

THE
SILENCE
OF
BONES

JUNE HUR



Feiwei and Friends
New York

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*To Eomma and Abba—thank you for offering me the freedom
and encouragement to pursue my love of writing.*

THE CAPITAL LAY deep in stillness.

By morning the dirt road usually clamored with life outside Changdeok Palace: women crowding fish stalls, farmers carrying produce, scholars garbed in silk robes, and monks with prayer beads strung around their necks. And there would always be a mob of children, faces burnt and glistening in the sticky heat, chasing one another down the street. But not today.

“Do you suppose the rumors are true, Officer Kyön?” Rain pitter-pattered against black tiled roofs as I lowered the satgat over my face, allowing the drops to dribble down from the pointed top and off the wide straw brim. “Whispers that the king was assassinated.”

Mud squelched under boots as police officers trudged ahead.

Officer Kyön, the last officer in line and youngest of all, sent me a fierce look over his shoulder. “Watch what you say. The capital is nothing like your countryside.”

He was referring to Incheon Prefecture. A few months had passed since I’d left home, brought to the capital to be trained as a police damo, an indentured servant-of-all-work.

“But, eh, I’ll tell you this much.” Officer Kyön eyed our gray surroundings as he adjusted the sash belt over his black robe. “When King Chōngjo died, there came a terrible noise of weeping from Mount Samgak, and rays of sunlight collided, then burst into sparks.”

“An omen?” I whispered.

“A bad omen. The old order has passed and the new will come with a river of blood.”

The king was dead, and our lives were going to change. I had

learned this while serving wine to police officers, eavesdropping into the accounts of politics and treachery that oftentimes left me over-excited. It was all I could think of, even as we were journeying to a crime scene, summoned there by the inspector.

“Let me tell you something about the capital, newcomer. The one thing everyone wants is power. To gain it or to stabilize it.” He clucked his tongue and waved me away. “What use has a damo to know such things? No woman should talk as much as you.”

Annoyance pinched at me as I followed in his shadow. He was right, of course—though I did not yet consider myself a woman. I was only sixteen. Still, I’d learned that among the seven sins a woman could commit, one was talking excessively. A man could even divorce his wife because of her chattiness.

I blamed Older Sister for my longing to know more. She was unusually learned for a servant, with vast knowledge of Buddhist and Confucian verses; she would always try to hide it from me and the villagers. I would tug at her long sleeve, asking her to tell me more, but she would pull away and say, “It is better for you not to know these things. Do not stand out, do not be so curious, then you will have a long life, Seol.” I had resented her for this, though now I understood her better. The longing for knowledge only got me into trouble these days.

“You there.”

I looked ahead. Inspector Han stood in the near distance, watching me from beneath the wide brim of his black police hat. The string of beads threaded on the chin strap trembled in the gusty rain. Behind him was his team of men, who must have arrived at the scene before us: two officers, a coroner’s assistant, a legal clerk, and a police artist. I hurried toward the inspector while the six officers who had traveled with me exchanged information among themselves, murmuring in my periphery:

“Found by a watchman.”

“When?”

“He was patrolling the South Gate, and at the end of his watch, there she was.”

I gathered my hands before me and bowed to Inspector Han, deeper than was necessary. He was one of the few worthy enough to see the top of my head. He was to me the great spotted leopard from my village: the speedy and well-muscled hunter who excelled at climbing and jumping, and in slipping silently through the grass with scarcely a ripple.

“You called for me, Inspector,” I said.

“Have a look at her.”

He gestured at a lump a few paces away. I walked into the vast shadow of the wall that enclosed Hanyang, the capital of Joseon. Its height blocked out the sight of mountains, and it was so thick that an invader might take a thousand years to chip through the massive stones. Yet dangerous as the world outside the fortress was, clearly danger lurked within as well.

My stomach turned to water as I stood before a young woman. She lay sprawled, drenched in rain, her face turned to the ground. Her long dress and jacket of a silky ramie cloth, the hem and sleeves richly embroidered with floral patterns, marked her as a noble.

“Roll her over,” Inspector Han ordered. “We have yet to see her wound.”

