

The Eddies of Time

a *Tale of the Nine Tailed* fanfic

by Rodo

for *theladyscribe*

SOME TIME AGO

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Hyeonuiong asked. He looked as dapper as ever, wearing a well-tailored suit that would impress any wife except the one he’d married. Bok Hye-ja saw him carrying a box of *tteokbokki* (both mild and extra spicy). She could just imagine Taluipa tapping her foot for every second he delayed its delivery, and shuddered internally.

“Ten years, I think?” she asked, not quite sure and staring in the distance to catch her thoughts. It was a sunny day, there was no war to plague the country. Times were good. Around them, young women in their summer dresses enjoyed the first warm days of spring.

“Has it been that long?” he answered, but Hye-ja could only smile and shrug.

The longer she lived, the more she realised that time moved like a river; sometimes, it caught on something and formed eddies, slowing, swirling, stretching moments until even those who had lived for millennia remembered what it had felt like to be young. Other times, it seemed that it just kept flowing while nothing much changed, until suddenly a waterfall shattered all routine and normalcy. Lately, she had been caught in a stretch of time that flowed straight and calmly. Change was inevitable, and perhaps overdue. Maybe Hyeonuiong’s appearance was an omen.

“There’s a park nearby. Why don’t we sit down for a while? I’d love to hear how you’ve been,” Hye-ja suggested.

Hyeonuiong eyed his burden, but nodded. Perhaps he too was in need of change – or maybe just an old friend. They found themselves a bench and watched the green grass, white clouds, and well-kept trees with high-rise buildings in the distance – would she ever get used to the sight of them?

“So, how have you been?” she asked.

“Oh, same old, same old. The dead never stop coming, and my wife’s been working me to the bone.”

Hye-ja had to grin at that. “Are you playing hooky with me now?”

Hyeonuiong huffed a little and couldn't meet her eyes, evidently too embarrassed to admit it.

"It's nice to see a familiar face again," she admitted. "So I'm grateful to you, even if it means you're risking an earful from the fearsome sister of King Yeom-ra himself."

He harrumphed, then cleared his throat. "I'm going to get her something for her joints to make up for it. Ever since the Afterlife Immigration Office switched to computers, she's been having trouble with carpal tunnel syndrome, but she refuses to take a rest, or do so much as go out for acupuncture. Keyboards are a menace, I tell you."

"Oh my," Hye-ja said, trying to imagine it. No doubt it was making Taluipa even more cranky than she usually was. She was beginning to wonder if Hyeonuiong taking time out of his day to sit on a park bench with her was such a good idea – and she no longer wondered why she hadn't seen him around in so long.

"And what about you?" he asked. "What are you doing these days? Still working as a majordomo?"

Yes, but she'd been doing that for decades now, moving from household to household and family to family, never staying long enough for anybody to notice that she never aged. Hye-ja was growing weary of it, of the loneliness. Watching those couples grow old and have children tended to remind her of what she had lost.

"Actually, I think it is time for a change," she said, a split second after she'd made a decision that had been brewing for years.

"Really? What kind?"

"I think I might open a restaurant."



The Snail Bride was maybe a bit obvious a name, Hye-ja would admit, but it was who she was, and she liked to indulge in a bit of playfulness every now and again. The painted letters made her smile when she saw them, and that was reason enough. That it had the tendency to draw a somewhat more unusual clientele than another name would have was a fortunate by-product of her choice. She liked to think that her clients were much like her, cast adrift in a rapidly changing world that no longer believed in things such as household gods, spirits, or fairy tales. The traditional dishes and décor reminded her of better times – and her guests as well.

"We've missed seeing you around," Gu Shin-ju told her when he and Lee Yeon visited for the first time.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you,” Hyeonuiong would say whenever he fled from another spat with his wife.

“I haven’t had a meal this good since the Joseon dynasty,” a slightly weepy raccoon dog wearing the skin of a middle-aged man confessed.

