

Like a Moth to a Flame

a *Mr. Sunshine* fanfic

by Rodo

for ConvenientAlias

A WILL TO live was a funny thing. Eugene Choi had resigned himself to death when he'd jumped on the train, and then again when he'd made his goodbyes, first to Joon-young, then to Ae-shin. He'd resigned himself to his death, knowing it would save the lives of those he loved, knowing that his sacrifice was worth it. And yet...

And yet, when he'd shot the coupling and all that was left to do was to wait for his death, something in him rebelled. He saw Ae-shin's stricken face, and at the last moment, in a desperate attempt to avert the inevitable, he jumped.

The first bullet struck him while he was still in the air, although the pain didn't hit him until after his feet had touched the other car, allowing him to cling to the guardrail. Then came the second bullet, and Eugene knew it was over. Suddenly, he didn't mind anymore. All he could see was Ae-shin as she rushed towards him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his shirt, but there was little he could do to comfort her. He could barely keep his grip as more bullets whizzed past them. He forced himself to remain standing until he no longer needed to shield her.

Then, they left the tunnel and the sun shone on them again. There were no more bullets, only peace. Eugene was about to fall to his knees, but Ae-shin dragged him forward, back into the shelter of the railway car. The blood was pounding in his head, he could feel his strength leaking out of him, but none of that mattered when he lay in her lap, looking up at her face. Even near the end, when his eyesight started to fail, he could still feel her tears drop onto his cheeks.

"Let me go," he told her.

Ae-shin shook her head. There was no telling her what to do when she'd made up her mind, he knew. She would need to learn that painful lesson for herself. And she could. Thanks to him. *This is a good death*, he thought, before fading away.



Waking up came as a surprise – a painful one. Oblivion had been peaceful. Eugene had imagined death would be as well, but when he opened his eyes to look sideways at the white-washed wall of some poor dwelling, he knew for a fact that he wasn't dead yet. There was too much pain radiating through his chest and lower back. The pain was dull and throbbing when he didn't breathe, then sharp and piercing when he did. But even then, it was duller than it should be – somebody had given him something for the pain. Nearby, he heard the quiet hissing of thread being drawn through cloth.

His companion stopped with her work when Eugene tried to maneuver himself into a different position – he'd never much enjoyed lying on his stomach. The movement tore at the wound in his lower back and caused him to fall back down with a subdued groan.

“Don't move! You're not well enough for that yet,” a female voice said. It was vaguely familiar, but Eugene couldn't place it. Only when the woman leaned over him to peer into his face did he recognize her – Ae-shin's aunt, Madam Jo. He'd seen her maybe a handful of times, but couldn't remember if he had ever spoken to her.

“Ae-soon!” the woman called, and from somewhere beyond his back another, younger woman appeared. This was a face Eugene was more familiar with. She'd frequented the Glory Hotel back in the day, wearing colorful hanboks and smiling without a care in the world. Now, the colors of her simple hanbok were subdued and there was a frown on her face. But when she saw his open eyes, that old, carefree smile once again lit up her face.

“You're awake!” she squealed, almost dropping the bundle in her arms.

Her mother was far more sober. “Come, help me with his back. He just had to move. He might have torn one of the stitches.”

Together, they peeled Eugene out of whatever was covering his back, and he had no choice but to let them. He was hurt and helpless. He wouldn't even be able to swat a fly with his back feeling like it was increasingly on fire with every layer they removed.

Madam Jo clucked her tongue when it was time to inspect the wounds. “No torn stitches, but there's a little bleeding around the edges. Don't try to move again until Nurse Park says you may.”

“Where am I?” Eugene asked. His voice sounded rougher than he thought it should. “How long has it been?”

Madam Jo just hummed slightly as she went about the work of cleaning and redressing his wounds. It was her daughter who was chattier, maybe to distract herself. Eugene could all but hear the wince in her voice as she answered.

“Manchuria,” she replied. “Some place where Ae-shin's friends send people to keep them safe. In the middle of nowhere. You arrived two days ago.”

