The Tiger And The Magpie

by suhossineun

Summary

Kyungsoo has lived through several centuries, carrying out his duties as a grim reaper, but it all has to change when he finds out that he could learn to remember his first life - his life as a mortal, all that time ago.

If he had known what it would all entail, would he still have been so adamant to find out the crime he's being punished for?

Notes

Kyungsoo is a grim reaper, so through his work, themes of death, loss, and the possibilities of afterlife will be discussed in this story, but there will be no graphic descriptions of how these people come to die. If death easily upsets you, however, I think this story is not for you.
Very loosely based on the popular k-drama Goblin.
Chapter 1

It’s raining relentlessly, a stark contrast to the youthful beauty of the cherry blossoms everywhere. Idly, Kyungsoo thinks about how they’ll all fall- how they’ll all die, days too soon, much before their time. It’s such a pity, too, yet he’s quick to scold himself for such a useless thought.

He’s seen them bloom hundreds of times before, and he’ll see it again for the next eternity and a half. He has no reason to grieve, especially the death of mortal things. It’s against his nature, against his very being.

Kyungsoo looks down at the envelop in his hand, the paper rough and thick in between his fingers. The ink looks fresh, the characters sharp and bright, and although he doesn’t know the exact content of it, he knows what he’s here to do.

He’s just playing the waiting game, now.

The wide rim of his hat shielding his face from the rain and his long, black coat keeping him warm, he watches the empty street where he’s standing right next to the bus stop. It’s quiet, only the occasional vehicle passing him by; the rain is so awful today that no one wishes to roam outside. It’s almost as if the rainy season has come months before its time, Kyungsoo thinks- and extreme weather like this means he’s going to be busy, work always picks up at times such as this, and he loathes it.

He’d rather be at home, curled up with a book, or playing his instruments. Letting the ancient arts to take him to a place far away from here, both in distance and in time, and forget about the mortals for just a moment.

But alas, here he is.

The sound of heels against the pavement is what catches his attention, and he looks up to see a young woman hurrying down the street. She has no umbrella and she’s walking as fast as she can in her heels, clutching her bag to her chest to try and keep it dry. Strands of her hair have escaped the low bun at the nape of her neck and are clinging wetly to her face, her mascara running down her cheeks.

She’s perhaps 23, maybe 24, Kyungsoo estimates, and glances down at his envelope. Kim Soohyun- sounds about right.

He watches her in silence, estimating, waiting. Something should happen- something is going to happen. And he doesn’t have to wait long before he hears it, sees it; a small, blue truck turns on the street, picking up speed as it goes downhill, the crates of fish jumping and jostling at the back of it as it goes.

Kyungsoo has seen this enough to know where this is going. With a sigh, he gently folds open the envelope, pulls out the single sheet of paper inside. It won’t be long, now, and then he’s free to go back home.

It’s so familiar that he also sees it before it even happens. She stumbles, her heel getting caught in a crack in the sidewalk, her ankle twists, and she stumbles, falls helplessly, right in front of the truck, and it all happens so fast the truck driver can do nothing to dodge her, can’t break, can’t do anything, and this is how another mortal life is going to end-

Except as she falls, something snatches her to the side, and she falls on the sidewalk instead of the
road. No laws of physics would have allowed that, the sudden, sharp change in direction for no reason, and Kyungsoo is confused- and then the piece of paper catches in flames in his hand and vanishes, just like that.

She’s safe, she’s going to live- but how?

He takes a step forward, and then he sees it- sees him.

He wasn’t there just a mere second ago. Not that Kyungsoo could see, and he knows there’s nothing wrong with his sense of sight. No, this man appeared out of nowhere- but no, that’s not it. He stepped out of the small door leading into a dingy dry-cleaning place, and somehow, in a split second, reached out for her and yanked her into safety.

There’s no such thing as coincidence in this world.

He’s helping the woman up all so innocently, his voice a low murmur that Kyungsoo can’t quite hear clearly. But the words don’t matter. The truck has disappeared around a corner now, leaving behind nothing but the passing memory of it, and the woman lives.

Kyungsoo’s work has been made to null, and he knows why. Blames the slight, young looking man who is now heading away, hands in his pockets and head hanging low almost as if he’s embarrassed.

And he should be, Kyungsoo huffs to himself. He damn right should be, for meddling in the lives of mortals in such a foolish way. But this is far from the first time he’s seen the goblin do this, and a part of himself scolds him for continuing to be surprised by it.

He’s lived long enough that there should be no reason for feelings of surprise, but somehow, each of his encounters with the cursed immortal catches him off guard.

“Why do you do this?” he asks out loud. “Why do you keep intruding into business that doesn’t involve you? Just let the foolish humans die when it’s their time. It’s what is meant to be.”

The man pauses, hesitates, before lifting his head up. And he stares right at Kyungsoo, even from the distance; it’s always startling, to be seen by someone who is not of his own kind, when he’s wearing his hat, when he’s out to carry his duties. It makes Kyungsoo feel so naked somehow, so vulnerable, yet he refuses to show him that.

“Wouldn’t it be a pity to die on such a day, surrounded by the cherry blossoms like this? To have your loved ones curse the beauty of them forever, because all they could ever think of would be your pitiful death?” Even though his voice is quiet, somehow it carries- and Kyungsoo knows that it’s part of the creature’s wicked magic. The goblin looks away for a moment, before he continues. “I don’t meddle- I only do what the mortals consider miracles. And where’s the harm in that?”

There’s plenty of harm in that, Kyungsoo thinks, watching the goblin open a door and disappear, undoubtedly using it to teleport to someplace else. Nothing good ever comes out of messing with the mortals and their fates; the less they concern themselves with their lives, and especially deaths, the better.

But there’s nothing Kyungsoo can do about it now. The card is gone, and the woman shall live- but Kyungsoo has learned that when a person is to die, death will find them one way or another. The goblin may have only postponed this woman’s end to a later date.

And Kyungsoo will be there, waiting.

Since he has no soul to take to the afterlife now, he doesn’t return to his tea room and instead, he
heads home. It’s a modest apartment on the outside, the building crumbling and falling apart, the other tenants never staying for long before moving on, disappearing, dying, and it suits Kyungsoo’s needs perfectly. Here, everyone minds their own business (just how the goblin should, too) and that’s all that he needs. To go unnoticed, to be left alone.

The mortals sense there’s something wrong with him, he sometimes thinks, watching how they avoid making eye contact with him, how they stumble over their words when they’re in the same room. Maybe he’s even part of the reason why no one stays very long; perhaps they can sense him even through walls. The human kind, they’re all idiots, but Kyungsoo will give them this much credit; they recognize death when they see it, and they know to stay away.

He arrives in his apartment and takes off his work clothes with a sigh, switching on the lights with the snap of his fingers. Although humble on the outside, inside he’s completely renovated his apartment to match his tastes; clean, simple furniture with heavy curtains covering the windows, his collection of instruments and books arranged neatly around a low table and into heavy bookshelves. His futon is rolled up neatly into the corner and his clothes are hung up neatly on a metal rack in the corner. Although he’s only required to wear black to work, he’s also picked out his civilian clothes in the same color; it’s easier that way, not having to worry about anything except to take his hat with him whenever he’s on duty.

The other grim reapers often tease him that he’s listened to the mortals’ tales a little too much- just because he’s the angel of death, doesn’t mean he has to dress like a stereotype of one at all times. But Kyungsoo pays no heed to their jests; he knows what he likes, and he sticks with it.

A man without a past, without more than his name, can only hope to cling to these tiny bits of his own personality and hope that it’s enough for a meaning.

Whether he wants to admit or not, he knows that the encounter with the goblin still bothers him when his restless fingers reach out for his gayageum and none of his other instruments. The big wooden zither is something he only picks up when he’s in this kind of mood- impossible to put into words, the sadness roaring inside him, tangled with emotions he has a hard time discerning. It’s because the instrument and its sound hurt him as much as they heal him, bringing forth a phantom pain from times long past- times long forgotten, memories he himself has lost. But even in that pain, there’s comfort, and that is now what he seeks, even if he doesn’t know why.

This is not the first time he’s ever met the goblin. Far from it. And it isn’t that he’s ever sought him out or wanted this to happen- but the man keeps reappearing, through centuries, coming back right when Kyungsoo has all but forgotten that he ever existed.

And it’s the memory of those chanced meetings that has Kyungsoo so out of sorts, as he places the zither in his lap and lets his fingers pick at the 12 strings, pulling out melodies he knows the contemporary world has lost eons ago.

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around 1230 CE

It’s been many a restless year, and Kyungsoo has never been quite this exhausted with his work. The invading Mongols keep ravaging the peninsula, and the victims are so high in numbers that although Kyungsoo and his kin work day and night, bringing them all to the afterlife is still a great ordeal. His clothes are soaked with blood of the mortals and he’s grown weary, so very weary, yet the war and chaos seem never ending. Some of his older colleagues, who still remember the wars around when the three kingdoms were unified under one ruler, speak of how it was very similar to this- bodies upon bodies, people left for dead, dying because of politics completely unrelated to them. Yet
Kyungsoo finds no comfort in their tales, because what consolation is that this has happened before, and will happen again?

No matter how tirelessly he works, it’s still all too much.

In fact, it’s been days since he’s last seen a living, breathing person. It’s devastating, and although he isn’t meant to pity the people he helps move on, he finds that settling into his heart regardless; to know that the monarch lives in safety on an island, waiting for this chaos to pass while his citizens perish, it doesn’t seem fair. Yet there’s nothing he can do, except help these poor souls to afterlife, onto their next existence that will hopefully be more peaceful than this. And their bravery, even in its foolishness, is touching; they fight back, they stand up for their ruler, even if there’s no hope left for them- even if the Mongols don’t kill them, their fields have been burned down, their homes lost, and once winter comes, they’ll all perish all the same.

Kyungsoo is weary.

He’s always known that being a grim reaper is difficult, an arduous task that never ends, but he’s only fully understanding the meaning of it now, leading hundreds of innocent souls to the afterlife.

He hasn’t been doing this long enough to avoid being affected by it somehow.

Him and his colleagues are standing upon the stone walls of a monastery. The temple and the surrounding buildings are full of peasants who ran to the mountain to escape the pillaging Mongolian troops, but now, the soldiers are riding up the winding paths towards the temple. The monks have done what they can, which is little- they’ve formed a line in front of the innocent civilians, standing together, praying and clutching their sacred artifacts, calling on Buddha and bodhisattvas alike, as well as the local gods. In their grey robes, they somewhat resemble a stone wall of their own, but one that isn’t a challenge for a horse to plow through.

The only physical protection they have is a narrow bridge made of rocks that leads over a gushing river, carrying waters all the way from the mountain tops, but that isn’t going to stop the riding soldiers; it’s too sturdy to collapse no matter how much weight is put on it, and definitely wide enough for a horse to cross. Unlike the ocean that protects their king on his island, since the Mongols don’t know how to build ships, this body of water isn’t going to keep them safe.

It’s going to be a blood bath. The grim reapers stand on the stone wall like a flock of crows, all dressed in black, holding their envelopes, waiting. Kyungsoo’s stomach keeps turning just thinking about what he’s about to witness; the slaughter of all these people, so brutal and unfair. The only consolation here is that it’ll be quick. The red of the buildings seems ominous in a strange way, like they’ve already been painted with blood before. The forest around them is silent, just how the statues of Buddha and bodhisattvas are- they haven’t arrived to save these people. The only deities present are the lowly grim reapers that have arrived to collect their souls.

The hollering of the soldiers carries in the wind, and soon enough the galloping horses can be heard as well. Kyungsoo feels sick- he’s witnessed this kind of scene far too many times now, yet the knowledge of what is to come doesn’t make the dreadful anticipation any easier. The beaded string of his wide-rimmed hat dances in the wind, hitting against his cheek like a slap in the face; this is real, this is happening, and there is no escape.

He’s doomed to be the silent bystander forever.

The Mongols emerge from the forest, and pull their horses to a halt when they see the monastery and the narrow bridge leading up to it. Some of them appear quite grim, but some of them are smiling—clearly some of them find great joy in this, even if others do not. They’ve got layers of caked dirt on
them from weeks and months of travel, some of them looking quite beaten and exhausted, but they’re trained warriors; they will stop at nothing, and they’re here to do their job, just as the reapers are doing theirs.

Their leader takes the center, and gazes upon the praying monks with disdain. “You fools,” he says in accented Chinese, something Kyungsoo can only barely understand. He doubts any of these people here know what he’s saying. “Nothing will save you now.”

“You might be wrong about that.”

The murmur is so quiet, so sudden, that Kyungsoo almost doesn’t hear it. No one else seems to hear it at all, as there’s no response, no one moves at first- but then, he sees the beautiful boy stepping out of the crowd, pushing past the monks, his light blue coat a stark contrast to their dull grey, and walking up to the bridge, and he knows it was him who spoke those words.

There’s an air about him that doesn’t seem right, and Kyungsoo can tell how the other reapers beside him tense up. He’s no regular peasant- his clothes are refined and made of silk in such a bright, beautiful color, even if a bit tattered, his features awfully symmetrical and gorgeous, his long hair tied up only on a ponytail instead of the proper topknot everyone else wears. And the confidence he carries himself with, it speaks volumes; but Kyungsoo doesn’t know what it is that it speaks of. Foolishness, perhaps? For what he’s doing right now, it’s the stupidest thing Kyungsoo has ever witnessed.

The Mongol scoffs at the sight of him, while everyone else holds their breaths. The soldiers don’t even hoist their weapons up higher, clearly not intimidated by the slight man, and why would they? But the man seems unphased by this, and instead walks all the way up to the bridge until his toes are barely touching the stones it’s made of.

The man raises his voice. “You won’t hurt these people,” he says in Chinese this time before adding something in Mongolian, which Kyungsoo doesn’t speak even a lick of. But the confused looks on the soldiers’ faces are clear- they’re starting to feel a little unnerved, now, even their leader curling his fingers tighter around the hilt of his sword.

The rest happens so quickly that Kyungsoo needs all of his supernatural abilities to even make sense of it.

The man springs forward, jumping up in the air, and he lands on the other side of the bridge, heels hitting the stones hard. And suddenly, the bridge crumbles; it collapses as if it was made of ashes and blown away by the wind, the pieces falling into the river below. That alone has everyone gasping for air, completely taken back, but the man isn’t done yet- he storms forward, a sword seemingly materializing in his hand, all the way up to the Mongolian soldiers, and swings himself up on their horses in one leap as if it’s not an inhumane feat. And he takes them all down, barehanded, jumping from saddle to saddle, the crunch of breaking bones and their screams of pain loud, disturbing, haunting, even if it happens so fast that it might as well be a dream, his sword slicing through air and flesh with equal ease, the blood splattering on the ground and marring the green grass.

Except it isn’t a dream- the men fall to the ground, one by one, either dead or severely injured, and the still remaining soldiers can do nothing to fight the small man off. He’s quicker than them, stronger than them, the sword in his hand almost gleaming with each blow he delivers. Try as they might to strike him back, he’s too swift, too elusive, gone before they can as much as raise their weapons to wound him, jumping from one horse to another, light on his feet but strong in every leap, every strike. He’s faster than them, stronger than them, and Kyungsoo knows deep down that something here is awfully, awfully wrong.
It’s over in what feels like a matter of seconds.

Everyone just watches in silent stupor as the few soldiers whose lives were spared struggle to get back on horseback and urge their beasts to carry them away from the scene, running away with terrified looks in their eyes, not even daring to look at the man who defeated them all- but he just stands there alone, calm, his sword still in his hand, watching them hurry off with a grim, pleased look, his hair blowing in the wind gently, his rugged breaths the only sign of physical exhaustion. He’s victorious, against all odds, and there doesn’t appear to be even a single wound on him, miraculous as it is.

If Kyungsoo weren’t immortal, he’d fear for his life right now.

Silently, the envelopes the grim reapers were holding light up on fire, and burn to ashes, just like that. Nothing else moves, as everyone stares at the young man in shock; they cannot understand what just happened, and the same goes for the immortals watching him. No one dares to even make a sound, despite their unexpected rescue- in their eyes, Kyungsoo reads only deep confusion, even fear, for what they just witnessed was not from this world.

“Goblin,” the oldest grim reaper murmurs under her breath, shaking her head. “I see he still hasn’t grown out of his foolish ways of meddling in matters he should stay out of.” If the goblin hears her words, he doesn’t show it, and instead walks away, slowly, while the villagers and the monks watch him in silence. He doesn’t even turn to look at them, doesn’t utter a single word, nothing to indicate the heroic act he just carried out.

The mortals don’t even dare to celebrate their sudden new lease on life, torn between their confusion and fear for the creature that just stood right before their eyes, unsure if he ought to be revered or feared in his strength and skill. If this is even real- if this all did really happen. If it was an answer to their prayers, or something even more wicked than the invading soldiers.

But the goblin solves this matter by simply walking away, as though none of this ever happened. As though he didn’t just do deeds that the storytellers will sing about for generations to come, should any of them survive this tumultuous time. As if he didn’t just rescue hundreds of innocent lives. He walks away, his sword still in his hand, the blade dripping fresh blood with each step he takes, and he disappears down the same path that the Mongols took as well, vanishing into the forest. It would be so easy to think none of this ever even happened- but the dead soldiers are still there, lying in the grass, some of their confused horses standing by their bodies, unsure of where to go without their riders.

And Kyungsoo knows he ought to be upset. Whether someone dies or lives is not for him to decide, but there’s an order of things, and it just got disrupted by a reckless immortal- yet he’s only relieved that at least for one day, for one time, innocent souls weren’t taken so violently.

It’s something he thinks back to many a time later on, but with the knowledge he’ll likely never see the goblin again. The immortals don’t mix well, and Kyungsoo doesn’t wish to cross paths with him again. But there was something very profound in that moment as well; while he can only be a silent bystander to the events of history, at least some of them can take action, make a change- enact powerful miracles to helpless mortals otherwise doomed to their miserable lives.

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present day

Kyungsoo stays in his tea room for the next few days. It’s pouring rain outside; it’s an unusual storm for the spring, the heavy droplets beating away the delicate petals and drenching the streets. It’s so
 dreary that it almost feels like it’s fall over again, several months too early

Kyungsoo fears he knows the cause for this strange phenomenon, but chooses not to think about it.

As he wishes that others don’t meddle with his work, he also wishes not to meddle with others’ business where he can avoid it.

Besides, it’s not as though someone can command the goblin to stop. He has no master, no lord, and he’s undoubtedly the most stubborn creature on earth. Talking sense to him is like conversing with a stone wall- Kyungsso would know.

He has only a few souls pass through his room. Mostly old people who are relieved to go, move onto their next life; they drink their tea with content smiles, without a fuss. Sometimes, their spouse is waiting for them behind the door; sometimes, they have to go all alone, yet they seem unfearful. They’re the easiest souls to handle, and Kyungsso finds peace in it, the mundane tasks of preparing their tea, sitting down with them, watching them pass through the door and disappear.

And there are those who don’t wish to go. Who were unprepared for their passing; accidents, illnesses, violence. Kyungsoo has grown numb to it all by now, but it sits ill with him, makes his skin tight and his mouth dry. But humans are foolish, and cling onto their lives so dearly, even if they should know that nothing is forever- but they forget, and it’s part of their blessing and their curse, all at once.

Kyungsoo helps them forget. So they can have a second, third, ninth, chance- without the burden of their previous attempts. The tea, it wipes away everything that once was, and leaves them a clean slate. They forget, and they’re born again, none the wiser. Ready to commit the same mistakes again, and again.

It’s foolish, but they don’t know it. They don’t remember, and so, they’re happy.

Kyungsoo, he remembers, and he knows. He watches, and he could teach them, but that is not his lot in life.

He’s just there to guide them forward.

The tears, the pleas, the desperation, they don’t touch him anymore. It’s not becoming of a grim reaper to feel pity- he has no power to turn back time, to grant wishes, only fulfill his task.

And he does it, content, unthinking. Watches the rain beat down against the cobblestones outside his window.

Whatever has the goblin this sad, it seems foolish as well. Why is he so swayed by emotion, still? Kyungsoo wonders this as he washes the clay cups gently. He’s existed for so long- surely, there should be no grievances left to affect him so much. To warrant a reaction such as this; a downpour so strange and sudden that the humans struggle to explain it.

But Kyungsoo doesn’t meddle, and is adamant not to think too much of it. It’s not his fault that the constant heavy rain keeps reminding him of him, though- there, he’s only a victim of his circumstances.

He goes home each day, and folds away his work clothes neatly. He likes to look proper and nice when he does his job, because he thinks it’s good and respectful to do so, considering the occasion. It wouldn’t do to show up underdressed for such a life changing event in these people’s lives.

After, he sits down to enjoy some warm sake, a habit he’s developed for dreary, gloomy days such
as these, and tries to lose himself in poetry, in music, in writing. Art, he has found, is the only thing close to immortal in this world, and it’s what he holds dear to his heart and finds solace in, yet somehow… Somehow, when he spreads out his futon and lays down, lying still with his hands crossed over his chest and his blanket drawn over his face, his thoughts are still bothersome.

The image of the goblin, appearing out of almost thin air to rescue the woman from painful death. The many times Kyungsoo has seen him before- the miracles the man has created, to the humans around him, a fickle and strange god that no one can command or wish upon, but still finds it in him to treat the humans with kindness.

His mere existence is bothersome, and Kyungsoo is annoyed that he has to spend any time even thinking about him.

The sooner the rain will end, the sooner he can forget all about him for the next hundred years.

late 13th century

The constant chaos and destruction of the Mongol invasions have turned into relative peace, now that the monarchy has submitted to the foreign rule and has promised to play by its rules. Kyungsoo finds himself almost bored, now, compared to the hectic years behind him, and it is of no comfort to him to realize that this is how the rest of the eternity will be like for him. Just completing the same task, over and over, while watching as a bystander how the world changes, crumbles, emerges again from the ashes.

He’s still young- he hasn’t been working for very long, and beyond that, he can remember nothing else. He hopes that boredom will become obsolete, somehow, as more years roll by; perhaps he will stop being plagued by it miraculously, when he reaches certain maturity.

A part of him frets that it’ll not be so easy.

His next envelope in no way indicates that this is going to be a strange mission, but then again, they never do. In death, all humans are equal, no matter their circumstances, but Kyungsoo thinks it’s a bit distressing, to have no foresight into what he’s going to witness each time.

The house alone is strange, as he approaches it. It’s a household of a wealthy yangban, that much he can be sure of, but it’s located so far away from everything else; it’s curious that any member of the noble class would build their residence so secluded from others of their kin. Unless they have been banished here as punishment- closed off from government posts and the walls of the capital, cast away from the limelight. But it’s such a beautiful home, the main building built with great care and attention to detail and the surrounding wings and courtyards equally pretty, and it looks like it has already been there for a long time. It’s not a house for someone hoping to return to a different life, it’s a home.

But it’s the inside that truly takes him by surprise.

The wealth he sees there is something he’s only heard of in fairytales, something he imagines the palace would look like. The walls are covered in expensive paintings and foreign tapestries, the floors covered in carefully woven rugs, the paper on the windows made ever so carefully. He sees bronze mirrors and golden trinkets, jade ornaments and delicate instruments, beautiful silks and gorgeous furs; the servants, moving about, are well dressed and have plump, red cheeks, even in the dead of winter. And there are massive trunks, placed in every which room that he passes through, undoubtedly holding even more precious items.
It only makes this even weirder.

Finally, Kyungsoo reaches the men’s quarters of the home, the main building. The ceiling is so high and decorated with carefully made paintings, bright in their colors and vivid in their depictions, although Kyungsoo can’t say if he knows the story they’re illustrating. And there, laying on a massive bed, he sees the man he is to take to the afterlife; he’s old, fragile, and his breaths come in labored and raspy like he’s struggling for each and every one of them.

He’s lived a long life, for a regular mortal- his attire is that of a servant, nothing more, yet the fact that his sick bed is in the main building speaks volumes of how highly he’s respected in this home. It’s only another odd detail to this all, and Kyungsoo somehow feels like he must have slipped through the fabric of reality into something like a dream. None of this makes sense, try as he might to understand it.

The last, and the most confusing piece of the puzzle, is the man seated next to the dying old man. He’s young, boyish almost, his hair brushed up on a high ponytail and his attire of luxurious silks with furs keeping him warm, his form small and delicate- and it’s the striking beauty of his face that gives him away.

Kyungsoo could have never forgotten that face.

The goblin sits there, holding the man’s hand in his. He only glances up once when Kyungsoo enters, looking right at him- and it feels terrifying, to be stripped from his invisibility like so. But this is no mortal being, Kyungsoo reminds himself. He’s learned very little of his kind, but he knows this- they’re not human, even if they may appear that way.

He’s stepped into the house of a goblin, and he knows he cannot be a wanted guest.

Unsure if the goblin could hear him as well, he keeps his silence, just waiting, even if he’s nervous. The candles around them grow shorter as moments pass by, the goblin gently holding the hand of the dying man. The old man has his eyes closed but he’s talking- whispering something, although Kyungsoo can only make out one name- Junmyeon, he calls the goblin. Master Junmyeon. And Junmyeon, he whispers to him back, tears glistening in his eyes, a reaction Kyungsoo did not think possible, for what affection could the goblin possibly hold for a mortal servant? But it is how they converse, for the last time, like brothers being torn apart.

And then, he takes his final breath, and parts from the mortal world.

The goblin- Junmyeon, stands up as Kyungsoo steps up closer, approaches the soul to read him his name from his piece of parchment. He’s scared, however; surely, since this man meant so much to him, the goblin might do something reckless, like try and summon him back- but no such thing happens. In tense silence, Kyungsoo leads the soul away, out of the room, step by step.

He can feel the goblin’s stare on his back, but he doesn’t turn to look, doesn’t say anything; he hardly knows how to comfort the dead, let alone the living.

It’s like a weight is lifted off his shoulders when he returns to his tea room, his heart pounding in his chest. So much could have gone wrong- he doesn’t even want to think of the possibilities. But as scared as he is, he’s also intrigued, and only barely manages to hold back from questioning the old servant. The dead should not answer for the living, he knows, and only relays his questions to a senior grim reaper when he runs into one by chance.

“Who is he?” he asks, both of them standing on a town square, watching a public execution. They’re here to gather the souls of the criminals, but it’ll be some time still before there will be anyone dead
for them to tend to. The air smells foul, a mixture of feces, blood, and rotting fish, as the day’s catch slowly goes bad in the heat. Kyungsoo fiddles with the beads hanging from the wide rim of his hat, loathes how tightly he did his bun that morning. He’s slowly getting a headache from it. “The goblin, I mean. I’ve seen him- I’ve seen what he can do. But his home, it’s covered in riches that would probably make even the king envious of him, perhaps even the emperor in China. What sorcery is that?”

The old woman sighs, shakes her head, her long braid swaying from side to side. “The goblin is someone we do not need to concern ourselves with,” she murmurs. “It’s best to stay away. He’s a powerful trickster with many magical skills and abilities, gathering wealth and riches one of his many useless talents. It would serve him well to be more concerned with serving his punishment, rather than trying to fill up the void with such meaningless items- they will not make his heart any less hollow.”

“Punishment?” Kyungsoo wonders out loud. “What punishment?” He’s never heard of such a thing, especially in regards to the almighty goblin; how does that even make sense. What kind of punishment is it to live surrounded by such wealth, having such great powers to do whatever he wishes? As far as he can tell, the goblin serves no lord, no master. If that can be regarded as punishment, then he would gladly accept it too, even without having done a thing wrong in his life.

The woman glances at him with something akin to pity in her eyes. As though Kyungsoo is not privy to some information that he desperately needs.

“Eternity is always a punishment,” she says, turning to look at the scene before them. “Living forever is the greatest curse of them all.”

Kyungsoo would ask her more- there’s a connection there, an obvious one, that runs away from his fingertips when he tries to make sense of it further. But then, the two criminals sentenced to death are brought forward, and his focus is taken elsewhere as he readies himself, takes out his piece of parchment from his wide sleeve.

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present day

Taking children to his tearoom can go two ways. If the child comes alone, it’s usually just fine; they don’t understand much about death, and aren’t usually too upset about moving on, even if some of them will call out to their mothers and fathers, will sob and cry. But most of them, they find their new adventure riveting and exciting, and Kyungsoo can wrap up his day feeling good about it all, satisfied, everything in order. As it should be.

If they come with their parents, however, it’s always a different story.

Today, he’s clutching two envelopes in his hand. The mother and the child are fast asleep on the same bed, snoring lightly. The scene is so peaceful, and there’s nothing at all to suggest that anything bad could happen- but the stove is leaking gas into the apartment, silent but deadly, and its permeating the air in the small apartment. Because he only has two envelopes, and because there are no other reapers present, Kyungsso knows how this is going to play out. He’s seen it, too many times.

The husband arrives home, smells the gas, tries to wake them up. They don’t stir even as he shakes them- he calls the ambulance, cries, the paramedics arrive.

They pass away on the way to the hospital.
Kyungsoo opens the envelopes with a heavy sigh.

“Kim Yerim, 34, and Oh Suyeong, 5, cause of death: carbon monoxide poisoning. Is that correct?” He says it with an even voice, unphased- he’s seen far crueler things. Passing away in their sleep, they couldn’t have suffered.

The shock is obvious on the mother’s face as she clutches her son to her chest tightly. “D-Death…” she whimpers. “Are we… Are we dead?”

Humans just simply never cease to ask the stupidest of questions. Kyungsoo sighs and nods, folding the envelopes away for filing later. The child is staring up at him with wide, big eyes, fascinated by his appearance. But the mom, she’s already shedding tears, her face twisted into an ugly expression. Emotions are so unappealing, Kyungsoo thinks idly, but at least the child is still silent. He’d rather it stays that way.

“Follow me.”

But the entire way to his tearoom, the mother weeps. Calls for god, the Christian kind, blames the universe for ending her life too soon, ending her son’s life before it even truly began. And Kyungsoo would feel for her, if he hadn’t seen this hundreds, thousands of times before. So, he simply tries to ignore it, let her voice just wash over him as white noise and nothing more. Yet, there’s something so very distressing about it that makes overlooking it next to impossible.

“Can you just not let us go?” she then turns to him, begins to beg him. “Please don’t send us to heaven, please, just let us go back. We can be saved if you let them, the hospital will take care of us. Please, just let us go. Please. I’ll do anything, I swear, I’ll give you anything you want!”

Kyungsoo tries his hardest to maintain a straight face, but he can’t hide his scoff. “There’s nothing in this world you could offer me, woman,” he says, opens the door to his tearoom. “For I am not human, and the human desires do not consume me. I do not care for money, or wealth, or fame, and you can give me nothing of value. And even if you could, I still do not have the power to fulfill your wish. I am no god, just a mere servant.”

Sure, he’s gifted in ways the mortals are not, but summoning people back to life- it’s not something he can do. He’s only the gatekeeper, and those who have already crossed over to the spirit realm he can’t let back in, because the door works only one way. It is not his design and it’s not something he has any control over. If someone is capable of such, he doesn’t know their name, has never met them.

He takes them inside, has them seated at the simple, wooden table. It’s cozy, his small tearoom; wood and real stone, the fragrant teas leaving the air aromatic and welcoming. Kyungsoo likes things best when they’re simple; this is only a place where people stop by briefly before carrying on, and they will forget their visit not even seconds after, so there is no point in impressing anyone. The only pieces of furniture he has are the table, chairs around it, and the stove and the sink he uses for making the tea, and some basic shelves. The windows give to the east, overlooking a quiet street, and it has two doors- one for the humans to pass through, and one leading into the bigger part of the tearoom where Kyungsoo keeps his hundreds of cups and teapots.

The mother takes a seat, before laying her upper body on the table and weeping into the crook of her elbow, her child still in her lap. And now he’s beginning to tear up as well, confused as to why his mother would be so upset- Kyungsoo sighs and counts to ten, lets it go. Anger is not becoming of a grim reaper, he reminds himself. He’s merely here as a servant. This doesn’t concern him.

He brews the tea as the mother and child cry. He’d offer comforting words but he knows by now
that silence is best- he used to try, when he was still new to this. Used to sympathize with the souls in his hands, tried to assure them that nothing bad would ever happen to them. But it proved useless; humans are silly like that, unable to listen to reason, so easily swept away by their fickle emotions.

Nowadays, he doesn’t say much at all. It makes everything move swifter.

Sometimes he wonders why creatures that have been designed to die find death so complicated and upsetting- why is it so hard for them to move on, that they need grim reapers to guide them through the process? And why make such a fuss about it, too?

Sometimes, he thinks himself lucky that he’s not a mortal man. It appears utterly exhausting.

Once the tea is done, he takes it to the table, pours two cups of it for the mother and her son. They haven’t stopped crying but they look up now, confused, and Kyungsso has given this speech many a time.

“This tea will make you forget all about this life,” he says quietly, also taking a seat at the table. “It is your blessing. You will forget all of your regrets, all of your mistakes, and get a fresh start in the next life. Nothing from this one will haunt you- not the pain, not the unhappiness, not the what ifs. Drink it, and move on to your next life happily, free of burdens. It is the gift given to you, so that the cycle of rebirths wouldn’t be burdensome.”

The mother looks a tiny bit hesitant, the child now curious. Kyungsso carries on. “It’s best that you drink it,” he encourages quietly. “There is a reason you’re allowed to forget- this is how it’s designed to be. Drink it, and cross over- may your next life be a happier one. For you, and your son.”

She looks as though she wants to ask more questions, wants to press him for answers, or perhaps beg him not to do this, but her child is already reaching for the cup curiously, his tiny fingers curling around the clay cup. And that seems to work- she gently guides it to his lips, tears still streaming down her face, and helps him take some measured sips before drinking herself.

Kyungsso sighs in relief. The hardest part is over now. It wasn’t as bad as he feared it would be, as bad as it could have been- and his task here is almost done. Once the tea is gone, he points at the wooden door that they entered through earlier.

“Walk through that door into your new life,” he instructs them. “Into your new beginning. Have no fear- there is no punishment waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, and stands up, her son on her hip, and walks up to the door, pushes it open, and slips through into a bright light before disappearing.

Kyungsso stands up to wash the cups and the teapot, staring out his window in silence.

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The weather doesn’t clear up for days to come, and prompts Kyungsso to play even sadder melodies with his gayageum, with his haegeum, with his daegeum. He’s worked tirelessly to insulate the walls of his apartment as well as he could, to minimize the sound that carries; his instruments aren’t particularly quiet, except for the plucked zither gayageum, and he isn’t looking to be evicted for his noisy hobbies. It’s just that his haegeum, a vertical fiddle with only two strings and a bow stuck in between, and his transverse, massive bamboo flute daegeum are his dearest companions, along with the rest of his instruments- their company is always gentle and welcome, their presence a comfort, a way to turn back time to… but there are no happier times to return to, not for him.

It’s all the same, year after year, so much so that he’s lost count completely. Time means nothing,
except more boredom, more exhaustion, more detachment from the world. The old grim reaper was right; eternity is always a punishment.

And so, he fills the silence with music, tries to only think of the next note, the next melody, plays until his lips are chapped and his fingertips calloused from the strings, yet as soon as he sets his instrument down… the silence returns, and so does the sound of the pouring rain outside.

Even his melodies begin to mimic the rain, fading and then coming back stronger, louder, demanding, so fierce that it feels like his very being is shaking, before easing down again, dying out into something so soft and delicate that it almost disappears completely. And Kyungsoo hates that, hates that his music has to imitate the very thing that is so bothering him, but he can do nothing about it- even as he tries to play music from sheets, or compositions he’s learned by heart, the same thing happens, and he’d cast away his unfaithful instruments if he didn’t love them so dearly.

Thoroughly annoyed by this, he finally leaves his apartment, marches outside straight into the rain. Fine- if he cannot hide from it, then perhaps he should face it head on.

“Why can’t he just leave Seoul already,” he whines to no one, walking down the street, the wide brim of his hat drawn low over his eyes. He doesn’t wish to be seen today, even though he’s not on duty; it’s easier to be invisible, to isolate himself from the human world. For he doesn’t belong there, and any attempt to feel closer to it only reminds him of the divide between them.

“Why can’t he just go and take the rain with him?”

“Who’s giving you trouble, sweetheart?”

Kyungsoo is startled to near death by the sudden voice addressing him, and glancing around wildly, he sees an old woman standing hunched over a small table where she has little trinkets laid out to sell, along with some vegetables in baskets. She appears old as time, her clothes worn out, her skin like tanned leather. But her eyes, they’re sharp, and looking right at Kyungsoo- which shouldn’t be possible, with his hat still on. It’s his only way to hide, to go unnoticed by mortals when he comes and goes on his duties.

Yet there she is, watching him, smiling at him with her toothless mouth, and Kyungsoo… he knows he should turn away and escape, run from this strange woman, yet he finds himself drawn to her, stepping up to her little makeshift shop. The heavy rain has chased away all other vendors but here she is, only a small makeshift tent sheltering her goods from the droplets, yet she doesn’t seem to mind in the slightest.

“Who’s giving you such trouble?” she asks again. “I do readings, you know- I could have a look, see if I can give you any advice. It’s your partner, is it not?”

“Oh, no,” Kyungsoo says and bristles slightly. “No, no. It’s just someone I, uh, know. We’re not, um, romantically involved in any way.” The mere thought of such foolish notion makes his stomach turn with disgust. He would never- he could never.

She chuckles as though she’s in on a secret about Kyungsoo that he himself is unaware of. “Doesn’t seem like a mere acquaintance to me,” she says, and promptly grabs Kyungsoo’s hand to look at his palm. He doesn’t have it in him to refuse- somehow, she has him wrapped around her little finger, just like that. “Oh no, not just an acquaintance at all.”

“What do you mean?” Kyungsoo is so confused, watching her inspect his palm closely. Even being an immortal being himself, he’s never figured out if any of this actually holds any truth to it; if fates are something you can see, and even if so, if mere humans would be able to adequately do it. He’s
heard many claims of such, but he’s never seen real evidence of it- yet some stories, some things he’s heard, they make a compelling case for it to be real after all.

But he also doesn’t know if it could concern him- if grim reapers have any fate whatsoever. His path is set for eternity, to keep fulfilling his purpose, and perhaps eventually be granted peace. Maybe. It’s another rumor he hasn’t been able to confirm- if there is something beyond this existence for the likes of him.

“I see a strong bond,” she hums, trailing a line on his hand with her fingernail, pressing so hard against his skin that Kyungsoo fears it’ll break. The smile still plays about her lips, her eyes squinted as she stares into Kyungsoo’s palm. “Something stronger than time, stronger than death, connecting you to this person who’s upset you like this.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Kyungsoo intelligently says. Chills go through him, something heavy settling into the pit of his stomach, like knowledge, and that scares him even more than her words. He tries to jerk his hand back, but she’s holding onto it with an iron grip. “I mean- It’s not like I even properly know him. He’s just annoying me, is all.” Him and the goblin? There’s no way.

She smiles knowingly, and it’s getting a little creepy now. “Yes, but in that annoyance there’s something much deeper,” she murmurs. “Don’t you think there has to be a reason why you hate rain in the spring so much? Don’t you think it could remind you of something… if only you could remember it.”

“I remember everything, thank you.” Kyungsoo finally manages to pull his hand free, and he rubs his palm with his other hand as though to undo everything she just did- everything she just saw. “I don’t- I don’t forget.”

Grim reapers don’t forget. It’s part of their condition, Kyungsoo thinks- as the silent bystanders, witnesses of history, they shouldn’t forget. Humans do, but at least some beings don’t, and if that is any consolation or hope, he doesn’t know, but he likes to believe it is. It’s his task to remember everything.

If he has ever forgotten something, it must be so deeply hidden that he doesn’t even know that he’s forgotten, and how could that ever make sense?

The woman shakes her head. “But you’re not an eternal being, for there was a time when you didn’t exist. You’ve been born into this existence, somehow- through death, you were made what you are today. Your soul was tied to this punishment, so you would pay for your sins; but your sins, you’ve all but forgotten. Like the foolish humans you help to forget- yet for you, forgetfulness and ignorance are the punishment, the reason why you’re tied to this existence.”

She says with such conviction, and Kyungsoo, he’s overwhelmed. He stumbles back, almost falls off the sidewalk and onto the road. She knows who he is- and she claims to know something about him that he himself has no idea of.

“What… what do you mean,” he whispers, staring at her, and now, he can see that there’s something she’s hiding, her true self that Kyungsoo isn’t able to see. And it’s upsetting, it’s disconcerting, for this could only mean one thing- she’s not a mortal being herself, is somehow more powerful than Kyungsoo, has powers to hide from him while seeing right through him.

He knows gods exist, but he has never met one, and now he hopes that it would have stayed that way. The immortals don’t mix well, that much is for sure, and he berates himself for being so foolish. But gods have their ways, and if she meant to find him… there’s nothing he could have done to hide.
“You’ve heard the rumors.” She says it softly, yet persistently. “And they’re all true. Eternity is always a punishment, and not even the angels of death have been granted that as a blessing. There is a past you don’t know about, and within that fragile, short life you lived, there is a fate that is yet to be fulfilled.”

And then she’s gone, as though her whole purpose to be here was to just deliver this message to Kyungsoo. Her table, her small tent, it all just vanishes like it was never there to begin with. Only the rain is constant, and the dry patch the tent left behind, now rapidly growing spotty as the rain drops fall down upon it.

Kyungsoo is reeling, his mind going crazy- could he trust what she said? Could he believe her outrageous claims? Of course he’s heard rumors, of course he has, having lived this long, yet he always discarded it all as nonsensical hearsay. People begin to gossip and make up stories when they’re bored, and when you’ve lived for hundreds, if not thousands of years, you have plenty of time for boredom too no matter how busy you try to be. So, it isn’t as though the reapers don’t talk amongst themselves, don’t sometimes speculate, yet nothing he’s ever heard whispers of has been this outlandish. Yet clearly, she held powers greater than what Kyungsoo could see, and she probably knows the truth… but would she tell it to him, or would she lie?

At this point, he’s far more concerned about the revelation about his existence and how he’s come to be- the part about the goblin, Junmyeon, he’s much less worried about. That, fate and everything, it’s just too long of a reach, but the rest, though bizarre, there’s alarming rationale to it too. This being a punishment- it feels like it, it really does, and also the fact that he has been born; he doesn’t know how, or when, doesn’t know what brought him into life, but something once did. And true immortals, true gods, there has never been a time they didn’t exist. They’re not born, and they do not perish.

So what is he, then? And if he was born, then could he also come to die?

What is he being punished for?

But what she told him, whoever she was, only left him with more questions than answers. The world keeps passing him by as he mulls it over, questions it, tries to dissect it, standing there on the sidewalk completely stupefied, stunned into a state of shock. The rain is the only thing to keep him company, but now he despises it even more- her suggestion that it could hold a deeper meaning, that it could be the reason why it bothers him so, it sits so ill with him.

And the rain keeps falling, even until nightfall. It isn’t until the sun goes down that Kyungsoo wakes up from his stupor, his focus coming back to the present moment. Yet he’s no closer to answers than he was when she first disappeared. Nothing makes sense, nothing adds up right, and he just doesn’t know enough.

Burdened, he turns around on his heels to head home. But as he does, he happens to look up, lifting the rim of his hat just enough to glance at the sky from beneath it, but to his surprise it’s not just the skyline he sees, or the clouds above.

There, perched on the roof of the nearby office buildings, sits the goblin, hugging his knees to his chest. It’s undoubtedly him- his beautiful features, his long hair blowing gently in the wind, the baby blue of his oversized hoodie an odd reminder of his attire when Kyungsoo first saw him. And he’s just sitting there, like a little gargoyle, gazing at the people below.

Gazing at Kyungsoo, it seems like, and that makes Kyungsoo avert his eyes immediately. But it can’t be- the goblin shouldn’t be able to see him. Right- right?
He realizes that he’s not so sure.

And it’s too much of a coincidence, the goblin being right there after what he just went through with the strange god. It’s too much of everything, and whatever it means… Kyungsoo honestly doesn’t wish to know.

He doesn’t want to meddle, even in business that supposedly his own.

“Go, and take the forsaken rain with you,” he murmurs in a bout of frustration. He’s had enough, of everything, and he doesn’t want to put up with it any longer. Any of it. “Get lost, goblin. You’re breaking the orders of this world, the humans are going crazy. And I’m going crazy, too.”

The goblin cocks his head to the side. Kyungsoo has no doubt that if he can see him, he can hear him- that’s less of a feat, even with the distance between them. And he’s right in his assumption, his own supernatural hearing allowing him to hear his answer.

“So it does bother you, then, even if you don’t know why.”

And that, that is what goes overboard. It’s the exact same thing she told him- this is no coincidence at all.

Something is toying with him, and it’s frightening.

“Leave me the fuck alone!”

Kyungsoo storms away then, not looking behind him even once. If this is a game the universe wants to play on him, then fine- fine, but he doesn’t have to stay here and just let it happen, let these immortals treat him as their play thing. It isn’t fair, it isn’t right if everyone else already knows the rules and he’s the only one left confused.

The god knows something- the goblin knows something, too. But as pressing as some of his questions are, Kyungsoo doesn’t know if he wants to hear the answers to all of them. If the goblin is somehow involved, he doesn’t want anything to do with it. They can’t force him.

But his origin- that, he wants to find out. That is what he needs to focus on, get to the bottom of as quickly as he can.

Yet when he reaches home, and slams the door shut behind him, it’s not the riddle of his existence that he thinks about, but the goblin, dressed in blue, his jet black hair flowing behind him, and the deep, deep sadness in his eyes.
Chapter 2

Mid-14th century

War. Eternal war, it seems like. Kyungsoo has grown so, so weary of it, again. It’s not even been a full century yet, since the last time this happened, but he had been hopeful- had been foolish, he realizes now. The man kind, it doesn’t know peace, and forgets the hardships of war so easily. They die- they die, and their memories die with them, and the next generation launches straight into another combat with little regard for how wasteful it is.

They forget, and that is their biggest curse- their biggest blessing.

He’s been marching along with the moving front lines for weeks, months. The Yuan dynasty is crumbling, falling apart, and the great kingdom of Korea, Goryeo is taking this as its chance to gain back its lost independence, gain back its territories in the north, beyond the mountains. The war campaigns are ruthless, even if there’s not much resistance; the Yuan chain of command is broken, and the new powers rising in the ever powerful China have yet to gain proper foot hold. So, the Goryeo army marches forward with relative ease, and while it has little incentive to destroy the villages its conquering for its king, there are still casualties. And those casualties are the souls Kyungsoo has been tasked to help to the afterlife.

The winter is upon them, and it’s much harsher here, up north, up in the mountains. The lands are barren from the cold and the rivers frozen over, even if still treacherous to those who dare and try to cross them. It’s Kyungssoo’s first time here, off of the peninsula and on the continent, and gazing upon the high mountains, the wide Tumen river, he aches to be back in Hanseong where the climate is much kinder, the cold less biting, the rivers less dangerous. Yet no- the armies keep advancing further, into Liaoyang, into territories that haven’t belonged to the Korean kingdoms since hundreds of years ago.

That can only mean trouble.

And Kyungsoo pities the civilians, yet again caught up in all of this. Their scared eyes when they see the soldiers, noisy and dirty and smelly as they are, their fearful submission as they give what they can, give what they can’t even afford to give with the long winter months still ahead, their cynical understanding that once these armies go away, the Yuan armies or even the armies of the next ruler of China can come and punish them for what they’ve done. Their bitter realization that they mean nothing to the faraway kings that want to hold command over their lands so desperately; neither the Mongolian rulers of China nor the king of Goreyo care about them, they only want more power, more land, more war.

“The rulers of this earth are the worst sinners of all,” Kyungsoo sighs heavily to one of his colleagues as they sit down in his tearoom after a particularly long day. Kyungsoo has his black robes soaking in a bucket of warm water, trying to get the grime and blood off of them, while his companion, Minseok, sips tea and stares out of the window behind Kyungsoo’s back. Minseok is from around here, works here in the mountains; there’s certain exotic beauty to him, Kyungsoo has noted, and he’s briefly wondered- perhaps grim reapers can have ethnicities too? He’s never seen grim reapers from other countries, but he supposes they cannot all be Korean. There has to be certain familiarity for the souls to find comfort in, no matter how small.

But most importantly, Minseok is a hard worker and he’s quiet, serious, which is why they get along so well. Why they sometimes sit together, even when all of their envelopes are gone. Kyungsoo has never worked this closely with anyone before, but he could get used to this. Could get used to not
always being so alone.

Minseok turns to look at him, his eyes thoughtful. “What do you mean,” he asks, takes another sip, nudges the kettle towards Kyungsoo to silently suggest he has some too. “Why do you say that?”

“Well, none of these people would have to die, if the kings and emperors didn’t order them to war;” Kyungsoo replies. He forgoes the tea; his chest is too heavy and too tight at the same time, he can’t even think of eating anything right now. He knows he shouldn’t let this get to him, yet it still does. “These people could live their lives so happily, but no. The king sent these soldiers here, and now there are fights and combat, and people are dying because of it. It’s not right.”

Minseok hums, takes another measured sip of his tea. It’s just regular tea, not the kind they prepare for the souls- Kyungsoo has been tempted to try it, see if it could make him forget too, but he fears the repercussions too much. He lets the silence stretch on as long as it will, knowing that Minseok needs the time to put his thoughts into words.

“But even when there are no soldiers and no wars, the people still fight amongst themselves.” Minseok sighs heavily, sets his teacup down. “If there were no kings, there would be no rules. Or if there were rules, they would be made by whoever is the strongest- and they would prove their strength through violence, wouldn’t they. The man kind will always find a reason to fight. It’s just how it is. So, isn’t it better to have a king, who controls the wars, rather than give these people the freedom to fight whenever they so desire?”

Kyungsoo wants to argue- isn’t ready to let go of the thought he’s had since he witnessed the Mongol invasions. But he knows Minseok is right. The humans… they’re fools. He places his head in his hands and almost crumbles on top of the table, suddenly so, so very exhausted.

“So this will never end, then.”

“No, it won’t. The humans will keep dying, forever, and for as long as they exist, we shall be here, too.”

Kyungsoo’s heart is so burdened by those words, because they’re hopelessly true.

“What a miserable existence this is.”

Minseok doesn’t respond, only presses a warm cup into his hands. A small comfort- but at least, a concrete one.

present day

It’s been hard to get the goddess’ words out of his mind. They repeat over and over in Kyungsoo’s head each time he’s idle even in the slightest- even when he’s playing his precious instruments, they still come back to him. They stick so well that a part of him fears she put them there with magic, so that he could never find peace again. But making sense of them is next to impossible, for logic doesn’t open their meaning at all. Whatever she meant by all of it, Kyungsoo can’t encrypt on his own.

That may be what she intended, as well.

He has to wait a while for an opportunity to ask anyone, however. The grim reapers hold regular meetings together, company dinners of sorts, to get together and destress a little every once in a while. Kyungsoo has never been a huge fan of these gatherings, for they’re always so tedious; he
finds the stories of the other reapers repetitive and boring, and he’s never been one for social events of any kind. It’s the same thing, over and over again, for centuries, the same old faces, so what point is there in going?

But this time, he makes sure to go, dressed neatly in his usual work attire, but instead opts for his old-fashioned hat with the beaded decoration hanging from the rim of it, kept in place with a black ribbon tied underneath his chin. It doesn’t have quite the same effect that it used to, when he still had long hair to tie up, but it’s his trademark of sorts- he usually wears the modern style hat when he’s working, but unlike most others, he hasn’t given up the old one he got when he first started.

He refuses to admit that he’s a little sentimental about it. It’s not very becoming of a grim reaper, to have silly attachments to things.

The restaurant is one tucked away behind many winding alleyways, and on a Monday night, it’s empty save for the reapers gathered at their longest table. If the owners think anything of their strange guests, they don’t say it, and that’s the kind of discretion they appreciate. They trickle in in pairs and by themselves, greeting one another with tense smiles and stiff bows, getting seated close to one another to leave room for any newcomers. It’s a routine, repeated over decades and centuries, all of this, and Kyungsoo has little patience for it when he has such burning questions on his mind, but he puts up with it, tries to mask his annoyance.

He knows that his colleagues know what a recluse he is, and he knows some of them fear him; he’s been around longer than most, has seen more than most, and his silence and resting angry expression are somewhat intimidating. It’s an image that he would like to maintain, since it means they leave him alone- except those stupid enough to be intrigued by the mystery surrounding him, who think they can pry him open in just one dinner, befriend him just like that.

With gritted teeth, he gives them one word replies to their invading questions, keeping his eyes focused on the door, waiting- but the one person he wanted to meet doesn’t show up even as the table fills up. “Has anyone heard from the old lady recently?” he asks, raising his voice, cutting through the general chatter of conversation around him. With all the attention suddenly directed to him, he can feel how his cheeks are coloring. “I mean- her. With the long braid. She looks quite old.”

No one knows her name, but some have called her 444 behind her back, for she’s the oldest grim reaper any of them have ever known. Calling her by the number that sounds like death three times over seems only appropriate, after all. Kyungsoo knows that they all know who he’s talking about- they all know her, have known her for a long time. And although she’s ancient as time, she’s no recluse- she’s not hard to find.

But the looks he sees on the reapers’ faces now are ones of confusion, each of them shaking their heads, until someone finally speaks up.

“I think… I think she moved on, I think?” She’s someone Kyungsoo has never seen before, doesn’t know if she can be trusted, but she seems to be the only one with any kind of answers for him. “Like, she got promoted or whatever- she’s not working anymore, I heard. She got to retire. I think. It was a while ago, already.”

“Which one is it, promotion or retirement,” Kyungsoo snaps. “Try to make some sense, girl.”

But he thinks he knows what she means. Knows why she seems unclear as to what term to use- because when grim reapers move on, when they stop working, they vanish. They’re never seen again, and not a word is heard from them. Where they go, what they do, no one seems to know. It’s just something that happens, eventually- yet Kyungsoo is here, waiting for his time to go, in vain.
If she’s now gone, too, then is he the oldest one to remain?

Upset and disappointed, he ends up leaving the dinner party early, tying his hat back on his head and bowing once before exiting the restaurant. If she’s gone, he’s going to have to look for answers elsewhere- and he thinks he knows who to turn to, even if it won’t be as easy as showing up to a regular dinner meeting.

Unless Minseok has moved on, as well.

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Making travel arrangements isn’t either hard nor easy. He doesn’t need any mortals’ permission for anything, has his own means of transportation from a place to another, but finding the time to leave his post to go somewhere else- that’s not so simple. His work, it never ceases, the envelopes don’t stop coming, and he doesn’t exactly have a direct way of contacting his employer to beg for days off. The grim reapers do not rest, unless people stop dying- and try as they might, they haven’t been able to do that yet.

But he has favors he can ask, some that he’s held onto for a very long time, and he finds himself a replacement for the couple of days he’s going to need for the trip up north.

He doesn’t know where to find Minseok exactly, hasn’t heard from him in decades, but that doesn’t mean anything- they’ve lived so long that even 10 years can pass like a blink of an eye. But nothing has changed even for the mortals, Kyungsoo notes, as he travels north; it’s still so terribly barren, the land so hostile. The trees are gone, the forests are gone, but the buildings look the same, only older, and the rare occasions he sees any farmers, they’re still tilling their lands with ox ploughs, or even with other humans pulling the device. Whenever he hears laughter, it seems wrong, out of place.

It’s sad, it’s terrifying, but the mountains and the rivers, at least, have stayed the same.

But on which side of the border could he find Minseok? Would Minseok even know the answer to that, if he asked- would he be so bothered with the politics of borders, would he care to know if he lived in China or North Korea?

It takes a while, but eventually, he runs into a couple of ghosts- they’re terrified to see him, knowing that he could drag them away and to the afterlife, which is exactly what they’re fighting against, but Kyungsoo manages to wrangle an answer out of them by promising to let them go, let them stay here. They know where Minseok is, and eagerly point him to his direction, happy to get rid of him- if he were on duty he might feel tempted to force them to cross over, but it’s not his territory. He doesn’t want to step on any toes, because he knows that reapers are petty people- it’s hard not to be, when you don’t forget anything that ever happens to you.

He has to trek up the mountains, near the holy Baektusan. There, he can see one of the few signs of modernity having reached this far- it’s part of the border and as the legendary birthplace of the Kim dynasty, too important to let just anyone climb. There are guard posts there, fences even, although everything seems relatively quiet, if not almost abandoned.

Gazing up at the volcano, he realizes that the reverence he feels for the mountain hasn’t changed, is still so ingrained in him. His nation has felt the same way about it for thousands of years, these people still do, even if the meaning of it has been changed to relate to the current rulers of this land. But it’s still one and the same faith and that, too, never changes- and in that, in the perseverance of something sacred, Kyungsoo finds odd comfort.

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mid-14th century

On a cloudy day, when the battles have ceased for the moment, Kyungsoo is staring at the horizon in the south. They’ve been on the move with the armies, heading further up north day by day, but there’s something in the southern skyline that keeps bothering him.

“What is the name of that mountain, hyungnim?” he asks Minseok, pointing at it. “The biggest one, that one over there- with snow at the top. What’s it called?”

Minseok laughs, amused. “Do you not recognize the home of our brave and strong nation?” he asks in lieu of a proper answer. “You’re looking at none other than Baektusan. Have you really never seen it before?”

Baektusan. Kyungsoo recognizes the name- has heard the tale, many times over. Twisted over the decades he’s been on this earth, but always recognizable. The story of how the son of the master of heaven and the creator of all things came down to earth, having persuaded his father to let him on this adventure, and Baektusan is where he descended, where he first gazed upon the lands that were to become the Korean kingdom, ruled by the son he would have with a bear turned into a human woman.

He never gave it that much thought- it was just a story, among many, and while he could accept a lot of it; gods doing whatever they please has never been a strange concept to him. But a bear turning into a woman, and bearing a son for a god? That, that seemed a little much. But somehow, despite all that doubt, seeing the mountain moves him in a strange way.

“Why is it like that?” he wants to know, gesturing at it. “Did the god wipe off the top, when he came down?” For the mountain looks strange indeed; instead of the sharp peaks that the other ones have, it seems to have the highest peak missing. He’s never seen anything like it.

“No,” Minseok says, full of mirth. “It’s a crater, full of water. There’s a lake at the top, Kyungsoo. Deep and beautiful. It’s truly magical, standing there, watching the sun go down, the light reflecting off of the surface. I don’t know if the stories are really true, for who knows… I’ve heard many such stories, about the first king, the first emperor, but I have to admit, there’s something mysterious about it. It feels different.”