I stepped over the corpse, crouched, and grabbed her shoulder. This was why the Capital Police Bureau kept female servants like me: I was an extension of the officers, my hands used by them to arrest female criminals and to examine female victims. An inconvenience for the police, and yet men were forbidden from touching women who were not directly related to them. It was the law, Confucius’s law.

As I flipped the corpse around, her voluminous skirt whispered and I almost jumped back when her long, soggy hair clung to my sleeve. *Don't yelp.*

I closed my eyes, panic thrumming in my chest. Never had I touched a murdered corpse before, having worked at the police bureau for only a few months. I sucked in a deep breath and peeled the damp strands off me, then forced my gaze down again. Blood stained her white collar. A deep gash with puckered edges stretched across her pale throat. A cloudy film covered her eyes. And a bloody cavern was dug into her face, a staring hole like that of a skeleton where her nose once was.

“Stabbed in the neck,” Inspector Han said. He gestured to the tassel-like ornament tied to the victim’s skirt. “No one has stolen the norigae, and the jewel pin is still in her hair. This is no robbery. What is that under her left shoulder?”

I lifted the shoulder. A small, bloody knife with a silver handle . . .

I looked back at the norigae hanging from the victim. Upon closer examination, I noticed there was a silver paedo ornamentally knotted to the norigae, and it was missing a knife. My hands moved of their own accord, taking the murder weapon and slipping it into the turquoise stone-encrusted sheath.

“It belonged to her,” the inspector whispered, a frown in his voice. “Give that to the clerk.”

I did so, stunned that the victim’s own decorative knife had resulted in her death.

“Now, look for her identification tag.”

“Neh.” I patted the corpse, buried my hand into her skirt, and discovered a yellow tag of poplar wood. By law, everyone in the Joseon kingdom had to carry one. There were characters engraved onto the wood, likely indicating the bearer’s name, place of birth, status, and residence—but I couldn’t say for sure, for to me words were brushstrokes

with no meaning. It was likely Hanja, classical Chinese writing, the official script of our kingdom, for what else could it be? Our native script, Hangul, seemed to have more circles and straight lines.

Placing the tag in the inspector's outstretched hand, I looked up, wanting to see his reaction to whatever name was written. But my gaze only managed to reach his chin, for I knew not to hold the stare of my superior. I still didn't even know the color of Inspector Han's eyes.

"Lady O, daughter of the Cabinet Minister O, and only nineteen years old."

A murmur rose among the officers. "Pity, gone at such a young age," someone said. "I'll wager her father's enemy killed her. Members of the Southerner faction like him have one too many rivals . . ."

As they shared their low-voiced speculations, I dragged the corpse toward Officers Kyōn and Goh, who were holding a wooden stretcher, waiting for me. No one else but I, the damo girl, was permitted to move the female corpse.

I clenched my teeth against the ache in my chest. In the past few days, an unusually high number of corpses had been carted in, the bodies of servants and peasants. Officers had looked upon their deaths as casually as they would butchered meat. But it was different now. The blood of a noble shocked them.

Another tug, and the sickly-sweet odor of death drifted into my nostrils. A smell that shouldn't have surprised me. I'd hunted rabbits and birds before with an arrow. I'd helped skin them too. But this, this odor seemed half mold, half animal. With one last heave, I pulled the woman onto the stretcher, and at once I shrank away from the horrible odor.

"Senior Officer Shim, take Kyōn, question the watchmen." Inspector Han's voice resounded through the beating of rain. "The rest of you will go to all the inns, then all the houses. This cannot

have been without witnesses . . .” He paused, and then called out, “You there.”

I got to my feet, knees mud-damp. “Me, sir?”

Inspector Han cast a glance my way as he mounted his horse. “Yes, you. Follow me.”

I hurried alongside, the horse’s powerful hooves striking the ground, splashing more dirt onto my skirt and sleeves. The peasants must have heard the tramping, for they dropped to the ground, bowing head-to-mud as was protocol. Inspector Han was not only an aristocrat, but he was a military official of the fifth rank—a rank very few noblemen achieved in their lifetime. No one would dare refuse to bow to a man such as he.

But me?

I was born a servant and thus belonged to the palchön, the “eight meanest groups of people.” Our lowborn class was crowded with monks, shamans, clowns, butchers, and the like. All of us, in one way or another, were considered polluted.

