Is your leg alright?”

Myungjun’s focus was all on his eldest brother. He grimaced, then spit out, “Damn you, Wangwi.”

Yes, yes, it’s somehow my fault your wife didn’t train you well enough. Or, perhaps, it isn’t Bin’s
shortcomings, but your own.” The other brother snorted and Wangi, enticed by his audience, continued, “You’re a pathetic excuse for a crowned prince. Our great empire doesn’t need someone who can’t even block a wooden stick.”

Myungjun said nothing in response to Wangwi’s words. In fact, he didn’t talk again until after Bin had taken him to see the physician inside the palace, until after he was ordered to rest and allow Bin to spread a salve all over his bruises. Only then, in the silence left between them, did Myungjun mutter, “Do you think I’ll be a bad king?”

“No,” was Bin’s instant response. He was careful in his movements, pressing Myungjun’s skin as gently as he could. “I think you’ll be an amazing king.”

“Are you required to say that simply because you love me?” Myungjun asked, but before Bin could reply, Myungjun continued, “Wangwi is right. How can I be expected to protect my kingdom if I can’t even protect myself?” He glanced over at Bin. “Perhaps I should take my leave. I could allow Wangwi to become king in my absence. He’s appealed himself to the masses more than I have. People would listen to and respect him. If I left, you would come with me, right?”

Bin ceased in his movements to better stare down at his lover. Myungjun looked defeated; underneath his bruises and split lip was the image of a man tired with being treated so terribly by those who ought to appreciate him. All the rotten words spoken by his brothers and others around town had truly penetrated his skin more than he let on. In the place of a greedy, snarky king-to-be was now an insecure, vulnerable boy.

He reminded Bin so much of General Kim, and Bin played with Myungjun’s messy hair. “I knew of a man very similar to you,” Bin murmured. “He was small. He had pretty black hair and sharp eyes, just like you. He was a general, and he was powerful out in battles. He knew how to lead. He knew how to fight. Unlike you, he was a little useless in terms of religion or politics, but he did well enough in his realm. Sometimes, however, he was unsure. He wondered if he could truly lead his men in battle; other men were more educated, older, better experienced, and yet he was the one who was chosen to lead. It scared him sometimes.” Bin placed the top onto his small, tin can of salve, then said, “But at the end of the day, it was that general who led his soldiers into victory after victory.”

Thinking about General Kim made him nostalgic. Even if it was General Kim in front of him, reborn into Crowned Prince Myungjun, even if this was the reincarnation of his lover from centuries ago, he still yearned for those days where it was just him and the general, and their constant love for each other.

He had to remind himself, time and time again, this was General Kim, albeit the title and grand fighting skills. This was still the man he loved.

“Myungjun,” Bin whispered, and he bent over to kiss the boy. Myungjun stared up at him, and Bin smiled. “You understand the point of my story, don’t you?”

Myungjun slowly nodded his head. “I...think so,” he murmured. “I’d like to hope I do. I’m...I’m just...I just let his words get to me too often.”

“That’s understandable,” Bin replied. “After all, he is your brother. The comments of familial persons matter far much more to you than if he was a random citizen.”

Myungjun gave a small noise of confirmation, agreeing with Bin’s words. He seemed happier. He seemed more cheerful. He didn’t seem as defeated as he had before, in any case.
“Bin, when you said this man had pretty hair, does this mean that, perhaps, you were in love with someone before me?”

Bin laughed. “Jealousy does not suit you, my darling.”

“I’m simply-“

“I know. You’re worried. But please do not worry.” Bin pat his hair again. “I only love you. My heart belongs solely to Myungjun; no others may have this love.”

He was immortal because of Myungjun; he was immortal for Myungjun.

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They didn’t spend their every waking second together. Bin would very much have liked to, but in order to not appear suspicious, they took breaks from time to time. Bin would study or help out with a few chores here and there, and Myungjun would focus on his foreign relation knowledge, or else practice new languages. Regardless, by nightfall, they would be together again and so Bin didn’t fret much.

Still, without Myungjun by his side, Bin felt so empty. He always tried to hurry along with whatever chores he had so that way he could be closer to Myungjun sooner. Departure was hard enough, and as time passed, Bin grew antsy and worried.

Myungjun always welcomed him. Even if Bin merely sat by his side as Myungjun sounded out strange words on his tongue, even if Bin fell asleep as Myungjun poured over scrolls in the soft flickering of candlelight, Bin was content enough to be with him.

One day, however, he realized Myungjun wasn’t reading. As he approached closer to the boy’s room, he heard soft music being plucked from some sort of instrument. Bin paused in his steps, listening closely. He recognized the song as some sort of ceremonial piece, though he wasn’t certain of the name. He had heard it, long ago, and listening again made him shiver with anticipation.

Slowly, he entered the room, trying his best to remain silent. There sat Myungjun, plucking at a beautifully ornate zither. He had skill, that was definite, and his fingers moved so precisely that it was mesmerizing.

Bin watched his lover until the end of the song, and then he made himself known, knocking slightly at the wall beside him. Myungjun’s head snapped up, his eyes wide, though he smiled brightly upon seeing Bin.

“You scared me,” he commented. “Why didn’t you announce yourself?”

“I was too busy admiring your music,” Bin responded. He hurried across the room to sit down next to Myungjun. “It was lovely.”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “I haven’t practiced it in a while. I remembered, though, the other day you mentioned that you really enjoyed music for the ordinary people. I don’t know any songs the ordinary people would enjoy, though. I only know court songs.” Myungjun pouted for a
split second before grinning. “But you thought it was lovely?”

Bin nodded his head, then leaned over to plant a kiss onto the plush of Myungjun’s cheek. “It was perfect,” he murmured. As his lover blushed heavily, Bin ran a finger down the span of the instrument. “I have to say, I’m both impressed and envious. I’ve longed to play a zither for years and years.”

Regarding him curiously, Myungjun said, “I can’t tell how old you are. Honestly, you speak as if you’re the oldest man alive, and yet I’m certain you’re younger than I am.”

Bin chose not to respond to Myungjun’s inquiring comment. Instead, he pointed at the zither. “Would you like to teach me?” he asked.

“That sounds like a difficult task.”

“I’m much smarter than I look. Honestly.”

Myungjun giggled before finally shifting his zither, placing it in Bin’s lap. “Alright,” he conceded. “Let’s start by using your right hand - we’ll use this hand to pluck-”

“-and your other hand helps raise and lower pitch. If you use your fingers, you can also control the vibrations.”

Bin looked at both his hands, then at the instrument in his lap. “I don’t think I’m accustomed to this,” he commented. “I’m a far better soldier than I am a musician.”

“You’re not a musician at all,” Myungjun lamented. “And originally I had decided I would marry a woman who could play music with me. Instead, I’m now stuck with you - you’re quite tone deaf, you know?”

“Be quiet.”

“No, honestly, you truly are. Remember when we all had wine to celebrate a victory? There was so much wine, most of the men were vomiting, and you decided to serenade me. My word, that was horrendous.”

Bin frowned and started to push the zither off his lap. “I don’t want to learn if you’re just going to treat me like that.”

“Oh, don’t be such a child,” Myungjun chastised, placing a hand out to stop Bin’s movements. “If I promise to stop mocking you, will you promise to let me teach you?” He stared expectantly at Bin, who nodded his head after some initial hesitation. Brightening considerably, Myungjun shuffled his body closer to Bin. “Good! I’m certain you’ll play an instrument better than you will sing.”

“I was drunk-”

Myungjun laughed and waved him off. “I love you despite your awful voice, Bin. Now, show me your hands again, and then we’ll start off with a few different notes.”
Myungjun was experimental. He was eager. He was oddly sexual, for someone who had been so innocent just months before. Bin found himself overwhelmed with Myungjun’s intense drive.

Overwhelmed, but not at all upset.

They exchanged messy, sloppy kisses on many nights, when Myungjun was sure they had no chance of being caught. Myungjun was loud; he moaned and panted and repeated Bin’s name, over and over again. It slipped off his tongue with ease, usually as the kisses gave way to more sexual endeavors. Bin loved to hear it and he yearned to hear it as often as possible.

Myungjun’s mouth liked to explore Bin’s body. He liked to murmur Bin’s name into his neck, against his chest, or by his stomach. Bin could hardly fathom how sweet, insecure Myungjun could somehow be so enticing.

Especially when, one night, Myungjun suddenly pulled Bin’s trousers down to his ankles.

“Myungjun!” Bin exclaimed, nearly stumbling back. Myungjun, knelt to the floor, looked up at Bin’s semi-erect cock. “Myungjun, what on earth-”

“You...you did this to me a few days ago,” Myungjun commented. He wrapped a hand around Bin’s penis and slowly began stroking it. “I couldn’t stop thinking about it.” He smiled, far too chaste and cute for what his hands were doing. ‘I’d very much like to return the favor.”

Bin swallowed thickly. He was growing hard within Myungjun’s grasp. “I don’t want you to do anything you’re uncomfortable-”

“I wouldn’t suggest it if I wasn’t comfortable,” Myungjun responded, and right after those words, he began to pepper kisses down Bin’s member.

Myungjun wasn’t the most skilled or talented with sex. It was apparent especially at the moment, and yet Bin found himself standing on shaky legs, biting down harshly onto his lip in order to keep silent. Whatever Myungjun’s mouth could not take in, his hands made up for, and Bin was quickly and easily becoming a mess.

The sounds Myungjun made were lewd. He choked from time to time, both from Bin’s size and from his own saliva. It was wet and disgusting and so amazing. Bin had to reach behind him to hold onto the edge of the table in an attempt to keep himself upright. He threw his head back and thanked the heavens for this moment, for this lifetime, for sending him back into Myungjun’s arms.

He thrust without thinking, and Myungjun choked more, coughing and sputtering, yet he still didn’t remove his mouth. Bin glanced down at his lover, whose chin was wet with saliva and semen. “Da-Darling, you don’t have to-” Bin started, tangling his fingers into Myungjun’s hair.

The door opened just then, though, before Bin could continue his sentence. Myungjun pulled off Bin with a loud pop and Bin scrambled to cover himself from the intruder. As he tugged his trousers up, he caught a glimpse of the girl standing in the doorway.
One of Myungjun’s sisters.

She looked stricken, her eyes wide as she surveyed the scene. Myungjun, frantically wiping at his mouth, stammered out, “Heungbang, th-this isn’t- I swear, it’s just...I was trying to-”

She ran off as Myungjun struggled to come up with an explanation. Myungjun stared at the door in horror before glancing up at Bin. “She’s going to tell.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. She’s Wangwi’s sister. She’s closer to him than she is to me.” Myungjun grabbed at his messy hair and tugged it. “What am I supposed to do now, Bin? Surely they’ll use this to their advantage! What if they tell my father? Or what if they spread the word to other noble families? No one will want a man as king if that man sullies himself in such a manner - it goes against Buddha’s teachings, to derive pleasure from another man, and what if people notice? I won’t be able to lead if no one-”

Bin bent down to Myungjun’s level, trying to calm his nerves. Truthfully, Bin’s heart was also pounding. He hadn’t wanted to be caught; more importantly, he hadn’t wanted Myungjun to be caught. There was much ridicule to be gained from sleeping with another man. Myungjun already suffered enough at the hands of his brothers; with this as their fuel, they would worsen his suffering tenfold.

Still, Bin had to push all of his worries aside and focus only on his troubled lover. “Myungjun, look at me.” He gently grabbed Myungjun’s cheeks, turning his face until their eyes met. “We’ll deny everything.”

Myungjun looked so terrified. He trembled in Bin’s hold. “There’s a witness, Bin.”

“And she sides with Wangwi. You must simply write it off as Wangwi trying to discredit your rule. He’s spread horrible rumors before; this will be no different.”

“If...if Heungbang tells him anything, he’ll likely force detail of the situation out of her. She’s loyal; she’ll tell everything she saw. And if Wangwi has so much detail, it’d be easy to believe him. You and I are close, and the palace knows I haven’t been interested in any of the noblewomen so far.”

“Darling,” Bin whispered. He kissed Myungjun’s lips; normally, tasting himself would be cause to continue their sexual escapade, but he was worried and Myungjun was worried. They first needed to figure out what their next course of action was. “You’re a strong orator. The moment an accusation arises, I know you will strike it down. You’re convincing and smooth and people will believe you over Wangi, as you can much better articulate your points.”

Myungjun swallowed thickly. He looked so small and so young, and Bin held him close.

“And no matter what happens,” Bin added in a whisper, “I’m going to stay right by your side. I’ll always be with you, Myungjun.”

They were called into the king’s chamber just a few days later. The young woman who summoned them looked rather embarrassed and couldn’t meet Myungjun’s gaze. Bin wondered if Heungbang had spread the rumor.

Myungjun wondered the same thing, too. “Do you think the others might know?” he asked as they walked down the hallways together. “Do you think she told?”
Bin was almost certain she did. Why else would they _both_ be called to speak with the king? Still, he shrugged his shoulders. “Hard to tell,” he replied. “But no matter what, we’ll both deny everything.”

“Right.” Myungjun wiped the worry and fear off his face until nothing remained but his regal persona. Bin hid a smile as he walked just a step behind his lover. The boy really could act; his royal disposition was so convincing that Bin often forgot Myungjun was a silly, shy man.

He was General Kim, after all; conniving and strong in public, weak and passionate in Bin’s embrace.

Bin knew he had to follow Myungjun’s stead in order to make their lie more convincing, so he plastered on his own fake expression, blank and emotionless as he ought to be. When they stepped into the room, Bin’s heart skipped a beat.

The king was sitting up in a large chair, dressed in his royal attire. He was growing thinner and paler by the day. Bin was certain that he would soon pass.

As much as he knew Myungjun loved his father, Bin hoped that day would come soon. Once Myungjun ascended to his position on the throne, he could put an end to his brothers’ reign of terror.

Those brothers also stood in the room. Wangwin appeared smug, hands behind his back as he smirked at Myungjun. “Show some respect, please,” the older man ordered.

Bin, remembering his place, quickly knelt down and bowed to the king, who ignored him completely in favor of staring upon his youngest son.

“Myungjun,” the king greeted.

“Hello, Father,” came Myungjun’s warm reply. He smiled, yet looked inquisitive. “Why have you called both Bin and myself here? And why are my brothers here? Has something happened?”

Bin stood back up, keeping his head bowed. He was always impressed when General Kim could lie and act; he was equally impressed with Prince Myungjun’s posturing.

“Your brothers have told me something interesting,” the king said. His voice was shaky and he struggled to keep his head up. “Have you been having sexual relations with your aide?”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows and blinked - the epitome of innocence. “I don’t know why you would suggest such a thing! Bin is like a brother to me. In any case, he’s more of a brother than I currently have.”

Wangwi snorted and rolled his eyes, prompting Myungjun to glance over at him. “Aren’t you tired of spreading lies and vicious rumors, Wangwi?”

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“I was not the one who began this rumor. Our _sister_ did; what stake would she have in lying?”

“She’s loyal to you. She wants you to become her king.”

“She gave me plenty of detail to explain just what she saw,” Wangwi responded smugly. “Why would she come up with such an elaborate lie?” Wangwi didn’t give Myungjun a chance to reply. He turned to the king, a smile on his face, and said, “Forgive me for the lewd descriptions, Your Majesty, but according to Heungbang, Myungjun was on his knees in front of Bin. Bin’s penis was in his mouth, and I assume he must have ejaculated; she mentioned a _white substance_ down
Myungjun’s chin.”

“That is vulgar!” Myungjun exclaimed. He looked disgusted and horrified; Bin couldn’t detect an ounce of guilt or humiliation on his face.

Myungjun was brilliant, and Bin was falling all the more in love day by day.

“Father, I can assure you, nothing of the sort has happened between myself and Bin. I would never degrade myself by-by...doing that. It’s wretched. Plus,” he added, “you know I’m dedicated to Buddha’s teachings.”

The king nodded his head, as if understanding Myungjun’s points. Not to be outdone, Wangwi broke in, adding, “It’s not as far-fetched as Myungjun might make it out to be, Father. He has rejected all marriage proposals and has never once shown any interest in the women around the palace.”

“When I’m king, I’ll certainly marry,” Myungjun assured. “For the time being, my time is best spent studying. If I am to lead this nation and continue our prosperity, I should be well-educated for the task.”

Wangwi glared at Myungjun. The other brothers in the room shuffled uncomfortably upon hearing of Myungjun’s supposed lewd actions. A few of them whispered amongst themselves, likely discussing whether Wangwi was truthful or not, until the king hushed them.

“I’ve heard many rumors before, Myungjun, of you and Bin.” He looked at his son and smiled. “Yet I can clearly tell you are likely ecstatic you finally have someone trustworthy by your side.”

Myungjun nodded his head once. “It’s been difficult, having siblings by my side who do nothing but spread these malicious lies. I apologize, Father, for any trouble you must have gone through in trying your best to sort this out. They never should try to discredit me in such a way.” Myungjun bowed his head.

The king gestured. “Very well. Myungjun, please be dismissed. I wish to speak to your brothers. You will become the next king, and they’d do well to stay silent about their qualms. Bin—” He smiled kindly to Bin and said, “Please proceed in caring for our next king.”

Bin bowed again, kneeling on his hands and knees and allowing his head to touch the floor. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he swore, and he only stood when Myungjun began to walk away. Then, he followed his lover down the hall, keeping one step behind, until they arrived outside of the palace, on a small balcony overlooking a garden.

Myungjun shut the door behind him and then breathed a sigh of relief. “How did I do?” he asked quietly.

Bin laughed. “Well, your father believed you. Even I was nearly convinced that you found our sexual relationship to be disgusting.”

“I don’t. Not at all. Our relationship, both the physical aspect and more emotional aspect, is probably the most amazing thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Bin leaned over to plant a kiss onto Myungjun’s forehead. “Even better than becoming king?” he asked.

Myungjun nodded with enthusiasm. “Even better than that.”
Wangwi, obviously upset over Myungjun’s favor with their father, had doubled his efforts to ruin Myungjun’s life. The rumors continued, each one worse than the next. The residents of the palace shunned Myungjun if he wasn’t talking to or ordering them directly. Wangwi had also managed to employ spies, who Bin began to notice the more time he spent by Myungjun’s side.

They would follow him, eyeing his every move. He noticed heads swivel if he laughed at something Myungjun said. He noticed movement in rooms where he thought he would be alone finally with Myungjun. These men even plastered their ears to Myungjun’s door or window, listening in whenever Bin visited with him.

Myungjun hated it. His anger was clear enough, even to the palace workers. He slammed doors much harder than necessary and he spoke harshly to those around him. When he did have time alone with Bin, it was under the guise of teaching him to play the zither.

Bin didn’t have the heart to tell Myungjun he was already skilled. He had learned the basics in the years he stayed with General Kim, and after the general’s death, he continued to practice until he was talented. Three hundred years alone made him bored and lonely, and so he picked up skills wherever he could.

But the zither was what could bring them together even when spies were all around. They could play the instrument, and soon simple phrases of encouragement became words of deeper meaning than what remained on the surface.

“That’s fantastic, Bin!” I miss you, Bin.

“It’s all thanks to your help.” I know. I wish we could be together as before.

“It would be fun to play the music of the ordinary people, outside of these palace walls.” Can we get away? How can we get away?

“Perhaps, but I would have to learn a new piece.” We can’t, least you get caught in the act a second time.

“Well, you will be fantastic at it.” But I miss you.

It was not an ideal situation at all. It was certainly not what Bin had in mind for his newfound relationship with Myungjun. Day after day, he longed for the king to die; once Myungjun was king, he could banish his brothers from the palace, rid the area of spies or those loyal to his siblings, and then he and Bin could share their love together in peace.

For the time being, they were stuck practicing the zither.

Bin grew tired of their talk, however. It was mindless and pointless, and he could only throw so many forlorn looks toward Myungjun before he was certain the boy would be sick of him. So he grabbed the parchment paper always perched on Myungjun’s desk and he dragged it over to where Myungjun sat. He left it there, smiling briefly at Myungjun’s confused face, before snatching up the ink and pen.
“I’d like to compose a song,” Bin lied, settling next to Myungjun. “And I’d very much appreciate the help of someone more talented than myself.”

He wrote carefully in Chinese: You’re very beautiful tonight, my darling.

Myungjun grinned widely when he realized Bin’s ingenuity. He snatched the pen away and scolded, “Allow me to start, Bin; I’m far more knowledgeable than you are.”

He wrote, I am not nearly as handsome as you.

Bin struggled to keep from giggling like some silly girl. He scoffed and shook his head as Myungjun handed him the pen. “I’ve been practicing; I’d very much like to create the first few notes.” Bin’s response was, As you will soon be my king, I’m required by law to say such things. As you currently are my lover, I’m required by the heart.

Myungjun did laugh, short and quick, and he stuffed a hand over his mouth to stifle it. Trying to cover for the boy, Bin exclaimed, “Don’t mock me! I’m trying my best!”

“You’re not doing well,” Myungjun gasped out, still giggling. “Here, let me fix it.” He took the pen and wrote, I love you very much.

Bin smiled softly, and leaned his nose into Myungjun’s nose, planting a quiet kiss onto his lover’s mouth. As Myungjun blushed, Bin wrote, I love you forever.

It wasn’t an ideal situation, but they made it work. Myungjun had to request a great number of blank scrolls. He stuffed the ones written on into his dresser, hiding underneath many stacks of clothing, though upon Bin’s request, he relinquished a few. Bin stored them under his mattress, and many nights he would lay on the floor and reread these scrolls, smiling greatly at the words of love they had spun.

The king passed away some time later. His body, overtaken by illness, had finally succumbed, and he breathed his last in the middle of the night. Bin only learned when he awoke, shaken awake by one of the women in the palace.

“The king has passed,” she whispered to him as she lit a candle nearby, giving the room a bit of light.

Bin blearily blinked at her, then asked, “Where is Prince Myungjun?”

She cast him a glance. Bin could see the disgust in her gaze, but at the moment, he cared very little. He was both elated and worried for his lover - Myungjun was now king and could now get rid of the disloyal servants in the palace, as well as his brothers, but Myungjun had just lost one of the few people who still cared for him. Surely Myungjun would feel these mixed emotions, as well.

The woman pursed her lips, then responded, “He is with his brothers in the king’s chamber at the moment. They’re mourning.”

Bin was certain Myungjun had only gone for show. Likely, he would mourn peacefully at a later
date, with his brothers nowhere by his side. As it was, he was required to be in the room with them, and so Bin dismissed the woman and dressed, all the while thinking how to best be of service to his king, to his prince, to his lover.

In the end, he simply entered the room after announcing himself. He gave the ceremonial bows, then stood to the back with a few other servants and kept his head ducked into his chest. He heard Wangwi say, as if continuing a conversation, “We will hold his funeral in three days time, as Jeungtong suggested. What do you say, King Myungjun?”

The man’s tone was filled with mockery, made all the more painful when Bin heard Myungjun sob out, “I ag-agree.”

One of the brothers sighed. “It surely is troublesome when our king can’t stop his blubbering and wailing. Why act as if you’re the saddest in this room, Myungjun? You knew him for less time and you’ve gained something from his death. If anything, we ought to be the ones shedding tears, and yet we’re keeping our heads held up because that’s what ought to be done.”

Bin spared a glance over. Myungjun’s small body was shaking with his cries. His siblings looked exasperated.

Disregarding common procedures, Bin moved forward quickly. He could see all eyes in the room turn on him in astonishment, but he didn’t care. The only thing he cared for was falling into despair right in front of him, and Bin could not allow for that to happen.

He embraced Myungjun tightly, pulling the boy into his chest. Myungjun was startled for a second before giving into his tears and crying into Bin’s robe.

“What are you doing, Bin?” Wangwi questioned. “You need to stand with the other servants.”

“I believe my rank is higher than that of a servant,” Bin snapped at him, rubbing his hand up and down Myungjun’s back. “I’m a nobleman, and you’d do well not to forget it.”

“And a nobleman ought to bow to those of royal blood,” Wangi retorted. “Yet you ignore that law, and all others, and romantically embrace the king instead.”

“I believe the king will tell me if I’m breaking the law.” Bin raised his eyebrows at Wangwi. “Or, is it you who is trying to go against what the king desires?”

Wangwi kept quiet then, but Bin noticed a look in his eyes; something challenging, something smug, something prideful. It didn’t make sense, as Bin was certain he had verbally bested the man.

“We still need to discuss burial arrangements,” one of the brothers muttered, tapping Wangwi’s shoulder.

Wangwi took a deep breath, then said, “I would actually like to discuss something with our king, if possible.” He glanced at Bin. “Alone.”

Bin didn’t trust Wangwi at all. He narrowed his eyes, then said, “No. If you must discuss, I’ll be here, along with the guards.”

“What? You really think I would attempt to kill the king?” Wangwi scoffed. “I’m a Buddhist man myself, Bin, and I would never lay harm to someone else’s life.”

What he said was partially true; at the very least, Bin was certain that the family’s deep respect for their religion would require that no blood be shed. Still, he couldn’t help but shake the feeling
something was truly amiss.

Myungjun pulled from Bin’s arms and muttered, “Just the guards will be fine, Bin. I’ll be fine.”

Bin glanced back worrily at the guards. They had weapons. They had also sworn to protect their king at all cost. He could trust them. “Very well,” he agreed finally, stepping back. “I’ll be waiting right outside the door, though.”

Myungjun smiled briefly at him. “Thank you, Bin.”

_I love you, Bin._

Bin returned his smile. “You’re welcome, Your Highness.”

_I love you, Myungjun._

He stepped into the hallway and waited until the room cleared, waited until only Wangwi and Myungjun remained, and then he shut the door and stood back, straight and tall, eyes never once leaving the closed door of the king’s chamber. He didn’t allow anyone to pass, save for one of Myungjun’s sisters who carried an ornate jug of wine. She had bowed politely to him, and Bin allowed her to enter the room.

She came out a minute or two later. Bin asked, “Are they both drinking?”

“Just a cup each,” she responded. “It’s King Myungjun’s favorite wine.”

Bin could smell it. Its scent was familiar, and he assumed he must have seen Myungjun drinking that wine before. She left, and Bin continued his vigil until the guards and Wangwi stepped out of the room. Wangwi quickly closed the door behind him, and when Bin moved forward, he held out a hand.

“Myungjun is quietly mourning at the moment,” Wangwi said.

“All the more reason for me to go to him.”

Wangwi dismissed the guards, who walked off quickly, and then he muttered to Bin, “He’s very distraught. It’s best to leave him be for now. After all, he just lost someone he loved dearly.”

Bin stared at Wangwi. Why was he being so kind? Why was he being so thoughtful? It was unlike Wangwi to worry about his youngest brother.

Bin tried to step around Wangwi, but the larger man stopped him, putting a hand to his chest. “Bin, please.”

Things suddenly made sense. It hit Bin all at once and he paused in horror.

The wine.

The smell.

It had been the poison Bin smelled nearly a year or two prior, when he had proven himself worthy of becoming Myungjun’s aide. It was a deadly poison, one that dissolved in liquids and left no sign of being present, save for the very slight smell.

Bin said nothing. He simply shoved Wangwi aside and slid the door to the king’s chamber wide open.
There, right near his deceased father, crouched Myungjun, choking and spasming on the floor.

“Myungjun!” Bin yelled, hurrying forward. “Myungjun, no!”

He grabbed onto his lover and wondered how long it had been since he had consumed poison. How long had he been writhing on the floor? Had Wangwi watched him? Had Wangwi simply left him to die?

Myungjun was convulsing in his arms, and Bin knew he had to save him. He couldn’t deal with Myungjun’s death, not for a second time. “Hold still,” he said, his voice shaking, though he knew Myungjun likely could not hear him. He looked too far gone, caught in the poison’s grasp, but Bin was still determined to ensure Myungjun’s survival.

He pried the boy’s mouth open and stuffed his fingers inside. Myungjun choked around him and bit down harshly, thrashing in an attempt to ease this extra discomfort to his body, but Bin, gritting his teeth, didn’t pull back. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, darling,” he whispered, trying his best to hold Myungjun’s body still. “Please, just let me rid your body of it—”

Bin managed to force Myungjun to heave. Myungjun vomited on the both of them, dirtying their clothes, but Bin cared very little about that. The only thing he cared for was dying in his arms.

The poison, Bin was aware, provided nothing but a horrible, painful death. Knowing that Myungjun was experiencing such excruciating terror made Bin sob, and he cried out for help. “Get a physician!” he screamed, but he was sure no one was listening. The palace had turned against the king, and they had left him there to die.

“Please!” he cried, now to the heavens. He cradled Myungjun in his arms as his lover’s body shuddered. “Don’t do this to me again!” he begged. “Don’t do this to him again! Why do you make him suffer?”

The gods were silent to his inquiries. Myungjun died, having gone through such an awful struggle far longer than most necessarily would have. Bin watched the fight leave his body, the light leave his eyes, and he cried heavily, his tears splattering onto Myungjun’s still form.

He wasn’t sure what he had done to deserve this sort of punishment. He wasn’t sure why he was willed to live, why Myungjun was willed to die. It was far too horrid, and Bin planted a kiss on Myungjun’s forehead as he weeped over the loss of his lover.

Myungjun meant everything to him. Bin cared not what happened to him as long as Myungjun was safe. But Myungjun lay dead in his arms, never to wake again, and Bin shook with despair and with rage.

Wangwi was to blame. It was Wangwi who had killed him. How could he leave his brother to succumb to such a terrible poison? What kind of person was he to do that? He claimed to be religious, and yet this was the fruit of his religious teachings?

Very well. Bin wasn’t religious; he would suffer no consequences for hurting someone else.

He kissed Myungjun again, one last time, and whispered, “I’m so sorry, my darling.” He was supposed to protect Myungjun, and yet he couldn’t even do that.

At the very least, he could avenge Myungjun.

He laid his lover on the ground, trying to stop his tears as he stood and left the king’s chambers. He hurried down the hallway, peeking into rooms along the way, until he finally managed to catch
sight of Wangwi.

The eldest brother was sitting in a room, surrounded by his other brothers and a few women by his side. He was laughing - the gall he had to laugh after what he had done - and exclaiming, “Drink up, brothers! Tomorrow, I shall accept the throne and we can all stay! I know Myungjun was planning on banishing us - he told me on multiple occasions.”

“He was far too smug,” another brother declared, raising his cup to Wangwi. “Thank you for ridding the palace of his nonsense.”

Bin couldn’t listen anymore. He stepped into the room and Wangwi looked over at him. “And here comes the final part,” Wangwi stated, as if Bin had been there all along. “No one will know Myungjun died of poison. If we simply pierce the boy’s body, then it becomes easier to explain; his aide had used him, only to steal his wealth, and the great King Wangwi struck down the aide and cried over his poor, kid brother. Does that sound nice to you, Bin?” Wangwi stood and gestured for a guard, who passed over a sword for him. Wangwi gripped it tightly and faced Bin. “Oh, you seem quiet. Are you sad? Don’t be; you’ll soon be dead.”

Bin moved quickly, striding forward. He dodged the sword Wangwi thrusted at him before grabbing onto the blade. It sliced through his hand, the same hand still bleeding from Myungjun’s biting, but Bin didn’t even register the pain. He just glared at Wangwi, rage causing his body to shake. “You deserve every ounce of pain and torture,” he hissed. “You deserve a horrendous, prolonged death. A pity I can’t give it to you now. But I’ll do my best.” He managed to tug the sword from Wangwi’s grasp. The man tried to reach for it, but Bin was quick enough to hold it away. For once, finally, Wangwi looked scared.

His strength far overpowered that of Wangwi’s. Wangwi was too fat, too slow, and Bin easily knocked him off his feet. The man fell onto the ground.

Bin, knowing he would soon be killed by irate palace guards, quickly grabbed Wangwi’s head and smashed it into the table. He heard screams of women, calls of the brothers, as he continued, over and over, smashing Wangwi’s bald head into the corner of the fine dining table. Blood splattered upon him and Wangwi’s lifeless body soon stopped resisting, and yet Bin continued to bash the man’s head in.

He felt a pain enter his body, and he faltered in his movements. Glancing down, he noticed a sword sticking through his chest. A guard behind him was yelling and yet Bin didn’t fall yet. He wanted to ruin Wangwi. He wanted to make his afterlife existence miserable.

He leaned forward and began to gouge out the man’s eyes with his fingers. Even as another sword stabbed through him, he didn’t stop, breathing harshly until the body before him had a head covered in blood, mangled and ugly and completely ruined.

Only then did Bin fall down and allow the pain to overcome his body.

He was dumped out in the fields. He played dead all the while, though it was difficult not to scream from the intense pain he was in. He was limp, like a doll, and so the palace was easily fooled. He was left to rot, refused a proper burial, but he didn’t mind. It would make it all the easier to get back up again. As long as he wasn’t buried alive, he could stay in the field and let his body heal.

He could think up a plan for the rest of his immortal life.

He could cry because he missed General Kim.
please follow me on my tumblr or on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

**chapter warnings:** violence, death, sexual implications, implied rape, implied child abuse, more violence and death, slight homophobia

we got major character death in this chapter as well, obvs

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**1360 AD**

News spread quickly throughout Goryeo of the death of the king and two of the princes. The king’s death was explainable; a mixture of old age and illness had caused him to succumb finally. However, no one had expected Myungjun and Wangwi to also die. After all, Myungjun was supposed to rise to the throne, and if not him, then Wangwi, yet it was some other brother who was granted the title of *king*. He stated that Myungjun and Wangwi were murdered by a bloodthirsty aide. People were shocked, but the new king had assured them that the aide had been put to his death.

Bin, healed of his wounds and stuck trying to regain the noble life he had once led, simply scoffed when he heard such news.

He had moved far away from the capital, into a small village where he worked hard transcribing scrolls. Twenty years passed and he moved yet again, not wanting anyone to discover his immortality. In the next town, he helped to design large buildings and beautiful gardens.

His life continued in such a manner. He juggled job after job until he was wealthy once again, until he could afford to rest and take plenty of breaks and wallow about in the deaths of his beloved Myungjun.

He didn’t know how many times this sort of thing would happen. He didn’t know how many times he was expected to suffer as he watched the man he loved die in his arms, over and over again. He had asked the gods on many occasions why they allowed for such a horrible thing to happen, but they didn’t listen.

He had also asked various religious figures - monks and Confucian scholars and shamans and Muslims - if immortality existed and, if so, how did one break the curse of immortality. Apparently, none of them were aware of such a thing happening and only mentioned that perhaps by following along with their written texts would an immortal person find peace.

Bin, instead, simply drank himself to stupors and entertained himself with the prostitutes around the different towns he lived in.

Bin had no need for religion. It was useless. If the gods had granted him immortality and had forced him to suffer so much, there was no way they could take it back, not even if he was as pious as he possibly could be. He told as such to one of his slaves, Jinwoo, as they soaked together in a
bathhouse nearby.

“Buddhists are wrong, and Muslims are wrong, and all those damn Confucian scholars are wrong.” Bin let out a loud sigh and leaned his head back. “Maybe there is no afterlife. Maybe there is no higher religious being that exists. Maybe we’re all just destined to be born and then to die.” Except, of course, for himself. He could not die.

Jinwoo was not aware of his immortal status. Jinwoo just always assumed Bin liked to complain about various aspects of religion. “I’d disagree with you there. I think there are spirits and demons and the sort.” He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps the reason you believe otherwise is because you’ve been influenced by demons.”

While Jinwoo meant it as a snarky remark, Bin found within the statement a valid point. Perhaps it wasn’t the gods who caused his immortality, but demons. Perhaps the demons simply wanted him to suffer.

Bin asked Jinwoo, on another night as he became drunk off fine soju, “Do you really think I’ve been influenced by demons?”

Jinwoo, sitting by Bin’s side, looked over at the high-quality bottles of soju Bin had simply wasted, pouring into his mouth without even tasting it. He sighed. “Must we discuss this while you’re drunk?”

“It’s a perfect time to discuss this,” Bin replied. He struggled to stare properly at Jinwoo. “What if I accidentally made a deal with a demon?”

“Did you?”

“I wouldn’t know! That’s why it would be an accident!”

“I believe you’ve had too much to drink,” Jinwoo stated, collecting the extra bottles of soju. “And it’s time to stop.”

Weeks later, however, Jinwoo seemed to have an answer for Bin. After walking in on Bin, who was engaged in lewd endeavors with a young boy dressed as a female, Jinwoo finally had an answer.

“You’re disgusting and this is your punishment for being disgusting.”

Bin frowned over at his slave, who smiled brightly in return. “For someone I bought, you’re a bit too cheeky for my liking.”

“Yet you keep me around. Shall I wash those blankets? I’m sure they’ve been through horrendous things.”

Bin, dressing and shooing the prostitute away, pondered on Jinwoo’s words. Could it be possible that he had done something in his past that forced the gods to deliver a punishment upon him?

What could be bad enough, however, for an immortal life of suffering and pain?
“Are you ever worried?” Bin asked one night as he traced over Myungjun’s face with his finger.

Myungjun, eyes closed, had hummed. “Worried?” he repeated. He shifted closer to Bin’s body. “What do I have to be worried about?”

Bin’s finger followed down the curve of Myungjun’s cheek. His lover had such soft features. He reminded Bin vaguely of a woman sometimes, and yet he was a man. He was fascinating and unique and he was all for Bin.

“The future,” Bin whispered, leaning down to press a kiss to the shell of Myungjun’s ear. “What the future might hold for us.”

Myungjun opened his eyes. They shone, even in the dark, managing to capture the very essence of the stars outside. “What do you believe the future holds for us?”

Bin pursed his lips. “That’s just it, Myungjun. I’m not entirely certain. And it worries me. Other men of our age are married, or soon to be wed. If they’re not, they’re typically away from home most of the time, or else they’re committed to Buddhism. Yet here we are, two men who can never marry. What should we do?”

“Say we’re committed to Buddhism,” Myungjun responded.

Bin poked his chin and Myungjun giggled from the gesture. “I’m serious, Myungjun! We’ve been together for a year, and perhaps that’s fine for the moment, but surely someone will notice our relationship sooner or later. We’re far closer than two men ought to be. We have sex in your house - what if one of your servants hears us? What if they find out?”

“If this turns into a lecture about how loud I am, I apologize again. You just are really good with your fingers.”

Bin sighed and flopped back over in the bed. He stared up at the ceiling and refused to look over at his lover, even as Myungjun said, “Bin, are you upset with me? I was joking - please, Bin, don’t be rude like this.”

He was never good with giving Myungjun the cold shoulder, so he turned back to the older man and murmured, “I just...I want to be with you for the rest of my life, but if others start to condemn us, will we be able to stay together? What if they move to separate us? What if they kill us? Or what if they simply talk, and spread rumors, and the pressure becomes too much for one of us to handle?”

Myungjun kissed him, soft and gentle, and whispered against his lips, “If they separate us, I shall just find you again. If they kill us, at least we were together until the very end. And if they talk of us, we shall run away to a place where no one will know, and then start a new life together.” He smiled; Bin could feel the smile against his lips. “No matter what our future holds, I think it will be wonderful that we will always be together.”

Bin’s worries about the future couldn’t disappear. His anxiety and stress over their relationship would always remain. Yet, with Myungjun in his arms, grinning joyfully up at him, at least he knew that Myungjun truly would always be by his side.
“Another village, ruined by the Mongols.”

Bin huffed and dismounted his horse. “Ruined by politics,” he corrected Jinwoo, who rolled his eyes at him. “Does it really matter if the Mongols try to take us over? Let them. It’s not like it will matter in a couple hundred years.”

“You’re far too relaxed about our current state of affairs,” Jinwoo responded, glaring at him. “I, for one, would like for Goryeo to be run by our people. I’m tired of the Mongolian influences, and I’m proud of the king for pushing back against the bastards.” Suddenly, Jinwoo nudged him and smirked. “The king takes many young boys as his lovers. I feel like you two have something in common.”

Bin shoved him away and took time to inspect the scene surrounding him. The village had been burnt, as had many of the bodies. The dead seemed to be a mix of soldiers and civilians. Bin saw children, too, their throats slashed and bodies tossed aside as if they were disposable. He grimaced as he stepped over a few lifeless villagers. “The king should understand that enraging the Mongols has consequences sometimes. Shouldn’t a king try to protect his citizens?”

He knew Myungjun would have done a far better job. Myungjun had a good handle on politics and foreign relations. He was calm and collected; he loved the people, even as they hated him. If Myungjun could be immortal and rule for the rest of his immortal life, Bin was certain peace would be achieved.

“A few might die for the protection of many,” Jinwoo pointed out. He stood by the horses and wagons. “Bin, let’s just return home. There’s no one left to trade with.”

“Perhaps we could loot some of the houses,” Bin joked, continuing in his examination.

“As I’ve stated time and time again, you are disgusting and this is why the demons have cursed you.”

Jinwoo’s words never bothered Bin. Sometimes he thought of them and agreed with them; other times, he defended his own actions. After living hundreds of years and suffering in such a manner, surely he had the right to be a little disgusting.

He was snapped out of his thoughts, however, when he heard movement. It came from the house in front of him. Perhaps it was an animal; maybe a dog who had just stumbled onto such a feast. Bin sighed as he quietly drew his sword. Even if he didn’t care much about a loss of life (he felt envious of the dead bodies around him), he would be damned if he allowed a dog to desecrate the innocent people.

Slowly, silently, Bin stepped into the building through the ruined door and peeked his head around the corner.

It wasn’t a dog. Instead, it was a young child, with a bloody cheek and wide eyes. He stared at Bin, at the sword in Bin’s hands, and then stumbled back until he hit the wall.

He couldn’t have been more than five years old. He was still so young, still so small, surrounded by decaying bodies and bloodlust that still lingered in the air. The sights he must have witnessed, too, were likely terrible. Bin felt pity for the young boy, and he sheathed his sword.

“Are you alright?” he asked.
The boy didn’t answer. He merely stared before trembling.

Bin took a cautious step forward. “I’m not here to hurt you,” he said. “I want to help you.”

The boy’s chin was quivering, and before Bin could say anything else, he burst into tears. He hid his face into his hands, his body shuddering with sobs, and Bin moved forward to rest of the way to kneel down by the boy.

“Shh,” Bin whispered, drawing the boy into his body. “It’s alright, child. It’s okay. No one will hurt you now.”

He asked the boy where his parents were. The boy cried harder at such a question, though Bin knew the answer was unlikely to be satisfactory. The boy had become an orphan, and Bin hated politics all the more for causing such misfortune to the young child.

“Would you like to come with me?” Bin asked him, trying his best to wipe the boy’s tears with the sleeve of his fine robes. He had big, pretty eyes and cute, plump lips. He was adorable, and Bin just longed to hold him forever and ever. “I have a large house with an extra room. I’ll make you yummy food.”

Bin expected resistance, but, oddly enough, the boy nodded his head, tearfully helping Bin to wipe at his face. Once Bin deemed him stable enough, he took the boy’s hand and led him outside of the house. “Look up at me,” he murmured to the child, who followed his orders. “Good boy. Don’t look down at your feet.”

They stepped over bodies of children and babies, women and the elderly, and the boy followed his instructions perfectly well. They made their way back to Jinwoo, who stared down at the child in confusion.

“We came here to trade,” Jinwoo said, “not take back orphan boys. Or,” he looked up at Bin and smiled slyly, “perhaps he will become a permanent replacement for those other boys-”

“The demons should ruin your life for being even more disgusting than I am,” Bin snapped, and Jinwoo simply giggled. Bin picked the child up in his arms and set him on the horse, then climbed up behind him. “Let’s go back home. I refuse to leave a child to suffer and die in this place.”

“As they walked, Bin tried to ask the child some questions. “What’s your name?” was the most important, and yet the boy stayed silent. He didn’t even acknowledge Bin was talking to him most of the time. His eyes stared off into the distance, and Bin wondered what he had seen and heard to make him so apathetic.

He ordered Jinwoo to draw a bath as soon as they arrived home, and he ordered another of his slaves to run and find child’s clothing that would fit such a small boy. The residents of his house were in awe that Bin had brought home an orphan child.

Bin, too, was in awe of himself. He wasn’t normally so open to accepting children. The world was an awful place, and if a child died because of war and battles, that was just the way the world worked. Bin had never cared before, but he didn’t want to let go of this child. Perhaps it was his frightened face, or perhaps it was the dread he would feel of being left behind in a lonely, desolate atmosphere.

As he undressed the boy for his bath, he muttered, “If anyone here tells you anything bad of me,
do not trust them. I am a kind person; though this is new and different for me.” He untied the sash
on the boy’s shirt and asked, “I assume you know how to clean yourself, correct?”

The boy stared at him, a little bit weary and unsure, and Bin offered him a smile. “I won’t hurt you.
Neither will the bath. We simply need to clean you up.” He wiped at the dried blood on the child’s
forehead. “You’re a mess at the moment, but you will feel much better after this, won’t you?”

He stripped the boy of his shirt but then stopped.

His body was littered with bruises and burns.

Bin blinked, then sat back on his heels. Most of the markings on the little body in front of him
weren’t fresh. If it had been the Mongols who had hurt him, Bin would be able to tell. These were
older, some by a few days and others by a few weeks.

“Did...someone in your family hurt you?” Bin asked, his voice quiet.

He knew the answer, as he had before. The boy didn’t need to respond, and he didn’t respond. He
bit down onto his lip harshly, and Bin had to soothe him. “Don’t do that,” he whispered, “it will
draw blood.”

He swallowed heavily as he turned the boy around to get a look at his back, which seemed far
worse than his front. “Did...your father do this?” he asked.

The boy nodded, giving one of his first responses to Bin. And, finally, he talked, his voice a little
scratchy but still so light and melodic, youthful and scared. “He-He said...it’s because...I-I was a
bad child.”

Bin’s stomach lurched. Even a horrible child did not deserve such treatment from his own father.
“You’re not a bad child,” Bin muttered.

“If I was good, he wouldn’t hit me.”

Bin frowned, then drew the boy into his chest, embracing him gently. The boy stiffened in his hold,
but upon seeing he wasn’t going to be hurt, he relaxed. “You’re a good child,” Bin told him,
rubbing his dirty hair. “Your father was not a good man. You should never hit someone, even if
they are bad. If he hit you, a good child, then he is a bad person.”

“Is...is that why he died?” the boy asked, his voice muffled as he leaned into Bin’s robes. “Because
he’s bad?” His grip tightened onto Bin’s shirt, and Bin sighed softly. The poor child had been
through so much, and Bin didn’t know what to say to ease his suffering.

“I’m not sure,” was Bin’s honest response. “But I will take care of you from now on. I will make
sure you are never hurt again.” He drew back and smiled, wiping at some of the tears that had
fallen from the boy’s face. “You can call me Bin. What may I call you?”

The boy sniffled, then stammered out, “M-My family name is Kim. I’m Myungjun.”

Bin stared.

Myungjun.

He hadn’t meant to find Myungjun. This had not been an active search for Myungjun. While his
lover haunted his mind forever and ever, he had tried to ignore the possible existence of his Kim
Myungjun in the world. He had thought that if they were apart, Myungjun might live; if they were
apart, he wouldn’t have to suffer again.

The gods and demons must truly hate him to plop Kim Myungjun back into his life once more. They must truly find him disgusting and despicable to make Kim Myungjun a poor orphan boy who had suffered abuse and who had witnessed wretched murders.

Damn the gods and damn the demons.

“Right.” Bin’s mouth was dry and he patted Myungjun on his head. “Beautiful name for such a beautiful boy.”

It was the first time he had seen the boy smile.

It reminded him so dreadfully of Myungjun and Bin felt sick.

“Close your eyes,” was the brief warning Myungjun gave him before dumping a bucket of water over his head. It was getting lukewarm now, and Bin shivered, wrapping his arms around himself in an effort to remain warm. “Bin, don’t be such a child,” Myungjun scolded him, scrubbing harshly at Bin’s hair.

“It’s cold!” Bin complained.

Myungjun dipped a hand into the tub, then scoffed at him. “It’s still warm. You really are a child.”

“I’m not!” Bin closed his eyes as some of Myungjun’s fine essential oils rolled down his face. “Myungjun, it’s getting everywhere.”

Myungjun splashed some water into Bin’s face and exclaimed, “Good! It means you’re going to smell very nice when you’re done with your bath. Which is wonderful, because you stunk.”

“Myungjun-”

“It’s like my soldiers are a bunch of animals. You work hard and practice long hours and then you allow the sweat to continue to build up until all I can smell is the stench of body odor.” He heard Myungjun sigh, then the general said, “Not one of my soldiers seems to understand the importance of bathing.”

Bin peeked through his eyes. Myungjun was grabbing a towel and gesturing for Bin to stand from the cramped tub. Bin did so, and he smirked when Myungjun eyed his body appreciatively. “What a sensual, greedy expression,” he joked.

Myungjun blushed lightly before slapping the towel into Bin’s chest. “Clean yourself off, you child. I can’t be expected to mother you.”

Bin rubbed himself down, trying to get all the water off his body, and watched as his lover began to clean things. He knew that typically the slaves would be in charge of such a task, but Myungjun didn’t want them to see Bin. He had ordered a bath be drawn, and then, once the door was shut, snuck Bin in through the window of the small room.
Hiding their relationship was difficult and upsetting, but there wasn’t much else they could do.

“I hardly was given a bath by my mother growing up,” Bin said, wrapping himself in the soft towel and standing behind Myungjun. “We hardly had time to draw a bath or go down to a bathhouse. It’s a luxury.”

Myungjun faltered in his chore before glancing back at Bin. “I know,” he admitted. “Most of the soldiers were - are - in similar situations, too. No time, no funds. I’m fortunate I have slaves to do most of the work for me.” He frowned and straightened up. “I do apologize if my words offended you. I was simply teasing.”

Bin laughed and wrapped his arms around the smaller man. He planted a light kiss to Myungjun’s forehead. “I’m not at all offended. I want to thank you for caring enough about me that you’re willing to go through the work and use up expensive oils just to clean me. It’s sweet, Myungjun.”

Myungjun smiled and curled into Bin’s bare chest. He kissed the skin twice, then looked up. “You’re so attractive. You’re so handsome.”

“Am I?” Bin asked, swaying slightly with Myungjun in his arms.

Myungjun nodded his head with enthusiasm. “And...well, I was thinking...since you came all this way to my house, perhaps we can make love?”

Bin snorted. “I see. This was your plan all along, was it not?”

“Maybe.”

Pulling back from Myungjun, Bin whispered, “I’ll sneak out this window and meet you at your bedroom window.”

Bin was halfway out the window when Myungjun smacked his back and hissed, “Put on your clothes, you moron.”

Myungjun was quiet as Bin bathed him. He followed instructions well; he closed his eyes when Bin asked him to, lifted his arms, stood, sat - he was clearly an obedient child. As Bin scrubbed at his hair, he couldn’t help but think that part of Myungjun’s obedience might have come out of fear from his father. If he disobeyed, if he was bad, he was hit.

Bin frowned, trying to brush those thoughts aside. It was all in the past and he shouldn’t dwell on such a thing. Many children were hit in an effort to straighten them out. Bin had never cared before, so why ought he care now?

Staring at Myungjun, however, made Bin care all the more. The child was so small, so scrawny and frail, and yet his body was littered with bruises and burns. It was horrific and Bin sighed loudly as he made Myungjun stand once more.

Myungjun stepped out of the tub, and he shook from the cold until Bin wrapped him up in a towel and ruffled his hair to get some of the water out. “There,” he commented. “You’re nice and clean.”
Myungjun looked up at him. The boy had such large eyes and a sweet face. Bin adored him already. “Have you ever bathed before?” Bin asked, trying to make conversation as he dried him off.

“No,” Myungjun murmured, averting his gaze. “Not...like that. In the stream nearby.”

“Oh.” Bin nodded his head. “Did you enjoy it?”

Myungjun shook his head.

“Why not?”

He didn’t receive an answer. Myungjun simply stared at the floor until the door slid open and Jinwoo poked his head inside. Bin glanced back at him and asked, “Have we gotten clothes for Myungjun?”

“Not yet,” Jinwoo replied. “The others are out still trying to find some for him. We ought to just make him clothes that will fit. Until then-” Jinwoo held out some of his own clothes. “I have for him one of my own shirts and...I don’t suppose the trousers will fit, will it?”

Bin studied the clothing before snatching it out of Jinwoo’s hands. “It’s far too simple for him,” Bin complained, holding the shirt out to see the size. “Myungjun deserves something with ornate stitching and vivid colors.”

“Well, it’s clothing for a slave,” Jinwoo pointed out, smiling brightly despite Bin’s words. “And he is an orphan child; does he really need something more elaborate?”

Bin had only ever seen Myungjun in beautiful clothing. Even the casual wear of both General Kim and Prince Myungjun were astonishing, and Bin wanted to continue that tradition.

Myungjun deserved the best.

“I don’t care who he is; I want him to look as handsome as possible.” Bin took the towel from Myungjun’s small body and pushed his arms through the shirt. “At least it covers him well enough,” he muttered.

Jinwoo sighed, then nodded his head. “We can go tomorrow and have Myungjun measured so clothing can be prepared.”

“Right.” Bin tied the jeogori properly and then stared at his handiwork. It looked silly, but Myungjun was likely warmer and less exposed now. “You look just as handsome as ever,” Bin murmured to the boy, who smiled for the second time. He picked Myungjun up and then walked to the door and ordered Jinwoo, “Start cleaning up, please.”

“I knew I should’ve sent another slave,” Jinwoo grumbled, but he bowed to Bin, exaggerating his movements, and said, “I shall do your bidding, My Master.”

Bin rolled his eyes and pushed past the man, though he whispered to Myungjun, “Order him around all you wish, darling.”

Myungjun giggled.

He sounded like tiny bells and little birds and all the happiness in the world.

Despite all the love Bin lavished onto Myungjun, the boy hardly ever spoke unless heavily
prompted. He gave simple answers on the few occasions he did talk, and he kept his eyes averted the majority of the time. Every night, Bin applied cream to his bruises, staring at his beaten body in anguish.

Part of him was quite pleased the Mongols had killed Myungjun’s father. Such a horrid man deserved a horrid death. The other part of him only wished he could have killed the man himself before whisking Myungjun away from that family life.

Still, he knew the event had taken its toll on Myungjun. Based on the little he said of the battle, he had seen gruesome sights. He talked most when he ate, and so Bin tried to ask questions during meals.

“Did your mother die?” Bin asked him, helping him to hold his chopsticks properly in order to eat rice.

Myungjun, movements clumsy, nodded his head. He chewed loudly, but always closed his mouth if Bin requested it of him. When he swallowed, he said, “The bad men stripped her, and then they...I think they hurt her.”

Bin winced. That was a wrong question to ask. He tried a new one. “Did you like your mother?”

Myungjun shook his head this time and mumbled, “She told me I was a bad son, too. She told me I killed my brother.” He played with his chopsticks and swore, “I did not kill anyone, Moon Bin.”

“You may just call me Bin. We’re friends.”

Myungjun glanced up at Bin, looking shocked for a brief second, before lowering his gaze again. “A-Alright, Bin.”

Bin chewed at some of the vegetables he had laid out. “Did you have a brother, then, as well?”

Myungjun shook his head. “Mother said I killed him before I was born. I don’t remember doing that, Bin. Do you think I killed him?”

Bin wondered if Myungjun was born with a twin. Perhaps one was a stillbirth; Myungjun survived the ordeal. It explained the hatred of his parents. It must have been a taxing situation for them, especially for the poor woman who had to bury a stillborn. He could not find it in himself to show pity for Myungjun’s family, however. Stillbirths were commonplace; they should have accepted the tragedy and moved on. They should have treated Myungjun with love and respect, as he rightfully deserved.

“You did not kill him,” Bin assured the boy and leaned over to kiss his head. “Just ignore all that your parents have told you. I will take care of you from now on, alright?”

Myungjun smiled again, and Bin couldn’t help but smile back.

Myungjun was charming. He gained the affection of the entire household. The slaves and their families adored him and doted upon him relentlessly. Myungjun could simply giggle and all the ladies would grab him and coo and plant kiss after kiss upon his little face.

Even with all of the attention, Myungjun was withdrawn. If talked to, he wouldn’t respond, unless he was responding to Bin or unless he was demanded to respond. He was shy, it seemed, or perhaps afraid to be hit again, as his father used to do to him. Despite how many times Bin attempted to tell Myungjun that no one would lay a finger on him, the boy was still scared.
One night, it began to rain. Bin, sitting in his room and playing a game of gonu with Jinwoo, simply glanced over to one of the closed windows. “Lovely,” he said. “We needed something for the crops. I was afraid of another famine.”

Jinwoo sighed and moved his little wooden piece forward. “Just because you can read various historical scrolls does not mean that you’ve lived through famines. Stop acting like you have.”

“Is that a demand, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo grinned and shrugged his shoulders. “Perhaps,” he stated, but then he quickly changed subjects. “I haven’t seen any prostitutes enter or exit this house since you’ve brought Myungjun home. Have you changed because of the boy?”

Bin moved his own piece on the table. Truth be told, he hadn’t felt comfortable bringing home a prostitute. His mind rest on Myungjun. Though the boy was just a child, Bin’s heart truly belonged to him. It would feel too much like cheating if he wore to sleep with someone else while claiming to love Myungjun.

“I don’t want him to grow up somewhere that resembles a whorehouse,” Bin mumbled. “It’s your move.”

“You’ve already stated he saw his mother raped, and he didn’t seem that upset.”

“Because he hated his mother and he doesn’t even understand what happened.” Bin huffed. “Why are we discussing this? I’m not sleeping with anyone while I’m caring for a child. It’s disgusting.”

“It was disgusting before Myungjun came,” Jinwoo pointed out.

Bin opened his mouth to respond, but he was interrupted by a flash of lightning and a loud clap of thunder. It shook the house and Bin laughed when things were silent again. “It sounds like an angry storm.”

Jinwoo clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Hopefully the lightning does not hit the house. If it catches on fire—”

He was unable to finish his sentence. The door suddenly flung open, and both men turned to the entrance of the grand bedroom.

Myungjun stood there, his eyes wide and face full of fear. He was trembling as his fingers gripped onto the doorway. He looked first at Jinwoo, and then at Bin, and he ran.

“Bin!” he cried, collapsing into Bin’s lap. Bin grabbed him before he hit the ground. “I—I’m scared!”

Bin tried to quiet him down, but Myungjun was sobbing now, curling as much as he could into Bin’s body and gripping tightly onto his clothes. “I d-don’t mean to be scared! I know I’m bad for being scared bu—but I don’t li-like thunder!”

As if on cue, the sky rumbled again, and Myungjun whimpered, his face buried into Bin’s chest.

Bin glanced up at Jinwoo in confusion, and Jinwoo just smiled. “I’ll leave you two, then,” he whispered. “I should be getting to bed, anyway. Let’s just say I won the game for now.”

“You can’t win if you forfeited!” Bin fussed, but Jinwoo cleaned up and ignored him.
Once he was out of the room, Bin turned all of his attention back onto the small child in his lap. “Myungjun,” he said, trying to soothe him by combing his fingers through his messy hair. “It’s alright.”

“I’m sorry!” Myungjun wailed. “I’m bad!”

“You’re not bad, darling, please don’t say that.” Bin kissed his cheek. “You’re frightened, and that’s perfectly fine. I’m going to protect you, alright? If you’re scared, you always need to come to me; you will always be good, and I will always protect you.”

Myungjun glanced up at Bin. His eyes were watery and he had tear streaks all down his face. “R-Really?” he hiccuped.

Bin smiled softly and nodded his head. “Don’t you fret, darling. I’ll always be right here, okay?”

It thundered again. Bin could feel Myungjun’s body tense up and he continued to comfort him, to soothe him.

The storm wasn’t letting up, however, and Myungjun wasn’t loosening his grip onto Bin. Bin had never seen a child affected so adversely by thunder. He felt pity, and though he was tired and quite unused to dealing with children, he never once suggested Myungjun try facing the storm himself.

Myungjun should never feel the need to face anything himself. Bin always wanted to stay by his side.

“Shall I play you some music?” Bin asked, smoothing back Myungjun’s hair. “To drown out the sound of thunder?”

Myungjun looked up at him. “Will you?”

Bin nodded. He thumbed away some tears from Myungjun’s sticky cheeks. “Of course. It might make you feel better. If you want to lay down on the blankets, I’ll grab my zither for you, okay?”

The boy glanced back at the blankets and bit down on his lip. “I...I don’t want you to leave me,” he whispered.

As if Bin’s heart wasn’t already soft enough for the boy. He cooed to himself, then kissed Myungjun’s head. “It’s just over there,” he said, gesturing to the other side of the room. “You can watch me the entire time, alright?”

It took a bit more convincing for Myungjun to finally nod and slowly peel himself off of Bin. Bin tucked the child into his bed, pulling the blankets up to his chin. He was quick in grabbing his instrument and pulling it out, and he sat right beside Myungjun as he tuned his zither.

It had been a while since he played for anyone. Even Jinwoo hadn’t been privy to Bin’s talent. It would feel weird playing for anyone other than Myungjun.

With Myungjun, things came naturally. Bin could play instruments for him, give up sleep for him, and better his own life just for Myungjun. No one else could garner such care from Bin. Only Myungjun.

Only General Kim.

He played the zither softly, just as Myungjun had taught him hundreds of years ago: right hand to pluck, left hand to raise and lower the pitch. At this point, Bin liked to boast that his skill with the
instrument was higher than all those in Goryeo, likely all those in the world. Not everyone had nearly a thousand years to practice as he had, after all. He had made good use of those lonely years by himself.

This was the best use for his skills, in any case. As he played, he cast a glance over at Myungjun. Still wrapped up in the blankets, the boy looked to be enjoying the little performance. His eyes were wide with wonder and awe rather than fear and anxiety, and he watched Bin’s fingers move deftly across the chords. Even when the thunder rumbled, Myungjun only winced; otherwise, he seemed far too immersed in the music to care about the storm raging on outside.

As the rain dwindled, though, and as the thunder sounded quietly from a distance, he grew more relaxed. The light drizzle and Bin’s soft music seemed to be enough to help lull him into sleep, for the next time Bin looked up, Myungjun was curled into the blankets, his breaths slow and even and his eyes shut.

Bin continued for an extra minute or two before he brought the song to an end.

Myungjun slept on.

He was so beautiful. As he was but a child, Bin felt nothing romantic towards him, but the affection and adoration still remained. Bin still loved Myungjun, regardless of what position in life he was in, and Bin wanted to protect this reincarnation just as much as he had wanted to protect Prince Myungjun.

Bin put the instrument away, moving as quietly as he could. He didn’t want the floors to creak, nor did he want to set his zither down too harshly, lest he wake Myungjun up. He pondered briefly where he would sleep, but then shook his head. A few hours of discomfort was fine, as long as Myungjun was content.

In the end, he settled down as close to Myungjun as he could without disturbing him. He managed to fall asleep, despite how cold he was.

When he woke up, Myungjun was holding onto him, his little body providing more warmth and comfort than any blanket ever could.

Bin was happy.

Myungjun stuck by his side every moment possible from then on. He was like a little duckling following around its mother. The women of the house commented to Bin how cute Myungjun was being towards him, and Bin would just smile proudly and pat Myungjun’s head.

The boy even slept with him now. He was always curled up in Bin’s covers by nightfall, and he never went to sleep without hearing a story Bin told him.

Bin’s favorite stories to tell were about General Kim and Prince Myungjun. Myungjun was fascinated with the strength and valor of the general and the wisdom and kindness of the prince. He soon begged to hear about them, and so Bin would be forced to rifle through his memories in order to find something pleasant to talk about.
Myungjun asked questions sometimes, too. He would blink owlishly up at Bin and ask, “Did General fight off demons and monsters, too?”

“Of course he did,” Bin would respond. “Let me tell you about one of the monsters he faced. This monster came from the north and had destroyed many houses along its way—”

He fibbed a little, exaggerated a lot, but it was all worth it because Myungjun wanted to hear it. Besides, if demons and monsters did truly exist, then General Kim could have easily fought them off, and Prince Myungjun would have ensured that such despicable creatures never made it into his kingdom.


Bin had smoothed back Myungjun’s hair. “Perhaps they were real. Maybe a long time ago, there was a General Kim and a Prince Myungjun. But the only Kim Myungjun I care for now is you, darling.” He poked Myungjun’s nose and the boy giggled lightly.

They would fall asleep together. Myungjun liked to curl into Bin’s side, or else splay across his large chest, and Bin, regardless of position, would hold onto him as tightly as possible, and he would pray to gods he didn’t believe in to keep Myungjun safe and sound for his entire life.

When they awoke, Bin would ready himself first and then begin to dress Myungjun. While he knew Myungjun could dress himself, he still enjoyed doing it. Myungjun was just such a sweet, young child and Bin wanted to cherish their time together as long as possible.

He would fix his hair, too. He would comb through any tangles and set it up in a tight top-knot before placing a hat upon his head. By the time Myungjun’s morning routine was complete and Bin was satisfied, the boy looked every bit the part of nobility. He wore the finest clothing Bin had made for him and his hats set him up on par with Bin’s own nobleman status.

People in the town were rather confused with the sudden addition to Bin’s family. A few believed Myungjun to be Bin’s son from one of the many prostitutes. Bin did his best to stifle such talk, but it was still spread all around the village, and soon people were shooting dirty looks to poor Myungjun.

Myungjun didn’t seem all that bothered by it. He kept close to Bin and simply ignored small remarks sent his way here and there.

Bin hated it, however. He didn’t mind when people spoke badly of himself, but when they brought a little orphan child into their nasty rumors, Bin found himself growing enraged.

Still, Myungjun liked going out in the town with Bin. He disregarded the townspeople and focused instead on the pretty sights. He liked the little shops and stands and marveled at some of the jewelry and other crafts being sold by pushy villagers. Bin bought him whatever caught his eye the most, and soon Myungjun had a wide plethora of shiny, expensive items he would likely never use.

Jinwoo, who tagged along on most of the trips around town in order to carry things, always joked to Bin, “You’ll spoil the boy. Soon he’ll think he can have anything the world has to offer.”

Bin, watching Myungjun ahead of him, had smiled fondly. “And he shall have anything the world has to offer. I’d get him anything he desires.”

“I used to think the boy had slowly changed you somehow, but recently I’m beginning to wonder about it,” Jinwoo muttered. “You’ve been attached to him since the first day we brought him home. Before then, you’ve known poor orphan boys and haven’t cared for them; since then, you’ve
also known poor orphan boys and they don’t receive even a glance. Why is Myungjun so special to you?”

Bin had been asked that a few times by various staff in his home. He was never certain how to respond. How ought he explain that he had fallen in love with Myungjun hundreds of years ago at the rise of the Silla Kingdom, and then again hundreds of years later at the rise of the Goryeo Empire? No one would believe him, and even if they did, they would find his attachment weird and unnatural.

It was to be Bin’s own secret, and so he shrugged his shoulders.

He didn’t get a chance to speak, though, because he suddenly noticed a man shove Myungjun over into a pile of mud. The man said something angrily, harshly, and Myungjun stared up at him with wide, fearful eyes.

Bin rushed forward, Jinwoo right behind him, and he stood in front of the man, blocking access to Myungjun. “What’s your reason for pushing him down?” Bin snapped. He could see Jinwoo, out of the corner of his eye, drop the bags he was carrying and help pick Myungjun up, but he remained focused on the man.

“He ran into me,” the man responded. “And he refused to apologize.”

“I saw him brush against your clothes, but he did not run into you.”

“He’s the son of a whore - he’s tainted by the demons for it! You should be ashamed of yourself for treating him as if he’s special. His mother is a prostitute-”

Bin grabbed the man’s collar and pulled him close. The man tried to pull back, but Bin’s strength was unmatched; he didn’t live for nearly a thousand years just to be pushed around. “You will apologize to him,” Bin growled.

The man tugged and struggled. Still, he was unable to get away, and Bin knew he would not get away. “Apologize!” Bin ordered, swinging the man around to face Myungjun.

The poor boy looked scared. He had mud all down his nice clothes and splattered across his face. Bin had to give him credit, though - he didn’t cry and he didn’t shiver. He simply grasped onto Jinwoo’s hand and stared at the ground.

Realizing the man wasn’t saying anything, Bin grabbed at his arm and twisted. He was willing to break it in an effort to get out an apology, but he needn't go so far. The man realized the situation was serious, and he gasped out, “I’m sorry! I should not have done that! Let me go!”

Bin held on for a second or two longer before shoving the man away from Myungjun. “If you ever do that again,” he started, “if you ever touch him or speak to him again, I will break your fingers. I’ll break them one by one, and then I’ll still make you apologize, yet again, to Myungjun. Do you understand?”

The man was embarrassed and humiliated. He bowed his head and scurried off, and Bin sighed heavily before turning back to Myungjun and Jinwoo.

Jinwoo stared at him in exasperation. “You certainly are breaking customs by forcing a grown man to apologize to a child.”

“Not just any child,” Bin replied. “It’s Myungjun. No one should be mean to Myungjun.”
“I agree, but this won’t stop the rumors from continuing. You might have lightened Myungjun’s load, but you’ve only burdened yourself.”

“Don’t worry so much, Jinwoo,” Bin ordered. He scooped Myungjun up in his arms. Jinwoo, despite his words, began to brush off some of the mud from Myungjun’s outfit the best he could. “It’s no use,” Bin said. “Look, it’s caked on there. You’ll have to wash it.”

Jinwoo pursed his lips, then muttered, “And by picking Myungjun up, you’ve gotten mud all over your clothes, too.”

“Wash mine as well.”

Jinwoo rolled his eyes, then ruffled Myungjun’s hair. He whispered, “Bin is a little bossy, isn’t he?” and he managed to succeed in making Myungjun smile a little bit. Pleased with his work, Jinwoo grinned, then returned to grab his bags he had dropped.

They walked back home. The further they got from the town center, the more people dwindled away, until finally they were walking in the quiet area near Bin’s large house. Myungjun had said nothing the entire journey. He only responded with a shake of his head to Bin’s question of, “Did he hurt you?” Otherwise, he was silent, simply choosing to bury his face into Bin’s neck.

Once inside, Myungjun asked, “What’s a prostitute?”

Bin glanced at Jinwoo, who mouthed, good luck and hurried off to put away their belongings.

“Um…” Bin set Myungjun onto the floor, realizing they were tracking dirt into the house. He’d have to remember to ask a slave to clean up after him. “It’s...you shouldn’t concern yourself, Myungjun. The man was just being ridiculous.”

“He said my mother is a prostitute. Is my mom a prostitute?”

Bin shook his head. He took off Myungjun’s hat and tried to scrape away some mud on his cheek. “No, darling. He was just an angry man spouting nonsense.”

Myungjun bit down on his lip. “The people in the village don’t like me.”

Bin’s heart felt like it was breaking. He tugged Myungjun close to him into a tight embrace and planted kisses across his dirty face. “They’re just confused,” he muttered, “that’s all. They don’t know where you came from, and they’re jealous because you’re much more handsome than any of their children.”

Fortunately, Myungjun giggled at that. He ducked his head into Bin’s chest and held onto him. “Bin?”

“Yes, darling?”

“Thank you.”

Myungjun was so sweet and gentle and kind. Bin thanked those horrid gods for giving them both a chance for happiness.

And he begged them to never take it away.
Bin still had business to conduct. He had to continue to gather wealth, for when he moved he did not wish to start all over. He transcribed texts from across Asia, mostly from countries whose language was not widely known by the general public. He was an important man for such a task, as he was one of the few within Goryeo who knew and understood such foreign languages.

Myungjun liked to watch him. The boy sat by his side and seemed rather interested in Bin’s work. He often would sit within Bin’s lap and Bin would murmur out the translations to the boy.

Grubby little fingers would point, and his small voice would ask, “Bin, what does this mean?” Bin would tell him, even if he had to push his own work aside to explain certain aspects of the translation.

He was certain that Myungjun did not fully understand things, but, regardless, he listened well and acted as if everything made perfect sense. He would nod along and then completely forget whatever word was translated in order to point at something else: “How about this one?”

He was adorable, and perhaps Bin wasted more time kissing Myungjun’s cheeks and playing with his hair than he did translating.

There was one day when Bin had to leave in the middle of his translation. One of the slaves had knocked over a vase, and he needed to reprimand the woman and check that it wasn’t an old vase. He had kissed Myungjun’s nose before he left and muttered, “I’ll be right back, darling.”

The slave had knocked over a cheap vase, an ugly one Bin had been given as a gift from a man a hundred years prior, and she was in tears, apologizing profusely for her mistake. Bin had simply given her the pieces and demanded she sell it and make good use of the money for her family. He liked being nice to his slaves, for it instilled trust and loyalty within them.

Pleased with himself, he rushed back into his room, and realized he ought to have given Myungjun instructions to not touch anything.

The boy had taken the pen and was using it to draw a picture on Bin’s translation.

Bin stared at the scene for a second or two. He took deep breaths. It was a long process and hard work to translate pages upon pages of writing, and since he had been using a scroll, it meant he was now behind pages and pages of work.

Myungjun had cost him over a day’s worth of work, it seemed.

He stepped forward into the room and asked, “What are you doing, Myungjun?”

Myungjun glanced up at him and smiled brilliantly, as if he hadn’t just been caught messing up Bin’s job. “I want to be an artist,” he said. “I, um, I like the artwork you have in your house. I want to make artwork so you can hang it up.”

Bin decided he didn’t care about the work he lost. He had an eternity to fix it, anyway. His heart softened and his anger disappeared and he sat down next to Myungjun. “Can I see?” he asked.

Myungjun nodded with enthusiasm and showed him the picture.

It was rudimentary, obviously the work of a child who had never picked up a pen before in his life.
Bin couldn’t tell what Myungjun was drawing. “What is it?” he asked.

Myungjun climbed back into Bin’s lap and pointed. “It’s you.”

“Is it?”

Myungjun nodded seriously. “That’s your head,” he said, pointing to the circle with wild squiggle lines through it. Bin thought he could detect a nose and eyes and possibly a smile - he thought it was likely hidden underneath the plethora of hair Myungjun had drawn on him. “I drew your clothes, too. And your necklace.”

“My necklace?” Bin repeated. He didn’t wear a necklace. He couldn’t remember the last time he had worn a necklace.

Myungjun blinked at his drawing and then began to pat onto Bin’s chest, as if feeling around for the piece of jewelry. He couldn’t find it and so he apologized, “I’m sorry. I thought...I thought you had a necklace.”

“Why do you think that, darling?” Bin asked. He wasn’t at all upset. If Myungjun wanted his drawing to have a necklace, then Bin wouldn’t mind.

Myungjun’s nose wrinkled and his eyebrows furrowed in thought. “I don’t know. I remember you with a necklace,” he stated.

He stared at his drawing for a second or two before saying, “It was green, right?”

“They necklace looks so good on you!” Myungjun exclaimed, eyes alight with excitement. “I knew it was the perfect gift!” He waited until Bin sat down beside him, then leaned into Bin’s larger body. “Ooh, my lover is the most handsome man in all of the world! The necklace adds to his good looks tenfold!”

“Are you saying I didn’t look good without the necklace?” Bin asked. When Myungjun giggled sheepishly, Bin gasped in faux surprise. “You think that, without the necklace, my looks diminish?”

Myungjun reached forward and gently slid the necklace over Bin’s head. He looked, his expression searching, and then nodded his head. “Yes,” he responded, handing the necklace back to Bin. “So you must wear it at all times now, alright? Or else you shall become very ugly and then I shall not love you any longer.”

Bin pouted as he put the necklace back on. “I think I look just fine without it,” he muttered, but Myungjun only laughed.

Perhaps Myungjun had a point. The necklace had become a symbol of their love. It was secret and easily hidden, and yet it shone brightly to Bin and Bin alone. Wasn’t that how their relationship was? Wasn’t that what their relationship had become?

He wrapped his arms around Myungjun and then fell back onto the grass, staring up at his lover.
above him. “Did you know,” he whispered, “that you are such a source of joy in my life and sometimes I can hardly believe how the gods have blessed me with you?”

Myungjun smiled. He bent over to plant a kiss onto Bin’s lips and he responded, “I can only hope that the gods have blessed us forever and ever.”

“Well, they’ve blessed me forever and ever. Apparently you have to deal with having an ugly man to love.”

Myungjun whined, then kissed Bin again. “Don’t take what I say to heart!” he exclaimed. “I was only teasing you, Bin. Even without the necklace, I think you’re very pretty.” He played with the little jade pendant hanging from the gold chain of Bin’s necklace, and he commented, “Though, I love your necklace. It comforts me. It reminds me that you will always come for me, no matter what happens in our world.”

“I promised you I would,” Bin stated. He hugged Myungjun close to him. Myungjun was soft and molded into his touch as if it was second nature to do so. “Forever and ever, right? I’ll never let you go.”

Myungjun nuzzled into Bin’s neck. He planted a few kisses there, too, and whispered, “I’ll love you forever and ever.”

Bin sat in his large garden and his eyes followed Myungjun’s tiny body. The boy was picking flowers, after Bin had agreed to such, and claimed he wanted to give them away to people in order to be liked. The idea was sweet, though Bin wasn’t certain what a bunch of flowers would do for the angry people within the village.

He didn’t care, though. Not at the moment. His mind instead rested on the strange drawings Myungjun had been producing.

Urged by Bin, Myungjun had drawn more and more. Bin supplied him with extra scrolls and Myungjun’s drawings had vastly improved within a few months. He drew alongside Bin as the older man translated foreign languages, and whenever he finished with one of his drawings, he would tug on Bin’s sleeve and excitedly ask, “Can we hang this one up?”

Bin’s room was now cluttered with all of Myungjun’s drawings, but he didn’t dare take any of them down. Myungjun was so proud of them, and Bin wanted to be proud of whatever Myungjun worked hard on.

Most of the drawings were of simple things Myungjun had seen. There was one of his old village, there was one of Bin’s favorite horse, there was several of Jinwoo (Jinwoo had asked, “Why do I look like one of those sea turtles?” and from then on, Myungjun only ever drew Jinwoo as a turtle). He liked to draw scenes from his everyday life spent with Bin, too. He drew pictures of the temples they would visit sometimes, of the food he liked to eat, and of Bin’s magnificent garden.

Sprinkled within the drawings from time to time were signs that Myungjun somehow remembered his previous life.
He drew the castle from Gaegyeong, the one where Prince Myungjun lived. Bin asked him what it was and Myungjun had stared at his drawing in confusion and then said, “Isn’t it a castle, Bin?”

He drew a zither, though it looked different from Bin’s; it had ornate designs within it, something Bin recognized as the one Prince Myungjun owned, but when he asked, Myungjun only said, “It looked pretty in my mind.”

His most detailed drawing by far was a helmet that General Kim had worn. It should not have been known to Myungjun; he was far too young to have studied old helmets from before Goryeo ever existed, and yet he had drawn one with surprising accuracy. Bin had stared at the drawing in awe and had asked Myungjun if he could keep that one by his side at all times.

Myungjun had misunderstood the request. He thought Bin wanted to keep it for sentimental reasons. He had grinned and asked, “Was-was it really that good, Bin?”

In reality, Bin just was confused. He didn’t know how this child held memories about his previous lives within him.

He asked Jinwoo, as the slave sat down in the garden with him, “Do you think Myungjun is a reincarnation of...of someone?”


Bin didn’t answer. Bin only shrugged.

Jinwoo sighed and glanced over at the boy, who was comparing the difference between two flowers. “I know you don’t necessarily believe in reincarnation, so you’ve told me time and time again, but it’s likely we are all reincarnations of someone else. Perhaps Myungjun is, too. It’s likely.”

Bin frowned. He pulled Myungjun’s helmet drawing from his robes and showed it to Jinwoo. “He drew this,” Bin stated. Jinwoo stared at the drawing and examined it. “It’s an accurate depiction of a helmet from ancient times. The helmet is shaped in a way that it hasn’t been shaped for hundreds of years, and the material of the helmet looks the exact same as it was back then. He even tried his best to draw the feathers that would protrude from the top of the helmet. Look!”

Jinwoo gave the drawing right back to Bin. “I’ll be honest, I know absolutely nothing about...helmets from hundreds of years ago.”

“Well, it’s very accurate,” Bin muttered, staring down at the drawing. It was General Kim’s helmet from his time as a general in the Baekje military. Myungjun, as far as Bin was aware, had never before seen such a helmet. “I even asked him, Jinwoo, if he had been familiar with ancient armor. He told me he’s only ever seen the Mongolian army before, and they have vastly different helmets.”

“He draws my head on a turtle body often. I wouldn’t put much faith into what he draws.”

“Just entertain the thought for a minute that Myungjun might be a reincarnation of...of a military figure back in the days before Goryeo.”

“I already said it’s possible,” Jinwoo replied, looking exasperated. “I don’t understand why this is so important to you, though.”

Bin swallowed thickly and stared back at Myungjun. “Because,” he mumbled, “he has those memories still.”
Even if those memories came and went, Myungjun still seemed to know something. His drawings revealed what his words could not; he had vast knowledge of many things that other children would never have, that even other adults would not know. Bin continued to question Myungjun about these strange drawings, but Myungjun would look bewildered, as if wondering the same thing himself.

Bin sometimes pushed Myungjun to draw more, even when the boy clearly didn’t want to. Bin wanted to unlock all of these memories that Myungjun had hidden within himself and he was a bit impatient for them. He understood, however, that some days, Myungjun would rather draw something else, or he would want to copy Bin’s translations as best he could. He would practice writing, too, with Jinwoo by his side to instruct him in a separate room. He was always proud with his Chinese characters, and he loved showing them off to Bin.

“Bin!” Myungjun exclaimed one day, running into Bin’s study and plopping down onto the floor to sit beside Bin.

Bin glanced up from his work and offered Myungjun a smile. “What is it, my darling?” he questioned.

“Can I show you something?” Myungjun held out his hands and looked at the pen Bin was holding onto. “I’ll be fast!”

He could never deny Myungjun a chance to show off. Bin adored Myungjun, and so he relinquished his writing utensil without any fuss. He had to mix a bit more ink, knowing that Myungjun would likely use much of it, but he didn’t mind. Ink was a trivial matter; Myungjun was important.

Myungjun was giddy when he took it and the boy instantly began to write. His strokes were slow and clumsy and he made a few mistakes with the characters, but he finally finished and he showed Bin his newfound skill.

*I love Bin.*

Bin stared at it. He heard Myungjun say, “I asked—I asked Jinwoo how to write it, and he told me this is the proper way. Is it alright, Bin? Do you like it?”

Bin swallowed thickly. His mouth felt dry. Fingers traced over the drawing as he recalled what Prince Myungjun had written to him on countless occasions, when they feared their love would be caught and scrutinized.

*I love you.*

Bin pulled Myungjun into a tight embrace and planted kisses all along his head. “I love you, Myungjun,” he said. His voice cracked. He knew he was about to cry, and so he buried his face into Myungjun’s hair and whispered, “I love you, darling.”

It didn’t matter to him, in that instant, whether or not Myungjun had stored away memories of his past lives. It didn’t matter to him that Myungjun could accurately draw details he wasn’t even present for. All that mattered was the present.

And in this present, Myungjun still loved him.
Myungjun walked alongside Bin, carrying with him a large bouquet of flowers. He had picked them from Bin’s garden, had scrutinized each and every one until he was satisfied, and he had been excited to go out into town today. He could hardly see over the tops of the petals, and was struggling to hold all of the flowers in his arms, but he refused to let Bin take any from him.

“I want to give them out,” Myungjun had stated, steadfast and determined. “Then the people in the village will like me.”

Bin assumed it would take more than flowers to get people to stop spreading horrible rumors. He had glanced over at Jinwoo, who shrugged and whispered, “Just let him be. No harm will come from giving out flowers, will it?”

Bin knew Myungjun would be fine; he just didn’t see much point in being polite to those who had been so terrible to Myungjun.

However, Myungjun was cheerful. He made certain that each and every person he passed received a flower of his choosing. He had careful deliberation to determine who would get each flower. He tried to match colors of the plants with the clothing the recipient wore, and he would explain his reasoning to each person who accepted a flower.

“This one is yellow,” he said to a woman, and he smiled brilliantly. “Because it looks like your hair pin!”

“This one is purple,” he said to an older man, “because it reminds me of—of regalty - Bin, is that the correct pronunciation?”

Bin found him so utterly endearing, and soon enough, many others in the town did, as well.

Bin had no expected the sudden change in attitude. He assumed people would continue to hate Myungjun simply because they believed him to be the son of a whore, but their preconceived notions about Myungjun soon dwindled away. They treated him more kindly. They smiled more and some even would pat his head after a few weeks of receiving flowers from him.

Bin noticed, too, some of the women would speak with him more. They would coo over Myungjun to him, then ask if he had any women in the household taking care of him.

“My, but wouldn’t I love to be a mother to him,” one woman said, eyeing Bin flirtatiously. “I would be a wonderful wife and a wonderful mother.”

Jinwoo pushed Bin forward to continue their walk, but said to the woman, “I take care of the child often, too. I am in need of a wife.”

The woman scoffed and snapped, “As if I’d lower myself to marry a slave.”

When she was out of earshot, Jinwoo had muttered, “Yet she’ll lower herself to marry someone who fucks men. Women are an odd breed, Bin.”

Bin didn’t care about any of the women, though. He only had eyes for the sweet child, running around in an attempt to please everyone. He only wanted to dedicate his life to Myungjun, and to Myungjun alone.
The town soon gained back their respect for Bin. Rumors of his relationships with prostitutes vanished in a month, and Myungjun was adored by all who frequented the town. Bin was glad that Myungjun would no longer have to live with petty gossip hanging over his head, and in his great cheer, he bought Myungjun a kite.

Myungjun had never seen one before. As they took it home, Myungjun asked countless of questions about the kite. “What is it used for, Bin? What should we do with it?”

Bin smiled. He ruffled Myungjun’s hair and let Myungjun hold onto the kite as they walked down the path to Bin’s house. “Right now, we’re going to use it for fun, but kites have been used for religious purposes, and for military exercises, and-”

Myungjun was impressed. He looked up at Bin, his eyes wide and hopeful. “Bin!” he exclaims. “Did General Kim ever use this to warn people of the monsters?”

Many times, Myungjun created the opening to his own story that he wished to hear. Bin liked to indulge him, and so Bin nodded his head.

“He did,” Bin replied. “Quite often, too. I remember one time, when a monster was about to attack a village. General Kim wanted to warn all of the women and children to get to safety, and so he launched a burning kite into the air. This told everyone that the monsters were close, and he managed to save an entire village from destruction because of this quick wit.”

“Yay, General Kim!” Myungjun cheered, jumping up and down. He nearly dropped the kite, and so Bin gently took it from him. Myungjun hardly noticed, too intrigued with the idea of lifting up a flaming kite. “Can we try to do that, Bin? We should warn people of monsters!”

Bin thought of the overly superstitious populace of Goryeo. If he wanted to cause mass panic for fun, he might allow Myungjun to catch his kite on fire and then fly it in the air. However, Myungjun had only just managed to find himself in the towns peoples’ good graces. Bin refused to ruin it.

“We cannot, simply because this is a special kite,” Bin said, showing it off to Myungjun. When he noticed Myungjun’s face fall, he quickly added, “If we fly this as normal, it will bring good luck to all of the villagers who see it. Look-” As they made their way into the courtyard of the home, Bin stopped and knelt to Myungjun’s level. He showed off the Chinese characters that adorned the back of the kite. “These are characters to bring good fortune on us. If we fly it and others see it, they will experience good fortune, as well.”

Bin was not at all superstitious. In fact, he thought the idea that writings could bring about fortune was ridiculous. However, Myungjun was different, and Bin would certainly lower himself to such a belief in order to appease sweet Myungjun.

Myungjun was satisfied with Bin’s explanation. Bin started off the kite, flying it high in the sky, and then allowed Myungjun to take over. He hovered his hands over the boy’s arms, ensuring Myungjun didn’t fall, and then he glanced down.

Myungjun was grinning and laughing, and he met Bin’s gaze, tipping his head back to do so. “Bin!” he exclaimed.

Bin smiled. “Yes, darling?”

Myungjun was beaming. He was blinding. Oh, how Bin loved him.

“Bin, I hope you have the best fortune of everyone!”
Bin’s heart didn’t know whether it wanted to break in pain or burst in joy. He had never had good fortune. General Kim had died and Prince Myungjun had died and Bin was forced to live for hundreds upon hundreds of years in his own sorrow.

Perhaps, though, this time would be different. Perhaps Myungjun’s call for good fortune would actually come to being.

Bin bent over and kissed Myungjun’s forehead. “I hope you have better fortune,” he whispered, and Myungjun laughed loudly.

Bin closed his eyes when Myungjun wasn’t looking, and he prayed that they could continue flying kites together for the rest of his life.

Myungjun’s only vision of a hot springs had been what Bin had supplied him with. He was in awe of how an outside source of water could be hot. Clearly he had never been to one, not in the tiny village from where he was born. He was used to bathing in running streams as a young boy, or else in the little tub where Bin would clean him off.

He begged many times to go to the hot springs, to see what it was like, and Bin finally relented. Myungjun had cheered, and upon Bin’s request, he ran to find himself some clean clothing and a towel to take along with him.

He bragged, too, to Jinwoo about his upcoming trip to the hot springs. Jinwoo was used to going along with Bin, and had complained, “Why isn’t Bin taking me?”

Myungjun giggled, and while Jinwoo brushed out his hair, the boy said, “Because Bin loves me most of all!”

Jinwoo didn’t refute it, for it was the truth. Bin smiled proudly at the scene, at Myungjun, and simply nodded his head. Jinwoo was his best friend for these years; despite Bin promising himself he would never be close with anyone other than Myungjun, he couldn’t help but find himself drawn to Jinwoo. Jinwoo was brash, yet took responsibility for his words and actions. He was kind, with a deep, rumbling voice and a cheerful personality. Despite his lowly status as a slave, he still took it upon himself to stick closely by Bin’s side, even as others tried to remind him of his place in society.

Bin held Jinwoo very dear to his heart, but he could never be as close to Bin as Myungjun was, as Myungjun would always be.

Once ready, Myungjun could hardly stand still. He skipped down the path as Bin led him to the hot springs, wondering out loud how hot they truly would be, if it would be better than the baths he took inside Bin’s house, if he would be allowed to stay in the warmth until his fingers gathered wrinkles. Bin replied to every inquiry Myungjun had, grinning widely all the while.

The hot springs were empty, as they normally were when Bin wanted to visit. He always had one of his slaves pay off any other visitors so he could be alone with his thoughts, alone with Jinwoo, and now alone with Myungjun.
Myungjun, before taking off his clothes, rushed over to the water to feel it. He dipped his fingers inside and gasped, “Bin! It’s very warm!”

“Is it?” Bin began to remove his own clothes, resting them on a nearby rock.

“It is!” confirmed Myungjun, who spun around to look at Bin with wide eyes.

Bin smiled. “Is it satisfactory?”

Myungjun nodded his head. “Can I go in?” he asked.

“Get over here and undress, silly. You can’t enter the springs with all of your clothes on.”

He smoothed out Myungjun’s clean trousers and shirt as the boy hurried out of his clothes. Everything was folded and laid nicely beside Bin’s clothes, and then Myungjun glanced at Bin with impatience shining on his face. Bin laughed and ruffled Myungjun’s hair.

“Go,” he ordered, and Myungjun beamed as he went back to the water, this time sliding down inside the pool.

Myungjun was absolutely amazed. He kept talking to Bin, asking questions how the water always stayed so warm. “Does Jinwoo keep having to change it?” he questioned as Bin lathered his hair up in essential oils. “He changes my bath water at home when it gets colder.”

Bin clicked the tongue against the roof of his mouth. “You ought not take such long baths,” he reprimanded lightly. “Poor Jinwoo must curse you in his head.”

Myungjun didn’t appear too bothered. He leaned the back of his head against Bin’s chest, then looked up at him, stretching his little neck in order to see properly. “Jinwoo told me he’d never curse me. Jinwoo told me he’d never hate me.”

Bin pursed his lips in an attempt to appear serious, but Myungjun didn’t budge. Finally laughing, Bin said, “It is true. Jinwoo loves you too much to ever be upset with you. I love you too much to ever be upset.”

“I’m very glad you love me, Bin,” said Myungjun. He still stared up at Bin, then spun around, nearly tripping in the water. Bin steadied him, and Myungjun asked, “Bin, why are you hurt?”

“Am I hurt?” Bin cocked his head and glanced down at his body. Myungjun’s eyes were drawn to his chest, and so Bin looked.

He forgot about his scars.

Living hundreds upon hundreds of years took its toll on the body. He got in little fights, suffered small accidents, and tried to end his life on various occasions. His body showcased those scars as if they were something he should be proud of. Myungjun obviously had never seen such horrible scars before, and the poor boy’s eyes shone with worry.

“Don’t fret over them, darling,” Bin assured, continuing to wash his hair. “I’ve just been...I’ve had trouble over the years.”

He didn’t expect to expand any on his words. He thought Myungjun would lose interest. Myungjun was always different than what Bin expected, and this time was no different. He questioned, “Were you in a fight?”
Myungjun gasped. “Bin! Was it the monsters? Did you fight monsters with General Kim? Is that why you know so much about them?”

It would be easy to say no and to cease any fantasies brewing in little Myungjun’s mind. While most children in the village were quite superstitious, they were still grounded in reality. People weren’t immortal beings who fought off monsters and lived to tell the tale. Monster-fighters were gods who were separated from everyone else; or so the superstitions said.

So it would be easy to scoff at Myungjun’s words and declare it all childish play. Bin, though, did not wish to do that. Instead, he nodded his head. “You must not tell,” he whispered. “I do not tell anyone of my monster fights.”

Myungjun nodded seriously, prepared to keep Bin’s secret. “What about that one?” he asked, pointing down at a large scar near Bin’s neck.

Bin recalled being stabbed as he worked to protect General Kim’s lifeless body. He grit his teeth down harshly, trying to rid himself of the awful memory, before telling Myungjun, “One of the monsters got me. I was trying to protect General Kim, and he hurt me. I almost died, but General Kim...General Kim saved me. General Kim always saved me. He was a brave soldier, Myungjun, and we should learn many life lessons from him. Never abandon your friends. Come back for them, as General Kim came back for me.”

Myungjun’s eyebrows were raised and his eyes were wide. He was immersed in Bin’s mini lecture. “I’ll always come back for you,” he promised, and he pointed to another scar. “Where did this one come from?”

Bin figured they would be in the hot springs for a while, so he moved them both to the shallow end, where he could sit with Myungjun kneeling beside him, and he continued, “Well, this one was from a monster with six heads. His name was Wangwi - he was fat and ugly. General Kim was always brave when he stood up to Wangwi.”

Myungjun was an adept listener. All the while as Bin talked, he couldn’t help but think how this Myungjun had already been with him for over a year. He was growing before Bin’s eyes, and Bin realized they had already been together for longer than he was with Prince Myungjun.

Bin wondered if this Myungjun would continue to grow and age, or if the demons would steal him away once more.

“Sometimes,” Jinwoo said, grimacing as he watched Bin eat, “I don’t understand why you willingly choose to consume swine.”

“It’s delicious,” Bin responded.

“Our cooks were not trained to cook with swine. It’s unclean. It’s butchered by unclean hands.”

Bin waved his chopsticks at Jinwoo. “Slaves and butchers are the same. Both are unclean and
unsavory in our society. Isn’t that right, darling Myungjun?”

He turned to the boy seated beside him and frowned.

Myungjun hadn’t been well since he had awoken that morning. As Bin dressed him, he had complained of his head hurting. Bin felt his forehead, wondering if it might be a fever, and when he realized Myungjun wasn’t warm, he had brushed it off as a typical headache. However, it seemed his symptoms had lasted into the late afternoon. Perhaps his symptoms had worsened. He hadn’t touched his food and he shivered, though it was summer and hot outside.

Jinwoo, too, frowned. “Have you not been feeling any better, Myungjun?” he asked, his voice soft.

Myungjun didn’t respond. He looked over at Bin with tears in his eyes. “I’d like to go to bed,” he requested.

Myungjun liked to play until Bin ordered him to sleep. He had learned the rules of gonyu and played every evening with Jinwoo. He would try to fly his kite even with a lack of wind and sun. He begged to go back to the springs. He never requested to go to bed.

Bin reached over to feel Myungjun’s forehead again, and then he cursed. “He’s warm,” he mumbled to Jinwoo. “I think he has a fever.”

Poor Myungjun. Bin gathered the child into his arms and lifted him up off the floor. Jinwoo stood, looking concerned, and he asked, “Should I put together some medicine for him so his fever doesn’t worsen?”

“Please,” Bin requested, rubbing a hand up and down Myungjun’s back. “I’ll go lay him down to rest. Bring water, when you come.”

Bin had nursed others back to health throughout the years. While fevers were a bit alarming, Bin had plenty of money to gather together rare herbs known to heal these sorts of illnesses. He had healed both children and the elderly. He had no doubt he could heal Myungjun, too, especially since he had managed to catch the fever so early on.

He dressed Myungjun in more comfortable clothes before laying him down on the blankets. “Are you cold, darling?” he asked, trying his best to make him feel at ease. “I can gather extra blankets for you.”

Myungjun shook his head, though he nodded a second later. “I am cold,” he muttered, and so Bin grabbed some blankets from one of his large chests nearby to layer over Myungjun. The boy couldn’t seem to decide, however, whether or not to stay under the covers. He kept moving, kept whining, and Bin realized how uncomfortable he must be.

“With fevers come chills,” Bin said. He kissed Myungjun’s cheek. “It will be okay. You can ask me to cover you up as much as you’d like to, okay?”

“I don’t like to inconvenience you,” Myungjun said. He looked so small and so pitiful, and Bin had to take a deep breath in order to compose himself, in order to not cry over such a sweet child.

“I’m never inconvenienced when it comes to you,” he assured.

So he sat there, removing the covers one minute and putting them back on the next. Whatever Myungjun requested, Bin made certain to do it.

Jinwoo brought in medication, herbs crushed and mixed together. They managed to sit Myungjun
up and he swallowed what Jinwoo offered, though he gagged at the taste and drank all of the water he could to wash it down. Jinwoo watched Bin’s fingers comb through Myungjun’s hair, then he commented, “I ought to get more.”

“Yes, please,” Bin murmured. Myungjun’s head rested on his thigh, and he stared sickly up at Jinwoo. “My poor darling must feel horrible. With medicine, though, he shall feel better tomorrow.” Bin’s words were directed at Myungjun, who only coughed in response.

The rest of the day and night passed pretty much the same. Myungjun slept restlessly, and when he was awake he was lethargic and fussy and miserable. Bin sat up with him the entire time. Jinwoo fetched things, back and forth, back and forth, but otherwise stayed in the same room. He fell asleep at some point, leaned up against the nearby wall in case he was needed, and Bin watched over both of them, feeling something unpleasant turn in his stomach.

He knew he was asking much of Jinwoo in order to care for Myungjun. He knew he ought to allow the man to go to his own room, to stay away from any sort of illness, but doing so would mean he would put less focus on Myungjun.

Myungjun was who he cared for most of all.

Morning came. The day went by and Myungjun showed no signs of getting better. He vomited once and so Bin fed him lightly, but he seemed to keep things down after that. Jinwoo gave him medicine and fresh water, and only left the room to get supplies or to inform the other slaves of their chores. On the third day of Myungjun’s sickness, Bin had sleepily said, “You don’t need to stay here. I can do this myself.”

He hadn’t allowed himself to rest, far too dedicated with taking care of Myungjun. He kept dozing, but forced himself to stay awake just in case he was needed. He was immortal, yet he still needed sleep.

Jinwoo noticed. “You need to sleep, Bin.”

Bin shook his head, rejecting the notion. “I...I need to stay awake. For Myungjun’s sake.”

“No, you need to sleep.” Jinwoo stood and pulled some clean blankets out of Bin’s chest. He laid them on the floor beside Myungjun and patted them. “Sleep, just for a few hours. Just to re-energize yourself.”

Bin yawned, then muttered, “I need to take care of him. I need to clean his body to try and get rid of the illness. I meant to do it yesterday, but I—”

“I can do that,” Jinwoo snapped. He moved Bin over to his makeshift bed. It wasn’t too difficult; though Jinwoo was smaller than Bin, manual labor had made him strong, and Bin was weak for the moment. He easily fell back against his blankets and Jinwoo, hovering over him, patted his cheek. “You need to sleep,” he repeated. “I’ll take care of Myungjun. I’ll awaken you if an issue arises, but he should be fine. He hasn’t vomited today.”

He failed to mention that Myungjun had hardly been awake, and when he was, he didn’t say anything. Bin hoped that meant he was sleeping off the sickness well enough, but he wasn’t sure. He just felt frustrated that the fever hadn’t broken as quickly as he thought it would.

He longed to stay up, but the blankets were cozy and his eyes were too heavy. He curled in on himself and mumbled some sort of order to Jinwoo, a quick, “Make sure he’s fine,” before he slept.

Myungjun was in his dreams; General Kim, Prince Myungjun, little orphaned Myungjun - they
were all the same in his dream. It was the Myungjun he loved and cherished, just in different times in their lives, in different paths in their lives, and he embraced the Myungjun that embodied them all.

Myungjun in his dream wore a green necklace and Bin smiled when he saw it. “I know that necklace,” he said, and the Myungjun nodded his head.

“We’ll keep it for you,” the Myungjun promised him. “All of us.”

Then Bin woke.

He had no time to ponder the weird dream. He had dreamed of Myungjun before, but it was always one of the Myungjuns he knew and loved; it was never a weird Myungjun that combined all of them. He wanted to write down the dream in his journal before he forgot, to keep it with the writings of his other dreams and peculiar events that had transpired over hundreds of years, but he could not, not when Jinwoo was shaking him as if a monster was attacking the village.

“What?” Bin asked, a little bit clumsy in his speech as he tried to ward off the sleep that still threatened to grip at him. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know!” Jinwoo exclaimed. He sounded panicked, and Bin sat up quickly.

“Myungjun...his...I don’t know, Bin, I don’t know what this is. I was trying to wipe his body down, and I…”

Jinwoo moved aside and showed him.

Myungjun’s shirt had been removed. His skin, usually a clear, golden tan, was pale and clammy and had large splotches all over. There were one or two boils, too, that had popped up; one Jinwoo pointed out was under his armpit, and the other was on his chest. Bin’s heart raced as he examined the poor boy.

“What...what is this?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Jinwoo repeated himself, running his fingers through his hair. “Bin, I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

Bin stared at the splotches and the boils and his mind reeled, trying to think of what it could be. It wasn’t until he bent down lower that his breath caught in his throat. “He’s bleeding.”

“What?”

“That’s...oh, gods, that’s internal bleeding, Jinwoo. Why is he bleeding? What happened?”

Jinwoo’s eyes were wide. “Nothing happened! I was trying to clean him, and - I don’t know what happened, I really don’t.”

Bin snapped his fingers under Jinwoo’s nose. He didn’t like to resort to such measures; he didn’t like to treat Jinwoo as an animal. However, in that moment, all he could think of was making sure Myungjun was okay. “Go to the herbalist. Right now. Explain Myungjun’s symptoms. Do not come back until you get some information, some medicine, some way to cure him, alright? Don’t even think about returning unless I can make sure Myungjun will be alive.”

“Right,” Jinwoo said. He scrambled to his feet and was quick to leave, likely wanting to treat Myungjun as much as Bin did. Bin let him go before looking back at Myungjun.
“It’s alright, darling,” he whispered, resting his fingers on Myungjun’s chest to feel his heartbeat. It was beating normally. That meant, surely, he would be fine. They could fix whatever was ailing him. They could rid it from Myungjun’s body.

The boy was still asleep, and he whimpered, but Bin maneuvered him so Myungjun was resting right in his lap. “I’m going to keep you safe this time,” Bin swore. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

He hated waiting. He had learned that waiting was necessary, was a part of his everyday life, but he hated it. He waited years to see Prince Myungjun; he had waited years to meet this Myungjun. And now he had to wait for Jinwoo to return from the herbalist, for Jinwoo to offer some sort of advice or information.

Minutes felt like hours, and hours felt like days, and through it all, Bin held onto Myungjun for dear life. He cried, too, kissing Myungjun’s forehead and he begged the gods and the demons not to take Myungjun. “He’s a kid,” he whispered. “Please, please, please, he’s so young, you can’t do this to him.”

They could, apparently. They could make Myungjun suffer more than they already had, and so Myungjun’s symptoms didn’t ease up. By the time Jinwoo made it back home, there were more boils in his skin, more internal bleeding, and Myungjun woke only to stare latheragically up at Bin and only responded with soft noises.

Jinwoo rushed into the room. He looked frantic, and when he saw Bin’s embrace of Myungjun, he choked out, “Bin, get away.”

“No. I won’t.”

“Bin, you’ll get sick, too, and you’ll die, too.”

Bin’s hold on Myungjun tightened. His fingers shook. Myungjun watched Jinwoo and Bin detected fear in the little boy’s eyes. “Don’t you dare say that, or I’ll kill you,” Bin hissed. “Myungjun won’t die. I won’t let him die.”

Myungjun whimpered and Bin narrowed his eyes at Jinwoo. “What does he have?”

Jinwoo swallowed thickly. He didn’t come forward. He stayed away. “The herbalist has had cases from out of town. He says it’s spreading into this village. It’s...he...he knows of no cure for it. He says it’s...it’s a death that...Bin, Myungjun is...his body is rotting. He smells, he’s bleeding, and the herbalist says the next step is...we’ll see his body rotting.”

Bin had to struggle to control his breathing. He wanted to murder Jinwoo. He didn’t want to ever look at Jinwoo or listen to him again. He turned his watery eyes instead to Myungjun and choked out, “I do not see it.”

“The herbalist says you’ll see it at the groin or the fingers or toes. They turn black. They rot. His boils will burst open with blood and—”

“You’re scaring him!” Bin exclaimed as Myungjun gripped at his clothes in horror. “Jinwoo, you keep quiet - if you say one more word, I’ll get rid of you.”

As Jinwoo fell silent, Bin checked on the body parts Jinwoo mentioned, and he felt his heart threatening to shatter. He hadn’t noticed the black before, far too concerned with the boils on Myungjun’s chest, but on a closer examination, he saw black spots on the tips of his fingers, spreading up his toes, and already crowded on his groin.
Bin needed to vomit, but he couldn’t let go of Myungjun. He wouldn’t let go of Myungjun. He simply turned his head and gagged before Jinwoo quickly brought over a pot they had used for Myungjun. He stuffed it under Bin’s face and allowed Bin the chance to vomit.

As he wiped Bin’s mouth clean with his own sleeve, he blurted out, “The herbalist told me there was nothing-”

“I told you to stay silent, you insolent brat-”

“-nothing he could do, but there’s a shaman nearby. Dongmin. He’s been from village to village and he says the sickness is caused by a plague of demonic energy. He says it’s possession; it makes sense, if there’s no cure. He boasts that he has exorcised many others.”

Bin thought shamans were idiotic. They believed in silly nonsense and performed ridiculous rituals. He didn’t trust anyone religious or spiritual, for they all spoke lies.

Myungjun did, though. Myungjun was superstitious. And Myungjun had always been smarter than him.

“Where is he?” Bin asked, quickly standing. He brought Myungjun with him, cradling the boy in his arms. “I’ll take Myungjun.”

“He’s a little far away. He’s on the outskirts of the village closest to the ocean,” Jinwoo said. He sensed the urgency, and he followed Bin out of the room. Slaves nearby avoided them; perhaps talk of an illness had spread. None of them wanted to be sick.

Bin didn’t care if they were, as long as Myungjun wasn’t sick.

“It will take you hours to ride there. You need to leave quickly. I’ll grab some money - he requires many coins in order to work, the herbalist told me.”

He sounded like a scammer, but if people were speaking of results, then Bin would take his chances. It would be worth it. He would spend all the money in the world to heal his sweet, darling Myungjun.

“Meet me out front with my favorite horse - he is the fastest I have. Grab some money. You will stay here and keep things running smoothly, alright?” He stopped and glanced at Jinwoo. “I...apologize for my earlier-”

“No time to apologize!” Jinwoo pushed Bin to the entrance of his home. “Get out there! I want Myungjun well, too, and we can’t stand around and expect him to magically be healed. The shaman will help, though. Dongmin will help.”

Dongmin had better help, Bin decided, or else Dongmin was better off dead.

The shaman was far different than Bin had expected. Shamans were usually older men who were ugly and mystical. Dongmin was young, handsome, and yet he seemed far more grounded in reality than any other shaman Bin had the displeasure of meeting.
He had set up a little camp away from the village, hidden amongst the trees, and he already had a handful of other sickly people laying on blankets. He seemed kind, delivering water to them, and when Bin rushed toward him, he calmed him with a few gentle words.

“Everything will be fine,” the shaman promised. He glanced down at Myungjun and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “The demons truly have a grasp on him.”

Bin remembered that Jinwoo had mentioned a possession. Bin didn’t quite believe it - then again, what else could it be? A sickness such as this was unheard of.

“You can help him, can’t you?” Bin begged, holding Myungjun close to him. “You must help him.”

Dongmin nodded, but when he looked at Bin, there was a selfish glint to his gaze. “I require funding, of course.”

Bin glared, but before he could say anything, Dongmin continued, “Many believe I am a scammer. I ask for money before performing rituals and rites. Maybe it’s wrong of me to do so, but even shamans must make their living somehow. And,” he glanced over at Bin’s horse, loaded with a sack of coins, “I am a greedy shaman. I prioritize easily, depending on what falls into my hands.”

He was honest, at least. Still holding onto Myungjun, Bin grabbed the money and tossed the sack down onto the ground. Dongmin smiled as he bent and looked through, running his fingers over the golden coins. “There’s your payment,” Bin snapped. Money was worthless. He did not care how much he lost. If Dongmin was selfish and greedy, Bin would supply him with whatever he needed in order to heal Myungjun. “Fix him.”

“Of course. I keep my word.” Dongmin stood and made a spot for Myungjun. He was on the ground, shivering with chills, and the moment Bin stepped away, Myungjun cried out for him.

Bin faltered. “Can I stay with him?” he asked, looking over at the fear and panic in Myungjun’s eyes. “Please?”

Dongmin was unrelenting. He shook his head and shoved Bin off to the side. “A ritual to rid his body of the spirits must be done only between myself, Myungjun, and the spirits. No others may join in. You may watch, but you cannot interact at all with either of us.” He was grabbing materials, pretty sheets of white paper and his bells and he began to chant out his prayers.

Dongmin was a graceful shaman. His feet moved with ease as he danced, as he demanded the demons leave Myungjun’s body. He burned his pretty paper and tossed the ashes across Myungjun’s body, though he took care to not touch Myungjun at all.

Bin wondered if his lack of contact was because the ritual forbade it, or if Dongmin was also scared of catching a sickness.

The ritual was shorter than Bin assumed it would be. Dongmin appeared exhausted, panting hard, and he faced Bin with a defeated expression. “These demons cling to him.”

“What does that mean?”

Dongmin put down his bells. “What ails this child is not a sickness, as many might believe. It is a possession. I’ve seen cases before in my youth, though the demons have never possessed so many before. Likely, the gods are angry that many have abandoned religion. They strike the houses of those weak in belief - like yourself, I suppose.”
“How...how did you know I don’t believe?” Bin asked, cautious.

“I can see it. I can sense it. The boy now suffers because of your disbelief.”

Bin didn’t know what he believed in, but he did know he wouldn’t put it past the gods to punish Myungjun for his sins. They were horrible beings, if they were real, and he cursed them in his mind.

“You can fix him though, can’t you?” Bin asked. He knelt beside Myungjun and smoothed his hair back. Myungjun was quick to grab onto him and hold, his fingers tight and turning all the more black. “You’ve...you’ve drawn the demons out from him, right?”

Dongmin clasped his hands together and said, “This boy is a special case. Your disbelief and hatred is strong, so he makes for easier prey. I must perform extra rituals for him. However, with all of the others I have, it will be difficult for me to... prioritize him.”

