

SOULS AT MIDNIGHT

HAHOE, KOREA – 1400s

Song: Imagination
Juniper Vale, RØRE



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MAGIC LEAVES A tangible taste in the air. Sunkai has tried hundreds of times to name it, but whenever he gets close, it changes. Once, it was brown sugar melting on his tongue. Another time it was like heavy rains soaking into the earth after weeks of cloudless skies. But it's always strongest at the midnight hour, and tonight it tastes of strawberries. "Sunkai."

He spins to face his eomma, Soo-Jin. Kohl lines her eyes, elongating their shape. He wonders, standing and brushing the dirt from his pants, if her face truly looks like that. Of the many magic types that exist, hers is illusions. He never really knows if any of her is real or not—if her hair is black and her chin pointed. Illusions need only belief to be made real, and he believes everything about her. Having the same type of magic, he'd tried once to fool her, using illusions to make himself appear taller and older than his eight years. She'd rolled her eyes and bade him to dispel the façade.

Magic isn't a toy, Sunkai.

Twelve now, he rarely needs the reminder.

"It's almost midnight," she says, offering her hand and leading him toward a small, weathered tent.

His appa, Junso, waits inside. Strangers gather around him, their numbers small. The first night in any village is usually quiet, locals suspicious of the magic his appa claims to have. Though magic saturates their world, no one is truly prepared to see Junso at work: a ferryman of souls, a man that follows the whims of magic to every corner of the world. The rarest kind of magic. Someday, it'll be Sunkai's.

The idea should thrill him, but he fears how short he'll fall of his appa's abilities. What if the souls don't trust him? What if his appa dies suddenly and the power of being a ferryman is thrust upon Sunkai too soon, magic wild and magic wielder untrained?

He shakes the thoughts from his head, distracting himself by asking, "How much longer?" He shrinks back when his eomma cuts him a look. Her long black hair eats the glow of the candlelight. "Never mind," he squeaks, glancing at his appa in time to catch the soft smile that crosses his mouth.

And then the lantern beside his appa sputters out. All the candles, too. The villagers huff and curse and yelp in the sudden dark. But Sunkai holds up his hands, copying his eomma's motions even though he can't see her. The air fills with warmth and the faint scent of lavender, created by nothing but magic. It settles the visitors long enough for the lantern to light again. This time the flame is blue and hovers above the candle wick.

Shivers roll down Sunkai's spine when the first figure emerges through the tent. A man—a ghost—framed in the same eerie blue of the lantern. The echo of his cane is silent as he moves toward the light. Not all souls need a ferryman to pass on, and not all want him, but for those that do, eternity, cut open by Junso's magic, is a draw wayward souls can't ignore.

Junso opens the lantern, the flame slipping out as if it needed his permission. It grows taller, twice Sunkai's height, and not a lick of its heat touches the living.

"Midnight welcomes you home," Junso says. The soul approaches, reaching a hand to the flame and letting it take him.

More souls appear through the canvas, surrendering

themselves to eternity in front of a captive audience. Some of them pause, recognizing the villagers as loved ones and making farewells before they move on.

Soo-Jin nudges Sunkai. "See that there aren't any souls milling outside."

He frowns. "Do I have to?" He prefers the souls that are easy, that step into the tent, utter not a word, and pass on peacefully. A soul waiting outside might not offer that same willingness. Sunkai doesn't want to be the reason they remain behind, stuck in life because he couldn't answer some question or ease some concern. He doesn't want to prove this early that he's unfit for the role of ferryman.

"Go," Soo-Jin says.

"Yes, Eomma."

He doesn't wait very long before a soul stops shy of the tent.

Gathering his courage, he says, "Hello."

The soul, a girl a few years older than himself, turns. Scars cover her left cheek, and when Sunkai breathes in a gasp, he tastes smoke instead of strawberries. "Are you hurt?" It's a foolish question for many reasons, the biggest being that she carries the glow of death.

She gives a subtle shake of her head. "Not anymore."