Still, I imagined they were bowing to me.



Older Sister always scolded me for having the airs of a Chinese empress. Growing up, I would always clamor after attention, convinced that I deserved much more—more love, more appreciation, more kindness. How could a servant have had such thoughts?

Life as a servant should have taught me that the world was cruel, and that I did not deserve anything better. Before I’d even learned to walk, I had learned of death. Father was said to have died from starvation, and while I could not remember this, from what I’d been told, I often dreamed that I was counting his ribs. Years later, Mother had tried to leap off a cliff into the sea, only to shatter upon the

craggy shore. Then, at the age of seven, I had found Young Lady Euna of the Nam household, whom I had thought of as my playmate (though really, I was her family servant), cold and motionless under a silk blanket. But somehow my “Chinese empress” air had stuck to me like a spiky burr, until three months ago.

A patrolman had caught me trying to run away from the police bureau. Amid the chaotic shuffle of arms and feet and high-pitched screams, I’d tried to escape him as well. For on that day—the fourth day of my indenture—I had received news about Older Sister’s deteriorating health, and my need to fulfill a certain promise to her had sharpened. But how foolish I’d been to think I could get away, and the police had made sure to teach me a lesson. They had scarred me with a hot iron, a punishment from the ancient times, branding my left cheek with a Hanja character: *bi*. Female servant.

I touched my left cheek, the skin thick and rough where the wound had healed. The memory chafed at me as I followed Inspector Han, the memory of wanting to die, not knowing how to endure the humiliation. The intensity of my death wish had passed quickly, though. So long as I had a purpose—to fulfill Older Sister’s request—my life still had meaning.

Stay in Hanyang, she had begged. Find your brother Inho’s grave.

We were both convinced of his death, for he had sworn on Mother’s grave that he would write to me, no matter where I might end up in the kingdom. And I had believed him, for I *knew* him. My brother always kept his word. Yet twelve years had gone by without a letter from him. He had to be dead.

To help with my search for him, Older Sister had given me a sketch of our brother on the day of my departure to the capital. A sketch so faded and badly drawn that it had warped my own memory of him. Still, I had never left the bureau without it, making sure to

keep it safely tucked inside my uniform. I had promised to find my older brother, and like him, I always kept my word.

Gradually the memory faded, my mind distracted by the labyrinth coiled at the center of the capital—of dirt paths and alleys, cluttered by huts made of cheap wood and thatch. Peasants crumpled in fear as we passed them by. The atmosphere changed when we ventured into the Northern District, the residential quarter of high-ranking officials, nestled between Changdeok Palace to the east and Gyeongbok Palace to the west. We were surrounded no longer by desperation but by the patterned stone walls and dark-tiled roofs of neighboring mansions. The rainfall had lightened, and in the clearing air, the eight peaks that surrounded Hanyang's basin cut the sky like teeth.

“Stop here,” Inspector Han said as we arrived before the gate of a walled mansion. “What was your name again?”

“It is Seol, sir,” I whispered.

A pause, and then he asked, “Well?”

I hurried forward, tied the rein to a post, then knocked on the massive wooden doors. In the silence that followed, I wondered why the inspector had failed to recall my name. Was I that forgettable? I straightened my raven-black hair, ran a hand over my uniform. The reflection in the shimmering puddle below revealed a small face with wide lips, and what I liked to think of as eyes shaped like petals. Not “Little Tiny Eyes” as my sister called them. My chest, tightly bound, and my frame—too tall, too lanky—made me look more like a boy wearing a skirt than a woman. There really seemed to be nothing remarkable about me.

The doors creaked open, startling me into attention. A gatekeeper peeked out and looked at me from head to toe; then his gaze slammed into Inspector Han. At once he lowered his head with humility. “Inspector!”

“I have come to speak with Lord O.”

“H-he left the capital a month ago.”

“Then who is home?”

“His wife, Matron Kim. But you will have to come another time. She is ill, you see.”

“It is a matter of great urgency.”