Two days. Manchuria. Eugene tried to do the math in his head. They'd barely left Hanseong when he'd been shot. The train ride to Pyongyang, then beyond, wouldn't have been easy with an unconscious person who'd been shot twice. They'd need to hide from the Japanese, keep their movements a secret. Five days to a week, he estimated.

"Where—"

"She's off somewhere, with 'her people,'" Go Ae-soon said. "Doing who knows what. You know, if you had told me that Ae-shin was running around with a gun, dressing up as a man, back when grandfather was alive, I wouldn't have believed a word. She was always, you know, Ae-shin, but that's a little much even for her."

Madam Jo sighed with a resignation so deep Eugene could feel it settle on him like a heavy blanket. "Your grandfather allowed her to learn, and given everything that has happened, I believe it was a wise choice."

There was a rustle of fabric – Ae-soon shifting her position. "Still—"

From the corner of his eye, Eugene could see the admonishing stare Madam Jo gave her daughter, and it seemed to be enough to make her drop the subject. They worked in silence until he was bandaged up again, then helped him lean up a little so that he could eat some stew and take some medicine. When it was done, Ae-soon left again, leaving Eugene alone with her mother and her sewing, stewing in silence.

"Thank you." The quiet voice broke Eugene out of his medicine- and pain-induced stupor.

"For what?"

"For saving her. Ae-shin has been like a daughter to me ever since she was left with us, along with news of her parents' deaths."

Eugene remained silent for a moment, wondering what to say. "I didn't do it for you, or because I'm selfless."

A hint of a smile stole onto Madam Jo's face. "Oh, I know. I know more than people give me credit for. I know my father-in-law rejected you as a suitor for her hand. Don't expect me to have a different opinion than he, just because you saved her life."

"Don't worry. I don't." Eugene had always known that their love was an impossible one, even when he'd allowed himself to dream for a little while. Joseon wasn't the kind of place where a man with his background could marry a woman from the Go family. It was why he would never think of himself as a Joseon man. A man of Joseon wouldn't have dared to ignore propriety and fall for a lady when he was only the son of slaves. An American, on the other hand, didn't think class was immutable.

“If I may ask,” Madam Jo said, fixing him with her eyes, “what is the story behind the ring? I have seen Ae-shin wearing a smaller one in the same style.”

Eugene was facing right, so he couldn't see his left hand and the simple but elegant intertwined golden bands around it. But he could feel it, with the other fingers, moving it a little with his thumb, like he used to sometimes when he was in prison, thinking of her in the darkness.

“It's a wedding ring,” he explained. “An American custom. Couples wear them to indicate their vows to each other.”

The scandalized look on Madam Jo's face was almost satisfying. But in the end, Eugene didn't enjoy upsetting Ae-shin's aunt, and so he continued: “I bought them when I helped her get to Japan for a mission. To sell the illusion that she was the wife of an American diplomat, along with the forged paperwork.”

He didn't say that he still wore it because, if it weren't for their circumstances, he would be her husband, or that he still wore it because she was the love of his life. Ae-shin loved him too, even if she loved her cause more. There was no point in stating the obvious. Madam Jo knew that as well as he did, and sighed with a little shake of her head.

“You must love her a great deal,” she said, a wistful look in her eyes. Maybe she was dreaming of her own youth. She picked up her sewing again and Eugene was hypnotized by the slow, steady movement of the needle. “It is a pity,” she whispered, as Eugene drifted off into an uneasy sleep, haunted by bullets and shadows of the past.



It would be almost two weeks until Eugene saw Ae-shin again. In the meantime, he concentrated on getting better. Healing was a grueling process. He developed a new appreciation for Kyle's tenacity in the face of his war wound, which had kept him out of commission for months as well.

The bullet that had hit him in the upper back and grazed his lung, lodging itself into his collarbone and breaking it in the process, had been removed by Nurse Park. The one in his lower back was still inside of him somewhere. But the wounds hadn't killed him, since she and Ae-shin and Joon-young had been able to stop the bleeding and infection hadn't set in. “A miracle,” Nurse Park called it, and Eugene said a silent prayer of thanks to God in the dead of night, when the pain kept him awake. He could still feel his legs, so Nurse Park thought he might make an almost complete recovery, although she warned him that the collarbone might bother him for the rest of his life.