"When did you die?" It's another foolish question, one Junso would never ask. The dead sometimes prefer to ignore their new reality, like doing so will give them a second chance at breathing. Newer souls will talk on and on for hours, but the only sentence Sunkai ever really hears during those exchanges is, *See? I can't possibly be dead.*

"Weeks ago? Maybe months. Time doesn't make much sense." The soul gives him a once-over. "When did you die?" The blood drains from his face so quickly he almost doesn't notice her flashing a grin. "Kidding."

It doesn't soothe the pounding of his heart.

She turns her coal eyes to the tent. "What's waiting in there?" she asks, mouth pinched.

"Peace." Sometimes, Sunkai can feel it, tendrils of eternity slipping through the cracks to graze the living. Warmth like summer lingers in his veins for hours after,

calm with it.

The girl snorts. "What is peace in a world like ours?"

A hibiscus flower is the only answer he can think of, but he doesn't dare say it aloud. She probably wants a bigger answer, something more profound than flowers that bloom and fall and bloom again. But it's peace to him, memories of feasting among the flowers with his parents, dozing while Junso tells stories and giggling as Soo-Jin adds illusions of shadow characters with her hands.

"It isn't in our world, it's beyond. It's eternity," he decides to answer, sneaking a glance at the tent. Souls pass inside without giving him or the girl a second of interest. "My appa says it's nice, though. Like the best part of every season."

Snowflakes and flowers and warmth and crunchy leaves all mixed up into one moment of contradicting perfection.

"Has he been?"

"Only heartbeats at a time," Sunkai answers, digging his boot into the dirt. Eternity can open at any point in the world. It's a bridge, of sorts, through the fabric of everything. When magic calls Junso to faraway places, eternity opens to allow him passage. In a tent one moment, on the other side of the world in the next.

"Then he doesn't really know, does he?" Her voice wavers, glowing limbs carrying her farther from the tent. "Maybe eternity isn't kind at all."

If she leaves now, there's no telling when she'll find her way back.

Sunkai casts out his hands, illusions spreading from his fingertips. Hibiscus flowers cover the ground, their honey-sweet scent saturating the air. He grins at her expression, at the gape of her mouth and the way her eyes stutter across the scene.

"How could eternity be bad," he says, as birds made of nothing but foliage swoop above their heads, "if it gives us the magic to do this?"

"Because it did this." She touches her cheeks and the scars there. Sunkai hesitates, struggling to find words. "It killed me."

“Humans killed you.” Soo-Jin’s voice sends relief flooding through Sunkai, appearing from the tent. She walks closer, resting her hands on his shoulders. “This world has too many burdens, too many rules of magic that can go astray under the ruling of ego. But eternity?” She eyes the flowers and birds, her mouth curving up. “It’s more beautiful than any of us could ever recreate, even if these illusions are likely a close second.”

Sunkai beams at the praise. “I can go into the tent with you,” he offers to the girl, sending a few of the birds in ahead of him. The three of them snicker at the shouts of alarm. His appa will have words for him later, but for now the girl is smiling.

“You needn’t suffer the burden of both life and death by remaining in the in-between,” Soo-Jin adds softly. “There is rest waiting for you.”

The girl stares at her feet, at the flowers and the birds and at Sunkai. He stretches out a hand. Even though she can’t really take it, even though her fingers pass through his, she says, “Okay.”

He leads her inside, telling her all he knows of hibiscus flowers so she doesn’t get nervous about the people gathered in the tent, or the lantern fire, or his appa. He stops right in front of the path to eternity, that same peace sneaking out to brush his cheeks.

“What’s your name?” he asks, the girl’s hand already engulfed in the light of eternity.

“Binna.”

“I’ll see you again one day, Binna.”

She nods, and then she’s gone. She’s at peace.

And he helped.

Soo-Jin comes to his side, drawing him back and then crouching beside him. She presses kisses to both his cheeks, his forehead, and his nose. “You did well.”

“Very well,” Junso adds, pride in his voice that draws more hibiscus flowers before Sunkai can stop himself, joy blooming in a tangible way.

They watch together as souls cross. He inhales the scent of strawberries once again, warmed by the light of

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eternity and the dark of midnight. Sunkai tries to memorize everything his appa does, every word and gesture and sway of his hands.

One day, Junso will find rest, too.

One day, the title of ferryman will belong to Sunkai.

One day, he might actually be worthy of it.