“Does it?” Kyungsoo has been watching the mountain for days now- it drew his gaze to itself, even when he didn’t know what it was, what it meant. Perhaps there truly is something special about it.

“Maybe one day I get to go there.”

“Maybe.”

present day

To this day, Kyungsoo hasn’t found the time to visit the holy mountain. He should make the time, should go see it- volcanos start to seem quite volatile, when you live long enough, so who knows how long it’ll be there for. Maybe later on this trip… But he turns his gaze away, and instead keeps walking, keeps climbing to where he’s been told he’ll find Minseok.

It seems as though Minseok has been alerted to his arrival- he’s standing before his humble adobe when Kyungsoo gets there, amongst the still leafless, sparse trees, wearing his black hanbok and black, traditional hat, a stark contrast to the natural hues of the landscape.
There’s a magpie sitting on his shoulder, and Kyungsoo has an inkling that the bird might have alerted Minseok of his visitor- he regards the bird warily, suspicious of it, but is quick to direct his attention to Minseok who’s staring at him with eyes as dark as the bird’s.

“Kyungsoo.” “Hyungnim.” Kyungsoo bows, a little stiffly, and Minseok repeats the gesture, the magpie shifting its weight and waving its tail to keep its balance, still not taking flight. Kyungsoo had been unsure as to how to greet him after all this time, what to say- but now, it seems like no fanfare is needed, which is a great relief.

Minseok doesn’t exchange any other pleasantries with him, just turns around and leads him to his house in silence. It’s small, and it appears at least a hundred years old- Kyungsoo wouldn’t be surprised to find that to be the reality, and he’d ask, but he figures it best not to. He has to lower his head when stepping through the door, to avoid hitting his head, stepping into the darkness of the hut.

He takes off his hat and sits down on the floor, kept warm with the traditional ondol system. Minseok sets about preparing tea, wordlessly, the magpie flying around the room once, twice, before darting outside through the still open door.

It’s quiet, only the quiet crackling of the fire Minseok uses to boil the water making any noise. Kyungsoo shifts his weight, worries his hands together as he looks around; it’s just a simple hut, really, the ceiling low and the walls darkened with smoke, probably from candles. There are woven fabrics on the floor and every piece of furniture is made of wood by hand, clearly with great care, the low desk at the corner covered in papers, books, parchment. It’s a place that has been lived in for a long time- has been lovingly kept, and Kyungsoo can understand Minseok’s desire to keep the place as it is, unchanging. As if this pocket in time and space isn’t moving, even as the rest of the world is.

They’ve both lived such a long time, and while they have no homes, no places to call their own, to have to watch everything they once knew disappear, over and over again… It’s harrowing.

Minseok places a steaming cup of tea in front of Kyungsoo, puts down a plate of sticky rice cakes drenched with honey. “Some of the villagers think I’m a deity of sorts,” he murmurs, his voice quiet, softer than Kyungsoo remembers it. “They leave me gifts, when they want their wishes granted- I haven’t granted any, ever, yet they still believe in it. Funny, isn’t it?”

“They’re bizarre.” Kyungsoo hasn’t gotten any closer to understanding the man kind, not even in the long centuries he’s lived through. “But that doesn’t seem too unfortunate, if treats like this are what they gift you.”

“You’re right.” Minseok smiles, before his mouth disappears behind his tea cup. Silence lingers for a moment, as Kyungsoo chews on a small cake, savoring the flavor of it. But eventually, the curiosity gets to Minseok, even despite his appearance of that of an ancient saint. “What brings you all the way here?” he wonders, his eyes sharp as he regards Kyungsoo. Kyungsoo is reminded of how the magpie was looking at him earlier- he could read the bird’s thoughts just as well as he can now read Minseok’s.

“Hyungnim. I had… a very disconcerting encounter with a goddess recently.” No use beating around the bush here. The only way to get to his questions is to describe what happened, and so he recounts the odd meeting with the god who seemed to have a message specifically for him. But he leaves out every bit about the goblin, for that is a subject he doesn’t want to even touch upon, doesn’t want to even think about. He wants to deny it altogether- and it’s not as pressing, as the truth about his very existence.

Minseok swirls the tea around in his cup, glances out of the window thoughtfully. “Sounds like Samshin,” he muses. He sets his cup down to undo the ribbons underneath his chin, slowly takes off
his hat. He’s kept his hair long, has it tied up in a neat topknot, and that he leaves untouched.
“You’ve heard of her, right?”

Kyungsoo frowns down at the table. Samshin. He’s heard the name- but that was a long time ago, for people don’t believe in the old gods like they used to. “The god of birth and fate,” he finally recalls. “Fate… she did speak of it, a lot.”

“There you go.” Minseok looks at him with expectant eyes, like waiting for something. Kyungsoo doesn’t know what it might be.

“Well, that gives her words a bit more credibility.” Perhaps too much so. “But hyungnim… what did she mean when she said all that about… about how we’ve come to be? What we’ve been and what we’re now? That this is a punishment? I mean, what I wish to know is- is it true?”

For gods can lie, too.

Minseok sighs, closes his eyes. “She was speaking the truth,” he murmurs, speaking as though it pains him to say it. “This existence- it is a curse. It’s a punishment, one we can only hope to escape. Once we’ve settled the sins we committed.”

Kyungsoo’s heart nearly stops, grows twice, thrice heavy in his chest. “What- what sins? What sins have we made, hyungnim?”

He can believe the punishment part. He can- he knows enough. The eternity of carrying out his duties, tirelessly, with no reprieve, the loneliness and the weariness; after 800 something years, he understands. Eternity truly is a punishment, unless there’s a reward waiting for them at the end. Somehow, he doubts that.

His words make Minseok chuckle, even if there’s no mirth to it at all. “What kind of sins do you think we’ve had to commit, to taint our souls with, to be damned to something as severe as this?” When he opens his eyes, they’re an ugly shade of red, his personal anger shining through. It has Kyungsoo jerking back in surprise, tense up, look for a way out. “What could possibly be so bad, that we have to pay for it like this? Think about it, Kyungsoo. You know just as well as I do what the answer is.”

And he knows. It comes to him so instinctively- it’s so intuitive, and the horror of it sits heavy on his shoulders, seeps into his bones. The realization, it’s right there, and should have been so obvious even without having to ask.

“We killed someone,” he whispers. “We killed someone, when we were still human. And this, this is our punishment- to witness death, day after day.”

“For as long as it takes for the gods to take pity on us.” Minseok sounds so weary as he says it, his shoulders sagging as he deflates, defeated. “Or until we learn to regret what we’ve done- but the cruel part is, that we don’t know. We’ve forgotten. We don’t know who we were, when we lived, what we did, none of that. So how are we supposed to feel remorse? Yet that’s how the rules have been made.”

It’s unfair. It’s so, so terribly unfair.

The silence is suffocating, as it wraps around them like a heavy coat of snow, silent but deadly, and neither of them find it necessary to break it, to stop it. For what could be said that would make it better? What could they do to somehow solve this?

And perhaps, that helplessness is part of their punishment, too.
“Let us go for a walk.”

The battles have finally ceased, for the most part, and there are rumors that the troops will begin to head south soon. The general Yi is needed in the capital, so it has been said, and so, they’ll return. Hopefully, Kyungsoo finds himself thinking. He isn’t supposed to want, isn’t supposed to care where he goes, but nonetheless… he does.

Minseok is looking at him expectantly, and so, Kyungsoo agrees. Why not go for a walk, when it’s such a beautiful evening? The full moon is up on the sky, shiny like a silver coin, lazy clouds floating across the sky like they have no place to be. It’s pleasant, and to just curl up to sleep in their temporary lodging in a tent would be a waste.

They don’t speak as they walk, Minseok leading the way. They walk along the tiny creek and past the village huddled on the banks of it, past the army camp, through the small forest shielding the village from the south. The only sounds they hear are of people settling down for yet another night, hurrying home and shutting their doors against the outside world. But the wildlife is a lot more alert; even with some animals hiding in their nests, others set afoot, to hunt, to eat, to explore.

Kyungsoo just takes it in, enjoys it for what it is, when the woods suddenly ends and they step out of the darkness back into the moonlight.

“What is this?” Kyungsoo wonders out loud, looking around. “What is this place?”

“It’s just a field of buckwheat,” Minseok chuckles, gesturing at the small opening. “But isn’t it beautiful? It’s such a modest little flower, yet there’s something so charming about it… It’s almost magical.”

Indeed it is. Kyungsoo steps forward, gently strokes the flowers with his hands, wades into them like it’s a gushing river, or three feet of snow. He’s never been one to really enjoy the outdoors, or to find much solace in nature in general, but this is beautiful, the pressure in his chest letting up just a little bit.

He’s just about to say something of it to Minseok, when he lifts his gaze up, and suddenly spots the figure standing at the middle of the clearing.

And it’s immediately obvious that this is nothing ordinary. The man’s dress is peculiar- a soft, delicate shade of blue, made all the more eerie in the moonlight, the fabrics plentiful and well made. He isn’t wearing a hat, his long hair flowing freely behind him, tied up with a piece of leather at the crown of his head. His features are beautiful even if twisted in pain, his hands clutched at his chest- and there, in the middle of it, is a sword, surrounded with blue and black smoke curling around the hilt, the blade pushed all the way through the man’s torso and coming out of his back.

But there’s no blood; none seeping out of the wound, none on his clothes. It’s just him, standing there, with the sword sticking out of him almost like it’s a part of him, his face frozen in agony.

Kyungsoo doesn’t know what to do, but his instinct is to move towards him- to help him, perhaps, or perhaps to gather his soul, he doesn’t know, but Minseok is quick to stop him, to pull him back. “Don’t meddle,” Minseok hisses to him, squeezing his bicep almost painfully. “You can’t help him anyway, the cursed goblin.”

Goblin. Kyungsoo recognizes the face now, even with the ugly expression of pain twisting his
features. It’s the goblin— but that doesn’t make any sense.

“What is he doing,” he whispers, still unable to look away. The image is so haunting, the serene buckwheat flowers and the moonlight, the goblin paralyzed with pain, the strange sword stabbed through him. “What’s happening to him?”

“Happening? No, it’s already happened, when he died.” Minseok points at the sword. “It’s what killed him, now forever stuck there, where they left it in his corpse. His own blade that betrayed him. It’s what keeps him here, keeps him from moving on. It’s his punishment, his curse.”

Chills travel through Kyungsoo just imagining the horrors of that. He’s heard many a sad fate in his time, but that… that is enough to make him pity him, even though he knows that the proud trickster of a god wouldn’t need that. “But I’ve seen him without it, before,” he asks, watches as the goblin slowly hunches over, crumbles to the ground until he almost disappears behind the flowers. “I haven’t seen it on him before this.”

“It’s not always visible. It isn’t always painful, either.” Minseok tugs on his arm, pulls him away from the scene. “I do not know what triggers it, or when, or why. But it doesn’t always ache, doesn’t always leave him like this.”

Kyungsoo stumbles after Minseok, doesn’t have it in himself to yank his arm free— and it would be ridiculous, to rush to the goblin’s side. Minseok is right, there’s nothing he can do, and he isn’t supposed to mess with other immortals.

But the image, the scene, it’s harrowing, plaguing his mind for days, weeks to come, and he doesn’t know why.

Doesn’t know why the goblin was there either, when he’s only ever seen him close to Hanseong, the capital. What was he doing so far up north? But alas, he is but a restless soul, stuck in an endless life—Kyungsoo supposes it’s natural of him to wander, to try and find adventure. Perhaps he’s saving lives again.

Perhaps he’ll run into him, again.

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present day

Kyungsoo returns to Seoul with only more questions. Minseok gave him answers to the riddles the Samshin spoke, but those answers gave him no comfort. For now he must ask— what sins has he committed, in his human life? What has he done, to be punished like this?

Does he really want to know, or will it destroy him?

But the knowledge that he was speaking with a god who knows everything of fate, it leaves him feeling ill. The things she spoke of the goblin, Junmyeon… Now, with some answers provided, he finds it hard to ignore what she said of him. But what did she even truly say, really, other than speak with more riddles? That Kyungsoo is somehow tied to him, through something stronger than death?

That doesn’t make sense, unless she’s speaking of how they keep running into each other, century after century.

And the chilling words the goblin spoke, upon seeing him. The goblin knows something Kyungsoo doesn’t— but what that could possibly be, of course Kyungsoo has no idea. Because his memories of his life as a human have been erased.
But if the goblin by some chance knew him when he was a human, like it would appear, then perhaps he could tell him what his sin is. What he needs to regret and beg forgiveness for, to gain freedom from this cursed life and finally move on.

Yet at the same time, Kyungsoo fears talking to him.

He resumes work as usual, goes through the motions of it although his focus isn’t there, his mind too occupied with the unanswered questions. Not that the souls should notice, since they’re usually quite consumed by the fact of their own death, usually quite surprised, caught unprepared, or at least unwilling to go.

But there are rare exceptions to this rule, as well.

It’s a pleasant Sunday morning. The clouds have moved away and the sun is shining, beautiful and warm but not yet suffocating like it’ll be in the summer months to come. It’s delightful weather, Kyungsoo thinks, as he walks down the streets, headed to his next location. He’s swapped out the modern style hat for his traditional one, the beads swaying with each step he takes; it’s less hot, this one, and after meeting with Minseok, he feels nostalgic for it in a strange way, even if he hasn’t been willing to change out his suit for the traditional hanbok. Besides, he doesn’t wish to scare the souls too much by appearing too foreign.

The place is a nursing home he’s visited many a time in the past as well. The corridors smell of disinfectant and old people, of the food they’re preparing somewhere in the kitchen, as Kyungsoo walks past the closed doors, past the common areas, until he gets to the right room, and steps inside.

Everything is so white that he feels like it’s on purpose to chase him away. Light is streaming in through the window, and everything looks so warm and cozy. There’s a recliner in the corner, a dresser underneath the window with several picture frames littered across it; a rug on the floor, a handmade duvet on the bed, a small stack of books on the bedside table along with some flowers in a clear vase. It’s simple, but it looks a lot more personal than the many hospital rooms Kyungsoo has seen, and he senses only peace and calm in the old man lying on the bed, the duvet pulled over his feet and his hands resting in his lap, his upper body propped up with pillows, so he can rest easy.

He’s asleep, taking steady, short breaths, even as his heart is racing towards the end. But there’s not a single sign of pain on his face, while Kyungsoo watches him, waits for him; there’s only the faintest of sighs when it finally happens, and his soul is set free from his body, emerges from it and materializes right next to Kyungsoo.

Kyungsoo doesn’t look at him, and instead opens the envelope, takes out the slip of paper. “Choe Chulsoo, age 85. Cause of death: heart failure. Is this correct?”

“Yes, it is.” The man says it calmly as ever, does a short bow to Kyungsoo. “I’m pleased to finally meet you.”

“Meet me?” Kyungsoo can’t quite hide his surprise, and the man just continues to smile. “Yes, you. Death. I’ve waited for you for a long time, now. I almost thought you’d still leave me hanging here, and still not come to get me. But finally, my time is up.”

Kyungsso chooses to say nothing at first, as he folds away the paper and the envelope, begins to lead the way to his tearoom. “I don’t come until it’s time,” he simply says, once they exit the building. “I don’t play games, either. I come, when it’s right. When it’s meant to be.”

“I know.” The man doesn’t appear bitter. Perhaps he was joking. “But I was ready to go for a long time, you see. Life isn’t fun anymore, when you’re just dying- people get so dreary about it, and you
have nothing left to do except waste time.”

That’s peculiar. “Most people find even their last minutes on this earth quite precious,” Kyungsoo comments. “They don’t want to let go, no matter what. Fight until their last breath. Why didn’t you? Why were you in such haste to leave it behind?”

The man laughs. His appearance is growing younger by the moment - he’s aging backwards as they walk, the long years practically melting off him to reveal his true self within. He’s taking longer strides now, his skin smoothing down, hair growing back on his bald head. “Not in a haste, but I just had already made peace with what I had in life, what I did, what I achieved,” he replies. “I had nothing left to want, to do. I was satisfied, and I knew it was my time. I knew it was time for me to go, and I made sure I had no regrets, no worries. Everything was already settled and worked out, I just needed you to come and take me.”

It’s not the first time Kyungsoo’s heard such a sentiment, but it’s always equally startling. Calmness in the face of such a thing as death, it seems very brave. But it also relates to him now a little bit more, makes him think. Was he like this, when he died? It doesn’t seem likely, unless he was foolish enough to not feel any guilt or regret even when he should have. Or perhaps he was riddled with it, and knew that he was going to face a punishment of some kind. Perhaps he was scared.

He can’t imagine having found peace before death, having committed sins great enough to warrant this level of punishment.

“You must have not done anything terribly wrong in your life, since you have no regrets left and leaving this world in such ease” he carefully says, as he opens the door to his tearoom, lets the man inside. He’s now taken the appearance that he had in his early twenties, perhaps - he’s a dashing young man now, quite handsome, and his dimples are deep, yet the wisdom in his eyes seems deeper still.

“No, that isn’t it.” The man takes a seat at the table without being prompted, runs a hand through his hair, marveling at the feel of it. “I’ve done many wrong things in my life, hurt a lot of people. But I managed to make my peace with that. I apologized to those I could, did volunteer work to repay those I couldn’t directly help anymore… And I accepted the past for what it was, and moved on. You can regret things as much as you want, but it’s not going to make it better.”

That… oddly makes sense. Kyungsoo is glad he can busy himself with preparing the tea, his back turned to the soul, so he can try and gather his thoughts. But if he’s supposed to learn to regret what he’s done, isn’t this man wrong? Isn’t regret the only thing that is going to save you from damnation, when you’ve done things wrong?

Yet this man is so, so calm, so sure of this, and somehow, it’s easy to believe him. But what could a mere mortal know, anyway; he’s none the wiser than Kyungsoo himself, all he’s doing is speaking from his own, foolish conviction.

Kyungsoo explains the tea to the man, who drinks it calmly, taking measured sips from the cup. They don’t exchange any words while he drinks, although Kyungsoo’s mind is full of competing thoughts. He wants to question this man further but he knows he shouldn’t, knows it’s not going to help him any, and so he just focuses on remaining silent.

The dead have no responsibilities to the living.

“So what’s going to be behind that door?” the man asks when his tea is finally gone, standing up from the table. “Heaven? Or are you not allowed to tell me?”

Truth be told, he doesn’t really know what awaits the souls once they leave his tearoom - if it’s
heaven, hell, or something else where they exist before they’re reborn. There’s something there, he knows it, but what it is exactly and what gods or deities rule over it, he has no idea. He’s sometimes seen just bright light, sometimes stairs; sometimes, loved ones are waiting for the soul, although usually there’s no one there. He’s never been told what exactly happens to the souls once they pass over, what happens between this point and them being reborn again.

It’s a mystery that the souls have to face alone. The grim reapers can only take them up to here, make sure they cross over, but not guide them any further.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” is what he chooses to say, as he stands up as well to hold the door open. There’s a gentle light streaming through, but he can see nothing else in there, doesn’t sense the presence of anyone else either. “But you should go in peace. There’s nothing there that will harm you.”

He’d know that much- he knows when souls are to be punished. But this man, he’s safe, and that is the comfort he can give him, even if he’s one of the rare ones who doesn’t need it.

“Thank you.” The man bows to him again, and then steps through, disappears into the light, just like that. But when Kyungsoo lets the door close behind him, he somehow feels empty inside- empty with dull jealousy, knowing that it’s unlikely he’ll ever get to experience that. To feel how it’s like to make complete peace with yourself and your past, to move on free from everything. He didn’t have that, when he passed away all those centuries ago, and he won’t ever have that, unless he’s incredibly lucky, somehow.

It’s so unfair.

Kyungsoo quite likes visiting the palaces, but he prefers them at night, when the crowds go away. The familiarity of the old buildings, it sooths him in ways that usually only his instruments can, and after visiting Minseok and his home frozen in time, he’s felt this ache for something that would feel more like home. And the palaces do- not because he’s ever lived in one, although he’s worked there plenty, has retrieved many a soul from the palace grounds over the centuries, but because they’re one of the few historical sites left in Seoul.

There, walking in the secret garden, he can almost imagine going back in time. Back into the past, where things stayed the same longer, where change was slow and easier to grasp, where life had a steadier flow. Where the cycle of the year mattered more than anything else, where things happened at a pace that Kyungsoo could understand. Back when he didn’t feel quite so ancient as he does now, surrounded by buildings high enough to touch the sky and defy the gods, where people have invented machines that do unspeakable things.

Back when he could pretend he hadn’t lived for as long as he has.

The palaces aren’t open to the public at night, and so he’s free to wander at his leisure, wearing his hat to keep himself hidden from any possible cameras and just enjoying the relative silence, the roar of the traffic only a quiet hum in the background. And although he knows that most of these buildings are only remakes, fakes, built in the last century when the original ones were destroyed in wars, they still allow him to pretend.

He’s wearing his yangban hat again, but decided against the hanbok last minute. It would have felt like a costume, after almost a century of not wearing it; but he can still let his thoughts carry him away, close his eyes and imagine this place as it once were- full of life, a scene for the politics and power, a home to the dynasty.
Now, it’s but an empty shell, for tourists to run amok, take pictures in. But at least at night, he can have it to himself.

Or usually, he can.

He arrives at the bond, gazes at the dark waters, smells the air. The cherry blossoms have vanished by now but other flowers are coming to bloom slowly, and soon, the air will be fragrant with them. But for now, it’s very simple, very clean, biding its time until the right moment arrives.

But then, a sudden flash of blue at the corner of his eye.

It startles him, as he didn’t expect to run into anyone here at this hour. Looking up and in the direction of the movement, he’s surprised to see a man standing there- and then, recognition.

The goblin.

He’s wearing traditional clothes, and Kyungsoo can immediately tell they’re from times long gone. No one makes garments like those anymore- the colors are delicate, the patterns intricate, and there’re signs that the clothes have been worn and washed many, many times. This time, only half of his hair is tied up, the rest falling down to his back freely, the gentle wind playing with it like fingers being brushed through the locks.

And he’s staring right at Kyungsoo, his eyes dark, unreadable, like the murky waters of the pond.

“What are you even doing here?” Kyungsoo can’t hide his annoyance. He’s just so fed up- his thoughts about the goblin won’t leave him alone, and then he keeps popping up like this, at the most inconvenient times. It just isn’t fair, that he has to spend so much energy thinking about someone he wants nothing to do with.

If he’d just disappear, for good.

The goblin shrugs. “Nothing much,” he answers, a haughty air about him. “Just hanging out. Having fun. It’s fire Friday, is it not? So, I thought I’d go out a little bit, do something exciting.”

“Fire Friday?” Kyungsoo’s brows furrow in confusion. “What even is that? Speak properly, goblin, so I can at least understand the nonsense you’re spewing.”

That makes a smile tug at the goblin’s lips. “Fire Friday is what the youngsters call Fridays,” he explains, cockily walking closer to Kyungsoo. “When they go out to have fun, you know. But I don’t think you know anything about having fun, so I shouldn’t be surprised you don’t know the term.”

Kyungsoo looks away stubbornly, refuses to take the bait. The goblin is trying to get a rise out of him, and he won’t give him the satisfaction- he won’t, he won’t. “Some of us have actual duties to carry out,” he responds as calmly as he can. “Some of us aren’t immortal creatures with nothing else to do but to run around causing havoc for the fun of it. Some of us don’t exist just to be menaces to the rest of the universe.”

He chose his words mean and harsh, but he did not expect to actually witness the goblin getting mad at him, stepping right up to him to yell in his face. But that’s exactly what happens; the goblin is only a smidge taller than him, barely at all, and his gentle features can convey a surprising amount of anger, of hurt, of bitterness. He doesn’t physically touch Kyungsoo but he can tell he has to hold himself back, possibly from slapping him, grabbing him, shaking him.

“I didn’t choose to be like this,” he says through gritted teeth, his eyes pained. “I didn’t want to be
like this, but I was forced to- I was made like this, and you know that, even though you pretend not to! This is a curse just how your life is one, so don’t pretend like you’re somehow better than me, like you can look down on me. Just because you feel like you have a purpose doesn’t make you any less pitiful than me!”

Kyungsoo takes a step back, startled, but his anger is rising as well. Long days of being stuck with his own, bothersome thoughts, they’re finally bubbling over, even if the goblin really isn’t at fault, save for his continuous reappearances and the way Kyungsoo has been reminded of him with the constant rain. “Well, at least I haven’t committed sins grave enough to warrant ending up as a goblin,” he hisses. “I might have killed one person, maybe two, but you- you have done deeds too terrible to even speak of, because that is the only way you end up like that! You’ve killed villages, nations, committed crimes so vast that no one can ever forgive you!”

If he thought that he’d seen the goblin as hurt and upset as he could get, he was wrong. For Kyungsoo’s words make him completely crumble, something far deeper than words can express welling in his eyes as he stares at Kyungsoo, stumbles back a step, another. His mouth is twisted terribly, his hands shaking where they’re balled up into fists by his sides. Blue smoke begins to curl around him, like tendrils wrapping around his torso.

“This… This has to be the cruellest part,” the goblin whispers. “You just stand there… screaming these words at me… Completely emotionless, not knowing my face, my name, not knowing… our past… That you’ve forgotten… everything…”

But that is as much as he can say, as the sword suddenly materializes in the middle of his chest, and the goblin howls in pain, sinking down to his knees, both hands clutching at the hilt of the sword as if to try and pull it out. But it doesn’t move, of course it doesn’t, and all the goblin can do is writhe in pain, gasping for air in between screams of agony. It isn’t the first time Kyungsoo has witnessed this, yet it’s still just as awful, still as haunting, and he does the only sensible thing he can think of; he turns around and runs, runs to get away as far as he can, until he cannot hear the goblin’s screams any longer.

But the image, the memory- they do not fade, and try as he might to go to sleep that night, he cannot. And worst of all, for Kyungsoo has seen plenty of that; it’s the words the goblin spat in his face, once again hinting at something deeper, something more terrifying than Kyungsoo can even imagine.

He doesn’t want this to be real, doesn’t want this to be the truth, but no, there were no lies in that. What the goblin said was true, at least to him, and the only way it couldn’t have been honest would be if he’d gotten Kyungsoo confused with someone else.

And that, that is now his only hope. That the goblin has gotten mixed up, somewhere along the way, and that Kyungsoo isn’t the person that he thinks he is.

But how would he ever find that out for sure?

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mid-14th century

It isn’t until days later that Kyungsoo dares to bring up what they saw in that buckwheat field, and he’s only forced to do so because they’re nearing Minseok’s home area, and soon, they’ll be separated, as Kyungsoo will carry on with the troops down south. But he cannot live with this mystery; he needs to know what it was that he saw that night.
“About the goblin,” he says once they finish tidying up Minseok’s tearoom. It was a quiet day, for the most part; a couple of wounded soldiers who finally perished from their injuries, some elderly people from nearby villages. Nothing too dramatic, but Minseok likes his space neat and organized, and Kyungsoo finds the menial tasks quite relaxing as well. “About… what we saw.”

Minseok raises his eyebrows at him, but doesn’t say anything else to prompt him to carry on. Kyungsoo swallows, nervously dries his hands with the rough towel. “I mean, the blade… It’s, it’s magic, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is,” Minseok says with a hum, wiping down the table for the fifth time. “Have you not seen him use it? Because he can do that. He can make it manifest in his hand and use it like a real weapon, even though in reality, it’s stuck in his chest.”

That makes Kyungsoo pause. He has seen it—the first time he ever saw the goblin. So the sword that he used to kill those Mongolian soldiers, it wasn’t just any blade… It was the one and the same, even though Kyungsoo didn’t know it back then.

“So… so it’s part of his punishment? That it’s forever stuck there. You said… it’s what keeps him trapped. But is there a way to pull it out, then? Is that how his punishment ends?”

He’s never heard of eternal damnation. There’s always a glimmer of hope— even the souls he’s sent to punishment, he knows that they’ll get their second chance when the time is ripe.

Minseok shrugs, sits down to take out his sewing kit to fix his jacket where it got torn earlier. “Well, there are rumors of a goblin bride,” he says, but it doesn’t sound like he quite believes it. “That the bride will be the one to pull it out, and set him free. That he’ll be able to die, then, and be relieved from his existence then. But who really knows?”

Kyungsoo pulls a chair out as well, sits across from Minseok to watch him work. The fire is warming his back gently and he can feel his eyelids growing heavier, his exhaustion settling into every fiber of his being. It’ll be nice to get back home soon, he’s missed it. Missed his routines, missed knowing everything like the back of his hand. Having his own space.

“So what has he done? What’s a crime so bad that he has to suffer like that?”

“What’s got you so curious?” Minseok glances at him with amusement written all over his features, but his dark eyes are scarily deceptive; even if on the surface he appears to be quite jolly, deep down, Kyungsoo knows that he’s watching him, studying him, figuring him out. It’s quite unsettling, even if he knows that he has nothing to fear from him.

“I mean, I just want to know,” Kyungsoo replies. “I’ve seen him around but no one’s ever told me anything about him, you know. Like, what he is, who he is, why he’s like this.”

“Well, I can’t really answer that,” Minseok says, leaning further down over his work to see properly, the needle going in and out of the black fabric. “I mean, I don’t know much. Not about him, per say. But you don’t become a goblin unless you’ve done something terrible— killed tens, no, hundreds of people. Killed them for the wrong reasons, too. And dying with no honor. He was killed with his own sword, and his body was probably left out to rot with no proper burial of any kind. You know, death so disgraceful and humiliating that if he hadn’t been turned into a goblin, he would have become a ghost to haunt the living, instead.”

That makes Kyungsoo shudder, just imagining it. He’s seen a lot, over the years, but that… To imagine having no one there to even bury your body, that is just too much. Even these soldiers, even in their rush to conquer new land, they’ve always taken care to have some kind of burial for their comrades; burning bodies or burying them in mass graves along the way. They’re not savages, after
all. But to be killed and then have your body left out to decay out in the open… Even if that is what’s supposed to be done to criminals, usually the families can retrieve the bodies eventually, give them a proper burial. Something, anything.

“So he died abandoned by everyone, having committed terrible sins… and now he’s here, and he’s supposed to find someone to save him?” That sounds dreadful, to say the very least. Kyungsoo shudders again, clenches his fists. And he knows he shouldn’t feel pity for him, shouldn’t think that what he’s going through is unfair- but those are his thoughts, and he doesn’t know what to do about it.

He’s never questioned the gods, and the way these things work. Punishment, especially. It’s not his place. He doesn’t pass judgment, he’s merely the messenger, and for him to even have an opinion about it seems wrong. But this, it just seems like too much.

Minseok doesn’t seem so perturbed. “Well, at least he has a way out,” he says instead, leaning closer to look at his own handiwork better. “You know? It may take a long time before he gets out of this life, but at least it’s there.”

“I guess.” Unless it’s only a false hope he’s been given, to make things even crueler. But what choice do any of them have except trust what they’ve been told? Because when you start to doubt the honesty of the gods, there’s no turning back.
Chapter 3

year 1392

“Long live the new king! Long live the new king! Long live the Yi dynasty!”

The cries are loud in the crowd, as Kyungsoo wades his way through the people. It is official now- Goryeo is no more, and now, the kingdom shall be called Joseon instead. He heard, he saw the ripples this caused in the palace, the Neo-Confucian scholars finding it hard to adapt when anyone usurping the throne is against all of the rules, and he knew the commoners might tip either way; but here they are, celebrating their new ruler.

Perhaps the old kings of Goryeo had really lost the mandate of heaven to rule. Perhaps it was time someone new rose to power- someone who understood what war was, how devastating it was, how useless it was to wage campaigns in futile hopes of gaining just a bit more land.

Perhaps such king wouldn’t forget about the horrors of war so easily.

Kyungsoo can only hope.

He’s chosen to roam the city dressed like a living man, not wearing his hat that would grant him invisibility. It’s too crowded for that, anyway, the streets packed with people, drinking and yelling. It’s quite the haphazard celebration, he’d say, very unplanned and spontaneous- but that is the true charm of it. Genuine joy and excitement, it’s always a thing of beauty.

It makes him smile, too. For just a moment, he can almost imagine belonging, almost being a part of this. His burgundy robes make him stand out, sure, but he still passes as a yangban- a scholar with a curiosity for the common people, maybe. And even though he isn’t wearing his work hat, he’s wearing a hat just like it, only the beads more colorful. Someone gives him a glass of warm soju that he knocks back to be polite, and after several such offerings, he finds himself bordering on tipsy.

It’s delightful, even if at the same time… He knows he’s not supposed to be here. He may mingle, he may even linger, but no matter how much he may want it, none of these people are welcome in his life. For he doesn’t have one, and to tell a mortal about his profession, no. That is impossible.

But just for today, he doesn’t want to be reminded of it.

Eventually, his feet take him a bit further away from the commotion, tucking away between the houses where he can have a bit of space but still watch everything that is going on. The acrobats and musicians have emerged now, a small clearing forming at the middle for them to perform, and people are getting drunker by the moment. Some guards walk by, but they do not interfere; it’s probably in the king’s best interest to allow his citizens this tiny bit of fun, to encourage their positive feelings about him and his new rule.

Someone comes to stand by Kyungsoo’s side, and at first he pays him no mind, far too engrossed in the dancers who’re dancing in the circle to the beat of the loud, shrill drums. But then, the person leans in closer- too close.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says, and Kyungsoo turns around to take a proper look- only to be met by the mischievous eyes of the goblin looking right at him.

He hasn’t changed much. His attire is still the same; short sleeved outer jacket, that same sky blue, the sleeves of his undershirt narrow and bound at the wrists to allow for better mobility, the pants
also bound at the ankles for the same purpose. His hair is still tied up in a ponytail, the hair flowing
down one shoulder in a dark, wild stream, a wide band tied around his head at the temples. And his
expression is full of mirth and mischief, a sure sign that the trickster god is up to no good.

Kyungsoo isn’t sure how to respond. “Well, it seemed worthwhile to witness such a historical
event,” he finally says, purposefully turning away to stare at the dancers again. “Not that my comings
and goings are any of your business, goblin. And how do we keep running into each other? You’d
think that this kingdom is vast enough that we don’t have to ever meet one another.”

“Please, call me Junmyeon. No need to be so formal. And I have my ways- I have ways to tell where
you’ll be next.” There’s a tinge of sadness in Junmyeon’s voice, but it’s gone as quickly as it came.
“So, say, how do you find this meager celebration? Is it worthy of our great, new king?”

Kyungsoo has no idea what the goblin could possibly mean by that. He has ways of knowing where
he’ll be? Surely that cannot be true, he must be just messing with him. “It’s befitting of the
circumstances,” he replies, trying to be as noncommittal as possible. “The people didn’t have any
time to prepare, and the years have been tough on them.”

The goblin chuckles, nudges him lightly. “Well, if it’s been tough on them, it must have been tough
on you, too! Collecting all those souls, you sure work so tirelessly.”

“Thank you.” He isn’t quite sure if it’s a compliment, but he’ll take it as one. The goblin laughs, loud
and bright, claps Kyungsoo on the shoulder.

“You’re so uptight,” he muses. “Even with soju, you’re still so prim and proper. Doesn’t that get
exhausting? Dead people, day in, day out. I’d go stir crazy.”

“There are standards that my behavior must meet,” Kyungsoo stumbles over his own words. It’s
true- it is hard, it is boring, but he isn’t allowed to admit such things. Especially not to the goblin, that
is for sure.

“Well, it’s time you let loose, then, yes? Let me make this mediocre celebration a little more exciting,
so even someone like you can find a bit of joy in it.” The goblin smiles at him once more, and then,
he’s gone, wading into the crowd and vanishing- even if only for a moment, before he emerges on
the rooftops on the opposite side of the market square where people have gathered.

No one else seems to pay any mind, but then, no one else is aware that there’s a goblin afoot.
Kyungsoo doesn’t know if he should stop him, at least tell him no, but the soju is warm in his
stomach and he finds himself agreeing with what the goblin said- he’s allowed a little bit of fun,
surely.

And then, the most beautiful fireworks he’s ever seen explode on the sky. He’s witnessed many such
celebrations, usually carried out by the court, but they’ve never been quite this gorgeous; vivid in
color, sparkling, flying so high up in the sky that they seem as if they belong with the stars. Everyone
around him is in awe, staring up at them in silence, too stunned to even say anything as the bright
colors dance across the sky. And something is humming inside of Kyungsoo, pleased and happy in a
way that he doesn’t remember feeling ever before- just seeing the fire flowers burst and light up the
sky, it touches him deep down in ways he can’t explain.

He knows it’s no ordinary fireworks, either. It’s the goblin- it’s Junmyeon’s doing, all of it. But for
once… he doesn’t see any harm in the magic the trickster god can do with his powers. And to think
he said he was going to do it for him, so he could be happy as well; the thought is forbidden, but
somehow, he’s pleased to know that all this is for him.
The lights linger in his memories long after they’re gone.

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*present day*

Kyungsoo is unable to move on from the dramatic experience at the secret garden, the fated meeting with the goblin. He’s struggled so much to ignore everything Samshin said about the creature, tried his best to put his focus on what she said about his past, about his current punishment, but after meeting with Minseok, it has all come back to the goblin anyway. It’s obvious that the goblin has something to do with him- that he knows something that Kyungsoo doesn’t, that they’re somehow connected.

Whether it’s truly greater than death, he doesn’t know. Doesn’t want to believe it. But it’s clear that the goblin knows something. Remembers something that Kyungsoo has forgotten, if he ever knew it.

That, or he’s playing tricks on him, lying to him to get what he wants, whatever that could possibly be. Or maybe he wants nothing. He lives in lavish wealth, Kyungsoo has seen it with his own eyes, so perhaps he’s only looking for a form of entertainment. Eternity is plenty of time to get bored, after all- even Kyungsoo knows that to be true, even if he’s quite satisfied with very little, with very few things to do.

The conclusion that leaves him with, however, is unpleasant.

He has to talk to him- purposefully seek him out.

Just the thought of that sits ill with him, he ponders, as he plays his haegeum, gently moving the bow between the strings, feeling the notes with his fingers as he clenches and relaxes his fingers minutely to tighten and loosen the strings to alter the pitch. He never wanted anything to do with the goblin, and to voluntarily look for him, try and talk to him- he has plenty of reservations.

But the only other person who could give him answers is Samshin, and well, she’s far scarier, and far more elusive than the goblin. She’s not a true option.

And besides- the goblin might be the only person who could tell him what his great sin is. What he needs to regret and apologize for, in order to find peace. For that, Kyungsoo is willing to do anything. Just that glimmer of hope, that there might be a way out of this… it has both made this existence more bearable, but also made him fearful that he may never reach it.

He can’t let this opportunity to slip between his fingers.

Yet finding the goblin is far easier said than done.

He visits the place where he recalls collecting the soul of the servant that the goblin seemed to hold dear. It’s now within the borders of Seoul, when back in the days of Hanseong, it wasn’t included within the city walls, well into the countryside that once surrounded the capital. But there’s no such house there, only apartment buildings, not any different from the rest of them- dull, grey, identical to one another. There’s nothing there, not even a trace of magic left behind, and Kyungsoo has no idea where to look next.

The next lead comes to him unexpectedly.

“Kim Areum, age 16. Cause of death: leukemia. Is that right?” The hospital room is exactly like the thousands of hospital rooms Kyungsoo has seen before, and he’s not paying much attention to his surroundings, until he realizes that the recently deceased soul isn’t the only spiritual entity in the
room. For there’s a woman, standing by the bed, tears streaming down her face, and by the similarity in their features, he understands that they must be relatives.

It’s a ghost- possibly the mother of the young girl.

And ghosts, they know things.

Kyungsoo is quick to act, stepping forward to grab the ghost by the arm, shoving her against the wall to stop her from escaping. “You stay right there,” he commands her, staring right into her frightened eyes. “Do as I say, or I’m going to drag you to the afterlife whether you like it or not.”

“But I was going to come- I was just waiting for my girl,” the woman says, scared, and fuck- Kyungsoo has to quickly reformulate his plan.

“Well, you’ll do as I say, or I won’t take you with me,” he says stemly, ignoring the fact that ghosts can cross even without the help of reapers. “Do you know where the goblin lives? You’ve seen him, I’m sure. You know who he is.”

The ghosts for some reason fear the goblin greatly, even more than they fear the grim reapers. Kyungsoo has never understood why, for what could he possibly do to them? But he’s positive that the ghosts must know where his residence is, if not for anything else than to stay clear of it.

The ghost looks bewildered to say the least, but she’s compliant enough. “I-It’s in Sinsa-dong,” she stammers. “In an apartment building, the top floor, I thi-think. He o-often sits on the roof top, just staring into no-nothing.”

It’s not quite an address, but it’s a lead. A roof top apartment in a lavish apartment building in Sinsa-dong, well, that doesn’t narrow it down much considering the kind of area it is, but it’s a start. It’s at least an area less vast than the entirety of Seoul.

“Thank you.” Kyungsoo releases his grip on her, and stands up straight. The soul of the teenage girl is watching him with wide eyes, clearly confused and quite startled. This wasn’t his most professional moment, that’s for sure, but no matter. As soon as they drink their tea, they’ll forget that this ever even happened.

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Camping out in Sinsa-dong every time he has a bit of free time isn’t something Kyungsoo is terribly proud of, but it’s the only thing he can do to try and find the goblin. He walks around the streets, pinpointing suitable buildings and committing them to memory, building up somewhat of a regular route to check first before venturing into new areas. It’s just that the neighbourhood is quite big, as all neighbourhoods in Seoul are, and the borders are hazy- there’s no clear-cut line where one area ends and another begins, so he’s stuck going around in endless loops, trying to chance a glimpse of the goblin.

But he has all the time in the world- there’s no real rush, expect the way these questions keep tormenting him and bothering him. But he can wait. He’s lived this long without knowing, and going days, even weeks longer, that doesn’t change much.

Yet even though he keeps telling himself that, he nearly loses his sanity, walking around in circles, looking for someone so goddamn elusive. He almost gives up completely; perhaps the goblin is purposefully hiding from him, perhaps he’s left town. How would he know? The ghosts he finds can’t give him any answers, don’t seem to know any better, and so his lonely quest continues.

Until it finally pays off.
It’s been a long, humid day, and Kyungsoo is sweating profusely. The last thing he wants to be doing is scouting out the streets, but his obsession won’t give him any rest. He’s wearing his historical hat once more for it’s much cooler than the felt one, but he’s rolled up his shirt sleeves and his black slacks feel terribly, terribly sweaty in this weather. But at least the sun is going down, at last, somewhat easing the heat, even if the night is probably going to be just as tropical regardless.

His neck aches from staring up all the time, trying to see to the rooftops, his eyes burning with strain, and he’s this close to just heading back home when he catches a glimpse- a glimpse of sky blue where there should be none.

There’s someone sitting at the roof top.

Kyungsoo doesn’t waste a single moment, dashing into the building, using his invisibility to slip in without being noticed. Like many apartment buildings for the rich, it has quite good security, but he’s not going to even bother dealing with that. He needs to get to the roof, now.

The elevator only takes him to the highest floor with apartments, and then, he has to go up the maintenance staircase to get to the roof. But the way the door to the roof is swinging open tells him that the goblin should still be there- he knows of his teleportation abilities, but he’s too close now to fail, to miss him by a split second.

He bursts through the open door, and there he is- his feet dangling over the ledge, cans of beer by his side, hair blowing in the wind as he gazes upon the city below. He does glance over his shoulder at Kyungsoo but doesn’t react in any other way, immediately returning to just vacantly staring ahead.

If he’d cracked some kind of joke, Kyungsoo would know how to react, but like this- he’s left unsure as to what to do. What to say.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he chooses to begin with, then, walking closer. “It wasn’t easy to find you.”

The goblin shrugs. “You just don’t have the gifts that I do,” he simply says. “I’ve never had any trouble to find you.”

“I’ve noticed,” Kyungsoo retorts back. “And I don’t know how you do it. But I’m here to talk, about something quite important.”

Junmyeon shrugs, and pats the concrete next to him, but Kyungsoo chooses not to sit there- he can’t die, but he still doesn’t wish to be tossed over the ledge. “I can see the future, in glimpses,” is all the goblin says. “Like that, it isn’t hard at all to know where you’ll be.”

A shiver runs down Kyungsoo’s spine, but he chooses to ignore that. “Right. But we need to talk.”

“Go ahead.” The goblin cracks open another can of beer, clearly very disinterested in this conversation- or perhaps, embarrassed by what happened last time they saw each other.

“You know something about me. Things that I’ve forgotten.” Kyungsoo cuts to the chase straight away. The less small talk there’ll be, the better. “I need you to tell me all of it.”

Something hardens in the goblin’s posture, even though at first, he doesn’t react. “I don’t know why I should tell you,” he says, rolling the beer can in between his palms. “I don’t know that I owe you that kind of thing.”

This is more like how Kyungsoo expected this to be. “But you want me to know. You hate that I don’t remember, don’t you? You’ve said it twice to me, now. You want me to remember, and here I
am, offering to- I need to remember. My human life. You knew me back then, didn’t you?’”

Somehow it looks like the goblin is getting smaller, curling in on himself, and Kyungsoo doesn’t understand why. It’s as though he’s in pain- but that can’t be, right? The sword isn’t visible right now, it isn’t acting up, so what is this? The wind blows harder up here, almost refreshing, but it makes the sweat on his skin cool and makes him shiver even more.

“I don’t think that the things I want you to remember are the things you’re looking to find out,” the goblin finally says. “You’re looking for a way out, aren’t you? You just want to make up for your sins and move on. But that’s not what I want you to remember about your past.”

Kyungsoo is silent for a moment, considers it; but there’s no price that he wouldn’t pay to figure this all out. “I’ll remember whatever you want me to,” he’s quick to promise, stepping in closer. To try and see the goblin’s face, even though he keeps slumping down, turning away from him. He looks quite tiny in his oversized sweater, somehow suddenly so small and almost fragile, but Kyungsoo reminds himself that he knows that to be false.

The goblin isn’t someone he ought to pity.

Junmyeon’s eyes are guarded when he glances at Kyungsoo. “You’re making a promise that you don’t understand the consequences of,” he warns him. “Because I want you to remember every single thing, before you remember what you want to know. And I think that you wouldn’t be able to comprehend what resulted in all of that, if you didn’t know the backstory.” He pauses, tosses his can away- it flies off, vanishes into the distance, and Kyungsoo doesn’t see where it lands. “So really, I’m doing you a favor- I mean, it would be a favor. A selfish one, but still.”

That should unnerve him, and it sort of does, but at the same time, he’s too desperate to find out the truth and his ticket out of all of this to truly care. But he can tell that he’s won; for him to remember his life as a human is something the goblin also wants, for whatever reason, and that’s good enough. For as long as he’ll find out the truth.

“I’ll do anything,” he repeats. “I’ll do whatever it takes. Remember whatever you want me to. I just need to know- need to know how and why this happened. Why I became a grim reaper.”

“Right.” There’s incomprehensible sadness etched in the goblin’s eyes, and he’s quick to look away. His hands are fussing with his shirt collar and hair, suddenly restless, almost nervous. “Of course. Well, as I said, I don’t care much if you don’t remember that part. The things I want you to remember are… much different, even if related. If you’ll do as I say, if you’ll first recall what I want you to- then sure. Why not.”

It obviously isn’t something the goblin is indifferent about. There’s something way, way deeper than that, woven into all of this, although Kyungsoo can’t even begin to guess what that might be. This isn’t just a casual favor- this isn’t something the goblin could overlook. Because he hates Kyungsoo’s amnesia as much as he himself does. Because Kyungsoo has forgotten something that matters deeply to him.

And that, that is the motivation he needs to do this. Which is a relief, because Kyungsoo has nothing else to offer.

Nothing else but his forgotten memories.

*****

year 1443
It’s the dead of winter, and Kyungsoo has been following these two drunken men for a while. The temperature keeps dropping, and the snowstorm will be upon them any moment, but the fellows are too out of it to even realize it, realize how instead of stumbling towards home they’re drifting away from the road, soon to find themselves completely lost and disoriented. Kyungsoo has seen this plenty a time; they’ll collapse in the snow, and die, only some minutes away from the warmth and safety of their homes.

Poor, drunken idiots.

He just wishes they would hurry up, because it’s really getting cold now, and he’d gladly head home, lay on the warm floor to stay cozy and have a good sleep, a good rest before tomorrow’s tasks. Yet here he is, waiting, idly watching the surrounding scenery while the men make ruckus, falling and struggling to get up only to fall down again.

He’s lucky that the men aren’t paying any attention, for the noise he makes when someone suddenly touches his shoulder is quite shrill and decidedly not befitting of a grim reaper. Spinning around, hand reaching for the knife he keeps at his waist, he comes face to face with someone surprisingly familiar- the goblin.

The bastard is grinning so widely, looking so terribly pleased with himself. “How are you doing?” he asks pleasantly, doing a mocking, deep bow in greeting. “It has been a while since we’ve last met, hasn’t it? But you look as well and handsome as ever, reaper.”

“Go away,” is all Kyungsoo manages before turning back around. He starts walking again, but of course it isn’t so easy to get rid of the nuisance of a god.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to ruin their fun by taking their souls to the afterlife,” the goblin says, gesturing at the two men once he catches up to Kyungsoo and falls into stride with him. “They’re having such a good time, aren’t they? It would be such a pity to see them die after such a fine evening they’ve had.”

“I don’t have much of an opinion on that, I’m afraid. I’m only here to do as I’ve been told,” Kyungsoo comments dryly. “Making judgments is out of my jurisdiction.”

“Always so uptight,” the goblin tutts, clicks his tongue. He looks so pale, even against the white snow, his black hair a stark contrast to both his skin and the snow. “Always so full of that ‘I have no opinions’ crap. Of course you have an opinion, you’re just too afraid to even think it.”

“That isn’t true.” Kyungsoo is immediately irritated, and a part of him recognizes that it’s because he fears that the goblin might be right. But it really isn’t his place to feel or think anything- he’s only here to do his duty, and anything else is unnecessary. Whether someone dies or not, it’s not his decision.

“Yes it is.” The goblin is so smug about it, too. He nudges Kyungsoo’s shoulder like they’re the best of friends, before waving his forefinger in the air; and just like that, the shorter of the two drunk men who was just about to topple over stands up straight once more, miraculously avoiding falling down. And suddenly, they change direction- undoubtedly towards their home, instead of the empty rice fields that they were headed for just seconds ago.

“Stop messing with them!” Kyungsoo tells him, but the goblin only laughs, eyes all crinkled up and his high cheeks even more pronounced. “Or else, huh? What are you going to do, reaper? Scold me?”

Kyungsoo huffs, tries to stop the goblin from raising his hand next time one of the drunkards is about
to topple over, but the goblin can’t be stopped. The men are steadily making their way home now, and Kyungsoo knows he’s lost the fight when the envelopes in his hands catch fire, the parchment burning and disappearing, just like that.

The souls are not coming with him tonight.

“Why do you have to keep butting in to my work?” he demands to know. His shoulders are tense and his hands clenched into fists, his entire body shaking with anger. The goblin isn’t supposed to meddle, isn’t supposed to intervene, and Kyungsoo is only trying to do his job but the goddamn creature won’t let him! It’s stupid and he won’t stand for it. “Get the fuck out, and don’t ever appear in front of me again! Do you hear me!”

There’s a twinge of sadness on the goblin’s face, his broad, proud smile fading away as he turns his gaze down, fiddles with his clothes as though suddenly nervous or unsure. “You can’t tell me what to do,” he says, not unlike a petulant child. “You don’t have that kind of power.”

“This is my work, you don’t get to ruin it for me!” Kyungsoo is livid. He would have tolerated the goblin messing with him a little, but to completely ruin what he was supposed to do here tonight, it’s too much. “You don’t get to sabotage me!”

That makes the goblin finally look at him. “Do you even hear the words you’re saying?” he asks, eyes dark, like tiger’s ready to bounce on its prey. Dangerous. “Do you even- so you’d rather I didn’t save these innocent people? You’d rather I just let you do this, and let them die? You like death so much that you don’t wish for anyone to be saved, now? Is that what you really want? People dying as much as possible, so you can just keep doing your pitiful job and feel like you’re somehow so important in all of this.”

The words cut deep, much deeper than Kyungsoo can even comprehend- mostly because they paint him for the monster that he’s become. Has almost become, at least.

The goblin is right. He shouldn’t feel anger that two innocent people got to live a little longer tonight. That there were no souls for him to take, this time.

But he also doesn’t like being lectured by a god refusing to face his own punishment.

He turns away, marches off as fast as he can. Snow has begun to fall around them, completely unexpected- the skies were clear just a moment ago, but now, heavy clouds are rolling in. But Kyungsoo doesn’t stop to think about, too focused on just escaping this situation as fast as he can.

The goblin has showed him a mirror, and he didn’t like what he saw in his own reflection.

*****

present day

How does one go about remembering something you’ve forgotten? That’s the question Kyungsoo has been asking himself, leading up to the lunch date he set with the goblin to meet up and talk. It’s not like there’s a set protocol for any of this- who knows if it’ll even work. If the goblin telling him facts about his life will trigger anything, or if he’ll have to somehow remember these things on his own.

The goblin appears quite bored by the topic, as he pushes food around in his bowl. Kyungsoo chose a small restaurant run by an old woman who’s half blind and half deaf, hidden in such a small nook that not many customers ever come by. This way, no one will overhear their peculiar discussion.

“I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere by just sitting here and talking about it,” the goblin says
with a shrug once Kyungsoo is done ranting about his speculations. “You’re acting like you have something to lose, here.”

“But I do.” Kyungsoo says, then mulls it over. Well- if something doesn’t pay off, then no, he hasn’t really lost anything, only needs to find another way. So maybe the goblin is right. “But even so. Isn’t it going to save us trouble to think this through, before we do anything crazy?”

That makes the goblin snicker. “No, I wasn’t planning on anything crazy,” he huffs, still playing with his food. “We just need to find the right trigger for this. You’re supposed to remember all of it, eventually. It’s not all gone, it’s just behind lock and key. But there has to be a way in.”

“You have an awful lot of optimism for this,” Kyungsoo sighs, shoving slices of kimbap into his mouth. “As if you’ve done this before or something.”

“No, but thing is- I know what the triggers should be.” The goblin glances at him, before looking down at the table, his restless fingers letting go of his spoon to instead fiddle with his necklace.

For a moment Kyungsoo is confused, before it clicks. “Right. Because you knew me, back then.” So at least the goblin has some kind of clues as to where to begin. “So tell me. What do you want me to do? Eat something? Go someplace? Look at a picture?” He’s seen this type of thing on TV, once or twice. Humans seem to really like it when people get amnesia.

“No.” The goblin reaches for the fish cakes, places a couple delicately onto his rice, and then puts all that in his mouth. He takes his time chewing before he carries on. “We’re doing this on my terms, the way I want to. Because you’re going to remember the stuff I want you to remember first. You promised.”

The way he says the last part sounds almost endearing. He’s very reserved when he talks, usually, but in short glimpses like that, a part of his real personality shines through. But Kyungsoo isn’t at all impressed by this plan; he’d rather know what they’re going to do, have a say in all of it, have some form of control. But obviously the goblin doesn’t want him to have any.

But he knows how delicate this situation is, how quickly the goblin’s mind could change. How easily he could abandon this project. He needs to keep him happy, for now at least.

“So, where do we start?”

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It’s the first time that Kyungsoo experiences teleportation in the way that the goblin does it. As they leave the restaurant, Junmyeon grabs his wrist and holds the door open for them, tugs him through the doorway- and instead of stepping out to the narrow alleyway where the restaurant is located, they appear in the middle of a small town. Kyungsoo glances back and behind them is a bank, not the restaurant- in one fell swoop, they’ve changed locations, just like that.

He’d always known that the goblin had other ways of travelling, but he’d never realized this is how it worked. But he doesn’t get to say a thing or two about it, before the goblin is already tugging him forward, hurriedly walking down the street. Only small trucks pass them by, and people pulling carts filled with items they’re selling or transporting, the houses low and a little rundown, even if the colorful signs advertising their products are almost identical to those Kyungsoo has seen around Seoul.

The mountains in the horizon are nothing he can recognize, the sudden quietness a startling difference to the bustling capital.
“What is this place?” he asks, hurrying after the goblin. People are staring— they’re obviously not from here, even Kyungsoo’s modest clothing quite a startling difference to what everyone is wearing. It eerily feels almost as though they’ve also travelled back in time, instead of only travelling physical distance.

“It doesn’t really matter,” the goblin says, gesturing with his hand. “It’s somewhere near Gwangju. I forget the name of this place.”

“Did I live here when I was human?” Kyungsoo wonders out loud, suddenly feeling much more interest for the scenery. But the goblin shakes his head.

“No, we didn’t live here when we were human. But we’re here to visit somewhere special and we’re running late, so hurry up and walk.”

They didn’t live here when they were human… and the realization washes over Kyungsoo suddenly. The goblin was also human, when he knew him—they shared their human lives, before either of them became immortal. And of course, why would the goblin have bothered him otherwise, it all makes sense, yet somehow, he never thought of that before. Somehow, it makes this all the more intimate.

They turn a corner and arrive at a slightly bigger building, a workshop of sorts, but the goblin doesn’t let him read the sign before pushing him inside. And inside, it’s a little dim, especially after the bright sunshine, the air filled with strange scents but mostly smelling of wood. There are quiet noises coming from somewhere, things being picked up and put down, the sound of working, and then, footsteps.

A middle-aged man appears at the doorway to greet them. The goblin is quick to bow, reaching out for the man’s hands and squeezing, and Kyungsoo reckons he sees a banknote or two change owners, but he doesn’t comment on such, only bows as well.

“I was just getting ready to put strings in, so you got here just in time. I think you’re going to find it really fascinating to watch.”

Strings? It makes Kyungsoo perk up a little, walking on silent feet behind the man and the goblin as they exit the forefront of the workshop, the small store of sorts, and step in further. They walk through a room filled with different equipment, tools of all kinds, some that Kyungsoo cannot recognize, and then a couple of rooms filled with raw materials; big planks of wood, hollowed out gourds, bamboo reeds, big rolls of white string. And then they step into the large working space, with unfinished and finished instruments on the shelves and tables, and Kyungsoo understands— this is the workshop of an instrument maker, a gayageum and haegeum maker to be precise, and something like excitement flashes through him.

The goblin is watching him as the master explains about his craft, picking up different unfinished bits and pieces, describing in detail how they’ll turn into the precious instruments; the body of the gayageum made from the giant planks, the base for the haegeum made from the gourd, so on and so on. And Kyungsoo just lets him talk, listens to his detailed explanation— he’s seen glimpses of how the instruments are made, understands parts of the process because of his own instruments, but he’s never witnessed the entire journey from raw materials to the fine-tuned instruments that he so enjoys.

