there's a ghost upon the moor tonight

by hybridrep

Summary

When Taekwoon comes back to the clearing his house stands in, he’s not able to appreciate the color of the sky that comes in hues of pink and yellow, because there’s someone sitting on his porch, throwing dead leaves all around the ghost kitty.

Notes

i've been meaning to repost this here for a while now and finally gathered myself to do so. it's funny because i wrote this in spring but it's such an autumn fic haha i just really like it so yeah

See the end of the work for more notes

Taekwoon wakes up to the sound of the wind whistling through the window. The heavy curtains are drawn closed, but the room is a little bit stuffy; the autumn sun is still strong these days. Taekwoon's bedroom isn't the only room in the house with the thick, navy material cutting out the daylight. The curtains cover every glass surface all around the two stories house he's been living in since last year.
Taekwoon makes his way down the stairs and goes to the kitchen to take a look outside. He moves the material of the curtains just by a few inches; the sun is already touching the tips of the trees outside the porch, so it must be far past noon. A cat is sleeping on the one of the stair steps, but there's no sign of any other soul ready to bother Taekwoon today. The kitty lifts its head a little and blinks at Taekwoon sleepily; it makes Taekwoon smile involuntarily.

After making a cup of coffee and putting on some clothes, Taekwoon checks the porch again - it's still empty. With a content sigh he steps outside. He doesn't raise his mental walls just yet, only a couple of faint voices whispering at the back of his mind.

It's going to be a good day for a break, Taekwoon thinks as he walks past the cat. He almost leans down to pet its head, until he remembers he can't do it. Taekwoon always forgets, when it comes to animals, that you can't touch a ghost.

The wind is indeed very strong and Taekwoon digs his hands into the pockets of his parka. The sun he can feel on the back of his head does nothing to warm him up. The weather couldn't be clearer about the fact that winter is just around the corner. It's going to be even colder by the river, but it's Taekwoon's favorite place for meditation, the sounds of swirling water splashing against the rocks calming him perfectly.

Taekwoon takes careful steps when he's near, colorful leaves crunching under the thick soles of his boots. It would be easy to slip, as they cover the ground thickly, and Taekwoon isn't in the mood for a cold bath. Fallen branches crack under Taekwoon's feet and then there's a rustle of dry leaves. He catches the movement to his left - it's a squirrel and it jumps away, startled by all the noise only a human could create.

The closer Taekwoon gets to the river the thicker the earthy smell gets. The water making its way down the rocks always splatters around; the ground of the riverside is damp because of it. With all the leaves constantly falling down the balding branches, it gets moldy pretty quick, making the smell even richer. It's nice; the scent is already familiar to Taekwoon. With a smile stretching his lips, he makes his way down to the stream to find his favorite rock he always sits on.

The hum of the river mixes with the whispers in Taekwoon's head and he tries to set them apart, as an exercise. He knows he should be resting and just shut it out, but he can't stop himself from taking on old habits. He draws the lines, tucks the ghost whispers deep inside and focus on the sound of the river. He can feel the presence of a lost soul not that far away, down the river, but he ignores it as well. It doesn't reach out for him, anyway.

It's getting dark by the time Taekwoon blinks his eyes open. His mind is relaxed, unlike his legs - they feel numb. He tries to stretch them, still careful of the slippery ground under his feet.
When Taekwoon comes back to the clearing his house stands in, he's not able to appreciate the color of the sky that comes in hues of pink and yellow, because there's someone sitting on his porch, throwing dead leaves all around the ghost kitty. The man spots him almost right away and straightens, beaming at Taekwoon. The smile he gives Taekwoon is pretty, he must admit, but he can't focus on it for long - there's a stranger on his god damn porch and he didn't have any appointments today. He doesn't even take appointments at home.

Taekwoon's finally standing at the bottom of the stairs and before he even tries to open his mouth to ask, the stranger introduces himself.

"I'm Hakyeon." He's wearing a leather jacket and, to Taekwoon's surprise, a thick wool scarf. "I'm here a little bit earlier than planned."

There's a backpack and a travel bag lying by the door and - oh - Taekwoon finally remembers. His mother told him about a boy needing a mentor when he visited the city last time. Taekwoon's pretty sure there's an email with the details sitting in his mailbox that he hasn't checked since yesterday's morning, just before he left for one of the most exhausting jobs he's ever had.

The smile doesn't slip from Hakyeon's face as they make their way into the house; Taekwoon can feel it. He's right, because when he turns around it's still there, making his eyes crinkle. He wonders if his patience is going to be put to test, as Hakyeon seems to be the bubbly, talkative type. It takes less than ten seconds for him to start producing an alarming amount of words. Taekwoon wonders when all the calm he'd gathered through today's meditation went, as his head buzzes, whispers slowly sipping in.

"Did any follow you?" he asks; that could be the reason for his barrier cracking little by little.

"Don't worry about it." It's not an actual answer to Taekwoon's question, but he doesn't push it, assuming Hakyeon wouldn't tell him anyway. He was informed that Hakyeon lacks control, even after a year of training, and Taekwoon was - still is - very doubtful he can teach him any.

Taekwoon never cooks for two so he ends up making a lot more food than both of them can eat, but Hakyeon is grateful and obviously hungry, because he devours most of it. It doesn't stop him from
talking, though, and by the end of the evening Taekwoon knows a lot more about the man than he actually cares to. The barrier is already crushed, but he does nothing to restore it and with a mild headache he excuses himself to bed.

Taekwoon wakes up to the sound of his coffee maker. It takes a moment to remember that he's no longer living alone. He blinks a couple of times, even though the room is dark, and with the heavy sigh he gets up and drags himself to the kitchen.

Hakyeon greets him with a smile, his teeth showing, and it's almost as blinding as the sun outside.

"I made us some coffee," he hands Taekwoon a steaming cup. "But I'm not good at cooking, so..." Hakyeon lowers his eyes in embarrassment and takes a sip from his own mug. Taekwoon only hums in acknowledgement and, passing Hakyeon, takes eggs out of the refrigerator. His mother supplied him with a lot of food, but with Hakyeon here it won't last long. Good thing he always visits his family when he has a job in town.

Hakyeon doesn't complain when right after breakfast Taekwoon takes him into the forest. This time Taekwoon picks a small clearing instead of the river for their meditation session. He doesn't trust Hakyeon not to slip on the wet rocks covered by moss and leaves.

Hakyeon is considerate though, Taekwoon must admit - he brought two blankets to sit on, and even a bottle of water. Taekwoon doesn't want to know when he had time to find those things. They settle down and Taekwoon sets his eyes on Hakyeon's face.