These words might never make it into online reviews, but they warmed her heart, nevertheless. She’d missed making kimchi, pickling cucumbers, wearing beautiful *hanboks* and making others happy with the dishes she served. On some days, she even forgot the hole in her heart. Almost.



“I see you’re quite busy these days,” the young woman on the other side of the counter told her, letting her gaze roam over the occupied tables and chatting crowds. “Don’t you need any help?”

Hye-ja hesitated to answer for a moment. “I can manage,” she said. It was true, but there were times when she thought she may have overestimated herself – or underestimated the appeal of her cooking.

“I could help, you know.”

The young – or rather not so young – woman didn’t look at her when she said it. Hye-ja had seen her before. She was beautiful, supernaturally so. And sometimes, Hye-ja thought she could spot a celestial glow about her that practically exuded peace and grace. She was a heavenly fairy, most likely; one far from home.

“Are you sure? Isn’t this a bit...” Mundane? Modest? Neither felt like the right word. Fortunately, the woman answered before Hye-ja made a fool of herself by trying to find it.

“I think it suits me just fine,” the fairy said.

And so Ran started working at *The Snail Bride*, helping with the customers, cleaning tables, and serving dishes while Hye-ja taught her how to make everything from kimchi to *tteok*. Taking her in might have been one of the best decisions she’d ever made, she thought one evening, when they were both sitting in one of the rooms, eating leftover *jokbal* and drinking soju. She was no longer as lonely, day to day, as she had been before.

“Do you ever think about going back?” Hye-ja asked.

Ran mulled over the question for a moment, staring into her cup. “Sometimes,” she finally answered. “But I left for a reason; if I went back now, I have no doubt that everything would be exactly as I left it. That’s how heaven is. Down here, there is always something new, always something that changes.”

“Some would argue that there’s nothing wrong with consistency.”

Ran merely smiled her mysterious, fairy smile. “My sisters among them.”

“But not you.”

“Not me. And not you either, I think.”

Hye-ja thought back to the time when she had been happy, so deliriously happy. She hadn’t truly known to appreciate what she had at the time, even if her eventual loss had been inevitable. Her dearest husband had been mortal, and even eighty years would have been too short a time to spend together. Some change, she could have done without.

“Well, I do rather like dishwashers,” she admitted.



“I’d like to compliment the cook,” a gentleman said when he took out his card to pay. Hye-ja looked up at him. He looked nice enough, with his narrow face and salt-and-pepper hair. She remembered him coming in with a group of colleagues for a nice meal between conferences, all clad in suits.

“I’m the cook,” she answered. The way his whole face lit up made her uncomfortable, but Hye-ja kept smiling. She couldn’t quite put her finger on why this expression unsettled her; it tugged at her heart and memory in some way, making her apprehensive.

“Oh, I just have to tell you: this was the best meal I’ve ever had! You’re a wonder. And such a beauty as well.”

“Er, thank you,” she answered, somewhat taken aback. He offered her his card and she processed it and handed it back to her, still feeling that gaze on her. Maybe it was just that she hated it when men expressed an interest in her. For Hye-ja, there had only ever been one man, and he’d been dead for centuries. She’d resigned herself to living life alone, feeding on the memory of his warm embrace.

“I’ll be by again soon,” he promised as he left, still smiling that boisterous, excited smile that made her feel queasy. She smiled back, even though she was certain that her unease was obvious.

“Someone you know?” Ran asked as she walked past with a stack of empty bowls.

“No.”

“He seemed nice enough...”

But Hye-ja just shook her head. She’d had that particular conversation far too often. It was why she liked all the nine-tailed foxes that came to her door – they only loved once, and they loved deeply, just like she had. They understood her desire not to find another.

The customer returned, as he had promised. She even learned his name, eventually. Choi Tae-seok, a several-times divorcé who worked at TVC, where he headed a production department focusing on – ironically – the supernatural and unexplained. He'd dined next to all kinds of non-humans at her restaurant, and not once did any of them seem to strike him as unusual. He also kept talking to her as if she was a normal woman, boasting of his accomplishments and showering her in compliments like a preening peacock. Hye-ja wouldn't have expected it initially, but she got used to it, even started to find him endearing. Despite his behaviour having a lot in common with that of men who took things too far eventually, he never stepped out of line, never touched her improperly or presumed an unwanted familiarity. Choi Tae-seok seemed genuine in his affection, and she appreciated a man who was sincere in expressing positive emotions. And yet... that melancholy note in her heart that rose whenever he smiled at her never fully faded.