His eyes were searching, searching, searching, and Bin discovered what he wanted. “Money?”

“I can be persuaded with riches.”

“You’re a sick bastard.”

Dongmin smiled. “Yes. I admit freely I am. However, I am also the only one who can save the boy, and I would like payment in order to save him instead of any others.”

Bin looked down at poor Myungjun, who was uncomfortable and frightened and unwell. There was no question in his mind that he would give up everything for Myungjun. “Alright,” Bin said. “I can bring you money tomorrow, when he is healed-”

“I’m not ignorant,” Dongmin scoffed. Bin glanced up at him sharply, and Dongmin still wore that same condescending smile. “Many have promised me tomorrow, and yet they have nothing. I cannot fix the boy with my hands empty. I require advance payment.”

Bin grit his teeth down and snapped, “Look at his damn fingers, you bastard. He’s growing more sick by the moment, and you want me to ride hours back home, then hours back here, just so you can dance a bit more? Are you out of your damn mind?”

Dongmin raised an eyebrow. Bin thought he looked like a woman.

Bin also thought he looked like a liar, a deceiver, a swindler, a bastard who deserved to rot, but he said none of that.

“Why sit here arguing about it, then, while the demons slowly kill him?” He sighed, then added, “The boy won’t be dead yet. He has another day. I can watch over him while you get the money, and then I will exorcise his soul. I will prioritize him above all others - if you get back before nightfall, there will be a chance to save him.”

Bin knew, based on the position of the sun, he could do that. If his horse ran quick enough, if he rushed things, then he could be back just in time to save Myungjun.

“I’ll be back, then,” he swore, but he felt a tugging on his trousers.

“Bin,” Myungjun gasped out, his eyes wide. “Bin, I want to go home.”

Bin’s heart tore. He hesitated, then whispered, “You don’t, darling. The shaman will make you
better. If you stay here, you will feel better, okay?"

Myungjun shook his head. “I want—I want to go home with you. Please don’t leave me.”

Bin thought he might cry if he stayed any longer. He might give in to Myungjun’s desires, though he knew those desires would kill him in the end.

He couldn’t let Myungjun die, not when he had this chance to save him.

“I’ll be back soon,” Bin promised him. He bent down to kiss Myungjun’s cheek. “Alright, darling?”

“Bin.”

“You need to be brave for me, okay?” Bin felt his voice crack. He continued, “Show me how brave you can be.”

But Myungjun was crying. He was weak and ill and Bin knew it must feel like he was being abandoned. “N-No, no, I don’t want to be alone!” Myungjun begged him. He held onto Bin, but his fingers grasped at nothing once Bin stepped back. “Bin, do-don’t leave me.”

Bin bit down on his lip, harsh enough to draw blood, and he glanced over at Dongmin. “Watch over him. Make sure he’s fine. I’ll give you as much gold as I can bring, and then whatever else you desire shall become yours, as long as he’s okay.”

“Of course,” Dongmin said, bowing his head. “We’ll wait for your return. Nightfall - remember that.”

He turned from Myungjun. He turned from the sight of the child who so desperately longed for his company. He turned from his darling, who was sick and dying, and left him in the hands of someone lower than dirt.

Bin felt disgusting.

He rode his horse for hours back into his village. He pushed the poor creature, even as it panted and foamed at the mouth, and when he hopped off finally, the sun indicating it was late afternoon, he patted its rump. “Bit more,” he whispered. “Keep up. Just a bit longer.”

He ran inside the house and was instantly met by Jinwoo. “Where’s...where’s Myungjun?” his slave asked.

Bin rushed to his bedroom, and Jinwoo followed. “Bin, where is Myungjun? Did he...is he-”

“The shaman knows I’m wealthy,” Bin said. “He’s willing to do more for Myungjun if I pay him extra.” He grabbed a key from inside his dresser and then unlocked one of the many chests his room held. “I’m going to give him more money. I’ll make him focus only on Myungjun.” Bin wiped at his eyes, at the tears that welled up again, as he remembered the blackness creeping through Myungjun’s skin. “I won’t let him die, Jinwoo.”

Jinwoo was silent, watching Bin frantically put things together. He waited until Bin was ready to leave, and then he mentioned, “I don’t think he’ll last, Bin.”

“Don’t-”

“The herbalist was certain there was no cure for this illness.”
“It’s not...it’s not an illness.” Bin turned to look at Jinwoo. “It’s a possession. The demons have possessed him.”

Jinwoo looked defeated. “You don’t believe that. You know it’s an illness.”

Bin tried to calm himself down. He tried to brush off Jinwoo’s insensitive words. However, all he could think of was that blackness plaguing the boy; the demons crawling along his body and rotting away the flesh.

He hit Jinwoo. He slapped the slave harshly, hard enough to send Jinwoo stumbling into the wall and to wheeze out in shock.

“You keep your mouth shut about things you don’t understand,” Bin growled. “He’s possessed. I’m going to help get rid of the demons. And you will pack all your belongings and leave. I don’t wish to ever see you again.”

Jinwoo glanced over at him. His eyes weren’t focused, likely from the sudden shock of the impact, but he still looked hurt. He blinked, then whispered, “Bin, please-”

Bin didn’t wish to hear him any longer. Myungjun was hurt, too, and he needed help. Bin left Jinwoo, just as he had left Myungjun, and climbed upon his worn and tired horse.

Horrible thoughts flitted about in his mind as he forced his horse to sprint across town. He thought of the poor animal he was ruining, his favorite horse reduced to this, his favorite horse who would likely not survive once the journey ended. He thought of Jinwoo, packing his things and leaving his home and he wondered how a slave would fare in a world where slaves were the lowest being possible. He thought mostly of Myungjun, left alone in the hands of that swindler Dongmin, and he cursed himself loudly.

He was ruining everything.

His horse collapsed finally, giving a loud cry as it fell to the ground. Bin tumbled off its back and his bags of coins split open and spilled out across the ground. He hardly took a second to gather his breath before he glanced back at the creature, panting heavily on the ground.

“Get up!” Bin demanded, shaking the horse’s head. “Damn you, get up! I have to save him! Do you want him to die?”

The horse stayed down, no matter how much Bin screamed at it, no matter how much he hit it, and he finally realized he had to make the rest of the journey by foot.

He apologized to the poor animal, apologized for pushing it and for leaving it now to the mercy of the wildlife. He stuffed the coins back in the bags and began to run.

Bin was out of breath soon enough. He was tired and worn; a lack of sleep and food had taken its toll on his body, and his strength could not last. He glanced up at the sky, at the setting sun, and yelled loudly, “Is this what you truly want?” He continued to move, even as he struggled to breathe, and he screeched, “Why are you going to kill him? He’s a boy!”

Loud sobs tore through the trees. He tried his best to gulp them down, but still he wailed and cried as he realized he wasn’t going to make it by nightfall.

Myungjun would die thinking Bin had abandoned him forever.

He fell to his knees and he bent his body, placing his head on the dirty ground. “Please,” he
begged. “Please, please please, please please -”

“Bin!”

A voice was calling for him. Bin could hardly believe it. He picked himself up and stared at the figure coming up on him.

“Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo rode on a horse, a different horse, and he had other sorts of valuables alongside him. When he saw the state of Bin, he stopped his horse and offered a hand. “Get up,” he ordered.

Bin stared in awe for a second before Jinwoo’s hand gestured at him. “Bin, get up. I’ll be damned if I allow Myungjun to spend an extra second by himself.”

That was all the prompting Bin needed. He stacked his gold alongside the valuables Jinwoo had, then climbed up behind his friend. “Why-why did you come for me?” Bin asked. He wrapped his arms around Jinwoo’s waist as Jinwoo kicked his heels into the horse’s side, forcing it forward again. “I hit you, I demanded you leave - why did you come?”

“Your horse couldn’t make such a long journey without rest or water or food,” Jinwoo said. “I knew she couldn’t - you knew she couldn’t. She’d fall and die, and you’d be stuck.” They were sprinting, the wind rushing around them, and Bin rested his head on Jinwoo’s back, allowing himself a moment to be at ease. “I know you told me to leave, I know you must despise me, but I still care for you, Bin. I won’t leave you and Myungjun to die.”

Bin thanked the gods he didn’t believe in for someone like Jinwoo. He wouldn’t know what to do if Jinwoo should be gone from his life. He tightened his hold on his slave and muttered, “Thank you so much, Jinwoo.”

His love for his friend was immense. It threatened to pour forth in the way of more tears, but Bin forbade himself from crying any longer. He would not cry again. He didn’t deserve the tears. Myungjun was the one alone and in pain and in the company of some crazy man.

“I shouldn’t have left him alone,” Bin murmured to Jinwoo. “Oh, gods, Jinwoo, why did I leave him alone?”

“It wasn’t for long,” was Jinwoo’s response, a blatant lie. The sun had now set and Bin realized this was the longest he had been from Myungjun’s side in over a year. He gripped onto Jinwoo’s clothes and Jinwoo hushed him. “He’s fine. He’s a strong boy. And if this shaman is as greedy as you say, then he’ll wait for payment. He’ll care for Myungjun so he can get extra money.”

Bin tried to convince himself it was all true, and yet something unpleasant stirred in his gut. He didn’t know why he felt such dread hit him, but he just needed to be with Myungjun as soon as possible.

When they arrived at the camp the shaman had set up, Bin was quick to hop down from Jinwoo’s horse. He grabbed his money and rushed forward. “Dongmin!” he called out.

Dongmin was standing off to the edge of his camp, tossing one or two sheets of that pretty, white paper into a fire he had just started. The sick were nowhere in sight. Myungjun was nowhere in sight. Dongmin just glanced back at Bin and raised his eyebrows. “You came?” He sounded surprised. Maybe he thought Bin was a liar.

Bin raised up his bags of coins. He stood in the middle of the camp and yelled, “Where is
Myungjun? Tell me and I’ll let you have these, and more. Please, where is he?”

Dongmin’s eyes were wide. He didn’t move from his spot over the fire, and then Bin realized something strange.

There were limbs in the fire.

Jinwoo, standing behind him, came to the same realization. He cursed, voice shaking, and gasped, “Myungjun?”

Bin dropped the gold and ran. He pushed the still-surprised Dongmin out of the way and began digging through the fire. Flames leapt at his arms, threatening to burn him up, as well, but Bin didn’t stop.

He figured out where the sick had gone. Some were still alive, moaning for Bin’s assistance, but Bin, his stomach queasy, simply shoved them aside in order to find the bodies underneath.

The bodies under the pile were in better shape. The fire hadn’t reached them yet, and, fortunately, Myungjun was part of those that were underneath. He was coughing and crying, and when he saw Bin through the smoke, he held up his arms. Bin grabbed him and tugged him away from the burning bodies, from the agonized, inhuman sounds coming from those Dongmin had damned.

He felt Jinwoo slapping at his arm. He hadn’t realized he, too, had caught fire, and he didn’t truly care at the moment. He allowed Jinwoo to put out the fire and then he held Myungjun close to him. The boy coughed into his chest; he likely inhaled too much smoke, too much ash, and Bin checked him for any other signs of fire-related damage.

His skin was black from soot and from the illness that plagued him.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Bin apologized, rocking Myungjun back and forth. He covered Myungjun’s ears, blocking out the sounds of those still being burned alive, and then he glared up at Dongmin. “You’re a demon,” he spat. “You’re a disgusting, revolting demon. You deserve to be in that damn fire. You deserve to burn alive like those poor people-”

“This illness is unlike anything you’ve ever seen before,” Dongmin responded. He had regained his calm demeanor as he stared at the flames, not at all repulsed from the sight that lay in front of him. “It has no cure, and it does not stop affecting all these innocent lives. It spreads too easily. One person will catch it, and then everyone else in their family will catch it, and then the entire village will catch it.” He turned his gaze to Bin. “You likely already carry the disease within you. Your friend, too, carries it.”

Jinwoo, trying his best to wrap up the large burn that stretched down the entire length of Bin’s arm, shook. His hands were trembling, yet he did not stop at his task.

Dongmin noticed his fear. “Look what you’ve done to your friend,” he said. “He’s scared of becoming like the boy, like the rest of those poor souls. He’s scared of blood pooling under his skin, of his flesh rotting off - you know that child in your arms is under unimaginable pain. I would have ended that pain, and I would have ensured that his sickness didn’t spread.”

“I can still heal him,” Bin snapped. He looked down at Myungjun, who had grown weaker and sicker in his absence. “I-I can make sure he’s okay-”

“I thought I could,” Dongmin said. “With my own child. With my wife. With my entire family. Yet, somehow, I’m the only one not afflicted by this disease. So I set about rescuing them. And they died.” Dongmin’s jaw was tight and his eyes were staring over at Jinwoo, who listened with
rapt attention. “All because others in the village had this disease and believed they, too, could survive. Instead, they died - but not before they spread it to my entire household. I lost everything I ever loved.” His fingers were curled into fists. He held rage within him; rage at the illness, and rage at the people who tried to overcome an unbeatable illness.

Bin didn’t care about Dongmin’s life, however. He could pity the man if he wasn’t gathering sick, hopeful souls and burning them alive. He could pity the man if he hadn’t tried to burn poor Myungjun alive.

“Jinwoo,” Bin ordered. “We’re going back home.”

“You’ll spread the illness,” Dongmin said.

Bin didn’t listen. He stood, his legs shaking slightly from exhaustion. He realized how much pain his arm was in when he finally moved it, and he gasped out. Jinwoo stood by his side, hovering close by, worried, but Bin didn’t care about his own health and wellbeing.

He needed to help Myungjun.

Before he could take a step forward, however, Dongmin suddenly pulled Jinwoo aside. Jinwoo, not expecting the action, tried to get away, though he stopped struggling when he saw what Dongmin had up against his neck.

A ceremonial dagger, one that shaman typically used for their rituals. It had never been for killing before, and Bin shook his head. “You won’t,” he said. “Shamans don’t kill.”

“Look behind you, if that’s what you believe,” Dongmin snapped. “But I kill to ensure others will live. If that child dies, think of how many people you will save. Is one life truly worth countless of others?”

“*Myungjun*’s life is worth countless of others,” Bin replied. He stared only at Jinwoo, only at that dagger on his neck. “Let Jinwoo go.”

“We’ll trade,” Dongmin offered. “I’ll give you back your friend if you hand over the boy.”

Bin had never before faced such a dilemma. The wise decision would be to give up the boy who would die anyway and save the man who would live for years and years to come.

Myungjun was always the wise one, however. Myungjun was the one who could think clearly and practically in these situations. Bin only thought with his emotions, with his heart, and he knew he couldn’t give Myungjun up. His heart refused to allow his body to move, except to step backwards.

Dongmin cocked his head. “Really?” he asked. “You’d give up your friend for a child?”

“It’s okay, Bin,” Jinwoo blurted out. He looked terrified to die, yet his voice was steady and determined. “I told you I wanted to save Myungjun, too. There might be something we haven’t thought of yet. There might still be a way to save him. You...you need to just get away from this crazy bastard and try-”

“I will kill him,” Dongmin interrupted. “The moment you take one more step back, I will stab him.”

Bin didn’t know why the gods wished to punish him so harshly. He didn’t know what he had done. He didn’t know why innocent people were dragged into his mess, either.
All he knew was that he loved Myungjun above all others.

“I’m sorry, Jinwoo,” he choked out. “I-I’m so sorry.”

With his next step back, he spun on his heel. He could hear Jinwoo being stabbed, over the sounds of the crackling fire and the burning bodies. He could hear that sudden inhale of pain come from Jinwoo, and then Bin ran.

Holding tightly onto Myungjun, he ran out of the camp, ignoring Dongmin’s yells. He ran, dodging trees and bushes, changing his route from time to time just in case Dongmin was after him.

He ran until his legs could no longer move, and then he slid to the ground, his back pressed against a tree, Myungjun’s face pressed against his chest.

“Darling,” Bin panted, looking down at the little boy he held. “Are you alright?”

Myungjun’s eyes could not focus on Bin. He tried, but seemed to give up, too exhausted to continue in his attempt. He felt so small in Bin’s hold, and Bin struggled, once more, not to cry.

He knew Myungjun was going to die. He was too sick to actually make any sort of recovery. Only a miracle from the gods would change his fate, and the gods hated Bin too much to actually offer any sort of assistance. Still, Bin didn’t want to let go. He wanted to keep a hold of Myungjun for as long as possible.

“Bin?” Myungjun asked, his mouth slow to form that one word. “Where’s...Jinwoo?”

Bin’s breath was shuddering as he released it. He couldn’t answer that question. All he could do was brush some of the soot off Myungjun’s face, grimacing when he noticed another boil had formed, and more internal bleeding had started on his cheek.

“Bin?” Myungjun asked again.

“Do-Don’t talk,” Bin stammered. He was crying, and he tried his best not to allow Myungjun to see his tears. “You’re too sick to talk, darling.”

“I want...I want t-to go home.”

His words made Bin release a sob, quickly and briefly, and he ducked his head into his chest. “Okay,” he whispered. “I’ll take you home.”

Along the way, he was certain Myungjun would die, but he wanted to at least try to fulfill his last request. So he stood, legs shaking with the effort, and forced himself to take a step forward. He was so tired, so exhausted. His arm was searing with pain and he felt weak and light-headed from a lack of sleep and nutrition, but he would walk days back home, if that’s what Myungjun requested.

He heard movement behind him, however, and he turned to look.

Dongmin stood there, knife in hand and an eyebrow raised. “You didn’t get very far,” he commented.

Bin gripped tightly onto Myungjun. “Get away,” he warned.

“What will you do should I stay?” Dongmin asked, voice daring. “I don’t think you’re in any position to be demanding things of me.” He gestured with his free hand over to Myungjun and snapped, “Let me kill him.”
Myungjun’s little blackened fingers curled around Bin’s shirt.

“Are you insane?” Bin asked, taking a step back. “I won’t let you touch him.”

“He’s going to die, anyway. I can make his death painless. I can take away all of his suffering, and, in turn, ensure that no one else will have to suffer because you place his survival over that of all others.”


Dongmin stepped closer, and Bin, unfortunately, found his back pushed into a tree. Dongmin was still brandishing the knife, and Bin knew that the moment he turned to run, Dongmin could stab him.

Better him than Myungjun.

He spun to his left, but he couldn’t get very far. Dongmin thrust the knife forward, digging it into Bin’s arm, the one already ruined from the fire. The pain was increased tenfold, and Bin screamed as he stumbled to the ground. He tried his best to keep a grip on Myungjun, at least with his good arm, but he felt the boy slipping from his grasp.

“It will all be over soon,” Dongmin said. He tugged his knife from Bin’s arm, then pulled Myungjun away from him.

Bin recalled the looters, grabbing General Kim from his arms, desecrating his body for their own selfish desires.

“Get off!” he screeched, reaching for Myungjun again. Dongmin kicked his face, however, and Bin fell backwards. He could hear Myungjun crying out for him, and he could feel blood dripping from his busted lip. His mind was dizzy, but he knew he had to save Myungjun.

He couldn’t save General Kim, nor could he save Prince Myungjun, but he could save this child - at least from Dongmin.

He sat up, but before he could do anything, he saw someone come from behind Dongmin and grab his neck. Fingers dug in, tightening their hold, and Dongmin gasped out for breath. He flailed wildly, but was unable to hit the smaller body behind him.

Bin watched, confused, as the hands suddenly grabbed Dongmin’s head. They twisted and Bin heard a loud crack.

Then Dongmin fell in a crumpled heap to the ground, and in his place was Jinwoo.

Bin’s eyes widened. “Jinwoo!” he breathed out.

Jinwoo stumbled forward, not yet acknowledging Bin’s exclamation. He collapsed to his knees beside Myungjun and asked, “Are you alright, Myungjun?”

Myungjun was crying, body taking in what looked to be painful heaps of breath, and Bin quickly leaned down to cradle Myungjun in his arms once more. He ignored the pain he felt and focused solely on the two most important people in his life.

“I thought you died,” Bin whispered, glancing over at Jinwoo. His eyes traveled down, and through the darkness of the night, he could make out where Dongmin had stabbed him. He was losing a lot
of blood and was extremely pale.

Still, he smiled. He had blood in his mouth, a result of internal injuries inflicted upon him, and murmured, “Dongmin did, too.”

“You’re hurt, Jinwoo.”

“I’m dying.” Jinwoo pointed out. He winced and moved to lean up against the tree, breathing harshly. Bin watched him, helpless to do anything to ease the suffering of his best friend. “But I...I couldn’t...I can’t leave you.”

“Jinwoo-”

“You’re my-my master, Bin. Perhaps if...if that was where our relationship ended, then I...I wouldn’t have come. But I was loyal to you because you’re my best...best friend.” He smiled again, but he was overcome with a cough.

Bin could do nothing. He could say nothing. He could only hold Myungjun to his chest and blink away tears.

“I have one...request, Bin.”

“Anything,” Bin whispered.

“Sit with me? As I die. Please.”

Bin stared at the face of his friend, at the man who had risked so much for him and Myungjun, and he granted that request. He, too, leaned up against the tree and allowed Jinwoo to rest against him.

It didn’t take long for Jinwoo to pass. His blood loss had been extreme, and exerting himself had done nothing to help. In any case, Bin was happy that his death was quick and easy, though feeling Jinwoo’s lifeless body against his own was awful. He longed to go back in time. He longed to be in his bedroom, playing gonz with Jinwoo, with Myungjun seated in his lap asking how to play. He longed to return to those simpler moments, before the sickness and the swindler and the word went chaotic.

“Bin?” Myungjun’s voice broke through the quiet night.

“Yes, darling?”

Myungjun’s eyes looked over to Jinwoo. “Is...Jinwoo asleep?” he asked.

Bin swallowed past the lump in his throat, and he nodded. “Yes,” came his response.

Myungjun curled up in Bin’s arms, though he moaned out in pain. Bin tried his best to ease the discomfort, but it was to no avail. “Darling Myungjun,” he said, “When Jinwoo wakes up, we’ll all go home together, alright? You can go back to sleep in my bed - it will be more comfortable there.”

Myungjun didn’t answer. He closed his eyes and asked, “Did...did General Kim ever...get sick?”

Bin’s mind couldn’t think of a good story to tell. He was always ready with a fantastical adventure of General Kim or Prince Myungjun, and yet now he felt blank. All he could think about was the dead shaman, and his dead friend, and the dying boy in his arms.

“Bin?”
But Myungjun wanted a story, and Bin knew he would have to cut through his own heartache to give a good story.

“Once,” Bin started, “a monster brought an illness into the village. General Kim had to fight off the monster, but the monster was too powerful. He told General Kim that if...if only General Kim took away the sickness, then he would allow the village to live. So General Kim infected himself and stayed far away, to ensure the rest of the villagers would never be sick. The sickness was said to kill anyone who caught it, and General Kim...General Kim was no exception to that rule. He died. His funeral was lovely, though. There were all different types of flowers. People came from all over Goryeo to attend the mourning ceremony. It lasted for months and months; that’s how special General Kim was.”

Myungjun wasn’t moving. Bin couldn’t feel him breathing. Still, he continued his story, tears rolling down his cheeks.

“The gods loved General Kim so much, they promised to bring him back, so that way his life was only halted for a little while. Hundreds of years later, General Kim returned, just as beautiful and strong as he always had been.”

Bin’s teardrops fell upon Myungjun’s dirty cheek, and his voice cracked as he whispered, “And I was here to witness that beauty and strength, and I don’t regret a single minute of it, darling.”

Chapter End Notes

i think i'll soon make a google docs explaining some of the historical references. it's interesting, i promise!

please follow me on my tumblr or on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!
He had given both Jinwoo and Myungjun a proper funeral. He cleaned their bodies well, trying to scrub away blood and soot and disease. He spent a while digging deep graves for both, and when those graves were covered again, he placed stones on top in order to mark their spots. He remained silent all the while, until he had finished.

Then Bin cried.

He didn’t know what he had done in his previous life to make this life so utterly painful. He didn’t know why he must suffer, and why others must suffer with him.

He didn’t know why he couldn’t just have happiness with Myungjun.

“Thank you, Jinwoo,” he whispered through his tears. “If you are able to come back, to be reborn, I hope you are reborn as a king. I hope you will never worry over anything in your next life.”

Then he turned to Myungjun’s grave. He remembered taking the boy’s hand for the first time, back when he discovered that ruined village. He remembered learning Myungjun’s name. He remembered Myungjun running toward him, frightened of the weather, and he felt tears roll faster down his own cheeks. “Darling,” he gasped out. “I-I’m sorry. I can’t ever keep y-you safe. I’m so sorry.” He bowed low, touching his head to the dirt that made of Myungjun’s grave, and he swore, “Next time, I’ll keep you safe. I’ll do anything. I won’t let you die for a fourth time, G-General Kim.”

Finally, after two days passed, Bin picked up his tired and weary body and began stumbling back to the closest village.

He was cared for by a kind family. He was given food and rest. He stayed there for a week, allowing them to heal his wounds, and then he watched the sickness take over.

It killed off many people, in that village and all other villages beyond. Bin returned home and watched, blankly, as bodies were dumped into large pits after they succumbed to illness. He kept his own doors shut and forbade any of his slaves from venturing outside, hopeful to keep the illness out.

It worked, and after a few years had passed, soon the disease waned. The village had lost a significant amount of workers, and so Bin gave up his writings for the time being and began to work the fields, alongside the slaves and other lowlifes.

Hard work kept his mind off of Myungjun, anyway, and Bin accepted it.
He moved when his slaves were getting older and wondering why *he* wasn’t.

He paid one last visit to Myungjun’s grave and then he left.

Village hopping was difficult. Every village questioned his motives when he arrived with large bags of many coins, and every village questioned his motives when he took in many prostitutes and whores.

“Why won’t you marry?” one of his slaves asked one day, after Bin paid two young women who had spent some time with him. “You could take on concubines, as well. You’re wealthy enough to do so. Marrying would also allow families to strengthen their bonds with you.”

Bin gestured for the man to bring him some alcohol, and after downing a bit of soju, he responded, “If I marry, I might miss out on meeting my one true love.”

Of course, his words were not understood. Many people did not marry for love. They married to form alliances, to capitalize on someone’s wealth, to get rid of their daughters. It wasn’t an unheard of concept, but it just wasn’t popular, especially not with the very wealthy. Bin’s slaves tried to convince him that he would likely end up falling in love with whichever woman he married.

Bin kept from them that he much preferred men, anyway. He didn’t wish for them to know that his late-night visit to brothels was typically to visit men, not women. The women came to him; he willingly sought out the men.

He felt gross. He felt guilty. He claimed to only love Myungjun, and yet he chased down his sexual desires without any hesitation. But what else was he to do for hundreds of years until Myungjun reappeared? He was not married, and he did not wish to form close bonds to anyone else, scared that Myungjun would pop up at any second.

So he simply existed. He ate and slept and fucked, like any other man would, though he disregarded relationships from his life. Even with his slaves, he kept a cold demeanor, too frightened he would grow attached to one, as he had to Jinwoo, and ruin their lives, as he had with Jinwoo.

He moved from village to village, selling his slaves each and every time, and he watched as Goryeo continued to change.

Buddhism was no longer popular after the establishment of the Joseon dynasty. Bin was happy enough to see it decline. He never did like the superstitious elements Buddhism offered. He felt people relied too heavily on mystical explanations for rational events.

Then again, he was an immortal being who kept seeing the love of his life reborn as someone new. He supposed the mystical explanations held some grain of salt in reality.

Still, he cursed the gods. He cursed the Buddha himself, too. If not for them, he would likely be dead. Perhaps he would be in an afterlife with Myungjun by his side. Instead, he was stuck forever roaming Earth, forever finding and then losing the only person who meant anything to him.

As the temples were taken down, Bin celebrated. He was ecstatic with each delivery of news that yet another temple was desecrated or destroyed or burned to the ground. He happily spoke to the gods who had betrayed him and mocked them: “I hope you all stay immortal. I hope you watch, for the rest of your pathetic, immortal lives, the humans you loved so much leave you one by one by one.”

His slaves told him he was too excited with the destruction of the temples, but Bin didn’t care what
they thought any longer. All he cared about was letting the gods experience what he experienced.

As the suppression against monks and nuns worsened, Bin moved out of the city. He sold his slaves and left the large house he lived in and traveled to a smaller village, hopeful he would find work and thrive there, as well.

He passed a temple on his journey, one of the few still left standing. It was ornate and gorgeous, and he vaguely recalled Myungjun seeing a temple for the first time.

The little boy had been in awe of the gold and jewels, of the statues and offerings. He had begged Bin to allow him to make his own offering, and though Bin didn’t want to give the gods anything, he agreed for Myungjun.

Myungjun’s offering had been flowers. A devout Buddhist nearby had scoffed at Bin and explained that flowers were not worthy to offer to the gods, but Bin shrugged off those words. Myungjun prayed over his flowers, his little voice mumbling, “Please accept these flowers. They’re my favorites. Please keep Bin safe. Please let us stay together forever.”

All was quiet and calm. Candles flickered around, and Bin stared at them as he felt his eyelids drooping. He kept himself awake, however, solely because he knew he ought to, though he longed to return home and sleep for hours and hours.

Myungjun sat beside him, cross-legged, his own eyes closed and his breathing steady.

There were a few others around them, though they sat further away and at least one appeared to be asleep.

Bin turned his gaze to the large statue of the Buddha sitting before him. He was made purely from gold - a waste of resources, Bin believed, but yet here he was, trying to meditate and thus reach a sense of enlightenment.

It was all useless. Whenever Bin shut his eyes, he just wanted to sleep.

He nudged Myungjun and whispered, “How much longer do we have to do this?”

Myungjun inhaled harshly. He peeked through his eyelids and glanced over at the people nearby. They clearly weren’t paying attention. “For appearance-sake, I must be here,” Myungjun replied. He closed his eyes again. “Once I’m able to see the sign, then I shall experience five stages of joy, and then we’ll know that I will have quality of mind. We can leave and I can boast to everyone about how devout in Buddhism I am.”

Bin frowned. He didn’t think Myungjun needed to be devout in Buddhism. “I’m shocked we didn’t combust into flames the moment we stepped into this temple,” he commented. “With all we’ve done together in bed-”

“Shh!” Myungjun glared over at him. “Don’t talk of sensual desires here. We were supposed to shed that at the temple gates.”
Bin rolled his eyes and watched as Myungjun returned back to his meditation position.

He was still bored.

“Explain to me the five stages of joy,” he murmured. If he could enact such joy in Myungjun, then they would be finished. Myungjun would have reached a quality of mind - perhaps not in the way the monks intended, but Bin was pretty sure the rules were loose enough.

Myungjun hummed once before whispering, “The first is slight joy.”

“Are you at slight joy yet?”

“Of course not, Bin. I can’t concentrate, not with you asking me a thousand questions.” Myungjun shifted where he sat and Bin smirked.

“How will you know when you have reached slight joy?”

“You can feel the hair on your body raise. Like when you become cold - that’s the first joy.”

Bin stared at the general for a second or two. He was so cute, sitting there with his eyes squeezed shut, trying to focus on his breathing. He was adorable. Bin loved him very much, and Bin also wondered why Myungjun thought it would be a smart idea to bring him along to a temple where one ought to be silent.

“Let me speed up the slight joy for you,” Bin said. Before Myungjun had a chance to ask him what that meant, Bin leaned forward and breathed lightly over Myungjun’s neck. He made a small noise, a little lewd moan, and he instantly noticed Myungjun’s arm hair stand up on end.

One down, four to go.

“Slight joy has been achieved,” Bin giggled. He made sure no one else in the room was listening in, and when he deemed them to be safe, he looked back at Myungjun.

The general looked exasperated.

“It doesn’t work like that, Bin. I can’t just experience joy from you. I have to experience it from quality of mind, after I’m able to control my senses well.”

“The rules of meditation are always flimsy. You’ve meditated, and now I’m just helping the quality hit you faster. I’m sure the gods won’t mind.” He smirked, watching a blush come upon Myungjun’s cheeks. “Tell me, General Kim, what’s the second stage of joy?”

Myungjun looked as if he wanted to fuss, but he kept his calm. He looked ahead of him, at the statue of Buddha, and whispered, “Momentary joy. It’s a joy that lasts only a minute. But, Bin—”

Bin kissed him. He pulled Myungjun’s face toward him and kissed him hard - but only momentarily. When he felt Myungjun give in, that’s when he pulled back.

Myungjun blinked at him, shocked, and Bin teased, “Was that a moment of joy?”

“You’re vulgar—”

“Is kissing at temples not allowed? My, so many rules I won’t follow.” Bin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth then scooted closer to Myungjun, plastering up against his side. “What’s the next stage of joy?”
Myungjun bit at his lip and glanced around him at all the people. No one noticed, still. “Well,” Myungjun said. He swallowed thickly, then continued, “It’s...Bin, don’t goad me into this. I’m trying to make a good image for myself, for General Kim.”

“No one will know what we’re doing!” Bin whispered. “These people are too deep into meditation.”

“As I should be!”

“They’re wasting their time trying to reach these five stages of joy. I’m just helping speed them along.” He ran a hand up and down Myungjun’s back, then asked again, “Stage three?”

Myungjun still seemed nervous, but he muttered, “Showering joy. Comes and goes as the waves do.”

That one was easy. That one was doable. Bin smirked and then kissed Myungjun again. He pulled back, waited a few seconds, and planted yet another kiss onto his lover’s lips. Over and over again he worked, he kissed, mimicking the waves Myungjun mentioned. He crept on shore, showering his lover in kisses, and then retreated back to the ocean, waiting until Myungjun recovered to strike again.

Soon enough, his lover was red in the face and staring at Bin with eyes wide, full of both desire and excitement.

“Stage four,” Myungjun whispered, “Uplifting joy. You feel as if your whole body is being lifted into the air.”

Bin wrinkled his nose. So the Buddha was making it difficult on him? It sure seemed like it. Bin didn’t know how he could accomplish that without actually picking Myungjun up.

He glanced around. No one else was watching. No one else was paying them any attention. If he worked fast and silent, no one would ever have to know.

Bin glanced over at the ever-watchful eyes of the Buddha.

Watch this, he thought to himself smugly, and then he stood. Myungjun looked up at him in shock, and held back a gasp when Bin picked him up.

Holding him, Bin kissed him again, deeper, more passionate. Myungjun wrapped his arms around his neck and returned the kiss with anticipation, and when Bin finally drew back, Myungjun’s lips were puffy and pink.

“Next stage, darling?” Bin questioned. “Hurry - before people look.”

“Set me down,” Myungjun said, hushed. Bin obliged, and Myungjun took a deep breath. He exhaled silently, then murmured, “Suffusing joy. It’s...the entire body experiences joy. It touches every part.”

Bin glanced back at the Buddha. He looked around at the other people meditating.

He decided he would take the chance.

“This will be your true meditation,” Bin whispered. He set his back to everyone else, and as he sat beside Myungjun, he slowly wrapped his arms around Myungjun and drew the man closer into his chest. Myungjun was stiff at first, but he soon relaxed, and Bin took the opportunity to shift
Myungjun so he sat in Bin’s lap.

Myungjun blinked at him. “This...this isn’t at all like what I was expecting,” he commented.

“What were you expecting?” Bin ran his fingers through Myungjun’s hair, then peppered kisses all along his cheeks. “Tell me, darling.”

Myungjun pursed his lips but made no response. Catching on, Bin laughed. He had to keep his voice down; Myungjun’s frantic finger came up to his mouth to quiet him, glancing around at all of the others inside the temple.

“Sorry,” Bin whispered. “But I can’t believe you’re the one thinking such sensual thoughts now.”

“I wasn’t - I mean, I only...you were the one who acted as if...!” Myungjun was flustered, stammering out his words, and Bin nearly laughed again.

“The greatest joy of all,” Bin whispered once he had calmed himself, “is simply being in my arms, isn’t it?”

Myungjun frowned. “What a cheeky bastard,” he huffed, though he curled up in Bin’s embrace and closed his eyes. “I can’t believe you are the one whom I chose to love.”

Bin smiled and as he held Myungjun, he couldn’t help but think that his greatest joy was having Myungjun in his arms.

Throughout the years, Bin had taken on many different types of jobs. He had a large skillset due to his lengthy time spent alone, but he had never once thought about working as an instructor at a university.

The idea was enticing. It was something new, something different, and Bin was eager to jump at the chance.

It was apparently also very competitive. Many men from noble backgrounds fought for such a strong position. Imagine becoming a leader of such wealthy, intelligent, and influential students, they would whisper to each other. Imagine the benefits one could reap from that, they would say.

Bin cared not for benefits, nor did he think many of these students would be remembered in a thousand years. He just thought the challenge would be exciting and fun.

He recalled teaching Myungjun of the different texts from all of the world. He remembered the little boy sitting on his lap, his tiny, grubby fingers pointing to each and every word of Chinese or Japanese characters. He smiled at the memory of Myungjun frowning over the strange sanskrit and Hebrew words, and laughing at the oddity that was Italian and French languages. If teaching a group of university students was anything like teaching Myungjun, then Bin longed to do it. He needed something joyful back in his life.

He passed the examinations rather easily. The committee that oversaw Sungkyunkwan University were impressed at his wide range of skills.
“What languages can you speak?” the chairman of the committee asked him, glancing over the papers Bin had submitted.

Bin smirked. “Anything you wish, I can speak it.”

He was given a place to stay on the grounds. A few of his servants were allowed to come with him, and he brought everything of importance from his home and placed it in his new dwelling. Myungjun’s drawings, faded with age, were kept secret, stored in a large, locked chest. Bin still liked to take them out from time to time in order to examine them. After all, they were the only things left of any Myungjun that he owned.

For the first few days, Bin roamed the campus of the university in an effort to figure out the layout and landscape. He was to start teaching at the end of the week and so he wanted to make sure he was prepared.

The students were polite, but detached from emotion. They focused solely on studying, and friendships seemed to be formed out of political factions or kinship. The students of royal blood kept to themselves and the students of lesser factions kept to themselves. Bin was used to this, but it still jarred him.

General Kim had been a man of great prestige, and yet he had lowered himself in order to become friends with those from families who had nothing but dirt to their name.

Different times, he told himself, remembering that he had been alive for almost a thousand years. Back then, bonds were formed easier. These days, everyone was far too caught up in social standing to even look at someone different from themselves.

Bin decided it would be fine, though. While he lied about his own background, he had enough wealth to back up his claims, and soon the other instructors sought him out in order to speak about such things like poetry and sciences and Confucianism and anything else they could think of.

It was nice. It was different. Bin decided he could do this for a while, before he started to garner attention for not aging.

The students weren’t Myungjun, however. They were hungry for knowledge, but only to further cement themselves into society. They did not have Myungjun’s intrigue or childish interest. They did not hold within them his goofiness or his excitement. They existed solely to strengthen their clans or families, and, as such, Bin found them quite boring.

He explained as much to one of the other instructors, Yi Ji, as they ate a meal together.

“I understand this university is simply to create government officials who will succeed at their jobs and positions, but I still wish I had someone passionate. I want someone who cares about what they do.”

Yi Ji nodded his head, seemingly in agreement, and so Bin continued. “I don’t think that interpretation is something that most people are passionate for, however. I suppose I ought to have taught music alongside you.”

“There are a few that enjoy music,” Yi Ji confirmed. “In any case, I suppose it has more passionate students than interpretation does.” He laughed upon seeing Bin’s frown, then nudged his shoulder. “Cheer up! We’re creating a new generation of leaders and our names will be hailed for generations, even after our deaths.”

“That must be nice,” came Bin’s bitter response. He drank from his cup of soju, trying to keep his
thoughts about life and death all to himself.

The door slid open. There were already various other instructors in the room with them, also eating	heir respective dinners, and so Bin didn’t think anything of the newcomer. He chose not to look
up, focused instead on his meal, but then, suddenly, Yi Ji greeted, “Myungjun, over here! I have
someone for you to meet!”

Bin’s head shot up. Myungjun?

It was him.

Bin hadn’t seen an adult version of Myungjun since Prince Myungjun’s death. He looked as
beautiful and ethereal as ever. He clothing wasn’t as grand as the Prince’s clothes, and he didn’t
appear as young as the prince, either. In fact, he seemed a bit older than General Kim; Bin could
detect wrinkles around the man’s eyes as he smiled.

His smile made Bin’s heart beat faster in his chest, and as Myungjun bowed to him in greeting, Bin
was speechless.

“Myungjun is from Hanyang. He’s part of the ruling class there - the pride instructor of our
school!” Yi Ji explained, and he raised his soju cup to Myungjun, who simply grinned and took a
seat beside him.

“I’m a music instructor,” Myungjun explained to Bin, who stared in amazement. “Are you the new
interpretation instructor?”

Bin couldn’t respond. He didn’t know how to respond. Myungjun was alive and well, seated right
in front of him. All Bin longed to do was lift him up and spin him around and love him forever and
ever.

Of course, that hadn’t worked out the first three times, and so Bin kept silent.

Yi Ji cleared his throat and stated, “He is. I think he’s pouting a bit at the moment, which is why he
is not talking, but I swear he’s charming when he wants to be. Perhaps you two can get to know
each other more later - Bin, you ought to hear Myungjun on the zither. He plays the prettiest music
I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Bin watched a blush rise up to Myungjun’s cheeks. Myungjun tried to hide it by grabbing to soju
and pouring himself a cup, but still Bin stared.

Myungjun glanced up. Their eyes met, but neither one looked away. Bin felt as if he had been
blinded by lightning or else lost in the wilderness. He hadn’t felt this way in years and years and
years. Now that Myungjun had returned, so had all the love and happiness in Bin’s heart.

Myungjun was the first to look away, to focus instead on his food, but Bin whispered, “I’d love to
hear your music one day.”

He saw Myungjun’s hands falter, and he grinned.

Life had become joyful once again.
Bin tried to spend as much time with Myungjun as possible. Under the guise of wanting to befriend a prominent instructor, Bin frequented Myungjun’s room or his class. Sometimes he would watch as Myungjun taught students how to sing, how to play various instruments of various origins, and how to compose beautiful notes for various ceremonies and other important occasions. Myungjun always joked, “I would return the favor, but interpretation bores me.”

“It bores the majority of students here, too,” Bin responded once as he sat in Myungjun’s room with him.

Myungjun, looking over his lesson plans, glanced up at Bin and raised his eyebrows. “Does it really?”

“Yes. They’d much rather study music or archery or law. Perhaps they see interpretation as useless.”

“It isn’t useless at all, though. In fact…” Myungjun pursed his lips and began riffling through a few papers he had. “I have been meaning to ask one of the instructors in your department to look over some old compositions for me. I think they’re in…” Myungjun grabbed a paper and squinted. “Is this English or another one of those odd European languages?”

Bin had to merely glance to blurt out, “German.”

“Oh. See, all of those countries start to blend together, if I have to be honest. I can’t tell any of them apart.”

“If you’re exposed to the languages for a long time, you will be able to,” Bin replied. He felt bitter, knowing that death was refused to him, but at least some good came out of it. At least he was able to help Myungjun in cases like this.

Myungjun likely wasn’t paying much attention to Bin’s inner turmoil. He was still looking over the papers. “If it’s not too much of a hassle, perhaps you could translate some of this for me?” Myungjun asked suddenly. He pointed at the text and sheepishly muttered, “These are instructions for notes in the composition. I’d like to know what they say so I can then adapt it properly to our instruments.”

Bin grabbed the papers. He was always prepared to assist Myungjun. He was always prepared to create more time to spend with Myungjun. “I would love to help,” he said.

Myungjun smiled. It was that same bright smile Bin had remembered, and his heart skipped a beat as Myungjun exclaimed, “You’re a lovely person, Bin!”

“As...as are you, Myungjun.”

He had a new purpose now for visiting Myungjun’s quarters. He would translate whatever it was Myungjun wanted, from scribbled notes in old compositions to stories found in books from afar. Bin desired to be alongside Myungjun more and more with each passing day, and translating for him was a good way to do so.

Sometimes, Myungjun would be curious in whatever it was Bin would translate for him. Sometimes he would ask about the various words and languages and cultures he had never experienced. Bin tried his best to explain everything to him, from the horrendous perversion of the Europeans to the exhausting and difficult politics of the Chinese.
It wasn’t at all like it had been when Myungjun was small and cute. This Myungjun could retain information easier and also didn’t sit on Bin’s lap and giggle relentlessly.

“Despite your negative opinion on the English,” Myungjun started one day after Bin had ranted about the awful Europeans, “they do compose lovely works of art and music. I’d like to visit Europe one day. I’d like to see those heathens for myself, and I’d like to ask how such horrible heathens can also embrace a rich culture.”

“Likely, they’ll just mock you,” Bin replied. “I’ve spoken to a few during travels or visits. Some are kind, but most are rude.”

“And is that any different from the people of Joseon?” Myungjun questioned. “We hate anything that is different from our own established culture. We even hate each other if we don’t fall properly in line. Isn’t that why the elite do not study hangul? It’s the language of those lower than us, those who are from poor, pathetic families. We turn our nose up at part of our own culture because we consider it to be beneath us.” Myungjun sighed and ran his finger over the English words written out in one of Bin’s many books. “And here we are, mocking the Europeans for being different from us, too. It’s interesting, is it not, that despite how much moral superiority we claim over them, we turn around and call them pigs. Are we any better than they are?”

Bin pondered those words, and then nodded. “We are,” he stated, and Myungjun snorted. “At least, you are better.”

“How so?”

Bin gazed over Myungjun’s soft features. He looked at his sparkling eyes and his small nose and his plump lips. He wanted to feel the smoothness of Myungjun’s skin, the roundness of his cheeks and the sharpness of his chin.

He tentatively reached a hand out. His fingers just barely brushed across Myungjun’s face, tracing a pattern by his jaw. Myungjun sat still, eyes wide, and then Bin whispered, “Because you’re perfect to look at and perfect to talk to, and thus that means you’re above all others, Kim Myungjun.”

Myungjun swallowed thickly before ducking his head, breaking the contact Bin made with him. “You speak boldly, Moon Bin.”

“Did you not enjoy my words?”

“Oh, I enjoyed them.” Myungjun laughed lightly. “Even if I think you’re wrong, even if I think you’re ridiculous, it is nice to be complimented from time to time.”

Bin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “I will take it upon myself to deliver such compliments to you,” he replied.

He complimented Myungjun every single day.

Often times, Myungjun could be found in the library. Bin would observe him from time to time,
seated by himself as he looked over different types of books. Myungjun was always far too engrossed in his reading to ever notice Bin’s presence, but still, Bin would stare.

The way Myungjun studied was interesting. He sometimes stuck his tongue out in slight concentration. He bent over the books in an awful posture, as if trying to get closer to the information written out on its pages. His hat might be askew or his clothes might be a bit wrinkled, and yet he always looked so beautiful to Bin’s eyes.

One day, Bin couldn’t help but to sit across from Myungjun. The man looked up in surprise, but smiled fondly when he saw who it was.

“Bin,” he greeted, bowing his head slightly before returning back to his book.

Bin had no books of his own. He had come purely to speak with Myungjun. “What are you reading?” Bin questioned, leaning forward so Myungjun would not have to speak as loud.

Myungjun showed him the title of the book: some Confucian text. Boring. Bin had read it ages ago.

“Ah. A book to teach you how to live a structured life. It’s no better than Buddhism.”

Myungjun’s sharp eyes caught Bin’s gaze. He stared for a second or two, then whispered, “Buddhism is banned here. Which is why there are only Confucian books to study from.” He clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “We claim to open up the minds of students, yet we close off important parts of our culture.”

“No better than the heathen white men, are we?”

“No much, no.” Myungjun closed his book and sighed. “Though, despite the shortcomings of this university, it certainly is more sacred than anything the Europeans could put together.”

Bin smirked. “About a hundred years ago, the university was closed and was filled with prostitutes for the king. Imagine what went on right here, right where we’re sitting.”

Myungjun made a face. “I needn’t be reminded of such a sore spot in our country’s past,” he fussed. “Kings are a…” He glanced around to ensure no one was listening, then murmured, “a filthy breed.”

Bin remembered Prince Myungjun. He would have grown up to be a fine king. He would have grown up to be a wonderful king. There would have been no pleasure grounds made from sacred universities, no banning of any one religion, no persecution of those who thought differently.

This Myungjun seemed quite similar in his beliefs and views.

“Humans are a filthy breed,” Bin responded. He also remembered Wangwi and how terrible he was. He remembered those disgusting looters who tried to ruin General Kim’s body. He remembered that false shaman and how he burned the bodies of the living and killed Bin’s best friend.

“Humans just...take and take and take, and when they can no longer take, they kill and kill and kill. It’s an endless cycle. Since the early times, this has been going on, and I doubt there will ever be an end to the greed humans possess.”

Myungjun regarded him with curiosity. “Of course there won’t be an end,” he replied. “Not until humans are gone from the planet. But...you’re quite a bitter person, aren’t you?”
“Me?” Bin scoffed. He earned a nasty glance from another library patron, so he lowered his voice and continued, “You’re the one that says that we’re as bad as the Europeans.”

“Because we are. No one race is better than another. It’s just a fact. But you decided that all humans are bad. I never said that.”

Bin pursed his lips. He wasn’t sure how to respond to the accusation. It was true, what he said; all humans were bad. The only exception to that rule was Myungjun - and, possibly, Jinwoo. How was he to explain himself, though, without giving away his lengthy past?

“I’ve just...experienced all of the worst humans life has to offer.”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows and smirked. “Really? I have not. Therefore, not all humans are bad.”

Bin longed to tell Myungjun that he had experienced the worst. He had suffered greater than most people ever would. He was doomed to die over and over again, and there was nothing he could do to ever stop his deaths.

“Well,” Bin stated, folding his hands in front of him, “at the very least, most all humans are bad. I think there are a few...exceptions. Like yourself.”

Myungjun’s smirk melted into a soft smile. He shook his head, rejecting the notion of his own goodness, and said, “I am like all other humans before me, and I am like all humans that will come after me. I think I’m neither good nor bad - just as you are neither good nor bad.”

“What if I was bad, though?” Bin questioned. He glanced down at Myungjun’s books, the ones that held within them all the knowledge of Confucian scholars, all the thoughts of the human psyche, all the information of good versus evil.

He could feel Myungjun studying him, that sharp gaze boring into his very soul. He shifted uncomfortably as Myungjun assessed his inner self, hopeful that his rotten thoughts and judgement would be hidden well enough.

Perhaps they were, for Myungjun said, “I don’t think you have the capability for bad.”

Bin sighed. He couldn’t agree with Myungjun. As a soldier alongside General Kim, he had killed other men simply to protect his own kingdom, which ended up falling despite his best efforts. He had taken these men and murdered them, depriving a nation of its soldier or a wife of her husband or, gods forbid, a son of his father. He had taken pleasure in those killings after General Kim had died. That one looter was the first man Bin was happy to kill. He recalled how satisfying it was to hear that disgusting, horrible man choke on his own blood.

Bin had left him to a slow and agonizing death, stuck in the ground with a heavy sword.

He also remembered the brutal death he brought upon Wangwi. He still believed Wangwi deserved it, every last bit of it, but he had felt pleasure when he noticed just how much he had ruined that man. His head was bashed in and his blood was splattered against Bin’s clothes, and all Bin could think at that moment was, good riddance. Were men supposed to feel happy at the horrid deaths of other men?

He recalled, too, the slaves he bought and sold with little regard to their well-being. He would sleep with the women sometimes, and he would hit the men sometimes. Of course, he hadn’t raised a hand against them ever since he hit Jinwoo.
Jinwoo offered up the prime example for the case of Bin’s depravity. He was a friend, yet Bin continuously regarded him as an untouchable citizen. Bin reminded him of that on many occasions after Jinwoo would speak out of turn. At the time, he thought he was doing what all slave owners ought to do, and perhaps it was what all slave owners ought to do, but Jinwoo wasn’t just a slave. Jinwoo was a friend, a best friend, and in return for all he had done, Bin had bullied him and hit him and, as his final act, had allowed Jinwoo to die at the hands of that fake shaman.

He had inadvertently killed his best friend. Even if he ignored the gross immortality of all his other wrongdoings, he could never push Jinwoo’s death from his mind. It had been his fault - and in the end, Jinwoo hadn’t even died honorably. He died for a child who would not live another hour. He died by the hands of a conman, with Bin watching. He died-

“Are you okay?”

Myungjun’s concerned voice broke through Bin’s self-deprecating thoughts. When Bin snapped his head back up to look over, Myungjun was staring at him now with worry. He had leaned forward and reached a hand out to grasp onto Bin’s arm. “Bin?”

“What?”

It was then Bin realized how wet his eyes had gotten, and how wet his cheeks were slowly becoming with the tears that dripped down his skin. He blinked rapidly and whispered, “Sorry. It’s...I’m so sorry. I didn’t- I was just-”

“It’s alright,” Myungjun murmured. He squeezed Bin’s arm and offered him another smile. “Bin, we’re friends, right?”

Bin struggled not to keep crying.

“And friends can tell each other all about their emotions. Tell me what you feel.”

Myungjun’s hand was so soft and gentle. He was so soft and gentle. Bin’s heart pounded with love for this man seated in front of him, and he murmured, “I feel...regret. I feel, too, pleasure.”

“A sea of emotions,” Myungjun commented. He glanced around them, at the quiet of the library, and then stood. “Why don’t we talk outside?” he suggested. “Less prying eyes will be there, and if need be, I’ll allow you to scream out your frustrations to the world.”

Bin longed to scream out his love for Myungjun to the world. He also longed to curse the gods who had granted him immortality and, thus, ruined his life, but he couldn’t do that while Myungjun was still very much unaware of who he truly was.

Still, he appreciated the chance to be alone with Myungjun, and so he, too, stood from his spot. “Alright,” he agreed.

Myungjun linked arms with him and grinned. “Good,” he said, “because you have become dear to me, and if you are unhappy, so I shall be, too.”

Bin loved him.

Bin always would love him.
Killing a human had not been as honorable as Bin assumed it would be. General Kim had talked about it with little care, and the other soldiers still laughed and joked after the battle, indifferent to the many dead men that lay in the field beside their encampment. One of the soldiers invited Bin to drink with the rest of them, but he had merely smiled and said, “I’m a little tired, so I think I might lay down.”

They left him, believing his lie, and the moment he was alone in his tent, he burst into tears.

He could still remember the look on the young man’s face he had stabbed. The look of pain and shock, the sputtered breath he gave before Bin tugged the sword from his small body.

He was probably fifteen. Bin had killed him.

He was the first man Bin had struck, and he couldn’t stop shaking. On the battlefield, he had to keep moving, fueled with adrenaline and fear, but now that he was alone, that one face remained at the forefront of his mind, and he could finally sit and realize what he had done.

He killed him.

Bin slid down to his knees and sobbed. He felt like gagging; he felt like his stomach was rolling and turning and twisting, but he couldn’t bring himself to do anything about it.

“Oh, gods,” he whispered, rocking himself back and forth.

He was a killer. There was no other way to describe his actions. Though it was his duty, though it was for the protection of his nation, though he served his king well, his instincts still reminded him of how wrong it all was.

“Bin?” he heard a voice calling to him, and he rushed to wipe his tears and lay himself down.

“Bin, are you alright?”

It was Myungjun’s voice, as clear and as bright as it always was, but Bin didn’t perk up as he normally would upon hearing it. He remained on the small blanket he had to sleep with, eyes closed, trying to pretend as if he was resting.

Myungjun entered the tent. Bin could hear him, once more, whisper, “Bin, is everything okay? The other soldiers told me that you are sick.”

Bin didn’t move.

Myungjun moved in closer to him before sitting down. Bin wondered why he couldn’t just leave, why he couldn’t just understand Bin’s desire to be alone.

He felt a hand come up and rub at his back.

“You know,” Myungjun murmured, “when I was young and idealistic, I was involved in my first battle. That was the battle where I was recognized for my skill and courage and quick-thinking. Everyone congratulated me. Everyone thanked me. I was seen as valuable and-and indispensable to the eyes of my superiors. Yet, when all the men had cleared away and I was left to myself, I couldn’t stop crying. I had killed people. I had struck down these men who were just doing their jobs, same as I was, and I had killed them. Of course, I told myself all sorts of things - I would’ve
died had I not done such a thing, they were for the other side so they must be evil, I was ordered to do so. None of it brought me much peace.

“It’s still hard, Bin, to kill people, but it’s the way the world works. The gods gave us the ability to use our best judgement. We kill, but we must understand that all those men who die come back as something better in their next life. If they were good people, then the gods will bless them, and in their next life, they will not die by the sword. The gods understand that the world is not perfect, that sometimes we must do our duty for our nation. We must kill. But we pray to the gods. We ask for forgiveness for our deeds. If we are defending our own people, then the gods will forgive us. If we only kill in the heat of battle, the gods will understand. They will grant the dead happier lives when they return.”

His hand moved up to run through Bin’s hair. “So, Bin, please do not cry for too long. These men would not wish for you to cry, either, for they will return and be satisfied with their new and improved lives.”

Bin could not keep his tears in check as he listened to Myungjun speak. He couldn’t stop imagining the dead out on the field, and even as he tried to pretend to be asleep, he cried. His body shook with sobs and he buried his face into his blanket.

“Oh, darling,” Myungjun whispered, bending over to hug Bin. “It’s alright. Please cry. Let it out. I will never judge you for being sad over your actions.”

Bin grasped onto Myungjun and sobbed into his chest. He knew, in the back of his mind, things might be bleak for now, but at the very least, he would always have Myungjun to comfort him.

Always, always, always.

Students had graduated from their classes and so the university had elected to take a formal break. This allowed many students to move back home and help their families during cold, winter months, and it allowed for the instructors to finally relax, as well. Bin was happy enough to get the chance to spend time with Myungjun, and he made such a thing clear as he helped Myungjun clear out his classroom.

“The only thing better in life than teaching is being around you,” he commented, smiling widely as Myungjun handed over a few manuscripts.

“You’re a first-year instructor, correct?” Myungjun asked.

“I am!” Bin exclaimed. He tucked compositions cleanly inside the trunk and then glanced over at Myungjun. “How long have you been here?”

“Three years,” Myungjun replied.

“Mm. What’s better than teaching, for you?”

Myungjun glanced over at his zither. It was not nearly as ornate as Prince Myungjun’s had been, but it still held its own beauty with it. “Playing instruments,” was Myungjun’s response.
A bit disappointed that he wasn’t better than teaching, Bin pouted. He still fished for compliments. “Objects aside - if you could spend time with any one in the world, who would it be?”

Myungjun had an instant answer that, once more, displeased Bin: “Zeami Motokiyo.”

Bin sighed loudly. “I should hope that it would be me.”

“Oh, don’t be such a bother, Bin. You’re lovely, but you asked if I could spend time with anyone. I mean no offense, but you surely cannot be as interesting as Motokiyo.”

Bin begged to differ, but he made no notion to argue Myungjun’s point. He had to remind himself that this Myungjun was different from the others. He seemed to keep his distance, despite claiming to love Bin, and chose instead to focus on his friendliness rather than any sort of romantic intimacy. Still, the words he said and some actions he performed led Bin to believe that this Myungjun still must love him. It was likely part of the curse placed upon him by the gods - Myungjun would always love him, just as he would always love Myungjun.

To appease the man, he smiled and said, “Well, then, why is Motokiyo so interesting to you?”

“He wrote many plays that are still famous in Japan today. He was a gifted musician and such an interesting man.” Myungjun looked fascinated. His eyes were wide and sparkled with such profound knowledge. His hands grasped onto Bin’s with little hesitation, too, and he whispered, “In truth, this world is not eternally inhabited. It is more transient than dewdrops on the leave of grass, or the moon reflected in the water.”

Bin blinked, then asked, “I’m not familiar with Japanese plays, but I assume this is one of them?”

Myungjun pursed his lips and dropped Bin’s hands. “You would do well to learn more about such plays, Instructor Moon. It’s from one of his more famous plays, Atsumori, and—”

“Oh! I do know that!” It had been quite some time since Bin read the play. It was hundreds of years old, and because of its irrelevance to daily life, Bin mostly had forgotten about it. However, the name spurred memories within him, and Bin murmured, “Human life only lasts fifty years. Contrast human life with life of Geten, it is but a very dream and illusion.”

“You do know it!” Myungjun exclaimed cheerfully, and before Bin could respond, he continued the verse. “Once they are given life from god, there is no such thing as perish. Unless we consider this a very seed of awakening, it is a grievous truth indeed.” Having finished the verse, Myungjun grinned and said, “Isn’t it lovely?”

“It’s…” Bin swallowed thickly. He had never bothered to learn the Korean behind the Japanese verses. It was only now, speaking it with Myungjun, that it gained new meaning to him. “Myungjun, Geten is...what is that?”

“Oh, I don’t suppose you would know.” Myungjun packed away the last of his belongings and explained, “It is a world full of greed and suffering. The verse is how...how we live to be only fifty or so, but the people in Geten live to be eight thousand. It’s a warning for us, not to let desire and human selfishness take control of our lives.”

Bin stared at the ornate decorations on Myungjun’s chest. He felt within him an unpleasant feeling stirring in his gut.

Were the gods forcing him to live out his years on this stupid, imaginary planet? Was he the only one that existed in this odd place? Was he actually living through a hell on Earth brought about by his greed and desires?
But, again, he asked himself the same question he had asked many times: what could he have done so wrong that warranted such a punishment?

“Bin?” Myungjun muttered. “You’re doing it again - you’re staring off into space again. Are you alright?”

Bin sighed. “Yes,” he said. He slammed Myungjun’s chest close, eliciting a slight jump from the man beside him. “I’m just...ashamed of the damn gods of our world.”

“Bin-”

“I would burn them all if I could,” he continued, noticing the look of horror on Myungjun’s face.

“You don’t mean that. They could punish you-”

“And I’d very well let them. I’ll piss on their sacrifices and destroy their sacred books.”

“Bin, don’t talk like that.”

“There’s nothing more they can do to me,” Bin snapped. “Killing me now would be mercy - a slow death would be mercy. Fuck the gods.”

Myungjun’s eyes were fearful as he stared upon Bin, but at that moment, Bin couldn’t bring himself to care about offending Myungjun. All he cared about was the knowledge that he was facing the wrath of the gods for something he likely did not do. He was being punished for something he couldn’t even remember.

It was not fair, not at all, and to ensure he didn’t make a greater fool of himself in front of Myungjun, he quickly stormed off.

He needed to find one of the remaining temples. He would desecrate it to his heart’s content.

He hoped it would anger the gods. He hated them.

Oddly enough, Myungjun never once mentioned Bin’s outburst. The next time they ran into each other, Bin steeled himself for an anxious stare or else a harsh lecture, but Myungjun instead smiled at him and greeted, “Good afternoon, Bin!”

So things were normal, then. Things were fine. Bin longed to ask what Myungjun had thought of such words, but he didn’t know how to bring it up. He didn’t know how to ask why Myungjun was okay with everything Bin had said. Myungjun wasn’t extremely religious, but he still held within him the same sort of superstitions that most all others had.

Still, Bin loved Myungjun. He wanted to spend every single waking moment with Myungjun, and he tried his best to.

Myungjun took notice. “It seems you cannot live without me by your side,” he mentioned one day as Bin hurried over to him.
“Of course not; you know that by now.” Bin hooked arms with Myungjun and hummed gently. “Some of the other instructors are heading to a kisaeng house later tonight.”

“How scandalous.”

“They’ve invited me, of course, as I am the youngest and most entertaining of the bunch.”

Myungjun laughed, light and cheerful, and nuded Bin’s chest, though he did not release their intertwined arms. “You’re cheeky.”

Bin grinned. “Well, I would very much like you to come with us.”

Myungjun cocked his head toward Bin. “We’re supposed to be a shining example for the young students that come to us. Galavanting off in the night to be entertained by a bunch of girls does not exactly signify our lofty status.”

“No, but...it might be fun. There will be drinks and good food and the women will dance well for us. Besides, it’s not as if you have to sleep with one! It’s just good fun!”

He awaited Myungjun’s response with baited breath, then released it all in one loud sigh when Myungjun nodded his head. “That’s good!” Bin exclaimed. “I think I would have refused to go if you did, too. Like you said, I cannot live without you by my side.”

Myungjun nuded him again, much to Bin’s enjoyment, but otherwise seemed willing to attend the gathering. He wore his nicest robes, too, which Bin teased him for, asking if Myungjun wanted to look nice for one of the women.

Myungjun instantly denied such a thing, which brightened Bin’s mood. It was growing clear that Myungjun had feelings for him. It was only a matter of time before one of them would snap and admit his feelings.

Bin was hopeful that supplying Myungjun with a hefty amount of alcohol would do the trick.

When they arrived at the kisaeng’s house, his first order of business was to have the women pour Myungjun a drink. The man was quick to swallow what he had in his cup, and Bin willingly paid for another drink, and another drink, and another drink.

Even as the men around drank themselves into oblivion and went off chasing some giggling girl, Myungjun stayed put by Bin’s side.

“You know,” Myungjun stated, finishing his fifth drink and looking a bit drunk, “if I didn’t know any better, I would say this was a ploy to get me filled with alcohol.”

“Possibly,” Bin replied, gesturing for another drink. “Is it working?”

Myungjun thanked the lady who poured him more, then glanced over at Bin. “I wish...I wish it had just been the two of us that came here.”

Bin’s breath caught in his throat. “Really?”

“I...really enjoy being by your side. I don’t very much enjoy the rest of the men. Look, they’ve been ogling at women all night. Half of our group has gone off with one of the kisaengs. The other half are not drunk enough yet to gather courage to do so, but I know soon they will. But you...”

Myungjun stared at Bin, his eyes half-lidded from too many drinks, yet still sparkling and full of life, as they always were. “You’re staying right by my side.”
Myungjun scooted over then, until he was leaning into Bin’s arm. He rest his head onto Bin’s shoulder and sighed happily.

Bin stayed still. Frozen in spot, he couldn’t believe this was actually happening. He had decided to take things slow with this Myungjun, and it appeared that all of his waiting and waiting and waiting had paid off. Willingly, Myungjun was falling for him. Sweetly, Myungjun loved him.

“I think you, Bin, are my favorite human of all time.”

“You...you are mine,” Bin murmured. He ruffled Myungjun’s hair gently. “Darling, are you tired?”

“I’m drunk,” came Myungjun’s blunt response.

“Of course.” Bin gestured for one of the women and asked, “Might we use one of your rooms? He needs to sleep off the alcohol, and the journey home will be too long.”

The woman glanced at Myungjun’s exhausted form, then looked at Bin. “Would you like a kisaeng to accompany you?”

Perhaps just a few years prior, Bin might have said yes. He sought out places like this for quick companionship to last him through the night.

Now, though, he had Myungjun. He needed no one else; just as he was Myungjun’s favorite human, so Myungjun was his.

“No, we do not. Just a place to sleep.”

“I can bring more bedding into the room for yourself, if you would like,” the woman said.

Myungjun was the one to answer. He shook his head, still leaning against Bin, and mumbled, “Don’t bother. We can share.”

Bin blushed, but he tried his best to hide it as he followed the woman down the hallway. He was going to share a bed with Myungjun. He was going to sleep by Myungjun’s side for the first time in hundreds of years. He hadn’t had the chance to be with a grown Myungjun since the Prince - and this would be even better, because of how long it had been and how bitter their partings had become. It was a dream come true, and Bin could hardly contain his excitement as he laid Myungjun down onto the bedding and then plopped down beside him.

“Myungjun?” he whispered, moving some hair off the man’s face.

“Mm?” Myungjun blinked blearily over at him and smiled. “You’re close, Bin.”

Bin was close. He hovered over Myungjun and stared down into his eyes. He was so beautiful. He was so gorgeous. Bin murmured, “I think I love you.”

Myungjun’s grin was dorky and sloppy, and Bin laughed. “Why are you grinning at me like that, darling?”

“Because - because of course you love me. I love you, too.”

The words made Bin’s heart pound. He wanted to cry, he wanted to sob, and he wanted to scream out to the world that Myungjun loved him. Myungjun had fallen in love with him yet again, and Bin had to scream it.

“Kiss me?” Bin whispered, bending down closer.
“I’ve...never kissed a man,” Myungjun admitted. He reached a hand out to play with Bin’s robe. “I’m not very willing to kiss one while I’m this drunk. I shall do it later. Just sleep with me for now, alright?”

Bin reminded himself that he had to take the relationship slow. This Myungjun was more practical than the others were. He was older, too, a bit wiser, less inclined to act solely on his emotions. Bin knew better than to push him into anything he did not wish to do.

So instead he settled down and pulled Myungjun into his chest. Myungjun smelled of alcohol and sweat and some sort of lavender oil.

He was perfect, and Bin whispered his love until they both were pulled into the night’s embrace.

A new batch of students had arrived from various affluent places. As before, they only focused on bettering their political or social upbringing. Interpretation was a skill that was necessary but not very well liked.

Bin greeted them politely on his first day of class. He looked out over the classroom, sending a few nods to some of the students as they filed in, but froze when he realized he recognized a face.

It had been many years since he had seen the man, but years do not take away the memory of a horrible shaman.

*Dongmin*.

Why was Dongmin here? He was evil and crude. He was scum, pure scum, and Bin hated him.

The rational part of his mind told him that if Myungjun could be reborn over and over again with the same body and face, then so could Dongmin.

Which meant if Myungjun could be reborn over and over again with the same views and beliefs and mindsets, then so could Dongmin.

This Myungjun loved him, as all the others before him had.

By that logic, this Dongmin was a murderer, as the other before him was.

Bin watched him throughout the class, waiting for his despicable nature to rise up. Unfortunately, he seemed smart and eager to learn. Unlike many of the other students, he asked questions and took notes and was very well-prepared for the lessons.

Still, Bin hated him.

He knew there was evil within Dongmin. He was so sure of it. The shaman he had met had hid his issues well enough, which meant that this Dongmin surely was hiding things well enough, too.

He brought the issue up to Myungjun one evening as his lover was bent over looking over composition notes. Short of bringing up his name and his past life, Bin explained the problem the best he could.
Myungjun scoffed.

“So he hasn’t done anything bad - you said he’s actually an exceptional student - but you know he’s bad?”

Bin sighed and murmured, “It sounds foolish when you say it like that.”

“Because it is foolish, Bin. You can’t just assume a student is bad without any sort of evidence.” He sat up and nudged Bin’s shoulder. “Here, tell me what this says. It’s in Italian and I cannot decipher it.”

“I ought to teach you languages so that your job will be easier,” Bin stated, but he did as Myungjun asked. He always did as Myungjun asked. “You owe me.”

“Of course, of course. I’m forever in your debt, Bin. What would you like from me?”

“A kiss.”

Laughter spilled forth from Myungjun’s mouth. “Be serious, Bin, what would you like?”

It was confusing; the relationship was confusing. They had not kissed or embraced or confessed their love again since that one night when Myungjun became drunk. Whenever Bin brought it up, Myungjun skirted around any sort of conversation pertaining to his actions or words.

By all accounts, they should be a couple, yet Myungjun acted as if he did not wish to be in a relationship. Bin had to wonder if the pressure of being a same-sex couple had gotten to him.

He knew they ought to discuss things, but Myungjun, once more, changed the topic.

“Anyway,” he said, before Bin could get a word in, “My students are wonderful. They’re all very willing to learn and very excited to learn. Music reaches the hearts of all, though, so I’m not particularly surprised. In any case, I don’t have any potentially evil students sitting in my class.”

“Hilarious,” Bin dryly responded. “When this student tries to murder me, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Dongmin, however, never once tried to do anything out of the ordinary. On the contrary - he was friendly to his fellow students, even going so far as to break social and political boundaries by talking to the students who had less money or came from less affluent families. He smiled easily and worked hard and his intelligence was quite impressive.

He translated things correctly. In fact, out of all of Bin’s students, Dongmin was the only one who had managed to complete an interpretation assignment without any flaws.

It was perfect work. It was work Bin hadn’t seen in years and years and years.

And it came from Dongmin.

Bin stared at the parchment sheet in front of him, rage seething in his mind. Dongmin did not deserve a high grade. Dongmin did not deserve his praise or affection. Dongmin was nothing but a murderer - he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He was trying to deceive everyone around him.

It wasn’t going to work. Bin could see right through his lies and falsehoods.

He found things to judge on the paper. A little ink blot there called for a deduction of points. A lopsided word required a full note on how unprofessional the penmanship was. Bin found
grammatical errors where there would otherwise be none, and he soon marked up the paper as much as he possibly could.

He was satisfied with his work, but he was more satisfied with the way Dongmin’s face fell the moment he received his paper. Clearly he assumed it was remarkable and perfect, but Bin knew otherwise. Bin smiled to himself as he took his place at the head of the classroom.

“I was impressed with much of the work I saw,” he congratulated the students. “You have all proven your worth. Of course, there are exceptions to that rule.” Bin turned toward Dongmin. The other boys glanced back in confusion, as well, and Dongmin shrunk under the weight of so many gazes directed at him.

“Lee Dongmin? I expected much better from you. You first seemed confident in your skills and so I had assumed that your paper would be perfect, but as you can see, it’s far from perfect. It is not even good. It’s subpar work. It’s embarrassing.”

Dongmin was floundering. His mouth was open in shock and his eyes were wide as he stared back at Bin.

“Perhaps if you put as much effort into your studying as you do preparing your hair every morning, then I would not have to chastise you in front of the entire class.”

Students jeered. They giggled to themselves and nudged each other, their faces conveying the exact same thing: think goodness it’s him and not me.

Dongmin stayed still for the rest of the class period, the paper gripped in his hands and his face alight with shame.

When Bin dismissed the students, Dongmin still sat there, aghast at what his perfect paper had been reduced to.

Bin sighed. “Dongmin, please exit my classroom.”

Dongmin glanced over at him. “I didn’t do this bad.”

“Oh, obviously you did. If you look at my notes-”

“Your notes are wrong.”

Bin had not ever heard such blatant disrespect from one of his students. He was shocked for a moment, taken back, but reminded himself that this was Dongmin. Of course Dongmin would be disrespectful towards him. Dongmin was pure evil, and he was finally showing his true colors.

“My notes are not wrong,” he snapped. “I have been doing this for far longer than you could ever imagine. I graded you on your ability to do the work well and you failed.”

“I had another instructor look this paper over for me!” Dongmin exclaimed. “An instructor that has been here for longer than you! He said it was perfect.”

“He was wrong,” Bin said.

“Instructor Kim was not wrong.”

Bin blinked. Instructor Kim? There were a few Kims at the university, but none of them were proficient in interpretation. Then there was, of course, Myungjun, who also went by Instructor
Kim, but surely he wouldn’t help Dongmin with a paper relating to the Japanese language. Sure, he knew Japanese, but so did many other instructors.

It wasn’t Myungjun. Dongmin had tried to kill Myungjun. Myungjun would never help him. Myungjun would never trust him.

“I’m sure Instructor Kim is not knowledgeable on this language.”

“He is. He reads plays and music in Japanese.”

Bin’s heart was racing. His mind was a muddled mess. “Is...wait...did you get, um, Instructor Kim of the music department to read this over for you?”

Dongmin’s gaze was defiant. “Yes. And he said it was perfect and that you would be a fool not to say the same.”

Bin wanted to vomit.

They had yet to speak about Dongmin.

Bin wanted to bring it up. He was spending all day long with Myungjun, and yet his nerves would get the best of him anytime he even considered mentioning Dongmin’s name. He didn’t want to hear praises. He didn’t want to hear compliments. In fact, he didn’t even want to hear Dongmin’s name spoken from Myungjun’s mouth. It was too vile a thought, and so Bin decided it might be best to stay silent on the matter.

Myungjun glanced over at him and asked, “Bin?”

“Hm?”

“You’ve done nothing for the past hour. I thought you were going to put together a lesson plan.”

Myungjun looked confused and concerned. It was sweet. Bin tried to calm his frustration by reminding himself that Myungjun loved him, and even Dongmin could not come between them this time. Bin would kill Dongmin the moment he acted out of line. He wouldn’t feel any remorse, either.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned his attention to the parchment paper he was scribbling ideas on. “My mind is preoccupied,” he explained.

Myungjun nodded, but it seemed he was not yet done speaking. “Have any of your new students caught your eye?”

“No.”

“What a pity.” Myungjun clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Several of mine are wonderfully gifted men. I’m proud to be teaching them. They are the future, after all, and if they can spread my knowledge out to the rest of the world, I can die fulfilled.”
Bin thought of death often. He had given up wondering why death evaded him. He accepted that he was simply cursed and would never die.

Myungjun, though, would die, and Bin’s chest tightened. He wondered how he would die this time. He wondered if Dongmin would have some sort of play in Myungjun’s next death. He prayed for something non-violent. He prayed for something peaceful.

He prayed for no death at all.

“How about disappointments?” Myungjun suddenly questioned. “Are there any boys in your class who have disappointed you with their work?”

Bin’s mind lingered on Dongmin. “Um...one,” he muttered. “But it’s fine. I’ll mold him, or…” He left off his own thoughts, of ridding the world of Dongmin once more. He would very much like to see Dongmin die, preferably by his own hands, but it would be difficult to do without any sort of indication that this Dongmin was evil.

Bin wanted to kill him, even if he was good. Likely, some evil still lingered inside of his reincarnated soul. Likely, he would still need to pay for his crimes hundreds of years ago. Bin wanted to bring justice to poor Jinwoo and Myungjun.

“Or, what?” Myungjun asked, seemingly curious. “Will you kick him out of the school if he doesn’t do better?”

That was easier to agree to, and so Bin nodded. “Something like that.”

“I’ll tell him to make sure his next paper is infallible,” Myungjun said. “Obviously something in this paper upset you.”

Bin nodded again, but then froze. Myungjun knew it was a paper. Myungjun knew it was graded poorly.

Myungjun knew just which student Bin hated.

“You know about that?” he asked, looking up at his lover. “About...Dongmin?”

“Yes. He actually had me look over that paper before he handed it to you. I’m...confused. Why did you grade it so terribly? It looked very nice to me. I’m not experienced in Japanese, but I know enough that your marks didn’t make any sense.” Myungjun closed the book he was going through and raised his eyebrows. “So? What happened? Why do you hold a grudge against such a wonderful student?”

Bin tried his best to swallow past the lump that was forming in his throat. “Wonderful?”

“He’s one of the most gifted musicians I’ve seen,” Myungjun answered as if it was obvious. “He’s talented and very intelligent in all of his subjects. I’ve spoken to a few other professors here in order to inquire more about him, and he’s adored by every single teacher he’s made contact with. Except for you.”

Myungjun didn’t appear angry. He looked curious still, cocking his head as he awaited some sort of response. He still wanted to understand, but Bin knew he could never understand this grudge. Bin knew he would sound crazy if he brought anything up about their intertwined past lives.

Instead, he mumbled, “Something about him rubs me the wrong way. It’s as if he...he holds within him some sort of evil.”
Myungjun gave a snort. “Some sort of evil. Right.”

“I’m not lying! I sense something in him, and I feel as if it’s my duty to ensure the protection of other students and...other professors. If I just allow him to succeed, he might do something drastic.”

“You can’t sense an evil within some kid who’s hardly of age. That’s rotten.” Myungjun pursed his lips and leaned forward, examining Bin. “Did something happen between the two of you?”

“Nothing. Yet. I’m just taking precautionary measures.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes. “Dongmin seems to think that he’s done something to upset you. He’s distraught that a professor does not like him and can give no reason. Are you sure he’s done nothing wrong?”

“Wait.” Bin had to take a second or two to process Myungjun’s words. So Dongmin had been speaking to Myungjun about the graded paper? Had they continued their discussions? How long had they been talking, and why was Bin only hearing about it just then? He asked as such, “Do you and Dongmin have conversations?”

“Of course! I told you he’s one of my best students. Probably my favorite, if I must be honest. He approached me and asked for me to look over his paper. He was excited to turn it into you, and when you graded too harshly, he came to me to ask what could be done.” Myungjun appeared nonchalant about the entire situation. He smiled and said, “We’ve spoken a few more times since then about you. I’ve assured Dongmin that you do not hate him, that perhaps you were just in an unpleasant mood. Were you in an unpleasant mood, Bin?”

Bin had no clue what else to say. The fact that Dongmin and Myungjun had been speaking - likely alone, too - made his skin crawl. He had no idea what Dongmin was planning except that he certainly wasn’t going to do any good in this world, and if he dragged Myungjun down with him, then Bin would ensure his demise.

“I...guess I might have been having a bad day,” he said. It wasn’t entirely untrue; his mood had permanently soured since Dongmin’s arrival. It had really taken a downfall upon discovering that Myungjun and Dongmin were, oddly enough, friends now.

Myungjun reached forward and grasped onto Bin’s hand. Bin stared at him, then down at their hands, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“Reminding you of our friendship,” Myungjun replied. “Bin, when you are having a bad day, please come to me. I want to help you feel better, and I will do that in any way possible.”

Bin tried to smile. It fell flat, and Myungjun narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “It wasn’t just a bad day, though, was it. It was a bad week?”

“Bad month,” Bin mumbled.

“Oh.”

It was silent at first, Bin wallowing in his grief and Myungjun watching him. Then, there was the sound of shuffling as Myungjun moved to get closer to Bin. He wrapped Bin into his arms, embracing him tightly, and rested Bin’s head onto his chest. Bin could feel his heart beating, still very much well, still very much alive.

He brought his own hands up, trying desperately to pull Myungjun closer to him, though there was
nothing between them save for the clothes they wore.

“Aww, Bin,” Myungjun cooed quietly, running his fingers through Bin’s hair. “Please don’t be upset any longer, alright?”

Myungjun’s body was small in his grip, but still so familiar. Bin thought of General Kim, and of Prince Myungjun, and he felt like crying. Myungjun was back in his arms and he could barely stand to believe it.

“I love you, Myungjun.”

Myungjun laughed and rested his cheek atop Bin’s head. “Of course you do,” he answered.

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Despite their shared moment, Bin still hated Dongmin. He hated hearing him and seeing him - he hated the mere thought of him being close by. At first, he tried his best to just ignore Dongmin’s existence, but it became increasingly more difficult to.

He was experiencing nightmares. Nightmares were the norm whenever Myungjun was no longer around, but he shouldn’t be having such horrible dreams now since he and Myungjun had found each other again. He shouldn’t be dreaming of Myungjun’s death over and over.

He did, though. Myungjun constantly died in Bin’s awful nightmares, usually cut down by Dongmin himself. Bin would wake up in a sweat, gasping out Myungjun’s name as he tried to rid his mind of those images.

Dongmin slashing his throat.

Dongmin infecting him with disease.

Dongmin burning him alive, his little limbs black with soot and sickness.

Bin grew to hate Dongmin all the more, and he made sure it was known to the other students and professors. He made up lie after lie and would whisper it in passing or else at dinners and other meals.

According to Bin, Dongmin impregnated a poor girl and left her.

According to Bin, Dongmin had a sister who married a butcher.

According to Bin, Dongmin had sympathies with the Japanese.

Each lie worked to destroy Dongmin’s reputation, until soon it seemed that Dongmin had very little friends or allies within the school.

Bin was proud of himself. He held such sick satisfaction seeing Dongmin so forlorn and alone. Even Myungjun had ceased talking of him, only mentioning once that the rumors seemed a bit outlandish.

“Which is why they must be true,” Bin pointed out.
“Mmhmm,” was Myungjun’s only response before changing subjects and begging Bin to go out drinking with him again.

In any case, Dongmin seemed to take all of the criticisms sent his way. He accepted the mean remarks and lies as if they were truth. He kept his head down and did his work. If not for his ruined reputation, Bin was certain he would be the most intelligent student in the school. As it was, professors graded him just as harshly as Bin did, and soon his grades dropped significantly.

Still, he made no arguments until one day, a few months later, as he sat still while everyone else dismissed themselves for the day.

Bin sighed heavily. “Dongmin, please leave.”

“Why do you hate me so much?” was Dongmin’s question.

Bin spared him a glance. He looked miserable, sitting there with anxiety written all over his face, with downcast eyes and dark circles from a clear lack of sleep. “What do you mean?” Bin asked.

“Why do you hate me so much?” Dongmin repeated himself.

“Explain.”

“You’re the one who’s said such horrible things of me,” Dongmin said. He sounded desperate. “I know you are. I’ve traced every single nasty rumor right back to you. You’ve told nothing but lies concerning my character and my past and my family, and I have no idea what on earth I’ve done to upset you so much. I’ve tried my best, even as you’ve turned my classmates against me. I haven’t complained. I haven’t so much as looked at you, and yet you’re intent on ruining my life.”

Dongmin stood and drew closer to Bin. “Please, just tell me why.”

Now that he was only a few feet away, Dongmin noticed, too, how young he was. He wasn’t the shaman that Bin knew from so long ago. He was a young man who had yet to come of age. He was smaller than the shaman, less charming, less devious.

Bin felt a stab of pity and guilt hit him, but he tried his best to brush it all away. “I have no clue how you traced those rumors back to me. I am above such hostility.”

“You’re not. I know it was you. Other people told me that they’ve heard it all from you.”

When Bin said nothing to refute Dongmin’s words, Dongmin tried again. “If I’ve done anything at all to upset you, please let me know. I’ll fix it. I promise.”

Bin barked out bitter laughter and stated, “You can’t fix what you’ve done.”

“I can try! If you let me know, I can take responsibility for it!”

The pity and guilt were washed away, replaced by anguish. Bin remembered Myungjun laying in that fire. Bin remembered the smoke and the ash and the burning bodies all around him. His stomach turned and he felt ill to his stomach.

Dongmin had been so willing to murder a child. Dongmin had been so willing to stab an innocent slave. There was no way this Dongmin could atone for the sins he committed in his previous life. It was silly to even try.

However, there was one thing that might make Bin feel better. He thought for a second before tapping his finger against his desk. “Alright,” he murmured. “I wish for you to drop out of the
music department and to never again speak with Myungjun.”

Dongmin blanched. “What?”

“I know that you two have been speaking. Or, at least, I know you two had been seeing each other outside of the classroom.” He remembered Myungjun’s defense of Dongmin and his blood boiled in frustration. “I know, and so I would like for you to cease all contact with him.”

The young boy in front of him looked terrified. “You know?”

“Of course I know. Myungjun told me. We’re very close, after all.”

Dongmin stumbled backwards. His breath came out short. “He told me he wouldn’t tell.”

“Well, he did.” Bin snorted and rolled his eyes. “And I suppose he has still been seeing you, hasn’t he? Throughout all this, have you two been confiding in each other? I thought at first it was a one-time thing, but I see I’m mistaken.”

So Dongmin and Myungjun were still close. Perhaps Myungjun was his only friend in the entire school. How wretched.

Dongmin took another step back. “You...no, we...haven’t been seeing each other. Only in class. I only ask him questions.” Before Bin could get another word in, Dongmin blurted out, “You cannot tell, or else neither of us will survive the outcome!”

His words were strange. They seemed rather ominous. But before Bin could ask about what Dongmin meant, the boy had rushed away, gathering his materials and scurrying out of the room.

Bin huffed loudly and flopped backwards onto the ground.

He had gotten nowhere and had accomplished nothing.

Myungjun stared at Bin with large, round eyes. His fingers gripped at the door and his tongue darted out nervously to wet at his lips.

“Hello,” Bin said, nodding his head in greeting. “What’s, um...what’s going on? Why can’t I come in?”

“I’m a bit busy at the moment,” Myungjun replied as he tried to shut the door.

Bin reached out a hand to stop it from sliding shut. “I won’t bother you. I just...I need some company at the moment, and you’re the only person I’d like to spend my time with.”

Myungjun cleared his throat. “I have someone else in my room I’m speaking with.”

Bin tried to foster the bit of jealousy that was rising up within him. He didn’t want Myungjun speaking to anyone else. He only wanted Myungjun to speak to him.

“I won’t bother whoever else you have inside your room,” he promised. “Please, just let me in. I...I
need to be in proximity of you. I’m not having a good day.”

He had been having bad days ever since Dongmin came to the school, but his mood had nosedived since he learned Dongmin and Myungjun were still talking. It wasn’t fair that this Myungjun was friendly with Dongmin. Dongmin was evil. Dongmin was horrid. Even if he had no recollection of his previous life, Bin knew it was somewhere deep inside of him, roaring and hollering to be released.

Bin just didn’t want Myungjun to be in the way when Dongmin revealed his true intentions.

Myungjun sighed and glanced behind him. He seemed to be contemplating something, but finally he opened his door fully and allowed Bin the opportunity to step inside.

The guest was Dongmin.

Dongmin sat there at Myungjun’s table, a steaming cup of tea in front of him and a guilty expression on his face. He only met Bin’s eyes once, and then he looked away, focusing instead on his drink.

“Why is he here?” Bin snapped, glancing over at Myungjun.

“I told you, I have someone I’m speaking with.”

“But why are you speaking with him? Surely you two speak enough.”

Myungjun winced. He grabbed onto Bin’s arm, leading him over to the table, and he stammered out, “It’s...about, um, about different compositions. That’s all this time. I swear it of you, Bin.”

Bin clenched his fists and whispered, “I told you before, Myungjun, he is untrustworthy and should not be allowed to sit this close to you. Something is not right with him, and...should a student even be in your room? I thought that was against the rules.”

Myungjun smiled nervously. “Well...you won’t tell on me, will you?”

The last thing Bin would ever want to do would be to ruin Myungjun’s life. If he told, then Myungjun could likely be kicked from his profession. Knowing how hard Myungjun worked to become a professor, Bin could do nothing but nod his head in agreement. “I won’t,” he confirmed, “but you shouldn’t be meeting with him. You know how I feel-”

“I know,” Myungjun interrupted him, smoothing down Bin’s overcoat. “Just promise me you won’t tell anyone that Dongmin and I have been...meeting to discuss compositions.”

Bin sighed loudly. He turned his attention to Dongmin, who still refused to look over at him.

“Fine,” Bin mumbled.

Myungjun grinned, and Bin’s heart raced faster in his chest. He loved making Myungjun happy. Even if it meant that Myungjun and Dongmin were becoming friends, at least Myungjun was happy. Bin would just have to keep a very close eye on Dongmin.

“Perhaps,” Bin whispered, “you should also invite me over when he comes by.”

Myungjun hesitated, glancing over at Dongmin. “For...studying purposes?”

“Do you two meet for any other reason?”
“No,” Dongmin blurted out, shaking his head with confidence. “I just really need help with my compositions sometimes.” When he noticed both Myungjun and Bin now staring at him, he shifted uncomfortably where he sat on the floor and murmured, “If you come around more, Professor Moon, perhaps you will also come to the realization that I’m not nearly as awful as you’ve been making me out to be.”

Bin scoffed. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Dongmin was still as awful as he remembered. People just didn’t change like that; Myungjun had remained the same even through all of his reincarnations. He was still smart and logical, romantic and sweet, still very much in love with Bin. Myungjun was the same, and therefore Dongmin was the same.

Regardless, he had a mission to ensure Myungjun’s safety, and if that entailed sitting alongside Dongmin, then so be it.

Bin sat down beside Dongmin, making certain that they didn’t touch at all. He felt a little sick, being so close to the man who killed Jinwoo, and so he kept his eyes trained solely on Myungjun, who sat across from the both of them with an awkward smile. “Well,” he said. “This is, um...fun.”

“You two can continue your talk on compositions,” Bin replied. “Just pretend I don’t exist.”

Myungjun turned his gaze toward Dongmin, who quickly averted his own eyes. A blush spread across the student’s face and he coughed into his hands.

“Actually,” Dongmin murmured, “I should be going now. I have...I have a lot of different things to do.”

“Yes! You are very busy!” Myungjun exclaimed. “Please walk safely to the dorms, Dongmin!”

Dongmin barely took the time to acknowledge him. He bowed to Bin, bowed to Myungjun, and then hurried out of the room.

Bin watched him leave, watched as the door closed, and couldn’t shake the feeling that something weird had just happened. But what was it? Were Dongmin and Myungjun really discussing compositions?

Maybe Dongmin just felt uncomfortable around him. There was never any sort of pleasantries exchanged from the first day they met, after all, so there was likely no reason for Dongmin to stay.

“Well, now it’s just us. Which is fine. More than fine, really.” Myungjun laughed and stood. “Shall I get you some tea, Bin?”

Bin tore his eyes away from the door. “Oh. Sure. Please.”

Myungjun grinned and then moved over to his teapot on the far side of the room, giving Bin a chance to look around.

Instantly, he noticed a flaw in the otherwise perfect interior of Myungjun’s room. “Darling, your mattress is a wreck.”

Myungjun spun around, his eyes wide. Bin pointed over to the strewn sheets and pillow that had been tossed aside and joked, “I thought you were a clean person, Myungjun.”

Myungjun faltered in his answer. “I...didn’t expect company. Forgot to clean. My mistake.”

And then Myungjun turned back to the teapot and quickly asked, “How have your classes been
Going?

Something was different.

Something was weird.

Myungjun had come home.

He had been visiting some government officials with other authority figures from the army. Apparently, they were to be awarded for their service and they would enjoy a lavish week with the king himself. Bin had been proud and had hardly been able to keep quiet about it. He helped Myungjun to pack his bags, kissing his lover all the while, reminding him just how much he deserved it.

Myungjun had laughed and drew Bin into an embrace. “I’d be nowhere without my soldiers,” he murmured. “Especially you, Bin. I’d be nowhere without you.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’d be just as strong and charismatic and intelligent, even if I pledged my loyalty to Silla.”

“Hmm, maybe,” Myungjun mused as he wrapped his arms around Bin’s wider and larger form. “But I wouldn’t be as happy as I am right now.”

Bin kissed him on the head and whispered, “I will make sure you are always happy.”

So it was with longing in his heart that he waved goodbye to Myungjun as he left, and it was with anticipation that he awaited Myungjun’s return.

He had counted down the days and had made himself look as handsome as possible, and finally the time had come.

Myungjun came home.

Bin stood right outside of Myungjun’s house, body perking up whenever he saw anyone coming around the path. He would wait until they got closer, and then sag again with the realization that they weren’t Myungjun.

He waited one hour. And then another hour. And then another.

The sun had nearly set by the time he finally saw Myungjun trudging along on his horse. His eyes were downcast, even as he drew nearer to Bin, and he kept his horse at a slow speed.

Bin was the one who hurried forward. He helped Myungjun down from the horse, fingers wrapping around the man’s slender waist. “Myungjun!” he breathed, taking Myungjun’s attention away from the bags still slung over the horse’s rump. “Darling, how I’ve missed you.”

Myungjun looked tired and unsure. He shuffled his feet. He didn’t respond to Bin’s adorations.

“Are you alright?” Bin asked him, lifting his chin up to stare into Myungjun’s eyes. He looked as if
he hadn’t slept all week long. Even his hair, usually immaculately groomed, was in disarray under his hat.

Myungjun, however, nodded. “Fine,” he murmured, grabbing his bags and sidestepping Bin. “I just need to sleep.”

Bin thought it was weird. Bin wondered what had happened. Even when Myungjun was exhausted during battles, even when he hadn’t properly slept for weeks, he still made an effort to smile widely and to kiss Bin. He was never so distant.

Still, Bin could recognize when he needed to take a step back. Myungjun was clearly upset over something, and Bin didn’t want to push him. So he simply grabbed the bags off of Myungjun’s horse and followed his lover inside of the house.

Myungjun didn’t speak to him at all for the rest of the night. He was sullen and silent. He kept his eyes averted at all times, and when Bin touched him, he flinched back.

He did allow Bin to sleep on the mattress with him, but even still, Myungjun kept some space in between their bodies. He was stiff and tense and when Bin whispered, “Good night, Darling, I love you,” Myungjun made no response.

It wasn’t until later on, hours after the sun had set, that Myungjun woke him up with his cries and sobs. Bin had cradled him and asked, “What’s wrong? Please, tell me what’s wrong.”

All Myungjun could blurt out was, “I’m so sorry, Bin!”

The next day, they received word that Silla Kingdom was encroaching on their territory, and Myungjun geared up his men for his final battle.

Bin wasn’t sure why that particular memory was stuck in his mind. He wasn’t sure why he could only remember the tears Myungjun had shed a few weeks before his death. He wasn’t sure why now, all of a sudden, it kept him up at night, tossing and turning on his mattress.

Myungjun was hiding something.

General Kim had a secret that had hurt him. Though he seemed to do better in the weeks that followed (the weeks until his death), though it was something Bin had brushed from his mind at the time, he now, suddenly, couldn’t stop thinking about it.

Myungjun was hiding something.

Myungjun was hiding something.

He sat up in his bed and ran his fingers through his hair.

Just as General Kim had his secrets, so Myungjun had his own. He had been odd recently. He hadn’t spoken as long with Bin, he had been a little flighty when they were together, and he refused to discuss anything that had to do with Dongmin.
Bin sighed heavily and glanced out his window. The moon was bright in the sky. He knew it was late, and yet a desire to figure things out rushed through him. He hadn’t tried to learn what was bothering General Kim. While Myungjun was still alive, though, perhaps Bin could discern a bit of the truth.

He crept from his room, ensuring the door closed softly behind him. He didn’t wish to wake anyone else up, nor did he wish to explain why he was skulking around so early in the morning in an effort to spy on his best friend.

No, this had to remain between himself and Myungjun. He could invite no one else into their complicated history.

The floorboards creaked lightly under his feet, but he paid them no mind. Most people wouldn’t be bothered by a few gentle sounds; those who were would likely believe it was just the wind, or else the dorms settling.

Myungjun’s room wasn’t too far from his own. Bin had walked the hallways enough that he was guided by memory alone, which was useful in the darkness that had swallowed the entire building. Brief glimpses of the moon from windows lit his steps, but it wasn’t nearly enough to keep from stumbling just before the entrance to Myungjun’s room.

He cursed lightly, then glanced down the hallway.

No movement. He hadn’t yet alerted anyone to his sneaking.

Just as well. He sighed and straightened out his robe. He wished he had the time to fix his hair to look a bit nicer, especially since he was about to wake and confront the man he loved. If Myungjun was upset at the intrusion, at least he would have had something to calm him down - Bin’s good looks.

As it was, however, Bin decided to make do, and so he carefully pried the door opened, cracking it ever so slightly so he could peek inside Myungjun’s room.

He heard movement. He heard kissing.

His eyes narrowed in on the bed and realized Myungjun wasn’t alone at all.

His heart hammered in his chest. Myungjun was pinned down by someone. They were kissing heavily; the man’s back was bare, and based on how things were going, Bin was certain that the trousers would soon follow. Myungjun seemed to be enjoying it, if the light moans he gave were any indication of that.

The man trailed his kisses down Myungjun’s jawline, sucking at the skin, leaving little marks behind in his wake. Myungjun was panting and whispered for more.

The man gave him more. More and more and more, until Myungjun’s shirt was splayed open and now he was whining and the man’s touches and little nips.

Bin felt sick to his stomach. He hadn’t expected this. He hadn’t expected to see his lover writhing underneath someone else, lost in the heat of pleasure. Myungjun was his, and his alone - never before had he been forced to share.

His fingers gripped the door, and when the man rubbed Myungjun through his trousers, Bin could no longer take it. He opened the door fully and rushed inside. “Get off of him!” he exclaimed, quite ready to kill if necessary.
Myungjun’s eyes snapped to his in shock, and he blurted out, “Bin!”

The man turned around and Bin stopped in his tracks.

Dongmin.

Bin could detect panic on Dongmin’s face as he scurried off Myungjun’s form. The boy was already trying to form an apology, stammering out nonsensical words, but Bin didn’t care. Nothing Dongmin could say would ever erase what he had done.

Bin pictured him grabbing that little, sick body from him. Bin could see him clearly, ready to kill a young boy. Bin had watched him as he stood over a fire of writhing bodies and as he stabbed Jinwoo’s chest in an attempt to ruin Bin’s resolve.

Dongmin was a killer, through and through, and his filthy hands didn’t deserve to be on Myungjun.

He would ruin Myungjun if he was allowed to continue in this affair. He would kill Myungjun. Bin was certain of it. Dongmin was evil and he had motives other than love.

Bin’s anger moved him. He grabbed Dongmin by the neck and started to choke him.

“Bin!” Myungjun yelled, smacking his arms in a desperate attempt to get him away. “Leave him be! Let him go! He’s done nothing wrong-”

“He tried to kill you!” Bin shouted. “He murdered Jinwoo - and I won’t let him get away with anything ever again!”

The scar on Bin’s arm felt like it was searing with those flames. He could feel them, creeping up his body, like it happened several moments ago instead of lifetime.

He wondered if that was how Myungjun felt, trapped in that fire with bodies splayed out on top of him, having to smell the stench of burning skin and human sweat.

Choking wasn’t a good enough death, not for Dongmin. He deserved worse.

Bin glanced to the side and noticed a candle.

He could burn Dongmin, the way Dongmin tried to burn Myungjun.

“Light it,” he ordered Myungjun. Dongmin choked for breath. His neck was so fragile, and Bin wished he had done this hundreds of years ago.

“What?”

“Light the damn candle, or I’ll break his neck,” Bin snapped.

Myungjun’s eyes were wide in the dark. He seemed unsure. “Let...let him go first.”

Bin could do that. Bin could let him go if only to prepare him for what would come next. He loosened his grip until he could hear Dongmin gasping out for breath, but Myungjun didn’t light the candle. Myungjun slapped him hard and then pushed Dongmin away from Bin’s arms.

Bin felt shock overtake his anger. Why was Myungjun against him? They had always been together. They had always worked together and laughed together and loved together. Never before had Myungjun taken any physical action against Bin - not for any reason at all.
Then he started to berate Bin.

“What in the hell are you doing to him?” he asked, shielding Dongmin as the kid coughed and sputtered for more air. “You can’t go after him - he’s just a student! Go after me, because I’m the one that allowed him to do this!”

“You…” Bin rubbed at his afflicted cheek, confused. “Why?”

Myungjun looked mad, but also very much ashamed. “I...am attracted to him. I like Dongmin.”

Things made sense. That unmade bed the day Dongmin was there for tea. The way Dongmin scurried around him. Their awkward yet adamant assertions that they only met for academic-related purposes.

They had been sleeping with each other for a while, apparently, and only now did Bin figure it all out.

“Myungjun, you...you love me .”

“I don’t, Bin.”

“You said you did!”

Myungjun sighed. “I just...I meant you are my dearest friend, but with Dongmin, I feel...differently. He’s more than a friend to me-”

“Dongmin is a murderer,” Bin spat out.

“You keep saying that, but yet you have no proof of anything.” Myungjun ran his fingers through his messy hair, then grabbed Dongmin’s shirt that he had laid aside. “Cover up,” he whispered, striking pains through Bin’s heart once more.

Bin took a deep breath. He needed to calm down, and yet he couldn’t get the image of Dongmin kissing Myungjun out of his mind. “I’m…” he started, drawing Myungjun’s attention. “I am, um, really old, Myungjun. Hundreds of years old, to be exact. I was alive at the fall of the Silla Kingdom, and I was alive at the crowning of Goryeo’s first king. And through it all, you keep popping up. We fell in love first when you were General Kim, and then again when you were Prince Myungjun. The third time I found you, you were an orphaned child, and we spent over a year together, but you grew sick, and I took you to Dongmin - Dongmin was a shaman. I spent hours racing my horse there for you. I spent hours racing back because Dongmin requested more money.”

He at least had Myungjun’s attention. That was all he wanted at the moment.

“When I came back for you, I had Jinwoo, my best friend ever. He had helped me out so much, and...Dongmin murdered him. He first burned the bodies of other sick villagers, and when I dragged you from that pile, Dongmin grabbed Jinwoo and murdered him.” Bin hated reliving the experience. Bin hated the consequences of all of his actions that led to that point. “He tried to kill me and Myungjun next, but Jinwoo had enough strength left to kill him , and then...then I had to watch both of you die. I would...I would have at least kept Jinwoo if not for Dongmin.”

Bin turned his hateful glare onto the young student, who just looked astonished at such a story.

“You’re...not immortal,” Myungjun said, shaking his head in disbelief. “No one’s immortal.”
“I am.”

“Prove it.”

Many years ago, Bin likely would have stabbed a knife through his heart in an effort to prove it. However, he was exhausted now, worn out, distraught from what he had seen, and so he simply shrugged off his shirt and displayed his scars for Myungjun and Dongmin to gaze upon.

“This,” he said, pointing at his arm. “Is where I was burned as I dragged you from the fire Dongmin flung you in, Myungjun. This is where he stabbed me, too.”

He gestured to the ones on his chest. “The palace guards stabbed me when I killed the next king, after he had poisoned you.”

Each scar told a story, and Bin went on and on with all of his scars, until Myungjun whispered, “How could you get hurt so many times and still live?”

“Because I can’t die. I’ve told you - I’m immortal.”

Dongmin looked unsure still, but Myungjun seemed to believe it. He stared at Bin and murmured, “It’s...impossible, and yet...I can’t, for some reason, dispute it.”

Bin tied his shirt together again and said, “We’re always together, Myungjun. We belong together. No matter where I go or what I do, I find you again. You can’t...you can’t be with Dongmin, not when you should be with me.”

Myungjun’s tongue darted out to wet his lips. He glanced over at Dongmin, who had his head down in shame, and then back at Bin. “Dongmin isn’t a murderer. Maybe...maybe the Dongmin in your immortal life was, years and years ago, but this Dongmin is different. He’s never hurt me or made me uncomfortable. He’s good. So...perhaps these reincarnations of us can be different from what you’ve always known. Likewise, I’m...not yours. I don’t belong to you. The others might have, but I...I love Dongmin.”

Bin couldn’t believe what he was hearing. That didn’t sound at all like Myungjun. “You can’t!” he declared. “You’re supposed to love me.”

“I’m not supposed to do anything. I have free will. I have a choice of my own. Just because all of the other Myungjun’s of the past have fallen in love with you doesn’t mean I have to. Dongmin’s different. I’m different.”

“You...Myungjun, please-”

“You must understand I never loved you in that way, and I...” Myungjun looked truly regretful. He reached out to pat Bin’s hands. “I apologize if I made you believe otherwise.”

Bin snatched his hands away from Myungjun’s touch. This wasn’t the way things were supposed to be. He felt himself tremble, and he blurted out, “I’ll tell.”

Myungjun swallowed nervously. “Don’t,” he begged. “Please, Bin, don’t. It’s bad enough Dongmin’s a male, but he’s a student - I won’t be able to teach anymore. Please, for me, don’t tell anyone.”

“I will.” Bin was defiant. He wanted to kill Dongmin still, to burn him the way he tried to burn Myungjun, but he knew he was powerless at the moment to touch the boy. So he stood, on shaky legs, and warned, “I’ll make sure everyone knows, Myungjun, until you have no choice but to
come crawling back to me.”

Myungjun’s pleas went on deaf ears, and Bin hurried from the room of the man he had considered his lover.

He saw Myungjun in the hallway later the next day. They passed each other as they never would have before. Before, Bin would have stopped and hooked their arms together. Before, Myungjun would have grinned and talked to him about everything and anything.

Now, though, Myungjun looked at him, fearful and nervous, and Bin only scowled.

He couldn’t tell.

Whenever he thought up the courage to, he reminded himself of Wangwi. He reminded himself how Myungjun’s reputation was tarnished and their relationship forced into intense hiding. Likely, this Myungjun’s punishment would be worse. He would be banished from the university and likely ridiculed by his family for his actions. He might end up desolate and ruined, living with the shame of having taken on such a young student as his lover.

Bin loved Myungjun. He couldn’t do that to the man he loved.

Still, he knew there was no way they could both survive at this school. If he stayed, Myungjun would forever live in worry, wondering at which moment Bin would tell his secrets and ruin his life. If Bin stayed, he would be forced to remember the way Myungjun had moved so willingly for Dongmin, the way he had molded into the boy’s touch as if Bin was nothing to him.

In the end, it was Bin who left.

He was used to leaving. He had done so before, and he could continue to do so, time and time again. He emptied out his room, dumping his clothing and books into the few bags he had on him.

He spent an hour or two gazing upon the drawings he had kept from Myungjun. They were frayed and yellowing, and some had developed tears and holes. The ink was fading, and what could be seen was messy.

Still, it was Myungjun’s. Bin could still see his little hands gripping onto the pen too tightly, pressing down too harshly, or else too lightly. Every little scratch he made on the paper was perfect.

Bin missed him.

Bin would miss him.

So he ran, as he was used to doing, away from the university, away from the city, and away from the country.
no character death this time :O

please follow me on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!
A crowd had gathered in the county square. It cut off direct access to Bin’s favorite fruit shop, and he gave a small huff as he smoothed out his robes. “This is ridiculous,” he murmured to the young slave who accompanied him. He heard a scream and he rolled his eyes. “I didn’t realize we would have an execution today.”

The slave stood on his tiptoes, trying his best to peer over the crowd, but he was only thirteen and tiny for his age. It was unlikely he could see anything. “I wonder if it’s that man who murdered his family,” the slave mused, setting back down straight again. “What do you think?”

“I think this is ridiculous,” Bin repeated. He began to shove through a few of the people nearby, gesturing for the slave to follow him. “Come on. I’m going to get my shopping done one way or another.”

“It would’ve been easier for you to take the carriage,” the slave commented, practically plastering himself to Bin’s side in an effort to stay close.

“But then we would not have been able to see such a lovely execution, hmm?”

Bin was joking, of course. He had only stopped once to watch an execution in China, and he had left very much underwhelmed. Despite the claims that the executions were long, slow and torturous, Bin was certain the criminal had been alive for only several moments before he died.

As they passed the wooden stake which held the criminal, Bin glanced over and sighed. This man seemed to be surviving longer than most of the others had. His skin was bloodied and various pieces of his flesh had already been ripped away. Some people held parts of his flesh; other pieces seemed to be subjected to decaying on the ground.

Bin wrinkled his nose but continued on his way, even as the guard standing watch over the criminal cut deeper into the skin.

Bin’s slave kept his eyes averted, only taking a deep breath once they were out of sight. “That’s awful,” he murmured.

“Well, the man was a murderer. He killed both his mother and father. I don’t think the punishment is too drastic.”

“Still…”

Bin glanced over at his slave. The boy had already seen a variety of awful sights; his own mother, kidnapped from her home country whilst several months pregnant, was beaten and raped and taken
from him, his father had died long ago, and he had been through several horrible owners who mistreated him and took advantage of him.

When Bin had first seen him, waiting to be sold, he was struck with how young the boy was, and his eyes traveled over his body. He had bruises and burns, not at all unlike the child Myungjun back in Goryeo.

Bin bought him instantly and treated him as kindly as possible.

The boy was Joseon, too, which created a stronger bond between the two of them. Bin could speak in his native language at home, and his slave would eagerly respond. Bin adored him greatly and took him practically everywhere.

As it was, at this moment, he wished he had the thought to leave his slave at home. He didn’t want him subjected to more murder and torture, even if the offender might have deserved such a thing.

“We’ll take the longer way back home,” Bin promised, clapping his hand onto his slave’s shoulder. “How does that sound, Sanha?”

Sanha’s eyes widened and he glanced around, ensuring no one else had heard his name spoken. When he decided the cost was clear, he whispered, “You really ought to use my Chinese name. People might be upset if they hear you willingly using my Joseon name.”

“Let them be upset. I have more money than anyone else in this county, save for Yang Jing. And Jing is out on military expeditions right now, so I can rest assured that no one will dare speak out against me.”

Sanha raised his eyebrows, and said, “Yang Jing returned a few days ago. I thought you were aware.”

Bin was surprised. He hadn’t heard anything of Jing’s return. He had assumed he would first be taken to the royal court, perhaps promoted or else invited to join the royal family in some way. His military might within Joseon had been nothing to scoff at; surely he wouldn’t make his way back to a small county the contained only a handful of elite nobles.

“Are you certain?”

“Well, some of your other slaves were talking about it. They said he has lots of new workers in his fields now - maybe other Joseon people.” Sanha smiled widely. “Since you two live nearby, perhaps I can befriend some of them.”