And so Eugene did the only thing he could – wait, rest and heal, and, when the nurse pronounced his wounds as healed enough, exercise a little. The weeks of lying left his body weak and shaking with every attempt to walk. But he wanted to get better. He hated being helpless, and he hated being useless. He wanted to see Ae-shin again.

She appeared as suddenly as she usually did, only this time not in Room 304 at the Glory Hotel. She didn't wear her elegant dark suit either. Instead, she stood in the rural farmers' house in a simple hanbok, like her cousin. She looked less like herself than Eugene had ever seen her, but her poise was unmistakable. She was in the house when Eugene returned from a short walk, sweating and breathing hard, and she fixed him with an implacable stare.

Eugene approached her carefully. Ae-shin raised her hands and balled them into fists, but then let them fall limply against his chest, wary of agitating his wounds.

"Never," she said, her voice ice, "do that again. Do you understand."

She commanded like a Joseon lady, but Eugene wasn't a Joseon man. He was a soldier, and an American one at that. "You know I can't promise that."

The tension rolled off her in waves, and it seemed that she might hit him after all.

"If I were in danger, would you stand by and save yourself?" he asked her, and the tension drained out of her.

"No," she admitted. "But that moment, seeing you almost die in my lap... I have never felt so powerless in my entire life. I don't want you to sacrifice yourself for me. I'd rather you live on without me."

For a long moment, Eugene said nothing. "That is the difference between you and me," he finally said. "I don't think I could go on without you. But I know that you can go on without me. You have your cause. I would rather die for you than live without you."

Ae-shin eyed him with what might be pity. Or maybe it was love. "Live for me, then."

Eugene had to smile at that. "I'll try."

Then, she inquired about his wounds and told him about what she had been up to for the past two weeks, organizing what was left of the Righteous Army into a semblance of resistance, helping them all find shelter, making sure they had food. She also told him about the fate of their friends – Kim Hui-seong's death surprised him, but not the others. He filed them away in the same part of his soul where he kept his memories of Joseph, of the many soldiers who hadn't survived El Caney. It was different for Ae-shin, who took every death to heart. He hugged her, trying to comfort her, even though it hurt when she wrapped her arms around him in return, crying into his shirt.

“What will you do now? They’re looking for you. There are only so many Americans that look like us around, so they know your name, Eugene Choi – you’re even wanted for the murder of Mori Takashi.”

Ah, yes. He had confessed to Baron Kuroda when he’d been certain he wouldn’t live to see the consequences. “Maybe it is time for Eugene Choi to disappear for a little while,” he said. “Maybe, I’ll try to be Choi Yoo-jin, for a little while.”

Ae-shin looked skeptical. “I don’t think that’s going to be enough to fool people.”

“What do you suggest, then?”

She tilted her head for a moment. “Go Yoo-jin.”

At that, Eugene had to laugh. “Your aunt is going to love that.”

“She’ll live,” Ae-shin replied dryly.

And so Eugene became Yoo-jin, the cousin of Go Ae-soon, at least for the benefit of the civilians living around them and for his own protection. He dressed in the same traditional Korean clothes the others in the village wore, and pretended to have been a porter back in the south. Ae-soon loved the charade, clinging to his arm and making cloying demands for sweets whenever they had to go to the market. Madam Jo was less enthusiastic, but eventually stopped flinching when someone called him Go. Ae-shin only dropped by once in a while, when her duties allowed her to. For the most part, Eugene and the two women settled into an uneasy routine, while Eugene kept improving and started being able to contribute to the household. Soon, he’d be well enough to find himself a job. Or maybe he could join the rest of the tattered Righteous Army (and thus Ae-shin).

Until then, he blended in, even if wearing traditional clothes to fit in better chafed at his soul, reminding him of a life he wanted to forget. They felt as foreign as Eugene did, in this remote corner of China.

One day, when he returned from retrieving firewood in the woods on the hills above the valley they lived in, a surprise was waiting for him in front of the humble peasant house.

“Lee Jung-moon,” Eugene said, nodding. Then he went about his business and took the wood off his back as if the guest wasn’t there.

“Captain Choi.”

“No longer,” Eugene pointed out.