The gatekeeper hesitated, wringing his hands, then stepped back and let us into the compound. The maid who escorted us also looked uneasy. Following her deeper into the strained silence, we traveled across the courtyard toward the guest hall: a long hanok building lined with fourteen hanji screened doors all the way to the end, heavy beams supporting the tiled roof, which flared on either side like dragon whiskers. A few paces away from this pavilion stood a gate, likely leading to another courtyard, for mansions usually had five quarters, divided by stone walls and linked together by narrow passageways.

Inspector Han paused in his steps, and I nearly walked into him. “Interview Lady O’s personal maid and report everything back to me.”

“Yes, sir.” Pushing back the brim of my straw hat, I watched him walk off until his robe of midnight blue disappeared. Not too long after, a servant passed by with a bucket of water.

“Excuse me.” I hurried over to her. “Where might I find Lady O’s personal maid?”

The woman turned her head quickly toward me. Her lips moved, but instead of words, she made a low moaning sound. I thought she meant for me to follow, so I did. She scuttled along, water sloshing out onto the wet ground. She set the bucket down under the eaves and led me through the gate beyond the pavilion, into the mansion’s inner courtyard. It was a space only women could enter, forbidden to

all men save for the most immediate male family members. The air certainly felt different here—heavier and filled with a sacred stillness.

At last, the servant woman tugged at my sleeve and pointed at a girl with plaited hair. She was pacing the grounds under the open sky, the rain now completely stopped.

“She’s the one?”

The woman nodded.

“Thank you.” I turned to face the girl, and our eyes met. I noticed immediately that she was extremely pale, strands of wet hair clinging to her temples. Sick, perhaps . . . or anxious. Afraid.

She too looked me up and down, took in the sight of my uniform—the light gray kwaeja vest worn over a dark gray dress, the blue collar and cuffs, the sash belt. Her eye caught on the scar branded into my cheek. “You’re a police damo.”

My face burned as I arranged my hair over the mark. “Yes.”

“What do you want?”

“I come bearing bad news . . .” I wondered how I might inform her gently, but there was no gentle way to share that someone had sliced her lady’s throat. “Your mistress is dead.”

I waited for her trembling and tears, but the closer I studied her, the more she left me confused. I couldn’t tell whether she was sad or not, whether she was too shocked to show emotions, or whether her emotions were too detached to register on her face.

“Dead,” she said, her voice flat.

“I’m sorry.” I explained the circumstance of her death as I understood it. Then I paused, wondering how to proceed. “You are the personal maid, so . . . so no matters regarding her could have escaped your attention. Tell me when the mistress left the house.”

“I don’t know. I woke up early to see if she had a good night’s sleep, but I could not find her anywhere, so I raised the alarm.”

“I see . . . And did she have any enemies?”

Her silence stretched on for too long. “I broke the rule.”

I had begun my questioning only because Inspector Han had ordered me, but now interest raced through me like fire over hot oil. Curiosity was the one thing I couldn't resist. “The rule?”

“The rule taught to all servants.”

That I knew too well. *I have a mouth, but I mustn't speak; ears, but I mustn't hear; eyes, but I mustn't see.*

“You heard something,” I said. “Or saw?”

“I saw. Something I shouldn't have seen.”

“What was it?”

I waited a long time for her answer. She stared and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she thought. “One night, without thinking, I opened my mistress's door and looked in . . . there was someone else there. It was dark and I couldn't make out the figure, but I knew it was a man. He jumped up and ran out through the back door. I was so embarrassed I ran away myself.”

“When did this happen?”

“A week ago,” she said. “And there was a letter.”

My thoughts swung around. “You read?”

“My mistress taught me.”

“And you were willing?” Not many indentured servants would be willing to learn, even if they had the opportunity. What was the point in becoming literate if the skill could never be put to use?

I studied the way she held her chin high and said, half to myself, “You don't wish to be a servant.”

“I was satisfied with my position, but my mistress . . .” She hesitated again.

“You may tell me.”

“My mistress said, ‘I do not believe anyone is born to be an

indentured servant. I look at you and I see a sister.” The slightest tremor shook her lips, her eyes locked on mine. “Why are we talking of this? You came to investigate her death.”

I cleared my throat, curiosity still bubbling in my mind. A literate servant was unheard of. Even scandalous. “The letter. What did it say?”

“It was short. I remember it well.”

I waited. “So . . . what did it say?”