Except, there’s a certain bizarre familiarity to all of this. The way the polished gourd feels in his hands, the ease that he feels shaving and filing the planks when the master lets him try it, how the thinnest of strings yet to be coiled into proper gayageum strings flow between his fingers. The smell of the wood stain and the burnt wood on the scorched gayageum bodies.
Even watching the master put in the strings on the brand new gayageum, the way he works, sitting cross legged on the floor with the gayageum in front of him, his skilled, calloused fingers pulling at the strings and attaching them at the right tension, sure yet cautious in everything he does, it all stirs something inside Kyungsoo. An itch to touch, to hold in his hands, to feel, to create- create not just music, but something far more concrete. To feel the raw strings in his hands and coil them tight and place them on the instrument just right, give the wooden body a voice, give it a sound, produce music in a much more concrete way than ever before.

And it dawns on him then, running his hands over the burnt pieces of wood, feeling the smooth surface of it, holding the gourds and bamboo stalks, that there’s a reason why. Why he understands this, why it feels like it’s calling his name.

Because once upon a time, this was all he knew.

The sudden realization brings him to tears, the old master slightly surprised but mistaking it for genuine emotion for the beauty of music. “Mister Kim told me that you’re an avid fan of traditional music,” he muses, watching Kyungsoo dab at his eyes. The goblin’s expression is unreadable, his eyes deep yet uncharted like a deep mountain river. “It is quite an exotic sensation to see how these precious instruments are made. Even those who play them might never witness this.”

“Thank you,” Kyungsoo murmurs, bows down. “Thank you, master.”

In this strange village, in this workshop, he’s found a piece of himself that feels like home.

The goblin takes him home as soon as they walk through the door of the workshop, stepping through it back to Seoul, somewhere near the historical village. It has Kyungsoo reeling even more than before, the familiarity of the buildings mixed with the modern day elements a disorienting combination in his current state of mind. He squeezes Junmyeon’s arm tightly, tries to ground himself, tries to process everything he just discovered.

“I was an instrument maker,” he whispers, looks at his own hands. They only have calloused from playing his instruments, nothing more, but he can imagine how they must have looked, compares them to how rough and weathered the master’s hands were. “I used to make… I used to make instruments… That is why I’ve always loved them so much, why I’ve always treasured them so much.”

The goblin nods solemnly. “Indeed. Just like him, you used to make gayageums and haegueums… But you also knew how to build geomungos, the flutes. You and your family were so well renowned for your skills. Almost all noble houses at the time had one or two of your instruments. There was nothing finer than a Do instrument…”

Shivers run down Kyungsoo’s spine, and when he closes his eyes, he can almost see it. The dim light in the workshop, early in the morning and late at night, the ache in his fingers and in his back from being hunched over all day, working. Collecting bamboo, carefully selecting the very best ones for his instruments, the joy of playing an instrument for the first time after it’s been finished.

Someone else’s hands guiding his. A voice scolding him for his mistakes, a voice complimenting him for his successes.

“I had a family,” he whispers, tears suddenly streaming down his face. “I had a family… a father, a mother… I wasn’t always alone.”

The goblin nods once more, and just watches him cry as his emotions get the best of him. To have lived so long thinking that you came in to this world alone, and no one cared… To have always been
so lonely and then to discover that it wasn’t always so. That there were people who cared, who loved him, who took care of him. Who gave him life.

It’s bittersweet, and overwhelming.

He’s never belonged anywhere, with anyone. But now he realizes that once upon a time, he did. Once upon a time, there was a home, and a family, even for him.

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Kyungsoo needs several days to process everything, to get his emotions under control. And it’s embarrassing, to have shown such weakness- to have been so affected, when the goblin seemed so undisturbed. But this is the first bit of evidence he has that it’s indeed possible for him to find out the truth; he just needs to know where to look for triggers. Thankfully, someone else has that knowledge already.

“What are we going?” he asks as soon as he sees the goblin again on their second quest for more of his memories. “What are we doing today?”

“Someone’s excited,” the goblin says with a slight smile, taking Kyungsoo’s hand once more, tugging him towards the nearest door that is within reach- a door leading into a Starbucks, Kyungsoo notes in amusement, but then he steps through and is transported to a field of buckwheat.

Or, rather, what seems like buckwheat. It isn’t blooming yet, as it’s still late spring, but Kyungsoo recognizes the plant even in this stage. He doesn’t recognize anything else- the goblin seems to be picking these obscure places on purpose.

“Buckwheat?” is all he manages to ask about it, however, before something heavy is pressed into his chest; a sword. Not the one that the goblin carries in his chest, but something quite close to it in style; rustic, the leather on the hilt a little worn down like it has actually been used.

“Take it,” Junmyeon insists, and Kyungsoo accepts it, even if he’s thoroughly confused.

“What am I going to do in the middle of this field with a sword?” But his follow-up questions are silenced after he witnesses the sword materialize in Junmyeon’s hands; it’s a gorgeous piece, clearly made with great care and talent, and it looks so heavy especially when held up by his thin arms, yet he makes it look so easy. So effortless. There’s no way to tell that it’s only a temporary manifestation of what is actually stuck in the middle of his chest; the brutality of that reality so, so grim.

He doesn’t have time to ask any more questions, before the goblin raises his sword, and points it at him, taking a step forward to swing at him. Kyungsoo only clumsily raises his weapon to block the blow, stumbling back as the pain zings through him, the weight behind that strike leaving his arms aching. “What the fuck,” he exclaims, but the goblin doesn’t hold back, instead attacking him again, this time cutting at an upwards angle from below, and once more, Kyungsoo struggles to block it.

The goblin doesn’t respond. His eyes are focused, his arms tense, his shoulders moving beneath the fabric of his loose t-shirt as he wields his sword with such ease. Kyungsoo keeps stumbling on his own feet, on the uneven field, and the sword in his hands feels like dead weight, impossible to control, each blow he stops from landing leaving him in pain. This is for real- the sound of metal on metal, the full intent behind each strike the goblin delivers with such precision, and Kyungsoo doesn’t even know if he’s holding the sword the right way up.

Until he changes his grip on the hilt, and suddenly, it all locks into place.

His feet are still unsure, his balance off and his strength lacking, but now, somehow, holding the
A weapon makes sense. It travels through him, the knowledge and understanding, from his brain to his very fingertips, and the sword is no longer dead weight; it’s a part of him, a part of his own arm, it moves with him instead of against him. And he’s no longer struggling to counter each blow, and instead- instead, he can attack now, no longer on mere defense. It’s not as though he can land any of his attacks, of course, but Junmyeon can no longer toy with him as he pleases; it’s a game of go, now, a strike, a block, a strike, a block, like a dance.

A dance Kyungsoo had forgotten, but one that his body knows regardless.

The goblin charges forward unexpectedly, and before Kyungsoo can do anything about it, the edge of his sword is resting on Kyungsoo’s neck, pressed against the skin but not breaking it. They stare at each other, both struggling to catch their breaths, the tension palpable, building, cresting- and then, Junmyeon looks away, lowers his sword and lets it vanish.

It’s over as soon as it started, and Kyungsoo is left gasping, the memories rushing over him just as overwhelmingly as they did last time. But now, it’s with less emotion- there are memories of feelings attached to the images flashing through his mind, but none that he can truly pinpoint or grasp.

“You used to teach me how to sword fight,” he says after a heavy, meaningful silence. The goblin nods, the wind gently brushing through the locks of hair that escaped the bun he has his hair in today. Somehow, he looks even wilder like this than when his hair is in a ponytail, his appearance much less polished, much less intentional, something raw flowing through him in that moment.

“Why? I was just a mere instrument maker, wasn’t I… What reason did I have to know how to use a sword, as a commoner?”

“I wanted you to be safe. The times… they were very difficult.” Junmyeon won’t meet his eyes once more, staring off into the distance. Around them, the scenery is filled with peace, with promise of brilliance once the summer brings the buckwheat to bloom; between them, there’s only unspoken tension already filled with grief, even if Kyungsoo doesn’t know why. “I wanted you to be safe even when I would be… gone.”

“So not only did you know me… you also cared about me.” It should have been an obvious connection to make. Why else would Junmyeon be doing this? Why else would he bother? Yet somehow, the thought never crossed his mind. “What were you trying to protect me from?”

At that, Junmyeon shakes his head, holds out his hand for Kyungsoo to give him the sword back. On his back, he has a sheath for it- Kyungsoo had mistaken it for a very large umbrella in the brief moment that he saw the goblin before they stepped into this field. It looks quite old, even if well kept, lovingly attended to, and Kyungsoo wonders if it might be the very sword he used to have. If Junmyeon would have held onto such a sentimental item. If it would have been able to withstand the centuries together with him.

He doesn’t quite dare to ask.

“Where did you go?” And when he asks that, a memory of forgotten sadness touches his heart, makes it break, ache, sink down. It hurts, it carries in his voice- and it makes Junmyeon jerk back as though burned, as though he can hear it too. Remembers it, unlike Kyungsoo. Knows the reason why.

“I had duties to fulfill,” is all he says, however. “But I wanted you to remember this. That we used to… used to train together. That I cared about you. That we weren’t just faceless strangers, once upon a time. Even if time has only been cruel to us…”
Kyungsoo doesn’t like this sadness, doesn’t want to feel it. It’s so disorienting, when he doesn’t know why- doesn’t understand why he’s feeling this way. Doesn’t know the story, yet, but he hopes that he will. He hopes that before this all ends, he’ll have all the answers.

Even if it scares him.

*****

early 15th century

"Why won’t you just take it?"

The voice startles Kyungsoo out of his deep though, and he almost drops the gayageum he’d been holding. Only his instinct to protect the precious instrument stops him from letting go of it immediately, instead placing it gingerly back where it was. He’s in the house of a lonely yangban man who died very recently; he already took the man’s soul to the afterlife, but the sight of that instrument is what lured him to come back. He knows he has no business here, but even so… something about that gayageum just called out to him. The funeral already came and went, he thinks, but no one has yet to clean through the house, or move into it- only the servants still linger, watching over their dead master’s home.

And now, he’s been caught red-handed admiring the instrument by the goblin. He has no idea what he’s in there for, but he’s the last person he wants to witness him breaking the rules, even just slightly. It feels morally wrong, to let the goblin see him in such a moment of weakness; he’s supposed to be better than him, above him, not equally foolish and silly.

It’s just not becoming of a grim reaper.

"It’s not mine to take," is what he settles for, even if he can barely look away. It’s such an intricate piece; there are delicate carvings on the wood and the strings have also been decorated at the loose ends. It’s a masterpiece, one that only someone of wealth could possess, and Kyungsoo knows that it’s unlike he’ll never get a chance to buy one for himself. Even if he saves up for hundreds of years, it’ll still be out of his reach.

And here it sits, unused. If the old man ever knew how to play it, he doesn’t know, but now, it’s been collecting dust for years. Undoubtedly, the withered hands of the man could no longer lure out the sweet notes, and it was abandoned like that. No one has even bothered to keep it clean- and no one has yet to touch it, to look for it, to show any interest in it.

It’s sad. It’s a tragedy, in Kyungsoo’s opinion; it’s an instrument made with love, and as such, it deserves to be played, to be treasured. It’s not an ornament.

"No one’s going to even know that it’s gone." The goblin sways back and forth on the balls of his feet, hands clasped behind his back. "They don’t care. The old man might have, but he’s no longer here. So what if you take it? The mortals won’t know."

"You can’t know that," Kyungsoo huffs, irritated to even have to listen to this nonsense. "Of course they’ll care. It’s a valuable piece, and humans are greedy. If they don’t know how to play it, they’ll just sell it forward."

"Yes, but to do so they would have to know that it exists in the first place," the goblin points out, reaches out with a finger to brush off some of the caked on dust. "But they don’t. He might have been one for the arts and other such elevating hobbies, but none of his descendants have inherited that noble spirit. It’ll go to waste, really. I wouldn’t be surprised if they would even burn it, to be
“No one would do such a foolish thing!” Kyungsoo raises his voice without even realizing. “Surely they wouldn’t burn a geomungo to boil a crane- no one is that savage!”

“It’s a gayageum, not a geomungo, and yes, they would. As a matter of fact, I know they will.” The goblin seems almost gleeful about his prospect. “Unless someone who understands its true value takes it and protects it. Plays it, and cherishes it. But if you won’t do that, then…”

“It’s a proverb, idiot,” Kyungsoo retorts back. “And you don’t know that. You know nothing.”

The goblin looks at him, and smiles, something about that expression so unnerving. “See, you ignorant fool, I can see into the future,” the goblin stage whispers. “I can see glimpses, images, events- and I can see this gayageum ending up in an oven. The winter will come, and the descendants probably haven’t left any money to maintain the house- it’ll get cold, and the servants will burn everything they can get their hands on to stay warm. Including this instrument that they probably do not recognize.”

Kyungsoo’s heart skips several beats. “No,” he cries out, and reaches for the instrument, delicately picking it up and holding it to his chest as protectively as he can despite its large size. “No, no, no. I can’t let that happen. I can’t- No. That’s not right.”

The goblin nods sagely. “I knew you would come around,” he teases. “Now, I hear footsteps coming this way. Do you need help getting out of here, or are you good on your own?”

“I’m good,” Kyungsoo replies without even weighing the goblin’s suggestion. He wants nothing to do with him. Just the fact that he just witnessed him stealing has his conscience so bruised, and to have to watch how gleeful he is only twists the knife in the wound. “I’m invisible, I’ll manage.”

“Suit yourself.” The goblin shrugs, and walks to the tall closet in the room, yanks the door open and steps inside- and vanishes, just like that.

Kyungsoo can never quite get used to that, and now, he has to figure a way out of here with the massive instrument still in his hands. Invisible or not, it doesn’t make him immaterial- but as much as he burns with shame, as he walks back home, deep down he knows he made the right choice.

present day

Looking at his gayageum now, Kyungsoo recognizes the details. The patterns, the style, everything about it- the strings he’s gotten redone several times and so, they’ve lost their original appearance, but the body is still the original one.

And now he knows that it was his own hands that made it, once upon a time. That it called out to him like so because it was his own creation. His own soul had been poured into that, and even the thought of it being destroyed was too much to bare. Because once upon a time, this instrument meant a lot to him- it was not just a piece he’d made to be sold, but something far more valuable than that.

But that is all he can remember, can feel. The rest, it remains shrouded in mystery.

When Junmyeon takes him to a horse ranch outside of Seoul, Kyungsoo is still full of questions, even though he knows he should have learned to trust the process. Trust the goblin, trust that the memories will come back. But even so, this just seems quite peculiar.
“I see why you made me buy jeans,” he says, looking at the buildings and especially the horses warily. “I suppose my usual attire wouldn’t have been quite suitable for this.”

“That, and also it was about time you tried wearing jeans. You grim reapers are all the same, so stuck in your ways. Explore the possibilities a little, it doesn’t hurt!” Junmyeon tugs him closer, to the stables, only leaving him be to go talk to one of the people working there, so quietly that Kyungsoo can’t quite hear what is being said.

The scenery is beautiful, he can’t deny that. They’re far enough into the countryside that there are only a few other houses around, the mountains surrounding the valley and the rice paddies and greenhouses. It’s sunny as well, the summer fully making its presence known now. There’s a lot of sand and dust flying everywhere, and Kyungsoo misses his silk fan dearly- he can already feel sweat dripping down his back.

“They have our horses ready, let’s go,” Junmyeon calls out to him, and Kyungsoo follows him further into the building and back out on the other side, where there are horses tied to posts, saddled and ready to go. They appear huge this up close, and suddenly Kyungsoo really, really wishes the goblin only wants him to pet one, or something.

But of course he isn’t so lucky. He’s only given a helmet and then Junmyeon helps him get in the saddle, the horse sidestepping to get away from him but calming down once he settles on its back properly. Junmyeon, on the other hand, is full of grace as he mounts his horse, and doesn’t hesitate nudge it forward. Kyungsoo glances longingly at the fenced in practice fields, because it’s quite obvious that the goblin is heading away from the ranch and into the wilderness.

“This is stupid,” he calls out to him, and the only response he gets is the goblin laughing, laughing so, so brightly, although he can’t say for certain if it’s at his discomfort or at the glee of being on horseback.

At least he gives Kyungsoo more time to adjust than he did with the swords. They keep a steady, even gait as they head further out, following a narrow path as it leads them through the fields and closer to the mountainside. It’s simple enough to let his horse just follow the other one, and Kyungsoo finds himself relaxing into the rhythm of it, letting his hips move as the horse does. It’s not so bad.

They take a turn to the right as they reach a river, following by its side now. It’s quite narrow, the banks very steep with very little water at the bottom. And the goblin picks up a little bit of speed, urging his horse into a trot, the beast still so steady on its feet even in the slightly uneven terrain. To keep up, Kyungsoo has to do the same, his own horse even pulling on the reigns as though itching to run faster, faster still. Kyungsoo’s arms quickly grow tired from holding it back, trying to stop it from bursting forward, from racing after the horse ahead.

They cross the river a little further down the road, and then the path makes a short loop before winding back at the river. But this time, Junmyeon doesn’t steer the horse to the bridge, instead winding back towards the forest, before coming to a halt, waiting for Kyungsoo to catch up.

“Say, what if jump over that river and race back home? Last one there is buying dinner.” He says it so mischievously, not giving Kyungsoo even time to respond before he reaches over to smack Kyungsoo’s horse on its haunch while also digging his heels into the sides of his own horse. Both of the beasts jump forward at the same time, Kyungsoo’s horse clearly overjoyed to be finally given the freedom to run as it will, galloping towards the river at an alarming pace. Nothing he does can make the horse stop, or slow down, not with Junmyeon’s horse running beside them, racing them.

The river approaches all too fast, and all Kyungsoo can do is brace for it- but instead of hunkering
down as he wants to do, his body does the exact opposite. He rises up from the saddle, braced on the stirrups, legs squeezing the horse beneath him, hands holding steady above the saddle but not holding onto it, gaze locked ahead. Even though his mind screams at him not to do this, that this is dangerous, that he should try and fall off when it’s still safe, his body once again knows what to do.

They reach the river, and his horse jumps, leaps over it, lands smoothly on the other side like this is all its ever done. Carries on galloping towards the ranch like nothing ever happened, both of the horses running at top speed now, trying their hardest to win. And Kyungsoo realizes that he’s laughing- breathlessly, giddily laughing, for this is the greatest freedom he’s ever felt. If he could fly, then this is probably how it feels; to be so light, weightless, and to burst forward at the power of a high waterfall, completely unstoppable. Free to go wherever, as far as he will, as far as his horse will take him.

To worry about nothing but just this moment, just live and exist like there’s no tomorrow.

They’re back at the ranch all too soon, but by the time they make it there, Kyungsoo already knows. Knows the answer why, without Junmyeon even having to explain it to him.

“You used to teach me how to ride a horse, on your war stallion,” he says, breathless, when they slow down their pace as they make it to the ranch. “You used to- you used to let me ride it like a mad man. It was... one of my favourite things to do. Just gallop as fast as I could through the forest.”

Junmyeon nods, letting down the reigns so his horse can lower its head, catch its breath. “It used to be so much fun,” he murmurs, petting the horse’s mane fondly. “You had never ridden a horse before. It was so exhilarating. To just... be free. Free from everything else. Everything that bothered us.”

And while that is the first time Junmyeon has ever mentioned anything about troubles, anything about negative things at all, Kyungsoo’s heart is too light and happy to hold onto it, to worry about it. He lets it go, and just enjoys the happiness- he doesn’t remember feeling like this for as long as he’s been a grim reaper. He almost feels human, with how giddy it has made him, with how his own heart is still racing.

This is the closest he’s felt to being alive since his existence as a grim reaper began, and he realizes now that it’s all thanks to the goblin.

They used to make each other happy. They used to bring joy to one another.

He wants more of it- wants all of the good memories of such happiness.

Wants to feel so light and be free from worries forever.

But even if Kyungsoo doesn’t see it himself, there’s sadness behind Junmyeon’s smile- for he knows that once they’re rediscovered every good memory there is, it will be time for the sad ones, and those... those will ruin this happiness as well, like they did when it all happened.

For now, though, Kyungsoo doesn’t have to know.
unknown time in the past

“Kyungsoo, you’ve been working all day! Wouldn’t you join me for a bit of fun?” Junmyeon’s voice pleads with him as he watches Kyungsoo meticulously prepare strings for the gayageum his father has been working on most recently. It’s tedious work, winding the thinnest strands of silk together over and over again until the threads finally form a string. Although an important step, his father often leaves it to him, for it’s so simple and requires very little skill- why should he waste his time doing it, when his apprentice, his son, can do it instead? “Your fingers are going to bleed if you keep working so hard! Come, have a bit of fun with me.”

“My fingers won’t bleed, silly, look at how calloused they are.” Kyungsoo lifts up his hand to wiggle his fingers at his friend, and it’s true- years of making instruments by hand and even playing them has hardened the skin on his fingertips. Especially the gayageum strings have left their marks on his fingers, from having to press them down while playing to create the signature vibrato. “And I promised to help my dad. He needs these done soon. The gayageum is supposed to be done before the next full moon.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean you can’t come play with me.” Junmyeon’s pout is almost irresistible, and that is why Kyungsoo has to redirect his gaze back to his work. He’s never been good at saying no to him, no matter how dutiful and filial he is, or wishes to be. But he knows his father won’t be happy, if he just abandons his task like this.

“You can wait until I’ve done enough for today. You just want to go to the river to skip stones or something else silly.” Kyungsoo thinks they’re a little too old for that- he knows some people his age who are already considering marriage. It’s time they stop childish games, or at least pick up some that are more appropriate for them.

Junmyeon rolls his eyes at him. “You think you’re so well and grown up,” he mutters, sighing heavily. “And when you’re done it’s going to be dark already, and then it’s too late to go to the river.”

“I would be done faster, if you stopped pestering me,” Kyungsoo counters. They’ve had this argument plenty of times- Junmyeon comes by almost every single day to beg him to join him for whatever he has on his mind, and ever since Kyungsoo got tasked with more responsibilities in his father’s shop, he’s had to refuse him more often than not. He knows his friend doesn’t like it, but what else is he supposed to do?

“But I’m bored.” Junmyeon leans his cheek on his hand, lips still pursed together. He’s seated on the floor next to Kyungsoo, but obviously restless, aching to head out, to have fun. “Watching you work is so boring. Why can’t you be a blacksmith or something? At least that is more fun.”

“Because I wasn’t born to a blacksmith.” It’s as simple as that. Instrument making is what he was born into, and that was a choice already made for him. Becoming anything else has never been an option. Not that he minds- but he wonders if Junmyeon sees it differently. A boy with no family, no name- everything he has in life, he’s had to fight so hard for, every single moment of every single day. There has never been a set fate for him.

“How is your training, hyungnim?” he asks, to distract Junmyeon. “Your commander isn’t too hard on you?”
Junmyeon took up training as a soldier recently, preparing to serve under the king’s name if everything works out. For his training and work he does as part of the troops, he gets his upkeeping; food, humble clothes, a place to sleep. It’s more than Junmyeon has ever had, probably, and Kyungsoo is happy for him, even if his career as a soldier scares him. He had tried to persuade his father to take him in, but he wouldn’t hear of it- a teenage boy with no family to call his own could not be trusted. Who knew what kind of people his parents had been? He could steal from them, could kill them all in the middle of the night if they took him in.

But in Junmyeon’s eyes, Kyungsoo has only ever read kindness and genuine warmth.

Junmyeon grimaces slightly, rubs at his shoulder as though thinking back to an old ache. “Well, it’s tough,” he admits, with an air of trying to play it off as something not quite so serious. “I’m not used to so much physical work, you know. Building roads and such, and the training. But at least we get fed. I get rice twice a day, can you imagine that!”

Kyungsoo can. His family has never had to go hungry, his father’s rich patrons have made sure of that, but he imagines it best not to tell Junmyeon that. “I’m glad,” is all he says, and smiles warmly at his friend. Something warm swells in his chest at seeing him smile back. “I just hope they give you enough clothes to wear when it gets colder. Tell me if they don’t do so, I’m sure mom could make you something warm for a coin or two.”

Junmyeon waves him off. He’s always hated receiving charity, and Kyungsoo knows that. But he can’t help but worry for his friend. Someone has to, because it’s not like he has family to do so.

“Well up and finish now,” Junmyeon says, shoving him playfully. “I’m getting old as we speak! Can you not finish that after sundown? I’m sure you could do that with your eyes closed.”

Kyungsoo knows he shouldn’t give in. Shouldn’t abandon his work. Knows that his parents consider Junmyeon a bad influence on him- but screw all that. They are indeed growing old, and time spent together playing and having fun is coming to an end. They’ll marry, they’ll have children, and they’ll be so busy with their lives that this won’t even come to question- and who knows where Junmyeon will wind up as a soldier.

Kyungsoo should cherish this while it lasts.

He’s quick to put his work away, and Junmyeon jumps up to his feet like an excited puppy, his entire face lighting up with joy. “I knew you would see reason,” he laughs, clapping Kyungsoo on the back. “Let’s go. I’ve been practicing my throws and I’ve gotten a lot stronger, I’m sure I’ll skip stones much further than before!”

“Last one there is a loser!”

present day

Having memories of his human life come back to him as vivid as his memories as a grim reaper has been quite unsettling. Rewarding, but unsettling, because they’re so familiar but also so strange at the same time, like a dream he’s had before but has forgotten completely. Memories of his family, memories of growing up, memories of the town they used to live in…

Memories of Junmyeon.

It has changed how he sees the goblin now. Seeing him as a childhood friend, seeing him as someone who once cared for him… it’s hard to just regard him as the same reckless god that he used
to think of him as. And it’s all the more disorienting, for he didn’t know that he could ever see him any different. That he would have any reason to change his opinion.

He has to repeatedly remind himself that whatever he used to feel for Junmyeon doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what he thinks about him now- he’s only here to discover the reason for his punishment, and he’s only going through these steps first because it was Junmyeon’s condition for this all. And so far, he’s discovered nothing that would explain why he ended up like this.

But as eager as he is to find out more, as occupied as he is with all of this, he still has to carry out his duties.

He’s training a new grim reaper today. The man is still learning, although the training will be quite short; they’ve all been born to do this, and there really aren’t too many intricacies to this. And the things that are most valuable, no one can teach- it’s knowledge that will only come with time, with experience, and Kyungsoo can’t help him with that.

But he sure wishes that Baekhyun wasn’t so fucking loud and nosy.

“But can’t we just like, let everyone live?” he asks as they follow a middle-aged man down the street. He’s just left his office, a couple hours early, and he’s not looking too good. Kyungsoo hasn’t looked at his card, but he already has an idea about what’s going to be his end.

“No, we can’t,” Kyungsoo replies, letting his impatience bleed into his voice. “That’s not how the world works. You know that. People have to die, and if we don’t help them into the afterlife, then they’ll be stuck here as ghosts forever.”

Baekhyun pouts, drags his feet as he walks. He’s dressed so flashy, too, in skin tight pants and a trendy jacket- he’s got no class, and Kyungsoo doesn’t approve of it, but he’s not going to say anything about it. If he can bite his tongue long enough, that is.

“But then, if all souls are reborn, how do we have enough souls for everybody? The population of the world just keeps growing, you know! So how is it possible to have enough souls for everyone, then?”

Kyungsoo sighs. He doesn’t like how many questions Baekhyun keeps asking- so many unnecessary questions. “Because new souls are also born. Souls don’t live forever either. They get to eternal rest after they’ve completed seven lives.”

“Ohh,” Baekhyun says as though he’s somehow very enlightened. “Ooh, that’s fun! So how do we know how many lives people have left? Is there like a tally on their envelope or something? Who’s keeping track of all of that? Are we? Is God doing that? Someone else?”

Kyungsoo has half a mind to shut him up by brute force somehow, and he blames it on Junmyeon for ruining his stoic state of mind. But also, he blames it on this chatter box he’s been riddled with- no one should be that bloody talkative, in his humble opinion.

“Just shut up and keep your eyes on the mortal. We can’t lose him, got it?”

The man finally collapses at the bus stop. He falls down, hits his head, his body twitching slightly, and although the paramedics try to restart his heart, he passes only a little while after they make it to the hospital. It’s quite uneventful, all things considered. Kyungsoo prefers it that way.

Kyungsoo clears his throat, and pulls out the card.

“Choe Choelsu, age 54. Cause of death: stress related heart attack. Is that correct?”
“Wow, you sound so majestic when you say it like that,” Baekhyun pipes up, and Kyungsoo can only barely resist hitting him. The soul looks well confused, sitting at the edge of the hospital bed, staring back at his physical body and then his spiritual being, before realization dawns on him. Kyungsoo can see in his eyes the moment when the dots connect.

“But I didn’t… I didn’t… There was so much I wanted to do,” he whispers, tears welling in his eyes. “So much… I wanted… but couldn’t do, because I was always at work… I was supposed to retire in ten years, live my dreams… but now I’m dead?”

“That’s so unfair,” Baekhyun whispers, and to Kyungsoo’s horror, he realizes that he’s also tearing up. This time he does grab him, and shoves him behind himself. If he won’t act like a professional, then Kyungsoo would rather he stays out of sight, at least. This is just ridiculous.

“Just shut up and let me deal with this.”

When he finally gets rid of the soul, and finally gets rid of Baekhyun, he’s completely exhausted, drained to the very core of his being. But oddly, as he washes the dishes at the sink and suddenly hears Junmyeon’s voice, he isn’t so disappointed- rather, he finds strange comfort in it.

Junmyeon is standing at the doorway of his tearoom, grinning at him. “I was watching you,” he offers in the way of explanation, sits down at the table without even being prompted to. Somehow Kyungsoo doesn’t mind this uninvited guest- his opinion of Junmyeon really has shifted, recently. Even though no one else but grim reapers are supposed to enter the tearooms, perhaps this once he can let it slide. “That’s a handful, that grim reaper you were with. I was laughing myself silly watching you try to deal with him.”

“I was ready to murder him,” Kyungsoo mutters under his breath, and finds joy in how that makes Junmyeon laugh. “God, that kid was driving me up the wall. His sin must have been talking too much, I can’t see any other reason why he’s ended up like this. He must have driven so many people mad with his constant babble.”

Junmyeon giggles at that, and nods his head. “That must have been it,” he says easily. “I think you’ve earned a special treat. What do you say, would you come over tonight, maybe? I was thinking of cooking some of the foods you used to enjoy. To really bring back some of those memories of everyday life. Can’t get them at a restaurant, anymore, I’m afraid.”

It’s certainly a surprising invitation. Kyungsoo knows where he lives, thanks to hunting him down, but he never even thought of possibly visiting him. What would he do that for? It seems very, very personal to see his living space- Kyungsoo never allows anyone to see his home, and visiting someone else’s feels somehow significant. But why should it, when he visits mortals’ homes all the time? He’s putting too much meaning into something so simple, so commonplace.

“Sure,” he agrees nonetheless. He agreed to do this Junmyeon’s way, didn’t he. If preparing food from times past is what he wishes to do, then Kyungsoo shall oblige.

Not that he minds it, at all.

*****

Kyungsoo does his best to dress for the occasion, too. He doesn’t want Junmyeon to think he has no class, although his wardrobe is all too simple and well-worn for anything fancy. But at least they’ll be dining in his home, rather than at a restaurant- it takes off some of the pressure, while adds a whole different kind of stress. But he does his best to push that out of his mind, and just focus on the moment.
Junmyeon opens the door for him with a smile. “Glad you could make it,” he laughs as he steps aside to allow Kyungsoo in. “Welcome to my humble adobe.”

It’s anything but humble. The entire wall of the living room is made of glass, overlooking the city below; the furniture is sparse, but all very carefully selected, the bookshelves lined with old titles that certainly cost a fortune now, hundreds of years after their making. The art pieces and the like have also been very diligently collected, and the rugs are lush against Kyungsoo’s socked feet. The leather couch feels like nothing Kyungsoo has ever sat on before, and the pleasant smell of vanilla, wood, and whatever Junmyeon has cooking in the kitchen are such a pleasant mixture. Homey, but distant, somehow. Ideal, and as such too good to be true. It looks like an image from a magazine- and perhaps that’s what makes it feel that way; there’s no sense of this being an actual home, rather than just a very well decorated apartment.

“This reminds me of your home I saw when I came to collect your servant,” Kyungsoo muses as he looks around. Junmyeon hands him a glass of wine that Kyungsoo discreetly sets to the side; he doesn’t favor drinks like that, doesn’t prefer right now to get tipsy, but maybe he’ll take a sip or two later. “Rich, wealthy. Fit for a king.” It’s a polite way to probe for information- not a direct question, but a bold statement.

Junmyeon hums, takes a sip from his own glass, licks his lips. “Well, I suppose. Although that house is no more- it was very dear to me, but it was demolished. My servants tried their best to protect it, as I was gone overseas at the time, but in the end, nothing could be done. Such were the times, back then.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t know what times he’s referring to, but certainly, he can agree. Times are always bad, he thinks- people always suffer, people always lose. It’s never any different.

Just as he’s about to say something, he’s completely surprised to see someone suddenly walk out of the kitchen, busily wiping their hands on a hand towel. He’s tall, and broad- his face peculiar, but not in an ugly manner. Certainly, with his unique looks and even more unique physique, he’s caught the eyes of many; is he someone Junmyeon keeps here for his pleasure? The thought flashes through Kyungsoo’s mind uninvited, and has his cheeks coloring even though he’s left the wine alone.

“My lord, the food is almost done. Some items just have to cook a little while longer. Should I leave you to it, or should I stay and serve the food also?” The man only spares Kyungsoo a brief bow as he talks to Junmyeon, and Junmyeon is quick to wave him off.

“All is well. I’ll take care of the rest, thank you, Chanyeol. You may go. I’ll call upon you in the morning.” And the man nods, and is gone just as quickly as he had appeared. In, and out, just like that- barely even noticeable, barely memorable, if not for his outstanding height and facial features. Kyungsoo feels suddenly so out of place.

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“Who’s that?” Kyungsoo can’t help but ask, and Junmyeon flashes him a smile, this time a bit timid around the edges. Like he’s sharing a secret, but only reluctantly.

“My current servant. My big brother, as of now- until he’ll grow old enough to pass as an uncle. You see… When you live this long, you need an alibi. You need someone to take care of things that you can’t do- someone to help hide your identity. Someone you can trust. Someone who ages, someone who dies when you can’t.”

Kyungsoo cocks his head as he listens, and that seems like all Junmyeon needs to keep talking. “That servant that you collected, as you said. He’s… He was Chanyeol’s forefather, many generations ago. Their whole family line has been devoted to me, to serving me. I don’t deserve it, but I need them desperately. They take care of things when I have to disappear, they manage the businesses under
my name, they play the roles of family when I need them to. Without them, this would be an even lonelier existence— even if having to bid farewell to them, one by one, is one of the most difficult tasks in the world.”

And Kyungsoo now understands— why Junmyeon seemed so very attached to the man whose soul he took to the afterlife. This family, they’ve sworn their lives to the goblin, for whatever cause, and they’re probably his only companions who may know the truth about him. It’s… It’s touching, surprisingly, a word that Kyungsoo doesn’t use very often for anything.

“I see.” It’s all he can say, and Junmyeon just nods, gets up on his feet.

“I best tend to the food, now,,” he comments. “I wouldn’t want Chanyeol’s hard work to go to waste. Shall we dine at the dinner table, or shall I set it up here? We could sit on the floor, and eat at the coffee table. It’s low enough for that.”

“Dining table is fine,” Kyungsoo replies. “Unless you think being seated on the floor is crucial to the experience.”

Junmyeon laughs. “No, I don’t think it is,” he says. “Fine. Just give me ten minutes.”

Rather than being a cohesive meal, the dinner turns out to be a collection of different food items that don’t necessarily go together. Kyungsoo spots several main dishes on the table as he takes it in, and some of the side dishes seem like an ill fit— granted, though, some of these foods he’s actually never seen.

But then he takes a second to really look at it, take it all in, and the memories, like always, begin to come back.

“What a hodgepodge of things,” he says with a laugh as he sits down. “I’m fairly certain that you’re breaking some sort of culinary rules, here.”

“Possibly,” Junmyeon replies, as he takes a seat across from him. “But I didn’t want to leave anything out, either. I don’t want you to miss out on your own memories.”

“We must have been really close for you to know so much even about the foods I liked,” Kyungsoo comments, not meaning much by it, as he begins to dig in. But when he glances at Junmyeon again, he catches the expression of pure sadness that his words brought forward— even if Junmyeon is quick to hide it behind his usual smile, fragile as it is around the edges.

“You could say that, yeah,” Junmyeon murmurs, poking at his rice with his chopsticks. “Let’s just hope that all of the the flavors are right…”

“I’m sure they are,” Kyungsoo reassures him, shoveling food into his mouth to stop himself from saying anything else stupid. Baekhyun’s bad influence already rubbed on him, it seems.

But the truth is— he’s discovered much about his family life, about the sort of activities he used to do, both with and without Junmyeon, but the goblin hasn’t told him what their relationship was like. Except that he once cared for him very much, and was doing his best to keep him safe; yet that could mean a thousand different things.

Something about Junmyeon’s lingering sadness warns him that he’s not going to like the answer, once he receives it.

He’s quick to distract Junmyeon from this dangerous topic, quick to retell a story of Baekhyun’s most recent follies— he quite likes seeing Junmyeon smile, seeing him laugh, and although it is rare
that his dry humor can elicit such a reaction, it’s well worth it.

Junmyeon is much better at telling stories though, and the things he gets up to, the things he’s done, they’re far more intriguing; Kyungsoo could listen to him speak forever, just seated like this, in his apartment, eating delicious food and somehow, oddly, enjoying himself.

It’s nothing that’s even related to him, to his memories- but it’s still so very, very enjoyable, and it’s impossible to see it as a waste of time.

Junmyeon can be such pleasant company, and Kyungsoo realizes that he’s denied himself of such for far too long. He doesn’t know if he blocked out the world in a conscious effort or if he just grew tired of it after all this time, but somehow, he’s become cut off from everything; even spending time with his fellow grim reapers is too much, nowadays, and he always opts for the company of his own instruments rather than living beings. Yet here, talking to Junmyeon, listening to Junmyeon, he almost wishes he could do this more often- could enjoy something so simple as social interaction, and not worry about anything else.

To just connect with someone else. Even if there’s no point in making friends now- as soon as he rediscovers his old memories, he’ll learn to regret what he did, and then, he’ll be granted a way out of this existence. In essence, Junmyeon is helping him to move on, and as such… once this is over, there will be no more of this.

The thought of Junmyeon still being stuck like this is somehow so very painful.

unknown time in the past

“It’s going to be Chuseok soon,” Kyungsoo comments as Junmyeon walks him home from the buckwheat fields where they practice sword fighting. Junmyeon has begun to teach him the things he’s learnt in his military training, and although Kyungsoo lacks the physical strength that it requires, he finds it quite fun. It’s exhilarating to see Junmyeon like that, moving so swiftly, so confidently, to see him shaping into a man, into a soldier, instead of the boy he’s known for all his life.

“I suppose so.” Junmyeon kicks a pebble on the road, his voice immediately tense. And Kyungsoo knows why- it’s hard for the orphan boy to rejoice about such events, when people gather to pay their respects for their ancestors, and to celebrate a bountiful harvest. Even if the celebration is communal in the town, even if people are always generous after they’ve reaped the fruits of their hard labor and gladly give to those who are less fortunate, it must make him sad not to have a family of his own to celebrate it with. Kyungsoo understands that- and he wants to change that for him.

“Are you going to be at the base?” he cautiously asks. “Or do the soldiers get to go home?”

“We get to go home,” Junmyeon says, voice clipped. Guarded. “But I’ll stay there, I think. It’ll be nice to have a bit of peace and quiet, with everyone gone. And someone has to tend to the horses, I guess.”

Kyungsoo has to take a moment to gather his courage to propose his suggestion. “There could be a seat for you at our table,” he timidly says, wringing his hands together. “And we could go to the town center together, to play games with the others. There’s a group of dancers and entertainers coming to town, I heard… We could watch them together. If you wish.”

Junmyeon kicks another pebble, fiddles with the ribbon that holds his jacket fastened. “And what would your family say about an orphan at their table?” he asks. “Doesn’t that seem unfitting for
something such as Chuseok?"

“Well, you know my sister got married, and since she had a baby boy, she moved to another village with her husband to live with his parents. And mom misses her terribly and complains that the house feels empty now that they’re gone, so I think she would gladly have someone else there to fill in for them. I already talked to them, and they won’t mind.” It’s only half a lie- Kyungsoo had to spend a great deal of time persuading them to agree, but they eventually did. Becoming a soldier is by no means a respectable occupation, but at least Junmyeon’s devotion to serving the king is somewhat admirable- and there really are empty spaces around the table this year, so an addition is indeed welcome.

“Well, I suppose I could come. If the horses don’t need tending to.”

And they don’t, luckily for them. Kyungsoo feels so happy, seated by Junmyeon’s side at the table, stuffing his face with the Chuseok treats; the fruits, the fish so delicately prepared, the fresh kimchi, the crisp radish, the many special dishes his mother, grandmother, and sisters helped prepare. It all tastes even better watching Junmyeon stuff his cheeks with it too, watch how eagerly he eats it all- it’s almost better than eating it himself. And later that night, when they run to the town center to join everyone else, the big, round moon lighting up their way, and when Junmyeon takes his hand to tug him along faster, Kyungsoo swears that this is the happiest he’s ever been.

He never wants this feeling to go away. Junmyeon so happy by his side, his hand solid and warm in his, the air filled with magic and excitement- he wants to keep this, forever.

present day

The meal brings back so many memories that Kyungsoo needs several days to pick it all apart. The carefully made dumplings that they used to eat on special occasions, or when his mother wished to spoil him; the seaweed soup that his mother would serve for breakfast whenever it was someone’s birthday; the simpler dishes filled with pickled ingredients, eaten during the harsh winter months. All of it, so vivid in his mind now. The tastes, the smell of the cooking fire and the chatter at the table as they would eat together. The way his mother would stroke his hair and his father would encourage him to eat more so he’d grow. His siblings sitting close to him, their elbows knocking together as they would compete for their favourite parts of the meal.

The way he would share food with Junmyeon. Sitting on stones, warmed by the sun, next to the river and stuffing their faces with food- sometimes stolen by Junmyeon, sometimes prepared by Kyungsoo’s mother, sometimes food they would purchase at the market with their sparse coins.

Junmyeon smiling at him, lips shiny and fingers sticky with honey. Cheeks stuffed with steamed chestnuts, his favourite little snack, or fingers holding out slivers of broiled fish for Kyungsoo to take.

Junmyeon’s tender smile. His gentle touch, quiet words. The heat of his body next to his, as they would huddle closer together in cooler weather, Kyungsoo’s hands in between his as he would rub warmth back into them in the middle of eating.

And it’s those things that surprise him the most- he had expected only memories of his family, because who else he would have shared dinners with? Possibly even a family of his own, maybe; his wife, his children. But none of those come forth- it’s Junmyeon, always.

He can’t make any sense of it. Junmyeon wasn’t raised as part of his family, they were only
friends… Right?

Perhaps they were both lonely. Perhaps there was never no one else. He hasn’t remembered any other friends- hasn’t seen anyone else who would have been the same age as him. Maybe Junmyeon was his only friend, even his own siblings too old to bother with him all that much. Perhaps Junmyeon, the orphan boy, had no other children willing to play with him but Kyungsoo.

Maybe.

Yet it makes him wonder- why cannot he remember a wife? Children? Is it because Junmyeon has yet to trigger such memories, or is it because he never had any? He could have died young. Or, perhaps, his sins are related to his wife and children, and Junmyeon doesn’t wish for him to recall those just yet.

Does he just really have so many memories with Junmyeon, or is Junmyeon only letting him remember the ones he’s involved in himself?

Kyungsoo knows he’ll never get any closer to the answer like this, but his thoughts won’t leave him alone.

His confusion and doubts make him avoid seeing Junmyeon for a while. He doesn’t agree to meet him, always making up excuses- that he has to train Baekhyun, that he has too much work, that he can’t come. And Junmyeon never presses him for an answer, a promise, always ending the phone call or their text conversation with a quiet ‘alright’. Just that.

Something about that too rubs Kyungsoo the wrong way, and when the rain clouds roll over Seoul once more, he truly, truly loathes all of this.

At least he can try and pretend that this is just the regular rainy season, nothing else to it at all- no goblins who could be sad about something, once more.

Even Baekhyun picks up on his foul mood, as he won’t stop pestering Kyungsoo about it even when they’re supposed to be working. “But why are you so grumpy?” he asks for the umpteenth time that day, as they wait by the roadside. It’s early in the morning, the sun barely climbing above the horizon, and Kyungsoo can only hope that this job will be finished quickly- he cannot wait to get rid of his annoying companion. Why does he think he can stick his nose into other people’s business like this?

“Because I have to work with you,” is what he says, gruff, irritated, and it isn’t so far away from truth because the longer he spends with Baekhyun, the more worked up he gets. Knowing that the other grim reaper has done hardly anything to deserve this kind of behavior from him only agitates him further, the guilt nabbing at him and merely adding to the uncomfortable surge of negative emotion.

“But you were grumpy when you got here, before I even said anything.” Baekhyun isn’t so easily distracted, even as his head snaps back and forth as he eyes the highway. “So it can’t have been all my fault.”

“Yes it is,” Kyungsoo huffs, glances at his clock. If these souls would hurry along…

“I don’t believe that.” Baekhyun adjusts his hat slightly, then glances at Kyungsoo mischievously. “Are you having boy problems? Is that it?”

That makes Kyungsoo splutter. “Boy problems? The fuck do you mean?” And he probably looks quite homicidal, for Baekhyun side steps to get further away from him, out of his reach.
“Well, I’ve seen you with that handsome goblin, is all! And some ghosts were talking, I heard them, they said they’ve noticed- that there’s something going on, between the two of you! So I thought, maybe you guys are like, dating or something!”

“That is the single most stupid thing I’ve ever heard,” Kyungsoo deadpans. He shouldn’t be so surprised to hear that coming from Baekhyun, though, who seems to have approximately two brain cells on a good day, but ghosts are talking about it too? Uh oh. “I’m not romantically involved with some goblin! We’re not even friends!”

But the last sentence tastes like a lie on his tongue. He thinks back to how Junmyeon behaved when he visited him at his tearoom, the way they talked, the way he found comfort in sharing things with him… The way he’s begun to enjoy his company, the way he’s not just some goblin to him anymore- he’s Junmyeon, now, a person he knows… But how could Kyungsoo possibly care about him? He doesn’t care about anyone, he’s a grim reaper- having emotions, having feelings of attachment, it’s not possible for him.

Baekhyun shrugs his shoulders, still staying further away from him. “Well I mean, it was just a joke anyways- and I mean, you know, even if you hang out with him, so what! Even if you date him, who cares! Nothing wrong with a little romance, right?”

“We’re grim reapers, we do not fall in love,” Kyungsoo is ready to start a whole lecture on that, but he’s stopped by a sound of metal being crushed violently. Turning back towards the road, he sees the wreck, sees the people inside; the souls, they’re here.

He’s so, so relieved to get out of this situation, this conversation. Him and Junmyeon, dating? There’s no way. What kind of idiot would even spread such a rumor? And the more he thinks about it, the more annoyed he gets- he didn’t think it possible, the turmoil inside him already so out of hand, but this, this is just too much. It’s hard to even focus on his work, going through the motions, with his mind so preoccupied.

Him, dating? Ridiculous. Him dating a goblin? Outrageous. He would never. He could never. Why would anyone even say such a thing?

Kyungsoo is so, so annoyed, and what makes his frustration worse that there’s nothing he can do. He can just hope that the ghosts aren’t gossiping about him for real- what would he ever do, if the other grim reapers heard such an outlandish lie about him?

His annoyance is only multiplied when he arrives back at his apartment complex only to see a tall figure standing by the doorway, shielded from the rain by a large umbrella. It’s raining cats and dogs, and Kyungsoo is soaked to the bone, his shoes filled with water and his jacket dripping with it. It’s terribly humid and hot for such a garment, but he needed some form of protection from the torrential downpour- it’s been a long day, and he’d much prefer to just get to his apartment for a cup of hot sake, and not deal with Chanyeol right now. Because it is Chanyeol, there’s no question of that, that height is unmistakable even from a distance- and he knows that he’s here for a reason.

He’s certain that the human servant of the goblin cannot see him, with his hat still securely on his head, but Kyungsoo isn’t immaterial. He’s going to have to open the door to the complex to get inside, and surely Junmyeon has warned him for such tricks. Chanyeol is here, and Kyungsoo knows he has to at least talk to him, no matter how much he hates it. But at least he’d rather talk to him here, than have him follow him up to his actual apartment door.

He takes off his hat as he gets under the small awning providing the door with very little protection from the elements. Chanyeol smiles at him as though there’s nothing odd about a man appearing out of thin air, and Kyungsoo has to really grit his teeth not to say anything terribly harsh. It’s not the
man’s fault he’s been sent here, for whatever errand Junmyeon thought necessary.

“Junmyeon sent you. Why?” he asks, tone clipped. He wants to make it clear he’s not here for
pleasantries.

“He wanted me to deliver you something,” Chanyeol replies, and he reaches into the breast pocket of
his jacket to take out a small package. “Junmyeon wanted you to have this, and he wished me to tell
you that he’s ready for another excursion whenever you are. Have a pleasant day.” And he hands
over the small thing, wrapped nice and tidy in thick paper, before walking off—simple as that.
Perhaps Junmyeon had the foresight to warn him against Kyungsoo’s standoffish nature, as well.

Kyungsoo puts off opening the package as long as he can. Getting changed into dry clothes,
preparing his sake, sitting down on the floor to write a short report about the duties he carried out that
day. But the packet weighs heavy on his mind, much bigger than its actual size, and eventually, he
has to give in. Despite his apprehension about certain memories that have risen, he’s still curious,
desperately so, to know more about his past.

The paper feels so luxurious against his fingertips, the present so carefully wrapped. Inside the
wrapping, he finds two boxes, one bigger and one smaller. There are stains on the bigger box so
Kyungsoo opens that first, only to find a box of traditional treats inside—small songpyeon, sweet and
sticky rice cakes filled with different things, colored in beautiful pink, green, yellow, white, resting
on a bed of pine needles to stop them from sticking to the box.

Without thinking, he picks one up and places it on his tongue. Honey, chestnut, the faintest hint of
the pine—and he recalls a body pressed against his, words spoken hurriedly, fingers pressed together
as he passes a small bowl of these treats to him, knows that they’re his favourite and he wants him to
have some, feels his heart race so, so wildly—And he forces himself to snap out of it, scared to see the
memory to its end. To see where it could lead.

His hands are shaking minutely as he opens the second box, much smaller in size. Inside, the item is
wrapped in a sheet of white cotton that he unravels ever so carefully, cautious of what might be
hidden in it. But when he finally unfolds the fabric all the way, all that falls on his hand is a simple
hair pin, tongkot, meant for holding a man’s topknot together. It’s made of bone, carefully carved at
one end into a simplified flower motif and ever so slightly sharpened at the other. It’s a beautiful
accessory, although rather simple, and humble as well. Kyungsoo has seen these things made out of
jade, precious metals—but somehow, the bone in his hand weighs much more than any gem ever
could.

15th century

It’s so easy to recognize the goblin each and every time. Even though clothes change, even though
centuries pass—there’s one thing constant about him, and that is his hair.

“Why do you not ever wear your hair in a topknot, like everyone else? Is the long ponytail not
bothersome to you?” Kyungsoo eyes the thing with slight disdain. It’s so unruly, and it makes the
goblin stick out so much. It’s almost as though he wants to be recognized for it—what a foolish
immortal he is. Shouldn’t he be more cautious of hiding?

It’s Seollal, the day of the new year, and Kyungsoo ran into the goblin once more in the midst of
celebration. The mortals are so keen on celebrating the beginning of something new, even though
Kyungsoo finds it odd they would rejoice the passing of time—but perhaps they’re not as aware of
how little time they have here as Kyungsoo is. Perhaps they do not worry, foolish as they are.
But days and nights like this are good for the immortals. Special times when anything is possible—
even for a grim reaper to make small talk with a goblin.

The goblin flashes him a joyless smile. They’re both huddled next to a fire, the goblin nursing a cup
of something that Kyungssoo suspects to be liquor. It’s getting late, and most of the mortals have gone
back to their homes. But the gods, they know no rest. The skies are clear above them, their breaths
coming out in white puffs of steam, the snow around them crispy white. Even Kyungssoo, with his
limited powers, can feel the closeness of something meaningful tonight.

“I have my reasons,” the goblin murmurs, and takes a slow sip from his cup. “You shouldn’t concern
yourself too much with it.”

It’s not like him to be so grumpy, but that only makes Kyungssoo more intrigued. “No, tell me;” he
presses. “Or is it just something you do out of vanity? Are you embarrassed to admit to such folly?”

The goblin glares at him, before he sighs, his form deflating as though something heavy was placed
on his shoulders. “I cannot tie my hair up like that, for it reminds me of someone I once held dear;”
he murmurs, twirling the contents of his cup around. The fire crackles, sparks fly up towards the dark
sky. “This special someone gifted me my first tongkot, when I became a man. I wore it with pride,
each and every day… Riding into battle… But then, when I lost that person, all it became was a
painful reminder of what I once had. What I had lost forever. I cannot replace it with another, and I
cannot use it either… So I let my hair fall down like this, instead.”

It’s such a grim story, and for a moment, Kyungsoo doubts if it could be real. If the trickster god
could actually be so affected by a tragedy… Yet he remembers witnessing his pain, his sadness, with
his sword struck through his chest, and he remembers the pity he felt then. The compassion.

The goblin is not here out of his own choice. Of course he’s known pain, in his life.

But that doesn’t mean that he has any words of comfort to say. What could he possibly utter that
would make it any better? Centuries spent with grieving mortals, and he has learnt nothing.

“I see. Well… If that is the case, I understand. But would your beloved not rather you use it, to
remember them by? Would they rather not be remembered, and perhaps, with time, have that pain
fade into something less bitter?” It is all he can muster, but the goblin shakes his head, hunching even
further down.

“No,” he whispers, fingers now clutching at the cup in his hands. “No, I don’t think so… And what
does it matter, when he will never know of it… He’ll never know how I feel…”
And that is true. For in death, all is forgotten.

It was foolish of him to suggest otherwise.

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unknown time in the past

Kyungssoo has spent so long preparing his gift. Acquiring the bone was simple enough, polishing it
too, even if tedious- but carving it, now that he isn’t so sure. He’s familiar with wood, knows how to
manipulate it to his own will, but bone, this is new. But he knows he cannot make his gift from
wood, for that would be too cheap- he wants Junmyeon to have something nice, for once in his life,
something that says that Kyungssoo cares.

Cares so very, very much.
He spends days working on it, perfecting it. Carving the sharp point first, figuring out the material, how it behaves underneath his knife, his tools. Regrets his mistakes and rejoices his victories, as it slowly takes shape, becomes what he imagined it being. Yet that doesn’t make him any less nervous, moving onto the decorative part- he cannot make any mistakes, but how to choose something that Junmyeon would like? How to choose something fitting for a soldier, a man?

He ponders upon it for a long time, before he realizes what he needs to do. He has to forget about such titles, for before anything else, Junmyeon is… Junmyeon. He’s someone Kyungsoo knows better than the back of his own hands, someone he’s grown up with, someone who he holds so very dear. He knows what Junmyeon would like- not a man, not a soldier, but Junmyeon.

So he chooses a flower, for he knows how much Junmyeon cherishes everything beautiful. How much he loves the flowers, how happy he is when they bloom in the spring.

It ends up far from perfect, much too simple to his liking, but Kyungsoo knows that there’s a limit to his talent; as much as he wants Junmyeon to only have the best, the best there is, for now this will have to suffice. Perhaps Kyungsoo can buy him a prettier tongkot when he goes to Hanseong next- he’s been saving up his money, and he would be happy to splurge on Junmyeon.

He deserves only the best.

But perhaps, his own handiwork is going to be more special than anything he could have bought. It’s one of a kind, at least, and made with great care, and attention, and… and love. So much love that Kyungsoo is almost bursting with it, waiting for when the tongkot will be finished, waiting for the day when he can finally give it to Junmyeon.

He steals a moment just for them for that purpose, taking Junmyeon to the field of buckwheat flowers where they’ve spent hours, days, weeks practicing sword fighting- where they’ve tumbled and rolled on the ground, where they’ve sat sweaty and tired, talking, sharing secrets with one another. It’s their special space, their place to hide from prying eyes, and there’s no better place to give Junmyeon this gift.

Junmyeon looks so dashing in his clothes. Taller, more serious, the weapons he carries only adding to that aura. But when he smiles, Kyungsoo can still see the boy in him- the one he grew up with, the one he grew to cherish so much. No matter how much they’ve both grown, no matter how much their paths have diverged, they’re still the same, deep down.

“I wanted to give you something,” Kyungsoo says, shy, holding the item behind his back so Junmyeon wouldn’t see. “Before you have to leave. I thought… I felt that I should. So you would have something to remember me by.”

That makes Junmyeon laugh, even if there’s also sadness mixed with the sound. “Silly, how could I ever forget you?” he says so easily. Words have always come readily to him- unlike to Kyungsoo, who has to search for them, sometimes fight for them. He truly was born for music, rather than poetry.

“Yes, but I wanted something more concrete than just the memory of me,” Kyungsoo carries on as bravely as he can. “Something you could look at every single day, and think of me… Think of me, back here, in our hometown, waiting for you. Hoping that you’ll return soon.”

“I’ll think of you every single day, regardless of what you give me,” Junmyeon murmurs, taking a step closer now. “You’re so funny, thinking that a day could go by without me remembering you, my dearest friend… You really do not understand how dear I hold you to my heart, Kyungsoo.”

“And I hold you very dear, too, hyungnim,” Kyungsoo whispers back. Their closeness makes his
heart flutter, his breaths come a little quicker. Like the wings of a small bird, caught in a cage. “I cherish you so much, and I will miss you tremendously… So I wanted to give you something. To send a piece of me with you, wherever you may go. Please, accept it.”

