Mateo lost all sense of balance as he fell to the forest floor. He watched in raw horror at the way his lifeless body swayed with the howling wind, how moonlight reflected off his dead, tear-streaked eyes staring upwards, how his limp body’s facial features held one of pain.

Memories made of hatred flung back into the buck’s conscious; he remembered befriending some men at a bar, their insistence on watching a meteor shower outside, then being beaten to a bloody pulp while punches, kicks, venomous words and homophobic slurs pelted him. At some point, one of the larger brutes decided to pluck his antlers off and ‘keep them as hunting trophies’, and the agony caused by it caused Mateo to black out.

At twenty years of age, they murdered him. They hung him from a tree.

The screaming finally bellowed from the buck’s sore throat. Mateo held his head as nonexistent tears welled in his eyelids and streamed forth. Cries of agony echoed across the dark forest, unheard by anyone over the howling winds on the corporal plane. Mateo sobbed into his palms for what felt like hours, unaware that the wolf from earlier had walked up to stand beside him. He gently placed a paw on his trembling shoulder. The consoling gesture—though cold to the touch—felt kinder than expected. Those fingers rubbed circular motions along the back of Mateo’s right shoulder blade.

He remained silent for some time. He simply let Mateo grieve.

The very next time the buck opened his eyes, the scenery had changed. No doubt thanks to the otherworldly canine doing his best to comfort him. The tall tree (and the rope hung around his corpse’s neck) vanished without a trace, instead replaced by a moonlit meadow containing the softest grass Mateo had ever felt, as well as several surrounding bushes of red carnations, each blooming crimson and green beneath a veil of stars and a Harvest Moon.

“This place…” he momentarily forgot about his raw emotions, if only for a while. “It’s so quiet and…beautiful.”

“I like visiting this place whenever I have the chance,” the wolf casually explained without stopping his comforting caresses. “Most souls I speak to are more focused on regaining their own mortality, begging me as if I’m generous, and it annoys me. But you, *cervatillo*, you looked like you needed a change of scenery.

“Souls?” Mateo realized without looking up at the pale-furred wolf. “If…If I’m dead, then that would make you…that would make you Death, right?”

“Straight up,” the canine confirmed in a solemn hum.

“Not rhetorically or…or theoretically?”

“Hehe, neither of those,” he chuckled lightly. “I am simply Death, and as you have probably figured out by now, I have come for you.”

“What’s…what’s going to happen to me?”

“The answer is simple, really: you’re coming with me to the afterlife,” Death proclaimed, only to then paused for a moment and smirk warmly down at Mateo. “I don’t do this often either, but I feel bad for the way you died. It isn’t your fault the world is full of people who hate someone for being…different. So, I’ve decided to do something a little unprecedented for my role as the Grim Reaper: I’m not going to reap you just yet.”

Mateo’s ears perked all the way high, to the point he stood up and faced the wolf again. He wiped the tears from his eyes and cleared his throat. “You…You’re not?” He asked incredulously.

“Not yet,” Death clarified, “Instead, I’ll help you fulfill one thing from your bucket list.”

“Bucket list?” Mateo cocked his head.

“Yes, bucket list,” the wolf pulled out one of his scythes to examine the blade, or perhaps its reflection. “It’s that mental list all you mortals carry with you to the grave and is full of what you want to do at some point later in life. Sometimes, it’s to see another city or country. Other times, a mortal wishes to fulfill some achievement. I often see these bucket lists after I collect a dead person’s soul, and yours is no exception.”

Mateo thought over what the items of his bucket list contained. He’d rarely left the sanctuary of his town, yearning since cubhood to see the world. He wished to visit Far, Far Away for himself one day, sail each of the Seven Seas, possibly visit a wizarding school or find the legendary Library of Babel. So much to do. Yet the one thing he always wanted to try was…

Mateo tried his best to not blush. He glanced away from Death, doing his best not to imagine what the wolf looked like beneath that black cloak shrouding his tall form. He dared not to think about the handsome canine’s jawline, or how deeply red those ruby eyes reminded him of the carnations at their feet. He failed though. The fact that Death smiled warmly at him caused his knees to buckle like a bashful schoolboy.

“Then…Then you know what I want, don’t you?” Mateo asked the specter.

“Hehehe, I sure do, *cervatillo virgen*,” the wolf replied, long tongue licking his chops.

“I-I don’t mean to offend you Señor Muerte,” Mateo quavered. “See, I-I’ve never had the chance. I live in a conservative town, everyone knows everyone, all I could do when I was alive was imagine what it’d be like for a strong, handsome man like you to sleep with me, but—Oh no, I’m sorry. I’m sorry if I’m offending you right now by implying that you’re gay like me—”

Death placed a gentle finger on his lips, silencing the young buck.

“Shhhh. Do not worry yourself,” he simply said. “My biggest problem with mortals is how they don’t take the time to enjoy what they have. Do us a favor and don’t let your fears prevent you from enjoying our carnal desires, Mateo.”

“Y-You mean…?”

Death nodded with a simple smirk. “So then,” he chuckled, “what are you waiting for?”

Like that, I didn’t know the answer. Instead, I acted. Within seconds, our lips connected in an earth-shattering kiss.