Bin appreciated Sanha’s innocence at times like this. Despite the horrors in the world, and despite the pain he had already lived through, he still managed to find good within his situation. It made Bin all the more grateful that he was able to keep Sanha close, away from other slave owners who might treat him harshly and steal away from him that sweet innocence.

Bin returned Sanha’s smile, then pointed down a particular pathway. “Veer right,” he murmured, “we’ll reach the markets that way.”

Sanha obeyed his orders, and together they turned away from the brutal execution. Sanha, all the while, spoke, sticking close to Bin’s side. “So far, Yang Jing’s slaves have all been Chinese, as well, and it’s difficult to befriend them. I don’t speak the language well, either.” The boy skipped over a small puddle and asked, “Would you be willing to teach me more?”

“You understand basic words and phrases. That ought to be enough of such a devilish language.”
“You don’t like the Chinese very much, do you, Master Sun?”

“As I’ve explained, please call me Bin when we’re alone.”

Sanha frowned at that. He was clearly unused to being treated so kindly. He was molded to show respect for whoever owned him, and with respect came using proper names. Bin, however, had lived in China for a long period of time. He had gone by his Chinese name, Sun Lian, and the name had become part of him. With the addition of Sanha to his household, though, he realized just how much he had missed the language of his home country. Hearing the words flow off Sanha’s tongue originally brought tears to his eyes, and when Sanha spoke his given name for the first time, Bin also realized it had been almost a hundred years since he had actually been called Bin.

He missed it, and he inquired for Sanha to refer to him as such as much as he possibly could.

“Do you like China, Master Bin?” Sanha asked, rephrasing his question.

“Forgo the master.”

Sanha took a deep breath and, once more, tried his luck. “Do you like China...um, Bin?”

Bin beamed down at the young boy, who simply blushed from the affection. “Thank you, Sanha. And I find parts of it interesting, but my home is in Joseon. I think China lacks a great deal in comparison.”

Sanha trudged along beside him, not bothering to glance up. He commented, “I don’t remember much about my home. Bin, what do you remember about Joseon?”

Bin turned another corner, pulling Sanha close in order to avoid a carriage; clearly the coach cared little for a child in his way, but when he saw Bin’s angry glare, he bowed as deeply as he could while sitting and worked on moving the carriage away smoothly. Even while they passed, Bin kept his arm around Sanha, wanting nothing more than to offer protection.

“I remember war,” he spoke, ruffling Sanha’s air. “Battles and the smell of blood and fear. Obviously, not quite a fond memory, but something I’m nostalgic for, nonetheless.”

He remembered General Kim out on the battlefield, cutting down any enemy in his way, and always looking back to smile at Bin despite it all.

“I remember...secrets kept. I remember being young and feeling as if nothing could ever drag me down.”

Nights spent away in General Kim’s room, engaging in activities that would be considered pornographic for Sanha’s young ears. More importantly, though, he recalled the times he would lay in silence, Myungjun’s smaller, warmer body curled up into his own. He remembered trying his best to count all of Myungjun’s eyelashes (he gave up after counting to four, far more content to plant kisses along Myungjun’s face) or else tracing the outline of Myungjun’s nose and cheeks over and over again.

Wistfully, he continued, “I remember a lavish lifestyle, with food not quite similar to what we eat here, what we eat now. Yet, I also remember having absolutely nothing and surviving off roots and wild plants.”

He glanced down at Sanha, who stared at him with eyes wide and interested. With a short laugh, he patted Sanha’s shoulder and said, “I remember large, green trees and beautiful waterfalls and gardens that surpassed all I see here in China. I remember friends and family who would never
betray me and I remember an immense amount of joy felt at all times.”

Once Sanha realized Bin was done speaking, he nodded his head slowly, and turned his gaze to look ahead once more. He was quiet at first, then said, “It sounds wonderful, Bin.”

“It was.”

“Then why did you leave?”

“Ah...it’s difficult to explain.”

How was he to explain that? How was he to let Sanha know the true reason he left; he fell in love with a man who was reincarnated constantly, yet this reincarnation did not fall for him and chose instead to be with the reincarnation of a scam artist and murderer. How was he supposed to say any of that and make it believable? Sanha would think him mad if he started going on and on about his immortality and his curse and Myungjun’s constant deaths.

Instead, he smiled tightly and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess it’s because I...wanted a new experience. I wanted to get away from Joseon for the time being. I felt...oppressed. Cornered. I...made the decision to leave.”

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“Do you regret it?”

Sanha, for being one so young, asked many thought-provoking questions. His inquiries made Bin hesitate in his answer as he was forced to truly ponder how he felt.

Did he regret leaving? Not likely, no. He couldn’t stay there, not around Myungjun, not when he had messed up so drastically. Spending time away from the place of so much pain had been good for him. He came to the realization that perhaps not every reincarnation of the man he loved would share his same love. Prince Myungjun had loved him, as had the little, orphan child, in his own way, and even the last Myungjun he met claimed to love him, just...differently. It wasn’t a similar love to General Kim’s. It was friendship and loyalty, but not love.

He had once forced himself to whisper those words, “He might not love me.” And, true - the next Myungjun he would meet would likely hate him, perhaps, or else disregard him as useless.

But that Myungjun would be in Joseon, and so Bin would never have to experience being dismissed by the one man he stayed alive for.

In that sense, no, he did not regret leaving Joseon, leaving a man who wouldn’t love him.

“Of course not,” he responded. “As horrible as I find China compared to Joseon, it’s been wonderful to gain a new experience in life. I’ve found you, haven’t I?” He grinned as he pinched Sanha’s little, button nose. “So I’d say I’ve little to regret.”

Sanha giggled, his voice cracking and breaking as he stumbled to get away from Bin’s pinching fingers. “I’m just a slave.”

“Oh, no, you’re far more than that, Sanha. You’re a wonderful companion - your slave status means absolutely nothing. I keep you around because you’re sweet and intelligent.”

“You bought me,” Sanha pointed out.

Bin snorted. He was reminded instantly of Jinwoo, of the snarky words and the witty comebacks. He had missed that dearly; Sanha wasn’t a likely candidate to fill that void in Bin’s heart, as he was
Far too kind and docile, but perhaps that would change soon.

“You’re too feisty for my liking,” Bin said, and Sanha giggled, moving to plaster himself to Bin’s side once more. “Let us shop now, alright? Pick out what foods you would like, Sanha, because I apparently live to please you.”

Sanha laughed once more, joyously, and Bin sighed in relief.

It was for the best that he left; Myungjun would live on in Joseon, and Bin could enjoy his life here with Sanha instead.

He could handle that.

The battle was a difficult one. Bin had lost sight of General Kim at some point, and his heart had hammered harshly in his chest, practically beating up against his armor, as his mind worried and worried. He tried to tell himself General Kim would be fine. After all, he had been in many battles before and had yet to fall. Myungjun was fast and smart and resourceful. He was strong and tough and brilliant. It was unlikely he would die from these people of Goguryeo. He knew that, and yet he couldn’t stop thinking of Myungjun.

A man in front of him swung a sword. Bin artfully blocked it before he pushed the man off of him and sliced across the man’s face. Blood splattered through the air, but Bin was now unconcerned. He had since become used to horrible battles and the cries of the dying. He focused his energy on winning—and now he focused his energy on finding General Kim.

He heard someone from behind him and he spun around, barely managing to dodge another attack. This man was easily dispatched, as well, and Bin left him on the ground.

Through all of the yells and orders of the Goguryeo army, Bin couldn’t hear his own general. He worried more. He was frantic, pushing past men of all alliances, killing those who stood to block him.

His eyes were wide, darting around the battlefield. General Kim would be wearing armor that signified his status. He was too proud to remove it, even as Bin had pointed out he would be more of a target that way. He liked his jewelry and his expensive armor and his feathery helmet.

If he was such a target, though, why was he hidden?

Bin grabbed a man in his own army and asked, “Where is the general?”

“Not sure,” the man said, breathless from the fighting. “But—behind you!”

Bin, once more, spun just in time. It was part of the cavalry unit, a man atop of a horse holding a long spear. Bin found cavalry a bit more difficult to manage; he was part of the infantry, after all, and foot soldiers could not carry such weaponry as the cavalry could.

Still, he did his best. He blocked and parried each blow before turning his attention on the horse and slicing at its legs. With the horse down, he would be on more equal footing with this man.
The horse cried as it fell, but Bin paid it no attention. Instead, he took his chance while the cavalryman struggled, stabbing him through the neck and letting him die quickly.

“Reinforcements are arriving!” a voice yelled out, and Bin glanced up.

General Kim, on his own horse, rode towards Bin and the rest of the army, rounding them up once more. He glanced at Bin and smiled.

Bin smiled back before noticing that his arm was bloodstained.

It wasn’t until after the battle that he finally got a good look at it, hidden away in General Kim’s luxurious tent.

“I was too slow;” Myungjun murmured, his shirt removed and his arm held out for Bin to examine. “It’s humiliating.”

“I would prefer a physician look at this,” Bin said, wiping some of the blood away from the wound. “It might need special attention.”

“I said it’s humiliating. Perhaps you didn’t hear correctly.” Myungjun stared down at his lap with a pout. “I never get hurt in battle. This is...beyond normal. The men will become demoralized should I approach the physician with any sort of wound.”

Bin rolled his eyes. Myungjun’s pride was overwhelming. Fortunately, Bin’s love was more overwhelming, or else he would have knocked some sense into his general. “The men trust you, and they understand that sometimes these things do happen. It was an intense battle, after all.”

Myungjun studied him for a few seconds, then murmured, “Not for you.”

“It was for me, too.”

“You’ve never gotten hurt in battle.”

His lover did look quite humiliated, Bin noticed. His face was red and he was keeping his eyes averted. “You...have no scars on your body. You’re untouchable.”

“Darling—”

“I’m humiliated because you truly are better than me.”

Bin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he reached for the jars of ointments Myungjun kept nearby. “Darling, you are being ridiculous.”

“Don’t call me—”

“You have been involved in far more battles than I have. Need I remind you I have only been part of your army for two years, right? You have been fighting for over seven years.”

Myungjun glanced up, finally, at Bin. He winced as Bin rubbed some salve on his wound, but otherwise allowed the younger man to continue. “You are also at the forefront of many battles. I am not. In half the battles, I’ve not even seen action. The enemy has surrendered before infantry could get to them.”

“Most men die after two years.”

“Is this a wish of yours, Myungjun? For me to be dead?”
“No!” Myungjun huffed, trying to tug his arm away from Bin’s grasp. Bin refused to let it go. “Bin, please, I just...you have no scars, and it’s...you’re so much better than I am.”

Bin stared at the wound on Myungjun’s arm, then his eyes traveled downwards, scanning Myungjun’s chest. He only had a few scars. Not nearly enough to complain about. “I think your scars indicate your bravery,” Bin muttered. He bent over and leaned in, placing a kiss on the small scar near Myungjun’s ribs. “And it’s all beautiful.”

His lips moved next to a larger scar below Myungjun’s collar bones. He kissed there, too, lingering in place before glancing up.

Myungjun stared down at him with such emotion and Bin smiled. “Don’t cry, darling.”

“I’m...not going to cry,” Myungjun snapped. “Don’t be foolish.”

“Difficult to ask of me.”

“I know. You’re so foolish.” Myungjun ran his fingers through Bin’s hair. “So damn foolish.”

Bin laughed. He looked at one of the pieces of jewelry Myungjun still wore, a necklace made of ivory. Bin kissed it once before moving his lips downward again. “I am a fool, but this fool holds within him such love for you. I love you, and I love your scars, General.”

Myungjun took a deep breath. Bin, eye level with Myungjun’s chest, watched it rise and fall. He smiled.

“Bin?”

“Yes, General?”

“Please show me how much you love me and-and all of my scars.”

Bin laughed and straightened up. “No,” he teased, poking Myungjun’s nose. “Not with that nasty cut on your arm. I can’t very well jostle you around roughly. Allow me to bandage it first, and once night falls and the soldiers quiet down, then, perhaps, I shall lavish you with all of the love I have to offer.”

Myungjun seemed satisfied enough with that, and silence fell between them as Bin carefully wrapped the wound, going slow so as to not harm Myungjun more than possible.

He decided, though, that it would be near impossible to lavish Myungjun with all the love he had to offer. It was too much love and it could not be showcased in any physical actions or spoken words.

Most likely, Myungjun knew this.

There was a knock at his door and Bin sighed as he flipped through his documents. He hoped, initially, ignoring the knocking would make it stop, but instead it simply became louder, more frantic, and finally Bin snapped, “Fine, Sanha, come in.”
No other of his servants or slaves would dare knock so often. Sanha, however, had learned what got Bin’s attention and what didn’t. He was one of the few people alive who could annoy Bin and face no consequence.

The door slid open and Sanha peeked inside quickly before bowing deeply.

“Unnecessary,” Bin stated, gesturing Sanha forward.

“It is necessary.” Sanha was whispering, but he hurried into the room, shutting the door behind him again. “Yang Jing is here.”

Bin blinked. “Why?”

“I’m not sure. I think he has stuff for you? From Joseon?” Sanha shuffled uncomfortably where he stood. “He is being served tea now as he waits for you. He has a few slaves with him and some bags. Gifts, I assume.”

“I don’t want his gifts,” Bin mumbled, turning back to his documents once more. “You ought to just send him on his way.”

Sanha swallowed nervously, hands clasped together in front of him. “You...you know I can’t do that, Bin. It’s...not polite for a slave to shoo away a nobleman.”

“You are far more noble of a man than that slug could ever hope to be,” Bin commented, but he understood Sanha’s reluctance to take action. If Sanha were to try and run Yang Jing off, it would be considered a huge slight and would reflect poorly on Sanha. Bin wouldn’t wish that on the boy. He sighed heavily and shoved his papers aside on his desk. “Fine. Bring another cushion for him, and then lead him back here. Remember, let’s not speak our language while he’s around, alright? He has a dislike of the Joseon people.”

“Right,” Sanha agreed. He bowed his head once before scurrying off to complete Bin’s instructions.

Bin didn’t like his neighbor. He was a rather despicable man. He had a wife and several concubines who did very little but hobble around inside and keep their faces hidden. He had more slaves than Bin had ever owned in his life, all of whom were treated horribly. He had talked down Joseon, unknowing that Bin was from such a culture, and regarded all Joseon people as filth.

Bin decided he hated the man when he dared to raise a hand against Sanha after he made a mistake. Bin had stepped in front and stopped Yang Jing from hitting the young boy, then made up his mind that Yang Jing was pathetic and small.

He didn’t want a visit from someone so worthless.

Still, Yang Jing had more standing within the county than Bin ever would. He was a decorated war hero, someone who upheld Chinese beliefs and customs, and so Bin had to tolerate him.

The doors opened again and Sanha laid out the cushion, as well as a table. Another slave had brought tea and placed the cups down on the table before bowing and standing aside.

Yang Jing entered boisterously, exclaiming, “Lian, it’s wonderful to see you again!”

Bin held back his dislike and switched to speak Chinese. “How was the campaign within Joseon?” he asked, gesturing for Sanha, too, to move aside.
“Wonderful! I brought many things. I also captured some amazing slaves. Look—” He stuck his hand outside of the door and snapped angrily.

Several men shuffled inside of the room. Their clothes were horrid, even for slaves, and their faces held bruises and cuts. Bin watched them file in, feeling himself seethe and rage at the obvious maltreatment of his own people, but he froze upon seeing the final man.

Myungjun.

His eyes widened, staring solely at Myungjun.

Why was Myungjun here? Why was Myungjun in China? Out of all of the men Yang Jing could have captured, how on earth did he manage to capture Myungjun? Were the gods playing with him? Were they jerking his emotions around every which way and laughing at him? Why had they deposited this beaten, ruined reincarnation of the man Bin dearly loved?

Yang Jing had been talking, but when he realized who Bin was staring at, he laughed loudly. “This is my greatest feat!” he exclaimed. “This is a great general within Joseon! General Kim, I was told. He had never lost a battle before he met me, but now he works in my fields. A downgrade, is it not?” Yang Jing grabbed a bag from Myungjun’s arms, then plopped on the cushion. “He’s stupid, though. Very dumb. He cannot speak a single word of Chinese. He only knows his horrid language.”

Bin’s mouth felt dry. He wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to run and embrace Myungjun, to keep him safe from this awful man who now owned him, but he knew that would bring on more trouble than it was worth.

“I...I'm-I’m, um, I’m...impressed.” He tried to swallow past the lump forming in his throat. “Ah, it’s...um...would you be interested in, um, selling him to me?”

Yang Jing raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

“He's...obviously in good shape,” Bin lied. “He would...I need someone to work the fields, and...”

“Trust me, you do not want this one,” Yang Jing replied with a snort. He was pulling items out from his bag. “He’s too feisty. I’ve had to beat him many times already. He was too sore to work yesterday, but I’ve forced him to come out here just for you.”

Bin glanced up at Myungjun. He was clearly exhausted and in pain, and yet he stared straight ahead with steely determination.

He was the closest reincarnation Bin had seen to General Kim.

Remembering General Kim, seeing General Kim, made tears spring to Bin’s eyes. He felt like he was suffocating. He suddenly couldn’t breathe.

“I brought pipes from Joseon, as well. One of the few things they make correctly are their pipes.”

Bin hardly paid attention, even as Yang Jing pulled out two long, intricate tobacco pipes made from silver. He passed one over to Bin, who took it without bothering to examine it.

“I have tobacco, too, and—Gouxing. Gouxing, here.” Yang Jing was snapping again and pointing at the pipes.

Bin stared at him, then glanced up at the slaves, all of whom appeared nervous. Yang Jing tried
again. “Gouxing.”

“Who—” Bin started, before realizing the other slaves were glancing at Myungjun, who continued to stare straight ahead as if he hadn’t even heard.

Did Yang Jing change his name, too? Did Myungjun even know, or did Myungjun simply not care? Bin was likely to bet on the latter, and he felt a pain in his heart. This General Kim was just as stubborn as the original.

Yang Jing stood from his seat, and with little warning, he smacked Myungjun across the face. Myungjun allowed it to happen a second time, too, before he finally took a deep breath and said, in his own native language, “What would Master Baboon wish for now?”

Sanha gasped, which made Yang Jing all the angrier. “Clearly you’ve said something rotten,” he hissed, grabbing Myungjun’s ear and tugging at it harshly. Myungjun stumbled and winced. “Otherwise,” Yang Jing continued, “that stupid child Lian has would not be so shocked.”

Yang Jing raised a hand to, once more, hit Myungjun, but Bin interceded. “I do not appreciate such violence in my house,” he declared, standing from his cushion. “Drop your hand and leave him alone.”

Yang Jing glanced at Bin and sneered. “He’s obviously making a mockery of my status,” the man stated. “Mind your own business how I punish my slaves. I won him, fair and square, and he is my property to deal with.”

Bin wanted to tell Yang Jing off, to demand he leave his house. However, if he were to do that, then Myungjun would be forced to go along with Yang Jing, and Bin could only assume how that would go.

He tried not to appear too angry. He held back the harsh words he wanted to say, and instead suggested, “I’m sure your slave will do as you wish now. Let us smoke and forget about this—it’s not worth becoming angry over.”

Yang Jing still looked angry, but at least he released Myungjun. He sat back down on his cushion, too, and pointed at his pipe. “Gouxing, light.”

Bin glanced over at Myungjun, holding his breath as he could see the conflict brewing in Myungjun’s eyes. Trying to prematurely cease another incident, Bin got Myungjun’s attention and sent him a brief smile. “Please?” he added, holding out his own pipe for Myungjun.

Perhaps it was the please that helped, for finally Myungjun nodded and lit both Bin’s pipe and Yang Jing’s. He stood back again as the two noblemen smoked, though Bin couldn’t help but stare at him.

He was handsome. He was so, so handsome, so perfect, so wonderful. Bin wanted nothing more than to whisk him away, right then and there. He would return Myungjun to Joseon and perhaps live out the rest of Myungjun’s life by his side.

If only he wasn’t a slave to such a wretched man.

Night was falling. Bin offered many times for Yang Jing to return home, but Yang Jing would only laugh. “I would like to spend dinner with you. We have much to discuss, and I have much more to show you. Perhaps you should just set a room for me, instead. Our houses are far apart and I do not wish to travel so late into the night.”
Bin glanced over at Myungjun and, despite his own hatred of having Yang Jing nearby, his love for Myungjun was overwhelming. He would do anything to have Myungjun in the same house as him for longer. “Alright,” he agreed. “Chengzong!” he called.

Sanha hurried over, bowing as low as he could to both Yang Jing and Bin. Bin didn’t wish for him to bow, but he knew he could do little to stop him; while Yang Jing was their guest, Sanha must play the part of a dutiful slave.

“Chengzong, please get some other slaves to set up Yang Jing’s room. Would you mind setting up room for the slaves?”

Sanha looked a bit confused; perhaps the Chinese Bin used was a bit too advanced. Bin tried again. “Room for slaves and room for Yang Jing.”

“Oh.” Sanha nodded his head. “Yes, Master.”

He bowed again, then left the room to prepare for the rooms. Yang Jing watched him leave before snorting. “That boy of yours is still as stupid as ever. I cannot, for the life of me, figure out why you bought such a dumb child and made him into a personal servant. He’s worthless.”

“I’d appreciate you not speak of my slaves in such a manner, Yang Jing,” Bin warned. “Especially when I am offering you room out of the kindness of my heart.”

Yang Jing glared at him before rising. “Bring the food into my room,” he demanded. “I wish to dine alone for the night.”

“Very well,” Bin agreed. Even if he felt a bit like he was being pushed around, at least he would not have to sit with Yang Jing more than necessary. He wasn’t sure if he could take it.

Yang Jing grabbed another of his slaves, a Chinese man, who followed him out. Bin ordered his own servants to show Yang Jing’s men to their rooms, but he grabbed onto Myungjun’s arm and held him back.

“Not this one,” he told his servant. “I...need him for a moment.”

Bin’s people knew better to question his actions. They simply nodded and left.

Bin was alone, and Myungjun was in his grasp once more. It was so difficult to fathom. Bin had believed leaving Joseon would mean he would never see Myungjun again, and yet here he was, just as small and lithe and beautiful as always.

Myungjun’s stare was defiant. He chose not to move, chose not to speak, but he faltered in confusion when Bin smiled fondly upon him.

“You can talk to me,” Bin said, reverting to the Joseon language.

Myungjun’s eyes widened. His stare was now less in defiance and more in shock.

“I’m from your country,” Bin explained, sitting back onto his cushion. He gestured for Myungjun to sit, as well, but the other man didn’t move. “I apologize for the way Yang Jing has treated you. He had no right to steal you away from Joseon. It was wrong of him.”

“You...you’re Joseon?” Myungjun asked, in awe.

It was such a pleasure to hear his voice once more. It was bright and high and somehow so flowery.
Bin was reminded of warm, spring days, of sunshine beating upon him, of happiness and love. He couldn’t stop from grinning widely. “I am. It’s always so wonderful to find others from my country. That’s partially the reason I bought Sanha—or, you might have heard me call him Chengzong. I only do such to not raise alarms. Yang Jing already hates the Joseon people, and switching to a Chinese name was simply so he would not be mistreated in this country.”

Realizing he was talking too much and Myungjun still had yet to catch up, he gestured, once more, at the cushion. “Sit. Please.”

Myungjun obeyed this time, plopping onto the cushion.

“Alright.”

Bin’s heart hammered in his chest. He couldn’t believe he was in this position again, sitting alongside his lover as if nothing could ever tear them apart.

Of course, he was reminded of the previous reincarnation, the one who didn’t love him. It was possible this Myungjun would be the same way. Perhaps he would only befriend him and their relationship would never progress. Or perhaps he would even grow to hate Bin and to disregard him as much as possible.

Whatever the outcome, Bin loved Myungjun. He cared not if Myungjun loved him back; as long as he was alive, he would do his best to keep Myungjun close and to keep Myungjun safe. He had failed two of the previous reincarnations, but he would not fail this time.

“Your name is General Kim, then?” Bin questioned, struggling to keep his excitement to a minimum. What he really wanted was to grab Myungjun and spin him around and plant kisses all across his face. Doing so would raise alarms, however, and Myungjun might find it a little off-putting. Bin had to restrain himself.

Myungjun nodded his head in response to Bin’s question. “Or, that’s my title. My given name is Myungjun.”

Bin already knew that, but it didn’t stop a surge of joy from traveling over him. “Lovely name,” he mentioned, still smiling. “I’m sure you have heard Yang Jing refer to me as Sun Lian, but my own given name is actually Moon Bin. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I have not heard him refer to you as anything. He speaks Chinese and I do not.” Myungjun, sensing he was free to relax a bit more, leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. Rude, perhaps, in their culture, but not unwelcome. General Kim would have done the exact same thing.

General Kim was doing the same thing.

“I’ve thought of taking my own life,” Myungjun announced suddenly, wiping the smile away from Bin’s face. “I’m miserable here. Back home, I was a revered general, but he’s reduced me to this. A field worker he humiliates and disrespects and hits all he wants. I think...I feel like he might murder me slowly, painfully, unless I kill myself first.”

“Don’t,” Bin said. He reached a hand out and grasped onto Myungjun’s own hand. The man looked down at it in shock.

Bin’s hands were clean and his robes hung over them, showing off the ornate details and colorful patterns. It was vastly different from Myungjun’s own hand, with dirt under the fingernails and threadbare cloth to cover his arms.
General Kim was the one with the pretty clothing, back in Bin’s past, and Bin was the one who always dirty most of the time. It was a complete change of roles. Bin felt anger at the gods.

He wouldn’t let them have Myungjun so easily.

“General Kim,” Bin whispered, “I will do everything in my power to take you back to Joseon.”

Myungjun stared at Bin in disbelief. “You would go against Yang Jing.”

“In a heartbeat. He’s a wretched man.” He would forever be listed alongside Dongmin and Wangwi in Bin’s mind; trying to hit Sanha was bad enough, but ripping a general from his homeland and treating him like a farm animal was unforgivable.

Myungjun seemed ready to reply to Bin’s statement, but the door slid open just then. Myungjun, likely fearing punishment, scrambled up from the cushion and stood back, his head bowed.

It was just Sanha, however, and Bin motioned for him to slide the door back shut.

“Bin!” Sanha exclaimed quietly. He glanced at Myungjun and offered a small, nervous smile. “Hello, um, Gouxing.”

Myungjun visibly tensed, and Bin sought to remedy the situation fast. “Sanha, he’s from Joseon. His name is actually Myungjun. He was a general.” Except, it didn’t seem right to brush off Myungjun’s military achievements or to disregard his title, so Bin corrected himself. “He is a general, even if Yang Jing has decided to bring him here. Once he returns to Joseon, then he will be a general.”

Sanha’s eyes were wide. He sat beside Bin, plastering himself up against his side, then asked Myungjun, “How many battles have you been in?”

“Several,” Myungjun responded. He glanced at Bin, worried for some reason, and Bin smiled in encouragement. “Over thirty.”

“Whoa.” Sanha was impressed. “How are we going to get him back to Joseon?” he asked, following Myungjun’s gaze to stare at Bin. “If he’s a general, he shouldn’t be away from his army for too long.”

Bin hadn’t concocted a plan yet. He knew it would likely be a difficult task to kidnap a slave from his owner and take him back to a different country, but he was willing to do it if it meant Myungjun could be back home.

He ruffled Sanha’s hair but kept his own eyes on Myungjun. “I’m not entirely certain yet,” he said, honestly. “But I swear, I will return Myungjun to Joseon. We could all stay together there, too.”

“Would you give up your riches here?” Myungjun asked, a bit scathingly.

The words came out before Bin could stop them: “Anything for you, General Kim.”

Myungjun looked shocked and Sanha looked confused, but Bin wouldn’t take it back.

It was the truth.

He would do anything for General Kim.
Convincing Yang Jing to stay a few days at his house was an easy enough feat. Bin supplied him with gifts he had in storage, riches he himself had grown tired of or else would never use. He passed over opium and ivory and gold and pornography, hopeful that Yang Jing would become lazy and would choose to stay.

It seemed to work rather well. Bin despised having Yang Jing so close to him, but it meant Myungjun could stay, too, and Bin would forgo any sort of trial and tribulation in order to keep Myungjun close to him.

Myungjun, it seemed, was rather confused about the sudden attention he was getting. Whenever Yang Jing was preoccupied with one of the many gifts Bin had given him, Bin would order Myungjun to his room where he would talk and plan of a way to escape.

Myungjun would just watch, usually silent.

“Why?” the fallen general finally asked one evening, a week into Yang Jing’s stay.

Bin glanced up, confused. “What?”

“Why?” Myungjun repeated. He sat cross-legged in front of Bin, eyebrows raised as he awaited an answer. He must have sensed Bin’s confusion, however, for he clarified, “You have only just gotten to know me, and yet you’re already expecting to run away with me. It’s clear you dislike China, and it’s clear you’ve been wanting to return to Joseon for some time now, but why now, when you’ve only just met me, do you plan to leave?”

He was suspicious, and for good reason. Bin couldn’t very well make up an excuse, and he couldn’t very well tell the truth. A lie would serve him best for the time being.

“I knew a general back when I lived in Joseon, too. He was strong and proud of his occupation. He died in battle, unfortunately, but I know he would have become devastated if he was brought from Joseon and forced into slavery. Helping you would...be wonderful. He would want me to do so.”

Myungjun sat back a little bit, propping himself up by his arms. “You speak of him with fondness. Was he close to you?”

Bin nodded. “Very close.” He hoped to one day become close to this Myungjun, as well, but he knew he would have to bide his time. After all, he didn’t become General Kim’s lover in a matter of a week. It took a while.

As long as Myungjun remained alive and close by his side, though, Bin could wait. He didn’t mind. He wanted to see Myungjun happy and well; that would be good enough for him. Myungjun could not become happy and well, though, until he arrived back in Joseon. For now, he was under constant threat of pain and suffering, since he was Yang Jing’s slave.

“Do you expect me to become as close to you as your general was?” Myungjun questioned, breaking Bin from his thoughts. “I shall not. You cannot make me.”

“I don’t mind,” Bin answered honestly. He shocked himself with that admission. He had originally run from Joseon in order to escape his one-sided love. Now, though, he discovered he would much rather stay by Myungjun’s side, even if Myungjun chose not to love him back.
Myungjun’s nose wrinkled as he looked upon Bin with distaste. “I am just going to use you. The moment I am freed from this wretched place and back home, I will not wish to see you again. You’re my escape, and that is the only reason I shall pretend to befriend you.”

Again, Bin answered honestly, “I am willing to be used.”

There was a moment of silence. Bin stared at Myungjun, and Myungjun refused to look away.

“You’re...different,” Myungjun murmured, sitting up straight once more. “Do you really not care that you will be used by me and that I regard you as little more than a nuisance?”

“I don’t care.”

“Is this because you feel some sort of obligation to protect Joseon generals?”

Bin laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “Possibly. However, I think it has more to do with my weakness towards Joseon soldiers who are highly attractive. I like tanned skin and sharp eyes and soft cheeks and smaller bodies. I find these physical attributes desirable.”

The blush that rose to Myungjun’s cheeks was cute. Bin smiled wide, and Myungjun acted unbothered. “Seems like something a man who engages in sexual debauchery would say.”

“It is.”

His answer took Myungjun aback. The man sat in confusion for a few seconds, blinking and struggling to come up with words to say.

“It...what?”

“If by sexual debauchery you are implying I’ve slept with men and prostitutes and others, then yes, I do engage in sexual debauchery.”

Myungjun’s eyes were wide. “You do?”

“Yes.”

Myungjun seemed to be struggling to comprehend what Bin was telling him. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head and whispered, “You’ve had sex with men?”

Playing along, Bin also dropped his voice to a whisper. “Yes. Would you like me to tell you about it?”

“No, thank you.” Myungjun sighed, then shook his head as if disappointed. “Why are you telling me, though? Did you believe I would willingly give my body up in order to get back to Joseon? Is this some sort of sick deal? I’ll have you know that I refuse to sleep with a man, and I’d rather die than—”

“I’m not asking you to sleep with me, nor am I asking you to commit suicide.” Bin couldn’t help but laugh; Myungjun was entertaining. “You accused me of being a sexual deviant, and I agreed. That was all.”

“What does — what does this have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. Again, you were the one who brought it up.” Bin grabbed onto his sheets of parchment paper and tapped to an outline of a plan he had devised. “Now, unless you have qualms about becoming a stowaway with a sexual deviant, that information should be absolutely useless to you...”
and we can continue to discuss how to get you away from your own personal hell. Would that be alright?”

Myungjun glanced down at the paper, but only briefly. His eyes found solace in Bin once more and he nodded his head slowly. “That’s...alright,” he murmured.

It was like Bin had gone back in time and was transported to General Kim. So much was the same, and yet Bin reminded himself this Myungjun was still different.

Perhaps, though, this Myungjun would also grow to love him as General Kim did. Bin prayed to the gods he had long since cursed to grant him that one sliver of happiness.

Just that one.

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Usually, Bin was the one who liked to sleep in. On the nights they would spend together, Myungjun would sometimes whisper something in Bin’s ear about how he had to wake up early the next morning, how he was likely to be gone, how Bin could show himself out but make sure none of the slaves caught sight of him. Bin didn’t mind, even if he was rather sad about waking up to a cold mattress. He did like the opportunity to sleep in, however, and he always laughed that his lover was quite an early riser.

Of course, early mornings and late nights would occasionally cause Myungjun to become terribly exhausted and unable to properly awaken without Bin’s assistance.

This was one such particular morning. The sun had yet to rise, yet Bin had blinked open his own eyes and stared blearily out into the darkness.

Beside him, Myungjun slept, curled up into Bin’s chest and holding on as if for dear life.

Bin smiled fondly down at his lover, petting his messy hair, then realized that Myungjun needed to be up around this time. “Before the sun,” Myungjun always said, especially on inspection days.

“This day’s an inspection day,” Bin murmured, trying to shake Myungjun awake. “Darling, please get up - you need to get ready.”

Myungjun grumbled out in his sleep, trying to smack away Bin’s hands. Bin tried harder.

“I don’t mean to disturb you, darling, but you do need to get up.”

“Leave me alone,” Myungjun whined, long and drawn out, as he tried to flop to the other side to ignore Bin’s insistent alarm.

Bin would not accept that. Myungjun was likely to be in trouble if he was late. So, in an effort to drive away all of the sleep, Bin pulled the covers back, exposing them both to the chill of the morning air.

Myungjun instantly curled in on himself, shivering despite his sleepwear. He managed to lay there for a few seconds longer before he blindly reached for the covers. “Bin, stop it.”
“No. You need to get up.” Bin pushed the covers off of the mattress completely and across the floor.

Finally, Myungjun turned and opened his eyes, glaring up at Bin who offered him a smile. “You’re a scoundrel,” Myungjun complained. “A wretched, despicable scoundrel.”

“Good morning, darling.”

“Don’t try to be friendly now.” Myungjun sat up, as well, moaning and running his fingers through his hair. “I ought to just kill you and go back to sleep.”

Bin pouted. “You will be sad if I am dead.”

“No, I will be happy. You won’t bother me any longer.”

Of course, Bin was well aware that Myungjun was simply tired and did not mean any of his threats. It was easy to brush off any mean words General Kim had for him — he would never harm Bin, and Bin knew that.

Myungjun sighed and glanced over at Bin. Though the room was devoid of much light, Bin could still detect just how exhausted his general was. His hair looked to be a mess and his robes were full of wrinkles. He must not have slept soundly through the night.

“I will bother you even in the afterlife,” Bin mentioned. “You know this.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes. Still, he leaned forward and reached a hand out to grasp onto Bin’s necklace. He admired the jade, even in the darkness of the room, and Bin could detect a smile.

“You look quite handsome today, Bin. I hope you will look this handsome in the afterlife.” He ran his free hand over Bin’s bare chest and released a quiet giggle. “You seem to know how attractive you are. Do you forgo clothes on purpose?”

“If it wakes you up, then yes, I do.” Bin kissed Myungjun’s nose and asked, “Shall I put on clothes and brush your hair?”

Usually, one of the slaves would ready Myungjun for the day, but while Bin stayed over, he liked to do it. Myungjun always seemed to appreciate Bin’s attention to detail, and he was able to relax a bit more if it was just Bin instead of some slave.

Sure enough, Myungjun was nodding his head. “I will light the lanterns as you dress,” he murmured, patting Bin’s cheek. “That way, I can see my lover better.”

Moments later, Myungjun sat in Bin’s lap as Bin combed through the messy tangles caused from a lack of sleep.

“Is there a reason you could not sleep well?” Bin questioned, trying his best to not tug or pull at Myungjun’s pretty, black hair.

Myungjun still winced from time to time, but otherwise didn’t complain. “I had a bad dream,” he responded. “Or, rather, a bad thought. It kept me up through the night. Usually I do not let such trivial matters bother me, but this one remained on my mind.”

Bin hummed. “Would you like to tell me?”

It took Myungjun a minute to answer. Perhaps he was gathering his thoughts. Or, perhaps the memory was just as awful hours later as it was when he first had the dream. Regardless, Bin kept
silent, not wishing to interrupt his lover.

“It was a weird dream,” Myungjun muttered. “I had your necklace.”

“Really?” Bin asked. He glanced down. It was now hidden under his robes, so he tugged it out and patted his chest. “The one you gave me?”

Myungjun nodded. “And I remember thinking, in my dream, I ought to give this to Bin, but I could not find you. No matter how often I looked, I could not find you. I was alone.”

“I’d never leave you alone,” Bin assured him, kissing the back of his head. “I’ll always come for you, no matter what.”

“Well, you did, in my dream. Finally, you arrived, but you...you were hurt. You were hurt all over. You were sick and dying and bleeding out and I grabbed onto you but you said — you said I was at fault for your pain and suffering.”

Bin stared at Myungjun’s tangled mess of hair. It would have been a frightening dream, had Bin dreamed it about Myungjun. He could only imagine how his lover must have felt. “Nothing will ever be your fault,” Bin assured him.

Myungjun glanced over his shoulder. His eyes instantly locked onto the necklace. He whispered, “I held it so tightly in my dream and it burned my damn hand, but all I could think about was you.” He looked frightened and he asked, “What if it’s a glimpse into our future? What if I do something that gets you harmed?”

“It can’t be a glimpse into our future. I would never allow you to have my necklace.”

Myungjun scoffed and hit Bin’s chest. While Bin laughed, Myungjun turned around fully. He still sat in Bin’s lap, but now he wrapped his legs around Bin’s waist and stared at him seriously. “Bin, I don’t want to do anything to harm you. It...it felt so real, in my dream, and I’m concerned that it is real.”

“It is not.” Bin buried his head into Myungjun’s chest and breathed in his familiar scent. He murmured, “You won’t harm me. You would never harm me. And I would never blame you if an accident occurred and I was harmed. It wouldn’t be your intentions.” He looked up into Myungjun's worried face and offered him a smile. “You love me, correct?”

Myungjun nodded. “Yes.”

“And you don’t wish to harm me, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Then we have nothing to worry about!” Bin’s arms snaked around Myungjun’s back and pulled him close, so he could rest his head onto Myungjun’s chest once again. “Is that why you couldn’t sleep?”

Myungjun sighed. He leaned forward and rested his cheek into Bin’s hair. “I was busy holding onto you. I was afraid of sleeping again. I counted how many breaths you took.”

“How many?”

“Enough to be alive.”
“That’s good. I’m glad I’m breathing.”

With a snort, Myungjun pulled back from him. His face in the soft glow of lights from the lanterns made him look all the more ethereal, and yet all the more exhausted. Bin felt love pour forth from his heart. His love was unstoppable and unshakeable. He couldn’t believe the gods had given Myungjun to him to love forever and ever.

“Don’t be a sarcastic fool,” Myungjun warned. He turned back around, legs in front of himself, and ordered, “Get back to brushing my hair. I need to leave in an hour.”

Bin laughed and returned to his original position. “Of course, General Kim,” he replied. One last kiss was planted into Myungjun’s hair, and Bin added, “Anything for you.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

After Yang Jing left, Bin felt like his life was in chaos. Apart from Myungjun and with only a vague idea of how to escape to Joseon, he sat and brooded in his room for hours, only accepting both food and company from Sanha.

The boy, like Myungjun, could not very well understand what was driving Bin to leave so suddenly. When he asked, Bin simply sighed and muttered, “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

Still, despite his reluctance to tell Sanha anything concerning his past, Sanha still tried his best to help out. “Do you want to see the general again?” he asked, pouring Bin a glass of imported wine. “Not...not General Jing. The other one. Gouxing. Or, uh, Myungjun.”

Bin sighed and slumped over on his desk until Sanha passed over his wine glass. “I do,” Bin confirmed, taking a sip of the bitter alcohol. “I need to discuss with him how to best break him out of his bondage. He would know best how Yang Jing treats the slaves and if he can escape undetected.”

Not only did Bin need to discuss details about leaving to Joseon, he also longed to see Myungjun once more. It had only been a couple of weeks since Yang Jing’s departure, but it was still like a lifetime.

Bin would know how a lifetime felt.

“Why don’t you go visit Yang Jing, then?” Sanha suggested. “You can be in his estate and also around his new slave. If you keep him drunk or-or on drugs or involved with pornography, as you did while he was here, maybe he wouldn’t really notice if you and Myungjun plotted.”

It was a brilliant suggestion. Bin wondered why he hadn’t been the one to come up with that. He stared over at Sanha and a smile overtook his face. “Wonderful! Sanha, you’re absolutely marvelous, did you know that?”

Sanka blushed, and Bin hugged him close, planting a few kisses on his plush cheeks and rifling his hair. It caused the boy to giggle, music to Bin’s ears, and then they set about preparing a plan.
The next day, Bin sent a messenger ahead to let Yang Jing know that Bin would soon be arriving. Bin loaded up a few boxes with things he was certain would take up Yang Jing’s time; valuables from Joseon he had yet to show off, his last cases of opium, the finest wine he could gather, and more tobacco from his farms. He couldn’t praise Sanha’s name enough, and he allowed the boy to ride along with him.

“You’re coming with us to Joseon,” Bin said as they were jostled around slightly in their carriage. “So it makes sense to involve you in the planning period.”

“Where in Joseon shall we live?” Sanha asked, practically bouncing up and down in excitement.

Bin calmed him down with a few pats to his head. “I’m not certain, but I’ll bring as much of my wealth as I possibly can, and we shall all live lavishly together.”

For once, he decided not to think of his immortality, and for once he decided not to ponder on the curse placed upon Myungjun’s reincarnations. He was determined to make things work out. He wanted this to be it; he wanted this lifetime to be the one that would end him. He had to make things work, though. He had to keep Myungjun alive and safe and perhaps, then, the spell would be broken.

Yang Jing’s estate took almost half an hour to reach. As Bin’s closest neighbor, Bin knew they were quite a distance away, but he preferred it that way. Yang Jing didn’t bother him too much. Because Bin was closer to the market, and because Yang Jing was lazy, Yang Jing only sent out slaves to do his errands. As such, Bin never really ran into him.

Yet here he was, willingly entering the belly of the beast simply because he was too attached to Myungjun.

Bin cursed the gods in his head.

When they arrived, Yang Jing was rather shocked to see him, despite having received Bin’s message.

“We have already spent ample time together the other week,” Yang Jing pointed out as Bin unloaded his carriage alongside two of his own slaves. “What has brought this on?”

“I’m simply curious to hear your war stories,” Bin responded, the lie coming far too easily. “When you stayed with me, you were drunk half the time and masturbating the other half.”

Yang Jing flushed. “That’s—”

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed. It’s normal bodily function. Besides, the pornography I’ve given you is quite erotic.” Bin grinned wickedly and held up one of his packages. “I have more for you to examine.”

It was obvious that Yang Jing was interested. “Well...I suppose I can make arrangements for you to stay for a few nights. After all, you have gifts for me and you are asking for friendly tales. I have the time.”

“Very good,” Bin stated, and he was led inside, Sanha close behind him.

They ate dinner together that evening. Yang Jing’s wife served them, hobbling around in her delicate shoes and ruined feet. She kept her head down and her eyes averted, only showing sign that she noticed Bin when he thanked her for the meal.
“Don’t thank her,” Yang Jing fussed. “She did not make this. She’s practically useless. She can’t produce me a son.” He leaned in and mock-whispered, “She doesn’t perform well in bed.”

Bin glanced over at the poor woman. “Well, she’s very beautiful and kind—”

“I only keep her now because it’s required by law. At least the concubines gift me with sons. In fact, one of my sons will be taking the imperial exam.” Now that the conversation was steered away from his wife, Yang Jing was excited. “He’s the oldest. A very bright and sturdy son. I will force the others to do so, as well, but one worries me. He’s too small and too weak. I think he might be as useless as my wife.”

As if to prove his point, Yang Jing glanced over at Sanha, who stood against the wall, and pointed. “He’s quite like that slave of yours. Worthless.”

Bin noticed Sanha wince. *Worthless* seemed one of the few Chinese words that Sanha could pick up on. Though he had not given any information, Bin was certain that Sanha had been called that many times in his short life from various owners.

“I already am concerned with your negative thoughts on your own family,” Bin stated, “but could you please leave my own out of it?”

“That slave isn’t your family.”

“He is,” Bin said, armed with steely determination to defend Sanha’s honor. “As you might have noticed, I am without a wife and children, and Sanha has managed to become my most trusted companion.”

Yang Jing looked confused. He glanced back and forth between Bin and Sanha, and finally asked, “Wouldn’t you like for a more... worthy companion?”

“I have the most worthy companion possible. I need no others.”

“But he’s property.”

Bin knew better than to fight what Yang Jing was saying. If he raised too much of a fuss, he would likely be tossed out, and then his chance to see Myungjun would be gone. Still, he didn’t want Sanha to be talked so badly about, so he asked, “Might we please veer the conversation away from my slave? Tell me, instead, how are your crops?”

Yang Jing did as Bin asked, possibly fueled with the opportunity to talk more of himself. He straightened up and said, “Things are fruitful this season, it appears. I’m not very proud of the slaves I am using, however.”

Bin thought of Myungjun. He was a field slave. “Oh?” He tried his best not to seem too interested. “Do you remember the general I brought from Joseon?”

“Yes.” General Kim. *Myungjun*. Bin couldn’t forget him if he tried. Of course, his initial pleasure at hearing Myungjun’s name was then superseded with fear. Yang Jing was singling Myungjun out.

“He’s been acting out recently. The other day he smacked me.” Yang Jing scoffed and shook his head disapprovingly. “I hit him back and now he’s been unable to work.”

Bin’s stomach turned. “How many times did you hit him?”
“Too many. Ah, well, I’ll give him another chance. I suppose if he tries anything funny again, I will not hesitate to put a stop to it, but for now I’ll let him grovel in punishment. He might learn that it’s best to do as I say.”

Bin had to quell his longing to attack Yang Jing. The man deserved it; how dare he hurt someone to that extent. How dare he hurt Myungjun, nonetheless. Yang Jing wasn’t worthy enough to even look Myungjun’s way, let alone defile him in such a manner.

Still, Bin knew better than to say anything. He let the matter go, pretending that such words had no effect on him whatsoever. He didn’t say anything concerning Myungjun again until he was alone in the room he was to share with Sanha.

“What a scumbag,” Bin murmured when he was certain the coast was clear. He could switch to his native language, and Sanha could finally understand what he was saying.

Sanha set out Bin’s bed. “What did he do?” the boy asked.

“Well, first off, ignore whatever it is he has to say. He’s...gross.” Bin sat down and watched the flickering light of the candle, his mind working to come up with a plan. “Second off, he’s just a horrible person. Being in his presence is akin to drinking poison.”

Sanha giggled lightly. “I don’t think you would know what drinking poison is like.”

Bin chose not to correct Sanha’s statement.

“I need to go find Myungjun, though,” Bin murmured. He glanced over at Sanha, who shifted nervously. “What?”

“Won’t...won’t General Jing be mad if you go and mingle with his servants and slaves?”

“The most he can do is force us to leave,” Bin assured him, patting Sanha’s head. “I need you, though, to cover for me. If Yang Jing or any of his own personal servants come into this room, just let him know I could not sleep and decided to take a walk around his gardens. You can do that, right?”

He knew he was putting Sanha in a difficult position. The boy could barely speak Chinese, and he certainly couldn’t stand up to a powerful and temperamental nobleman. However, Bin was determined to see Myungjun, one way or another. If he had to drag Sanha into his lies and deceit, so be it.

Fortunately, Sanha agreed, albeit a bit hesitatingly. “I-I won’t tell him where you’ve gone, Bin. I promise.”

Sanha was perfect. He was truly too good to be in the position of slave, and as Bin took his leave, he wondered if he could free Sanha once they were back in Joseon. Of course, he always hoped that Sanha would choose to stay by his side, to allow Bin to dote on him just a bit more.

To make Sanha’s life better, he needed to get out of China, and he wasn’t going anywhere without Myungjun.

Bin made his way across the courtyard, stepping quietly past the house he knew Yang Jing was in, and down to the front wall. Bin’s own servants slept in such an area; he assumed Yang Jing’s did, as well.

He opened one door slowly, trying his best to make as little noise as possible. Inside were women,
asleep in their own beds, and Bin left them. Next, it seemed, were the servants who worked inside Yang Jing’s estate; he supposed so, for the room was much better furnished.

The last door of the house appeared to be for the field workers. Bin could tell because this room was a bit more dirty and a bit more crowded.

Besides, he noticed Myungjun, laying closest to the door and wrapped in a thin blanket.

Minding the other sleeping bodies in the room, Bin walked slowly and bent until he was beside Myungjun.

He shook the general awake, holding a finger to his mouth to signify the need for his silence. Myungjun stared at him incredulously. Bin gestured at the door multiple times until Myungjun finally nodded in understanding.

Time to leave.

As Myungjun stood, he seemed to be in pain. He was slow in movement and flinched when Bin grabbed onto his arm to help steady him. In the darkness of the room, however, Bin couldn’t see very well what was the matter.

Even outside, the moon provided little light, and so Bin could only guess what Yang Jing had done to him. It wasn’t until they were back in Bin’s room, where Sanha kept the lanterns and candles going, that Bin could finally get a good look at Myungjun’s wounds.

“He really beat you,” Bin whispered in shock.

Myungjun had a few bruises on his face, but his arms seemed to have undergone the worst treatment. Bin examined them and asked, “Did he flog your arms?”

Myungjun sighed. “He said if I couldn’t use my arms, I couldn’t hit him. I think he forgot I would also be unable to work.”

Sanha piped up, “We have some salve I can get for him - shall I apply it to his wounds, Bin?”

“No. No, you...you sleep, Sanha. I need to talk to Myungjun privately, so I can do it when we step outside.” He rifled through his own personal belongings before he found what Sanha was referring to, then asked Myungjun, “Would you mind sitting with me outside? I’ll leave the door opened so I can see your wounds to apply the solution, but this might help the pain.”

Myungjun was still cautious and still hesitant, but he nodded his head, eyeing Bin in suspicion.

As Sanha laid down to sleep, Bin led Myungjun outside once more, sitting close enough to the door that the light still shone down upon them.

“What are you doing here?” Myungjun asked. “Are you and Sanha staying here just to be close to me?”

“Would it annoy you if I were to say yes?”

Myungjun pursed his lips. He winced slightly as Bin spread some of the cold cream onto his arms.

“I apologize, darling,” Bin murmured, trying to be more gentle.

“Darling?” Myungjun scoffed. “I’m not your lover.”
“Not yet, no. What a pity.”

Myungjun was silent for a minute, watching as Bin tried his best to cover any cuts he saw, but then he asked, “You’ve stated before you are a homosexual man—or, at least, you engage in homosexuality, but I’ve asked about you. Another slave here is Joseon but he also speaks Chinese. He told me that, as far as he knows, you’ve never once taken any concubines or lovers of any sort. Did you lie to me? Are you just trying to prove something?”

Bin smirked. He didn’t look up at Myungjun, not yet. “What on earth would I be trying to prove by telling you of my preference for pretty boys? I’d likely ruin my image — which is the opposite of trying to prove anything.”

“Then do you expect me to swoon and fall for you?” Myungjun questioned. “What type of game are you playing, Sun Lian?”

“Bin,” came the response.

“Fine. What type of game are you playing, Bin?”

Bin finished his task in covering up Myungjun’s arms with a salve. He moved the little tin can away and sat up straighter, meeting Myungjun’s accusatory gaze. “I’m not playing a game. I truly like you.”

“You liked me the moment you met me, it seems.”

“Like I mentioned before, I have a weakness for pretty men. You are a pretty man. However,” Bin turned to look away from Myungjun, to stare out instead at the sky and the moon hanging low, fit and snug among the stars surrounding it, “as I’ve coordinated plans to leave with you to Joseon, I think I’ve come to love you even more. You’re determined. You’re stubborn. You’re steadfast and strong and brave. Yet, you’ve treated Sanha with nothing but kindness. You’ve treated the slaves and servants with nothing but kindness, as well. You are a magnificent man, and I love you.”

Myungjun, once again, fell silent. When Bin spared a glance over, Myungjun was looking down at his lap.

Bin leaned closer. “I’d like it, Myungjun, if you would love me back.”

He didn’t get a chance to kiss Myungjun. The younger man, instead, drew away from Bin’s touch, eyes wide with fright.

“I’m sorry,” Bin apologized, quickly returning to his original position. “I overstepped boundaries. It will not happen again, I assure-”

“I’ve never kissed anyone,” Myungjun whispered.

Bin thought he might not have heard correctly. He blinked in confusion, then asked, “Repeat that, please, General Kim.”

“I’ve...never...” Myungjun gestured at Bin and then again at himself. Though it was difficult to tell from the little light leaving Bin’s room, Bin was certain that Myungjun was blushing.

“You’ve never kissed anyone?” Bin asked.

Myungjun shook his head.
That was difficult to believe. Even General Kim had fornicated before he met Bin, with various girls and one or two men, apparently. *This* General Kim was supposed to be similar in all aspects.

The new information reminded Bin that General Kim was *not* here with him again. This was yet another reincarnation; it was Myungjun, but it was still a different person.

No matter what, though, Bin would love him.

“We don’t have to kiss, then,” Bin assured him. “And I will not try at all to force my love upon you. It would be uncouth of me.” He smiled, hopeful he had not upset Myungjun, and said, “For now, we can simply discuss our plans to get you out of here and back to—”

“I’d like to try kissing you, though,” Myungjun blurted out. He met Bin’s gaze; despite how embarrassed he was, it appeared he was trying his best to remain that determined, strong general Bin had initially fallen for hundreds upon hundreds of years ago.

“Are you sure?” Bin asked. “Again, I’m not trying to force you—”

“I’ve never kissed anyone, and as I’m stuck in slavery for now, I doubt I’ll get the chance for a while. I’d like to try — besides, you’re wealthy, and if I become affectionate with a wealthy man, it isn’t the *worst* thing I could do,” Myungjun snapped.

Bin couldn’t help but laugh. “ Typically, romantic feelings ought to be coupled with romantic words. Write me a poem to portray your feelings, General Kim.”

“I never said anything about romantic feelings,” Myungjun shot back. “Again, I want to use you, Bin, and if that involves kissing you and allowing you to love me, then so be it.”

He put on such a bravado. He put on such a front. Bin loved it. He noticed the way Myungjun’s fingers gripped tightly at his own robes and how his tongue darted out anxiously to lick at his lips, and how he kept his eyes averted. He was humiliated. He wasn’t steadfast in anything but words.

Which meant he either desired a kiss, or he *did* have some semblance of romantic feelings within him.

*Cute.*

“Just to be clear,” Bin murmured, “You’re perfectly fine if I go ahead and kiss you, correct?”

Myungjun stared at Bin. Bin could practically see the thoughts spinning in his mind, the pros and cons of such a situation, the hesitation and yet excitement at trying something new and different. Then, he nodded his head once.

“Correct.”

Bin had to steel himself. This hadn’t happened in quite some time. Even when Myungjun had been around, even with the new reincarnations, he hadn’t kissed any of the Myungjun’s romantically since Prince Myungjun.

He took a deep breath and leaned forward.

Already, Myungjun’s eyes had fluttered shut. His lips puckered out, just slightly, awaiting the kiss Bin had to offer.

Bin did not wish to rush this, though. He wanted to take his time, to savor this moment. So he
moved slow, instead, and placed his forehead against Myungjun’s. He smoothed back Myungjun’s tangled hair, brushed the bangs away from his eyes, and stared upon the man.

His skin was smooth, yet tan. He had faint freckles on his nose and some on his cheeks, freckles Bin could only detect up close. He was warm, too, as if he had harnessed the power from the sun. He had long eyelashes and plump lips and a small nose.

Bin marveled at his appearance and marveled at how intimate he could finally be with Myungjun again.

Myungjun, realizing the kiss had never come, opened his eyes and looked at Bin. “The longer you take to kiss me, the more likely I am to change my mind,” he whispered. His breath fanned against Bin’s skin.

Bin blinked rapidly and murmured back, “I apologize. I just...want to...look at you. I want to study you. I want to memorize you.”

“Why?”

Bin tentatively brought a hand up to Myungjun’s face. He ran a finger along his cheekbones and down his jaw. His whole arm was shaking. He felt completely overwhelmed.

“I-In case you disappear,” Bin whispered, “in case you leave me, I need to keep you with me forever. I need to savor this moment so I can always look back and think, yes, this is what the man I loved looked like and felt like .”

Myungjun was confused; Bin could see it in his gaze. However, he didn’t ask questions and he didn’t try again to hurry Bin along. He was silent, allowing Bin to brush over every feature on his face. He simply closed his eyes and kept still.

When Bin’s hand traveled to Myungjun’s lips, though, he finally stopped his exploration of the face before him and took a deep breath.

He wanted, so badly, to kiss Myungjun.

So he did.

He pressed his lips gently into Myungjun’s own. When he noticed Myungjun give a jolt of surprise, he wrapped his arms around him, trying to convey a sense of comfort and security. Fortunately, it seemed to work well enough. Myungjun remained still, wounded arms by his own side, as Bin kissed him.

The kiss was chaste. It only lasted a few seconds. When Bin drew back, he realized the world was a little blurry, a little watery.

It was Myungjun who pointed out the obvious. “Are you crying?”

“I’m...” Bin sniffled and wiped at his eyes.

This was the first time he had kissed Myungjun in hundreds upon hundreds of years. He couldn’t even do the math in his head to think of how long it had been - six hundred? Seven hundred? Whatever the case, it was too long to have been without the one man who meant more to him than anything else in the world ever would.

“I’m emotional,” Bin choked out as tears poured down his cheeks. “O-O-Oh, god , Myungjun, I
needed this. I-I-I need you.”

Myungjun did his best to help Bin wipe the tears off his face. “You are emotional,” he agreed. “Very, very emotional. Bin, please, get a hold of yourself. You kissed a man, as you’ve said you’ve done before. You ought not be emotional.”

He had kissed plenty of men, thousands of men, in between the Myungjun reincarnations. None of them would ever be as special as Myungjun, however. Myungjun brought with him a spark of life, a bit of happiness, into Bin’s otherwise dreary existence.

“Not like this,” Bin argued, placing a hand on Myungjun’s cheek. His thumb stroked the skin, and it was pure luck that Myungjun did not fling him away. “Not like you.”

Myungjun swallowed thickly, and asked, “What makes me so wonderful?”

“Everything,” Bin responded, breathlessly. “I love you, Myungjun. Allow me to love you forever.”

He leaned forward to kiss Myungjun again. This time, he allowed more passion to spill forth. He threw caution to the wind and held Myungjun close as he kissed him. His lips parted and his tongue darted out, eliciting a noise of surprise from Myungjun, and yet Bin didn’t part. He kissed and moaned and grasped tightly onto Myungjun’s clothing.

Myungjun stayed still, doing very little work, and yet he allowed Bin to kiss him. He kept his eyes shut and his lips parted, yet he finally expressed discomfort when Bin started to tug at his shirt.

“Bin,” he whispered, pulling away. “Stop.”

Bin’s eyes grew wide. Did he go too far? Did he become too intimate? He dropped his hands from Myungjun’s clothes. “I won’t do it again,” he swore. “I...should have asked if that was—”

“I’m not going to have sex with you,” Myungjun said, voice still hushed. He glanced back at the room, at the open door, and Bin followed his gaze.

Sanha lay there, fast asleep, oblivious to any affair happening just outside the room.

Bin nodded in understanding, then whispered, “I can shut the door and he will not know. We will be—”

“No, I...don’t want to have sex.” Myungjun averted his gaze and shifted so he faced forward, instead of facing Bin. “I...just would rather not have sex with a man.”

Bin felt disappointment flood his heart. He had been looking forward to such closeness after so many years apart. He wanted to fill Myungjun. He wanted to hear Myungjun pant and moan and curse. He wanted to taste every sweet bit of Myungjun’s body. And, when it was all done, he wanted to hold his lover in his arms, never minding the sweat and bodily fluids, and watch him sleep.

Myungjun’s resistance made things difficult, however.

“Why not?”

“I just...I’m not comfortable.” Myungjun cleared his throat. “Not now. Maybe...maybe later on. Back in Joseon. Maybe. But, please, do not force me to comply. I will not, and if you rape me, I will not enjoy it and—”
“I’d never rape you.” Bin drew him close again. He planted a small kiss on his cheek. “I love you. Love entails respecting you and your body. I won’t do anything you dislike.”

He could detect a smile forming on Myungjun’s face. The general fought against it, but his cheeks were still pushed upward and his eyes still crinkled. “Really? You won’t?”

“As long as I can at least still kiss you, I shall be satisfied.”

Myungjun smirked. “I did like the kiss, so I will not complain should you continue to kiss me.”

“What a change of attitude. First you stated that you would use me, and now you allow for me to kiss you?”

Myungjun scoffed and rolled his eyes. “If I derive pleasure from such an act, then why should I not indulge in it? It benefits me, either way; I enjoy kissing you and I also enjoy using you to get me out of China.”

“Oh. But of course.” Bin laughed. His cheeks were still wet from his crying, his eyes were still filled with tears, and his heart was still hammering with adoration.

Things were finally looking up.

The Lantern Festival had begun. Outside, people prepared for the festivities. The entire city had been a chaotic scene, and Bin was excited to finally see the fruits of everyone’s labor. Usually, Bin would enjoy the sights by himself. When he bought Sanha, he was able to help make the lanterns and play different games and he finally found the festival entertaining.

Now, it was even better, for after some bargaining with Yang Jing, Myungjun was able to celebrate the Lantern Festival alongside Bin.

The young general was excited. He sat beside Sanha, eagerly telling him all about the celebrations that took place in Joseon, supplying Sanha with a bit of his own forgotten history.

Sanha stared at Myungjun, hanging onto his every word, and asked, “Did you make lanterns, too?”

Myungjun nodded his head. “For the Buddha’s birthday, we would all make lanterns. I used to do it a lot more as a child; when I joined the army, however, I was away from home for the majority of the festivals, and so it’s been a long time since I’ve actually celebrated one.”

Bin passed out the dish he had prepared and smiled fondly upon Myungjun and Sanha. He had given both boys a new set of clothing; as per tradition with Sanha, and hopefully a new tradition he could start with Myungjun. They were dressed in the finest silk Bin had to offer, and their shoes were made of hard leather with elaborate designs to signify Bin’s own wealth. He thought they both looked dashing, but he truly could not stop staring at Myungjun. He was cleaner than he had ever been since Bin had met him in this lifetime, and his clothes finally fit him and covered him properly. He reminded Bin vaguely of Prince Myungjun and the beautiful clothing he wore.

Myungjun glanced over at Bin, as if he had noticed the staring. They shared a small smile and then
Bin asked, “Shall we eat?”

Sanha cheered. As Bin passed out spoons, Sanha said, “General Kim, this is the best part! Bin told me that if we eat this yuanxiao together, then we will always be a family.” He glanced over at Bin and asked, “Can General Kim join our family?”

“He certainly can,” Bin responded. He sat down across from Myungjun and Sanha and asked the older boy, “Would you like to join our family, General Kim? We’re not a large family, nor are we necessarily related to each other, but I will welcome you.”

Myungjun was smirking. Clearly, he was remembering their stolen kisses. Since their first kiss, Bin had been back many other times to see Myungjun. They would kiss at nighttime, plastered against the boundary wall of Yang Jing’s home. They would kiss behind closed doors whenever Bin paid a visit to his neighbor, or vice versa. They would blow kisses to each other when they couldn’t physically touch. If Myungjun wasn’t already welcomed enough at this point, then he would never be.

“I would like to, Bin,” Myungjun replied, and he grabbed his spoon.

The yuanxiao was delicious. Sanha slurped at his soup and chewed loudly on his dumplings, forgoing all manners, and even Myungjun made noises of exclamation as he ate. It was sweet and filling and significant for their relationship to blossom.

As they headed out that evening, Sanha a few steps ahead of them, Bin commented, “I suppose you are already well aware that this holiday is also a time for women to be matched with men?”

“Is it?” Myungjun wondered aloud. He glanced around him and asked, “Is that why there are women out here?”

“Yes. They’re not supposed to come out often on their own, so this festival is usually a chance for them to meet someone, or else to speak with a matchmaker.”

Myungjun nodded his head. He walked close to Bin’s side, brushing arms with him from time to time. “Have you ever spoken with the matchmaker?”

“No. I told you, I prefer men. Besides, I think my entire life has been dedicated thus far to waiting on you.”

Myungjun made a face, and Bin couldn’t help but laugh. “Keep such disgusting thoughts to yourself,” Myungjun warned. “There are people here who will not be so open to your sexual debauchery as I am.”

Bin hummed lightly. “Is that what you consider my love for you? Sexual debauchery?”

“Of course,” Myungjun stated as if it was obvious. Still, he smiled despite his words and glanced up at Bin. “I haven’t even returned your love, and yet you have still remained attached to me. You truly are dedicated.”

The little smirk he gave and the way his head was tilted and the brightness in his eyes was enticing. It was all too much for Bin, and he quickly pulled Myungjun away from the crowd.

They nestled behind a large tree and Bin kissed him.

If Myungjun was surprised by the sudden burst of affection, he didn’t show it. He kissed Bin back, throwing his arms around Bin’s neck and stepping close to him.
“I love you,” Bin murmured, placing his hands on Myungjun’s waist. “I will always love you.”

Myungjun placed kiss after kiss after kiss, all across Bin’s face, and whispered, “And I am excited to have such a wealthy lover.”

“You’re cheeky.”

“Yet, you love me.”

Bin snorted. He kissed Myungjun’s cheek and then tugged at his body. “We’ve likely lost Sanha,” he said. “Let’s go find him.”

Myungjun didn’t move from his position, though. He stayed, hugging Bin, and responded, “He’s actually staring at us. He followed us.”

Bin spun around. Sure enough, Sanha stood just in view of them, his eyes wide and his mouth open. When he realized he had been caught in his staring, he bowed quickly and stammered, “I apologize, Master Sun! I hadn’t — I mean, I didn’t mean to look, I was — why-why are you kissing a man?”

Myungjun found it all rather amusing. He didn’t hide nor did he blush. He smiled, instead, and asked Bin, “Yes, Bin, why are you kissing a man?”

It would be kind of him to explain to poor Sanha what was going on. Bin’s wish had been to explain at a later date, perhaps when they were all together in Joseon, but he supposed this would have to do. “Sanha, um, it’s...I am in love with Myungjun.”

Sanha swallowed thickly. “Is...that allowed?”

“Not exactly,” Bin responded. “I trust you will keep it secret, though.”

“Does Myungjun — does General Kim love you back? Is that why he’s kissing you?”

Bin glanced over at Myungjun who raised his eyebrows. For once, it seemed the general was unsure of what he ought to say. He took a deep breath and shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh.” Sanha seemed a bit disappointed. “Master Sun, I thought—”

“It’s Bin.”

“Bin, I thought you liked women.”

“I like Myungjun.”

Sanha glanced over at Myungjun and shuffled his feet nervously. “Oh,” he said again. On his face was a heavy blush and Bin sighed. The poor boy probably felt terribly awkward being in their presence. Such affection between men was not of the norm; such affection between a wealthy man and a slave boy were **certainly** not of the norm. Sanha must not know what to think and what to feel.

Bin sought to save him the trouble.

“This will not affect my relationship with you, Sanha,” he stated. “I still care very much for you. I also care for Myungjun. I will love the both of you.”

“So you will not kiss me like you kiss him?” Sanha asked.
Bin smiled. “Of course not. Please, Sanha, do not worry about that.”

Sanha returned the smile, albeit a bit cautiously. “Alright. I apologize, still, for interrupting. I just...saw you and General Kim head behind the tree and I followed because I was curious. I didn’t want to be left behind.”

“He just wanted to sexually harass me, is all,” Myungjun said, dismissing Sanha’s concerns. “And now that he’s felt me up, I guess we can continue the festival?”

His nonchalance to being kissed made Bin burst out laughing, though he felt bad when he realized Sanha was alarmed and possibly disturbed. He hit Myungjun’s arm and scolded, “Please don’t turn our kissing into some heinous crime. And don’t sully the boy’s ears.”

“Fine. I won’t sully his ears. Now, come on — I’ve heard about the lanterns and I’d kill to see them.”

They continued on their walk again. Bin bought Sanha and Myungjun a few goodies at a few different vendors, and they also got a chance to stare out at the pretty lanterns. Lit up against the night sky, they were a sight to behold. The landscape around them was a warm orange, making Bin feel safe and secure and so happy. Sanha brightened up when Bin bought him his own lantern, and Myungjun lost some of his sarcasm as he struggled to work on some of the riddles attached to the lanterns.

Later that night, with Myungjun frustrated that the Chinese had been too difficult to understand and Sanha nearly toppling over from exhaustion, Bin took them both home. He tucked Sanha into bed and then retreated to his own room, where Myungjun sat, fiddling with his shirt.

“Is everything alright?” Bin asked. He sat on his mattress beside Myungjun and stared over at him. “Do you need help taking that off?”

“I don’t want to have sex with you,” Myungjun blurted out. He looked panicked, far from the suave general he was earlier that day. “Please, Bin, respect my boundaries.”

Bin blinked, slightly surprised. Had he given off the indication that he desired to have sex with Myungjun? He thought he kept that emotion hidden deep within him. He was too unwilling to upset his lover and so he had yet to mention anything to do with sex.

“I won’t have sex with you,” Bin assured him. “I wasn’t thinking about it. Were you?”

“You said we’d sleep in the same bed,” Myungjun mumbled. “And you’re offering to take my clothes off.”

Bin smiled. He leaned over to kiss Myungjun’s forehead, and he responded, “Neither of those involve sex, darling. I won’t touch you until you ask me to.”

Myungjun stared at him for a few seconds longer, as if observing his true intentions. When he seemed satisfied, he sighed and began to untie his shirt. “What if I do not wish to have sex with you, even after we arrive to Joseon?”

“Hm?”

“I mean...what if I never want to have sex with you?”

Bin hadn’t considered that to be a possibility. He had thought about waiting for Myungjun to become comfortable enough with the idea of having sex with a man, and he thought about walking
Myungjun through it. Never before had he considered Myungjun being with him and not having sex.

He felt confused. “You...don’t wish to have sex? At all?”

Myungjun looked away from him and murmured, “I have never wanted to engage in-in sexual activities. It’s never appealed to me. I knew, of course, if I were to marry a woman, I would have to in order to make a son. I just...don’t want to. It’s not anything to do with you, and it’s not because you’re a man, it’s just...I don’t wish to have sex.”

Bin tried to argue Myungjun’s feelings away. “It’s likely you’ve just not thought of it. Trust me, it’s a wonderful feeling; when two people who love each other become intimate—”

“I don’t want to.”

Myungjun had always been stubborn and steadfast and determined. Sometimes, he wished to have his mind changed. Sometimes, he wished for Bin to argue with him and to tease him.

Bin knew this was not one of those times. Rather than a glint of confidence and competition in his gaze, Myungjun looked nervous and unsure. He looked frightened of judgement.

So Bin refused to judge him.

“I will still love you.”

Myungjun looked at Bin now. His tone was hopeful as he asked, “Really? Honestly? You will love me even if you cannot have sex with me?”

Bin took Myungjun’s hair down from his tight bun. He ruffled it and smiled. “I will always love you. Just because you don’t wish to have sex doesn’t change my feelings. As long as I can still kiss you, I think I shall be satisfied enough.”

He would likely have to masterbate a bit more than usual. He would likely have to stifle such desires around Myungjun. He knew he could do it, though. He knew he would be proud to do it, proud to make Myungjun more comfortable.

Myungjun seemed relieved. He allowed Bin to take his shirt off and pull a new one on. Finally, once his clothes were prepared, he whispered, “Bin, I love you.”

Such a confession caused Bin to freeze. He stared at Myungjun with eyes wide. His heart hammered in his chest. Such words, such a meaning from those words, had been rare. “Say it again,” he demanded.

Myungjun looked shy, yet he repeated himself. “I love you.”

“Again.”

“I love you.”

Bin realized he had been holding his breath. He gulped for air, then asked, “Are you in love with me?”

Myungjun nodded his head. “I’m in love with you,” he confirmed.

Bin couldn’t help but to embrace Myungjun. He wrapped his arms around the smaller male and held him close, wishing to never let go again.
Myungjun did not belong to the world. Myungjun belonged only to him. Myungjun belonged only in his arms, and in his arms he would stay.

“I love you,” Myungjun whispered again, voice muffled from Bin’s chest. “I love you. I love you, Bin, I love you.”

Bin felt tears spring to his eyes, and he buried his nose into Myungjun’s tousled hair.

“I love you, General Kim.”

Since Myungjun’s confession, Bin had become much more inclined to spend his free time at Yang Jing’s estate. It confused Jing, who once asked, “Does something here interest you that much, Sun Lian, that you choose to spend your every waking moment here?”

Bin laughed him off, but truthfully, he found himself unwilling to spend much time away from Myungjun. Now that they both loved each other, Bin made up excuses to stay at Yang Jing’s place: his own home was under renovation, his slaves had contracted an illness, he simply preferred Yang Jing’s dwelling to his own. Regardless of his excuse, Yang Jing still treated him with suspicion, and Bin had to tread lightly.

He would wait until nightfall, until everyone else in the household was asleep, and he would open his doors for Myungjun to arrive. Sometimes Sanha remained with Bin; on those nights, they would all play a game until Sanha caved to the whims of exhaustion, and then Bin and Myungjun would sit outside and talk and smoke and kiss. Other nights, Bin was alone and he liked to whisper sweet nothings into the ears of his lover until the sun was just over the horizon.

The longer he stuck around, though, the more he noticed Myungjun’s own qualms.

Sometimes, Myungjun would come to him with a bruise on his cheek and a split lip. “Yang Jing hit me,” he would mutter. Other times, his back would be wounded, angry, red cuts practically shining through his thin clothes. “Yang Jin hit me,” he would mutter again. On one particular day, he arrived with a broken finger, which Bin wrapped the best he could, trying his best to kiss away Myungjun’s tears.

“Was it Yang Jing?” Bin questioned him once the broken finger was securely wrapped to Myungjun’s other finger.

Myungjun nodded his head. “I’m not certain why he’s suddenly angry with me.”

“Has he not told you? Does he not scold you?” Bin pursed his lips. “You are rather snarky; not that it’s any reason for him to hit you, but perhaps you are making him upset.”

“It’s not that,” Myungjun stated. “I don’t speak to him — I can’t speak to him, for all he knows is Chinese and all I know is Joseon. I do my work, too, as I’m trying to ward off suspicion that I am spending my nights in your company.”

Bin blinked. “Then...he lashes out at you for no reason?”
“Yes.” Myungjun stared down at his hand and frowned. “He did this to me this morning. I was working in his fields and he had a slave come to fetch me. The slave took me to his quarters and he talked to me in Chinese for a minute before grabbing my hand and twisting my finger back. It was sudden. It was odd. He sent me back to work afterwards.”

Since there was no reason to Yang Jing’s random animosity, Bin took it upon himself to talk to the man. They sat down for dinner together and Bin said, “I saw that slave the other day. The general from Joseon.”

“Oh?” Yang Jing chewed on his rice and looked up at Bin. “You are interested in him?”

“Not particularly,” Bin lied. “I was curious, though — is something wrong with his finger? It was bandaged up.”

Yang Jing raised his eyebrows. “Why should you show concern over a slave, Sun Lian?”

“The emperor is doing his best to promote familial relations between slaves and their masters. They ought to be treated with respect.”

“What makes you think I had anything to do with Gouxing’s finger? Perhaps he broke it while fighting with another slave. Maybe he was fingering a prostitute and he moved his hand back too hard, too fast.”

“Are you speaking from experience, Yang Ling?” Bin snapped. “Have you broken a bone by fingering a woman?”

Yang Jing’s eyebrows furrowed together. He stabbed at his meal and said, “I have not. I was giving reasons as to why that damn slave’s finger might be hurt. I do not keep up with each and every single one of my slaves, but as long as he can still do his work, it’s of no concern.” Before Bin could say anything else to refute him, Yang Jing turned his glare on his wife, seated nearby. “The rice is undercooked,” he fussed. “You lazy cow, you can’t even cook my damn rice properly, can you?”

As Yang Jing continued to berate her, the rage in Bin’s stomach grew. He knew Yang Jing was hiding the true reason behind his anger. Why on earth would he choose to take any of that anger out on Myungjun, however?

Bin kept a careful eye on the fields the next day. He walked with Sanha around the perimeter, slowly but surely. Sanha, kicking at a few rocks here and there, was bored. “What are we supposed to accomplish from this?” he asked. “We know he’s hurting General Kim, but is there anything we can do to stop it?”

“I would like to try my best to stop it,” Bin replied. “As long as I can keep an eye on Myungjun, I will feel better. Perhaps, too, I can figure out the reasoning behind Yang Jing’s sudden attacks.”

“He’s just a grumpy man,” Sanha pointed out. “I think he’s taking his anger out on whoever is closest.”

Bin sighed. Perhaps Sanha was correct. After all, Yang Jing resorted to hitting his wife once the other night, and he likely would have hit her more if Bin had not stepped in to stop him. He had been treating all of the slaves with contempt, too, but Myungjun was the only slave he dared raise a hand against.

“Why Myungjun, though?” Bin stressed his question. “The servants inside the house would be an easier target, and yet he either comes outside to Myungjun or forces him inside. It’s a lot of effort to
Sanha was reluctant to agree, but he still nodded his head and continued in his slow and steady walk.

It took a few hours for anything to happen. Myungjun had become aware of Bin’s presence earlier in the day and had taken an occasional break in order to wave over at both Bin and Sanha. Bin always made certain to wave back, a smile on his face, though Sanha seemed warier.

At some point, a servant came outside and beckoned for Myungjun. He called the boy’s Chinese name, as well: “Gouxing, Master Yang wishes to speak with you.”

Of course, all Myungjun could understand was the name he had been given. He was confused, and he glanced over at Bin as he walked away from the fields.

“I’ll follow him,” Bin whispered to Sanha, patting the boy’s head. “You stay back. I don’t wish for you to get into trouble.”

Before Bin could go forward, Sanha grabbed onto one of his long sleeves. He looked concerned. “If you keep pushing this, Yang Jing will become angry with you,” Sanha whispered. “I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

The sentiment was sweet, but Bin would not be deterred. He removed Sanha’s hand and replied, “Sanha, when you love someone dearly like this, you will understand my motives. You will work hard to make sure they’re safe. Trust me, it’s a feeling that cannot be ignored. Please, for now, just do as I ask. I need to make sure my darling Myungjun is alright.”

He turned away without waiting to hear Sanha’s response and he left his slave behind.

Inside, he could see Myungjun being led to Yang Jing’s personal quarters. He stayed back as the doors closed, but he did listen in, hearing those words Myungjun could not understand.

“Do not take any of this personally, Gouxing,” he heard Yang Jing say. There was a slap, and then Yang Jing continued. “It is for my own personal enjoyment. It is also for my own personal curiosity. How long, I wonder, will this continue?” There was another slap, then movement; Myungjun grunted in pain. “Daizong, would you mind fetching my whip for me? I have not yet inflicted enough damage on this whore of a man.”

Bin didn’t wish to listen in secret for any longer. He shook with rage as he entered the room, much to Yang Jing’s surprise.

“That’s enough!” Bin barked. “What have you to gain by hurting this man? He’s done absolutely nothing wrong.”

Yang Jing took only a second to recover from his shock. “Sun Lian, what are you doing here? Have you been listening in?”

“Is this more of your noble goal of making me familiar with my slaves?” Yang Jing pushed Myungjun aside, and Bin spared his lover a glance. Fortunately, despite Yang Jing’s harsh hand, there wasn’t too much damage to Myungjun’s body. His face was red and was likely to bruise, but it wasn’t nearly as awful as getting flogged would have been.

“It’s part of my noble goal to ensure we follow the teachings of love, kindness, and acceptance, as
the emperor would like us to,” Bin replied. He reached out and gently grabbed onto Myungjun’s arm. The younger man glanced over at him and relaxed. “I will take him back outside; no need to do it yourself. Please, just relax and keep your anger to a minimum.”

Yang Jing said nothing else. He watched, though, eyes thoughtful, as Bin stepped outside the room and closed the door.

“Are you alright?” Bin whispered, switching to Joseon so Myungjun could understand. “He didn’t hurt you too much, darling, thank goodness.”

Myungjun gingerly touched his cheek. “I wonder why he is hurting me at all. Were you listening? Did you hear what he said?”

“Nothing that made sense,” Bin responded. “He’s doing it for himself, he said. He called you a whore — I do not know why.” With a sigh, Bin led Myungjun down the hallway. “I’ll keep an eye on him again. You need to go back to work.”

“Can I come to your room again tonight?” Myungjun asked, stopping just short of heading outside. “I’d like you to shower me in your love.”

“You are still using me for your own advancement in life?”

“Of course.”

Bin laughed and he leaned over to kiss Myungjun’s soft, plump lips. “Alright,” he agreed. “I will see you tonight. Be diligent and work hard. Soon, we shall escape to Joseon and then no one will ever mistreat you again.”

Myungjun smiled softly and returned Bin’s kiss. “I would very much like that, Bin.”

“Good.” Bin released his lover and stepped back. “I love you, General Kim.”

“I love you, Bin.”

He watched as Myungjun left the building. His heart, filled with delight and joy at being able to kiss Myungjun, soon deflated. Yang Jing was acting odd and suspicious and, for some reason, Myungjun was his target.

Bin needed to figure things out quickly. He couldn’t leave until he put this matter to rest.

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The rain hadn’t stopped for days. Bin felt as if he would be forever wet, drenched in the eternal sadness of the gods, and he pointed it out to General Kim. “I feel that this weather is ominous.” Mud squelched beneath his boot and he sighed as he continued to walk. “Mostly inconvenient, though.”

Myungjun didn’t respond. He had been quiet for a few days — ever since his return from the capital, Bin had realized. He wasn’t quite sure what happened there, but whatever it was, it was impeding on Myungjun’s clarity and focus and general happiness.
Bin had asked a few times already: “Darling, please tell me what took place while you were away.”

Myungjun remained silent through it all.

At least he was starting to acknowledge Bin’s presence. Today was the first day he chose to follow Bin into the markets in order to pick up food. He kept his gaze averted, however, and a hood over his head to hide his expression.

Bin gnawed on his lower lip with worry. “I don’t suppose you care very much for the rain, General, do you?”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. It was the first response he had given to any of Bin’s questions since the visit to the capital.

It wasn’t much, but it was something. At the very least, it proved that Myungjun was listening to him.

Bin tried again. “What would you like to eat? I heard that there are peaches at the market now. Shall we get some peaches? I can make a kimchi with them, or perhaps we can just eat them as they are. Peaches are delicious.”

Myungjun nearly tripped over a protruding tree root. Bin righted him, then continued. “If we stop by the butcher, we could get some meat. Or would you rather have fish? I feel like a fish right now, with all this water — I’m soaked, darling!” He laughed, trying to lighten the dreary atmosphere. “Let’s get some fish. What fish would you like? How shall I prepare—”

“You ought to destroy that necklace,” Myungjun said.

Those were his first words spoken to Bin. He had cried before, certainly, and had apologized for nothing, yet these were his first coherent words.

Though, they weren’t that coherent. Bin had no idea why Myungjun would request such a thing from him.

“Destroy it?” Bin felt around his robes. He still wore the pretty, jade necklace, as he did every day, and he had no intention of destroying it. “That’s ridiculous. I wouldn’t ever destroy this. You gave it to me.”

Myungjun glanced over at him. His eyes were bloodshot, likely from a lack of sleep and all the tears he had shed. He seemed exhausted, too. Bin knew that Myungjun’s sleep had been restless and fitful. He didn’t know what he could do to help.

“I will gladly take it back,” Myungjun stated. “If you don’t want it, I will—”

“Oh course I want it. What are you saying?” Bin stopped in his tracks. When Myungjun kept walking, Bin reached out and grabbed onto his arm, pulling him back. “Don’t you dare walk away from me, General Kim. You are frustrating me. You are confusing me. Have I done something wrong? Is that why you have been acting like this?”

“You would never do anything wrong,” Myungjun mumbled.

“Then what is wrong with you?” Bin searched Myungjun’s face for answers. He stared through the pouring rain and tried to find a reason behind his sudden bout of unhappiness. “Did something bad happen while you were at the capital?”
Myungjun tugged his arm from Bin’s grip. “Let’s go,” he said.

It seemed Bin had hit a nerve. He knew something had happened. However, he couldn’t imagine what was bad enough that Myungjun would stop talking to him.

“Did they demote you?” he asked. “Did they scold you? Did they hurt you?”

“I don’t want to talk about the capital.”

Myungjun was walking again, and Bin hurried along to follow him. “Well, you aren’t the same person you were when you left,” Bin pointed out. “You’ve been apologizing to me, too; have you done something wrong?”

Myungjun glanced over his shoulder at Bin. He looked frightened. “I…don’t want to talk about it, Bin.”

Bin fell into place beside his lover. He connected their arms again and held tight onto Myungjun’s hand. “You’re cold,” he murmured. “We should get you out of the rain as soon as possible.”

Myungjun’s chin was quivering. He made a noise, a small noise of exclamation, and ducked his head.

He was crying again.

Something terrible had happened at the capital. Bin was certain of that fact. Myungjun had left just as snarky and sarcastic as could be, and had returned home a whimpering mess. He couldn’t stop crying, couldn’t stop brooding, couldn’t stop that misery.

Bin’s free hand curled into a fist as he took Myungjun down the pathway to the markets.

If anyone had caused Myungjun pain, Bin would bring the wrath of the gods down upon them.

“You can’t skip over my piece,” Sanha complained, shoving Myungjun’s hovering hand away from the gonu board. “That’s not how the game is played.”

Myungjun grinned and refused to remove his piece. “It’s the traditional Joseon way to play the game, Sanha. You wouldn’t know that because you’ve lived in China since you were young, but rest assured, I know how to play gonu.”

In desperation, Sanha turned to Bin and asked, “Is this true, Bin? Can he do that?”

“Of course he can’t.”

Myungjun’s prideful expression vanished almost instantly. He glared at Bin as Sanha triumphantly moved his piece back, then he sighed. “I can’t believe this,” he mumbled. “Bin, who’s side are you even on? I thought you loved me; how on earth could you decide to side with Sanha?”

Bin, seated beside Myungjun, leaned over to kiss his cheek. He minded the new bruise that had formed; clearly, Yang Jing had yet to stop his unwarranted attacks. “I do love you, darling, but that
doesn’t mean you can cheat while playing with poor Sanha. What has he done to deserve such treatment?"

“He’s been reading your erotic texts when you are not around. I entered this room the other day. You were gone, but Sanha was flipping through the book, and I think he was palming himself—”

Sanha threw one of the small board game pieces at Myungjun’s head. “Keep your mouth shut!” the younger boy ordered. He was a deep red and kept his gaze averted.

Myungjun wasn’t deterred. He laughed, as if it was all a game, and rubbed at his head where Sanha had managed to hit him. “No need to be embarrassed, Sanha! You are a young man, after all, and all young men are curious—”

“Not you, though,” Bin murmured, wishing to defend Sanha’s honor.

Fortunately, his words shut Myungjun up, and his lover turned a glare on him again.

Sanha began to pick up the board game. “I was not reading anything. He’s lying, Bin.”

Regardless of whether or not Myungjun was fibbing, Bin didn’t really care. He hadn’t felt so content in such a long time. He was reminded of days spent at his home in Joseon with Myungjun curled up into him, watching as he and Jinwoo partook in their own game of gonu.

Now, though, Myungjun was a grown man and very much in love with him, and the child he cared for was Sanha.

“I do not lie,” Myungjun snapped, cutting through Bin’s thoughts. “Maybe I exaggerate the truth from time to time — still, Bin, Sanha deserved to lose. He’s ugly.”

“I’m not ugly!” Sanha exclaimed, his voice cracking with indignation. “You are uglier than I am!”

“I’m appalled at the lack of respect you have been showing me. In Joseon, I am a great general—”

“And here you are a lowly field slave,” Sanha shot back.

“You’re a slave, as well!”

“I’m a house servant, which puts me above you!”

Sensing that this fight would go nowhere, Bin groaned and draped himself over Myungjun. “Stop,” he begged. “You two are acting like children.”

Myungjun scoffed. “Sanha is a child.”

“I’m thirteen! I’m almost an adult!” Sanha exclaimed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Thank you, Sanha, for cleaning up.” Bin decided to just ignore the constant bickering. He had started to invite Myungjun into his room even earlier than before. Once the sun was setting and the slaves were free to head inside, Myungjun would break off from his group in order to visit Bin. It put them at risk of being seen by Yang Jing, but Myungjun had declared that was a risk he was very willing to take.

(“He’ll hit me either way,” Myungjun reasoned, “so there’s not much of a point in following his orders, is there?”)

Gonu became a competition between Myungjun and Sanha. For the week that Myungjun had been
coming over, they had been keeping a running score to see who was better at the game. So far, Sanha had been winning; or, he would be winning if the games did not all end early due to Myungjun’s cheating.

“You should play your zither, Bin,” Sanha stated once the game was cleaned up. He plopped back down on his cushion and smiled brightly, previous transgressions forgotten.

Myungjun, leaning on Bin and playing with his sleeve, glanced over at Sanha. “Bin plays the zither?”

“Yes! He’s very good at it. He used to play it to me all the time when I was younger; it helped me sleep.”

Bin remembered that almost all of the previous Myungjuns could play the zither. General Kim was the one who taught him, after all. He smiled fondly at Myungjun and asked, “Are you able to play an instrument?”

“I...I can play the zither, as well,” Myungjun said.

Bin’s heart soared. This Myungjun had so many similarities to the original General Kim, and Bin could hardly handle it. He felt overwhelmed with love and affection, and to show it, he hugged Myungjun close and kissed him again.

Sanha was the one who interrupted their quick burst of intimacy. “I would like to hear Bin play the zither.”

“Let Myungjun do it,” Bin murmured, patting down Myungjun’s hair.

Myungjun looked a bit embarrassed, but he ended up nodding his head in agreement. Bin was thankful Sanha had remembered to pack the zither; he wasn’t sure when he would get to hear Myungjun play such a beautiful instrument ever again.

In Myungjun’s hands, the zither sounded better than it had before. He could play the older songs from Joseon’s past, songs that the common folk played late at night during smaller festivals. He took his time, and the notes were gentle and soft and seemed to fill the air with a calmness Bin hadn’t experienced in years.

When Myungjun completed his song, Sanha clapped for him, and Bin could hardly stop from grinning.

“I’m...not that good,” Myungjun murmured, handing the zither off to Bin. He moved to sit beside Sanha. “You play, Bin.”

“I’d much rather hear more of your music,” Bin said, trying to deny Myungjun’s request.

However, Myungjun shook his head and worked on taking unbraiding Sanha’s hair. “Please, Bin. My hands are too sore to continue. Besides, if Sanha says you are good, then I would like to have actual confirmation.”

“General Kim doesn’t trust me,” Sanha pointed out. He kept still as Myungjun combed his fingers through his hair.

“He’s right. I don’t trust him,” Myungjun agreed. “I need to hear it for myself.”

Bin stared at the two of them, at his lover’s gentle hands tousling Sanha’s hair, and he smiled.
“Right,” he muttered. “I’ll play for you.”

He played for a long while. He played until Sanha’s eyes were drooping and the boy couldn’t even keep himself seated upright. He played until Myungjun finally tucked Sanha into his bed and sat back to listen some more.

Finally, he realized that even Myungjun was yawning, and so he put his zither down. “You could have told me when to stop,” he pointed out.

“I didn’t want to. I wanted to continue to listen.” Myungjun scooted across the floor, situating himself right next to Bin. He tentatively reached a hand forward and placed it over Bin’s. The warmth from his hand made Bin’s breath hitch. “You are truly magnificent, Bin. Very talented.”

“Not...not nearly as talented as you are,” Bin whispered. He breathed in Myungjun’s scent and sighed deeply. He did not smell nearly as nice as the other reincarnations had, but they also had the privilege of bathing and perfumes. This Myungjun, as a slave, could only do so much.

Bin kissed him, despite his smell, and said, “You are a general who has been reduced to this, and yet you still maintain a bright personality.”

Myungjun smirked. He poked Bin’s nose and murmured, “I do not have a good personality at all. I was accusing Sanha of masturbating.”

“Was he?”

“No, but he was definitely flipping through your erotica.”

Bin laughed. “He’s old enough, I suppose. Leave him be.” He cradled Myungjun’s face and planted a few kisses on the apples of his cheeks. Myungjun’s smirk turned into a smile. “The erotica is something you could do without, correct?”

“What a discussion we are having tonight,” Myungjun laughed. “I don’t mind it. It interests me. I suppose I find it slightly enticing, but not enough to act on any of it.”

“Is there a reason you find sex so unappealing?”

Myungjun furrowed his eyebrows in thought. “I...don’t know. I’ve just never wished to engage in any sort of sexual activities.”

“Have you ever masturbated?”

“Once.” Myungjun ducked his head and cuddled into Bin’s side. He didn’t want to look up; likely, he was embarrassed. “It was a few years ago. I wanted to try it. I thought it was weird that the other men were happily having sexual relations and I was not. It...it took a while and I did not care for it, so I decided to just hide my reluctance. Most people just assume I was too busy to marry.”

Bin kissed the top of his head. He rubbed Myungjun’s shoulder and said, “Well, you do not have to worry about hiding it any longer. I know, and I do not care. I will love you the same, no matter what — as I’ve told you before, nothing could ever change the way I feel about you.”

Myungjun sighed deeply, content, and wrapped his arms around Bin’s waist.

Just before Bin could continue to kiss him, though, the door opened. Bin glanced quickly over his shoulder as Myungjun scrambled from his side.
“Yang Jing!” Bin exclaimed, standing up.

Yang Jing stared upon the two of them. His gaze darted back and forth between Myungjun and Bin, and he asked, “What...what is Gouxing doing here?”

His words were in Chinese. Myungjun seemed to recognize his name, but otherwise appeared lost. He stared at the floor, submissive and quiet, and Bin decided to take over.

“I was asking him about Joseon,” he lied. “I’m interested in the culture.”

“How do you understand him, though? I...heard you speaking in his native language. Bin, do you understand Joseon?”

Bin had struggled to keep secret his heritage for so long. He knew Jing was not fond of the Joseon people, and to remain in his favor, Bin pretended to be only Chinese. He had to come up with another lie. “I am a man of intellect, Jing. I pride myself on knowing a variety of languages. As they are our neighbors, Joseon was simple and easy enough to learn.” He glanced over at Myungjun and said, “He is a very intelligent man, as well. I would like to teach him Chinese one day. Perhaps you will find it easier to communicate with him, and he will—”

“I do not care about communicating with a whore,” Yang Jing snapped. He gestured for Myungjun, calling out, “Gouxing. Here.”

Myungjun, understanding the simpler commands, hurried forward.

Yang Jing slapped him, hard. Myungjun managed to stand his ground, though he was tense.

“There’s no reason for that!” Bin exclaimed. He took a step, but Yang Jing held out a hand, stopping him in his tracks.

“You have overstayed your welcome here long enough,” Yang Jing fussed. “I have been feeding you and housing you for over a week now. I have also turned a blind eye to your constant badgering. I will treat those in my possession however I wish to treat them, and you’d do best to keep your mouth shut.” He reached over to grab a handful of Myungjun’s hair and he twisted it. Myungjun stumbled forward and cried out. He tried to grasp onto Yang Jing’s arm to pull him off, but Yang Jing barked, “No!”

Myungjun stilled, whimpering only slightly under Yang Jing’s tight hold.

“Are you trying to prove a point?” Bin questioned. He noticed Sanha moving under his covers, likely spurred by the sudden chaos, but he kept his eyes trained solely on Yang Jing. He wished he could wring the man’s neck. He wished he could kill him for the way he was treating Myungjun.

As it was, all he could do was stand and shake with rage.

Yang Jing studied him for a second before releasing Myungjun. “Get out,” he ordered, shoving Myungjun aside. The young man cast one last glance back at Bin before he obeyed Yang Jing’s command and left.

Yang Jing sighed and shot Bin a bitter smile. “I’ve proven my point well enough.” He bowed lightly and said, “Sleep well, Sun Lian. Tomorrow, you will be forced to leave.”

He left then, closing the door behind him, and Bin grit his teeth down.

He couldn’t leave. He hadn’t accomplished anything, short of spending all of his free time in
Myungjun’s company. He needed to stay, to find a way to escape with Myungjun, to get his lover out of slavery.

“Bin?” Sanha asked, his voice hushed. “Are you alright?”

Bin took a deep, shuddering breath and mumbled, “Yang Jing wants us out tomorrow.”

Sanha sat up, his eyes wide. “We haven’t developed a plan to get to Joseon yet!”

“I know.”

“What...what are we going to do, then?”

Bin pondered that question for a few seconds. He felt hopeless. It was too risky to prompt Myungjun to run away. He would be caught and killed, for certain.

His only other option was to somehow convince Yang Jing to sell Myungjun to him.

“Tomorrow,” Bin stated, “I’m going to pump that disgusting man full of opium and alcohol and then I will force him to sign Myungjun over to me. And then...then we can go to Joseon.”

He had such little time, but he was absolutely determined to make it work.

He wouldn’t leave this house without Myungjun.

Bin was granted presence to Yang Jing’s quarters the next morning. He and Sanha carried with them alcohol and opium and tobacco — all things he knew Jing would like, and all things that Jing could likely become light-headed from. It was unfortunate that Jing kept in the room his wife and a few of his own slaves, but Bin decided to overlook them. Surely they wouldn’t dare interrupt a business deal between two men, even if Jing was under the influence.

The moment he sat down, he said, “Before I part, I would like to offer my sincerest apologies. It was not right of me to tell you what to do in your own house.”

Yang Jing raised an eyebrow.

“I have opium and alcohol,” Bin continued, gesturing over to Sanha, who held the goods. “Shall we partake in these indulgences?”

Yang Jing sighed and sat back on his cushion, elbows propping his body up. “I have a guest that will be joining us shortly.”

Bin was interested and a bit concerned. The more people crowding this room, the less of an opportunity he would have to coerce Jing into signing away his rights to Myungjun.

“I don’t think anyone else needs to join us,” Bin argued. “You are the one I wish to thank, and I would prefer us alone—”

“You know this guest, though,” Jing retorted. “I think you will appreciate him being here very
much.”

Bin cocked his head, confused for only a second before his eyes widened.

Myungjun.

Yang Jing seemed to anticipate Bin’s realization. He grinned, wicked and cruel, and leaned in. “You will appreciate his presence, won’t you?”

Before Bin could come up with a response, the doors opened. Myungjun was led in by another slave. He looked shocked to see Bin seated in the room, and he mouthed, *what’s going on?*

Bin didn’t have an answer to that. He had no idea, either.

“Gouxing, come,” Yang Jing ordered.

Myungjun recognized those words. Still confused, he stepped over to Yang Jing and knelt by his side.

Yang Jing smacked him across the face, hard. Myungjun nearly toppled over from such a strike, and Bin started to scramble upwards to defend him.

“You’re very concerned for him!” Yang Jing exclaimed, looking over at Bin, who froze in place. “You have a look of fear and panic on you whenever I lay a hand on him. Yet when I hit anyone else, you are just angry. You care for the boy, do you not?”

Bin shook his head. “I...I don’t—”

“I heard you speaking Joseon to him. I might not know the language, but I can understand tone, Sun Lian. You speak fondly to him. You watch over him and talk kindly and you have turned him into your whore.”

“I haven’t—”

“Other slaves have given me reports. You kiss him when you think no one is looking. Just last night, he was in your embrace, right next to the child slave you own.” Yang Jing clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “No shame, no pride, and no dignity. You have truly sullied yourself, Sun Lian. Furthermore, you have sullied your slave and made a mockery of my own household. You engage in terrible, perverse acts right in plain view, and you think I do not even notice.” The man glowered at Bin, then reached under his robes. “I cannot allow this to continue anymore. I will not stand for having you as a neighbor, let alone an acquaintance. I apologize, Sun Lian, but you do not deserve life.”

He pulled out a knife. Sanha gasped, and Myungjun looked horrified.

Two slaves came up from behind Bin while he was still baffled. They grabbed him, holding on tight, and shoved his body down onto the table. His head, now, was near Yang Jing and Myungjun.

Yang Jing raised the knife. Bin heard Sanha screech out his name, but before Yang Jing could make any blow, Myungjun punched him hard in the face.

Yang Jing fell to the side, though he kept a tight hold onto the knife. He sputtered, yelled something like, “Grab him!” but Myungjun was too quick. Myungjun grabbed onto Yang Jing’s hair, as the man had done to him just hours before, and tugged harder and harder and harder, until Yang Jing cried out in pain and released the knife.
The slaves holding onto Bin let him go. They rushed toward Myungjun, but they were a bit too late in getting there. Myungjun already grabbed onto the knife and unceremoniously stabbed it into Yang Jing’s face.

There was an inhuman scream that came forth from the man’s mouth, but Myungjun didn’t stop there. Even as the other slaves halted in horror, Myungjun continued, stabbing Yang Jing over and over again. Bin, too surprised to move, thought it seemed familiar.

He thought of Wangwi, of smashing his face into that table over and over again. He remembered how good it felt, the blood that rushed down his hands, and he wondered if Myungjun felt the same.

He scrambled to his feet and pushed past the slaves. As Yang Jing’s wife cried out in terror, Bin grabbed Myungjun’s arms and ceased his movement.

“Darling,” he whispered. “It’s alright. He’s dead.”

Myungjun’s grip on the knife was tight. His body was covered with Yang Jing’s blood. It had splattered everywhere, but mostly on Myungjun. He looked up at Bin, eyes wide and that liquid crimson dripping down his cheeks.

“He-He-He was going to kill you,” Myungjun said. “I couldn’t...I wouldn’t let that—”

Yang Jing’s wife could not stand on her ruined feet anymore. She collapsed to the ground near her husband, screaming still. A slave ran from the room, and Bin realized they were in trouble. If the slave grabbed the officials, Myungjun would not be free from punishment.

“Sanha,” Bin barked. “Go outside. Meet us at the gate.”

“B-Bin—”

“Go, Sanha!” Bin yelled. The boy, frozen in fright, finally moved, hurrying from the room.

Bin moved a bit slower. He tore the knife from Myungjun’s grip and dropped it. He looked down at the dead and bloodied form of Yang Jing before standing up and bringing Myungjun with him. “We’re leaving, too,” he whispered. “Back to my place.”

Myungjun appeared to be in a daze. He nodded his head, but Bin practically had to drag him from the room. He spoke when they were in the courtyard.

“I didn’t mean to,” he said. “I didn’t mean to. I didn’t want him to kill you. I defended you. I lost control, though. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s alright,” Bin assured him, exiting the front gates. Sanha was waiting for them, staring at Bin with great anxiety.

“Bin, we can’t hide him!” Sanha exclaimed. “They will find us, and we will all be in trouble!”

Myungjun, holding onto Bin’s arm, gripped him tightly. Bin shushed him with a kiss to his hair. He tasted of blood. “It’s a risk I’m very willing to take,” Bin responded. “I will not throw Myungjun to the wolves.”

Sanha still seemed unsure, but he nodded his head, anyway, following them closely. Bin was rushing as much as he could, walking as fast as he could, but not yet running. He kept Myungjun’s face down, kept the blood hidden from the rest of the world, though he was thankful the area was
secluded and no one was around.

So many thoughts began to cross through Bin’s mind. He wondered how he could hide Myungjun. He wondered if he could hide Myungjun. He wondered how long it would be before the officials came after him. He wondered if it was possible to escape to Joseon the moment they packed a few necessities. He wondered why everything good must turn so awful in a matter of minutes.

“Bin,” Myungjun whispered, gripping onto Bin’s hand. “What do we do?”

Bin shushed him. “Keep walking.”

“I mean, what do we do when we return to your estate?” Myungjun sounded frightened. “I killed a general. Wasn’t he revered by the Chinese people and their government? They’ll send many men after me, and Sanha is right — if you’re caught hiding me, they will—”

“We won’t worry ourselves with that for the time being,” Bin replied. He kept a tight grasp on his lover as they moved quickly down the road. “We’re going to take things one step at a time. First, once we arrive, I will wash the blood from you. Then I shall find a secure place for you to hide and I will do my best to ward off any officials who come looking for you. My final step is to move us all out of China and into Joseon. Alright? You have to trust me.”

Myungjun didn’t respond, but he did move closer beside Bin, and he also kept glancing over his shoulder.

They arrived at Bin’s house. Sanha ushered them in, and Bin ignored the questions from his other slaves that were left behind from his lengthy stay with Yang Jing. Some of the women noticed the blood and gasped and some of the men asked if there was a war to be fought.

Bin brushed past them all and took Myungjun into his own sleeping quarters.

Once the doors were shut, Bin turned to face Sanha and Myungjun.

“We don’t need to panic,” were the first words that came from his mouth, but Sanha interrupted him.

“How can we not panic?” he asked. His eyes were wide and he brought his hands up to cover his mouth, as if he just realized what had taken place. With a gasp, he exclaimed, “Myungjun killed General Jing! Oh, god, he killed him—I’ve never seen anyone kill like that! And the slaves will tell and they’ll know he went off with us, they’ll have seen it, and they’ll come and—Bin, the law doesn’t care about slaves like me! If you’re taken to prison, then where shall I go?” He was tearing up, frantic and paranoid, and he asked, “I can’t—I can’t be sold off again! I’d sooner kill myself, Bin! Please, don’t let me be sold!”

Myungjun, beside him, still looked scared but otherwise remained calm. He appeared to be dazed still, covered in another man’s blood and awaiting whatever Bin’s plan was to be.

Bin took a deep breath. Things were moving too fast. Things were far too chaotic. He couldn’t think properly.

“First step,” he whispered to himself, trying to remember what he told Myungjun. “First...first step—”

“Wash the blood off,” Myungjun supplied.

“Yes. Thank you. Sanha, please go prepare a bucket of water and a rag. Grab some of my clean
clothing, as well. Myungjun, you can strip of those soiled clothes.”

Myungjun nodded his head in agreement and was already working on taking his tunic off.

Sanha stared at them in amazement. “That’s...that’s not what we should be doing, Bin!” He ran his fingers through frazzled hair. “Myungjun killed someone! He’s a liability! We can’t pamper to him —”

“Go get the water!” Bin bellowed at him, feeling his confusion and frustration and fear reach a breaking point. He hated to take such emotions out on poor Sanha, but he couldn’t keep them in any longer, nor would he dare release his anger onto Myungjun.

Sanha was the only other person available. Bin felt pity, but it didn’t stop him from yelling. “If you question my motives again, I will punish you!”

He had never threatened Sanha before. He hardly ever ordered Sanha around. Sanha’s look of terror, then, was completely justified. Considering his previous masters had been such awful people and hadn’t hesitated to hurt the boy, Bin understood Sanha’s shock.

At least it made him act, though. Instead of hanging around and arguing, Sanha rushed off, slamming the door behind him.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Myungjun murmured once Sanha was gone. “It was mine. He doesn’t deserve your anger.”

Bin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to keep his emotions under control. If he became this disturbed, he would never have the chance to save Myungjun. “I will apologize to him later. For the time being, my primary concern is you. I need to clean you up and get you away from this county.” He helped Myungjun remove his pants, and then he sat the man down on his mattress.

Kneeling beside him, Bin whispered, “We will get out of this. We will return to Joseon and live peacefully together from then on.”

Myungjun was naked and covered in blood and vulnerable. He wrapped his arms around himself and shook his head. “Sanha’s right,” he responded. “By keeping me here, you are putting yourself at risk. You are putting Sanha at risk, too, and all of the other innocent slaves who call this place their home.” He stared at Bin. “If you give me up, you will keep the others safe.”

Bin thought of all the people whose lives he would ruined by guarding Myungjun. Once he left, too, they would be at the mercy of the county officials who would not treat them so kindly. *Harboring a fugitive* was a crime. *Protecting a murderer* would get at least some sort of prison sentencing. Since they were slaves and therefore disposable, they would likely receive the worst punishment possible.

Death.

Bin felt his heart race against his chest. He was reminded of Jinwoo. He had sacrificed his best friend, his confidant, for a few extra hours by Myungjun’s side. He had felt guilty for his entire life knowing that Jinwoo’s painful death was caused solely by his own inability to see past the welfare of anyone but Myungjun.

He hadn’t regretted his decision.

And if all of his slaves died so Bin could protect Myungjun, then so be it.
Bin grasped onto Myungjun’s hand. He rubbed at the dried blood that had gathered on the knuckles. Flakes fell onto the floor and Bin whispered, “I would do anything for you, darling. I will allow all others to die just so you can survive.”

Myungjun swallowed thickly. “Are you so willing to give them up just to save me?”

“I am.”

“What...what about Sanha, then?” Myungjun took his hands away from Bin. “You cannot say the same about Sanha, can you? You love him very much; he loves you very much, more than you could possibly know. You can’t...you can’t sacrifice Sanha just to save me.”

It was a difficult decision. Bin had never thought he would be in a position where he put someone else above little, innocent Sanha. Sanha had never done anything wrong. Sanha had remained cheerful and sweet and kind regardless of how he was used and abused in the past.

Would he be willing to toss Sanha aside in order to save Myungjun’s life?

He dipped his head and squeezed his eyes shut as he responded, “If allowing you to live and prosper means letting Sanha die, then...I’d do it. Anything for you.”

“You can’t be serious.” Myungjun shook Bin’s shoulders. “Bin, don’t...don’t say that. You are not serious. You’ve only known me for a little while. You’ve known Sanha for years, though. He adores you — you can’t just allow him to die. It’s like drowning a dog. It trusts you.”

“Sometimes drowning is necessary.”

Myungjun sat in silence after that. Even as Bin worked hard to scrape blood off of him, Myungjun said nothing. He didn’t speak again until Sanha walked into the room with a bucket of water, a rag, and some clothing.

“Here,” Sanha muttered, setting the bucket down beside Bin. He kept his eyes averted from Myungjun’s nudity, but Myungjun hardly seemed to care. He was still in shock, likely from his actions and the possible ramifications of his actions.

“Thank you, Sanha,” Bin replied. He instantly got to work in wiping the blood off of Myungjun’s face and hands. He scrubbed hard, causing the skin to turn red, but it was better than blood.

Sanha sat down beside him, sullen and silent, and Bin said, “I am very sorry for my words, Sanha.”

Both Myungjun and Sanha stared at him. He felt his skin crawl from their judgement. “I’m a little stressed right now, Sanha. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

Sanha had always been sweet. He had always been quick to forgive. And now he nodded his head and murmured, “It’s alright, Bin. I understand.”

Myungjun narrowed his eyes at Bin.

Bin felt sick.

“Sanha, do you have those clothes? Myungjun ought to get dressed.”

“I brought them in,” Sanha replied. He stood to grab them. They were some of Bin’s favorites, but he didn’t dare scold Sanha for grabbing the wrong sort of clothes. Besides, Myungjun would look handsome in them.
Or he would, if Bin wasn’t so concerned with Myungjun keeping a low profile.