Lee Jung-moon nodded and watched as Eugene put away the firewood he’d collected into a small, sheltered alcove next to the house. Eugene wondered why he’d come – to find Ae-shin? They were allies, after all. But Ae-shin would probably be easier to find than Eugene, these days. After all, few knew where her family was hiding, while she, along with

the remains of the Righteous Army, was busy building a network of connections all over the peninsula.

“What do you want?” Eugene asked when he was done, sitting down on the bank next to Lee Jung-moon. “Madam Jo and Lady Ae-soon aren’t here right now – they’re off selling some of their sewing.”

Lee Jung-moon lifted his head, scrutinizing the clouds. “I didn’t think I’d see you again.”

“Neither did I,” Eugene said. “Your allies are dead. All but a few. Do you still think you can save Joseon?”

Eugene watched Lee Jung-moon’s eyes as they turned from cloud to cloud. It would rain soon, he thought. Hopefully the women would return before it started.

“No.” The word was firm and sure. “Joseon is dead. But I’m not giving up on its people. One day, they’ll be free again, even if I won’t live to see it. And there are many who will fight for a new future, a new country. Even an American.”

He turned away from the clouds and towards Eugene, then, fixing him with his piercing, ruthless gaze, daring him to contradict him. But for once, Lee Jung-moon wasn’t entirely wrong about Eugene’s motivations.

“I don’t know if I share your optimism, but your cause is a just one. On that, I can agree. That doesn’t mean I care.”

“You care about Lady Ae-shin and her friends.”

Eugene shrugged.

“And now, you’re even using a Korean name. Have you finally decided to abandon America?”

“No.” That was never a question. Eugene owed America much, and he’d let her down. He would rue it, if it weren’t for the fact that he loved Ae-shin more than he loved his country. As it was, he only felt a faint twinge of sadness when he thought of home. “No matter the name I use, I’ll always be an American. But then, I suppose you know all about living under a false name by now. Lee Jung-moon must be wanted by many people right now.”

Lee Jung-moon inclined his head. “I have not given up on you yet, Captain,” he said, but in the end he had to leave without a new recruit pledged to his banner. Eugene was pledged to Ae-shin. She was a spark of hope that might one day start a fire. There was nothing Lee Jung-moon could say to change that, but Eugene had no doubt that he would make use of it. Eventually.



“Please, Yoo-jin,” Ae-soon begged him for what felt like the hundredth time that day. Her mother had given up on trying to rein her in on this matter, leaving Eugene to deal with her begging. “Please, please, please, can we go to the village?”

Eugene sighed. In the end, he relented. If only because Ae-soon was reckless and bored enough to go without him if he declined yet again.

All the farmers, charcoal burners, foragers and hunters that lived in the valley went to the village these days, because it could boast a new, never-before-seen attraction: a foreigner, and a white one, at that. A British missionary of some sort, or so Eugene had gathered through conversations with some of the other hunters and gossip picked up by Madam Jo. Eugene could understand why the local population was so excited about the presence of the missionary, but Go Ae-soon had lived in Hanseong for most of her life, and had seen more white people than any of the villagers would in a lifetime; there was little reason for her to share the villagers’ curiosity.

When Eugene asked her about this while they walked down into the village, she sighed deeply. “It’s just... I’m so bored, these days. Back home, there was always something to do, something to see. I had friends and family. I know why we’re here. Mother told me about what happened during grandfather’s memorial rite. But I still miss it. I just want to have a little bit of fun.”

Then she kicked a little rock off the path with a frown on her face, and for a moment, Eugene could see the resemblance between her and her cousin.

“I don’t think seeing a missionary is going to be a lot of fun.”

“You’ve known many missionaries, have you?”

Eugene had to smirk at that. “I was raised by one, actually.”

Ae-soon stopped so suddenly that she almost stumbled over her own feet. Eugene had to catch her arm to steady her. “Really?”

Eugene nodded. “Although he knew how to have fun when he wasn’t preaching. And even then... everything he did was full of love.”

Ae-soon nodded. “I wonder if this one is the same way.”