Now

“Do you know who just entered?” Ran hissed as Hye-ja was peeling garlic. For once, she didn't look angelic and radiant. Instead, she was scowling and where there was usually light, there now seemed to be darkness – even if it was more likely just an absence of her celestial glow, rather than an actual darkness permeating her aura. Still, Hye-ja forgot all about the garlic, alarmed.

“Is it bad? Do we need to—” call the police? Probably not, since Ran was unlikely to get worked up about a mere human. But maybe call Lee Yeon, or Gu Shin-ju. So far, Hye-ja's supernatural guests had mostly been very good about leaving their troubles at the door, and those that didn't she never hosted twice, but there was always someone...

“The Tenth Judge!” Ran all but spat out.

That explained the anger bubbling within her. Hye-ja had heard about the tension between the realms of heaven and hell, although she'd never witnessed it manifest personally. Ran didn't seem to mind Hyeonuiong's presence in the least – maybe because he dwelt at the border, rather than in hell proper.

“Leave it to me,” Hye-ja told her before getting up and putting away her apron. She found the Tenth Judge in their best room, sipping on a cup of plum tea. He looked harmless, if one didn't take his eyes into account. Those were dark, cold and much older

than they had any right to be. The only person Hye-ja had met who could rival that look was Taluipa. For a second, she regretted having taken over Ran's duties.

"What would you like to order?" she asked, remembering who she was.

"Ah, Snail Bride. I have heard good things about your *galbitang*."

She nodded stiffly. When she returned some time later, it seemed as if the Tenth Judge had not moved at all. Even the tea was still steaming. Hye-ja served him in silence while unbidden thoughts kept running through her mind.

"Why did you do it?" it finally burst out of her. "Why did you have to be so cruel to Lee Yeon and Lee Rang?"

The question had been haunting her ever since one disappeared from the world without a trace, while the other was left to pick up the pieces. It had been cruel – these two had deserved a better ending than the one they'd got, and the Tenth Judge could have given it to them, all it would have taken was a little mercy. But hell was not known for that, and its last judge just eyed Hye-ja over the rim of his glasses with that icy gaze.

"It's not your place to question a judge of the underworld, Snail Bride."

"Then whose place is it? Don't the people who live with your judgements have the right to know why they were made?"

"They do not," the Tenth Judge answered, taking up his chopsticks and spoon. "You people always assume that your little lives are the only thing that matters. But we see the big picture. The foxes got the judgement that they needed to receive. Nothing more, nothing less. Now leave. I want to eat in peace."

With a sigh, Hye-ja took her serving tray and left. She felt that he was wrong, of course, but a small part of her couldn't help but wonder what he knew that warranted such words. A seed of hope was planted in her heart – maybe Lee Rang's story wasn't quite over yet.



"Oh, this is too much," Hye-ja said when she saw the place. She had expected Tae-seok to ask her to a nice restaurant, considering he'd asked her to put on something special, but she hadn't expected something *this* nice. The *Coq Dansant* was one of the fanciest French restaurants in Seoul. When Hye-ja saw it, she was very glad to have chosen her best Western dress, for once. Still, she felt very underdressed.

"It's not," Tae-seok insisted. "You deserve the best. And I thought you'd enjoy something a bit different for once."

Well, she certainly felt flattered. He was always like that – too much, too fast – but still the same, utterly sincere in his affection. She had fallen for him once, and she was beginning to feel herself fall for him again, no matter how much she guarded her heart. No matter how inevitable losing him was.