"Close your eyes." Hakyeon does it without question. He's all serious now, a stark contrast to his ever smiling face. Taekwoon can't help but notice that he is very handsome. "Who do you hear?"

Hakyeon doesn't even furrow his brows as he slowly lists all the voices he can hear in his head. Taekwoon is surprised, because he picks every single soul from the hum of their prayers. He doesn't pause to hesitate even once. Taekwoon wonders what the real problem here is.
"The one by the river is really bored." Hakyeon's hard expression finally cracks and he grins at Taekwoon.

Taekwoon frowns at him; the detail is not important and Hakyeon must have connected with the ghost to know it. That's not what they do. Maybe that's his real problem? Taekwoon doesn't say a word about it just yet.

"Shut them down, one by one." He instructs Hakyeon, who sighs and closes his eyes again. "Raise your barrier."

It doesn't take long at all and now Taekwoon is sure that Hakyeon's only problem is probably his personality. How can Taekwoon deal with it, when for the past year he's lived alone in the middle of the forest?

They fall into a rhythm after the first week and Taekwoon can finally pick up a job from the piling messages in his inbox.

They get to know each other better during this time and Taekwoon finds Hakyeon really easy to be with, sans the constant chatter. On their way to the city he falls a bit quieter and there's a different expression on his face every other minute. Taekwoon knows he's listening to the voices and he snorts at the especially funny face Hakyeon makes. The sound startles Hakyeon and he looks up at Taekwoon in a total bewilderment that soon transforms into the biggest grin.

"I knew I would eventually make you laugh." Hakyeon doesn't know what personal space is and he clings to Taekwoon arm, smiling happily. "Well, I wasn't meaning to right now, but whatever works."

Taekwoon snorts again, turning his face away in embarrassment. He should scold Hakyeon for dropping his barrier, especially when they're in the city, but he knows the other won't listen. He needs to, eventually. Taekwoon still hasn't figured out how to convince Hakyeon to follow the rules, at least until his next evaluation, because no one will care how he uses his powers once he gets the license.
There's a reason for using the barrier as much as you can, though, and it's very simple - it stops you from going mad too soon. Whisperers not using their barriers are known to lose their mental stability just within the first couple of years of being in the field. That's what happened to Taekwoon's mother best friend and just remembering it, the look on his mother's face when she told him, is enough for Taekwoon to set his mind on finding a way. He needs to make sure Hakyeon won't end up the same way.

The first job, to Taekwoon's surprise, goes without any incidents. Hakyeon is really good at interacting with people, or, in their situation - with ghosts. He doesn't get distracted at all and they're able to finish up quickly. Hakyeon might not be fond of barriers but he sure can control his gift. Taekwoon is close to admitting that Hakyeon's even better than him and he could have passed the test if he only tried.

Even a single job always drains Taekwoon emotionally. They're filled with sad stories and tears, tragic experiences, people wanting to say their farewells to their lost relatives, friends or lovers. Yet, Hakyeon is still as lively as ever on their way back home. It's almost annoying and Taekwoon's impending headache makes him want to punch Hakyeon, but surprisingly the first thing Hakyeon does when they step through the door is silently going to the kitchen. Taekwoon can hear the clatter of pots, but he decides to go straight to his room and pray for Hakyeon not to burn his house down. He kept his guest away from making any food after the statement he made on the first morning of his stay. Except the coffee maker; this Hakyeon could operate just fine.

Taekwoon doesn't even remember when he falls asleep when suddenly there's a hand shaking him awake. He squints his eyes, bracing himself for the strike of light, but the room is dim. He has barely any time to prop himself against the headboard of the bed when there's a big mug flying just before his eyes. It smells sweet and Taekwoon recognizes it as hot chocolate. Hakyeon looks incredibly pleased with himself as Taekwoon finally grabs the ceramic cup. He sits beside Taekwoon, his own mug already half empty. It's oddly comfortable and Taekwoon focuses on drinking the cooling beverage. He wonders if it's the appropriate time to ask the question that's been bugging him.

Hakyeon beats him to it. "You must be curious why I don't want to use a barrier." His voice's softer than usual and it sounds deeper.

Taekwoon doesn't say anything, just nods.

"I've been hearing the voices half of my life," he starts after a while. "Maybe even longer. I got used to it quickly, it became familiar and didn't frighten me. It didn't take long for me to figure out what it
means - my family had mentioned whisperers from time to time." Hakyeon sets the cup on the night-stand and pulls his legs up, wrapping his arms around them. He looks smaller than usual.

"But whenever they spoke about it they seemed sad. They told the stories of other people getting help from whisperers in hushed voices like it was a taboo, so I got scared. I only told them in high school, when you should start your training." He smiles, probably to reassure Taekwoon he's fine, but it's probably more for himself. "They were happy but also afraid. I was cheerful since I was a kid and they associated a whisperer's gift with something sad." Hakyeon doesn't need to explain way. It's because you deal with dead people.

"When I started training and the topic of barrier was brought, when I started learning it I- I didn't liked it. I was so used to the voices that the silence that barrier brought was unbearable." Hakyeon catches Taekwoon's eyes with his and for the first time he looks scared. "They tell you the voices can make you go mad, but for me it might be the silence."

Hakyeon falls quiet. Taekwoon mulls over everything Hakyeon said and even though for him the voices are too much - he understands. What Hakyeon feels is just a reverse of what he feels, a parallel. And he's far more talented than Taekwoon, so the fact that Hakyeon's mentor sent him here, in the light of the story he's just heard, is ridiculous.

There's still one small problem though.

"We still need to find a way for you to pass the evaluation," Taekwoon voices his concern and it makes Hakyeon sighs heavily. He turns fully toward Taekwoon, lowering his legs, and a bright smile blooms on his face.

"We will!"

Taekwoon can't help but smile in return. If Hakyeon isn't worried, neither should be Taekwoon. The smile turns into a gasp when Hakyeon rests his head on one of Taekwoon's legs, closing his eyes. It surprises Taekwoon at first; the heaviness against his body, the warm breath he can feel through his pants and how steady it is. As he keeps looking at Hakyeon's brown hair splattered on his navy jeans and dark eyelashes casting shadows on Hakyeon's cheeks he doesn't feel annoyed or flustered. The calm presence of another body beside him reminds him of home.

Taekwoon is almost lulled into sleep when Hakyeon startles him with a tap on his thigh.
"Now you tell me your story."

The wind is loud again, the glass of the window rattling a little with the force of it, but it's not what wakes Taekwoon up this time. It's because of the sound of Hakyeon's laughter down the hall, high and loud. Taekwoon should be mad at him, for disturbing the small amount of sleep he can get, but he finds himself more curious about the cause of Hakyeon's good mood.