As Myungjun pulled on the trousers, Bin glanced over at Sanha. “We should get a hat for him,” he stated. “It will hide his face a bit better. Perhaps they won’t suspect that he changed clothes. Myungjun, would you like to wear a hat?”

Myungjun shook his head. “This will do fine.”

“Nonsense. You have unique features. A hat will hide them.” Bin placed the dirty rag back in the bucket and sighed. “Second step in my plan is to hide Myungjun. If the officials come by, where are they least likely to look?”

Sanha had no response and Myungjun, it seemed, refused to answer. Bin thought and pondered until he formulated an idea.

“Pretend someone died,” Bin ordered Sanha. “If anyone asks, pretend we are in mourning. I’ll change into my mourning clothes — you do the same. We will forbid anyone to enter the family room. We will say we have a coffin of...my sister. Say my sister has passed and her body lies in my family room for the typical funeral rite, and, as such, only family may enter. That’s where we will hide Myungjun.”

Sanha didn’t seem convinced. “Won’t that be too suspicious? They already know you are hiding —”

“They don’t know anything,” Bin refuted. “All they know is that I left with Myungjun. I can concoct some story to lessen their suspicions. It will work.” He ignored Sanha’s doubtful gaze and glanced at Myungjun. “It will work.”

“You’re trying to convince yourself of that,” Myungjun stated. “It won’t work.”

Bin felt his breath hitch. He ran a hand down his face. Suddenly, he felt as if he had aged. He felt as if he become hundreds of years old in the time span of an hour. “What, then, do you suggest?”

Myungjun stepped forward. “Turn me in.”

“I’m not turning you in. Don’t be foolish.”

“I was accepted into your family,” Myungjun said. He was calm and confident. “Sanha has become dear to me. You, Bin, are more dear than anyone has ever been. I love you. For that reason, I refuse to bring harm to my family. I will turn myself in so that—”

“Sanha, do you remember the execution we saw? It was shortly before we met General Kim.” Bin didn’t turn his stare away from Myungjun, but Sanha seemed to realize he ought to speak, anyway.

“Y-Yes.”

“What are the public executions like?”

Sanha was nervous. His voice shook as he spoke. “They...cut flesh off from you. They keep you alive as long as possible and they...they cut you up.”

Myungjun met Bin’s gaze. Despite the collected emotion he portrayed, Bin could detect the telltale signs of fear. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were wide and his lips were dry.

He was afraid of the death that awaited him. He was afraid of the slow, torturous end.
Bin, wanting to frighten Myungjun into hiding, asked Sanha, “Who do they reserve this execution for?”

Sanha murmured, “People who murder those of great importance.”

Myungjun seemed to understand what Bin was getting at. He took a step backwards and turned his stare to the ground.

“I will not allow you to experience such hardship, General,” Bin whispered. “So let’s hide you, okay? I will give you a knife to defend yourself if necessary, but I will not let them take you away from me.” He moved to his chest and opened it. He had his mourning clothes stashed away, as well as a variety of antique knives. “Sanha, give this knife to Myungjun.”

Sanha obeyed; even if he disagreed, he was likely scared to face Bin’s wrath for a second time. Myungjun held tightly onto the knife as Bin removed his mourning clothes from the chest.

“Now, Sanha, go instruct the servant at the front gate to bring any officials to me. I will be in this room.”

Sanha nodded once and scurried off. He was still scared, obviously, yet he was an obedient child.

Bin felt guilt stir in his belly, remembering how he told Myungjun he would gladly give up Sanha’s life. He wouldn’t allow it to come to that. He wouldn’t allow either Sanha or Myungjun to die on his watch.

“Myungjun, you can go over to the family room. Keep the doors barred. I will do my best to bring their attention elsewhere. Perhaps I shall say that you ran, or that I killed you myself. Anything to get them—”

“I love you,” Myungjun said.

It was an odd interruption at an odd time. Bin blinked, then said, “And I love you, Myungjun. Please, though, go into the family room.”

“If they do find me, you will be charged for harboring me. Sanha will lose his home and his family.” Myungjun shook his head. “I refuse to allow that to happen.”

He held the knife tightly. Bin stared at the object with alarm and then looked up again at Myungjun. “Darling, don’t do anything—”

“Yet, I also do not wish to suffer the terrible fate at the hands of my executioner.”

“Myungjun—”

“I wish I could’ve seen Joseon once more. I wish...I wish I could have lived out the rest of my life by your side.”

He held the knife to his chest, and Bin moved. However, Myungjun was standing too far away, and as it was with Yang Jing, he was too fast. The knife plummeted into his chest as Bin screamed out his name.

He caught Myungjun as he fell. He slid to the floor with his lover in his arms. Blood was pooling on his chest, staining his clothes. He coughed once, and Bin realized blood was dribbling down his chin, too.
He was dying.

The knife remained stuck in his chest. Bin held him, crying and shaking his head. He called for Sanha. He called for the rest of his slaves. Yet Myungjun appeared just as calm as he had been before. He smiled, even, and reached a hand up to place on Bin’s cheek.

Bin’s tears rolled onto Myungjun’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” Myungjun whispered. He gurgled more blood and choked on it. “I—I can’t—I love you too much.”

Bin sobbed. He brought a shaking hand up to the knife, wanting to take it out and to heal the wound. However, the internal bleeding was a sure sign of death. There was nothing Bin could do to stop it.

He felt like he was on the battlefield again, with a dying Myungjun in his arms. He remembered the way Myungjun had looked up at him, eyes full of love and fear and sadness and regret. This Myungjun looked the same.

“I-I wanted to protect you!” Bin cried out. “General Kim, I-I can’t protect you!”

Myungjun’s hand traveled across Bin’s cheek. His fingers brushed across Bin’s thin lips, and he murmured, “I don’t care. I just love you.”

His hand fell back. He was going limp. Choking on his own blood, bleeding out from his chest, he was dying.

Bin was helpless, as he was the past three times.

Once Myungjun was still, once he had taken his last breath, Bin screamed out again, cursing the gods for their horrible deeds. They had brought Myungjun to him and given him happiness and then had cruelly ripped it away from him each and every time. They never allowed Bin and Myungjun to truly be together.

They were punishing them both for reasons unknown.

“I’m sorry, General Kim,” Bin sobbed. Time and time again, he had failed his lover. Even now, even when he moved and changed his name and lifestyle, Myungjun had found him.

“I love you, General Kim.”

Even through the passage of time, despite all that had happened, Bin would defy the gods. If they wanted him to abandon his general, he refused. At some point, the gods would tire of killing Myungjun, wouldn’t they?

At some point, Bin and Myungjun could grow old together and the gods couldn’t stop them.

Not again.

Chapter End Notes

...
please follow me on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!

and just a forewarning, next chapter will be the most mature one yet!
The knife lay on the table and Bin stared at it.

He stared at the dried blood that cloaked the blade and the handle. He stared at the length of it and the ornate designs just barely visible through the large amount of that awful crimson liquid. Sometimes he would reach out for it, when he was truly alone, but he would always withdraw his hand.

Sanha sat nearby the knife, as well, most of the time. Unless he was out refilling the teapot or gathering food for Bin to eat, he was seated at the table across from Bin.

“Bin?” he asked, voice quiet and sullen, “will you eat?”

Bin glanced down. He thought the food smelled delicious, but everytime he tried to eat, it tasted bland and dry. He gagged at the mere thought of trying to stuff that meal down his throat, and so to answer Sanha’s question, he shook his head.

Sanha looked desperate. He pushed the plate closer to Bin. It was now in the center of the table. “It’s pork,” he whispered. “You like pork.”

Bin took a deep, shuddering breath and shook his head once more. “I can’t.”

“Please.”

“Myungjun’s dead.”

Sanha swallowed thickly. He hadn’t slept; Bin would know, because he had not slept, either. Sanha watched him often, eyes cautious and worried, but he wouldn’t sleep. Not for two days.

Bin did not expect him to hold out much longer. Sanha was not immortal. Sanha was not used to lengthy periods of sleepless nights. Sanha would cave.

Myungjun had caved.


“You’re scaring me, Bin,” Sanha responded meekly. “Please, you will feel much better if you eat.”
Bin pushed the food off of the table. It clattered to the floor. Sauce spilled on the wood and rice scattered about. Sanha jumped with the sudden movement, but remembered his place and bent down to clean up the mess that Bin had created.

The room fell silent once more. Sanha didn’t talk, but his movements were punctuated with little sniffles here and there. Bin had made him cry.

He wanted to care. He wanted to hug Sanha close and apologize for his actions. However, when he tried to move, his body wouldn’t let him. He stayed still where he was, staring at the wall in front of him still, trying desperately to get the image of Myungjun’s dead body out of his mind.

“How many more times will I go through with this?” he asked. Sanha glanced up at him, eyes welled up with tears.

“Bin?”

“I can’t do it again. I can’t keep doing this.”

“What do you mean?”

Bin stared down at the knife on the table. He reached a finger out to scrape off some of the dried blood. It collected under his fingernail and he felt like retching.

That was Myungjun’s blood. All he had left of this Myungjun was the bloodied knife. The officials had come and had torn his body from Bin’s grasp, citing a necessary disposal. And Bin, in shock and disbelief, had relinquished his lover.

He wouldn’t be given a proper burial. He would be tossed aside like garbage. Bin shook with rage and pounded his fist onto the table.

Once more, Sanha jumped.

“It should be me!” he exclaimed. “I should die! I want to die! Is it fair that it’s him?”

“Stop!” Sanha begged. The tears spilled out of his eyes as he faced Bin, still bent to his knees. “Please, Bin, stop! You must move on! You can’t—”

“I always move on,” Bin snapped at him. “How many more times will I be forced to move on? How many more times will Myungjun be forced to die?”

Sanha was, quite obviously, confused with the words. He stammered for a few seconds, but then asked, “Bin, may you please rest? You’re sick. You must be sick. You’ve not slept or eaten—”

“I’d like to die. I’d very much like to die.”

The words caused Sanha to shut his mouth. Good, Bin thought, bitterly. He couldn’t bear hearing him speak right now. He didn’t want Sanha to be near him. He took several deep breaths in an attempt to control his anger, but he still couldn’t stop shaking with rage.

Sanha reached out, cautiously, to touch Bin’s arm.

His hand was gentle. His gesture was sweet. Still, Bin couldn’t help the helplessness that stirred up in his chest.

He wished Sanha had died instead of Myungjun.
It would have been a blow, definitely. It would have been difficult to live with. Sanha, though, was but another casualty in the cruel world they lived in. He would die either way. He was not stuck in such an endless cycle as Bin and Myungjun were. If he died, Bin could have escaped to Joseon with Myungjun. Perhaps if Myungjun had survived, the curse would have been broken.

Instead, Bin was left with nothing except pain in his heart, and the knowledge that Myungjun would soon be back in a different lifetime.

Sanha would die. His existence was pointless.

“I wouldn’t like it if you died,” Sanha whispered. “Please. I love you very much.”

His voice was just as gentle as his touch, and guilt shrouded Bin’s cognitive abilities.

He was craving death when this child looked to him for protection. He was craving death when Sanha longed to stay by his side. Was it selfish, though, to only think of himself and Myungjun? Was it selfish to want something that was granted to everyone else but himself?

Was it cruel to die and leave Sanha alone?

Regardless, he wouldn’t die. He couldn’t die. He had tried so many times to kill himself and he was cursed to stay alive no matter what the circumstances. The gods wanted to see him suffer. It was likely amusement to them to put Myungjun right in his grasp and then take him away.

They laughed, probably. They had a jolly time. And all Bin could do was pick up the pieces and keep going.

He had tried most everything he could think of, but perhaps the way to break his curse was something odd, something silly, something unthinkable.

If he killed himself with the same weapon used to kill Myungjun, would he die?

He had yet to try it.

“Sanha,” he murmured, picking the knife up from the table. He could see Sanha’s eyes widen. He could see his body tense. Sanha likely anticipated what was to come.

Knowing that Sanha would be witness to yet another horrible event brought pain to Bin’s heart. However, he knew that this would be one of his only chances to end his life. If it worked, he would be free from the hell he lived through.

Sanha’s despair and horror would be an unfortunate side-effect, but Bin pushed that aside. He would be selfish for once. He would try to leave.

“If I do die, do not mourn me. Celebrate, instead. Collect the money I have gathered over the years. You, and you alone, shall take my place when I am gone.”

“Bin!” Sanha exclaimed, but Bin refused to listen. He would not be persuaded.

He brought the knife down into his neck; the chest was too risky of a place to hit. He would need to stab through his heart as precisely as Myungjun had, and he could not. The neck, though, would surely end his life.

As Sanha screamed, Bin tugged the knife across, breaking even more skin and causing blood to spill out all over his hands and onto the floor. It was painful. It was a searing, red hot pain that
stretched out across his entire body, and yet it did not feel like death.

It felt like every other time Bin had been supposedly murdered but had survived.

Sanha was still calling out for him, but the world was becoming a little dark, a little fuzzy, and all Bin could say as he fell unconscious was, “sorry, Sanha.”

His neck healed itself, of course. It was a painful process of days, of not being able to speak, and of watching Sanha cry through it all.


When the wound healed up completely and Bin could sit up finally, Sanha stared through watery eyes and his question turned to, “How, Bin?”

Bin closed his eyes and ran his fingers across his throat. He touched the scar of his neck; new, sure, but it was alongside older scars, worse scars. It was familiar to Bin’s body now. He was riddled with scars he could never get rid of.

“I cannot die,” Bin responded, feeling the weight of those words crash upon him. He dipped his head and sighed. “I have never been able to die. I’ve tried countless times, and yet I am still alive. I am still here.”

Sanha sniffed and rubbed at his nose. He still looked amazed. “Are you immortal?”

“Yes.”

“No one is immortal.”

Bin raised his eyebrows. “You’ve seen my scars,” he said. “Is it possible for a man to have so many scars and still survive? Or is it possible for a man to be nearly decapitated and to still survive?”

Sanha winced at those words; clearly, he must still have such a vivid memory of Bin’s self-assault. Bin pursed his lips and looked away. “I apologize. I am being too harsh.”

“Why are you immortal?” Sanha asked, suspending his disbelief in an effort to better understand Bin. “Are...are you a god?”

“I’m no god. If I was, I would be able to leave. I am a man who has been cursed for a reason I have not yet figured out.”

Sanha stared at the scar on Bin’s neck. He looked thoughtful. “You mentioned...you said how many more times in reference to Myungjun’s death. Is...Myungjun immortal?”

Bin didn’t want to think of Myungjun. Not now. His chest felt empty; he wondered if his heart had shriveled up due to its old age. He wondered if he was doomed to feel this lonely forevermore. But Sanha awaited an answer, and Bin had ruined the poor boy enough already. He ought to cooperate. “In a sense,” Bin responded. “He is reincarnated every hundred or so years. He’s something different every single time. Originally, he was a general, as was this one. He was also a crowned prince at one point, an orphaned child at one point, and a scholar a hundred years ago. I can only assume I am meant to live on forever and ever, and Myungjun is meant to come back into my life forever and ever. He has been taken from my arms in terrible ways each and every time.”
“He constantly dies?” Sanha asked, amazed.

“He...does. Mostly. The scholar did not...well, he must have died at some point, but he...I left before that could happen. He was in love with...with someone else. I had to leave. And I figured if I could escape Joseon, then perhaps he would no longer appear. I would remain immortal, but I could live without the sadness of losing him.” Bin frowned and ran his fingers through his hair. “I was wrong, of course. He will come no matter where I am. The gods will force him on me, and I must...I must watch him die.”

“That’s horrible.” Sanha averted his gaze and bowed his head. “I apologize, Bin. I did not know.”

“There is nothing to apologize for,” Bin stated. “I am used to it, at this point. It’s an unfortunate reality of my life.”

“Still...” Sanha swallowed thickly, then said, “I’d like to stay by your side. I will continue to do everything in my power to help you. Perhaps we can figure out how to—how to break the curse. I will make sure you don’t have to be immortal any longer.”

Bin was surprised. He thought Sanha might be scared off by his immortality, or else despair over a lack of ideas as to how to break the curse, and yet here he was, offering to help.

Sweet.

“Please,” Bin murmured, “stay by my side.”

He wouldn’t suffer alone in his knowledge anymore.

It wasn’t the first time Bin had woken up in a sweat, Sanha shaking him relentlessly. He heard his name being called by the younger man: “Bin! Bin, wake up! Bin, are you alright? Bin!”

The dream faded from his mind. Bin was able to catch his breath, to focus his gaze on Sanha, and to pretend he had no idea what his nightmare had entailed.

Sanha looked concerned. “Bin? Are you alright?”

Bin nodded his head, trying to convey some sense of normalcy. However, normalcy was not in his life’s description. When had things last been normal? When had things last made sense?

“I’m fine, Sanha. Thank you for waking me.”

Sanha’s eyebrows were furrowed. Instead of laying down and going back to sleep, Sanha moved to light some of the candles inside Bin’s large room. Bin watched him, a bit wary. Sanha moved clumsily, as if still unsure how to control his long limbs and lanky body, but soon the space was cast with the eerie glow of flames, and then Sanha turned back to Bin.

His baby fat had long since melted away, Bin noted. His face was sharp, roughed over by the years of a difficult life. His eyes held in them a maturity Bin hadn’t known Sanha could ever possess, and now they stared at Bin, searching for answers.

“How old are you now, Sanha?” Bin asked as Sanha drew closer to him. “Twenty-two?”
“Twenty-one,” was Sanha’s response. He sat beside Bin and sighed. “I’m twenty-one.”

Bin reached out to touch Sanha’s face. His fingers trailed the curve of his cheek and the dip by his nose. He gazed at the youthful expression and the serious eyes and whispered, “And soon you will be twenty-two, but I shall remain twenty-seven.”

Sanha pitied him. He could see it in Sanha’s gaze. He had known, since the first day Sanha learned of his secret, that Sanha pitied his miserable existence.

Sanha was a dear, though. Sanha never said anything to show his pity. He tried his best to treat Bin normally, like he wasn’t an immortal soul doomed to watch his lover die over and over again.

Even now, Sanha leaned forward and kissed Bin softly. He smiled, hiding the proof of his pitying nature, and murmured, “I’ll still love you, even when I’m old and you are not.”

Bin stared at Sanha and said, as he always did when Sanha confessed his love, “I am only in love with Kim Myungjun.”

He did not know why he felt the constant need to remind Sanha of this. Sanha knew that. Sanha was well aware of Bin’s love. Yet, Bin had to tell him, if only to remind himself of that fact.

Sanha faltered but still stayed strong. “I’ve accepted that. I’m alright with that. But by your own admission, he only comes back after a hundred years or so, correct?” Bin nodded, and Sanha continued, “So, for the time being, might I be allowed to love you?”

“I worry, though, that the gods will decide to torture me. They will send Myungjun back while you are still alive and loving me.” Bin took a deep breath and embraced Sanha. He planted a few kisses into his hair, then replied, “You may love me, but...if Myungjun returns, I will not hesitate to leave your side for him. Can you accept that, Sanha? Can you accept that you shall forever remain inferior?”

Sanha sighed, drawing back from Bin’s arms. “I have told you that I accept it. If I did not, would I really have become your lover?”

Bin bit down on his bottom lip and laid back down. He stared at the ceiling above him, at the shadows cast there from the candles, and he muttered, “Part of me regrets breaking down and telling you all these things. I regret dragging you into my life in such a manner.”

“Why is that?”

“You could be married to a Joseon woman right now. You could be producing sons. You could be living the life that China never offered of you, and yet you choose to stay with me. Why?”

Sanha laid down beside Bin. His body was close and warm. He was taller than Bin, lankier than Bin, and when he wrapped his arms around Bin’s torso, Bin was reminded that he was nothing like Myungjun. Myungjun was smaller and molded into Bin’s side without any awkward movements. Sanha was a completely different person.

Bin loved him, but only to an extent. Bin loved him, but only superficially. It wasn’t anywhere close to the love he held for Myungjun. Bin’s love for Sanha was a weak flickering in his heart, fueled more by desire and loneliness than actual love.

“Bin,” Sanha murmured, “back when we were in China and Myungjun was still alive, I loved you. I hadn’t been certain of—of these feelings. Myungjun caught onto them, however. Myungjun knew. He never said anything, but he knew. I could see it in his eyes. When I walked in on you two
kissing sometimes, he would draw back and he was sympathetic. When I was forced to listen to you praise him endlessly, he would divert attention away. He watched me carefully and noticed all of my actions. And because I loved you, I thought I was fine with your romantic liaisons. You were happy. Myungjun made you happy.” Sanha reached out and brushed some unruly hair from Bin’s face. “I had not realized the true extent, though, until you explained to me your immortal life. I had not realized Myungjun was an eternal soulmate to you.

“I know I’m second place to Myungjun. I know you would leave me without a moment’s notice to be by his side. For now, I’m okay with that.”

Bin furrowed his eyebrows. “For now?”

“Well, I can’t look into the future. I do not know what it holds for me.”

Sanha lay close beside him. Bin stared over at his lover and shook his head as best he could. “You have become very mature. Oh, when did you grow up, Sanha? You’re so different from the young boy I used to know.”

“I’m still just as adorable,” Sanha pointed out.

“You’re still just as cheeky,” Bin scolded. He kissed Sanha again, then ran his fingers through the younger man’s hair. “Thank you very much, though, for accepting me, even despite the baggage I hold. Thank you for loving me, even despite my love for another. You are truly amazing, Sanha. Thank you.”

Sanha smiled, taut and unsure, but said nothing.

Bin gazed over at the man and said, “Myungjun...he said something that implied you did have feelings for me.”

“Did he?” Sanha questioned. “So he told you?”

“Not necessarily. I hadn’t realized it at the time. I never gave it a second thought. But what you’ve said — that Myungjun was aware — it did remind me. He told me that you loved me. He said, "Sanha loves you more than you could possibly know."”

Bin decided against mentioning that, at the time of that declaration, he had just been telling Myungjun that Sanha should die instead. Bin had already scarred Sanha enough in his youth; he would not bring that up again.

Sanha chuckled lightly and rolled his eyes. “He was always aware. He was intuitive. He impressed me so much in my youth.”

“Does he not impress you now?”

“I suppose he does. He’s worn many hats, hasn’t he? He’s been in such a variety of placements in life.” Sanha sat up slightly, looking curious, and asked, “So this was the second general that you’ve met, correct?”

Bin nodded his head. “The first was...well, it was the first Myungjun I fell in love with. General Kim. He was the one who...he was when the cycle started. It was after he died that I learned I could not die. And with Prince Myungjun, I realized I was doomed to live in this cycle forever. There’s no reprieve. No end.”

“What caused it?” Sanha wondered, eyebrows furrowed. “What caused you to be cursed? Did
anything happen with you and General Kim?”

Bin was inclined to shake his head, to say no of course not, but he faltered. Memories resurfaced and he felt confused.

“Well...I thought of something when I was a scholar at Sungkyunkwan University, about a hundred years ago. The Myungjun there was also a scholar, a professor, and when he held a secret, I remembered General Kim, too, held a secret. He had gone to the capital for recognition, and when he returned, he was never the same. He was quiet and sullen and would not talk about his experience. He apologized profusely, too. He would cry at night and hold onto me and apologize.” Bin sighed. “He died a few weeks after that. I never figured out what had happened. I likely never will.”

Sanha lay back down. “Perhaps he laid the curse on you there. Maybe he unknowingly spoke with a witch? Maybe she cursed him for a slight?”

“General Kim was a little superstitious,” Bin responded. “He would have likely caught sight of a witch. He would have known. He would have kept his mouth shut in an effort to not offend her. Besides,” he sighed, “what on earth could he have said to make this witch angry enough to curse the both of us like this?”

Sanha shrugged his shoulders. There was a list of reasons; there was a variety of paths Bin could explore, but he knew it would be difficult to figure out what truly happened at the capital.

“Whatever happened in the palace is what caused it,” Bin murmured. “I wish...I wish Myungjun had told me.” He frowned and stared up at his ceiling. “If Myungjun had given me even an inkling of an idea of what happened, then I could figure things out. It wouldn’t be so difficult now.”

“You must look back on his behavior after he came home from the capital,” Sanha stated. “You might find your answer.”

Bin closed his eyes. He thought of Myungjun’s pain and sadness the weeks leading to his death. He remembered his reluctance to speak and the cries he gave when he thought Bin was fast asleep. Nothing was jogging his memory, and he groaned and shook his head. “All I know is that he was sad. Horribly, undeniably sad.”

“Then he must have known,” Sanha mumbled. “He must have known whatever he did cursed you in some way.”

“Don’t be a fool,” Bin snapped. “General Kim would have never knowingly cursed me. It has to be something he is unaware of.”

He felt disgusted that Sanha would even suggest such a thing. Why would Myungjun wish to cause him harm? Wouldn’t Myungjun work to undo the effects of whatever curse he had placed on Bin accidentally? It wasn’t him, then, because that was too out of line for him, too out of character.

Bin glanced over at Sanha, who was looking away, likely hurt from Bin’s words.

“You should apologize,” Bin demanded. “Myungjun loved me. You clearly don’t know how he was — he never would have kept a secret from me if he knew it would end up doing this.”


He didn’t mean it, clearly. He was still ashamed of having been chastised. He was just doing as Bin wished.
He did that often.

Bin sighed and turned over, his back now facing Sanha. “Sleep,” he ordered. “I will need you up early to go to the market for me. I have business to conduct elsewhere.”

Sanha didn’t respond.

“You must give me a kiss!” Bin whined as he attempted to drape himself over Myungjun’s arm. “Please, darling. Just one kiss.”

Myungjun groaned and pushed Bin off of him. “I said when I started my work that I shall not kiss you until I am done. If I kiss you now, I will just continue to kiss you, and then I shall never finish these plans.”

Bin glanced over at Myungjun’s writing. The Chinese characters were forming some sort of elaborate plan to strengthen the Baekje military. It was impressive, really, and if the king and his advisors liked the idea, then Myungjun will have done something great for their kingdom.

Bin was already filled with pride for his lover; he couldn’t imagine how he would feel if this resolution passed.

“You’re so attractive when you’re serious like this,” Bin murmured, which garnered a laugh from Myungjun.

“I’m happy you find me attractive,” Myungjun stated, “but that does not mean I will push this aside any longer. Just think, Bin! If this does pass, then our army will be strengthened! If I can gather a higher budget for our men, we can upgrade everything, and then I shall lose less of the soldiers in battle.”

Bin nodded his head and sat still, watching Myungjun write. He knew it was difficult for Myungjun; he was so young and had already lost so many men close to him. Myungjun might not know the names of all the soldiers, but he was personally invested in them. He would inquire about the dead ones: did they have wives or children, mothers and fathers? He wanted to make things right again, though Bin told him not to.

“Death,” Bin had said, “is expected as a soldier.”

So he said again as Myungjun mixed together more ink.

“Darling, you know you cannot stop us all from dying. Death is expected. We train to fight and we accept the results, whatever they might be.”

“I cannot,” Myungjun replied. His hand faltered, and his fingers became black with ink. “Damn,” he cursed, reaching for an already-dirtied rag. He wiped the ink off, though it just smudged and streaked down the rest of his hand.

“You cannot accept the results?” Bin asked, sitting upright and staring. “Really? You’re a general but you can’t accept that we shall die in battle?”
“I wish you wouldn’t say we,” Myungjun fussed.

“Why? I am with the other foot soldiers. I am equal to them. Many of my friends have fallen, and with every battle, I fully expect to be next.”

Myungjun pursed his lips. He grabbed his pen again and dipped it in the ink, then said, “I don’t think you are equal to them. You are above them.”

“Myungjun—”

“I don’t want you to be prepared to die in battle,” Myungjun said.

“What else can I do? I’m a soldier.”

Myungjun nodded his head and took a deep breath. “That’s why...as part of my resolution, I will be asking to send...I will be sending select soldiers to Japan. These will be very skilled soldiers who are familiar with various cultures and who I hold in very high regard. I will station these soldiers in Japan in an effort to increase their support of our military; basically, the soldiers I send will impress the Japanese enough that they shall help us if Silla or Goguryeo ever encroach on our territory again.”

Bin glanced down at Myungjun’s proposal and then asked, “Am I one of the soldiers you wish to send?”

“If my resolution is passed...yes.”

“I refuse to go.”

“You cannot refuse an order from your general!” Myungjun snapped, glaring over at him. “I know you don’t wish to leave, but this is the only way I can ensure your safety. If you fall on the battlefield, Bin, I shall never forgive myself.”

Bin scoffed. “And what about my thoughts on this? I don’t want to leave your side. If you go to battle and I am stuck in Japan — what if you fall during battle? I want to be with you through everything, darling, even if it means dying during war with you.”

“Bin—”

“I think you have a brilliant plan. I think improving our foreign relations is a must. But do not think for a second that I will be one of the soldiers you send.” Bin leaned over and kissed Myungjun’s forehead and offered him a small smile. “I won’t die on the battlefield. I promise. The only way I will fall is if I first see you fall, and then I shall allow myself to be taken so I will never have to leave your side.”

Myungjun sighed, but he said nothing to refute Bin’s statement. He just curled up into Bin’s touch and murmured, “I don’t want to leave your side, either.”

“Then I will not go to Japan, even if you try to force me.”

“Don’t be a pain,” Myungjun fussed. “But I’ll...I’ll think about it. I’ll come back to this plan. If the resolution passes, we shall talk it through, okay?”

Bin knew, though, that he would definitely not go. Even if Myungjun threatened him with punishment, he would take it. Even if he was forced out of the army, he wouldn’t leave Myungjun’s side.
He kissed Myungjun again, this time on the lips, and murmured, “Fine. But you cannot very well say that you can send me away and be satisfied with yourself, can you?”

“I can.”

“Mm, sounds false.” Bin wrapped his arms around Myungjun and continued to kiss him.

Myungjun tried to complain. “Bin,” he murmured when Bin drew away from his lips in order to take a breath, “Bin, I must work on this resolution.”

“Later,” Bin replied. He trailed a hand down Myungjun’s chest; beneath the clothes, he could feel his toned body, and he smirked deviously. “I think right now I must show you what you’d miss if I was sent away.”

Myungjun didn’t argue with him anymore.

Sanha was gone.

It happened quickly. It happened suddenly. The reason made sense, but it still made Bin so lonely.

He had asked, “Is it because of my love for Myungjun?” He was accusatory, demanding answers, and Sanha, now in his late twenties and quite weary, had just sighed.

“I’ve told you, Bin, time and time again, I understand that you love Myungjun. I know, too, that you love Myungjun far more than you could ever love me. I’ve accepted that. What I cannot accept, though, is how you live solely for him.”

Bin scowled. He crossed his arms over his chest and asked, “How else am I supposed to live if not for him?”

“For yourself,” was Sanha’s answer, punctuated with a slight roll of his eyes. “You live day by day speaking of nothing but Myungjun. Every step you take is a reminder that you’re only here for Myungjun. Every step I took was a reminder that you’re only here for Myungjun.” Sanha had a few bags packed; Bin’s slaves were already carrying them away.”You dreamed about Myungjun, though I was right there beside you. You talked of Myungjun, though you had ignored all I had to say. When we made love, Bin, you spoke of Myungjun and you called out his name and...I cannot compete with him. It’s tiring.” He looked exhausted. He looked worn. “Perhaps it’s time I stopped living for you and started to live for myself. Perhaps it’s time you do the same.”

Bin swallowed thickly. He watched the last of Sanha’s bags be taken out of the room. “I do not know how to live for myself,” he murmured, closing his eyes briefly. “I do not remember life before Myungjun.”

“This is life before Myungjun,” Sanha gently reminded him. He stepped forward; he was taller than Bin now, just barely, but Bin still realized how much Sanha had grown.

He had never noticed. He was always focused on Myungjun.

“Myungjun will come back, but for now it is life before him. You must figure out what to do with
the time you have to yourself. You must figure out how to live for yourself.” Sanha smiled. He seemed regretful. His eyes displayed in them such longing that Bin was stunned momentarily.

“Sanha—” Bin started, but Sanha cut him off with a kiss. It was slow, passionate, full of unspoken words and boundless gratitude. It said all that Sanha left unsaid, and when they parted, Sanha turned and left.

He was gone.

Bin found that his life did not change that much. He missed Sanha day after day. He wanted Sanha to come back, if only to provide him with a bit of company, but he decided it would be better this way. He would not be caught up in a relationship should Myungjun return, and Sanha would not be doomed to live with the man who would never love him back.

However, as time passed by, Bin realized Sanha had a point.

His life was spent in stages: wait for Myungjun, live with Myungjun, mourn for Myungjun, repeat. It was strenuous. It was miserable. The only bouts of happiness came with Myungjun’s return. Surely there was a way to be happy without Myungjun.

Surely there was a way he could be Bin, not the Bin who awaits Myungjun.

Time was not as valuable to him as it was to others, but with the time spent alone, Bin decided he could work on ending his immortality. “Not for Myungjun,” he would always say as he opened books and crossed off lists of what did not work. “Not for Myungjun. For myself.”

He wanted to take care of himself. He wanted to die because otherwise he would wait around forever and ever for each reincarnation of his lover. He couldn’t do that. Sanha was definitely right — he had to do it for himself.

Immortality, though, was a curse that would not end. Bin’s suicide attempts were fruitless. His research was pointless. Each time he took a step closer to figuring things out, he would find himself lost and return back to square one.

Sanha’s words from years ago stayed with him. Through all the failures, he remembered what Sanha suggested.

Did Myungjun curse me?

He couldn’t imagine how. He couldn’t imagine why. They had loved each other so much. Why would Myungjun place a spell on him, then?

He needed to confer with Sanha again.

It had been decades since Sanha left his side. Still, Bin knew he had time to find him. He always had time. He searched and asked around until, a while later, he was able to locate a Yoon household, headed by the father Yoon Sanha.

“Father?” he questioned the boy leading him into the house.

“He’s my grandfather,” the boy responded, looking up at Bin with a large smile. “He’s wonderful! He likes to tell me stories!”

Bin’s heart felt like it was being crushed. Had it been that long? Had he been too late? How was Sanha old enough to have grandchildren?
The weight of his immortality was too much to handle, and Bin stumbled as he walked. The child — so much like Sanha, so similar in appearance and mannerism — glanced up at him in worry. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Bin nodded his head. “Fine,” he lied. They stopped at a door and Bin gestured at it. “Is, um, is this...Sanha’s room?”

The child nodded his head. “He doesn’t feel well,” he muttered. “I think he’s—”

“I shall see him myself,” Bin interrupted, gently pushing the child aside. He didn’t want to hear the words he knew would come. Sanha doesn’t feel well, he thought to himself as he opened the door. Sanha’s dying.

He was very old — that was what Bin first noticed. Sanha lay in bed, grey and wrinkled and shrunken up as if he had never been tall. Bin lingered in the doorway for a few seconds before Sanha’s head turned and caught sight of him.

His eyes widened and he called out, “Bin?”

Bin took a deep breath, steeling himself and putting up an iron wall, then hurried forth. He bowed his head, a sign of respect, something he had never done before for poor Sanha.

Sanha laughed, ignoring Bin’s display, and whispered, “You do exist.”

“What?”

“I thought you were a figment of my imagination. I thought, of course he isn’t immortal. Of course I didn’t see him kill himself. I thought I was just a silly child for believing such a thing.” He held out a hand, and Bin took it after a moment’s consideration. “But you’re still alive. You don’t look any different.”

Sanha’s hand was leathery. Bin’s own was much more smooth. He shook his head and murmured, “Haven’t aged. Haven’t figured out how to end my immortality.”


“I...I think you might be right,” Bin stated. “About many things. Everything. But mostly...what if Myungjun did curse me? I...I know I was harsh when you suggested it. I know I disregarded it instantly. But I think that this immortality is a curse, and Myungjun did something at the capital, and I am now cursed from it. I just...don’t know what he might have done.”

Sanha frowned. “It’s been such a long time since...since I thought of Myungjun.”

“Really?” Bin felt bad. Here he was, intruding on what should have been Sanha’s final moments in order to help himself. He apologized, bending over to kiss Sanha’s head, and murmured, “I shall stay silent. I shall leave, if that’s what you want, so you can get some peace.”

“I’d rather you stay,” Sanha responded. “Just for a bit longer. Until I sleep, at least.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then said, “Whatever it was Myungjun did, he felt bad about it. You must remember that.”

Bin remembered. He didn’t think he could ever forget Myungjun’s tears and sobs for weeks after he had visited the capital. He was forced to forever recall a time when Myungjun messed up and ruined both their lives, and yet he could never understand what Myungjun’s actions were.
He kissed Sanha again, his lips lingering on the older man’s forehead, and he waited until Sanha slept.

“I will miss you, Sanha,” he murmured, brushing his fingers through Sanha’s grey hair. “But I will end my immortality, and I will find you, and I think then we shall both be happy.”

He left, and Sanha was gone.

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Bin almost fell asleep a few times, lulled in part by the singer standing before him and the steady beating of the drums to his left. It was all so soft, all so quiet, and Bin was so tired. He closed his eyes for a brief second, wanting to rest, but was awakened when the drums suddenly turned loud and the singer raised up in pitch, voice now emotional and angry.

He should have known better, he supposed, than to attend one of these acts. While the singers were always so talented, it became boring after a couple hundred years. They all sang the same songs and told the same story.

Still, it would be rather rude of him to sleep. He had chosen a seat near the front of the small courtyard, and his absence would be noticed. So awake he stayed.

He only had to pinch himself a few times, a sharp and quick reminder to not fall asleep again, but he made it through, clapping and cheering with the other audience members when the singer finally gave their bow.

“Thank goodness,” he muttered to himself as he stood from his seat. Many others had chosen to stand around and talk, to exclaim how good the singer was or how talented the drummer had been, but Bin decided against partaking in such small talk. He wanted to get home and lay in his bed and not worry about anything else until the morning would come.

He exited the area and held back a yawn as he squinted in the setting sun.

Someone pushed past him to get out of the courtyard. They pushed a little too hard, and Bin stumbled slightly.

“Sorry!” the man apologized, and Bin bit back all of his complaints when he realized he recognized that voice.

Myungjun.

The man was already leaving, so all Bin could see was his back, but it had to be Myungjun. That voice was ingrained into Bin’s mind. It would play over and over again at times of intense loneliness and longing. It was melodic and sweet and airy.

Myungjun.

He knew Sanha would likely tell him to stay away. After all, Sanha wanted him to live for himself, not for Myungjun. Myungjun should be nothing but a man Bin had been in love with in the past.

Nothing good ever came when Myungjun appeared, either. Death and despair followed him, tacked
on as if he and his reincarnations were to be cursed, too. Staying away would be best for the both of them.

Myungjun was turning a corner and Bin groaned. “Fuck,” he cursed as he hurried after him.

There was no way he could keep himself from Myungjun’s side. Though he had been living a better life than waiting around for the next Myungjun, he still couldn’t help but pray for Myungjun’s return. Myungjun was his reason for happiness. Myungjun was his reason for pain.

A life without Myungjun was not possible.

Sorry, Sanha, Bin offered to the heavens as he, too, rounded the corner and kept his sight on Myungjun’s back.

He tried to console himself with the thought of his curse. One of the Myungjun reincarnations might have answers. One might also jog Bin’s memory. Perhaps there was something lodged in the far reaches of his brain that Myungjun could uncover. Therefore, chasing after Myungjun wasn’t so bad. It could very well end with the curse being lifted.

And if Bin got to live out the rest of his life with Myungjun by his side, that was just a wonderful bonus.

The area Myungjun was walking through wasn’t a savory spot of town, Bin realized suddenly. It was full of low-lives, full of scoundrels, and Bin wondered if Myungjun was part of them. Anything was possible with the reincarnations, it seemed; he was already a prince and a child and a scholar and a slave. By all accounts, some sort of scummy swindler could be next.

Bin didn’t care that much. Bin would love him regardless.

He stopped, though, when Myungjun entered a building. The sign on the door was clear and matter-of-fact, but not very inviting.

It shouldn’t have been a place for Myungjun.

Still, Bin didn’t believe it. His eyes were playing tricks on him. His mind, already sleep-deprived, was interpreting the words differently.

He grabbed an older gentleman passing him by and pointed at the building. “That place,” he whispered, “is that really a brothel?”

The man didn’t even have to look to know which building Bin was referring to. He smiled; half his teeth were gone. “Sure is,” he replied. “It’s not a brothel with the female whores, though, so I wouldn’t go in unless you’re fine with boys taking off their clothes.”

Bin didn’t let him go. He was still very confused. “So...boys work there? As prostitutes?”

“Yes.” The man shrugged Bin off of him and smirked. “Don’t be shy. They do good work.”

Bin stayed silent, even as the man cackled and sauntered off.

He had been to whorehouses like this one years and years ago. They catered to shady men who would rather keep their lustful desires secret. The boys who worked in them were often so young, often humiliated, and often desolate and under strict contracts.

Bin thought it to be a fate worse than slavery.
Sanha’s words echoed in his mind again. Getting caught up in Myungjun’s life would likely ensure a demise. Getting caught up in Myungjun’s life would, at the very least, benefit neither of them.

But Bin, fueled with a desire to break the curse and be reunited with his true love once more, took a deep breath and entered the building.

It was kept dim in effort to hide identities. It was small, a little quiet, and Bin glanced over at a woman seated and smoking on a pipe.

He offered a smile. She just raised her eyebrows.

“You must be the mistress,” he greeted, stepping closer to her.

“Are you here for one of my boys?” she questioned.

“Yes. One in particular.” Bin knew after he said the name, he would likely never turn back. His immortal, cursed life would forever be intertwined with this Myungjun’s existence. He would either bring about his fall, or break the curse and live out a happy ending.

He would work hard for the latter. He wouldn’t ruin it.

“Myungjun,” he replied, blurting out the name before he could second-guess himself. “A, um, a Kim Myungjun.”

The woman pursed her lips and sat back. “He just returned from his errands,” she murmured. “Were you watching him?”

“No,” Bin lied. “I ran into him while he was out. He told me his name, and I was intrigued and...well, I would very much like to meet him.”

“Fuck him, you mean.”

She was abrasive. Bin winced. “Well, sure, yes.”

“Fine.” With a sigh, she gestured over to the hallway. “Upstairs, third door on the right is his room. He’s under a contract for a while, so please don’t harm him and make him unable to perform for his other clients.”

Bin nodded his head. “It’s also wrong to harm him as a person, isn’t it? He’s not just a whore.”

“He might as well be.”

He decided he was done speaking to the woman. He was likely to become angry if she continued to refer to Myungjun in such a derogatory manner. Instead of talking back, he bowed slightly to her, and then moved down the hallway she had shown him.

Upstairs, third door on the right.

Myungjun was right beyond that door.

Bin had to swallow past the lump that was forming in his throat. He tried his best to quiet his wild, beating heart. This would be the first time he met Myungjun again after a hundred years. The last death had been particularly difficult on him. He refused to let this Myungjun get to the same point.

This Myungjun would not die under his watch.
He knocked twice, and there was a bit of shuffling before Myungjun’s voice rang out: “Come in!”

He opened the door slowly, peeking inside first.

Myungjun sat on the floor, quite surprised. He had a few books laid out before him, though he didn’t appear to be reading them. There were two mattresses side by side with sheets strewn about, and a folding screen that divided up the other part of the room.

Otherwise, it seemed rather bare and empty.

“Are you a client?” Myungjun asked.

Bin stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. He felt overwhelmed. Myungjun looked as beautiful as he had the day he left. He was younger, though Bin was uncertain of the age, and his skin was far more clear. He wore a nice hanbok; definitely not upper-class, but still of good quality and design. His hair was short, though tightened into a top-knot, pulled back in a way that looked almost painful.

“Are you going to say anything, or shall you stand there and look like a fool?” Myungjun asked, voice scathing and sarcastic.

Bin blinked. “I...I’m just...I saw you earlier today, at—”

“I don’t really need to hear how you found me,” Myungjun replied. He stood from his seat and offered a smile. It was polite and cordial, devoid of warmth. “So, how shall you have me? Would you like me to dance for you? Do you prefer boys, like myself, or women — I can become a woman for you, if you would like.”

“A...woman?”

“God, do you not know how this works?” Myungjun scoffed. “While I clearly don’t have the, hm, proper woman’s anatomy, I can dress myself in any way you prefer.”

“I know how it works,” Bin responded. He had slept with boys who would dress as girls in order to convince the likely-homosexual men they accepted as clients that they were still normal.

Myungjun crossed his arms over his chest, awaiting an answer.

He was rude.

Bin loved him all over again.

“Could we just talk instead? I’m a bit exhausted. Sex makes me more tired,” Bin stated.

Myungjun snorted. “Not likely. I don’t get paid to talk. Since you appear indecisive, though, why don’t we just do it with how I am now?” He was already untying his trousers. “I have a few rules you must follow. Number one is that I will not perform oral sex. I gag too much, you see, and most men don’t wash down there. Number two is that you must not tie me up while we have sex.”

“Tie you up?” Bin asked. “Do men tie you up?”

Myungjun grinned and shrugged his shoulders. “The men that come through here have such odd fantasies, and they like to try them out on me. After many times of trial and error, I’ve decided I hate trial and error.”

He pulled his pants down and Bin stared with wide eyes.
“Number three — you must remove your own pants as well.”

Bin’s eyes shot up to Myungjun’s. Myungjun looked downright devious and playful. He didn’t look at all like being a prostitute was a bother or a crime.

“Most prostitutes don’t make me take off my pants. Not all the way, at least.”

Myungjun shrugged. “Well, you’ve come to me, and these are the rules you must abide by. You can walk out the door if you would like. I will not stop you. Otherwise, if you wish to engage in the best sexual activity of your life, then you deposit your pants over there.” He gestured close to the screen and kept that smile on his face.

Bin glanced over to where Myungjun was pointing. “Why so far?”

“I don’t like clothing articles in my way,” Myungjun responded. “Besides, men have been known to agree to the rules and then somehow bind me up anyway — one man used his pants as a gag for me.”

“He gagged you?”

“You ask a lot of questions for someone looking to fuck young prostitutes,” Myungjun commented. “Remove your pants, please, and place them aside.”

Bin swallowed nervously. His fingers toyed with the hem of his pants, and he asked, “Could we just talk instead? I’d like to get to know you more.”

“Ew,” was Myungjun’s only response to that.

Bin knew he probably shouldn’t have sex with Myungjun right upon meeting him. It was disrespectful. It was sleazy. It was gross. Yet, Myungjun was so enticing. He moved to get on the ground, his back now facing Bin and his butt in the air, and Bin realized this had been the first time he had seen Myungjun in a sexual manner in years. Since Prince Myungjun, he figured, which was nearly a thousand years ago.

He hadn’t been able to have sex with Myungjun in almost a thousand years.

His heart hammered in his chest, and he found himself thinking of such lustful, sinful thoughts. General Kim had already been sexually active in the past; a prostitute version of that would make it so much better, wouldn’t it?

Bin removed his pants and dropped them where Myungjun had requested.

When he turned back around, Myungjun was already preparing himself, hand stretched underneath and fingers teasing at his hole. He winced once or twice, but otherwise seemed so used to the bodily intrusion that he took it all rather casually.

He took his place behind Myungjun, eyes roaming over his body. He was still tanned, as he always was, and his skin was smooth and clear of blemishes. Bin ran a hand down his back, feeling Myungjun breathe and shudder underneath his touches, and he whispered, “Myungjun, I want—”

“How do you know my name?” Myungjun asked, glancing over his shoulder. He moved his fingers out of him andwigged his ass. “Stick it in.”

“Not the romantic sort, are you?” Bin mused. “Wait, I’m still…” He trailed off and sighed. “Don’t most prostitutes help their clients become erect?”
“If you aren’t erect just from seeing my backside, then you must have issues,” Myungjun stated, and Bin couldn’t help but smirk. He took his penis in his hand and pumped, trying his best to steady his breathing. “So,” Myungjun continued, “you know my name?”

“Ah...yes, well, you were recommended to me by a colleague of mine. Could you look at me, please? You’re attractive and I feel like I could ready myself easier if I could stare at you.”

Myungjun gave a loud sigh, as if the request was far too demanding for him. Still, he listened and sat himself upright, turning around to show off his face properly. “Normally, I would say no because you’re asking a lot of me, but I am rather handsome. I can’t blame you for lusting after my face.”

He was cheeky and rude and Bin adored him.

However, even Bin’s love did not stop his brain from reminding his heart that this was a prostitute. The two that Bin had sex with before — General Kim and Prince Myungjun — had been in love with him. They had wanted to have sex, not for money or power but for love. This Myungjun seemed to only have one thing on his mind as Bin rocked back and forth into him.

“You have to pay the mistress,” he groaned out, holding onto Bin’s shoulders. “Not me. Give the money to her. Add a tip if you’d—you’d like.” His fingers tightened, gathering the silk fabric into his fists, and he squeezed his eyes shut. Sweat sheened on his forehead and on his neck. Bin stared at him all the while, mesmerized by the man he truly loved.

He felt himself tear up, but he couldn’t cry. Not again. He had cried for the last Myungjun and it was foolish of him to do so. It would cause too much of a ruckus, and so he took a deep breath instead and blinked the tears away.

“Is that a thing to talk about as we have sex?” he asked.

“Would you rather me not talk at all? I can make sounds instead. Most of the men are — god!” He threw his head back and panted briefly before continuing, “Most of the men are satisfied with the sounds I make. It feeds all of their desires and urges. Shall I make some for you?”

Bin grinned. He liked causing Myungjun to come undone. He knew this body, knew it very well, knew all of Myungjun’s weaknesses and sensitivities. He knew exactly which direction was best for thrusting; he knew what would make Myungjun happy.

“Wouldn’t it just be acting, then, if you make sounds without truly meaning anything by it?”

“Well,” Myungjun grunted. He was breathing deeply, and his hips were coming up to meet Bin’s thrusts. “You’re doing a-fantastic job, so I don’t...they won’t be for show. I’m holding back now, but—”

Bin leaned forward and kissed Myungjun, swallowing up whatever words he had to say. He noticed Myungjun open his eyes, shocked and confused, but at least he did not draw back from the kiss.

Bin chuckled and said, lips still moving against Myungjun’s skin, “I’d love to hear you, darling.”

He had forgotten how vocal Myungjun could be. He had forgotten how loud Myungjun could be. He was shrill and his voice rang through the air like a piercing bell, but Bin craved more and more and more. He pushed harder into Myungjun and sped up his movements, began to jerk him off, until Myungjun was like putty in his arms.
Myungjun came first; it was that face, the face of pure ecstasy, that had Bin spilling into Myungjun just a couple minutes later.

By the time he pulled out, Myungjun still had yet to fully catch his breath.

“How was that?” Bin asked. He couldn’t refrain from smiling. He wiped some sweat from Myungjun’s forehead and kiss the spot. “Did you enjoy that?”

Myungjun sighed. He brushed aside a few loose strands of hair and replied, “What sort of client asks his prostitute if he enjoyed sex?”

“It’s not fun for me if you aren’t enjoying it,” Bin pointed out.

“Well, it is none of your concern. I don’t enjoy most sex I have.” He stood, despite Bin’s reluctance to let him go. Bin liked to bathe in the afterglow of sex. Bin liked to pamper Myungjun, to kiss him and hug him and fall asleep with him.

Myungjun in this era, though, was a prostitute. Bin had to remind himself that this Myungjun would be a bit different. Sex was nothing but work for him. Bin was nothing but a client, a way to earn money. He had no personal or romantic connection.

Bin closed his eyes for a second and bit back a groan of frustration.

“Here are your pants,” Myungjun said, tossing the pants onto Bin’s head. Bin opened his eyes and glanced over; Myungjun was dressing himself.

“Is that it, then?” Bin asked. “Is that all?”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows. “What more would you like? You fucked me. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Like I said before, I want to talk. Will you please —”

“It’s going to be night soon and I’m busy,” Myungjun snapped, his tone becoming much more serious. “I would appreciate it if you didn’t hang around here and waste my time. I can’t earn money if you just sit here and talk.”

“Myungjun—”

He was cut off once more. “Get out.”

Myungjun pointed at the door and huffed. Not willing to anger the man he loved more than life itself, he nodded his head and pulled his pants back on. He tried to take his time in tying them back into place properly and in ensuring his shirt was straight and not frumpled, but there was only so long he could linger.

Myungjun was a prostitute. He had to accept that he was not Myungjun’s only client. He had to accept that there were others who would experience Myungjun in such an intimate way.

He hoped none of them could ever elicit such real sounds from Myungjun, such loud and wonderful sounds. He hoped none of them could ever satisfy Myungjun like he could.

What they had between them throughout the centuries was special. He didn’t want anyone else to tread on it.

“May I return?” he asked as he walked to the door. He glanced back at Myungjun, hopeful, and
unsure. “Maybe to talk next time?”

“You’re odd,” Myungjun commented. “We’ll see, though, if you come again. There might be other prostitutes who catch your eye. Don’t worry.” He blinked flirtatiously, mockingly, and whispered, “I won’t be upset if you leave me for another.”

Obnoxious and sharp — he was so much like General Kim. Bin wondered, briefly, if each of the reincarnations would become a bit more like General Kim. He wondered how many more he had to go until the last one.

As he wondered, he bowed his head and stepped just outside the room. He had so many things he wanted to say to Myungjun, so many things he wanted to do with Myungjun, but he knew he was on a time limit. Myungjun’s profession was not allowing for his silly, romantic feelings.

Still, Bin turned around and smiled. “I’m glad to have found you, Myungjun,” he murmured.

Myungjun looked confused, but said nothing in return. He just shrugged his shoulders and began to close the door.

Bin noticed, though, just before the door shut, something on the other side of the room. Where the divider stood, a younger boy was peeking his head out in an attempt to get Myungjun’s attention.

There had been someone else all along.

Bin stared at the closed door. He put an ear to it, listening in; the doors were thick, but he definitely heard two voices.

Why had someone else been in the room? Why had someone else been hiding? Was that another prostitute? Was Myungjun hiding prostitutes in his room? For what reason?

There were many questions, but Bin knew better than to push Myungjun right now. He didn’t want to become despised by his true love. He would leave the matter to rest and return later in order to talk through things.

He went downstairs, where the woman still sat, still smoked her pipe. She raised her eyebrows at him and asked, “Are you paying with Korean currency?”

Bin reached into the pocket of his trousers for his wallet. He had been through this process many times. He’d enter a whorehouse, fuck a prostitute or two, and then pay. It was so normal that it shouldn’t cause him alarm.

But now it did. Now it was different, because Myungjun was the prostitute. He was paying to fuck the man he loved. He felt rather dirty, and he sighed loudly as he gathered the coins. “Yes,” he muttered. “How much?”

“Two hundred,” she responded.

Bin raised his eyebrows. “In...Korean currency, right?”

“Yes. Unless you have Chinese.”

“I...” He paused and blinked owlishly at her. What she said didn’t make much sense. “That’s such a small amount. Two hundred mun?”

She rolled her eyes. “You can pay more if you’d like. I will not stop you. However, you were there
for half an hour. Two hundred is a half-hour.”

“That’s hardly enough for him to live off of,” Bin complained. Many clients must pay only the required amount. He couldn’t imagine very many would offer up more — he should know, having frequented these places often.

He knew, though, he had amassed a small fortune in his wallet. He had high-value coins, many of which would be useful to Myungjun, and so he poured them out in his hand.

There were far less coins there than he remembered.

He knew his wallet was filled. He had shelled out money for the pansori performance earlier that day. He had plenty left over. He could feel the weight of it in his pocket. Now, though, there was just enough to pay for the sex and only a bit extra leftover.

The woman blew smoke from her mouth. It lingered in the air. “Is something the matter?” she asked, seeming unconcerned. She held her hand out, awaiting the money.

Bin shook his head. He couldn’t imagine where all of his money had gone to. He had it when he entered the whorehouse, and now—

“Damn,” he murmured.

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, sorry!” Bin grinned sheepishly, and then deposited the coins into the woman’s hand. She instantly closed her fist around them, possessive and greedy. Once she was sure Bin had given all he would, she turned and began to count.

Knowing it was the correct amount, Bin bowed his head and hurried out of the building. He closed the door behind him, and then laughed, covering his mouth so as to not seem insane to anyone passing by.

Myungjun was tricker than he thought.

Myungjun was a prostitute and a thief.

This would be interesting.

He returned the very next evening, unable to stay away for too long. His mind had been flooded with memories and images of Myungjun. No matter what he did, Myungjun remained at the forefront of it all. As he slept, he could only think of how nice it would be to have a warm body beside him. As he ate, he gazed at the empty seat across from him, knowing Myungjun would have been smiling if he sat there. As he dressed for the day, even, he could remember Myungjun helping him straighten his clothes and fix his hair.

It was too much to handle, and so Bin hurried back to the whorehouse at night, when things seemed a bit busier, when the mistress was already dealing with a few more customers.
She noticed Bin and scoffed. “You again?” she asked, shooing away an older gentleman with frumpled clothes and sweat around his neck. “You can’t stay away, can you?”

“No,” Bin agreed. “Can I go upstairs?”

“She’s with another client,” the woman stated. “I have a few other boys who are available; they’re younger, prettier—”

“I prefer Myungjun,” was Bin’s response to that.

She pursed her lips and then shrugged her shoulders. “Fine,” she said. “You can wait until his current client comes back downstairs.”

Bin did not like the idea of some other man fucking Myungjun. He could hear noises down the hall, primal grunts and groans, panting and cursing, and he thought of Myungjun upstairs in that tiny, barren room, bent over to be taken by some random stranger. He thought of what Myungjun had said the previous day; some men gag him and some men tie him up. Those had been against the rules Myungjun had established, so surely others must force him to perform oral sex. Wasn’t oral sex one of the rules?

He took a deep breath, glancing at another client that entered. Most of the men who frequented these places were ugly and old and gross. Bin could see nothing but lust in this man’s eyes, that animal desire rising up within him. He would choose one of the young boys, and perhaps they would show off a dance as he grabbed their ass, or else they would dress as demure women, ready to be taken.

Myungjun was treated like that, too, and Bin clenched his teeth together and tried his best to think of other things.

If he could help Myungjun escape this life, he would never have to worry about other men again. He could be the only one — and if he wasn’t, if Myungjun wanted someone else, Bin had learned better by now and would let him go. As long as Myungjun as happy and treated right, Bin knew he would be satisfied.

For now, though, he was antsy. Myungjun was right in his reach, and yet his doors were closed. It was excruciating and infuriating, and Bin could do nothing but sit there and wait.

Soon, fortunately, a man came down the stairs. He was balding and his eyes were too small and too far apart. He smiled, however, as he paid the woman the correct amount.

Bin glared at him as he left, knowing that man was likely Myungjun’s client.

The mistress of the house confirmed it. As she counted the money, she gestured her hand to the stairs. “Go on, then.”

“Does he not even get a break?” Bin asked. He knew the answer before the woman could say anything. As long as prostitutes continued to make money, they would receive no breaks. It was something Bin had been witness to before.

It was something he felt appalled in partaking in, now that someone he loved was a victim of such a life.

He went up the stairs and knocked on the third door to the right. His heart skipped a beat — perhaps several beats — when he heard Myungjun’s voice call out, “You can come in.”
Bin took a breath and then stepped inside of the room.

Myungjun was wearing only his jeogori, though it was long enough to cover his lower extremities. His hair was in disarray, and it was then that Bin realized just how short it truly was. Much shorter than any of the other Myungjun reincarnations.

Bin thought he looked dashing.

His eyes traveled to Myungjun’s face; flushed and sweating and displaying an expression of exasperation.

“What are you doing here?” Myungjun snapped.

Bin grinned and then closed the door behind him. “I came to see you.”

“You’re desperate, aren’t you? Are you some lonely man whose wife can’t please you? Do you have... issues performing in bed for her?” Myungjun scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Fine, though, I suppose you can take me. Here—” He began to pull his shirt up from his thighs, but Bin reached out to stop him.

“As I stated before, I would just like to talk.”

“You also seem to enjoy having your clients move their trousers over to the divider so the little boy on the other side can steal from them, hm?”

He caught Myungjun. He watched the shock grow, watched those pretty eyes widen, and watched his mouth try to form words of apology. Bin smirked and pat down Myungjun’s wild hair. “I wondered why I hardly had any of my coins. My, but you were greedy, weren’t you?” He glanced back at the door and asked, “Did you steal from the man who just fucked you?”

Myungjun jerked away from Bin. He looked fearful now. His sarcasm was gone, replaced instead by guilt and regret. “How—How do you know it was me?”

“I traced my steps back. I had a lot of money right before I took my pants off, and I had no money when I put my pants back on. Simple logic, Myungjun.”

The boy wet his lips, tongue darting out once or twice, then he asked, “Did you tell, um, the mistress?”

“My, but you were greedy, weren’t you?”

Myungjun sighed, loudly, out of relief. He then called out, “Minhyuk, come here!”

The face appeared again, peeking shamefully from behind the divider. When Myungjun gestured, the boy hurried over, keeping his head bowed and eyes averted.

He was much younger than Myungjun. Bin thought he looked to be at least ten, maybe a bit older than that, but no older than thirteen. He was tiny, though, skinny and small, and Bin stared at him for a few seconds before looking over at Myungjun.

“Is he a prostitute?”

Myungjun made the boy — Minhyuk — sit down. Minhyuk did not say a word. “He is,”
Myungjun replied.

“Then why does he hide?”

Myungjun appeared to be struggling with an answer. He stalled, busying himself by brushing out Minhyuk’s hair, and finally just shrugged his shoulders.

It was Minhyuk who answered, in a soft, quiet voice. “Myungjun takes all my clients from me.”

“Why?” Bin blinked, looking to Myungjun for answers. “So you can get the money?”

“It’s not like that!” Myungjun exclaimed. “Mistress Choi doesn’t give us any money, anyway. She keeps it all for herself.”

Bin thought of the extra coins he had passed over. Bin thought of his pride knowing Myungjun would have a large tip. Instead, it was all going to that greedy woman downstairs, the woman who cared very little for the boys under her watch.

As if sensing Bin’s anger and confusion, Myungjun explained, “She feeds us and we have a place to stay. She says in return, we make her money. That’s how it’s always been.”

“Is that why you steal, then?” Bin asked. “For money?”

It was Minhyuk, once again, who answered Bin. “He steals it for me, sir.”

“You don’t need to answer him,” Myungjun murmured. “He’s not worth getting in trouble for.”

Minhyuk glanced up; finally Bin could see his face clearly. He was very cute, but Bin could not understand how a boy this young was allowed to work as a prostitute. Minhyuk, sensing Bin was studying him, ducked his head again and replied to Myungjun, “He seems kind. And he’s handsome.”

“That’s nice of you,” Bin commented, smiling, but Myungjun just snorted.

“Handsome?” he repeated. “You must not be serious. Have you looked at him? He’s ugly. His nose is squished and odd and he has no lips — it’s like kissing a dead fish, Minhyuk, it’s gross.”

“You seemed pleased with him last night,” Minhyuk mumbled.

Bin’s smile turned into a grin. He nodded his head and sat back. “You were pleased last night, Myungjun. Shall I remind you? You said you would have no trouble making those delicious noises for me, remember?”

Myungjun grit his teeth down, his jaw set and square, but decided not to respond to the mockery. Instead, he returned to the original subject of stolen money. “All of the coins I steal, I keep stashed away. Minhyuk doesn’t belong here — I’m going to save up enough money to buy his freedom and give him a nice place to live.”

It was a sweet gesture. It was far more kind than Bin had originally given him credit for. Even now, hundreds of years later, his General Kim was still such a thoughtful person.

“Is that why you take the clients from him?”

“No. He’s...I mean…” Myungjun ran his fingers through his hair. “A lot of the men that come through like youthful boys. Minhyuk was a favorite, but there’s a few men that are...really harsh. Very rough. I couldn’t...he’s young, and…”
Bin shushed Myungjun gently. He understood what Myungjun was trying to say. It was a noble act, and Bin was impressed. “So you take his clients?”

“I’d rather them be rough with me,” Myungjun said, proudly. “I can take it. I’ve grown up in this life. Minhyuk just came here more recently and he doesn’t deserve it.”

Bin hummed and nodded his head. “You mentioned his freedom. Are the two of you contracted into this?” He had seen this many times before, as well. Young men and women were often times sold in order to make more money for their family. The parents would sign a contract, dictating the amount of time their child must live under such conditions. There was no escape, save for death or the end of the contract — and with the end of a contract, the prostitutes were usually too old to continue work and would likely end up desolate and miserable. It was a terrible situation, and Bin realized that Myungjun was stuck in this situation. He had been so shocked with the initial idea of his lover being a prostitute that he failed to realize the future that awaited him.

There was more reason now to get Myungjun out of prostitution.

Myungjun nodded his head. “Though I don’t believe my father understood the implications of the contract. I think he was under the impression that it was for some sort of physical labor.” He sighed and reached for his trousers, which had been tossed aside. “I can’t very well blame him, however. The life we had at home was nothing short of miserable. Selling me gave them some money; I only hope Father invested it well and has enough wealth to at least live off of.”

As Myungjun pulled his pants back on, Bin glanced over at Minhyuk. “What about you?” he asked, kindly. “Are you in the same situation as Myungjun is?”

“Yes. Sort of. My parents were...more greedy.”

“They’d given away kids before,” Myungjun commented, retying his pants and then fixing his hair. He gathered what little hair he had and pulled it back into that impossibly tight bun, wincing as he did so. “So Minhyuk, I guess, was not anything to cry over. Which is why I’m the only family he has — right, Minhyuk?”

He poked Minhyuk’s cheek and the younger boy giggled. “Right,” he replied.

Myungjun looked at Bin and took a deep breath. “We usually don’t steal that much money,” he assured. “It was just...Minhyuk saw you had a lot and perhaps we did get a little greedy. Usually we only steal a few coins here and there, or if they have a lot of jewelry, we take a few pieces. You were...you were an exception.” When Bin said nothing, Myungjun swallowed nervously. “I can, uh, give you the money back as long as you promise not to tell anyone of this. You can fuck me for free, if you’d like!”

“I’m sure the mistress would make me pay the moment I stepped back downstairs,” Bin pointed out.

Myungjun pursed his lips. “Right,” he muttered. “Right. There’s...that. And she would be suspicious if I told her you needn’t pay. She wouldn’t accept. Well...I can forgo my rules for you, if that would make up for my thievery.”

“Technically, Minhyuk was the one who stole.”

“Touch Minhyuk and I’ll hurt you,” Myungjun warned.

Bin laughed. He found Myungjun’s protective streak very sweet. He had such a big heart, such a noble idea of justice, and Bin would never come between the two boys. He shook his head and
offered Minhyuk a smile. “Wouldn’t dream of it. In fact, I don’t mind if you keep the money.” Myungjun’s eyes widened and Minhyuk breathed a sigh of relief. “Though,” Bin added, his tone cautionary, “I would be careful about who you are stealing from. I don’t want you getting caught by the wrong person, Myungjun, alright?”

“Don’t worry, we’re usually very careful,” Myungjun promised. He was still smiling, still so happy about the lack of consequence and the new addition of money. “You just surprised us, really, with how much you had. Are you rich?”

The fortune in his wallet had been nothing to scoff at, but Bin had far larger quantities of wealth stashed elsewhere. He raised his eyebrows as he pulled more coins from his pocket and passed them over to Myungjun.

“I am, as long as you tell no one about it.”

He didn’t feel as cheap anymore, seeing the two boys grin and excitedly talk as they shared the wealth with each other.

As long as he could continue doing this, too, perhaps one day he could buy Myungjun his own freedom.

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Bin awoke with the sun brightly shining through the window and with the little snores of Myungjun beside him. He blinked away sleep and bleariness and then yawned. It was rare that he had the chance to sleep in like this. Usually, there was always something to be done.

But it was a holiday, and Myungjun was off-duty and Bin was off-duty and they had spent the night together, embracing sin and lust and desire for hours. It had been wonderful, and Bin glanced down at his lover and smiled brightly.

Myungjun was curled into Bin’s own body, his head resting on Bin’s shoulder and his mouth slightly opened as he slept. That explained the snoring; it explained also the reason Bin’s arm felt like it was going numb.

He wanted to wake Myungjun and wish him good morning and kiss his cute, plump cheeks over and over again, but as his mind became more alert, he began to realize something.

It was later in the morning than he had initially expected.

The sun was already shining, which meant sunrise had passed, which meant that Myungjun’s slaves were bound to start their day.

They almost always started their day by entering Myungjun’s room with breakfast and clean clothes.

Bin cursed and then shook his lover. “General Kim,” he whispered, glancing at the door in alarm. “General, darling, wake up!”

Myungjun groaned as he picked his head off of Bin’s chest. Normally, Bin would take the morning
slow. Normally, he would kiss Myungjun’s exhaustion away until the rising sun produced its first rays, and then he would sneak out of the window.

But not now. Not when he could already hear the slaves walking down the hall.

Myungjun seemed to hear them at the same time. He gasped and sat up quickly, now just as alert as Bin. “Oh, gods, how long did we sleep?” he asked, scrambling over Bin’s body to grab his own clothes. “Bin, here are your trousers! And—”

The footsteps were right outside Myungjun’s door. Myungjun drew in his breath and held it before looking down at Bin.

He was naked, save for that jade necklace hanging from his neck, and Myungjun cursed. “Hide in my chest over there!” he exclaimed, gesturing wildly to a trunk in the corner of the room. “It’s large enough—”

“Are you crazy? That’s too tight!” Bin hissed.

Myungjun’s eyebrows furrowed and he shoved his finger into Bin’s bare stomach. “If you escape through the window, naked, people will see. Until I come up with a better plan, soldier, you will hide in that damn trunk, or I will force you in there myself.”

Bin grit his teeth down. A voice outside the door called, “General Kim, are you decent?”

He really had no choice.

“Fine,” he snapped. “I was going to kiss your cheeks but I don’t think you deserve it now for this treatment.”

“You’re just lucky I love you,” was Myungjun’s angry response before he shoved Bin aside. “Go!”

So Bin grabbed his clothes and climbed into the trunk, amongst all of Myungjun’s spare blankets and pillows, and held his breath.

Myungjun, for his part, was a good actor. Almost instantly, he was the cool and composed General Kim, not at all frantic or panicked. He called out, “I am decent. You may come inside.”

Bin felt like he was suffocating. The space was almost too small for his larger body. He was folded up in such a way he hadn’t known was possible.

At least he knew he was this flexible. Myungjun might be happy to know that next time they decided to risk having sex.

“I have breakfast for you, General Kim,” one of the slaves said as they walked in. Bin could hear a few other footsteps behind him, likely people bringing side dishes and drinks. He held back a loud sigh, hopeful that Myungjun would soon send them all away.

“Thank you,” Myungjun said. “Now, I would like to eat in—”

“Is your neck alright?” the slave asked. “You are bruised!”

Bin smirked to himself. His handiwork had been noticed. Hopefully they would appreciate the beauty of Myungjun’s love-bitten neck.

Myungjun stammered, trying to defend his honor, “I—I think I was bitten by something.”
He was, Bin could concur. He definitely was.

“Shall I get an ointment for you?”

“Not necessary. You may leave, though.”

“I actually have a message for you. A messenger stop by this morning. Captain Cho requests your presence for a training exercise.”

“I am on holiday,” Myungjun responded.

“It is an urgent matter. There is something wrong with some of the troops, apparently, and Captain Cho has said it must be corrected. He needs you there.”

Bin’s body was getting sore, holding this position for so long. He couldn’t breathe well, either, closed off from fresh air and stashed away in blankets. He squeezed his eyes shut and willed himself to take deep, steady breaths, trying his best to stay silent.

“Right now?” Myungjun asked. He was trying to stall; Bin knew he was trying to stall. He hadn’t been madly in love with General Kim for years and learned nothing. Unfortunately, stalling wasn’t going to work in this case.

“Yes, right now. I will ready your hair as you eat breakfast.”

“Can it not wait until I finish? I don’t want hair strands in my food, you see. It’s gross.”

“We will have no time if it waits until then. I will do my best to keep your hair from falling into your food; if I make a mistake, you must punish me.”

“I won’t punish you for such a slight, but if — fine, just make it quick.”

Bin was definitely going to give Myungjun a scolding after this. Forget no cheek kisses — at this point, he would not kiss Myungjun on the lips for at least a few hours. He was stuck now with no escape, and he was growing more and more uncomfortable by the second.

He breathed sharply. He breathed incorrectly.

He coughed twice, and then held his breath, his eyes watering and his throat scratchy.

One of the slaves gave a start, a noise of exclamation, and the other gasped, “What was that?”

Myungjun was quick to stand; Bin could hear his chaotic movement, his scrambling to protect his secret relationship, and then his stammering voice, “It’s—it’s nothing, please—”

“Is there someone in that trunk?” a slave asked.

Bin coughed again, unable to hold it in, and then gave a few breathy wheezes in an attempt to stabilize his breathing. He could hear, above the noise of his own madness, Myungjun curse and run closer to the trunk, as if defending it from a hoard of hungry fowl. “I might...I might have a woman in here.”

There was silence. Bin wheezed again, and Myungjun spoke up, louder, trying to drown out Bin’s sounds. “She is a whore, and I only hid her in an effort to save face! She is naked, however, and very embarrassed, and so if you would all please leave the room, I will send her out of here.”

“Oh.” The slave cleared his throat. “Right. Of course. We do not mean to intrude. Come along,
let’s leave General Kim alone for the time being.”

Bin could hear them all scurrying away; he was not at all embarrassed, but he knew they were.

The door closed, and not a second later did Myungjun open the trunk to glare down at Bin.


“I could’ve coughed up a lung!” Bin exclaimed, climbing out of the trunk and collapsing to the floor. He coughed again then gagged. “That was terrible!”

“You didn’t even try to stay hidden!” Myungjun complained.

“I breathed wrong! You can’t blame me for a natural bodily function!” Bin coughed again, then groaned, massaging his throat. “Darling, I feel like death has me in its grasp.”

“Good. I’d let it take you in an instant.” Myungjun sighed and glanced over at his breakfast. “They always had their reservations at my religious affiliation. Now I’m certain they know I’m not Buddhist and I’ve just been lying this whole time.”

“At least you weren’t reduced to being a whore girl you stuffed in your trunk. See, that’s what I am now, a whore—” Bin coughed, gagged, and groaned, then repeated the process.

Myungjun looked down at him and wrinkled his nose. “Oh, how I wish you were a whore. I’m embarrassed to call you my lover.”

Bin gestured for water, which Myungjun brought to him. Myungjun also held his head up as he drank and thumped his back and sat him up against the wall.

Once Bin didn’t feel like he was about to choke any longer, he couldn’t help but smile.

Myungjun would never be embarrassed of him. Myungjun would never forsake him. He could always trust Myungjun.

Bin had become used to visits with Myungjun. At least twice a week, he would hole up inside Myungjun’s little room in the evenings, usually bringing with him gifts or books or pretty artwork for Myungjun to examine. Minhyuk would sit nearby and listen; sometimes he’d pipe up, his little, quiet voice interrupting whatever it was Bin or Myungjun were discussing, and Myungjun always made certain to switch topics to whatever Minhyuk desired. Their bond was close. It was cute. Bin appreciated it, and he soon started bringing gifts for Minhyuk, too.

He learned that neither of them could read nor write, something that shocked him. Out of all the Myungjun reincarnations he had met, only one could not read, and that was mostly on account of his young age. This Myungjun was old enough to have learned, but stated he never had.

“I focused my efforts on more important things!” he proclaimed, but sometimes he would express interest and would lament, “Kiseangs have the opportunity to learn and they are expected to learn, and it’s not fair that just because we are male prostitutes, we are treated differently.”
“It depends on location, as well,” Bin would respond as a way to comfort Myungjun. “This area of town is not highly educated in general. Perhaps if you lived closer to me, then you would know how to read and write at a far younger age.”

“I’d like to be closer to you,” Myungjun said one day after Bin finished detailing how large and decorated his home was. “You’re wealthy. You’re generous. And...Minhyuk was right. You are kind.”

“And handsome,” Minhyuk added, but Myungjun scoffed.

“He’s not handsome. At most, he’s younger and maybe more attractive than my usual clientele, but it really is not hard to be more attractive than them. My standards are low, and Bin just...barely passes those standards.”

He was all talk, Bin was learning, for at times he would sneak glances when he thought Bin wasn’t looking, and his touch would linger for a few extra seconds, and he would blush with any compliment Bin would deliver.

Perhaps it wasn’t love just yet. At most, it was the beginnings of infatuation. It was the vines in Myungjun’s chest starting to bloom and grow, starting their ascent up to tangle around his heart. If it was anything like the vines inside of Bin’s own chest, they would soon tighten and strangle any other rational thoughts. They would allow the heart to take over, to control Myungjun’s actions, and then he would fall in love.

Bin could wait. Bin could bide his time. He only wished Myungjun would not prostitute himself out any longer, because jealousy was a constant emotion that had lodged itself into Bin’s otherwise loving heart.

Waiting was a little frustrating when he knew that other men were occupying Myungjun’s time. Bin would stand in the lobby, watching each man that came down those stairs, waiting for the one who was taking up Myungjun’s time. He hated them, each and every one of them, for they regarded Myungjun as little more than a quick fuck. Myungjun deserved better. Myungjun didn’t deserve them.

Two months after meeting Myungjun, Bin met another reincarnation.

He was waiting in the lobby, watching the mistress of the house smoke, when he heard footsteps coming down the stairs. The woman had leaned over to check down the hallway, and then glanced at Bin. “He’s done with the client,” she said.

Bin, in his excitement to go see Myungjun, almost ignored the man entering the room, but he happened to glance over, just once, and his eyes widened.

Wangwi.

He looked the same as he had nearly a thousand years ago. He was overweight, bald, smug and arrogant. He wore many necklaces and bracelets and rings to display wealth. He was sweeter than most of the men that had come before him.

He also paid more than any of the men Bin had seen.

Wangwi spared him only a quick look, a little smirk, before he rushed out of the building. There had been no recognition in those eyes, which made sense, but part of Bin wished Wangwi remembered him.
Then Bin would have an excuse to kill him all over again.

“Was...was that man with Myungjun?” Bin asked.

She nodded, but then corrected herself. “He might have been with Minhyuk. I’m not sure — I think they share clients.”

Bin knew that Myungjun took all of Minhyuk’s clients, so even if Wangwi had originally been there for Minhyuk, it was likely that he fucked Myungjun.

He rushed up the stairs and knocked on the door once. “Myungjun?” he called.

“Don’t come in!” Myungjun exclaimed in response. He sounded frantic and alarmed. He sounded upset.

Bin’s blood boiled underneath his skin, prickling and itching. He thought of what Wangwi must have done to make Myungjun sound like that. He wondered just how vile and disgusting the Wangwi in this lifetime had become.

He didn’t heed Myungjun’s instructions. He opened the door and stepped inside the room.

Myungjun was just picking himself up off the floor. He was propped up on elbows — with his hands behind his back — and breathing harshly. He wore a dress — European styled — and heavy, amateur makeup plastered on his face, with bright lip coloring and dark eyeliner. A wig was lopsided on his head, the long hair hiding much of Myungjun’s face, sticking to skin from sweat and what looked to be another bodily fluid.

“Did...did he ejaculate on your face?” Bin gasped, closing the door behind him and hurrying forward. “Myungjun—”

When he edged closer, he realized, too, that Myungjun’s hands were tied behind his back.

“Just...” Myungjun looked pitiful and defeated. He shrugged his shoulders uselessly and mumbled, “Please untie my hands.”

He wished he really had killed Wangwi, regardless of his lack of crimes, just for treating Myungjun like this. However, he knew better than to go chase that man. Killing him would be more trouble than it was worth for the time being, and Myungjun needed him right then and there.

Bin removed the bindings from Myungjun’s arms and then helped him to sit up and lean against the wall. He brushed strands of hair out of Myungjun’s face, fingers trailing along the sticky release, and he wrinkled his nose. “Why did he do this? Did you tell him your rules?”

“He never listens.”

“So he’s done it before?”

Myungjun was reduced to using the sleeves of his dress to wipe off the semen. He nodded his head and sighed. “He pays extra. He pays a lot more than most of them do. It makes the mistress happy. I can’t say no when he’s giving her all that money.”

“But none of it goes to you.”

“It keeps my contract up. If I don’t earn enough, she could toss me out and I’d be out on the streets and Minhyuk would be stuck in this hellhole. I can’t do that to him.” He snatched the wig off his
head and let it fall to the ground. “That...that man always asks for Minhyuk, anyway. I can’t...I can’t let him go through this humiliation, Bin. I can’t. You understand, right? I’m...I’m not that disgusting, I just...I’m not disgusting.” He gazed at Bin, eyes wide and searching for acceptance. Bin could see him swallow thickly. He could see tears welling up in those large eyes, pretty lips quivering in fear, and he shook his head.

“You are not disgusting. You’re...an amazing person, honestly. You’re protecting your friend.” Bin brought a hand up to wipe away some of the heavy makeup. Lipstick was smeared quickly, and the eyeliner soon followed. “Ah, damn. We’ll need some water to clean you up.”

Myungjun closed his eyes and leaned into Bin’s touch. “Minhyuk went to go fetch some,” he murmured. “He went out back, into the courtyard. I told him to stay there for a while first. I don’t...like him around when that man is here.”

Bin nodded his head. He resorted to using his own sleeve, too, like Myungjun had done, to wipe up the mess. He could clean his clothing later. “If he sees Minhyuk, will he ask for him?”

“Yes. That, and...he’s extremely rough. It’s...ah, I get so humiliated and it’s worse if Minhyuk witnesses it.” Myungjun sniffed but otherwise didn’t move. “He makes me wear dresses. He requests beforehand I do my makeup, too. I have to look like a girl. The...the first few times...I only prepare myself when, um, when my clients are in the room. They like to watch, I thought, but he just took me as I was the first few times he came around. Now I have to prepare beforehand.”

“And he ties you up?”

“Yes. Even when I established rules, he laughed in my face and continued to tie me up and made me perform oral sex. I...” Myungjun bit down on his lower lip. He looked too mature for his age, too upset. Boys like him should be studying and discussing law and math and science and religion. Boys like him should be settling down, or at least thinking of starting a family. Instead, Myungjun was forced into this awful position and forced to take on awful clients.

“When he comes around, he makes me feel like dirt,” he whispered, wiping at his eyes. “I’m so ashamed of myself, Bin. I don’t mind wearing the dress. I think I look pretty. I look pretty, right?”

“You do,” Bin agreed, though right now Myungjun just looked miserable and distressed.

“It’s...it’s not the dresses, Bin. It’s not the makeup. It’s how...most clients treat me like a whore, but he treats me like a fucking object. Most clients understand I’m still human, even if I’m but a despicable one, but he treats me like an object.”

Bin leaned forward and kissed Myungjun’s forehead. He tasted of sweat, salty and moist, but Bin didn’t care. When he pulled back slightly, Myungjun’s eyes were wide, and Bin smiled at him. “You are very pretty. You are very handsome, too. And you are not a despicable human. You are far from an object. You, Myungjun, are darling, and if I could, I would go and stab that man in his fat neck.”

Myungjun sniffled and asked, voice quiet, “Do you mean that, Bin? Or is this an effort to fuck me?”

“I have not had sex with you since we first met. Don’t be ridiculous.” Bin cradled Myungjun’s face in his hands, thumbing over his cheek and staring into his eyes. “I do think, though, you need to work on your makeup skills, but otherwise, I cannot detect a single flaw about you.”

They were close, unbearably close, and Bin’s eyes darted down to Myungjun’s lips. Red with
smeared lipstick, plump, and desirable. He was just in reach to kiss, but Bin refused to move, as much as his heart longed to. Myungjun had been through enough today, and Bin did not wish for Myungjun to receive any unwarranted kisses. He might take it the wrong way; though he had kissed many men before, he was a prostitute, and kissing always entailed sex. Bin didn’t want sex, and so he held back.

Myungjun, however, moved forward and kissed Bin first.

It was chaste and quick, just a brief pressing of lips against lips, and Myungjun drew back with a soft smile.

“Minhyuk was right,” he whispered. “You are kind and handsome.”

Bin had to calm his breathing. He wished he could calm his heart. The organ thudded against his chest, loud enough that he was sure Myungjun could hear, and he asked, “So you do think I’m handsome?”

“Well, you’re not as ugly as I had initially presumed.”

“So I’m handsome.”

Myungjun laughed, his tone cheerful and exuberant, and he exclaimed, “You are very prideful, Bin, and I take back what I said! Not handsome.”

“You can’t take it back after kissing me!”

“I can do what I want!”

At least he was smiling now. At least he was laughing now. As Bin held him closed and tried his best to plant kisses all over Myungjun’s face, as Myungjun struggled and screeched and giggled, Bin realized he could have Myungjun wholly and fully once again. He wouldn’t let him go.

The moment Bin opened the door to his house, Myungjun’s jaw went slack and his eyes grew wide. Minhyuk, standing beside him, managed to hide his awe a little bit better, though it was clear that he was still amazed. Bin couldn’t help but laugh as he ushered the two boys further inside.

“You really are rich,” Myungjun exclaimed, staring over at the pretty artwork that adorned the walls and the priceless artifacts that decorated the room.

“Did you assume otherwise?”

“I knew you were rich but not this rich,” Myungjun exclaimed. He grabbed onto Minhyuk’s arm and tugged him. “Look, he has pretty plates. Those are Chinese. I’m certain of it.”

Minhyuk blinked and responded, “That’s a plate from Japan. The style is different.”

Bin tried his best to hide a smile even as Myungjun scowled. “I think I’d know the difference in
plates. I’m really into art. Bin, that’s Chinese, correct?”

“It’s Joseon,” Bin corrected, and both boys looked sheepish.

When he had invited Myungjun over, he had originally thought it would be only Myungjun. However, he had failed to take into account that Minhyuk trailed after Myungjun most everywhere he went. “It’s safer for him,” Myungjun had stated when Bin tried to argue. “Otherwise, I leave him here all night and he has to have sex with men that come through.”

He was happy Minhyuk was here, though. The boy was almost as tall as Myungjun, and his personality was so very different that they shared great chemistry. Myungjun was loud and sarcastic and boisterous, and Minhyuk was subdued, observant, and calm. Even right then, as Myungjun bounced from one decorative piece to the next, Minhyuk held back, offering commentary when need be and otherwise choosing to watch.

He mentioned that to Myungjun later that night as they settled down together in Bin’s bed. “Minhyuk’s interesting,” he murmured, watching as Myungjun shifted to get more comfortable. “His personality is the complete opposite of yours.”

“He’s weird, isn’t he? I like him.”

Bin smiled and smoothed the covers down over Myungjun’s chest. “How did you two meet?”

Myungjun glanced over at Bin. “Well,” he started, “we each have a roommate at the brothel. It saves on space and room that way. We have dividers in case both of us have a client, and that way we can offer more privacy to the men who come to see us. My old roommate died, and so I was alone for a week or two before Mistress Choi acquired Minhyuk. She put him in my room, and he was...I don’t know how to describe it. Vulnerable, maybe? He was so scared and upset. After he had his first client, he cried all night into his pillow.”

Myungjun sighed and turned to look up at the ceiling. “There’s an unspoken rule in the brothel — we should never get too attached to anyone. Clients, especially, but also each other.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because accidents happen. Prostitutes are not a...a well-respected class. If we die from the hands of our clients, no one cares.”

“Is that what happened to your old roommate?”

Myungjun pursed his lips and then shrugged. “Not exactly. He...he was younger than me. Just a bit younger. Wangwi liked him and I guess it just became too much. Wangwi is...” Myungjun trailed off, as if trying to find a good descriptive word for the man, until he finally landed on, “Wangwi gets off on humiliation and power. My old roommate couldn’t take it. He hung himself one night after Wangwi left.”

Bin stiffened where he lay. He had no idea exactly how terrible Wangwi’s actions were. Myungjun only revealed as much as his physical state allowed him to. Were there emotional damages? Were there any other wounds Myungjun hid deep within his heart and soul? Bin watched Myungjun cautiously, carefully, but Myungjun retained his shell that kept himself protected from the cruel world.

As if sensing Bin’s sudden despair, Myungjun grinned and nudged his shoulder. “You do not have to worry about me. I have my own outlets. Stealing is a speciality of mine, and the knowledge I’m creating a better life for Minhyuk is more than enough to keep me going. Besides that, I think I...I
have you to confide in if things become too difficult.”

“Stealing is a speciality of Minhyuk’s ,” Bin corrected, and Myungjun laughed.

“Well, yes, but only on my orders.”

“Are you sure that you will come to me when things are too difficult?” Bin asked, propping himself up on one elbow to stare down better at the younger male laying before him. “Other than the one night you were with Wangwi a few weeks ago, I don’t think you’ve talked to me about such deep subjects.”

Myungjun wrinkled his nose but then smiled. “Wangwi only comes once a month. It’s easy enough to handle now that I know I only have to endure it for a few hours. He demeans me and humiliates me, but I tune him out. Besides, now that...now that I have you saying nice things to me, I...I’m not as upset.”

Bin smiled. He bent over to place a soft kiss onto Myungjun’s nose. “Cute,” he whispered.

“Ew. Gross. Get off.” Myungjun shoved Bin aside and huffed. “Anyway, as I was saying, my old roommate hung himself and so Minhyuk came along and though I knew better than to get attached, I got attached. The second night, he cried again, and this time I hugged him. After a few months, I started taking his clients and we started to steal from them. I just feel the need to protect him. He’s young, and he’s obviously not at all prepared for this lifestyle. He’s not like me, Bin. He can’t tune out the awful things people say, and he can’t pretend he’s still pure and innocent after the awful things people do .”

Bin, still propped up, ruffled Myungjun’s short hair. “Both of you seem rather pure and innocent to me,” he murmured.

“Well, I’m not. I’ve seen crazy things. Too many crazy things.” Myungjun swatted Bin’s hand out of his hair and raised his eyebrows. “Stop touching me or I shall go find Minhyuk and cuddle with him instead.”

“I didn’t think you minded me very much.”

“You’re even uglier when you hover above me like that,” Myungjun replied.

Bin laughed. He dropped down and lay next to Myungjun instead, staring at him fondly. “You are silly,” he murmured. “I think it’s why I like you so much.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes. “You shouldn’t like a prostitute. You are aware of that, aren’t you? Prostitutes are shared with many men. You cannot claim me, no matter how much you like me.”

“I’m in love with you, if that helps matters.”

Myungjun was quiet. He simply stared, searching for any sort of hesitation or lie on Bin’s expression. His tongue darted out quickly to wet his lips, a sure sign of discomfort, and when Bin refused to budge, Myungjun took a deep breath and whispered, “Do you really love me?”

Bin nodded his head. “I do.”

It felt like time had stopped and the world had stood still. In that moment, Bin was thankful that Minhyuk was asleep in the other room, for now it was just himself and Myungjun. For now, they could indulge in the silence and in each other. He could hear Myungjun’s breathing, short and quick breaths coming out and fanning across his pillow. He could feel it, too, tickling his cheek,
and he smiled.

“I love you,” he repeated.

Myungjun’s lips twitched upward, and without any further hesitation, Myungjun moved forward and kissed Bin.

It was meant to be a light kiss, a chaste kiss. Bin could tell that from the way Myungjun had leaned and puckered his lips. But Bin was fueled by emotions and desire and the stillness of that night. He kissed back, passionately, and rolled over until he was over top of Myungjun. He placed his hands on either side of Myungjun’s head to hold himself up, and then he continued to kiss.

The kiss was sloppy, wet, filled with various whines and moans, and Bin loved every single second of it. As he pushed a hand up Myungjun’s shirt and as Myungjun’s fingers curled around his biceps, Bin was filled with adoration and love.

“I’ll never let you go,” he whispered between kisses.

Myungjun, eyes half-lidded and mouth chasing after Bin’s lips, blurted out a quick, “Don’t,” before he pulled Bin down again.

Bin prayed to the gods to make this Myungjun the final one, to give him this happiness, at the very least.

Ever since Myungjun had returned from the capital, things had been quiet between the two of them. Myungjun hardly ever spoke to Bin; if he did, his tone was filled with regret and guilt and everything else in between. As such, Bin was hardly able to stay over for too long at Myungjun’s place without being driven out by Myungjun’s reluctance to talk things through.

But they seemed to be doing a bit better after two weeks. While Myungjun still chose not to discuss anything that had happened, he was loosening up a bit. He smiled at a joke Bin made (though it was brief), his hand lingered on Bin’s arm for a bit longer than necessary (though he drew back suddenly as if burned), and he had even invited Bin to spend the night (though only after Bin had pestered and bothered him about it).

So that night, they lay down together underneath Myungjun’s thick, warm blankets.

That was it.

Usually, Myungjun would be the first to engage Bin. He would kiss Bin’s lips and run his hands across Bin’s body, and the clothes were quickly removed after that. Now, however, Bin was left staring up at the ceiling as Myungjun curled in on himself.

“Darling,” Bin whispered.

“What?”

“Are we not going to have sex?”
Myungjun sighed. He sounded exasperated. At least it was a bit more personality than Bin had heard from him in two weeks. He smiled to himself, pleased with the reaction he was given, but then Myungjun rolled over into him and nodded his head.

“Fine,” he murmured. “Sex.”

He didn’t seem enthusiastic, but Bin, having nothing but his hand for the past three weeks, chose to ignore that for the time being. He wanted to take his lover and ravish him with love. He wanted to taste that smooth, silky skin under his lips and tongue and to feel all across Myungjun’s strong, lithe body. Without much hesitation, Bin gathered Myungjun in his arms and kissed him deeply.

Myungjun kissed back, but that was all he did. Even as Bin removed his clothes, Myungjun made no effort to help, nor did he make any effort to take Bin’s clothes off of him.

“Darling,” Bin whispered, peppering kisses along Myungjun’s face, “General, please, would you mind participating?”

“I’m participating,” Myungjun replied, his voice filled with venom, “otherwise I would not do this.”

Bin huffed, but chose not to comment any longer. He was aching; his erection was pushing against his trousers. He had to undress himself, frustrated at the lack of interaction he was being given, while Myungjun watched.

“You’ve been a bore since the capital,” he complained, shuffling over to where he knew Myungjun kept some oil as lubricant. “I don’t know what happened, but if it’s not dire or life-threatening, you can put it out of your mind.”

“That’s easy for you to say,” Myungjun scoffed.

“Of course it is.” Bin returned. He poured oil on his fingers and rubbed them together. “I was not at the capital. I have no idea what happened, because you refuse to tell me.” He teased Myungjun’s entrance with his middle finger, eliciting a whine, and then pushed it in. “If you would just talk to me, we could reach a solution and you would be much happier.”

Myungjun rocked his hips forward. Bin added another finger. “I don’t think I can be happy,” Myungjun whispered.

Bin froze and stared down at the general. “Really?”

“Just...please, Bin, just fuck me.”

“No need to ask me twice.” A third finger made Myungjun moan, and Bin grinned deviously. “Whatever it was must not be so bad,” he murmured, deciding to ignore the way Myungjun tensed from those words. “You’re letting me have sex with you. That’s a step in the right direction.”

Myungjun glanced up at him, eyes wide, and Bin grinned. “You’re so handsome,” he said. “I’m so lucky to have you as my lover. The great General Kim, coming undone for me — I can’t believe I’m—”

“Get off.”

Bin wrinkled his nose. Why was there a sudden change of attitude? He shoved his fingers further into Myungjun. “No.”
“Bin, get—”

“You said you would have sex with me, so just—”

“Bin, I don’t want to.”

His words cut Bin deeply. It wasn’t fair, he decided, to have Myungjun tug him every which way, to have Myungjun mess with his emotions in such a manner. He removed his fingers and Myungjun sighed with relief.

“What’s wrong with me, then?” he questioned, wiping his fingers on Myungjun’s sheets. “Why have you been treating me as if I’m not even here?”

“It’s none of your concern.” Myungjun was starting to sit up, but Bin felt an anger rise from within. It grasped at the vines of love that had covered his heart before and it tainted them.

He grabbed Myungjun’s hips and forced him back down. He ignored the soft gasp that came from Myungjun’s lips and he positioned himself accordingly. “You said we could have sex. Let’s have sex.”

“Bin—”

“Shut up,” Bin growled, and he lifted Myungjun’s hips.

He couldn’t get further than that, however, because Myungjun reached up just enough to slap him. Hard.

In Bin’s confusion, Myungjun kicked him away and then scrambled backwards breathing deeply. There were tears in his eyes, welling up and threatening to spill, and he stammered, “D-Don’t do this to me, Bin. Don’t force me into this. I thought you loved me!”

Bin rubbed at his cheek. Myungjun was strong. Myungjun’s physical attacks hurt, but it fortunately paused that anger and hatred and calmed him down.


Shame washed over him. Had he been ready to ignore his lover’s wishes just because he wanted to fuck? Had he been so desperate that he could hurt Myungjun like that?

Myungjun was crying, sobbing into his hands, and Bin crawled over to him. He gingerly reached out and touched Myungjun’s shoulder.

Myungjun leaned into him and gasped, “I-I’m sorry, Bin.”

“Why are you sorry? You have nothing at all to apologize for. I was the one who...I was the one who put you in that situation. Gods, I feel terrible, darling. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t—”

“I messed up!” Myungjun wailed into Bin’s bare chest. “I messed up so horribly, and I hate myself!”

This had to be about the capital. It couldn’t have been about tonight. Tonight, Myungjun was not at fault. Tonight, Bin had ruined things.

He ran his fingers through Myungjuns hair. “Please, don’t ever hate yourself. I do not hate you,
It was difficult to love a prostitute. Myungjun’s warnings had been clear, and Bin realized he was now forced to love a man who had sex with many other men.

Most difficult had to be waiting down in the front room of that dingy, gross brothel, with the mistress staring at him while smoking on her pipe, and men of all sorts coming from the doors and from the rooms, sweaty, aroused, and lustful.

Bin tried his best to come early most days. He wanted to be the first one Myungjun saw. He would bring books to read or things to work on and take up as much of Myungjun’s time as the mistress would allow.

Myungjun always appreciated the company. He would talk to Minhyuk and laugh and giggle and sneak coins from Bin’s wallet when he assumed Bin wasn’t watching.

Bin always caught him. “You’re not very subtle when you steal from me,” he would comment.

Myungjun, passing over some coins to Minhyuk, would grin sheepishly. “I don’t have to be, because you will let me keep whatever I steal.”

He was right.

When he arrived, though, he was sometimes reminded that Myungjun had other clients, many of whom had particular tastes. Myungjun would have to dress differently and put on that wig and work on his makeup.

“You’re very bad at makeup,” Bin observed once when Minhyuk was away on errands and Myungjun was readying himself for a client who preferred Japanese women.

Myungjun pouted at Bin. He was using a small mirror to fix his wig properly and apply the heavy makeup, and he sighed as he grabbed some sort of white powder. “Well, the clients hardly pay much attention, you know. I’m just their cute Japanese woman for the night.”

“The kimono is very pretty on you.”

“Isn’t it?” Myungjun gushed, glancing down at the bright and colorful outfit he was wearing. “One of my old clients bought this for me! He said I was so gorgeous that he could come just thinking about me in the—”

“That makes me jealous.”

Myungjun laughed and worked on plastering his face in the white powder. “Sorry,” he apologized. “I did go a little too far in detail. There are things you must not want to hear, hm?” He got some of
the white powder on his wig and huffed. “Bin, could you be a dear and help me?”

Bin moved closer and took the powder from Myungjun’s hands. Still, he asked, “What makes you think I’m capable to putting on makeup?”

“You were complaining about it earlier, so you must know something.”

Fortunately, Bin did. He had been alive for long enough to understand certain things, and he knew exactly what type of makeup Myungjun was trying to emulate. “So geishas have makeup on their necks, too. I assume you knew this.”

Myungjun’s eyes were wide. “I did not. Would you mind putting it on my neck?”

“Of course. Turn around.”

As he worked, Myungjun hummed a little song, and then asked, “You know a lot about the makeup of geishas.”

“Not that much.”

“Still, more than most men. Bin, have you slept with Japanese women before?”

Bin turned Myungjun back to face him once satisfied with the makeup along the neck. He smiled and wiped the powder from Myungjun’s heavy wig. “A few times,” he admitted. “On a few trips to Japan. Of course, not one of the geishas I met were as beautiful as you.”

Myungjun grinned. “I am very beautiful,” he admitted, glancing at himself in the mirror. “I astonish myself. No wonder I’m highly sought after.”

“Highly…?” Bin snorted. “Face me, darling, I need to put on your eye makeup.”

He showed Myungjun how to properly apply it, for the next time if he wasn’t there. He showed how to make the eyebrows black and thick and how to add a red outline to the corner of Myungjun’s wide eyes. Myungjun listened, engrossed in the lesson, and then smiled when Bin picked up the lip coloring.

“I can do this!” Myungjun exclaimed, snatching it away from Bin’s hands. “I’ve perfected this much, at least. Would you like to see?”

Bin smiled. Myungjun was precious and adorable, and all Bin wanted to do was snatch him in his arms and embrace him and never again let go. As it was, though, Myungjun was a prostitute and could not leave. Not yet, anyway. Bin had already asked, but Myungjun was far too concerned with Minhyuk’s well-being.

(“Him, too, then,” Bin had said. “I can buy his freedom, too.”)

Myungjun had sighed. “No. Mistress Choi will not allow for that. One man tried to buy a prostitute last year. He had plenty of money. But she doesn’t really need that money. She needs power, though, and property, and she has both. She needs nothing else.”)

So he had to resign himself to the fact that this was Myungjun’s fate until he outgrew life inside a brothel. He would become a bit older, perhaps reach twenty, and then the mistress would kick him out. There was no use for an older prostitute.

Then, finally, he could be freed and Bin could love him for the rest of his life.
“Let me see,” he said, choosing now to focus on Myungjun and his lipstick.

Myungjun did apply it well. If nothing else, he at least knew how geishas colored their lips. He was careful and slow in his movements, making deliberate lines and circles until he finally drew away from the mirror and smiled sweetly at Bin.

His bottom lip was red and round, almost as if it was a flowerbud waiting to bloom. His top lip remained white with powder, and Bin had to commend him on his skill and attention to detail.

“You look every bit the part of a geisha,” he stated. “If I didn’t know any better, I would be convinced you were a Japanese woman.”

“Don’t flatter me, you idiot,” Myungjun replied with a giggle. “I know I’m beautiful, though. I was born to be a glowing star.”

Bin rolled his eyes. “You would do well to act the part of a geisha.”

“No point in that. I sing a little for my customers, but they hardly listen. They just start to rub themselves on me while I sing.”

“Once more, I’m jealous.”

“Oh, don’t be. It’s more of an annoyance than anything.” Myungjun smiled again, but then snapped his fingers suddenly. “I want to try something! I’ve always wanted to do this and the makeup isn’t the best for it, but…” He gestured for Bin with his fingers. “Come closer.”

Bin leaned in, and Myungjun smacked his lips up against Bin’s cheek. He drew back with a smirk and then shrugged his shoulders. “It’s not the full effect, but it’s obvious what I was trying to do.”

“And what were you trying to do?” Bin asked.

In response, Myungjun grabbed the small mirror and held it up to Bin’s face. Bin stared at his reflection before noticing the lip stain on his cheek. The makeup had been plastered to his skin in the shape of Myungjun’s lips; white powder topped the darker, red color on the bottom, and Bin couldn’t help but grin as he brought a hand up to touch the affected spot.

Myungjun, though, swiped at his hand. “No!” he exclaimed. “Don’t get rid of it yet! I like to look at it — it reminds me that you’re all for me.”

“Cheeky,” Bin commented. “But now I wish I had something to remind me that you’re all for me.”

Myungjun pursed his lips in thought. He looked cute, pretty, and very much like a girl. “I will think of something,” he promised, “something that you can look at and think, Myungjun loves me this much.”

“Right,” Bin said, but something in that sentence caught his attention. “Wait... love?”

Myungjun’s eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to explain himself, but then there was a knock at the door. A young boy poked his head inside and whispered, “Myungjun, your client is here.”

“Okay! Thanks, tell him he can...he can start coming up,” Myungjun said, standing from his seat. Bin stood, too, and Myungjun glanced up at him. “I’ll talk to you about it later,” he promised. “But...I love you, Bin.”

Then, he shoved Bin out of the room.
Bin could see Myungjun’s client hurrying up the staircase. He stood there, though, even as the client pounded at the door, even as Myungjun’s gentle voice said, “Come in,” and even as that man rushed inside.

Myungjun loved him.

Once more, Myungjun loved him.

He couldn’t help but to let out a loud, “Yes!”

He swore he heard Myungjun giggle.

“Wangwi has been here, hasn’t he?” was Bin’s first question one night as he arrived in Myungjun’s room.

Myungjun was washing his face, freeing it of makeup and sweat. He glanced over at Bin and sighed before nodding his head. “Yes,” he responded.

Beside him, Minhyuk sat quietly, hands fidgeting in his lap as he watched Myungjun clean himself.

Bin knelt down beside the two boys and took the washcloth from Myungjun’s hands. He could tell whenever it was the time of month Wangwi stopped by. After Wangwi’s visits, Myungjun was always exhausted and downtrodden and shaky. Bin sometimes wished he would run into Wangwi again, if only to hurt him and make him suffer.

He scrubbed the eye makeup from Myungjun’s face, frowning at a bruise he saw on his cheek. “Did he hit you?”

Myungjun winced when Bin touched it, then lied, “It barely hurts. It was more of a surprise, really, and I suppose I had it coming.”

“What did you do?”

“Broke character. He prefers I pretend to be a girl the whole while he fucks me. It’s...difficult to do that when I’m in pain, though, and I slipped up.” Myungjun sat still, allowing Bin to wash him, and then asked Minhyuk, “Did he pay my usual rate?”

Minhyuk shook his head and Myungjun cursed. “Damn it. I figured, but...I still hoped he would understand that it can be difficult sometimes.”

“I will pay whatever he did not,” Bin murmured. He deemed Myungjun to be clean enough, and he dropped the washcloth back into the small bucket of water. “Minhyuk, would you mind emptying this while I help Myungjun change back into his hanbok?”

Minhyuk did as he asked, as he always did, and scurried off. Once the door, was closed, Bin tugged at Myungjun’s western dress. “These are far too heavy,” he commented, pulling it down from Myungjun’s chest. “And the waist is far too tight. Doesn’t it hurt?”
“I suck in my breath,” Myungjun responded. Before Bin’s hands could go further, though, he reached out and grasped them. “Wait. I...I have something for you, first.”

Bin paused and stared at Myungjun curiously. “Something...what is it?”

Myungjun leaned to the side, rifling through his blankets for a few seconds before he finally seemed to find the object he was searching for. “Well,” he started, “I wanted to get you something to signify my love. Something to remind you that I am always yours, despite my profession and placement in life. And I saw this and immediately thought of you. I believe it’s fine enough for your wealthier tastes.”

In his hands, he displayed a beautiful necklace. It was long and golden, with detailed patterns carved onto some of the golden beads. Bin blinked and took it from Myungjun’s hands. A quick examination brought upon more amazement. “It’s from Spain,” he whispered, “an older piece, too, likely from very early on — Myungjun, this is worth so much money. Where did you find this piece?”

Myungjun looked pleased. “Do you like it?” he asked, not answering Bin’s own question. “Well, yes, of course, but...Myungjun, please don’t tell me you spent money on this for me. I don’t see how you could, though, this must be worth a fortune.”

“It’s...not important. What’s important is that you like it!” Myungjun took the necklace back from Bin and grinned. “May I put it on you?”

Bin agreed and he ducked his head so Myungjun could clasp it properly behind his neck. All the while, he played with the beads, wondering and pondering how Myungjun could afford such a priceless artifact.

The answer came to his head rather quickly. “Myungjun, you didn’t steal this, did you?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s yours now!”

So he did steal it. On one hand, Bin wanted to be upset with Myungjun for gifting him stolen goods. On the other hand, the gesture was sweet; clearly, Myungjun cared for him greatly, or else he would sell the necklace in order to add more money to his stash.

Bin laughed lightly and shook his head. “Darling, you are very unique. Not too many men would steal necklaces for their lover.”

“I’m one of a kind,” Myungjun teased, and he leaned over to plant a kiss on Bin’s forehead. “You look very handsome, though. It looks so good on you. I told Minhyuk it was a perfect gift!”

This all sounded familiar. It sounded too familiar. The breath escaped Bin’s lungs and he couldn’t draw a new one. He sat there, eyes wide as Myungjun continued. “The necklace makes you less ugly! It adds to your looks tenfold!”

*General Kim.*

*General Kim.*

*General Kim.*
It was exactly as General Kim had said when he first gave Bin that gift of a necklace. Almost word for word, Myungjun was saying what General Kim had already said. It was almost like General Kim was here with him again, like the necklace hanging around Bin’s neck was that jade necklace.

*What happened to that?*

His memory was blank. Just when he needed that damn necklace, just when he wondered if there was something important he was forgetting that related to the necklace, he couldn’t actually remember.

And, just as he started to think, Myungjun asked, “Bin, are you okay?”

Bin blinked rapidly, clearing away his thoughts. There was no significance to the jade necklace, he decided. It was just a necklace. It was likely lost over time. He must have misplaced it somewhere else. He brought a hand up, feeling the necklace this Myungjun gave him, and he swallowed thickly.

“It’s beautiful,” he mumbled.

Myungjun beamed and nodded his head. “I knew it was! And I knew you would love it! I’m so happy, Bin, it really does suit you. I want to get you a whole set, but I’m not sure what you have already. Might I see your jewelry one day? I need to make sure I’m getting you things you do not have already.”

All Bin could do was nod along to Myungjun’s statement.

He had to push that jade necklace from his mind. There was no point in wallowing about in the past. For now, he had to focus on *Myungjun*.

“Sir,” a servant said, entering the room and bowing deeply to Bin. “Sir, there’s someone here to see you.”

It was the very next evening after Myungjun had given him the necklace, and Bin had chosen to stay at home. He had to keep a distance sometimes; people were too suspicious of their relationship otherwise, and he did have work he needed to get done. It was painful, being away from the brothel with the knowledge that other men were fucking Myungjun, treating him like some sort of worthless whore instead of the bright gem that he was.

He had to steel himself, though. Distance was good, he assumed. Distance would ensure Myungjun’s safety.

So he kept a hold on his necklace with one hand and worked diligently with the other.

When the servant stepped into the room, though, Bin’s attention was drawn away from his work. He sighed in exasperation. “Send them on their way. I’m in no mood to be interrupted.”

“I tried, Sir. He’s determined to see you. He started to cry when I tried to make him leave.”

There weren’t too many men who would cry from being shooed away, and Bin looked up in
confusion. “Who is it?”

“He says his name is Minhyuk, and he’s—”

Bin scrambled to his feet, refusing to hear the rest of whatever it was the servant had to say. He pushed past the man and hurried outside his room, into the courtyard. His heart hammered in fear and anticipation, and the hand holding the necklace tightened its grip. Why was Minhyuk here? Why was he crying?

Where was Myungjun?

There was another servant at the door, blocking Minhyuk’s way, but the boy was crying and struggling to get through. When he caught sight of Bin, he gasped, “Bin! Bin, Myungjun needs you!”

“What’s going on?” Bin asked, moving the servant aside. “Minhyuk, what’s wrong with Myungjun?”

Minhyuk appeared to be out of breath. He was panting and sweating and holding onto the doorway to keep himself upright. From the looks of it, he had run all the way from the brothel; quite a lengthy distance, Bin realized, and he felt panicked.

“Th-The necklace was Wangwi’s,” Minhyuk stammered. “And he’s back — he never comes twice in a month. He knows Myungjun stole the necklace. We have to go!”

It had been clear that Myungjun stole the necklace from someone, but Bin had never guessed it would be Wangwi. Of course, he should have realized; Wangwi was one of the only clients Bin had seen who wore such heavy jewelry just to fuck a prostitute.