And he holds out the small gift, wrapped in a piece of fabric that he stole from his mother’s chest. Junmyeon glances at him, then at his hands, before taking the bundle from him, and ever so carefully pries it open. The bone is only a little bit different in color than the white linen it’s wrapped in, and Junmyeon’s skin is only so slightly different, when he traces a finger over the accessory to touch it-hours spent in the sun haven’t changed him, somehow, as weird as it is; Kyungsoo tans the second the sun kisses his skin, but Junmyeon has always been different in that regard.

“You made this yourself?” Junmyeon’s voice is but a whisper, his eyes wide when he meets Kyungsoo’s gaze once more. “You made this for me?”

“Yes,” Kyungsoo bashfully admits. “Yes, yes I did.”

“You are right, I will remember you by this every single day, for I’ll put it in my hair every morning, and take it out every evening,” Junmyeon promises, carefully squeezing it in his fist. “Kyungsoo… I will miss you so much, I do not have the words for it. I do not wish to go… I do not wish to leave. But I fear that I have no choice… Such is the part of a soldier, I suppose.”

Kyungsoo takes his hands, holds them tightly in his. They’re both trembling, but he chooses not to say anything. Chooses not to say anything about the tears they’re both now shedding. “It is alright,” he whispers. “It’s… I’ve made peace with it. For as long as you come back safely… I’ll wait for the magpies every day, to bring me the good news of your return. I’ll watch them, fatefully, waiting… And eventually, they shall bring me the message of my soldier coming back to me.”

After that, there are no words, just their lips pressed together, their mouths moving against one another, arms wrapped around each other. For all that can be said has already been said- for all that can be done, has been completed.

The kiss burns, travels down to Kyungsoo’s very core, marks him, changes him- after this, there will be no return. There will be no one else for him but Junmyeon, his brave soldier, his tiger, protective and good. And he will wait, no matter how long it takes.

He will wait, for he will never want another like he wants Junmyeon.

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present day

Kyungsoo snaps out of the vivid memory like coming up for air after diving for far too long. His whole body is shivering, his limbs suddenly weak, and as he sinks down on the floor of his apartment, clutching the bone tongkot in his hand so hard that the sharp point digs into his skin painfully, he realizes that he’s crying. Tears fall down his cheeks in a steady stream, uninvited as they are, and somehow, he feels so violated. This overwhelming sadness is something he never asked for, didn’t know that was waiting for him- he wasn’t prepared for it, and it feels unfair, somehow, even if all he wanted was to recover his old memories.

But why is it so sad to remember how much he once loved Junmyeon? What else is there, that he still doesn’t know?

And he remembers Junmyeon’s bleak warning- that he wouldn’t be happy to remember. That he wouldn’t want to know these things.
Staring at the tongkot still on his palm, it all feels so surreal. But he remembers it now- the process of carving it, giving it to Junmyeon, their first kiss. Junmyeon’s words about how tying his hair up is too much of a painful memory now.

But now, he’s sent it to Kyungsoo. Why is that? Why would he?

It seems as though that the more he learns about his past, the more questions he has.

Junmyeon is waiting for him when he gets to his apartment not long after. Despite his exhaustion, he needs to know- he needs to understand, and Junmyeon seems to have guessed that this is how it would go. He opens the door for Kyungsoo with a blank expression, but in it, Kyungsoo reads nervousness, anxiety, in part mirroring some of what Kyungsoo is feeling as well.

He gives the tongkot back to Junmyeon wordlessly. “I don’t think I should have it,” he says, watching closely how gingerly Junmyeon holds the item in his hand. “I… I made it for you, didn’t I. I don’t want to have it.”

Junmyeon nods in understanding, but continues to hold the item like it could hurt him at any given moment. “So you remember.” It’s not a question- he knows that Kyungsoo knows.

“I do. As soon as I saw it… I knew. And I guess… I guess you’ve been hinting at this, for a long time. It just… It just never crossed my mind. That I would have… loved you, at one point.” It feels crazy to even say it now; that he would have loved the goblin, once upon a time. That that’s the fate tying them together.

Lovers.

In all of his centuries as a grim reaper, Kyungsoo has never had a partner. He knows some grim reapers date, love- but even if some do it, it’s still taboo. Baekhyun was trying to bring it up to him, but Kyungsoo didn’t even wish to discuss it. It’s never been something he’s even thought of. Loving a mortal would only result in pain, and loving an immortal? That just seemed too dangerous.

But he’s known love. He’s felt love- for Junmyeon.

Remembering it, knowing that it was in the past- even now, as he looks at him, he can feel the tendrils of that lukewarm love curl around his heart. A phantom feeling, long since dead; yet it’s there, somehow, although he’s quick to push it back down.

He isn’t supposed to love.

“You did. And I loved you, very, very much,” Junmyeon says quietly, walking up to the window to stare outside. His shoulders are drawn high and his lips are pressed together in a tight line, hands restless; he doesn’t find this easy, even if it was his own decision to bring this to the light. “All that time ago… In a different life.”

“Is that why… Is that why you kept showing up? Is that why you got close to me, through all this time? Because I always wondered what kind of connection we could have that we kept running into one another… Were you doing it on purpose?” It all makes sense even before Junmyeon nods to answer him- why he would see the goblin so often, why the goblin would act towards him the way that he always has.

And it makes sense now why Junmyeon has been so pained. Kyungsoo cannot even imagine… realizing that his lover has been reborn as a grim reaper, only then to discover that Kyungsoo has completely forgotten him? There’s hardly anything crueler than that.
“I’m sorry.” It’s the only thing that makes any sense to say- Kyungsoo can’t fix anything, can’t turn back time, but he does feel sorry. Sorry that Junmyeon had to endure such a thing. But he must have ceased to love him eventually… Right?

Somehow, he doesn’t have the courage to ask that.

Junmyeon’s fingers curl around the tongkot into a fist, and for a moment, he’s silent, simply watching the city below. “It’s… It’s not your fault,” he murmurs, but there’s tension there that Kyungsoo doesn’t quite understand. “I guess… I guess it was just a part of my punishment. To be the only one to remember it. To watch you and follow you through centuries, through millennia, knowing that you would never know me. And if it was… then perhaps it’s part of my salvation that you finally know the truth. That you finally remember.”

Salvation. It’s what Kyungsoo has been looking for, in all of this, and he had never even thought about Junmyeon’s- but perhaps, he is right. Perhaps, this is a sign of the end, for the both of them.

If not a happy ending, then at least a painless one, if Kyungsoo would dare to ask for anything.

“I’m… I’m relieved to know this part of my story.” Relieved, because at least one mystery has been explained. Certainly not happy, however, for it’s obvious that there’s still much to unearth here. “Thank you for showing me… Thank you for letting me remember.”

Junmyeon shakes his head slowly. “You shouldn’t thank me,” he murmurs, raising his other hand to trail his fingertips along the glass. “You don’t know the bad parts yet… And once you do, I don’t know if gratitude is something you’ll feel towards me.”
Chapter 5

late 16th century

Chaos. Utter and complete chaos where the only ones victorious are the ones who are dead. Kyungsoo, in all his life, has never seen anything like this- couldn’t even imagine a carnage such as this.

He thought the Mongol invasions were bad. He thought that the wars they waged north were bad. He thought that he had seen it all, yet all-out war with the invading Japanese force is something out of a nightmare. Villages are burning, people are left for dead, towns are captured and any kind of order completely overturned; the fact that even Hanseong has fallen speaks enough for the severity of the crisis. Yet he’s seen so little of the dynasty’s soldiers- who is fighting for the people? Who is trying to defend them? Or have they been completely abandoned, once more, to fend for themselves, while powers that be hide to wait for the storm to pass?

It’s infuriating, and his rage is not at all quelled by the souls he takes to the afterlife by the dozens, hundreds. It’s dizzying, knowing that this is all because of the folly of the rulers, of people hungry for power with no consideration for those who stand in the way of their plans. He’s never understood it, that kind of ambition; has never felt anything like it.

Perhaps he’s just not human enough.

In a moment of sheer emotional exhaustion, Kyungsoo climbs up all the way to the southern mountain. Just to be away from it all for a moment. The past few days haven’t been as severe, for after the initial capture of the city, things calmed down somewhat. Mostly, now, people are just unsure and afraid, with no direction; who is their new ruler? Who should they obey, and trust? Are the Japanese here to stay, or will they be driven out eventually? Can they carry on with their lives, or should they continue to hold their breaths?

Kyungsoo doesn’t know. He cannot see the future, and he’s kept in the dark just like the mortals are. That, too, is infuriating, that he cannot see the outcome of all this. Can’t see the greater picture, only the suffering of these people, all of the unnecessary deaths. If he wasn’t left equally lost as these poor people are… perhaps, this wouldn’t feel so tiring, and meaningless. But as it is, he has no comfort, no hope of this ever ending.

He knows that it will. Things always calm down. War and chaos, although quite natural for the man kind, are not a status quo that they can maintain. If not for anything else, peace is needed for food, for children; for without both, the mortals would perish for good.

It just feels so bleak right now.

He reaches the top of the mountain, the shrine there abandoned. And looking down at the city below, there’s a sense of irony to this- the mountains are meant to protect the city, and the people in it. It is the sole reason why the city has been built like this, surrounded by the high peaks. Yet they could
not stop the menace that arrived from the ocean, sailed up the river, and ransacked the city so quickly, so easily.

“Are you not the protectors of this land?” he asks out loud, although expecting no answer of any kind. “Are you not supposed to provide safety for all of these people? Are you not the fearsome tigers that ward off evil beings?”

The forest around him is silent.

“Or if you, too, have abandoned us… Then can you not crumble down the ground, and disappear, so that your shape wouldn’t mock us from the horizon every time we glance up?”

“You have such mighty demands for such a powerless being,” a voice startles him, yet even in his surprise, he recognizes it immediately- the goblin.

The goblin is perched on top of the shrine, his hair still falling freely down his back as usual, but his clothes seem a little tattered, bloodied. He appears pale, and on his face, Kyungsoo reads a sense of exhaustion similar to what he feels as well. His sword lies by his side, as though he’s ready to jump into a fight, the blade of it darkened by blood. Kyungsoo shudders just thinking about how the red substance smeared the weapon like so.

“I am just frustrated,” he replies, redirecting his gaze back to the skyline. “I am just… so tired, of watching people die. Where are the gods now, I wonder… Where have they gone, or is this just a punishment for them all?”

“Well, I haven’t gone anywhere,” the goblin comments grimly. “I haven’t rested ever since those pirates and pesky soldiers set foot on our land- I have been trying to fend them off, gather up troops wherever I could find them. I don’t know where the other tigers are, but I am here. I’m trying.”

That makes Kyungsoo look at him again, take in all of the details again. If the goblin has truly been fighting all this time… The invasions have gone on and off again, like tidal waves, for some years now. If the goblin has been part of the resistance ever since day one, well, that would explain why Kyungsoo has seen so little of him.

“I admire you for your brave effort,” is the best form of gratitude he can muster. “But I don’t believe that you, a goblin, can win a fight if it has been set to motion by someone far greater than either of us. Yet at least you’re doing your part, even if it’s in vain.”

“I was made to pay for my sins,” the goblin says, and his sigh feels as deep as the centuries they’ve both lived through. “To pay for the souls I took without any right. I was made a protector… and the soldier in me doesn’t know how to put down my sword. I cannot die, so I have nothing to lose- but I will fight as long as I can, to save whoever I can. Even if it isn’t this country, this dynasty, I’ll fight to save these people.”

It’s a fight that will never end, one that will never give any satisfaction of knowing that it’s over- so, much like Kyungsoo’s own task in life. He, too, is enslaved to a thankless job that has no end point. But what he’s doing, is only collecting the harvest of these hardships; at least the goblin is trying to do his part, trying to fulfill his destiny.

Kyungsoo and the other grim reapers often fault him for not taking his punishment seriously, but right now, Kyungsoo couldn’t make such a claim. Clearly, he is devoted, even when he knows that all has been lost.

“Soldier’s pride and honor,” he says quietly, watching as the sun slowly goes down. Even the red
hues of sundown remind him of calamity now, the light like blood spilled upon the scenery itself. “I suppose you’re the tiger, then. You’re here, to protect.”

“I am.” The goblin says this grimly, yet with serious conviction. This is no laughing matter. “Till the end of my punishment… till the end of time.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t say anything, doesn’t wish for his words to read like a promise- but he knows he, too, will be here. Forever.

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present time

“Can I touch your sword?” Kyungsoo isn’t quite sure what compels him to ask that now, but it’s something he’s been curious about for a long time. Junmyeon’s sword- a magical item, something that defies all laws of natural and supernatural. It’s real and it’s not real, it’s stuck in his chest and it isn’t. And sure, while he’s seen it on many occasions, he wants to actually see it. Feel it.

Junmyeon’s eyes are wary, as he looks up at Kyungsoo. They’re both perched on the rooftop once more, watching the sun go down, the shadows growing and the neon lights shining all the brighter. The roar of traffic is a pleasant white noise in the background, the wind caressing Kyungsoo’s face tenderly like it’s greeting him from its travels to faraway places. It makes him think about Minseok briefly- how is he doing? What has he been up to?

“I’m not… I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Junmyeon looks away, tosses his beer can into the distance. Kyungsoo has his cup of warm sake, not that the humid summer weather warrants such a drink; it’s just a peculiar affection for the drink, and now, having discovered that a lot of his preferences stem from his human life, he wonders if he’ll discover what made him like this drink. He hopes it’ll be a cozy tale.

“Why? I just want to see it from up close. I’ve seen it from afar so many times that I’m kind of burning with curiosity. Can I please see it?”

Junmyeon shakes his head, and he’s quick to open another can of beer. Except Kyungsoo knows he could drink two dozen of those, and it would do him no harm- apparently goblins have an innate, impressive alcohol tolerance. He can’t decide if he is lucky or unlucky for it.

“What if I don’t want you to see it?” Junmyeon counters after a moment of silence. “What if I don’t want you to. It’s quite personal, honestly. It’s the closest thing to my heart.” His laughter is quite humorless, and Kyungsoo can only muster a timid smile in return.

“Please, Junmyeon.”

Another moment of silence passes between them, before Junmyeon sighs heavily. “Why is it that I cannot say no to you?” he mutters under his breath, but before Kyungsoo has time to comment on that, the sword materializes right in his hand. There’s no mannerisms, no magical chants, it just appears out of thin air, as though it had been there the entire time, only concealed somehow. But Kyungsoo is the master of invisibility, and he knows that the sword doesn’t fully exist on this plane.

Junmyeon holds it out for him to see almost haphazardly, downplaying how nervous he is by acting haughty and disinterested. But Kyungsoo isn’t paying much mind to this, his eyes immediately drawn to the blade, how it shimmers in the waning light. It appears silver but he knows it cannot be made from such soft metal, and it bears no signs of being hundreds, thousands of years old.

“This is the sword you had, when we were human,” he comments. He’s seen it in his human
memories- hanging in its sheath by Junmyeon’s side. The decorative handle, with a strip of leather wrapped around it for better grip, the width and length of it; it’s familiar, even if also new at the same time.

“It is. It is my own sword, that would be the weapon to kill me.” Junmyeon lets go of it when Kyungsoo grips it, although with his hand poised in the air, Kyungsoo can tell he’s ready to tear it out of his grasp at any moment. “It is a fine weapon. It has served me well.”

Kyungsoo is barely listening now. Something is pulling him in- something is urging him to hold onto the hilt of it, grasp it in his hand like a soldier would. But when he does it, it doesn’t feel right, and instead, he changes his grip; instead of holding it upwards, ready to strike, he holds it so that it points downwards at his feet.

His breath seizes and his knees buckle, as the memory engulfs him, so painful and so traumatic that it feels like a chokehold around his chest, so tight that it could crush bones.

Junmyeon’s body, limp and pale, dirtied with blood and mud. The rain beating down on them heavy, suffocating, but not able to wash away none that, the blood having clotted into a thick mass, staining Junmyeon’s clothes. Junmyeon’s eyes unseeing, his mouth open and his teeth also smeared with red. The smell of the wet earth, buckwheat, and also something heavy, rotten, disgusting- and his hands, attempting to pull the sword out of Junmyeon’s chest, but it’s not budging, stuck somewhere, somehow, the noises it makes as he tries to pull on it absolutely vile. No matter how hard he tries to pull it, it won’t move, not even an inch, simply jerking Junmyeon’s dead body around, the weight of him painful and the knowledge of what he’s doing like a blade being struck through his own heart.

His tears mixing with the rain, his hands quickly tiring of his helpless task. The leather on the handle of the sword now stained with blood, the darkness growing thicker around them as moments pass. But no matter how he struggles, he cannot pull the sword free from Junmyeon’s body- no matter how hard he tries, it won’t come free, won’t let him forget the terrible, terrible way that his lover has been killed and thrown away like a dead dog.

The sound of his own screams, as he yells his frustration and sorrow out loud, the sound ripping through him almost violently in its haste to come out.

And then hands, lifting him up, holding him upright- no, no, these hands are real, these hands are concrete, not part of this wicked memory. Kyungsoo blinks, realizes that he is crying, and when his eyes focus, he’s staring right back at Junmyeon who’s holding him up by the arms, calling his name, trying to get his attention.

“Kyungsoo? Kyungsoo, what is the matter? Talk to me!” The panic in his voice is real, harsh, terrifying, and Kyungsoo struggles to tear himself free from the web of that memory. To fully come back to the present moment, the here and now. What is real- but no. That image, that scene, it was once real, as well. But now, it was so long ago… yet his heart and soul are hurting, aching, still trembling with the aftershocks of it.

Junmyeon helps him to sit down on the concrete, his hands still on his body to make sure he stays upright. Apparently he fell, when the memory hit him- it has never been so powerful before, but the things he’s recalled have all been rather benign and harmless. Nothing has hurt him like this, nothing prepared him for this.

The sword is no longer there, and he’s glad for it for he wouldn’t wish to see it right now.

“What is the matter, Kyungsoo? Tell me, please. What happened?”

The words do not come so easy. There’s no way to describe what he saw, what he felt in that
moment; for his human self, who loved Junmyeon so dearly, could hardly even fathom the loss of his lover in such a violent way. To give sound and expression to what he just witnessed, it isn’t so simple.

He realizes then that what he’s going to tell him, will be news to Junmyeon as well. For he was dead, when that memory was created. He wouldn’t have known of it, at all.

“I saw you deceased,” is what he chooses to say. And it really shouldn’t be so awful, for he has seen plenty of corpses in the past, killed in the most horrific ways. Yet this is different. This is someone he cared about, in a time when death wasn’t so common place for him. “I saw… I saw your dead body, Junmyeon. I was trying to pull the sword free, take it out, but I couldn’t. It was stuck, somehow.” His voice wavers, and he loathes it. “It must have been soon after you were killed, for there was no real signs of decay.”

Junmyeon shudders, his eyes closed. The image must hurt him too, even if he only has the sparse details that Kyungsoo just told him. “I’m… I’m so sorry,” he whispers, and his voice is brittle as well. “I didn’t… I didn’t know. I didn’t know you saw me like that… I didn’t know you had such a memory of me, of the sword. Had I known… I would have never given it to you.”

But Kyungsoo shakes his head, even if he’s still reeling with the impact of it. “No, it’s my memory, I wanted to have it,” he hastily says, and it is true. He’s become greedy to find out more, to collect all of his memories; he wants them all, every single detail. Even if it hurts.

“Even so… That is not something that you should have to remember.” Junmyeon pulls away from him, curls in on himself as though physically pained. Perhaps he is- Kyungsoo cannot see his sword at the moment, not even the magical swirls that surround it, but it could be hurting him. It has in the past, when he has gotten emotional about something.

“It’s… It is alright. I’ll be alright. I just have to think about it.” Although what will that change? Yet, there’s nothing else he can think of saying.

On Junmyeon’s face, he can read how it provides him no comfort at all. And although Junmyeon tries to persuade him to stay, insisting that it doesn’t feel right to let him go, let him be alone after something so dramatic, Kyungsoo leaves the apartment soon after. It’s just too much, right now, to watch Junmyeon alive while the memory of him dead plays in his mind, over and over again. It’s not even the vision itself, but the pain associated with it; for he has never grieved a death in his life, has never felt anything watching mortals die except sadness at the general state of things. Deaths in vain are always a burden to witness; unnecessary deaths of masses of people, when they’re in no way guilty of the circumstances, causes, actions. But this is different- this is an individual death, and tragic as it is, that alone shouldn’t warrant this kind of reaction.

It’s his human emotions that are getting to him. His human memories of a love long lost.

He lies in his bed that night, sleep avoiding him no matter how hard he tries to switch his brain off and fall asleep. The weight of the covers on top of him is usually so comforting, but right now, he feels as though he’s suffocating; the images of deceased Junmyeon flash through his mind over and over again, even bringing him to tears despite how much he tries not to give in to it. Eventually, he gets up, and leaves to go to his tearoom, the only place where he can think of finding peace.

The sleepless night leaves him weary, leaves him brittle, and although he works with determination, washing his cups and arranging his tea supply neatly, wiping down every surface and brushing away every bit of dirt, his thoughts refuse to quiet. His mind, and most importantly his heart, just won’t let go of that haunting memory.
And if it affects him this much now, he cannot even fathom how badly it must have broken him when it first happened.

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unknown time in the past

Ever since Junmyeon’s departure from their hometown, Kyungsoo has mostly devoted his waking hours to his work. There’s nothing else for him to do, to fill up the emptiness; he misses him so tremendously, yet he has nothing but the memories of days past to keep him company. Yet somehow, thinking back to those happier days, he feels all the lonelier. Bitter that life had to separate them like this, when their love story has only just begun.

“Do not dwell too much in sad thoughts,” Junmyeon had warned him before his departure, cupping Kyungsoo’s cheeks in his calloused hands with a tenderness that no ordinary soldier could possess. But he had always been much too sensitive for this choice in occupation. “Do not let sadness consume you, my love. When I return, I do not wish to see you aged by longing or grief. I want to see you just how you are right now. Happy, and content. Your smile is the most precious thing to me.”

“Then you cannot age from loneliness and hardship either,” Kyungsoo had murmured back to him, stepping closer to him to feel the warmth of his body closer to his. “I do not wish to see you return as an old man. I just want my hyungnim, my Junmyeon. Please. Please come back, just as you are right now, so I won’t spend all this time holding the memory of you in my heart only to have that image shattered upon your return.”

Junmyeon had kissed him, then, the corners of his mouth tilting upwards even if his eyes remained sad. “War and battle might be too much for me,” he had said. “I do not know if it’ll be possible for me to remain unchanged… But I will try, so you would recognize me upon my return.”

But it’s hard not to be sad. Kyungsoo doesn’t know where Junmyeon is, what he’s doing; Junmyeon cannot send him letters for he’s illiterate, and Kyungsoo himself knows only the barest of basics. And even if they could write to each other, sending such letters back and forth would be difficult, if not impossible- and hence, they’re doomed to complete isolation from one another.

It makes Kyungsoo regret not having told Junmyeon about his feelings earlier. They could have had more time, if they hadn’t waited so long to confess… So many more intimate moments they could have had, so many tender words of love they could have spoken.

He buries himself in his work, earning praise from his father and some concerned looks from his mother. But it’s only for the best, for interest in their instruments is climbing; a lot of prominent scholars have moved nearby from the capital, for what reason Kyungsoo doesn’t know, and they all seem eager to sponsor and purchase their gayageums, haegeums. He’s only glad, because it allows him to work from dusk till dawn, endlessly, until his hands and fingers hurt and his back aches from being hunched over all day. Even collecting the raw materials is hard work, yet he doesn’t shy away from it either; at least the overwhelming exhaustion allows him to sleep dreamlessly, without thoughts of Junmyeon haunting him even in his slumber.

There’s one scholar in particular, who’s well interested in their art, in their craft. He comes by very often, visiting their humble home despite his father insisting that he shouldn’t, for it’s no place for a noble man like him. That if he wishes to discuss something, he should just call upon him, instead; it would be his honor, to serve him, spare him the trouble of having to come all this way.

Yet the man never listens. He still visits them, often dropping in as though he had just been walking
by; but Kyungsoo knows that their home is so far away from everything that the scholar could possibly be heading to or from. There is no way that his visits could be just casual, meaningless, unplanned. No one strays this far on accident.

The man always speaks to him, as well. Always addresses him directly, even when his father is right there. Asks him questions, about this and that- about his age, when he’s going to marry- always questions about marriage, in fact, which Kyungsoo finds rather puzzling. What is to him, when he’s planning on doing such a thing? But he knows his father would cane him if he was rude to the man, so he just fakes a smile, fakes a noncommittal answer, and leaves the workshop, if he possibly can.

If only he could write to Junmyeon, tell him about his days, he would also write about the noble man and his obnoxious visits, how stupidly enamored his own father is with the attention. They could laugh at the foolishness of the man together, mock him together, and then forget all about him. But Kyungsoo can do no such thing, now, can only keep these stories in his heart to share with Junmyeon whenever he returns.

If he returns. Kyungsoo knows that is the terrible reality of it- whatever calamity Junmyeon is partaking in could take his life. Could have him dead, and Kyungsoo wouldn’t even know about it. That’s what is so frightening- Junmyeon doesn’t have any family, so the news of his death would be brought to no one. How would Kyungsoo find out if he lives or dies, if he hears nothing from him?

Sometimes, it keeps him up at night. Has him praying to all gods he knows by name; the powerful Buddha, the all-knowing Samshin, the gods in the mountains and the gods in the rivers, his own ancestors who might be able to protect Junmyeon somehow. He doesn’t know if it’ll really help, if any of these deities would care enough to protect an orphan like Junmyeon, but it’s all he can do.

All he can do is wait, and look for the magpies that would bear the good news.

But in the midst of trying to live through his longing for his lover, in the midst of burying himself with his work for something to take his mind off things, he misses the whispered conversations his parents share. He misses real meaning behind the noble man’s visits, although no one could blame him; who would have guessed that he was dropping in so frequently because he wished for an arrangement to be made?

Why would such a prominent, well-established man wish to marry his daughter off to a man like Kyungsoo?

And that is the first thought that crosses his mind when his parents finally relay the news to him. The shock shakes him to his very core, leaves him speechless, and the only thought in his mind is ‘why’. Why would he marry his daughter to a son of an instrument maker, no matter how renowned and skillful? Even if he has many daughters and many sons, why waste even one of them in such a low and meaningless marriage?

“I don’t want to marry her,” Kyungsoo says, but he knows it means nothing. It’s not his decision to be made, not anymore. His parents have already agreed to it. The agreement has been made, behind his back, and he doesn’t get to say this or that about it. Of course his parents would jump at the opportunity; it’s a step up on the social ladder, if not for them then for Kyungsoo, and his children. To have ties to a yangban family, that is important, far more important than just instruments.

“I don’t want to marry her. I love another,” Kyungsoo whispers when he’s left alone, later. Whispers to himself, because he knows it’s a secret he cannot say out loud. “I love Junmyeon… It’s him I want, not anyone else.”

The wedding is set to take place in three months.
present day

“But I only just got married!” the soul screams at Kyungsoo in a shrill voice, as though there’s something he could do. Somehow erase the fact that her body now lies in the wreck of her car, mangled, crushed, bleeding. There’s no saving her- no matter how far the modern medicine has come, there’s nothing to be done. “We just got back from our honeymoon! I can’t die now, my life was just about to finally start!”

A wave of nausea washes over Kyungsoo. Marriage. The word grows tainted, now, as he recalls his arranged marriage in his own human life. How sickening it was, being forcefully tied to someone he didn’t care about in the slightest- and it’s disorienting and uncomfortable, that these memories now come forth even when he’s not with Junmyeon, even when he’s not inviting them in. He’s only trying to do his job, here, yet his own personal matters won’t let him focus.

Baekhyun is just as useless as ever, whimpering somewhere behind Kyungsoo in sympathy for the sorry woman. But Kyungsoo doesn’t have time for this nonsense. There’s an order to these things, to what he needs to do, and no one can stand in his way. Not even his own mind.

“Please follow me,” he says, voice void of all emotion. “We are here to help you to the afterlife. Do not fear, you will feel no pain, and soon, all of this will be forgotten.”

“Forgotten?” The woman’s voice breaks as she finally succumbs to her tears. “But I don’t… I do not wish to forget. Forget my husband? I don’t want to do that.”

“But you must.”

Yet she keeps arguing him the entire way to his tearoom, even as Kyungsoo explains the function of the tea for her. She’s adamant on not drinking it; adamant on not forgetting the love of her life, as she puts it.

Kyungsoo doesn’t have patience for this.

“Fine, don’t drink it, then,” he says, slamming his hand on the table so hard that the liquid sloshes around in the cup, spills on the table top. “Just walk through that door, then, and move onto your next life with the full weight of your past mistakes to carry. See if I care.”

She looks startled, then, but still doesn’t drink her tea, instead following his advice and walking through the door, leaving the tearoom to enter the realm of afterlife. Baekhyun looks almost timid, staring at Kyungsoo, and Kyungsoo does feel ashamed; he shouldn’t let his feelings get to him like this. He hides his face in his hands and just focuses on breathing, just letting go of the emotion welling up inside of him. The nausea still hasn’t passed, and he just wants to lie down, to sleep, so he wouldn’t have to think. Feel, remember.

But to remember was what he wanted, wasn’t it?

“I do not know what has upset you so,” Baekhyun says with great caution, weighing his words. “But dude… It’s kind of obvious, and it’s kind of getting in the way of all this business. Can I help, somehow? Is there anything I could do?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Kyungsoo snaps back at him immediately. “Just get lost, will you? I haven’t had a single job go as it should ever since you started shadowing me, so what about you just go solo from now on? I’m done babysitting you.”
Baekhyun’s eyes widen, and his bottom lip catches in between his teeth. “Oh… I mean, I guess I need to… I guess I thought that I could still learn from you for a little while longer… Are you sure you’re not doing this just because you’re upset and sad about something, and trying to cope with it by isolating yourself?”

Kyungsoo has had enough of this. He steps forward to physically grab Baekhyun, and shove him through the door. He’s done with his invasive questions, done with his lack of social skills to judge what is appropriate and what isn’t, and he’s not going to listen to his yapping any longer. “I said, get lost,” he says through gritted teeth as he pushes him through the door, and slams it in his face, locking the door with trembling hands afterwards. The laws of physics applied to his tearoom are a bit hazy, but at least the locks still do work.

But there is no hiding it, his conscience far too loud and insistent to let him live in denial; he is isolating himself, because he’s scared. Because hiding in his shell is his last useless hope at escaping the memories that keep flooding back to him. He knows it isn’t helping, knows that his irritation is only his own fault and he shouldn’t have taken it out on Baekhyun, but what else is he supposed to do?

He spent all this time, staying hidden, staying in the shadows. Avoiding attention, just carrying out his duties.

He should have kept it that way, yet even with that twinge of regret, he’s too greedy to stop. He wants to, a part of him does, but he can’t.

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unknown time in the past

The wedding is… it’s an ordeal. Kyungsoo, of course, doesn’t partake in the preparations much; it’s for women to take care of. He does prepare some gifts for his future wife, who he has yet to even meet, and there is a dowry to be paid as well. Clothes are prepared, and food is cooked in copious amounts. And preparations are also made for him to move in to the family home of his future wife, as per the orders of the noble man himself, his future man-in-law.

“Why do I have to move there?” Kyungsoo asks, time and time again, and the answer his parents give him is always the same. “Because he wanted it to be that way. Because all of his other children live in the capital, his sons all doing important work for the government there. He needs his daughter to take care of him, and why- we have your brother and his wife here, we don’t need another daughter-in-law living with us right now. You can live there, and let your wife help her father, and continue to work here.”

It’s against tradition, although since Kyungsoo isn’t the eldest son, his presence at the family home isn’t so crucial. Typically, they would have made their home somewhere nearby- but the other side of the town, that’s a bit too far away. But Kyungsoo knows why his parents are acting this way; this marriage is so well out of their league that they’re willing to promise whatever it takes to make it happen.

Kyungsoo feels like an animal being hauled to the market to be sold to the highest bidder, and he hates it.

Everything is done so hastily, too. The matchmaker finds a suitable date for them, giving them only three months to prepare, which is really not enough time. Especially preparing the traditional gifts is difficult, in such a strict time frame, but it’s not work Kyungsoo enjoys. Watching his sisters and his mother sewing his clothes is not something he enjoys; listening to his father and brothers’ tales of
married life isn’t something he enjoys.

Chances to escape this madness are far and few in between, but every time he can, Kyungsoo runs to the river, to the same stones where him and Junmyeon would sit and spend their time so pleasantly—such a distant memory it is, now. At least by the river he can breathe, he can have moments of clarity; sometimes resolve, that this is now his fate, sometimes anger and urge to disobey. But he knows there’s no way out of this now; the marriage has been made public to the entire town, it’s the center of all gossip, and he knows they can’t back out of it without completely losing face. And that is something he cannot do to his family.

It’s his duty as a son to do as his parents tell him to.

The wedding day itself goes by in a haze. Travelling all the way to the house of the bride, Kyungsoo feels nauseous, every step heavier than the last. Yet people are watching, and people are excited; a wedding of this caliber doesn’t happen very often, at all. But to him, it only seems cruel that his miserable fate is celebrated in such a manner, against his will, by people he’s known all his life and people he doesn’t know at all.

There’s no pride or joy in him when he first sees his bride waiting for him. There’s no excitement, no pleasant nervousness for their future together. Just the nauseating knowledge that this is wrong; that if anything, he ought to be marrying Junmyeon. Not this girl, few years his junior, barely old enough for marriage as it is. Not this girl who knows she’s marrying below her own social status, too, who will never hold any love or affection for him once she realizes the sorry state of matters later.

And heavens forbid that they should ever have any children— they would loathe their father to know that they had the chance of becoming powerful scholars, and instead be doomed to becoming instrument makers. For with an artisan for a father, they’ll never stand a chance to study and work at the capital, in the king’s court.

This is too much.

Yet he doesn’t do anything to stop the celebration, the formalities, the traditions. Just follows the motions to what he’s been told to do, to what he’s seen others do before him, and prays that it’ll be over soon.

That when Junmyeon comes back, he’ll figure out a way to be with him— perhaps, they could run away, run somewhere where no one will know their names.

And truly, how terrible is it to be planning his escape from the very marriage that is being celebrated right in that moment?

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present day

Ever since the incident with the sword, Kyungsoo has been once more ignoring Junmyeon, avoiding Junmyeon. He knows he’s wrong in doing so— that he ought to at least explain the reason why. But the truth is, he feels awful just thinking about seeing him, witnessing the sadness in his eyes that he’s just now beginning to understand, somehow. Yet he’s scared to ask— how much of that pain is because of Kyungsoo? How much of that pain is just from times past, and how much of it is fresh?

Could he still possibly be in love with him, or did he get over him hundreds and hundreds of years ago?

At least to him, this pain is as fresh as if it all happened yesterday. Remembering it all in excruciating
detail, going through the emotions, living and breathing it all, it hurts. There are no words to even describe it, the hopelessness and immense sense of loss that he feels in his heart. He plays the saddest songs he knows, cries as he does so; he tries to drink to forget and it only makes him more miserable. It is as though his heart and soul has been made anew to match those he had when he was going through all of it as a human- it’s not just an ache that he’s recalling through time, but something far more real than that.

He doesn’t know how to talk to Junmyeon about it. Doesn’t know how to verbally process it all, doesn’t know if he should. And Kyungsoo hates that he has to go through this, that he has to experience this; the pain seems so unfair. Why cannot he just remember, and not feel like this?

But despite being unable to find any answers for himself, he keeps avoiding Junmyeon to the best of his ability.

Once more, it is not the goblin that comes searching for him, but his servant.

Just like before, Chanyeol is standing by the entrance to his apartment building. This time, it isn’t raining, and the tall man is dressed very casually in denim shorts and a t-shirt, looking like any average man his age. But his eyes are sharp as he waits, back leaning against the wall of the building.

This is annoying, too. Why can’t Kyungsoo just isolate himself? Why do people have to come looking for him? He should move elsewhere, and not tell Junmyeon about it; he wants his privacy back, some control back, especially now that he’s lost all of it when it comes to his own emotions.

He reveals himself with a heavy sigh, taking off his traditional style hat, gat. A smile appears on Chanyeol’s face, as he bows in a brief greeting.

“Hyung asked me to see that you are well,” he says, his deep voice revealing very little emotion at first although his brows are furrowed now that the joy of finding Kyungsoo is wearing off. “So, are you well?”

“Yes,” Kyungsoo replies sharply. “I am. You can go now.”

Chanyeol nods as though checking off something from a mental to-do list. “I’m glad to hear that. Hyung also wants to know when you would be available for a slightly longer outing. He plans to take you outside of the city, I assume. When would be the most convenient for you?”

Never, is the answer on the tip of his tongue. But if he ceases to chase after more memories, all of this misery will be in vain- he’s still not anywhere near discovering the truth to what made him like this. “I have to see what I can arrange. My work isn’t exactly planned or predictable.”

“Of course. Well, let him know when you’re available, I don’t think he even needs much warning before heading out. You know how quickly he can travel.” Chanyeol’s brows knit together even further, the corners of his mouth pulling downwards. His face is so expressive, Kyungsoo has never seen anything like it. “Forgive me for overstepping my boundaries but… I really hope that you and hyung can solve whatever that is wrong. He’s been quite miserable, these past few days, and he usually never gets this way during the summer. Only in the spring. It makes me worry.”

“I don’t know the reason for his fluctuating moods,” Kyungsoo tersely says. “It’s none of my business.”

Chanyeol fixes him with a questioning stare, and there’s surprising harness to that as well, something that his jovial appearance has never given away before. “But it is your doing,” he comments, even as he pushes himself off the wall and stands up to leave. “It is because of you, at the very least. So, I
hope that whatever it is, you two can fix. I don’t like it when he’s sad, it’s so awful to witness. But, I will tell him that you will be in touch, once you’ve arranged for some time to travel with him. Goodbye, for now.”

It doesn’t feel right to be scolded by a mere mortal like this, especially on matters that are none of his business. But Kyungsoo also feels incredibly guilty because he knows Chanyeol to be telling him the truth, no matter how surprising it is to think that Junmyeon is saddened by his absence. Granted, the previous incident with the sword must have been rather upsetting to witness, and Kyungsoo can’t fault him for that. Perhaps he feels guilty for it- wants to make sure Kyungsoo is alright, not any worse for wear because of it.

The emotions they both have in relation to this are getting so convoluted, and Kyungsoo doesn’t know how to manage it all. How to find balance, in such a precarious situation.

He owes Junmyeon an explanation. Or, perhaps, an apology. But that is something he doesn’t want to think about right now, thoroughly exhausted and emotionally worn out all of a sudden. There’s a headache brewing at the base of his skull, ebbing and pulsing and poking at the back of his eyes with needles. All he wants to do is just escape… go back to the tasteless, meaningless, colorless existence he used to lead before all of this.

But no one can turn back time.

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unknown time in the past

Settling into the new home isn’t easy. Kyungsoo isn’t used to living in such a fancy home, with servants running about and so many vast rooms and wings attached to the home. His family home isn’t poor or humble when compared to the average home in town, but this is something different- this is truly a home for the wealthy, the powerful, and he feels like an unwelcome guest, bumbling about like a country bumpkin.

He sees little of his newly wedded wife. She appears to prefer her books and paintings to spending time with her husband, and honestly, he would rather keep it that way. The few times they’ve ever been together, he has been at a complete loss as to what to say to her. She comes from a totally different world than him, and he can’t imagine her finding any amusement in anything he could say. She was born and raised in the capital, and thusly, this small town must feel so backwards to her. And marrying a mere instrument maker must have never been part of her dreams for the future.

And marrying a mere instrument maker must have never been part of her dreams for the future.

They haven’t even shared a bed, together, save for the wedding night. And even then, Kyungsoo found himself too nervous to properly consummate the marriage; she didn’t seem to care, at all, rather nervous and timid as she was, too shy to even properly undress herself in front of him. Kyungsoo felt terrible about it, too- how scary it must have been, to reveal her bare body to a total stranger?

He knows people will start wondering about their offspring soon, but for now, it isn’t so urgent. He sleeps in his own room, for the first time in his life; it’s strange, too, not being able to hear anyone breathe by his side. To go to sleep completely alone, in perfect silence, on a mattress that feels all too big after sleeping his whole life in a shared bed with his brothers. For company, at least, it would be nice to have his wife there for; but perhaps that is not the way of the nobles, the scholars. Perhaps they do not crave company like the peasants do.

He still goes to work every day to his father’s workshop, and he tries to spend as much time there as possible. It’s the only thing still familiar, the only thing he understands. The burning coal, the hard
wood, the soft silk in his fingertips. The repetitive motions of preparing each individual part for the instruments. Business has picked up, as well, people coming in pulled by curiosity. His wedding has been the talk of the town for weeks now, and the interest still isn’t dying down.

Eventually, his mother takes to chasing him out before supper, so he has to dine at his new home rather than sharing a meal with them. “You need to get to know them,” she says, wiping away the sawdust on Kyungsoo’s clothes. “You know what they say about son-in-laws; you’re a guest for a hundred years. But that doesn’t have to be that way, if you just make a little bit of effort. Married life is always hard in the beginning, but it’ll get easier.”

Kyungsoo bites back his sharp, harsh replies, and walks home as slowly as he possibly can.

Because although his young wife has no interest in him, the same unfortunately cannot be said for his father-in-law. He has ceased to visit the workshop, instead choosing to make conversation with Kyungsoo here, in the privacy of their shared home; they eat together, and the man demands Kyungsoo to spend time with him, after, drinking and playing music, or playing cards together.

Kyungsoo is bad at everything else save for music, gets drunk too fast and sucks at cards, but the man doesn’t seem to care too much, instead laughing so hard at Kyungsoo’s acts that his round belly shakes with it.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” he always says, and claps Kyungsoo on the shoulder. Squeezes his leg, leans in a little closer. “You’ll learn to let go, and live a little. Drink more, gamble, appreciate the beauty of women. You fancy my daughter very much, don’t you? She’s a real treasure, with that body shape and everything… her wide hips will carry you many, many sons.”

“Thank you,” is all that Kyungsoo can ever slur back at him, swaying with the alcohol coursing through him. “Thank you.”

There’s nothing else for him to say. Nothing else for him to reply with. Everything has to be jovial, no matter how odd or wrong he finds the things his father-in-law says. Kyungsoo is in no position to defy him.

That is no way for him to speak of his daughter. That is no way for him to talk about their marriage.

That is no way for him to touch him.

At first, it’s just this uncomfortable feeling. This itch he gets under his skin, whenever the servants leave them alone in the sitting room, with drinks and food and tobacco. This feeling that he should run, should get up and leave, and knowing that he cannot, must not. That there is no excuse great enough to get away from this. And although he tries to put his finger on it, he can’t quite grasp what it is; it’s not any one word, any one touch, but rather… a string of things that always keep him on his toes, somehow. Always keep him nervous. Makes him anxious for the time after dinner and makes him wish that bedtime would come faster. That morning would come faster, and he could leave for the workshop once more.

And he tries to explain to himself that this is just the initial awkwardness that makes things so difficult. That once they get to know each other, once he gets accustomed to this life, everything will work out. He just doesn’t understand these people, doesn’t understand their habits and customs— they’re like citizens of a different nation, a different country, their entire lives so vastly different from what Kyungsoo has ever known.

His father-in-law touches him more, leans even closer, squeezes him tighter, and Kyungsoo feels himself slowly suffocating on something incomprehensible, something he cannot name.
He sits by the river and cries, knees hugged to his chest, and prays for Junmyeon to return soon—although he has no illusions about what he can do to fix this. Kyungsoo knows that Junmyeon, as a mere soldier, holds no power whatsoever. There’s nothing he can do, no way he can help Kyungsoo. Not unless he agrees to run away with him, and Kyungsoo knows that deserting his place in the army would make him a criminal. He can’t ask that of him, of someone who already has nothing.

But gods, he wishes. He prays.

At least having him here would make it more bearable. To have someone to talk to, to have someone who would erase the memories of those unholy touches with loving ones instead. To be held by someone who doesn’t make him choke on his own bile with disgust. To have someone to kiss who he wants to kiss—just have someone there, and not feel so terribly, terribly alone.

Yet he frets. What would Junmyeon say, how would he feel—would he be angry? Might he do something rash? Or would he blame Kyungsoo for this, say that he should have stopped it? That if he didn’t want it, he should have done something to make it stop. Should have said no, should have refused, should have walked away.

Perhaps Junmyeon won’t comfort him after all.

The days are so, so terribly dreary, as he spends them in this kind of emotional turmoil. For there is no reprieve; the relief he feels in the morning, arriving at the workshop, gets wiped away as soon as he has to return. There is no escape from this, no foreseeable end to this, and that hopelessness is what makes it so much harder to bear.

He prays for a solution—prays the benevolent Buddhas, bodhisattvas, gods, mountains, rivers, yet no one answers.

Weeks turn into months, and Kyungsoo’s heart grows black, rotten, cold, disgusting, and there is nothing he can do to fight it.

But then— a glimpse of hope.

News of troops arriving to town soon spread like wildfire. People have their sons in the military, their husbands, their brothers, and everyone is wishing for one thing; that they would see their loved ones return, even if only momentarily. Even if only to leave again, they wish to see them—wish to know if they still live, or if they have perished. And even in Kyungsoo’s bleak existence, this brings him newfound joy, the sole idea of seeing Junmyeon again. He tries not to be too hopeful, for who knows if Junmyeon will be among the men at all, but perhaps there will be someone who knows of him… someone who could tell Kyungsoo about his whereabouts. Whether he walks in this life, or the next.

The men arrive late in the day, having walked on foot to get here. It is already spring but it’s dry and dusty, the troops covered with dirt, loud, smelly as they walk through town. Kyungsoo is among the crowds, trying to catch a glimpse of a familiar face, but no luck, and the troops disappear into the barracks and tents outside of town for the rest of the day, going through the motions of settling down, making their camp here.

Everyone is so antsy, waiting for the men to leave the base and to come into town, to come in to search for their families or a place to drink at. Good or bad, people want the news, Kyungsoo still among them—there is no way he could return to work, or worse yet, return to home. Even if he has to spend all night looking for someone who knows of Junmyeon, it doesn’t matter. He’ll do it.

And it’s almost comical, how he at first doesn’t recognize him. The time spent apart has changed him
so much; he has aged, years and years, it looks like, the boyish roundness gone from his cheeks and replaced with eyes sunken in, cheekbones sticking out. He’s wider yet smaller, every ounce of fat he once had beaten out of his body. His clothes are covered in dust, although he’s managed to wash his face and hands clean from it, even the sword by his side showing signs of the battles they’ve been through. And there’s a scar at the corner of his eye, now, as well, already old and healed over, and it makes Kyungsoo’s stomach twist with the sudden realization that while he’s been going through hell, Junmyeon has lived through something much worse.

“Junmyeon… hyungnim…”

At the sound of Kyungsoo’s voice, Junmyeon looks up, eyebrows raised, and when he spots Kyungsoo standing there, he immediately rushes forward to sweep him up in his arms, holding him so tightly that it leaves Kyungsoo gasping for breath. He embraces him back just as tightly, swallowing back his tears because the street isn’t the right place for that, yet some still escape him, running down his cheeks and onto the fabric of Junmyeon’s clothes.

The relief washing over him now is beyond measure. To know that Junmyeon is alive- to see him, to hold him, is all he ever wanted. For the first time in months, he’s not thinking about the terrible, terrible things he’s been through, but only living in this moment; only focusing on the warmth of Junmyeon’s body, the strength of his arms around him, the sound of his voice as he whispers over and over again how much he missed him, how much he loves him.

They stumble away as though drunk, holding hands, unconcerned with who might see this. Nothing else matters but this; the miracle that they’ve been reunited, against all odds, despite the despair they’ve both had to persevere.

The river is the only place where they can have any privacy, and that’s where they head to, wordlessly, without needing to even discuss it. It’s not until they’re seated at the flat stones, the sun going down in the horizon and the first cicadas singing in the trees around them, that Kyungsoo realizes the one flaw in this decision.

“You must be starving,” he says, reaching out to stroke Junmyeon’s cheek tenderly. It still doesn’t feel quite real that he’s there, that he’s really real. There in flesh and not just a vivid mirage.

Junmyeon shakes his head, takes his hand and squeezes it in between his. Although his hands never were soft to begin with, hardened by the cruelling practice and the odd jobs he had to do ever since he was young to earn his keeping, Junmyeon’s hands have now grown even rougher, harder, sturdier. But they’re still just as warm, and still hold Kyungsoo’s hand as though he’s the most precious thing to him in the entire world.

“I’ve been fed today, already,” he murmurs, shuffling closer to press against Kyungsoo fully. “I was coming to town to maybe find soju for my parched throat… And perhaps visit you, if you were still awake. I should have known you would be waiting for me, though… I should have guessed. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t say sorry for anything,” Kyungsoo scolds him, even as he wraps his arm around his shoulders. Junnyeon has indeed grown wider, even if he also feels skinnier. But he slots against his body just as pleasantly as he always did, like they were made to fit together like this. Like parts of the same instrument, coming together to create something far more beautiful than just the wooden and silken parts themselves.

Kyungsoo is scared to ask the questions bubbling up, but he certainly doesn’t want to talk or think about his own life right now. So, no matter how painful Junmyeon’s stories might be, he’d much rather hear them first. “What… what has happened, since you left? Where did you go? Did you ever
see the capital? The palace of the king? Is it as grand and amazing as they say it is?”

Junmyeon snorts at that, and shakes his head. “I think I saw it, when we marched through the city,” he says, thoughtful. “It was… It was massive, Kyungsoo-yah. It was bigger than anything else I’ve ever seen. Or, well, maybe the city gates were just as big. But it wasn’t made of gold, or jade, or anything fancy at all. So, I guess all in all, it wasn’t anything out of this world.”

He’s quiet for a moment, even as he wraps his arms around Kyungsoo as though seeking even further comfort. “And I don’t know… We mostly just marched a lot. Back and forth. I don’t even know where we went, nobody told us. Just ordered us to do things, to walk faster. We didn’t even fight all that much- although I’m not complaining. I absolutely hate combat.”

Kyungsoo presses a tentative kiss to Junmyeon’s forehead, and he sighs heavily. “Practicing sword fighting is one thing… But having to raise your weapon against another human being? That… haunts me. Especially when we had to fight people that… couldn’t even defend themselves. Very rarely did we ever encounter other soldiers, people with a desire to fight us. It was always people helpless to do anything but raise their bare arms to protect themselves, turn their backs to us so they wouldn’t see the final blow coming.” A shudder goes through him, and all Kyungsoo can do is hold him tighter still. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to forget the feeling of… my sword moving through bones and flesh…”

They sit in silence for a while. Kyungsoo stares at the running water, the ripples and waves of it, how it glimmers in the waning light. But inside of him, there’s a growing rage- how is it fair that both of them have had to go through this kind of suffering? What reason, what cause has there been for this? They’ve only come out of it more damaged than before. What was the point, in all of this? What is the point in it continuing for the unforeseeable future?

Junmyeon squeezes his thigh, and angles his head so that he can press light kisses on Kyungsoo’s jaw, shy but warm. “Enough about me, though. I want to hear about you… What have you been doing? Anything new that has happened while I was gone?”

Kyungsoo knows that Junmyeon expects to hear the same, mundane news as always. In their town, nothing much ever happens- yet, Kyungsoo’s entire life has been turned around, and not for the better. The words don’t come so easy, either, for he hates that he cannot provide Junmyeon any comfort at all, only the misery that he’s been through as of late.

But as much as he would like to lie, just to make Junmyeon happy, he knows he can’t.

“I got married.”

It’s as simple as that. He recounts the tale slowly, voice trembling as he recalls what happened, even though this is the harmless part. The process of arranging the wedding, the celebration, relocating to his new home. Getting used to married life, as strange as it’s been- as distant and withdrawn as his wife has been.

Junmyeon listens to him in silence, but Kyungsoo can feel the tremors going through him. He’s unhappy, too, which comforts Kyungsoo a little, to know that he isn’t the only one grieving the state of things as they are.

Yet time spent apart has done nothing for Junmyeon’s ability to read him. “But there’s more. There’s something upsetting you, something you’re not saying.” He points it out calmly, clear as day. “It’s not just the marriage, isn’t it? Something else is wrong.”

“Well, it is the marriage, kind of,” Kyungsoo whispers. “For without it… I wouldn’t have to live
with my father-in-law. I wouldn’t have to withstand his… advances. The way he demands for my attention and time, the way he talks to me, looks at me… touches me…”

And he doesn’t even have it in him to be surprised when that makes Junmyeon jerk back, grabbing Kyungsoo by the shoulder to force him to face him. “Touch you?” he asks, voice grave. “Does he… Has he tried to bed you? Or has he succeeded?”

“No, quite,” Kyungsoo murmurs, hands clasped in his lap. It makes him sick to his stomach just thinking about it. “Not because of his lack of effort… And I know that one day, he’ll have what he wants. That’s how it is. He got me into his house, he got me fall right into his hands… He’s going to have his way with me. I’m only postponing the inevitable.”

Something dark and dangerous flashes in Junmyeon’s eyes. His features are frozen with rage, it seems like, not even a single muscle in his face moving, his lips pursed together and brows furrowed. Kyungsoo has never seen him like this, this enraged, even beyond words, and somehow… Somehow, that makes him feel better. To finally tell another living soul about his woes, to finally have someone else’s reaction confirm that all of this isn’t right. That he isn’t crazy for being so disturbed.

“I hate him. I hate his disgusting hands, I hate his sweaty body, I hate his pot belly, I hate his smelly breath. I hate how he touches me, I hate how talks about the things he wants to do to me. I hate him… I want him dead.” The words just bubble out of him, having stayed hidden deep inside for so long. And they seep right into Junmyeon, his eyes growing harder, scarier still.

“Trust me, he will die,” Junmyeon hisses, and finally, he tears free to stand up. “He will feel my wrath- for touching you, for hurting you! Hurting what is mine, he shall not be forgiven, I will see to it, I will end him!”

His hand reaches for his sword, impatient, bloodthirsty, dangerous, and that is what compels Kyungsoo to stand up as well, to take his hands back in his instead of allowing him to draw out that sword. For he knows that there will be no going back, should Junmyeon draw the blade.

Not because he wishes to spare that awful man’s life- but because he knows Junmyeon would be throwing away his, should he just march in there, careless, thoughtless.

Unprepared.

“No,” he whispers, and draws Junmyeon in for a passionate kiss, kissing him like he’s drinking from his mouth, holding him as tightly as he can. Just to feel him closer, feel his breath, his beating heart. Feel that he’s real. “No… You mustn’t waste your life like that… I don’t want him dead only to lose you, too. We need… We need a plan.”

And Junmyeon kisses him back, holds him as though attempting to merge them into one being. Although he says nothing, Kyungsoo can feel that he agrees- that he silently, wordlessly, agrees to Kyungsoo’s plan yet to be woven.

But there will be one, and once they are ready- they will strike.
Chapter 6

present day

Now that Chanyeol forced him to agree to see Junmyeon, Kyungsoo no longer has any excuses left. He tries to postpone it as long as he can, but his guilty conscience is eating away at him, and combined with the way the memories haunt him, and how unstable his emotions are, he’s going insane. Something needs to give— and Kyungsoo knows that he has to see the goblin, whether he likes it or not. Whether he’s scared to or not.

It’s just with the way that the memories have been developing that he knows that what’s left is going to be the worst, the hardest part. Because even until now, he hasn’t found a reason for his fate of becoming a grim reaper. He’s done nothing wrong, as far as he can see— he hasn’t been an awful person, hasn’t really done anything but told white lies and occasionally eaten things his mother told him not to touch. It’s all very minor things, and he knows that no one would be punished for that. Whatever is left has to be awful— has to explain how he wound up like this.

When he first embarked on this journey, he was excited about the prospect of finding a way out of this eternal existence. But it didn’t cross his mind then how difficult it might be to face his own actions; didn’t cross his mind that he would feel this way when the time came to do that.

But Kyungsoo fears that now, he’s going to remember everything even if he doesn’t want to. The memories come completely unprovoked, now, tormenting him day and night, and he hasn’t found a way to stop them. To plug them, to keep them in the depths that they’ve been buried in all this while.

The heat is scorching on the day he agreed to meet with Junmyeon again. It’s humid, too, the peak of the summer weather. The skies are clear and there’s not even the slightest breeze that would bring relief from the heat, Kyungsoo’s dress shirt clinging onto his skin with sweat not ten minutes after he’s left his apartment. And the heat and sweat only makes his disdain for the throngs of mortals even stronger, his whole being tense and filled with simmering anger as he wishes that everyone would just disappear. Just vanish, and leave him alone. Let him be. People surround him like swarms of flies, much like his own thoughts, feelings, memories, and it’s all too suffocating.

Junmyeon told him to come to Cheonggyecheon, a beautiful stream running through northern parts of Seoul flanked by skyscrapers, art installations, and greenery alike, the pathways running alongside the river dropped down to the water’s level. On a day like this, the small urban oasis is filled with people even during the office hours, and Kyungsoo cannot understand why they have to meet here— if Junmyeon is going to take him away to somewhere, like Chanyeol said he would, then it shouldn’t matter where they go. Having to come all this way only irks him even further, the first throbs of a headache making themselves known at the base of his skull.

But when he finds Junmyeon near the Gwanghwamun square, all he does is nudge Kyungsoo to walk with him upstream, headed towards northeast. “Does this not remind you of the river we used to sit by, whenever we needed a private place to talk?” he asks, easy, casual. He doesn’t seem too affected by the heat; there’s a bit of moisture at his hairline, but even so, his thick, black hair is still cascading freely down his neck and back. “I know it’s not the same one, but even so. The Han river is just too wide, too grand. This feels more like home, to me.”

“I suppose,” Kyungsoo says gruffly. “I thought Chanyeol said we were going somewhere, though? Let’s just find a door and go, I’ve seen the river plenty of times.” As afraid of what is to come as he is, he’s still impatient to have it be over with. This dilly-dallying is only making him even more anxious.
Junmyeon glances at him, lips pressed tightly together. “Well, that was my initial plan. To visit someplace of significance, to both of us, from when we were still human. I was always planning on it, ever since I promised to do this with you. But I went to visit our hometown recently and… there’s nothing left. Of course, there’s nothing left, it’s been so long. But there’s no point in visiting there… The places where we once stood bear no resemblance to what has been kept in our memories. Perhaps it is for the best…”

That makes sense, but it doesn’t curb Kyungsoo’s impatience. “So what are we doing here?”

Kyungsoo looks at the tourists, looks at the families with children, the youngsters jumping from one stone to another to cross the stream. “This doesn’t seem like the right place.”