There's no use in trying to sneak up on Hakyeon; the old wood creaks with the tiniest move. He must have already gotten used to it, because when Taekwoon peeks through the open door of his room, Hakyeon looks genuinely surprised. He's sitting cross-legged on his bed and in front of him there's a boy. He's opening his mouth, but there's no sound coming out. It couldn't be that...

"Have you invited a ghost into my house?"

Hakyeon has enough sense to at least look guilty, but he doesn't stop smiling. Taekwoon refuses to drop the barrier and crosses his arms in front of him. He's never let any ghost into the household; even the ghost cat gets as far as the porch.

"He was chatting my ears off!" Hakyeon starts, pointing at the ghost.

Taekwoon raises his brows. That's the exact reason why they need to use a barrier.

"He's very bored." The smile on Hakyeon face fades away. "There are no other ghosts out there."

The ghost pouts at Taekwoon and he already knows this battle is a lost one. Taekwoon only sighs and turns around in hope to escape from Hakyeon's morning pestering, but before he can even step out the door, Hakyeon starts whining.

"You need to hear some of Jaehwan's stories from high school!"
Taekwoon sends them an unimpressed glare. "I'm going to prepare breakfast." He resumes his grand escape, and he might or might not regret his next words. "You can join me downstairs. Both of you."

Taekwoon doesn't get rid of the barrier until he's finished with setting everything on the dining table. All that he can hear during this time is Hakyeon's laugh and his short comments. As he sits down, he takes in the ghost's appearance; his hair is dark and unruly, face young and very expressive. He must have been a cute kid. Taekwoon takes a deep breath and braces himself before the barrier collapses. He doesn't even notice the whispers at first, because Jaehwan's voice is all he can hear, loud and high pitched. Taekwoon winces - turns out he wasn't ready at all.

By the end of the meal Taekwoon is already exhausted. They try to engage him in their conversation and he easily gives in, both Hakyeon and Jaehwan smiling at him encouragingly. It feels nice, after the whole year of living alone, to have some company, he must admit it. Just, the amount of noise his companions can create, accompanied by the pressure of the voices in the back of his head, wears him out pretty quickly. But before he excuses himself, there's a question Taekwoon can't stop himself from asking.

"Do you need our help?"

The laugh stops immediately and Hakyeon looks at him like he can't believe in what he's just said. Taekwoon glares at him in response. There must be something more than just the boredom for the ghost to bother them here.

Jaehwan drums his fingers against the table, but there's no sound. "Actually... I don't," he concedes shyly. "When Hakyeon said that I was bored, he said the truth." The smile on Jaehwan's face is back. "What can you do in the forest all alone?"

Taekwoon studies the ghost's face for a while. There's still something off about all of this.

"You're still here." He speaks the words very carefully, not wanting to spook Jaehwan. Spook the ghost, ridiculous. "There must be a reason."

"Taekwoon." Hakyeon warns him, as if he knows more than he's letting them know.

Jaehwan lifts himself abruptly, his body going through the table and the chair smoothly. He moans, throwing his arms into the air.
"Nobody found my body, okay?!" His voice is raised and he’s pouting at Taekwoon.

It's a wonder how Jaehwan uses the best way to make Taekwoon feel bad-by making sad eyes and pouting. Taekwoon is one step from apologizing, but it's also the truth that ghosts don’t reach out to the whisperers without wanting a helping hand - or mind in this case. So it must be it, Taekwoon was right-

"And I forgot where it is, anyway."

-or not.

It takes him by surprise, and the ridiculousness of Jaehwan's statement makes him burst out laughing. Jaehwan looks offended, but he doesn't disappear, and Taekwoon only laughs harder, hiding his face in his arms. He catches the look of disbelief on Hakyeon face and when he finally calms himself down and lifts his head - it's still there.

"I've never seen Taekwoon laugh this much since I met him," Hakyeon says in awe. He looks up at Jaehwan, his mouth stretching into a grin. "You're the best, Jaehwanie."

Jaehwan collapses back onto his chair and whines. "It's not even funny!"

And just like that Jaehwan sticks around. Almost every day Taekwoon is woken up by the sound of laughter down the hall, Hakyeon's sleeping habits and Jaehwan's lack of any permanently changing his routine. So everyday Taekwoon drags himself out of the bed with a sigh, and the sound of coffee machine easily lures Hakyeon in, with Jaehwan in tow.

Jaehwan is pouty every time they need to go on a job - he can't leave the forest. He got attached easily; he waves with too much enthusiasm when they get back, asking about every detail. At first Jaehwan is a bit cautious of Taekwoon, one annoyed glare easily shutting him up, but soon it dawns on him that, him being a ghost, all Taekwoon can really do is cut him off with a barrier. It's exhausting for Taekwoon - Jaehwan pushing his limits every chance he gets, disappearing through the wall with a squawk when Taekwoon launches at him. Not that Taekwoon could get him, but they are both well aware of that. Taekwoon finds it endearing, and what's even more surprising - he gets attached too. It's weird how he got stuck with two loudest, most annoying creatures and somehow hasn't run away into the forest yet. Not even when Jaehwan happens to do the most embarrassing things.
The morning Taekwoon decides to take a shower even before the first cup of coffee is when one of the embarrassing accidents happens. He steps out of the shower and lifts the towel to dry his hair first so the cold droplets won't fall onto his shoulders. Jaehwan has the tendency to, instead of using the doors, just go through the walls comfortably. That's why the moment he's making his way through the bathroom he screams as he almost walks through gloriously naked Taekwoon.

"I'm so sorry!" Jaehwan yells, stumbling back with hands over his eyes. He disappears through the same wall he's walked passed and soon there's an echo of Hakyeon's laughter somewhere in the house.

Taekwoon is rooted in place for a few beats; he can't wrap his head around what's just happened. He was so surprised he didn't even lower the towel to cover himself and the thought makes him flush red and start to rub at his damp skin furiously.

He's almost done when there's a knock on the door. "Taekwoon?" It's Hakyeon. "Are you okay?"

Taekwoon covers himself immediately and then groans at his own stupidity. It's not like Hakyeon is going to burst into the bathroom any second and it's a wonder how his reflexes were a lot worse with Jaehwan than they are with Hakyeon. What is wrong with him, really.

"His body is more than okay," Jaehwan says. Taekwoon flushes anew, wondering if he can spend the rest of the day in the bathroom.

Hakyeon giggles. "I'm going to make coffee."

Taekwoon doesn't say anything, too afraid he might say something he would regret.

"I'm quite envious, I must admit." He can still hear Hakyeon's voice as the boards creak under his feet.