He swallowed thickly and grabbed Minhyuk’s arm. “Come on,” he said. “I have a horse; that will be faster than running back there.”

As they walked to the stable, Minhyuk continued talking. Fear had obviously taken him over, for his eyes were wide and his voice was on the verge of breaking, trembling. “He told—he told the mistress he wanted Myungjun dressed up, and sh-she asked why he came twice, and he said he just missed Myungjun, and, Bin I stole the necklace, not Myungjun, and I was his client, not Myungjun, a-and this is all my fault! What if he hurts Myungjun? What if I wasn’t fast enough running here? M-Myungjun said he would stall and he would take longer to apply makeup, but I’m not sure how long Wangwi wants to wait, and what is he going to do? ”

Bin listened, but he had no answers. He, too, felt stricken with fear. If Wangwi hurt Myungjun, Bin didn’t know what to do. He would kill Wangwi, of course, but it wouldn’t solve anything. Myungjun would still be hurt — or dead.

He led his horse from the stable and lifted Minhyuk on top first, then climbed up after him. “No time for a saddle,” he muttered, patting the boy’s shoulder in an effort to calm him down. He shook underneath Bin’s touch, but Bin couldn’t comfort him. Not right then. Not when he desperately needed to get to Myungjun. “Just hold on.”

He pushed his horse fast. He forced it into a sprint down the street, not caring that people had to jump out of the way to avoid being hit or trampled. All that rest on his mind was Myungjun’s status. How long had it been since Minhyuk had gone for help? It was such a long distance by foot — did Minhyuk make good time?

So many thoughts plagued him, and he felt sick by the time the brothel was coming into view.
Without bothering to tether his horse, he hopped off and shot a quick, “Stay there,” at Minhyuk before running inside.

The mistress sat there, smoking and counting money as she usually did. When she glanced over at Bin, she sighed. “His client left,” she murmured, “so you can go see him.”

Bin cursed inwardly before racing up the stairs, taking them two at a time. His feet pounded on the wood, likely raising a few heads from downstairs, but he didn’t care.

Myungjun’s door was closed and Bin knocked twice.

No response.

He entered quickly then, and stared at the scene before him.

Myungjun was breathing, at least, and his eyes were opened, but he was gagged and tied up, hands behind his back as they were when Bin had first seen the extent of Wangwi’s treatment. His face was bruised slightly and there was a small cut above his eyebrow, but Bin could not detect anymore external injuries.

Still, the moment Myungjun laid eyes on him, he began to cry.

The cloth stuffed into his mouth and bound in place with a rope around his head made his sobs muffled, but Bin could see his hard exterior crumble down. Tears rolled down his cheeks, streaking his already-ruined makeup, and Bin stepped closer.

He smelled of piss and sweat.

“Christ,” Bin whispered, removing the gag first and foremost. “Darling, are you okay?”

Even with the gag removed, Myungjun didn’t speak. He cried loudly, keeping his head laid down on the floor. His wig was a mess, and so Bin removed that next before working on untying his hands.

He had to bend over Myungjun to reach, and something caught his eye.

Nearby was something wooden, carved in the shape of a penis. It was thick and wide and crude. Blood was splattered all over it and pooled around it and Bin felt the breath leave him.

“Myungjun,” he started, “did...did he fuck you with that?”

Myungjun didn’t answer. Once his hands were untied, he reached out and grasped onto Bin’s pants, sobs coming out breathy and short.

Bin tried to shush him, running fingers through his hair. He was wet with semen and piss, but Bin didn’t care. All he could think of was Wangwi torturing Myungjun in such an awful manner.

All he could think was Myungjun alone in this room, enduring all that Wangwi put him through with no chance of salvation.

He wanted to see the extent of the damage, though, to know what exactly Wangwi had done. He kept one hand on Myungjun’s face, rubbing at his cheek and trying his best to deliver comfort, and he leaned the other hand down to lift up Myungjun’s dirty dress.

He pulled the fabric past his thighs and saw blood.
That was confirmation enough for him that Wangwi had ruptured something inside of Myungjun. He was too rough, too harsh, and poor Myungjun had suffered greatly at his hands.

Bin shook with rage. He wanted to kill Wangwi for a second time. He wanted to bash that man’s head in again, to feel Wangwi’s blood rush over his hands. He wanted to make him pay for what he had done.

But he couldn’t go off and avenge Myungjun yet. The boy was still crying, still sobbing, and Bin needed to get him far away from the brothel.

“I’m going to pick you up,” he murmured, trying to get Myungjun into position without hurting him further. “It’s going to be painful while we move, but I’ll do my best to make it better, okay?”

As expected, Myungjun cried out as Bin scooped him into his arms. The boy gripped onto Bin’s shirt and buried his head into his chest, trying his best to stifle the sobs. Bin kissed the top of his forehead before leaving the room.

He hoped he would never have to return again.

He was careful going downstairs, and when the mistress saw them, her eyes widened.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Your client hurt him,” Bin snapped. “You don’t even fucking check to see what’s going on, and he’s hurt —”

“He’ll be fine. Wangwi is a little rough, but Myungjun’s been through worse. Leave him in his room.”

Bin’s jaw was clenched and he glared over at the woman. “I’m taking him to my place. I’m going to make sure he will be fine, because he isn’t right now. And if you try and stop me, I’ll kill you. I’ll gladly kill you.”

She just stared. She made no move to stop him, and so Bin left, thankful that he wasn’t held back, thankful that he could get home sooner.

He stepped outside and walked briskly over to his horse, where Minhyuk still sat in wait. The younger boy’s eyes widened when he saw Myungjun, and he asked, desperate, “What happened? Bin, wh-what happened to Myungjun?”

Bin could see the guilt in Minhyuk’s eyes, the fear that his actions somehow resulted in this. Bin hesitated as he stepped up to the horse. If he told Minhyuk everything, Minhyuk would likely blame himself.

“I’ll tell you later,” Bin replied, knowing the truth would come out one way or another. He lifted Myungjun up and asked, “Can you grab him? Hold him like that, alright? I’m hopping on behind you.”

Minhyuk was weak, but he managed to keep a strong hold onto Myungjun, wrapping his arms around the older boy and keeping him close. He whispered words of comfort, words of reassurance, but Bin could see his hands trembling and his lips quivering.

His own heart was filled with despair as he took them back to his house. He wondered if Myungjun could ever recover from such a terrible assault. He wondered what would become of Minhyuk should Myungjun pass.
He wondered what should become of him should Myungjun pass.

All he could do for the moment was pray to the gods to spare Myungjun’s life, at least once, like they had never done for him before.

Myungjun’s pain wasn’t subsiding. It remained there throughout the night. He couldn’t get comfortable, he complained, for when he shifted, the pain would shoot up his body like daggers piercing his skin. He cried for hours, until his tears had dried up and his eyes were rimmed-red.

“I didn’t know he would do that,” he whispered once things were still and he finally found the voice to talk. “I thought he-he would scold me, or tell Mistress Choi and kick me out of the brothel. I thought maybe he would hit me. I...I didn’t know he had that with him.”

Bin, working by the dim light of candles, dipped a rag in water and began to wring it out over the basin. “He gagged you so you wouldn’t make noise,” he observed, “so he wouldn’t be caught.”

Myungjun closed his eyes and nodded. Bin placed the dampened rag across his forehead. Myungjun was developing a fever, and Bin was trying his best to calm it down.

Still, he knew the outcome for Myungjun’s life was dim. He knew he didn’t have much chance to save his lover. Myungjun seemed to guess it, too, for he asked, “Will I die, Bin?”

Bin swallowed thickly. “Why do you think that?”

“The pain isn’t getting better. It’s getting worse. It’s spread — my body is on fire, an-and I feel...I feel very sick, too.”

Bin had seen the symptoms while in China. Little girls would have their feet bound in an attempt to make them pretty and desirable. Something would go wrong on occasion, and the girl would suffer in pain for a couple of days before death took her. It was some sort of infection, some sort of poison that leaked into the bloodstream, and there wasn’t much that could stop it from traveling.

That’s what Bin suspected happened to Myungjun. From what he had observed while cleaning Myungjun and changing him out of the filthy dress, Wangwi had managed to pierce something during his assault. Wangwi had poisoned him.

Again.

“You will get better,” Bin assured Myungjun, trying his best to smile. “And then you shall stay here and live with me forever and ever.”

“What about Minhyuk?” Myungjun turned his head, looking over at the far side of the room where Minhyuk slept. Bin had offered to put him in a private room, where he wouldn’t be woken by Bin’s constant movement, but Minhyuk had refused. He wanted to stay by Myungjun’s side, he had declared, no matter what.

Bin nodded his head. “Minhyuk will stay here, too. I won’t let him go back to the brothel.”

“Even when I’m dead, he can stay here, right?” Myungjun asked, voice quiet. He didn’t turn away
from staring at Minhyuk.

Bin closed his eyes briefly, then took a deep breath. His voice trembled as he replied, “I don’t think that’s something we have to worry about. I won’t let you die.”

“What if you can’t stop it?”

Myungjun’s words rang true. He couldn’t stop it. He was never able to, not once, stop Myungjun from dying. No matter how hard he always tried, the gods would steal Myungjun from him regardless of his efforts.

Bin opened his eyes and choked out, “What am I supposed to do, darling? I want you to live, but…”

Myungjun turned his head then to gaze at Bin. He reached out his hand and Bin accepted it. “I’ll do my best to stay alive,” Myungjun whispered. “I love you. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to ever leave you.”

“I… I will do my best, then, to keep you alive,” Bin assured him, and Myungjun smiled.

It was easier said than done, as everything else was, for the sickness overtook Myungjun quickly. The very next day, Myungjun was in more pain. He breathed harshly and sweated and shivered despite the heavy blankets Bin draped over him. Bin rushed to and fro, gathering medicine from his servants and trying whatever he could think of to ease Myungjun’s discomfort.

Minhyuk sat by his side through it all. The boy bit his nails down to the stumps, until they bled, and cried when Myungjun was asleep. Bin found it difficult to offer him any comfort; he, too, was beyond distraught at the way things were going.

On the third night, Myungjun cried and sobbed and wailed. He tried to turn, to curl into Minhyuk’s embrace, but the pain appeared to be too much for him, and he could do nothing but lay on his back and stare up at the ceiling as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Bin realized there was nothing more he could do, except lull Myungjun back to sleep.

Then Myungjun remained asleep.

Minhyuk kept a tight hold on his hand, thumb brushing up and down his wrist to feel for the slowing heartbeat, and Bin sat on his other side, staring at the peace that had finally come over Myungjun’s face as he drifted further and further away.

When Minhyuk removed his hands to frantically feel for a beat on Myungjun’s chest, Bin knew he was gone.

They stood outside the brothel. Minhyuk licked his lips, tense as he stared up at the sign, hands clenched into tight fists. Bin stood just behind him, rubbing his back, and he asked, “Minhyuk, are you certain you want to go through with this?”

Minhyuk took a deep, shuddering breath and nodded his head. “Absolutely. As long as things go
According to plan, we will be fine, and then I’ll never have to see this damn place again.” He glanced up at Bin and asked, “Are you sure?”

Bin felt the knife hidden in his clothing, a weapon with a taste for blood, and he repeated what Minhyuk had said. “Absolutely.”

“Alright.” Minhyuk swallowed thickly. “Come on. I want to get out of here as fast as I can.”

“If you don’t want to be here—”

“I’m doing this for Myungjun,” Minhyuk snapped. “And because Wangwi deserves death.”

His words were strong, especially for a boy who was quiet and had always allowed Myungjun to coddle him. He had grown up far too quickly, shaped and molded by the horrors of the brothel and the anguish of Myungjun’s death.

Still, Bin didn’t think Myungjun would, for one second, scold Minhyuk for devising such a bloodthirsty and deceitful revenge. Myungjun would be proud. He would be touched.

Bin was determined to follow through with Minhyuk’s plan and avenge Myungjun’s death.

They entered the brothel together. Mistress Choi smoked and raised her eyebrows at their appearance, but Minhyuk was quick with excuses. “I’m showing him to the room of another prostitute—”

“You and Myungjun have been absent for a while,” the woman stated. She blew smoke in the air and sighed. “Almost a month now.”

“Myungjun died,” Bin responded. She didn’t appear at all upset or deterred. “I’ve kept Minhyuk with me so he could mourn, and now I’m returning him.”

She sighed and gestured down the hallway. “First door on the right is available,” she mumbled.

Minhyuk grabbed Bin’s hand and tugged him along without exchanging another word with the woman. Once they reached the top of the stairs, he shoved Bin into his own bedroom. “Hide behind the divider,” he whispered, relaying the plan information. “I’ll go down and wait for Wangwi.”

“Be careful,” Bin warned. “If you think he might suspect anything, or if he tries to take you elsewhere, run back here and tell me, okay? Do not put yourself in danger for this, Minhyuk.”

Minhyuk nodded his head. “I won’t,” he murmured, “I just...I’ll make sure he dies one way or another for what he did to Myungjun.”

He left, closing the door behind him, and Bin was alone.

He glanced around the room. He could see the stain on the wooden floor, the blood left behind from Myungjun’s terrible ordeal. The fake, wooden penis was still there, as well as the bindings used to keep Myungjun still and quiet, tossed aside and forgotten. Bin’s lips tightened and he turned from those reminders of the awful experience Myungjun was forced to endure. He had to push the guilt and regret aside. He had to focus on the task at hand.

Time was passing as Bin slowly rifled through Myungjun’s bedroom. He found a few other pieces of jewelry, likely stolen as well, and he pocketed them. Anything that seemed to have once been treasured by Myungjun, Bin wanted to keep. He wanted to hand them off to Minhyuk, as
Myungjun would have wanted, as Myungjun would have requested.

The stash of money, too, was hidden, and Bin stuffed it into his pocket. The coins jingled as he moved, but he didn’t care. He wouldn’t need to stay in secret for too long.

There were footsteps on the stairs. Bin could hear Minhyuk’s quiet, calm voice: “Right this way, Mister Wangwi.”

He ducked behind the divider, obscuring himself from view, and listened.

The door opened again, and Minhyuk stepped inside. The heavier footsteps were Wangwi’s. Bin had to control himself, to stop himself from barging out right then and there. He had to remember the plan, and the plan entailed his silence until Minhyuk made certain that Wangwi would not escape.

The door closed. Wangwi asked, “Why are you not dressed for me?”

“I had only just gotten back from an errand. You understand, right?”

Minhyuk’s voice was shaky. He had none of Myungjun’s suave confidence. He was scared, despite his dedication to this plan, and Bin longed to run out there and save him from acting the part of some demure prostitute.

Not now, he told himself. Not yet.

“It’s no matter,” Wangwi responded. “Now that Myungjun is no longer here, I can have you, instead.”

He was disgusting and despicable. Bin took a chance and peered out from behind the divider.

Wangwi was rubbing a hand down Minhyuk’s side, a lustful expression plastered on his face. He licked his lips; clearly, he had no remorse for the prostitute he had killed a month earlier. Only one thing was on his mind, and Bin gripped onto the divider harshly.

“Right,” Minhyuk said. He moved himself closer to the divider. “I operate in this side of the room, though,” he commented. “I have...my dresses in there. You might like them.”

Bin moved back. He grabbed his knife from his clothes and readied it.

“I like that,” Wangwi said. “You might look even prettier than Myungjun ever could. You will be tighter, too, I’m willing to wager. And—”

He stepped around the divider, and Bin took the chance to lunge at him and bury the knife deep into his neck.

Wangwi gasped and coughed. Blood dribbled from his mouth and his tiny, beady eyes widened in shock when he saw Bin. Bin twisted the knife, trying his best to apply as much pain as he possibly could, and he whispered, “That’s for Myungjun, you son of a bitch.”

Wangwi gave one last noise of exclamation, and Bin let him fall to the ground.

He died quickly, choking on his own blood, and Bin stared down at him with distaste. Once Wangwi stopped twitching, stopped moving, Bin turned to Minhyuk. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Minhyuk nodded. He was biting down harshly on his lip, struggling not to cry, and he blurted out, “Do...do you think Myungjun would be proud?”
Bin smiled softly at him and replied, “He’d cheer you on. He was always a devilish soul. I think...he’d be proud that you stood up for what’s right.”

“I miss him.”

Bin nodded his head, and then Minhyuk broke down in tears.

The revenge was over. They had to face reality now, and Bin realized that reality was bleak and grim.

No amount of revenge could raise Myungjun from the dead.

Chapter End Notes

oof

please follow me on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!!
Chapter 7

Minhyuk didn’t stay with him for too long.

He was nothing like Sanha, who longed for affection and love, who was sweet and innocent until he left. Minhyuk was quiet, yet yearned for freedom. He was haunted by his past, by the sins he had committed and the life he had once led.

The night before his departure, when he was only seventeen, he asked Bin, “Do you think I am a bad person?”

Bin glanced over at the bags Minhyuk had packed; bags filled with the money Myungjun had earned for him, and the clothes Bin had tailored for him. “Why would you ask such a thing?” Bin countered, keeping his eyes averted.

Minhyuk sighed. “I was a child prostitute,” he said. “I’ve allowed my body to become defiled. I...I’ve had sex with men whose names I never knew.”

“That’s not—”

“Then, when I grew too sick and weak to continue, I allowed Myungjun to take over for me.”

Minhyuk hardly talked of Myungjun. The memories had always seemed too painful, and Bin was well aware that Minhyuk had lost his only friend. Bin could never replace Myungjun; Minhyuk wouldn’t let him, anyway.

Bin turned his gaze back onto the young boy, who was struggling to find the right words to say, who was struggling to come to terms with his past. “It was right after Wangwi had sex with me. I couldn’t stop crying. Bin, if I had never cried that day, Myungjun would still be alive. I think...I think of that often.”

He closed his eyes and murmured, “I wish it had been me.”

“Don’t talk like that. Myungjun would hate to hear you—”

“We don’t know what he would want because he’s dead.”

Bin felt frustration rise up within him. He liked it better when Minhyuk didn’t speak about Myungjun. He liked it better when Myungjun could remain in peace, and Minhyuk could remain quiet.
“I think I knew Myungjun better than you,” he fussed.

“You didn’t,” Minhyuk shot back. “Did you know he hated himself for what he did? Did you know some nights he contemplated taking his own life? He only stopped because I was too scared to be alone. If...If I let him do that, then at least he wouldn’t have died like that.”

Bin could see tears welling up in Minhyuk’s eyes, and he chose not to comment on anything the boy was saying. Minhyuk, too, must be frustrated. Minhyuk had gone through such terrible things already in such a short amount of time.

Perhaps the best thing to do for him now would be to keep quiet and let him speak.

“He acted like he was fine with being a prostitute. Especially to you. He told me that he didn’t want you to see him weak, so he acted composed. He accepted it around you. But around me, when we were alone, he cried often. Since...since he had to take on more clients for me, he was always so exhausted. And do you know what it was like to wait around that divider and listen to everything? Most of the men treated him like dirt. They said horrible things, and they would pull his hair and make him cry, or else they would slap him and hit him because they got off on that. He was miserable. And that’s all my fault.”

Bin watched him break down. Minhyuk spoke more than he had for weeks, and his shell had been broken. Inside was a boy who was wronged by the world, and who blamed himself for it all. Inside was a boy who was lost and lonely and confused, and he had never once tried to seek help.

“Minhyuk,” Bin murmured, “it isn’t your fault. None of this is.”

“I didn’t run fast enough,” Minhyuk snapped.

Bin knew what he was referring to. That night of Myungjun’s suffering, that night where Myungjun’s life was ruined forever — Minhyuk had run for him. He was small, though, with short legs and a weak body and he hadn’t been fast enough. Bin recalled seeing the state that Minhyuk had been in, panting and gasping for breath and crying all the while.

“It was a long distance,” Bin said, defending him. “You couldn’t have been expected to make it on time.”

“I should have stolen a mule, or—or a horse,” Minhyuk replied. “I had the chance to. I saw one, and if I stole it, I could’ve gotten to you faster, on time, and maybe we could have saved him.” His chin was quivering. The tears were threatening to fall. “I had never ridden one before, though, and was scared it would throw me off. How horrible is that, Bin? I let my best friend be raped like that just because I’m a fucking coward.”

He was crying now, shoulders shaking with his sobs, with the weight of all the actions he did not take.

Bin could do nothing but stare.

“But none of that would have happened in the first place if I hadn’t stolen the necklace. Or...or if I hadn’t allowed Myungjun to take the fall for it. Or if I hadn’t allowed Myungjun to take Wangwi as his client. If...if just one of those things didn’t happen, then Myungjun would be—”

“He would be fine if he never met me,” Bin responded. Minhyuk glanced up at him in shock, wiping tears from his cheeks, and Bin continued, “He made you steal the necklace in order to give it to me. If he hadn’t wanted that necklace as a gift, he would still be alive.”

Minhyuk sniffed. He rubbed at his cheeks and his nose and said, “It—it isn’t your fault. Myungjun
wouldn’t...he wouldn’t like it if you took the blame.”

“And he would like it even less if you took the blame.” Bin smiled softly at Minhyuk, hopeful that his words would stick and make a point. “Myungjun loved you very much, Minhyuk. He made those choices all on his own, and there were unfortunate consequences. We avenged him, and...and all we can do now is remember him.”

Minhyuk didn’t argue after that. Minhyuk simply cried and hugged Bin for the first time since he had moved into the large house, and then he left the very next day, ready to start a normal life as Myungjun hoped he would do.

Bin was alone once more.

He thought often of Myungjun. He thought of what Minhyuk had told him. He wondered just how miserable Myungjun’s life truly was. He wondered if his happiness was all a facade, put up in order to protect himself.

He wondered if he truly had brought about Myungjun’s demise. Clearly, being around Myungjun caused harm to befall his lover. Yet, even when he tried to keep away, he could not. Moving to China hadn’t helped, and moving back to Korea hadn’t helped. He had hoped that this Myungjun would be different. He had hoped to find the reason behind his immortality and Myungjun’s reincarnation with the prostitute, but it had done nothing. It had only killed a young boy, and ruined another one.

Next time, he swore to himself, he wouldn’t get caught up in Myungjun’s life. Next time, he would do his best to stay away.

He could figure out how to break the curse on his own.

“You’re a fool,” Myungjun snapped at him the moment he took his helmet off. “You’re nothing but a damn fool, Bin, and you’ve embarrassed not only yourself, but me. How dare you run out there like that and break the command I—”

“I was scared you were hurt!” Bin shot back in an effort to defend himself. “Your horse went down and I couldn’t see you. I was trying to protect you, General.”

Myungjun glared at Bin with a fire in his eyes, an anger in his gaze, with enough force to make Bin take a step back. He returned the stare as best he could, but then Myungjun stuck a finger out, pointing it into Bin’s face, and he growled, “On the battlefield, you are a soldier, do you understand? You are my inferior, and I am your superior. You are like everyone else out there, alright? You are a pawn of war, and you will heed every order I give. Do you understand, Moon Bin? Do you need to return to training to have this simple lesson drilled into your thick skull?”

Before they fell in love, Bin would have been terrified to talk back to his general. He would have listened and nodded. He would have responded with nothing but apologies and promises to do better next time. Now, though, he had been intimate with Myungjun. He loved him, inside and out, and felt that a relationship as close as the one they shared deserved mutual respect and understanding.
He swiped at Myungjun’s hand, pushing it away, and replied, “Don’t treat me like I’m just another soldier. I’m not. You know I’m—”

“On the battlefield, you are,” Myungjun stressed. “I thought we had made that clear! You were to do exactly as I ordered. You were to stay in line and hold your ground."

“You fell! Your horse was struck and I lost sight of you! I was worried, General, for what if you had been wounded?"

“That’s my fate, then!”

“I don’t believe in fate,” Bin replied. He crossed his arms over his chest, an act of defiance against his superior, something that truly brought fury to Myungjun’s stare. “I believe that if you fall, you should not just accept it as fate, for I will not. I will come and save you if you will not save yourself.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Who said I wouldn’t save myself? Of course I will try to save myself, Bin, as I did during today’s battle, but if it is my fate to die, then there’s nothing you do can stop it.”

“It’s my fate to stop you from dying, then.”

“I wasn’t dying! I was perfectly fine!”

Bin’s jaw was set. He felt tense, bombarded with insults from the man he loved, with the slow ebbing away of his adrenaline, with the fear that still filled his heart knowing his true love was a target during battle. “I didn’t know you were fine!” he yelled, taking his own helmet off his head. “I couldn’t see you! I feared you were dead, and I know you ordered me to stay with the others, to remain a soldier and let you remain a general, but I couldn’t do it! I didn’t want you dead! I didn’t do it to deliberately disobey you, I did it because I love you and I couldn’t live with myself if I allowed you to fall during battle!”

His words hung in the air. In the small confines of Myungjun’s tent, they lingered and expanded until Bin felt like he was suffocating under Myungjun’s stare and the obvious lack of submission he was giving to a superior officer.

He expected Myungjun to hit him, as he did with many of the other unruly soldiers. He expected Myungjun to punish him, as he had before. Instead, Myungjun’s body relaxed and his face softened.

“I appreciate your concern, Bin, I really do, but when you break the line like that, it can cause massive repercussions for the rest of the soldiers. Do you understand?”

Myungjun’s concern was logical. His worries were grounded in reality. Bin took a deep breath and nodded his head, deciding to remain as calm as Myungjun was being now. “Yes,” he mumbled.

“And when you rush towards me like that, people might start to catch onto the fact that we’re in a relationship. We’re not supposed to show that sort of consideration to each other in public, correct?”

“Right,” Bin agreed, averting his eyes.

“I appreciate you caring for me, I really do, but it’s...it will become a burden if we are found out. And you know I will stay with you regardless of whatever action is taken against us, but, really, Bin, I’d like to continue working as a general, and I’d like you to continue as a soldier, and I’d like
Bin sighed. He nodded his head. “Right,” he repeated.

Myungjun stepped closer to him, until they were but a foot or two apart, and then he smiled. “I’m safe. I’m fine. I did not get hurt, Bin, see. No cuts. Nothing on me.”

“I know that now,” Bin said. He reached forward and cupped the palm of his hand around Myungjun’s cheek. His thumb brushed over soft skin, and he closed the small gap between them, embracing Myungjun close. The general’s body armor dug uncomfortably into Bin’s chest, and they were both sweaty and dirty, but Bin didn’t care. He liked the proximity. He liked it now, especially, for it reminded him that Myungjun was alive.

“I’m sorry, darling, for causing trouble. I can’t help myself from worrying.”

“On the battlefield, at least, push it aside. I’m a general, and if I die in battle, it’s part of life. It’s part of the life I’ve made for myself as a general.” Myungjun stood on his toes and planted a kiss onto Bin’s lips, then murmured against them, “But I fear death even more now since I’ve met you. I can’t leave my Bin all alone here. So I made the promise that I would never die, alright?”

“Well, everyone must die. You can’t stay alive forever.”

“Don’t be cheeky. You know what I meant.” Myungjun kissed him again and then wrapped his arms around Bin’s waist, holding him tightly. “I love you, and I promise I will not die.”

Bin felt relief wash over him. He was no longer being scolded, and Myungjun seemed to understand all of his fears and concerns. He kissed the top of Myungjun’s head and whispered, “I’m going to ensure you do not.”

He would never let Myungjun die while he was still alive.

1950

Superstition was dumb.

Bin didn’t believe in bad luck or karma befalling him. Even if, he decided, he was doing something that could be considered sinful and terrible, he wasn’t going to be punished anymore than he already was. What else could the gods do? They killed Myungjun and kept him alive forever, and that was the worst fate that he could ever be stuck with.

“Try your worst,” he mumbled to the gods as he rifled through the clothes of the dead woman before him. He moved her arms aside, feeling through her clothes, searching for food and provisions. She had bread, fortunately, which he tucked into his backpack, and a small jug of milk, likely for the dead baby that lay on its side beside her.

Once done, he sighed and stood back up, glancing around at the desolate landscape that stretched before him.

Most of the houses in the area were in ruin. Bin was certain it was from one of the many airstrikes. Some of the houses still burned with dwindling fires; others were completely demolished, only wood and shingles left where a structure once stood.
He stepped over the woman’s body and continued further into town, hopeful he could find water elsewhere.

War had changed drastically since he was a soldier. Gone were the days of swords and spears, of arrows and crossbows. Now all of the soldiers carried rifles and handguns, and great, big planes flew overhead to drop bombs on their enemies. Bin had thought, with the introduction of such modern equipment, that wars would be much quicker than they were before. Instead, they seemed to drag on for lengthy periods of time.

He saw the body of a dead caucasian soldier. From the uniform style, Bin deduced he must be American, and he rushed to the body with joy. American soldiers typically carried more provisions on their bodies. They had the backing of the United Nations, the backing of the great American nation, and so they were not likely to go as hungry as the Koreans were.

He found a tin can of water, which he stole with glee, and several pictures of a blonde woman, which he tossed aside with indifference. There was a gun, too, but Bin already had the same model and make. He pocketed the bullets, in any case, figuring those might come in handy one day. He had already shot a few men before, and he would not hesitate to do so again.

Once he had pillaged all he could off the disfigured man, he shoved him aside and continued to walk.

He spotted a house in the village, one that remained intact, somehow able to survive all of the bombings. It looked like a nice house; whoever lived there must have had some sort of wealth, and so he hurried along, desperate to find more goods to help him keep healthy during such a period of war.

Starvation was a hard death, probably, but it was even worse for one who was immortal. Bin didn’t mind it when he was blown up by an airstrike where he sat in his house. He had been out quickly, and his body healed a few days later. He had been shot once, too, by a Chinese soldier, and while it was painful, nothing could compare to starvation.

With starvation, his body slowly ate away at itself. He grew weak and frail, and yet he could not die. He simply wasted away, trembling and wailing and struggling to breathe, until food was granted to him.

But that had been a long time ago, when he was desperate to try anything to end his immortality. Now that he knew he could not even starve to death, he must keep himself fit and well-fed. He wouldn’t become a waste of a man. He wouldn’t cause that sort of pain to his body.

He drew close to the house and noticed that the door was opened. He wondered if someone else had gotten the same idea as him, or if whoever lived here before had simply left in a hurry. Regardless, he drew his gun as he slowly entered the house.

It was silent, just as it was out on the streets. The house looked untouched; decorations were scattered about, and beds were made and neatly pushed off to one side. Bin listened, and when he heard nothing, he made his way deeper into the house, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious.

He rounded the corner into the kitchen.

Several clay pots were stacked onto a counter. One was opened and emitted the strong smell of kimchi. Bin’s stomach grumbled and he hurried forward, muttering, “Oh, god, yes, you left kimchi behind for me!”
However, the moment he reached the delicious food, he heard the unmistakable sound of a gun cocking. He froze, holding his breath, and glanced over his shoulder.

It was Myungjun.

He was older than the prostitute, but clearly not by much. His cheeks were round and his eyes were wide and his finger, poised on the trigger, shook along with the rest of his hand.

“Don’t move,” he snapped.

Bin couldn’t move even if he wanted to. He was shocked with this sudden appearance, and a bit confused. Why was Myungjun here? Why was Myungjun alone in this house, in this ruined town? Why was he pointing a gun?

Bin’s gaze went down and he noticed the uniform.

He was a soldier.

Bin slowly began to turn, but Myungjun stopped him by yelling, “I said don’t move!”

“Sorry,” Bin apologized. He glanced down at his own clothes and realized the trouble. “I, um, I stole these clothes off of a dead man, Myungjun. I’m not really part of the army. See, look, my nametag isn’t—”

“You know my name?” Myungjun asked. He took a step back, stumbling slightly, and snapped, “How the fuck do you know my name? Are you a superior in the army? You can’t take me back! I’ll fucking kill you if you try!”

“A...what?” Bin blinked, trying to make sense of everything. He stared up at Myungjun, at his fearful face and his shaking hands.

A soldier from the army shouldn’t be here, he realized. The Korean soldiers were supposed to have moved out of this area, to defend the southern areas as the Korean People’s Army kept pushing their limits. Myungjun was clearly fighting for the Republic, and a soldier for the Republic shouldn’t be alone in enemy territory.

Bin figured it out relatively fast. “You deserted,” he commented. “You’re running from the—”

Myungjun fired his weapon. Bin heard the shot, the loud blast, and realized the bullet had entered right through his head. He felt the quick searing of pain before his body tumbled over, into the counter, like a limp ragdoll.

After the initial hit, he realized he couldn’t feel much of anything. Even as he collapsed onto the ground and blood began to pool around his head, he couldn’t feel.

He could still see, though. He could still breathe and hear and he could listen to Myungjun panic.

“Oh, fuck,” Myungjun whispered, “Fuck, fuck, fuck—”

There was a clicking sound, and Bin wondered what Myungjun was doing. He wanted to pick his head up, to look and see, but he couldn’t move. All he could do was stare at the floor laying right before him, at the blood surrounding him, and hope that his body would heal fast. If Myungjun left now, while he was incapable of movement, it would be hard to find him again.

Myungjun’s boots came into view, standing right near Bin’s body. Bin couldn’t look up, but he
could still hear him, at least, through the pounding of his heart as it tried to rush blood back to his head.

“Fuck,” Myungjun whispered again. “Oh, god, I killed him. Fuck, and there’s fucking blood — oh, god, I’m going to get bad karma for this. Shit, there’s too much blood, oh my god.”

Bin wanted to reach out, to grab hold of Myungjun, to never let him go again, but no matter how much he tried to tell his arms to move, he could not. He was stuck there, bleeding out, watching the love of his life panic.

Myungjun, however, seemed to notice Bin was still alive. He gasped and squatted, his face coming into Bin’s view finally. He was smoking a cigarette — and holding a lighter, which explained the clicking noise — and his eyes were wide with alarm. “You’re alive!” he exclaimed. “Are you alive? Can you nod? You look like you’re alive. You’re breathing.”

Bin couldn’t nod, but he could stare at Myungjun and continue to breathe.

Myungjun ran his fingers through short hair. He seemed lost and confused. “How the fuck are you still alive? Your fucking brain matter is on the wall!”

That explained why he couldn’t move. A gunshot wound that close surely messed with several parts of his brain. It might take a while for his body to heal and grow everything back as it was before.

Myungjun took a long drag of his cigarette as he stared down at Bin. Bin could see his mind turning, trying to come up with a solution, and he finally asked, “Can you blink?”

Bin couldn’t blink on command, he realized. Myungjun tried several times to get him to blink by asking questions; Bin only blinked once with those five questions, in the middle of Myungjun speaking, and Myungjun muttered, “So it’s an involuntary movement, then, right?”

Bin couldn’t answer.

Myungjun decided, after a few minutes of pondering, to sit him upright. As he did so, blood spilled onto his hands, and he had to turn away twice to vomit nearby. Each time, Bin fell back down into the pile of blood and filth his wound had created, and Myungjun had to start all over again.

Finally, though, Bin was situated upright against the counter space. His head lolled onto his shoulder, unable to keep it straight, and he was able to stare at Myungjun fully now.

Myungjun, who looked ill and had somehow kept his cigarette despite his puking. Myungjun, who was a deserter in the army and looked hot in uniform. Myungjun, who thought him to be an enemy of sorts but still stayed by his side.

He was perfect, and Bin longed to tell him that. If only he didn’t have a bullet in the brain.

Myungjun’s hands were filthy. Bin could see blood all over them. Myungjun tried to wipe them off on some pretty towel hanging in the kitchen, but he couldn’t rid himself of all of it. He finally seemed to give in, to accept that he needed a good washing, and he worked instead on wiping up the blood that was all over the kitchen floor.

For a soldier trying to desert and still stay alive, Myungjun seemed rather worried to leave the house a wreck. He muttered as he cleaned and worked, lamenting over the pathetic state of his life, worrying about family members and friends, and fussing often at Bin for coming inside the house.
“I was trying to get supplies,” he snapped. His cigarette was dwindling, but he still smoked on what was left. “And you had to fucking walk in. Were you looking for me? Are you a soldier with the Republic of Korea? That’s what your uniform looks like. But you said...you stole it, right? God, I wish you could talk. I should just leave you. That’s what any other soldier would do, right? They’d leave someone they shot, someone who obviously has no chance of survival.” Myungjun glared at Bin and blew smoke right in his face. Bin wished he could cough. “I’m too fucking nice, aren’t I? I’ll just stick with you until you die. How the hell are you not dead, though? How the hell are you still alive? I’ve seen men die from less. God, even if you do survive, you’ll be an invalid, won’t you? I’m going to leave you here after a few days, alright? I don’t care if you starve to death. I have to find my own family. If you aren’t better in a few days, you’re shit out of luck, you hear me? And you can’t even blame me!”

Bin would never blame Myungjun for anything, but he couldn’t say that. All he could do was sit and stare.

The time passed very slowly. Myungjun carried a little Bible in his pocket, which he read to Bin in between smoking a pack of cigarettes. Bin, having heard all the stories before, only cared for Myungjun’s voice, and Myungjun’s commentary at many parts.

“...” Myungjun interrupted himself with a yawn, then tapped the Bible and continued his sentence, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me. Myungjun groaned and closed his Bible. “Enough for today,” he said. “We got through a lot of chapters. The story continues, you know. I mean, we’ve already read Jesus dying a few times, but I think we got one more time to read about. I don’t know. I’ve only read this once. Do you believe it? I do. Sort of. I believe that there’s multiple gods, though, and this guy is just one of them. He seems like a nice one.” Myungjun settled down, slumping over on the wall, and glared at Bin. “I’m not shooting you again because I’m also nice. If you suddenly get up in the middle of the night like that lame guy Jesus healed, don’t you dare fucking shoot me. Remember my kindness, got it?” He ground out his last cigarette and then mumbled, “Sleep well, keep hold of your immortality. I might have to use you as a shield.”

Bin watched him doze off. Through the little light that was available in the kitchen, Bin could stare at Myungjun, memorize his face for the seventh time, and fall in love all over again.

He stared and stared until he felt too tired to keep his own eyes open for much longer.
Voluntarily, he closed his eyes.

Voluntarily, he smiled to himself.

He was healing fast, and soon he would be able to walk and talk. He could hold Myungjun close, he could kiss those sweet lips, and he could whisper his declarations of love as often as possible.

Still, as he fell asleep, one thing was bothering him, and it remained in the subconscious of his brain, the part of his brain still left that still worked.

*Who did sin that he was born blind?*

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Myungjun fed him breakfast the next morning.

It wasn’t something he had to do. In fact, it wasn’t something that Bin expected him to do. Myungjun had seemed desperate to keep things to himself, and yet he ate a bit of the kimchi that had been left out, then held a piece up and asked, “Are you hungry?”

Bin blinked, his only method of communication, and Myungjun narrowed his eyes. “Was that a voluntary or involuntary blink?”

Bin blinked again.

“Okay.” Myungjun squat down beside him and waved the kimchi in Bin’s face. “Would you like this kimchi? Blink twice for yes.”

Bin blinked twice.

Myungjun looked rather impressed. “I’m still confused as to how the hell you managed to survive,” he commented, pressing the kimchi up against Bin’s lips. Bin opened his mouth slightly to accept it, and Myungjun pushed the food in.

“Ew,” Myungjun mumbled as Bin chewed on the cabbage. “You licked my finger. Did it taste like blood? It’s all your blood, you creep. God, this is my life now, isn’t it? I’m stuck feeding some immortal fucker. This wasn’t my plan for today, you know. I was going to leave this town and keep going up north. Now I’m stuck caring for your useless ass.”

Despite his complaints, he passed more kimchi to Bin’s lips. “Here,” he murmured. “Does it taste good? Blink once for yes.”

Bin blinked for him, then continued to chew.

“Hopefully the fact that you can eat is a good sign that you’re healing. You *are* healing, right? Blink twice for yes.”

Bin blinked twice. Myungjun fed him again.

“Are you truly immortal, though? Blink...blink five times if you are.”
Bin took his time with blinking. He was slow and deliberate, making certain that Myungjun counted every single movement, that Myungjun understood it was no lie.

After the fifth blink, he stared at his eternal lover, who took a deep breath and then reached into his pocket for his cigarettes. “That’s insane,” he murmured. “That’s...I wouldn’t believe you, except half your skull did get blown away, and...it looks a bit better today. It’s still caved in. I can still see all the icky shit hanging out.” He stuck a cigarette in his mouth and then lit it. “You can be useful to me once you’re better, though. Want some more kimchi? Blink twice for yes.”

So Myungjun continued to feed him, and Myungjun continued to talk. “You said you weren’t a soldier? Is that true? Did you really just steal that? Blink once for yes.”

Bin blinked.

“Damn. I mean, it’s good cover, unless you’re spotted by a soldier from the other side — then again, all of the soldiers are just killing civilians, anyway, so I guess it won’t matter what clothes you wear. This village was ruined in an airstrike. That’s the Americans’ doing. They’re supposed to be on our side, and I guess they are, but then they ruin places where innocent people live. Here’s some more kimchi.”

Bin awaited the food, awaited the gentle touches Myungjun gave him, and listened.

“I left the army because I don’t want to kill anyone. To be honest, you’re my first kill. You didn’t even die, and you’re the first man I shot.” Myungjun sat back against the wall, next to Bin, and sighed, glancing down at his pot of kimchi. “I went into the army because it seemed like a good idea at the time. They made it seem wonderful. You can protect your family, they said. It’s bullshit, honestly, because now my family is stuck somewhere up north. Maybe they’ve tried to run down here. Maybe they’re trying to get into Republic-occupied territory. I don’t know where they are. All I know is that I didn’t want to kill anyone, and I couldn’t protect my family when I’m so far away from them.” He fed Bin again. “So I’m going home. I left a few nights ago, and I’ve just been traveling up north ever since.”

Bin stared at the man before him. He wished he could talk. He tried moving his mouth, sounding out the words, but no coherent sentences came. He could only give a low mumble, and Myungjun wrinkled his nose with distaste. “Don’t do that,” the young soldier said. “You sounded like a dying dog. Are you trying to talk? Blink once for yes.”

Bin blinked, though he inwardly cursed his inability to speak.

He had so many questions to ask. How old are you? was his first, but that would be followed with, Can I stay with you? and Can you help break this curse? and Are you single?

Myungjun, though, was the only one whose voice still worked properly, and, as such, was the only one who could ask questions. “Once you’re all healed, do you mind coming with me to find my family? I mean, as long as you don’t have anything better to do. I can really use you. Like, you can be a shield for me, and for my family once we find them. That way, none of them will die. You might die, but you’re immortal so you’ll just come back to life. I’ll keep caring for you like this, too.”

Bin blinked once. Myungjun stared at him, brows drawing together in confusion, and he asked, “Would you really be fine getting shot for me? Blink twice for yes.”

Bin blinked twice.
“Why?” Myungjun asked. He stuck his hands in the pot of kimchi but didn’t grab anything out of it. “You’re immortal, yet you would willingly allow yourself to be reduced to this for me? It...doesn’t make any sense. Do we know each other? Do I know you?”

Bin managed to screw his nose up, as Myungjun had just a minute or two before, and Myungjun laughed. “Is that a maybe? You look confused. Blink, um... blink once if we’ve met before.”

Bin blinked.

Myungjun removed his hands from the kimchi pot. He had a few pieces in his grasp, which he stuffed into his own mouth ravenously. “I don’t remember meeting you,” he said. “Was I a kid when I met you? Blink once for yes. Twice for no.”

Bin blinked three times; yes and no.

“Don’t do that,” Myungjun fussed. “Don’t make this all confusing. I either met you as a child or I didn’t. Yes or no?”

Again, Bin blinked three times.

In frustration, Myungjun groaned and then pushed some kimchi up against Bin’s lips. Bin accepted the food, though before Myungjun could draw his hand away, Bin placed a light kiss up against the fingers.

Myungjun jerked back, eyes wide with shock, and while Bin chewed, he simply offered Myungjun a small smile.

“Did... you just kiss me?” he asked. “Once for yes, twice for—”

Bin blinked once.

Myungjun stared at him. He opened his mouth and closed it a few times, as if trying to think of something to say, then asked, “Why?”

Bin wished he could answer. Bin wished he could shower Myungjun with all of the love in the world. He wished he could explain what they used to mean to each other. Since Myungjun was aware of his immortality, Bin wished he could talk about General Kim and how much they had loved each other, how much Myungjun had loved him in his previous lives.

All he could do, though, was purse his lips and close his eyes.

“Don’t go to sleep. You need to tell me why you just fucking kissed my fingers! That’s so weird — you’re a homosexual, aren’t you? Blink once for yes and twice for no.”

Bin decided a little bit of mystery and intrigue wouldn’t be bad for Myungjun, so he kept still, kept his eyes closed, and Myungjun grumbled in defeat.

“Be like that. Fine. Once you talk, though, you’d better fucking tell me, or I’ll shoot the other side of your brain out and then leave you behind, got it?”

Bin smiled, which seemed to frustrate Myungjun all the more.

“Jesus would hate you. He probably does.” Bin heard the lighter go off; Myungjun was smoking another cigarette. “He has a whole book in his Bible about how much he fucking hates you. I hate you, too, you asshole.”
Bin didn’t care if Myungjun declared his hate forevermore. As long as he could hear that melodic
voice, he was satisfied.

Myungjun’s lips against his were ravenous. He was a man starved for affection and love,
something only Bin had to offer, and Myungjun took it all like he would never get a chance to eat
again. The ferocity of his kisses were almost too much to handle. Bin was pushed against a wall
and he lost his breath momentarily.

As if sensing he needed a chance to gulp in air, Myungjun’s lips parted from Bin’s, but he didn’t
move away. Instead, his mouth latched onto Bin’s neck, and he sucked and bit and nibbled.

Bin was certain that it would soon look as if he was mauled by a wild animal.

It was not far from the truth.

“Darling,” he moaned out, stretching his neck in order to grant Myungjun better access to his
skin. “Keep—keep going. Gods, don’t stop, please, do not stop.”

Myungjun, fueled by the positive response he had received, continued his descent down. He tugged
at Bin’s clothes and whispered, breathlessly, “I want these off.”

Bin shed easily of his overcoat. It had already been loosened from Myungjun’s aggressive kissing,
and it was an easy matter to let it drop to the floor. His shirt, however, took a little more
struggling. His fingers kept shaking and his hands kept trembling, and it was difficult to remove
himself of the shirt.

Myungjun seemed to notice his fear and anxiety, and he folded his hands over Bin’s. “What’s
wrong?” he whispered, concern replacing the look in his eyes where lust had been before.

“You’ve...slept with men before, correct?” Bin asked, averting his gaze.

Myungjun nodded. “Yes. A few, perhaps. I’ve forgotten how many.”

“Oh.” Bin cleared his throat. He wanted to lay out his worries. He wanted to express his fears.
Yet, all that came out of his mouth was, “I thought you were religious. Are Buddhists allowed to
sleep with multiple people?”

Myungjun smirked and lightly hit Bin’s chest. His hand lingered, however, rubbing at the muscle
underneath the shirt, and he mumbled, “I told you, I am definitely religious but I see nothing
wrong with...with indulging myself from time to time. At a later date, perhaps, I will rid myself of
temptation, but for the time being, I love you and wish to ignore the rules and regulations.” He
moved his hand over to Bin’s arm and squeezed his bicep. “Is that all, Bin? Were you just curious
about my religion?”

Bin swallowed thickly. He ducked his head and asked, “Will you laugh, as I am inexperienced?”

“Oh, come off it. You’ve slept with women before.”

“But...the anatomy is completely different.”
“You’re thrusting into a body part. If you close your eyes, I promise that it will feel like a woman, except even better.” Myungjun stood on his toes and planted a soft kiss to Bin’s cheek. “Would you feel more comfortable if I took my clothes off first?”

He longed to see Myungjun naked in a sensual light. He longed to experience that desire by looking at a bare body. So, he nodded his head, a bit eagerly, and asked, “Please?”

Myungjun was so confident. He didn’t appear at all perturbed by their actions as he removed his coat and shirt. When he slid his pants down, Bin watched hungrily.

“How do I look?” Myungjun asked, suave and composed. Bin couldn’t respond, but Myungjun didn’t seem to mind. “You can touch me, Bin.”

He grabbed onto Bin’s hand and planted it on his chest. Myungjun was toned, muscle hidden under the prospect of a lithe, slender body, but looking at him now, Bin could see just how often he worked. He was tough, with a few scars from war scattered here and there. His chest contained a few freckles, too, likely from extended time exposed in the sun, and some parts of him were more tanned than other parts.

Even his imperfections were perfect to Bin.

Myungjun made Bin’s hand trail downwards, brushing against the line of hair on his lower stomach. Bin licked his lips, and then moved his hand on his own accord. He stroked Myungjun’s cock, and he felt his lover tense under his touch.

“Handsome,” Bin whispered, and Myungjun shuddered from his words. “So, so handsome. So perfect. I love you. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Myungjun replied in a gasp. He rolled his hips into Bin’s hand and then tugged once more at Bin’s shirt. “Off,” he requested. “Please. I want to feel you, as you feel me.”

Their clothes scattered the floor. There would be laundry to do in the morning, things to clean, but in the secrecy of Bin’s tiny hut, they didn’t seem to care. Nothing existed save for the two of them. The room was filled with their kissing and moaning, with the wet, sloppy sounds that accompanied love-making. Skin slapped against skin, so animalistic and yet somehow so euphoric.

Myungjun claimed the easiest position was on all fours. He had braced himself against Bin’s dirt floor, had said, “Use your fingers first, Bin. Stretch me out as much as you can.”

While Bin certainly liked the view of Myungjun’s ass, he realized he did not want his first time to have such a view. He pulled and tugged at Myungjun’s shoulders, whining at him to sit up.

“Face me,” he begged. “Please. Even if it’s not as easy, please allow me to watch your face the entire time.”

He had never had sex with a man before. He had never had sex with General Kim before. He wanted to see all of Myungjun’s expressions. He wanted to see what Myungjun liked and what he disliked. He wanted to see how Myungjun moaned, how he reacted to sex, and how the words I love you could easily fall from his lips.

Myungjun didn’t seem at all frustrated with the request. Instead, he smiled, and maneuvered himself into the position Bin requested. “Romantic,” he whispered. “You truly are the more romantic of the two of us. I’m so happy with you, Bin. I don’t think...I don’t think I could ever love anyone else so much.” He placed his hands on Bin’s shoulders as he was lowered onto the sheets. Bin made sure that his pillow was placed underneath Myungjun’s head for some support, and
before he did anything else, he asked, “Is this alright, darling?”

“Perfect,” Myungjun whispered. “Do you have the oil I gave you?”

Bin nodded his head, reaching for the small bottle Myungjun had placed aside. “Here,” he murmured, showing it off.

“Right. Okay, so pour some on your fingers and then press one finger at a time into me. Slowly, okay? I’ll let you know if it hurts.”

He followed Myungjun’s instructions without argument. He wanted Myungjun to feel good; and, sure enough, with the addition of the third finger, he could already see sweat forming on Myungjun’s forehead. The older man squeezed his eyes shut tightly and gripped at Bin’s sheets. “Higher,” he whispered, “push your fingers higher. Push them to the — oh, gods, right there, Bin! Right there! Push harder — fuck, yes, that’s—” He cried out, loudly, and lifted his lips, thrusting into Bin’s fingers.

Bin was mesmerized. Here he was, bringing the great General Kim to this state. He felt powerful. He felt confident. He felt so in love.

“Push your cock in me,” Myungjun gasped. “Please, push it in now, I want you to fill me up, please.”

Bin’s cock was throbbing. He was erect and precome was leaking from his tip, and so he decided to obey Myungjun’s wishes.

“Hold still, then,” he murmured.

He woke with a start. It took him a few seconds to catch his breath and to remember where he was. In front of him was Myungjun, leaned up against the wall and sleeping. He looked uncomfortable, with his body slumped over and his head lolled over on his shoulder. His mouth was partially open and he breathed softly, the only noise in the midst of the otherwise silent landscape.

Bin sighed and smacked his lips together. He could feel again, which wasn’t ideal. His head was pounding and his body was sore and his pants were wet.

Wet?

He glanced down at his trousers. Just barely visible was a small wet patch.

“Fuck,” he whispered. He hadn’t had a wet dream in a few months; figures he would have one when he was partially paralyzed and stuck in a tiny kitchen with Myungjun as his only company.

Figures, too, that he would have a wet dream about his only company.

“Fuck,” he muttered again.
At least he could talk.

He tried to move his body and found himself unable to. It was unfair; he had to deal with the pain, yet he couldn’t even move.

He coughed, then groaned in frustration. “Myungjun?” he called out. “Myungjun, wake up.”

Myungjun yawned. He stretched his neck, eyes still closed, and mumbled, “What is it?”

Before Bin could respond to that question, Myungjun’s eyes suddenly flew open and he stared at Bin. “Holy...you spoke, didn’t you? Didn’t you speak just now?”

“I did. My voice is back. Thank god.” Bin tried to move, but found himself still stuck in his position. “Can’t fucking move, though. My life is miserable.”

Myungjun, looking very much amazed, scrambled closer to Bin, minding the dried blood on the floor. He gazed at the afflicted spot, the wound in Bin’s head, and commented, “It looks even better than before. It’s...healing really fast, you know. Now it looks like a clean gunshot wound, not like a surgery.” He grabbed a cigarette. “Sorry for, you know, shooting you in the first place. Wasn’t my proudest moment.”

Bin watched Myungjun smoke, then he asked, “Do you always smoke first thing in the morning?”

“Calms my nerves,” was Myungjun’s quick response. “But do you always kiss the fingers of your caretaker as they feed you kimchi?”

“Yes.” Bin could be just as quick to respond. “It’s my kink. I love fingers and kimchi and sex.”

Myungjun narrowed his eyes. “So you must be homosexual, right? You are gay, aren’t you?”

“I am. Unapologetically so. I have fucked many men, and I will likely fuck many more.” And, now that he could talk, he could finally ask the important question. “Myungjun, are you single?”

Myungjun scoffed. “Really? That’s what you’re worried about right now? You just gained the ability to talk, and you want to fuck me?”

“I don’t want to fuck you,” Bin responded. “Unless you want to. But I don’t. Not right now. I want to...I want to love you again.”

“Again?” Myungjun clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, then settled down beside Bin. “You need to tell me everything. You...you know my name, which was already weird, but then you reveal you’re immortal, which I’m inclined to believe because your brain matter is still on the wall, yet you’re obviously healing. Now you’re saying you want to love me again, and yesterday you said that you would gladly become my immortal shield, and...are you an angel? Are you like my guardian angel?”

“I would suck as a guardian angel,” Bin replied. “But we have met before in the past. You wouldn’t remember it. It’s been a few times.”

“A few times?” Myungjun cocked his head, curious. “Am I a reincarnation of someone you know?”

“You don’t sound...shocked,” Bin noted. “Were you expecting this?”

“I think reincarnation is true!”
“But you said you think Jesus was real. I don’t think the Bible has anything about reincarnation.”

“Don’t get into the logistics of all this shit,” Myungjun snapped. “I believe in all different types of stuff. Perhaps this Jesus guy is real, but that doesn’t mean reincarnation is fake. I mean...you’re immortal, and I’m pretty sure no one else except Jesus was immortal, which means already the Bible must be sort of wrong on a few details.” Myungjun waved a hand, as if disregarding his religious beliefs, then asked, “So, who am I a reincarnation of?”

Bin smiled. He thought of Myungjun’s past, of all the people he once shared a name and face with, and he murmured, “You are a reincarnation of you.”

“What?”

“You’ve always been Myungjun. From the time I met you as General Kim, you...you were Myungjun.”

“I was a general?”

“In the Silla Kingdom, yes.” Bin glanced over at Myungjun as much as he could without actually trying to move his head, and then he said, “It’s a long story. Do you mind listening?”

“Only if you tell me your name first.”

“It’s Bin. Moon Bin. And as you’ve always been Myungjun, I’ve remained as Bin.”

He told the story. He thought it might be long and boring. Myungjun, though, was interested all the way through. He listened to the description of General Kim, of his long, pretty hair and his scars and his cocky demeanor. He heard of his death and frowned, but smiled again when he learned he was once a prince.

And so Bin talked of all of the Myungjun reincarnations he had known before. He remembered the cute, orphaned boy who followed him everywhere, the scholar who dismissed his romantic interest, the slave who shied from sex, and the prostitute who stole money from his clients.

It was midday by the time he finished going over the basic information, and Myungjun scoffed at all the stories he heard. “I couldn’t imagine being a prostitute. How awful must it have been for that kid to have his balls fondled by old guys? Ew.”

“He wasn’t much younger than you are,” Bin pointed out, “yet I’m sure he was wise to the ways of the world.”

“And I’m not?” Myungjun was on his third cigarette. He had offered one to Bin who just rolled his eyes and refused. “I’m nineteen years old and I’ve shot a man’s brains out.”

“Congratulations.”

“Don’t be a smartass.” Myungjun took a drag of his cigarette, then asked, “Why are you immortal, though?”

Sanha had been unable to figure out the meaning behind the curse. Bin, having been alive for over a thousand years, had also been unsuccessful. Perhaps a new mind, a new perspective, a new Myungjun, could suggest some sort of reason.

“I think...I think I was cursed,” Bin stated. He thought of telling Myungjun of General Kim’s final weeks, of the change in personality and attitude. He thought of asking if something might have
happened at the capital.

In doing so, though, he would be pitting one Myungjun against another. Perhaps General Kim had cursed him; he didn’t want to hear Myungjun suggesting such, though. Listening to Sanha was bad enough, but if the love of his life implicated his past self in some sort of cursing scheme, Bin would feel lost and confused. Who ought he believe in that situation? Should he really accept that General Kim did something to curse him? Should he allow this Myungjun to talk badly of the man he loved?

Instead, he said nothing of General Kim’s possible involvement. He swallowed nervously and then muttered, “But I have no idea what could have caused it.”

“Did you piss someone off?” Myungjun questioned. “Did you meet a witch and piss her off?”

“I don’t think I did. Besides, this isn’t a fairytale, Myungjun.” He closed his eyes and thought of something that could have caused the curse; something that did not involve Myungjun. “Perhaps the gods are punishing me for living while General Kim died.”

Myungjun snorted. “You didn’t live. I blew your brains out. I doubt you remained unscathed for a thousand years, anyway. Surely you must have been killed at other points.”

He wasn’t wrong. Shortly after General Kim had fallen, Bin was brought down. He hadn’t wanted to live a second more without General Kim, and he had fully expected to die right then and there.

It wasn’t that. It was something that happened at the capital. All Bin could think of was General Kim cursing him.

But how? And, more importantly, why? General Kim would have no reason to ever do such a thing. They had been in love and their relationship had no flaws. Why would General Kim place a curse on him?

“You’re thinking,” Myungjun commented.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been noticing that you get a stupid expression on your face while you’re thinking.” Myungjun blew smoke into Bin’s general direction and grinned. “Which is different from your usual stupid expression.”

“Stop blowing smoke in my face,” Bin fussed. When Myungjun giggled, he just sighed, then asked, “You haven’t told me if you’re single or not yet. I need to know what my chance is for being able to kiss you later, when you put that cigarette down.”

“Firstly, I’m not wasting this cigarette,” Myungjun said, waving the tobacco in Bin’s face. “Secondly, I’m not going to kiss someone as ugly as you, especially not when your skull is still caved in. Third, I’m—”

He paused. Bin was about to ask why he went silent just as he had been about to answer the most important question, but then he heard movement.

The front door had opened and someone was walking in the house.

Myungjun looked terrified. His eyes were wide and he grasped onto Bin’s arm. His fingers shook. “What do we do?” he mouthed.
Bin had to push aside all thoughts of General Kim and curses and Myungjun’s romantic life. He had to make sure Myungjun remained safe. He had to make sure Myungjun didn’t die.

“The gun,” he whispered. “Grab your gun.”

Myungjun did as he was told. He couldn’t stop trembling. He gripped tightly onto his gun and took a deep breath before asking, “Do I shoot them?”

“Is your gun loaded?”

“I still have some bullets—”

The footsteps entered the kitchen. Myungjun aimed but hesitated. Bin saw his finger on the trigger, and he quickly glanced up.

“Jinwoo!” he gasped.

He had never thought he would lay sight on Jinwoo again. Since he died by Dongmin’s hands hundreds upon hundreds of years ago, Bin assumed he was lost to the world. The only other reincarnations that had made their way back into Bin’s life, aside from Myungjun, were men he considered scum — Dongmin and Wangwi.

Jinwoo was one of the few people Bin had wanted to see again, and his face lit up in a large grin. “Jinwoo, it’s...oh, god, you’re alive!”

Jinwoo had a pistol aimed at Myungjun. He didn’t lower his weapon, even when Bin exclaimed his name. He did, however, narrow his eyes and ask, “Do I know you?”

“I’m...I mean, no, not...kind of.” Bin moved his eyes and looked at Myungjun. “Gun down,” he ordered.

“Him first,” Myungjun hissed. “I don’t trust—”

“Why are you talking when there’s a clear bullet hole in your head?” Jinwoo asked Bin.

“I shot him!” Myungjun easily took credit for that. He looked as if he was trying to appear tough; though, with the cigarette hanging from his mouth and the way he cowered next to Bin’s body, it was obvious it was all a facade. “And I’ll shoot you, too, if you want.”

Jinwoo smirked. “I don’t want that. Obviously. Why are you sticking around someone you shot? He’s bled out a lot. It’s all over my floor.”

His words took a few seconds to register in Bin’s mind. Myungjun still was pondering over them when Bin gasped, “This is your house?”

“Shit,” Myungjun whispered. “Bin, I blew your fucking brain apart all over his kitchen.”

Jinwoo was the first to lower his gun. He didn’t seem too concerned with the fact that Myungjun’s rifle was still trained on him. “This is my house. I left before the air raids started — are you two from the Republic army? Those uniforms aren’t the People’s Army uniforms.”

“I deserted,” Myungjun supplied. “And Bin just stole his uniform off a dead man.”

“Gross.” Jinwoo stepped further into the kitchen. He scoffed when Myungjun tensed his hold around his weapon. “Put the gun down, I’m not going to hurt you. I’m just curious why brain matter and blood is all over my kitchen wall and floor and counters, and yet this man is still alive.
and talking as if he hadn’t been shot.”

“He can take a piss fine, too. We need to get him new pants. I assume you have some in your house,” Myungjun said.

“Myungjun,” Bin snapped. “Shut up.”

“Fine.” Myungjun finally did lower his rifle. He moved slower than Jinwoo had, still suspicious, and explained, “He’s immortal. Like Jesus.”

Jinwoo nodded his head, appearing unconcerned. “Right. Jesus. Okay.” He glanced around his kitchen before finding the pot of kimchi Myungjun had stashed on his side of the room. He chose not to comment on the fact that the two strangers had been eating his food. Instead, he asked, “Why did you shoot him if he’s immortal?”

“I didn’t know he was immortal. I found out by shooting him.”

“Why did you shoot him and then decide to stick around for him to heal, then?”

Jinwoo wasn’t bothered by talk of immortality. He grabbed his pot of kimchi and opened it. The smell spread through the air almost instantly, and Bin realized he was hungry again. He said nothing, however, for Jinwoo was smiling at his kimchi. He was likely hungrier. Bin wondered how far he had strayed from the village and how little food he had while he was away.

“I...um, I felt...” Myungjun sheepishly glanced over at Bin, then mumbled out his answer. “I felt bad leaving him to die.”

His embarrassment went either unnoticed or disregarded. Jinwoo nodded and ate more of his kimchi. “How did he know my name?”

“He knew my name, too. He’s a freak.”

“I told you, I’m immortal,” Bin said, glaring over at Myungjun. “And Jinwoo, Park Jinwoo, used to be my best friend hundreds of years ago.”

Jinwoo raised an eyebrow over toward Bin. “Is that so?” he questioned. Somehow, he seemed to talk it all so casually. Somehow, none of it bothered him too much.

Myungjun noticed Jinwoo’s attitude, too, and he stated, “You’re acting as if this is something normal to experience.”

“Nothing’s normal at the moment. The country has gone to shit, so I don’t think the appearance of some immortal man who seems to know my name is anything to fret over. Besides, he might be immortal and all-knowing, but he’s obviously paralyzed, so I doubt he’s a god or...I mean, he’s hardly even a man who can strike fear into my heart.”

“He’s muscular,” Myungjun pointed out.

“What’s the point of those muscles if he can’t do anything?”

Myungjun fell quiet for a second, and Jinwoo took the opportunity to continue munching on the kimchi.

Bin stared at Jinwoo, still amazed that his old friend was back in his life, still amazed the gods liked him enough to now grant him his two favorite people in the entire world. What’s more, they
were both aware of his immortality this time. He had only spoken of his past with one Myungjun before, and he had left before that Myungjun could die.

His heart raced. What if that Myungjun died only from old age? What if the knowledge of immortality had caused that Myungjun to live?

Perhaps this Myungjun might be the same. Since he now knew, he might not die. And if Bin could stick by his side, they could work on uncovering the curse together, and then they could live out the rest of their lives together.

Jinwoo closed the lid shut on the clay pot of kimchi and stuck it back onto the counter. As he moved, Bin could see the gun that he had; a pistol, one issued by the American soldiers. “Where did you get that?” Bin asked.

“Get what?” Jinwoo didn’t look at him. He was rifling through his cabinet drawers.

“The, um, the pistol. Where did you get your pistol?”

“I got it where you got the uniform.” He peered over at Bin and offered a small smile, neither mocking nor sarcastic in nature. “It’s every man for himself out there. I saw a fallen soldier and I saw the pistol and I had to take it. Good thing I did, too, because if your friend had been a little more trigger-happy, I would have made good use of it.”

“I’m not trigger-happy.” Myungjun defended himself. He looked over at Bin, at the wound that had ruined half his skull, and grimaced. “Maybe...Maybe I was a bit trigger-happy with Bin, but only because he came out of nowhere and, with his uniform, I thought he was going to drag me back to the army or kill me for desertion. He knew my name, too, and I couldn’t take the chance.”

Jinwoo gave a small ahh in acknowledgement and then sat himself on the ground, taking over the spot where Myungjun had been sleeping.

Myungjun wrinkled his nose. “Are...are you sticking around?”

“It’s my house,” Jinwoo retorted. “I can kick you two out whenever I want.”

“Bin isn’t...he’s not healed yet. And I can’t carry him. He’s too heavy.” Myungjun’s cigarette was out. He removed it from his mouth and ground it under his foot before snatching a new one from his case.

Jinwoo pointed to the cigarette now smudged into his floor. “Can you not litter in my house?”

“There’s blood everywhere, asshole. A little cigarette butt isn’t going to hurt.”

Bin failed to mention that Myungjun had probably smoked the equivalent of forty cigarettes since they had holed themselves up in Jinwoo’s house, and, as such, cigarette butts were scattered all over the kitchen. Jinwoo seemed to notice it, too, but he didn’t comment on the mess.

“When do you think he will be healed?” Jinwoo asked, leaning back into the cabinets.

“Well?”

“Hopefully.” Myungjun lit his cigarette and sighed with relief and pleasure as he continued to smoke. “Then we’re off to search for my family. I need to make sure they’re safe. We’ll be out of your way—”

“I can come,” Jinwoo offered. Bin stared at him curiously. Jinwoo seemed to be hiding his
enthusiasm, his excitement, and, oddly enough, his fear. Trouble brewed in his eyes. Conflict
dwelled in his posture.

Bin was smart, and was able to deduce what was ailing him.

“You have nowhere to go,” Bin muttered. “You came back here to start over, right?”

Jinwoo glanced sharply at Bin, then crossed his arms over his chest. “Smart mouth,” he
commented. “But…sort of. I left my home with my wife and parents a few months ago.”

He took a pause, a lengthy pause, and while he hesitated, Myungjun asked, “Did they die?”

“Myungjun!” Bin snapped.

“What? It’s a serious question! I’m not trying to make light of the situation, I would just like to
know—”

“Yes,” Jinwoo responded. He closed his eyes and released his breath slowly, heavily. “My mother
was already sick. She died first. My father died shortly after as we were still running south. Lack of
food, exhaustion, I don’t know. My wife was...she was pregnant and...she went into labor early. We
were almost to the coastline. We would’ve been fine if we had made it to the coastline. But we
weren’t, and there was nothing I could do. She lost too much blood.”

Myungjun made a soft noise of sympathy. His fingers curled around the cigarette. “How about
your—”

“Stillbirth.”

“Fuck.” Myungjun sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I really am. You don’t...you don’t
deserve any of that. Right, Bin? He doesn’t deserve that.”

“No,” Bin murmured. Jinwoo, sitting by himself, looked so young and so lost and so confused. Just
like that, in the course of a few months, he had already lost his entire family. They had been
innocent casualties of such a stupid, pathetic war.

Bin was used to it. General Kim had been used to it. He had to remind himself, though, that neither
Myungjun nor Jinwoo had experienced war like this.

“You can certainly come with us,” Bin offered. “We’ll be searching for Myungjun’s family, and
for a way to end my curse.”

“That…” Myungjun narrowed his eyes and took a drag of his cigarette. “That really wasn’t in the
plan. I hadn’t agreed to it.”

“There’s nothing really you need to do. Just help me sort through my life and figure out what could
have caused this curse to be placed upon me. Is that alright, Jinwoo?”

Jinwoo pursed his lips in thought. “I wasn’t exactly planning to help break a curse of immortality,
but…” He left his sentence unfinished. Bin knew what he was trying to say. But I have nowhere
else to go. But I have no one else to rely on. But I’m lost.

He smiled at Jinwoo and said, “We’d be happy to have you.”

Jinwoo glanced up at him, then over at Myungjun, before he returned Bin’s smile. He seemed
rather relieved. He seemed so young; older than Myungjun, likely, yet hardly mature enough to
deal with such a loss.
“Alright,” he agreed. “Alright, I’ll...I’ll come.”

Being there, even paralyzed and in pain and still healing, Bin realized he hadn’t felt so happy in hundreds of years. Myungjun was by his side and Jinwoo was across from him and his secret was out in the open.

Things would be fine. He knew it.

The next day, Bin was not fully healed, to Myungjun’s dismay. He could stand and move, but any extended period of walking made his legs buckle over. He felt like a newborn fawn, shaky and trembling, but Myungjun kept hold of him as best he could. They practiced a few times, walking to the door and back, before Myungjun shook his head at Jinwoo.

“Nope,” Myungjun stated. “Not yet. I can’t drag him, as much as I would like to, so maybe one more day.”

Jinwoo seemed fine with waiting. After all, his family was dead and he had nothing else to live for. Myungjun, however, was antsy. He kept talking about his mother and father, somewhere alone up north or down south.

“I don’t know where they are,” he said that night, filled with anxiety and nerves. “But maybe they’re still at home. It’s just a few days from here. The village was probably okay, right? It might not have been involved in any of the direct fights, right?”

He wanted comfort that his family had not suffered the same fate as Jinwoo’s.

Jinwoo kept silent. Bin took it upon himself to comfort Myungjun.

They left the next morning. The bullet had made its way out of Bin’s skull. He showed it off proudly to Myungjun as they packed their bags again.

“Is that my bullet?” Myungjun asked, staring at it in amazement. “Did your brain seriously push it out of your skull?”

“Yeah!” Bin said, proud that he was able to cause such wonder. “I told you, I’m immortal, and when my body heals, it doesn’t allow foreign objects to stay. This came out sometime overnight.”

Myungjun snatched the bullet from Bin’s hands. He showed it off to Jinwoo, who regarded it with indifference.

“That’s a bullet,” Jinwoo had commented, hardly glancing at it.

“No shit,” Myungjun scoffed. He pocketed the bullet, vowing to tell his parents of how amazing Bin’s body was, and then he led Bin outside.

Bin had to blink away the sunlight. He was holed up for a couple of days, and his eyes took a few minutes to adjust properly to such brightness. Fortunately, Myungjun seemed to notice his discomfort, and grabbed onto Bin’s hand to lead him down the main road.
When he tried to pull away a bit later, Bin squeezed his hand.

“Don’t let me go,” Bin whispered, grinning widely down at his lover. “I’d like it very much if you continued to hold my hand.”

Myungjun peeked over at Jinwoo, who was leading the two of them (he had established himself as the most mature and most knowledgeable, and Myungjun had not fought the point), then hissed, “What if Jinwoo looks back and notices us?”

“Already noticed,” Jinwoo called. “And as long as I don’t have to deal with you two fucking each other, I’m okay with gay people.”

Myungjun scoffed. “I’m not gay!” he exclaimed. “Bin is!”

“He said that he’s slept with your reincarnation, so you must be gay.” Jinwoo glanced over his shoulder and smirked. “Bin, have you slept with my reincarnation?”

“No. You were never gay.”

“See?” Jinwoo gave Myungjun a big, shit-eating grin, and added, “So even if you claim not to be gay, you must still have some rampant homosexuality brewing in your loins. Just embrace it, Myungjun, before you explode.”

Bin couldn’t help but laugh at Myungjun’s expression. He was certainly cute, with his pout and furrowed eyebrows, but he snapped, “Shut up, Bin,” before reaching his free hand into his pocket for his cigarettes.

Time was difficult to keep track of as they walked. None of them had watches, and so Bin calculated the time based on how many cigarettes Myungjun had smoked.

He would usually get through five cigarettes in an hour. Bin counted ten cigarettes, and decided they must have been walking for a little over two hours. He mentioned as such to Jinwoo, who said, “Duh. Can’t you read the sun?”

“Oh.” Bin cleared his throat. “I forgot that.”

“You’ve lived how many years and you forgot that the sun can tell the time?”

“Well, this way might be a tad bit more accurate. I can tell based on the location of the sun what time it must be, but I can tell based off Myungjun’s addiction to cigarettes how long we’ve walked.”

“It’s not an addiction,” Myungjun complained, reaching for his eleventh one of the day. He frowned when he took the pack from his pocket and asked, “Can we stop somewhere and see if someone will trade me for a pack of cigarettes?”

Jinwoo sighed. “What were you going to trade?”

“Either the kimchi or your pistol.”

“Both of which we need.”

“Well, I need more cigarettes or I might lose my mind.”

Jinwoo looked angry. Bin could see his jaw tense and knuckles clench, and before the two could get into a fight, he interjected. “I actually have money, so there’s no need to trade. We can just buy
some cigarettes. During wartime, there will always be people selling goods like that, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find. Let’s...” He glanced around, trying to figure out where they were. “Jinwoo, we’re in Boeun County, correct?” When Jinwoo nodded, Bin pointed and said, “Then I think there might be a village down this way. I mean, there was one a couple hundred years ago, so I assume it still stands.”

“Oh, of course,” Myungjun said, sticking one of his last cigarettes into his mouth and lighting it. “A city was there hundreds of years ago, so it still must—”

“Got any better ideas, Myungjun?” Jinwoo asked.

Myungjun stayed silent.

There was a village, fortunately. It still stood, untouched from any fighting from the war, and shops remained perfectly intact. A few peddlers were out on the street, offering goods from dead soldiers and other civilians, or else things they had swiped from the less-fortunate villages in the surrounding region. Myungjun caught sight of the cigarettes and he dragged Bin over to the little cart.

“That!” he exclaimed to the peddler, pointing at the cartons of cigarettes behind him. “We’ll take them all.”

The peddler looked excited. “Thirty-five thousand won!” he said, snatching the packs from his cart.

Bin paid him and Myungjun greedily began to stuff the cigarette packs into his bag. Before they turned away, however, Myungjun gasped and nudged his elbow into Bin’s waist. “That necklace is really pretty,” he commented. “And it’s jade — Bin, if you buy that, it will bring you good luck.”

_Jade_.

Bin turned to the necklace that Myungjun was pointing at. He lost his breath. His eyes widened as he stared upon the necklace laying on the man’s cart.

That was _his_ necklace. That was the jade necklace General Kim had gifted to him over a thousand years ago. It was the necklace he had thought of for centuries, had lost for centuries, and now, suddenly, it had turned up in the most unlikely of locations.

“Where did you get this?” Bin asked, gesturing to the necklace. He could see Myungjun staring at him curiously. He could also see Jinwoo come to stand beside Myungjun, as if curious about the holdup. He didn’t care, though, where either of them were at the moment. All he cared about was that necklace.

The peddler grabbed it and held it up. The jade shone, and sunlight glinted off the large gold chain. “It’s an antique,” the peddler said.

“Where did you get it?” Bin repeated, frustration welling up inside of him.

Obviously, it was stolen, for the peddler’s only answer was, “It’s very expensive. You won’t be able to afford—”

Bin tossed down his wallet. He knew he had a lot of coins. He hadn’t counted, but it was all he had left of his fortune. He had been saving it for food and clothing and other necessities, but logic flew out of his mind when confronted with a piece of his past.
The peddler opened the wallet, then dropped the necklace into Bins outstretched hand. “It’s yours!” the old man gasped, holding the money close to him. “You keep it!”

Jinwoo’s eyes widened. He stared at the money Bin had just tossed aside and snapped, “That was a lot, Bin! We could get food with all of that; why the fuck are you spending it on that stupid necklace?”

“It’s pretty,” Myungjun defended him. “But he’s right. What am I going to do now about my cigarettes?”

“Shut the fuck up about your cigarettes for five goddamn seconds,” Jinwoo scolded.

“Stop whining for five goddamn seconds,” Myungjun shot back. “Bin, you do realize that necklace is broken, right?”

Bin blinked and looked over at Myungjun, tearing his eyes away from General Kim’s only surviving treasure. “Wha-What?”

Myungjun pointed down at the jade and said, “It’s broken. See this crack? It’s real jade, because you can see the little minerals inside, but it’s broken. And jade doesn’t break on its own, not usually. It’s a highly durable mineral. This looks deliberate; some of the gold chain around the jade is bent.”

The words coming from Myungjun’s mouth didn’t make any sense. They spilled out hurriedly, and Bin couldn’t comprehend what Myungjun was trying to say.

Jinwoo examined the jade, as well, then asked, “How do you know all of this, Myungjun?”

“I was fond of the sciences when I was in school,” Myungjun responded, taking a drag of his cigarette. He coughed once, then continued, “I liked studying minerals. I wanted to collect a bunch of minerals, and before the war started, I did have a good collection. I had a few jade pieces, as well, though none that looked as old as this one.”

“So...it didn’t break on its own accord?” Bin questioned, allowing Myungjun the chance to study the necklace again.

Myungjun shook his head. “Nope. Someone tried to smash this.” He smiled as he looked up at Bin. “Someone didn’t like it.”

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War was imminent. Silla’s soldiers were marching closer and closer by the day. At first, Myungjun declared that they ought to keep an eye out, and so he sent a few spies up into the Silla Kingdom in order to get a better read on Silla’s location. It soon became clear that they were marching to the border, and Bin doubted an army that large would just be going to strengthen their border.

He spent as much time with General Kim as he could. Even if Myungjun was still quiet after having visited the capital and still didn’t enjoy company, Bin stuck with him.

“You don’t have to be near me at all times,” Myungjun pointed out one evening. He was bent over
maps and drawings and war plans. His hair was a mess and his eyes were accented with dark circles, evidence of his sleepless nights. Still, Bin found him beautiful, and he smiled as he ran his fingers through Myungjun’s tangled hair.

“You’re right. I do not have to. I would like to, however, for I love you.”

Myungjun’s jaw tensed. He didn’t respond much these days to any of Bin’s declarations of love. If Bin didn’t trust him fully, he would have feared that Myungjun’s love had vanished.

But Myungjun would always love him. Even now, as hesitant as he was to show and embrace affection, Bin could still sense the love Myungjun had.

“I have work to do,” Myungjun said.

Bin kissed his cheek. “You have been doing work for days,” he complained. “How much more is there to do, really?”

“If the Silla army is this close, Bin, there’s lots of work to be done. You do know that tomorrow we must go out and march to the border, right?”

“We’re close by, anyway. It’s not like it will take long to reach.” Bin’s kisses trailed down Myungjun’s cheek and to his jawline.

“Still.” He could feel Myungjun’s movement against his mouth, and he latched his lips onto the side of Myungjun’s neck. “Bin, please—”

“We won’t get a chance to do this later,” Bin pointed out.

Myungjun fell quiet. He fiddled with his map and then turned an inquisitive gaze to Bin. “What does that mean?”

Bin shrugged his shoulders, drawing back in order to look fully at Myungjun. He reached a hand out to brush aside some hair in Myungjun’s face. “If we are marching out tomorrow, then we will be surrounded by soldiers. The war will start. We will become so busy and overwhelmed that it’s likely we will not have the chance to indulge in each other for a lengthy period of time.” He swallowed nervously and admitted, “Besides that, I worry...their army is very large. They have more resources than we do. What if we don’t—”

“Please, do not concern yourself with the what if ’s, Bin.”

“I’m not. I just...there’s a nagging feeling in my chest.”

Myungjun licked his lips. Bin could tell he, too, was nervous of what the war might bring. He turned and looked at Bin, eyes wide with concern, and asked, “Are you expecting to fall during battle?”

“Of course not. Are you?”

Myungjun shook his head slowly.

They sat in silence, staring at each other. It was comfortable. It was nice. Bin could study the features on Myungjun’s face. He could pin it all down to memory, and no matter what the morning would bring, he knew he would always remember Myungjun the way he was right then and there.

Myungjun was the first to move. However, he didn’t move away, as he had every other time they
were close since he had gone to the capital. He moved forward instead, crawling into Bin’s lap, and then they kissed.

Bin moaned into Myungjun’s mouth, delighted with his lover making the first move. His hands held onto Myungjun’s small waist, and fingers dug into clothing and skin. Bin wouldn’t be shocked if bruises formed. Myungjun, for his part, wrapped his arms around Bin’s neck in order to keep upright as the kiss turned more passionate.

Soon enough, Myungjun was tugging Bin’s clothes from his body. Off went his coat and shirt. His pants were next, and Bin kicked his boots off, and then returned the favor for Myungjun. When they were both naked, Bin bent down to kiss Myungjun again, but Myungjun stopped him.

“Let me...let me take off the necklace for you.”

“Necklace?” Bin glanced at the jade stone dangling against his sternum. “Why? I’ve never taken it off before when we make love.”

Myungjun clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. His fingers trembled as he worked on unclasping the necklace from Bin’s neck. “I would just rather...I want to, um...you look nice with it off.”

“You told me I look more handsome when I wear it.”

“Yes, but for tonight, I’d like us to just be bare. I don’t want anything at all between us, even this necklace.” He finally got the necklace off and held it in his hands. Bin looked down. Myungjun held the jewelry so carefully, so fearfully. Before he could ask about it, though, Myungjun stammered out, “I-I will put this, um...I will put this away so that it will not get lost. Stay right here, Bin.”

Bin watched, curious, as Myungjun scurried off to his wardrobe. He rifled through his pants for a few seconds before stuffing the necklace inside the pocket of one.

Then he returned back to Bin’s side and offered him a small smile. “Keep kissing me.”

“Why did you put—”

Myungjun took initiative once more and kissed Bin, hard. To keep from talking, he also grabbed hold of Bin’s erection and teased the tip with his thumb.

“Make me scream loud, Bin,” he whispered as Bin jerked up into his touch. “Please.”

Bin did his best work, but he could tell Myungjun’s mind was elsewhere. Myungjun went through the motions with him, but even as Bin made him scream and moan, he could tell that Myungjun’s thoughts were not with him.

At least he didn’t draw away. Myungjun stayed with him all the time. Throughout the night, he kissed Bin’s chest and neck and ears and nose. He whispered sweet words, and then he apologized. Bin, half asleep, mumbled out, “What for?”

He could see Myungjun’s eyes fill with tears. He heard him sniff, yet he was not awake enough to ask about it. Instead, he drew Myungjun closer and repeated himself. “Why are you apologizing, darling?”

“For what I’ve done,” Myungjun whispered, his voice hoarse and raw from their lovemaking.
“You haven’t done anything.”

“I have,” Myungjun said. “I have, but I’ll make it right. I’ll fix it, Bin. You won’t suffer, I promise.”

But Bin was already falling asleep, too tired to stay and listen to whatever it was Myungjun was talking about. He felt warm and loved, and he slept with a smile on his face.

He forgot about the necklace the next day, and with the chaos of war, he never thought to ask about it again.

“It sounds like General Kim stole it from you,” Myungjun said, chewing on more kimchi. Bin had just relayed the story of that night, of when he remembered the necklace missing, and realized he truly hadn’t thought about it since General Kim last took it from him.

“Why would you steal it, though?” Bin wondered, staring at the necklace he held in his hands.

“Why would he steal it,” Myungjun corrected. “I’m not a thief, so I wouldn’t—”

“You stole my kimchi,” Jinwoo mumbled. “And decided to raid my house for anything else useful.”

Myungjun wrinkled his nose, but he couldn’t very well deny that truth. “Fine,” he said. “Maybe I am a thief. But I’m only a thief when my life really depends on it.”

Bin narrowed his eyes in concentration, then asked, “Did your life depend on it back then?”

“I’m not General Kim.”

“Right. Sorry. I’m just...I’m confused.” Bin sighed and hung the necklace around his neck. The jade felt cool to the touch, and he realized how much he had missed wearing it. It rested nicely next to his other necklace, the one Myungjun had stolen from Wangwi, and Jinwoo commented, “I like that golden necklace better.”

“Myungjun stole it for me.”

“Fuck,” Myungjun said, his mouth full of kimchi, “I am a thief.”

“As we have established.” Jinwoo stood from his seat and snatched the pot of kimchi from Myungjun’s hands. “We need to make this last, since Bin decided to spend all of the money on that stupid necklace. I’m keeping it with me, because I don’t trust it with a thief.” He bowed his head slightly to Bin, though Myungjun did not get the same respect. “I’m going to bed. You two don’t stay up late; we have a lot more walking to do tomorrow.”

Jinwoo retreated into the tent Myungjun had set up, as part of the supplies he had been given as a soldier.

It fell silent. Bin’s hand lingered on his chest, fingers touching the jade, and he sighed as his mind raced through possibilities concerning the disappearance of his necklace. The more he thought
about it, the more likely it seemed that General Kim had, for some odd reason, stolen the necklace away.

“If General Kim stole it,” Bin mumbled, breaking the silence of the night and catching Myungjun’s attention, “then do you think he was also the one that tried to break it?”

“Possibly,” Myungjun replied. “Likely.” He lit a cigarette and smoked. “I don’t see why he would want to break it. So the story goes, if I’m following you correctly, that he gave you the necklace and then, right before he died, he took it away and tried to destroy it?” Myungjun shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense. Especially because it’s a jade necklace.”

Bin blinked. “What does the mineral have anything to do with it?”

“Jade is a good luck charm,” Myungjun responded. “I’m sure tons of soldiers back then would have killed to have a jade necklace. It offers protection from war. Which makes me think...he took it away, thereby ruining your streak of good luck.”

“Streak of good luck?”

“Well, you hadn’t died in battle, so I assume it was doing its job.”

Bin thought back to the scars General Kim suffered from, to the way he oftentimes was hurt after a battle. He thought back, too, to General Kim’s jealousy with the lack of scars he had.

“I...before that last battle,” Bin mumbled, a thought popping to his head, “I had never once been hurt. Many of my comrades around me would fall, but I came through every single time with nary a scratch on me.”

Myungjun smiled widely. “See?” he commented. “It was working. The good luck in the jade was keeping you safe from harm.”

Bin sighed and slumped over where he sat on the ground. General Kim had been superstitious, as had all the Myungjun reincarnations. He would have likely known about the superstitions surrounding jade. He would have known it was useful as a good-luck charm. Why, then, would he take it away from Bin?

“Maybe he wanted it,” Myungjun said, as if reading Bin’s thoughts. “Maybe he was worried and decided he would wear it during battle.”

“He didn’t have it during battle, though. I buried him.” Bin ran his fingers through his hair, frustrated. It felt like he had suddenly made a large stride in figuring out his curse, only to be stopped again by the mystery of his stupid necklace. “I don’t know what he would have done with it after he took it. I don’t know where he put it. I don’t know what he was doing with it.”

“My theory wouldn’t work anyway, if I also think he tried to destroy it.” Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry, Bin. I really have no clue.” He was finishing up his cigarette; he offered the last bit to Bin, who shook his head. Greedily, Myungjun stuffed it back in his mouth and grinned. “Maybe General Kim was just an asshole.”

“You weren’t an asshole,” Bin snapped.

“*He* was probably an asshole.”

Bin turned his glare to Myungjun. This is what he had been worried about. He didn’t want to choose sides if it turned out that General Kim had done something to curse him. He didn’t want to
agree with this Myungjun, yet he also didn’t want to disagree. Regardless, it was still General Kim sitting in front of him, but General Kim was dead, and Bin refused to choose a side.

“What makes you say that? You didn’t know him like I did.”

“I didn’t know him at all,” Myungjun pointed out. “But if he did destroy your good luck charm right before a major battle, he sounds like a bit of an asshole.”

Bin ran his fingers through his hair. He refused to believe that there wasn’t a logical explanation behind General Kim’s actions. He refused to believe that the man who loved him so fiercely would ever try to ruin his chances of survival. It wasn’t what General Kim would’ve done.

“Someone else must have tried to destroy this necklace,” he muttered, glancing up at Myungjun. The younger man rolled his eyes and put out his cigarette. “Someone else did it,” Bin said, louder this time. He tried to convince Myungjun that this was the case.

He tried to convince himself that this was the case.

“Alright,” Myungjun said, thoroughly un convinced. “Whatever you say.” He stood and stretched his arms above his head, then yawned. “I’m going to bed. You should come, too.”

But Bin didn’t want to sleep. Not yet, anyway. Not when so many thoughts were passing through his mind. He shook his head and mumbled, “I’ll be out here for a little while longer.”

Myungjun didn’t try to convince him otherwise. He just scoffed and said, “Suit yourself.”

Before he walked away, however, Bin reached out and grabbed onto his hand. Myungjun stared at him, curious, but his eyes grew wide when Bin placed a kiss onto Myungjun’s knuckles.

“What the fuck, Bin?”

“Sleep well, darling.”

He released Myungjun’s hand just as Myungjun snatched it away, acting as if he had been burned. It would’ve been amusing, but Bin’s mind was preoccupied already.

Still, he didn’t miss how flustered Myungjun seemed, nor did he miss how he gave a half-hearted, “Fuck off,” before disappearing into the tent.

Bin did not sleep much that night. He tried, as the moon was lowering in the sky and dawn was beginning to break, but the weight of the necklace hung heavy against his chest. He listened to the birds wake for the morning, their sounds filling the air, and he wondered what General Kim had done.

There was that indistinguishable click of the lighter and Bin sighed. “How many packs have you gone through?” he asked, glancing over at Myungjun.

Myungjun snorted and waved him off. “I’m slowing down,” he assured. “I’m running low, anyway, but this is only my fifth one for today.”
It was mid-afternoon, and Bin was actually impressed that Myungjun had managed to only smoke four cigarettes before he stuck that one in his mouth. “A record low,” he commented, and Myungjun looked proud.

“Isn’t it?”

It had been three days since Bin found the necklace, and he was no more closer to figuring out what the curse was. Frustration filled every void of his body. No answers were coming, even from Myungjun, who kept seeming to hit close but never exact.

He had wondered if the necklace itself was cursed, or if Bin had actually met a witch, or if Bin was supposed to be some sort of god. Each suggestion made less sense than before, and Myungjun hadn’t spoken of the curse at all in a few hours.

Jinwoo, leading them (and carrying Myungjun’s gun along with his own), broke through Bin’s self-pitying thoughts to say, “He’s planning to get more once we reach the next town.”

“With what money?”

“Mock me if you will, Bin, but I’m going to persuade the peddlers to hand over the cigarettes. We have guns and uniforms; can they really refuse?”

Bin rolled his eyes. “This is going to backfire so hard on you—”

“I don’t need your negative thoughts.” Myungjun blew some smoke in Bin’s general direction, then said, “Oh, and I’ve been thinking about your necklace.”

“Have you?”

“Yeah. It feels silly that I did not think of this sooner, but what if it’s not the necklace that’s cursed, exactly, but it’s something bad you’ve done?”

Bin stumbled as he walked, and Myungjun held out a hand to steady him, muttering, “Slow the fuck down, you moron.”

Jinwoo continued to walk, but he always did when Myungjun and Bin fell behind. They could catch up later. For the time being, Bin was too focused on what it was Myungjun had just suggested. “Something bad I’ve done?”

Myungjun nodded his head, a smile on his face. He rolled the cigarette between his fingers, watching the smoke trail up into the sky, and said, “The jade on the necklace signifies good luck. However, I’m wondering if you’ve done something truly awful, then perhaps the jade can turn into a charm of bad luck. I’ve heard tales of such a thing happening, and it seems plausible. Jade is good; if the wearer is bad, then it might turn bad.”

“Something bad?” Bin tried to think. He couldn’t remember anything evil he had done. “Would fucking a man be something bad?”

“Sure.”

“But I don’t think it was considered that bad back then. Temptation was bad, but...sex wasn’t.”

“Sex between men isn’t good.”

“But it’s not bad. At least, not bad enough to cause this.”
Myungjun shrugged as he continued to smoke. “Did you cheat on him? Cheating is bad.”

Even the suggestion of adultery made Bin recoil. “Of course not! Don’t say stupid shit. I would never cheat on you. I told you—”

“Him, you told him.”

“Right. I told him he was the only one I would ever love, and he said the same to me.”

Myungjun pursed his lips and nodded his head. “Right. Well, it’s gotta be something else, then. Something bad you’ve done. Maybe it’s something bad you’ve done to him, since all of the reincarnations seem to die horrible deaths.” He grimaced, then added, “And you’d better figure out soon what it is you did, because I’m not going to die a horrible death. I’ll be damned if I end up like that fucking prostitute.”

“He was you. Just in a different era.”

“Sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night.” Myungjun gestured with his cigarette to wherever Jinwoo had gone. “Let’s go catch up with him.”

Bin agreed, except the moment they took a step, he grabbed Myungjun’s arm. “I disobeyed your orders once. You had told us to stand back, and your horse was brought down and I broke from the rest of the infantry and ran for you.”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows. He opened his mouth to say something, but Bin continued.

“Another time, I started kissing you while we were in a Buddhist temple.”

“Oh, god.”

“I once tried to have sex with you when you clearly didn’t want to.”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows, and Bin corrected himself. “With General Kim, I mean.”

“He didn’t want to have sex? Did you rape him?”

“No! God, of course not. I’d never do that. I...I tried to keep going, but he kicked me off and then I came hold of my senses. I apologized right after I had done that, though. It had...it had just...” It had been a while since they made love, is what he wanted to say, but he had yet to tell Myungjun about General Kim’s visit to the capital and the personality change that had occurred. It was too private. It was sensitive information.

It would likely put General Kim as the cause behind all of this.

“It had just what?” Myungjun asked, trying to figure out the rest of Bin’s sentence. “You trailed off. It had just...what?”

Bin shrugged his shoulders. “I...I don’t know. It had been a while since, um, we had sex. He was always busy.”

That answer seemed to satisfy Myungjun. He said, “Well, just keep thinking, then, about something bad you might have done to him. But we really need to catch up with Jinwoo. That bastard is going to leave us behind otherwise.”

Myungjun started to walk, so Bin hurried after him. He reached down, though, and grasped Myungjun’s hand.
Myungjun glared up at him, and Bin offered him a small smile.

“I called you stupid once.”

Myungjun’s lips twitched. He was hiding back his own smile. Bin continued.

“I combed your hair and pulled too hard once. You yelled at me for that.”

“Did I?” With his free hand, Myungjun took the cigarette from his mouth and blew smoke in front of him. “Keep going.”

Bin brought Myungjun’s hand to his mouth. He kissed it lightly, and he was pleased that Myungjun did not pull away from him this time.

“I laughed once when you tripped and fell in mud.”

“Cruel.”

“It was so funny. I couldn’t help it, darling.”

Myungjun was definitely smiling. Bin could see his cheeks, round and rosy, push up against his eyes. He had a sweet smile. He had an adorable smile. “I highly doubt any of those actions would have warranted this sort of punishment. It was something worse.”

Bin had teased Myungjun enough. It was time to think, time to get serious about the matter. He glanced down at the hold he had on Myungjun’s hand, then asked, “Could it be because I was a soldier? Because I killed people?”

“Unlikely,” Myungjun replied. “Many other men had jade jewelry during battle, yet you’re the only one running around as a fucking immortal.”

“Presumably.”

Myungjun shrugged. He looked unconvinced. “Being a soldier is a job. I doubt you were punished for your job. As long as you remained respectful of those you killed, there would be no reason for the gods to curse you.”

Bin nodded, but otherwise chose not to respond to Myungjun’s statement. He thought of General Kim’s visit to the capital, of his personality change when he returned home, and wondered if this Myungjun was wrong. Perhaps it was a curse, as Bin had always assumed. Perhaps General Kim had accidentally cursed Bin.

But what part did the necklace play in all of this? Why did Myungjun steal it and try to break it?

The more Bin uncovered, the more confused he became.

They had stopped in a village for the night. Myungjun was disappointed because it was completely abandoned, devoid of any life, save for the few wild animals that roamed, looking for something to eat.
“This sucks,” Myungjun mumbled to himself as Bin plucked feathers off a chicken he had killed. “I need more fucking cigarettes. Do you see how low I’m running?” He opened his backpack. Several packs fell out, which caused Jinwoo to snort.

“Not low enough.”

“If it takes us five days to reach the next village, yeah, I’m pretty fucking low,” Myungjun snapped. “And I can’t keep smoking only ten a day. They don’t last long enough to be satisfied with only ten a day.”

As he spoke, he lit another cigarette and stuffed it in his mouth.

“You’re addicted,” Jinwoo mumbled. “You get irritated when you aren’t smoking.”

“Fuck you.”

Wanting to stop the arguing, Bin interrupted whatever Jinwoo was trying to say back. “Did you start smoking when the war started?”

Myungjun nodded his head, watching as feathers floated down to the ground. “One guy gave me a pack. Told me I’d need it. I didn’t like it at first but I kept smoking when everyone else did, and finally I just couldn’t stop. It calms me down. It makes me think a little less about shit like bombs and tanks and guns and my family out there alone.”

Bin cursed lightly to himself when he felt some of the chicken’s skin tear. He was pulling at the feathers too hard. He had to slow it down. “Do you think you’ll stop one day?”

“Sure. Maybe. When the war ends and I found my parents and I have less to be concerned about.”

Bin had thought, in the past few days, to ask Myungjun to stop smoking. It was a bit of an inconvenience, having to stop everywhere to find cigarettes and trading their limited food supply to fuel his nasty habit. However, he had seen Myungjun’s personality take a complete turn when he had not smoked in several hours. It wasn’t something he wanted to deal with.

Not again. No more personality changes.

As he tore feathers from the chicken, he thought of General Kim’s arrival back home. He thought of the constant tears, the endless apologies. He thought of that personality change. General Kim, usually so happy and vibrant and determined, had become sullen and moody and so unsure of himself and everyone else.

Maybe General Kim had some sort of addiction.

That didn’t make sense. Bin sighed in frustration. Something had definitely happened at the capital.

“I think you’ve defeathered that chicken enough,” Jinwoo commented, and Bin’s hands slowed. He was tearing at nothing, and he grimaced.

“Yeah. Sorry. Here, help me gut it, Myungjun.”

“Gross. No, thank you.”

“You don’t pull your weight around here,” Jinwoo mumbled, and he received Myungjun’s middle fingers as a response.
Once more unwilling to allow fighting to erupt, Bin shook his head. “It’s fine,” he said, but he noticed, as he and Jinwoo gutted the chicken, how Myungjun kept his eyes averted and how he just smoked more.

Myungjun had been disgusted from the blood that had spilled when he shot Bin, too. He had thrown up, and he hadn’t wanted to look at the affected area for longer than necessary. Bin smirked to himself, wondering just how queasy Myungjun was. War was no place for him. He was sheltered and scared, and Bin loved him, even if he was vastly different from General Kim.

The meal was filling. Myungjun fell asleep shortly after eating, curled up in a bedroom of the largest house they had found in the village.

Bin, though, could not sleep. Often times at night he would lie awake in bed and wonder about the past, about the present, and about his future. He liked to sneak off to be alone in those times, to examine his necklace and to think.

So he sat outside, staring up at the stars and letting his fingers stroke the jade necklace.

What had General Kim done? Why had General Kim done it? Bin prayed to the gods to give him an answer, but they remained silent, as they had for a thousand years. They had given up on him the moment they allowed him to be cursed.

Bin closed his eyes shut, but spun around in alarm when he heard the door open.

Jinwoo stood there, staring at him in concern.

“Why aren’t you in bed?”

Bin felt his heart hammer in his chest as his shocked from the intrusion died down. He shrugged his shoulders in reply. “Couldn’t sleep well. What about you? Why are you out here?”

“Had to take a piss,” Jinwoo responded. “The soju you found did a number on me.”

“Oh.” Bin gestured. “Go piss, then.”

But Jinwoo didn’t leave. Jinwoo regarded him with curiosity for a second or two before taking a seat right beside him. “It’s not that bad,” he said. “I can hold my pee for a few minutes. I’m worried about you, though.”

“Me?” Bin scoffed. “I’m immortal. What’s there to worry about?”

“Just that. You’re immortal.”

Bin cocked his head and stared over at Jinwoo, making out his facial features in the darkness of the night. He looked the exact same as he had all those years ago. He had a sharp jawline and a large nose and small eyes. His hair was shorter this time, and his muscles were less defined, and perhaps he had a few extra wrinkles from his few extra years alive, but he was the same Jinwoo Bin had known and had loved.

As if sensing Bin’s inquisitiveness, Jinwoo sighed and leaned back to sit against the house. “I mean, you’ve been alive for hundreds of years. You’ve...you’ve seen Myungjun die over and over again. I mean, he’s an annoying shithead so maybe it’s not all that bad—”

“Watch it.”
"Sorry." Jinwoo smiled and continued, "I just mean that experiencing all of that can definitely damage someone’s psyche. I...I watched my parents die. And I saw my wife die. And my child was stillborn. It’s...” Jinwoo took a deep breath, trying his best to compose himself. He was unable to. The tears welled up in his eyes, anyway, and began to roll down his cheeks. “Shit,” he hissed, wiping at his face. “Sorry. I’m still trying to process it—"

“You don’t have to apologize,” Bin said. He licked his lips, unsure of the best way to comfort Jinwoo. “When...when you were alive, hundreds of years ago, you were my best friend.”

Jinwoo sniffed. He looked miserable, but he glanced over at Bin and asked, “Really?”

“Yeah.” Bin smiled at him and rubbed his back as Jinwoo continued to cry. “Granted, you were a slave, but I—”

“Of course I was.”

“But I didn’t consider you one. I considered you my best friend. Seriously, we did everything together. I would get drunk and sob to you about how pathetic my life was.”

That elicited a chuckle from Jinwoo. Pleased with the response, Bin continued. “We used to go to the hot springs together.”

“So you’ve seen me naked,” Jinwoo said. He rubbed at his eyes and asked, “So...so was Myungjun around during this time?”

Bin nodded his head. “Yes. He was very young. A little orphaned child I had found. Very sweet. Very cute.”

“He’s a shithead. I doubt he could ever be cute.”

“He’s different when he’s a little kid, trust me,” Bin assured him. “But I was so happy back then. And, as morbid as this sounds, I’m so happy now. I’m...I’m happy to have you back. God, I saw...I saw a few other reincarnations of people. There was Dongmin, a fucking asswipe. He tried to kill kid-Myungjun during his first life, and during his second life, he was fucking him.”

“I guess that’s an upgrade?”

Bin shrugged his shoulders. “Then there was Wangwi, who killed Myungjun both times he was alive, and I killed him both times afterward.”

Jinwoo sniffed once more, but his tears had stopped, at least. He gave a loud sigh and stared up at the night sky, then asked, “Does it still hurt to remember their deaths? Does the pain ever stop?”

Bin thought of all of the Myungjun reincarnations he had met. He thought of how much he had loved each and every one of them. Then, he shook his head. “It should,” he mumbled, “because I know Myungjun returns every single time, but he never remembers the previous life. I have to start all over. What’s more, that means the previous Myungjun is...is dead. Completely dead. And he always dies such horrid deaths, and I think...he’s in pain when he dies. He’s never died peacefully. Something terrible always happens. He doesn’t deserve that. I know you think he’s shitty, and a coward, and obnoxious, but he doesn’t deserve to die again.”

Jinwoo listened, then nodded his head in understanding. “I promise I’ll do my best to keep him alive,” he assured. “I won’t let him die on you again.”

Bin was reminded of the Jinwoo from hundreds of years ago. He had worked hard to help save
Myungjun. His efforts were fruitless in the end, but he had never once given up. This Jinwoo seemed the same. When Bin glanced at him, he could see truth and determination shining in his eyes.

“Thank you,” Bin murmured. “I appreciate that.”

Jinwoo offered him a small, shaky smile before standing to his feet. “I really do have to piss,” he said. “Crying didn’t help matters.”

Before he could walk away, though, Bin blurted out, “I’m happy you’re here with me again, Jinwoo. I’ve truly longed for you to return.”

Jinwoo’s smile turned into a grin. “You’re just happy I know how to shoot guns and I’m more useful than your stupid, gay boyfriend.”

“That, too.”

Hearing Jinwoo laugh again was like a dream come true, but the moment he walked off, Bin couldn’t help but frown and return to stroking his necklace.

If things turned out like last time and he was left the only one alive, he wasn’t sure how he could go on anymore.

He had to break the curse. He wouldn’t go through another lifetime alone.

He had to die.

The next day as they walked, Myungjun willingly grabbed his hand.

Bin hadn’t expected it. He hadn’t asked for it, either. He had been a bit quiet, tired from the sleepless nights. His mind was preoccupied solely with the weird mystery of his curse and the necklace and General Kim’s capital visit. He had stumbled once or twice over branches in the forest, and then Myungjun grabbed a hold of his hand.

Bin first gave a start, as the touch was completely unexpected, but when he glanced over at Myungjun, he could detect the red on his ears and the blush spreading across his cheeks. He was clearly embarrassed, and to hide it, he took a long drag of his cigarette and then cleared his throat.

“You’re so cute,” Bin blurted out.

“I’ll kill you if you keep talking loud,” Myungjun hissed. He didn’t look over at Bin. His eyes were averted, situated solely in front of him. Bin realized, too, his palms were clammy. This must be nerve-wracking for him. It must have come only with a huge surge of confidence, and Bin respected that.

Still, he couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re adorable.”

“Shut up, Bin. I’m only holding your hand so you don’t trip and fall again.”
“God, I love you.”

“You love General Kim, asswipe.”

“No, I love you, too.” Bin plastered himself to Myungjun’s side and murmured, “You’re different from him. You’re grumpier and a bit more crude, and while General Kim smoked his pipe every so often, I don’t think he was addicted.”

“I told you, I’m not addicted. It just calms me down.” Myungjun held onto his cigarette and glared up at Bin. “I’m not gay.”

Bin laughed. “Of course not.”

“Seriously, I’m not.”

“I believe you.”

“Bin, you’re being a fucking idiot. I’m honestly only holding your hand because you were stumbling over the ground, and I don’t need you to fall and break—”

He was unable to finish his sentence, however, because Jinwoo stopped and spun around with a loud sigh.

Bin wanted to show off Myungjun’s affection. He wanted to prove that this love was not one-sided. So, when Jinwoo’s attention was on them, he held up their conjoined hands and exclaimed, “Jinwoo, look! Myungjun likes me!”

Myungjun snatched his hand away and stomped his boot down onto Bin’s foot. It was painful, definitely, and Bin yelped as he scrambled backwards, but fortunately Myungjun did not continue the attack. He just huffed and ducked his head, smoking even more heavily on his cigarette as he hid his face from Jinwoo’s exasperated gaze.

“Can you two knock it off?” Jinwoo asked. “We’re in enemy territory, and you both won’t stop making noise. Didn’t I specifically say we needed to keep quiet?”

“Sorry,” Bin apologized, bowing his head slightly to Jinwoo. Myungjun did not give him the same respect, but it seemed Jinwoo expected that. He just rolled his eyes and started walking once more.

When he was a slight distance away, Myungjun slapped Bin’s shoulder. “You piece of shit.”

“Shh,” Bin hushed him, grinning widely. “You need to keep quiet, as Jinwoo ordered.”

If looks could kill, Bin would be dead. Happily so, for the last thing on his mind would be Myungjun’s frustrated pout and his red face.

Bin reached for his hand again to hold. Myungjun didn’t draw back, but he did whisper, “This is your last chance. If you pull that stupid shit again, I won’t hold your hand for the rest of my life.”

“Duly note,” Bin responded with a smile.

They walked for a while, hand in hand, and Myungjun continued to smoke. He was running low on cigarette packs, but they had yet to come across a village with a supply for him. Instead, he smoked less and grew more irritable by the second.

Only Jinwoo minded. Bin decided he could deal with it, because even an angry Myungjun was still a Myungjun, and Bin loved all versions of Myungjun.
He wanted to tell him. He wanted to bend over and whisper it in his ear.

However, he noticed Jinwoo freeze suddenly, his head swinging around wildly as if trying to catch sight of something. He held a hand up, stopping Bin in his tracks, and then glanced over his shoulder. “Listen,” he mouthed.

Bin and Myungjun stood still.

Movement.

Whispers.

There were people nearby.

Bin grabbed the rifle slung over his back and readied it. He had traded weapons with Myungjun relatively early on in their meeting, when he realized that Myungjun was terrified to fight, and so now he gestured to the pistol strapped to Myungjun’s side.

Myungjun seemed to gather what Bin was asking for him to do, and so, with shaking hands, he took the pistol and aimed it.

There was a gunshot. A bullet whizzed past Bin’s head and buried itself into the tree behind him.

“In front!” Bin yelled, and he fired a few rounds.

Whoever was shooting was yelling, too. They spoke Korean, and Bin assumed they must be from the People’s Army. His heart hammered in his chest. How many were there? This was their territory, and if there were soldiers camped up here, surely others would come.

Jinwoo shot, too; from the sounds of it, he hit someone, and he hurried forward, ready to face the men head on. Bin took a step, too, but Myungjun suddenly grabbed onto his arm, holding him in place.

“Don’t go!” Myungjun begged. His eyes were wide with fright, and the gun was rendered useless in his hands. He shook too much to aim. He panicked too much to think. “Pl-Please don’t go. You said you’d be my shield. I d-don’t want to get shot, Bin, please—”

“I will be your shield,” Bin assured him. He couldn’t stick around, though. He had to go make sure Jinwoo was safe. “Myungjun, stick right behind me, okay? If they shoot, they’ll shoot me and not you, alright?”

General Kim would have argued that suggestion. Hell, the majority of the Myungjun reincarnations would have issue with being protected in such a manner. This Myungjun was different, though. He nodded his head and grabbed the back of Bin’s shirt.

Bin didn’t care if this Myungjun was too stricken with fear to fight. He didn’t care that this Myungjun was basically dead weight during such a critical moment. He loved him regardless, and he would protect him no matter what.

He caught up with Jinwoo, who was standing over one dead North Korean soldier.

“There were more,” Jinwoo whispered. “They hid.”

The forest was thick with undergrowth and crowded with trees. Bin knew the soldiers must still be around, but he wasn’t sure where they were.
It was Myungjun, though, who spotted one, who pinched Bin and whispered, “To your right!” as he hid himself.

Bin spun and shot without taking a look. His bullets hit their target, and another soldier fell to the ground.

“How many more?” Bin asked.

“Two?” Jinwoo questioned his own knowledge of the situation, then corrected, “Maybe three. I don’t—”

Two soldiers were running away, and Bin fired his rifle, shooting them in their backs. They both fell. One was still moaning, but Bin decided it wouldn’t be worth it to go and shoot him again.

They stood still, listening, and there was no more movement.

“Two, then,” Jinwoo muttered. He did not yet put away his weapon. He was on edge, as Bin was, worried that more soldiers might show up.

Bin grabbed onto Myungjun’s arm. “You okay?” he asked his lover, who nodded fearfully. “Let’s get out of here as fast as we can,” Bin said, speaking now to Jinwoo. “In case they called reinforcements, or in case we were heard, we can’t stick around here.”