“Right place? Right place for what?” Junmyeon is now also growing agitated, Kyungsoo’s mood rubbing off on him. It tugs at Kyungsoo’s heart strings in a weird way- it’s the memories of his human emotions messing with his perception of Junmyeon in the here and now. It’s yet again another confusing, frustrating thing, being so unable to tell which emotions are his and real, and which ones are just memories of emotions.

It’s just that in his memories, he can literally feel the deep, selfless love he felt for Junmyeon; he experiences it as though it is happening now.
It’s so unfair.

“Right place for you to tell me how we both died!” Kyungsoo has to really fight back against the urge to scream those words in Junmyeon’s face. “I remember everything else- you going away to war, me getting married, my rotten father-in-law, you returning home from war. And I saw you dead, when I touched your sword. What else is there left to see? But you want us to talk about it here, now? Surrounded by all these bloody mortals eavesdropping on us?”

Junmyeon falters in his steps, his hand pressing to his chest as though the sword is causing him pain once more. Kyungsoo has begun to see a pattern there, too, and he hates it. Hates knowing he can be the cause of his pain. “You’ve… recalled things a lot faster than I thought,” he says, quiet, distant. “I didn’t… I didn’t realize…”

“Yes, I’ve recalled most of the miserable life I lived as a human,” Kyungsoo spits out, then grinds his teeth to bite back the harsh words bubbling up with his anger. He can’t lose his temper, not here, not now. Perhaps this is the right place for this, then, if only to keep his wrath in check. “You were right, it’s all hideous. But I’m only missing the last piece, so what is it, then? What did I do? What did we do? How did you die?”

There’s pain in his heart as well, not unlike the pain of a blade pushing into his very core. The questions are tearing him apart, the mixture of the need to know and the reluctance to find out the painful truth confusing him. This path has been so difficult to walk, and looking back, he almost wishes he had never chosen this- if he could have just carried on, as a grim reaper, forever.

It doesn’t always seem as though this suffering is worth salvation.

Junmyeon looks away, somehow appearing smaller than usual. “I… I wasn’t… I thought I still had time,” he whispers, and it seems like his words are not directed at Kyungsoo. “I thought… I’m not ready. I’m still not ready.”

Junmyeon is holding his chest even tighter now, and that spikes up worry inside Kyungsoo. Without thinking, he wraps his arm around him to support him, and although as soon as he realizes what he’s doing he wants to immediately let go, he doesn’t. Junmyeon can’t faint here, not now, not in front of everyone else. The mortals would call for an ambulance, and Kyungsoo doesn’t know much about goblin physiology- would the paramedics freak out, or could he pass as a regular human? No, he
cannot allow that.

No, he cannot allow Junmyeon to be in pain. For him to hurt, at all. Ever.

The feeling is foreign, it doesn’t belong to him, *yet it does*, and Kyungsoo hates this.

“Let’s find a place to sit down.” He drags Junmyeon up the nearest staircase leading up to the street level. The skyscrapers are casting a faint shadow here, so the heat isn’t quite as stifling, and they enter a small clearing decorated with statues and plants. There are benches on the sides and that’s where Kyungsoo takes Junmyeon, for a moment of respite, sitting him down and taking a seat beside him. Junmyeon all but collapses against him, head lolling down on his shoulder, and Kyungsoo just lets it happen, his arm still around his shoulders; he doesn’t trust Junmyeon to stay upright on his own, his breathing heavy and his face pale, so he lets him stay like this.

Wants him to stay- no, doesn’t want him to stay.

For a while, it’s quiet. Kyungsoo’s own heartbeat calms down, his posture relaxes. Alright. There will be no grand reveal today, then, for clearly Junmyeon wasn’t prepared for it- like everything else, it leaves him feeling torn. But as much as he wants to press Junmyeon for answers, he knows that now is not the time. Not the place.

The weight and warmth of Junmyeon next to him are so calming, though, and eventually, Junmyeon’s hand drops down from his chest, the pain evidently gone.

They sit there for a long time. For the first time in a long while, Kyungsoo isn’t thinking of anything, isn’t overwhelmed with emotion; he’s simply just fully present, in the moment, and nothing stirs inside of him, only a sea of calm within his mind.

Then, the sound of kkwaenggwari, a small hand-held gong, its metallic clang unmistakable, its shrill sound piercing even the heavy, humid air. The heavier sound of the janggu, the double-ended drum, joins in next, then the earthier timbre of buk, the barrel drum, sets the base tone for the two quicker, more varied instruments. The last one to join is the bigger gong, jing, its pitch mixing with the kkwaenggwari’s but also distinct in its own tone. Kyungsoo looks around to spot the source of the music even as his foot begins to tap to the complex rhythm, instantly recognizing the pattern even though its vastly different to the court music he usually plays; for this is pungmulnori, the music and performance of the peasant people, simple in instruments yet breathtaking in skill it requires.

He doesn’t have to search long before the ensemble appears from around a corner and enters the small square. It’s four men, dressed in vaguely historic outfits, playing their instruments and shouting, walking forward as they do, followed by four dancers in similar costumes, moving along to the music and taking the foreground once they reach the middle of the square, promptly putting up what seems like an impromptu performance although this must have been carefully planned beforehand.

Watching the dancers, listening to the music, something moves within Kyungsoo’s heart. His hands begin to clap to the rhythm as well, and his lips part to shout out encouragements to the dancers, the musicians, lapsing into the ancient Korean he spoke as a human. For although this music is not like the one played in his human memories, not quite, it still bears resemblance enough- still touches something within him that has almost been forgotten.

Junmyeon, too, perks up, also clapping along to the beat although not so adept at following anything else but the base beat of the buk. And right before Kyungsoo’s eyes, he sees this scene, transported back in time; them enjoying music in their hometown, seated side by side, drunk on rice wine and drunk on the merriment of the celebrations. The tension between them heightened pleasantly in an atmosphere free of worries of the everyday life, their feelings for one another that much more
Kyungsoo doesn’t have time to push that memory aside, before Junmyeon springs up to his feet, tugs him up as well. “Come, join me,” he shouts over the sound of the music, perhaps also spurred on by the same memory. “Let’s show them how it’s really done!” And he pulls Kyungsoo right up to the dancers before he can even get a word in sideways.

It’s so very embarrassing. This is a choreographed performance, and the audience isn’t meant to join in- but Junmyeon doesn’t seem to care, instead throwing himself into it, seizing the moment.

And Kyungsoo finds himself moving with him, following the muscle memory he didn’t know was there; dancing to the beat, together, like they did as humans, all that time ago. In a different place, in a different world.

Their style certainly doesn’t match that of the dancers, but Junmyeon doesn’t seem to care. Doesn’t care about the people watching, either, and Kyungsoo- he finds himself disarmed.

The way Junmyeon smiles at him, despite the pain he was just in. The way Junmyeon encourages him to just let go- just be carefree, even if only in this moment. It’s something he’s recalled a lot of from their human lives, something he’s experienced many times with Junmyeon before he truly knew him, and even now.

At least some things never change.

The group welcomes them in, smiling and laughing as they watch them dance, and the rhythm grows faster, more daring, more breathtaking. Junmyeon grins at Kyungsoo and they do their best to keep up, to dance how they once used to; back when this wasn’t only a carefully preserved art of the past, but living and breathing form of entertainment for all. They twirl around each other, moving faster as the music grows more frantic, mirroring the movements of the dancers but with their own twist. The modern clothes do the dance no justice but they don’t care, don’t care about the people watching and taking pictures, don’t care about the heat or the way their clothes stick to their skin with sweat.

There’s only this moment, and nothing else.

Only them, and no one else.

And it scares Kyungsoo, but he can’t fight that. Can’t change that, even if he would like to.

The music grows louder, louder, faster, and then- it ends, the beat coming to an abrupt end. Junmyeon and Kyungsoo just stand there, staring at each other, breathless, chests heaving and bodies vibrating with energy. Energy that tries to pull them together- but Kyungsoo finds the strength to resist it, even if it makes him tremble. Yet he can’t tear his eyes away, can’t stop looking at him, even as the crowd around them bursts into cheers and applause, for Junmyeon has him completely enchanted in ways that he knows are only remnants of his human emotions yet still feel so very real.

In Junmyeon’s eyes, he reads emotions he’s scared to name, scared to understand, for they might give an answer to his question whether Junmyeon still has feelings for him or not.

The silence after the music is scary, too, and Kyungsoo wishes he knew where to go from here. How to carry on from this- and not just this extraordinary moment, but all of this, everything. And Junmyeon flashes him a sad smile before turning away, walking away from him, and the distance hurts too.

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Junmyeon appears at his tearoom a couple of days later. The sun is already setting but the heat isn’t
getting any better; the tropical nights are the worst, and Kyungsoo loathes this. He much prefers Septembers, Octobers to this, when the temperatures go down, but it’s not fully fall yet. But his mood has gotten better ever since the last time they saw each other.

He doesn’t know why. Doesn’t know what about their outing warrants such a shift in his mood- but he’s glad for it.

“You look like you’ve gotten some rest,” Junmyeon points out as he looks Kyungsoo up and down. Kyungsoo shrugs and sets down the street, Junmyeon falling into step beside him. Like they’ve done this hundreds of times before.

“I got some sleep, at last,” he admits, wiping at his brow with a handkerchief. “No more disturbing memories have come forth, so that has been a relief, and I am no longer in charge of training that annoying grim reaper. I can finally hear my thoughts, you see. It makes all the difference.”

Junmyeon chuckles at that, bumps his hip against Kyungsoo’s playfully. “I hope that you mean that he graduated from an intern to a pro, rather than you tying him to a tree in some faraway forest,” he teases him. “Whoever decided that you should work together did not know you at all.”

“Tell me about it,” Kyungsoo sighs. Baekhyun was such a headache to him, and he’s relieved he hasn’t seen him since he drove him away. He had worried that the other grim reaper wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t do as he was told, but it seems as if he took the hint, after all. “But what are you here for? Do you finally want to tell me how our story ends?”

That makes all jovial jest leave Junmyeon at once, his shoulders rising up tensely. “You’re really impatient now, aren’t you,” he murmurs, rubbing the nape of his neck stiffly. “No, actually… That is not what I was thinking. I just, well, I just wanted to talk. About this and that. Nothing in particular.”

Junmyeon is clearly reluctant to talk about the topic, and Kyungsoo isn’t sure why. But he does still remember that he promised Junmyeon to do this on his terms; to do things in the order that Junmyeon wanted him to. He’s already recalled a lot more than Junmyeon had planned for, or so it seems, so perhaps it makes sense Junmyeon would want to slow things down a bit.

Although what for- why would he want to draw this out, that is something Kyungsoo can’t comprehend.

“Talk about what?” he still asks. “What do you want me to remember, then, if not how it all ended?”

Junmyeon skips along, hums a tune under his breath. A forced display of brushing off his initial reaction to Kyungsoo’s words- it’s not fooling him, but Kyungsoo thinks it best not to say that out loud. Honesty isn’t sometimes so kind.

“Well, I don’t know,” Junmyeon keeps avoiding his questions. “I wasn’t really thinking about anything, to be honest, I just wanted some company, okay? Chanyeol is away doing stuff and I was getting restless. Lonely, I guess you could say.”

“Lonely?” The word tumbles out of Kyungsoo’s mouth before he can bite it back, even though he can tell it’s a stupid thing to say as soon as he’s said it.

Junmyeon glances at him with sharp, darkened eyes, the carefree façade dropped almost at once. “Yes, lonely,” he replies, then bites his lower lip as though to physically hold back the things he wants to say. Then a forced exhale, to buy time. “Don’t you get lonely?” he says, then, hanging his head down. “Do you not feel it? Am I the only immortal who feels that way?”

“I… I guess I’ve never given it much thought.” Only a partial truth- but Kyungsoo is terrified to
admit to too many human feelings. “Most of the time, I’ve been too busy. This line of work, it keeps me well occupied. I don’t have time to dwell on such thoughts, I suppose.”

Wordlessly, Junmyeon follows him into a corner shop where Kyungsoo buys himself some groceries, as well as bottles of makgeolli with the intention that they share it together. It’s not until they leave the store and head up the narrow alleyway to Kyungsoo’s apartment that Junmyeon speaks up again.

“Well, at least you have your colleagues, so to say,” he sighs quietly. “Even the annoying ones… They’re still company, aren’t they? I’ve seen how you sometimes work together, in pairs and in groups. It always made me jealous.”

Kyungsoo can only hide his surprise because he’s purposefully guarding his reactions, so he wouldn’t blurt out anything else hurtful. “Jealousy is not something I would expect you to feel,” he says instead, after a moment of consideration. Punching the door code at the front door, he leads Junmyeon up the stairs and into his apartment. “Especially about… about us.”

Grim reapers tend to be very reclusive, especially when it comes to other supernatural beings, other immortals. They’re really just the blue-collar workers of the immortal world; it is their sole purpose, their sole focus, and all of their powers relate to their work. Not only that, however, but death is very uncomfortable even for most gods to speak of— they do not want to be reminded of it, even, through the presence of grim reapers, endlessly transporting souls from one life to the next.

It doesn’t make sense the jester god would feel jealousy toward them.

Junmyeon sits down on the floor while Kyungsoo puts away his purchases, except for the makgeolli. He very quickly prepares some anju for them to enjoy, snacks to go with the drink because it wouldn’t do to just drink alcohol and not have anything to eat. Junmyeon remains silent once more all throughout it, just watching Kyungsoo and taking in his small apartment, detail by detail. It’s a little unnerving, but Kyungsoo tries not to think too much of it. He’s never had visitors in this apartment and he’s acutely aware that it could reveal something about him— yet it’s so bare and minimalist, save for his instruments, that he doesn’t know what Junmyeon could possibly deduce from it.

“You have a community.” He says it only after Kyungsoo has sat down, once everything is laid out in between them. The food, the bowls for makgeolli, the bottles. “You have… You know you’re not alone. That there are others like you, out there. Some you may not like and some you may not see as frequently as you would hope, but they’re there. They exist, and that’s… That’s more than I have. There’s only just me, time and time again. Decade after decade, century after century.”

It’s a chilling statement, and one that Kyungsoo recognizes as the truth. Junmyeon is, indeed, terribly alone in his existence; if other goblins exist, Kyungsoo has never run into them, and he can’t imagine that they would feel much comradery between them anyway. It is not like they have anything in common, necessarily, or a reason to stick together.

“You have Chanyeol,” is all he can point out, and Junmyeon sighs again before taking a long sip of the slightly carbonated rice wine. “Well, yes, until he inevitably dies,” he says, morose but frank. “And that is the greatest curse, the biggest punishment. That everyone I care about has to die, and vanish from me. No matter how dear I hold these mortals… They will still all leave me.”

“Yet you keep them around. Wouldn’t it be easier, then, to be completely alone? So you wouldn’t have to suffer that loss, time and time again.” Kyungsoo knows how awful of a statement that is but yet, the logic is there. And furthermore, the desire to see Junmyeon feel better is there; he just doesn’t know how to fix this. How to make him smile again.
He’s just simply too awkward with his words to really help.

Junmyeon twirls the drink around in his cup, gazing into it as though looking for answers. “I’ve tried that, too,” he murmurs. “But it only made me more miserable. And while 80 years is only a fleeting glimpse to me by now… It’s still a glimpse of something better than complete darkness. We were once human, Kyungsso-yah. We were not made to be completely alone, abandoned by our kin. It’s not in our nature, to be always alone. It’ll drive us mad.”

Kyungsoo has half a mind to argue, but then takes a moment to reflect on Junmyeon’s words. To his surprise, he realizes that he’s right- Kyungsoo has never truly been alone, not in the sense that Junmyeon is alone. Suddenly, the regular dinner meetings with the other reapers make a lot more sense, or teaming up to work together whenever the workload is getting out of hand.

He’s been alone, but never completely isolated, and that’s the difference.

The sense of pity grows within him, at first, but then, underneath it, Kyungsoo discovers something else; an overwhelming sadness for the fact that Junmyeon has had to endure that, on his own. That there was no one with him… That Kyungsoo wasn’t with him.

“Chanyeol cares about you a lot.” He hurries to try and change the subject, both for their conversation and for his own thoughts. “I assume the others before him have also been equally as devoted to you. But why is that? Why has his family given their lives to serving you?”

Junmyeon looks at Kyungsoo in silence for a moment, parts his lips as though to speak, and then presses them together once more. Shakes his head, and then finally speaks. “Perhaps that is not a story that is for me to tell,” he says with a quiet murmur. “You can ask Chanyeol that, one day. Perhaps he wouldn’t mind telling you the truth.”

“The truth?” That sounds puzzling, but Junmyeon refuses to say anything more about it, no matter how the curiosity is instantly eating away at Kyungsoo. Why couldn’t Junmyeon share that story with him? It all happened such a long time ago, so what does it matter, then. Why would it be a secret?

But Junmyeon can be as stubborn as the mountains, and Kyungsoo knows when he’s been defeated. Although he will be sure to ask Chanyeol about this, next time he sees the man. He has to find out.

For a moment, they’re quiet again. The silence is heavy, but not uncomfortable- Kyungsoo realizes with a start that he’s really become this close with Junmyeon. It doesn’t feel awkward, to just sit here, in his apartment, with nothing left to say. Just be there, for each other, even when all words have betrayed them. It’s the sort of companionship he hasn’t really had with anyone, except perhaps with Minseok- Junmyeon and him have shared such vulnerable things with one another, share such a meaningful past together, that it would be impossible not to grow closer to each other.

Not to feel at least an ounce of something for each other.

“This may sound very pitiful,” Junmyeon says as Kyungsoo pours them some more makgeolli. “This may sound… pathetic. But Kyungsso-yah… I just wanted to say, I’m grateful that we’re doing this. That you’re finally remembering everything… I know that you’re doing this only to find salvation, and I don’t blame you for that. I, too, would rather escape this fate than be stuck like this. But even if I know that you’re doing this only to also go away and leave me behind, well… I’m still happy. That finally, I’m not the only one who remembers. That even if you’re not the same as you once were, I still get to have you back, no matter how fleeting this is going to be. So thank you. Thank you for letting me have you, have this, for this time. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. To not feel so alone.”
It isn’t pitiful, or even pathetic. What it is, however, is touching—Kyungsoo has to look away to hide the emotions that surely would be very obvious on his face. It hurts, it really, really hurts to realize this—Junmyeon is doing this, if only to lose Kyungsoo again. Just for a moment of something like satisfaction and happiness, before it’ll be gone once more. Before he’ll be alone, once again.

And a part of him hates that he has to go. A part of him doesn’t want to let Junmyeon go. Not right after discovering who he is, what they were, what they had— but then, what has been the point of all this, if not finding his way out?

Why should he stay when to stay means to suffer?

The contradicting thoughts are like wild beasts, driving him into a dead end, their teeth sharp and eyes gleaming, hungry for his blood. And there is no escape, even if facing them will be painful, and pain is something Kyungsoo has always shied away from.

It’s so very unfair.

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early 17th century

It’s not often that Kyungsoo is the one to find the goblin. Usually it’s the goblin who seeks him out, or chances upon him— but this time, it’s him. Probably because the goblin is a bit poorly; he’s hunched down, shaking and sweaty, head hanging down. If anyone were to see this, they would certainly be quite alarmed; the goblin is dressed like a noble man and in the palace gardens for that matter, acting as though he’s on the verge of death. But Kyungsoo saw it, the magic of his sword, and knows that it’s just its curse that is paining him like this.

The gardens around them are silent, the fragrance of the flowers pungent and the air heavy. From this point, Kyungsoo cannot see any of the palace buildings, only a small part of the walls surrounding the compound, and it almost feels as though they’re in an enchanted forest. The pine trees, the cherry trees, the magnolia trees around them shielding them, and the carefully planted and maintained flowers delicate and beautiful even in the dark. This deep into the secret garden, no one from the servants can enter; this is only for the royalty, only for their eyes.

Kyungsoo is passing through here because he was going to pick up a soul, but in the end, the queen survived the dramatic birth, and she shall live a little longer. So, he’s empty handed, and taking the long way home just to enjoy this rare chance— but why is the goblin here?

“This is no place for this,” he says with a low hiss, crouching down next to the goblin. Junmyeon seems startled, but Kyungsoo pays that no heed. “If anyone saw you like this— gods, your foolery knows no limits. Come, we need to get you out of here.”

Junmyeon stands up on his feet, leaning heavily on Kyungsoo as he does. “I wasn’t planning on being caught,” he hisses back, hand clutching at his chest still, his voice hoarse. “I wasn’t… doing this on purpose.”

Kyungsoo says nothing in response at first, simply focused on finding a way out of the labyrinth of the gardens. Luckily, though, there appears to be no one around; the whole palace has been so focused on the queen giving birth that no one has strayed this far.

“This is no place for this,” he finally says as they reach the ponds. “It’s not something you can control, is it?”

“I wish it were,” Junmyeon sighs, and visibly winces as it presumably stabs him again. “But no. It’s
stuck there, and it hurts me as it pleases. Sick bastard.”

Kyungsoo snorts at that, despite the dire situation. But since Junmyeon isn’t exactly very light, and since there really seems to be no acute danger, he lets him sit down at the pavilion next to the water. It’s probably a place where kings and queens have ever sat, but well- they’re immortals, so doesn’t that raise them above the mortal rulers?

Junmyeon hunches over again, hands still pressed to his chest, while Kyungsoo stands awkwardly next to him, arms crossed over his chest. “The sword, uh… I heard that it’s part of your curse. That it’s sort of like, keeping you here? Is that true?” The question has been bugging him for literally centuries- and now that they’re talking about it, he figures he might as well ask.

Junmyeon nods, and sighs almost as though forcing all air out of his lungs. “It’s… Yes. It’s indeed the biggest part of the magic that is keeping me here, keeping me like this. I can’t take it out myself… And for as long as it’s there, I’ll live forever. I’ll be punished, forever.”

His glum words make Kyungsoo shudder, both with fear and some level of disgust, because that kind of tortured existence sounds awful beyond words. “So then, who can take it out? How can you be saved? You can’t be stuck like this forever. That just doesn’t make any sense.” It would just be too cruel. If mortals are allowed to forget and move on, then why shouldn’t the goblin have the same right- once his crimes have been made up for?

The goblin shrugs, and pushes himself up so he’s seated a little more upright. He won’t look at Kyungsoo, however, as he answers him. “There’s a legend about a goblin bride,” he says quietly. “Someone… special, I suppose, who will be able to deliver me from pain, and end my punishment. Who shall remove the sword, and set me free. Let me turn into dust, and finally die. I just… I just don’t know how I could find that person, or how I’ll know that it’s them. I’ve been given no clues.”

“Goblin bride? Is that also a goblin?” Kyungsoo has never heard this tale before, which is unheard of. After living this long, there’s hardly anything new or surprising in the world left.

Again, another shrug. “I don’t think that they are,” Junmyeon says quietly, kicking at the fine sand with his feet. He seems to be feeling a little better, and for that, Kyungsoo is relieved. “I don’t… Well, I do not know. The gods do, but they don’t talk to me. Maybe it means it’s not my time yet… But alas. All I can do is wait, and hope that they come along sooner rather than later.”

Kyungsoo turns away to gaze at the ponds, look at the reflection of the moons and stars on the surface of the dark waters. “Well, if it’s a bride… It sounds like it’s someone you have to fall in love with, perhaps. Someone who should love you, too. Love is magical, I’ve heard- it can cure all sorts of things, mortals say.”

The silence stretches on for so long that Kyungsoo begins to think Junmyeon isn’t going to respond anymore. But then he finally speaks, his voice more serious this time. Hopeless, almost. “That is impossible. I cannot fall in love… I can’t, when I’m still in love with someone who will never, ever be my savior. And how could anyone love me, either… Well, if love is really the requirement, then I’m doomed to this fate, forever. But I suppose that it seems fair, to those who decided that this punishment was just and right for me.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t know what to say to that. To pry more- it seems like he’s already poked at something very, very painful and intimate.

But it does seem very unfair. That Junmyeon should be stuck like this.

If only there was something he could do to help.
present time

Junmyeon continues to show up at his doorstep, or at his tearoom. It’s strange, even if at the same time it isn’t- and Kyungsoo understands, looking back now, that at some point, collecting his human memories had morphed into spending time together so very casually. Yet now, it’s not about the memories anymore, and rather just Junmyeon seeking him out. Going through great pains, in fact, to chance upon him- to find an excuse to talk, to do things together.

Yet each time, when Kyungsoo brings up wanting to find out the last part of his memories, Junmyeon retreats, pulls away, tries to hide. And there comes a point where Kyungsoo knows that it’s not just him wishing to do this at his own pace, but something deeper than that. Something more painful than that.

He’s scared of naming that, however, and doesn’t press where it so obviously hurts.

“What is your favourite memory of us as humans?” Junmyeon asks one day. Kyungsoo just finished taking a young couple to the afterlife, deceased in a tragic car wreck when the boyfriend was drunk driving. So irresponsible- the metal boxes on wheels never seemed like a good idea to him, but why would the mortals heed any warnings? But Junmyeon’s question is well enough to pull him out of his thoughts of disdain for modern vehicles.

“My favourite memory?” He has no obvious answer right off the bat. He’s never thought of it in that sense. “You know… At first, all memories were just so precious to me. I didn’t care if I liked them or not… So I’ve never thought about it.”

“But you can think about it now.” Junmyeon insists, his eyes sincere as he looks at Kyungsoo, pressing for an answer. “I want to know. I’m curious.”

“Clearly.” Kyungsoo bumps his hip against Junmyeon’s lightly, playfully. It’s so easy to mess around with him like this, to fool around in the most innocent sense of the term. To act how they remember them acting, when they were still human; yet that poses a problem, for it brings forth the feelings he also used to have, as a human.

They’re once more headed to Kyungsoo’s apartment. It’s become their usual spot for hanging out; it’s closer than Junmyeon’s place, even if distance is of no importance to the goblin and his abilities, and far safer than any public restaurant or bar they could frequent. Not that Kyungsoo minds. For the first time, in all honesty, his apartment feels less like a roof over his head and more like a home, a place he’s actually attached to.

That isn’t becoming of a grim reaper, but he’s chosen to ignore it.

Junmyeon lets him think about his answer, all the way until they reach the apartment building, until they’re seated on the floor with cups of tea. The summer weather is still hot and humid outside, but they both quite fancy the drink when they’re not opting for alcohol. Sentimentality at work, whether they would like to admit or not.

Old habits do really die hard.

“I think about the river often,” Kyungsoo admits after a long sip from his cup. “The way it looked through the seasons… The stones we would sit on, how you taught me how to skip stones on the water. And I remember feeling so safe, with the sound of rushing water surrounding us. Like a blanket, like a wall that was protecting us.”
That seems to please Junmyeon. “The river is my favourite place, too,” he says, gentle, warm. “I never had much of a home, growing up an orphan… But the river was always there for me, no matter what. It never could turn its back on me. And it’s where we would play and talk, and share our biggest secrets.”

Hearing Junmyeon talk like that- talk about him like that, it makes something warm swell inside of Kyungsoo. But he’d rather not dwell on it, even if he enjoys it, for he knows it’s not right. It’s just the mere cold memory of his human memories, he tells himself. Only a distant touch of something long since gone.

“What else?”

“I also… I think about how you would teach me to wield a sword. How scary it was, at first, but how happy I was to make you proud when I did well. The smell of buckwheat flowers and dust, all around us. How we would lie in the flowers afterwards, sweaty and out of breath, and just laugh, stare at the sky. Talk about idle things- and meaningful things, too.” The warm sensation just keeps spreading, but Kyungsoo tries to blame it on the hot tea he’s drinking. Not on how the matching warmth in Junmyeon’s eyes, not on how cherished and beloved these memories are. How precious it is to finally say these things out loud, make them that much more concrete.

“You were the worst at it.” Junmyeon’s gentle tease has no heat to it. “But I liked it. I liked knowing you were getting stronger- I liked the idea that even when I would be gone, you could still protect yourself. And I certainly liked the talks, afterwards… feeling so connected to you.”

Kyungsoo has to look away, at last, the tension between them growing to unbearable heights. He knows, he feels what Junmyeon is alluding to- but he must fight it. For both of their sake.

Junmyeon brings his knees to his chest, wraps his arms around his legs, curled up as small as he can be. Again, just looking at him makes all these weird urges rise within Kyungsoo, and it’s terrible, it’s confusing, it’s wrong.

“My biggest regret… It’s not everything that I did that made me end up like this. It’s not things I didn’t say or didn’t do.” Junmyeon sighs, heavy and serious. “I guess I’ve had too much time to get over things like that… But you know what I actually regret?”

“What is it?”

“I regret being born an orphan.”

The statement makes Kyungsoo’s eyes widen with surprise, that’s how unexpected of a statement that is. Junmyeon flashes him a smile, all teeth and no joy.

“Yes. Because you know- had I not been born an orphan, had I had a choice, I wouldn’t have become a soldier. No matter how poor my family would have been, no matter if we were born slaves or whatever, I wouldn’t have cared. I would have at least had a place to call home… And I would have never had to go away. I would have never left you, and allowed all those things to happen. None of this would have happened…”

“You don’t know that,” is Kyungsoo’s knee-jerk response, a weak attempt at brushing away the pain so evident in Junmyeon’s voice, his entire being. “You don’t know that… My parents would have married me off to whoever. It was never something either of us could decide.”

But Junmyeon shakes his head. “No, see- I’ve had time to think about this. Had I not been an orphan, struggling to survive from day to day, I would have saved money, I would have done
something to earn your hand. I would have never let you go… Or I would have run away with you, if that was the only choice we had. I wouldn’t have left you, and we wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

And for a fleeting moment, Kyungsoo can imagine that. Can picture Junmyeon marrying him, instead of being wedded to the girl he didn’t even know; can picture living with him in a humble home, a small hut with straws for a roof and mud and stones for the walls, a small vegetable garden around it to provide for them. Even if that would have made them social outcasts, he wouldn’t have cared. With Junmyeon, with his hyungnim, it wouldn’t have mattered.

The life they could have had.

He realizes he’s crying only when Junmyeon reaches out to wipe his cheek dry with the pad of his thumb.

“We would have lived, and we would have died, and we would have been happy. We would have never known pain like this…”

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the mid-17th century

Kyungsoo is weeping.

It doesn’t happen very often. Hardly ever is he moved to tears by anything, but this time, he’s overwhelmed with sadness. The two orphan children whose souls he had to collect and deliver to the afterlife, their sad eyes and famished figures haunt him, refuse to leave him. So much so, that for a moment, he thought that perhaps they didn’t leave; perhaps, they stayed back as ghosts, to haunt the last person whose face they saw.

But there’s nothing there. It’s just him, and his own thoughts.

Seated by the river, he cries. He brought his gayageum with him, to play and drown out the voices in his head, but it isn’t working. His hands tremble, distorting the vibrato he’s supposed to create, and each melody dies out, swallowed up by the sound of the water.

Human suffering, he still doesn’t quite comprehend it. He’s seen so much, too much, and isn’t usually so affected by it no matter what, yet sometimes… Sometimes, it still cuts deep.

The sound of footsteps almost goes unnoticed by him, and he doesn’t bother to turn around to look—he’s wearing his hat, after all, thus hidden from view, safe for as long as he keeps silent.

“Why are you crying all by yourself? Why are you crying at all? I thought grim reapers didn’t weep.”

The goblin’s voice is unmistakable. Kyungsoo refuses to look up, however, instead tilting his chin down and using the wide rim of his hat to shield his face. It’s humiliating, to be seen like this, at a moment of weakness, only made worse by the fact that it has to be Junmyeon.

“Go away.” But of course, the goblin doesn’t- instead, he sits down right beside Kyungsoo, in the old, forgotten pavilion built by the river. It appears as though no one has been here in decades, which is why Kyungsoo was bold enough to sit here, certain that he would not be disturbed.

“Play for me. Please.”
Reluctantly, Kyungsoo tries. Tries to will his fingers to move as they should, to lure out the elusive songs. Yet nothing comes of it, his heart just isn’t in it. Doesn’t want him to forget what he saw so easily.

When he loses his focus for the fourth time, Kyungsoo finally sets down the instrument, admitting defeat. “I just took to the afterlife two little souls,” he says, gazing at the river stubbornly. “It’s… their eyes, they won’t leave me alone. They were so starved… two little orphans with no place to go, no one to look after them. Of course they wouldn’t survive for very long. So why am I thinking about them…”

“Why are you thinking about them, indeed?” Junmyeon’s voice is void of all mirth. His question is only sincere, and it begs an answer, even if Kyungsoo has trouble properly wording it.

“They just… They were so starved for attention that they held onto me like I was their savior,” he says quietly, pressing his hands together tightly in his lap. “They wanted to hold my hand, wanted to sit in my lap… They drank the tea like it was the most delicious thing they’ve ever had, too. I just…it just broke my heart. That they were in such a dire situation that even death… even I was a welcome sight.”

Children didn’t usually behave this way. They are usually gullible and obedient, whenever dying alone, but this… This, Kyungsoo wasn’t prepared for. To directly feel their desperation for something they never had whilst alive.

It touched something within him, and he doesn’t know how to undo that.

Junmyeon is silent with him for a while. “I was an orphan, once,” he eventually says, his confession surprisingly honest and intimate. “I… I think I would have acted the same, had I come to die at a young age. There were times when I prayed for death… It is not winter yet, but it’s coming, and there’s nothing more dreadful than going through it when you have no shelter, no food.”

Kyungsoo has never experienced that, of course, but he understands enough of the human world that he knows that to be true. “So I suppose it was a blessing, then, for them to pass away.” He feels choked up, like there’s a tight rope around his chest, making him struggle for air. “I just… it just seemed so unfair. Why didn’t their village take care of them? It is not time of war or calamity… They could have been cared for. They didn’t need to die.”

“You’re right.” Junmyeon carefully touches his shoulder, and Kyungsoo doesn’t have it in him to shrug it off. Right now, it’s almost welcome, the silent comfort of it. “But such is the fate of many abandoned children… I, too, might have come to die at an early age, had it not been for this one boy in our hometown.”

Fighting against the tightness in his chest, Kyungsoo can’t bring himself to say anything, but he tilts his head slightly towards Junmyeon to show that he’s listening.

“He was even younger than me, when we first met. Big, round eyes and chubby cheeks, and he was so shy. But he was so affectionate, and so loving towards me, a dirty little rascal as I was. He wouldn’t stop pestering his mother to give me a bite of food… He would steal food for me, bothered his sister to sew clothes for me out of scrap fabric.” Junmyeon’s voice is so fond, his eyes brimming with deep emotion Kyungsoo can only describe as love. “He would sneak me into the house on cold winter nights, and play with me by the river. And whenever I was sad or tired from working hard to earn my keeping, he would let me rest next to him, feel him near… He would stroke my hair and tell me everything was going to be alright… And when he made his first instrument and made his first bit of money for it, he gave me the coins instead. Said he didn’t need it, said he would be more fulfilled to see me happy than spending it on himself.”
It’s impossible not to be moved by such a story. “He sounds like a good person,” Kyungsoo says, and Junmyeon is quick to nod.

“He was. He was the only one in the entire world who cared for me. Who loved me and whom I could love… It meant so much to me. It still does, even after all this time. Kindness and generosity like that, it’ll never be forgotten, no matter how fleeting.”

And Kyungsoo is sure that Junmyeon indeed hasn’t forgotten. It’s evident in his eyes, in his voice, in his words, and for a moment Kyungsoo is almost envious- to have experienced something so pure, so meaningful, it sounds so precious, no matter how glum the circumstances were.

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*present time*

Kyungsoo is returning home after spending the afternoon with Junmyeon in his apartment. It’s become so commonplace- spending time together. Like friends, Kyungsoo likes to think of it as. Friends. What friends do, all the time, what he’s seen mortals do because he hasn’t had such friends in so, so long, if ever. Even Minseok, the one grim reaper that he trusts the most, was never such an integral part of his life; only for the times that he ever wound up in the north did they ever spend time together like this, and most of it was due to work and not their own free will.

This is work too, he likes to think. A very strict, professional way of figuring out how to retire from his job, that is.

It’s quiet, quiet enough that it’s almost disturbing, keeps him from sinking deeper into his own thoughts. It should be the peak of rush hour, commuters hurrying home yet street after street, he finds himself almost completely alone. He glances at the sky and can see the first signs of a storm brewing- but it should not be enough to deter the mortals, yet.

It almost feels like something odd is afoot, yet he doesn’t know what it is until he’s standing face to face with it.

With her.

“You’ve changed a lot since I last saw you, reaper,” Samshin says, smiling. She looks nothing like the human form she had taken last time; instead of an old lady with wrinkly, leathery skin and eyes as hard as that of a beetle, she’s standing before Kyungsoo as a young woman, dressed in red head to toe. She’s beautiful, but in a way that speaks of danger; the same way tall cliffs are beautiful, or massive waves. Beautiful, because they’re powerful.

Kyungsoo is quick to bow, quick to look away. This form, although still human, is far more imposing and threatening in a silent way, and the last thing he wants to do is to anger her. There are many things she could do to him, no doubt. Shivers run through him, his eyes ringing even in the sudden silence surrounding them. If she has transported them to another realm, or done something else, he cannot know for sure, but he knows he’s not going anywhere until she so decides.

“I’ve… I’ve learned a lot,” he chooses to say, and that makes her laugh. “Yes, I know,” she muses. “You have done well, finally facing your past. Finally fulfilling what was once foretold. But I have to wonder- why are you stalling now? Why did you stop?”

How she knows these things, Kyungsoo has no idea, but knows better than to ask.

“I… It is not me, but the goblin, ma’am. Your holiness. I’ve pressed him for answers… But he doesn’t want to give me any. I do not know why…”
“He’s stalling because he’s selfish.” Samshin says it like it’s as clear as day. “He loves and cherishes you too much to let you go… Doesn’t want to give you all of your memories, in fear that he’ll lose you. He’s weak…”

Deep down, Kyungsoo knew this, had understood Junmyeon’s heart long before he could admit it consciously. But now, laid out in the open, there’s no way to put it back into hiding, and cover it with denial.

“I’ll find out the rest,” he hurries to say. “I want to know. I want to get out, and I know this is the only way. I won’t stall any longer. I promise.”

She sighs, then, and shakes her head as though to shake off something. “Mortal or immortal, you humans are all the same,” she muses. “But I suggest you hurry. It is your fate to rediscover your memories… Postponing that fate is only going to bring calamity upon you. And it is his fate, to lead you to the truth, lead you to the answers… And he, too, will be gravely affected, if he tries to shy away from it. You do not rewrite your fate, remember that.”

“I wouldn’t ever dream of disobeying you, ma’am.” Kyungsoo bows again. “I promise you… We will do as we must. No more time will be wasted…”

“I should hope so. I would hate to have to pay you another visit. I do not usually meddle in things like this, but I’ve realized that you immortals sometimes get the idea that you have more power than me. That you have a choice, after all. Mortals don’t misbehave like this… So don’t waste my time, and don’t make me do this. You won’t be happy to see me again, little reaper.” Her voice is perfectly even and calm, yet Kyungsoo knows that she’s completely serious- it’s not a useless threat.

“I promise,” he murmurs, and when he looks up again, she’s gone.

Kyungsoo has lived long enough to know that he shouldn’t piss off a god no matter what. If his own impatience wasn’t enough, then this is all he needs to make Junmyeon finally tell him. He needs to know the truth, and the time is running out.

Whether he’s ready or not, he has to face his fate now.

Shivering, Kyungsoo begins to walk, but not in the direction of his home. He’s going to seek out Junmyeon right now- even if Samshin appeared quite friendly now, she gave him a proper scare with her appearance. He’s going to retrace his steps back to Junmyeon’s apartment, and this journey they started will end today.

This needs to end now, no matter what. Junmyeon has to finally tell him the truth.

Even if it will break his heart.
Chapter 7

unknown time in the past

“Are you… Are you sure that we should do this?” Kyungsoo can’t help the slight tremor in his voice betraying his hesitation and uncertainty. He knows that this is the only way out, knows that this needs to be done, that none of their options are easy, but even so… He’s scared.

Junmyeon, the tough soldier he’s become, shows no signs of fear or doubt as he kisses Kyungsoo on the lips. Searing, burning, desperate.

Perhaps there’s fear in him, too.

“It’ll be over before you know it,” he murmurs, presses more kisses on Kyungsoo’s lips, bitten red by the previous hungry kisses. “It’ll be all done, and we’ll be free. We’ll go far away from here to places you’ve never seen, where rice grows plentiful and fruits ripen in the trees all year round. Where no one ever goes hungry or cold, and where no one knows us, judges us.”

It’s a beautiful promise. It’s a promise worth pursuing.

It’s just that so much is on the line, now.

“Be swift,” Kyungsoo whispers as he pulls away. The cover of the night will soon vanish, and so, they must hurry. “I will pray for you… may the mountains protect you, and your sword, too.”

If it weren’t such a dire situation, maybe Junmyeon all strapped in his uniform with his sword by his side would be a sight to marvel. He’s so handsome, too, hair pulled back and tied into a tight topknot, revealing his symmetrical features, his determined eyes. Even in the darkness of the night, he’s almost glowing. Yet this isn’t how Kyungsoo ever wants to think of him; on the verge of something so terrible, just moments away from death and devastation.

The Junmyeon he wants to remember is the one he used to star gaze with. The one he would share his food with, the one who would swim with him in the river and teach him how to catch fish. The strong hyung who would push him to such daring stunts and foolery; who would hold him at night and whisper stories of whimsical lands to him. Who would sit beside him and watch him make his instruments, tirelessly admiring the work of his skillful hands.

The Junmyeon he grew up with, the Junmyeon he fell in love with.

And somehow, it has all come to this.

Watching Junmyeon ride away, Kyungsoo sinks down to his knees and prays.

“May the magpies bring me the good news of your success.”

*****

present time

Junmyeon is right where he left him. Seated on the balcony once more, not even flinching as Kyungsoo strolls inside- the goblin has a bad habit of not keeping secrets where most would, including the passcode to his apartment door.

“Back already?” Junmyeon doesn’t seem too surprised either, although as he takes stock of
Kyungsoo’s frazzled state, he appears a bit confused. “Is everything alright?”
Kyungsoo opens his mouth to speak, but the words are lodged somewhere in his throat, painfully so. He knows what he’s here to do- but he’s scared.

If Samshin didn’t lie to him… If she’s right… Looking into Junmyeon’s eyes, Kyungsoo can’t tell. But then, how is love supposed to look like? How could he tell the difference, if Junmyeon never ceased to love him and all Kyungsoo has ever seen is that devotion?

Has there been any change in his own eyes, once he remembered who Junmyeon is? Once his emotions began to bleed together with the past like ink into water, once he lost control of keeping his human life separate from this existence.

Once past Kyungsoo began to morph together with the present Kyungsoo.

“You need to tell me the truth, hyung. I have to know what happened. No more games. Hyung. We have to face it, even if it hurts.”

Junmyeon’s face falls at that, and he turns away, gaze directed at the faraway horizon. Water glimmers there, as the rays of the sun hit the surface of Han river, play with its waves. But there’s no playfulness left in the trickster god now.

“I don’t want to…”

“It isn’t about what you want!” Kyungsoo snaps, grabbing his wrist to force him to turn around and look at him. “It’s not about you! The gods themselves want me to know this, want an end to this, and the longer we try to fight it, the more it’ll hurt us! We don’t get a choice, not anymore. We don’t have a choice.”

Because perhaps this pain is part of the punishment as well.

Junmyeon opens his mouth, probably to argue, and then closes it again. Snatches his hand free from Kyungsoo’s grip, which somehow is painful. To be rejected. “I take it you ran into someone on your way home, or received some kind of message,” he says, voice flat. “I take it… we really have no choice, then.”

“There was indeed a message delivered, and I wouldn’t mess with Samshin,” Kyungsoo says, dead serious, and the mention of the goddess’ name makes Junmyeon’s eyes widen as well. But of course he would know who she is, what she’s capable of.

With a sigh, Junmyeon stands up and walks inside. Kyungsoo follows close behind him, not wanting to give him even the slightest chance to run away now. But all Junmyeon does is walk up to the couch in his living room, and sits down in the corner, legs drawn up against his chest protectively.

From the pained tilt to the corners of his mouth, Kyungsoo can tell that his sword is giving him trouble again- this topic seems to quite aggravate it, and he does feel bad for it.

This really doesn’t have to be any more painful than it already is.

“How much do you remember?”

“Almost all of it.” Kyungsoo sits down as well, but keeps his distance from Junmyeon. It feels safer that way- as though physical distance could help lessen the impact of his words. “I remember… you arriving back from battle, and telling you about my father-in-law. I remember… sending you somewhere, afterwards. I remember feeling so scared, too. There’s this ominous feeling attached…”

Junmyeon hugs his legs tighter, his knuckles white where he’s holding onto his own arms as though
to anchor himself. Bracing himself for impact. “Right... Right. So you remember... Everything else but what actually happened.”

“Seems like it.”

Junmyeon swallows, struggles to put the story into words, into something comprehensible. Kyungsoo’s best guess would be that he’s never told this to anyone- or perhaps, once upon a time, has told it to one of his servants, who then took it to their grave with them. And inside his own chest, his heart is beating so wildly, blood thrumming in his ears and his hands shaking where he’s resting them on his knees, the anticipation gripping him like a vice.

“Tell me. Doesn’t matter, I just... I need to hear it, hyung. I really, really have to.”

“I...” Junmyeon doesn’t get more than one word out before a single tear rolls down his cheek. He wipes it away almost angrily, tilts his chin down to avoid having to look at Kyungsoo. “I... I rode into the home of your father-in-law with the intent to confront him. To kill him.”

Kyungsoo exhales slowly, forcing the breath out through the iron grip around his chest. “Right. I think... I think I guessed that, at least. What else could you have done...”

“Many things. Many, many things. Yet that was our plan. Our foolish plan.” Junmyeon wipes at his cheeks once more. “But that’s what we felt was for the best. I was so angry, too, I wanted him to suffer... I wanted to end him with my own sword, to pay back for what he had done to you. And then, we were going to leave the town and go someplace else. Start over. Be free. Go to Hanseong, where no one would know us. Care about us. It would have been just you and me, together, forever...”

The sense of that same regret sloshes inside Kyungsoo as well. Like an ocean- like it has always been there.

“So I rode in there... You hadn’t gone home the night before, or that day, or that night, as we stayed up to plan this out, so I suppose they must have known something was wrong. Perhaps... they had some kind of sign that told them to prepare. Because when I rode in, there were men there. Not trained in combat, but there were enough of them...”

Kyungsoo can imagine that, too. The courtyard filled with men with poorly made weapons and torches, waiting for something, anything, perhaps getting ready to search for him. All of the tenants farming the lands of the fat, disgusting man, forced to do his bidding whenever, wherever. And upon seeing a lone soldier right into the yard, sword drawn and bloodthirst in his eyes, perhaps they only acted upon instinct; swarmed him, pulled him down from the saddle, beat him.

Kyungsoo closes his eyes, but it doesn’t make the images stop.

Junmyeon carries on, his voice even quieter now. “I killed as many as I could... I did my best to fight as valiantly as I could. For your sake. I thought about what a disgrace it would be to perish like that, without even facing your father-in-law. Without being able to take revenge on the things you suffered through while I was gone. There was just too many of them...”

The swarm of bodies, the yells, the smell of blood. Men falling down from Junmyeon’s sword, only for someone else to take their place and continue the fight. Everyone in the home waking up to the chaos of it all, scared and unsure why they’re under an attack.

Somewhere hidden in sight in a buckwheat field, Kyungsoo waiting for Junmyeon to return so they could escape together.
“I fought… And I managed to tear myself free. I ran forward, blindly. You told me the blueprint of the house but I was disoriented. I had been injured, I was bleeding, and I knew then that it was hopeless… So I just tried to do what I could. Kill whoever I could. Torches fell down and buildings began to catch fire around me, and suddenly there were women outside as well, running and screaming- and I grabbed the young girl I guessed must have been your wife, by her dress and age, and I stabbed my sword through her chest. Because if I could not kill that man, then perhaps I could cause him pain through her, at least.”

Kyungsoo shudders. The poor girl who never did anything- wasn’t guilty of anything, yet had to pay for her father’s mistakes in such a horrible way.

Yet no matter how sorry for her he feels, he still rejoices in the knowledge that some justice was served that day, no matter how wrongfully so.

Junmyeon curls up even smaller, tendrils of blue smoke dancing around his chest. The sword must be hurting him, but he says nothing of it. “It was over quickly after that. I killed some more servants before at least, I was captured. It was shameful, too… Being dragged to your father-in-law, not able to do what I set out to do. Knowing I was going to die.” He shakes his head, eyes squeezed shut. “He wasn’t even man enough to kill me himself… Instead, he made someone else hold the blade, and pierce it through me. And that’s all I know… That is how my first life ended.”

Fighting for Kyungsoo, fighting for his revenge- dying for him, too, ashamed that he couldn’t do what he wanted to.

Died, and knew that Kyungsoo was still waiting for him, out there, somewhere. Ready to ride away, so they could have their happily ever after.

Kyungsoo has never been one for tears, but now, they’re cascading freely down his cheeks. Even through this all, he’s never been so overcome with emotion; the grief, the hopelessness from those days past, it’s now as present as ever, and bubbling out like blood from a fresh cut. He remembers it, too- remembers praying for Junmyeon’s return, remembers seeing the smoke climbing higher against the whitening horizon, remembers waiting… Waiting… And seeing no one.

Remembers Junmyeon not coming to retrieve him.

“You never came back,” he whispers, and before he can think twice of it, he throws himself forward, throws himself into Junmyeon’s arms, faces pressed close. “You didn’t come for me.”

And it’s with a cry of sheer pain that he kisses Junmyeon, muffling his sobs against his lips. Kisses him like a man starving, a man dying. Kisses him like he should have kissed him thousands of times, for hundreds of years; kisses him like the shy, young man he once was. Kisses him like a man cursed for centuries, and forced to forget what he once treasured more than anything on this earth.

And Junmyeon, he kisses him back, kisses him with murmurs of his name slipping off his tongue, kisses him like this alone is his salvation, his reward, for waiting all this time. For remaining loyal, all this time.

As the pendulum swings one way, it has to swing back, and Kyungsoo pulls himself away from the embrace like coming for air after a long dive, pushing himself away from Junmyeon, back to his original place on the couch. Back to a safe distance, even if the energy between them knows no physical limits. The connection, it’s deeper than either of them can comprehend; and Kyungsoo understands why Samshin wanted to rush it. This is not something to be kept dormant any longer, not to be kept in the dark.
It’s roaring, powerful, and he would be afraid of it if it weren’t so deeply connected within him.

Even the silence is full of meaning.

“Junmyeon, I…”

“IT’s alright.” Junmyeon presses a hand to his chest, his voice hoarse once more. “It is… alright. Now you know… The rest, it will come back to you, I’m sure. Either way, this is all I can give you… The last part, I’m sure it’ll find its way back to you.”

Kyungsoo can feel it in his bones.

It will.

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**unknown time in the past**

The morning comes, but Junmyeon does not.

Kyungsoo already knows what’s happened. There’s no other explanation- Junmyeon would have arrived already, no matter what, if only he could.

He can only pray that instead of dead, he’s only kept in captivity- but that, too, will see him dead in only a flash.

Kyungsoo doesn’t know what to do, and he agonizes over it the entire day, lying in wait, watching the town below. He saw the smoke rising from his father-in-law’s estate but from his advantage point, he can’t tell how much of it burned down, if any. There doesn’t appear to be much commotion in town just yet- but the gut feeling remains the same.

Something is wrong.

It’s not until nightfall that Kyungsoo finally ventures out. He’s no expert in this, only has his small knife to protect himself and a bamboo sword Junmyeon quickly made him yesterday, but he doesn’t think he’s in any real danger. Finds it hard to believe his father-in-law would be merciful enough to have him killed. Yet the sense of dread won’t leave him as he moves through the fields, approaching the town, slowly, staying hunched down in the shadows.

It isn’t until he reaches the lands attached to the house of his father-in-law that the first true signs of calamity make themselves known. There’s debris piled outside, at the back; it’s hard for Kyungsoo to see from faraway, but he guesses it could be things ruined in the fire last night. He would have to look closer to know for sure.

Just as he’s about to crawl closer, movement at the very edge of his vision catches him off guard. He turns around quickly but then realizes they’re just birds; birds scuffling together next to a big, dark shape that Kyungsoo at first doesn’t recognize because the angles are all wrong, the position so unnatural for a human being, the sight of a dead, discarded body a new experience for him. The sword sticking out on both sides adding a weird shape to it…

And then it hits him.

It doesn’t even feel real. Rushing towards the body even as his own heart sinks, even as he knows that it’s all too late. Has been too late for a long time, now. Turning him over to see Junmyeon’s face, tarnished with blood, whether his or someone else’s, it matters not. And the sword, struck through
his chest, the wound gaping open around it, the clotted blood the thickest there. Junmyeon’s eyes still open- no one even had the decency to close them. They just threw his body out here, and left it to rot.

Perhaps left it to bait Kyungsoo.

He’s never known grief like this before. For a moment, the world doesn’t even feel real; nothing does. His own body, the weight of Junmyeon’s body in his arms, the dire circumstances- nothing is real. There’s only this grief, this sadness, like an ocean without shores. Endless, bottomless.

How he finds the strength to stand up, he doesn’t know, but after that, he only knows one purpose. One goal.

And it’s almost laughably easy, now. Sneaking into the estate, through the courtyard and into the men’s quarters. He knows exactly which floorboards creak and how much to open each sliding door before pushing through; he knows the sounds of the house, knows his way in.

Why did he ever send Junmyeon here? Why did he sacrifice his own lover, like this? Why was he ever foolish enough to think he couldn’t do this, wouldn’t have the heart to do it?

If he hadn’t been such a coward, then Junmyeon would still live.

There’s no hesitation left. There’s no thoughts, only silence in his heart and his mind, unified with the grief he still cannot even begin to process. But it’s easy- sliding open the door to his father-in-law’s bedchamber, walking in on light feet, and even in the darkness he can clearly see the man’s figure on the bed.

Kyungsoo doesn’t even wake him, and instead, sinks his knife into the man’s chest with both hands, feeling the bone break against the blade and tissue give away underneath it. And he pulls it back only to stab him again, and again, the gurgles and muffled screams of the man hardly even registering with him, the hands grabbing at him and trying to shove him away almost laughable in their weakness.

He doesn’t want him to just die- he needs him to suffer.

No words are said. There’s no need for that- his knife does the talking, takes his revenge.

It’s not until he hears those floorboards creak that he knows he has to run. The man is still conscious but now laying limp on the bed, staring up at Kyungsoo, mouth wide open, his teeth tainted red. But Kyungsoo only spares him one glance, before he jumps out through the window, throwing himself through the thin paper and wood with no hesitation.

Finally, he’s had his revenge; not for what was done to him, but for what was taken away from him.

Junmyeon’s body, however, he can’t take with him just yet, as he flees into the night, hearing the screams grow louder behind him.

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present time

Kyungsoo doesn’t find rest for days. The weather has taken a turn for better, the temperature dropping slightly to more tolerable levels, and there’s a faint promise of autumn in the air; it’ll be long ways until then, but just how you can sense when spring is growing closer, autumn is also making a promise of its swift arrival. But Kyungsoo is so occupied with his own thoughts, his own memories, that he hardly even notices such changes, hardly even cares.
His heart is as heavy as a stone, and he aches. He aches, and he grieves, and he loves.

The man who died for him.

Kyungsoo weeps, at night, together with his ajaeng as he plays, and loathes the gods that this is all real.

He’s almost paralyzed, with the turmoil inside of him, and there’s only one thing he can think of doing right now.

When seeing Junmyeon hurts too much. Reminds him of too much.

This time, he doesn’t make much preparations before heading north. Kyungsoo just finds it so hard to care about his job right now; once the most important thing in his life, now, it seems just pointless. Each soul passing through his hands only an unpleasant reminder that Junmyeon was once one of these souls- that he, too, was brought to this limbo before being sentenced to his punishment.

Perhaps, had the grim reaper been kinder, he would have been given the tea and allowed to pass through swiftly. Into something happier, better.

Perhaps.

Kyungsoo races north, and this time even the sight of Baektusan doesn’t move him like it did before. He knows it’s selfish, all of this is, but somehow… he’s too weak to be better, to do better.

Minseok awaits him like he did before, the same magpie still balanced on his shoulder. No doubt, the birds once again warned him of a visitor. And nothing has changed, aside from the trees and vegetation; nothing about Minseok’s hair, clothes, his demeanor. It’s startling, somehow, after all the change Kyungsoo himself has been put through, how different he feels than when he last visited here.

Minseok is silent as he leads him into the house, and remains silent as he brews them tea. The magpie, instead of flying outside, jumps down on the low table and bounces on it closer to Kyungsoo, head tilting this way and that as it regards him curiously. It allows Kyungsoo to pet it, as well, with a light touch of only one finger, tender and slow, its dark eyes giving away none of its secrets.

“Why the magpie?” Kyungsoo asks, and his voice startles the bird so that it flies away, finding a safe space on a high shelf next to the stove. “Why them?”

Minseok sets the table, moving slowly, deliberately. “Because they’re the harbingers of good news, don’t you know?” he says, glancing at Kyungsoo. “They bring all kinds of good news- and to a tired soul ready to go, our arrival is also such.”

Kyungsoo says nothing in response to that, and Minseok sits down opposite from him. “I’m surprised to see you here so soon, only months after your last visit.” There’s a hint of playfulness to his voice, to the light in his eyes, and Kyungsoo forces a smile in response.

“I… I’ve discovered something, since I was here last.” Nothing is the same now… But that would be too much to try and share now. “We talked about… finding a way out of this life. You told me then that the only way to have salvation is to remember what we did that we are being punished for.”

Minseok takes a measured sip from his cup. He’s become almost stoic, in some regards, Kyungsoo absently thinks; he’s become one of those grim reapers who’ve lived far beyond the usual life span, and it has begun to show. Like this, Minseok will soon become like his home; unchanging, silent,
still. But Kyungsoo cannot help him, for he doesn’t know how to recover his memories.

“Go on.”

“Hyungnim, I— I spoke to the goblin. And he… he helped me remember. My life as a human. I’ve spent the entire summer rediscovering that, piece by piece… And now, finally, I’ve seen what I did. What I’m being punished for.”

It still feels unreal to say. That he has come this far— that he now has all the pieces to the puzzle.

Yet they still don’t click together. The picture isn’t complete.

Minseok raises his brows at that. “You did? I didn’t… I didn’t think it was quite possible, to be quite honest. But you have regained your memories… Then, what is it? What have you done?”