Taekwoon wonders if Hakyeon means his body or Jaehwan seeing his body and he mentally slaps himself for even thinking about it. As he walks into the kitchen, he's ready to blame his red face on the hot shower he took, but no one teases him about it. If anything, Hakyeon's smile is especially wide when he hands Taekwoon his cup of coffee. It's big, with a lot of milk and sugar. Jaehwan
doesn't join them for the breakfast, probably too embarrassed after what happened, but he still sends them off with a wink when they go on another job.

On the day they're supposed to visit Taekwoon's mother, the first snow falls. It starts faintly, small flakes twirling down from the sky when they wake up.

The alarm goes off and Taekwoon groans into the pillow. It's a sign for Jaehwan to start screaming excitedly, announcing the arrival of winter even before he or Hakyeon are able to look through the window. Taekwoon shuts the ghost off as he busies himself making a quick breakfast. The way to his mother's place is long and they need to be back before dawn. He's already stressed; his mother is going to ask ten thousand questions, especially with Hakyeon there. She's going to throw half of them at Hakyeon.

Taekwoon sighs into his cup of coffee, looking outside the kitchen window. The layer of snow is still thin, barely covering the dead grass around the house, but it doesn't melt away so it must be quite cold.

Hakyeon joins him by the counter, his coffee long gone. Taekwoon takes a glance and he's pretty sure he can recognize one of his sweaters hanging loosely around Hakyeon's shoulders. He can't find it in himself to scold Hakyeon as his eyes wander back to the sight outside. Taekwoon can't let him freeze to death.

It's almost dinner time when they arrive. Taekwoon's mother fusses over both of them and shushes Taekwoon away when he tries to help her.

"You can't leave Hakyeon alone," she nags, cutting the radish and swatting Taekwoon's hands away. "Your sisters are going to be here soon."

He is sure Hakyeon could handle his sisters better than Taekwoon himself, but he doesn't argue. He gives Hakyeon a little tour around the house. His mother's tarot cards are sitting on the coffee table neatly. Hakyeon doesn't ask about them, but he might have already guessed what her special ability is. It's Hakyeon who got himself into Taekwoon's life with her help, in the end.

Hakyeon asks a lot of questions and Taekwoon tries to keep up with answering them. Usually, he's
very reluctant to talk about his life and his family. It's just that he got so familiar with Hakyeon during his stay at Taekwoon's house that it doesn't feel like he's trying to pry into his life. And he shares almost as much details about himself as Taekwoon does, contrasting every little thing Taekwoon tells him with his own experiences.

Taekwoon falls considerably quiet when two of his sisters arrive; the third one got stuck in work, unfortunately.

"Aren't you bored with our little brother?" The youngest asks. She has always had the highest temper, happy not to be the youngest of the family after Taekwoon was born.

Hakyeon laughs softly, looking at Taekwoon across the table. "Not at all." His smile turns into a smirk. "He's probably the one bored with me." Everyone at the table snorts, disbelieving. "Or rather annoyed."

Taekwoon rolls his eyes.

"You see? Totally annoyed!" Hakyeon points at him and Taekwoon almost chokes on the food as everyone laugh and shake their heads.

It's not long before it's time to leave. Their backpacks are stuffed with homemade food, and Taekwoon is ready to put on his shoes, when his mother sits them down on the sofa.

"We don't have time," Taekwoon huffs when she starts tossing the cards.

"Just one simple spread."

Hakyeon looks excited, but Taekwoon hates when she tries to look into his future. He knows his mother has an amazing gift and people pay a lot of money for it (she's quite popular in the city). Taekwoon can deal with the past, with lost souls searching their solace, but the future - he doesn't want to know. He wants to build his own future, not live in fear or anticipation the cards would bring.

"I did it once, at the school festival," Hakyeon chatters, his hands already stretch on the table like he can't wait to choose the cards. "But it wasn't a real fortune teller."
"We are a rare species," Taekwoon's mother admits. "How did you know, though?"

Hakyeon laughs, ducking his head. He is embarrassed, Taekwoon can tell by now. "Actually, I knew even back then." His hands are back in his lap, fingers pressing into his thighs. "That I won't be able to marry and have kids not only early in life, but, well, ever."

Taekwoon's mother eyes are sharp, a tiny smile playing on her lips, but she doesn't say a thing. Taekwoon tries not to dwell on Hakyeon's words and what they could mean. He feels out of place, even more so when his mother spread the cards on the table. He excuses himself to the toilet - being a witness of someone else's reading has always seemed too personal for Taekwoon.

When he comes back, Hakyeon is already putting on his coat, still looking a bit embarrassed, his cheeks flushed. Taekwoon's mother hugs them both, making them promise to visit again soon. His sisters yell their goodbyes from the kitchen, and then they go through the door to a world a lot whiter than when they arrived. It takes them a lot more time to go back, as the public transportation is much slower in the face of the first snow.

They enter the forest when it's almost dark. Hakyeon was less chatty on their way back, probably mulling over the cards. He still clings to Taekwoon as the trees get thicker, the forest darker. Jaehwan meets them halfway, all worried. It's when Hakyeon finally relaxes, laughing at Jaehwan's little pout.

The lamp on the porch is on, the orange light illuminating on the white snow. There's a lot of it, heavy loads on the trees bending the branches down. They make their way through the thick layer on the ground, their boots and pants getting drenched as they dip into the soft whiteness. Taekwoon lights the fireplace as soon as he gets rid of his wet clothes. He throws heavy blankets on Hakyeon who's shivering in front of the fire, he makes hot cocoa, and settles beside Hakyeon. Hakyeon smiles at him with gratitude, spreading his fingers over the warm ceramic.

Hakyeon hums as he takes the first sip and leans unabashedly against Taekwoon. "They scheduled my second examination."

Taekwoon turns his head to look at Hakyeon, surprised. He totally forgot about it, about what they are supposed to be doing here and to what it leads.

Hakyeon's eyes are set on the fire when he speaks again. "It's going to be in February." He sighs and then chuckles right into Taekwoon's arm. "We should practice more."
Two more months, then. Taekwoon feels like he should say something, but he has no idea what. There's a smile on Hakyeon's lips but it doesn't reach his eyes. When he lifts his eyes at Taekwoon, all Taekwoon can do is to put his head back against his arm and awkwardly pet his hair; he's not ready to answer the questions hidden behind Hakyeon's eyes.

It's not the time to already feel sad about him leaving.

It's definitely not the time to ask him to stay.