He wasn’t, or at least not to Eugene’s eyes, when he saw him. The man who introduced himself as Father George Bingham was a missionary, and he seemed to care more about God than the people around him. He lacked the warmth Eugene had come to associate with Joseph. Or maybe it was just because the man was British. He was friendly enough, but more interested in talking about his sermons than *makgeolli* or pottery. Regrettably, his sermons were nothing to write home about, and delivered in a somewhat broken Korean at that.

“Was it as fun as you thought?” Eugene asked Ae-soon when they walked off the field that the priest used in place of a church.

Ae-soon made a face like a petulant little child. “Not really. But at least it was something different. Even if I don’t think I like Christianity.”

After a sermon all about sin and hell, Eugene could sympathize. They were about to pass by one of the women who gave work to Ae-soon and her mother when a commotion at the market square drew their attention. When Eugene saw what had caused it, his heart skipped a beat and his hand twitched for a gun he didn’t carry. There were a couple of Japanese soldiers in their uniforms, harassing the vendors on the small village market, turning over baskets and tables full of wares.

“Where is the foreigner?” one of them screamed at Mister Park, the local blacksmith. He was speaking Japanese, of course. None of these people understood a word he was saying. Mister Park just shook his head and tried to look as non-threatening as a big, muscular man could manage.

“Do you know what he’s saying?” The question had been asked by one of the other onlookers, who stared at Eugene with hope in his eyes. “You lived down south, didn’t you? Do you know what they’re saying?”

“They’re Japanese,” Ae-soon said. “And they shouldn’t be here. We’re north of the border, even if just a little.”

But evidently they didn’t care. Or maybe whoever had sent them thought that China was too weak to pay any attention to a border village inhabited mostly by ethnic Koreans. It wouldn’t even be an incorrect assumption.

While Eugene was trying to think of a way to extricate himself and Ae-soon, their conversation had aroused the Japanese soldier’s attention, making it all the more difficult. Two of them now strode towards their little group with purposeful steps, while the last one stayed back a little, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“You,” the one who had been screaming at Mister Park said, waving his hand at all of them. He was young, over-eager, and his gaze fixed itself onto Ae-soon with a dark glint. “Where. Is. The. Foreigner?”

There was really only one thing Eugene could do. He carefully stepped to the side to shield Ae-soon from the men and held up his hands in a pleading motion. “I’m sorry,” he said, in Korean, of course, “but we don’t understand what you’re saying.”

That had been the wrong thing to say. The man raised his gun and brought the butt down onto Eugene’s shoulder. His bad shoulder, the one with the barely healed collarbone. The shock of pain was searing and he went down to his knees with a gasp. At

least that meant that the next hit went to his ribs and back while he was doubled over, as did the one after. The blows drove the air out of his lungs. Eugene wouldn't be able to answer their questions even if he wanted to. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the third man, the leader, watch Eugene and the crowd for any sign of weakness.

"The. Foreigner!"

Then Eugene felt a weight throw himself over him and the blows stopped hurting. Instead, he heard Ae-soon's sharp cry right next to his ear. With the last of his strength, he struggled to stand up again, but Ae-soon clung to him like a monkey and barely budged.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

The voice had been thunderous and angry, and most importantly, it had been speaking English. The blows stopped as the entire marketplace froze. Except for the missionary who blustered until he looked far more massive than he had during the sermon. Eugene saw him confront the Japanese soldiers without a hint of fear on his face once he and Ae-soon had retreated out of their reach.

The leader of the Japanese men finally stepped forward. "You, American?" he asked, in incredibly broken Korean. "You speak English?"

"Of course I speak English," the Father replied, now visibly insulted. "I am *Irish*."

"We told that American in this village."

"No American, only I." Then he added, in English: "Obviously you idiots are too stupid to tell white people apart from each other."

For a moment, the two men engaged in a staring contest. It was the Japanese soldier who broke eye contact first. "Sorry. We looking for American wanted for murder. Misunderstanding."

The Father huffed, but didn't deflate until the man had collected the other two soldiers and stalked off back towards the border. When they were almost around the corner, the soldier who had beaten Eugene and Ae-soon cast one last, greedy look back towards her and Eugene could feel her shrink at his side.