The full story would be too long, too personal to share, but Kyungsoo recounts it as quickly as he can to get the main points across. Minseok listens to him quietly, nodding his head now and again, occasionally staring out the window or down at his teacup. “So you murdered someone in hatred and sadness,” he repeats once Kyungsoo has told his tale. “Yet you’re still here. Do you not… Do you not repent that?”

He understood Kyungsoo’s problem so easily. “I find it so hard to regret it,” Kyungsoo whispers, closing his eyes. “He took Junmyeon from me… Took everything away from me. I cannot feel anything but anger. Even as I recall how it felt to hold that knife, to sink it into his body, I still can’t regret it. I would do it again, if I could— I would not hesitate. And that’s just the thing. Killing was so easy, once I had a reason to. Once I lost someone I cherished and treasured so much… It was easy. Even if it was a crime.”

In fact, he’s relived the murder several times, trying to find even an ounce of regret inside of him. But there’s none— no matter how vividly he imagines it, pulls apart every scene, he doesn’t feel sorry. The screams of the man, the feel of his blood gushing out on his hands and face, the knowledge that he was killing another human being… It matters not. Minseok studies him silently for a long while, and Kyungsoo tries to face his stare head on. “You love him,” is Minseok’s final conclusion, and the words make Kyungsoo shudder even though he knows them to be true. Has given into the feeling, now.

He couldn’t keep the feelings of the past and present separated, no matter how hard he tried.

“I fear that I do.”

“I can see your dilemma.” Minseok sighs, and that coaxes the magpie to fly to the table once more, settling down so that Minseok may pet it from head to tail. Kyungsoo dares not to touch it again, only looks into its wise, unreadable eyes, and hopes he could understand. “But no one ever said that to regret our deeds would be easy… That, I think, is also a part of the curse. That we must struggle with our own feelings, as well. Reshape them into something else. No matter how hard it is.”

“I suppose.” Kyungsoo looks down at his hands. The same hands that murdered a man. “I guess… But I don’t know how. I just… I care much more for Junmyeon than for anything else, that is the problem. But maybe, with time, I’ll be able to repent. It just, somehow, seems like these centuries have numbed me to what it means to die. I see people get murdered, slaughtered almost every day. It just doesn’t feel like anything…”

“But you felt something when you saw Junmyeon die. Does that not help remind you of the value that human life has?”
Minseok asks that so easily, and the answer is simple too. But that doesn’t leave Kyungsoo any less conflicted, regardless.

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Waiting for the next soul to stumble its way to him, Kyungsoo finds himself distracted. It’s quite unusual for him to pay much attention to mortals around him, for he cares little for their trials and tribulations, but now, he’s quickly developed a habit of watching them more closely. Yet it’s not just any mortals, but couples. Couples of all ages, as they walk by him, sit in cafes around him, show up on TV and movies he sees flashing across screens when he enters homes.

Even now, he’s watching a couple. They appear to be around the same age as Kyungsoo and Junmyeon both appear physically, the girl the kind of pretty that most people don’t know how to appreciate and the guy quite forgettable. They’re seated in a café across from the apartment Kyungsoo is in currently, right by the window so they’re clearly visible to him. They appear so shy around each other- the girl keeps looking away bashfully, the guy is fiddling with his straw anxiously. It’s nothing special, yet…

He’s so drawn to it, for now, he relates to it. That could be him, that could be Junmyeon- sharing that precious moment, together, making promises of forever. Just talking about whatever, yet still doing something so much more important than just that. Bonding. Telling stories, getting to know each other. Truly know one another as they exist in this life- not the one they had before. It was all so long ago, and they have very little in common with who they once were.

To laugh together. To make plans for the future, together. To dream.

Kyungsoo has never had dreams, as a grim reaper. He’s always been solely focused on his work, on his music, on the mundane stream of days, years, decades. He’s never thought of anything else. Just dreaming about having dreams and goals for the future is strange, and exciting.

And it makes him sad, because there will be no future, if he achieves his goal of salvation. Right now, he’s not sure how he ever could, but even more importantly… The thought of leaving Junmyeon behind scares him.

The contradictions between his heart and his mind just keep getting more complex, and even when he manages to solve one issue, another comes along.

But it would be so nice… The couple is sharing a slice of cake between them, even playfully feeding each other pieces. Chatting and laughing as they slowly grow more relaxed. It’s so adorable.

“Uh… Excuse me, sir? Are you… Are you a grim reaper?”

The voice startles Kyungsoo out his thoughts, and he turns his head to look at the room he’s actually currently in. Before him, stands a soul; an old lady, still wearing the apron she was wearing while preparing vegetables in the kitchen. It’s a small restaurant, by the looks of it run by her alone, and she must have died as she lived- working tirelessly, preparing food for others. The next customer will have the unpleasant surprise of finding her dead body.

And Kyungsoo was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he didn’t even notice her dying.

Even through all of this, he’s never been quite this unprofessional before, no matter how distracted he’s been.

He fumbles for the envelope even as she keeps staring at him, and pulls out the letter clumsily. “Yes, Kwon Yeongjung, age 72. Cause of death: cardiac arrest. Is that right?”
“Yes, that is right.” The old lady is nervously wiping her hands with her apron, looking quite worried. “Is there… Is there something wrong? You were staring out the window… Is someone else going to die, too? Oh, I shouldn’t say this, but I wouldn’t mind that so much. Going to heaven alone seems scary, I don’t know what I’ll say to God… It would be much better to have someone with me who’s good with words.”

Kyungsoo decides not to burst her bubble. Many people are excited about the prospect of going to heaven, and well- Kyungsoo has no definitive answer to if such a place exists or not. If these people will meet a god, or not. He doesn’t want them to freak out on him, should he reveal this fact to them. It’s best to just get them there, and walk them through that door, and be done with it.

“No, it will be just you for tonight. Follow me, please.”

Fuck. He’s gotten sloppy- it’s something he would have ever thought that could happen to him. Perhaps even the short weeks he spent with Baekhyun were all too long. His foolery might have been contagious. The corners of Kyungsoo’s mouth pull downwards even just thinking about it. He’ll really have to get a grip, now, even if at the same time, there’s a faint voice in his head that asks if there’s any point in that when he’ll hopefully be gone soon. Why invest any more energy into this, when it’ll soon be a thing of the past?

Maybe. Given that he can learn to regret killing someone he very much hated.

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at the dawn of the 18th century

Temples have always been one of Kyungsso’s favourite places. Everything is so predictable and easy, as the monks always follow the same routines, day in, day out. Their numbers have been in a sharp decline, however, and that makes Kyungsoo concerned; he’d hate to outlive yet another tradition that he cherishes so much. It is of course only natural; human beings perish so quickly and so easily, and their ways of life are wiped away just as fast. But he wouldn’t want to see this to vanish, too- the only place where the mortal world seems far, far away.

He might be tempted to stay here for a long time, if his precious instruments were allowed. If his music was allowed here. There’s singing and drumming of course, but the monks are really not one for the joys of music. And that keeps Kyungsso returning back to the world- he misses it, misses his instruments, and can’t go without even in a place as serene as this.

But nothing is serene with a goblin around.

He recognizes Junmyeon’s voice as soon as he hears it. The goblin walking through the gates with a young man following him, carrying a bag while Junmyeon’s hands remain empty. So a servant, then. There’s something oddly familiar about the boy’s face, but Kyungsoo doesn’t think too long on it, his attention on Junmyeon as he watches him enter the temple compound.

The monks, true to their nature, welcome him in and give him and his servant a sleeping chamber. The temple has lost a lot of monks since its glory days and there’s a lot of vacant space to take in travelers, should anyone find themselves this high up on the mountain. Kyungsoo keeps his distance but he knows it’s futile; he knows that the goblin knows exactly where he is. That he is here.

This is not just a coincidence.

At night, when the monks have gone to bed, Kyungsoo gets on the roof of the temple to see the stars better without the trees in the way. He gets to be alone for almost all of five seconds, before he hears
the distinct sound of footsteps on the old rooftiles, moving towards him.

There’s only one person who could have made it up here.

“You’re learning, grim reaper. Doing devious things like climbing on roofs, and at a temple at that? I wouldn’t have thought I’d ever witness the day, but here we are.”

“Shut up, I only came here to see the stars.” And maybe because he knew that the goblin would come here as well. It has always been their fate to meet one another at places like this; high up, far away.

Junmyeon sits down beside him. For once, his hair is braided, his usual blue robes changed for the greys and reds that the monks typically wear. “My servant washed my clothes for me, so I have to wear these until they dry,” Junmyeon offers as an explanation. “We’ve been on the road for a while. Everything needed cleaning and maintenance.”

“Where are you headed?” Kyungsoo finds that such a riveting thought- travelling somewhere freely, without being told where to go. He knows he’ll never experience that, so maybe asking Junmyeon about it isn’t so wrong of him.

Junmyeon shrugs. “Nowhere in particular. Probably going to make our way to Busan, and sail over to Japan for a while. I’ve stayed too long. People are going to start asking questions- why am I not aging? Why haven’t I died? I don’t want to chance it. I’ll return once everyone has forgotten who I am.”

Something heavy settles into the pit of Kyungsoo’s stomach, but he chooses not to say anything. It’s not his place, it’s not his right to ask him not to go- meeting once in a century should be enough.

“So which one of the monks is dying?”

The question startles a laugh out of Kyungsoo, so sudden and abrupt it is. “The one who greeted you at the gate when you arrived,” he answers. “Not yet, though, I just came here a little early. If you leave tomorrow, you won’t have to see any of the hassle.”

Junmyeon laughs and nods, before leaning closer with a mischievous look to his eyes. “You know, do you ever think about it- These monks. They spend all their lives hunting epiphanies and salvation, but then they die knowing nothing of the mortal world. Like the charm of wine… the magic of tobacco…”

“The temptation of the flesh,” Kyungsoo finishes for him, guessing where this is going. He’s blushing just thinking about it, even though he’d hate to admit it; this is a topic he’s very at unease with. “Well. It is what they have sworn to. They’ve done it willingly.”

“Well, I suppose. But imagine it- to die without ever knowing the pleasure of holding someone else close, so close they become one with you. To never have felt the passion and love for someone, when you press against their naked body…” Junmyeon’s voice is almost sensual as he says this, sending shivers down Kyungsoo’s spine. “That’s all I can think about. These poor men dying and lacking such profound experience in life.”

Kyungsoo squirms in his place, wringing his hands together. Gosh, now he really is thinking about it, and he doesn’t know what to do about it, his body reacting in ways almost completely foreign to him. Because indeed, foreign it is- he, as well as the monks, has never given in to the carnal pleasures he knows theankind to indulge in so often.

Junmyeon reads him like an open book. “You’re not serious,” he says, mock aghast. “All this time
and you haven’t ever- No, Kyungsso-yah. You cannot be- are you a virgin? Really?”

“It is not becoming of me to do such things,” Kyungsoo hurries to say, even if it sounds like a flimsy excuse even to him. “And to get involved with mortals in such a way- that is horrid, Junmyeon. No way I could do it.”

The other laughs, loud and clear, head thrown back as he does. “I didn’t say you had to do it with a mortal that you seem to fear like the plague,” he teases, nudging Kyungsoo with his elbow. “Seriously though- do you not ever even think about it? Do you not want to try it?”

Kyungsoo shakes his head. “No, I don’t think about it,” he replies, and it’s the truth. Such things hardly ever cross his mind. “Do you- do you do it with mortals, then? Often? You sound very fond of it.”

Junmyeon quirks a brow at him, something more serious flashing in his eyes before it’s gone once more. “No, I do not do it,” he answers. “But I have done it, before. Not anymore, however… Because I’ve only done it with someone I very dearly loved, and to do it with anyone else would feel as though I was being unfaithful. They wouldn’t know of it, they wouldn’t even care about it… But I want to keep the vows I once made. But when I did do it, wow, words cannot even describe how good it felt. It is amazing.”

Kyungsoo’s cheeks are burning hot, the most inappropriate images flashing through his mind. He’s seen people doing it- has witnessed such moments of passion before, and to picture Junmyeon in such a scenario, it’s wild. It’s doing things to his body he’s ashamed to even admit, but he blames it on how inexperienced he is. That anything could make him react like this, and it has nothing to do with the goblin beside him.

“Well, since you speak so highly of it, perhaps I should try it once.”

“You should.” Junmyeon gives him a weird look, like he can’t quite decide if he should be amused or serious, and Kyungsoo doesn’t understand why. “Tell me how it goes, if you ever do. I’m curious to hear all about it.”

“You’re weird.” Kyungsoo says with a huff. “But don’t hold your breath. I’ve gone this long without, it might take me another hundred years before I get around to it.”

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present time

It would make sense to stay away from Junmyeon. Their story is over- Kyungsoo has read it to the end, and seen how it all came crumbling down. There’s hardly any reason to see him- isn’t that the only logical conclusion? Yet somehow… He doesn’t want to stay away, now. Doesn’t want to lose him.

It’s odd, but he knows why. Even Minseok could point it out to him with no hesitation. He loves him, and that love keeps him going back to him. Pulling him in.

They’ve been alone for so long, and even if Kyungsoo’s time is running short… He can’t find it in him to reject this feeling, and turn his back on Junmyeon. Even if they’ll only have a short while together, he wants to make it worth it. Wants to experience it, be it temporary or not.

Of course it’s scary. Of course it’s difficult- to know that they’ll have to say goodbye. And what makes it even more painful is knowing that Junmyeon has no way out- no way to end the painful eternity. But even so, for once Kyungsoo wants to be selfish. For once, he’s going to go after what
Junmyeon seems only slightly startled to see him appear behind his door, once Kyungsoo returns from his trip to the north. “You’re back,” he says, stating the very obvious. He’s dressed so casual, too, clearly not having expected visitors; a blue, soft sweater, sweatpants, glasses on his nose. His hair has been braided but it still falls down over one shoulder, instead of being tied up.

Even though he has Kyungsoo, he still won’t use the hairpin.

“Of course I came back.” Kyungsoo enters the apartment, and hands Junmyeon a small, neatly wrapped package. “A good friend of mine sends his greetings in the form of this gift. It’s local delicacies, from the north. I hope you like it.”

“Thank you,” Junmyeon mumbles, taking the box of treats to the coffee table. Even the apartment feels less organized, less magazine-like; there’s an air to all of this that feels like giving up. Giving up making an effort, giving up pretenses.

Junmyeon must be so very exhausted.

If Kyungsoo can help that, he should.

He pulls Junmyeon down on the couch with him, and Junmyeon comes, easy, although cautious not to touch Kyungsoo accidentally. “So, how are the northern provinces? I haven’t been up there in a very long time… Not since the division, really. I didn’t want to cause any trouble, to myself or Chanyeol’s family.”

“It was alright,” Kyungsoo replies, curt. “Junmyeon, I… I didn’t come here to talk about that. I mean, yes, we can talk about it if you’re really curious, but really, there’s something else… A lot of something else.”

“Have you remembered something new?” Junmyeon’s fingers are busily picking at the fabric of his pants, his eyes cast down. “Did the goddess visit you again?”

“No, none of that.” Junmyeon really isn’t making this any easier, and doubt begins to grow in his mind. Perhaps Junmyeon knows what he’s about to say- and doesn’t want to hear it. He has a gift of seeing the future, after all.

But all Junmyeon does is regard him with such sincerity in his eyes. There’s so much emotion there—emotions that Kyungsoo is only slowly coming to understand. Wants to understand, but doesn’t have the keys to those secrets just yet.

They’ve been apart for such a long time, but now it’s time for that to end.

“Hyung,” he says, quiet. The word feels almost foreign, after such a long time. “Hyung, I… Gods, I have so many things I wish I knew how to say. But I guess the biggest one is that… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for everything I’ve done to hurt you. When I didn’t know who you were. When I kept you waiting for me for such a long time… I cannot even begin to imagine how hard it must have been. How hard it still is.”

His mouth is dry, his heart beat thundering loudly in his own ears. He’s never felt this nervous, and now it’s taking over his entire body. Moving his limbs feels as though he’s moving through molasses, but he pushes his hand forward until he can link his pinky with Junmyeon’s. Just the smallest touch, yet it feels like it’s making Kyungsoo’s world completely anew.

Junmyeon doesn’t pull his hand away, and Kyungsoo can feel the trembles going through him as
well.

“And I’m sorry I was mean to you. I’m sorry I approached you only when it was for my own gain, and I wasn’t even thinking about you… And I’m sorry that all this time you were helping me, you knew you were only taking me closer to leaving you again. I’m sorry… I’m so, so sorry.”

And to his surprise, there are tears falling down his cheeks once more. He wipes at them with his free hand, and chances one more look at Junmyeon. Still, the fondness hasn’t left him; the honest love and attachment haven’t gone away.

They never have, and they never will.

This time, the kiss happens slowly. Kyungsoo doesn’t want to surprise Junmyeon with it, this time. Wants to know that Junmyeon wants this, too, that he accepts it and wants this. Gently cupping Junmyeon’s face and bringing him closer until he can press his lips to his, feel his soft mouth against his, and in that moment, he feels more whole than he remembers ever feeling. Just holding Junmyeon, just having him here- knowing that there is something, for them, between them.

And Junmyeon kisses him back, just as tender, just as delicate, leaning in closer until he practically falls into Kyungsoo’s lap, arms wrapping around his waist and shoulders. Giving into the kiss, letting Kyungsoo pull him near, allowing Kyungsoo to deepen the kiss with his tongue pressing against Junmyeon’s lips, asking for entrance.

It’s all so new, something he’s never done, yet it all comes back to him. He remembers this, remembers doing this, and in some ways it’s almost as though several centuries haven’t passed- yet the hurt, the weight of the past, they remind him of how long it has really been. How much time they wasted, living so close but separated.

Junmyeon makes the most delicate noise and Kyungsoo’s heart swells with affection. He kisses him that much more firmly, pulling him down against his body as they fall down on the couch, bodies entwined, and the weight of his body against his feels so right. Everything just falling into place, that simple, for just a fleeting moment everything making perfect sense.

“I missed you,” Junmyeon whispers against his lips, tears in his voice. “I missed you, Kyungsoo-yah. I didn’t think… I didn’t think I’d ever get to have you back.”

“I’m here,” Kyungsoo murmurs back, pushing his fingers clumsily into Junmyeon’s hair before they get caught in his braid, pulling it apart. “I’m here, now. I know… I know that forever is not for me to promise, but for now, for this moment… I am here. And I remember you, hyung. I remember you. I know you. I see you. I love you.”

Junmyeon shudders, and kisses him silent, like he’s scared of what more words could do to him if he lets Kyungsoo speak.

Junmyeon’s body, his touch, they set ablaze a need in Kyungsoo that has stayed dormant all of his life as a grim reaper. His whole being suddenly craving something he’s never felt any interest for, and his hands begin to wander, begin to tug at Junmyeon’s clothes to touch bare skin, to get closer, impossibly close. Junmyeon doesn’t hold back either, hurriedly tugging his sweater over his head and pressing against Kyungsoo with a soft sigh, lips never leaving Kyungsoo’s.

He’s not the same as he is in Kyungsoo’s memories. Not as slight, not as slender- there’s a certain steadiness that Kyungsoo quite likes, the ripple of muscles as he runs his hands over his bare torso. A kind of power he would like to see, once, to fully appreciate it- but this is good too, for any more distance between them and he fears he couldn’t take it.
And it’s so easy to give in. To let Junmyeon undo his shirt, to let him push it off his shoulders, to wriggle out of it and strip away the undershirt. Junmyeon’s hands so small against his body as they feel him up, map him out, reverent but eager in how he touches him, kisses him.

Kyungsoo is dizzy with want, with need, and it’s all too much too soon yet not enough. Perhaps nothing will ever be enough to satisfy him- there’s too much to make up for.

“Hyung…”

“I love you.”

Kyungsoo rolls them over again so that he has Junmyeon underneath him, and pulls down his pants before he pauses to admire his naked form, splayed out against the luxurious couch. There’s not a single mark on him, not even where the blade once pierced him, his dark hair a beautiful contrast to his skin, and Kyungsoo can’t believe that this is real. That Junmyeon is here, and his, his to touch and his to love.

“Touch me, Kyungsoo-yah. Please.” He’s never heard Junmyeon’s voice so small, so fragile- needy in a way he could have never imagined, and it fills his heart with desire to give him everything he wants, everything he could ever want.

It’s such a pity that they could have spent all this time like this, yet only now found each other.

Kyungsoo leans in to kiss Junmyeon with fervor, sliding in between his legs and enjoying the feeling of Junmyeon squeezing his hips with his thighs. “You’re so beautiful,” he murmurs, a praise so uncharacteristic of his usually stoic disposition, but it’s true. Junmyeon is breathtaking, and he wants all of him, all of this.

They should take this slow. They should savor this, like a gift well deserved or a price earned with great effort, but they’ve waited too long. Something has to give, now, and they both know enough about loss to understand that this, too, could be taken away from them at any moment. And it’s that fear and that impatience that drive them both, to feel more, to ask for more, to be greedy.

Junmyeon’s hands on his body, small but persistent in how he takes, needs, demands. Junmyeon pushes his pants down as well and then it’s just their naked bodies, pressed against each other and still needing to be closer. Kyungsoo shudders as his hard cock brushes against Junmyeon’s, against his abs- it’s a sensation so new, and it travels up his spine and makes him almost dizzy in the head, breaths coming quicker and the need building up even further.

Need to have more.

Junmyeon sinks his hands into Kyungsoo’s hair, too, tugs on it and runs his fingers through it. “I always wanted to do this,” he whispers, delicate. “I always wanted to know how different it would feel when it’s short like this… Oh, how long I wanted this…”

Too long.

Kyungsoo would say sorry, but he doesn’t want him to be sad. Doesn’t want this to be sad- even if that can’t be avoided, the knowledge of how much they’ve lost already and they’ve only just begun.

“I want you.”

Kyungsoo kisses down Junmyeon’s body. He needs to feel all of him, touch all of him; peppering kisses down his neck, savoring his reactions, his sharp gasps and how his fingers tighten in his hair. Kissing his collar bones, their hollows, up to one shoulder and back to the center again. And to feel
how it makes Junmyeon squirm underneath him, how his muscles tense up and relax again, how his chest falls and rises with each sigh and each whimper. Trailing down lower to his belly, its tender skin and feeling each muscle move, until he reaches his hip bones, beautiful in how they push against his skin, the lines and shadows they draw.

“Kyungsoo…”

A wave of bravery surges through him, and Kyungsoo takes the tip of Junmyeon’s leaking manhood into his mouth, pushes his tongue against the ridge, the slit. Sees how pleasure overcomes him, how it makes his back bow and mouth drop open; knows he can’t stop here, when he can make Junmyeon feel so good, give him this much pleasure.

It encourages him to take more of him in, hollowing his cheeks and letting the thickness of it rest against his tongue as it slides further into his mouth. The stretch to his lips something he finds himself enjoying tremendously, the taste of Junmyeon and his clean skin overwhelming his senses until his gag reflex comes in and his eyes water as his throat works, fighting to keep going, to take even more of Junmyeon’s cock into his mouth. His enthusiasm seems to please Junmyeon as well, who can’t get a coherent sentence out, moaning out Kyungsoo’s name each time he moves, each time he swallows around him.

But it’s not enough.

He pulls back, lets Junmyeon’s cock slip out of his mouth, licking his lower lip to break the string of saliva connecting him to the tip of it. He can still taste him in his mouth and he enjoys it, wants to treasure it, wants to remember forever how Junmyeon is looking at him right now, expectant, fond, loving. Open- waiting for what he wants, for what he picks.

There are so many possibilities it has Kyungsoo dizzy, but he really just wants to feel him as close as possible.

“Hyung… May I fuck you?”

“Yes,” Junmyeon breaths out, and closes his eyes for a moment- a bottle of lube lands into his hand, flying across the room from the bedroom. And really, Kyungsoo didn’t know he could do that, move matter with just his thoughts alone, but it matters not. It would have been an impossible feat to get up to retrieve it now, when he needs and wants Junmyeon so desperately, his own cock aching for attention in between his legs.

“Do you know how to use this?” Junmyeon asks as he uncaps it, reaches for Kyungsoo’s palm to squirt it onto. There’s no teasing tone to his voice; it’s merely a sincere question, and Kyungsoo appreciates it. That he understands- knows how Kyungsoo has led such an isolated life for so long.

“I think I do,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss Junmyeon even as he slips his hand in between their bodies, humming into the kiss as his fingers find naked skin, find Junmyeon’s perineum, and feel down towards his hole, taking it slow just to watch Junmyeon squirm and whine a little bit more. He’s only ever been strong in his memories, brave and undefeated in this present life, but now… He wants to see him truly let go. Wants to spoil him, too, to give him what he deserves.

Junmyeon’s body opens up for the first finger easily, and for the second as well. “I’ve done this so many times,” he confesses in a whisper as he rocks back onto Kyungsoo’s hand, attempts to fuck himself open on his digits. “Thinking about you… thinking about how good it would feel to have you like this again, ah, fuck, Kyungsoo.”

“I’m here,” Kyungsoo murmurs, pressing demanding kisses along Junmyeon’s neck, biting down to leave marks to stake his claim. “I’m here.”
And the impatience is just too much. He knows he could spend a great deal of time here, just making sure that Junmyeon is comfortable, but Junmyeon is begging him with his body and Kyungsoo cannot wait any longer. Is still scared that he could still lose this, even now.

He wants to devour Junmyeon, to keep him close forever, even if only in his memories. Even if this might be the last time.

Sliding into Junmyeon’s body in a lot of ways feels like he’s becoming whole again. United with his lover so intimately, it’s as though the entire universe has fallen into place, at last. Nothing is in disarray- every step they’ve taken has led them here, in this moment, to be perfect again, in each other. With each other. The way Junmyeon trembles and quivers beneath him, how he whispers tender confessions of love, how he looks up at Kyungsoo with near feverish passion- urging him to move, move against him, inside him, begging for him to give him what he so desperately needs.

Kyungsoo intertwines their fingers as he begins to rock into him, slow but steady. The friction is so good, and he never wishes to forget this feeling- he already forgot it once, and he can’t let that mistake be repeated. And to witness how Junmyeon comes undone beneath him, hands squeezing Kyungsoo’s biceps, head thrown back, lips bitten raw, eyes glittery like the surface of the Han, waves dancing in sunlight.

Their heartbeats the steady rhythm of the buk drum, the pace of their rocking hips that of the janggu, much more complex and forever recreating itself, forever changing, in motion. Their whispered words of love like the distinct jing, their building, cresting pleasure the loud, demanding kkwaenggwari. Their bodies moving together like the dancers, enchanted by the music, enslaved to it, unable to escape it, and it keeps building, building, the rhythm and melody ever more complex, faster, faster.

Through hundreds of years, they waited for this. Longed for this- Junmyeon did. Despite everything, forever loyal, watching over Kyungsoo and praying for this day.

And Kyungsoo waited, too, even if unbeknownst to himself.

Kyungsoo takes Junmyeon’s hand in his, squeezes it tight. The drums beat faster, the music grows louder, as Kyungsoo fucks into him harder, deeper, chases both of their orgasms. Wants to see Junmyeon come undone, wants to come undone with him- to fall apart, together, and be made anew as one.

He didn’t know love like this could exist. Didn’t know he could care so much- could be so grateful, and so sorry at the same time.

“I love you, Junmyeon.”

And everything clashes, all at once, unity rising from the cacophony as they come together, almost simultaneously. Junmyeon’s body gripping his like a vice, his legs squeezed around him so he can’t pull away, can’t put distance between them, his eyes at last closed and core tense as he spills between their bodies. Kyungsoo barely even notices his own orgasm, much too captivated by Junmyeon’s beauty and the sudden silence ringing in his ears- his heart full but his mind empty.

“I am so sorry.”

Junmyeon doesn’t respond, but Kyungsoo knows he feels the same.

The music is gone, and all that is left is demanding, meaningful silence- and Kyungsoo doesn’t know what is next.
Chapter 8

Kyungsoo wants to spend every waking moment with Junmyeon. The sense of urgency never goes anywhere- the knowledge that there’s a limitation on their time together. They wasted so much time not knowing one another, not having this bond, and whatever is left should be treasured and cherished.

Even physical intimacy, something which he never cared much for, he craves now. Desperately wants to hold onto Junmyeon, as the days finally begin to grow cooler and the winds harsher.

Autumn is here, and just like that, the time for their love to bloom is also already coming to an end.

“I wish you had told me sooner who you were,” Kyungsoo murmurs as they lie together on the palace rooftop. Not any palace in Seoul, for there someone might see- but the palace in Gyeongju, the remnants of the Silla kingdom. Over here, the city lights aren’t so blinding that they would hide the stars behind them, and it’s silent all around them, not even a single wave stirring in the deep bond right beside the restored palaces and pavilions.

There’s something special about this place, too. The palaces resemble those in Seoul; their pillars painted red, roofs black, decorated with bright colors, yet there’s something so unique about them as well. Their massive roof structures appear so heavy that it should be impossible for them to stay on top of the pillars- the proportions giving it almost a magical feel, like some deity has made them float in place, somehow.

It was Junmyeon’s idea to make a trip down here, and it was his idea to do something as reckless as this, of course it was. But Kyungsoo finds it so hard to say no to him now, to refuse him. Centuries of rejection should be enough, already. The roof tiles aren’t so comfortable against his back, but the feeling of Junmyeon’s hand in his, it’s enough to make this worth it.

“I couldn’t tell you. Not until you were ready to hear it.” Junmyeon nudges his cheek with his nose, a gentle reminder for him to stop dwelling. But how could Kyungsoo just forgive himself so easily? “You wouldn’t have believed me, anyway. I had to remind you of other things first… who you were, how you lived. Only then could I also remind you of who you loved.”

Junmyeon has already told him this countless times, yet Kyungsoo finds little comfort in it. Even if he knows it to be true… He wishes it weren’t.

He’s trying so hard to figure out where this all went wrong, and he hates that the answer is that this all happened as it was planned. Perhaps a little late- Samshin seemed impatient to see her plans come to fruition, but nonetheless.

Is this how helpless mortals feel as well, when faced with their inevitable fates?

Junmyeon kisses his cheek, sensing that he’s still not letting go. “Kyungsoo-yah.. It’s alright. We have all the time in the world. I’ll be here, forever. Even if you have to be reborn as a human, eventually, I’ll still be here when you come back. There is no salvation for me, and I want none, if it means I can stay by your side. I don’t mind waiting.”

But that is also what bothers Kyungsoo so. He knows this is a punishment- he knows Junmyeon is suffering. He cannot stay, not like this. And what if Kyungsoo never finds him again, and he’s doomed to more loneliness? He cannot allow that.

“I won’t be reborn,” he murmurs back, instead. “I’ll never regret killing off that bastard. I will never
feel sorry for it. I’d do it again, if I could. So there will be no rebirth for me either. I’ll stay as a grim reaper until the end of time. Together, with you.”

It’s true. In his heart, there’s nothing but hatred for his father-in-law. For what he did to him, and what he did to Junmyeon. If the condition for his salvation is to repent that crime, he’ll have to be punished forever. Even with what he knows of death, knows of lives wasted and taken too soon, he can’t feel any pity for that despicable man.

But somehow, he still feels ill at ease. Even with this certainty that he’ll never be sorry, he still worries. Still fears.

Fears that he will have to part from Junmyeon, and leave him alone yet again.

Junmyeon sighs softly, and Kyungsoo doesn’t quite know what he’s thinking. What he’s feeling. “We still have time,” is what he chooses to say. “So just… just relax. Nothing is ever going to come of all this worrying, you know that. If you think we have so little time left, then let’s enjoy it to the fullest, and not dwell on the what ifs and could have beens. Alright?”

And it makes sense. Junmyeon is right- he’s wasting precious time, feeling so sorry for himself and for Junmyeon. There will be no solution to this, and no matter how long he thinks about it, he won’t find a way.

Maybe he really is wrong. Maybe there is nothing to fear- maybe they have another eternity, together, like this.

Maybe.

The stars above them keep twinkling, like they have for as long as Kyungsoo can remember, as if a reminder that some things do last. Some things do live past the normal life span of a mortal human- but at the same time, Kyungsoo knows some of those stars are already dead even if their light can still be seen.

Perhaps their love is like that, too. Dead, even if it isn’t visible on the outside yet.

He hopes and prays that isn’t the case.

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Only rarely do his emotions get the best of him while working, but some situations simply make his blood boil- especially after getting more in touch with his human emotions, remembering his own human life. Perhaps, it has helped him see value in life now, after he had almost forgotten what it actually means. How unfair it is to die too young, too soon, violently, suddenly. Harshly.

The sound of crashing metal doesn’t make him wince as he watches the car hit the back of a parked truck. It’s instantly obvious that there are no survivors there- the whole front of the car is collapsed and crushed like a piece of crumpled up paper, both the driver seat and the passenger seat invisible in the middle of the wreck. People rush forward but it’s already too late. There’s nothing to be done for these people.

At least, in this life.

Kyungsoo folds open the envelope as calmly as he can, despite the slight tremor to his hands. He’s simply so overcome with rage that it’s hard to withstand it, but he tries his best. He needs to keep up the pretense of professionalism, after all.
“Kim Hyungwoo, age 34. Cause of death: trauma to the head. Park Haneul, age 32. Cause of death: collapsed rib cage. Is that right?”

The two souls in front of him don’t look quite as battered as their bodies certainly must be. They appear confused, looking around, looking at each other- until the woman collapses down on her knees with a shrill cry.

“You killed us, you really killed us this time… You really killed me, you fucking bastard, you really did it…”

The man looks as though nothing makes sense to him in this moment. “I…” He looks at the car, stares down at his hands, stares at Kyungsoo. “I didn’t… I didn’t mean to… I just wanted to scare you…”

Kyangsoo has to put the envelope away to make sure that the trembling doesn’t give him away. It’s hard to keep his tone flat, even, but he harnesses all strength he has and pushes through. “Follow me.”

The entire way, the couple keeps fighting. The woman, Haneul, cannot stop crying; sobbing about her wasted life, her death at the hands of her drunk husband whose recklessness and jealous, hot-headed, rash decisions have gotten them hurt before as well. How she should have left him a long time ago.

“I wouldn’t be dead if I broke up with you,” she says through her sobs, stumbling forward. “I wouldn’t be dead- I should have left you, when you first threatened to kill me, I should have left you when you first hit me, I hate you, I really, really hate you…”

The man’s weak excuses don’t even register with Kyungsoo. He doesn’t care- doesn’t want to hear his side of the story.

He killed someone, and he will be punished for it.

In his tearoom, the woman finally quiets down a little. Kyungsoo works slowly as he prepares the tea- but only one cup. One portion, for one person.

He says nothing as he places it down in front of her, and sits down, hands clasped together on the table.

The man looks confused still, a bit curious, too- eyeing the cup and eyeing Kyungsoo, but not saying a word about it.

The woman accepts the drink, and it’s only after her first sip that Kyungsoo finally speaks.

“Ending a life is not a crime to be taken lightly.” The words resonate with him more now than they ever did before. “Ending a life for no reason at all, that is even worse than killing someone in anger, or vengeance. And it is the product of your foolishness that you died, as well- but at least there, justice was served, for you to go on living would have been too unjust.”

The man opens his mouth to speak, to defend himself, but Kyungsoo won’t let him utter a single word. “So, you shall be punished. This tea I’ve prepared for Haneul-ssi, it will gift her the blessing of forgetfulness. She will remember none of this, moving onto her next life; she will not remember the terrible things she suffered, with you. She will forget you, and she will move on to a better, happier future.”

Her fingers tighten around the cup, as she hastily brings it up to her lips again. Kyungsoo only
needed to say that much to convince her, and for that, Kyungsoo is glad. He turns to look at the man again, eyes growing harder, more piercing. “But you- you will remember. You will not be allowed the gift of forgetting your past sins- you will live with them, remember them, until they torment you enough to make you regret everything you did. Everything you did to hurt this woman, and others before her. Some have called it hell- and that is where you will be entering.”

The man stands up, begins to yell, but Kyungsoo has his ways of dealing with angry souls. He gestures at the door and it swings open, light shining through, blinding, beautiful. The woman stands up, staring at the pure light, and reaches a hand forward as if to touch it, but before she can take a single step towards it, the man rushes past her, shoving her to the ground, and runs to the door, in a hopeless attempt to avoid his fate and get into what seems like heaven.

Kyungsoo doesn’t need to even lift a finger. What is beyond that door is out of his control, anyway; it is not his task to monitor it, it would give him too much power. The man steps through and right as he does, the light vanishes and all that is left is emptiness so concentrated and deep that it feels as though it’s sucking light from the room they’re in right now.

The man can only yell out in fear, and then it’s too late. The door closes, and then opens again, to reveal the same, perfect light that was there before.

“You can go, now,” Kyungsoo says, gesturing towards it. “You will forget all about this, and step into your new life, ready to start over. But just know that he will suffer for what he has done. There is justice here, even if it does not always exist in the mortal world.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, wiping at her eyes with her sleeve. She doesn’t hesitate now, walking through the doorway and stepping into the light, and just as she’s swallowed in it, the door closes softly behind her.

Kyungsoo sighs heavily as he sinks down into his seat. That took a toll on him, holding in all of that anger. Yet he doesn’t feel satisfied- the man will not be turned into a grim reaper, for one, and he knows that for certain now. What he did was awful but only what most courts would consider manslaughter, and lacked the kind of decisiveness and ill will that is needed for a real murder.

His fingers curl up into fists, and bile rises in his throat suddenly. The memories of murdering his father-in-law come forth unexpectedly, uninvited- yet even with the sounds of his blade sinking into flesh ringing in his ears, Kyungsoo still cannot feel any regret.

There isn’t always justice in the mortal world, but he’s glad he could serve it, even if only that one time.

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unknown time in the past

Kyungsoo cannot return to his life in his hometown, not after what he did. His heart is split in two thinking about his parents must feel, how devastated they must be- how burdened they must be, as the whole town probably turns their backs on them for raising a murderer like him. But there’s nothing he can do, except flee, and try to make a life for himself elsewhere.

He doesn’t want to live. He doesn’t want to see another day rise when Junmyeon is gone- but he’s too horrified with the idea of taking his own life, that he cannot bring himself to do it.

And he still has a duty to complete.

It would be for the best to run as far as he can, but instead, he stays hiding in the mountains nearby.
He has to keep an eye on the house, after all, and most importantly, Junmyeon’s dead body. No one seems to care to move it or touch it, however, as the servants bury the dead and his father-in-law’s body is taken away—probably his oldest son arranging for him to be buried somewhere else, in a more auspicious site, where the soul of his father might find peace.

Kyungsoo curses his name and prays he will suffer for all of eternity.

The house is left mostly empty after a while, and Kyungsoo moves down from his hiding spot in the middle of the night. He has nothing to lose— if they catch him and execute him, he wouldn’t feel any fear or grief. But he has to do this one last favor to Junmyeon, no matter what it takes.

He approaches the house slowly but as he gets closer, he can’t see anything beyond the walls surrounding the compound, but it’s the dead of the night and it seems unlikely anyone would be awake right now. He’s holding his breath as he makes his way over to Junmyeon’s body, and he did his best to mentally prepare, but what he’s met with when he reaches him… It’s simply unsightly.

He closes his eyes, swallows down the vomit rising up, and wraps Junmyeon’s battered, rotting body into the sheet of fabric he stole from another village across the mountains. He tries to avoid looking at him as much as he can, wants to preserve the memory of him as he was when he lived, yet he can’t escape the feeling of his soft, melting flesh giving away once he touches him, can’t avoid the smell of decay, can’t ignore how his body turns and twists in all the wrong ways as he lifts him up to carry him away.

He’s crying, stumbling forward, feeling the edge of his blade press against his chest, a painful reminder of how this all happened. Why everything had to end like this.

It’s a grueling task. Kyungsoo was never particularly strong, and although small in stature, Junmyeon’s body still grows heavy in his arms quickly as he trudges through the fields, towards the forest and mountains. He doesn’t want to drag him on the ground, though, scared of leaving behind too obvious a trail, and so he has no choice but to keep going, trying to avoid adjusting Junmyeon’s body in his arms because he simply doesn’t want to touch him. Doesn’t want to remember this, how wrong his body feels, how death has secured its grip on him and taken him away.

The sun is high up in the sky by the time Kyungsoo finally sets Junmyeon down. He climbed up the mountainside as far as he could, to give Junmyeon a resting place he deserves. He wishes he knew more about proper burial methods, but he does what he knows, what he’s seen, and he spends the following days building a burial mound for Junmyeon. Nothing too grand, for that he doesn’t have the tools or the strength for that, but just something decent. Something modest, but made with great care, to be at least partially worthy for him.

Kyungsoo cries through most of it, grieving the loss of his lover as he works. Yells out at the sky, at the mountains, curses the gods for doing this, and carries on working, digging deeper, arranging stones, bringing in dirt from elsewhere to build a proper mound. Laying down Junmyeon’s body is the hardest part— he’s sobbing uncontrollably as he does, letting him go one last time, even if it’s merely his decaying corpse, an empty shell. But letting that go is the final goodbye; the last memory of him he’ll have, the last time he’ll touch him, hold him.

He covers his body with the stones he found, sniveling as he does, voice breaking as he tries to sing the proper songs. He needs to do what he can, for such a violent death would certainly make Junmyeon’s soul restless— and he doesn’t want that, wants him to find peace and rest, with his ancestors at last. Even if he had no family in this life, there has to be a family for him there, beyond what Kyungsoo can see, feel, hear.

Building the mound goes faster than digging up the grave did, and he weeds out the area, tears away
the shrubbery, sets it up as nicely as he can. He even goes into another village to steal fruits, fish, alcohol, to lay them out- for the spirits, for the ancestors, for Junmyeon. Singing over and over the songs he knows, making up his own, from sunset to sundown, and then through the night, gazing at the stars as he sways in place, still singing.

Within him, there’s no peace still, and even with Junmyeon’s body now laid to rest, there’s still something Kyungsoo can do- must do for him. It’s custom for sons to stay by the graves of their deceased parents for three years to properly mourn them, to show their filial piety and pay back the debt made when they were small children, when their parents had to tend to them day and night. And as there is no one to do it for Junmyeon, Kyungsoo decides that he shall do it for him; after all, there’s no other purpose in life for him, now.

Determined, he sets to building himself a shelter, right beside the gravesite, to stay in for the next three years. Perhaps he can manufacture the tools he needs for making instruments- at least music can keep him company, even when he’ll be out here, on his own, alone. Watching over the grave of his most beloved.

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present time

“What time period was your favourite?” Kyungsoo asks as they walk through the secret garden in the Gyeongbokgung palace once more. It’s sometime past midnight, and usually Kyungsoo would be dead asleep, but Junmyeon lured him out on an adventure with him- even if Kyungsoo often visits this place on his own accord, it feels much more special to share it with Junmyeon, strolling hand in hand through the palace compound together.

“Hm, I don’t know,” Junmyeon muses. He’s huddled in his oversized sweater and a massive scarf, even though the chilliness of the autumn weather has yet to properly set in. It won’t be long before then, though- it’s coming, they both know it. “They began to blur together after a while, I suppose. I just liked it whenever there was no war, no conflict. I can’t stand to watch people suffer, and it’s hard to enjoy yourself when you know that there’s something terrible going on around you.”

Kyungsoo squeezes Junmyeon’s hand tighter in his. His precious soldier. “I also liked the times of peace the best,” he agrees. “Each century had something special about it… new things in the horizon. The mortals keep surprising me, with the things they can make, things they can do.”

“Right? I cannot wait for them to also figure out teleportation,” Junmyeon laughs, grinning widely at Kyungsoo. A bird stirs in the bushes, a flash of white in its feathers- a magpie, who give them a dirty look before going back to sleep. “Or maybe it’ll just unleash chaos we’ve never seen before.”

“You like chaos,” Kyungsoo rolls his eyes at him. “At least judging by the state of your apartment. If it wasn’t for Chanyeol, you wouldn’t even find your way out of there without teleportation.”

“See, that is exactly why humans need this superb ability,” Junmyeon simpers and presses a firm kiss on Kyungsoo’s cheek. “You just like rules too much. You’re stiff like a corpse.”

“Am not,” Kyungsoo huffs. No matter the fact that Junmyeon has teased him about this for centuries, it’s still a bit of a sore spot. “Just responsible.”

Junmyeon hums, and lets go of his hand in favor of wrapping his arm around his waist to bring him in closer. “Yes, that you are;” he agrees. “But that doesn’t mean you have to obey every rule in the book all the time. Don’t you think?”
Kyungsoo rolls his eyes again. Around them, the scent of the flowers is still intoxicating- soon, they’ll all perish, vanish before the winter comes, but for now, they still act as though they know nothing of the struggles ahead. It reminds him of Junmyeon, somehow, his constant optimism, his faith in the good in everything. His resilience and quiet strength, to wait for as long as he has to until he can finally bloom again.

He wants him to blossom for a long time.

“I think I’ve already broken many, many rules, with you,” Kyungsoo says after a pause. They’ve almost walked the entire way around the pond, but he wouldn’t mind another round. Maybe head out to eat something, after-the marvel that is food service around the clock is something Kyungsoo deeply appreciates. “I was never meant to fall in love… I was never meant to devote time to anything else besides my job.”

“Yet here you are, enjoying a leisurely walk with me,” Junmyeon teases, pecking his cheek. “You’re so diligent, Kyungsoo-yah. You deserve a bit of fun, a bit of time to yourself. You’ve worked so hard for this long.”

Somehow, that genuine praise makes Kyungsoo’s heart skip beats all the while swelling in his chest with gratitude. No one has really told him that, in all this time- no one has thanked him for what he does, how well he does his job, because it’s just expected of him. It’s a given, that he should work day and night, so why would anyone thank him for it, praise him for it?

Junmyeon seems to sense his mood, as he stops walking to properly hug Kyungsoo to his chest. “You seem to think that it’s only me who’s had a hard time, living for this long all by myself,” Junmyeon says with a quiet murmur, gently stroking Kyungsoo’s hair. The shortness of it never seems to cease to intrigue him. “But that is not at all true. At least I had Chanyeol and his father, and his father, and so on and so on… I always had a companion. I enjoyed life, for the most part. But you… You devoted yourself to your work, and never strayed from that path, no matter how hard it was. You suffered, too.”

And Kyungsoo didn’t know how badly he needed to hear that, not until those words leave Junmyeon’s lips. That he yearned for someone to acknowledge that what he’s been through… It has been difficult, sometimes. It’s taken its toll on him, too, even if it was all what was expected of him, what other grim reapers also do daily.

That it was never easy, because it was meant to be a punishment.

He wraps his arms around Junmyeon tightly, and blinks his eyes rapidly. He doesn’t want to cry, but it’s hard to resist- it’s hard not to give into emotion, when he feels so secure, so protected, inside Junmyeon’s embrace.

Junmyeon presses more firm kisses on his cheek, rubbing his back up and down. “But it won’t be so hard anymore,” he says quietly, and somehow, Kyungsoo believes him already. “It won’t be so tiring… I will be here for you, with you. You will never have to be alone, like that. Hyung is here…”

There’s a lump in Kyungsoo’s throat, so he says nothing. Doesn’t want to hear his own voice crack, snap, break. He knows that Junmyeon understands how he’s feeling, regardless- even if in that relief and love there’s always that tinge of sadness, hopelessness.

It’s hard to depend on someone like this, when he could lose him so quickly.

He wishes he could shake that off his mind somehow, but it’s always present, always lurking.
On a bright autumn day, Kyungsoo finds himself in a neighbourhood in Shillim where the houses aren’t as tall, the streets not as wide, and everything feels as though he’s been transported back 50 or something years. It’s not a bad feeling- he doesn’t miss those decades much, if at all, but there’s a certain charm to it; the memory of budding economic successes, the promise of a better, brighter future. But he hasn’t forgotten the bad things about it, and so his nostalgia will always be coloured in with those memories as well.

He likes, it though. Likes the looming presence of Gwanak-san in the horizon, the home mountain of the most prestigious university, Seoul National University. The forests and national park that surrounds it, the trees that are sometimes so far and few between in a metropolis like Seoul. The busy, hardworking ahjummas and ahjussis, running their businesses like they probably have for decades already, mixed with the occasional college student, on their way to class or back to their cheap dormitories.

He’s on his way to collect another soul, as he always is, but he came here early to have some time to linger. To look around and not worry about making it to his destination on time; look at the little restaurants and small shops that are still selling the same items he recalls them supplying decades ago. The hum of traffic a constant reminder of the massive roads leading out of the city that run right past the mountain, the occasional appearance of the many buildings on top of it as he weaves through buildings, people, going up and down streets.

It would have been so easy to not notice her, standing there, amidst all the other old women. Selling her trinkets like she had before, in no way standing out from the rest of the sellers here. But of course, she came here to be seen- to meet him, and so it wouldn’t do for him to just walk past her. Samshin controls the fate of everyone, even Kyungsoo’s, and it’s his fate to meet her here, today, like this.

Fear strikes him silent as he spots her, recognizes her, but his feet move on their own accord, bring him closer even though that is the last thing he wants. “Hello,” the goddess croons, gesturing at her items she’s laid out. “A dashing man like you would certainly like to bring a nice gift home to his beloved, am I not right?”

She knows. She must. Kyungsoo wipes his palms dry on his pants and looks down at the table, unable to meet her eyes. “I do not think he needs or wants anything, right now,” he murmurs, unsure what he should say. He feels like he’s been caught red-handed, though- even if he doesn’t quite know what he’s done so wrong. “He has plenty of riches…”

“That, he does.” She sounds amused, but her tone grows more somber with her next words. “Especially now that he has you. So you’ve made progress there, at last. But what about your past? Did you make progress there?”

Kyungsoo doubts that she really needs to ask that. She should know- she probably knows. So, there is no point in even thinking about lying.

“I discovered what happened,” he answers quietly, still not looking at her. “I discovered… how we both died. How it all ended.”

She waits in silence for him to continue talking, but when he doesn’t, she sighs. “And have you yet learned to regret it?” she asks. Just the tone of her voice has Kyungsoo feeling pinned, like a small insect under her thumb; he has no choice but to answer her, no matter how unwilling he is to talk about this. The sense of danger is present, more so than ever- he knows the goddess could hurt him,
hurt Junmyeon, if she so decided, but he doesn’t know what she wants to hear. What she expects to hear.

“I do not regret killing my father-in-law,” he whispers. Around them, life continues as normal, people talking, cars and motorbikes going by, street vendors calling out to customers—so oblivious to how his entire life is being weighed and judged, right here, like this. “I don’t. I cannot regret it—he took Junmyeon from me! He killed him. The person dearest to me…” And in his eyes, there are already tears, although he hates being so vulnerable and weak in front of Samshin. Yet he cannot help it.

Kyungsoo wipes at his eyes angrily, more words bubbling out of him despite how scared he is to utter anything. “I do regret sending Junmyeon out there,” he continues. “I regret that I encouraged him to take revenge like that… We should have just left the town, and never looked back. We would have been happy. We would have been together. Alive. But instead, I sent him away to die, and that is the biggest mistake… It’s my fault he died. It’s my fault all those other people died, too… Everyone he killed.”

And it’s true. It is his fault; Junmyeon’s pitiful, useless death, all the deaths that Junmyeon caused when he tried to fight his way to Kyungsso’s father-in-law. All of it, it was Kyungsso’s doing. Junmyeon might have wanted to take revenge for him, but Kyungsso could have talked him out of it. He could have stopped it.

None of it had to happen. It was only Kyungsso’s own foolishness that caused it.

“If I had been wiser, if I had thought about it more, we wouldn’t have ended up like this.” Finally, he lifts his gaze to look at her directly. He guesses this isn’t what she wanted to hear; after all, Kyungsso is a grim reaper for the person he killed with his own hands. But why does it feel like the blood on his hands is Junmyeon’s, and no one else’s? “If I hadn’t been so stupid, Junmyeon would have lived a long, happy life. With me. Those servants wouldn’t have died, either. My wife—she wouldn’t have died, in the place of her father. And even if my father-in-law would have never been punished… I should have trusted that justice would be served in afterlife.”

He could have lived, even knowing that the vile man never paid for his sins. He could have lived, for as long as it was with Junmyeon.

She doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even blink, just listens to him with an unreadable expression.

“And if I wanted revenge so badly,” Kyungsso carries on, emboldened by nothing but his own desperation, the weight of his guilt. “I should have gone in there myself. I shouldn’t have involved Junmyeon. I shouldn’t have made others… I shouldn’t have had others die for the justice I wanted to see served rightfully. For there was nothing fair or right about innocent people dying for that man’s sins.”

It’s all true. Kyungsso regrets it all, he would take it all back, if he could. But there’s nothing in him that regrets killing the man with his own hands— that is the only fair and righteous part in this entire story. That man deserved to die, and Kyungsso will never think otherwise. Even if it’ll keep him damned forever, then so be it.

But somehow, she seems almost pleased. “Very well.” She regards him very seriously, before she nods once. “I understand. I won’t keep you any longer, I know you have a job to do. But know that I have heard you… I have listened to you.”

And as Kyungsso blinks, she vanishes. As though she was never there to begin with.
Shaken up but not wanting anyone to stop and stare, he hurries forward, drying his face with his hands as he walks briskly towards the location where he needs to pick up the dead soul. His thoughts and feelings are in jumbles, to say the least- getting all of that off his chest felt cathartic in a way, even if at the same time he’s worried for what her verdict could be. What she could do- if she wants to force him to regret what he did, somehow.

He just knows this won’t be the last of her that he’ll ever see.

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He doesn’t tell Junmyeon about the encounter. It seems better that way. Junmyeon wouldn’t worry about it, perhaps, but he doesn’t want to risk it. The last thing he wants to do is cause him pain- he’s done enough of that, already.

So instead, he goes along with his whims, to see him smile, to hear him laugh, for nothing is as precious as his happiness.

“Have you ever been overseas?” Junmyeon asks him one day. They’re lounging on the plush rug in Junmyeon’s living room, staring at the ceiling. It’s not quite the same as laying by the river, watching the clouds go overhead, but it’s similar. It’s still good. “Outside of Korea, I mean. Across the Tumen river doesn’t count. That used to be part of Korea.”

“No, I haven’t travelled,” Kyungsoo admits, feeling a twinge of shame in admitting that. He’s lived so long, he should have ventured to new places more- but the truth is, he hasn’t even been everywhere on the peninsula, either. Work was always more important, and he didn’t understand the point in just travelling for the fun of it; it was too tedious, too time consuming, and so he simply never did it.

Maybe in the past, Junmyeon would have poked fun of him for it, would have teased him for it, but instead, he pecks Kyungsoo on the cheek. It seems like one of his favourite things to do- he’s so grossly affectionate, Kyungsoo can’t help but adore him for it.

“We should go together,” he murmurs, voice already full of excitement. “I would love to show you my favourite places. I’ve travelled quite a bit- to conceal my identity, at times. People start to question things when you don’t die, or age… So sometimes, I had to stay overseas for some time, just so that people would forget me and I could come back.”

That sounds incredibly lonely. To be condemned to exile like that- away from everything familiar, just so mortals would pass away and thus forget about the man who doesn’t grow old, doesn’t change, doesn’t die. Junmyeon did tell him about that, before, how Chanyeol’s family has always been there to help him manage things when he’s been forced to go elsewhere.

“Where have you lived?”

“Mostly the United States and Canada,” Junmyeon replies, cuddling closer to him, chin on Kyungsoo’s shoulder, arms wrapped around Kyungsoo’s. “I like it there. It’s so freeing. They do things so differently, over there, I always really enjoyed myself there. I’ve also been around Europe, I wanted to see what that was all about. Beautiful cities, beautiful art, music, food. There’s a depth to that place… And sometimes I would just stay in China or Japan, because it was easy. Different, but not too different. People who looked like me, whose languages I would easily understand… Customs and habits that made sense to me, you know.”

“You’ve seen a lot.” Kyungsoo says that with a hint of envy. Junmyeon has lived as long as he has, but he’s spent his years much more wisely, it seems. He’s done so much more, seen much more. In
some ways, Kyungsoo feels like a child next to him. “You’ve… done so much.”

Junmyeon shrugs, squeezes his fingers. “Travelling is easy, when you can do what I do. Let me show you!” And suddenly, he springs up to his feet, tugging Kyungsoo up with him. “Come, come with me!”

Kyungsoo scrambles to get up, and before he can get a word in sideways, Junmyeon has already pulled him through the nearest doorway- and instead of walking into his bathroom, they step into a street in a totally foreign city, something that Kyungsoo has never seen before. The narrow cobblestone street surrounded by stone buildings only three, four stories high, all so obviously old, decorative, rich with tiny little details that Kyungsoo could stare at all day. The colors form a simple harmony of faded yellows and greens, reds, greys, together with the white windows and black rooftops. Everywhere around them little coffee shops and restaurants, fashionable people walking by, and here they are, in their sweatpants and slippers, in the middle of all of it.

“What is this place?” Kyungsoo asks, clutching Junmyeon’s hand. He knows for sure it isn’t Asia- these people are all Western in appearance. “Where did you take me?”

“This is old town in Stockholm, Sweden,” Junmyeon says, proud with what he’s done, not at all bothered by their strange attire. It’s considerably colder here than it is in Seoul, too, and Kyungsoo can already feel the unpleasant chill biting at his toes and fingertips. “I’ve been here, too! I don’t know why this is what I thought of first, but I did, so. I brought you here.”

It’s marvelous- everything around them new, exciting. There’s a part of Kyungsoo that aches to see more, to venture into those coffee shops, to walk hand in hand with Junmyeon like he can see the mortals doing. To explore, and discover, hear more of this strange language around them. But he’s more acutely aware of how unfitting their clothes are, how unprepared they are; they cannot stay, not now.

“Take us back,” he demands, giving Junmyeon a glare. “We’re practically in our pajamas, for fuck’s sake. What are these people even thinking about us right now? We’re just standing here like two lunatics, you know that. Take me back home!”

Junmyeon laughs, and isn’t ashamed at all about kissing him, right there, right then, and Kyungsoo can’t deny how it makes his toes curl in his slippers and how it makes him all warm despite the cool weather. Makes him feel like he’s almost floating- and heavens, he’s so in love with this man, it’s ridiculous. This silly goblin who takes him across the globe on a whim, just like that, teleporting to another place like it’s nothing, in their sweatpants, with no money, no clothes, no shoes. The silly man who has taught him to enjoy life again, shown him that there are things worth enjoying beyond his music, beyond his solitude.

“Let’s come here for a day or two, sometime,” Junmyeon says, even as he reaches behind Kyungsoo for the door that they walked through in the first place. “Properly. With clothes and stuff.”