There's even more snow the next morning. There must have been a bit of a wind, too, because a few inches of the snow fall into the house when Taekwoon opens the front door to take a better look. Even though the sun is hidden behind the clouds, it's very bright outside, due to the white covering almost every surface. The ghost kitty is once again glued to the porch; it would easily disappear inside the thick layer of snow.

Instead of the promised meditation, they busy themselves with shoveling the snow out of the path leading into the forest. It takes a couple of hours, and their faces are flushed pink from the biting cold outside and all the work after they're done. Jaehwan laughs at Hakyeon's red nose, and the hat Hakyeon throws at the ghost, as expected, goes right through him. Jaehwan laughs even louder.

"You look cute!" Jaehwan tries to explain. "Doesn't he look cute, Taekwoon?"

Taekwoon got used to not using a barrier inside the house. The voices aren't that persistent and he wouldn't be able to hear Jaehwan. Sometimes he regrets it, though. At least he can still try to pretend he didn't hear that; his frost-bitten cheeks hide the blush that creeps on his face perfectly.

Of course Hakyeon is cute, with or without a red nose.
They end up in front of the fireplace again. Taekwoon is going through his mail inbox, the new job offers piling up. Hakyeon has gotten comfortable with Taekwoon pretty quickly and it's been a while since he decided to peer over his shoulder, commenting on the requests, helping to pick up the next job.

"Taekwoon, Taekwoon, this one!" Hakyeon squeezes his forearm in excitement and Taekwoon's fingers stop on the keyboard. "Doesn't it sound familiar?"

Taekwoon scans the text. *Friend got lost in the forest a couple of years ago during a school trip. Body never found.* It does sound familiar, but the chances-

"It could be our Jaehwanie, right?" Hakyeon is positively gleaming. "We need to contact him." He squints at the screen. "Lee-"

"Maybe," Taekwoon interrupts him. "Don't tell Jaehwan yet, though." The pleading look turns into a warning one as Hakyeon opens his mouth, ready to argue. "We can't be sure."

Hakyeon sniffs, but doesn't press further. They can't give Jaehwan false hope. It's not even certain Jaehwan wants to be found, as he's never mentioned reaching out to anybody. He wasn't in any hurry to cross the path to the other side, judging by his behavior. If they are going to take this job they need to be especially careful, and it makes Taekwoon anxious for the first time since he started to work in the field. Jaehwan might be a ghost, but it all feels strangely personal, and he was taught to never pick personal cases. Taekwoon is sure Hakyeon knows this rule too, but he shouldn't be surprised that Hakyeon won't follow this one as well. Taekwoon took note that Hakyeon is more about what feels right than what's supposed to be done, and to be honest - he can't argue with that anymore.

In the end that's the first job they take once the snow stops threatening to bury the world. Taekwoon, more than the anxiousness, can't stand Hakyeon's constant whining, and with Jaehwan getting curious about it, he has no other choice than to finally agree.

The trip to the city is exhausting; the path in the forest is buried under the snow, the traffic heavy as the snowplows slowly make their way through the streets. Taekwoon's feet are freezing by the time
they reach the cafe where they're meeting their client.

He greets the warmed up room with gratitude. Even though he has his own coffee machine, he still orders the same thing he drinks every day - a latte. The only difference is a pump of hazelnut syrup he asks for. Hakyeon, on the other hand, goes all the way and orders some fancy spiced latte with extra whipped cream. He even sprinkles it with cocoa powder and cinnamon sugar.

Hakyeon's order looks ridiculous, especially compared to the simple black coffee Lee Hongbin is drinking. He looks their age or maybe even younger, adorable dimples appearing in his cheeks when he smiles at them from across the table.

"I wasn't even sure if you'd take on my case," Hongbin starts, his fingers clenching and unclenching around the cup. He must be really nervous. "And here you are, and with a partner, too."

Hakyeon laughs and Taekwoon wills himself not to get flustered, because Hongbin obviously meant a work partner, nothing else.

"Taekwoonie is babysitting me." Hakyeon is playing with his spoon, mixing the whipped cream with the cocoa and sugar. Taekwoon hopes he won't make a mess. "Doesn't mean I'm not brilliant, of course."

Taekwoon rolls his eyes. Hakyeon is already treating Hongbin - their client - as a college friend, or something.

Hongbin laughs, his dimples deepening. "We'll see about that."

It's slowly starting to look like they're flirting and Taekwoon wants to dig up his own grave just right there. Suddenly Hongbin's smile isn't as appealing as Taekwoon first thought.

Taekwoon clears his throat. "So who are we supposed to be looking for?"

Hongbin blinks up at him and his smile disappears. His voice is small as he starts talking. "As I said, my friend went missing a couple of years ago. We were on a field trip in the forest and, uh," he bites down on his lip. "We've got into an argument. He ran off and that's the last time anybody has seen him."
"Are you sure he's dead?"

Hakyeon kicks Taekwoon under the table as Hongbin lowers his head and lets out a shuddering breath.

Hakyeon reaches out a hand to comfort Hongbin and Taekwoon has an urge to catch it. "What Taekwoon meant-"

Fortunately, Hongbin recovers quickly. "For a ghost whisperer, that's a valid question." If he sees Hakyeon's retreating hand he doesn't acknowledge it. Taekwoon suppresses a sigh of relief. "They never found his body, but he wouldn't- he really wouldn't run away or something like that." The cup he's holding knocks against the table, his hands trembling.

The description really matches Jaehwan, but somehow Taekwoon still feels the need to act cautious.

Another clank of the ceramic pulls Taekwoon out of his thoughts.

"I shouldn't drink so much coffee," Hongbin mumbles and the next second Hakyeon is excusing them from the table so they can ask for some water (and spiced latte refill).

"It must be our Jaehwanie," Hakyeon whispers, turning around to take a quick look at Hongbin, who is fumbling with his phone. "Oh!" Hakyeon shakes Taekwoon a little and it's embarrassing but Taekwoon lets him - it's not the place to make a scene. "We should ask for a photo! Why haven't we asked before? Taekwoon!"

Hakyeon is so excited he almost forgets to ask for the water, but finally they manage to bring all the cups to their table. Hongbin thanks for the water with a small smile and they soon wrap up the meeting. They ask for the photo and the location of the field trip, but it's more for keeping up the appearances, they both know it. Taekwoon looks outside the window with despair. He's not ready to face the cold again.

All three of them shudder when they step outside the cafe.

"I'll email you the photo as soon as I get to the dorm." Hongbin digs his hands into the pockets of his
coat. He looks like he's ready to walk away, but he stops them in the last second. "Oh! I don't know if it helps, but he was really weird back then. Really loud." He laughs, probably remembering something from their past. "I assume he still might be, you know, as a ghost."

Taekwoon can't stop himself from smiling this time. It really might be Jaehwan.