“Right,” Jinwoo said, and gestured with his gun back to the path they had been following. “Keep going that way. It’s well-hidden and off the path.”

They hurried along, keeping silent and hidden. Myungjun kept close to Bin’s side, now relying on him less for affection and more for protection. He jumped with every rustle in the bushes, every gust of wind, and every far-off bird cry. He smoked more cigarettes, too, though Jinwoo warned that enemies might be able to smell it.

“Bullshit,” Myungjun said, voice shaky, as he stuck his fourth cigarette in an hour into his mouth. “Unless they’re close up, they can’t smell any of the smoke. Besides, I need this. You might not understand, but I need to smoke.”

“It’s the addiction,” Jinwoo mumbled.

Myungjun bristled at the repeated accusation, but before he could respond, Bin hushed the both of them. They kept silent for the rest of the day.

It wasn’t until the sun had gone down and the moon hung high in the sky that Bin finally stopped their rushed escape. “They aren’t following us,” he concluded, glancing behind him. “We’re way too far. They would’ve shot us by now if they were, anyway. We’re okay.”

Myungjun, though, was not convinced. As they set up the tent and rummaged in the backpacks for some food, Myungjun kept worrying and fretting. “What if they pop up, Bin? What if they were following us in secret the entire time? What if they wanted to see where we would stop? They could be anywhere, and it’s—”

“But they aren’t.” Bin smiled kindly at Myungjun and added, “Plus, like I said, I’d be your shield, remember?”

That kept Myungjun silent for a while. Even as Jinwoo muttered loudly, “He’s only protecting you because you refused to do it yourself,” Myungjun chose not to respond. He kept his head down as he ate and retired into the tent with Bin and Jinwoo to sleep.
As per usual, though, Bin could not sleep. Thoughts of the necklace and of the curse kept tight hold of his mind already, and now he was worried that perhaps Myungjun’s fears would come to light. If soldiers came across their tent overnight, how would he be able to properly protect both Myungjun and Jinwoo? If he had to choose only one to shield, he would choose Myungjun, but it would be too familiar. It would be a repeat of the past. Bin didn’t want anymore repeats. He wanted both Myungjun and Jinwoo to survive and to live, and if he had to choose Myungjun over Jinwoo again…

He sighed and closed his eyes, but the noises of the forest kept him awake. He briefly contemplated leaving the tent and sitting outside. He would be able to hear better out there, and he could clear his mind instead of laying in the middle of such a tiny, crowded tent. Jinwoo’s elbow dug uncomfortably into his side and Myungjun was restless and moving too much.

“Myungjun,” he hissed, poking the man beside him. “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” was Myungjun’s instant response, an indicator that he had not yet slept.

“You keep...you keep moving. Are you sure you’re okay?”

Silence was his answer. It stretched on for a few seconds, and Bin assumed Myungjun was not going to respond, but then the younger man turned to face him.

They lay close together. It was difficult to see Myungjun, too dark to make out any features other than his basic form, but Bin relished in being in such a position. He smiled and reached a hand out to ruffle Myungjun’s short hair. “Darling, what’s wrong?”

“You really are being my shield.”

“Yes. I told you I would.”

Myungjun sighed. He moved again, likely getting more comfortable, but he didn’t move away. Bin thought that, at least, was a good sign.

“I’m being selfish in asking such a thing of you, aren’t I?”

Bin shook his head, though he knew that Myungjun was likely unable to tell. “No. No, of course not, you’re not being selfish. I volunteered for this, darling. I knew what I was going to get into. Besides, I’m immortal, and you saw that a gunshot wound only takes a couple of days to heal. Even less if it didn’t hit my brain.”

Myungjun was quiet again, but he curled in closer to Bin’s body. He grasped onto Bin’s jacket, too, with a cautious touch, his fingers gripping onto the fabric, and he whispered, “Then let me stay close, okay? It’s...it’s just because you are my shield. I need to stay close to you for protection.”

It was like Bin had remembered with many of the previous Myungjun reincarnations. The warmth, the intimacy, the familiarity was overwhelming. Bin could only grin as he wrapped his arms around Myungjun and kept him tucked into his embrace.

Myungjun didn’t stay still, however. Bin had assumed Myungjun would fall asleep like this, but he started to move once again. “Myungjun, what—” Bin started to ask, but he felt Myungjun’s lips press up against the corner of his.

It was quick. It was chaste. Myungjun drew back with an intake of breath as if even he was surprised by his actions. “Sorry,” he whispered, wiping at Bin’s face, wiping away the remains of his lips. “I didn’t...sorry. I wasn’t thinking correctly.”
Bin’s heart hammered in his chest. He hadn’t expected this Myungjun to try to engage in any sort of affection like that. Even the hug was more than Bin thought he would ever receive. A kiss, as short as it was, had been a welcome surprise.

“Don’t apologize,” Bin said, his own voice hushed. He wondered if Myungjun could hear his heartbeat. He wondered if Myungjun’s heart was beating just as fast. “Never apologize for kissing me.”

Myungjun took another breath. “I missed, though. It was fucking stupid in the first place for me to even try. I thought it would just be a reward for you, for...for being my shield. Since you’re gay and jerk off to this sort of thing.”

“I’d jerk off to this sort of thing a bit better if you kissed me properly,” Bin teased. He brought his hand up to caress Myungjun’s cheek. It was dirty, grungy, a bit oily, but Bin didn’t mind at all. He smiled widely and added a question of, “May I show you how to kiss properly?”

Myungjun’s eyes were closed. Bin could feel when his hands traveled across the man’s face, like a blind man feeling his way around. He felt the curve of Myungjun’s nose and the dip right before his mouth began. He felt his chin, and his jawline, and his cute ears.

Myungjun stayed silent and still, so Bin asked again, “May I kiss you, darling?”

He felt Myungjun nod, and without waiting for anymore hesitation, Bin leaned in and planted his lips against Myungjun’s.

He was testing the waters first. He didn’t know how long Myungjun would like for the kiss to be, and so he kept it simple and plain. Even so, the lack of any sensual activity made it seem so innocent and special, and Bin smiled against Myungjun’s mouth.

Myungjun drew back first. He kept close enough that Bin could feel his breath, and he asked, “How was your first time kissing a man?”

“First time kissing anyone,” Myungjun murmured.

Bin blinked. “Really?”

Instead of responding to that, Myungjun chose a different question to answer. “I...I’m single. When you asked that, when you could talk, when we first met — I’m, um, I am single.”

His stammering was cute. Bin was certain that if he could see Myungjun right then and there, he would be blushing. His cheeks would be red and his ears would turn bright and Bin would call him cute.

For now, though, Bin simply chuckled and whispered, “Thank you for answering my—”

Myungjun quieted him with another kiss.

His kisses seemed to all be short and chaste, but Bin didn’t mind. He was grinning and trying to hold back his laughter. “You taste like cigarette smoke,” he said.

“Fuck off. You don’t mind.”

“Mm, I don’t.” Bin kissed him again, then began to pepper his kisses across Myungjun’s face. He heard Myungjun giggle from his ministrations, and so he continued until Myungjun was biting at his lips to control his volume.
Unfortunately, trying to kiss in a crowded tent wasn’t an ideal situation, and on his other side, Jinwoo snapped, “If you two are going to make out, at least get out of the tent.”

“You’re awake?” Bin asked as Myungjun pushed him away.

“I’ve been awake this whole time. It’s disgusting. God, I wish those soldiers had shot me so I don’t have to deal with this.”

Bin smirked and turned on his back, one arm still holding tightly onto Myungjun. “You always were grumpy at night.”

Jinwoo smacked Bin’s shoulder, and Bin gave a half-hearted, “Ow.”

Myungjun then leaned over Bin and smacked Jinwoo’s arm. “Don’t hit him,” Myungjun fussed.

In response to the attack, Jinwoo sat up and pinched Myungjun’s side, and soon enough, Bin was in the middle of the most ridiculous fight he had ever seen.

“Stop pulling his hair, Myungjun,” he grumbled, trying to pry Myungjun’s fingers away from Jinwoo, and then he snapped, “And Jinwoo, stop trying to bite him — oh my god, both of you fucking stop.”

But as annoying as it all was, he kept smiling. He kept laughing.

Jinwoo was alive and well. Myungjun was, too, and had kissed him. They were searching for an end to the curse.

Things, finally, were almost perfect.

“It’s fucking stupid that we’re stopping for the night,” Myungjun complained, watching as Jinwoo and Bin set up the tent in a small clearing they found. “We can keep going. Are you guys tired? I’m not tired.”

Jinwoo sighed and glanced over at Bin. He looked tense and frustrated, and Bin readied himself for another argument. “Why don’t we let him go off by himself?” Jinwoo asked, his voice laced with annoyance. “I think it will help our sanity.”

“No,” Bin responded, and then he turned to Myungjun, who had likely heard Jinwoo’s question, given his proximity. “We’re going to stick together, okay? It’s safer that way. So no one goes off on their own in the middle of the night. Alright, Myungjun?”

Myungjun was down to his last pack of cigarettes. He had been smoking on them slowly throughout the past few days. In the past twenty-four hours, he had only smoked three, which wasn’t nearly enough to satisfy him, apparently. He was more irritable now than ever, and he took most of his anger out on Jinwoo, who sometimes fought back but otherwise accepted his new status as the punching bag.

Bin didn’t like it, but he decided he could work on helping Myungjun curb his addiction when things settled down. Once his curse was broken, once Myungjun was back with his family, then,
perhaps, he would figure out how to help Myungjun’s cigarette problem.

For the time being, he grit his teeth down and tried to ignore the symptoms.

“My parents are only a day away, and the more time we spend trying to get to them, the less likely it is that they’ll stay in one place,” Myungjun grumbled.

Bin shook his head and replied, “It’s likely they already left; you said so yourself, that they might have gone down south in order to get away from the North Korean army. One extra day isn’t going to cause any harm, darling, I promise.”

Myungjun’s only response to that was, “Don’t fucking call me darling.”

The tent was set, and Jinwoo pulled his pot of kimchi out of his bag, along with several cans of food. “I’ve been saving these for when we’re hungry,” Jinwoo stated. “They’re from some dead Americans. Military rations, I believe, but I can’t read what’s in them.”

Myungjun scooted closer. He grabbed the kimchi, the familiar food, but neither Jinwoo nor Bin tried to stop him.

Bin took a look at the cans Jinwoo had. “Biscuits,” he read. “And...these two are beans.” Bin opened one of the cans and sniffed. It reeked, but at least it was better than nothing. “I think when the war is over,” he mumbled, grabbing one of the spoons Jinwoo had also prepared and stuffing it in the slimy mess, “I’m going to cook the biggest fucking meal I can think of. I’ll make it seafood based. It’s been months since I’ve eaten seafood. Crab and octopus and shrimp, and the best fish I can find at the markets. I’ll cook every side dish I can think of, too.”

“Count me in,” Jinwoo said, pulling the biscuit from its can and tapping it. “This is probably stale.”

Myungjun shoved the pot of kimchi into Jinwoo’s arms. He had already eaten a bit, evident by the sauce on his lips, but he muttered, “Here. It’s better than whatever shit is in that can.”

“Oh.” Jinwoo cleared his throat. “Thanks, Myungjun. You’re right; I’d rather not try this biscuit.” He put it back in the can and said, “Let’s have it as our emergency ration.”

“Did you eat enough?” Bin questioned. He held out his beans to Myungjun. “You can have some of these, if you’re still hungry. They taste like shit, but it’s filling.”

Myungjun shook his head and sat back. “No,” he mumbled. “I’m not really hungry. I just want to go see my mom and dad.”

“We will,” Bin promised. “But we can’t walk all that way, and it’s not safe to walk around at night, anyway, especially not when you and I still have these jackets on.”

They had toyed with the idea of ditching the military jackets in order to appear as civilians, not as soldiers. However, the nights were cold and windy and the jackets were necessary. It meant more secrecy, less walking around in the open, but Bin decided it was worth it in order to stay healthy and relatively warm.

Myungjun didn’t argue his point. Myungjun just nodded his head. “Right,” he said. “I know.” He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “I’m just anxious.”

“That’s from your cigarette addiction.”
“Shut up, Jinwoo. It’s not just that. It’s...it’s my family, and Bin’s curse.” His fingers drummed a tune on his leg and he added, “And maybe I just want a cigarette a little bit, but it isn’t an addiction.”

Before Jinwoo could continue fussing at Myungjun, Bin asked, “Are you really still thinking about the curse? You don’t have to concern yourself with it right now, not when we’re trying to find your parents.”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders and said, “You’re my shield, though, and while I’d like for you to continue to be my shield, it’s...a little fucking sad, don’t you think, that you’re immortal? So I’ve been thinking about what could’ve caused it, but all I can think back to is that necklace turning into a cursed object from something awful you did. And it had to be really awful to punish you like this. But that doesn’t make sense because you really don’t seem like an awful person.” Myungjun’s eyebrows with furrowed with thought and he met Bin’s gaze. “You didn’t do anything bad, did you?”

“He kept me up the other night because he wouldn’t stop kissing you.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Jinwoo.”

“Don’t be a fag, Myungjun.”

Bin decided not to involve himself in the argument. It was silly, anyway, and all it amounted to was Myungjun playfully shoving Jinwoo before they went into the tent. His mind was on the curse. Now that Myungjun had mentioned it again, Bin thought about the necklace and his curse and the heinous thing he didn’t do.

Hours passed. Beside him, Jinwoo snored lightly and Myungjun mumbled nonsense in his sleep. Bin, though, remained awake.

Myungjun was the only person who could even remotely make that sort of connection about an awful action and a cursed necklace. Myungjun was superstitious enough to have an idea about what had caused Bin’s punishment.

Myungjun did not know, however, about General Kim’s visit to the capital.

Keeping such vital information away was more harmful than helpful in the end. If Myungjun didn’t know, he wouldn’t be able to convey his thoughts or make any other connections.

Bin had to tell him, and he had to tell him now.

“Myungjun.”

Myungjun gave a small noise, and Bin nudged him.

“Darling, wake up.”

“What?” Myungjun asked, keeping his eyes closed. At least he was awake. At least Bin had his attention, however tired he was.

Bin swallowed nervously and decided it was high-time to forgo his fear of pitting Myungjun against General Kim. “I didn’t tell you everything.”

“Everything?”
“Before he died, a few weeks before, General Kim was invited to the capital in order to dine with the king and a few other important dignitaries. He spent a week away, and when he came back, things were different. He was quiet and sullen. He cried a lot and kept apologizing. I don’t know what he was apologizing for. He didn’t like being affectionate with me after that.”

Myungjun yawned. “Can’t this wait until morning?” he asked.

“I just...I needed to tell you. It’s been weighing on my mind, and I wanted your opinion.”

“Hmm.” Myungjun smacked his lips together and, eyes still closed, asked, “He took the necklace after that?”

“Yes. A few days before he died, we finally had sex and that’s the last time I had the necklace in my possession until recently.”

Myungjun rolled over, curling into Bin’s side. If not for the anxiety bubbling in Bin’s body, he would forget everything about the capital and embrace Myungjun all night. As it was, though, he wanted an answer.

“Sounds like he cheated on you.”

The answer wasn’t worth waiting for. Bin sighed loudly and kissed the top of Myungjun’s head. “He did not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Fine. Let me sleep, then, if you won’t listen to my suggestions.”

Bin pursed his lips, then asked, “What makes you think he cheated? Out of everything it could be — maybe he cursed me on accident, or something else happened.”

“You said I’m his reincarnation, and if I was a great and powerful general with a boyfriend, I wouldn’t curse him. Not even accidentally. If General Kim was anything like I am, he wouldn’t mess around with curses. Too superstitious for that. But maybe he cheated and felt guilty about it.”

“He wouldn’t cheat, though.”

Myungjun scoffed and pinched Bin’s side gently. “Fine, fine, he didn’t cheat. Regardless, his cheating wouldn’t mean you’d be punished, so I don’t know. Maybe it’s not even related.”

That made the most sense. The capital visit could be completely unrelated to whatever curse the necklace had on it. Bin relaxed and pulled Myungjun even closer to him, allowing the man’s head to rest against his chest.

“You wouldn’t curse me?”

“No. Shut up, Bin.”

“You wouldn’t cheat on me, either, would you?”

“You have to be dating in order to cheat, you fucking idiot. Now shut the hell up.”

Bin smiled widely as he closed his eyes. Perhaps sleep could come easier now that he knew there was likely no relation in Myungjun’s weird attitude and Bin’s immortality.

It didn’t bring him any closer to figuring out what the curse was, but at least he knew it wasn’t Myungjun’s fault.
“Sometimes I long to hold onto you in public,” Myungjun said as they walked along a stone path overlooking the long river that stretched through Baekje Kingdom. It was a pretty place, with clear air and scents of nature and many small animals. Bin had always enjoyed such leisurely walks down the path with Myungjun by his side, but when his lover spoke, he listened and agreed. “I wish I could hold your hand. I wish I could kiss your cheek. I wish I could declare to the world that I am in love with you, and shall forever be in love with you.”

“You can,” Bin said. “People will assume I am a concubine. Or, else, a younger lover. And I am younger.”

“Not by much. Don’t be cheeky.” Myungjun sighed and glanced out over at the water, eyes soft as he watched the slow and gentle flow of the river. “I would not mind showing our love off to the world if it didn’t have consequences. As I am in the public eye, a shining role model for your average man, it would be uncouth of me to portray myself as anything but a pious general. Should word get out that I am sleeping with one of my soldiers, then I might not be trusted. Would you want a general protecting you when that general is sleeping with a soldier?”

Bin shrugged his shoulders. “I would not care,” he claimed, but Myungjun scoffed at such a response.

“You only say that because you are the soldier I’m sleeping with. I can assure you, your worldview would be far different if you were married to a woman or two, with no extra male lover on the side. If you were Buddhist, that would change things even more.” Myungjun glanced up at Bin and added, “I’m supposed to be Buddhist. Imagine if word got out that I am not.”

“You are Buddhist,” Bin responded. “It does not matter that you sleep with me. I don’t view it as temptation; it’s simply a way to show your love and affection. Sex can be very intimate, and we make it so. There’s nothing terribly wrong about a general sleeping with his soldier.”

Myungjun pursed his lips. He appeared thoughtful and turned his gaze back onto Bin. “To many people, there is something wrong with it. I’d be better off sleeping with a whore than with you.”

“Do you want to sleep with a whore?”

“Of course not!” Myungjun rolled his eyes. He kept close to Bin; several times, Bin could see his arm reach out as if to hold onto Bin’s hand, but he seemed to remember himself and where he was. There were other people walking and sitting, and word would spread if they were caught in any sort of intimacy.

To keep from holding Bin, Myungjun crossed his arms over his own chest, as if that could ward off all temptations.

“Bin, even though I say I want a public love, please understand that you are the only man I will ever love. You are the only person I will ever love.”

Bin smiled and glanced at his lover. “Is that so?”

“You know it is, don’t be ridiculous,” Myungjun scolded. “I might sometimes be upset that I
cannot tout you around in public as my handsome and attentive lover, but that doesn’t mean that I
will find someone else.”

“I should hope not.”

“Bin. I swear.” Myungjun stopped Bin in his tracks and stared upon him with a serious expression.
There was no mockery in his tone as he said, “I swear I will never sleep with anyone but you. My
lips are made for no one’s lips but yours. You have my word. The gods should smite me down in
punishment if I stray from your arms, and I will accept that punishment.”

“I won’t,” Bin declared. He glanced around, ensuring that no one was watching, and then bent
over to place a quick kiss onto Myungjun’s head. When he drew back, Myungjun was hiding a
smile, and Bin couldn’t help but grin. “I will not allow you to be punished, General. The gods
ought to punish me instead.”

Myungjun laughed and shoved Bin lightly. “Don’t be foolish, Bin.”

“No, I really will take any punishment given to you. You’re too wonderful to be punished. You’re
my sweet darling, and you’re too good for the gods to punish. I swear, on everything I hold dear, I
will accept your punishments.”

Myungjun gave Bin a slight tsk, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and said, “It’s
easy for you to accept such a thing because you do not even believe in the gods.”

“Exactly.”

“You’re a damned fool. I’m surprised I love you so much.”

“If you really love me, let’s hurry back to your home so I can embrace you in private.”

He loved the river and the nature and the scents and sounds, but he loved Myungjun so much
more. He would give up everything if it meant he could remain within Myungjun’s arms forever.

Later that night, as he and Myungjun lay side by side, Myungjun asked, “You weren’t serious,
were you? About accepting whatever punishments might befall me?”

“I was. I don’t say things if I’m not serious.”

Myungjun frowned. In the darkness of the room, his face was visible only by the flames from a
lantern, casting dark shadows across most of his features. Bin moved closer and smiled.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “There’s nothing to be concerned over. You will not do anything to
anger the gods, to enact their wrath. And you would never sleep with someone other than me,
right?”

“Of course. I love you far too much.”

“Then there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Still…” Myungjun sighed. “I wish you wouldn’t make such promises.”

Bin kissed Myungjun’s cheek. “Silly wish,” he murmured.

As Myungjun fell asleep, Bin felt a warmth touch his chest. He brought a free hand up to feel the
jade necklace. Usually it was cool to the touch, only warmed when Bin held it tightly in his hand,
but now it felt a little heated. He decided it was likely from his own body heat, and from
Myungjun’s tight embrace, and he smiled to himself.

“You fill me with warmth, darling,” he whispered to his lover.

Myungjun, half asleep, gave a small giggle.

“Even my necklace is warm because of you.”

Myungjun kissed his chest, then his necklace, and sighed, “Let me sleep, Binnie.”

“Of course.”

And as Bin drifted to sleep, he begged the gods he didn’t believe in, the gods he thought to be fake, to never punish Myungjun for anything.

If it was a punishment, Bin would accept it. He would accept any amount of pain in order to give Myungjun a better life.

Once they entered Myungjun’s town, the scene before them was dismal. Many houses had been destroyed from the war and rubble lay everywhere. The houses that still stood were in slight disrepair and disuse, and the citizens seemed too few, too little. A few hungry beggars huddled together on the street, wary eyes peering at Bin as he walked past.

Myungjun could only stare in horror at the sight.

He didn’t speak much. He stuffed his final cigarette into his mouth with shaking hands and lit it, but he didn’t speak. Bin could practically feel the dread radiating off of him as they neared closer to the center of the town, where Myungjun said his home would be.

Jinwoo was the first one to break the silence. “Like Bin said last night, your parents likely gone. Right, Bin?”

“Right.” Bin was agreeing now to calm Myungjun’s nerves. “They would’ve left as soon as the fighting commenced.”

Still, Myungjun said nothing until they got closer to his house, until he could see with his own eyes that it was now nothing more than debris.

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head in disbelief. He rushed forward, Bin following closely behind. “This...oh, god...Bin, my house! My house, it’s…”

“I know.”

Myungjun climbed up on the wooden pieces and began tossing aside the wreckage, as if digging for a trace, of a clue, as to where his family might have gone. Bin wanted to stop him, but he recognized that Myungjun ought to deal with his grief as he saw fit. If he wanted to uncover memories hidden within the trash of what was once a great home, Bin wouldn’t interject.

Myungjun glanced behind him, eyes wide and filled with tears. “Where d-did they go, Bin?”
Bin gestured behind him. “South,” he answered, “where everyone else went.”

“There’s still people here, though. Not everyone went south.” Myungjun stood from his house and carefully made his way back to solid ground. He wiped the tears from his face; dirt smeared across his cheeks. “Bin, what if they got caught in the fighting?”

“They didn’t,” Bin assured him, solely for the sake of assuring him. He honestly didn’t know what fate had befallen Myungjun’s parents. Perhaps they escaped only to die elsewhere. Perhaps they were alive and well behind the American lines. Perhaps they were killed in their home. Bin had no idea, but he refused to dash Myungjun’s hopes with his realistic thoughts.

Beside him, Jinwoo kept quiet, surveying the scene with a cautious expression.

Myungjun glanced around wildly until he seemed to catch sight of someone familiar. “That’s Sunghoon!” he exclaimed. “He lived beside us. Let’s...let’s ask him. He might know.”

Still, Myungjun hesitated, and Bin understood why. He was afraid to figure out the truth, in fear it might be unsavory.

He was afraid to learn his parents did die.

Bin nudged him forward, and Myungjun stumbled over a roof tile. At least he was walking, though, Bin and Jinwoo right behind him.

Sunghoon was an older gentleman, seated on the doorsteps of what used to be a home. He had a bottle of soju beside him, mostly emptied, and a blanket covering his legs.

“Sunghoon!” Myungjun greeted with a slight bow. “Sunghoon, where are my parents?”

Sunghoon looked up at Myungjun, then smiled widely. “Myungjun! You came back! Your mother was so scared when the fighting began. She kept praying you would return, and I told her you surely would. You look well. How has the fighting been?”

Myungjun nodded his head. “Fine. It’s...where is my mom? And dad? Where are they?”

The old man’s smile faltered. He ducked his head and sighed. “I’m sorry, Myungjun.”

Myungjun’s body tensed. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and Bin could see him shaking.

“Sunghoon, where are they?” he repeated, voice strained.

Sunghoon gestured to his right, to some fields. “The North Korean soldiers came through and they shot everyone who appeared educated. Your...your mother and father had books in their home, and they were killed. I’ve buried them for you, though. I’m so sorry, Myungjun.”

A whimper escaped Myungjun’s lips. He shook his head now, frantic and distraught, as if trying to deny the truth. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

Only sobs.

He would have fallen to his knees had Bin not reached out to keep him upright, and then Myungjun truly allowed himself to mourn. He gripped tightly to Bin’s arm, fingers digging in painfully, and wailed like a child for his family to return.

It took a long while to calm him down. His grief was immense, and both Bin and Jinwoo understood. “He’s lost the two most important people in his life,” Jinwoo muttered when
Myungjun sat by the makeshift graves given to his parents. “It’s a shock. It won’t stop hurting — but I needn’t explain all this to you, right? You already know.”

Bin sighed. He knew all too well how long grief could linger. “It’s been over a thousand years and I still mourn for General Kim,” he replied, quietly, in hopes that Myungjun could not hear. He watched Myungjun shift, watched him bury his head into his hands to cry, and he said, “I’m going to sit with him.”

“Alright.” Jinwoo nodded and clapped a hand on Bin’s back. “I’ll try and find us some food. I guess our next step is to return south?”

“Yeah.” Bin ran his fingers through his hair. “Make sure you look for cigarettes.”

“Of course.”

As Jinwoo scurried off, Bin moved forward carefully, not wanting to interrupt the grieving process Myungjun was going through. His heart hurt hearing Myungjun cry in such a manner; he wished he could wrap the man up in his arms and kiss him and remove all of the pain and suffering from his life.

“Myungjun,” he said, announcing his presence. “May I come sit?”

He saw Myungjun nod, and he took a seat beside his lover.

The graves were likely several weeks old. They weren’t freshly dug, but it was still obvious where each of the bodies lay. A small stone had been placed on top of each, too, as a marker, and Bin decided after the war, he would replace it all with something grander.

“I’m so sorry, darling,” he murmured, leaning slightly into Myungjun. Myungjun did not draw back. “I’m sure your parents were wonderful people. They didn’t deserve—”

“They couldn’t read,” Myungjun gasped out. He looked up at Bin, his eyes bloodshot and the skin around them puffy and red. He had visible tear streaks down his cheeks, likely to soon be multiplied, and Bin reached out to wipe clean his face. Myungjun still did not pull away. “The books, Bin, the books were mine. I was—I was the only one who could read.” He whined, high-pitched and sad, and choked, “They were killed because of me!”

“No. Myungjun, it was not because of you. It wasn’t. During war, people are killed indiscriminately, and it is no one’s fault save for the killer.”

Myungjun sobbed out, “They should’ve been protected! They—they weren’t soldiers! They were civilians! M-My mom and dad were civ-civilians!” He gasped as he struggled to take a breath. “The Americans s-said they would help us! Why—why did they leave my parents to die? Why weren’t they he-here?”

“They’re not doing their duty,” Bin agreed, though he was unsure how truthful that was. They came later in the war; they were still making their way up north. Still, he’d rather put the blame on American soldiers than onto poor Myungjun.

“They only care about themselves!” Myungjun cried, leaning fully into Bin now. “I hate them!”

“Shh.” Bin kissed the side of his head. He felt Myungjun shake under his touch and he whispered, “Let’s stay here for a few days, alright? We’ll give your parents a proper funeral rite before heading back south. Is that okay?”
Myungjun nodded his head, but even the promise of a dignified funeral could not appease him. Bin was well-aware of the pain Myungjun was going through.

He knew it, too; nothing would make it better.

Not even after a thousand years.

The American soldiers were moving up north. Bin, Jinwoo, and Myungjun had watched from the sidelines during several battles, and with each passing day came more Americans. Bin supposed that was a good thing, as it would hopefully result in a ceasefire before too long, but he didn’t care very much who ended up winning. He had been through many different rulers with varying styles of governing their land, and he was certain he could live through a communist regime or else an American dictatorship. It didn’t matter much to him.

It didn’t matter much to Myungjun, either. When Jinwoo made mention that they should settle near the southern coastline, Myungjun snapped, “Who gives a fuck where we end up?”

Jinwoo held back any sort of biting response. He and Bin had agreed that Myungjun was still mourning, and it wouldn’t be kind of them to argue when he was obviously mentally distraught. His whole world was ruined; his parents were dead, he had no home, and he was in the midst of war. Coupled with that was his cigarette addiction, which had only become worse with a lack of cigarettes, and Myungjun’s outlook on life had spiralled down.

Still, it didn’t stop Bin from loving him with every fiber of his being. He knew to keep his distance most of the time, and he knew when he was needed to offer love and comfort. At times, Myungjun would curse and yell at him if he drew near; at other times, Myungjun craved affection and attention and would grip tightly onto Bin. Poor Myungjun experienced such a wide array of emotions on a daily basis, and was usually exhausted by the time nightfall came around.

With that in mind, Bin treated him gently, carefully, as if he was a piece of fragile china that could break at any moment, with any small push or shove. General Kim would’ve hated being treated in such a manner. This Myungjun, however, seemed to appreciate it.

Most villages along the way down south were in ruins. The ones that still stood were devoid of people, the citizens having already fled the fighting, and so looting was their only option to gather certain goods. Bin had always despised looting. It reminded him too much of when General Kim had died, of when he had discovered his immortality. He recalled the villagers who had come to pick goods off the dead bodies.

He recalled the man who had come to steal from Myungjun, who had defiled his body as if he was a nobody.

And here he was, doing the exact same thing.

He tried to pray over each dead body he stole from. He tried to pray for the previous occupants of each house they entered. However, he wasn’t very religious, and his personal vendetta against the gods made it difficult for his prayers to be anything more than words.
He then would apologize, not to the gods but to the people. He would ask the gods to pass along his apology, to keep safe those who might still be alive.

Still, he believed the gods to be assholes, so he didn’t put much faith in his prayers.

They entered one house. Bin prayed quickly before crossing the threshold, where Jinwoo had already disappeared into.

It was a nice house, but it was clear the occupants had left in a hurry. Clothes were tossed astray, and a few bags of rice littered the kitchen ground. Jinwoo was quick to scoop those up with a smile on his face. “All we need is water and fire for this,” he stated, stuffing the rice into his backpack.

Myungjun rifled through desk drawers for cigarettes, but he paused after a second and asked, “Do you hear that?”

Jinwoo glanced up, listening, and Bin heard the noise at the same time as Jinwoo.

“That’s a pig,” Bin breathed out, and the three of them rushed to one of the back windows.

Behind the house, in the tiny backyard, was a shed with several pigs still locked up. From what Bin could tell, a few were already dead, likely from starvation, but he counted at least four of them that were still moving. They were skinny, a little mangy, but Bin grinned widely at the sight.

“I can salvage a bit of pork from those fuckers,” he said to Jinwoo, excited. “God, we haven’t had real meat in a few weeks, have we?”

Jinwoo’s eyes were wide and he shook his head slowly. “No. That’s...that’s a lot of meat. Is there anyway we can take some of it with us when we leave?”

“I can cure it, but it’ll take a few days. Would you two be opposed to sticking around here for a bit?”

Jinwoo was the first to shake his head. “No. North Korean soldiers are pushed further up north, so I think we’ll be safe. Myungjun, what do you think?”

Myungjun glanced over at Bin, who offered him a small smile. “We’ll do whatever you want, darling.” If Myungjun wanted to go south and forget the pigs, then Bin would. He knew Jinwoo might complain, but Bin had made it clear he was willing to forgo basic necessities if it would make Myungjun satisfied.

Fortunately, Myungjun said, “I like pork.”

“Great!” Jinwoo stared hungrily at the pigs. “Bin, you should do the honor of killing them. You have the most experience.”

Bin was already reaching for his knife. He had killed pigs before, and curing them was second nature. “You two can go check out the other homes,” he suggested. “Perhaps we’ll find something useful in those.”

Jinwoo shifted his backpack and finally tore his eyes away from his future meal. “If we find more pigs?”

“Mark the houses in your mind, and I’ll get those, too. If you find any animal, just let me know.” He opened the door; the squealing was louder now. “We can spend a week or two drying out the meats, and then we’ll stuff as much as we can into our bags.”
So Jinwoo and Myungjun went off on their own, and Bin took his time butchering the pigs. They were very skinny, likely only kept alive by scavenging whatever bugs had come into their shed, but there was enough meat on their bones to work with. At the very least, it was more meat than they had seen in a long while.

An hour had passed and Bin had just finished skinning one of the pigs he had killed. He was ready to begin the unsavory process of removing the insides, but he heard a gunshot.

Then another one.

Myungjun and Jinwoo were supposed to be the only two others inside this little village.

His heart hammered as he scrambled to his feet and raced back inside of the house. He grabbed his gun, the one he had taken from Myungjun, and ran out the front door, frantically searching for his friends.

“Myungjun!” he yelled, taking the direction he believed the gunshot to have come from. “Jinwoo! Myungjun!”

He heard Jinwoo yelling, and then he heard a response. It was a different language, a foreign language, but Bin recognized it immediately.

English. American soldiers, likely. Why had they shot, though? Who had they shot?

Bin rounded the corner and almost tripped over Jinwoo, who was crouched over Myungjun’s body. He was yelling obscenities, hands over what looked to be a very bloody wound in Myungjun’s stomach, desperately trying to keep the younger man alive.

Two American soldiers stood a few feet away, looking nervous and unsure, trying to calm Jinwoo down. They spoke with voices that shook, likely from nerves, but their words were meaningless. “We told you to stand down,” one said, but the other one nudged him.

“He doesn’t speak English.”

Bin did, but Bin couldn’t deal with them, not right then. He fell to his knees beside Jinwoo, trying to survey the damage caused to Myungjun’s small body.

Myungjun’s face was pale, ashen. He was panicking, eyes wide with fright, breaths coming out short and quick. When Bin pressed down on the wound in an attempt to apply pressure, Myungjun’s face contorted in pain.

“It’s alright,” Bin said, though he knew it was not alright. Myungjun had two gunshot wounds in his stomach, Bin decided after a quick look, and there wasn’t much that could be done. Not out here, in this desolate village with no help around for miles.

Myungjun gasped out for breath. He was choking on his own blood. “B-Bin!” he stammered. “Bin, I-I don’t w-wanna die!”

“You won’t,” Bin promised. Empty promises. Lies. Falsehoods. He was used to those. It just hurt all the more when he delivered them to Myungjun.

Myungjun’s eyes filled with tears, likely from the pain. Bin took a deep breath and whispered, “Darling, look at me. Look up at me, okay? Jinwoo is going to go through your backpack. It’s going to be a bit painful, since he has to grab it from your shoulders, but can you let him do that?”
It wasn’t as if Myungjun was in any place to argue. Still, he nodded as the tears raced down his cheeks, and then gagged on blood. Some of the blood spilled from his lips. Some of it stained his teeth. He seemed to realize it was blood and not saliva, and he cried harder. “Bin!” he sobbed as Jinwoo hurriedly rifled through his backpack. “I—I’m scared! I don’t — d-don’t let me die! Pl—Please, Bin!”

“You won’t die. Jinwoo is finding your first-aid kid. Remember the one you were issued as a soldier?”

Once more, Myungjun nodded. Jinwoo shook his head agitatedly, pulling out gauze and bandages and medicine. “How the fuck do we heal a gunshot wound?” he asked, but Bin ignored him. Bin turned his attention to Myungjun.

“Darling,” he said, pressing down harder on his wounds. “Darling, look at me. Stay with me, okay? Please, Myungjun, please, please, please don’t die. Please.”

His words went unheard. Myungjun’s body convulsed once more, twice more, and then was still. The light faded from his eyes, and the fear was forever immortalized on his face.

He was dead.

Bin’s efforts to save him had been fruitless all along. He had known that. Yet, he hoped and he prayed that this time it would be different. Myungjun had known of the curse, and he still died.

The gods had given Bin no escape from the hell he lived.

Jinwoo was quiet for a second, slowly putting away the first-aid kit. Then he spoke. “I’m so sorry, Bin.”

“What the fuck happened?” Bin asked. He sobbed, holding back a wail, and demanded, “Why did
you let him fucking die?”

He saw Jinwoo wince, but hurting Jinwoo’s feelings didn’t matter all that much. So what if Jinwoo was upset? Myungjun was dead, and Bin wanted to blame someone for his death.

“I...I’m sorry. He saw...those American soldiers had come. I guess they’re scouting. They asked us something, I think, but I don’t speak English, but I thought we were safe because Myungjun had on his uniform and we were on their side, but...he ran at them, Bin. Myungjun ran and started punching one of the soldiers, yelling about how they were assholes for not protecting his parents. They...they shot him fast. I think they were scared. He had a gun on him, and...maybe it was self-defense, but he hadn’t reached for his gun.” Jinwoo swallowed nervously and stared at his hands, bloodied from Myungjun’s wound. “I should’ve grabbed him sooner. I was in shock. I’m so sorry, Bin.”

Bin knew he couldn’t blame Jinwoo. He was done being mad at Jinwoo. He had learned his lesson a thousand years ago, and he couldn’t repeat the past.

But someone was to blame. The gods were the likely choice, but they were impossible to reach, impossible to attack.

Bin stared down at Myungjun’s lifeless body. He closed his eyes, trying to make him look a little more peaceful, and then whimpered at the sight of his lover dead.

Again.

He wiped the tears from his face, smearing blood across his cheeks, and then stood, turning around to glare at the Americans. They stood nearby still, cautious and unsure, and Bin called out, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

One of them gasped. “You speak English?”

Bin didn’t dignify that with a response. His hands shook with anger and pain and sadness, and he pointed to Myungjun. “You killed him.”

“He...he was attacking—”

“You fucking shot him.”

They seemed not to know what to say, so Bin continued. “You didn’t even shoot him just once. You shot him twice. You fucking bastards shot him twice. And for what? All he did was punch you!”

“We didn’t know if he would do more,” one of the soldiers tried to explain, but Bin had heard enough.

Someone was to blame, and they were disposable.

He grabbed his rifle. They realized what was happening too late, and as they tried to ready their own weapons, Bin shot them both.

He made sure they were dead. Even as they fell, bleeding out from wounds in their head and chests, Bin shot them again. He shot one, and then the other, and then the first again, and then the other again, until he ran out of bullets.
He turned, ready to reach into his backpack for more ammunition, to waste his supply until his anger was gone, but he realized Jinwoo was watching him in shock and fear.

Bin took a deep breath and released the hold on his weapon. “I…”

I what? How was he to explain himself? How was he to talk of his bloodthirsty need for revenge?

“You killed them,” Jinwoo whispered. “Fuck, Bin…”

“I’m sorry.” Bin went back to his knees. He dropped his gun in order to pull Myungjun’s body close to him, to cradle it in his arms. He blinked tears away from his eyes and sobbed, “They killed Myungjun! H-How was I supposed to let them live? I can’t...I can’t do this anymore, Jinwoo. I can’t keep watching him die, over and over again, and I just...oh, god, he’s dead!”

His tears came down fast. He wailed, stricken with the pain and loss he was forced to endure. Jinwoo’s arms tried to embrace him, tried to hold him close, but Bin could hardly feel anything at all.

And what he could feel was Myungjun’s body lying limp in his arms.

The most important person in his life was dead for the sixth time and it seemed there would never be an end to this suffering.

He was stuck in his personal hell for eternity.

“Here,” Jinwoo said, tossing Bin a pair of gloves he had come across in one home they were looting. “It’s starting to get cold. Will these fit you?”

Bin stared down at the gloves. They looked nice. They were probably high-quality gloves. The house they were from was definitely that of a lower-income family, so why did they have such expensive gloves?

Bin wondered if they had worked hard, slaved away, earned enough money to splurge on something. Bin wondered if a man had bought this for his wife as a present.

He hoped the fictional husband and wife pair were safe and happy. He hoped everyone else made it out of the war alive. He hoped nobody would end up like Myungjun.

But he knew his hopes and wishes and prayers were always dashed before they could ever come true.

“I also found these.” Jinwoo held up a pack of cigarettes.

The gods were surely mocking him, Bin thought. Before Myungjun’s death, they had difficulties finding cigarettes. Now, Bin had at least ten packs in his bag, and he kept coming across more and more.

“Where the fuck were these a few weeks ago?” he grumbled, snatching the pack from Jinwoo’s hands.
“You don’t have to take them. We have plenty.”

“I smoke. You smoke. We’ll make use of them.”

“Neither of us smoke *that* much.” Jinwoo sighed, but chose to mostly ignore Bin’s hoarding issue, just as he had chosen to mostly ignore Myungjun’s addiction issue. He ignored a lot these days. He ignored Bin crying in the middle of the night. He ignored the thin bodies on the streets begging for food. He ignored the prostitutes that beckoned for them but ended up with soldiers. Bin had noticed that Jinwoo was a pro at ignoring things.

Bin found life’s nuances a little more difficult to brush aside. His attention was caught to everything. He wanted an escape from the endless cycle his life was forced to go through. He wanted something *new* to happen, something interesting.

War was getting boring. He could only take so many air raids, so many tanks, so many dead bodies.

“There are some nice knives in here,” Jinwoo commented, having moved to the kitchen. “How’s your knife looking?”

Bin pulled his knife from the makeshift scabbard and examined it. “Dull,” he replied. “I’ve sliced open one too many chickens.”

“Here, come look for one of these, then. Some of them are as big as the one you have.”

A new knife was something *slightly* more interesting than constant bombings, and so Bin trudged over to Jinwoo’s side to take a look.

He first noticed a sharpening stone, and he grabbed that with glee. “I don’t even need a new knife,” he said. “I can just sharpen my own. It’s still good, otherwise.”

“Alright, if you’re sure. You can still take a new one, though.” Jinwoo leaned up against the counters, watching Bin sharpen his knife. He lit a cigarette while waiting and watching. The smell of nicotine filled the air; it was comforting, for it reminded him of Myungjun. It was painful, for it reminded him of Myungjun.

“He liked those fucking things too much,” Bin mumbled, above the soft scraping of his knife running across the smooth stone surface.

Jinwoo knew exactly who he was speaking of. “Myungjun. Yeah.”

“None of the other reincarnations were addicted to anything.”

He could feel Jinwoo’s gaze on him, examining, scrutinizing his attitude to see if it was safe or not to mention more of Myungjun. He seemed to determine it would be fine, and he asked, “Did the others smoke?”

“General Kim had a pipe. He smoked that sometimes. But otherwise, I think that was it. Perhaps they had before I came along. I’m not sure. My time with them was short.”

He swept the knife across the stone. The sound of metal against rock was ringing in his ears, and he longed to replace it with talk, instead.

Fortunately, Jinwoo kept the conversation going. “How long did you spend with General Kim?”
“A few years,” Bin replied. “Then…” He sighed and glanced up at his friend. “Well, you know the story.”

“That he cursed you before he died?”

“No, no… I don’t think he cursed me. I actually spoke to— Myungjun about the curse. He had… he had a weird idea. I disagreed with it, but I’ve been thinking that… maybe he’s right?”

Jinwoo took a drag of his cigarette, long and slow, before asking, “An idea?”

Saying it out loud made it real. Saying it out loud would make it final. But Bin couldn’t hide it any longer. Just as he had to tell Myungjun about General Kim’s initial visit to the capital, so he also had to tell Jinwoo about Myungjun’s weird idea.

He took a deep breath and said, “Myungjun thinks General Kim cheated on me.”

Jinwoo’s eyebrows rose. “And… what do you think?”

“I think he might be right.”

“Interesting. Do tell.”

Bin stopped sharpening his knife, wanting to talk without the sound of scraping metal. “General Kim was called to the capital a few weeks before his death. He was to be honored. I stayed behind, because no one knew I was his lover. When he came back, he was… he was different. His personality had changed. He was no longer affectionate, no longer loving. He kept crying and apologizing and I knew it had to do with the capital. It took a lot of convincing for him to finally have sex with me again, and that was when he stole the necklace, like I told you and Myungjun before.”

Jinwoo nodded his head and pursed his lips. “Still,” he said, shrugging his shoulder, “it could’ve been a curse he accidentally placed on you.”

“But I remembered… I remembered General Kim telling me he would never be unfaithful, and should he sleep with someone else, he wanted to be punished for it. And I said… I swore I would take the punishment from him.”

He was met with silence. Jinwoo smoked, though his eyes were wide as he stared at Bin.

Bin didn’t like the quiet. He needed to talk. “I wasn’t aware it would happen. I don’t even know why it happened. Part of me wonders if General Kim was so unhappy with hiding our relationship that he perhaps fucked someone else, but… he never seemed unhappy with me.” Bin groaned and returned to sharpening his knife. “Maybe I’m wrong. I could be wrong.”

“That’s pretty damning evidence, Bin,” Jinwoo said, cautiously. “I think Myungjun’s theory could be true.”

“And if it is, then what? How do I break that curse?”

“I don’t know,” was Jinwoo’s truthful answer.

Bin didn’t care if Jinwoo was no help. He knew it was something he had to figure out on his own. Or, mostly on his own. Myungjun had been the one to nudge him in this direction, though.
Thinking of Myungjun made him frown and he muttered, “You know what’s weird?”

“What?”

“This Myungjun shot me in my head, and I forgave him instantly. And I think if he were to come back and do it again, I’d forgive him instantly. The previous Myungjun let other guys fuck him while he wore a dress and pretended to be a girl, and that was after we met, and I forgave him for that, too. The Myungjun before him killed my neighbor and put me in danger and I didn’t care one bit. And the Myungjun before *that* wasn’t in love with me, and...maybe I did care, but I forgave him for it, because he can’t control who he loves.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“Point is, I forgave every single Myungjun for every single transgression. I forgave General Kim for every single transgression, too. When he called me stupid, when he pretended to hardly know me in public, when he decided he’d rather pray to Buddha than suck my dick, I forgave him.”

Jinwoo smirked, then stuck the cigarette back in his mouth, and Bin continued.

“So why did General Kim keep such a huge secret? He knew I would forgive him.”

“You forgive him, then? If he slept with someone else, you forgive him?”

“Of course I do!” Bin exclaimed. “I love him more than anyone. He probably had his reasons for it, and even if he didn’t, he was clearly sorry for what he had done. I’d forgive him in a single instant if he asked for it, but he needn’t even ask. I forgive him no matter what.” Bin sighed and took his knife from the sharpening block. “But he didn’t admit to it, and perhaps I’m wrong, and even if I’m right, I still have no idea what to do to break the curse.”

Jinwoo gave a shrug of his shoulders. “We’ll keep looking,” he promised. “We’ll figure out something.”

“Right.”

“Are you done sharpening the knife?”

Bin glanced around him. Normally after sharpening, he would test his blades on food or paper, but nothing like that was around. And so he grabbed the blade with the palm of his hand and sliced across the skin.

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Jinwoo snapped, wincing at the sight of the blood dripping off the knife and down Bin’s arm.

Bin snorted. “It’ll heal in less than a day, and you know it. Look, we know it’s sharp enough, at least. I could probably kill even an elephant with this knife.”

Jinwoo was already pulling the first-aid kit from his backpack, the same one he had almost used for Myungjun’s wounds. “Good thing there aren’t any elephants in Korea,” Jinwoo murmured. “Come here and let me wrap it. Even if you are immortal, I don’t want you bleeding out on me.”

Bin tried to argue, tried to claim it would be a waste of gauze, but Jinwoo was stubborn. Jinwoo never listened to him.

At least, even if the gods had abandoned Bin, Jinwoo was always there for him.
Their movement was slow. They took their time getting to the south. For the most part, they were safe. While they definitely remained in enemy territory, Bin had switched out his stolen army uniform for different clothing, along with a heavy wool coat. They could pass through, then, undetected by northern soldiers. When they came across fighting, they did their best to avoid it, taking hidden roads, creeping through forests, or else waiting until the fights died down. Air raids would happen from time to time, but Bin and Jinwoo could both recognize the signs of potential air raids. They would stay close enough to watch, but far enough to remain safe.

Bin preferred it that way. Jinwoo had no future until the fighting was over, and Bin’s only future would likely appear in a couple hundred years.

“I wonder where society will be then,” he muttered as Jinwoo rewrapped his wound. “I’ve already seen the invention of lightbulbs and cars and airplanes and televisions. I wonder what we’ll have in a hundred years from now.”

Jinwoo gave a small hum. “I’d worry more about this hand of yours. It looks like it might be getting infected.” He looked up at Bin, confusion evident in his gaze, and asked, “Didn’t you say you would heal soon? It’s been three days, and it’s gotten even worse.”

Bin had definitely noticed that his wound wasn’t healing. That had never happened before, not since he had become immortal. The gunshot wound in his head healed after a couple days; why, then, was a little knife wound in the palm of his hand taking so long?

It was worrisome, but Bin didn’t want to bog Jinwoo down with his concerns. “It happens sometimes,” he lied. “I’ll just have to take better care of it.”

He wondered if the gods were punishing him even more. He wondered if they had decided to stop letting him off easy when it came to physical wounds. Perhaps he wouldn’t be able to die, but perhaps it would never heal at all.

Bin cursed them in his head.

He hated the gods.

Jinwoo finished and they started their day. The sun had just risen, lighting their path, and the village they were in was bustling with people. A few North Korean soldiers stood around, chatting amongst themselves, but they were no threat. Bin had learned to politely nod to them, and they never bothered him.

Jinwoo munched on a slice of bread as they walked, something they had picked up upon arrival to the village. He was satisfied with the meal. “Most bread we come across is stale, moldy,” he said, his mouth full. “God, a slice of cheese would make this even better.”

“Don’t talk about improving on the meals we get,” Bin complained. “Do you know how much I’d love gujeolpan right now?”

“I hope you’d split it with me.”
“Get your own, Jinwoo. I’ll dine like a king by myself.”

Jinwoo laughed and opened his mouth to say something, but there was a loud noise suddenly overhead. Bin could see the soldiers running, yelling to each other, and too late he realized what was happening.

An air strike.

Bin pushed Jinwoo in front of him. “Run!” he yelled. Jinwoo didn’t need any more prompting. He was fast, panicked. The bread was dropped in his haste to get away. Already, Bin could hear bombs going off, likely towards the back of the village, and he pushed himself harder to get away.

He wanted to stay close to Jinwoo, to stick by his side to ensure his survival, but he noticed a young girl who had fallen just a few feet from him. She was a child, holding tightly onto a small toy, and was crying, screaming. She went ignored by the others rushing past.

Every man for himself, they had been taught.

Bin had believed that phrase, too, but in that moment, all he could see was that little orphaned boy he had saved from the ruins of his village.

He refused to let this girl suffer the same horrors that Myungjun had.

“Keep going!” he yelled to Jinwoo, “I’ll meet you in the forest!” Then he spun around, pushing past the crowd to find the girl.

She had managed to stand up by the time he reached her, but she wasn’t running, likely stricken with fear.

He skidded to a stop in front of her and grabbed her hand. She screamed at him, but he didn’t have time to worry if he was scaring her. “I’m good, I swear,” he assured her, scooping her up in his arms.

He couldn’t move a step further, though. There were bombs behind him, and then bombs right on top of him.

The world was spinning, a chaotic mess of debris and fire and smoke, and Bin lost the girl somewhere as the bombs hit right beside him. He flew through the air and crashed onto splintered wood, likely the remains of a house nearby.

Pain was all he felt.

Pain shot through his legs and his chest. He gasped for breath, but his lungs were struggling to find air. Agony tore him apart with every breath he could take, and when he tried to get up, he found his legs wouldn’t move.

The bombs continued, further ahead, but all Bin could do was lay there and stare up at the smoke and the sky and the small bits of debris still falling through the air. The planes flew off, likely done with their attack, and all that remained was ruin.

He could give it a day or two. Maybe then, in a day or two, his legs would be better and he could move. He could find Jinwoo and they could continue on their trek down south. He would be good as new then.

Just for a bit, he had to endure the torturous pain placed upon him.
As the minutes ticked away, as the hours passed, he could only hear the sounds of the dying. They moaned, called for help, cried, but Bin could do nothing to ease their suffering.

It was too similar to being on the battlefield with General Kim. As his body had healed that first time, he was stuck in the midst of the mortally wounded soldiers.

He closed his eyes briefly, trying to gulp in air. All he got was putrid smoke, and he coughed heavily.

“Fuck!” he screeched when pain shot through his chest. He brought a hand up to feel. He pressed down gently and cried out again.

His ribs must be fractured.

He felt saliva dribble down his cheek and he wiped it away in disgust.

It wasn’t saliva, though.

He wiped again, felt again, then spit onto his hand. His eyes widened when he saw the fluid dripping down his fingers.

Blood.

Internal bleeding was a sure sign of death.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. No. No, he had bled from the mouth when he was on the battlefield with General Kim. It happened sometimes. He wasn’t going to die.

Why, then, did it all feel so different?

Instead of getting better, he just felt worse. It was as if the gods truly did long for him to suffer. They took away his healing abilities.

“Fuck you,” he whispered to the gods. “Fuck all of you.”

It was turning dark. The sounds of people nearby were falling silent. Movement had ceased.

Or, it had for a while, and then someone was rushing up to Bin.

“Bin!” Jinwoo’s voice rang out, and Bin’s eyes snapped open to stare. “O-Oh, god, Bin...you’re alive.”

Of course I am , Bin wanted to say, but he gagged on blood instead.

Jinwoo’s eyes were wide, frantic, scared. He examined Bin’s body and took a deep, shuddering breath. “Y-Your legs are...blown apart. Oh, fuck, Bin, can you...can you heal from this?”

I want to, Bin tried to say. I’m trying to . He just moaned instead.

Jinwoo pushed hair back from his forehead. “You fucking idiot,” he whispered. “You had to go and be a noble hero, didn’t you?”

Bin spit out blood. He could talk, just barely, and in a raspy voice he asked, “Did she live?”

“No. She’s worse off than you.”
“Dammit.”

He could feel himself drifting. Things were getting dim. The pain wasn’t as bad, somehow, and yet he wasn’t healing.

He brought his hand up to stare at the bandaged wound. It was bleeding again. It still hadn’t healed, even after the hours he had lay there. His body was through regenerating itself.

His immortality was gone.

His curse was lifted.

“I’m dying,” he whispered.

He looked up at Jinwoo, who stared down at him in shock.

“Jinwoo!” He couldn’t help but grin. “I’m...I’m dy-dying,” he sputtered. Blood dripped down his chin again, and Jinwoo wiped it away with shaking hands.

“Bin—”

“Keep...keep going south,” Bin ordered. “Find a—a family. New wife, ne-new start. God, Jinwoo, I’m, I’m s-so happy. And...god, you’re here with me. And I’m...I’m done.” He couldn’t keep staring at Jinwoo for any longer. His eyesight was going. He was finally dying.

“Thank you, Jinwoo,” he said.

“Bin, d-don’t...just wait—”

“I’m done waiting.”

He was finished. He closed his eyes, and though it pained him to hear Jinwoo crying his name, he allowed himself to be selfish.

He allowed himself to embrace death.

And death took him.

There was light.

Bin could sense light from behind closed eyelids. It was an unnatural brightness, something he hadn’t expected in death, and he blearily blinked open his eyes.

Above him was a ceiling. Was he inside? When did he get moved inside? Didn’t he die? He wondered if the gods had tricked him, if he had survived the air raid. That was a logical explanation for the change of scenery.

But the ceiling looked familiar. It was built like a house from a thousand years ago, back from the Baekje Kingdom.
There was movement in the room. Someone shifted. *Jinwoo?* Bin thought, and he craned his neck to look.

Myungjun.

It was Myungjun, seated by a window. He stared out, chin resting in the palm of his hands. From what Bin could see, he looked sad.

His hair was longer. His clothes were grander, more traditional, and Bin examined him for a few seconds before his eyes widened.

It wasn’t *just* Myungjun. It was General Kim.

He sat up and realized he was in General Kim’s house, in the master bedroom, sleeping on the same mattress he used to always sleep on.

It was as if he had woken from a terrible nightmare.

That must be what it was, then. Bin felt around his body for the wounds that had befallen him earlier, but he wasn’t hurt at all. His hands were clean of blood, and his clothes were *his*, back from when he was a poor soldier, back before 1950.

Myungjun turned his head and his eyes widened in surprise.

“Bin!” he exclaimed, standing from his seat, but Bin was quicker. Bin tore the covers aside and scrambled from the mattress. He rushed to Myungjun and gathered him in a tight embrace. He inhaled deeply. This Myungjun smelled of tea and those flowery oils. He didn’t smell like cigarettes and smoke and death.

“Myungjun,” he breathed. His hands felt all over Myungjun’s body. He wanted to make sure this was real. He wanted to make sure that his original lover was standing before him once again. “Myungjun,” he said, burying his head into Myungjun’s neck and breathing deeply. “God, Myungjun, is this real? Are you real?”

Myungjun hesitated, then nodded his head. He wrapped his arms around Bin, though his hold was weak and unsure. Bin didn’t care. Bin would hug him tight enough for the both of them.

He grinned widely and laughed, exuberant that he was awake from such a horrid nightmare.

He had to tell Myungjun. He had to tell him *everything*. He pulled back slightly and stared upon his lover. He looked gorgeous. He looked beautiful. Bin swooped down to kiss his lips, and then murmured, “Oh, god, I had the worst dream *ever*.”

“Myungjun?” Myungjun asked, fingers clutching onto Bin’s clothing.

“I dreamed that you died, but I couldn’t die, and then I traveled everywhere and you kept coming back. You were reincarnated as a prince, and a child, and a scholar, and a slave, and a prostitute, and a soldier, but each time you died and I was left alone again. I’m so glad I’m awake. I’m so fucking glad I’m awake!”

Myungjun tensed in his grasp. He shook his head, ademnetly, and said, “You didn’t dream *anything*.”

Bin snorted. “Of course I did, because you’re here with me. I finally died in my dream, and that’s when I woke up.” He sighed and kissed Myungjun’s forehead. “I still feel a bit bad, though. I left
Jinwoo behind. You would like Jinwoo, he’s stubborn, and—"

“He lost his wife and parents in his new life, didn’t he?” Myungjun asked.

Bin paused and stared in confusion at his lover. That didn’t make sense. How was Myungjun to know such a thing? If it was a dream, if it was Bin’s dream, then he shouldn’t have any insight.

Myungjun gave a loud sigh and took a step back. He kept his eyes averted, situated on the ground, and muttered, “And I died from two gunshot wounds.”

“What?” Bin whispered. He didn’t release Myungjun. He kept hold of him, tightly, not wanting him to leave again. “It...it wasn’t a dream?”

Myungjun shook his head.

“Where are we, then? We’re...back home, right? In the Baekje Kingdom? It’s...what year was it, 660?”

“667, when I first died,” Myungjun replied. He swallowed thickly, loudly, and said, “Everything that happened to you was real. I fell on the battlefield, and you lived. You lived until you met me again; or, rather, a reincarnated version of me. Prince Myungjun. He was poisoned.”

Bin felt horribly lost and confused. He blinked, then asked, “How do you know?”

Myungjun glanced over at the window, and Bin followed his gaze.

It wasn’t the scene that had been outside of General Kim’s home. Gone was the garden, the other buildings nearby that had made up his estate. In its place was a more modern scene.

It was him.

“That’s me,” Bin gasped.

He was laying on rubble. His legs were a bloodied mess; Bin couldn’t tell if they remained or not. Blood was caked to his face, and his eyes were closed in an endless sleep.

“Jinwoo left,” Myungjun stated. “He did stick around your body for a while. He cried a bit, but then he left. I assume he will survive.”

“What the fuck?” Bin questioned, gesturing wildly to his body. “Myungjun, what the fuck am I looking at?”

“It’s...it’s a bit of a story, to try and explain everything.” Myungjun took a deep breath and then looked up at Bin again. There was pain in his eyes, sadness and regret and guilt, but Bin had no time to comment on it, for Myungjun was speaking again.

“Remember when...when we had spoken about...oh, god, I don’t know how to explain it. I...I suppose it’s…” He squeezed his eyes shut, as if trying to reign in those clear emotions. When he seemed ready again to talk, he said, “You promised you would take away punishments meant for me. And that’s exactly what you did.”

That made sense. Bin had already thought of that possibility, of that stupid promise he made causing the curse, and so he nodded his head. “Right. So my punishment was...this?” He glanced around him, at Myungjun’s immaculate home, and asked, “And you’re punishment was to be stuck here?”
“Yes. I’ve been in this room, and you’ve been out there. I was able to watch you from the window. I was able to see everything you were doing. It...it was terrible.” Myungjun opened his eyes again and bit down harshly onto his lip. “I had to watch you suffer. I had to watch you fall in love with me over and over again, only for death to ruin your love. I cried so often, Bin. I begged the gods to cease your punishment, but they didn’t listen, and it’s all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is!” Myungjun’s eyes were watery. He wiped at them, but it was to no avail. The tears were welling up anyway. “The last Myungjun figured it out. I...I was unfaithful, Bin. And I had sworn I wouldn’t be unfaithful, and if I was then I ought to be punished. You...you swore to take that punishment.”

“At...at the capital, then? You cheated on me there?” Myungjun nodded to Bin’s question. A tear fell from his eyes, and, once more, Myungjun wiped at his face. “Why?”

“I have no excuse for what I’ve done,” Myungjun murmured. “It was the final night of my stay, and...and we were supplied with alcohol, and with women. I was goaded by the king and other officials to flirt with the women, to allow myself to be seduced. The alcohol in my system was...it was a little overpowering, but it honestly is not an excuse. I remember thinking that I could sleep with a girl, something I hadn’t done in so long, and it would be socially acceptable to do so.”

Bin’s mouth felt dry. “Oh,” he said. He had guessed Myungjun was unfaithful, but it was painful to hear. It was painful to know that the one bad decision Myungjun made had cursed him so unfairly.

“I felt horrible, Bin,” Myungjun said. His voice hitched and he took a shuddering breath. The tears fell freely now; he no longer tried to stop them. “I woke up with her in my bed and I was sick. I didn’t want to face you. I was afraid of judgement. I...I was going to tell you, but when you greeted me so sweetly, I...I was selfish, Bin. I wanted our relationship to continue, and so I thought if I pretended it never happened, then perhaps things would be normal.”

He sobbed and buried his face into his hands. His next words were muffled. “But I knew it was wrong! I was filled with such intense guilt! And-and I remembered you had made that promise, and I grew fearful that the necklace would become cursed. This recent Myungjun was correct; the jade signifies good luck, but when a bad deed is done, it becomes bad luck. You...you had taken my punishment, and so the necklace became cursed.”

“But you took it from me,” Bin stated, and he patted his chest, feeling for it. It rested there, behind his clothes, and he took it from its hiding place. “Look. You broke it.”

“It didn’t matter,” Myungjun cried. “It had already cursed you. Oh, god, I’m so sorry, Bin! I—I had no idea it would place such an awful punishment onto you. If I had known, I would’ve told you!” He sniffed. He looked pitiful, pathetic, but Bin made no move yet to draw him near.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked. “You had plenty of chances.”

“I know,” Myungjun said. “I...god, I know. I just...I was so scared you would hate me. I was scared you would leave me. So I tried to destroy your necklace instead. I thought, perhaps, that could fix it. But it didn’t.”

Bin said nothing. He was thinking, his mind overwhelmed with the information he was given.

In his silence, Myungjun fell to his knees in front of him, then knelt over until his head touched the ground. “I’m so sorry,” he apologized, voice muffled. He still cried, still sniffled and sobbed, and
he stammered out, “If—if you do not wish to forgive me, then I understand. I deserve nothing but your contempt. I was unfaithful, and I allowed you to take this punishment for me.”

“General—”

“I wish I had taken the punishment instead! I hated seeing you suffer, and I love you, Bin. I love you! I’m so sorry for—”

“Myungjun, get up.”

Myungjun didn’t get up. He did pick his head off the ground to gaze up at Bin. His face was red and blotchy, and the area around his eyes was puffy. Tears streaked his cheeks, glistening in the bright lights of the room.

He looked a mess; he looked lovely.

Bin knelt beside him and smiled. He felt his own tears coming, welling up in his eyes, and he whispered, “I missed you, General Kim.”

Myungjun choked out another sob, then wailed, “I—I missed you, Bin!”

Bin embraced him once again, and Myungjun cried into his shoulder.

They sat like this for a minute, maybe two, until Myungjun’s sobs had turned into quiet whimpers.

“Darling?”

“Yes?”

“Why...why did I die, then? Why is the punishment complete?”

“Because…” Myungjun sniffed and wiped his nose on his sleeve. He pulled back to look at Bin. His hand trailed over Bin’s cheek and down his jawline. “Because you forgave me. You thought I might’ve cheated, and yet you still forgave me. All that was needed for the punishment to end was that.” He looked ready to cry again, and he blubbered out, “If I had...told you then, no-one of this would’ve happened! If I hadn’t kept it to myself, then—”

Bin silenced him with a swift kiss. When he drew back, Myungjun asked, “Why do you forgive me? Even after all you’ve been through because of me, why do you forgive me?”

“Because I love you,” Bin responded. He grabbed Myungjun’s hand from his face and kissed the knuckles. “I love you so much, darling. And I understand you are apologetic. I know you love me. We all have moments of weaknesses. Yours resulted in a weird curse of immortality placed upon me, but...you hadn’t known that would happen.”

“I...I did, though. I thought you might be cursed—”

“You thought I might. And you destroyed what you thought to be the origin of the curse.” Bin held up the necklace again and added, “Not very well, though. It’s still intact.”

“Sh-shut up, Bin.”

He grinned and let the necklace drop against his neck. He kissed Myungjun once more, then murmured against his lips, “What’s done is done. No point in wallowing about in our actions. I’m much more concerned with the rest of my life spent with you.”
“But this is it.”

Bin blinked. He pulled away from Myungjun’s lips. “What?”

Myungjun glanced over at the door. “It’s...it unlocked once you died. It’s been locked since I died. I’ve tried to open it, but...I heard it unlock the moment you passed away and came here. We can leave, now. And once we leave, that’s it. Our...our lives have ended. We can go to the afterlife. Perhaps we will be admitted to the heavens. Or perhaps we will be reincarnated once again.”

Bin swallowed and shook his head. “I...I want to be with you though. I don’t want to take the chance of reincarnation, because...will we still be together?”

Myungjun stood from his position. He helped Bin up and smiled up at him. His chin quivered. He still had so many tears, and Bin worked on wiping clean his face.

“My reincarnations found you every single time,” he said. “I think we can find each other again.”

“But you had no control over them, did you?”

“No. They were sentient beings, separate from myself, but...I think, Bin, that no matter who I am, I’m drawn to you. And no matter what, you are drawn towards me. We’re soulmates, see, or something of the sorts.”

Bin glanced up at the door. It seemed so intimidating now. It could very well part him from Myungjun. It could very well end be the end of life as he knew it. He could very well be no more.

“I’m scared,” he whispered. “I’ve longed for death all this time, but now I’m—”

“I am, too,” Myungjun admitted. He took a deep breath, then sniffed again. More tears swept down his cheeks. He didn’t bother to wipe them away. “But if we go together, it is not as scary. If you are by my side, I can face whatever the gods will deliver to me. If it’s my own punishment for what I’ve done, or if it’s a reward after all our hardships, I will accept it.”

Myungjun tugged him closer to the door. He allowed his fingers to touch the handle, gently, cautiously. “Bin,” he murmured, “are you ready?”

Bin gazed at his lover. This might be their last time together. In any case, this would be his last time as Bin, the soldier who couldn’t die, the man who was immortal.

He thought of all the Myungjun reincarnations he had known. He had loved them, each and every one of them, but in the end they were all General Kim.

And General Kim was the man he loved more than life itself.

He examined the features on his lover’s pretty face for one final time. He held the image of Myungjun to memory. Then, he grasped tightly onto his hand with one of his own hands.

His free hand joined Myungjun’s on the door.

“I love you,” he blurted out.

Myungjun’s face softened. He smiled, despite his tears, and whispered, “And I love you, Bin.”

They opened the door.

Bin felt no more.
Chapter End Notes

BUUUUUT we still have two chapters left ;)

please follow me on my twitter, i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!! leave a comment if you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

**chapter warnings:** language, slight homophobia, internalized homophobia, sexual situations, SLIGHT smut?

there's some possible smut in this chapter but it isn't as bad as previous chapters!

in any case, new chapter awaits!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Being the new kid in school was hard. Bin had been the new kid four times.

“Five times,” he reminded himself as he ran over his hair with his fingers, a replacement for the comb his mother always told him to use. He could hear her cooking downstairs, likely plopping down side dish after side dish. She always cooked large breakfasts for Bin’s first days. She said that starting off right would make the rest of the school year sail along.

His mother called up to him: “Bin! Breakfast is ready!”

Bin sighed and stared at himself in the mirror. He looked alright. He looked as good as he could, in any case. Maybe a little bit tired from late nights playing games. Maybe a little nervous, too, but at least his hair was cooperating (for once) and his uniform fit well. He had been working out recently and his shoulders were impressive. He flexed once, admiring the way he still looked strong despite his navy blazer.

“Bin!” his mother yelled again. “If you’re not down in one minute, I’m giving Sua your share of the breakfast!”

His mother didn’t joke about that sort of thing, and Bin knew Sua was a monster and would eat whatever was given to her. He couldn’t allow that to happen.

“I’m coming!” he yelled. He looked over himself one more time (mostly hot, he thought) and then scurried downstairs.

His little sister was already trying to hoard the food. She had the best dishes on her side of the table, arms wrapped around them protectively. When Bin yanked the short ribs away from her, she whined, “Mom, you said I could have those!”

“I said if he wasn’t down in one minute, and he made it down.”

“But—”

“You have food and he has food, and I don’t want any complaining.”

Bin smirked at his sister, smug and rude, and she rolled her eyes at him. Despite her mother’s rule of no complaining, she still said, “I don’t see why we had to move here in the middle of the school year. No one will like us.”
“No one will like you,” Bin said. He thought his insult was great until Sua kicked him under the table.

She then wore the smug smirk.

Their mother ignored all fighting and responded, “Because my promotion to this city is permanent and it will not change. This is your final school, alright?”

She had said as such before, but she kept advancing within her career as marketing. Bin supposed this time was the last time. She had managed to become the director of marketing for a large hotel chain and now worked at their headquarters. There was nowhere to go but down, and Bin knew his mother; she wasn’t going down.

Bin stuffed some of the ribs into his mouth and then gulped down his bowl of rice relatively fast. “Delicious,” he muttered before moving to the soup. “Mom, you’re one hell of a chef.”

“Don’t cuss,” his mother scolded, but she didn’t try to punish him for his language. She grabbed her purse instead and said, “I’m heading out. Bin, make sure Sua actually goes to school.”

“I don’t need school when I’m a famous pop star,” Sua complained, watching as their mother gathered the rest of her belongings. “I’ll be rich enough to never go to school again.”

“Sure,” their mother said, and she waved goodbye. “Have fun! Make lots of friends!”

Once she left, Sua mumbled, “Like you’d ever have friends.”

“God, shut up, Sua.”

He thought his life was rather infuriating. He had been through many different moves and was still nervous about liking one place too much, fearful that they would end up moving again. It was hard to make friends like that; even if he did befriend someone, moving away usually fractured that relationship. Bin only had a handful of old friends left from his childhood, but they never contacted each other, save for the quick, “Happy birthday! Hope to see you soon!” texts every year.

But if his mother was accurate in her assumption that this really would be their last time moving, then Bin remained hopeful. Cautious, but hopeful. He knew that arriving to a school so far into the year wasn’t great for any sort of friendship prospects. People had already chosen who they wished to hang out with and be around; a new transfer student likely would not cross their radar as a potential buddy.

Still, Bin thought he was hot and muscular and smart. He was friendly, too, to anyone who wasn’t Sua, and his desire to finally make actual friends overwhelmed his shyness.

He made sure Sua left the house, though she complained all the while. He locked the door and ruffled her hair (he messed it up, apparently, — or so she yelled at him) and said, “Don’t kill anyone with your bad looks, Sua.”

And then he made his way to his own school, to his first day of a permanent school.

His last few new schools were normal. A little boring, even. He would introduce himself to his class, choose an empty seat, and most of the other students pretended he was invisible. He preferred it that way, too, because it was way better than attempting to constantly prove himself or, heaven forbid, talk to people. He would sit in the back of the class and would say a few nice things to a few nice people. He might make a school friend or two. Then he would move.
However, this was his final school. This was the school he would graduate from. This was the school that would give him lasting friendships. He was determined to show them all that he was a great, intelligent, sexy kid who could outrun any of them. He was also a loyal friend, trustworthy and honest and kind.

Or so he liked to think.

“Hi, I’m Moon Bin and my family is from Cheongju,” he whispered to himself in preparation for his introduction. “It’s nice to meet everyone.”

Should he bow? He tried it as he walked. Someone nearby bowed back to him, confused, and he walked faster down the street to hide his embarrassment.

No bow. Just a simple greeting and then he would find his seat. He would personally greet the people he sat near. He would make a point to find the hottest girl in class and sit near her. Then they would date. The hottest people in high schools always ended up dating each other, and this would be no exception.

The school was coming into view. Though he had been through this before, Bin felt nervous. He hoped everyone hadn’t already chosen friends. He hoped all the hot girls weren’t already taken. He would definitely still worm his way into friend groups and relationships, but it would be far easier if people were simply available for him to take.

He stopped, staring at the school. It wasn’t as impressive as his old school was, but it still looked well enough. It looked like a high school, in any case, with kids milling around the front and talking to each other and waving hello to acquaintances.

Bin took a deep breath, but before he could take another step, a body crashed into him. He almost went flying, saved only by his quick reflexes and steady balance. He stumbled, but then turned to glare at the perpetrator of such an event.

“I’m so sorry!” exclaimed said perpetrator. He was a tall, gangly kid with large glasses and a clueless look about him. Bin thought he looked like a toddler who had suddenly grown overnight into the body of a man. The image made him want to laugh, but he had to focus on the more important matters at hand; that being his near-death experience on his first day at the new school.

The kid was still rambling, and Bin snapped to focus. “—and I just didn’t realize you had stopped and I kept running and I ran right into you, and I really didn’t mean to do that! I’m sorry!”

Normally, Bin would say something mean, probably a bit sarcastic. He was not afraid of confrontation when it involved someone else in the wrong. And so he opened his mouth and asked, “Did you not see me stop? With those glasses, I would assume you’d be able to see everything.”

The kid’s face fell. Bin could see the frown tugging at his cheeks, the slight hurt in his eyes (behind those giant glasses), and he realized he shouldn’t ostracize himself on his first day. Why would he make this poor kid feel bad for a simple mistake? Why couldn’t he take this opportunity and make a friend? It would be a funny first-meeting type of story, anyway.

Bin smiled brightly and continued, “I like your glasses. They look good on you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah!”

But they didn’t. They made him look too awkward and dorky. Still, Bin liked awkward and dorky.
Those traits were charming, especially on this ridiculous kid who had long limbs and tiny ears.

The kid was grinning, at least, pleased with the compliment he was given, and so Bin decided to drop it.

“I have contacts,” the kid said, “but I don’t like to wear them, except on special occasions. And my eyesight is really bad, so the contacts aren’t perfect. These glasses work pretty well, though. Jinwoo says that my glasses are coming back in style. They’re trendy now in high school, and so I’m more likely to make friends that way.”

There was a lot of information given at once, and Bin struggled to keep up. “Jinwoo?”

“Yeah! He’s my best friend here, except he’s a third-year so he’s graduating soon, and then I won’t have a best friend. I’ll have to find a new best friend.”

The kid looked at Bin suddenly, his eyebrows raised. He scanned Bin’s body, almost creepily, and Bin had half a mind to cover his crotch, as if the kid had x-ray vision or something.

“Hey, do you have a best friend?”

Bin shook his head.

“Perfect! We can be best friends, then, since you’re lonely and I’ll soon be lonely.”

“What makes you think I’m lonely?”

The kid made a face. He gave a little, knowing smirk, and Bin realized he couldn’t say anything to refute that assessment of character. He was lonely. He had no close friends and he was in unfamiliar territory all by himself.

If he didn’t take this kid up on his offer to become friends, perhaps he would be lonely for the rest of his school life. Perhaps everyone else had already chosen friends. Hell, this kid had a friend, an older friend than either of them. If even this kid already had someone, then Bin was likely out of luck.

He couldn’t afford to be picky. He would have to take friends as they came.

“Alright,” he agreed, nodding his head. “We can be friends.”

The kid grinned widely, then pumped a fist in the air as if he had won some sort of sports competition. After his mini celebration was over, he introduced himself. “My name is Yoon Sanha! I’m a first year student and I like running and singing and I’m pretty good at science.”

Bin hadn’t wanted to devolve so much information on his first day. Friendship took time, he thought. Friendship was about bonds strengthening over time. Still, Sanha was staring at him expectantly, and so Bin sighed.

“I’m Moon Bin,” he responded. “Second-year. It’s my first day.”

Sanha gasped. “First day?” he repeated, and then, “Second year? I could’ve sworn you were older! You look so mature!”

That was a good compliment. Bin could really get used to having Sanha as a friend if he was complimented on a regular basis like that.

“I’m a pretty mature person,” Bin informed him, a little haughty and proud. “I’ve already done lots
of things that most people my age have not.”

“Really?” Sanha seemed impressed. Bin felt himself smiling widely, pleased to have shown off how cool he actually was. “Like what? Have you...do you go out and drink a lot? Lots of mature kids here do that.”

“I do,” Bin confirmed, nodding his head. “And I’ve already had, like, three girlfriends. See? Probably more mature than most of your friends, right?”

Sanha nodded his head. He was in awe; Bin could tell from that wide-eyed expression and that open mouth.

Suddenly, Bin realized something rather important: Sanha was adorable.

He looked innocent, despite his stupid height. He looked brand new to a world of wild teenagers, to a world of sex and drinking and tomfoolery. He looked as if people might easily take advantage of him.

Bin made up his mind that he would have to protect Sanha. If not him, then who else would?

Bin’s smile became kind. He pushed aside his arrogance and clapped a hand onto Sanha’s shoulder. “Walk me to class!” he exclaimed, an order rather than a question. “And tell me more about yourself as we walk.”

His first friend wasn’t exactly who he wanted, but perhaps his first friend would become his best friend.

Once the mysterious third-year student known as Jinwoo left the school, anyway, he and Sanha would be best friends. But Bin could bide his time until then.

He stood at the front of the class, trying to calm his nerves. While walking to his class with Sanha, he had forgotten all about the introduction he would be forced to perform, but once he handed his teacher his class schedule and a note concerning his newcomer status, she happily stuck him in front of the chalkboard and exclaimed, “Class, this is our new student! I’ll let him introduce himself.”

He didn’t remember what his introduction was supposed to consist of. He had practiced it before Sanha ran into him, but he couldn’t recall the exact words he had used. It should’ve been easy to say, “Hello, I’m Moon Bin,” but in an effort to become memorable and interesting, that fell flat in Bin’s mind.

“Hello,” he finally said, nodding his head at the class.

Someone cleared their throat. Most people seemed disengaged. A few girls were passing notes. Another kid was on his phone.

However, there was a boy up front smiling at him. He had a pretty face with a flawless complexion. He looked kind. He looked encouraging. He nodded his head back to Bin as if
prompting him to continue.

Bin took a breath and rambled, “I’m Moon Bin. Um, my mom and I moved here — my sister, too. My...oh, yeah, my family is from Cheongju. It’s nice to meet everyone.”

Should he bow? It was the question he had asked himself before meeting Sanha. It was the question he had yet to figure out an answer to. Bowing on the street had been pretty silly, but bowing in front of the class would be different, wouldn’t it? Or would it be too formal? It might be silly to the students.

Bin lingered until the teacher gave his shoulder a pat. “Very nice,” she stated. “We’re all happy to have you. You can sit right next to Dongmin.” She gestured over to an empty chair next to the pretty man.

He didn’t sit until he checked who would be on his other side, and he was pleased to see a thin girl with braided hair. She smiled at him, and Bin decided she was far more pretty than Dongmin was, and he returned her smile as he took his seat.

“Hello,” he greeted, and she grinned at him. Before she could devise a response, however, Dongmin spoke.

“It’s nice to meet you, Bin!” he exclaimed, forcing Bin’s attention away from his future-girlfriend. Bin turned and glanced at the boy, his smile faltering. “Cheongju must be far different from Seoul, right?”

Bin shook his head. “Not really,” he responded. “I mean, there’s more buildings here, but the atmosphere is similar.”

“Ah,” Dongmin nodded his head as if he somehow understood. “I grew up in Gangnam and the rest of Seoul can’t even compare to that experience. I imagine Cheongju is different from Gangnam, even if it’s similar to other places here.”

Bin couldn’t tell if Dongmin was trying to be an asshole, or if his personality was just that horrible. Regardless, he didn’t really care to find out.

“That’s nice,” he commented, doing his best to seem neutral, but Dongmin took it as an opportunity to continue talking.

“You might find this class difficult, too, especially since you’ve arrived a bit further in the school year. You can always talk to me if you do! I don’t mind tutoring the students who aren’t as smart. I do it often!”

Bin wasn’t sure how Dongmin managed to be both kind and insulting in the same breath. It was actually amazing, and if Bin wasn’t on the receiving end of Dongmin’s weird personality, he might have been impressed.

As it was, he had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. He did not stop himself from saying, “I’m pretty fucking smart all on my own, thanks.”

Dongmin was stupid, Bin concluded, because he did not catch the obvious quip. Instead, he just laughed lightly and replied, “Of course you are! You seem rather intelligent. Still, don’t hesitate if you need help with anything, alright?”

Bin chose not to answer him. The teacher was writing something down on the board, anyway, ready to start class, and so Bin had an excuse to keep silent. He took out his notebook and glanced
at the girl beside him. She was hot, and probably great in bed, but Bin highly doubted he would be able to enjoy this year much at all if he was to be sitting next to Dongmin for hours a day.

He tried to talk to the girl at various times throughout the morning. When there was group work to be done or else a transition between classes, Bin would ask for various pieces of information. He figured out her name and her favorite color and her favorite animal. She liked to study and she was smart and she was single, she claimed.

All in all, she was perfect, and Bin was determined to win her heart before the end of the month. He knew he could do it. He was charming. He was confident. His last few girlfriends had also proclaimed his body to be extremely sexy, and as he had been working out even more, he knew that this girl would fall for him in no time. He just had to show off for a bit and then he would have her in his grasp.

It was easier said than done, however. He couldn’t show off his intelligence because Dongmin kept beating him to it. With every question asked, Dongmin would proudly raise his hand and blurt out the answer. Bin’s reactions were too slow; while he knew the answers, Dongmin always beat him to the punch. It was infuriating, really, as was the smile Dongmin shot him with each and every correct answer.

Lunch couldn’t come fast enough. Even before the lunch bell had finished ringing, Bin had shot up from his seat and started to pack his bag.

Dongmin laughed and asked, “Are you hungry?”

He was always hungry; this time, however, he just needed to get far away from Dongmin. In an effort not to upset his classmate on his first day, though, he just nodded. “Yeah.” But Dongmin wasn’t packing up, something Bin found a little odd. “Are you not going?”

Dongmin shook his head, then frowned. “Oh, I’m sorry. You would’ve liked to sit with me, wouldn’t you? Chunja and I meet during lunch to discuss the student council meetings.”

“Student council?”

“He’s the class president,” the girl beside Bin supplied. She was pulling a packed lunch from her bag, and she offered Bin a small smile. “I’m the vice president.”

Bin grit his teeth down. He lost out the chance to eat with the hottest girl in the class. She was spending her time with Dongmin instead of him. It was a terrible blow to his morale.

“You can eat with us, though,” Dongmin offered. “We wouldn’t mind. Would we, Chunja?”

She smiled at Bin and said, “Sure, if you’d like to.”

“I didn’t...I didn’t bring a packed lunch,” Bin mumbled. Even if he had, he refused to eat with Dongmin. Sitting next to him for half the day was bad enough; if he had to be near him for any longer, he might go mad.

Still, in an effort to be friendly, he returned Chunja’s smile and said, “It’s fine. I might make some friends in the cafeteria.”

They wished him luck, all grins and cheer, and he left the room in a rush, happy to be out of such a restrictive atmosphere.

He hoped that Sanha would be in the cafeteria. He could at least have one friend that way. Perhaps
the aforementioned Jinwoo would be there, as well, and Bin could increase his arsenal of friends. There was the possibility they had lunch at a different time, or else they ate at tables that were too full, but Bin decided to go with the flow. If they were there, great. If not, he was charismatic enough to find another friend.

When he reached the cafeteria, he sighed. It was halfway filled, but everyone seemed to have already chosen friends. A few people milled about by themselves, but as Bin watched them from his spot in line, even those people were soon joined by others. Friends had already been established this late in the year. Bin didn’t foresee an easy way to make friends. He would have to insert himself into a group that was already formed, and being the outsider in those situations was difficult.

He was determined to try his best, though, and so once he got his food, he took a deep breath and stepped aside, scanning the room for available seats.

Sanha wasn’t visible. If Jinwoo was in the room, Bin had no idea what he looked like, so there was no way to introduce himself. There were some empty tables, but Bin couldn’t stand the thought of sitting at one of those.

Just as he was about to give up and choose a random friend group to worm into, he noticed a boy take a seat at one of the empty tables.

He looked nice enough. He was short and had messy, brown hair with a uniform jacket just a size too large for him and thin, wire-framed glasses, but his face seemed like it could be filled with warmth with just a simple smile.

It was only one person, but it would be one extra friend to start his new school with, and so Bin made his way to that table.

He plopped his food down, and the kid jumped.

“Sorry,” Bin apologized, taking a seat in front of him. “You just...I needed someone to talk with during lunch, and since I’m new, I figured...I mean, I didn’t want to sit alone, you know? That’s a little sad.”

The kid sighed and rolled his eyes. “I was sitting alone,” he said. “Am I sad?”

His voice was cute; a little nasally and a bit higher than Bin had expected, but it fit him very well.

Bin coughed, deciding to ignore the fact that his mind just called another boy cute. “No,” he replied, trying to work on damage control. He never thought before he spoke. “I just...I’m a really outgoing person, so I thought...I mean, for me it would be sad. Not you.”

“Why not me?”

Making friends was not going as well as he had originally hoped. Bin helplessly shrugged his shoulders. “I should...I shouldn’t speak. Sorry.”

The boy nodded his head, agreeing to Bin’s statement, and continued to eat his meal.

Bin, too, began to eat, though he realized just how awkward and tense the atmosphere was. He hated eating in this sort of situation. He liked things to be happy and fun, and he couldn’t believe he had likely hurt this kid’s feelings on his first day in the school.

The kid slurped up some noodles, and once he was done chewing, he replied, “And I’m Myungjun. Not new. Third year.”

“Oh, so you’re almost a high school graduate!” Bin pointed out. He wanted to be friendly, even if Myungjun was making it rather difficult. “Are you studying for your entrance exams?”

“Of course I am.”

“What career path are you planning to take?”

That question, at least, seemed to stump Myungjun a bit. He had no smart response, no sarcastic remark. He chewed thoughtfully on his food, then said, “Right now, history. It’s something I enjoy. I’d like to work at the Seoul Museum of History. Curating sounds fun.”

History wasn’t Bin’s strong point. Memorizing dates was boring, and memorizing the lives of the dead was even more so. Still, he didn’t want to give Myungjun more reason to hate him, and so he nodded as if he found it all rather interesting. “Sounds fun,” he lied. “What got you into history?”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “No clue,” he admitted. “I just realized I’m unnaturally good at it. I can memorize all of the facts, but it’s not just about memorization. You have to have an understanding of events and people and lifestyles of a particular time period. You have to draw conclusions. It’s like being a detective, only you uncover past mysteries. It’s exciting.”

As he spoke, Myungjun’s eyes lit up brilliantly, displaying his clear passion for the subject. It was cute, and Bin wanted to curse at his mind for, once more, thinking another man was cute. Still, even as he told himself to think of something else, he kept focusing on the story behind Myungjun’s gaze, of the happiness and joy and adoration he found there.

“Anyway.” Myungjun offered him a small smile, and Bin realized he was correct in his original assessment; Myungjun’s face was definitely filled with warmth. “What about you? What are you going to study?”

Bin cleared his throat and screwed up his face in thought and concentration. “I...I think...”

He didn’t get further than that when two boys walked past their table, pointing at Myungjun and whispering frantically to each other. They left in a hurry, though one kept glancing back over his shoulder.

Myungjun appeared unbothered. He kept his gaze solely on Bin, waiting to hear his answer, but Bin was confused.

“What the fuck was that all about?”

“Hm?”

“Those boys. Do they have a problem with you?”

Myungjun finally looked to where Bin was gesturing, but the boys had long since disappeared within the throng of the lunch crowd. Myungjun shifted in his seat and said, “No.”

“So you did see them! I thought you hadn’t — are you ignoring them? Are they fighting with you?”

“No. I don’t know who they are.” And that was that. Myungjun turned back to Bin and asked, “So what are you going to study?”
It was weird. The entire exchange between the two boys had been weird. The fact that Myungjun was so obviously ignoring them, too, was weird. Bin wasn’t sure if he should focus more on the situation or move on.

A friend might figure out the truth, but Bin could hardly be called a friend at that point. He was just the guy who sat in front of Myungjun at lunch. He had no place to fight for justice.

“I want to go into film school,” he said. “I think making movies would be fun. My mom says I should do marketing, like she is, but I’m not sure yet. I keep changing my mind.”

“You have a bit longer to figure it out,” Myungjun assured him. “Would you become a movie director, then?”

Bin wasn’t sure, and so he shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe editing — I haven’t decided, really. Maybe acting. I like to act.”

Someone else walked past their table. A girl, who snickered before meeting up with her friends nearby. Bin was certain she was snickering at Myungjun, and maybe him, but her eyes seemed to have been trained on Myungjun.

Myungjun had been seated by himself and was the subject of teasing, it appeared. But why? Bin opened his mouth to ask, but Myungjun quickly continued on with their original topic.

“So do you enjoy movies?”

Bin blinked. “Are you not at all bothered by those kids? They—”

“I like older movies,” Myungjun stated. “Black and white ones. The American ones are funny. Oh, but I also like superhero movies.” He stuck some kimchi in his mouth and muttered, “It’s always the underdog who gets the happily ever after, isn’t it?”

Bin knew something was definitely up, and he knew Myungjun was well aware of what was going on. Why he chose not to comment, though, Bin had no idea, and why he chose not to fight back was also a mystery. Was Myungjun the laughing stock of the school? Bin couldn’t figure out why, if that was the case. He looked clean and put together well. Maybe his jacket was too large and maybe his glasses were a little dorky, but he still seemed handsome and nice enough.

Maybe it was because he had a sharp tongue, but Bin had been able to evade that tongue for the past few minutes and he thought the conversation was going well.

Something must have happened before Bin ever started coming to the school. Bin missed out on some juicy gossip from the beginning of the school year. He was burning with curiosity, itching with a desire to know, but he couldn’t ask about anything.

He couldn’t ask, because the happiness was stolen from Myungjun’s gaze and he looked down forlornly at his meal. Something those students knew was tearing at Myungjun’s cheer. Whatever those students teased him for was breaking down Myungjun’s resolve.

Bin didn’t know what it was, but he also didn’t care. There was no reason for someone so innocent to go through that sort of bullying.

“Yeah,” Bin responded, “but I think the underdog always comes out on top in real life, too. Everyone always roots for the underdog. Like, my favorite soccer team is always the team that loses, because one day they’ll win and it will be the sweetest victory of them all.”
Myungjun glanced up at him. Bin thought he saw a ghost of a smile, but then Myungjun said, “That sounds really fucking stupid.”

“It’s a metaphor for life.”

“Well, it sucks. Don’t make metaphors.”

Bin nodded his head, conceding to Myungjun’s demand. “My favorite team is Pohang Steelers.”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders, a sign he truly didn’t care, and finished off his lunch. “I need to get to my next class,” he muttered. “Nice talking to you, Bin.”

He left before Bin could get him to stay. He left before Bin could ask him to stay.

“What a weird kid,” Bin mumbled to himself, and he finished his own lunch hurriedly in an effort to leave his empty table. There was a stigma behind kids who sat at empty tables, and Bin did not want to become stigmatized.

He had his next class in a different room. He was confused, trudging down the hallways while staring at the school map he had been given. He briefly thought of asking someone nearby for assistance, but just as he didn’t want to be the kid who sat alone at lunch tables, he also did not want to become the new kid who did not know his way around. So, instead, Bin wandered the halls aimlessly until he was finally able to find the class number.

He opened the door and stared at the few students milling about in the classroom.

And there, right in the middle of the class, seated alone and away from everyone else, was Myungjun.

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Bin couldn’t concentrate well. Myungjun, it appeared, couldn’t actually shut his mouth sometimes. Bin had assumed, from their initial cafeteria meeting, that Myungjun was the quiet sort. Instead, he just kept huffing and sighing and muttering to himself.

Bin looked away from his assignment to glare at Myungjun, who seemed none the wiser to Bin’s anger.

“Dude,” Bin said, “I’m trying to work. I can’t work when you keep making so much noise.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes at Bin’s frustrations. Bin wanted to fuss even more, to possibly even complain to the teacher and asked to be moved (though he chose the seat), but then Myungjun snapped, “I hate English.”

Bin glanced over at Myungjun’s paper. He had only completed a few of the questions and his answers were laughable. Though older than Bin, he clearly had not been able to grasp the English language very well.

Myungjun sighed again, then asked, “How come you’re so good? Do you speak English?”

“Not fluently,” Bin replied. “But languages come easily to me. I can speak pretty good Chinese and
Japanese. English is...it’s like my fourth-best language, I guess.”

“Wow.” Myungjun didn’t sound impressed, but it could be because he was still battling his own anger at the worksheet. “I wish I could just pick up languages well.” He ran his fingers through the mop of messy, black hair on his head and asked, “Why do I even need to study English, anyway? My line of work won’t involve much English.”

Bin shrugged his shoulders as he returned to his own worksheet. “You never know. You might have to translate something one day in English. Or, at your museum when you become a curator, you might have to work with someone who only speaks English. I just think that knowing all different types of languages can be helpful.”

There was silence. Bin hoped Myungjun had finally returned to his work, finally decided to leave him alone, but he knew he wasn’t so lucky. Myungjun spoke again, this time punctuated with shoving his assignment onto Bin’s desk. “Help me,” he ordered.

“What?”

“Help me. You know English well, and I know nothing about it. This class isn’t…” Myungjun glanced around for the teacher. When he spotted him seated at the desk in the back of the class, he lowered his voice, “—this teacher is no help. He just gives us worksheets to do and never explains shit. I can’t learn that way.”

“I have my own work to do. I can’t just drop everything to help out you.”

Myungjun snatched his worksheet back with a rude curse. However, he still wasn’t done. “I can help you out in another class,” he offered. “I’m really good at history. If you need help with history, I can tutor you if you tutor me in English.”

Bin wanted to reject the offer, but then he remembered that Dongmin was in his history class.

Dongmin and the hot girl.

Dongmin, who stole away the hot girl’s attention because he knew the answers better than Bin.

It would be stupid and moronic of him to spend his free time tutoring someone, and being tutored back, just in effort to date the hot girl in his class, but Bin prided himself on always choosing the stupid and moronic choices in life.

He looked over at Myungjun, who smiled deviously at him, eyes shining bright behind his large glasses. “You do need help in history, don’t you?”

“Yes, but...I’m only doing it to impress a girl.”

“Of course. The dick of a teenage boy thinks better than the brain.”

“And yours doesn’t?”

Myungjun tensed up. The smile left his face and he glowered at Bin, gripping tightly onto his pencil. “Do you want my help or not?” he snapped, refusing to answer Bin’s question.

Bin didn’t care. It had been a quick retort, anyway. “You’re the one who wanted my help,” he pointed out.

Myungjun waved him off. “Whatever the case, are you going to help me and am I going to help
Common sense told Bin not to agree to such a thing, but Myungjun was right; the dick of a teenage boy thought better than his brain. He agreed with a nod of his head.

Myungjun smiled. It was soft and kind, far unlike the other smiles he had given before, and Bin found himself staring at the boy for a few seconds longer than necessary.

He cleared his throat and turned back to his paper. “Here,” he muttered, “Scoot closer and I can help you right now.”

Myungjun did as asked almost instantly, bright and cheerful and ready to learn.

*He’s cute*, Bin thought.

*I’m straight*, Bin reminded himself.

*I’m dumb*.

Sanha found him at the end of the day, waving him down in a flurry of limbs, yelling, “Bin! Bin, over here!” Bin had to wonder how Sanha even saw him, but the fact that he towered above most other students in the school answered that question.

Bin made his way over and realized Sanha wasn’t alone. Beside him was a shorter male with bleached hair and dangling earrings. Bin wondered if it went against school dress code, and he wanted to ask, but Sanha was talking again.

“Bin, this is Jinwoo! Remember, he’s the friend I mentioned before. I told him that you’re new and looking for friends, and he said he’d gladly apply.”

“I didn’t say gladly,” Jinwoo corrected. For such a smaller man, his voice was rather gruff, and Bin found him interesting.

Sanha rolled his eyes and shoved Jinwoo lightly, then said, “He’ll become your friend whether or not he’s happy about it, promise.”

“Oh. Uh, thanks.”

“I guess you had to eat lunch alone, right? I had somewhere to be, and Jinwoo was outside with some of the other third-year students. Did you eat okay? Did you make any new friends?”

Sanha was curious. It was cute, but Bin thought back to the two people he *did* meet during school, the two people who were infuriating beyond compare.

“Yeah,” he said. “Dongmin is in my first few classes. He’s a second-year, like me. Do you know him?”

Sanha shook his head, though Jinwoo looked thoughtful.
“I think so,” Jinwoo muttered. “Is he the president of the second-year class?”

“Yeah! Him.”

“Then I know him.”

“Is he as annoying to you as he is to me?”

Jinwoo smirked, a little amused, and asked, “Was he insufferable?”

“Yes!” Happy that someone understood his pain, Bin groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. “Everything he said belittled me in some form, but I don’t even think he was trying to belittle me! I’ve never met anyone like that. And then the vice president of the council seems to like him well enough, but she’s hot and I didn’t think a hot girl would like Dongmin.”

Jinwoo scoffed at him. “Are you kidding? Of course a hot girl would like Dongmin. Have you seen him? He’s gorgeous. Hell, if I swung that way, I’d like Dongmin, too, even if he is an idiot.”

That didn’t make Bin feel any better. He had wanted to come into the school as the sexy newcomer, the guy that all the girls could swoon over, the one male in the school who didn’t reek of ugly genes. Instead, Dongmin had beat him to the punch and didn’t even seem to realize the effect he had on others.

Bin wanted to rant more about it, to curse Dongmin’s name, but then Sanha asked, “Did you eat lunch with him?”

“Oh, no. I ate lunch with a third-year student. Myungjun is his name. Not as bad, but he’s a bit of an asshole.”

This time, both Sanha and Jinwoo recognized the name. Sanha gave a small “oh!” and Jinwoo pursed his lips and nodded his head in understanding.

“Myungjun,” Jinwoo started, “Is...he’s not...he’s nice once you get to know him.”

They both seemed to know something Bin did not. Sanha cleared his throat and nodded his head in agreement to Jinwoo, but otherwise offered no explanation behind Jinwoo’s statement. Bin stared at him, then glanced at Jinwoo.

“So you two know him?”

Sanha hummed a bit. “Everyone knows Myungjun. He’s famous — infamous? He’s infamous, right, Jinwoo?”

“Infamous?” Bin repeated.

“Most of the school thinks he’s infamous, and...he’s become a little bit of an asshole because of that. Once he trusts you, he is nice, promise.”

“Does he trust you?” Bin asked.

Jinwoo shrugged his shoulders. “Sort of. We have a mutual understanding that we won’t be assholes to each other. He’s not a friend, but I guess he’s nice enough to me.”

Sanha leaned in to whisper, “He’s gay.”

Bin’s eyes widened. “He’s...gay?”
Sanha nodded, as if he just shared some sort of serious government secret. “No one knew until late last year, right, Jinwoo?”

“Yeah. He...he was blowing another guy in the school bathroom,” Jinwoo shared, grimacing. “There was actually a video. The other guy left, but Myungjun stuck around. I don’t know why he stuck around, because I’d leave out of embarrassment. Can you imagine getting caught doing... that?”

It explained the whispers and glances and snickers. It explained why Myungjun ate alone and sat alone. It explained why he didn’t trust people and why he distanced himself. And it explained why he was mad when Bin teased him about his dick and teenage girls.

Things made sense, and Bin found himself more intrigued with Myungjun now that Jinwoo and Sanha had allowed him to be privy to such information. “Who took the video?” he asked.

“The guy who caught them,” Jinwoo replied. “I think the guy thought it was a girl, originally, blowing a dude in the bathroom, because you obviously wouldn’t expect it to be another guy. So he was filming it for fun and then it finished and the door opened and it was Myungjun.”

“Did you watch it?” Bin asked.

“I was curious!” Jinwoo exclaimed, defending himself. “And I didn’t really believe it when I heard about it. It...it didn’t show anything. They were in a stall, so all you could really see were the legs. Just the moans and...ew, gross slurping sounds.”

“Ew,” Sanha agreed, screwing up his face in distaste.

“Even though it showed nothing,” Jinwoo continued, “it was obvious what had happened, and once Myungjun stepped out, it was obvious that he was the one doing the...the blowing.”

Bin couldn’t imagine Myungjun doing that. Even if he was gay, he seemed a little shy and aloof. He didn’t seem like the sort to have oral sex in a public restroom.

“How many people saw the video?” he asked.

Jinwoo shrugged. “It was last year, before Sanha came, but everyone knows about it. I think the guy who sent it distributed it to his friends first, who distributed it to their friends, and it just spread.”

“I haven’t seen it,” Sanha offered with a large smile. “I don’t want to, either. I feel bad for him. No one likes him because of that video. Even people in my class talk bad about him.”

“Minhyuk likes him, though, doesn’t he?”

Sanha snorted. “Minhyuk likes anyone who’s quiet and thinks he’s amazing.”

“Minhyuk?” Bin asked. The first day of a new school was always difficult. There was so much catch-up to go through, so much gossip to figure out, so many names to sort through. This was, by far, the most interesting drama to ever happen on a first day of school, and Bin wanted to know everything he could.

“Minhyuk is in my class,” Sanha responded. “He’s a first year, too. Apparently he and Myungjun live in the same apartment complex, so they’ve been friends for a while. He’s fought with a few students after school because they wouldn’t leave Myungjun alone.”
Even if Myungjun’s life sucked, at least he did have one friend. At least there was someone around to defend him from pointless teasing. Bin didn’t like that it was only one person, though. “Does he have any other friends, or is Minhyuk the only one?”

Jinwoo shook his head. “He’s friendly enough with Dongmin.”

“That makes sense,” Bin muttered. Of course, the two most insufferable people would befriend each other. That was just his luck.

“Not really,” Jinwoo replied in disagreement. “Dongmin isn’t the sort to befriend...Myungjun. Dongmin is from a religious family and he’s a pretty upstanding figure in the school, and Myungjun is...gay and known only for giving a guy a blowjob in the toilets.”

Bin had figured as much. The only thing Jinwoo had said of Myungjun, aside from his homosexuality, was that he was nice when you got to know him. Already, Bin felt like he knew more about Myungjun than his actual classmates did.

“He wants to be a museum curator,” Bin blurted out, much to the surprise of Sanha and Jinwoo. “He likes history a lot. He sucks at English. He likes old American films, the black and white sort.”

He could tell he had impressed the other two boys. Jinwoo’s eyebrows were raised and Sanha’s lips created a small o shape. “You’ve talked to him a lot!” Sanha exclaimed. “Are you two becoming friends?”

Bin wasn’t sure if he would also be ostracized for befriending Myungjun. Dongmin didn’t seem to be, if he could still get the attention of the hottest girl in their class. Minhyuk probably was, if only because he was beating up kids after school. Bin didn’t want to become an outcast, someone who ate lunch alone and sat in class alone.

As if sensing his inner dilemma, Jinwoo said, “Most kids here won’t judge you for being his friend. You’re not the one who did something embarrassing. People might snicker or tease a bit, but I don’t think they’d be out to get you.”

“I’m not worried about that,” Bin lied, though he knew Jinwoo wasn’t fooled.

“And I’ll still be your friend!” Sanha exclaimed with a large grin. “We can all eat lunch together! Do you think Myungjun would like eating lunch with me and Jinwoo? Oh, gosh, he might hit on me. I’m really handsome.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” Jinwoo muttered, and Sanha whined in frustration.

Bin thought he had found good friends. Jinwoo and Sanha were both willing to give up any sort of possible social standing they had in order to appease Bin’s wishes to befriend Myungjun. It was kind of them, especially for just having met, and Bin decided that even if Sanha and Jinwoo weren’t ideal friends, he could get along just fine with them.
The landscape before him was gray.

Rain pounded down harshly against the ground, creating deep puddles, creating slick mud. The clouds hung low overhead, rumbling as it released its torrent of water upon the citizens of the tiny town. Bin could only watch in displeasure. The rain soured his mood.

As if it wasn’t already soured enough.

He sighed and smoked on his pipe. He was in a safe position from the rain, sheltered under the tall roof of the library. Several students rushed through the rain, becoming drenched and yelling at each other in order to be heard over the sounds of the storm.

Otherwise, the courtyard before him remained empty. Not too many people would like to be caught in the rain, and so they all stayed inside.

Bin, though, could just barely feel the mist rising up to hit his skin. While the rain could not penetrate his barrier of protection, the mist could. Perhaps he could move from the porch in order to remain completely dry, but he wasn’t interested in moving. He didn’t want to move. He wanted to sit where he was and continue smoking on his pipe.

From the distance, Bin could see someone else running. He huffed, somewhat in irritation and somewhat in amusement. They would be soaked, for certain. Furthermore, they might soak him, for they were running closer and closer to the steps of the library.

Still, Bin wasn’t going to move. If they stood over him and allowed the water to drip onto Bin, he wouldn’t move at all. He might offer up a few choice words, but he would remain in his spot no matter what.

The man rushed up the staircase. He gasped for breath, likely exhausted from his sprint, and then took off his hat in order to clear out the water from it.

Bin watched him, and his eyes widened in recognition.

“Myungjun?”

Myungjun spun around to catch sight of who was calling his name. Water was still cascading down his cheeks, dripping from his hair. He looked different, soaking wet like this. His clothes clung to his body, detailing the majority of crevices and dips in the muscles he had likely been building up. He looked ethereal, even as drenched as he was, and Bin’s heart beat loudly in his chest.

There was thunder. Bin wondered if it could cover the sound of his heart.

Myungjun grinned when he realized Bin had called his name. He strode forward and exclaimed, “It’s a tad wet out here.”

“A tad,” Bin agreed. He patted the spot next to him and scooted over slightly. “Here, come sit. You must be tired.”

Myungjun obliged with a loud sigh. “Thank you,” he said, sinking to the ground beside Bin. Bin could smell the rainwater from him, the smell of wet clothes and earth and whatever oils Myungjun had used to wash his hair. Bin wanted to smell more, and so he leaned in just slightly, trying to appear as if he was interested in what Myungjun had to say, and not as if he was trying to catch another whiff.

“I probably should not have done that,” Myungjun continued. He placed his hat beside him and
then worked on wringing out the sleeves of his shirt. Water pooled around the wood where Bin sat. The hem of his pants were growing wet. He did not care. “One of my students, though, requested some information about an old English drama. I am sure the library has some record of that.”

“Which drama?” Bin asked. He knew many of them. Having lived as long as he lived, he was aware of many different plays.

Myungjun had asked for his advice before on many works of art. He had become impressed with Bin’s knowledge, and he would usually come to Bin as his first stop. The fact that he was willing to forgo Bin for the library was intriguing.

But Bin decided not to ask that for the moment. He did not wish to appear too needy. He was sure that Myungjun was aware of his desires; after all, Myungjun had already confessed to love him, and while they did not act as romantically as Bin had hoped for, he knew his feelings were reciprocated. Therefore, there was no need to become overly clingy.

“The Castle of Perseverance,” Myungjun replied after a brief second of hesitation.

Bin pursed his lips in thought. While Bin did not know too much of that one, he knew he had seen performed during one of his many European trips. “Do you know of that one?” he asked.

“My student did,” Myungjun responded with a smile. “I do not, which is why I am at the library.” He leaned against the walls of the library and added, “I told him I know plenty, however, of the play and shall write up all my knowledge for him.”

Bin laughed. “You lied?”

“To save my pride,” Myungjun answered, indignant at the accusation. “If I admit that my student knows more than I do, how would I look as a scholar and a professor? I would become useless to the university.”

“Never useless,” Bin argued. “You are, perhaps, one of the more knowledgeable scholars here. The day you become useless to Sungkyunkwan is likely the day the world will end. There is not Sungkyunkwan without Myungjun.”

Myungjun snorted. “Thank you for your kind words, but please don’t lie. They survived just well enough without me.” He stuck the hat back on his head, never minding the water that still dripped from it onto his face. He looked over at Bin, inquisitive, and asked, “But back to the play — you know of it?”

“I do,” Bin confirmed. “It’s a morality play.”

Myungjun gave a small ohh, and then asked, “Like Everyman?”

“Yes,” Bin said. “I do not know who wrote The Castle of Perseverance, however.” He gestured at the library behind him. “I highly doubt they would have any manuscripts, either. I don’t think it’s a very well-known play even within England.”

“Damn,” Myungjun cursed, and Bin couldn’t help but smile. It was so vulgar, so crude, so Myungjun. He was reminded of General Kim whenever Myungjun spoke.

“Language,” he chastised, though his scolding was in jest and Myungjun knew as much. He nudged Bin, causing Bin’s overcoat to become wet, then asked, “Do you know any information about The Castle of Perseverance?”
Bin smoked more on his pipe, thinking back to the many plays he had seen within England. “Other than the genre, I do not. And I only know the genre because that is a play from...is that the 1300s?”

“I don’t know, like I told you.”

“I think it’s 1300s,” Bin muttered, answering his own question. “Plays back then were mostly morality plays.”

“I do know that much.” Myungjun sighed and glanced over at the rain. It thundered again, louder this time, and there was a flash of lightning in the distance. Beside him, Bin could feel Myungjun jump, surprised from the sudden noise and light, and he smiled to himself.

Myungjun was not only vulgar and crude, but also cute and small and someone Bin felt the desire to protect forever and ever.

“What else did you wish to know, then?” he asked.

“Characters,” Myungjun responded. “My student was curious. I would like to know as much as my student, at least, if not more.” He shook his head in defeat. “I feel foolish for not knowing. I feel like I ought to know every question asked of me. Perhaps I should’ve studied the old English plays more than I had.”

“The English plays are not important. You should know Joseon plays, and perhaps those of our neighboring countries such as China or Japan.”