“Deal.” Kyungsoo would love that- would really, really cherish such a memory made with Junmyeon. His first time overseas, his first time in Europe. A romantic trip, even if just for a day.

They have so much lost time to make up for, after all.

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unknown time in the past

Three years go by slowly. Kyungsoo spends months preparing tools and resources, at first; collecting
bamboo and wood from the forest, while also building himself a place to stay. A simple hut, really, half of it dug into the ground to make it easier on himself. He never had to learn these skills but he’s learning them now, little by little, mistake by mistake, as his walls tumble down and his roof leaks at the first rain shower. He steals food to get by until he learns how to hunt, how to gather edible plants from the forest, and he crafts the tools for making instruments by the light of the fire at night.

And the entire time, the silent mound of Junmyeon’s grave reminds him of what he’s lost.

The first year is the hardest. The winter is harsh and he’s ill prepared for it- he has to venture into new villages to steal things, for people have gotten suspicious, have begun to look for the regular thief that comes in at night. The loneliness is also settling in heavily, as there are less and less things to do; the snow piling up high, making him unable do much outside of his little hut. All he can do is wait- wait, and stare at the grave he buried his lover in, pouring Junmyeon’s spirit shots of alcohol every once in a while, when he manages to get some.

The second year, time begins to blend together. Days, weeks, months, they matter not, although he does his best to keep track of them. He’s better prepared now, more comfortable, life is more bearable, and he’s making progress on his first haegeum. He can’t fully explain why that is the instrument he longs to make the most- perhaps it is the sorrowful voice of it, its unearthly voice that can also sound like someone crying, wailing in pain and grief. It is not a simple project, of course, but he does his best- it will not be a masterpiece, but it will be important, regardless.

Every night, he sings to Junmyeon under the stars. He fears that he’ll lose his voice, otherwise- he hasn’t spoken to anyone living in so long, now. The mound has begun to grow weeds and grass, blending in with the environment, and Kyungsoo does his best to plant beautiful flowers around it, for he knows Junmyeon would have liked that. Would have appreciated that.

Sometimes, he cries. The weight of his sorrow is still bone deep, and endless like the oceans. It’s been so long, and he’s spent all this time serving the memory of Junmyeon, yet it’s not letting him go. Letting him breathe.

He knows he’ll never know peace, and it frightens him, even if he knows that Junmyeon deserves as much. Deserves to be remembered.

Kyungsoo’s suffering will never be enough to make up for the sacrifice he made.

The third year goes by in a blur. He goes through the motions of survival, following the routine he’s set up for himself. Gathering and hunting for food, making improvements on his little home, working on his instrument whenever he can. Tending to Junmyeon’s grave, to keep it tidy, keep it taken care of. So his spirit wouldn’t be angered by the neglect. Wouldn’t think that Kyungsoo no longer cares, no longer loves him.

He’s heard that some unmarried spirits will become angry and resentful. He wonders if Junmyeon needs to marry someone, in the afterlife- to be happy, to find peace. But Kyungsoo supposes that only other ghosts can marry spirits of the dead, and so his hand won’t do, but also he’s much too jealous to find Junmyeon someone else to marry.

“I’ll marry you, when I die,” Kyungsoo promises him. “I’ll be with you, forever. So, do not be upset. And besides… marriage is stupid. Me getting married is the entire reason we ended up like this, in the first place. Don’t think too much about it.”

He doesn’t know if Junmyeon is the kind of person to be upset about that, anyway.

By the end of the three years, his instrument is finally ready. It’s crude in some ways that Kyungsoo
wouldn’t have accepted even when he was a child learning the trade, but it’s the best he could make, like this. On his last night, he sits down by the burial mound, the hollowed gourd in his lap as he places his hand on the neck of the haegeum, and lifts up the bow, feeling the strings slide together as he moves it back and forth. He did his best to tidy up for this occasion- he stole some soap, and ventured to the river to wash himself properly, thoroughly. Washed his clothes, too, and tied up his hair, staring at his rippling reflection in the surface of the water, barely recognizing his own image anymore.

Three years have made him into another person completely.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he says, looking up at the sky. “I’m… I don’t know where I’m going. I would stay, but… I do not know. But somehow, I feel as though I shouldn’t stay here. I do not know what it is calling out to me… Or perhaps pushing me away. Is it you? Is it you, trying to tell me to go and live my life, out there? Move on and… And live as though none of this happened? I do not know. But I’ve had this feeling for a long time, and I believe I must follow it.”

He doesn’t know what it is, or why it is. Just something telling him to go- no direction, no destination, just start moving.

He begins to play a melody, slow, swaying with it as he plays. He simply lets his fingers do as they want, coaxing gentle sounds out of his crude instrument, letting it cry for him for he has no tears left. He’s grieved, and will continue to grieve- but it’s time to move on. He will never forget Junmyeon, will never let himself forget, and there will never be a moment when he doesn’t think of him… But this part is now over.

Kyungsoo doesn’t know what purpose he’ll have, what he’ll do, but he’ll figure it out. After all, he has nothing to lose.

He stays up playing all night, letting his music travel towards the heavens, towards where he hopes Junmyeon’s soul is, too. Where he can hear it, and rejoice in the sound of music- music from Kyungsoo’s hands, his instrument. The haegeum cries like a wounded human, but there’s raw elegance to it, a certain dignity; even underneath the pain, there’s something else there. Something purer, something that will always survive.

It’s his way of asking Junmyeon to show him the way, to guide him on his journey towards nothing. To be with him, even as he leaves his gravesite behind.

And he’ll be back. He won’t leave this place abandoned- Junmyeon deserves better than that.

But until then, he has to venture away first.

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present time

Kyungsoo spends the majority of the day at his tearoom. He’s been neglecting it, and it’s in a sorry state. A proper dusting is in order, at first, as he goes through every single shelf, every single nook and cranny, working diligently. This is a place where time doesn’t reach, where it holds no meaning, a place stuck between the mortal world and the eternity, and time spent working hardly means anything. But it’s been too long since he took care of his work space; he’s been much too occupied, enjoying time spent with Junmyeon, a touch of eternity in that experience as well, shared between two immortals.

The shelves are counted in the hundreds, each of them holding a different cup, a different teapot. For
the mortals, the selection means nothing, for Kyungsoo picks their cups without asking for preferences. But it’s important- it’s testament to how long he’s been doing this, how long he’s spent collecting souls and also collecting pottery. Some of them are as old as he is, and mortals would consider them great treasures, even if once upon a time, they were simply items of everyday use, nothing spectacular at all. Most of them he never lets souls use or hold, for he cherishes them too much, enjoys the beauty of them, how they remind him of the time he got them.

He’s proud of his collection, and he’s proud to maintain it well, even if he’s the only one to ever see it; the shelves are placed in a different room than where the mortals sit with him to drink their tea. But much like his music, this too is only meant for his own enjoyment. Because it’s dear to him, because it’s something to hold onto in a world that keeps changing much faster than what he can sometimes keep up with.

Now, wiping dust off each and every one of them, they not only bring back memories of centuries past, but what he did with Junmyeon back then- where he saw him, what they spoke of together, how much time passed until they saw each other again. Each memory is so vivid, but also colored with shades of roses and sunlight- a definite bias of romantic love, and Kyungsoo knows it. Can’t scold himself for it, even if he knows he should.

It’s slow work, but he doesn’t mind. Quite enjoys the privacy of this, and as his hands work, allowing his mind to wander. To not only places and times past, but also to the future- what they should have for dinner together, what they should do, where they should go. Together, with Junmyeon.

He’s so happy he feels like he’s floating two inches above the ground.

But then, he’s pulled out of his thoughts by a knock on the door.

That, is unusual. His tearoom is hidden from mortals, and he’s only ever shown it to a few grim reapers. But after the initial surprise, his joy comes back tenfold, for he immediately thinks it must be Junmyeon. Who else would call on him for no reason, no warning? It has to be him.

Gingerly, he places down the cup he was cleaning, and wiping his hands on his trousers, hurries out of the shelf room and into the main room, to get to the door. He’s already smiling, fond words on the tip of his tongue- and he pulls the door open only to be standing face to face with none other than Byun Baekhyun.

He hasn’t changed- not that Kyungsoo can see. He’s still dressed a little too flashy for Kyungsoo’s taste, for the dignity this profession requires, his face still open and friendly. Or it would be, if he wasn’t staring back at him almost fearfully- fearful, and sad, at the same time, and Kyungsoo cannot even begin to guess why that would be.

That is, until he remembers what kind of person Baekhyun is.

“Did you fuck up, somehow?” he asks, the frustration already settling in. He should have seen this coming. “What did you do? Did you let a soul run away? You did, didn’t you. I told you, we have to bring them to the afterlife. No matter how much they might beg you to show mercy, you can’t let them stay here. They’ll just wander around forever, probably, and torment the living while finding no rest themselves. They have to cross over.”

“I- I know that,” Baekhyun stutters, now confused. “I didn’t screw up, I swear- I didn’t let anyone get away, nothing like that. Hyung, it’s… It’s not that…”

“So why are you here?” Kyungsoo lets him step inside. The entrance to his tearoom is hidden from
mortals, so they can’t be seen even standing here, but he would still like the physical barrier between the eternity and the human world. “I don’t understand.”

Despite Kyungsoo gesturing him to sit down, Baekhyun refuses to do so, instead hovering near the doorway. Kyungsoo never saw him acting like this, before- nervous, hesitant, struggling to keep his feelings under control. Even when things got nasty, when he was training him, he didn’t react quite like this.

Something isn’t right.

“I… I don’t know how to say this,” Baekhyun mumbles, shaking his head, jaw and shoulders tense. “Hyung, I’ve… I’ve been sent to come get you.”

“Get me where?” Kyungsoo isn’t following. Quickly thinking back to their previous company dinner with other grim reapers, he’s fairly certain that they didn’t schedule the next event until weeks from now. It’d be unusual for anyone to be sent to fetch him even if he didn’t show up, but since that isn’t the case…

Baekhyun swallows, nervous, and finally lifts his head up look Kyungsoo in the eye, and to Kyungsoo’s utmost surprise, there are actual tears beginning to well up in Baekhyun’s eyes. “I was sent here by Samshin,” he says, a mere whisper, and Kyungsoo’s blood runs cold immediately. His breathing stops, his vision begins to blur. “She… She said I have to take you to the afterlife. That your punishment is over… You’ve been sent free, hyung.”

“No,” Kyungsoo whispers, blindly reaching for the chair to sit down, his knees suddenly buckling underneath him. “No… No, this cannot be… This cannot be real…”

He told her he didn’t regret killing his father-in-law. He made that very clear to her- he thought that it would have been enough. The one thing he was supposed to do, he hasn’t done, isn’t going to do, so how could she have decided to free him? How could this be?

This cannot be.

Baekhyun steps forward, tentative, and reaches out to place his hand on Kyungsoo’s shoulder. Kyungsoo is much too in shock to even reject the touch, the comfort, and just lets his delicate hand rest there, even if the weight of it does nothing to calm him down.

“She said… she didn’t explain it all to me. But she said you had understood… the bigger picture. That you… had seen what you needed to see. You regretted the right things, and that… you had merely served justice, in killing that man.” Baekhyun squeezes Kyungsoo’s shoulder tighter, to emphasize his words. “Hyung, I know… I know you have a lover, now, I know you don’t want to go, but she… she wouldn’t listen to me. I couldn’t fight for you, she wouldn’t let me… I’m so sorry, I really am. I’m so sorry.”

Kyungsoo presses his face in his hands. He can barely breathe, a tight band wrapped around his ribs, squeezing tight, threatening to snap his ribs in half with how unforgiving it is. So his monologue had in fact worked against him- it had proven to Samshin that he had learned regret, grief, remorse. That he had understood his crime, and suffered for it sufficiently.

That killing his father-in-law was not the crime, but sending Junmyeon to die was.

And now, he must go. Go into the salvation that he searched for- that he thought he wanted.

The image of Junmyeon floats through his mind, and he knows that he cannot. This isn’t how or when he needs to part with the mortal world.
He cannot follow Baekhyun anywhere. Even if breaking the rules was what he always avoided, what he feared, he knows there’s no other way.

“You can’t take me,” he says, as he snaps his head up. He feels as though there’s a fever burning through him, with how frantic and frazzled he feels right now. It must seem that way to Baekhyun too, who recoils away from him as though scared of his reaction, scared of his emotion. “You can’t-Baekhyun, I beg of you. Please don’t take me. Not now. I can’t go. Not yet. There’s so much—there’s something I need to do. For Junmyeon. I cannot… I cannot leave him like this.”

Baekhyun looks back at him, obviously torn. “But didn’t you say… You always told me how important it is to follow the rules—” “Fuck those rules!” Kyungsoo stands up now, to properly stare Baekhyun down. “Fuck them! Are we some toys for the gods to play with? First, they leave us to live like this with no explanation, no direction, abandoned to just fend for ourselves, and then, if we’re lucky, we find out what we’re supposed to do here. And then they will just rip us away from everything we’ve ever known, too? And they expect us to be grateful for it. I’ve spent centuries working so hard to please them, and this is my reward. To be torn away from the only person I’ve ever loved, with no warning, no nothing. Isn’t that so unfair?”

He doesn’t know where those words even come from, but he can tell it resonates with Baekhyun. Passionate, sympathetic Baekhyun. The grim reaper who always thought it unfair people should go before their time, unfairly.

“But what about… What if someone finds out about this?”

“Then you tell them that I fought back too hard, and ran away.” Kyungsoo is channeling Junmyeon’s fighting spirit, right now. He knows he can’t leave like this, without a fight, and he’ll be damned to abandon Junmyeon again. No matter what it takes, he’ll do what is right. “That you were too scared to tell anyone what happened, and did your best to bring me back on your own. They won’t punish you. And if they punish me, well, I don’t care. But hopefully… Hopefully it won’t come to that.”

He knows he can only buy time. He can’t stay— it’s not meant to be, and he knew it.

But even so, he has to do something. He can’t follow Baekhyun to the afterlife, not yet.

Kyungsoo has never been this scared, but he’s also never been this determined. In a way, it reminds him of the night when Junmyeon rode away to fight to bring justice to Kyungsoo, but back then he was a mere child in comparison to who he is now. This time, he knows what he’s getting into- and this time, he won’t let anyone else fight his battle for him.

And he won’t wrong Junmyeon again.

Baekhyun nods, determination in his eyes now, a firm set to his mouth. “Alright, hyung,” he says, and squeezes Kyungsoo’s shoulder once more. “Alright. I’ll… I’ll give you time, to do whatever you have to do. I don’t… I don’t know what I can do, but I’ll try, whatever I can. Don’t worry, I won’t tear you away against your will. You deserve this much.”

“Thank you.” Kyungsoo stands up on his feet, still feeling a little unsteady, but ignoring that. There’s hardly a moment to be wasted, now. The plan isn’t yet clear, the path still covered in darkness, but he knows he has a goal.

He needs to set Junmyeon free.
Chapter 9

Late 19th century

Watching the body of the queen of Korea burn is a surreal sight. Kyungsoo is not the only grim reaper in attendance, watching the Japanese soldiers bring in pieces of furniture and branches to keep the fire burning, to break down the flesh and bones. The silk clothing burned away quickly and that’s when Kyungsoo averted his eyes, not wishing to see too much- her body had already been scandalized enough, violated enough, when she was dragged out to the courtyard, tarnished with the blood of her ladies in waiting who had tried to shield her from the attack. When she was stabbed to death in great anger- there was no hesitation, the soldiers felt no remorse, held no respect for her, as they carried out their despicable mission.

Things in the kingdom have been going terribly awry for some years, now, but never did Kyungsoo think that it would come to this. That someone would dare to do this- would do something so bold and foolish, out in the open, and expect to get away with it.

That he would have to see the only world order he’s known fall. Crumble into pieces, fold down like a paper kite, crashing from the heights into shambles on the ground.

It seems like the other immortals feel the same. They stand still, in silence, watching her burn, watching the soldiers move, and wordlessly, they all share the same sentiment.

There’s no going back, now. There’s no winding back time, to times more predictable than this, safer than this. The chain of history has been broken- and the door into something more has been opened, wrenched wide to let the new tide in.

Kyungsoo isn’t so surprised to see Junmyeon appear at the site, too. The news must already be spreading like wildfire, among the ghosts and spirits alike- this kind of ordeal could never go unnoticed. They can keep the mortals in the dark about the truth, but the immortals, those in the shadows… they know.

Junmyeon comes to stand right beside him, as they watch the flames lick at the sky. “Is she… Is she gone?” he asks, careful, and Kyungsoo nods stiffly.

“She was escorted away as soon as her spirit parted with her body… We didn’t want too much hassle, because we knew that this would… corner some attention.” He understands why; even he would have liked a chance to talk to her, say something to her, bow down before her. She may have only ruled the mortals, but even as such, she was still royalty. “She’s long gone, I hope. Has long since forgotten that this ever happened to her, too.”

Junmyeon chuckles, although there’s no real amusement there. “I guess that is for the better,” he muses. “If a death like this doesn’t turn you into a powerful demon, I do not know what will.”

Kyungsoo purses his lips together, and says nothing, although he agrees. This is just too terrible, too terrible.

The crowd of grim reapers and ghosts brave enough to come close begins to disperse, little by little. There’s nothing really left to see- the body of the queen now turning into ashes, little by little, the soldiers poking at the fire to make sure their job is done. But Kyungsoo’s heart feels so heavy, burdened with thoughts and feelings he doesn’t know how to make any sense out of.

“How it’s going to be like, a
hundred years from now? Two hundred? Five hundred?” he asks Junmyeon quietly. He knows the goblin will humor his question, even if it may seem odd. “Do you ever think about… all the things we’ll have to see, if we stay here?”

Junmyeon glances at him, something akin to pain flashing in his eyes. “Are you scared of change, Kyungsoo?” he asks instead of giving him a proper answer, and he hits the nail on the head, just like that.

“I am,” Kyungsoo admits in a whisper. “I am… If change is like this… I do not wish for it to come. I want to be gone… I want to be gone, before everything I’ve ever known vanishes. If there will be nothing familiar left for me…” A world that he doesn’t recognize. He can already see the foundation of it being built, right before his very eyes- burning the queen being one of the corner stones of that strange, frightening new world. “I’m scared. I’m scared of the things that will happen. I’m not a keeper of this world- I do not worry for it, I just worry for myself.”

It’s a selfish, raw feeling. If nothing is no longer sacred- if everything is abandoned and being replaced by something unpredictable, dangerous, wild, then Kyungsoo doesn’t want to bear witness to it. He’s seen so many terrible things in his life; this is enough. No more. He cannot bear witness to any more of the madness of men. It has to stop- it has to come to an end. If not for the mankind, then at least for him.

Junmyeon sighs heavily, and reaches out to squeeze Kyungsoo’s shoulder. “Well, at least you have a way out,” he says, and now the pain is almost palpable. “At least there’s a chance… for you to be free. While I’m stuck living like this, waiting for my savior to be born… Someone special who could set me free. And I have seen the future, Kyungsoo… This is nothing. This is only the beginning of something terrible. So if you’re scared, if you want out- Run. Run now. It is only going to get worse. The powers that have been unleashed… They will not stop, until everything is in ruins.”

There’s finality in his statement, and Kyungsoo doesn’t doubt his honesty. But even so, even despite his selfish urge to save himself and not look back, he wishes that the goblin didn’t have to stay. That they could run together, away from this place, and towards salvation- even if it is oblivion.

For all this time, change has been slow, and the world today is largely the same it was when Kyungsoo first opened his eyes. But now, the pace is picking up, and no one will be spared.

*****

present time

Since Kyungsoo is certain that Junmyeon would be able to tell that something is wrong, he doesn’t go to him directly. Even with the urgency of knowing his days are counted, even with the pressing need to spend that remaining time with Junmyeon, he knows that he has to be smart about this. And so, he goes to Chanyeol- the only person whom he thinks might have the answers to his questions.

Chanyeol agrees to meet him, although he is apparently quite confused about the sudden hurry, the sudden need for secrecy, for Kyungsoo forbids him from uttering a single word to Junmyeon about it. He shows up at Kyungsoo’s doorstep not half an hour later after Kyungsoo called him, looking a little ruffled like he left in a hurry, but there’s still a smile about his lips as he greets Kyungsoo pleasantly.

“I was wondering what this could be about, as I was driving here,” Chanyeol muses as he steps inside, sits down on the floor where Kyungsoo points him to. Kyungsoo prepared tea, just to be courteous, even if he doesn’t intend for this to take very long. “Why you would want to see me, of all people. But you’re planning something romantic for Junmyeon hyung, aren’t you? Like a big
surprise, or something. I’m happy to help, just so you know, so just give me the word and I’ll do anything. He’s such a sap for things like this, it’s about time someone does this for him.”

Kyungsoo hates to burst his bubble, and the idea is so precious, too- he can picture it, Junmyeon’s joy and pure excitement, how he would kiss Kyungsoo and murmur words of thanks and appreciation… But alas.

“That is not quite the reason why I needed you here,” he says as he sits down beside Chanyeol. “I’m afraid that… this is not going to be anything so pleasant.”

At Chanyeol’s inquisitive look, Kyungsoo merely shakes his head. “The details don’t matter. You’ll understand later. But tell me- what do you know about the goblin bride? Junmyeon told me about it in passing, but nothing much… Please, I need to know. Is the goblin bride the only one who can set Junmyeon free?”

Chanyeol’s knuckles are white where he’s holding the cup in his hands, the only visible tell that Kyungsoo’s question is upsetting. Perhaps discussing the way in which his master could die isn’t so pleasant, Kyungsoo realizes. From his mortal standpoint, it must seem like such a dreadful thing, although Chanyeol should have seen with his own eyes how eternity has made Junmyeon suffer so much.

“Yes, that’s how I’ve understood it,” Chanyeol replies. “That this person, whoever it may be, will come along and just… Pull the sword out of his chest, I suppose. That will allow him to die, finally.”

“So what are the requirements? How does one become the goblin bride?” Kyungsoo needs to know the specifics, but Chanyeol just shrugs his shoulders.

“See, we don’t know.” He sighs and takes a long sip of his tea. “It has to be someone special, though. Nobody can touch the sword, you know, let alone pull it out. He’s made all kinds of people try it for him, but no one has succeeded. So it has to be someone pretty important, somehow.”

Someone special…

“So someone who loves him? The name bride would suggest so…”

Chanyeol nods his head at that, and then looks at Kyungsoo, up and down, weighing something. “Well, I kind of thought… I kind of thought that it might be you,” he confesses, eyebrows knitting together. “You love him, he loves you. Yeah it’s called a bride but seriously, I think that’s just some old-fashioned bullshit. It’s a magic sword, what does it care about gender or sex?”

Kyungsoo never gave that option any thought, but he doesn’t know why. Now that Chanyeol said it, it all seems so obvious. Why wouldn’t it be him? Junmyeon has loved him all this time… Shouldn’t that make him special enough?

Could the answer really be so simple?

“I’ve never tried to touch the sword,” Kyungsoo admits. That idea never came to mind, either- it seemed way too personal to touch, and he’s also seen very little of it, ever since they were properly reunited as lovers. It hasn’t really bothered Junmyeon as of late, and that makes Kyungsoo wonder if that’s also a sign of something. Something he should have realized long ago.

Chanyeol nods his head again. “Well, maybe you should. So we would find out.” He shrugs his shoulders once more, but Kyungsoo can tell that he’s far from nonchalant. He obviously loves Junmyeon dearly- he knows he doesn’t want to part from him, even if it would be Junmyeon’s wish to at last find peace.
But that makes Kyungsoo wonder what would happen to Chanyeol, if Junmyeon were to cease to exist. What would happen to an entire family devoted to serving the goblin?

“Your… Your whole family line, you’ve been dedicated to staying by Junmyeon’s side. What would… If Junmyeon were to finally… pass on, then what do you think would happen to you? If it happened while you’re still serving him.” It’s a bleak topic for sure, but now that the thought crossed his mind, Kyungsoo can’t help but ask, curiosity eating away at him. He’s seen how deeply Junmyeon cares for his servants, and he knows that Chanyeol is just as attached to his master. But Kyungsoo doesn’t know if Chanyeol and his family are being punished as well- if having to stay by the goblin’s side is their way of making up for something.

A heavy sigh leaves Chanyeol, as he mulls the question over in his head. “I don’t… It’s never been discussed, really,” he admits. “We’ve been… It’s been hundreds of years, no, thousands of years, but he’s still here. I guess somewhere along the line we just stopped thinking about that possibility.”

“That seems fair.” Kyungsoo knows how short the human memory is, after all. “So you don’t know? Are you not, say, magically attached to him, somehow? Would the bonds tying you to him break, if he were to move on from this world?”

Chanyeol shakes his head at that. “There are no bonds of any kind,” he replies, simple. “There’s nothing there. Just an old promise… An oath, I think you would call it. To always be by his side, and help him. Do whatever it takes to serve him.”

“Who made that oath?” Kyungsoo finds this so intriguing. He’s never met humans this loyal- especially to something that compasses generations. Sure, Chanyeol’s family probably has benefited from the riches Junmyeon has gathered over the years, but that seems like a flimsy excuse to keep doing all this.

This time, Chanyeol isn’t as quick to reply, as he just stares at Kyungsoo. There’s a question in his eyes- a heavy one, too, something that Kyungsoo cannot begin to read. But it seems as though Chanyeol gets his answer anyway, for finally he speaks again.

“You did.” He flashes a nervous smile at Kyungsoo, despite his stunned silence. “You did… A long, long time ago. You promised we would never forget him… We would never leave his side. Perhaps you only meant for us to cherish the memory of him and visit his grave, but when he came back as a goblin, years after your passing… We just knew what we had to do.”

It isn’t so hard to imagine himself making such a promise, but it is next to impossible to picture himself having children. Ever being intimate with anyone else, allowing himself to be attached to anyone else, after everything that happened. That he would have fathered children… given life to mortals himself, once upon a time, instead of reaping their souls away from this world.

There are tears brimming in Chanyeol’s eyes, and Kyungsoo doesn’t know what to say. What to do. Once again, nothing seems real- but he knows that Chanyeol wouldn’t kid about something so serious as this.

“So you are… you are my grandchild… heavens know how many generations between us…” Kyungsoo’s hands are shaking, and he finds himself getting choked up. To think that he founded a family… founded the lineage of servants to Junmyeon, so he wouldn’t have to go alone, all this while.

“Hello, father,” Chanyeol murmurs, and bows his head. “I hope… I hope we’ve made you proud.”

Kyungsoo blinks, and realizes that he’s crying, too. “You’ve done everything I asked for, I’m sure,”
he whispers back. “You’ve… you’ve stayed by him longer than I could have ever asked. Thank you… Thank you.”

Chanyeol snivels his nose, and smiles through his tears. “It’s been an honor, to get to see you reunited with him again. To have witnessed the day that the circle closed… We didn’t know if it would ever happen, and I’m so thankful… I got to be here, to see it.”

“It’s been an honor to meet you too, Chanyeol.”

unknown time in the past

Kyungsoo spends some years travelling from village to village, earning his keep by doing simple jobs and selling items he carves out of wood, using his knowledge of instrument making for creating everyday items instead. He never strays far from Junmyeon’s gravesite, however, always returning to bring him fruit, alcohol, and other offerings, to try and appease his spirit- and his own ill conscience, as well, as the memory of him haunts him every single day.

But still, he feels restless. As though this isn’t what he’s supposed to do. The same force that guided him to leave the mountains and forests behind keeps urging him- but he doesn’t understand what it wants from him. He’s afraid of settling down, afraid of people asking questions about his past, and finds it easier to travel from place to place, like a little sparrow, finding his home in the wind and the sky instead of taking root anywhere. But then what is he supposed to do? He returns to Junmyeon’s grave regularly, but doesn’t feel compelled to stay there either, and walking from village to village, town to town, the feeling continues to haunt him. Until he finally finds his answer.

It’s pouring rain. The monsoon season has arrived and turned all roads into an ankle-deep mess of mud and water. People hide in their homes and stay away from it all, only venturing outside if they absolutely have to. Even Kyungsoo has taken refuge in an abandoned barn, seeking shelter under its leaking thatched roof and half collapsed walls. No one should be out in this weather- even the animals have all taken to hiding away, waiting for the rain shower to end, doing their best to stay dry.

The sun is setting now too, and Kyungsoo is returning to his temporary home after collecting some more twigs and brambles. They’re of course completely soaked, and it’s humid enough that he doesn’t need fire for the warmth, but he does dream of a warm meal and plans to let them dry for a couple of days before even trying to use them. He’s deep in thought as he walks ahead, not even bothering to look around for he knows he’s the only soul braving this weather, but then- a voice calls out to him.

“Kind sir… Kind sir… A morsel of food, kind sir…”

Two orphan boys are standing by the road, staring at him. They’re of course soaked to the bone, their clothes tattered, and they look severely famished. They must be under ten years old, judging by their faces and heights, and Kyungsoo pauses in his tracks without even thinking why, as memories of times past flash before his eyes.

Junmyeon, when he was that age. When he was just a small child, passed around in the village, since no one wanted him, wanted to keep him. Begging for scraps of food, spending his days scavenging for something to eat, doing chores for whoever would let him, would be so kind to reward him with a bowl of soup, perhaps some barley, even rice.

Junmyeon, who Kyungsoo tried his best to help, back then, but could do so little for him. He’d beg
his mother for food for his friend, he’d sneak out to share his own meals with him, but it was barely enough to help Junmyeon get by.

His Junmyeon, who deserved so much better than that.

His Junmyeon, who is now dead.

Yet in these orphans, Kyungsoo can still see him. A faint memory of him, of who he once was. Who he was, as well, a long time ago.

If this was Junmyeon, he wouldn’t walk away. He wouldn’t rest, until he’d made sure they were well cared for, well fed, well clothed.

They aren’t Junmyeon, but they might as well be.

“Follow me,” he says gruffly, and ushers the boys forward. They seem wary, as they should, cautious of the stranger suddenly giving them an order like this. “I’ll feed you- you just have to come along. I’ll set up a fire, dry up your wet clothes, too. Just come along, will you?”

The boys are clearly suspicious of this, but also hungry, and the latter wins over the former easily. And how they eat- they polish off every single bite of food Kyungsoo had, scarfing down everything like it’s the most delicious thing on earth, and watching them eat like that… For the first time in years, Kyungsoo feels the tiniest, the briefest flash of genuine joy.

“What are your names?”

“I’m Jongdae,” the older one of the boys says, licking his fingers to make sure there’s nothing wasted, nothing left behind. “And that’s Chanyeol. We’re brothers.”

“I see.”

And as Kyungsoo tucks the boys in, in his own makeshift bed, covered by his jacket and his blankets, he knows that he has a purpose now beyond just keeping Junmyeon’s memory alive. These two boys… They’ve come to his life for a reason, he knows it, and he’ll never let them go hungry or cold for as long as he lives.

Perhaps a responsibility like this wasn’t what he wanted, but it is what he needed. To feel more grounded to the world once more, instead of only listening to the calls of dead souls from the afterlife.

Two boys who need him- who will remember Junmyeon, bring him offerings, when Kyungsoo is no more.

****

present day

Kyungsoo can only hide from Junmyeon for so long, before he comes looking for him. Kyungsoo knew this, understood this, and so he’s not surprised to see Junmyeon walking towards him on the street as he’s headed to collect another soul. Although he’s technically now free, the envelopes have still kept coming, and he takes care of them diligently, just like before, even if his thoughts are even less present in his work than before.

“Kyungsoo-yah.” Junmyeon slots his arm through Kyungsoo’s, and changes course to walk alongside with him. “Fancy seeing you here. I haven’t heard from you in so long- have you been
avoiding me?”

There’s a playful edge to his words, but also a certain sadness, as well. Kyungsoo feels so guilty, yet there is no way he could tell him the truth. He just hopes that whatever if awaiting him, Junmyeon cannot see it written in his future.

“No, I was just… taking care of some things. I’m sorry, I should have… communicated that better.” He flashes Junmyeon a brief smile, and pats his hand carefully. “I’m on duty right now, so what if I come by later? I’ll grab us something to eat from that restaurant you like. We could watch a movie, or something. Whatever you want.”

“That sounds perfect.” Junmyeon smooches him on the cheek, and Kyungsoo can’t fight back his blush. “That is exactly what I need to forgive you for ignoring me.”

“Your forgiveness is so easily obtained.”

“No, it isn’t.” Junmyeon says with a laugh as he pulls his arm free once more. He knows he shouldn’t mess with Kyungsoo’s job, and he’s already leaving, feeling satisfied after hunting Kyungsoo down and getting this promise from him. “But I can’t be mad at you, ever. I can’t sulk, or brood. I just want to be with you, and be happy.”

His words make Kyungsoo’s stomach turn, but he says nothing, only smiles as he places his hat on his head to hide away from view. But in that smile, there’s already a sense of goodbye.

But it’s hard to focus on anything fun like movies, when there are such pressing issues at hand. Kyungsoo knows he’s now on borrowed time, and his mission is so, so important- he cannot even imagine the consequences for Junmyeon, if he doesn’t succeed. So his focus isn’t there at all, as Junmyeon lays on his chest and talks to him about the movie, about the things he finds funny or moving. It would be so endearing, usually, his genuine excitement for something so fake and artificial, but Kyungsoo… his mind is occupied by only one thing.

The thought comes to him unbIDDEN, too, as he thinks back to his conversation with Chanyeol. Not for the first time, however- it’s plagued him ever since, even if he’s tried not to give it shape, scared of the direction it’s taking him. But if he, someone who knows the most about Junmyeon besides Kyungsoo himself, thought that Kyungsoo is the goblin bride, then maybe… He should meet the requirements, right? Who else but him could be that special someone? What else could there possibly be, when their love story has been hundreds of years in the making, written in the stars and created by the goddess of fate herself?

And if he’s the goblin bride, then isn’t it him… who ought to kill Junmyeon?

It makes him shiver just to think about it, just the mere idea of being the one to take Junmyeon’s life. This time with his own hands- deliberately, fully knowing what he’s doing. But even if it hurts, it’s for the best. It’s for Junmyeon’s own sake, for his own happiness. This punishment needs to end, and Kyungsoo would be glad to be the one to set him free.

He knows how much Junmyeon has been through, and he knows that there will be no peace or rest for him, until that sword is removed.

It’s as though his thoughts are summoning the cursed item into being, as Junmyeon slides to rest against Kyungsoo on his side instead, hand coming up to massage the middle of his chest. “Does it hurt very much?” Kyungsoo asks, taking Junmyeon’s hand in his and giving it a gentle squeeze. His
own heart is hammering heavily against his ribs, suddenly very nervous, for the thoughts swirling around in his head are leading him to a very rash decision. “Is it… very painful?”

“It’s aching,” Junmyeon says in a quiet murmur, pressing his face into the crook of Kyungsoo’s neck. “It… It likes to remind me that it exists, I suppose.”

“Does it hurt very often?” Kyungsoo is not at all surprised to feel Junmyeon nod his head. Of course it does- but maybe Kyungsoo could put an end to it.

“Can you show it to me?”

Junmyeon sucks in a deep breath, clearly startled by Kyungsoo’s sudden request. They’ve hardly ever talked about the blade at all, and perhaps he assumed Kyungsoo didn’t wish to know anything more of it. Didn’t want to even think about it, for the painful memories that it resembles. “If you’re sure,” he says in a quiet murmur, and he pulls further back, away from Kyungsoo. Blue swirls begin to dance at the middle of his chest, like small flames licking up, reaching their tendrils towards Kyungsoo. “If you… If you really want to see it.”

“I do.” Kyungsoo gives him what he hopes is a reassuring smile. “I’m just curious… But if you don’t want me to see, then you don’t have to. I don’t want you to be any more uncomfortable.”

But of course Junmyeon would never refuse him.

The handle materializes little by little, taking form within the blue flames, slowly gaining mass until it finally appears like it’s something of this world instead of pure magic. And it looks exactly how Kyungsoo remembers it looking like in their human life- how it looked when it was strapped to Junmyeon’s hip, a part of his uniform as a soldier for the kingdom. How it looked like in Junmyeon’s hand, as he taught Kyungsoo how to use a sword to defend himself. But it has not been touched by time; by now, there should be wear and tear visible on it, since Junmyeon has fought many battles with it since then, but it appears completely new. The only imperfections it has are small speckles of blood on the leather- whether it’s Junmyeon’s or not, Kyungsoo doesn’t wish to know.

Slowly, he reaches out to run a finger along it, and shivers shoot up his arm and deep into his core as he makes contact with it. It’s not exactly cold- there’s something else, something otherworldly that makes him feel like this, and instantly, something heavy settles into his heart. Magic like this, it’s something Kyungsoo would usually avoid, wouldn’t want to get mixed up in it, and he knows it’s powerful. It has to be, to be able to keep Junmyeon here, to keep him captive in this existence, to have him forever stuck like this. To keep his body from aging, decaying, to keep him from dying no matter what happens to him.

Junmyeon is staring at him with big, wide eyes, fingers curled around Kyungsoo’s wrist. “You can… You can touch it?” He sounds as though he can barely believe the words coming from his mouth. “You can… You can actually touch it?”

“Yes,” Kyungsoo whispers, and to prove it, does it again, this time more bravely running his fingers along the hilt. His own blood is thrumming in his ears, a sickening feeling at the pit of his stomach. “Yes, I can… Is that, is that not usually what happens?”

Junmyeon’s grip grows tighter still. “No one has ever been able to touch it,” he murmurs. “No one… I’ve had people try, so many people, yet no one has ever… succeeded…”
That leaves no space for doubt in Kyungsoo’s mind, then. He’s the one- it’s his duty to do this.

He is the goblin bride.
Something just comes over him, then, some rational part of his mind shutting down. Perhaps it would be for the best to discuss this- to tell Junmyeon the truth, tell him what he wants to do for him before the inevitable. But the sword is right there, at his fingertips, and he could just end it all here. Junmyeon would never have to feel this pain ever again, and Kyungsoo… He could go into the light, at last.

What comes after that, he doesn’t care to think that far just yet.

He curls his fingers around the handle, slowly, feeling the weight of it. Squeezing tighter, and it still stays concrete in his hand, doesn’t avoid his grip, doesn’t vanish from him. And he looks into Junmyeon’s eyes, and doesn’t know what he sees, exactly- understanding, surety, betrayal? A question.

An answer.

Kyungsoo presses his other hand against Junmyeon’s chest, for leverage, and takes in a breath, slow, steady- time has frozen, for a while, in this moment, where the balance is so close to tipping over, into something unknown, unheard of.

And he pulls on the sword.

And all it does is jerk Junmyeon forward with the force of it, the blade not moving one inch, instead acting like an anchor, pulling Junmyeon’s entire body with it. Even as Kyungsoo pulls harder, pushes back harder to keep Junmyeon still, it still won’t move, won’t slide out of his body.

Junmyeon’s fingers curled around his wrist, but not stopping him from doing this. Not fighting it, just watching- Kyungsso’s face, the sword that remains stuck in his chest. Disbelief written on his features, and surprise; he didn’t think this is how it’d end.

They both thought they knew the answer.

“Why… Why won’t it come out?” Kyungsoo lets his fingers go slack, lets his hand fall down, but his hand pressed to Junmyeon’s heart stays there. Feeling, listening, his heartbeat, fragile and roaring all at the same time.

“I don’t know.” Junmyeon’s voice a mere whisper, his grip like a vice around Kyungsoo’s wrist. It could break and splinter bones, but Kyungsoo knows Junmyeon would never hurt him. “I don’t… I thought…”

“That I’m the bride.”

They both did.

The blade fades out of sight, then, slowly, little by little, as they watch it. It’s almost as though it, too, is disappointed- perhaps the sword itself yearned for freedom, as well, which Kyungsoo couldn’t give to it after all.

“Perhaps… Perhaps there’s something else…”

“But what? What else could there be?” Kyungsoo finds anger suddenly rising within him. Not directed at Junmyeon, but the standstill they’re in now. How unfair it is, that he couldn’t free Junmyeon. Couldn’t save him.

That he has to go, soon, and now he has no idea how to save the only person he’s ever cared about.
“I don’t… I don’t know.” Junmyeon whispers. And it speaks volumes that there’s no anger in him, now; he’s not upset that Kyungsoo, in effect, attempted to kill him. Attempted to send him into the light, not asking if it’s what he desires- because the answer was obvious enough. Only sadness. Hopelessness, that this is the fate he has to submit to, fully. Forever.

Kyungsoo cannot stand this. Cannot let this be.

He’s done being a plaything for powers bigger than him. He’s done rolling over and hurting- he’s done being punished, like this, done watching others suffer for no reason whatsoever. And most of all, he’s done allowing those powers to keep hurting Junmyeon, who has paid for his sins many times over.

He sits up, gets up on his feet, and storms off to the door. To put on his shoes, to leave- Junmyeon’s hand grabbing him by the elbow, now, pulling him to a stop.

“What are you going?”

Kyungsoo doesn’t know. But he has to leave- has to fight back, even if he’s raging at the world itself.

Something has boiled over, inside him, and he can’t push it back down anymore. In the brief moment, when he thought he’d found the answer, he felt such relief- even if it was mixed with grief, fear, and worry, he was still relieved. To know that Junmyeon wouldn’t know any more pain, any more loneliness.

He won’t let Junmyeon be left behind to suffer, when he’s gone. He needs Junmyeon to go first.

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but fuck, Junmyeon. I… I can’t just… roll over and accept this.”

Kyungsoo meets Junmyeon’s eyes. Junmyeon has rarely looked so small as he does in this moment, his free hand pressed over his heart, clutching at the spot where the sword was visible mere moments ago. His eyes are so full of mixed emotions that Kyungsoo can barely even begin to pick them apart. Shock, disbelief. Grief. Love, fear.

Kyungsoo knows he deserves the truth, but Kyungsoo can’t tell him now. Can’t explain why he’s so frightened, so angry. This disappointment alone is enough.

“I’ll come back. I promise.”

He reaches out, and Junmyeon falls into his embrace, easy, their lips connecting as they both yearn for the touch, the comfort. Kyungsoo wraps his arms around Junmyeon, presses their bodies together- to feel their hearts flutter against one another, their breaths in sync for just this moment. He kisses him with the same pained desperation he did when they first kissed, lips sliding together, tongues brushing against one another, but with the shared understanding that this could never be enough. It’ll always end too soon.

It’s Junmyeon who breaks it, then, but he doesn’t pull away, his lips brushing against Kyungsoo’s. “Just answer me this,” he whispers, and shudders. “If it had moved… If it had moved when you pulled, would you have pulled it out? All the way? Would you have killed me… without letting me say goodbye? Without any warning?”

There’s a hint of hurt, buried in those words, and Kyungsoo cannot blame him. It would have been unfair- but he feared that Junmyeon would fight back. Wouldn’t let him, if he warned him. That he would resist it, would fight tooth and nail to stay in this world, insist that he doesn’t wish to die when he finally has Kyungsoo.
That Kyungsoo would be reason enough not to relinquish his grip on the eternity.

“I don’t know,” is his honest answer. He didn’t think that far- only acted on impulse, on fear that their time is running out. There was never a detailed plan. “I don’t… I don’t know.”

Junmyeon swallows, thickly, and nods, short and tense. “I… I wish you could have talked to me,” he says. “I wish… But I understand. I’m not… I’m not upset. Please don’t… But if you ever want to do it, if we- if we can make it work, then please, don’t do it by surprise. I… I don’t want to just disappear, like that. Please.”

Kyungsoo cups his cheek to bring him back in for another kiss, tender, slow. “I promise,” he replies with, even if he doesn’t know if it’ll even depend on him. If he’ll ever have the ability to save Junmyeon, after all.

And then he leaves, for the temptation to stay is growing too high.

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He’s never had to look for a god on purpose, has never wanted to find them, never wanted to deal with them. As such, he has no direction, no idea where to go- how to summon Samshin into being. Are gods not everywhere and nowhere, all at once? Are gods not so omnipotent that they should know when someone is looking for them?

But no god has ever listened to his prayers. Why would the goddess of fate listen to him now, when he needs her the most? When he should already be gone- when she already sent someone to take him into the light?

It’s pouring rain, suddenly, as Kyungsoo walks along the streets. There was no sign of clouds earlier, and so he knows- it’s all Junmyeon’s doing. The goblin is grieving, too, and knowing that Junmyeon is in such a state only makes Kyungsoo’s heart ache even more.

“I know you can hear me,” he calls out, raging at the stormy skies. “I know you’re there- so show yourself. I must speak with you, Samshin. Talk to me, as I’ve spoken with you whenever you’ve so desired.”

And it’s so unfair. The gods have played with him for so long, have made him serve them for centuries, doing their bidding, yet they turn their backs on him when he has something to ask.

He’s lost all respect he ever had for them. They are not just, they are not good- much like the kings of the mortal men, they’ve been corrupted by their own powers.

“Answer me! I know you can hear me! Five minutes of your time, it’s all I ask of you, so I can finally have the answers I need. Talk to me!”

Tears burn in his eyes, as his frustration bubbles up all over again. The helplessness- that there’s nothing he can do, or say, that would change this situation. He can’t force her to respond, he can’t make the sword come out of Junmyeon’s chest, he can’t heal the pain Junmyeon has been through. Even paying for his own sins he did wrong, for he did it too soon, and now he has to go before he can find a way to save the man he loves.

“She isn’t available right now, but I might be able to answer in her stead.”

The male voice startles Kyungsoo out of his thoughts, and as he spins around, he comes face to face with a young man he’s never seen before. He’s tall, and appears younger than Kyungsoo himself does; he’s wearing an immaculate suit, his hair combed back from his forehead. But most notable of
all, there’s an aura of strange power surrounding him—power that Kyungsoo knows instinctively to be afraid of. He stumbles two steps back, staring at him, trying to figure out what and who he might be, but nothing comes to mind.

The man doesn’t seem to feel any sort of way about his reaction, adjusting his cufflinks in a nonchalant manner. “You were demanding for answers, so I came. Ask me anything.” He says this with confidence, the same kind that Samshin has about her, but somehow his mere presence is shaking Kyungsoo down to his very core. Even if he’s always been scared of the goddess of fate, he never felt this way standing before her.

Who is he?

“T—trying to talk to Samshin…”

“But she is elsewhere. Trust me, anything you want answered, I can handle it.” The man’s tone grows more demanding, now, and Kyungsoo knows better than to make him impatient.

“I just… I thought I was the goblin bride. I thought I could set Junmyeon free. The goblin, I mean.” Nothing moves on the man’s face, his eyes showing no emotion or reaction, and Kyungsoo doesn’t know how to interpret that. What to make of it. “Samshin sent someone to get me, to take me, to cross over… But I cannot go. Not until I’ve freed Junmyeon. But I tried, and the sword— it won’t move. It won’t move an inch. What have I done wrong? What is still missing? What didn’t I get? Because based on everything… It should be me…”

He realizes how arrogant this all sounds. That he could have cracked the code, and figured out a way to break a curse so mighty, so old. But he really, really thought that he had it all figured out. Chanyeol thought so, Junmyeon thought so—so why didn’t it work?

Why were they all wrong?

The man stares at Kyungsoo, and he has never felt so small in his life. “The goblin bride. I’ll be honest, I did not expect it to take this long for this to be brought up— I thought that you two would have figured it out a long, long time ago.” The man purses his lips, and glances at the sky thoughtfully. “But you failed to pull out the blade tonight, and the goblin is sad, once more. Feeling hopeless. He got his lover back, but now… Now, it looks as if he’s stuck. And he knows you’re here on borrowed time. Knows that you’ll leave him, just like his human companions have, and all he will be left with are the memories.”

Just hearing those words spoken makes Kyungsoo want to weep. “I won’t allow that,” he forces out, fists clenched. “I won’t allow it— No matter what it takes, I will do it. I will save him. Just tell me how. Just give me the answers, and I’ll do it.”

The god huffs as though holding back laughter, something akin to amusement flashing in his eyes. “Getting back in touch with your memories as a mortal have really made you so irrational,” he muses. “But I will tell you. After all, you have both stayed on this earth for far longer than we ever intended you to. It is time for both of you to step back into the cycle of life.”

The way he speaks, the way he knows all these things— a chill settles into Kyungsoo’s bones as he begins to understand who he’s talking to. Could it be… the creator… But why would he bother with such a small thing such as this?

“Say, Kyungsoo, what do you know about the goblin bride? What are the requirements needed?”

“T—to be someone special, someone destined to save Junmyeon.” It’s an easy answer. “Someone who
is… born to be that special person. It requires genuine love, I suppose, hence the name bride… But it’s not a matter of my gender, right? It couldn’t be.”

“It is not a matter of anything so trivial, that is correct. But you already said everything there is- you already know the answer why you couldn’t pull it out now.” The god looks almost smug as he says this, and this is truly what Kyungsoo despises about all deities. They are so full of themselves, for having the answers and keys to everything- but just because they think all of this is obvious, doesn’t mean that it actually is.

“What is it? What did I miss? Because I do not understand, and I won’t be left with just riddles. Tell me, directly. No more games.”

“Very well.” The god gestures towards Kyungsoo with his hand. “The problem here is that you have died, but you haven’t been reborn. You passed away, in your human life, and were made into a grim reaper, instead of being granted another life. And even if your existence is much like that of a mortal’s, it’s not a life- you’re not alive, reaper. You might sleep, you might eat, you might breathe- but you’re not alive. You haven’t been born. You’re still just as dead as you were the day your heart stopped beating as a mortal man.”

And the pieces fall into place, just like that. It was obvious, after all- it should have been clear to him from the start.

“So there is no way… I could ever save him. For as long as I stay as a grim reaper… There will be no salvation for Junmyeon.” The whole picture has become so clear, suddenly, the puzzle now complete. He should have seen it from the start, but he didn’t, the fragments too obscure until this moment. “There is no way… for me to save him, until I walk into the light myself.”

“That is correct.” Again, the god speaks to him as though he’s so pleased with himself. “I really, really didn’t think he’d wait this long until giving you your memories back. I thought he’d last a century or two, max, before caving in and seeking you out. That he waited this long… It boggles me, sometimes, the whims and follies you humans get up to. I might have made you, but I still do not fully understand you.”

“But if… If I walk into the afterlife… Junmyeon will be alone again… And who knows where I will be reborn, or where he’ll be, or how I’ll ever find him again…”

“Such are the risks.” The god shrugs. Clearly, from his perspective, these are all useless musings. “But it’s the only way. You must be born again, before you can save him. That’s your answer.”

It is an answer- but it’s terrifying and unsatisfying. Yet Kyungsoo knows there’s no point in arguing, no matter how angry he is. With this entire thing- that the rules were made like this, that no one told him all this, that it had to take so long before they even came to this point. That he’s been pushed around towards something no one wanted to explain to him, and when he finally thought he had it all figured out… He was let down again, harshly. It is crushing.

Yet raging against the creator, or the goddess of fate, it wouldn’t change anything.

“Thank you.” It’s all he can say, without exploding into inappropriate language. It’s all he can say, and keep his composure. He’s so livid, so disappointed, so afraid- but he knows that the god knows all this. There’s no point in vocalizing it.

“The sooner you do the right thing, the quicker you can come back to save him.” The god grants him a smile, oddly gentle, before he begins to walk away. “No more breaking the rules, you have no more excuses. Do as you’ve been told, reaper, and finally, finally walk into the light. No one was
intended to live this long… No one was meant to be doomed into an eternity of this magnitude. Not you, and not the goblin. So set yourselves free.”

And he walks away, just like that, leaving Kyungsoo with the bitter knowledge that what he must do next will be more terrifying than he can put into words. But there’s no other way.

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unknown time in the past

“Do you ever think about what death is like?” Junmyeon asks this so suddenly, as they lie in the tall grass, gazing at the stars above. Their hands are joined together, their thighs and shoulders touching, their breaths synced as they stare up at the dark sky. Junmyeon is to leave in just a few days, and Kyungsoo aches- but tries not to think about it, for he doesn’t want Junmyeon to have to bear the weight of his grief as well.

“Death?” Kyungsoo squeezes Junmyeon’s hand tighter despite himself. “No, I don’t think… I don’t think I’ve ever given it much thought.” He’s been rather sheltered from it- one of his siblings died when he was still very young, but he does not remember it. Doesn’t remember his grandparents passing, doesn’t remember much of the village people that he’s seen buried before. He’s too young to think about it very much- has just focused on play, on learning the family trade, focused on Junmyeon. He hasn’t thought about anything much else, in his entire life.

“I would have assumed so.” Junmyeon’s thumb is so tender as it brushes against the back of Kyungsoo’s hand. “I didn’t… I didn’t think about it much either, until I began to train to be a soldier… Until they told us when we would be leaving, to fight. To go to battle. It was only then that… it became a reality.”

“Right.” Kyungsoo doesn’t know what else to say, but he can tell that Junmyeon has a strong urge to talk about this right now. “Because it’s… more tangible, now.” And truth be told, the news of Junmyeon going away made it more real for him, too. Made him consider possibilities he never did before.

“Exactly. Because now… I know there will be people who want to kill me. Who will raise their weapons against me, and who will fight back… That I will no longer be able to live in peace, right here. In this village where nothing ever happens.” Junmyeon’s laughter is not one of joy, or merriment. “I don’t know, Kyungsoo. There is no point in thinking about it, because it won’t change a thing. But I can’t help but wonder… How it might be like. Does it hurt very much? I suppose it must, if you die from wounds you get from battle.”

“It probably does.” Kyungsoo shudders, doesn’t want to imagine it. Junmyeon’s pale body, pierced with a blade, cut with a sword, blood tainting his clothes and his complexion. “It must be really painful… Unless you were to die in your sleep, or something.”

“True…” Junmyeon’s voice is so quiet now. “But I wonder… If there is pain, afterwards. If there is pain in afterlife. If it hurts after… After everything is over.”

“I don’t think it could hurt,” Kyungsoo whispers, and turns his head to press a light kiss on Junmyeon’s cheek. “I don’t think… You’re just a spirit, then. Your body no longer holds you… you become one of the ancestors. How could a spirit feel pain? That wouldn’t make any sense.”

“You’re right.” Junmyeon turns his head so that their lips connect. “That must be how it is… That is a great comfort, Kyungsoo-yah. That even if it hurts to die, there will be no pain afterwards… I’ll be
just a spirit, and nothing can hurt me anymore.”

Kyungsoo swallows, doesn’t know how to put into words what he’s feeling. What he’s thinking. “Please don’t become a spirit,” he murmurs. “I beg of you… Please don’t become a spirit. I want you here, in flesh. Like this. Always.”

“But when we both become spirits, we will have each other.” Junmyeon says this with such confidence that Kyungsoo has to believe him. “We will be together forever. As spirits. No one can harm us, no one can hurt us, there will be just… Just us, and all the other ancestors, and we’ll be able to do as we wish. Go wherever we wish.”

Kyungsoo doesn’t know if that is how it’s actually like to be a spirit, but it does sound great. And there is, indeed, a great comfort in that- in thinking that even if in this life, they’ll have to endure a lot of pain, a lot of uncertainty, once upon a time all that will end. There will no longer be separation, or hunger, or suffering, and he will be with Junmyeon forever.

“If you have to go first… Will you wait for me?” He presses his hand on Junmyeon’s stomach, his chest. To feel him breathe, to feel his heart beating. “Will you be there, waiting for me?”

“Of course.” Junmyeon doesn’t even hesitate to promise him that. “I’ll be waiting for you, with my arms wide open, and I’ll give you the fiercest hug when you arrive. And I’ll show you everything I’ve learned, and together, we will have great fun.”

Somehow, this makes Kyungsoo tear up, and he hides his face in Junmyeon’s shoulder for a moment, trying to compose himself again. “That would be… That’s a promise now, hyungnim, alright? You have to keep it. And if I go first, I’ll do the same.”

“It’s an oath, then,” Junmyeon murmurs. “With the stars as our witnesses, it’s a promise that can’t be broken.”

It gives Kyungsoo a bit of comfort. This promise that even if they must say goodbye, it won’t be forever… Even if they lose each other, they’ll always return together.

Even separation will only be temporary.

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present time

Kyungsoo seeks Baekhyun out immediately. Now that he knows what needs to be done- he has to do it, right away, with no hesitation. He cannot let himself overthink it, for he fears that he wouldn’t be able to go through with it. The temptation to just stay, for as long as he can avoid the inevitable, it would just grow, and he knows his own foolish heart- he’d attempt to run away from his fate, just to gain a few more days with Junmyeon. Just to be with him for a little while longer.

But what are days, weeks, or even months, when you’ve already lived for hundreds of years? Just a blink of an eye- and in the end, he’ll be hunted down. They will find him, and they will send him over to the afterlife.

No, he cannot tempt himself like that. Cannot give into his own foolish desires. Now, with the frustration and anger still burning inside of him, he needs to act; even if it feels like he’s rolling the dice with all the odds stacked up against him. The uncertainty, it pains him, knowing how difficult it will be to find Junmyeon later on… But if it’s fated, if it’s meant to be, then he has to trust it. Rely on it.
He’s never had to leap into the unknown like this.

He dashes around the city wildly in the search for the grim reaper. It’s getting late but he’s not in his residence, and so Kyungsoo guesses he must be out on duty. But none of the other grim reapers he runs into have seen him, and it takes Kyungsoo a while to find anyone who even knows of a way to contact him.

When he finds him, he’s seated in front of a 7-Eleven, in their cheap plastic chairs, with a cup of barley tea in hand. “Heavens, you’re hard to track down,” Kyungsoo mutters as he walks up to him. “I need you- it’s urgent.”

Baekhyun, who had been slouching comfortably in his seat, snaps into attention. “Hyung? Why are you looking for me? Are we in trouble- Are we in trouble somehow?” Even as carefree as he usually appears, his mind jumps into the worst case scenario immediately- sign enough that all of this rule breaking is getting to him, too.

It’s unfair. To make him fear punishment for his disobedience- Kyungsoo has certainly done nothing to deserve it. He feels awful for putting him through this, but at least there’s comfort in knowing it’ll soon be over.

“No, we’re not. And we won’t be, because I need you to help me cross. I’m ready. I have to go.” Saying the words is like being punched in the gut- he feels nauseous, just thinking about what those words mean, but he knows there’s no other way. “Let’s go to your tearoom. Now.”

Baekhyun nearly drops his drink. “Shit- I mean, sure, if you’re- Did you kill him? The goblin? Did you do it? Is your job here done?”

Kyungsoo grits his teeth. “No, but this is part of the plan. Trust me. Just… Just take me there. Let’s just go. Before I freak out and back down.”