A loud shriek erupts inside the house as Taekwoon brings some chopped wood he's stashed under the porch. It might take a while to set the fire, and Taekwoon curses himself for forgetting to do it before they left this morning. He drops the load before the fireplace and looks questioningly at Hakyeon, who appears at the top of the stairs, frowning.

The realization downs on him. "You told Jaehwan." It's not even a question and the worry that flashes in Hakyeon's eyes is enough of an answer.

Hakyeon makes his way down the stairs and flings himself into Taekwoon's arms, personal space be damned. "Taekwoonie!" His voice is muffled by the scarf still wrapped around Taekwoon's neck. Hakyeon turns his head, and the warm breath tickles Taekwoon's jaw as he speaks, "I really tried to be gentle, but he panicked as soon as I said Hongbin's name."

Taekwoon can't even be mad. Jaehwan might be a ghost, but they surely treated him as a friend for the last couple of weeks, ever since he insisted on hanging out with them. Taekwoon has seen how Hakyeon treats their clients, always with a warm smile and reassuring words, and he's sure he wasn't any different towards Jaehwan. If anything, he must have been even gentler.

Taekwoon's hands are still covered in dust, but he closes his arms around Hakyeon anyway. The fireplace is still unlit, but Taekwoon already feels a lot warmer. Nothing Hakyeon does is half-assed, even a simple hug; he keeps Taekwoon extremely close. His hands are no longer cold; warm fingers that sneaked under his scarf are a proof.

They jump away from each other when Jaehwan appears out of nowhere and says, "I'm not meeting with Hongbin," adamantly.

Hakyeon coughs into his hand and then tries to mask his embarrassment with a pout. "I know you had an argument, but-"
"I confessed and he laughed in my face!"

They all fall silent. Taekwoon looks at Hakyeon in panic - he's never dealt with something like that. His sisters have always had each other in such moments, and Taekwoon was too busy with his gift to bother with relationships.

Hakyeon sighs. "Jaehwanie." His expression softens. "The fact that he wants to reach to you must mean something." Jaehwan shakes his head and he looks like he's ready to bolt out again. "People can laugh for many different reasons." Jaehwan's face scrunches. "Taking me as an example," Taekwoon snorts at that, "I laugh when I'm embarrassed."

"Why does he always make sense," Jaehwan mumbles; he looks defeated.

"Taekwoon can beat him up for you." Hakyeon looks at Taekwoon expectantly.

Taekwoon turns towards him. "I can beat you up."

Hakyeon laughs and takes a step back, rising his hands in surrender. Taekwoon's hand closes around Hakyeon's arm but they both freeze when they hear a soft giggle. Jaehwan's pained expression is long gone and he's pointing at Taekwoon and the wood logs scattered on the floor. "Wasn't that a compliment."

Taekwoon lets go of Hakyeon immediately and starts placing the logs inside the fireplace in an attempt of hiding the blush on his face.

Jaehwan is running through walls mindlessly when the day of Hongbin's visit arrives. They didn't exactly tell Hongbin that Jaehwan was here; they just scheduled the meeting at their house, with Taekwoon picking Hongbin up on the edge of the forest. Without Hakyeon, because he would probably spill everything.
It hasn't been snowing lately, but since the temperature remains low, the forest is still buried under a thick white layer. The walk back to the house drags on as Taekwoon makes his way through the drifts, with Hongbin in tow. Taekwoon tries to fend all the questions Hongbin throws at him and thankfully he gives up after a while.

Hakyeon is sitting with his hands folded on his knees, like it's some kind of an official meeting, when they finally arrive. He beams at them, and seeing how red their faces are from the cold outside, he ushers them to the fireplace. Jaehwan is nowhere to be seen, probably hiding upstairs. He tends to poke his head out of the walls or furniture, trying to spook them, but Taekwoon believes Jaehwan is not in the mood for pranks today.

"Ugh."

Just as on cue, Jaehwan comes out through the kitchen wall, and his expression is undeniably pained. He grumbles under his nose, and Taekwoon looks at Hongbin in alarm.

He can't hear them, Taekwoon must remind himself. People without the gift can't hear or see the lost souls, but Taekwoon has gotten so used to Jaehwan, he sometimes forgets he is indeed, a ghost. He shifts his eyes to Hakyeon and they nod at each other. It's time.

Hakyeon clears his throat. "Hongbin," he says. "We didn't mention it before, but we've found Jaehwan long before you contacted us."

Taekwoon doesn't correct Hakyeon, that he's the one that let Jaehwan into Taekwoon's house. He also tries not to notice how Hakyeon always speaks for both of them. It doesn't mean anything, does it?

Hongbin's eyes widen. "Does it mean he's- is he here?" He asks, voice laced with disbelief.

Hakyeon obviously can't keep the appearances anymore and he grins.

"He's even more handsome!" Jaehwan cries out and collapses on the sofa.

Hakyeon laughs at that. Hongbin is looking around, like somehow he's going to be able to get a glimpse of his late friend. "He's here, isn't he?"
Taekwoon looks up at Jaehwan, waiting for his permission. Jaehwan pretends to chop Hongbin's head off, his hand going smoothly through Hongbin's neck, and only then he nods.

"Shoot!" Jaehwan shouts and it's the perfect time, if Hongbin's puzzled expression is any indication.

"He is here," Hakyeon starts. "But he's not very happy."

Hongbin scratches his neck, just where Jaehwan's hand went through a moment before. "No wonder," he murmurs. "I know it's far too late, but I-I'm really sorry?"

"Fuck you," Jaehwan spits out, folding his arms. "Honestly, fuck you."

Hakyeon looks like he wasn't expecting this. He tries to fake a cheerful tone. "Jaehwan says he, he-"

"He says fuck you," Taekwoon finishes, because he couldn't agree more. Jaehwan deserves to be upset about it.

Hongbin's face scrunches upon hearing the words. "I know," he huffs. "I know I should have been gentler, but I panicked."

Jaehwan snorts but neither Taekwoon nor Hakyeon mention his reaction.

Hongbin takes a moment and then continues. "You fled before I had a chance to explain," he finally says. "It wasn't that I hated it. I was just surprised." Taekwoon catches sight of Hongbin's hands - they're trembling again. "Surprised and embarrassed, really. I didn't know better back then. If you had waited for a bit, I'd come around."