Her gaze did not waver from me, as though she’d summoned all her will not to look away. And in the steadiest voice, she recounted the words as though she’d recited it countless times. “It read, ‘Dearest, My loyalty to you is as solid as stone, and my love for you still unshakable. Never doubt it. Tonight, when it is the Hour of the Rat, come to me at our usual place.’ This is the letter she received yesterday morning before . . .”

In the silence, I finished her words. “Her death.”

“Yes.” She straightened her shoulders. “Please, if there is no more, I’d like to be alone.”

“I understand,” I said. Then, unable to stop myself, I asked, “What is your name?”

“Soyi,” she replied, giving me a long stare. Her eyes were like black pools that I didn’t want to look at, feeling as though something lurked beneath the stillness.

“Thank you, Soyi.” I shifted away, ready to find my way back. Yet I felt her behind me, as if we were not yet finished. I turned and asked, “Where is the letter?”

She didn’t look at me this time, speaking instead to the rain-wet ground. “The letter ended with a request. ‘Burn this.’”



Under the gathered clouds, I followed Inspector Han down the muddy street, reporting to him my interview with Maid Soyi. Or rather, not to *him*, but to his shoulders. They were like ancient rocks smoothed by blue silk. He was only twenty-seven years of age, yet something about his presence made him seem much older and wiser.

“And last, she shared with me a letter written to Lady O. A letter written by the lover,” I said, and recited the letter word for word. When I finished, I added, “I wondered how it was that Maid Soyi knew how to read, and she explained that Lady O had personally taught her. After that, we parted.”

“It is true, you do have a good memory,” Inspector Han said. “You will be expected to assist more often in collecting information from women.”

“Of course, sir,” I replied, barely able to contain my thrill. To be of use to a man like him! “How can you tell, sir, if someone isn’t telling you the full truth?”

“Why do you wish to know?”

“I’m curious, sir.”

“Curious.”

A single, curt word, and he said no more. His silence stretched, and a ball of nausea sank into the pit of my stomach. *Do not speak to your superior without permission, Seol. How difficult is that?* my sister had reprimanded me several times. I had felt the same knots of tension when in her presence; a weighty quietude packed with secret thoughts.

Our tense journey finally ended when we arrived before the Capital Police Bureau, an intimidating establishment I’d mistaken for the palace itself when I first laid eyes on it, with its elaborate pagoda gate, wooden beams painted red, and tiled rooftops.

“When you tell a lie, Damo Seol, how do you feel?” Inspector Han said unexpectedly.

It took me a moment to realize he expected a reply. “Extremely nervous, sir.” *Just as I felt a moment ago.*

“Anxiety is a potent trigger. It leaves clues all over you. The pattern of your speech, the color of your cheeks, the movement of your hands.”

I remembered Maid Soyi’s eyes, those black, unknowable pools. I dared myself to ask a last question. “What about the eyes, sir?”

“They break away sometimes. Hiding secrets makes an individual flighty.”

“What if they stare intensely at you in a very unusual way?”

He swung his leg over the saddle, and for a man of his height and build, he landed on the ground with the lightest *crunch*. “There is a special breed of liars who will lock their eyes on you. They are those who know how to manipulate and control.”

Before I could say anything more, he handed the reins over to a manservant, then strode into the bureau. I paused before it and felt myself fold up; my head lowering, my shoulders drawing in, one hand hiding under the other. I shrank into my shell every time I beheld the invisible warning on the gate: *Be careful. Cross no one. Obey always.*

Cautiously, I passed through the gate. Everyone was bustling about the courtyard. A servant boy with a dirty face pushed a cart, its wooden wheels whining; a line of maids passed him by, holding trays of side dishes, neatly arranged; two men appeared—Officers Goh and Kyōn—carrying a wooden stretcher with a corpse hidden beneath a straw mat.

“Inspector Han! You have arrived!” Kyōn said with a simpering air.

“What is it?”

“The commander wishes us to move Lady O to the examination room.”

“Do so.” Then Inspector Han looked over his shoulder. “Seol, assist them.”

I stared at the stretcher, at the sight of lifeless gray fingertips left uncovered. *Keep it away from me*, I wanted to say. But I kept silent before Inspector Han. His waiting gaze upon me, I wrung my hands as the odor of death reached my nose again, and at last dragged my feet forward, if only to show him my obedience.