Baekhyun nods, and leads the way, trying to make nervous small talk but Kyungsoo is too preoccupied to even listen.

He’ll write Junmyeon a note… It’ll be safer, to not see him, to not be tempted anymore. He’ll have Baekhyun deliver it, and he’ll ask Junmyeon to just trust him, to just wait… He’ll be back. He said so, and Kyungsoo would never betray a promise. It might take him many years to come back to Junmyeon, but again- years mean nothing to them.

Even if Junmyeon will have to spend them alone. Kyungsoo feels so terribly, terribly guilty, but his hands are tied.

The entrance to Baekhyun’s tearoom is tucked away in an alleyway, and when they round the corner to it, they see that they’re not alone. But the blue smoke swirling around the dark figure is all Kyungsoo needs to recognize who it is.

“Where are you going?” Junmyeon’s voice has never been so sharp, his eyes for once clear with emotion- hurt, anger, all in an unstable chaos.

Kyungsoo knew that he could see the future- knew that often, it was how he could find Kyungsoo and meet up with him throughout the years. But he had not anticipated that it would give away Kyungsoo’s abrupt plan- he didn’t think that Junmyeon would be able to predict it, find him on time to try and stop it.

He knows how this must look like.
“Junmyeon- I have to.” He steps past Baekhyun to approach Junmyeon, hands stretched out. He doesn’t know what he’s reaching for, what he’s hoping to receive, but he needs Junmyeon to understand. “I have to do this. There’s no other way.”

For the first time ever, Junmyeon recoils away from him. He’s still looking at him, but nothing in his eyes changes as he stares at Kyungsoo. “So you thought that it would be for the best to just- leave? And not tell me?”

“No,” Kyungsoo whispers. “No… I just feared that… Trying to say goodbye to you would be too hard. That I wouldn’t be able to walk away.”

Baekhyun wordlessly opens the door to his tearoom, glancing between them, but Junmyeon refuses to step inside. “So you thought it would be better not to say anything at all. To leave me waiting- leave me wondering? Why are you in such a hurry, now? What’s going on, Kyungsoo? I don’t understand at all.”

Kyungsoo glances at Baekhyun, wordlessly asking him to leave them alone for a while. This conversation doesn’t need an audience. Thankfully, the grim reaper understands, and steps through the door, allowing it to close behind him, and vanish into the wall like it never existed.

“Samshin sent Baekhyun to bring me over a while ago,” he admits quietly. He knows it’s now time to come clean, if he hopes to make Junmyeon understand. “She said I was free… That I should move on. But I couldn’t. Of course I couldn’t. I didn’t wish to leave you, and most importantly… I didn’t wish to leave you behind, still tied here, still being punished. I wanted to find a way to set you free. But I found out tonight, that there’s no way for me to do that while I’m still a grim reaper.”

Something shifts in Junmyeon’s eyes, but he still won’t come any closer, still won’t let him touch him. The blue swirls dance about his chest, indicating how his sword must be hurting him even now. How much pain he must be in… And Kyungsoo aches, knowing that it’ll be a long while until he can finally relieve him from it completely.

“Is that why you tried to touch the sword? Why you tried to pull it out tonight?” Junmyeon’s voice has never sounded so frail before. “You knew you needed to leave… That you didn’t have much time left…”

“Correct.” Kyungsoo feels so awful, even though he’s losing track of everything he’s done wrong. Every way he’s failed Junmyeon, in this life and the one before it. “I hoped I could set you free, and then move on myself. But it’s not possible. I was told that I have to be a real human, before I can help you. Before I can break the curse. And so, there’s no other way… I have to go.”

Junmyeon blinks his eyes rapidly, and the tears finally fall. Thunder cracks loud above their heads, as rain beings to pour down even more heavily than before. At this rate, it’ll turn into a storm that they haven’t seen in Seoul in decades- but Kyungsoo is done caring about what the mortals will think.

“But so soon…” Junmyeon whispers. “Without saying goodbye… Without letting me say goodbye… You would just leave me, like that.”

“Because I knew how hard it would be to leave you, if I saw you again.” Kyungsoo takes a step forward, and tentatively wraps his fingers around Junmyeon’s forearm. “Don’t you see how hard this is, already? How am I meant to let you go… Knowing how hard it might be to find you again? How it could take decades for us to be reunited? I know what I’m doing- I’m leaving you alone, once more, and it’s so unfair. It’s… It breaks my heart. I’ll never forgive myself, for doing this. But I have no choice. I can’t save you when I’m like this- and I’ll soon be forced to leave, anyway. And I don’t want to get Baekhyun in trouble, because of me. It’s not fair.”
It’s so difficult, to try and reason with Junmyeon when he feels in his heart how wrong this is. How unfair this all is. He doesn’t believe even half the words he’s saying, his own selfish desires urging him to just stay. Stay with Junmyeon. Stay here, until Samshin herself comes to tear him through the door. But that’s another issue; he doesn’t want to risk being punished again. He needs to be born human, and he needs every odd in his favor possible.

If he wants to come back to Junmyeon, he needs to eliminate all risks, all obstacles, all dangers. For the first time ever, he’s not sending Junmyeon to the battle. Instead, he’ll fight this battle alone, and he’ll do his best to do the right thing.

“I love you so much.” Kyungsoo slowly brings Junmyeon into his embrace. He’s so rigid in his arms, but allows it to happen regardless. “I love you more than I can ever say… But we can’t live like this. You can’t live like this. Let’s… Let’s finally be happy. Alright? I’ll come back… As soon as I can. I’ll find you, and I’ll save you. Your pain will be over… And we will live as humans, love as humans, and the fate of the world will no longer be upon our shoulders. Haven’t we done enough? Haven’t we deserved to rest, too?”

Junmyeon slowly tilts his head down until it’s resting on Kyungsoo’s shoulder, and he wordlessly hugs him back, silently sways them back and forth. Holding Kyungsoo tighter- because this is their goodbye.

“I love you. I will wait for you… How you served me, at my grave, I’ll wait for you. No matter how long it takes… I will be here.”

“I know.” Kyungsoo presses a kiss on his cheek, and as he blinks, his tears fall, as well. “I know. Because you’re a guardian. A protector of these people- but it’s time that someone else takes on the task. It’s time that we’re both free.”

And they just stand there, for a while. It’s impossible to find any words that would suffice in this moment- nothing that would carry enough meaning. No matter what, it’s a pity to part from one another so soon, so suddenly, but even a hundred years would have never been enough. Nothing would ever be enough, not even eternity, and yet… That is the very thing they’re running away from.

Kyungsoo doesn’t know how he finds the strength to finally pull away and let go. “I have to do this,” he whispers, and kisses Junmyeon on the lips. He keeps it short, for he knows there’s no time for anything else. Not for anything that would make a difference. “I have to go… I’ve kept Baekhyun waiting- I’ve kept you waiting. It’s high time I do this.”

Junmyeon says nothing, only steps back, head tilted down, and it’s a pain that Kyungsoo could have never imagined- seeing him like this, so wilted, so vulnerable, so alone.

But the sooner he leaves, the sooner he can return.

And he turns away, and knocks on the door of Baekhyun’s tearoom.

He doesn’t look back, when he steps inside. It’s already too hard as is- it’s already impossible to do this.

“Pour out the tea,” Kyungsoo tells Baekhyun quietly as the door slams shut behind him. Every cell in his body is telling him to turn around, return to Junmyeon, and it’s taking all of his willpower to fight it. “I don’t want to forget- I cannot forget. I will just… I will just go.”

Baekhyun looks a bit alarmed, but then agrees with a quiet nod, and instead leads Kyungsoo to a
different door that he swings open for him. And although Kyungsoo has done this so many times, even tough he knows this routine like the back of his hand, somehow… It feels lacking. Like something is missing. It feels so pitiful to part from everything so easily, with no fanfare, no nothing—just the knowledge that it’s all over, now.

He stands before the door, staring into the light, and still he hesitates. Rocks on his heels, as he still reconsiders— but he knows he doesn’t have the luxury to change his mind.

“Farewell,” Baekhyun wishes him quietly, and Kyungsoo just silently nods. Doesn’t have it in him to speak.

Somehow, he’s never felt this small in his life. About to lose everything he knows— about to relinquish all control into the hands of the gods.

But whatever awaits him on the other side, he needs to go through it, and return.

He closes his eyes, and walks through the door, into the blinding light.

And then, there’s nothing.
unknown time in the past

Kyungsoo has known that his time is running out. The illness that has been eating away at him since late summer has only gotten worse during the harsh winter months, and it’s obvious now that there’s no cure to this. Chanyeol and Jongdae have tried out every last trick they’ve been able to think of—buying him the most expensive herbal teas and tinctures, calling upon the village shaman, the village doctor, even riding out to the city to visit the doctor there. Their wives have cooked him the healthiest of meals to eat, their children have taken him outside whenever the weather hasn’t been so brutal for a breath of fresh air. But nothing is helping, and he’s growing weaker by the day.

It’s in his lungs. It’s hard to breathe, and he keeps coughing, phlegm and sometimes even blood coming out as he hacks into the handkerchief. And he feels so sorry for everyone else, as he sleeps in the men’s quarters with the others, but Chanyeol and Jongdae never complain, even as they get up in the middle of the night to pat him on the back or to bring him water to drink.

His boys have been the biggest blessing in his life, since Junmyeon’s passing. He’s never regretted the day he found the two orphans and took them under his wing. Many years, decades have passed since then, and now, he’s a grandfather with grey hair and grey beard, old as time as his grandchildren say.

It has been a life worth being thankful for, Kyungsoo knows it. Settling into a village where no one knew him or who he was, making a life for himself and his family… Tending to Junmyeon’s grave, even though the trip takes a whole day, and another whole day to come back.

He couldn’t have asked for anything else, except for the most obvious thing. But he knows that it’s the burden he must live with- and die with.

As his breathing grows heavier, and as fever begins to rise in his body once more, he stares out the window, quietly. His family is bustling all around him, completing their chores, the children playing on the floor, and there’s something so peaceful about the ordinary hustle and bustle of things. That all of this, he’s been able to give them, can leave them with. That there will be people to remember him... Remember Junmyeon, even if they never met him.

And Kyungsoo made sure that Chanyeol and Jongdae know that he is to be buried by Junmyeon’s side. He doesn’t want it to be the family grave- they can choose a better site, something closer to the village, once it’s time, but for him, it’s all he wants. For his body to rest right beside Junmyeon, and for his soul to be reunited with him, at last.

He hopes Junmyeon has waited for him. Has kept their promise- isn’t cross with him for taking so long.

“I didn’t mean to,” Kyungsoo mouths the words silently to himself, at night. Time passes by in a blur- it hardly matters to him, anymore. One blink, and the whole day has passed, one breath, and hours have gone by. It’s the fever, making him drowsy, making him drift in and out of consciousness, and he knows that little by little, it’s consuming him.

“I didn’t mean to linger… I didn’t mean to keep you waiting.”

There was just so much to do. So much to see. Jongdae and Chanyeol to raise, to watch over them,
and then make sure they married well... And then his grandchildren, to watch over, to teach, to spoil.

So much to live for. And there’s a guilty part of him, too. He was never meant to stop thinking about Junmyeon- never meant to be happy again, without him. But there might have been fleeting moments, or days even... When he didn’t think about him at all.

He’s so sorry, but he hopes Junmyeon knows it.

Air moves slowly in and out of his lungs, and his body, it aches. He’s so tired, even as the sunlight prickles at his eyelids, tempts him to open his eyes and face yet another day. But Kyungsoo, he’s so weary, and it’s so tiring to even lift one finger. The noises around him, he doesn’t really hear what they’re saying, only their constant murmur like waves breaking and crashing on the shore.

“I hope you’re still there... Still waiting. I wonder if you will recognize me now, I have become so old... I’ve changed so much. Maybe you will look at me and think me a total stranger... I’m sorry about that, too. But at least there will be others who will weed our graves, who will sacrifice food and drink for us, pray to us... People for us to protect... As I’m sure you’ve protected us, all this time.”

A gentle hand touches his forehead, strokes his hair back, and somehow, it feels like a permission. To just go, at last.

To let go.

His breaths come slower, and slower, and his heart, it follows the same rhythm. Little by little, his pulse fades away, and then... It vanishes.

Kyungsoo opens his eyes, and for the first time in a very long time, he can see clearly, can sit up with ease. Around him, he sees his family hunched over his bed, crying- and he sees his own body, lying there, limp and sickly and famished. Startled, he stumbles further away, not sure what is happening to him, and no one even looks his way, no one reacts or notices- they don’t see him, or hear him.

His spirit has left the mortal world, at last.

He looks around the room then, suddenly filled up with nervous excitement. Might Junmyeon be here, then, waiting for him? He expected the spirit realm to be different than this, to be more separated from the world he’s always known, but never mind, if he can have his lover back with him. But even in the darkest corner of the room, he cannot see Junmyeon anywhere; not even a glimpse of him.

Instead, there’s a dark figure standing by the doorway, staring at him with piercing eyes. He’s dressed in all black and wearing a wide rimmed hat, tied underneath his chin with a string of beads hanging down from the rim. His eyes are sharp, slightly slanted, almost feline, his features hard to read in their stone like beauty. His face is pale and his lips dark, and Kyungsoo cannot help but shudder, suddenly nervous in a different way.

Whoever this is, he doesn’t seem too pleased to be here.


Kyungsoo can only nod, even if the meaning of those words is well beyond him. The man nods, and puts away the slip of parchment he read the words from.

“Very well. Follow me, then.”
The man makes to turn and walk through the door, but Kyungsoo remains rooted in his spot. “Follow you where?” he asks, not quite sure where he found the courage to speak up. The man turns back to look at him, really look at him from head to toe, evaluating him. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you in any way. It’s what comes after that is going to be the difficult part. But by then, you will have forgotten every word I just said. Now come, I don’t have all day. You’re not the only soul I have left to collect today.”

Whatever those cryptic words mean, Kyungsoo has no idea. But he only has one wish- and in the hope of finally being able to see Junmyeon again, he follows the man, out of the house, leaving his dead body and grieving family behind.

Had he then known what was truly awaiting him, maybe he would have not come so easily.

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present time

Kyungsoo had sometimes tried to imagine what nothingness would truly be like, but none of his ideas ever came close to the real thing. There’s something solid he’s standing on, or at least he’s not sinking- but then again, he’s not sure if he even has a mass that could be falling, or rising, or going into any direction at all. Everywhere he looks, there’s just… nothing. No darkness, no light, a mere absence of everything.

There are no thoughts, either. No time, no sensation.

Just him, and the vast nothingness that has swallowed him whole.

He breathes- and he does not. He no longer has the physical body to do so. He tries to raise his arms to try if he could see them, but nothing happens. Nothing moves, nothing becomes visible. He tries to blink, and nothing changes.

If this is how it felt like last time, he doesn’t remember. He knows this is a mere limbo- this will end. But what if he didn’t know that?

And his thoughts come back a full circle. Back to Junmyeon.

Imagining how scared he must have been, when he faced this. If he ever did- Kyungsoo doesn’t know how goblins are made. What happens to them. It must be something even more terrifying than this.

But perhaps, with your memories gone, you wouldn’t know to be scared of this. Perhaps this would feel like a complete, singular existence- a perfect state of no disturbances, no changes, just this. Timeless floating in a place where nothing means anything.

Perhaps Junmyeon didn’t have to be afraid. It would be of great comfort to know that…

Even like this, it’s still him you think of.

The voice, Kyungsoo recognizes it. The creator god whom he just spoke with- he cannot see him, doesn’t have ears to hear him, but he can sense him. Everywhere, all around, even if he cannot see him, touch him.

I did not think you would jump into this so quickly. But you were given a great deal of determination, when you were first made. And a good sense for what is right, and just. I knew that when I gave you the answer, you would do the right thing.
For Junmyeon, of course he would. It’s all he ever wanted. He might have failed him so many times, so many times he could have done better… But this, this is too important. Junmyeon’s freedom, the end of his suffering.

Junmyeon deserves as much. He deserves this nothingness, too.

You still do not understand. It is not the gift of death that is the blessing that has been taken away from you… It’s the gift of forgetting. Being able to start over. You should know this, having denied that very gift from people before as punishment. What does it matter to start over in a new body, if you still remember your old pain? Your old suffering? You have to forget.

But it’s not just the memories. It’s the sword, stuck in the middle of Junmyeon’s chest. It’s far surpassing the normal lifespan of other humans, having to watch everyone you loved die.

It’s not having the freedom to choose if you wish to forget, or if you wish to remember.

He’s chosen to remember. He’s chosen to live on, remembering everything he’s been through, everything he’s seen. The person he’s loved.

But right now, Junmyeon doesn’t have a choice. Doesn’t get to choose.

Very well.

And at the end of nothing, there’s a void so vast that even the light of his own consciousness fades away and vanishes.

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Humans are born very, very incomplete, with almost none of the mental and physical abilities they will develop as they grow. And even though Kyungsoo chose to keep all of his memories, it takes several years before he’s capable of stringing all of those memories together in a somewhat coherent manner- in a way that gives them meaning and a story that has intent, and reason, and an open ending written at the end of it.

No one understands the things he speaks of, until he learns to not share these memories with anyone. Until he realizes that it isn’t normal, to remember, to know- to have seen the things he has. His life as a grim reaper, as a goblin bride.

It’s a shame, really. Everyone likes stories, likes listening to them, watching them, yet the stories he could tell, no one wants to hear. All the wonderful things he could tell them- the amazing things he’s seen, and witnessed.

His parents, especially, they seem to fear the things that come out of his mouth, sometimes. The frightened look in their eyes whenever he lets something slip- things a kid his age shouldn’t know, shouldn’t have ever heard of, shouldn’t speak of as though they happened to him. How they tell him to be quiet or not to make up lies, and if he insists that he’s not lying, the fear seems to grow only more intense.

They even take him to see a specialist. A doctor, they say- at the door, it says child psychiatrist, and from his memories, he can pick apart the meaning of those words.

But by now, nearing the age of 10, he’s gotten accustomed to it. Knows to keep his mouth shut. He knows there’s nothing wrong with him, it’s everyone around him who doesn’t understand him.

Because they chose to forget.
And he does his best, to pretend. Keep up the façade of a normal child, in front of that doctor. Watches the things he says more closely, hides the drawings and diaries he keeps, recording and channeling the flow of memories that is constantly travelling through him. Plays outside with his friends and pretends not to stare at the rooftops too long in the hopes of seeing a certain someone… Someone who in his memories seems to always sit up high, on the very edge of evident death, fearless and delicate, all at the same time.

He’s chosen to remember.

It takes some more years before he can start looking for Junmyeon. He’s a teenager now, with freedom to go wherever, to travel on his own, and although his free time is limited, he makes the most out of it. Mapping out the tallest buildings, the ancient sites, rivers, mountaintops- His family doesn’t live in Seoul and that worries him, for he doubts Junmyeon would have moved to Gwangju, but perhaps… Perhaps, the goblin has been searching for him too.

Perhaps Junmyeon is just waiting, waiting for a sign that Kyungsoo remembers.

That he’s searching for him as well.

His high school years, he spends like that. Visiting every plausible location around Gwangju he can think of, on the weekends even taking the train to nearby places, travelling in old buses through small towns and villages, looking for any sign, any clues… And every time he comes up empty handed, a small weight is placed upon his chest, his shoulders, weighing him down.

He lays awake at night, wondering. How hard would it be for Junmyeon to find him? If he can no longer see into Kyungsoo’s feature, then perhaps, it would be near impossible… He wouldn’t even know if he’s been reborn yet. South Korea alone is so vast, and there’s always the slight possibility that he might have been born outside of it.

Perhaps Junmyeon is waiting for him in Seoul. In his old home, where he knows Kyungsoo will find him easily.

The thought leaves him restless. Could the answer have been so simple, all this time?

He saves up his pocket money, and begs his parents for permission to travel to Seoul. He makes up some excuse about a school project, a lie about wishing to see an exhibition on old traditional instruments since he’s taken up playing daegeum in this life, a youthful wish about seeing the capital. And his parents, although ever worried about him and his state of mind, despite the doctor’s promise that he’s perfectly normal, they finally give in. Finally let him go, with a great list of warnings and demands for constant updates for how he’s doing, what he’s doing.

Kyungsoo’s heart is hammering wildly in his chest, as the train pulls up at Seoul central railway station. He’s finally here- possibly a mere hours away from being reunited with Junmyeon again. He’s imagined their reunion many times over; how Junmyeon would first look at him in disbelief, unsure if he’s seeing things correctly, and then the overwhelming joy upon recognition. How they would embrace each other, and kiss each other, crying and laughing about the lost time that divides then and now. And they would talk, all night, about everything and nothing, and make love… For if there’s one thing Kyungsoo regrets, it’s not making love to Junmyeon more, more often, more ferociously.

His steps are light, as he travels to Apgujeong. The subway lines are still mostly the same, even if the city has changed- the buildings taller, the smog thicker, the air harder to breathe. But Kyungsoo pays that no mind, as all he can think about is Junmyeon. His long, silky hair; his smile that makes his eyes crinkle up and cheeks bunch up; the way it felt to kiss him, hold him, touch him.
The first thing he must tell him is how much he loves him. The second how much he’s missed him.

When the step for pulling out the sword comes, he doesn’t know. But they will figure it out together.

He exits the subway and heads down the familiar streets. The city has grown vertically but the roadmaps have stayed the same, which is a great delight. It makes it feel like less time has passed, since he was last here- and it hasn’t been too long, as it appears that only a couple of years went by before his rebirth.

Kyungsoo turns around the last corner and he’s already grinning widely, excited- but then, his eyes land on the building. Or rather, where it should be, for in its place rises another building. Entirely different, and at least ten stories taller than the previous one. None of it is familiar, none of it is as he remembers it. The old building must have been demolished, and this new one built in its place.

His heart sinks down to his stomach, bruising itself against his ribs as it does, but Kyungsoo steels himself, keeps marching forward. No matter. Perhaps they fancied a bit of remodeling- building taller, newer, better. It would make sense. Why would that mean that Junmyeon wouldn’t still be living here?

Sneaking into the building is much harder now, when he can no longer use invisibility to his advantage. But Kyungsoo is nothing but resourceful, and he finds his way in, slipping in through the doors when an elderly couple exits the building and scurrying up the stairs before anyone can ask him any questions.

But he’s soon met with another dilemma.

How would he know which one of these apartments is Junmyeon’s?

Climbing up the stairs, from one floor to another, he checks all doors. Perhaps Junmyeon would have left some sort of sign for him… Perhaps there would be something to point him to the right direction. But floor after floor, a flight of stairs after another, there’s nothing. Only endless length of hallways that are all meaningless, sterile, void.

There’s only one more thing he can think of trying.

He takes the elevator downstairs, all the way to the lobby. It’s a very expensive apartment building after all, and downstairs, on the ground level, there’s a doorman- or, rather, just an old man watching TV, looking so bored that it’s obvious he doesn’t have much to do around here. It’s probably his only job to exist, to play the role, to further support the illusion that this is a place for the wealthy.

It’s unlikely that he’ll be of any help, but Kyungsoo doesn’t know what else to do.

“Excuse me, sir,” he says with his strongest Gwangju dialect, fully playing the part of a country bumpkin lost in the city. “Excuse me, but could you help me? I think I’ve gotten lost…”

The man turns away from the screen with a slight frown. “What are you looking for, boy? This is not a hotel, or a department store. How are you lost? You shouldn’t be here.”

Kyungsoo scratches his head, and smiles apologetically. “See, I’m here to visit my cousin. This is the right address, I think, but I can’t seem to find the right apartment. Do you know which apartment Kim Junmyeon lives in? He’s not picking up his phone right now, otherwise I’d ask him.”

It’s clear that the man is a little suspicious of him, but he seems to make the call to trust his story. “There’s no Kim Junmyeon here, though,” he says with a shake of his head. “I would know if there was. I sort out the mail every morning, and deliver it to their boxes. If someone called that lived here, I would know about it.”
Panic begins to trickle in now, but Kyungsoo doesn’t let it show. Junmyeon did mention something about how Kyungsoo’s family has always helped him hide, whenever people have gotten suspicious of him not aging- perhaps this could be the case here, too.

“I see,” he says slowly, pretending to think. “But I could swear that this is the right address… Wait, is there anyone called Park Chanyeol here? That’s my cousin’s brother. From his mom’s previous marriage. It’s really messy, right,” he hurries to say as he sees the disdain on the man’s face. “But I wonder if my cousin would have sent me to his brother, instead. They’re super close, and such, and maybe because my cousin is busy he wanted me to come here and just forgot to tell me to ask for Chanyeol hyung and not him…”

The explanation is very, very strange at best, but the old man still seems trusting. That, or he covers up his true feelings well. “Too bad, kiddo,” he replies. “There’s no one called Park Chanyeol here, either. No one called Chanyeol and no one called Junmyeon. Check that address again, because this is not the right place.”

And now, the fear and confusion are real. Kyungsoo only manages to nod numbly before turning around on his heels, and walking out. He had been so sure… He had been so, so certain that this would be where Junmyeon would wait for him. Where he would find Junmyeon. Where he’d knock on his door and he’d swing it open, and they would embrace one another once more.

No sign of Junmyeon, however, and no sign of Chanyeol, either.

So where could he have gone?

Kyungsoo aches, hurts to terribly. But he refuses to think of it as Junmyeon abandoning him- something must have happened. There must be a reason why, only he doesn’t know what it is.

The disappointment, though, it cuts deep. This was never part of the plan.

But he recovers quickly. Junmyeon cannot have gone very far. He must know that Kyungsoo will come looking for him, so he must have chosen a place to stay where he’d know Kyungsoo would look.

His lover cannot have left him, that is the one explanation that he’ll refuse to believe.

The weekend in the city is then spent walking around, looking into old, familiar places. Even the palaces, Kyungsoo makes sure to visit, even if he knows that it’s silly to think he could find Junmyeon there. Yet he turns up empty handed, none the wiser, and he runs out of time, runs out of ideas.

Returning to Gwangju makes him sick to his stomach, even though he tries to stay positive. Junmyeon isn’t hiding from him, so he just needs to be smart, and find him. He can do this.

Yet even on his following trips to Seoul, as he runs off to look for the goblin every chance he gets, he still finds nothing. He does everything he can possibly think of, even attempts to summon ghosts to speak with them- but he wasn’t gifted the ability to see them, or talk to them, and so he discovers nothing.

Every memory he has with Junmyeon of visiting places, he looks there. Goes to every building, walks down every street. Most buildings have been demolished, most restaurants have been closed many years back, even street names have changed, but he still goes to see- he cannot leave a single stone unturned, in the fear of missing something.

But the only thing he discovers is silence.
If Junmyeon left him a sign, a clue, it is too difficult for him to find. He blames his human abilities-things were so much easier even with the limited powers of a grim reaper.

He moves to Seoul for college, eventually, and after that, he devotes every night to looking for Junmyeon. He’s long since run out of places that would somehow make sense, and instead, he just walks around; hops on a bus and goes to a different part of town, and just goes around in circles there, looking. He takes up photography as a hobby, to use as an excuse; but really, what he’s capturing with his camera is not the scenery, or the people, but the absence of someone special.

The world seems so grey and dull, without him.

In some ways, this feels reminiscent of the years he spent by Junmyeon’s grave. Serving him, tending to him, even if it was for no apparent reason- for Junmyeon was never there, was never aware of his efforts. Even now, Junmyeon might be somewhere out there, assuming that Kyungsoo is doing nothing in order to find him- perhaps wondering if Kyungsoo has yet to be born, even. And just like back then, he spends all his time just thinking about him, wishing for him to come back, come back to him. Each day going by with just that one thought, one wish, no matter how futile.

And in his moments of despair, he thinks that perhaps Junmyeon doesn’t want to be found. Perhaps, he no longer wishes for freedom from his curse. Perhaps, he decided he wants to live forever after all, and is running away from the one person that could set him free.

It’s thoughts like those that keep him from sleeping, keep him from eating, and the only thing that helps is walking, and taking pictures. Endless, countless amount of pictures- the city as he sees it, void, hollow, colourless, because no matter how busy the street or how crowded the subway, it means nothing for as long as Junmyeon isn’t there.

He spends hours upon hours looking at those photos, trying to catch even a glimpse of something familiar. Freely flowing, long hair, a hint of that light blue, un tarnished like the sky right after the sun rises. Or perhaps a tall figure, big ears, wide smile- either of those would be a relief. An answer.

But he receives none.

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It takes him a very long time to realize that there is, after all, hope of gaining answers. For if there is one thing that is a constant in this city, it’s the grim reapers’ tearooms. The location of those doesn’t really change, for they don’t really exist in this world; and if he’s just patient, and even the tiniest bit lucky, he should find Baekhyun quite easily.

Why he didn’t think of this sooner, he has no idea.

The place still makes his heart beat faster, his palms clammy. The look on Junmyeon’s face, the way they held each other before Kyungsoo parted from his existence as a grim reaper… Perhaps that painful memory is what made him suppress any thoughts related to it, he thinks idly, as he leans against the wall. He knows where the door is, but he cannot sense it, cannot open it, and can only wait; wait for Baekhyun to enter, or leave, and hope that he’s not invisible as he does. That he won’t wish to avoid him, when he sees him.

He really ought to have treated Baekhyun better.

Hours pass by, ticking away slowly, eating away at his hope, his determination. It’s not impossible that the location might have changed; it’s not impossible that Baekhyun might have already been set free. But both seem so unlikely, and Kyungsoo really, really wants this to work, even just this, for he needs some glimmer of hope; he’s growing older but not any closer to finding Junmyeon, and life
itself has begun to lose meaning. Finding Baekhyun and talking to him would be the biggest step forward he’s taken in all this time…

Feet falling asleep and the chilly weather settling into his bones, Kyungsoo is close to giving up. His mortal body suffers more than his immortal vessel ever did, and he’s never been able to get used to it. Perhaps Baekhyun isn’t coming, tonight. Perhaps, he can try this some other time.

But then, the door opens. He only sees it because he’s waiting for it, because he knows what to expect- the untrained eye would not spot it, a mere flash in the delicate fabric that separates this plane from the next. But it was there, the moment so brief, and Kyungsoo moves forward with urgency, hands grasping at what he hopes would be Baekhyun’s arm, shirt, shoulder, just anything at all.

“Baekhyun- it’s me. Kyungsoo. Please, talk to me.”

His fingertips brush against something, although invisible, and he can hear the halt in the other’s footsteps. “Look at me, it really is me,” he pleads, fingers curling around Baekhyun’s bicep. “There’s no way you could have forgotten me, already. It’s me, Kyungsoo. Talk to me. You know it’s not forbidden.”

“I know it’s not.” Baekhyun takes off his hat, and before Kyungsoo can say anything else, throws himself into Kyungsoo’s arms for a fierce hug. This kind of intimacy, it puzzles Kyungsoo, although he’s grown more accustomed to it in this life; but still, it’s still strange, coming from someone he always had a poor relationship with in the past.

“You really look different,” Baekhyun says as he pulls back, eyes wide as he takes in Kyungsoo’s features, hands on his shoulders. “I mean… I can tell that it’s you, it’s obviously you, but somehow… Yeah, it’s just different.”

“Can we go inside? I’ve been freezing my toes off, waiting for you to come out.” Kyungsoo doesn’t know what else to say; Baekhyun seems just the same, even if a bit more… subdued, perhaps? He’s still so loud, but his energy, it’s a little less overwhelming, somehow. He doubts that the other wants to hear it, however.

Baekhyun grimaces. “I don’t think you’re supposed to go in, as a mortal,” he says, his tone quite apologetic. “But there are nice cafes around! They’re all open until late, anyways. Let’s go, it’s my treat. I want to know everything about what you’ve been up to.”

Right. Of course that part of the world is now blocked away from him. He’s no longer capable of such things; he’s now doomed to obey the same laws that all other mortals are.

“Let’s go, then.”

Of course, he has no interest in small talk. He doesn’t want to recall the mundane days of his human life- hardly wants to hear Baekhyun’s babbles, either. Or so he thought, for surprisingly, there’s odd comfort in it, in talking with a familiar face, at long last. Someone who knows his story, knows things he’s not been able to share with anyone else, who listens to him with such rapt attention and has some entertaining stories to share himself.

He really should have treated the boy better, when he still was around last time.

“I actually came looking for you for a reason,” he finally admits, once their coffee cups are empty and most other customers have trickled out of the coffee shop. It’s really getting quite late, the employees nodding off behind the bar, which only makes it more suitable for discussing sensitive matters. “I… I’ve been in Seoul for some time, now, but I began looking for Junmyeon even earlier. But no matter how hard I’ve tried, I haven’t been able to find even a trace of him. He no longer lives
in his old address, he no longer visits the places he used to. Do you know where he’s gone, perhaps? Have you heard anything?”

Baekhyun’s smile falls immediately, concerned etched on his otherwise so carefree face. “You haven’t been able to find him?” There’s genuine surprise to his voice. “I mean, I did hear that he’d left Korea- I heard ghosts gossiping about it. Of course he wouldn’t tell me about it, so it was all just rumors. But I figured he’d come back for you, that he wouldn’t be gone for very long. That he’d just visit some place, and come back. But come to think of it… I haven’t heard anyone talking about the goblin returning.”

Something cold, icy cold trickles into his chest, filling up his lungs until it feels hard to breathe. “He… He left?” It doesn’t make any sense. “But where to? Why would he? Why wouldn’t he come back? He knows I’m looking for him.”

Except he doesn’t. Junmyeon has no way of knowing that Kyungsoo is even alive, again.

“I mean, I might be wrong!” Baekhyun is quick to try and reassure him, patting the back of his palm awkwardly. “He could be back, already. I don’t pay a lot of attention to the ghost gossip, you know, so, I might have missed something.”

But no matter how much Baekhyun tries to make it right, Kyungsoo cannot feel at peace.

“Please just… If you run into any ghosts, or anyone else, please ask them. Please ask if they’ve heard anything. I just… I really need to see him.” The coffee tastes sour in his mouth, as he thinks back to all the time he’s spent looking for Junmyeon already- when the goblin might not have even been in Korea, all this time.

It just doesn’t make any sense. Why wouldn’t Junmyeon wait for him? Why would he just… disappear?

As much as it hurts, it also worries him. Could something have happened?

“Of course. I’ll ask around. Someone has to know something.” Baekhyun’s smile is sympathetic, as he reaches over the table to squeeze Kyungsoo’s shoulder. “Just give me your number, man, and I’ll keep you posted. Okay? Don’t worry so much, I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.”

Baekhyun’s optimism is very, very uncharacteristic for Kyungsoo, and so he can find no solace in the fragile thread of hope Baekhyun is so generously trying to offer him. But he knows he should, or at least shouldn’t be so quick to believe the worst-case scenario, whatever it may be.

He’ll have to believe in Junmyeon.

He gives the grim reaper his phone number, and swears him to call him as soon as he hears anything at all. Baekhyun of course agrees with great enthusiasm, and in turn, has Kyungsoo promise that they should hang out, sometime. “Since you’re now more in with the current trends,” he says, teasingly, lightly bumping his hip against Kyungsoo’s, and Kyungsoo doesn’t even have it in him to be mad at him.

But even as days, weeks go by, Baekhyun has no news for him.

“No one has seen him, or heard of him, in a long time,” is all he can tell Kyungsoo. They’re huddled in Baekhyun’s small apartment, drinking makgeolli from small plastic cups that Kyungsoo detests with his entire being. “None of the spirits and ghosts have seen him around, and I’ve spoken with as many as I could. All they keep telling me is that the goblin is gone, he’s gone away, or dead, but
that’s bullshit. You’re the only one who could have killed him, so that can’t be it.”

Baekhyun pours more makgeolli into their cups, and Kyungsoo stares into its murky, cloudy depths, looking for answers at the bottom of his glass but finding none. “So wherever he’s gone… Nobody knows,” he says gloomily, before downing the drink. It’s really not meant to be knocked back like so, but right now, he has to channel his frustration somehow. “He left me no clues, no signs, no nothing.”

Yet again, Baekhyun fills his cup. “There has to be a reason,” he insists, and he sounds so sure. If there’s anything constant about him, it’s his confidence. In himself, and in the people around him. “He wouldn’t just… up and leave, you know? He knows you’re looking for him, or you’re gonna look for him.”

“Exactly. So why didn’t he leave anything behind?” But Kyungsoo knows Baekhyun has no answers. There are no answers, period.

Unless he’s somehow missed those signs. Maybe he’s just too stupid to follow Junmyeon’s clues.

The only thing, then, that makes sense is to keep looking.

Photography helps in that, too, as he can search his photos pixel by pixel, trying to find what the eye cannot see. Perhaps Junmyeon left something very subtle… Perhaps a message in the flowers of the old imperial garden, or in the rocks at the bottom of the lake there? Perhaps a shape, or an image, imprinted on buildings that used to mean something, streets they used to walk. Even the faintest of traces, to suggest a way, a direction- a step forward, at least.

And once he runs out of familiar places, he explores the rest of the city. Seeks connections even when he knows there aren’t any- because to admit that he’s all out of options, out of stones to turn, would mean admitting defeat.

He’ll never give up on Junmyeon, ever.

Months turn into years, just like that.

He feels the passing time differently now, even if it’s less concrete for him than it’s for most humans. But his body, it slows down, it changes, it gets sick and it aces, unlike his body did as a grim reaper. His parents, they grow old too- and they ask him to come back to Gwangju, to visit them more often, yet he never finds the time for that. What if that’s the exact moment that Junmyeon decides to visit Seoul, even if for just a while, and cannot find even a trace of Kyungsoo anywhere? What if him leaving the city means he’s going to miss him? He cannot risk that.

Meeting up with Baekhyun is the only constant in his life, besides wandering the streets of Seoul with his camera. There is something disconcerting about how he doesn’t change- or in how Kyungsoo doesn’t quite realize how he’s changing himself, until he looks an immortal in the eye and sees what it really looks like. But Baekhyun doesn’t comment on it, doesn’t talk about it, and instead, makes light chit chat about whatever is on his mind that day.

The moments spent with Baekhyun are the rare moments when he’s not constantly thinking about Junmyeon. Constantly missing him, yearning for him.

But every time he sees Baekhyun, he still has to ask.

“Have you heard anything?”

And Baekhyun always shakes his head. “I’m sorry,” he says. Always. “I’m so sorry. No one’s seen
him, or heard of him coming back yet. I’m sorry.”

It shouldn’t hurt anymore, but it does.

Years turn into decades, then, between working odd jobs and photographing the capital city, between meeting with Baekhyun and chatting with his parents on the phone. Between sparse sparks of hope, brought on by the faintest shadow, a hint of something familiar, right out of the corner of his eye or in his pictures, and endless disappointment when it all proves to have been false.

Hope is just that, hope.

But giving up, it’s not a choice he can make.

*****

1951

None of the wars he’s witnessed so far prepared him for this hell on earth, the monstrosity that is modern war; napalm raining down from the sky, machine guns mowing down men like grass, airplanes flying overhead, tanks rolling forward and destroying everything before them. Even though Kyungsoo cannot die, cannot hurt, he finds himself afraid- it’s sometimes impossible to even know which way is up, bombs exploding all around him, shockwaves shaking him every which way, the constant rumble and noise of machinery and weapons so overpowering that it rattles his brain and leaves his ears ringing even when he sometimes manages to get away from it all.

And he takes soul after soul after soul to the afterlife, yet there’s no end to it all. Koreans, Americans, Chinese, he can’t keep up with them all, just going through the motions as best as he can. Hopes that these poor souls that had to die on foreign land, or fighting against their own brothers, will somehow find peace. If not through forgiveness, then through forgetfulness.

Wonders if there will be punishment waiting for them, once the door closes behind them.

He knows he shouldn’t, but he cannot help but feel sorry for himself, too. The tide of history truly has turned, and no matter which way he looks at it, the future seems bleak at best.

If it could come down to this- a nation fighting amongst its own, for something as useless as ideologies, then who knows what’s going to happen next?

Kyungsoo no longer recognizes this world, and he wants nothing to do with it. Wants a way out, or at least, a distraction.

And he finds it in Junmyeon.

The goblin is amongst the fighters, too, even if he’s been forced to abandon his sword. This warfare knows only ruthless killing, with machines that will take your life even tens of meters away, with bombs that come down from the sky like wicked rain, and it has no place for such relics as Junmyeon’s sword. But he’s not fighting on either side- instead doing his best to protect the civilians, stuck in the middle of it all, with the frontlines moving rapidly each and every day, surpassing villages and rampaging through the peninsula. Masses and masses of civilians are trying to escape, and they need help- Junmyeon’s help, who’s working hard to keep his oath to protect those who need him.

But sometimes, even amongst this chaos, they find time to just sit down. In abandoned homes, in empty shrines and temples, at mountaintops, wherever they can find solace at the moment.
There’s not much to be said. Not much to do. They’re both angry, they’re both disappointed, they’re both terrified, and it’s no use to even voice it anymore.

So instead, they just sit in silence, together, and try to simply breathe. Breathe, and hold on to this rare moment of peace, to find the strength to keep going.

“Once this is all over… Do you know what I want to do the most?” Junmyeon says one day. It’s all silent around them, the silence deafening and dangerous, even at the quiet village far away from battles. Most of the civilians here have fled, already, and for just a fleeting moment, it feels like it’s just them in this vast world. “I want to go to the sea… Soak my feet in the waves and feel the sand give away beneath my hands when I touch it… Smell the salt in the air and look at the horizon for any ships going by. And I won’t think about anything, anything at all, as I lie down, and stay there until nightfall, watch the stars come out. I’ll just sit there… Listen to the waves, stare at the stars, and perhaps fall asleep like that, without even realizing the moment where my consciousness ends and dream begins.”

“That sounds like death.” Kyungsoo says it without thinking, but the more he thinks about it, the truer it sounds. “The fading of consciousness, little by little, giving yourself over to something eternal… For there’s nothing like eternity on this earth, except the oceans, and the skies.”

To fall asleep, at the edge of eternity. To fall asleep, on the cusp of something timeless, limitless- to never wake up, and become one with that boundless, endless space.

That is not just your body being exhausted, but your soul, your heart- and Kyungsoo understands him. He, too, can feel it. It’s settling into his bones, into the spaces in his joints, into his muscles. Day by day, it becomes harder to go on.

“I wonder if death will be quite so peaceful.” Junmyeon says this calmly. “I wonder if it will truly be like falling asleep… I’ve heard people wish for a death like that, but I don’t know. Yet at the same time… It is appealing. To just fall asleep, and never wake up. To never have to face the following day.”

Kyungsoo hums quietly, plays with the fraying threads at the end of his sleeve. “I think you have great hope for a serene death,” he muses. “Since no illness or bodily harm can kill you. But I don’t know if it will be as you’ve imagined. I do not speak with the human souls much about matters like these, but I don’t know. I just have… a feeling.”

Junmyeon nods his head, thoughtful. “Sometimes, we just know things, even if we don’t know how or why. So perhaps, your hunch is right.”

And they watch the sun rise. Yet another day, and they have no choice but to face it. To live, and to live through, no matter how weary they’ve grown, how old and tired their souls have become.

Their time to rest hasn’t yet come.

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present time

Even though he desperately wants to, Kyungsoo can no longer go out on his photography tours. His body simply refuses to- his feet too feeble to even carry him from his bed to the bathroom without having to hold onto the wall for support, his eyes nearly blind, his hands too weak to hold up the weight of the camera. Everything aches, hurts, breaks, and although his mind is still just as sharp as it’s always been, his body, it has given up.
Without him knowing, it grew old, aged, and deteriorated.

He still longs to keep searching, however, and feels guilty for wasting precious time like this. But since going outside is no longer an option, instead he pours over his pictures, scrutinizing them even more closely than before, piecing them together like pieces in a puzzle, trying to see something, anything he might have missed before.

It’s thankless, tiring work, his back hurting from spending all that time hunched over, his legs numb when he tries to get up, but Kyungsso is determined to ignore all this discomfort. He has a goal, after all; he has to find Junmyeon, has to be reunited with him. He made a promise. He said he would come back, and set him free.

But somehow, his time is running too short.

Despite growing weaker by the day, he doesn’t stop. Mumbled apologies spill from his lips as he looks through every picture, looks at the faces he’s captured, the silhouettes, the hands, the hair. Apologies for failing like this, for keeping him waiting for so long. That he couldn’t piece together the clues that Junmyeon must have left him.

This time, he has no children. No one to visit him, or take care of him. He orders in food when he remembers to feel hungry, and he cleans what he can- but he has no interest in any of that. It means nothing to him now, as the cycle of his life is nearing its end once more.

He’s lived a long life, by human standards, and it felt excruciatingly long to him, too.

All this time that he could have shared with Junmyeon, wasted. All these years spent looking for him, fruitless.

Kyungsso doesn’t want to admit defeat. He knows he’ll just start again, once he’s reborn. Maybe by then, Junmyeon has returned to Korea. Maybe then, they’ll be reunited.

It’s devastating, to think about the possibility of never being able to find him. That these cycles would repeat, and repeat, and he’d never se him again… Never be able to hold him again.

In those moments, Kyungsso feels bitter. Feels cheated. Did the creator god not tell him to do this? Did he not tell him this was the only way?

“But where are you hiding,” he whispers, looking from picture to picture. “Where are you? Why cannot I see you?”

The pictures don’t answer.

When he catches pneumonia, he knows that it’s over. Even if modern medicine could save him, could artificially prolong his life, he doesn’t wish to live any longer. His body is useless like this. If he has to be reborn again, then so be it- at least he’ll have a working body once more, to continue searching. He’ll try something new… Figure out something he didn’t yet try.

He lies in bed, and waits.

Baekhyun sits with him, too.

“If anyone gets the envelope with your name on it… I asked them to bring it to me. I want to… be there for you, when it happens.” Baekhyun speaks quietly, softly, completely uncharacteristic of him. Kyungsso knows that his aging process has been quite unsettling for the grim reaper, when it acted as such a crude reminder of the fundamental differences between them. “Even if I know you’re not afraid… Even if there’s not going to be much pain… I want to be there. I helped you cross over last
time, and I wish to do it again.”

Kyungsoo thinks he’s being silly, but a part of him is relieved. Thankful, even.

And he’s seen enough people die that he knows when the moment has come. His heart beat growing slower, his breaths heavier, shallower. His fever is high but there’s at last some mental clarity in it, too, as he lies in bed and stares at the ceiling. Baekhyun is probably going to come over any moment now- to wait for the inevitable.

He doesn’t cry, but he is devastated. He really thought… He really thought that he would see Junmyeon again, in this life. To know that he’s failed, it hurts deeper than he ever wanted to admit.

Next time. Next life. He’ll never stop searching.

But then- a knock on the door. At first, Kyungsoo is sure he imagined it, just a trick of his own brain, as it slowly gives in, gives up on him. But then it repeats, more insistent, this time. Yet no matter how he thinks about it, it doesn’t make any sense- Baekhyun should be able to just walk right in. He should be on duty, now, so no locks can hold him back. There is no such thing as a trespassing for death itself, it comes and goes as it pleases.

It repeats once again, and now Kyungsoo is just annoyed. Puzzled. None of his neighbours have ever cared much for him, about him, as he’s never been keen to greet them, get to know them. He has no family, no friends- his entire life spent just looking for someone more elusive than the rays of sunshine, the gusts of wind, the end of the rainbow. Too caught up in it to even spare a thought for bonding with others around him.

“Open the door,” he says out loud, regardless, to the AI that maintains the apartment. He has no strength left to get up and open the door for himself; but if they want to get in so badly, then they may come. There’s nothing worth stealing, nothing worth taking. Only a sick, old man, waiting for his third death.

He can hear unlock, can hear the person walk through the door. Taking off their shoes, walking further into the apartment. “Who is it?” Kyungsoo calls out, unable to see to the entry way from the bedroom. “Who’s there? What do you want?”

A figure appears at the doorway, and Kyungsoo blinks his eyes, tries to see, make sense of who he’s looking at. They’re not very tall, quite slim, dressed in a shade of beautiful light blue… Black hair gathered at the top into a bun, small face, pale skin. Just standing there, staring at him.

“What do you want,” he repeats the question, and rubs at his eyes. “I’m not going to buy anything, I don’t have anything, so, you should just go.”

The person steps closer, close enough for near-sighted Kyungsoo to finally see him better.

But even so, even with his features now clear, obvious, sharply in focus- what he sees makes no sense.

Kyungsoo’s breath seizes in his throat, his words die on his tongue. All these years, these long decades, he always pictured how their reunion would be like. Seeing Junmyeon again; how he would touch him, what he would say to him. Words of love, longing, or a light joke, about how long he’s been waiting. But now, seeing him before him, his mind is blank, and his heart heavy.

Junmyeon smiles at him, as he walks up to him, and Kyungsoo can now see the tears streaming down his face. Gently, quietly, cascading down his cheeks. His features, untouched by time, his smile, his eyes… Everything the same, yet it’s been so long since he’s last seen him that it feels like a
dream. That the memories he’s treasured, all this time, have finally come back to life.

“Your hair…” It’s all he can utter, but it’s true; Junmyeon, who never, ever would wear his hair up, has his hair now wrapped up in a topknot. And Junmyeon, as he would, laughs, his eyes crinkling up ever so prettily, as he sits down on the mattress next to Kyungsoo, and nods, takes his hands, and nods again.

“It’s the tongkot you made for me,” he whispers, and yes, Kyungsoo can see it now. The light bone, the flower so carefully carved into it. “I realized… That it was no longer just a painful reminder, but something I thought of with fondness, and love. It was the only piece of you I could keep with me, no matter where I went… So I began to wear it, once more.”

It’s only when Junmyeon reaches for his cheek, for his temple, that Kyungsoo realizes that he’s crying, as well. “Junmyeon…” He chokes up, coughs, and Junmyeon gently pulls him up, upright, so that he’s leaning against him. Rubs his back, sways him slightly from side to side.

“We don’t have much time,” Junmyeon says in a quiet murmur, voice cracking in the middle of his sentence. “We don’t… So we have to do this quickly. My love, I am so sorry that I had to keep you waiting… But I figured it was for the best. See, I didn’t want you to pull out the sword too soon, or else our next lives wouldn’t sync up. What use would it be, if I was born ten years before your death, and you would be reborn when I was in my thirties? I thought it would be safest to die at the same time. To make sure we would be united, in the next one.”

Kyungsoo nods, weakly, curls in closer to Junmyeon in the embrace. Oh, he would sink right into him if he could, for nothing is close enough, nothing is strong enough. He needs Junmyeon, needs him close, even as his heart is stuttering towards the moment it will stop beating.

Junmyeon’s words, they make sense, and they don’t. Kyungsoo aches, and he cries.

“But that is not all.” Junmyeon kisses the crown of his head, trembles apart in Kyungsoo’s arms. “That is not… Of course, even if I had returned sooner, you wouldn’t have had to pull out the sword immediately… But it would have been so difficult. To hide how I don’t age, don’t change. I didn’t… I didn’t want to risk anything. Your friends, your family… What would they have said? Because Kyungsoo, I no longer want to be a secret. I no longer want to hide. When I’m with you, I want the world to know it. I want to grow old together, with you. Live as a mortal, not watch you wither away as a god, helpless to do anything about it.”

He doesn’t apologize, but in his words, there’s apology written in between the lines. That he didn’t return sooner, that they couldn’t spend this life together. That they had to wait, still, decades spent waiting for their happy ending. For the life where they finally, finally get to have each other. For real.

Junmyeon is right. It wouldn’t have been what they both want, living in the shadow of this secret. Hiding it, running away from it, with Kyungsoo constantly growing older, changing, while Junmyeon remaining as a statue by his side.

It would have been unsatisfying. A mere shadow of the dream they held, cherished, protected.

And even if Kyungsoo would have still chosen that life, would have still rather had that false promise of happiness, he wouldn’t blame Junmyeon for the choice he made.

He made the choice of passing on, without asking Junmyeon. He crossed over, with only a brief goodbye. It was Junmyeon’s right to make this call, to do what he believed was right.

Kyungsoo feels like drowning, and not only because of the tears still streaming down his face.
Junmyeon’s hands are gentle as he lays him back down, as he touches his face, neck, chest, arms.

“We don’t have much time,” he whispers, repeats his own words. “Your time… It’s running out. But there’s still something you have to do. You have to pull out the sword, for me. So I can follow you. So we can be born together, so we can finally have what we’ve always wanted.”

Kyungsoo blinks his eyes to try and focus, tired as he is, and there’s the familiar blue smoke dancing about Junmyeon’s chest, before the sword hilt finally materializes. His hands are too weak, however, for him to raise them from the mattress, and Junmyeon has to do it for him, guide his hands around the handle, assist his fingers to curl around it, feel the smooth leather underneath his fingers.

“Your hands are so cold,” Junmyeon mutters, as he rubs his thumb over them. But there is no helping it, now, this close to death. “But see? You can touch it, even in this life. And now, the last obstacle has been removed. You can pull it out.”

It’s all happening so fast, all of a sudden, this entire moment. Slipping through his fingers like fine sand, and blowing away in the wind. There’s so much to say, so much to talk about- so many ways he imagined this happening, but none like this. Nothing so rushed, with Kyungsoo’s time already over. Everything has already been lost, to the 80 years he spent alone, begging, searching, praying.

“Junmyeon…” he whispers to him, quiet, mouth dry. “Junmyeon… Where were you… All this time?”

The corners of Junmyeon’s mouth tilt upwards, even if it’s only a ghost of a smile. “You want to know? I went to Stockholm, love, my dearest. I moved there, so I could learn the city, show you around in our next life. I won’t be able to teleport you there, but planes are quite nice, I’ve heard.”

They chuckle together. “I’ve never been on a plane, before,” Kyungsoo murmurs, staring up at Junmyeon. Trying to take him in, all of him, commit this to memory, too. For there’s a part of him that doesn’t quite trust this, doesn’t quite believe that he could have Junmyeon for good, beside him, after one more birth.

One more time, they must die.

“So it will be even more special, then,” Junmyeon whispers, caresses his temple once more. Touches his skin, wrinkled and worn out by time, tanned by the hours he spent outside, photographing. “We will marry, and I will take you there. On our honeymoon.”

Kyungsoo nods, and coughs, and sucks in a breath. It’s getting harder, and harder, and he can feel the sleep claiming him- except from this, his body won’t wake up from. “Promise me one thing,” he forces out, has Junmyeon’s brows knitted with concern. “Promise me… A place where I can come looking for you. Where should we… Wait for one another?”

Junmyeon only needs to think about it for a short while. “The palace gardens at sunset,” he says, sounds so sure, so confident. “Even if I’m born elsewhere, I’ll come back here. Wait for you there, every night, if I can. So, come looking for me there.”

“Is that a promise? Do you swear?” Kyungsoo feels a little lightheaded, and he can read the urgency in Junmyeon’s eyes, too, his grip around Kyungsoo’s hands growing tighter.

“I swear. I will wait for you just as loyally as you’ve waited for me, searched for me. And I will spend the rest of our lives making up for what I’ve put you through. I love you.” Junmyeon’s smile, it fills Kyungsoo with aching joy, the beauty of it, the fondness of it; the fragility of it.

“I love you, too.”
He doesn’t know which one of them really does it; which one of them really pulls, or moves. Who is the cause and who is the effect, who is the end and who is the beginning. But it happens so fast, the sword coming out of Junmyeon’s chest like some great tension is released, throwing Junmyeon’s body back even as the sword suddenly grumbles in Kyungsoo’s hands, onto the bedding, onto the floor. And for a moment, Junmyeon is suspended in air, like the laws of physics suddenly don’t know what to do with him; before light explodes out his chest, blinding, hot, and he falls apart in it, disappears from sight, piece by piece but in a blink of an eye. Gone, so quickly, someone who existed for thousands of years. Someone who became a god, to be punished for the foolish things he did as a mortal.

Gone, just like that, and the balance of the world tilts over, keels, wavers.

Kyungsoo can feel it too. Something bigger than words, it’s all gone. Vanished in Junmyeon, as he finally moved on.

“Please… Take care of his soul, too,” Kyungsoo whispers, to no one in the room but to the powers that still remain. “Please… Please guide him across safely…”

I will. Do not fret. He is safe, and so are you.

Kyungsoo closes his eyes, and succumbs to nothingness once more.

Exhales, and his heart stops.

*****

unknown time in the future

It’s nerve-wracking. Every bit, every part of this; Kyungsoo changes his outfits at least five times, before he can finally walk through the door, exit his brand-new Seoul apartment. His entire life is still packed away in boxes, waiting to be put away, to take over the new home, but that, it must wait. For Kyungsoo, he’s waited far longer for this moment- even if he tries not to get his hopes up, to be wishful, his heart is soaring, his blood singing.

He does remember the disappointment this very same thing caused him, in his previous life, but he refuses to let that hold him back.

This time, he’s not chasing someone who doesn’t wish to be found.

But he has a deadline, and so, he must head out, even if he feels like he isn’t quite ready. Hurry down to the subway and stand around anxiously, counting stations and minutes until the Anguk station, dashing through the doors and up the stairs.

He’d stop at nothing, except at the sight of flowers- pretty, pale blue, a shade so unusual that it must be fate. He purchases all of them at once, hurries the old woman along to wrap them up for him, before he sprints out, up the stairs and onto the street, towards the palace.

It’s early spring, the delicate cherry blossoms only barely in bloom yet, but it too feels like a sign. That this is meant to be. If it would be too great a tragedy to die on a spring day such as this, then wouldn’t it be equally great a romance to be reunited surrounded by scenery like this?

Pushing through the crowds, Kyungsoo hardly cares about the people he knocks into, the people he shoves out of his way. The sun is already touching the horizon; his move took longer than expected, coming all the way from Daegu, this time.
And the gardens, oh, how little they’ve changed. He still navigates them as though he lived here, before, speed walks past the throngs of people taking pictures, walks around the pond because he knows, he just knows, that the water would draw him in. That out of all places in these vast gardens, the pond is where he would be.

The blue, the set of his shoulders, the width of his hips, the tilt of his head, it’s all unmistakable, even from behind. Even after decades, even when his hair is now short, dyed blond. The way he looks around, as he stands there, by the water, as though waiting- waiting for Kyungsoo.

“Junmyeon!”

He turns around, and his smile, it nearly has Kyungsoo sink to his knees. “Kyungsoo,” he says, and the world around them goes silent. Everything else, it disappears, as they stare at one another.

“Junmyeon…”

Kyungsoo trembles, and so does Junmyeon, as well, even as he reaches out with both hands, begs in silence, takes one step forward- and Kyungsoo runs to him, crashes into him, hugs him as fiercely as he can.

Because he’ll never let go, ever again.

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe I did it

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