Afterwards, the Father and the other villagers offered to patch them up, but Eugene and Ae-soon declined, insisting it wasn't that bad, that they just wanted to go home. And so they left. Ae-soon had weathered the beating better than he had, which Eugene wouldn't have expected from her.

"Deok-moon used to beat me, sometimes," she admitted in a quiet, broken voice. Gone was the bubbly, stupid girl she presented to the world most days. "You don't need to worry about me."

Eugene thought back to the body of her husband as it had lain where he had been felled by Ae-shin's bullet. The man had been a despicable human being, and he had deserved a far worse death than the one he got.

Back at the house, Eugene had been expecting Madam Jo, who would fuss over her daughter and leave him in peace as he tried to lick his wounds. His collarbone might be broken again, as might the ribs, but they were all at least bruised. All he wanted was to take care of his wounds in the privacy of the little back room that served as his bedroom, meditating until the pain was more manageable. Every breath hurt again, after he'd finally mended to the point where he only noticed the old wounds when it was about to snow.

His hopes were dashed when he saw Ae-shin sitting by the fire with her aunt, drinking tea. She was dressed as a partisan again, the way she used to dress when she trained on the mountain. Her eyes widened when she saw them enter dirty, bruised, and disheveled.

Madam Jo took care of her daughter, as Eugene had predicted, but Ae-shin followed him into his room with murder in her eyes.

"Who did this?" she hissed.

"Japanese soldiers. They're gone now."

"They could come back."

Of course they could, but Eugene could do nothing but wait and stay vigilant. And keep his gun on him from now on. Leaving now would only make him seem more suspicious, should the soldiers return. With a resigned sigh, he sat down and gingerly leaned back against the wall. His shoulder was burning.

"Are you bleeding?" Ae-shin asked. Eugene opened his eyes to look at her face in the dim light. He hadn't noticed that he'd closed them. It was worse than he had thought.

"I don't think so."

Ae-shin huffed and stood straighter, then sat down next to him. With careful hands, she undid the tie to his *jeogori*, trying to get it off his shoulder. When she tugged too hard, Eugene winced. After that, she treated him more carefully, like he was made of glass. And despite the pain, Eugene enjoyed the closeness and intimacy more than he probably should. To get the *jeogori* off, he had to lean forward, supported by her carefully placed hand on his good shoulder, while the other brushed the fabric off the wounds.

Ae-shin gasped when she peeked over his shoulder.

"That bad, huh?"

He felt her hand tighten in the fabric, close to his arm. "You're not bleeding."

Eugene laughed and immediately regretted it. He could feel the abused muscles spasm around his bruised ribs. "I know," he said through a cough. He leaned forward against Ae-

shin's shoulder, closing his eyes again. He didn't want to move from her side right then, and evidently she didn't either, because she tightened her hold on him.

"We need to bandage your shoulder," she pointed out.

Eugene hummed, but he didn't want to move until he had to. He felt her hand settle on his neck, took in her scent, enjoying the feeling of home, of being where he was meant to be.

Then the moment was broken by a heavy sigh. Ae-shin turned her head towards the door and Eugene lifted his head. Madam Jo stood at the door, with the bandages Eugene had been so glad to be rid of months ago clasped in her hands, laundered and stashed away somewhere for the day when they were inevitably needed again. She looked sad, resigned, and more tired than Eugene had ever seen her. For a long moment, she said nothing. Then she squared her back and stuck out her chin in what looked like defiance.

"Very well," she said, shaking her head.

Eugene didn't find out what that meant right away. She simply dropped the bandages in Ae-shin's hand and left her to dress his wounds and comfort him. Eugene forgot all about her when Ae-shin allowed him to rest his head on her thigh, lying on his good side while she ran through his hair. Every now and again, he felt the gold of the wedding ring she wore brush against his skin while he tried to keep his breathing even. At first, they talked a little, about everything and nothing, basking in each other's company. Then, the conversation faded as the day caught up with Eugene and he drifted away into an uneasy sleep. In his last moments before drifting off, he thought he heard her hum *Greensleeves*.

He found out what Madam Jo had meant the next morning, when they were all awkwardly assembled for breakfast. Ae-shin and Ae-soon were trying to get along with each other and it was a strange sight; usually, they bickered and teased each other like sisters. But on that day, they saw the good in each other for once.

