

## How to Hide from the Heavens

By K.T. Nguyen

*This city reeks of death*, Godric thought, taking his first step into the city of Tokim.  
*Are those chocolates I smell?* Boi wondered as he peeked through the beaded curtains of his horse-drawn carriage.

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### Godric

It had been years since he last stepped foot in Tokim. Despite the public's love for the city, Godric could think of nothing else but the bile he felt building up in the back of his throat as he walked underneath the red gate and welcome sign that was at least ten times his height.

*Don't get me wrong, it's gorgeous*, he thought as he turned his eyes upwards.

Greeting the darkly dressed man sat pillars that seemed to touch the clouds. Temples floated off the ground with elaborate, marble staircases swerved between carvings of gods and paintings of heaven, and streets bustled with colors of red and gold as street performers played songs of legend. Shops lined the busy city as the vendors would shout their "daily specials" of roasted duck, thick noodles, and deliciously ripe mangos. The aroma of home permeated the atmosphere with hints of jasmine and spices as people bartered for the prices of each item.

*Every coin counts.*

Decorating the road came the carriages, a parade that rained streamers and guided by a barrage of unlit lanterns.

Godric gripped his savor tightly. *Tonight, these lanterns will be lit, and the dead will return.*

He tensed when he reached to adjust his black, serpent-like mask. It wasn't the sight of a long-lost home or the sound of songs that he had not heard for years that made him freeze, instead, it was the scent of ash and flame in the air as the residue of last night's fireworks lingered in the air. He tucked away the dark strands of hair that managed to escape his tight bun and took a heavy breath.

*Tonight, I will say goodbye tonight.*

### Boi

Boi ran through the halls of the castle. Clutching a broken jade-beaded necklace in one hand while hiding his torn robe with the other, Boi cursed as he attempted to dodge behind red pillars. He gagged at the ghastly sight of clashing colors *□ This is exactly what I said I did not want.*

As footsteps sounded down the hall, Boi quickly wrapped himself in a nearby curtain and clamped a hand over his mouth. When he felt the tangled mess of his hair that hung over his shoulder, Boi was forced to stifle a sob.

“Your majesty, please be reasonable,” an exasperated voice panted as shoes squeaked against the polished floor. “T-This is unacceptable! We must have the preparations perfect for tomorrow. What will we do if the Duke of Uriuch appears and you confuse the name of his ferret for the name of his son like last time? O-Or if the Emperor of Mizzan is stunned because you bowed to her instead of embracing her?”

Boi held back a groan, burying his face into the curtain until the pattern of trips, squeaks, and scuffles from his advisor began to disappear.

Sinking to the ground, Boi threw his torn robes aside in frustration.

“I can’t do it anymore,” Boi muttered as he took off the ribbon atop his forehead that marked him as royalty.

Boi sighed. *I need to get out for a day.*

### Godric

His first destination was the temple.

Each step that Godric took up the pristine floating stairs of the temple made his feet ache for soil. A single movement of his lifted feet on the marble felt heavier than all of his years traveling.

Godric winced, suddenly remembering how he had to leave behind his trusted stallion at the city’s stables at the gated entrance. *I hope they’re feeding him the apples he needs*, he thought, attempting to push his worries behind him.

Even though there were many religious buildings within the capital of Tokim, they were all paths that eventually led to the Crystal Palace, the hub of divine celebration for the entire nation. And now, as Godric approached the glowing building, he whistled a note of awe.

Memories flooded back to him as he gazed at the murals that lined the temple. Depictions of war, peace, benevolence, and fury were pictured as the eyes of the all-seeing gods gazed upon him. Cycles of life, death, and rebirth moved in three-dimensional sculptures as artists buzzed away crafting their faith.

It was almost enough for him to smile.

Godric remembered how his sister would take him to the temple every week. She would tell him the stories of the gods before he lost his faith and push the vitality of goodness.

“Every person is gifted,” Liu would explain. “And it is the duty of every person to use their gifts for good.”

Godric would beam, admiring how she would make an effort to make every person who crossed her path smile. In Liu’s heart, there was no such thing as a bad person, nor was there such a thing as evil, even if they riddled the legends she believed in.

Staring at the passersby, Godric approached the nearest statue and took an incense stick. He lit it with a clear mind, placing it gently into the pot before taking a deep bow.

*I hope you found your peace, Liu.*

### Boi

Boi laughed with glee as he tucked himself further into his extremely well put together disguise. Brimming with happiness, Boi dug his teeth into the juiciest meat skewer he had ever tasted as he swung his feet against the side of the road.

With his lips dripping in grease and his hands covered in sauce, Boi giggled as he tugged on his straw hat.

*I guess it worked!* He thought happily as he began to chow on a sugary, fried pastry.

Boi had always been a rebel. From cooking his own meals to sneaking out into the city at night, it seemed as though Boi rejected the royal lifestyle.

*They couldn't be more wrong*, Boi would think. He adored planning military strategy, leaped at the thought of civil engineering, and didn't even mind the luxuries of silk garments. However, he hated the idea of a tyrannical government overseeing his home.

*My home, my meat skewers*, Boi thought as he contemplated how his council had been fighting against his demands to revoke laws prohibiting street vendors in favor of "modernizing" the nation. Further, Boi took comfort in his pastry as he pondered how terrorists kept attempting to plant spies into his council despite his lack of tolerance for treason and violence in his country.