I followed the officers into the drafty room filled with the scent of vinegar and decay. On a stand was an open book, an illustration of the human body. Next to it, a table with tools: knife, ruler, bowl, needle, a silver pin. My attention lingered on the pin. The last time I was in this room, a corpse had been brought in with witnesses claiming he’d died from drinking poison. I had watched the coroner’s assistant inserting the pin into the corpse’s mouth, then the anus. Apparently, the pin turned black in the case of poisoning.

“Servant!” Kyōn called out. “Lift this corpse onto the table. The head needs to point south and the feet to the north.”

The moment I grabbed and lifted the stiff corpse, my skin crawled. I had carried people before, like when I’d piggybacked my friend while playing, but her weight had felt different. She had felt alive. A corpse was nothing but a slab of meat. Death was heavier. When at last I dragged her onto the wooden table, I stepped back and waited for my stomach to settle.

“Get used to it.”

I looked over my shoulder and found that I was alone with Officer Kyōn, the other man gone. “Neh? Get used to what, sir?” I spoke to him in honorific, using the polite form of the language, as if he were a venerable soldier. But he was a low-ranking police officer, hardly two years older than me.

“You saw all those corpses this week.” He picked the book off the stand and flipped through the pages of calligraphy and human body illustrations, stopping at the drawing of organs. “Commander Yi moved most of the corpses to another region to avoid autopsy. The rest were buried in surrounding hills, their killers acquitted or lightly punished. Do you know why?”

This was no trick question. I was always observant, watching everything from the corner of my eye. “The victims were all lowborn.”

He snapped the book shut, sending a cloud of dust into a ray of blue-gray light. “Come closer, and I’ll tell you a secret,” he said. I took a few hesitant steps toward him, and because he was taller than me, I had to tilt my head as he whispered close, “They were all Catholics.”

The hair on my neck rose. “Catholics . . .” I kept my voice as low as his, the word sounding too treacherous. They were followers of the Western teaching, and any teachings from the West were forbidden and could result in an execution.

“The victims were all Catholics, so no one in the bureau cared. But the killing of Lady O, now . . .” Officer Kyōn shook his head, and a humorless chuckle escaped him. “You will suddenly find Inspector Han no longer so indifferent.”

I turned to Lady O, her unblinking gaze fixed upward, along with the staring hole in her face. Someone had killed her in the wide open, so close to the patrolling guards. This someone could have immediately run away to avoid any chance of capture, but instead had crouched before the corpse and had taken the time to cut off her nose. I took a step back.

I had hoped that Lady O would be the first and last murder victim I’d have to touch. But after what Kyōn had said . . . Gods, would I have to handle more corpses?

THE NEXT DAY, on my errand to deliver a letter for a police clerk, I took the long way around until I found what I was looking for. It was still there, the wanted poster of Priest Zhou Wenmo pasted onto the clay wall of an inn. Straw roof thatching cast a shadow over his thin face and eyes drooped down at the corners.

Only two months ago, the drawing of him had portrayed a man with a pair of much smaller ears and a rounder face. His changing appearance was like a man's trembling reflection on a puddle, never the same. No one knew how he truly looked, the artists who painted him guided only by floating rumors.

But his eyes had always stayed their same shape, the saddest eyes I had ever seen.

Now I could no longer look at the priest's silent gaze without recalling the dead bodies of Catholics. Since the king's passing, I had watched death swell and push its way through the gates of the bureau, and it had seemingly failed to shock Commander Yi. As though he had expected these killings to occur.

Two siblings starved to death, locked up in a storage hut by their own father. A drowned servant, pushed into his watery grave by his master. A missing girl, last seen collecting water from the well, only to be found lying lifeless under a thornbush, killed by her aunt. Following that, seven burned corpses piled in a cart, recovered from a hut that had burned down, right after the doors had been locked by the orders of an upper-class woman.

"To execute any person is a grave matter for the kingdom," Commander Yi had said while interrogating the noblewoman in

the police bureau. “Even if your servants were Catholic rebels, the fact that they are the ruler’s subjects should have prevented you from harming them carelessly.” Her case had moved up into the hands of the Ministry of Justice for a final appeal, yet I’d heard whispers of the already-made decision: the execution of the Catholic rebels had been necessary for the good of the kingdom.