It sounds suspiciously like an excuse and crosses the border of dangerous "what ifs", so Taekwoon decides to interfere. "You were teenagers," he says. "Both acting rashly, due to your emotions. It's no one's fault it ended like this." He can feel all three pairs of eyes on him, and he starts to feel uncomfortable with all the attention. "It doesn't mean you can't reconcile."
Jaehwan's eyes move to Hakyeon even before Hakyeon's hand grabs one of Taekwoon's, squeezing it gently. It should be Taekwoon teaching Hakyeon, but somehow it feels like it's Taekwoon getting a praise. It's not as if Hakyeon haven't seen him work before, and Taekwoon can communicate with clients just fine, yet-

"That's why we are here," Hakyeon says cheerfully, squeezing Taekwoon's hand again.

Jaehwan's face twists - he is still mad - but then it smoothes out and he sighs, finally looking at Hongbin, really looking at him. "It's fine," he says in a soft voice. "I was never able to be truly mad at you for a long time. Except this time, of course."

Hongbin laughs as Hakyeon passes the message. "It's been almost as many years as we knew each other."

The tension in the room finally disappears and they converse more freely. Taekwoon and Hakyeon discover that Jaehwan's parents, like many other people, don't believe in whisperers, tellers or healers. There's still a lot of religious people, or superstitious ones, but even those tend to go to tellers or healers, in secret from their families and friends. Not Jaehwan's parents, though. Their family has been always against those practices, and even the disappearance of their son couldn't make them turn for help. There was also a reason why Hongbin was trying to find Jaehwan only now. His parents have similar views to Jaehwan's, and Hongbin, not having any money until he started his part-time job last year, couldn't afford to visit a whisperer. And definitely not such a good one, as Hongbin states, making Taekwoon blush.

"Are you going to - what - disappear now?" Hongbin asks, smile slipping off his face.

Jaehwan kicks his legs in the air. "Why are you asking me this!" He averts his eyes, not looking at any of them. "I'm not." He grumbles, but doesn't finish.

"Only if he would like to," Taekwoon offers in a small voice. He's almost sure now that Jaehwan doesn't want to go anywhere. Taekwoon hasn't met a ghost opposed to going to the other side until now, but he's heard of them.

Jaehwan visibly relaxes and shakes his head. "I don't want to go anywhere," he whispers, stealing a glance at Taekwoon, as if he's afraid Taekwoon might change his mind.

"Can I visit again, then?" Hongbin asks hopefully.
"He's going to ask if he can bring his boyfriend, isn't he." Jaehwan squints his eyes at Hongbin, but he doesn't look angry.

Hakyeon bursts out laughing and Taekwoon smiles; the confused look on Hongbin's face and mock anger on Jaehwan's are incredibly endearing.

Jaehwan grumbles some more, but agrees nonetheless.

The time of Hakyeon's second evaluation comes faster than Taekwoon expected. They don't take on a lot of jobs, as the snow won't melt away. It only starts to get warmer the last week of Hakyeon's stay. When the ice finally gives in, they go to the river. Not to meditate, no - just to enjoy the view. Hakyeon grows more quiet, laughs less, and even though Jaehwan tries twice as hard to amuse him, he doesn't fool around with him as often as before.

Taekwoon thinks he must be very nervous; it's his second time in the end. They go through the basics again and again, but it doesn't exactly help. It's just that Taekwoon doesn't know what else he could do to make Hakyeon feel better. At least he enjoys the food Taekwoon makes; he tries to make it a bit fancier than before.

The day before Hakyeon has to leave, he tries to make breakfast.

"I need to do something, please, let me," he pleads. Taekwoon's resistance to Hakyeon's smile is non-existent, probably has been since the day one.

The toasts aren't that burnt and you can't go wrong with boiled eggs, really. Doing dishes doesn't go that well, though. Hakyeon is so preoccupied with his own thoughts, he breaks the first plate he tries to clean. He looks at the remains of it in astonishment, and when Taekwoon notices what happened he gently pushes Hakyeon away from the sink.

"Oh." Hakyeon makes a face. "I'm so sorry." He laughs, but he chokes at the end of it and he hides his face in his hands.
Taekwoon draws him into a hug without hesitation. This is the last thing he can do for him. And probably for himself, as the thought of Hakyeon disappearing as quickly as he appeared in his life causes him to swallow down his own tears. Hakyeon is breathing heavily against Taekwoon, but he doesn't cry. He's digging his fingers painfully into Taekwoon's shoulders and he apologizes for it after he steps back after god knows how long. Taekwoon just shakes his head and finishes cleaning for him.

They take the last long walk through the forest, their shoes getting dirty with the mix snow and mud. They practice for the last time, with Jaehwan's help, and for the last time they sit with a cup of hot chocolate in front of the fireplace. The simple routine seems to calm Hakyeon's nerves a little bit. He even laughs when Taekwoon advises him with the same tips once again, and even more when Jaehwan tries to imitate what Taekwoon has just said. They are reluctant to go to sleep, even though staying up late is not the best idea, since Hakyeon needs to wake up very early to make it on time for the first test. But instead of sleeping, they talk about various silly things; Taekwoon even shares some of his embarrassing stories that happened during his training. They chat until Hakyeon's head starts to sway and then falls on Taekwoon's arm.

It feels familiar, Taekwoon thinks, and doesn't wake Hakyeon for a couple of minutes, opting to stare at his beautiful face just a bit longer. There's a hint of the chocolate they drank earlier in the corner of Hakyeon's mouth he hasn't spotted before. Without thinking, he reaches his hand to run a thumb over the spot. Only when Hakyeon stirs, barely opening his eyes, and asks if it's time to go to bed, it hits Taekwoon. He wants Hakyeon to stay, preferably forever, so they could not only sit in front of the fireplace when it's cold outside, but also on the porch on the hot summer evenings, with lemonade instead of chocolate.

He knows it wouldn't hurt to ask, or even beg Hakyeon to stay, because he can't imagine them just parting their ways. But words die on Taekwoon's tongue and he silently helps Hakyeon get up from the thick rug they were resting on, and he's barely able to say goodnight when they climb the stairs, his voice strained and rough. The tiny smile Hakyeon offers before he enters his bedroom for the last time keeps Taekwoon awake through the whole night.

In the morning Taekwoon's exhausted, but he doesn't miss the moment Hakyeon drags his bags outside the house. They seem to be heavier, somehow, and Taekwoon suspects Hakyeon might have stolen some of his sweaters. He wonders if it would be rude to point it out, but it's not like he cares - it's not the sweaters he's going to miss. So he just stands there, unsure what to say. You can still ask him, a little voice inside his head tells him; it sounds suspiciously like Jaehwan's. Ask him to bring back your sweaters, the voice says again. Taekwoon frowns and looks around - the ghost is indeed sitting on the railing, swinging his legs. There's no trace of mischief on his face though, and he looks
rather sad as he glances at Hakyeon adjusting his backpack on his shoulders.