Boi sighed, he grappled with the fear of being a puppet for a long time, but tomorrow things would change.

Rising from the streetside, Boi smiled as he handed the vendor beside him a small purse of coins. "Keep the change!" He beamed, taking hold of another skewer before contently roaming away.

### Godric

His second destination was his old home.

Godric opened his eyes as he approached an expanse of blackened land before almost vomiting. The scent of fire lingered. *The scent of fire lingered.*

Godric took a deep breath, stilling himself as he watched the wind blow dust and spores across dull land.

*For you, always.*

Godric thought of his mother and father. He remembered their warm hands and delicious food. He recalled their silly banter and words of comfort as he and his sister would giggle in delight.

When it happened, Godric was almost too young to remember. But he swore to the moon and back that the memories of warm fires and family tea were not in vain. Godric bit back the memories and grasped the hilt of his saber.

“I kept my promise Liu,” Godric murmured, pressing his head against the weapon. “I kept my word without using violence...”

### Boi

Boi nearly tripped running into his favorite bakery. It had been so long since he was home.

*Honestly, I'm not sure if giving up these cakes for a month was worth world peace...* Boi thought, drooling as he anxiously watched the baker bag his fluffy round sweets. The journey overseas was exciting, new, and different. Boi was absolutely ecstatic to meet delegates and discuss matters of the “utmost importance”, but he could not deny that he longed the sweets from back home.

Boi hummed with fondness as he recalled old memories of his siblings. While he missed the feeling of family, he had not forgotten why he was left as the sole survivor of the war.

*Young. Weak. Naive.*

Boi shook his head and laughed away the thoughts. He'll find family one day. That's all he ever read about in his books.

Exiting the brightly lit shop with his desserts in hand, Boi made his way to his favorite spot in the entire world—a spot hidden from every mortal and every god.

### Godric

His third destination was the waterfall.

Tucked behind images of green foliage and running water, a small cave hid from the world and its worries hid. Godric sat in tranquility among the lotuses and the frogs. The water was warm, blue, and clear, almost as if it came directly from a mosaic. The stones created patterns of movement, ones that Godric knew would glow once it reached nightfall.

As the sun set on another day, Godric removed his mask and sat in anticipation of the yellow lanterns he would soon see reach his spot from where they were released in the upstream river.

“Oh, hello!”

Godric turned around swiftly and was greeted with a bright face. With a drenched straw hat, a large canvas bag, and long black hair, a man no more than two years his junior waved. His rosy cheeks glowed in the dimness of the cave while his smile seemed to brighten the room.

“I'm Boi!”

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“What are you doing here?” Godric asked firmly, one hand on the hilt of his saber while the other dashed to pull down his mask.

Boi smiled and reached into his bag, “Offering a peace treaty!”

Taken aback, Godric took a step backward, causing a sudden fish to splash away.

Throwing a tightly wrapped pastry into Godric’s hands, Boi took a seat on a tall stone. With crossed legs and his chin resting against the palm of his hand, Boi asked, “Honestly I should be asking you the same thing.”

Godric took a deep breath and shook his head.

“Finding peace? Hiding from the heavens?” Boi asked lighting, tearing away a piece of pastry and throwing it into the water.

Godric paused, “Something of that sort.”

Boi grinned, “I guess that makes us one and the same!”

Godric took a look at the pastry he held in his hands before quietly shredding away the paper that wrapped it. He pondered the baked good as if considering its danger before removing his mask and tearing away a piece with his teeth.

“It’s good.”

Boi beamed, “I know! I just got back from a foreign trip and I had to stop by. King Bakery has been my favorite place ever since I was a kid.”

With slow bites, Godric began to rotate the baked good in his hands, examining the item as if he had never seen anything like it.

“Are you new to the city?” Boi asked, splashing the puddles of water with the soles of his shoes.

A pause. “No,” Godric answered, his voice hollow. “I grew up here. I only came back to make amends.”

Boi thought to himself for a second. “Ah, I guess I’m the one that took your spot then,” He smiled. “I came here only recently, I guess we just missed each other.”

The pair sat in silence as darkness slowly began to overtake the cavern. As the sun dimmed, sudden smears of purple, red, and pink began to streak the sky. It was as if a deity himself came from the heavens to wave hello.

Godric pointed towards clouds that began to form from behind the waterfall. “The pillars of earth.”

Boi nodded, “The pillars of the earth.”

From there, Boi couldn’t help but admire Godric’s stoicism. Despite his cold face and shoulders that held years’ worth of tension, Boi found comfort in his steadiness. Perhaps it was that in a world where everyone seeks faith, it felt pleasant to have someone who could hide from the heavens with him.

“They let the dead come back.”

Boi perked at the sudden comment. “Excuse me?”

Godric nodded towards a cascade of glittering lights that were making their way closer to them through the waterfall. “The lights are to guide the dead. The pillars of the earth are their bridge.”

Boi watched as lanterns began to approach the cave. Steady as the sounding of a gong, the lights began to flow into the pool of water and illuminate the cavern.

Without thinking, Boi offered Godric his hand. “Let’s say hello to the heavens.”

Godric felt a slight tug on his lower lip as he set down his saber and mask, taking hold of one of the floating lanterns. Taking Boi’s hand, he let the younger guide them outside the cave to greet the stars.