What was it about this teaching called Catholicism that terrorized the culprits enough to kill their own servants, their own children?

After delivering the police clerk’s letter to a government office on Yukjo Street, near Gyeongbok Palace, I hurried back to the bureau to finish sweeping the main pavilion as the chief maid had instructed me. But once I retrieved my broom, I paused on the way and hid by the examination room door. I’d wanted to know more about the cause of Lady O’s death since yesterday, but police protocols and the state-mandated mourning period for the king had pushed the examination to today.

Once it seemed safe enough, I inched closer, then peered through the crack in the door, drawn to look inside by the sound of solemn voices.

I shouldn’t be here, I thought, but curiosity anchored me to the spot, as did the question: Was Lady O’s death related to the other murders? Had heresy from the West killed her too?

“The crown and the left side of the head look normal,” Damo Hyeyeon observed aloud, speaking to the men, who stood with their backs turned. She was their eyes, the only method they possessed to examine the naked victim. “There is an old scar a little behind the right side of the head, beanlike in shape . . .”

Hyeyeon explained every detail, however trivial, and the men trusted her observations. Unlike me, Hyeyeon and the other damos were educated girls, possessing vast medical knowledge and skills.

Rigorously trained to become palace nurses, but having failed to achieve good grades, they had been demoted to the position of damo and would remain in this low position until they successfully passed the medical exam.

A harsh punishment indeed for bad grades.

But if Hyeyeon ever thought this unfair, not a ripple of irritation ever disturbed the surface of her countenance. Her cheeks hadn't even flushed with anger when Kyōn called her "a pretty face ruined by too-big ears." At eighteen, she had the grace and maturity of those highly respected palace nurses who served the queen herself.

"There is a single knife wound across the throat, with no hesitation marks." So calm was her voice, always so calm. "The nose has been cut off with a blade." With a ruler, she measured along the wounds and offered the lacerations' depths and widths in the measurements of ch'on and p'un.

"The knife wound was deep enough to be fatal," the coroner's assistant murmured.

"Based on the condition of the victim, and other factors like the rain and the late summer's heat," Hyeyeon explained, "Lady O's death occurred around midnight. By morning, she would have been dead for several hours already."

"Hmm. Then the murder occurred during the curfew hours," the coroner's assistant remarked, referring to the period that began an hour before midnight and ended at dawn. "Watchmen would have been patrolling nearby, yet the killer took the time to cut off her nose. Why do you think he did this, sir?"

He turned to a gigantic man standing in the room, who wore a wide-brimmed police hat that cast a deep shadow over his eyes. Only his long purple scar was visible, rippling down his red cheek, inflamed by a rash. It was Commander Yi.

“The murder was surely committed by someone with a deep grudge,” the commander said. “Let me see what it was she was clutching.”

My brows crinkled. *What?* She had been clutching something? I only remembered her fist, but had not looked closely.

A clerk presented Commander Yi with a wooden tray. A string the length of a man’s arm lay coiled there. As he examined it, I craned my neck to have a better look.

“One can see it was knotted,” Commander Yi said. “Inspector Han suspects it was a necklace, perhaps pulled off by the killer. I have officers searching the area for its ornament, if there was one.”

A restlessness rippled through my limbs. I wanted to run out and search for the ornament, which might identify the killer, but before curiosity could pull me away, I saw Hyeyeon spray lees and vinegar on the corpse. My lips parted as I watched the way the flesh reacted. Something in the substance made all the injuries more visible, making patches of purple and yellow and red blossom all over. I clutched the doorframe.

“There is a bruise around her mouth, purple in color, the shape of a hand,” Hyeyeon said.

“Someone tried to muffle her cries,” Commander Yi observed.

Since my first day at the bureau, life had turned strange. I didn’t know where I was heading, where I would end up, and I often walked around the capital without purpose. Each day ended like an unresolved case. While I could find no solution to my life, the tangle of frustration in me loosened as I watched Hyeyeon take the strangeness out of the corpse. There was a story behind every bruise and gash, evidence that—when pieced together—would surely return life back to normal.