"I will consent to your marriage," Madam Jo said, out of nowhere.

"What?" Ae-shin and Ae-soon cried at the same time, but instead of answering, Madam Jo took the first bites of her breakfast.

"It doesn't matter," Ae-shin said. "Grandfather made his decision very clear. I won't disobey him."

"But why not?" Ae-soon argued. "You could do far worse."

Of course, Ae-soon didn't know that Eugene was the son of slaves. She had been living at her husband's back then. And sometimes, the world seemed much simpler to her than it did to Eugene, Ae-shin or her mother.

Eugene sighed and ate as well. "I respected Lord Go Sa-hong a great deal," he said. "And Ae-shin is right."

Madam Jo put down her spoon with a decisive clack. “My father-in-law was the greatest man I ever knew. He was kind, wise and well-mannered, as a Joseon noble should be. But he was a man of his time, of his country. I can see that now. Those times and that country are gone. Now, what is left to us isn’t propriety, it isn’t our nation, it isn’t the rules that have governed our lives for so long. What is left is people. The people who will help you in times of need, even without you asking for it.” She stared straight into Eugene’s eyes then, the steel in her voice echoed by her glare. “Ae-soon told me what you did yesterday. And I saw you with my niece. Neither of you will marry another. And unlike my father-in-law, I know how fragile a life at the side of one’s love can be. Your parents did too, Ae-shin. Do you think your grandfather would have approved your father’s choice in bride?”

For a while, neither of them said anything. Eugene exchanged a look with Ae-shin, the rice forgotten on the table. There was nothing Eugene wanted more than to marry her, and he knew Ae-shin wanted it too. She had been far more affectionate towards him since his almost-death. Then Eugene looked upwards, seeing a black crow circling in the distance. Go Sa-hong, come to ruin his view of the sky?

“Mother is right,” Ae-soon said. “Who cares? The world is in shambles and nobody does a thing. If you can have happiness, you should fight for it. If grandfather were here, he would rage and rave and scold you until his face was flush, but in the end, he would forgive you. Even if it took years. Besides,” she added with a smile at Eugene, “I’d like you to be my cousin for real.”

They all chuckled at the memory of Go Sa-hong, all but Ae-shin, who stared intently at nothing, pursing her lips, fighting with her own demons. Eugene knew she loved her grandfather more than anybody else in her family, that she respected him more than any other man, even Eugene. And yet, when she looked up, she nodded.

“Let’s do it, then. Let us find our ‘happy ending.’”



It was a simple ceremony, and not at all how Eugene had pictured this wedding when he’d first indulged in an impossible daydream while drinking tea in the legation. Back then, he’d imagined Kyle being his best man, with Gwan-soo and Do-mi being there, crying, Joseph would have officiated, almost as happy as Eugene. When he would ask Ae-shin later, she would tell him that she had imagined Haman’s and Haengrang’s teary faces, most of all. None of them were there that day, for one reason or another.

A wooden cross had been erected on the field that Father Bingham used in place of a

chapel, and the sun and birds were their witnesses. Joon-young was his best man, even if he had no idea what that meant, while pretending to be Ae-shin's brother. They married under the names Go Yoo-jin and Choi Ae-shin. The only guests besides Ae-shin's family were some of the villagers who didn't know any of their history. It was a wedding full of lies and deceit, but none of that mattered. In a way, it even fit them, considering how they had first met, considering the lives they had lived. What mattered was that their vows were real, that their future was.

When Eugene looked up as they faced the guests after their vows, he saw a crow in the sky above him, and for once, he didn't think it ruined the view.



Dear Kyle,

I'm still on my picnic, and it's been quite an adventure so far. I'm sure you've heard some about it, but don't worry. I'm quite enjoying myself so far, and I'm fine. When we see each other again, I will have quite a story to tell, and you'll have a lot of material for your novel.

I don't want to give away too much of the surprise, but a while ago, you congratulated me when congratulations weren't yet in order. Well, yet. They are in order now. Drink a nice, cold, American beer on me, my friend.

Yours sincerely,

your old friend.

Fin