The dinner was, in one word, perfect. The *bœuf bourguignon*'s rich taste was divine, and the meat almost melted on her tongue. But the best part was the company. She always wanted to smile when he was around, affectionate as a puppy and just as clumsy. She couldn't help but laugh when Tae-seok fumbled to keep a hold of his fork after he gestured a little too enthusiastically during one of his stories from work.

Then came the crowning glory: dessert, the most delicate *mille-feuille* she had ever seen. The waitress put down the plate between them as if it bore a crown, and when Hye-ja looked up again, she saw a diamond twinkling from its velvet cushion as Tae-seok presented her with an engagement ring.

"I know, I may not be the best choice of husband, given my failed marriages, but I'd like to think that they taught me how to be a better husband. Will you, Hye-ja, do me the honour of becoming my wife?"

Hye-ja didn't answer. He kept looking at her, eyes bright with hope, and she still didn't answer. Words eluded her. Until his face fell and he closed the box.

"No, it's not like that," Hye-ja protested. "I'm not saying *no*, that's not what I mean. I'm just... not ready yet. I want to be, one day. In fact, I very much hope I will be. Just not today. We barely know each other, and I'd like to take my time, getting to know you, going to dinner, or just spending the evening together at home while we both complain about work. Please?"

He still looked hurt and put the box away, back into his jacket pocket. The *mille-feuille* sat between them like a bomb. For one terrifying moment, Hye-ja thought she had ruined it all, then he took his fork and forced a smile onto his face. "I do love you, you know. And I don't want to lose you."

Hye-ja understood that only too well. She didn't want to lose him either. "And I don't want to lose you. But maybe ask ahead, the next time – and I hope that there will be one."

His smile became a little more genuine and Hye-ja's heart calmed. Maybe not all was lost. Not this time.



“Did *you* bake the cake?” Hyeonuiong asked when he spotted the pink monstrosity at the centre of the table. It dwarfed the smaller cupcakes, plates and cake forks with its three tiers and decorative ribbons made out of fondant.

“Oh dear, no. Lee Yeon ordered it especially from some upscale bakery specialising in cakes. Just the best for his love, he told me. Which is just as well. I’m not sure I could have lived up to expectations as grand as this,” Hye-ja replied.

Hyeonuiong chuckled and Hye-ja joined in. It was good to see Lee Yeon this happy – it had been centuries since they’d first met, and that was after he’d already lost his Ah-eum. She now understood why others had said that he’d seemed a shadow of his former self, when to her, he’d always seemed larger than life.

“Am I the first?”

“No. Ji-ah’s colleagues are here already. Shin-ju and Yu-ri and the little one as well. We’re just waiting on the guest of honour and her parents. Lee Yeon is fetching them.”

“Can’t have a birthday party without the birthday girl,” Hyeonuiong agreed. “And while we’re talking about Ji-ah’s colleagues—”

“I don’t think there’s anything to talk about there,” Hye-ja said, cutting him off. The last thing she needed was well-meaning advice from a man whose courtship had involved his wife stealing him away. Although that was probably a bit harsh. Despite it all and their many varied differences, Hyeonuiong and Taluipa were still married. He must be doing something right.

“Does he know?” Hyeonuiong asked. “He just seems very... smitten.”

Hye-ja followed his gaze and spotted Tae-seok, talking to the young ones while his eyes kept straying to her. She felt herself flush a little. Smitten was the right word.

“I don’t know. He should have been able to piece together some things by now, but I’m not sure how much. We’re taking it slow, anyway.”

“He doesn’t seem like a man who wants to take things slow. Reminds me of my wife when we were newly-weds.”

Hye-ja gave him one of her looks and he took the hint and dropped the topic. Hye-ja knew full well what she would have to do, eventually. That didn’t mean she had to rush into things. There was a peculiar kind of beauty to the dance of courtship, just as there was one to marriage, as Lee Yeon proved when he walked in beside his wife, followed by his parents-in-law. On the one hand, he was as proud as could be as he showed off the cake he’d bought. On the other, he was uncharacteristically insecure whenever her parents were nearby. Hye-ja chuckled as his face fell a little when Ji-ah’s father said that he might have overdone it a little with the cake.