“I forgot that you dislike the western nations,” Myungjun murmured, but he didn’t seem too upset of that fact. “Regardless of how you feel, they do produce great works of art and literature. It’s impressive.”

Bin hadn’t found the western nations that impressive. In all of his travels, he was met with bland, tasteless people. He was met with the reminder that Myungjun would die and he was doomed to forever be alone.

“I don’t dislike them,” he muttered in defense of himself, but by then Myungjun was standing up from his seat.

“Come on,” he said, gesturing for Bin to also stand.

Bin obliged, then asked, “Where are we going?”

“Inside. It’s cold and wet out here. Besides, we need to look for a manuscript concerning my play.”

Bin put out his pipe and asked, “We?”

“You’re helping me, of course.”

“What makes you think that?”

Myungjun grinned deviously. He wrapped his arm around Bin’s waist and tugged him closer to the main doors of the library. In this proximity, how could Bin say no? Now that he was this close, how could he refuse?

Myungjun knew how to force him into obedience.
“Come along,” Myungjun whispered, and Bin, plastered to his side, allowed himself to be led into the building by a soaking wet Myungjun.

I love you, he thought, though he knew Myungjun could not hear. I love you.

He would think it for eternity.

He was doomed to, after all.

Bin didn’t often dream.

If he did dream, he didn’t often remember his dreams. They were typically shrouded in mystery and darkness. Fragments of the dream would come to memory sometimes, but not usually. Therefore, waking up that morning was weird.

He could remember every single detail of his dream.

He remembered the feel of the mist from the rain. He remembered the taste of smoke in his mouth. Most importantly, he remembered the sound of Myungjun’s voice, bright and cheerful to his ears.

He sat up in bed and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to think of what would have caused such a strange and vivid dream.

He knew nothing about history. He knew nothing about the name of the university, nor did he know anything about the supposed European play he spoke of. People only dreamed of what they knew, and his dream was full of things he did not know.

With a sigh, he leaned over to grab his phone from the nightstand.

He had slept in late.

With a curse, he rushed up from bed and stumbled over to his closet, where he haphazardly pulled on clothes. Why didn’t anyone wake him? Did his mom leave without knocking on his door? Did his sister leave without checking to see if he was still asleep? He cursed again, then rushed downstairs.

A note lay on the table from Sua: Mom’s gone to work early and I’ve gone to school early for a club interest meeting.

“Great,” Bin snapped, crumpling the note up in his hands. Of course they left him like this. His mom had been telling him that Sua was the good child who woke up on time. This was likely to teach him a lesson.

He had no time to be angry, however. It was his fault for not setting an alarm. He was responsible for himself.

Still, he wished his mom would ease him into becoming a responsible adult instead of tossing him to the sharks.
He had to run to school (thank goodness he had started working out), but his day didn’t improve. The memory of Myungjun still lingered in his mind, and it was with gross realization that he thought of the love and adoration he had felt within the dream. His dream self had been in love with Myungjun’s dream self. They had both been adults, too; Myungjun’s face had been so much more mature. Myungjun had mentioned students in the dream. Was he a professor?

And why was Dream-Bin so certain that Dream-Myungjun would die?

In the midst of his dream recollection, Dongmin leaned over to poke him. It was so sudden that Bin jumped, and when he snapped his head over to look at his classmate, Dongmin offered him a wide smile.

“Did you complete your homework for our next class?” he asked, pulling out his own binder.

Bin blinked, then nodded his head. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Why?”

“The teacher usually gives us some time to work on it before class,” Dongmin informed him. “Just thought you should know.”

It was actually helpful advice, and Bin felt bad for his mean thoughts about Dongmin, but then Chunja spoke up.

“Dongmin’s very smart,” she told Bin, as if he even cared. “If you ever need help, you can bring your homework and he’ll help. Right, Dongmin?”

She leaned over Bin’s desk to look at Dongmin, who nodded at her. Her lips turned upwards in a smile and her cheeks grew pink and rosy.

Dongmin, too, looked rather flustered, and he returned her grin before quickly looking back at his own homework.

“Oh my god,” Bin murmured to himself.

“What?” Dongmin asked, refusing to glance up from his sheet, but Bin just shook his head in order not to respond. He could see the infatuation blossoming between Chunja and Dongmin. It was gross, and he cursed the fact that he sat right beside both of them, in the middle of their possible love affair.

He couldn’t get out of that classroom fast enough.

Of course, in his desperation to escape, he failed to remember who he would likely meet at lunch again.

Myungjun.

Once more, Myungjun sat alone, nestled away at the far end of one of the last tables. He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes. He kept his gaze focused on his lunch and ignored the comings and goings of all those around him.

The dream still haunted Bin. Those intense emotions he felt toward Myungjun still lingered within him, oddly enough, and he felt inclined to act on such emotions.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by a voice calling his name. He assumed it must have been Myungjun, likely having just spotted him, but when he turned, it was Sanha, jogging towards him while dodging students. Jinwoo followed at a slower pace, but still smiled when he saw Bin.
“Hey!” Sanha exclaimed, grinning as he stood beside Bin in the cafeteria line. “What’s up?”

“Nothing, really. I had to deal with Dongmin again, which wasn’t pleasant.” Bin grabbed a tray as the line moved. “What about you two?”

Sanha and Jinwoo followed suit, and they grabbed the foods that were presented to them. “Jinwoo said he would eat lunch with you and me today,” Sanha told him, nodding proudly as he glanced over at Jinwoo. “Right, Jinwoo?” Before Jinwoo could answer, Sanha continued, “Usually he eats with the older students outside, but today he said he would eat with us. That’s nice, isn’t it?”

Bin stepped out of line once he had grabbed all of his food. “It is,” he agreed, looking for an empty spot to eat. “Where do you usually sit?”

Sanha pointed at a table filled with what Bin could only assume were first year students. “Over there,” Sanha replied. “I’m friends with them. They’re in my class. But Jinwoo doesn’t really know them well, so he and I don’t always eat lunch together.”

“Most of my friends eat outside,” Jinwoo explained. “But, if you want, there’s a table with some second year students over there.” Jinwoo gestured with his head to a table with less students. “We can sit there and make some new friends.”

Bin wanted to agree. He needed some friends his age and in his class, and the table was filled just enough that it wouldn’t be awkward at all for him to squeeze into their conversation. However, from the corner of his eye he saw the empty area where Myungjun sat.

He swallowed past the guilt and empathy in his throat. Why would he doom his popularity in order to sit with the kid who had sucked the dick of another kid? Furthermore, why would he subject himself to more weird dreams involving Myungjun and their weird dream-romance? He definitely wasn’t gay, but being around a gay kid would surely make his dreams become even worse.

Jinwoo seemed to notice his dilemma. “Oh, yeah, we said we’d eat lunch with Myungjun.”

“I don’t want him hitting on me,” Sanha muttered, a reminder of their conversation from yesterday.

In response, Jinwoo nudged him and fussed, “Stop saying shit like that. He wouldn’t hit on you. If he hit on any of us, it’d be me.”

“It wouldn’t be you! It’d be Bin — he’s way more handsome than you are.”

“You’re both equally handsome,” Bin quickly said, glancing back at his friends. “And you’re both way more handsome than I am, and so he definitely won’t hit on me. Not in a million years. Because I’m not gay.”

Sanha smiled. “I know!” he exclaimed. “But that doesn’t mean he won’t hit on you.”

“Has he ever hit on someone straight?”

“He’s never hit on anyone,” Jinwoo answered. “Sanha’s just being an idiot.”

“He obviously hit on the guy from the bathroom, or else they wouldn’t be close enough for...you know.”

Jinwoo grimaced and Bin had to wonder if the video was seared forever into his mind. Bin was thankful he came in too late for that video to pop up again. He didn’t think he could handle such a provocative notion. Even if, as Jinwoo said, nothing was seen, Bin could imagine there were
sounds and the rest was left up to the wild imagination of a teenager.

“Ugh, let’s not talk about the bathroom,” Bin mumbled.

Myungjun still sat there, unaware he was the subject of such gross conversation.

Myungjun still sat there, gay and humiliated and outcasted.

Even if Bin would rather not get close to him in an effort to stifle out the weird dreams and to avoid becoming perceived as gay himself, he couldn’t just let him eat alone in such a pitiful state. He had to do something.

“Fuck me,” he murmured, and then began to walk. He could hear Sanha and Jinwoo behind him, albeit a bit more cautious and hesitant in their steps. Bin didn’t care. He didn’t even care if they left. He was filled with steely determination to befriend Myungjun and to ensure he never ate lunch alone again.

He plopped his food down on Myungjun’s table. The older boy gave a start and looked up at Bin with wide eyes, his mouth filled with food.

Bin sat across from Myungjun and cleared his throat. “Hey.”

Myungjun didn’t get the chance to respond, for Sanha and Jinwoo sat on either side of Bin. Jinwoo seemed a little subdued, but Sanha smiled brightly.

“You’re Myungjun, right? Bin told us about you; I didn’t hear a thing about you from anyone else. Nothing about...about anything.”

Myungjun looked confused.

“I’m Sanha,” Sanha introduced. “This is Bin and this is Jinwoo. Bin is new.”

Myungjun swallowed the food in his mouth. Bin watched, stared, and wondered how good his gag reflex was. It must not work very well if he could suck dick. Bin wondered how he looked in such a position.

Bin slammed a fist onto the table, making not only Myungjun jump, but also Jinwoo and Sanha.

Sanha pursed his lips, then whispered, “Are you mad I introduced you like that?”

He couldn’t make such an outburst. Even if he was trying to ward off any potential homosexuality Myungjun was emitting, he had to keep his cool. “No,” Bin mumbled. “There was a gnat.”

“Oh!” Sanha nodded his head, as if it was a normal reaction. “I hate gnats. Do you hate gnats, Myungjun?”

Myungjun narrowed his eyes, first at Bin but then at Sanha. Instead of answering the question given to him, he asked, “So why are you three here?”

“We wanted to eat lunch with Bin,” Jinwoo stated. He seemed disinterested in the conversation, other than the question. “And Bin wanted to eat lunch with you.”

Myungjun’s gaze then turned to Jinwoo. Out of everyone, he seemed to regard Jinwoo with the most caution. Bin was confused at first, but a few seconds of thought made him realize the reasoning behind Myungjun’s distrust. Jinwoo had seen the video. Jinwoo was around when Myungjun committed that act of debauchery. Sanha was a first year and had only heard about it
second-hand, and Bin was brand new to the school. Only Jinwoo was privy to the video of Myungjun giving someone a blowjob.

So, then, only Jinwoo received his greatest doubt.

Bin wanted to keep all conversation away from what had happened that day. He didn’t want to mention the video, nor did he want to bring up Myungjun’s homosexuality. He wanted Myungjun comfortable.

“How’s the chicken?” he asked, pointing at the fried chicken on Myungjun’s tray.

“Good,” was Myungjun’s simple response, and he turned away from Jinwoo. He didn’t look at Bin, though. He stared down at his food instead.

It was difficult to make conversation with Myungjun. He seemed nervous to have three people seated before him, and it definitely showed. He spoke in one-worded sentence, only answering questions when directly asked, but otherwise kept silent.

Things were awkward. Things were weird. Jinwoo passed the time mostly on his phone, and Bin kept shooting glances toward Myungjun in order to make sure he wasn’t growing too nervous.

Sanha, then, was the only one who kept talking.

“Myungjun,” he started, after finishing his spiel about a video game he was enjoying recently. Myungjun made a noise, signalling he was listening, and so Sanha asked, “Who is most handsome out of the three of us?”

Jinwoo sighed. “Sanha, don’t.”

“It’s not because he’s gay,” Sanha argued back.

Bin noticed Myungjun tense.

“What were you talking about earlier?” Myungjun asked, placing his chopsticks onto his plate and moving his hands to his lap. His glare was accusatory, as if he was awaiting an unsavory answer.

Thinking about it, Bin realized the answer would be unsavory. How was Sanha to explain their earlier discussion? How was Sanha to tell Myungjun, *we just talked about which one of us you would hit on*?

Sanha, fortunately, seemed to realize how wretched of a thing that would be to admit, so he just grinned and responded, “Jinwoo thinks he’s better looking than Bin is, but I think Bin is way more attractive than Jinwoo is, don’t you?”

It was a good cover, but even that didn’t ease Myungjun. He scoffed and rolled his eyes. “I’m not falling for this shit again,” he fussed.

Sanha blinked. “What shit?”

“You’re pretending to just have me casually choose someone and then you’ll tell people I want to blow him, too. Isn’t that right?”

The grin was fading from Sanha’s face. He shook his head with vigour. “N-No! No, I wouldn’t do
“None of you are attractive,” Myungjun snapped. “How’s that?”

Sanha, shamed into silence by Myungjun’s frustration, cleared his throat and began to pick at his food. Jinwoo said nothing, either, though Bin did catch him reaching over to pat Sanha’s shoulder to comfort the boy.

The lunch table was awkward after that. No one else wanted to say anything to initiate another failed discussion. It wasn’t until Myungjun was packing up that Bin finally felt compelled to speak, to make sure things weren’t ended on such an awful note.

“I think I’m the hottest,” he announced. Jinwoo glanced over at him and Sanha tensed.

Myungjun waited a few seconds before giving a response. “Can you just shut up about —”

“Myungjun is second hottest.”

Myungjun’s eyes widened. He stared at Bin, frozen in shock. Bin could see the tips of his ears turning red, and he prayed it wasn’t from anger or humiliation.

“What the fuck are you saying?” Myungjun hissed, lowering his voice.

“I’m saying that I think you’re hot. I mean, in the most heterosexual way possible, you’re hot.”

“You’re mocking me, aren’t you?”

Bin sighed. “Why do you think we’re mocking you?” he asked. “What do you think any of us have to gain by being a jackass to you?”

“What do you have to gain by being nice to me?” Myungjun asked.

It was Jinwoo who spoke this time, pulling his gaze away from Bin in order to look at Myungjun. “I like being friendly,” he stated. “Sanha does, too. And Bin apparently does, because he was the one who wanted to sit with you.”

Myungjun seemed conflicted. He grasped harshly onto his lunch tray and bit down on his lip in worry. After a few seconds of thought, of bouncing his knee up and down, he stood from his seat and muttered, “I need to get to class.”

He left, then, and Jinwoo groaned. “Maybe it’s not worth being his friend,” he commented.

Sanha nodded forlornly. “He doesn’t like me.”

“He doesn’t like anyone,” Jinwoo corrected, but Bin didn’t think that was accurate at all. He recalled the way Myungjun had smiled when Bin promised to help him with his English work. He remembered how relaxed his face was, how bright it was, how cheerful Myungjun had become.

He also remembered how Myungjun had willingly talked to him during lunch yesterday. He remembered how his eyes lit up when he discussed history, and how he engaged Bin in the conversation by asking questions, and how he ignored those who had laughed at his misfortune.

Myungjun liked people. His trust, though, had been shattered.

Bin finished his food fast, shoveling the leftovers in his mouth, then asked, “Sanha, can you clean up for me, please?”
“Sure, but...where are you going?”

“To cheer up Mr. Grumpy-pants,” Bin replied with a smile.

He ignored the “good luck,” Jinwoo called after him, and hurried down the hallway. When he rounded the corner right before his classroom, he nearly ran straight into Myungjun.

He skidded to a halt just in time and took a deep breath. Myungjun’s gaze was a wary, and Bin reminded himself that Myungjun didn’t trust people. Myungjun wouldn’t trust him. Bin knew he was gay, and for that, Myungjun wouldn’t trust him. Bin would have to tread lightly in order to prove himself worthy to become Myungjun’s friend.

“Why are you running so fast?” Myungjun asked.

“Had to catch up with you,” Bin said. He gestured at their classroom door. “Is it locked?”

Myungjun nodded his head, then looked away from Bin with a sigh. “Just waiting for the teacher to come back from lunch.”

Waiting.

That’s what they had done in Bin’s dream.

Except, in Bin’s dream, it had been raining and they were outside and Bin was smoking a pipe and Myungjun was delightful and wet and so ethereal.

Bin grit his teeth down and cleared his throat. He had to get that dream from his mind. He couldn’t keep thinking about Myungjun in such a manner, not when he was straight.

“You know,” he started, getting his thoughts cleared up, “Sanha wasn’t trying to start something. I mean, I haven’t known him for that long, but he’s just really friendly. He likes to talk a lot. He wanted to talk to you.”

“He could’ve done that without asking who I found the hottest,” Myungjun mumbled.

“But it wasn’t an insult to you.”

“Who told you I was gay?” Myungjun asked, ignoring what Bin said and facing him with an accusatory glare.

Bin was caught off guard by the sudden question. He first tried to feign innocence. “Why would you think I know about your sexuality?”

“Because you made it clear that you were straight,” Myungjun replied. “Remember? You called me hot in a heterosexual way. If you knew I was gay, you wouldn’t have gone and said something so stupid.”

“I didn’t think it was that stupid.”

“It was pretty fucking dumb.”

Bin sighed loudly and leaned against the wall, standing next to Myungjun. He thought how he could best detail his knowledge. Part of him wanted to hide the fact that he knew, to pretend that he was still ignorant to Myungjun’s sexuality. However, lying wouldn’t make a friendship. Playing dumb wouldn’t, either. If he wanted Myungjun to like him and to trust him, then he would have to tell the truth.
“Jinwoo told me about the video,” he muttered. “Only because I mentioned who you were and Sanha and Jinwoo both knew you. I mean, Sanha never watched the video. He doesn’t want to, either.”

“Jinwoo has, though, is what you’re trying to say.” Myungjun didn’t seemed shocked by the information. Bitter, sure, but not shocked. Bin felt pity toward him.

“Yeah.”

Myungjun said nothing else. He stared down at the ground, eyebrows furrowed. He adjusted his glasses once, but otherwise made no movement or comment.

Bin hated the silence. He found it disconcerting. Especially now, when Myungjun looked so broken and beaten and resigned to his fate, the silence did nothing but swallow the both of them up.

“I don’t care what you did, though.”

Myungjun glanced over at him. “What?”

“It was horrible of that kid to film you. I mean, from what I heard you couldn’t see anything, but...still, my point still stands. He shouldn’t have filmed you. And people shouldn’t mock you for it. I don’t know much about...about being gay, but it’s not like you had a choice, right?”

“I had a choice to suck Soojong’s dick.”

Bin now had a name to the faceless boy who had allowed Myungjun to perform oral sex on him. It didn’t help with his imagination at all, but it did allow him some sort of information. “Yeah, but...you don’t have a choice in being gay. And I think people shouldn’t mock you for being gay.”

Myungjun pursed his lips and returned to staring at the floor. His silence spurred Bin to talk more, to ask more questions.

“Who was Soojong?”

“The guy whose dick I sucked.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

Myungjun sighed and looked down at his phone. Lunch was over. At any second, students would come pouring down the hallway to attend their next class, and then Myungjun and Bin would be both seen and heard. Myungjun likely didn’t want that to happen; Bin really didn’t want that to happen.

He had worried, even earlier that day, that if people saw him talking to Myungjun, then they might think he was gay. However, now he worried that if they heard the subject he and Myungjun were discussing, they might decide to tease and mock all the more. Bin didn’t want that to happen.

“Did you finish the English homework?” he asked, nudging Myungjun with his shoulder.

Myungjun looked up at him again, eyes a little wide. He glanced around them and, spotting no one, asked, “What’s...what’s with the sudden change in conversation? You were badgering me, but now —”

“I’m curious about the homework. And I’m curious to know how much I have to edit; I saw you work on that assignment in class. You suck at English.”
Myungjun stared at him for a second or two longer, and then he smiled.

He smiled that beautiful, bright, genuine smile he had given to Bin the other day.

Bin couldn’t help but return it.

Bin couldn’t help but think of Dream-Myungjun.

Bin could help the thumping of his heart.

The smell of smoke lingered in the air, thickly and heavy and filling Bin’s lungs with its putrid stench. He had thought that the constant smell of nicotine that clung to Myungjun’s body was bad, but this was even worse.

Still, he had experienced such horrible things in the past, for years and years and years. One more village burnt to the ground could hardly bother him at this point.

It bothered Myungjun, though, and Jinwoo, both of whom were still new to the world of warfare and civilian deaths.

They gazed upon the dystopian landscape in horror. Jinwoo sighed in resignation, but Myungjun stuck close to Bin’s side, eyeing the victims of the bombing in horror.

Bin glanced over at him and murmured, “Are you alright?”

Myungjun didn’t answer. He smoked his cigarette still, and though the sights of burned bodies clearly disturbed him, he continued to stare as if ingraining each one into his memory.

“This is disgusting,” Jinwoo stated as they stepped over the body of what appeared to be a small child. “It’s as if neither side is taking into account all of the lives they’re sacrificing by continuing this stupid war.”

“It’s war. Of course they don’t take lives into account,” Bin replied. “In the end, the sole purpose is to win, and if thousands of innocent people die in the process, then that’s simply a tragedy of war.”

Jinwoo, unlike Myungjun, decided to keep his eyes averted from the death and destruction. He stared at Bin instead, and asked, “You’ve been in countless wars, haven’t you? Were any this bad?”

“They’re all bad,” Bin responded. He sighed as they neared the edge of town, away from the ruined village, and continued, “As the years go on, the wars become more advanced and people become more widely distributed, which means that the war then spreads to the people. There’s always so much death. There’s rape and pillaging and other horrible things, too, and I’ve no doubt in my mind that it still goes on. Regardless of which side it is, they’re raping and pillaging and killing.”

Myungjun stumbled over some fallen debris, and Bin righted him quickly. The worry in Myungjun’s gaze was evident. He trembled in Bin’s hold, then asked, “Do...do you think my parents have met
such a fate? Do you think...do you think that—"

“No,” Bin replied, hurriedly. He didn’t want to give Myungjun the wrong idea. He didn’t want Myungjun to continue on his journey with the thought in mind that his mother might’ve been raped, that his father might’ve been murdered. Even if it was true, he had to ensure that Myungjun remained optimistic about their situation. “Your parents are further up north. It’s likely they’ve escaped the majority of the fighting. It’s likely they actually left earlier and went down south. Regardless of where they are, we’ll find them, alright?”

Myungjun took another deep breath and then gave his cigarette a long drag. It was dwindling away, and Bin prayed they had enough cigarettes left to last them until the next viable town appeared.

“Right,” Myungjun mumbled. “We’ll find them.”

“Exactly.”

While Bin had never been much of a believer in false hope, he had also never been keen on seeing Myungjun despair. Not this Myungjun, especially, who, while being cowardly, maintained a stubborn and strong persona.

He was getting his personality back, too, with each step they took from the village. “I’ll fucking murder anyone who’s touched my parents,” he stated, his voice a little shaky. “I’ve got a gun and I’ll use it. Ask Bin.”

Bin touched his head. He had the small scar from the wound Myungjun had given him, and he nodded. “You’ll blow their brains out.”

“Exactly.”

Jinwoo snorted. “You’d better hope none of them are immortal, like Bin.”

“Shut up, Jinwoo.”

“I asked you two to shut up last night, but you didn’t. It’s a wonder I’m not sleep-deprived. All I hear anymore is you and Bin making out.”

Bin didn’t mind the teasing and the mockery. It amused him, as did Myungjun’s frustration with such. When he looked over at his lover, Myungjun’s face was red and he glared at Jinwoo. “I wasn’t making out,” he lied.

“Bin, Binnie, please, please kiss me more,” Jinwoo moaned, a sorry impersonation of Myungjun’s needy voice. Bin knew that Myungjun sounded far more sexy and enticing than that.

Myungjun put his cigarette out under his boot. “Keep talking shit, Jinwoo.”

“Penetrate me anally, Bin, please, I’m a virgin—”

“I didn’t fucking say that!” Myungjun yelled. He grasped Bin’s backpack and tugged, which, in turn, tugged Bin. As Bin choked and stumbled backwards, Myungjun had already rifled through and found a tin can of beans, which he threw at Jinwoo, and which Jinwoo artfully dodged.

“Hey!” Bin exclaimed. “Don’t ruin our food source!”

“They taste like shit, anyway,” Myungjun snapped at him. He ran forward to grab the beans and,
once more, threw them.

Jinwoo dodged them again, laughing and egging Myungjun on, tossing little jeers at him. “Weak arm, Myungjun!” he teased. “If you jerk Bin off some more, though, you might become stronger!”

“At least I have someone to jerk off!” Myungjun shouted.

“You haven’t jerked me off,” Bin tried to inform Myungjun, but he was ignored. Myungjun had caught Jinwoo and was engaged in the stupidest fight Bin had ever seen. Jinwoo slapped at Myungjun uselessly, and Myungjun was reduced to slapping him right back.

Bin rolled his eyes and sighed. So much for keeping quiet and paying their respects to those who had died in the village. Instead, Myungjun and Jinwoo were yelling vulgarities at each other and fighting like two dumb assholes.

They were tired out afterwards, at least. When they stopped for the night, Jinwoo went right to bed, and Myungjun leaned onto Bin as he put out their fire and closed the lids on their containers of food.

“You’re warm,” Myungjun commented, voice groggy.

“You’re tired,” Bin pointed out.

“Oh, fuck off. I won’t pay you anymore compliments if you state the obvious.”

“Fine.” Bin kissed Myungjun’s forehead and whispered, “I’m warm just for you, darling. Because you fill me with warmth.”

Myungjun curled in closer to Bin’s touch and responded, “No. It’s because of the fire you just made.”

“Cheeky bastard.”

“Shut the fuck up and just kiss me. That’s all I’m here for and you know it. If we make out outside the tent, Jinwoo can’t complain.”

It sounded like a solid idea to Bin. It would also help Myungjun to relax and unwind, to maybe forget, if even for a few minutes, the signs of destruction and death they had seen in the village. It would take his mind off his parents, who could have possibly suffered a similar fate. It would bring him peace and comfort for a while.

Besides all that, Bin enjoyed making out with Myungjun.

*He loved Myungjun too much to refuse.*

It had been a week since his first day at the new school. In such a short period of time, Sanha had already declared them all to be best friends, to which Myungjun had spitefully responded, “No, thank you.”
Myungjun’s words never did matter, though, for he still continued to eat lunch with the three of them and he still continued to smile when Bin treated him with respect.

The weird dream hadn’t returned, either, until that one night, and Bin woke with a raging headache and a pounding in his chest.

He put his fingers to his lips and pressed down. Though if had been just a dream, he could still feel the way Dream-Myungjun had kissed him. He had tasted of tobacco, of cigarette smoke. His lips were chapped and clumsy and hungry for more attention.

He was so familiar, and yet Bin knew they had met only a week prior.

“Just a dream,” he mumbled to himself. He had to remember that dreams didn’t count in reality. While he and Dream-Myungjun might have made out in the midst of some sort of war, and mere feet away from a sleeping Jinwoo, that wasn’t at all what his real life entailed. He would never make out with Myungjun.

Especially not near Jinwoo.

Especially not at all.

As he walked to school, his head still throbbing, he wondered why he was having so many strange dreams concerning Myungjun. There was no reason for his dreams to randomly single out Myungjun, of all people. He definitely wasn’t the first person Bin had met. There had been Sehun, one of their neighbors in the previous apartment complex.

And there had been…

Well, just Myungjun, other than that.

But Bin didn’t think he would be caught up in someone’s sexuality. He had never focused on it before, so why were his dreams focusing on it now?

And why were his dreams allowing him to make out with a Myungjun who smoked and fought Jinwoo and avoided dead, burned babies.

He closed his eyes briefly, trying to get the image and the smell out of his mind. It was hard, however; everything in the dream had felt so real. It hadn’t felt at all like a dream. In fact, he could still catch the scent of nicotine drifting by.

Too real.

He opened his eyes and noticed a student — or someone wearing his school uniform — leaning up against the building of a closed noodle shop. A cigarette was lit and placed haphazardly in between his pointer and middle finger. Bin wrinkled his nose and cleared his throat, trying to say, with no words, that smoking was bad.

The boy looked up.

“Myungjun?!” Bin gasped, his eyes wide as he stared at his friend.

Myungjun looked equally surprised. His mouth moved, as if trying to stammer out an excuse, but when he realized he was still holding his cigarette, he dropped it and stamped it out. “I-It’s not what it looks like,” he said.
“You smoke?”

Myungjun swallowed nervously, thickly, and hurried forward to Bin’s side. Bin could definitely smell tobacco now; it was no longer in his dream. Had his dream become a reality? It must have, or else why would he have a dream where Myungjun smoked before he even knew Myungjun smoked?

“Please don’t tell,” Myungjun whispered, glancing around to make sure no one else had seen his dirty secret. “I’ll get in trouble if they find out I smoke. I was already in deep shit because of...of the...you know.”

Bin knew. The bathroom incident. The indecency incident. The caught-sucking-dick-in-a-bathroom incident. There was no need to add another incident to that one.

“If the school figures out I smoke, then they might kick me out, and I can’t be kicked out when I’m so close to finishing.”

“I...I won’t tell,” Bin promised. He wasn’t concerned with getting his friend in trouble. It wouldn’t have even crossed his mind. While he disagreed with smoking, and while he found it a little gross, there was no reason to tattle on Myungjun for something that didn’t hurt anyone else.

More compelling, however, was the dream Bin had. How could he dream about Myungjun smoking? He must have seen it before. He must have smelled tobacco on him, or else heard about Myungjun’s habits from another student. So he asked, “Does anyone else know you smoke?”

Myungjun shook his head hurriedly, then stopped to think about it. “Maybe...Minhyuk.”

Bin had yet to meet Minhyuk. It wasn’t from him, then. “Just Minhyuk?”

“Just Minhyuk.”

“I must’ve smelled it on you before, then,” he mumbled.

Once more, Myungjun shook his head. “I don’t smoke often,” he assured Bin. “Just sometimes. I don’t think I’ve smoked anything since...maybe two weeks? I think it’s been two weeks.”

Two weeks was before Bin came to the school. If that was true, then there was no way Bin had smelled tobacco beforehand.

His dream had acted on its own accord. His dream had outed Myungjun as a smoker before there had been proof of that. It was all so confusing, and it made Bin’s head hurt even more. He sighed and ran his fingers through messy hair.

“Are you okay, Bin?” Myungjun asked him, worried.

“Fine,” Bin responded in a mumble. “Just...weird dream. Bad dream.” It hadn’t been bad, though. His dream self had been happy, despite the destruction and mayhem all around. His dream self had loved kissing Myungjun.

His head was going to blow up at this rate.

“I had a weird dream, too,” Myungjun admitted, looking a little sheepish. “Which was why I was smoking. Just...just had some thoughts.” He peered closer at Bin, then asked, “Are you sure you’re okay?”
Bin squeezed his eyes shut and dripped his head into his chest. “My head just...it hurts.”

“Did you take medicine for it?”

“Yeah.”

There was silence. Myungjun was hesitating. Bin opened his eyes in confusion, wondering why he wasn’t getting back a response, when suddenly Myungjun reached forward and, with both hands, massaged either side of Bin’s head. His thumbs rubbed at the temples and his long fingers inched to the back of Bin’s neck where they caressed the skin softly, gently, as if Bin was made of fragile china.

“If it hurts too bad,” Myungjun murmured, “you ought to go home and sleep it off. It might be a migraine.”

It likely was a migraine. Migraines took time to go away, Bin had heard. They lingered often, hitting against the skulls until their victim would succumb and lay in bed for the rest of the day. However, this migraine was beginning to disappear.

Myungjun’s hands were like magic, really, for they were likely the reason behind it.

“Keep going,” Bin whispered, gazing into Myungjun’s eyes.

Myungjun blinked. “What?”

“It’s working. Whatever...whatever you’re doing with your hands. It’s working. My head doesn’t hurt as much.”

Myungjun seemed surprised that Bin had admitted to such a thing. He glanced around, as if ensuring no one else was watching, and then he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

Despite the confirmation, Myungjun still hesitated. He smelled of smoke, of nicotine, but Bin didn’t care. For some odd reason, the smell comforted him now. He wondered if it was another side-effect of his weird dream.

“You know I’m gay,” Myungjun stated, “and if someone catches us like this, then they’ll think you’re gay, too.”

“I don’t care. I know I’m straight and that’s all that matters. Keep going.”

Finally, Myungjun listened to him. He continued to massage Bin’s head, and the headache continued to dissipate.

It was silent, though. The quiet was almost as bad as loud noise would have been. Bin hated the silence, especially in such a position. He asked, his eyes still closed and his head still bowed and Myungjun’s fingers still running over his temples, “What happened to Soojung?” And then to clarify, he added, “The...the guy whose...you know.”

Bin could feel Myungjun tense. “What sort of question is that?”

“I’m curious. Everyone else at the school knows but me.”

“Why don’t you get Jinwoo or Sanha to tell you?”
“Because that’s not fair to you. We’re friends, right? Then you should be the one to tell me about yourself, not them. I want to make sure, too, any knowledge I have of the incident isn’t from baseless rumors whispered by people who hardly know who you are.”

Myungjun still for a moment, and so Bin spared a glance at him. Their eyes met. Myungjun’s were full of curiosity and confusion.

“Why,” he started, “do you care about getting your story right?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

Myungjun wet his lips, his tongue briefly darting out, pink and cute and so endearing. Bin watched it until it retreated back into Myungjun’s mouth, then he berated himself for thinking another man’s tongue was cute. His dreams were rubbing off on him far too much.

“No one...no one else has before. Asked me, I mean.”

Bin straightened. He gently removed Myungjun’s hands from his head and asked, “Really? How about Dongmin? Or...Sanha mentioned Minhyuk and you were close, right?”

“Minhyuk already knew because I told him. He didn’t ask,” Myungjun explained. “And Dongmin...oddly enough, Dongmin never cared. He never asked, he never engaged himself in the gossip, he just...accepted me regardless of what the truth was.”

Bin’s opinion of Dongmin had always been low, what with how annoying the boy was and how condescending he could be. However, if he treated Myungjun with that much respect, surely he had some good in him.

Myungjun sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “Soojung left. I thought you would’ve heard that much, at least.”

“I did,” Bin said, deciding to focus later on Dongmin and Myungjun’s odd friendship. “But I wanted to know why he left you.”

Myungjun furrowed his eyebrows. He looked as if he was deliberating whether or not he should give an answer. Bin hoped he would. Bin waited with baited breath for some sort of answer.

But then Myungjun’s name was called, and they both gave a start.

Another student was running toward them, someone Bin had not met before. He didn’t smile; he eyed Bin harshly as he stopped at Myungjun’s side, then asked, “Who the hell is this?”

“It’s Bin,” Myungjun answered.

“Is he bothering you?” The boy clenched his fists, then swore, “I’ll fucking kick his ass if he is.”

Bin was ready to fight back, to bristle and exchange angry words in return, but then Myungjun sighed, “God, Minhyuk, calm down. Bin’s a friend. Remember, I told you about him.”

So this was the Minhyuk Bin had heard a lot about, from both Sanha and Myungjun. He looked harsh, and apparently acted harsh, but Myungjun could detect a protective streak in his gaze as he positioned himself in between Myungjun and Bin.

“The new kid?” Minhyuk asked.

Myungjun nodded his head. “Yeah. We’re friends now.”
“And are you sure he’s not bugging you?”

Bin scoffed, and before Myungjun could say anything, he answered, “Why would I be bugging him? Not everyone who talks to Myungjun is out to get him, you know..”

Minhyuk had no response to that. He narrowed his eyes and turned to Myungjun, slinging an arm around his shoulder. “Do you want to eat lunch with me today? I made extra, just in case.”

“Um…” Myungjun glanced over at Bin. “I was actually...I was going to eat lunch with Bin and Sanha and Jinwoo —”

“Please?” Minhyuk begged. “We haven’t eaten together in a while, and I’ve missed hanging out with you.”

“Why don’t you come to the cafeteria to eat lunch with us?” Bin asked.

Minhyuk glanced over at him and rolled his eyes. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Bin wanted to tell Minhyuk that his behavior was deplorable and unnecessary, but Myungjun nudged Minhyuk’s stomach first and said, “He has tutoring during lunch.”

“You don’t have to tell everyone you know,” Minhyuk mumbled, but he otherwise didn’t seem to care. “Just eat lunch with me. I can’t get out of my tutoring, but I’m sure my tutor won’t mind if you sit in with me.”

Once more, Myungjun looked toward Bin. His eyes were wide and searching, as if asking for permission. Bin didn’t feel like Myungjun needed to ask him for permission. Myungjun could do what he wanted. And if Minhyuk and Myungjun had been friends for a while, then Myungjun ought to eat with him.

So Bin shrugged his shoulders.

Myungjun sighed lightly and bit down on his lip before nodding his head. “Alright,” he told Minhyuk, “I’ll come eat lunch with you today.”

Minhyuk gave a small yes, and a little cheer, and then the two of them quickened their pace, walking a few steps in front of Bin.

“What did you make for me?” Myungjun asked, and Minhyuk began to rattle off the dishes he had prepared.

Bin felt disappointment grow in his chest. He wanted to eat with Myungjun. He looked forward to the hour they got to spend together before classes, and he didn’t like the idea of someone stealing Myungjun’s attention away from him. He couldn’t really fight it, though. He wasn’t Myungjun’s best friend. He was just some new kid Myungjun liked to hang out with from time to time.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared at Myungjun’s back.

The boy turned his head once and met Bin’s gaze.

He mouthed sorry, and offered a small smile before returning to his position and laughing with Minhyuk.

Bin longed to be in Minhyuk’s position. He wished he was the one Myungjun was clinging to and giggling to. He wished Myungjun would constantly smile with him. He wished he had the foresight
to bring in a home-cooked meal for Myungjun to enjoy.

But it all sounded like something a boyfriend would do to his girlfriend. He shouldn’t be thinking such things about another boy.

The dreams were having too much influence on his life. He needed to find some way to forget about those dreams.

He took a deep breath and stared at the screen in front of him, still playing some pornographic video, as his headphones dangled around his neck. He felt a little dirty sometimes, jerking off to something he shouldn’t be watching at all, but after days of thinking about Myungjun, it was the only thing he figured he could do to get his mind elsewhere. It had worked for a little while, watching a woman and a man engage in heavy sex. Now that he was done, however, he thought again about Myungjun.

He wondered if Myungjun would watch porn. The Internet was sure to have gay porn, wasn’t it? Did Myungjun watch that? Did Myungjun get off on that?

“No,” he told himself, pulling his pants back up and tossing some tissues in the trashcan beside his desk before shutting his laptop down. “Don’t think about Myungjun.”

He went to the bathroom where he washed his hands. He let the water and soap run down his fingers, and he sighed loudly.

He wondered what Myungjun was doing right then. He wondered if Myungjun was studying his English, as he had promised Bin he would, or if he was in bed sleeping, as Bin should have been. He wondered what Myungjun’s evenings looked like.

“Dammit,” he cursed as he hurried back to his bedroom.

He had gotten Myungjun’s number earlier that week. He had said, “If we’ll be studying together, I think we’ll need to communicate.” So far, all they had sent was times to meet up to study history or English.

Bin wanted to change that, however. He wanted a nice, casual relationship with Myungjun.

Once he got back to his room, he grabbed his phone from his desk and flopped over onto his bed. The screen of his phone illuminated his dark room, and Bin gnawed at the inside of his lip for a few seconds.

Did he dare text Myungjun this late? It was after midnight. Surely Myungjun must have been asleep.

Still, it didn’t hurt to try. Bin typed out a simple message, something a guy would send to another guy in the middle of the night:

[to: myungjun] hey what’s up

He pressed send before he could evaluate how stupid the message sounded. “Hey, what’s up?” he
repeated out loud to himself. He rolled his eyes at his own stupidity.

Then humiliation set in.

Myungjun surely wouldn’t be awake. He was likely asleep. He wouldn’t get the text until the next day, when he woke up to Bin asking him hey, what’s up? He would wonder why the hell Bin was texting him at midnight. He would ask, and Bin would have no answer for him.

What was he supposed to say? “I jerked myself off then wanted to talk to you?”

“Stupid,” Bin fussed at himself, burying his head underneath his pillow. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

He was never going to live this down. It would forever hang over his head, his single greatest moronic act in the history of his teenage life.

But then he felt his phone vibrate. He picked his head up in confusion and glanced over.

It was Myungjun, texting him back.

His heart raced as he snatched his phone up to look.

[from: myungjun] lol its in the middle of the night bin ^^

Despite it all, Bin found himself smiling.

“Cute,” he whispered, rereading the message again.

It was cute. It was cute for a guy. It was cute for a gay guy. But a straight guy, such as Bin, ought not to find such a message cute.

He cleared his throat, trying to ward off such ridiculous thoughts, and texted Myungjun back.

[to: myungjun] i just couldnt sleep!! And jinwoo isnt answering and neither is sanha so you were the next choice .

He swallowed nervously, staring at his phone in anticipation. It went dark. He turned the screen back on.

[from: myungjun] its an honor to be your third choice of someone to text.

He laughed, slapping a hand over his mouth in order not to wake his mother or sister. They were far enough down the hallway that they likely wouldn’t hear, but it was better safe than sorry.

[to: myungjun] next time im up at midnight, i’ll make sure you’ll be my first choice!

[from: myungjun] im going to hold u to that >.<

The emoticons he used were so cute. Bin could picture Myungjun in his bed, hair tousled and clothes loose, smiling groggily at his phone with each text he sent.

Of course, he knew better than to think such thoughts. That was gay, way more gay than he wanted to be.

[to: myungjun] why are you awake though? Shouldnt u be asleep?

There was about a minute before Myungjun texted him back.
Bin had to take a deep breath and put down the phone. He felt his heart pounding in his chest. Why was a guy making him feel this way? Why was someone he considered a friend making him so happy? He would expect a girl to do that, type cute messages and make his heart flutter. But why was it a guy?

He chalked it up to the weird dreams and to Myungjun’s (supposed) promiscuous behavior. He was still young, and it was likely Myungjun’s sexuality was making him confused. He had never been friends before with a gay person, after all.

He would have to ask Jinwoo if he, too, was confused when Myungjun treated him kindly.

Once he deemed himself calm enough, he typed out his next text:

*Im proud of you no matter what.*

He couldn’t send that one, though. That text was definitely encroaching the territory of flirting. Would he send the same thing to Jinwoo or Sanha? Definitely not. He wouldn’t send it, then, to Myungjun.

He deleted that text, then typed out a new one.

[to: myungjun] almost forgot about the exam!

He hadn’t, though. He had studied for the exam for a few days. He had studied with Myungjun for the exam. He figured if he sent a casual statement regarding the exam, it would take pressure off of him to respond in some sort of sweet way.

[from: myungjun] if u forget then i might be able to do better than u

[from: myungjun] i shouldnt remind u next time

Bin found himself grinning at his phone again. Myungjun really shouldn’t make him feel like this. Myungjun really shouldn’t make him so damn happy.

And, yet, he did.

[to: myungjun] u cant do that to me!!!

[from: myungjun] i can and i will (¬‿¬)

Myungjun was such a dork. Bin liked talking to him. Bin wanted to keep talking to him. However, he knew they would both have to wake up early the next day. Besides, they would get to see each other at school. Bin could handle going to sleep if it meant he would see Myungjun in just a few hours.

They finished up their conversation after a few minutes. Bin couldn’t help but send a good-night text.

[to: myungjun] sleep well!!! I need u rested so u can do good on ur exam

[from: myungjun] thanks! I will sleep and then i will ace this test. Night, bin!!!

Perhaps Bin stared at the texts for a little while before he slept.
At the very least, he went to bed happy and satisfied and excited for the next day.

The establishment was quiet, oddly enough. Bin could see two men loitering in the lobby, sharing a pipe together, and the landlady seated nearby, watching them cautiously. When she noticed Bin, she gestured toward the stairs.

“He’s available,” she commented. She needn’t ask who he wished to see; she was familiar enough with him.

“Has he had any clients tonight?” Bin asked, trying to appear inconspicuous. While it made him burn with a jealous rage to learn about potential clients, he liked keeping tabs on his lover. Myungjun hardly told him how many men he had in a night. Myungjun hardly told him if those men treated him correctly. The landlady, however, was always so brutally honest.

She pursed her lips in thought, then shook her head. “Not tonight, no,” she said. “It’s been slow tonight. I think the rain is keeping people indoors.”

It made sense. It was always slower on rainy days. People didn’t want to drench themselves and become dirty to go visit prostitutes.

Of course, sometimes that meant the prostitutes would then wait on the streets to pick up lonely, desperate men. Rainy nights could be dangerous.

Myungjun never did that, however. Myungjun cared about his own well-being.

Also, Bin forbade him from doing such, too fearful that something would happen.

The landlady spoke again. “He had many men last night, though.” She smiled, a little smug in her observation. “I know how jealous you get over the other men that get to fuck him.”

“Shut up,” Bin growled.

“You don’t like the idea of those big, beefy men fucking him into the floor, do you?”

He didn’t want to stay and listen to her. She liked to rile him up, for she knew it made him all the more encouraged to visit Myungjun for long hours into the night, and she got money out of his long visits.

“I hope you burn in hell,” he snapped to her as he turned from the lobby.

He just barely heard her say, “I’ll see you there,” as he bounded up the staircase.

Upon reaching Myungjun’s door, he knocked twice, then called out, “Darling? Are you decent?”

There was movement, a slight curse, and then Minhyuk opened the door. He blinked up at Bin and said, “He’s decent.”

Minhyuk slipped around Bin, smiling widely, and Bin glanced back at him. “Where are you going?”
“To visit a friend downstairs,” Minhyuk responded. “It’s been boring here tonight for everyone, so we’re going to play cards. He also has a cigar for me to try!”

“Don’t smoke,” Bin scolded, but Minhyuk simply laughed in return before rushing down the staircase, feet pounding across the old, wooden floors.

Bin sighed, knowing Minhyuk was unlikely to listen to him, and stepped inside of the small room.

Myungjun was dressed up.

He looked beautiful in his kimono. He wore his finest wig, too, with silky, black hair styled in a magnificent manner. His face was covered in the white powder of a geisha, with his lower lip painted red and a similar red color down the middle of his upper lip. Even the back of his neck was white, Bin could tell as he stepped closer into the room, signifying that not only had Myungjun listened to Bin’s makeup advice from before, but he had also cared enough to provide the finer details.

Bin closed the door behind him and stammered, “What’s...what’s the occasion, darling? I thought you haven’t had any guests. Were you expecting one?”

Myungjun puckered out his lips. He looked every bit the part of a demure geisha, and Bin’s heart skipped a beat.

“You are my guest,” he stated, tone high and sultry.

Bin stared for a second longer, then stepped further into the room. Myungjun peered up at him with heavy eyelashes.

“I don’t pay you so I can fuck you, you know,” he said, careful to make sure he didn’t just grab onto Myungjun right there and then. His hands itched to do so. He wanted to make Myungjun moan and cry out. He wanted to see the makeup smeared across Myungjun’s face, and expression of pure ecstasy overtake him.

But for the time being, he would control himself.

“You ought to make an exception,” Myungjun replied. He smoothed the skirt of his kimono. Bin couldn’t help but watch his fingers move deftly along the fabric. Myungjun had such slender fingers. They were beautiful, as was the rest of him.

“I like to fuck you in your free time,” Bin muttered. He sat down beside Myungjun and cleared his throat.

Myungjun reached behind him, where he kept a nice, glass cup. He held it out to Bin, who grasped onto it and sniffed. “Soju?”

“For you, sir,” Myungjun murmured, bowing his head.

Bin smirked. “That’s not at all authentic to a geisha. Where’s the sake?”

Finally, Myungjun faltered from his act. “Damn,” he whispered, “sake would’ve been better.”

Bin couldn’t help but laugh. Despite trying his best to act like a fragile woman, Myungjun could never keep in his vulgarities.

“The soju is very much appreciated, however,” Bin said, and he quickly downed the small glass he
was given. When he lowered his cup, Myungjun was staring over at him, hopeful and unsure.

“Shall I pour the master another one?” he asked.

Bin sighed and nodded his head. “I’ll need to be drunk for this, if you keep calling me master.”

Myungjun obliged to his wishes, bowing his head slightly as he poured. “Most men that come in prefer it when I call them master or sir,” he said, his voice taking on its usual, lower tone. “It helps them pretend I am a wife, or perhaps a slave girl. Or, I mean, maybe a geisha. I don’t really know what geisha call men, though. I’ve never been to Japan.”

When Bin was given his second glass of soju, he drank it slower this time, eyeing Myungjun appreciatively. “Just call me Bin,” he said when his glass was empty. “I like hearing you say my name, anyway.”

Myungjun scoffed and took the glass away. He refilled it. “You’re not into roleplay, are you?”

“Not with you. I don’t need to pretend anything with you. I’ll take you just as you are.” Bin reached for the glass, then asked, “Why have you dressed up for me today? Is it a special occasion?”

“No. It’s just a slow day and I decided I would surprise you with this. I know you get jealous of the other men who fuck me, so I thought perhaps you would like to experience a little of what they get to. With a personalized touch, of course.”

It was an enticing thought. Bin knew what went on behind Myungjun’s closed doors. While he came to talk and play games, other men came to watch Myungjun dress up, to hold him close and listen to him moan out in a girlish manner.

Bin much preferred his sex with Myungjun, slow and gentle and quiet. However, he couldn’t say he wasn’t intrigued with the idea of getting a little bit more than what he had bargained for.

But he wanted to tease Myungjun a little bit. As he got drunk off of the soju Myungjun provided, he wanted to make the time last as long as he could. He sipped briefly on the alcohol, then said, “I don’t get jealous.”

“Don’t be a liar.”

“Why would I lie about that?”

Myungjun pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. He looked gorgeous. He looked like a beautiful geisha, even with the faux pout he wore. Bin truly wished to lavish him with love right then and there, but he would much rather keep his act going. He liked seeing Myungjun frustrated. It was a cute look.

“I see how anxious you are when other men have been in this room. The mistress has informed me that you pace, too, when I am with another client. It sounds like jealousy to me.”

“You are mistaken. I only come to check up on Minhyuk.”

Myungjun snorted. His pout was gone, and now he just looked amused. Or, Bin thought he did, though it was difficult to tell underneath the heavy makeup. “Really?” he prompted. “You’re only here for Minhyuk?”

“Yes. In fact, since he has left, I, too, should be on—”
It was then that Myungjun reached out and grabbed onto his arm. His grip was harsh at first, but when Bin glanced over, he loosened his hold and cleared his throat. “Don’t go, sir,” he said, voice high-pitched again. He fluttered his eyelashes. “Wouldn’t you rather stay the evening with me?”

Bin smirked and downed the rest of his alcohol. He could feel himself growing more and more tipsy with each passing moment. The drinks were truly helping to loosen him up and ready himself for a night of roleplay.

“You know my name.” Bin sipped at his alcohol.

Myungjun hissed, “You have to pretend, Binnie.”

“Don’t be rude, it’s unladylike.”

The boy in front of him sighed first, but soon smiled again, back to acting like a woman. “You’re very strong, Bin. What is your line of work?”

That question stumped Bin briefly. If he was to pretend, he had to choose to become something else. He couldn’t just explain his immortality and his collection of wealth. He had to be something new, something Myungjun could call him for the sake of their roleplay. Perhaps he could go back to his roots, then.

Soldier Bin didn’t have a good ring to it.

Neither did Teacher Bin or Prince’s Aid Bin.

He wet his lips briefly, then said, “General...General Moon.”

Myungjun’s eyes widened, as if surprised Bin had decided to play along, but he was able to get a hold of himself relatively fast. He gave a small “oh,” and scooted himself closer to Bin, draping over his arm slightly. “General Moon. I’ve never been with a general before. How enticing.”

He had to down the rest of his soju. He was definitely affected by the alcohol. He felt a little light, a little giddy, and even more so when he heard Myungjun call him General.

He remembered calling out General Kim’s name late into the night, their bodies intertwined, covered in sweat and dripping with lust.

He wondered how Myungjun would sound calling out the title of General.

Myungjun moved into Bin’s lap, wrapping his legs around Bin’s waist. The skirt of the kimono
lifted just past his knees. Bin couldn’t help but run a hand down Myungjun’s leg, feeling the smooth skin underneath his fingers.

Myungjun giggled, then kissed Bin’s cheek. “Do you like what you see, General Moon?”

“I do,” Bin responded. He lifted Myungjun’s chin and planted a few kisses there.

“Then would—”

Myungjun could get no further in his speech. Bin bit down lightly at some of the skin on his neck, and the boy moaned at the touch. Pleased with the response, Bin took the nibbling here and there, knowing he was going to leave marks.

He wanted to leave marks. He hoped Myungjun’s clients would see. He hoped they would all know Myungjun was his, and they would never get to experience the love Bin did on a daily basis.

“I’m going to enjoy this, Myungsoon,” he whispered.

Myungjun gasped as Bin squeezed his bottom, and then responded, “I’ll enjoy it even more, General.”

His dreams were getting worse.

The first dream implied nothing but possible feelings to his friend. The second dream was more explicit, what with the kissing and possible make-out session by the fireside. However, the third dream was damning evidence that Bin’s unconscious self thought way too much about engaging in homosexual relations with the boy he called a friend.

Though there was two weeks in between the second dream and the third dream, Bin didn’t think things were going to get better. If they kept following his twisted fantasies, they would become even worse.

He asked Myungjun, a few days after the third dream, “Can I ask you something a little weird, a little private, a little gross?”

Myungjun, working on his English homework with Bin in the school courtyard, glanced up. The sun shone down on him, brightening his tanned skin, lighting his body as if he was a god of sorts.

Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “Sure. What is it?”

“Do you get...do you have wet dreams about...guys?”

Myungjun’s smile faltered. He messed with the glasses on his face; a nervous habit, Bin had noticed, and he wanted to shoot himself for noticing such miniscule details.

“Wet dreams?”

“About guys,” Bin repeated.
Myungjun cleared his throat. “That’s...really private. And weird.”

“That’s what I said.”

“I guess you did.” Myungjun looked away from Bin, clearly unsure of what he ought to say next. “Why are you asking, though?”

Bin didn’t want to tell him that he was asking for his own self. He was straight — he had emphasized his heterosexuality enough in the past few weeks, and he didn’t want to start defending himself to Myungjun. He couldn’t tell, then, or else it would seem too weird. It was already weird; no need to make it more weird.

“I just...I was thinking that, um, that guys have lots of wet dreams about girls, usually. So do gay guys have wet dreams about...about guys?”

“You can’t really control your...dreams.”

Bin shrugged his shoulders, then watched Myungjun expectantly. The older boy wet his lips with his tongue, a movement Bin found enticing. He had to look away. “Just tell me.”

“I’ve...yeah.”

“You have?”

“Yeah.”

“Wet dreams about guys?”

Myungjun looked around, ensuring they were alone. His cheeks and ears were bright red. It was a cute look. Once again, Bin had to look away, to stifle all those thoughts in his mind.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

It hadn’t been a question he was planning on asking, but the words spilled from his mouth before he had the chance to stop them. He was accusatory, demanding, and the jealousy that reared in his chest frightened him.

He didn’t know why he was so jealous all of a sudden. He didn’t know what it meant. Maybe because he just hated seeing Myungjun around other people who could possibly take away his attention, and that was only because he considered the two of them to be close friends. There was no other reason. It was just a close friendship.

Myungjun scrunched up his nose. “Why do you want to know so bad?” he questioned.

Bin couldn’t answer that. He countered Myungjun’s inquiry with one of his own. “Was it...Soojung?”

“It...I mean, back when...when he was at the school, sure, it was him. It’s...again, I can’t control it, Bin! Just like you can’t control yours!”

That was definitely an understatement. Bin had tried his best to control it. Thinking about girls didn’t help. Talking to girls didn’t help. Nothing helped, and the more he talked to Myungjun, the stronger his weird, nightly urges had become.
He thought about cutting contact with Myungjun. He thought very briefly about pretending Myungjun didn’t exist. However, in that moment of thought, Myungjun texted him a good morning message and Bin knew he could never do that. He never wanted to do that.

The only other thing he could do, then, was to try and get his overwhelming emotions under control, and to do that, he would try and create a clear boundary between himself and Myungjun. If he could find enough differences to prove he wasn’t gay, then he would be fine.

So far, he wasn’t doing well.

“What happened in your wet dream with Soojung?”

Myungjun groaned and placed his head onto his opened English book. He mumbled, “Fuck my life,” before glancing up at Bin.

He looked adorable. He looked frightened and angry and adorable all at once, and Bin was glad Soojung was out of the picture. It meant he had Myungjun all to himself.

“Let me rephrase that,” he said, sitting back in his seat. “What happened between you and Soojung?”

Myungjun blinked. “Have you really not asked anyone else yet?”

“I told you, I don’t want to hear it from anyone except for you.”

There was silence between the two of them. Myungjun picked himself up from his book and took the glasses off his face. He played with them, hands fumbling at the temples, folding them in and out again.

“Soojung,” he started with a deep breath, “was gay, if you couldn’t figure that out. We were in a class together and he was the only gay classmate I had. That I know of, anyway. And as the only two gay people, we bonded a bit more. We weren’t out yet, per say. I had planned to never come out. I had also planned…” Myungjun put one of the tips of his glasses into his mouth and chewed slightly, then continued, “I wanted to have sex with...with someone I would date.”

He paused, and Bin pondered that sentence. It took him a few seconds to get what Myungjun was trying to convey. “You two weren’t dating?”

Myungjun shook his head worriedly. “I asked him out a few times, but he didn’t want to date me.”

“Why not?”

“He said I was frumpy.”

“Well, fuck him.”

Myungjun snorted. “I didn’t care. I was frumpy. Still am.”

Bin disagreed, but he didn’t want to derail the story. He was curious how Myungjun and Soojung became an item despite never having dated.

“Anyway, um...one night I spent the night with him and he was...he was touchy.”

“Touchy?”

“He, um...it was all over the clothes, but he kept...touching me.”
Bin raised his eyebrows. “Were you okay with that? You said you wanted to have sex with someone you date.”

“I told him I didn’t want to, but...he convinced me it was fine. And it was! I mean, I enjoyed it. There was nothing wrong with...with it. I felt guilty later, for betraying my own morals, but...I’m allowed to have sex, aren’t I? No one can tell me no.”

Myungjun stuck his glasses back on his face. “After the first time, it became easier. We were the only gay guys around, so it made sense that we’d hook up a lot. It never meant anything. Except, when we did it in school, we were caught. And Soojung didn’t want to...he didn’t like being bullied. He never spoke to me again after that. He blocked my number. He convinced his parents to send him to live with his grandfather in Sweden.”

“And...you chose to stay here where people bully you?”

Myungjun smiled sadly. “Most people don’t bully me. They ostracize me, sure, but the bullying’s died down a lot. Besides, if I decided to ignore it, then the bullying would stop. And it did.”

“But you’re still ostracized.”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders, then giggled. “I have a theory that I would’ve been ostracized even if I hadn’t been caught that day. I mean, look at me. I’m super dorky. I like comic books and kittens and guys. Of course I’m ostracized.”

“You’re not that dorky,” Bin defended. “You’re…”

Cute, he wanted to say. Myungjun was so adorably cute, especially when he giggled like that, his hands coming up to cover his mouth, sleeves a bit too long for his arms and cheeks round and pink. He couldn’t say that, though. He couldn’t out himself as possibly questioning. He wanted to remain straight, and to do that he just needed to stop noticing so many minuscule details about Myungjun.

“Handsome,” is what he landed on instead.

Myungjun snorted. “Handsome?” he repeated, gesturing to himself. “Handsome?”

Perhaps not even that was the right thing to say, but Bin had already said it. If he took it back now, he’d seem nervous and unsure. “Handsome,” he confirmed.

“Yeah, right.”

“Seriously, Myungjun, you shouldn’t sell yourself short. I think you look very handsome, for a guy.”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows. “As opposed to handsome for a girl?”

“Some girls can be categorized as handsome, yeah,” Bin said, and Myungjun smirked.

Thinking about handsome girls, however, reminded Bin of his dream. He had just put it out of his memory, and yet now all he could think of was Myungjun dressed as a geisha, with pretty makeup and a kimono and a fancy wig. He thought of Myungjun sitting on his lap, rolling his hips, calling out his name in that breathy, high-pitched falsetto he had been using.

He was definitely more gay than he originally thought he was.
“Hey, Myungjun?” he asked when silence had fallen between the two of them. “I have another weird question.”

“I don’t know how many more weird questions I can handle,” Myungjun admitted.

Bin offered him a quick smile, then began to think of how to best word his inquiry.

“When did...when did you know you were gay? Was it, um, was it something gradual, or did it just pop up randomly?”

Myungjun pursed his lips as he pondered Bin’s question. “Um...why?”

“Just...just curious.”

It was for himself. It was to gauge how his own sexuality might progress. His sudden infatuation with Myungjun was not gradual at all. It came on quickly, frighteningly fast, forcing him to reevaluate his entire life.

“It was mostly gradual,” Myungjun informed him. “I ignored the signs first. You know, all the times I found the male actor hotter than the female, or the times I wanted to be near all of the boys in my class instead of the girls.”

Bin nodded his head. He hadn’t experienced that. He only found Myungjun enticing. “So how did you make sure that you liked boys? Did...did you kiss one? Is that how you figured out?”

Myungjun shifted in his seat and cleared his throat. “It’s...it’s too embarrassing to talk about here. Besides, I don’t think you really need to know.”

He knew he shouldn’t argue that point. He didn’t need to know. He shouldn’t ask something that made Myungjun too embarrassed to talk about, anyway. That wasn’t what friends did in their spare time.

But he was dying to know. He was dying to figure it out. “You can tell me,” he said. “I won’t...I won’t tell anyone.”

Myungjun sighed. “Why do you want to know so bad?” he asked, voice quiet. “It doesn’t pertain to you. You’re straight. Jinwoo said you’ve been hitting on this girl in our year.”

He hadn’t been. He only told that to Jinwoo in effort to draw attention away from his growing desire to be close to Myungjun. He didn’t want anyone suspicious of his sexuality.

“I want to know more about you,” he said. It wasn’t exactly a lie; he was curious about Myungjun’s life. However, this specific information was solely for his own benefit.

Myungjun swallowed thickly and then looked down at his lap. He wrung his hands together, hesitating, then whispered, “Gay porn.”

“Excuse me?”

“I...I thought gay porn was...better than straight porn.”

“And that’s how you figured out?”

Myungjun fidgeted with his phone, clearly looking for a way out of the conversation. “That’s all I’m telling you.”
“But—”

The older boy stood from his seat and gathered his books, stuffing them into his backpack. “I, uh, I have to go home. My dad is...he wants me home. It’s my turn to...to cook, so I should leave. Thanks for the tutoring!”

Before Bin could get in another word, Myungjun was gone, rushing out of the courtyard to the school gates.

Bin could only watch him go as his heart hammered inside of his chest, pushing harshly against his ribs.

Gay porn.

He was going to have to watch gay porn.

And if he managed to get off on the gay porn, he definitely wasn’t as straight as he wanted to be.

“Fuck me,” he whispered to himself, running his fingers through his hair.

Myungjun had turned his life upside down.

He had to wait until his mother went away for the weekend, and until he convinced his sister to do the same. He knew there was no way he would ever attempt to watch gay porn with either of them in the house. When he shooed his mother away that Friday evening, she watched him cautiously and commented, “You seem awfully excited to have me out of the house.”

“I’m...I’m inviting Jinwoo and Sanha over for a movie marathon. We’re starting in an hour.”

She took the bait and left after making him promise to be good and not cause chaos within the house. Sua left, too, and when Bin locked the door for the evening, his anxiety began to flare up.

“Gay porn,” he whispered to himself, trying the words out on his tongue. “Gay. Porn.”

He didn’t even know where to begin. He had never been interested in such a controversial medium before, and now he had made plans to sit back and watch.

And once he watched, he would then know whether or not he was gay.

He lingered by the staircase for a while. He had to keep taking deep breaths in an effort not to psych himself out.

“It’s not a big deal,” he whispered, seated on the first step. “People watch it all the time. People do it all the time. That’s why there’s porn of it.” He nodded his head, knowing he was doing a good job of convincing himself to move. “Myungjun watched it. Myungjun probably watches it. He’s fine. He’s normal.”

Myungjun, though, had given a guy a blowjob in the bathroom and was cast aside by his classmates. He wasn’t exactly normal in that regard.
Bin shook his head. He was doing a bad job. *Normal*, he reminded himself. *He's still normal.*

He groaned and leaned back on the staircase, the wooden steps digging uncomfortably into his back.

“No one will know,” he murmured, staring up at the ceiling. “You’ll watch it and maybe you’ll hate it and then no one will ever know. You’ll take your secret to the grave.”

That was a good argument. He liked that idea. As he picked himself up, though, his inner self asked, *what if I like it?*

What *if* he liked it? What then? Would he have to act on his desires? Would he have to fuck a man to get the full effect? Would Myungjun even *want* to fuck him?

“It doesn’t have to be Myungjun,” he scolded himself. “You don’t even know if he likes you.”

Besides, he didn’t have to have sex with anyone. Confirmation he was gay didn’t require actually *being* gay. He still liked dating girls. He could return to that.

*But that would mean leaving Myungjun.*

He flicked his head with his pointer finger, then winced. “I’ll figure it out,” he assured himself. “But I need to figure *this* out first.”

His inner self shut up. Bin ascended the staircase.

At first, he wasn’t sure what he should type in. His regular porn site was definitely for straight people. Was there a gay porn site? Those must exist somewhere on the Internet.

*Gay porn,* he typed in, and he squeezed his eyes shut in anticipation when he clicked *search*.

There were many sites. Too many to choose from. He glanced behind him at his closed bedroom door, and though he knew he was alone, he waited for a few seconds to ensure not even the possible ghosts or burglars would catch wind of what he was doing.

The coast was clear. He clicked the first website.

He was met with a site full of dicks.

The normal porn site had boobs as a selling point. This one was the exact opposite. There were too many kinds of dicks, and Bin blanched as he stared at the welcoming page.

Was he supposed to find this hot? Was just the image of male genitalia supposed to turn him on?

*Think about Myungjun,* his inner self urged him. *Wouldn’t you like it more if it was Myungjun’s dick?*

He thought about it.

He decided he would.

“Oh, christ,” he murmured, then sent an apology to the heavens for viewing such horrible material. Jesus would probably prefer straight porn. He should’ve listened.

But Myungjun had a tighter hold on him, and so Bin scrolled down until he found a video that seemed partially interesting.
It looked sensual. It didn’t look rough or kinky like the others. It was even titled *Sweet Boyfriend’s First Time*.

He would like a first time video. It would give him an idea of how it would be for him.

“How it *might* be for me,” he reminded himself in a whisper as he opened the video.

The start of the video was awkward. He could tell it was low-budget. He wondered if gay porn had anywhere *near* the budget of straight porn.

Still, the two actors *were* cute together. They giggled and laughed and held hands and didn’t even seem to register that they were on a set with cameras around them.

When they kissed, they still smiled, and Bin wondered how kissing Myungjun would be.

He chose roles for them. He was clearly the buff actor. Myungjun was the smaller one, the one with the slender hips and the long, elegant fingers.

As they continued to make out, Bin licked at his lips. His hands palmed the front of his pants and he felt desire overwhelm him.

He wanted to share such a moment with Myungjun. He wanted them so engrossed in each other that they wouldn’t notice anything else around them.

The camera gave a close-up. Tongues were involved in the kissing. The smaller one moaned. Bin wondered how Myungjun would sound. Bin wondered how Myungjun would taste. Bin wondered if Myungjun would grip the front of his shirt in such a manner, and wrap his legs around Bin’s own waist.

Bin wondered if Myungjun would want to do this with him.

Bin hoped he would.

The scene changed. They had moved to the bedroom now, a popular transition even in straight porn. The kissing commenced once more, though this time the hands came into play.

It followed a similar formula to the normalized porn Bin had seen before. Clothes came off and there were a plethora of close-ups that Bin didn’t think was necessarily vital to the experience, and one of the actors was definitely portraying a more dominant role.

However, as normal of a formula as it was, Bin couldn’t look past the fact that it was two guys on screen. He was watching two men engaging in very explicit sexual activities, and through it all he could only think of Myungjun.

*Did Myungjun look like that when he sucked dick?*  
*Did Myungjun gasp out like that when he was touched in such a manner?*  
*Did Myungjun wrap his legs around the body of his partner?*  
*Did Myungjun bite down and drool on the sheets?*  

Bin came before the video was even over. He sat there in his chair, panting and staring as the two men kissed and moaned, and then he looked down at the mess *he* had made.

Dread was settling within his stomach as he realized the implications of it all.
He had watched gay porn and liked it. Not only had he liked it, but he masturbated to gay porn. He thought of a fellow classmate as he came into his hands.

The dread intensified, and with it came disgust and self-loathing.

The video ended. His screen went dark and a replay button popped up.

Watch Again? it asked.

Bin minimized the video. Suggestions began to pop up of other things he would supposedly enjoy. He wondered if he actually would enjoy those.

Probably, he decided, because he had enjoyed Sweet Boyfriend’s First Time. He hadn’t thought he would, either. The test to decide whether or not he was gay wasn’t supposed to end with him actually being gay.

He turned his computer off and the room was cast into semi-darkness. The only light shone from Bin’s bedside lamp. He stared at the shadows on the wall and wondered how he could become a shadow on the wall. He would like to be a shadow on the wall. There would be no expectations of him, no trials to overcome. No one would know if he was gay or not; he wouldn’t even know himself if he was gay or not. He would be mindless and useless.

That had to be better than being gay.

With a loud sigh, he stood from his seat and hobbled to the bathroom. A shower was needed. A shower could cleanse him and fix him. He could wash off the disgust and start anew.

Except, all the shower did was exacerbate things. The hot water and the steam and the nudity that he associated with showers reminded him that he was gay. Gay people liked hot and steamy bathhouses, didn’t they?

Bin didn’t know. He never had, but he assumed he must now that he was gay.

The water drenched him, and he finally had to turn it off after he half-heartedly lathered his body in soap. He stood for a few seconds as water dripped from his hair, creating a steady, repetitive sound that echoed across the otherwise silent bathroom.


He wondered, then, if some of his tears might be mixed in.

“Am I crying?” he whispered to himself. He felt at his face, but it was hard to tell. There was already too much water. He didn’t know if that water involved tears.

There was no reason to cry, though. He knew that. He didn’t want to be a giant baby, sobbing simply because his sexuality had become something different than what he originally assumed it would be.

Myungjun was gay. Myungjun never cried about being gay. Myungjun proudly accepted his label and didn’t care who knew and who didn’t know.

But Myungjun had been unwillingly outed. He had hid who he was for as long as possible, until students spread that damned video, and then he had to accept it. He had no choice but to accept it.

Bin still had a choice. He could reject the new desires that stirred within him. He could toss them
aside and focus instead on girls.

Girls were easy to think about. Girls were *normal* to think about.

So was Myungjun.

Myungjun had become easy and normal to imagine. Myungjun had taken the spot of any girl Bin had originally wanted to date. He tried to think of Chunja, tried to conjure up the jealousy he had felt earlier in the new school year when he realized Chunja liked Dongmin.

Instead, he felt relief that he wasn’t dating a girl and that he could date Myungjun instead.

“No,” he told himself, shaking his head. He grabbed a towel and dried off his face, then his hair. “I’m not dating Myungjun.”

Myungjun probably didn’t want to date him. More importantly, Bin didn’t want to date a *boy*. Dating a boy would solidify his sexuality. It would make him *gay*. Jacking off to gay porn wasn’t the gayest thing he could do. He could chalk it up to general horniness, maybe pretending the feminine man was actually a girl. He could make his mind believe that the gay porn was definitely not much of an issue.

What he couldn’t do, however, was disregard the obvious infatuation he had for Myungjun.

That was what was making him gay. Not the porn or sudden lack of interest in girls, but Myungjun was making him gay. He never started questioning himself until he met Myungjun.

Perhaps he was projecting. Perhaps he liked Myungjun as a friend and he just projected Myungjun’s sexuality onto himself.

But he thought about how he imagined Myungjun giving him head, or moaning underneath his touches. He had thought about Myungjun as the bottom, and as the top.

Hell, he had weird, kinky dreams where Myungjun was dressed as a geisha and straddling his lap.

Above all of that, however, he constantly desired Myungjun’s presence. He liked it best when Myungjun smiled at him, or nudged him playfully, or gave him some sort of sweet compliment. He wondered what it would be like to hold hands with Myungjun. He wondered what it would feel like for Myungjun to kiss his cheek. He wondered how happy he would be waking up beside Myungjun every single morning.

He was definitely gay.

As he dressed himself, he held back more tears. Discovering his new sexuality was a blow to his morale. It was a blow to his *life*. Things were challenging as a gay man; Myungjun had taught him that much. He didn’t want life to be challenging. He wanted to be a normal guy with a normal girlfriend and have a normal life.

“Oh, god,” he sobbed to himself, stumbling back to his room. It was difficult to see through his tears, but he made it and collapsed onto his bed, wet hair instantly dampening his pillow.

“Change me back,” he begged to the heavens, wiping away the tears that kept following. “Pl-Please, just change me back! I can’t be gay! I don’t want to be gay!”

No one was listening to him. No one ever did.
He rolled over in bed, regretting the decision he had made to watch the stupid porn in the first place. He preferred not knowing. He preferred being in a weird, limbo state of mind where he had a strange infatuation with a classmate and nothing more.

His phone vibrated. He thought to ignore it at first, but then it vibrated again.

He grabbed it and prayed it wasn’t his mother or sister. He wasn’t sure how he could talk to them yet.

It was neither of those two.

[from: myungjun] hey are u up? 🌾﹏_ASM

Bin held back laughter at the cute emoji, but then he blinked away his tears again. What was he supposed to say to Myungjun? How could he respond as if everything was normal?

He hesitated, fingers hovering over the keyboard of his phone, before typing in: yes.

[from: myungjun] are you okay???

Bin didn’t want to get into anything just yet. He didn’t want to tell Myungjun what he had discovered about himself.

[to: myungjun] sort of. maybe. idk its been a weird night

He figured that would be a satisfactory response, but Myungjun was intuitive. Myungjun was curious.

Myungjun seemed to know him well.

[from: myungjun] what happened bin?

He couldn’t tell. He wouldn’t tell. He was terrified of putting himself in a position, too, where Myungjun would figure out what happened. His only option was to lie, as he had done to Myungjun before, as he had done to himself before.

[to: myungjun] its not a huge deal. I just think i need a friend rn.

While his stupid heart longed for Myungjun to be more than a friend to him, he knew what he needed now was someone who could comfort him and care for him with no information as to what had happened. He wanted someone who wouldn’t judge him, either, when the truth inevitably came out.

Myungjun was a perfect friend.

He hopefully would be a perfect confidant later.

[from: myungjun] consider ur friend here and present (◡‿◡)

[to: myungjun] where do you get all of the cute emojis??

[from: myungjun] ive acumulated many through the years of having a phone

[from: myungjun] do u like them?????

Bin bit down on his lip. He sniffled and rubbed at his cheeks with one hand, realizing his tears had
mostly subsided since he started talking to Myungjun.

“I like you,” he whispered to himself in the soft lighting of his bedroom. He wondered if the shadows on the wall could hear. He wondered if they would judge him as much as he was judging himself.

Shadows couldn’t judge, though. Shadows didn’t care whether or not he was gay. That’s what made the shadows so wonderful and comforting.

He couldn’t confess now. It would be stupid to confess now.

Even if he was gay.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a brief second, but that second stretched on into a minute.

Myungjun texted again in that time.

[from: myungjun] bin?

He had to answer, at least, so he typed out a quick, nice.

[from: myungjun] whats nice? the emojis??

“You,” Bin whispered, and he felt his eyes welling up with tears once again. “God, stop crying,” he scolded himself, but the tears came anyway.

[from: myungjun] bin whats the matter ur freaking me out

He didn’t want to freak Myungjun out. Even if he had freaked himself out, Bin refused to pass his fear onto Myungjun.

[to: myungjun] sorry its fine

[from: myungjun] whats fine?

He knew he wasn’t making any sense. He knew Myungjun was likely confused.

He had to clear things up.

[to: myungjun] i havenot had a good night and im being weird im sorry

Myungjun’s next message came relatively fast, and Bin tried to stifle his tears the best he could as he read the text.

[from: myungjun] what can i do to make things better??

It was sweet. It was too sweet. It made Bin’s heart ache even more for Myungjun. He smiled despite his tears.

[to: myungjun] be my friend no matter what?

[from: myungjun] thats easy. you couldnt get rid of me even if u tried lol(づ ̄³ ̄)づ

The emoji made Bin laugh. He wiped at his cheeks, drying them with the sleeve of his shirt, and stared at his phone.

Myungjun was amazing. Myungjun was calming him down with no knowledge of the situation.
Myungjun was his friend.

Myungjun would be his friend no matter what.

Even if he came out as possibly-gay, even if he remained confused and scared for much of his life, he had no fear of being alone. Myungjun would stick by his side.

Bin took a deep breath and turned his gaze up toward the ceiling.

He was going to be fine.

Chapter End Notes

one more chapter left before my baby is completed ;A;

please follow me on my twitter. i'll definitely give a bunch of spoilers on twitter for new chapters. i also have an update schedule located on twitter, but this fic will be a bit irregular compared to my others - still, be on the lookout!! leave a comment if you enjoyed this chapter!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

chapter warnings: language, homophobia, talk of sex, smoking

and so begins the final chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Seeing Myungjun a few days later was a little awkward and a little weird. Bin could clearly detect worry in the other boy’s eyes, and he offered Myungjun a small smile in order to quell any fears he might have. “Hey,” Bin greeted, and he cleared his throat. “Did, uh...did you study your English last night?”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows. He wanted to ask questions. Bin knew Myungjun wanted to ask questions, but Bin had no answers. He was still confused on a variety of things. He still needed to get his own life in order before he could respond to any confusion Myungjun had.

“I did,” Myungjun said. He eyed Bin curiously for another moment or two before taking a deep breath. “Hopefully we won’t have any surprise quizzes today. I didn’t study for long enough.” He returned Bin’s smile, wide and mischievous, and added, “I was playing video games late last night.”

He wasn’t mentioning their exchange. He wasn’t mentioning the bizarre text messages he had received from Bin. He seemed to have taken his cue rather seriously and was refusing to say anything on the subject.

Bin’s heart thumped wildly in his chest. He really liked Myungjun. He truly, sincerely liked Myungjun, and Myungjun became all the more endearing to him now that Bin knew he was empathetic and understanding.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Bin scolded him as they walked into the school building together. “What if we do get a surprise quiz? What if we’re tested on something you didn’t study?”

Myungjun laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “I guess I’ll have to cheat.”

“I’m not letting you cheat.”

“Oh, come on. You won’t even notice. I can just peer over at your sheet, or else you write down answers on a note and pass it over.”

Bin rolled his eyes, even as Myungjun continued to badger him.

He didn’t mind, though. He liked the normalcy. He liked to pretend things were fine. He could just ignore how excited he got when Myungjun touched him or talked to him or looked at him.

He could ignore it all.

Except it was more difficult than he thought, and by the time he got to his first class of the day, he already felt exhausted. He sat down in his seat with a loud sigh and then slumped over onto his
Dongmin, beside him, asked, “Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Bin mumbled.

Dongmin was silent for a few seconds, then continued in his questioning. “You’re friends with Myungjun, right?”

Even when he assumed he wouldn’t have to speak of Myungjun, he was wrong. He closed his eyes briefly before nodding. “Yeah. Why?”

“He was talking to me yesterday. He said you two were close.”

Bin picked his head up and stared over at Dongmin, who smiled at him. Bin didn’t return the smile. “Myungjun was talking about me?”

“Yeah. He sounded a bit worried, though. Are you doing alright?”

Bin hoped Myungjun hadn’t relayed any information to Dongmin. Bin didn’t want the word to get out that he was panicking over text. He nodded, ignoring the question Dongmin asked in order to ask one of his own. “What was he saying?”

Dongmin thought for a second or two, lips pursed. “He said...he said you were acting different. He was afraid someone was a jerk to you. I told him I haven’t seen anyone rude to you here. No one’s been rude to you, right?”

Bin shook his head.

“Well, if something is going on at home, just know that you can always talk to him. Or, if that’s embarrassing, you can always talk to me! I know we aren't close, but sometimes it’s easier to talk to someone you aren’t close to.”

Dongmin’s generosity and care was confusing to Bin. As far as he was aware, Dongmin had been a little naive, a little ignorant, and a little stuck-up. Why, then, was he suddenly being so hospitable? Unless Bin had judged him wrong the entire time.

Chunja entered the classroom. She called out a greeting to Dongmin, who returned it with a little wave. Then, however, his attention was focused back onto Dongmin.

The girl sat down and Bin remained confused and quiet.

“It’s fine if you don’t want to talk to me,” Dongmin told him. Chunja watched with interest. “I know it’s a bit awkward—”

“How come you’re friends with Myungjun when you know he was sucking some dude’s dick in the bathroom?”

He heard Chunja give a sharp intake of breath, but Dongmin’s eyes widened only slightly. He didn’t look too surprised to be given such a question. Bin wondered if he was often questioned in such a manner.

“Should I not be friends with him?” Dongmin asked.
“No one else is.”

“ *You* are.”

Bin’s mouth was dry. He wet his lips and struggled to formulate a good response to that accusation. “Yes. Yeah, I...I am, but I came in later in the school year. I wasn’t here for...for that video.”

Dongmin shrugged his shoulders. “And I didn’t watch the video.”

“So if you had watched the video, you wouldn’t be his friend?”

“If *you* watched the video, would you two still be friends?”

Bin blinked. “Of course!”

“Then there’s your answer.”

Dongmin was a loyal friend. Bin didn’t understand, though. From all he knew of Dongmin, all he had heard of Dongmin, he didn’t seem like the type to befriend an overt homosexual. Minhyuk was a likely candidate for Myungjun’s friend, but Dongmin wasn’t. Myungjun had a foul mouth which he regularly used to smoke and, apparently, give blowjobs. Dongmin was gentle and modest and religious.

“Why are you asking, anyway?” Dongmin wondered. “Are you doubting my friendship?”

“No! No, I just...” Bin looked down at his desk and struggled with what to say next. Why was he asking? What he was so concerned about? And how much could he say before Dongmin would figure out Bin’s own internal issues?

He had to come up with something, though; Dongmin was staring at him, awaiting an answer, and so Bin muttered, “I just thought...you two are very different from each other.”

“We are,” Dongmin confirmed, nodding his head. “But it would be boring if he was a carbon copy of me. Myungjun’s different. He’s fun and exciting. He’s mean, too, and very blunt, and I appreciate it. I think he’s hilarious. He was the first one to talk to me when I was a first-year student. The others in my class didn’t like me. They called me a know-it-all. Someone spread a rumor that I had...” Dongmin swallowed nervously, then leaned close to Bin, who copied the movement. “They said I had slept with one of the teachers in order to get better grades.”

Bin hadn’t realized that Dongmin, too, was subjected to such bullying tactics. No wonder Myungjun was drawn to him. “That’s horrible,” Bin murmured.

Chunja spoke up then, obviously having heard the conversation. “You know they were just jealous of you, Dongmin.”

“I don’t mean to make them jealous,” Dongmin admitted. “I’m not trying to be a know-it-all. I just get excited about my work.” He licked at his lips, still awkward, and when he sat back up he added, “Myungjun gets excited with me. And Myungjun told people to shut up when they talked about me behind my back. He’s a good person.”

Bin glanced at Chunja, who nodded in agreement. “He’s never been mean to me, either,” she said.

*Weird*, Bin thought, turning back to the books on his desk. Myungjun had been rude to him upon their first meeting. Maybe he had been hurt too many times. Maybe he only trusted those he knew would never leave him or judge him.
Bin wondered if that’s what *his* life would soon become.

He prayed it wouldn’t.

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When Bin made it to the lunch room, Sanha and Jinwoo were already seated with Myungjun. Sanha was excitedly talking, his animated face making it clear that he was excited about something or other, and so Bin hurried to get his food so he could join into the conversation.

Myungjun only spared him one curious glance, but otherwise made no mention of the odd messages. Bin was appreciative, just as he had been earlier that morning, and he sent Myungjun a brief smile before asking Sanha, “Why are you so cheerful?”


Jinwoo followed the order. “Jungha is having a party at his house this weekend. He invited me and told me I could bring some guests if I wanted to.”

Unable to wait for Jinwoo to finish telling the story, Sanha broke in, “And he said *we* can be his guests! We, as in *me*, too!”

Bin had been to parties before. He was a popular guy at his last school; he killed it in the good-looks department (Dongmin stole that from him now), and he killed in the intelligence department (once more stolen by Dongmin) and he was always the talk of the school for being brand new (and being the talk of the school, too, was stolen — though by Myungjun). He *liked* parties. He liked drinking and making out with girls and being completely rebellious.

Now, however, it all felt different. He was worried about his sexuality coming to light. He didn’t want to party with girls or with people who would possibly hate him should they learn the truth of his secret, hidden desires.

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Me, too?”

“You,” Jinwoo confirmed. “And Myungjun.”

Myungjun made a face, wrinkling his nose. “I don’t think I was the guest that Jungha had in mind when he invited you to his party.”

“He didn’t specify which guests I could bring,” Jinwoo stated, picking at his lunch. “Just that I could bring people I wanted to bring.”

Myungjun pursed his lips. “Does he know you’re bringing me?”

“No.”

“You’re going to be kicked out from the party,” Myungjun scoffed. “You’re going to be ridiculed for even choosing to associate with me.”

Jinwoo rolled his eyes and shook his head. “If *that’s* the reason I’m kicked out from a party, it’d be a lame party. I’d rather be kicked out for better reasons.”
“What reasons would make you get kicked from a party?” Sanha asked, still in absolute awe of the invitation he had been given.

“I could have sex in Jungha’s bed,” Jinwoo stated with a mischevious smirk. “I think that would be reason enough.” He glanced at Myungjun and said, “The king of Getting Caught in an Unruly Position could enlighten us on that.”

Myungjun scowled. “You’re about to be kicked from this table, Jinwoo.”

“Ooh, good. I’ll be prepared for the party, then.”

Myungjun didn’t seem to wish to dignify Jinwoo’s comment with a response. He sighed and looked over to Bin. “Are you going to be having sex on Jungha’s bed, too?”

In the past, Bin would have answered with glee and would have seen such a question as a challenge. He had sex with girls before at wild parties such as that. He had liked it. But now the thought made him a little sick.

He imagined, instead, having sex with Myungjun at one of those parties. He imagined having to be secret and quiet, giggling all the while as they took off each others’ clothes. They’d be drunk off cheap beer and soju and the general spirit of the party. Their breath would stink but they wouldn’t care in the slightest.

He supposed they would have sex as the two men in the porn had sex. Myungjun would hopefully be the bottom. Bin imagined being over him, pounding into him, watching Myungjun struggle to keep silent so they wouldn’t be caught. His face would be red and dripping with sweat, and he would be so, so hot.

“Bin?” Myungjun nudged him and Bin jumped.

“What?” he asked, worried his thoughts were somehow accessible through the emotions on his face.

Jinwoo snorted and laughed, then said, “He’s probably already imagining who he’s going to fuck.”

Sanha, fueled with excitement, squealed nervously and tugged at Jinwoo’s arm. “I can’t believe this is happening! Oh, god, I can’t wait to see what an actual party is like!”

Myungjun was the only one who didn’t seem joyful. He frowned at his food, instead, and didn’t eat another bite.

In fact, Myungjun seemed sullen for the rest of the day. Even as they sat together in class, without the pressure and teasing remarks from their other friends, Myungjun remained downtrodden.

“What’s wrong?” Bin finally asked, worried Jinwoo or Sanha had said something to upset him.

Myungjun glanced over at Bin and plastered a fake smile onto his face, then shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing,” he assured.

Bin didn’t buy it. He raised his eyebrows and said, “Something’s wrong. What is it?”

Myungjun glanced down at his book, at the work they were supposed to be completing, and he murmured, “Just a bit nervous, I guess. I’ve never been to a party before. I mean, not a party like this, in any case. And people already don’t like me, so how do you think they’ll react when I show up?”
Those fears weren’t completely unfounded. With the way people treated Myungjun, Bin understood why he was having such anxiety. Bin wouldn’t want Myungjun to attend the party if it would have a negative effect on him and if it would make him upset.

But he also didn’t want to attend the party without Myungjun.

It wouldn’t be fun if Myungjun wasn’t by his side. Sanha and Jinwoo were good friends, great friends, but they never made Bin feel the same way Myungjun did.

“You don’t have to go,” Bin told him.

Myungjun made a face. “I’d feel like a loser if the three of you went and I stayed home.”

“I can stay home with you. We can just play video games all night instead.”

“I’m not going to make you do that,” Myungjun countered, shaking his head. “I’ll go. I can handle it. It’s just one night.”

Bin wouldn’t have minded staying in with Myungjun. It would’ve been nice. However, he knew if they were left alone together, he would have far too many desires and temptations. Things might have gotten awkward and embarrassing, and so he breathed a sigh of relief. At the party, he likely wouldn’t have any opportunity for such thoughts of Myungjun.

“If anyone talks shit about you, I’ll beat them up,” Bin promised, and finally Myungjun’s smile was genuine.

“How kind,” the boy said, dryly. “My knight in shining armor.”

He turned back to his work, and so Bin did the same. However, Myungjun could only focus for a minute or two before he asked, voice quiet, “Do you really have sex at these parties?”

Bin hadn’t expected such a question. He was unsure how to answer. While he certainly did have sex at a few parties with a few girls, he had thought nothing of it. Now, though, he felt shame wash over him.

Why, though? It wasn’t as if Myungjun was a squeaky clean virgin either. Surely if anyone would refrain from judgement, it would be Myungjun.

“I, um...yeah. A couple of times.”

Myungjun’s lips tightened. Bin watched him curiously, then asked, “Why did you want to know?”

“I...I don’t know. I guess so if you leave my side randomly, I know where you are and what you’re doing.” He sighed and added, “I’ll trail after Sanha instead. I doubt he’ll have sex with anyone.”

Bin frowned. “I’m not going to have sex.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

He couldn’t have sex now. Not with someone random. Not when he knew he really liked Myungjun. It wouldn’t just be a betrayal to his crush; it would be a betrayal to himself. He was finally accepting who he was and who he liked, and if he tossed that all aside for a quick fuck, he would never forgive himself.
Of course, the sensible part of his mind tried telling him that having sex with a girl would likely erase all doubts about his sexuality.

But the romantic part of his mind, the part that yearned for Myungjun’s affection (and only Myungjun’s affection) shut that down quickly.

“You can trail after me,” Bin told Myungjun, nudging him lightly. “I’m not going to go anywhere. We’ll have a few drinks and mingle a bit and you can watch me dance. I’m really hot when I dance.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes. “Some humility would be nice.”

“I’m humble! But I also recognize my own talents and abilities. One of my many talents is looking hot while dancing.”

“Somehow, I doubt it.”

“I’ll prove you wrong, then,” Bin promised, and Myungjun giggled at the serious expression on his face.

Bin’s heart felt warm and soft watching Myungjun smile. He wanted things to be like this always. He never wanted to part from Myungjun’s side.

He just hoped he would one day get the courage to say something, to bind his fate with Myungjun’s for all eternity.

“How are you so skilled with archery?” Myungjun asked after having examined the arrows sticking from the board. “You have near perfect aim — even Wangwi isn’t this skilled.”

*Bin smirked, pleased that Myungjun was impressed with his proficiency, and said, “I’ve had plenty of time to practice. You forget, I’ve trained long and hard for various positions. The army seemed appealing to me for a short time.”

“And, yet, you’ve instead gotten yourself stuck by my side with the order that you must swallow poison in my place. Tell me, Bin, is this an upgrade for you?”

Bin recognized his lowly position in life. However, even when he was in the army, he was nothing more than a foot soldier. He, like all the other infantry men, was expendable. Even now, he was expendable, a man who was to die in place of the crowned prince.

Bin didn’t mind it at all; he couldn’t die, anyway, so as long as he could keep Myungjun alive, he was happy.

“It is an upgrade,” Bin confirmed, tearing his arrows away from the target. Myungjun watched him, marveling at his strength, and Bin made certain to let his sleeves roll back a little bit as he pulled at his arrows, allowing Myungjun the chance to watch the muscles ripple in his arms.

Myungjun blinked, then rolled his eyes, as if catching onto Bin’s subtle trick. He pulled Bin’s sleeve back down and scolded, “Don’t be so bold.”
“Bold?” Bin teased, grasping Myungjun’s hands within his own. “Do you think I’m being bold, darling?”

He delighted in seeing the blush form across Myungjun’s face, spotting at his tanned cheeks and enveloping his cute nose. “My brothers might see if you continue doing this,” the crowned prince defended, glancing about as if they were being watched.

Since they had confessed to each other, since they had made love in the hot springs, Myungjun was willing and compliant behind closed doors. He hesitated, however, to show his affections out in the open, even if they were alone, even if there was no sign of anyone else in sight.

Bin could respect that. He knew Myungjun meant no insult by choosing not to be affectionate. Myungjun was just nervous, scared he would be judged for whom he chose to love. It was a reasonable fear to have. Bin wished, however, Myungjun could live in a world without that fear.

“I will not let your brothers catch sight of us,” Bin promised him, pulling the last of the arrows from his training board. “Shall we continue?”

Myungjun licked at his lips and sighed. “You know I’m not very skilled with the bow and arrow. I would look silly, especially in comparison to you.”

Bin shrugged his shoulders. He never minded how Myungjun looked while practicing weaponry. Regardless of Myungjun’s skill firing arrows, Bin would love him all the same. “I said I would help,” he reminded as he and Myungjun turned and walked back to their original spot. “I will teach you how to become better at archery. Once you get the hang of it, it’s not that hard.”

He pointed at a spot on the ground where Myungjun moved to. Bin passed him the large bow, which Myungjun held. “Like this?” he asked, readying the weapon.

He held his arms incorrectly. Bin swooped in to help, standing behind him and gently wrapping his arms around Myungjun’s body. Myungjun jolted in surprise, but Bin hushed him.

“I apologize, Prince Myungjun,” he whispered, steadying Myungjun’s arm. “I just must show you the correct way to hold your bow.”

“Could you not have instructed me from a distance?” Myungjun asked, his voice tight.

Bin smiled brightly. “People learn best through hands-on practice, darling. You learn best from hands-on practice. I am more familiar with your learning styles than anyone else is and will ever be.”

He could feel Myungjun sigh under his hands, but at least he was given the opportunity to continue. He positioned the younger man correctly, taking his time and letting his touch linger. “You want to keep your elbow at this angle,” he murmured, lips brushing against Myungjun’s ear. “And you must keep your fingers tight around the bow. Tighten them a bit more. I know you can.”

Myungjun licked his lips and murmured, “I can’t tell if you’re being crude or not.”

“Ah, you disappoint me, darling. I am never crude.”

“That’s a lie.”

Choosing to smile and laugh off Myungjun’s criticisms, Bin continued in his examination of Myungjun’s posture. “Alright,” he stated once he was certain all was correct. “Stay exactly like this, but aim toward the center of our training board.”
Myungjun narrowed his eyes. “It’s difficult to do.”

“How so?”

“Am I aiming correctly? I am unsure.”

Bin stayed where he was, arms around Myungjun, as he tried his best to judge the position of Myungjun’s arms with the distance and location of the target. “A little down. A bit more. That’s...alright, perfect.”

Bin started to move away from Myungjun, but Myungjun frantically asked, “Wait, is everything else alright?”

“I’m starting to think this is a trick to make me hug you for longer.”

Myungjun scoffed. “I’m trying to do this correctly, Bin. If I don’t, Wangwi will likely mock me forever. I can’t allow that. Please, let me know if everything else is correct.”

Bin stared at him for a second or two before demanding, “Relax all muscles that are not being used for the bow and arrow. Relax your neck; your muscles there are tight. I can tell. And stop holding your breath. You are allowed to breathe.”

He was pleased when he saw physical proof of Myungjun following his commands.

“Now, you’re almost ready to release. When you do, your hand will lightly brush against your face; that is fine. Keep it light. Keep it steady. Don’t falter.”

“Alright,” Myungjun whispered. He took a small breath and said, “Tell me when.”

Bin smirked. “I will not. You go when you believe you will hit the target.”

There was silence. There was stillness. Bin wondered if Myungjun was about to give up, or else about to ask more questions, but then he released the arrow.

In a quick second, the arrow was stuck to the center of the target, a perfect shot. It quivered where it was, and Myungjun gasped in shock.

“Bin!” he exclaimed, spinning around and shooting Bin a smile. “Bin, I’ve done it!”

He truly did it. He believed in himself and his actions had proven that he was talented. Bin was proud, and rushed forward to hug Myungjun tightly.

“I knew you could,” he murmured, running his fingers through Myungjun’s hair. “You must have more confidence in yourself, darling.”

“I’ve...I’ve never been able to before,” Myungjun admitted. “I’ve hit the target, but never in the center. I know I’m not...I’m not strong. I’m not a fighter. I’m not a very remarkable person; I’m an underwhelming choice for Crowned Prince. I sometimes wonder if I should give it all up and allow Wangwi to take over in my stead.”

“Wangwi is stupid,” was Bin’s response. He kissed the top of Myungjun’s head. “Wangwi cares nothing for the citizens of this country. All he cares for is expanding the nation and proving his strength, and fighting, fighting, fighting. Should he become king, I’ve no doubt this country will turn to ruins. Wars are needless. Much can be solved with diplomacy and discussion. That, my darling, is where you excel.”
General Kim’s service was best used for war. He was a fighter, through and through. He moved as if possessed by the war gods themselves. He attacked with such ferocity that Bin was sometimes rendered speechless and frightened. How could someone so small, so fragile, so sweet in his arms turn into a machine of chaos out on the battlefield?

Confidence, he decided, was what turned General Kim into the greatest leader. And confidence was what would turn the Crowned Prince into a magnificent figurehead.

“I remember,” he murmured, drawing back slightly from Myungjun’s embrace in order to stare into his eyes, “the first time I saw you in court. You were so knowledgeable. Your intelligence surpassed that of anyone else in the room. You thought through situations and you tried your best to remedy them all. When told of the uprising to the north, you considered your options. Many advisors urged you to put it down quickly, to show your strength as a leader. It was an option I would’ve chosen,” Bin admitted. He kissed Myungjun’s forehead, delighting in the way the younger man looked upon him. “In fact, it was the option everyone would’ve chosen. Uprisings are bad for a country’s morale. You knew this, and yet you inquired further about the unrest.

“When you learned of the mismanagement of the province, you took action. Rather than kill those who had quarrel with the government, you ordered the termination of the official who cared for that city. And, as we later found out, your gamble paid off. The people were being mistreated by their officials. Food was withheld, and the poor were forced into unnecessary tribulations. You ceased the uprising and saved many lives because of your quick wit and determination.”

Myungjun swallowed thickly and ducked his head. He was unused to such praise. Those within the palace treated him with disdain; his brothers from jealousy, and others from a lack of trust. Myungjun was unconventional in his methods.

Myungjun was unconventional in his love, too.

“You say you would not have done the same, but I beg to differ. I think you would’ve. You care for people as well, Bin. You would not allow them to suffer anymore than I would’ve.”

But that was untrue. Bin had spent the first part of his life in battle. He was a foot soldier, and he was used to killing anyone who opposed his kingdom. He would strike them down and he would feel their blood splatter his face. While it had been difficult to do so at first, it was almost habitual after some time.

Myungjun, however, was still so pure and innocent, and Bin adored this new Myungjun. He missed General Kim, but he reminded himself daily that this was General Kim, had General Kim been born the son of the king.

“I am not smart enough to think through such decisions,” Bin admitted. “I choose the easiest option. I choose the option that I believe will make me look strong.”

Myungjun pursed his lips. He ran a hand up Bin’s arm and shrugged. “You seem strong enough to me. No need to make yourself look strong when you clearly are. All you need to do is take off your clothes and the citizens will obey you.”

Bin laughed. “Is that what I should do? Take off my clothes when I mean to threaten those who might hurt you? My, but Wangwi would surely see me in all my nude glory, wouldn’t he?”

“On second thought,” Myungjun muttered, shaking his head. “Let’s save such a view for me.”

As Bin laughed, Myungjun’s eyebrows furrowed in thought. “What’s the matter, darling? You
appear to be thinking. Oh, my smart, sweet darling, using the intelligence he has to make a profound statement.”

“It’s not as profound as you might hope,” Myungjun replied with a scoff. “But...are you sure my diplomacy will help me as king? The advisors warn me against always trying to assist the people; sometimes, they say, the people must be taught that they should be brought to their knees instead of their feet.”

Bin clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Such a barbaric view,” he commented. “If you wish to be feared, then listen to their advice. If you wish to be loved, then listen to your heart.”

Myungjun managed to smile at that. “I got you to love me,” he mentioned, “so surely I’m doing something correct.”

And all Bin could do was laugh.

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Bin stared up at his ceiling. A light from outside cast shadows upon the walls. His alarm had yet to go off; he wondered if it was early morning. He wondered if it was about to go off.

He wondered a great number of things, though.

The weird, historical dreams had returned. This one was different, though; Myungjun was not kissing him, nor was Myungjun readying to have sex with him. Myungjun was…

He was unsure. He was scared. He was anxious.

It seemed so real.

Bin sighed and rolled over, trying to calm the pounding of his heart. Why did his dream-self have a backstory? Were dreams supposed to have backstories? Were dreams supposed to all connect in some way? What was this dream trying to tell him?

“It’s just a dream,” Bin mumbled to himself, pulling his duvet up to his shoulders. He burrowed in the warmth, though he was unable to close his eyes, concerned he might return back to the strange dream.

His chest felt warm. The middle of his chest carried a weight. He brought a hand up to feel, but there was nothing there.

Nothing, except for a single name that forced its way to Bin’s mouth, that danced along his tongue.

“General Kim,” Bin whispered to the darkness of the night. “I miss you.”

He fell asleep and didn’t dream anymore.

The next day, he ran into Myungjun close to the school. Or, he assumed it was Myungjun, anyway. Though the boy was far away, Bin could still spot a familiar hairstyle, and glasses, and jacket, and
cigarette. He rolled his eyes and hurried to his friend.

“Smoking again?” he asked.

Myungjun, positioned in a squat with his back against a building, glanced up at Bin. He took a long drag on his cigarette before nodding his head. “Yeah.”

Bin slid down next to him, choosing not to stare. He knew Myungjun didn’t like being stared at. Myungjun hated being a spectacle. If Bin stared, he would make Myungjun into a spectacle.

“What’s stressing you out today?” Bin inquired. “Is it the party? Jungha’s party?”

Myungjun pursed his lips. He played with the cigarette between his fingers, tapping it lightly. Some ash fell onto his shoe and he lightly kicked it off. “Sort of.”

“Sort of?”

“Sort of,” Myungjun confirmed. He took a deep breath before sticking the cigarette back in his mouth.

Bin did watch this time, spectacle be damned. “You’ll get cancer if you keep smoking those.”

“I’ll also get cancer if I use the microwave or eat food from the grocery store or watch television,” Myungjun muttered, smoke tumbling forth from his lips. “I’ll get cancer from doing anything, I’m sure.”

“Well.” Bin didn’t have a good reply to that sort of dim outlook on life. Instead, he turned his attention away from Myungjun’s dirty habit and stared at the building in front of them both. “So how are you sort of stressed about the party?”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “I just am. Sort of stressed, I mean. I’m not...I’m not fully stressed about that.”

“Last time you smoked, it was because you had a weird dream,” Bin pointed out. He groaned and pulled his knees up to his chest. “I’ve had a weird dream, too.”

“Want a smoke?”

“Nopbe.”

Myungjun smirked lightly, but then seemed to remember why he was there, why he was smoking. After taking another quick puff, he explained, “It was a weird dream. And that coupled with the impending party of doom is making me a bit...it’s making me nervous.”

“How did the dream make you nervous?” Bin asked, glancing over at his friend. Myungjun didn’t respond; he only shrugged again and tapped his cigarette with one finger. “Did you dream about me being sexy and gorgeous and—”

“You were nowhere near my dream,” Myungjun snapped. He scoffed, too, then shoved Bin. “Besides, the dream wasn’t important. It isn’t important.”

Bin wished he could say such a thing. At the very least, he could lie. He could lie and pretend he wasn’t panicking due to the realistic nature of his dreams. He could pretend he wasn’t coming to grips with his sexuality because of his dreams. He could pretend he didn’t wake up with an unfamiliar name on his tongue that he no longer could remember, but knew had to do with
Myungjun.

So he did.

“Good. My dream didn’t involve you, either, and it wasn’t important.”

“Yeah, well, good for you. But we’re talking about me .”

“Don’t be a dick.”

Myungjun sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s just...I’m positive that some of the people at this party will have viewed my video. Jinwoo has, and Jinwoo likes me. I know it’s spread, too, and even the underclassmen like Sanha have probably seen it at some point or another. How the fuck will I be able to be in the same room as them with the knowledge that they...they saw that?”

Bin wasn’t sure how he could answer that. He tried his best. “Well, you’re fine with Jinwoo, and he’s—”

“Not everyone is as nice as Jinwoo,” Myungjun grumbled. “Jinwoo chooses to ignore and forget. They don’t.” He gestured in the direction of their school. “Most of them have mocked me for it at some point. Back when it was still fresh, some of the guys would…” Myungjun quickly, crudely, mimed giving a blowjob. Bin’s heart only skipped one beat. “They would do that when they saw me coming down the hallway. Some of them would ask certain questions. How are your knees, Myungjun? What’s your favorite flavor of yogurt, Myungjun? Have you gone to the bathroom recently, Myungjun?” Myungjun took a long drag and blew it all out, then said, “I cried a lot, you know. When it all happened.”

Bin couldn’t imagine not crying. “Well, not everyone was a jerk to you, right? I’m sure Jinwoo wasn’t a jerk when it came out.”

“No,” Myungjun confirmed, “but he never talked to me unless it was for class. I guess I appreciated him not joining in at all. But only Dongmin and Minhyuk really cared about me, it felt like. The rest just…” Myungjun pursed his lips. “And you know what’s stupid?”

“What?”

“I bet if I had been an innocent audience member of that video, I wouldn’t have cared, either. I would’ve thought, That’s disgusting, how can he live with himself? ”

Bin frowned. That didn’t sound like Myungjun. “You wouldn’t have.”

“I would’ve. Bin, you haven’t seen the video. I…” Myungjun gently let a hand fall to the dirty ground. He didn’t look over at Bin. “I watched it. Someone sent it to me. And I was...I was making such horrible, disgusting noises. It was gross. I couldn’t believe myself. I was...I was blowing a guy in a public restroom.” He finally looked at Bin. Desperation shone in his eyes. “That’s not how I am, Bin. I-I know a lot of people will probably tell you that I’m...I’m a hyper-sexual beast or something, that I can’t even wait until school is over to suck on a dick, but that’s not true. I just felt...I felt like I had to.”

Bin didn’t like that reasoning. He didn’t want sex to be because I had to . Was it truly consensual then? “Did Soojung pressure you into...doing that?”

Myungjun didn’t answer at first, and when he did, he was defensive. “We were both gay. It made sense.”
“It doesn’t make sense if you aren’t comfortable doing it.”

Myungjun sighed. “I liked giving blowjobs. Maybe...maybe not as often or as public as he liked for them to be, but to say he pressured me is bullshit.” Myungjun put his cigarette out. “I said yes. I agreed to it. He told me if I didn’t want to then we wouldn’t do it.”

Silence fell over them. Bin nodded to Myungjun’s story, accepting it, until Myungjun added a small, “But…”

“But what?”

Myungjun played with his fingers, now that he no longer had to hold onto a cigarette. “I knew it was a bad idea. I was scared to do that in public. I’m not...I’m not into stuff like that. And I wanted to say no, but he...Soojung wanted to do it. Maybe I’m a huge pushover. Maybe what everyone else says is true. Maybe I’m a slut.”

Bin didn’t like such negative talk. He was reminded briefly of the dream he had, of the prince version of Myungjun doubting himself and hating himself. He shook his head quickly and said, “You’re not a slut, Myungjun. You had sex in the school bathroom; so what? If that’s the worst thing you’ve ever done, that doesn’t make you a slut. At least you don’t bully people. You don’t hurt animals in your free time. You study hard and work hard. Giving someone a blowjob isn’t that bad.” Before Myungjun could say anything, Bin continued, “However, if you gave him a blowjob because he was pressuring you, then it’s—”

“That’s what makes me a slut,” Myungjun mumbled.

Bin scooted closer to Myungjun. His pants were likely dirtied from sitting on the ground, but he didn’t care. All that mattered at that moment was Myungjun. “No, it makes him a horrible person. It doesn’t make you anything except someone who has been unfairly treated because of Soojung’s crudity.”

Myungjun was quiet for a few seconds. When he did speak, his voice was small, unsure, scared. “Do you...do you think I should’ve been more assertive? Do you think I should’ve said no and stuck to that?”

“I think he shouldn’t have pressured you into doing shit,” Bin replied. He glanced at his phone. Almost time for class. As much as he longed to remain here with Myungjun, to soothe any fears or worries he might still hold within him, he knew that they couldn’t really afford to be late for school. Myungjun least of all; the teachers seemed well-aware of his bathroom mishaps, and Bin didn’t want Myungjun punished unnecessarily. “Come on. Let’s get to class.”

Myungjun nodded his head. He stood, then helped Bin to his feet. He still seemed so fearful of judgement. Bin hadn’t seen this meek side of Myungjun before.

“Hey,” Bin said, tossing an arm around Myungjun’s shoulder as they walked. “I’m your friend, right? No matter what happens, I’ll be your friend. And you can’t get rid of me, even if you try.”

He had remembered the texts Myungjun had sent him, that night when he first came to realization of his sexuality. He kept them within his heart, repeating them when things were tough.

He wanted to return the favor to Myungjun.

Myungjun, too, seemed to recognize the significance of the words and he smiled softly. “Ah,” he said, nodding his head. “Tossing my own messages right back at me.”
“Asserting my friendship,” Bin corrected. “Letting you know that I, too, can be a magnificent friend to have.”

“Then I’m happy to have you.”

He had Bin, in more ways than one, and Bin was happy to let him.

The day of the party arrived much quicker than Bin had anticipated. He wished he had more time to prepare and to think and to contemplate his sexuality. As it was, though, there wasn’t enough time in the entire world for that, and so he readied himself with the mantra, “Just forget about it tonight.”

If he acted weird, he would draw attention to himself. If he brought it up, he would become an outcast. He couldn’t do that. He was there to have fun and show Myungjun that he, too, could have an equal amount of fun.

Unfortunately, Myungjun looked as nervous as Bin felt. He wore nice jeans and a plaid shirt and he looked hot. Bin wanted to tell him that the jeans hugged his thighs in such a lovely way, and the shirt complimented him very well, too. But all he could really say was, “Stop bouncing your leg so much. It’s making the whole damn bus move.”

“Sorry,” Myungjun muttered, and he placed his hand over a knee in order to cease his movement.

Sanha, seated in front of them with Jinwoo by his side, spun around to face them both. “Jinwoo told me there’s going to be, like, a dozen girls here,” he mentioned brightly. “Do you think any of them would talk to me?”

“They will,” Jinwoo assured, staring out the window to watch for their stop. “Most of them are trying to get into the babysitting field.”

“Ha. Funny. Shut up, Jinwoo,” Sanha snapped, his enthusiasm dwindling. “I might be a first-year, but I think I’m still really good-looking.”

“You have braces,” Jinwoo added, “and the smallest ears I’ve ever seen.”

Sanha frowned and covered his ears with both of his hands. He turned around to face the front again, muttering to Jinwoo about how mean he was.

They had all met up earlier that night. Myungjun requested a quick bite to eat, worried that the party would have no food, and then they hopped on the first bus they saw. Bin wished they hadn’t. Bin wished they had stuck around for more food, and maybe watch a movie together. He used to like parties. He loved the thrill and the excitement and the friends all around. He liked meeting new people, too, after a few drinks to loosen up.