Taekwoon raises his barrier, and just as he thought - the voice fades away. He sends Jaehwan a nasty glare, but the ghost ignores him.

"Let me know how it went," Taekwoon says, trying to make his voice sound light. "Remember what I taught you."

Hakyeon grins and pats Taekwoon cheek. "Yes, teacher." He salutes and with a sigh he picks his bag and turns to leave.

He turns around in the middle of the way to the forest and fakes shooting Jaehwan down. The ghost obligingly falls off the railing, right into the puddle of mud. Hakyeon laughs and Taekwoon is still able to hear it, his ears tingling with the sound of it. Jaehwan raises himself off the ground and brushes off his clothes. Taekwoon rolls his eyes - Jaehwan is perfectly clean, of course. He shifts his eyes to Hakyeon once again and catches the last smile before Hakyeon resumes walking away.

The sky is cloudy today; the clouds slowly float across the sun, cutting off its light. Taekwoon looks up to the sky and he can't help but feel like it's personal; Hakyeon was lighting up his days, but without him everything becomes dull once again.

Taekwoon spends the rest of the day cleaning the house and cooking. It doesn't ease his mind exactly, but at least numbs the worry a little. He's so exhausted in the evening he just goes straight to bed. He doesn't even bother with raising his barrier when Jaehwan whines that he's bored, as sleep comes to him easily.

He looks through the job requests the next day, but suddenly he can't pick anything on his own, not to mention he barely can focus on the content of the emails. There's nothing left to do in the house, so he goes into the forest to clear his head, exercise for a bit. He turns himself off for quite a long time, so when he goes back the sun is already setting down. It's a big relief, and with his mind calmed he's able to read a book for the rest of the evening.

On the third day everything goes back to being hectic. Suddenly, Taekwoon is not sure if Hakyeon's evaluation will finish today, or maybe tomorrow morning, making it a full seventy two hours.
Hakyeon never said when and, most importantly, how he'll let Taekwoon know how it went.

"I would punch you If I only could," Jaehwan says loudly when he knows Taekwoon's barrier is down. "You should have listened to me!"

No more denying it, then. Taekwoon gives him a blank look, and turns to go back to his bedroom, preferably to sleep forever. Or until Hakyeon informs him, in one way or another, that he passed the stupid evaluation.

Somehow, Taekwoon manages to sleep till the morning of the next day and he jumps out of his bed in alarm. He checks his phone, almost dropping it on the floor. No new messages. He curses, and stumbles down the stairs, almost going through Jaehwan when he turns the corner to the kitchen.

"Ah!" Jaehwan squeaks as he takes a step back. Then the surprise on his face turns into a big grin and he waves his hands. "You should take a look outside," he sing-songs.

Taekwoon has no time to ask what for before Jaehwan sways away, humming to himself. With a frown, he throws a jacket on and puts on his shoes. He opens the door and is met with a very nervous Hakyeon.

"Oh, Taekwoon," Hakyeon blurts out and then flashes an uncertain smile. "I was about to-" he makes a vague gesture towards the door. "Yeah."

Taekwoon searches his face. "How did it go, did you-"

"I passed!" Hakyeon says, now fully smiling. "Licensed whisperer, right here." He points at himself.

Taekwoon doesn't even realize he's smiling until a short laugh passes his lips.

Hakyeon is soon back to looking uncertain. "They also gave me an advice." He takes a deep breath. "To find a place outside the city, where the voices are quieter. So I won't go insane." He rolls his eyes. They both know the fact that he passed the examination doesn't mean he's going to start using barrier on daily basis.
Taekwoon weighs his options; the information Hakyeon has just shared might mean everything or nothing at all. Jaehwan doesn't whisper inside his head this time, but Taekwoon remembers his words all the same.

His stomach turns unpleasantly as he opens his mouth to breathe a soft, "You could stay."

Hakyeon doesn't look surprised. His gaze is intense and Taekwoon fights with himself not to look away. He gulps around the lump in his throat and his stomach twists again.

They look at each other for what feels like the longest time. The spring is just around the corner; sun is peeking through the clouds, snow almost fully melted by now. There's still some of it left on the roof and it keeps dripping down the edges. Like now, one big droplet falls onto Taekwoon's face and he breaks the eye contact as he wrinkles his nose and rubs at his face, getting rid of the wet trail on his cheek.

"Jung Taekwoon, you aren't just being polite right now, are you?" Hakyeon asks and Taekwoon would assume he's being playful, but the tone of his voice is serious. "Or am I reading this the wrong way?"

Taekwoon doesn't believe his voice can be as steady as Hakyeon's, so he makes a step forward and puts both of his hands on Hakyeon's cheeks. The sun might be shining through the clouds, but it's nowhere as bright as the tiniest of Hakyeon's smiles, just as the one he's giving Taekwoon right now, shy and pretty.

"Stay," Taekwoon repeats, enjoying the warmness of Hakyeon's cheeks against the palms of his hands. He's always so warm, Taekwoon thinks.

Hakyeon lifts his own hands and places them over Taekwoon's, running his fingers over Taekwoon's knuckles. Only then Taekwoon finally registers that Hakyeon is wearing one of his sweaters.

"You were going to stay anyway, weren't you," Taekwoon murmurs, and he can not only see but also feel the grin that blooms on Hakyeon's face.

"I guess so." Hakyeon shrugs and they both laugh into the kiss that follows.

Hakyeon's lips are as warm as his cheeks and Taekwoon can't stop kissing them, even when their
teeth bump against each other as they can't stop smiling. Taekwoon only manages to pull back when another drop of water falls into his fringe.

Hakyeon doesn't step away just yet, playing with the hem of Taekwoon's sweater. "I might have parked my car with all of my things near your house," he confesses, moving his hand to touch Taekwoon's earrings. They're made of black onyx that protects from negativity and helps releasing sorrow and grief. Perfect choice for a whisperer.

Taekwoon isn't that surprised, neither is he when he hears Jaehwan cooing at them through the open door. And making kissy faces, as Taekwoon notes when he glances at him over his shoulder.

"I wish I could make him carry all of your things," Taekwoon says somberly.

Both Hakyeon and Jaehwan laugh out loud, and it carries through the clearing. Taekwoon can't stop himself from leaning in again to steal one last kiss before he tells Hakyeon to lead the way. The sooner they move everything, the better.

Jaehwan jumps after them excitedly. "You wouldn't believe how boring Taekwoon was during those three days!"

Taekwoon is glad he doesn't have any heavy objects at hand, because throwing anything at Jaehwan would be a waste of time, anyway.

End Notes

[gabrielle aplin: start of time]

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