“I’m glad to see you happy,” she told him when she finally got a moment alone with him.

“And I want to thank you again for letting us use the restaurant for this.”

“There’s no need to thank me. You’re paying me well enough already.”

Lee Yeon raised his eyebrow at her, and put on one of his best self-assured grins.

“Oh, go back and deal with your in-laws. And maybe take it easy with the cake. Too much sugar is bad for your teeth, I hear.”

It was quite amazing how his face could shift from utter self-contentment to horror within a single second, but he didn’t let the prospect of having to visit the dentist again deter him from polishing off two more pieces. Hye-ja watched them all, happily celebrating a birthday that fate had once upon a time decreed should never happen. Across the room, her eyes met Tae-seok’s and she wondered if this was what a happy end should feel like. But then again, this wasn’t the end. It was the beginning of the rest of their lives.



Choi Tae-seok was very romantic, as always. Hye-ja couldn’t help but be painfully aware of the fact while she sat on a blanket on the beach next to the Yellow Sea, with the sun setting before them in a tableau of magnificent colours and swirls. He’d brought cake, champagne and even an extra blanket that she could wrap around herself when the weather got a little chilly.

“Do you like it,” he asked, almost insecure.

She shot him a look. “Of course I do. Who wouldn’t?”

Tae-seok grinned then, taking her hands in his and warming them. He was so attentive – he was different from her husband in many ways, but this part of him had survived reincarnation. With a sudden clarity, Hye-ja knew that it was time.

“Tae-seok, I think we have to talk about something.”

“Oh?” he replied. His hands stopped rubbing hers.

“I don’t know how much you know, about what happened with Terry and the CEO, but—”

“You mean that there was something supernatural to it? You do know what I do for a living, don’t you?”

Hye-ja raised her eyebrow at him. Of course she knew. He talked about it all the time unless she asked him not to. “That doesn’t mean you believe in what you report on.”

“I don’t, generally. I just want to give people a good story. But that sickness... there was something odd about it.”

Well, vomiting up snake eggs was hardly a common symptom of normal human diseases. He’d almost died, and she’d been helpless. All she could do was hold his hand and watch him suffer, like she had centuries ago. Like she might again, if she was lucky and he stayed.

“Well, yes. Terry was an *imugi* – he was the source. But what I mostly wanted to talk to you about is that there are more supernatural creatures out there – not all harmful to humans. Such as, such as myself,” Hye-ja confessed, finally. Her heart felt lighter for it, but her body heavier.

Tae-seok froze, staring at her, mouth agape. Around them, time marched on while he simply stared, with the waves bathing in red light and lapping at the shore in a steady rhythm.

“Say something, please,” she finally begged, which shook him out of his stupor.

“You’re not human.”

“Correct.”

He blinked again, let his eyes roam over her face as if he was looking for any signs. But there were none that his human eyes could find. “So... you’re...” he trailed off, as if he was trying to find the right words without being insulting.

“The Snail Bride,” she answered.

All at once, Tae-seok relaxes, a relieved smile on his face. “Oh, that’s...”

“Not as bad as you feared?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I thought that maybe you were a nine-tailed fox.”

Hye-ja laughed out loud when she heard that. The idea was quite preposterous – she’d never met a nine-tailed fox as reserved as her, and not all were on the hunt for human lives. He’d realise that once he figured out just how many foxes he had already met.

“No, I’m not a nine-tailed fox,” she assured him. “Just a woman who is rather good at cooking and housework.” And also a snail.

He looked past her, clearly embarrassed. But not afraid.

“There is also something you should know about yourself,” Hye-ja continued.



“So, are we going to talk about the ring?” Ran asked when Hye-ja returned from her vacation.

“No,” Hye-ja said, shooing her off to work. There wasn’t much to say, really. Or there would be time to say plenty once the preparations for the wedding would start in earnest. No doubt everybody would have a great deal to say then. For now, she was happy to keep her joy private, locked in her heart like a treasure that she would keep forever.

Fin