Now, though, he didn’t want to meet anyone and he especially didn’t want to enjoy any sort of thrill.

It was too late to say anything now, however. Besides, he knew he had to remain strong and tough,
if only for poor Myungjun, whose nerves were clearly portrayed with every move he made.

Wanting to comfort his friend, Bin leaned over. “It’s not...it’s not going to be as bad as you think,” he whispered, hopeful that Jinwoo and Sanha were too busy squabbling to overhear what he was saying.

“I don’t think it will be bad,” Myungjun lied. He looked upon Bin with feigned innocence. “Why on earth would you think that?”

Bin raised his eyebrows and then gestured to Myungjun’s legs, which he was once more bouncing up and down. Myungjun lightly cursed and dropped his head to his chest. “Fine,” he mumbled, “I’m nervous.”

“Clearly.”

“I’ve never been to one of these parties before, though. I’m really not like you. They never sounded enjoyable, and...and now, especially, they sound horrible. Sex with random girls and drunk people? It’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“That’s what has always made these parties so fun,” Bin pointed out, smiling softly. “Thrill. Excitement. Disasters. All things that make for a good party.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve had my fill of that already. And, trust me, it isn’t fun.”

“But that means you don’t have to worry,” Bin said, nudging him. “You’ve already had your disaster. Let someone else fuck up tonight! Let someone else become the talk of the school! Your dirty laundry is out in the open, and you have nothing left in the wastebasket that is your life.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes. “Laying on the metaphors thick today, aren’t we?”

With a small laugh, Bin nodded his head. “But it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Maybe.” Myungjun leaned his head against the window of the bus, watching as they passed cars and people and signs. “I just hope you’re right.”

“I’m always right,” Bin said. “And if I’m not and someone’s a jerk to you, I won’t hesitate to knock them out.”

“Oh, don’t do that. You’ll get in trouble.”

“No teachers or parents there to stop me.”

Myungjun looked over and smirked. “Well, at the very least, you’ll likely hurt your hand. When you punch someone, your knuckles will be affected. You’ll get hurt.”

“And you’ll care for me. You’ll bandage my fingers and kiss them and bring me food and water.”

“God, you’re so fucking dramatic.”

Bin was, but at the same time, he wished Myungjun would do all of that for him should he one day get hurt. It would be so cute. It would be so domestic. He would be so in love.

“This is it,” Jinwoo suddenly announced, standing from his seat. “Come on. His house is a block or two down that neighborhood.”

Bin had been so busy reassuring Myungjun that all would be well and he completely forgot about
his own nerves. It was easier said than done, being confident enough for this party, and Bin wished he hadn’t been so keen on figuring out his sexuality. If he still believed he was straight, then he could go to the party and have fun and not have a single care.

Instead, he was gay and a wreck.

A gay wreck.

They piled off the bus. Jinwoo and Sanha led the way, commenting on the style of houses in this neighborhood. Myungjun and Bin trudged behind. At one point, Jinwoo made sure to call out over his shoulder, “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you two weren’t looking forward to this.”

“Myungjun isn’t,” Bin replied, and Myungjun smacked his shoulder. “Ow. Don’t hit me.”

“Don’t sully my good name,” Myungjun hissed.

“It’s already sullied; what does it matter if Jinwoo knows you’re freaking out?”

“He was kind enough to invite me; I don’t want to be a dick and act like this is a chore.” Noticing that Jinwoo was still glancing back at them, Myungjun said, louder, “I’m nervous, but I’m still excited.”

Sanha, cheerful as always, exclaimed, “I’m like that, too, Myungjun! I’ve never been to one of these parties! It’ll be so much fun, though!”

Bin wished he could borrow even a tiny iota of Sanha’s innocence. It would make things so much easier, so much better.

When they arrived, things were already a little loud and chaotic. A couple was leaving, giggling in each others’ arms and whispering lewd suggestions. Myungjun, watching them, stepped closer to Bin’s side.

“There’s no need to worry,” Bin murmured. “I won’t be doing that.”

“I didn’t think you would,” Myungjun responded in defense of his actions, but he certainly didn’t move aside to give Bin more space. He seemed to appreciate his new spot as Bin’s shadow.

Bin liked shadows a lot.

They stepped into the house. Bin’s eyes were drawn almost instantly to the alcohol. Alcohol was great for parties; it always helped him to loosen up a bit. As Jinwoo talked to someone (Jungha, perhaps), Bin pointed to the drinks.

“Want something?” he asked Myungjun. “A beer? Something harder? They have liquor—”

“A beer is fine,” Myungjun said. “I’ll come with you, though. I get a little picky about my beers.”

“What is there to get picky about?” Bin asked, leading Myungjun to the kitchen. “Beer is beer. Most of it tastes like shit. It’s just there to help you get a bit of a buzz.”

Myungjun shrugged as he looked at the alcohol selection. “I prefer wine.”

“Wine? Really?” That was interesting information. Bin wanted to store it away for later use, though he wasn’t sure when he would ever use it. “I don’t think they have wine here, unfortunately. Just beer and hard alcohol.”
Myungjun made a face. “Not very classy at these parties, are they?”

With a giggle, Bin shook his head. “Nope. But a party isn’t about being classy; at least, not our parties.”

“Our?”

“High school students,” Bin explained, gesturing toward himself and Myungjun. “Teenagers. Wild youth who would rather get drunk off the cheap stuff.”

“Oh.” Myungjun sighed as Bin grabbed a beer for the both of them. “One day, I’ll make my own party. It will be a really classy party. We’ll have wine and…and champagne. The fancy drinks.” He examined the beer in Bin’s hands before taking it and nodding in approval. “This one’s fine.”

Bin smirked as Myungjun popped the lid. It fizzed lightly, but Myungjun drank it before anything could overflow. “Who will be invited to your party? If the youth come, they might be a little bit rambunctious.”

“I’d invite you, obviously,” Myungjun said.

“Me?” Bin leaned against the refrigerator, the fondness in his heart growing larger and larger with each passing second. “Just me, or anyone else?”

Myungjun stared at Bin and his hands fumbled with his drink. Suddenly, the nerves seemed to hit him again. He had to break eye contact after a moment, and Bin detected a blush on his cheeks. “Jinwoo and Sanha, too,” Myungjun muttered. “Of course I’d invite them. I’m sure they will be classy enough.”

“Sanha? Really?” Bin snorted and rolled his eyes. “Sanha acts like a child a majority of the time. And Jinwoo eggs him on. Really, Myungjun, if you invite them, your party won’t be classy in the slightest.”

“Well, don’t expect to be the only attendee. You need more than one guest for it to be considered a party.”

“Not in my experience.”

Myungjun quickly gulped at his beer. He was flustered. Bin was making him flustered. But why? He didn’t really want to make Myungjun flustered. He liked the friendship they shared. He liked their casual way of talking and teasing. This was borderline flirtatious. This wasn’t at all what Bin had meant to do. He thought back to the dreams he had. The dream-Bin was always flirtatious in such a manner. He teased with lewd undertones or sensual glances. It was so far detached from how Bin operated in real life, and he was appalled he was acting like his dream-self.

He cleared his throat and took a sip of his beer. “This,” he muttered, holding it up, “is cheap.”

He saw Myungjun visibly relax.

“It’s a high-school party. If they bought it themselves, then clearly they didn’t have much money to spend.” Myungjun leaned against the counter, watching as other people lingered and talked and laughed. The music from the living room was loud, but not loud enough to deter their conversation.

Bin wanted to keep his focus away from the actual party. He was far more interested in Myungjun. “And if their parents bought it for other purposes?” he asked.
“Then their parents have shit taste.”

Bin guffawed as a smile forced its way to his face. It didn’t want to leave when he faced
Myungjun. It wanted to stick around, to remind him of how happy Myungjun constantly made him.

Good things could hardly last, however. Voices came closer, and when Bin finally tore his gaze
from Myungjun, he realized some fellow classmates were hurrying into the kitchen, likely to refill
on drinks. Bin stepped aside, and Myungjun followed suit.

“Hey,” one greeted with a grin. Clearly he was already a little tipsy. “Enjoying the party?”

“We just got here,” Bin replied, shrugging his shoulders. “It seems cool.”

“You’re Bin, right?” a girl asked, raising her eyebrows. “Jinwoo told us you’re a party animal.
Why don’t you come dance? Others are dancing.” She glanced behind her and grimaced. “Well,
*trying* to dance.”

Bin wished Jinwoo wouldn’t spread around his past so lightly. It made him embarrassed, and it
brought to light the fact that he truly changed overnight. He took another sip of his beer, then
replied, “I might dance. I’m not feeling so hot. I just like hanging back and talking tonight.”

The girl nodded as if she understood. She glanced at Myungjun, who kept his eyes averted. “What
are you two talking about?” she asked.

Bin waited a few seconds for Myungjun to respond, and when nothing was said, he held up his
beer can. “The shit beer.”

The girl snorted. “You’re telling me. I told Jungha he should buy better beer; if he has a fake ID,
why doesn’t he get *good* beer? It’s not like his parents aren’t loaded, either.”

“It’s because he doesn’t know anything about beer,” someone else responded with a giggle. “He
just bought whatever he could find, I bet.”

“I like Jungha, but he can be such an idiot sometimes,” the girl said. Her friends grabbed some
beers and began heading back to the living room. The girl, however, lingered for a second. “You
really should come, Bin. It’ll be fun.”

“Thanks,” Bin said, though he had no desire to do anything without Myungjun.

Instead of leaving, the girl still stayed where she was. She hesitated briefly, then turned to
Myungjun. “You’re Myungjun, right?”

Myungjun nodded his head. He looked steadfast and strong, but Bin could detect the slight tremor
in his fingers that betrayed his true feelings. He felt fear; fear of being noticed and singled out. It
was reasonable, too, given how people always treated him.

The girl didn’t say anything mean, though. She just smiled and gestured to the living room where
her friends had all gone. “You should come, too. No point in attending a party if you’ll just blend
into the background, is there?”

Myungjun blinked and responded, “I, um, I guess not.”

“Good! Get another beer and join us!” She left, finally, after seeming satisfied with her persuasion.
Myungjun stared after her, and when he seemed certain she wasn’t going to return, he glanced over
at Bin. “She knows me,” he said, “but she’s...treating me normally.”

“Surprised?”

“A lot.” Myungjun raised his eyebrows as he took a sip of his beer. After he swallowed, he continued, “I mean, surely you can understand. I’ve never been to a party before, and the first one I go to, people are treating me...normally. Not with fake kindness or unwanted pity, but just...they’re treating me like they’re treating you.”

Bin was happy for that. He wanted people to understand that Myungjun’s sexuality was not definitive of who he was.

“Let’s go out and join the party,” Bin said with a smile. He grabbed a couple of beers, then nudged Myungjun off the counter.

“But...I mean, maybe we—”

“No buts,” Bin whispered, shoving Myungjun past the kitchen and into the living room. “They’ll like you. Trust me.”

The music in the living room was louder. Bin felt the bass deep within his body, beating at a rhythmic pace. He bobbed his head to the beat as he greeted a few people, while Myungjun, shuffling in front of him, could only stare at the floor.

Sanha, upon noticing them, rushed to their side. He had a drink in his hand and rosy cheeks. “I thought you guys left!” he teased. “Look how fun this is!”

Bin snorted and pointed to Sanha’s drink. “What is that?” he asked. “Vodka?”

“It’s water!” Sanha exclaimed. He seemed unashamed to be refraining from any alcohol. “Jinwoo told me I shouldn’t drink unless I really wanted to, and if anyone tried to pressure me into it, he’d beat them up.” Sanha grinned. “I tried his beer, but I don’t like beer. I bet I’d like soju, but Jungha doesn’t have any.”

Speaking of Jungha, Bin swiveled his head in an attempt to find the host of their party. It took him a while to spot, but Bin finally saw him engaged in conversation with Jinwoo and a handful of peers. “Is Jinwoo having fun?” Bin asked, smirking as he saw his friend laugh. “Looks like he is.”

“He told me…” Sanha paused to giggle, then continued, “he told me he might have sex with one of those girls tonight.”

“Bin won’t,” Myungjun blurted out. Bin glanced at him in surprise, and Myungjun, face a little red, continued, “I mean...he told me he wouldn’t. He’s got...he’s, um...he and I are hanging out tonight, since it’s my first party. So he won’t...he won’t do that.”

Sanha nodded his head wisely, as if he understood the situation. “It’s my first party, too. I won’t have sex with anyone tonight, either.”

Myungjun drank his beer. He gulped it down, and Bin could tell he was obviously nervous. “Hey,” Bin murmured, poking Myungjun’s shoulder. “Slow down. Are you alright?”

“Fine,” Myungjun responded, wiping at his lips. He set his beer down and asked, “What should we do? Did you want to go talk to anyone? Or dance?”

“Dancing sounds fun,” Sanha said, eyes wide with cheer. “Other people are dancing. Do we have
to dance like them?"

Some nearby were swaying their hips to the beat as they retained conversation with their friends. Others were more involved with the music, gyrating and grinding against those of the opposite sex. Bin had once been part of the latter group, but now seeing Myungjun’s gaze harden as he stared upon them, he shook his head. “I’m not a good dancer,” Bin lied.

Myungjun’s attention snapped to him. “You...you said...”

“Maybe we should go hang out with Jinwoo?” Bin suggested, wanting to interrupt whatever Myungjun was going to say. He could sense confusion, even as Sanha agreed and slunk through the crowd of people.

“Bin,” Myungjun whispered, tugging at Bin’s arm. “Did you lie to me, or to Sanha?”

“I don’t want to dance,” Bin answered with a soft smile. “Besides, you don’t want to dance, do you?”

Myungjun shook his head with enthusiasm. Bin could hardly hold back laughter at how cute Myungjun looked, with his circular glasses and rich, black hair. He slung an arm around Myungjun’s shoulder, wanting to keep him close always. “Allow me to escort you,” he teased, guiding Myungjun over to Jinwoo.

Jinwoo greeted them both with a large grin and a wave. He, clearly, was a little tipsy, a drink in one hand and a girl plastered to his side. “I was wondering where you two went!” he exclaimed. “Bin, Myungjun, this is Su Bao. She’s a Chinese transfer student. She speaks good English, though; Bin speaks good English, too.”

The girl smiled. She looked kind, with soft eyes, and she said hello to both of them with no hesitation. Bin decided that he liked her fine.

He liked Jungha less, especially when the boy asked, “Jinwoo, why did you invite Myungjun?”

Jinwoo lost his smile. “He’s a friend,” he replied, and then he took a sip of his beer.

Jungha sighed and leaned back against the wall. “I didn’t think you’d befriend someone who sucks dick if you pay him enough.”

Bin spared a glance to Myungjun, who looked frozen in absolute shock. Surely, that was a new rumor. He seemed as if he had never heard of it before. It was a disgusting rumor, too, and Bin bristled in indignation upon hearing it.

“Shut up, Jungha,” he snapped. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re going on about.”

Jungha was already drunk. Bin could tell from the way the older boy held himself and kept an unfocused stare on Myungjun. “I sometimes wonder whose dick you sucked. I meant to ask...” He cleared his throat and yelled, “Hey! Raise your hand if Kim Myungjun has requested money in exchange for a cock down his throat!”

People looked over. Some laughed. Some looked awkward. The mix of reactions bugged Bin even more; even those that seemed exasperated or annoyed did nothing to stop Jungha’s yelling.

“Raise your hand,” Jungha continued, a devious grin spreading across his face, “if Myungjun has tried to rape you!”
“You’d better shut your mouth, Jungha,” Bin retorted. He could feel Myungjun trembling from underneath his arm. Out of fear, pain, or anger, probably, but Bin wasn’t sure which. Maybe a mixture of all those emotions. Likely a mix.

Jungha scoffed at Bin. He had the attention of most people in the living room now. He seemed to enjoy the attention. “Look at you,” he mocked. “You’ve got him wrapped up in your arm — have you two fucked?”

“Bin’s straight,” Jinwoo interjected, eyes darting back and forth between the two. “And Myungjun isn’t like that. Cool it, alright?”

Bin looked over at Myungjun again. He looked downright terrified. The eyes in the room were laying upon him, and Bin imagined he must feel quite like prey feels among predator. Anyone else could turn on him at any moment. Anyone else could agree with Jungha’s false claims and could tarnish his reputation even moreso.

“He is like that,” Jungha retorted. He took another gulp of the beverage in his hand and continued, “We have video of him blowing another guy in the school bathroom. You know only sluts do it in the toilet, so what does that make Myungjun?” Before anyone could answer his rhetorical question, he gasped in excitement and said, “Wait! I think I have the video on my cell phone! The first-years haven’t seen it — has Bin seen it? He’s a newcomer, so probably—”

“Why are you so fucking obsessed with Myungjun’s sexuality?” Bin snapped, holding Myungjun closer to him, possessive and protective. “You won’t shut up about it, will you?”

Jungha stopped looking for his phone and instead turned his glare onto Bin. “It’s not very cool, is it, to suck off another guy?”

Bin scoffed. “You’re disgusting, Jungha. You’re fixated on that blowjob, aren’t you? It’s not cool to suck off a guy? Is that it? I bet you’ve gone down on a girl before, haven’t you? How’s that any different?”


“I will bother,” Bin responded, and he kept a challenging gaze on Jungha. “How’s it any different? Answer that.”

Jungha glanced at Myungjun, then back at Bin. All others in the room awaited his answer, though Jinwoo looked ready to fight and Sanha appeared extremely nervous. Jungha finally replied, “He’s gay, Bin. He’s a fag acting like he’s one of the cool kids.”

“Gay people can’t be cool?” Bin asked.

“Yeah. I said it. Gay people can’t be cool.”

A slight murmur went up among the crowd. Some seemed to be in agreement; others seemed unsure. Still, no one said anything, save for Jinwoo, who shoved Jungha and snapped, “Lay off.”

Bin didn’t want to give Jungha another minute to spout his hatred. He tightened his jaw and looked over at his friend.

Myungjun had expected those words. While pain was visible in his pretty, brown eyes, so was resignation. He had likely heard such a thing since he had come out. Bin hoped he didn’t believe it.

Bin didn’t believe it for an instant, but he knew proving it wrong would require some sort of
You thought I was cool, didn’t you? Before I defended Myungjun, at least.”

Jungha blinked. “You’re fine, as long as you stop fucking around with gay people.”

“But I’m gay.”

The murmur stopped. Jungha stopped. Jinwoo and Sanha turned to Bin in shock and alarm. Myungjun, holding onto his arm, tightened his grip and drew in his breath.

Jungha took a few seconds to compose himself. “You’re...what?”

“I’m gay,” Bin repeated. The weight of his secret was removed from his shoulders; the reality of his new life was heavier, however, and he wanted to run and hide and scream. But he couldn’t. He would stay there and accept any criticism so Myungjun would no longer suffer alone. “You think I’m cool, but I’m gay. So your logic is wrong, isn’t it?”

Jungha’s mouth struggled to form words. Everyone else seemed too surprised to say anything. It was Myungjun who finally broke the silence. “Bin,” he whispered, “what the fuck are you doing?”

“This party is probably only for cool people,” Bin stated, looking around at the crowd. His heart hammered in his chest. He hoped his knees weren’t shaking. He hoped the fear he felt wasn’t evident on his face. “So Myungjun and I, two very uncool guys, will be leaving now.”

Myungjun allowed himself to be tugged out from the living room. Sanha followed, calling after them in concern. Bin could hear Jinwoo cursing up a storm, all of his words directed toward Jungha.

Sanha caught them just as they stood by the front door. “Bin!” he exclaimed, “are you really gay?”

Bin shot Sanha a small smile. His lips trembled. “Just...you stay with Jinwoo. I want...I want to talk to Myungjun about a few things, alright? Can I tell you later?”

Sanha hesitated before nodding his head. His eyebrows were furrowed together in confusion. “Right,” he mumbled. “Um...okay. You guys...be safe going home. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Of course!” Bin said, and with a wave to Sanha, he quickly exited the house, pulling Myungjun along with him.

It wasn’t until they were outside that Bin released his hand. “Sorry,” he muttered. “For...for tugging you too hard.”

“Oh.” Myungjun cleared his throat. “It’s fine. Don’t worry. I’m fine.”

Bin felt awkward and uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure what to say. He wasn’t sure what Myungjun wanted to hear. He pointed a finger down the sidewalk and asked, “I guess we should walk to the bus stop?”

“I...yeah.” Myungjun nodded. “Yeah, the bus stop.”

They walked in silence. Bin could hear each of their footsteps against the concrete. He could hear the few cars that passed by so late at night. He could hear Myungjun shuffling his hands around, messing with his glasses or else running fingers through hair.

“Sorry,” Bin finally spoke. He wanted to be the one to speak first; he wanted to be the one to clear
Myungjun glanced at him. “For what? You...you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I mean, if I hadn’t agreed for the two of us to go, then Jungha wouldn’t have acted like such a dick.” He shrugged his shoulders. “So I apologize.”

There was silence again. Myungjun’s eyebrows were furrowed in confusion and concentration. “Bin?”

Here it came. The question Bin knew would come, but the question he dreaded having to answer. He took a deep breath and replied, “Yeah?”

“You didn’t have to say you were gay, you know.”

That wasn’t at all what Bin had anticipated. He stumbled; Myungjun righted him.

“Sorry,” Bin repeated. He gave a small chuckle. “What do you mean, though, by saying I didn’t have to say that?”

“Well…” Myungjun removed his hands from Bin’s arm. It was a pity, for Bin liked feeling Myungjun holding him in such a manner. “I just mean that you don’t have to lie for me. People will start to talk. They’ll spread rumors about you. You’ll actually be branded as gay, and you’ve seen how much it’s affected me. It’s not a good thing to be gay, Bin.”

Bin swallowed thickly. So Myungjun thought it was all fake? If Bin kept up with that lie, it would probably be for the better. He could let people at school know that he had been bluffing. He could laugh it off and tell everyone he was actually into girls. He could live a normal life.

However, his normal life would be tainted with that one lie.

He couldn’t do that. Not to himself, and certainly not to sweet Myungjun.

“I’m not lying,” he murmured, keeping his head ducked down. They walked underneath a streetlamp, and Myungjun stopped him.

“You’re not lying about what?” the boy asked. Bin could hear the surprise in his tone, the disbelief. He knew Myungjun would never judge him for his sexuality, for something he was unable to control.

“I’m actually gay.”

Myungjun stared in shock. He shook his head slowly, as if denying the truth, and stammered out, “You...you’ve had sex with girls. You’ve flirted with girls, I...I know you’ve done that. You’re not gay.”

“Bisexual, then?” Bin shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “But I’m gay. Partially gay, at least.”

“You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?” Myungjun snapped. Bin glanced up at him. Myungjun looked as lost as Bin felt. “You think it’s funny to be gay, and so—”

“Why would I fuck with you?” Bin asked. “You’re my best friend. I wouldn’t hurt you like that.”

His words caused sense to enter Myungjun’s mind. “Fine,” Myungjun responded, “but you aren’t gay. You’ve never been gay.”
“I know.” Bin sighed, and without hesitation, slid to the ground, his back against the streetlight. He needed to sit. He needed to breathe. He needed to take a moment to understand what his confession meant for the rest of his life. “But recently I’ve started thinking. I’ve had...I’ve had thoughts that aren’t exactly pure, and they’re about...they’re about other guys.”

He was admitting he was gay, but he needn’t admit that he was only gay for Myungjun. One step at a time, he told himself.

“And I thought that maybe befriending you was just causing me to see people a bit differently. I thought that I couldn’t possibly be gay, because I never had such feelings before. But...do—do you remember when I was asking you about...about gay porn?”

Underneath the streetlight, Myungjun’s cheeks turned pink. He looked away and nodded.

“I went home and I watched it.” Bin swallowed and stared down at his hands. He felt disgusted, having such a dirty secret, admitting to such a dirty secret. “I found gay porn and I watched it, and...and I got...I was turned on. I wanted to have sex with a guy. An-and since then, I’ve...I’ve wanted to have sex with a guy.”

Unwanted tears sprang to his eyes. He wiped them away and sniffled, but managed to catch the attention of Myungjun, who bent down beside him in worry. “Bin, don’t cry! I’m so sorry I snapped, I didn’t mean anything by it. I just...Bin, please don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Bin hiccuped, rubbing his face into the sleeve of his shirt. “It’s...is this how you felt? It’s...it’s overwhelming, and I had to get it out, and part of me is glad I did, but the other part of me is so scared.” Bin looked at Myungjun. He knew he must look like a mess. His eyes were red and watery and his cheeks were splotchy and he couldn’t stop from sniffing in an effort to keep snot from rolling down his nose.

Myungjun wrapped his arms around Bin. Just as Bin had protected him from the stares at the party, so Myungjun was protecting him from self-deprecating thoughts that sought to plague him. “I felt that way, too,” he murmured, ruffling Bin’s hair. “It’s really hard to get through. It’s hard to long for acceptance while knowing that only a few will still treat you as they had before you came out. It’s...it’s hard knowing that your life is forever different, and that people will judge you for those few words that outed you. However, if you have friends and family who will love you regardless, it’s easier. And, Bin...” Myungjun poked Bin’s cheek and smiled. “I’m a friend who will...I’ll be your friend forever.”

Bin smiled through his tears. “I wasn’t worried about you,” he confessed. “I knew you would like me regardless of who I want to fuck.”

“Such an eloquent way of putting it. My, I’m swooning over your word choice. What lovely vocabulary.”

Bin laughed and nudged Myungjun. It was quiet for a minute. Myungjun reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. “Want one?” he asked, taking one for himself. “It’s good for stress.”

This time, Bin took up Myungjun’s offer. Myungjun lit his cigarette and instructed him the best way to inhale without coughing.

Then they sat in the quiet, cigarettes in their hands as the smoke trailed lazily up to the night sky. Bin would be okay. He knew things would be fine. Myungjun was with him no matter what.
And Bin would love Myungjun no matter what.

Sometimes as he worked, Myungjun would watch him. Often it would be out of boredom; Jinwoo wasn’t playful enough to care for a young child. Sometimes, however, Myungjun would be vying for attention, wordlessly begging Bin to play with him rather than the texts he had to translate.

Bin would oblige most days. However, on one particular day, he had already fallen behind on his quota and he desperately needed to keep his focus on the task at hand. It was that day Jinwoo was too busy to care for Myungjun, and Myungjun was bored.

He played with a few dolls Bin had made for him, wooden figurines engaging in polite trade in his tiny grasp. That must have grown tiresome, however, for he soon put the figures down and asked, “Can I help?”

“Mm, no, but thank you, darling,” was Bin’s response as he carefully transcribed the text in front of him.

Myungjun appeared not to like that answer. He scooted himself closer and asked, “Are you sure? I can write. You and Jinwoo have taught me how. I will be very good at writing for you.”

Bin offered Myungjun a smile. He was a small thing, but his eyes were wide and bright and ready for acceptance and affection. It would be silly for Bin not to give as such to him. He gestured, and Myungjun grinned joyfully as he climbed into Bin’s lap.

“Well, I would prefer you not write,” Bin admitted, kissing Myungjun’s plush cheek. “It is tedious, darling, very boring work for someone of your age. However, as I write, I can teach you what I’m writing.”

Myungjun nodded, taking Bin’s words seriously. Bin laughed at such a stoic expression on the boy’s face, and he pointed to a map he had laid out to his side. “I’m using this as a reference to ensure the facts in the text are correct.”

“What is the text about, Bin?” Myungjun asked. He gasped, as if figuring out the answer to his own question, and excitedly said, “It’s General Kim!”

Bin laughed and shook his head. “It isn’t General Kim, darling. This is about the Khitan Invasions, and the war that took place between our great nation and the Khitan State.”

“Myungjun repeated, as if testing the words on his tongue. “What does that mean?”

“The Khitan State was over here.” Bin ran a finger over the portion of the map that once held the Liao dynasty. “And we are right here.” He pointed to Goryeo. “See how close they are to each other?”

Myungjun nodded. “But why did they fight?” he questioned, tapping the map with one grubby finger. “Why aren’t they friends?”

Myungjun should’ve understood warfare. He had lost both of his parents in an invasion, and surely
he had heard talk of it before. But he stared up at Bin with the wide-eyed innocence of any young child, and Bin had to answer honestly.

“It was because sometimes nations and states and people don’t like each other. Sometimes they’re willing to hurt others in an effort to uplift their own culture and people. It’s sad, but it’s the way the world works. And in this case, it was Goryeo that decided to expand and fight the Khitans.”

Myungjun leaned back in Bin’s chest. He played with the sleeves of his jeogori and said, “Can you tell me a story instead?”

“This is a story,” Bin retorted, mussing Myungjun’s hair. “It’s important to know, too. You must grow to be a smart, young man, and all smart, young man must know their history of our country.”

Myungjun was still for a second before nodding his head. “Alright,” he murmured. “I will learn my history.”

And so Bin continued to teach. He told him all about the Goryeo-Khitan War, about culture and customs within each nation at the time, about leaders and rulers and government officials worth noting. He talked for a while, and he talked for so long that he didn’t even realize Myungjun had fallen asleep after some time.

Bin blinked and stared down at the boy in his lap, curled into his chest and breathing softly. He poked Myungjun, and whispered, “Darling, are you napping?”

Myungjun didn’t answer. He must’ve been tired, to fall asleep so suddenly. Then again, perhaps the lesson was boring to him. Bin grimaced. It would’ve been better for both of them if Bin had made up yet another story about General Kim.

Still, this wasn’t bad. Myungjun looked like a sleeping angel, and Bin liked the feeling of a child sleeping in his arms. He kissed Myungjun’s forehead and smoothed his bangs away from his face.

“Alright,” he murmured with a wide smile. “When you wake, I’ll tell you a story.”

Myungjun slept for a while, and Bin wondered if this was what true joy felt like.

“I want you to come over to my place,” Myungjun stated the moment Bin met up with him at school.

Bin’s head pounded. He had taken medicine, but it didn’t really work well. All he could think of was that small kid he called Myungjun within the dream world. Bin wondered, too, if Myungjun had truly been so precious as a child.

“Your place?” Bin asked, massaging his temple. “Why?”

Myungjun clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Do you have another headache?” he asked.

“No,” Bin lied, for he knew admitting to such a thing would make Myungjun mother him. Bin didn’t mind it, but he saw classmates nearby. If they saw, more rumors would be spread.
Bin was already dealing with the fallout of his announcement at the party. Jungha had made certain that not a person was left in ignorance. “Are you really gay?” was the most-asked question in the whole school now.

(Myungjun claimed he would take that over, “Are you really a cum-sucker?”)

Still, Myungjun was able to see past his lies. The boy rolled his eyes and said, “I know when you have a headache, Bin. You get them often.”

“I took medicine,” Bin assured him, offering up a small smile. “It will go away soon.” He wasn’t sure whether or not that was true; he did know that his previous headaches had only lasted until he saw Myungjun.

Myungjun made everything better. He cured Bin’s headaches, he brightened Bin’s mood, and he stuck with Bin regardless of what difficulties Bin was struggling with. And as they walked together, Myungjun certainly didn’t forget to keep Bin’s wellbeing at the forefront of his mind.

“How about I massage your head? That helped last time.”

Bin pursed his lips and looked around them. They were sure to be recognized soon. Already a few classmates were walking past, talking to their fellow peers and preparing for another long day of school. Bin had yet to see anyone from the party, but he assumed word about his sexuality had traveled. He never knew who might be listening and watching.

“Not right now,” he murmured. Before Myungjun could object, Bin asked, “But why do you want me to come to your place?”

Myungjun blinked, slightly surprised. “That’s what friends do,” he pointed out. “They invite each other over to their place. I mean, you don’t even have to spend the night if you don’t want to, but it’ll be fun to play some games and go over some homework. I can help you with history if you help me with my English.”

Bin liked that idea very much. His heart hammered in his chest with the realization he would have the opportunity to hang out with Myungjun outside of class. That’s what he had longed for, and now it was coming to pass.

He nodded his head eagerly. His headache was beginning to ebb away now that he was around his own personal sunlight. “That would be fun. Can I sleep over? I mean, I know girls have sleepovers, so it might be weird, but I was—”

“Guys can sleep over at each others’ places, too, you know,” Myungjun said with a scoff. “It’s not solely a girl thing.” Still, he didn’t seem very angry at all. He smiled wide instead and added, “I’ve been studying for the college entrance exams, anyway, and you can help me with that.”

“Are we going to spend all night studying?” Bin asked. “Sounds like a boring sleepover.”

Myungjun rolled his eyes and nudged Bin’s shoulder. Bin giggled as he stumbled forward a few steps. “Don’t be an ass about it,” Myungjun scolded. When Bin glanced back at him, he couldn’t help but smile more. Myungjun looked precious, eyebrows furrowed down and eyes shining with mirth behind his glasses.

They made plans for that very night. Bin called his mother and Myungjun called his mother. After receiving confirmation from both, Bin’s heart would not rest easy. He was excited, overly so, about the prospect of spending the night with the boy he was crushing on.
It wasn’t until lunchtime, as he was putting away some books in his locker, that he even remembered his coming-out moment, and that’s when he also realized that now people were spreading many rumors concerning his sexuality.

His locker had a note taped to it.

“Fag,” Bin read to himself. Some students nearby snickered; likely, they were the culprit. He didn’t want to appear weak, for if he was weak, they would strike even harder. He didn’t think there was anything to be upset about, anyway. It was a lame attempt to mock him. He snorted and ignored the sign as he shoveled his books away.

He didn’t tear the paper down, either. He left it there, rubbing the tape to make sure it stuck properly. When he glanced at the students, they looked a little confused.

Good, he thought. He wanted them to wonder and ponder why their stupid attempts to ruin his life weren’t working. He wanted them to come to the realization that he didn’t care what they thought of him.

It was far different from how Bin used to be. In the past, he took pride in his image. He was a playboy, a scoundrel, and a fun friend. He was smart and witty and sharp. Here, though, he had yet to make an impression on most people. Jinwoo and Sanha had easily become his friends without any effort, and Myungjun was the only other person whose opinion was all that mattered. Random students who had heard about his sexuality from the grapevine didn’t mean a thing to him.

He turned from his locker and was only able to take a few steps before Jinwoo ran up to him, calling his name. Bin blinked in surprise; he had never seen Jinwoo so frantic and worried before.

“What’s up, Jinwoo?” Bin asked, looking around at his surroundings. The students were walking away, likely to the lunchroom, so they would soon be alone.

Jinwoo took a second to catch his breath, then he patted Bin’s back. “Are you doing alright?” he asked, countering a question with a question. “I mean...from the party. I didn’t get a chance to talk to you since then. Um...is everything alright?”

“It’s fine,” Bin said, offering Jinwoo a smile.

Jinwoo glanced at Bin’s locker, at the paper that displayed the slur. His lips tightened, and Bin knew he had to be quick with damage control.

“Seriously, Jinwoo, it doesn’t bother me. It’s just a few shitheads trying to make my life miserable.”

“They’ll spread the rumor to everyone that you’re gay,” Jinwoo murmured, concern laced in his voice. “You don’t want to live like Myungjun, do you? I mean, he was ostracized for a while.”

Bin shrugged his shoulders. “He was ostracized mostly because of that video. My situation is a little bit different. Besides, if people decide to ostracize me, so be it. I don’t care. I can’t change the way they feel.”

Jinwoo turned his gaze back to Bin. “You could tell people you’re not gay, that it was a lie and you were just standing up for a friend. I mean, I’m sure most people believe that, anyway.”

That made Bin hesitate. Jinwoo didn’t believe he was gay, did he? Myungjun hadn’t at first, either, but had accepted it easily. Jinwoo was a different story. Would Jinwoo accept Bin’s sexuality? He was fine with Myungjun, but Bin — more or less — practically forced a relationship to develop
between Jinwoo and Myungjun. How would Jinwoo react if he had a choice of who he could choose to be his friend?

But Bin felt bad for thinking such negative thoughts. Jinwoo had always been nice to Myungjun, regardless of what other people said about him. And at the party, too, Jinwoo had been one of the first to defend Myungjun against Jungha. Why would he suddenly ditch Bin for something he had defended?

“Bin?” Jinwoo whispered, nudging his side. “You’re spacing out. What’s up?”

Bin had to tell the truth. He claimed he didn’t care what people thought of him, and so he knew he shouldn’t care what Jinwoo thought of him. Still, his nerves clutched at his heart as he took a deep breath.

“I am gay,” he stated, keeping his eyes averted from Jinwoo. He didn’t want to face judgement. Not yet.

Jinwoo was quiet for a second. Then, he scoffed and said, “You’ve liked girls, you told me. You think they’re hot. And I know you aren’t a virgin. You’ve had sex with girls before, right?”

Bin looked at the empty hallway. He was happy they were alone, at least. He hoped Myungjun and Sanha wouldn’t wonder where he was.

“I have. It’s...my sexuality is a recent development. But I’ve discovered that I like men.”

Jinwoo nodded his head slowly, as if coming to an understanding. “Are you bisexual, then?”

Bin released a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. He thought he was going to be brave, but facing any judgement from Jinwoo caused him great fear and turmoil. He didn’t know how he would have reacted if Jinwoo actually had shown disgust.

“I don’t know. It’s mostly...it’s just...” He had to tell. He needed to get the secret off his chest, so he blurted out, “I just like Myungjun.”

“Myungjun?” Jinwoo repeated, and realization came to him within a second. “Oh my god, you have a crush on Myungjun?”

“I...yeah.” Bin groaned. He had spilled his secret. His shoulders felt lighter, but his brain told him that he was stupid, stupid, stupid. “God, you can’t tell anyone! Not Sanha, or...or any of your other friends, whoever they are. You can’t talk to Dongmin or Minhyuk, either. And you definitely can’t say a thing about it to Myungjun! Fuck, I’d kill myself if he knows.”

Jinwoo cocked his head. “How did you figure out you liked him?”

“It’s stupid. I mean, it’s...weird, mostly, but also stupid. I’ve just had a lot of dreams about him.” Bin began to slowly shuffle along, headed toward the cafeteria, and Jinwoo followed. “And the more I dreamed, the more I thought about him in a romantic sense. And the more I did that, the more I wanted him around me at all times.” Bin pursed his lips and added, “Gay porn really solidified it.”

“You’ve seen gay porn?” Jinwoo was stifling laughter. He glanced at Bin, eyes turned into tiny crescent moons, and asked, “How is it?”

“Stop mocking me!” Bin whined. “I thought it was a good way to test my sexuality, and...I mean, I guess it was.”
“Oh, ew. Gross.”

Bin rolled his eyes. “It’s not much different from straight porn, Jinwoo.” When Jinwoo actually laughed, Bin glared. “Fine. Maybe it is different, but it’s something I wouldn’t mind doing in the right setting with Myungjun. And I don’t see anything wrong with that at all.”

When Jinwoo quieted down, he said, “There is nothing wrong with it. I mean, Myungjun’s not bad looking. And he’s already gay, which makes wooing him a lot easier, right?”

Bin nodded his head. “Right.”

“So I think you should go for it. He likes you the best out of any of us. Does he know you’re actually gay?”

Bin nodded his head again.

“See? It will be easy! I think he likes you, if I had to guess.”

Bin was intrigued upon hearing that. He hadn’t notice Myungjun treat him any different than he treated the others. Perhaps Myungjun liked him better than he liked Jinwoo or Sanha, but probably less than he liked Dongmin or Minhyuk. Myungjun had never shown a romantic interest in him, anyway, and so Bin sighed. “Doubtful.”

“Don’t doubt something that might happen!” Jinwoo fussled at him. “I’ll keep watch on his actions and his language. I’ll see if maybe he’s showing any sort of interest, and I’ll definitely let you know the first chance I get.”

Jinwoo was not only respecting Bin’s sexuality, but he was making an effort to bring about success for Bin’s romantic endeavors.

It was touching, really, and Bin asked quietly, “Are you really okay with me being gay?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Jinwoo retorted. “You’re my friend. I think it’s a bit weird, but I also think you’re still a regular guy. And if you go out with Myungjun, then I’ll feel like some sort of matchmaker.”

Bin would have commented on Jinwoo’s latter point, but he was more touched by the words he heard. Coming out was difficult, but it wasn’t as rough as he assumed it was going to be. He smiled, then asked, “How...how is Sanha dealing with it?”

“He’s wondering if you find him hot.”

“Oh my god.”

At least things weren’t going to change.

Myungjun’s apartment was far smaller than Bin’s. It was clear his family was not one of immense wealth. Moderate wealth, perhaps, but even with two parents, his place was still small.
Bin didn’t care. It was cozy and warm, with family pictures and cute artwork lining the walls. As Myungjun took Bin’s backpack from him to set aside, Bin took a few seconds to look over the photographs.

Myungjun’s old photos looked exactly the same as how he appeared in Bin’s most recent dream. The similarities were shocking, and Bin couldn’t tear his eyes away from it. There was the cute, upturned nose. There was the tanned skin with the soft freckles. There was the smile with soft dimples. There was the rounded chin. Bin blinked and leaned in closer, trying his best to find at least one difference.

There was none.

“Hey,” Myungjun said, hurrying forward. The backpacks were gone. Bin, though, didn’t move away. “Why are you staring so intently at my baby picture?”

Bin bit down on his bottom lip and shook his head. “I have...I have deja vu,” he said, a partial truth. “It’s like I’ve seen...I’ve seen this before.” He pointed at the picture, implying this meant the actual photograph and not Myungjun as an actual child.

Myungjun looked at the picture Bin was pointing to. He shook his head. “I haven’t shown you any baby photos of myself. Thank god. I looked ugly.” When Bin still didn’t tear his eyes from it, Myungjun whined and slapped a hand over the photo. “Stop staring! I was such a gross child!”

Bin tried his best to shake himself from his trance. It had to be some sort of weird coincidence; either that, or maybe his dreams were revealing important pieces of information concerning the future.

It couldn’t have been the future, though, for in all of the dreams, their clothes were old. Unless the future was comprised of old clothes.

“What’s with you? Did my baby photo scare you that much?”

“No. No, I’m...”

He couldn’t tell Myungjun anything. He couldn’t say, “No, I’ve just been having weird dreams about you since we met and you were a child in one of those dreams and, though I’d never seen a picture of you as a child before, I knew exactly what you looked like.”

That was stupid. He had to pretend as if he had seen nothing and knew nothing.

“I’m just amazed with how adorable you look.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“No, seriously, you looked really cute back then!”

Myungjun cocked his head. “Back then?” he asked, and for a second Bin wondered if he had slipped up. But then Myungjun continued, “Are you implying I don’t look cute now?”

Pleased that Myungjun had yet to catch onto anything, Bin laughed and pretended to examine his friend, judging whether or not he still remained cute throughout the years.

Of course, he found Myungjun incredibly cute even now, but he wasn’t about to admit to anything. “Back then, you had cute, chubby cheeks and tiny eyes and a round chin.”
“I’ve got all of that now, too.”

Bin sighed, as if deciding such things was too difficult for him to even bother with. “Jun, it’s not the same! Back then, I could’ve picked you up in my arms and cuddled you close.”

“You can do that now, too!”

He could. Therein lay the problem; Bin could pick up Myungjun because he was taller. He could cuddle Myungjun because he was gay.

He wouldn’t do any of that, though, because though they were both gay and both of perfect height, Bin didn’t think Myungjun liked him in such a manner, nor would Myungjun likely ever like him in such a manner.

Bin swallowed nervously but joked, “Like I’d pick you up. You’d probably kick me in the nuts on accident, and I’d die.”

“You’d die?” Myungjun’s eyes glinted with amusement, and he snorted. “You’re overly dramatic, Bin. You wouldn’t die.”

“Fine. I’d fall over, mortally wounded, and you would have to cradle me in your arms as my last moments on earth dwindled away.”

“Again, you wouldn’t die.”

“God, you and your technicalities,” Bin huffed, rolling his eyes. “What if I just became injured, crying out for help, and forced you to call the ambulance on my behalf?”

“That sounds far more accurate,” Myungjun said, finally satisfied. “Except I would not call the ambulance because I wouldn’t kick you in the nuts. I’d kick you in the shins. I’d just bruise you up real well.”

Bin grinned and nudged Myungjun. “Abusive,” he teased. “I have such an abusive friend.”

The word friend was oddly heavy on his tongue. He didn’t like it. He wanted it to have a different meaning. Boy friend would suffice, and it would make his life all the more better. He wanted to tease Myungjun with that title over their relationship. I’d just bruise you up real well, Myungjun would say. You’re cute, Bin would respond. So, so, so cute, and Bin wanted them to be more than friends.

He couldn’t focus on that, however, or else he would make himself sad. He shouldn’t be sad on their first night together. He looked around and cleared his throat. “Where are your parents?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Work,” Myungjun responded. “Mom works at one of those high-end retail stores, and Dad is an editor at the newspaper. They should both be home soon; Dad before Mom, probably. But they’re excited to meet you!”

“Are they really?” Bin was curious, and so he asked, “Did you tell them much about me?”

Myungjun shrugged, though he didn’t meet Bin’s gaze. “A bit. I mean, probably a lot. You’ve become my only other friend, aside from Dongmin and Minhyuk, so they hear a bit more about
“I’m not your only other friend,” Bin argued. “What about Jinwoo and Sanha? They’re friends, too, right?”

“Not...not in the same way,” Myungjun muttered. “You became my friend before either of them did. I...I can relate more to you than I can with them. And it’s not just because you’re gay, though that’s a huge part of it. It’s also because I feel like I can tell you things that I can’t tell them. It’s because you make me laugh more, and I just feel a little bit more comfortable being by your side.” He backtracked. “That’s not to say Jinwoo and Sanha aren’t great, because they definitely are, it’s just a matter of compatibility, I think.”

Compatibility. What a wonderful word to use to describe their relationship. Bin felt proud, in a way, that Myungjun considered them to be so compatible. Compatibility was at the core of all relationships, be it a friendly relationship or a more romantic one. Bin hoped Myungjun would remain compatible with him for a long time.

He cleared his throat and nodded his head. “Your parents know you’re gay, right?”

“Yeah. Duh. I mean, even if that video hadn’t come out, I had already told them.”

Bin blinked. Myungjun’s words implied something he had never before thought of. “Your parents know about the video?”

Myungjun took a deep breath and moved Bin from the pictures and into the dining room. “It’s hard to not know about that fucking video. Even the teachers knew. They asked Mom and Dad if they knew what I was doing. Bin, do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to have your parents ask about...about your sex life? And to scold you for giving blowjobs to another guy in school?” Myungjun slapped his hands over both his cheeks, as if hiding a blush, and mumbled, “It was horrible. I cried so much. I think they felt bad, but...god, the fact that they know is humiliating.”

“Do they not hold it against you?”

Myungjun shook his head. “No. Mom told me not to do it again, but that was it. They haven’t brought it up since.” He dropped his hands and asked, “Will you bring that up?”

Bin scoffed. “Of course not! It’s none of my business. Besides, I told you I don’t care what you’ve done in the past. Hell, if you did it again, I wouldn’t care.”

He would care. He would care very much. He would feel anger itch at his skin and jealousy pound against his chest. He would hate and hate and hate whoever Myungjun chose to love. He wanted Myungjun all to himself.

“I’m a selfish man,” Bin added in a small murmur.

Myungjun heard it, and he raised his eyebrows. “You’re selfish?” he asked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

It was difficult to explain why he was so selfish without actually admitting to any sort of crush. Bin was bold, but not bold enough to cut straight to the point. He chose the longer roads instead, the windy roads, the roads with nice scenery and little chance of completion.

“I mean, I’m selfish when it comes to you. Just a bit.”

While Myungjun stared in confusion, Bin decided to save himself. He asked, rushing to ignore his
misspoken words, “Do your parents know I’m gay?”

Myungjun’s eyebrows were furrowed. He nodded his head and said, “Yeah. Why?”

“Can you just ask them not to mention it to anyone?”


Bin laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “It’s not a big deal! I mean, I can tell them later, right? I’m...I’m sure it will be fine!”

Myungjun gnawed on his bottom lip and nodded his head in agreement. He leaned against a chair and said, “If you need help telling them, I’d come with you. It’s sometimes easier with a friend.”

“Then Mom would get misunderstandings and think that I’m coming out and displaying you as my boyfriend.”

“You say that as if it would be a bad thing,” Myungjun fussed.

Bin hadn’t meant at all for it to come out negatively. In fact, he would love to have Myungjun as his boyfriend. He just knew it wouldn’t happen; not yet, at least.

He smirked and rolled his eyes. “You wouldn’t be able to handle me as a boyfriend.”

“I bet I would. I handle you just fine now. You’re a dumbass, but easily trained.”

“Easily—” Bin snorted. “You can’t train me! I’ve got awesome muscles!” He flexed, showing off his fruits of labor. He thought his biceps were nice. He had a way to go, but he was certainly more muscular than most other boys his age. “Look! I’m ripped, Jun, and you’re just jealous that you can’t get a piece of this!”

“I had a piece of someone else. I don’t think you could handle me.”

Bin had to agree with that. Myungjun was more knowledgable than he was in the ways and art of homosexuality. Myungjun was also more wise to the ways of the world. Myungjun cussed with little regard, smoked outside where no one would notice, and apparently gave amazing blowjobs. He couldn’t say anything else on the matter, however, for Myungjun’s father came home. The door opening made Bin jump, but he kept his composure while meeting the older man. Myungjun’s mother was soon to follow, and Bin could tell that Myungjun came from an extremely loving family. They doted on Myungjun and treated Bin with respect.

Neither brought up his sexuality. When they ate dinner, they kept the conversation focused solely on school. They asked about teachers and homework and tests and life aspirations. It was comforting, and Bin wondered if his own mother would treat him normally if she ever discovered he was gay.

He asked as much to Myungjun as they settled down in front of the television that night, blankets strewn about all over the couch. “Do you think my mom will be mad when I tell her I’m gay?”

Myungjun had pulled up a movie online. It was an older American movie, with terrible sound quality and no color and lackluster acting. Bin could only understand some of what was said; there were no subtitles, and yet Myungjun was following along rather well.
“I don’t know your mom,” Myungjun replied with an awkward shrug.

Bin pursed his lips. Whatever was happening in the movie was weird. Still, he chose to focus on his mother for now, asking, “If she kicks me out, can I stay over here?”

Myungjun glanced at him with wide eyes. “Are you really expecting your mother to kick you out, Bin? Do you think she would actually do that?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard her make an opinion on homosexuality before. It’s not something that’s ever needed to come up, so it’s not something she’s ever talked about.” Bin sighed, then pointed at the television. “What the hell is going on, anyway?” A bunch of women in giant, white ball gowns were lined up on the staircase and singing something that didn’t sound entirely English.

“I have no clue, but I hope you make something this phenomenal when you became a film director,” Myungjun teased.

Bin shoved Myungjun lightly, then leaned on his friend and muttered, “Am I making you frustrated by talking about my mom so much?”

“Nope.”

“But don’t you want to listen to the movie?”

“Bin, I can’t understand anything they’re saying and there’s no subtitles. I’ve only been following along based on the information you give me and whatever I can decipher by myself.”

Bin smirked. “What is going on now, then? I can only understand a little bit.”

Myungjun was more insightful with such movies. He was excited to discuss what he knew, too, and so he eagerly pointed at the screen. “They’re both in love with that girl, but she likes that one. The one in glasses is trying to win her back.”

“They all have annoying voices.”

“Likely just the sound quality. It came out in 1930, you know.” Myungjun tapped Bin’s knee in rhythm with the music playing on screen. “In the 1930’s, Korea was still making silent films.”

Bin laughed and decided to tap Myungjun’s knee in return. “You know a lot about the film industry. I feel silly now, since I know nothing.”

Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “I just enjoy film a lot. And if you were to become a film director, I’d give you all the information on films you’d need, and I’d watch every single film you’d create. I bet they’d be better than this garbage, anyway.”

“This is garbage,” Bin teased. “Why are we watching it?”

“Because it’s fun to watch garbage.”

Bin had to admit that Myungjun was correct. The movie was a mess, and since neither of them could understand what was being said, they made up their own storylines for each of the characters. One of the men was a shoemaker who longed to become a hatmaker. One of the women was a lotion-tester with very soft hands. The movie was more enjoyable with their jokes and comments and wise-cracks.

At some point after Bin told a particularly funny joke and they spent a minute or two laughing,
Myungjun asked, “Are you going to tell your mom that you’re gay?”

“I...I guess I’ll have to,” Bin replied, a little shocked by the sudden question. “I mean, if I don’t and I end up dating some dude, then she’ll be surprised. And probably mad I didn’t tell her before.”

“Oh,” Myungjun murmured. He pulled one of the blankets up to his chin and curled a little closer to Bin. “Any idea who you’re going to date?”

Bin wanted to announce his crush to the world. He wanted to scream from the rooftops that he wanted to fall in love with Kim Myungjun. However, he couldn’t say anything, not with Myungjun looking up at him inquisitively. Myungjun probably didn’t like him in such a manner. It wasn’t fair to Myungjun if Bin claimed to like him, because then what was Myungjun to say?

So instead he shook his head. “No. Not yet. Maybe one day I’ll fall in love with someone.”

Myungjun had nodded and looked away, lips tightened and body tense. “This movie is almost done,” he murmured. “Want to watch another one?”

Myungjun fell asleep during the second movie, which was something a little slower and more political. It was the first time Bin was able to see Myungjun sleeping. He had such pretty, long eyelashes, Bin noticed. He had taken off his glasses and laid them aside and Bin was able to get a good, long look at how pretty Myungjun’s eyes truly were. Illuminated by the grainy, black and white movie still playing on the television, Myungjun reminded Bin of a sleeping cherub angel figurine, the sort his grandmother liked to collect. He had cute, chubby cheeks and a round nose and soft features.

He looked gorgeous.

He was curled up against Bin, mouth opened slightly as he breathed, and Bin couldn’t help the proud smile that came across his face.

Bin wanted to date him. Bin wanted to become Myungjun’s boyfriend. And maybe later down the road, Bin wanted to marry him.

He had to wait, though. For now, they were just best friends, close enough to sleep on each other and yet not exactly a couple.

But it was fine. Bin would wait forever, if necessary.

There was a small knock at the door. Bin excitedly opened it. He expected Myungjun. He awaited Myungjun. Every night, Myungjun would come by Bin’s room where he and Sanha would set up games or else read books. It was the highlight of Bin’s day, really, and he anticipated it greatly.

So once he heard the knocking, Bin was quick to slide the door open and greet Myungjun with a wide smile.

“How have you been?” He closed the door after Myungjun and then turned around to give Myungjun his attention.
His smile disappeared, however, when he noticed Myungjun’s blood-stained shirt. He drew in a large gasp of breath.

Yang Jing had taken a liking to hurting Myungjun often. He found little things to complain about, and those complaints turned into punishments. The reasons for the punishments were usually extremely petty; Myungjun looked at him wrong, Myungjun was taking a short break, Myungjun didn’t like the nasty gruel he was given. Bin knew those reasons were all excuses, anyway. Part of him wondered if Yang Jing had caught on to Bin and Myungjun’s love affair and was acting out for that, or if perhaps he just hated Bin’s interest in Myungjun. Regardless, it was Bin who usually had to patch Myungjun up after a particularly nasty punishment.

This one might be the worst one yet.

“Did he whip you?” Bin asked, fearfully. He pulled up Myungjun’s shirt, fingers cautious, and his suspicions were confirmed. Myungjun had several open wounds across his back that seemed to have stemmed from the lashing. Bin felt sick to his stomach.

“Sanha?” he glanced over at his own slave, who sat by the gonu board, watching the examination with horror. “Sanha, can you grab some bandages, please? And go fill a bowl with fresh water. We must clean this.”

“Of course!” Sanha exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. He was small, but fast and bright. He would bring back what Bin needed in no time at all, and he would keep quiet all the while.

Once Sanha was gone, Bin moved Myungjun onto his mattress. He carefully pried the shirt from Myungjun’s body and tossed that aside. “Myungjun, what happened?” he asked.

Myungjun sighed. He didn’t look back at Bin. He kept his eyes on the ground in front of him. “It was actually my fault today. One of Yang Jing’s Chinese slaves taught me a few choice words. Yang Jing made me upset, and so I used those words at him. He whipped me in front of the other slaves as a warning to all of them, not to use such language.”

“That was stupid, darling.”

“He just makes me so frustrated!” Myungjun exclaimed. “I used to have slaves back home, but I made certain to treat them with respect! I cared for them — you care for your slaves, too. Hell, Sanha is practically a son to you at this point. And Yang Jing treats us as if we’re cattle. No, he treats his cattle better than us. He treats us like...objects.”

Sanha returned then, hurrying forward carefully so as to not spill any water. Bin thanked him, ruffling his hair and smiling, then asked, “Grab some food for Myungjun, alright? And then you can sit with him while I try and fix his back.”

“Alright,” Sanha murmured, pulling out a few meals Bin had packed away. “Does it hurt, Myungjun?” he asked.

Myungjun scoffed. “Of course not,” he replied. “Sanha, I used to be a general. I was a great general, too, and I have suffered far worse than these ridiculous wounds.”

Bin wet his washcloth and then rubbed it gently down Myungjun’s back. It must have really hurt, for Myungjun cried out in pain and lurched forward. Bin smiled and rolled his eyes. “Such ridiculous wounds shouldn’t make you hurt.”

“It’s because you aren’t being gentle,” Myungjun snapped.
“I’m being very gentle. It’s just a horrible wound, darling.”

Myungjun took a deep breath and didn’t release it until Sanha laid out a few dishes in front of him. “I can feed you,” Sanha offered, cracking a smile, “since it’s such a painful wound.”

In response, Myungjun snatched the chopsticks from Sanha’s hands and began to eat. Sanha giggled before returning to his one-man game of gonu.

His departure gave Bin a chance to speak to Myungjun. He leaned forward and kissed the back of his neck before continuing to clean the blood. “Hopefully this does not become infected,” he worried.

“It shouldn’t,” Myungjun said. “I mean, you’re scrubbing it rather well. I’m sure you’ll take my skin off if you keep doing that.”

“Sorry.” Bin put the washcloth back in his bowl. The water had turned a soft red color and he grimaced. “I’ll bandage it next. This might hurt, alright?”

“It won’t hurt Myungjun!” Sanha exclaimed cheerfully. “They’re nothing but ridiculous wounds. Right, Myungjun?”

Myungjun glowered at him and muttered, “Shut up, Sanha.”

Sanha laughed again but said nothing more concerning the wounds. Bin sighed and took the bandages Sanha had given him.

Wrapping Myungjun’s back wasn’t too difficult. Myungjun was used to receiving treatment; he had been a soldier first, then a general, and then a slave. Pain was nothing new to him. He kept his eyes closed and he squeezed Bin’s bed sheets tightly in his fists.

By the time Bin was complete, Myungjun’s entire torso was hidden from view.

“How long should I keep this on?” Myungjun asked as Bin cleaned up after himself.

“Probably a week, at least. Keep coming back here each day so I can change it. If it becomes dirty, then it’s likely to also become infected.”

Myungjun frowned and leaned into Bin, keeping an eye on Sanha and a grip on the sheets. “When can we run away?” he asked, voice quiet, as if his words were made only for Bin’s ears.

Bin hugged him close, minding the wounds. “I’m still devising a plan,” he assured. “Please, do not worry. I’ll get you out of here.”

“Even when we get back to Joseon, my relationship with you will not be viewed in a positive light.”

Bin shook his head. “No,” he murmured. “It won’t be.” It would be difficult to ever keep Myungjun as his lover and showcase such love to the public. Society was against their love. Society would always be against their love.

That didn’t matter, however, for Bin would love Myungjun regardless. Even if the entire world stood against them, Bin would still love Myungjun.

He kissed Myungjun’s ear and added, “But in Joseon, you will not be a slave. In Joseon, you will be freed. You can become a general once more, or you can work with me as a government official. And no matter what it is you choose, I shall hope that we will always be together.”
Myungjun finally smiled, looking over his shoulder at Bin. “I will always be with you,” he promised. “You know that.”

Bin knew that, and he kissed Myungjun on the lips this time.

Their love transcended all adversity. They would be together until the end of time.

“I got your text message.” Jinwoo jogged up to Bin, confusion evident in his expression. “What’s up, Bin? Was someone an asshole to you again?”

Bin shook his head. There were only a few classmates who were willing to talk to him about his sexuality. Some expressed disgust; some expressed surprise. Some just left vulgar messages on his locker. Only one kid so far had actually followed him into the bathroom, phone camera out and ready, mocking, “When are you going to suck Myungjun’s dick?”

Bin ignored all of that, though. The words made him feel bad but he figured he could be like Myungjun; if he ignored it, perhaps the bullying would die down.

“No one’s been worse, in any case,” Bin muttered. “But that’s not what this is about, anyway. It’s...it’s, um...” He closed his eyes briefly before leaning up against a building. His hands were shaking a bit. Jinwoo watched him curiously but made no move to ask any questions.

“I’m not used to...liking boys,” Bin finally blurted out. He stared up at the sky. “I keep thinking I should tell my mom, or else just go ahead and ask Myungjun out, but...I know it’s abnormal to like boys.”

Jinwoo frowned. “Don’t let all of the other students get to you,” he chastised. “It’s not abnormal.”

“It is. Boys liking girls is the default. Boys liking boys is...basically a glitch in the world, I guess.”

“Bin—”

“Stop trying to treat me like it’s normal. It isn’t.” Bin groaned and buried his face into his hands. “I keep having dreams about Myungjun, too. And my dream-self is so certain that I want to be with him. My dream-self has no worries about being gay, even if everyone else is against it. I want that confidence, but then I remind myself that I’m gay. That’s nothing to be proud of, is it?”

Jinwoo said nothing, and when Bin spared a glance, Jinwoo just stared back at him.

“What?” Bin snapped. “What’s wrong? You think I’m abnormal, too, don’t you?”

“I’m not out to get you, Bin,” Jinwoo sighed. He leaned against the side of the building next to Bin and continued, “You like guys. So what? Some people are a little close-minded and just think it’s weird because they haven’t encountered gay people before. But there’s absolutely nothing wrong with liking another boy.”

“You’re only saying that because you don’t have to deal with it,” Bin mumbled.

Jinwoo lightly smacked his shoulder, causing Bin to jump. When he glanced over again, Jinwoo
scoffed. “Stop trying to make me pity you. It isn’t going to work”

“I’m...I’m not making—”

“I only pity you because you won’t accept who you are.”

Bin pushed himself off the building. “I have accepted it. And I hate it. I hate these stupid dreams and...and I fucking hate how Myungjun makes me feel!” He realized he was getting choked up. He realized he was getting worked up. But he had no one else to discuss his feelings with, and he knew Jinwoo, at least, wouldn’t judge him. “You don’t understand how much I like him. I...I really like him, Jinwoo. And I’ve accepted I’m gay, but dating him will make it...it will be real. It won’t just be dreams or feelings. It’s going to be my new reality. If he doesn’t date me, I’ll be humiliated and still gay. And if he does date me, I’ll...I’ll be so fucking gay. My life will be different. It’s...I don’t know how to be gay! I don’t know how to make the feelings stop, either.” Bin wiped at his eyes. They were watery, and so he quickly looked away to hide his tears from Jinwoo.

Jinwoo reached a hand out and rubbed at Bin’s shoulder. “What are you so afraid of?” he asked, voice quiet. “Rejection?”

“Maybe,” Bin choked out. He sniffed. “Rejection. Being...being gay.”

“You’re already gay. Even if you don’t date Myungjun, you’re still gay.”

Jinwoo was right, as difficult as it was to take in. Bin gave a shuddering breath and looked over at Jinwoo, who smiled kindly at him. “I only want to date Myungjun, though. Does that still make me gay?”

Jinwoo shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe. Or it makes you Myungjun-sexual.” When Bin made a face, Jinwoo laughed and nudged him. “Bin, come on. You honestly have nothing to worry about. You still have friends. Your family will love you regardless. Society is changing, too, so maybe one day it will be viewed as a normal, regular thing. For now, though, the only thing that’s changed is you don’t want to fuck a girl anymore.”

“You make it sound so easy to accept it,” Bin muttered with a sigh.

“It’s not easy, but I think once you do accept it, it becomes easier. Myungjun’s accepted it, right? It was hard for him, I bet, but now he’s confident in his own sexuality. He holds his head up high despite the teasing, and he doesn’t wish to be anything he isn’t.” Jinwoo poked Bin’s chest and said, “And I think it will be easier if you ask Myungjun out.”

“And have him reject me?” Bin shook his head. He wiped his eyes one last time and said, “No, thank you.”

Jinwoo pursed his lips. “I think you should try it. He seems to like you. He’s always hanging around you; even before you announced you were gay, Myungjun really seemed to like you.”

“You just want us together because we’re the only two gay people you know.”

“You’re not wrong,” Jinwoo laughed. He patted Bin’s back and gestured to the school building. “Come on. It’s lunch. We’re going in there and you’ll talk to Myungjun and ask him out and he’ll say yes and I might cry a little bit.”

Bin wondered if his eyes were rimmed red. He wondered if it was obvious he had been crying. “Don’t cry,” he muttered, walking slowly with Jinwoo. “I’ve already cried enough for the both of us.”
“And it’s fine that you’ve cried. You can’t bottle up your emotions like that.”

Jinwoo was a good friend. Jinwoo was an amazing friend. Bin couldn’t believe he had found someone so wonderful who would always stay by his side. Jinwoo gave him the confidence and determination Bin had been lacking.

“No bottling up emotions,” he said, then took a deep breath. “So I definitely should ask Myungjun out?”

Jinwoo looked at him in excitement. “God, yes! But don’t do it at lunch, when everyone’s around. Maybe wait until after school. Just catch him alone and do it. Say, Myungjun, I want to go on a date with you, and see how he responds. And then text me instantly to let me know how it went, alright? I want to hear everything.”

“I might pass out if he says yes,” Bin replied. “I might pass out if he says no.”

“Then text me when you come to.”

Bin couldn’t help but laugh, and he couldn’t help but shove Jinwoo, and he couldn’t help but feel a large amount of affection for his friend.

One day he would consider himself normal, and he had Jinwoo to thank for that.

He met Myungjun in the same place later that day, after school had let out and most students had gone home. He had geared himself up for the moment, spending the entire second portion of his day reciting to himself what exactly he would say. He had spaced out multiple times during class, and Myungjun was already concerned.

When they met, Myungjun hurried forward, much as Jinwoo had also done earlier that day, and asked, “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Bin responded with a small smile. “I...um, I—”

“I saw your locker. People keep posting stupid shit all over it. Are you sure you’re alright?”

Bin had hoped that Myungjun wouldn’t notice. He left the papers up the first few times it happened, but after a while he grew weary of pretending it wasn’t bothering him, and of Myungjun worriedly checking on him. He had to be strong, and he had to get those words out of his head.

Being reminded of the current bullying also reminded him of the increased bullying he would likely face should he and Myungjun date.

Bin kept the smile on his face, though he knew it was tight. “Ah, yeah. I’m fine. Really, they don’t...they don’t bug me much.”

Myungjun didn’t look convinced, but he said nothing more on the subject. “Why did you ask me to come out here, then?”

He was given the perfect opportunity to ask Myungjun out. He had thought of how he would do it.
Myungjun, he was going to say, *I really like you and I want to take you out on a date.* It would be polite and quick and sincere.

But the words weren’t coming. He opened his mouth and couldn’t get anything to come out. Maybe it was his tongue. Maybe it was his lungs. Maybe his vocal cords had suddenly seized up. He had to try again, and so he cleared his throat, took a deep breath, and started, “Myungjun?”

Myungjun’s interest was piqued. His eyes widened and a blush overcame him. “Yes?”

“I, um…I really…” His mouth felt too dry. Why didn’t he bring a water bottle out with him? God, he was so stupid. He looked at the ground and shifted slightly. How was he supposed to say anything? What if Myungjun rejected him?

He was scared of being gay, but he was already gay. He was more scared now of rejection. If he was gay and without Myungjun, his life would be made all the more miserable.

“I really…I think…I think you’ve been doing well with your English.”

Myungjun raised his eyebrows. The blush had not yet escaped his cheeks. “I’ve…what?”

“Yeah. You’ve done…you’ve done well.” Bin wanted to punch himself in the face. He was an idiot. He couldn’t believe he had flaked like that. Everything was set up perfectly and he was just too cowardly to proceed.

“That’s why you called me outside after school?” Myungjun asked. He was confused. “Because you wanted to say that? You could’ve said it in class, you know.”

“I…I know. I just thought it might be more special out here.”

“Special?” Myungjun scoffed. “What did you really want to ask me, Bin?”

Bin couldn’t say it. He couldn’t say anything. Myungjun stepped closer to him, as if challenging Bin to speak up and ask his original question. But Bin was frozen in fear.

Myungjun let out a deep breath. “I know it’s not about English. I know you, Bin, and you wouldn’t bring me outside in this quiet, secret place after school ended just to tell me that I’ve done well in English. So what is it really that you want to ask?”

Myungjun knew. In that second, Bin became aware that Myungjun knew. He was always more intuitive, relying often on his perception of people to make judgments. Myungjun could read him well, and Bin felt stupid for trying to hide his feelings. Myungjun likely knew; if he hadn’t already known, he must have guessed from their exchange.

It was a little pointless to run and hide now. Bin had to face up to his fears and hope (and pray) that Myungjun would still be his friend if not his boyfriend.

“I really…I like you,” Bin blurted out. He looked down at his feet, trying not to focus on Myungjun’s reaction. “And I’d like it if, um, if you allowed me take you out on a date.”

There was no response. Bin was scared to look. He was scared Myungjun would laugh at him and reject him. He was scared he had come to terms with his own sexuality for nothing.

But then Myungjun reached out a hand and grasped onto one of Bin’s hands. Bin tried to stop him, but Myungjun was relentless. “Myungjun, stop!” Bin exclaimed, glancing up at Myungjun. “My hands are sweaty!”
Myungjun simply smiled in return, and then Bin realized that he and Myungjun were holding hands.

Myungjun had decided to hold his hand.

He swallowed thickly and stared at Myungjun with wide eyes. “Is that...are you saying yes to the date?” Bin asked, breathless.

In reply, Myungjun grinned and nudged his shoulder into Bin’s chest. “Where will you be taking me?” he countered, pulling Bin away from the wall that he had been leaning on. “It has to be somewhere cute, since it is our first date. And you’ll probably know how to act better than I will; I’ve never been on a date before.”

Bin couldn’t believe it. Myungjun had said yes? Myungjun wanted to date him? His hopes and dreams had all come true in the span of a few minutes, and he wondered if this was what love felt like.

Perhaps it was premature to fall in love. It was, and Bin knew it, but Bin didn’t care. In all the dreams he had, he had been happiest with Myungjun by his side.

His dreams told truth, and now Bin couldn’t help but feel an abundance of love and joy.

“I didn’t think that far in advance,” he admitted, swinging their conjoined hands. “I thought you would say no.”

“Are you kidding me?” Myungjun scoffed. “I’ve had a huge crush on you since your second day here. I remember when I decided I liked you.”

“My second day?” Bin thought back to his first week of classes, but he couldn’t remember anything he had done specifically to make Myungjun like him. “What happened on my second day?”

Myungjun hummed lightly. “You asked me about Soojung,” he responded, “and I didn’t want to answer you, but you didn’t push it. When you figured I wasn’t comfortable with that topic, you switched it. You were...you were the first person to ever truly care for my feelings before gossip. So I thought, hey, he’s hot and nice. And I’ve liked you since then.” He laughed suddenly and walked closer to Bin. “It’s coincidence that you also turned out to be gay. I...I didn’t expect it. I thought I was doomed to just have this unrequited crush for the rest of my life.”

“Seriously?” Bin had to laugh along with Myungjun. “I thought that would be my life. I thought there was no way in hell you would like me, of all people.”

“What’s not to like? You’re tall and smart and handsome and nice. And brave. And talented. And fun.” Myungjun tightened his grip on Bin’s hand. “And now you’re all mine. I don’t have to share.”

They were slowly walking down the sidewalk, away from the school. Most students had left; the ones still lingering near shops and stalls didn’t notice Bin and Myungjun holding hands. Still, Bin grew weary and fearful of whatever rumours might spread, and he cleared his throat before asking, “Can we hold hands later?”

Myungjun didn’t hesitate in releasing Bin’s hand. He seemed to recognize Bin’s anxiety, and he asked, “Have you come out yet? I mean, to people other than those at the party.”

“Well, the whole school likely suspects something at this point, even if they don’t necessarily believe in gossip.” Bin sighed and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He missed the warmth that
Myungjun’s hand had provided.

Myungjun eyed him curiously. “And how about your mom?”

Bin pursed his lips. “Not yet,” he muttered. Myungjun gave a sharp intake of breath, and Bin quickly worked to calm the situation. “I know I probably should’ve told her a while ago, but it’s been weird, Myungjun, and I’ve been a bit freaked out. I thought that maybe I won’t have to tell her if you rejected me, because there’s no other guy I’d like to date, but...you didn’t reject me. We’re going to be boyfriends, right?”

Myungjun’s eyes widened and he nodded his head enthusiastically.

“So...so I should only tell my mom when I actually have a boyfriend. And I...I do now.”

Myungjun bit down on his lower lip in worry. He looked concerned for Bin. “Are you going to tell her tonight?” he asked.

Bin closed his eyes briefly before replying, “Yes.”

“It will be fine, you know,” Myungjun assured him. “It’ll be awkward at first, but not nearly as awkward as my coming out story.” When Bin still didn’t cheer up, Myungjun added, “I can be with you, if that will help. Someone by your side might give you the confidence to come out. A hot boyfriend by your side will definitely give you the confidence to come out.”

Bin glanced over at Myungjun and smiled softly. “I wouldn’t say hot,” he teased.

Myungjun frowned and shoved him. After chuckling and righting himself again, Bin was left to think of the best way to approach the subject with his mother and sister. “I want to do it myself,” he said. “Thank you so much for the offer, Jun, but I think...it’s best to do it alone. She’s going to be shocked, and I’d...I’d like to deal with it. I don’t want you put in an uncomfortable situation.”

“Alright,” Myungjun agreed, nodding his head. “I promise, though, it will go well.”

Bin wasn’t sure.

“If it doesn’t, you...you can always come to me, alright? I’ve got room in my bed for someone else. Or my couch. We can just spend our nights watching stupid films from America.”

Bin nodded his head. He had friends. He had Myungjun. He had options in case his mother decided she hated him. “Hopefully it won’t come to that,” he told Myungjun. “Not that I wouldn’t want to watch movies with you again, but I’d rather do it with my mom’s blessing.”

“I understand,” Myungjun said.

They were down an empty road. No cars, no people, no possible stares. Bin took his hand from his pocket and grabbed onto Myungjun’s arm. “Hold hands with me again,” he whispered. “I think it’s giving me strength.”

Myungjun’s cheeks were red, but he couldn’t stop grinning as he did what Bin requested.
Bin couldn't eat any of the meal his mom had made.

It smelled delicious, but he had taken a bite at the start of dinner and realized it tasted like cardboard in his mouth. Everything was too dry, too bland, and he had difficulty swallowing it down.

Instead, he pushed the rice around on his plate and ignored the meat, listening as Sua talked about her new friends at school and what they had all done together. His mom kept glancing at him, but otherwise gave Sua her full attention.

Bin tried his best to devise a perfect way to come out. He thought of just blurting it out, but that would be too shocking. He thought of slowly easing his way into it, but that would be too torturous. He wondered how much he should tell, too, if he should discuss how he came to the conclusion that he was gay or if he should only focus on saying, “I’m gay.”

“Bin, what’s wrong?” his mom suddenly asked. Bin gave a start and looked up from his food. His heart hammered in his chest. Sua, too, was staring at him and awaiting an answer.

He didn’t often freeze up in front of his family. He was comfortable with them. He was able to joke around with them. But he couldn’t act as if nothing was wrong, so he cleared his throat. “I was, um...I made some new friends, too.”

His mother smiled at him.

“You made friends? Shocking,” Sua teased.

Bin couldn’t tease her back. He was too scared of the judgment he knew would come. When he said nothing in response to Sua’s comment, their mom narrowed her eyes. “Bin, tell me what’s wrong.”

He thought of Myungjun, of the date they were planning and the excitement he had felt. He wanted Myungjun to be accepted into the family. He didn’t want to hide away his boyfriend and pretend he was straight and normal.

He had to tell them.

“I like one of my friends,” he muttered. “A...a lot.”

His mother smiled and opened her mouth to say something, but Bin beat her to it.

“We’re going on a date soon. I haven’t decided when yet. Or where.”

Sua snorted. “You’ve dated loads of times. Why are you acting shy all of a sudden?”

“Don’t be rude, Sua,” their mother fussed. “This girl must be really special to you, Bin! I’m happy she said yes.”

Bin looked back down at his rice. He thought of the shadows on his bedroom wall. Shadows weren’t judged by family members. Shadows didn’t have to come out as gay. Shadows wouldn’t deal with looming concerns of sexuality.

But he wasn’t a shadow. He was a high school kid who was loved dearly by his family, and they had every right to know who he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

“I, um...I hope that one day I can...let you guys meet him.” Bin took a deep breath. “He’s really
great. I think I’ve mentioned him. Myungjun, remember?”

He heard a small clatter, and he looked up at Sua, who had dropped her chopsticks on her plate. Her eyes had widened. “No way,” she whispered. “A boy? Bin, you’re gay?”

“I’m…” Their mother shook her head. Bin stared over at her, desperate for approval. “I’m confused. Bin, I’d love to meet your friend one day, but who’s the girl you like?”

“Mom,” Sua began, but Bin decided to cut her off. He wanted to do it. He wanted to say it.

“It’s not a girl,” he corrected. “I don’t like a girl. I like a boy. I like Myungjun. And I asked him out today. Mom, and he said yes, and please don’t hate me for it.” He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed thickly. There was nothing else he could say. He had to await her reaction.

Sua spoke first. “You’ve never been gay,” she argued. “You’ve only dated girls.”

“I thought about it, and…maybe I’m bisexual? I don’t know. All I know is I only like Myungjun now. I only want to date him.”

His mother’s chair scraped against the floor. Bin spared a glance over; she had stood from the table and was collecting her dish. “Mom,” Bin murmured, fearful of what she might say. “I’m sorry if…if I’ve upset you, but—”

“Bin, not now,” his mother snapped, glaring at him. “If this is your way of telling a joke, it isn’t—”

“It’s not a joke,” Bin promised. He stood, too. Sua watched on cautiously. “Mom, I really like him, and I don’t…I don’t want you to hate me for that. I know it’s weird. I know I’m weird. But I’m still Bin. I’m still…I’m still your son.”

His mother remained silent. She seemed a bit conflicted, glancing from him to Sua, as if waiting for the moment they would announce it was all a huge joke. But Bin knew that moment would never come, for it wasn’t a joke to him.

He was in love with Myungjun, and he wanted his mother to accept him.

She took a deep breath and then left, leaving her dish on the table and rushing upstairs to her bedroom. Bin’s heart dropped as he watched her leave. He didn’t know what to say to make up for anything. He didn’t know what to do to make it all okay.

Sua turned to him, slowly and cautiously. “So it…it’s not a joke?” she asked.

Bin shook his head and sighed. “She hates me.”

“She doesn’t hate you. It’s just…you’ve never been gay before.”

Bin shrugged his shoulders in reply.

“Why are you suddenly gay now?”

“People don’t become suddenly gay,” Bin muttered. “Myungjun says that if you’re gay, then you’ve always been gay. Maybe it’s just taken me a while to finally figure it out. I just…I was so scared to tell her, and now she hates me.”

“Again, she doesn’t hate you.” Sua stood from her place at the table and cleared her throat. “It’s weird, Bin. You know this is weird, right?”
“I know.”

“And you also know this gives me more reason to make fun of you, right?”

Bin sighed again. “Right,” he mumbled. “It’s easy to make fun of me now. I’m pathetic, aren’t I?”

“You’ve always been pathetic. Now you’re just pathetic and in love with a dude. My teasing is going to be even more fun.” She took her dishes to the kitchen sink. “You should eat the rest of your food,” she added, pointing at Bin’s untouched meal. “I bet your boyfriend wouldn’t like you if you starve yourself.”

“Shut up, Sua,” Bin snapped. His sister giggled before flouncing off to her bedroom.

At least Sua seemed to have accepted his changed sexuality. She would make jokes, sure, but she made jokes about everything in his life. This would be no different. In fact, he would welcome it; it would be a normal sibling interaction. His mother, though, was different. He had expected yelling and fighting. He had expected mean words. That would be normal for a coming out experience, so he thought. Instead, he got the silent treatment.

He didn’t eat anything else. He threw away his leftovers and dumped the dishes in the sink.

Going upstairs seemed like an emotional heartache, though. His room was across from his mother’s room. If he went upstairs, he would have to be reminded of his mother’s disappointment. He didn’t want to be reminded of that.

He didn’t want to tell Myungjun what had happened, either. If he wrote it down, then he would be forced to come to the conclusion that perhaps he was now unwanted.

His throat felt dry and scratchy. He swallowed past a lump that had formed, but the pain of rejection did not go away.

He thought he would be rejected by Myungjun. He had prepared himself for that pain. The rejection of a family member, though, was a different kind of pain, and Bin was woefully caught off guard by the heavy emotions that were deposited into his heart.

He blinked back tears and then looked at the dishes. They were all dirty. No one had taken the time to clean them. Normally, Bin wouldn’t clean them, either. He hated doing chores.

But this chore was better than going upstairs.

He cleaned the dishes. He scrubbed them until his fingers hurt and his hands burned underneath the sweltering spray of hot water. Then he dried them, take great care not to drop any, and put them away.

That wasn’t enough, though. That didn’t take up enough of his time.

He wiped down the table, too. He cleaned any crumbs or spills he saw. He swept the floor. He took out the trash. He mopped. He folded laundry. He did everything in his power to not set a foot upstairs.

But the hours were passing as he cleaned, and he found himself growing tired. His phone kept vibrating in his pocket as he ignored Myungjun’s texts. He didn’t want to go to his room, but he had to sleep.

In the end, he flopped over on the couch and wrapped himself in a blanket they kept nearby. It was
cold and uncomfortable, but better than facing his mother’s rejection.

He was in and out of sleep during the night. It was a restless sleep filled with bad dreams and bad thoughts. He tossed and turned and tried to keep his crying to a minimum.

The fourth time he woke, he heard movement elsewhere in the living room. “Sua?” he mumbled, opening his eyes and staring at the shadow nearby. “What is it?”

“Why are you down here, Bin?”

The voice didn’t belong to Sua. It was his mother.

Bin sat up quickly, trying to adjust to the darkness. His heart hammered in his chest and his fingers gripped onto the blanket. “Mom?”

“Why don’t you go upstairs?” she asked. Her voice was kind, without any resentment. Bin stared at her in confusion.

Upon noticing that Bin wasn’t going to say anything, she sighed and sat down at the end of the couch, toward Bin’s feet. She put a hand on his knee and muttered, “Bin, you know I...I could never hate you, right?”

Bin hardly dared to breathe.

“And I’m so sorry if I made you think that. I was...I was confused. It’s a lot to process. It’s a lot to take in.” She dipped her head to her chest. “I’m so sorry for making you upset, Bin. I love you. You’re my son and I will always love you.”

Bin’s chin quivered. He wanted to cry out of relief. He wanted to sob and finally, finally relax. “You’re not mad at me?” he asked, quietly.

She took one look at him, then leaned over to pull him into a swift hug. She kissed his cheek and rubbed his back, treating him as if he were a child again.

Bin appreciated it, though. He needed this affection, this love. He hugged back and buried his face into her shoulder.

“I’m not mad,” she confirmed. “I’m confused. I’m unsure of this. But I’m not mad. And as long as...as he likes you back and treats you well, then...I’ll learn to deal with it, Bin. Promise. I’ll love you no matter what.”

That happiness he had felt earlier came back in full force, flooding his body with joy.

Myungjun loved him.

His family loved him.

His friends loved him.

That was all he would ever need.
A first date had never been so frightening before in Bin’s life. Typically, he treated first dates as nonchalantly as possible; perhaps he and his date would go to a cafe and maybe walk around a park and then part ways. Dates weren’t something Bin prepared for with great anxiety.

This date was.

He wondered if it was because it was his first date with a guy.

He wondered if it was because it was his first date with someone he truly liked.

He wondered if it was because it was his first date with Myungjun.

It was likely all three, and his knees jittered as he sat in wait, with popcorn and drinks by his side, for Myungjun’s arrival.

Fortunately, it didn’t take too long for Myungjun to walk into the theater. When he spotted Bin, he smiled brilliantly and hurried over. “I’m not late, am I?” he asked, checking his watch.

Bin shook his head and returned the smile. “You’re on time,” he assured. “I was just super early.”

“How?”

“Got nervous.” Bin passed over one of the drinks. “Do you like lemonade?”

Myungjun laughed and nodded his head. “I love lemonade. But you said you were nervous?”

“If you tease me, I’ll leave.”

“Aw, I wouldn’t dream of teasing you!” Myungjun said, though his tone was definitely that of mockery. “How on earth could I ever tease you, Bin? You’re too nervous for me to tease!”

Bin made a motion to go, but Myungjun giggled and grabbed onto his arm, exclaiming, “No, Bin, please, I’m just joking!”

Bin really liked Myungjun.

They sat in the darkened theater together, placing their drinks down and balancing the bowl of popcorn on the armrest that sat between them. Bin could hardly believe such a thing was happening; he could hardly believe that he was on a date with someone who meant so much to him. He also could hardly believe that a few months ago, he thought he was completely straight.

Obviously not, his brain joked as he threw a piece of popcorn into Myungjun’s hair in a useless attempt to get it in his mouth.

A few other people sat nearby. Bin’s actions became less and less flirtatious the more the theater filled up, and Myungjun definitely noticed.

“I’ve never been on a real date with a guy, either,” he whispered to Bin. “Or...or with a girl, in that case.”

“Oh.” Bin felt a little bad. He hadn’t thought of Myungjun’s dating experience; if he had taken Myungjun into account, then he would’ve done something a little more grand. A first date ought to be a little more grand, especially if Myungjun was involved. “I’m sorry,” Bin murmured. “I just...I chose the theater because, um...it’s dark.”
He didn’t explain himself very well. Fortunately, Myungjun was nodding in understanding, and he said, “So that way, nobody notices that you’re on a date. Right?”

Myungjun always got him. Myungjun always understood when no one else did.

Bin nodded. “I mean, maybe once I get more used to it, I’ll be comfortable enough to be out in public, but — I mean, it’s not like I’m embarrassed by you, not at all, I just...I’ve never been gay.”

“Well, technically you’ve always been gay,” Myungjun corrected, but then he smirked. “Technicalities aside, I get what you mean. People treat you differently when they learn that you’re gay.”

Bin smiled softly, pleased that Myungjun wasn’t holding anything against him. He took a sip of his drink, then added, “You’re a prime example of people treating you differently.”

Myungjun shook his head. “People are probably only treating me like that because I got caught sucking dick in the bathroom. As long as you don’t have public sex, I highly doubt they’ll be as vicious.”

“Damn, there goes my plans for Monday,” Bin joked, and Myungjun hurled a piece of popcorn at his face. Once Bin’s laughter died down, he continued, “To be honest, though, people have already been mean about it, and they don’t even know if it’s true.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Myungjun pursed his lips. “It’s an initial shock. Once they realize you aren’t bothered by their bullying, it’ll stop. It mostly has for me, and I had a much worse coming-out story than you did.”

That’s what Bin had been assuming, and he was happy Myungjun confirmed it. He wanted to say more, to discuss their sexualities and experiences, but the movie was starting. The lights grew even more dim and the screen grew a little wider.

In the obscurity of the theater, Bin was less scared to act on his affections. He reached over and grabbed Myungjun’s hand, holding it tight within his own.

He swore he saw Myungjun blush with the little light offered to him, and he was satisfied.

They held hands throughout the entire film. Bin was certain his hands were sweaty, and Myungjun sometimes had to shift weird in order to grab his drink, but neither wanted to let go. It wasn’t until the lights came back on that Bin hurriedly released Myungjun from his grip, reminiscent of the day they had confessed.

Myungjun wasn’t at all bothered by it. He simply stood up and collected their trash. “That was a good film,” he commented.

Bin hadn’t paid attention, too enthralled with the boy beside him. However, he agreed with a nod and stood as well. “You like superhero movies?” he asked.

“Well, they aren’t as great as my old American flicks—”

“Anything is better than what you showed me a few weeks ago,” Bin complained. “God, I couldn’t understand what was going on and it was boring.”

Myungjun nudged him, then tossed their popcorn and drinks in the garbage. People around them filed past, and Bin lingered nervously by his boyfriend. “We made up our own plot. It was better than the original plot.”
“When it’s better than the original plot, you know it’s a bad movie,” Bin muttered.

Myungjun stared at him for a second or two before watching other movie-goers leave the theater. They were close enough to the exit that they, too, could leave, but then Myungjun asked, “Can I hold your hand for a little bit longer?”

Bin was shocked. He wasn’t sure what to say in response to that. He stammered out useless words and phrases, but couldn’t form a full sentence. “I...wh-where should, um, we do that? How...I mean, I just...there’s a lot of people around.”

Myungjun smiled. His eyes were full of kindness and perception. Bin felt comfortable with him. Bin knew that Myungjun would not be upset should the answer be no.

But Bin didn’t want the answer to be no.

He grabbed Myungjun’s hand and pulled him away from the throng of people, back into the theater where people were stepping out and leaving. And there, tucked away in the darkness with only the sound of the credits to accompany them, Bin held both of Myungjun’s hands.

Myungjun giggled, ducking his head into his chest. “This is nice,” he murmured.

“It is,” Bin agreed, and it truly was. Bin didn’t want to leave the theater. He wanted to stay there forever and hold Myungjun’s hands forever.

He was taller than Myungjun, and he could study the outline of his boyfriend from an interesting angle. He liked being taller. He thought Myungjun was adorable and short.

Too adorable to leave alone.

He bent over and placed a kiss onto the top of Myungjun’s head. He smelled of apples and fresh linen with a slight tinge of nicotine. “Have you been smoking again?” he asked in a mumble.

Myungjun looked up at him and then, without a reply, planted a kiss onto Bin’s lips.

It was his first kiss with a boy. It was too quick to make a great judgement, but Bin decided he quite enjoyed it. He wanted more kisses. He wanted so many more kisses, and his eyes, wide in shock, stared down at Myungjun.

Myungjun cleared his throat and whispered, “Got nervous.”

And then Bin kissed him again, over and over, until the credits had rolled through and the movie was resetting.


There was light.

Bin blinked his eyes opened and stared up at the ceiling. The architecture was familiar, reminiscent of his life back when he had been alive.
Back when he had been alive?

Bin felt his body hurriedly, a rush of breath escaping his mouth as he realized he wasn’t dead. He was alive and okay. The dark void had ceased to exist and now he was left with the sound of birds and the recognizable outline of General Kim’s room.

He sat up breathing deeply and laughed. He could breathe. He could move and he could live. It felt like no time at all had passed since his death, though he knew, in the back of his mind, that years had flown by without notice.

He wouldn’t notice, after all. He was nothing anymore, not even a soul left wandering.

Wait, that wasn’t correct. He was a soul. He was still Bin. He was that child, the young boy in high school, the kid who remained blissfully unaware of his tragic past.

“Death is confusing,” he muttered to himself.

A voice nearby answered, “And so it shall always be confusing.”

Bin stood from his bed. General Kim was leaned against the window, a large, beaming smile on his face. When he noticed he had garnered Bin’s attention, he rushed over.

Bin closed the gap and embraced Myungjun in a tight hug. He felt his body all over, sighing in relief when he knew Myungjun was alive.

“Oh, darling,” he murmured, kissing Myungjun’s cute nose. “How I’ve missed you.”

“Ah, but you shouldn’t miss me,” Myungjun giggled, poking one of Bin’s cheeks. The poke soon turned into a gentle caress, and Myungjun continued, “We are dead, Binnie. You are unable to feel anything at all when you’re dead. You cease to exist.”

He had ceased to exist. But why did he know where his soul had been placed, then? Why was he aware of the student his soul resided in?

His eyebrows furrowed, he asked, “What are we doing here, then? Why do I know of the two students who have our names and faces?”

Myungjun’s smile faltered. He swallowed thickly, then kissed Bin again. “Keep kissing me first,” he ordered.

Bin wanted to follow such an order, but his confusion was running rampant. He asked again, “What’s going on, darling?”

Myungjun pursed his lips. “I should’ve been satisfied with our death,” he responded. He held onto Bin’s hands. “I mean, both of us had been kept in wait for hundreds of years. You suffered greatly; I was forced to watch you suffer as payment for my sins. Our deaths were...long overdue. I should be satisfied that the gods allowed us to pass together, that they allow our souls to become intertwined now.”

He was hesitant. There was a but there that he had yet to say. In order to urge him forward in his explanation, Bin kissed him again. “Tell me,” he whispered, his lips brushing against Myungjun’s own lips. “Talk to me. Tell me why we’re here now.”

“I wasn’t satisfied,” Myungjun responded, voice quiet and filled with pain and frustration. “I think my soul was...I was resentful. A resentful soul doesn’t make it through to the afterlife. I spoke with
the gods. I begged and bargained for them to give me an ending that would leave me sated.”

Bin blinked. He wasn’t sure if he fully understood. “Is that why we exist now in the bodies of the children?” he asked. “And is that why I know who they are — who we are?”

“Yes,” Myungjun said. “I finally gained the pity of the gods. My sin was great, but the punishment outweighed my sin. We didn’t deserve the torture we received. Bin, you, especially, did not deserve a single minute of what the damned gods had given you.” Myungjun leaned his head into Bin’s chest. His muffled voice continued to speak. “My memories have been invading this Myungjun’s dreams. Your memories have been invading this Bin’s dreams. I’m making them remember their previous life; I’m making us remember our previous life together.”

That made sense, then. That was why Bin had been aware of his soul’s placement. That was why he knew the thoughts and feelings of the student he was apart of.

Myungjun pulled back to look at Bin. He ran a hand down Bin’s jawline and cupped his cheek. “We deserve happiness,” he choked out. Tears filled his eyes and he took a deep breath. “Bin, we deserve a happy ending.”

Bin didn’t like to see Myungjun cry. He shook his head and wiped away the tears that fell. “Darling, I got my happy ending. You did, too. The punishment was wiped away. We were able to depart this world.”

“We didn’t get to live together!” Myungjun exclaimed. “We were a couple in secret. I slept with another and lied. I was killed in battle and exiled to this room, and you were doomed to live as an immortal, forced to watch my reincarnations die over and over again!” He pushed away from Bin and snapped, “I wanted to be them. I would have rather lived their miserable lives and died their torturous deaths than to have been stuck here yearning for you.”

Bin reached out for Myungjun again. “Stop it,” he fussed. “Don’t. Don’t think of what could have been. It’s in the past. You were not those reincarnations, and I had not been a mortal. It’s over.”

Myungjun rubbed at his nose with his free hand and cried, “It isn’t! I’m not letting us be over! I made a deal with the gods, Bin. I broke them down. They feel pity on us; that’s why they’ve allowed our reincarnations those dreams. That’s why they allowed our souls a second chance.”

Bin blinked. “A...a second chance?”

“We can become the students,” Myungjun whispered, his watery eyes filled with hope. “The gods have allowed us the chance to...to become them. We will share their bodies and their lifetime, but our own memories will return. We will return to the world of the living with them as our vessels.”

Bin didn’t know if that was possible. Myungjun seemed so certain, so sure that it must be possible.

The idea of living again in a time period where their love would be more acceptable was enticing. Bin longed to do away with the current lives of that Bin and that Myungjun and take them over. He could live out a life he had only dreamed of living. There would be no war, no torturous deaths, no immortality and no lack of Myungjun. He wouldn’t have to wait and cry. He would have Myungjun with him at all times.

It was so tempting. Life was within his grasp, and yet he couldn’t help but think of the lives of the students their souls lay in.

Bin and Myungjun had a good life. They were teased a bit, bullied a bit, but they had families who loved them and friends who defended them.
“What will happen to...to the Bin and Myungjun of today?” Bin asked, worried. “Will they cease to exist?”

Myungjun sniffed and nodded his head. “But, Bin, please don’t think of it as a death for them. It isn’t death. It’s...it’s just us reclaiming our bodies and souls.”

It was death, though. The current lives of Bin and Myungjun would come to a halt.

Bin thought of the current Bin, of the student wearing his skin. Bin had accepted his sexuality. Bin had gone on his first date with a boy. Bin was happy and still exploring his life. Bin was young and proud and good. Bin deserved more than a quick end.

“I don’t think it’s right,” Bin murmured. He looked at Myungjun, at his Myungjun, who’s excitement fell. “Darling, we had our chance. We were born in a difficult time, but we had a chance at love. We screwed it up.”

“I screwed it up,” Myungjun choked out. “And I want to make it right again. Please, Bin, allow me to make it right. Allow us to be together, please.”

“I can’t.” Bin shook his head. Myungjun squeezed his eyes shut as tears escaped. “Please, don’t cry, Myungjun. I was happy during our life together. I...I was happy with the prince and the child and the scholar and the slave and the prostitute and the soldier. I lived such a long life. It wasn’t a good life, but when you appeared by my side, I became happy. I had enough happiness to equal a lifetime, I believe.”

Myungjun didn’t look at him. Myungjun tried to turn away, but Bin stopped him. “Myungjun, don’t be upset. We had our chance. Allow these students to have a chance, too.”

“I-I don’t want them to live out the life I wanted,” Myungjun sobbed. “It’s not fair! I want that happiness! I...I don’t want us to end!”

“We won’t end, silly.” Bin wrapped his arms around Myungjun and held him close, rocking them both back and forth. “We never did end. Even when we finally passed on, even when the curse had ended, our love has returned. Those two students are us! They have our souls resting within them, and we’ve found each other again. We’ll live out the life we always wanted. You and I, our current selves, won’t be there for it, but those two will be. Our souls will live on.”

Myungjun looked up at Bin again. He still cried, gasping his words out through his tears. “If-if we don’t take the chance now...if we don’t take over their bodies and become them, th-then you and I will be completely finished. I won’t be resentful; I will accept your decision. But...Bin, please think it through. Just think of-of how happy we will be together!”

“We’ve been happy together,” Bin murmured. He leaned into Myungjun and kissed him deeply. When he drew back, he wiped some tears away and whispered, “I am happy. My soul is peaceful. I’m with you forever and always, darling.”

Myungjun held Bin’s hands. He kissed each and every knuckle, nodding all the while as if trying to believe in what Bin was saying.

“I’m sorry,” he said upon the last kiss. He whispered his apology over and over into Bin’s skin, and Bin lifted up his chin.

“You’ve nothing to forgive anymore,” Bin told him. “Your punishment is finished. Death is our reward; and reincarnation together is, apparently, a bonus reward.”
Myungjun offered a small smile. “I wish I could change the past.”

“We cannot.” Bin kissed him again. “But those two will not make the same mistakes we did. I know they won’t. They have our souls and our souls are longing to be together.”

Silence fell over them. Myungjun contemplated his next move and then he sighed loudly and deeply. “This is it, then?”

“This is it.”

“I won’t ever see you again?”

“No.” Bin nuzzled his nose into Myungjun’s cheek. “But, to be honest, I thought our last meeting was when I died. Because you were resentful, we got this final chance. The gods must like us to allow us the opportunity to meet again.”

Myungjun grabbed Bin’s face to hold it still. He planted a few kisses across Bin’s cheeks and murmured, “I’m just too in love with you to ever let you go.”

“You have to let go, General Kim. Give them a chance.”

Myungjun nodded. He wiped at his face and muttered, “No more dreams, then.”

“No more dreams,” Bin agreed. “Make it so they won’t remember their previous dreams. Make it so their lives together are brand new and without our interference. That’s what we would want; that’s what they deserve.”

Myungjun nodded once more. He rest his forehead against Bin’s, standing on his toes to do so. “Then it is done.”

Bin smiled. He felt tears prickling at his own eyes.

This was truly it for them.

“I love you, Bin,” Myungjun choked out, closing his eyes.

Bin was slipping, falling, but he held tight to Myungjun as he lay to rest.

“I love you, General Kim,” he replied.

He was no more.

They were no more.

The alarm was going off way too early for a Saturday. Bin groaned as he reached over to blindly grab at his phone, situated somewhere on the nightstand. Before he could turn off the incessant beeping, however, a warm body rolled on top of his in order to complete that task.

Bin yawned and grabbed the warm body instead. “Mm, lay back down, Jun. It’s too early.”
Myungjun giggled in his arms. He kissed Bin’s chin a few times, then whispered, “I have to get ready. My exhibit opening is today.”

Bin opened his eyes in order to look at his boyfriend. Myungjun was delightful when he first woke up. His eyes were puffy and his cheeks were bloated and his hair was in disarray. He was naked, too, with a few hickies spread across his collarbones. Bin admired his work for a few seconds before asking, “Can’t you stay with me just a little bit longer? You look so yummy.”

“Gross.” Myungjun rolled off of Bin, who whined and tried to grab him again. “You can stay asleep for a bit longer, you know.”

“Can’t.” Bin sighed and stuffed his face into his pillow. “It’s impossible to sleep without you by my side.”

“Aww, poor baby,” Myungjun teased. Bin felt a weight escape the bed, and he peeked over to watch Myungjun rifle through their dresser. “What on earth are you going to do in Japan for the next week while you film that new movie?”

Bin sighed again. “I don’t know. Probably die.”

Myungjun clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. Once he chose his clothes, he winked. “I’ll be in the shower. Think you can survive until then?”

“Only if you take a few dick pics to appease me.”

“Gross,” Myungjun repeated before disappearing into their bathroom.

It was the perfect time to go back to sleep. Bin wanted to; he was tired and his bed was warm and comfortable and it was a Saturday morning. However, his eyes remained on the bathroom door for a while, wondering how he got so lucky.

How did he get so lucky? How was he drawn to such a wonderful man? How was Myungjun drawn to him?

“That’s the real mystery,” Bin muttered to himself before getting up from the bed. He found his clothes, discarded on the floor after a night of pure passion, and began to dress in his pajamas. He ran fingers through his hair and scratched at his belly, looking around for ways to help Myungjun ready himself faster.

He caught sight of one of the photo frames on his dresser. It was one of many; their entire apartment was lined with pictures of moments they had shared together. There was a selfie they had taken on their first date. There was a photograph of Myungjun’s graduation, Bin holding him and sharing his triumph. There was a picture of Myungjun sleeping and drooling; there was one of Bin doing the same.

The one that Bin stared at was his favorite. It was a bit blurry, taken by Sanha during a group outing. Bin’s arms were wrapped around Myungjun, poised to pick him up. Myungjun’s hair was wild, his face alight with joy.

It was cute. It defined their relationship perfectly, and Bin loved staring at it.

Myungjun exited the bathroom. His hair was still wet and steam followed his movements, but he grinned when he noticed Bin was up. “Hey, sleepyhead.”

Bin smiled back at him. “Remember that time?” he asked, pointing to the photo.
Myungjun glanced at it, rubbing a towel against his head. “Oh. Yeah. It was fun, wasn’t it? God, you’re cute in that picture.”

“No, you’re cute.”

“Of course I am.”

Bin scoffed and moved to take the towel from Myungjun. He worked on drying Myungjun’s hair and he asked, “Can I take that picture with me to Japan?”

Myungjun laughed and nodded his head. “As if I’d say no. And you know…” He held up his hand, where his phone was gripped, and murmured, “I’ve got a few photos in here I’ll be sending you.”

Bin grinned deviously and draped the towel across Myungjun’s head. “Gross,” he teased, repeating Myungjun’s earlier words.

In response, Myungjun laughed and smacked Bin’s chest. “Maybe I’m not being gross! Maybe they’re just cute selfies!”

“They’d better not be.”

Myungjun grinned as he finished getting ready. He looked handsome and poised, and Bin told him as much as he worked on tightening Myungjun’s navy blue tie.

“My boyfriend is the most handsome curator of all time,” he said, proudly, patting Myungjun’s chest. “He belongs in the museum as a work of art.”

“I don’t work in an art museum. It’s history. Are you calling me old?”

“You’re older than me!” Bin announced. “So maybe you do belong in a museum.”

Myungjun shoved him aside and finished with the tie himself.

Still, he knew Myungjun wasn’t mad at him. Myungjun forced him to walk him out to the hallway and to give him multiple kisses all over his face.

“You’ll do brilliant,” Bin murmured in between the kisses. “And I’ll be there at noon to cheer you on, alongside Jinwoo and Sanha and Dongmin and Minhyuk and your parents and my parents and whatever news crew is coming, and hopefully the president, since I think the president ought to know that he has a living piece of artwork in his country.”

Myungjun giggled and placed a kiss on Bin’s nose. His cheeks were red and his eyes were filled with mirth. “You’re sweet,” Myungjun replied. “I’ll see you there. Don’t be late, darling.”

Once he left, Bin readied himself. He had the option of going back to sleep, but he was too excited to sleep. He wanted to see Myungjun’s new exhibit, and he wanted to see all of his friends, and he wanted to see Myungjun.

He would do anything for Myungjun. He would even wake up early on a Saturday for Myungjun.

He got to the museum a little before noon. Normally, he liked being on time. Arriving early was presumptuous. He hated waiting around and he hated seeming like some sort of lame overachiever. However, this was Myungjun’s exhibit, and it deserved all of his attention.

Dongmin was already there, as Bin had expected. Overachiever, Bin thought, making his way through the small crowd to greet his friend.
Beside Dongmin were Chunja and Minhyuk, the latter sipping at his drink and avoiding eye contact.

“Hey, Bin!” Dongmin greeted, hugging him as if they hadn’t seen each other in weeks. They just had drinks together a few nights ago, but Bin knew Dongmin was friendly. He was very much unlike Minhyuk, who pursed his lips and nodded his head, as if that constituted as a hello.

“Hey,” Bin replied, pulling back from the hug. He smiled kindly to Chunja, who hugged him as well. “Is Minhyuk going to hug me, too?” Bin teased, glancing to the youngest of the small group.

Minhyuk scoffed. “As if. You’d crush me in your stupid arms.”

“I worked out for long hours to get these arms. Besides, Myungjun thinks they’re hot.”

“Of course he does.” Minhyuk took another sip of his drink, and then Dongmin quickly gathered Bin’s attention once more.

“Minhyuk’s upset because Sanha got a promotion over him,” Dongmin explained.

Minhyuk rolled his eyes. “I’m not upset because of that. I’m upset because now he’s acting better than me. He keeps calling me his junior. That’s upsetting.”

Bin laughed, even if Minhyuk shot him a glare. “You know how Sanha is,” Bin told him, smiling widely. “Just trip him a few times and you’ll put him right back in his place.” He looked around, then asked, “Speaking of Sanha, is he here? Is Jinwoo here?”

Dongmin nodded and gestured off to another part of the museum. “They went exploring, I think. Sanha wanted to look at the small history of video games section.”

“Of course he did.” Bin sighed and nodded his head. “I’ll find them. I’ll peek at Myungjun’s exhibit, too, before he gives the opening speech.”

Dongmin and Chunja bid him farewell as Bin rushed through the crowd again. He looked down a few hallways, then traversed to the section Myungjun had pointed out to him before.

“My exhibit will be here!” Myungjun had exclaimed, pulling Bin through the museum and showcasing which spot would house which artifact. Bin could nearly imagine the entire exhibit in his head, and when he finally found the room, it was just as Myungjun had described.

There was camera equipment laying around, likely news crews setting up, but otherwise it was devoid of people, save for Myungjun.

“Hey!” Bin called out. Myungjun gave a start and spun, but Bin grinned. “Just me.”

Myungjun narrowed his eyes, adjusting his glasses. “You’re supposed to wait until I give my speech and usher everyone into the room,” he chastised.

Bin shrugged his shoulders as he moved to stand beside his boyfriend. “Got bored of waiting. Minhyuk’s pissy, so that’s no fun, and I can’t find Jinwoo and Sanha.”

Myungjun sighed. “Did you look for them?”

“Nope.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Still, Myungjun made no move to kick him out just yet. He looked back to his exhibit, staring in particular at one case.
Bin followed his gaze and then gave a low whistle. “That’s pretty,” he commented, staring at the necklace inside the display case. “Is that the piece of jewelry you told me about?”

“Yeah.” Myungjun checked around him to make sure they were alone, then he leaned slightly into Bin. “A jade necklace from the Three Kingdoms period. Its origins trace back to China, though it was likely bought from a traveling merchant in Korea. It was found on the body of an unidentified man; late twenties, died from bombing in the Korean War.”

“Ooh.” Bin nodded his head and leaned in close to examine the necklace. “It looks broken.”

Myungjun confirmed the break in the jade, and said, “It was a deliberate break. We’re not really sure why. But I find it more interesting that it was around and in good condition for such a long time. I mean, that’s over a thousand years.”

Bin didn’t find it nearly as impressive as Myungjun. His attention fell toward the armor nearby. He gave a low whoa and stepped near the metal pieces. “What’s this?”

“That’s armor from the Baekje Kingdom.”

“Southern Korea?”

“Yup.” Myungjun followed Bin to the armor. “I’m glad you know your geography and history.”

“Shut up.” Bin marveled at the armor, at the beautifully ornate helmet, and asked, “Does this have a story behind it?”

All of history was a story, and Myungjun loved to tell those stories. “It was armor worn by a general, though I’m not sure who the general was. We haven’t found evidence yet. He was killed during battle with the Silla Kingdom. We found Silla artifacts in the field, too. He was buried away from the other Baekje soldiers, and the only one given his own grave. Someone cared enough about him to dig it by hand.”

“Sounds like love,” Bin teased.

Myungjun snorted. “Or just devotion to your general.” Still, he hummed and cocked his head. “Curiously, though, his helmet was off. It was in the grave, it just...it wasn’t on the skeleton’s head. Someone had taken it off before burying him.”

Bin didn’t know why that was so curious. He asked, “Is there a reason for that?”

“I’m not sure. Most men who died in battle were buried as they died, with helmets on. Someone deliberately took his off; I assume whoever buried him did that. Most of the other employees here have a few explanations; maybe his head was damaged in some way, or maybe they used the helmet to scoop out dirt for the grave.”

Still, Myungjun seemed unsure of those theories. Bin wrapped an arm around his waist and asked, “What do you think, darling?”

“I...I think that you would take the helmet off to say goodbye. You’d want to see their face. And whoever dug this grave was either very devoted to their general, or very close to their general.” Myungjun shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it was love.”

“Ooh, spicy,” Bin teased. “A forbidden love between a general and his soldier. How sneaky and romantic.”
“Hey, you never know! It could have happened that way!”

Bin smiled, but as he stared over at the armor, his eyes were drawn back to the pretty jade necklace. “Maybe,” he murmured. Something crossed his mind, a distant memory of a green necklace and an overwhelming amount of heartache and love, but then Myungjun grabbed onto his hand, effectively pulling Bin from the depths of his subconscious.

Bin blinked and looked down at his boyfriend, who smiled shyly. “Do you think my exhibit is good?” he asked.

“I think it’s perfect,” Bin replied, kissing the top of Myungjun’s head. “I think you’re perfect.”

Myungjun giggled and wrapped his arms around Bin, kissing him back.

“I love you, Jun,” Bin whispered, holding Myungjun close. “I love you more than the soldier who buried his general did.”

“And I love you even more than that.”

“You can’t love more than that.”

“Too late. I do.”

Bin sighed as Myungjun laughed in his arms, but truly, Bin did not mind at all.

They would love each other forever and always, throughout this life and into the next.

They would never, ever part.

Chapter End Notes

i want to thank everyone so SO much for the support this was given! It was incredibly fun to write and rewarding to post, and i really can't believe it's over lol. i spent such a long time planning and researching and writing general kim that everything else feels mediocre. but i have other fics in the works, and some in the planning stages, so please continue to support everything else i do!

please follow me on my twitter to be updated on the other fics i plan to write!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!