I strained my ears, trying to better hear their low-voiced

conversation. Then a flush burned up my chest and spread across my face as Hyeyeon examined the private parts. I spun around, hearing her declare, “She is not a virgin,” only to find myself standing before Inspector Han.

“What are you doing here?”

The tips of my ears burned. “I was j-just looking. Curious, sir.”

“Curiosity seems to be your perpetual state of being. Where exactly is the end of it?”

I hesitated to answer. “I never reached the end myself, sir, so I do not know.”

The slightest smile twitched at the corner of his lips. “Tell me, damo investigator, based on all that you’ve observed, what do you think led to her death?”

“I . . . don’t know, sir.”

He nodded. After a moment, he said, “There are usually only three causes for murder: lust, greed, or vengeance. Among these three, vengeance is the most common.”

“I never knew that,” I admitted quietly.

“No, you would not have. I wouldn’t be surprised if she was killed by her family or an intimate partner. I have worked for so long at the police bureau that I find very few things to be surprising or new.” Expelling a weary sigh, Inspector Han gestured to the door. “Announce me and go.”

I announced his presence to Hyeyeon, who temporarily covered the corpse with a straw mat, and once alone, I made my way toward the main pavilion, still blushing. There, I swept the vast floor, and the repetitive swishing of the broom allowed my thoughts to drift back to Lady O. So she wasn’t a virgin; she must indeed have had a lover. *Perhaps*, I thought, *a lover with a dagger*.

I stopped sweeping and covered the end of the bamboo handle

with both hands, resting my chin there. Fog that hid the morning sun rolled in through the open gates and swam in the courtyard, leaving a sheen of dew on the massive wooden pillars and the cold, gray stones. It was as though the bureau had plunged into the deep and livid sea, a boundless space between myself and the world.

I wondered if the underworld might look like this. The home now to Lady O, and the home to my father, my mother, my brother . . .

“Hurry! Faster!”

My thoughts scrambled as voices echoed from the distance. I saw shadows, shapeless lumps behind the fog. The shadows grew larger and more distinct. It was two officers, their black robes flapping behind them as they entered the bureau through the main gate. “You there!” one of them called out. “Where is Inspector Han?”

“In the examination room.”

They ran past me, disappearing into the southern courtyard.

A complaint must have arrived. Perhaps another loose woman like Lady O, slashed to death for the sake of family honor, a crime I was coming to learn was quite frequent. Honor was everything here in the capital, more important than life itself to these nobles. I’d heard a bizarre story of a woman who had hacked her shoulder with an ax simply because a male stranger had touched it.

My thoughts wandered as I swept here and there, though mostly pulling the broom along, leaving large spaces untouched. I rarely put my whole heart into domestic chores, especially when it came to sweeping. There were more important things to do with my life than to chase after dust.

More important things? I could almost hear the chief maid’s rebuke. *Such as what, Damo Seol?*

We damos were prone to avoiding our chores or doing them half-heartedly. Once, the chief maid had sent Damo Aejung to

prepare tea, only to find her sleeping in the yard outside the kitchen with a medicine book open on her lap. She had lashed Aejung's calves as punishment, and did so with every other damo who shirked their duties. But it was the wrath of the police officers that we feared most.

When the space looked decent enough to keep me out of trouble, I dragged the broom along the courtyard toward the storage room, but I paused, hearing hurried footsteps behind me.

It was Officer Kyōn. "What are you doing just standing around?"

"Sir, I was told to sweep—"

He tossed me a coil of rope made of five braided strings, used to arrest criminals. "You're to come with us. A woman is needed."

"Where?"

He replied under his breath, so quietly I barely heard him. "Mount Inwang."

I licked my dry lips, my throat suddenly parched. Now I noticed his bow and quiver full of arrows. Mount Inwang was a place I had dreaded since I'd first heard of it as a child, the home of white tigers.

I tapped my finger against the bamboo broom handle, trying to distance myself from panic. "What is on Mount Inwang?"

He might have reprimanded me for speaking out of turn. Instead, Kyōn said, "Maid Soyi has fled."



The fog thickened by the time we rode out that afternoon, but Inspector Han had a keen sense of direction, easily leading the twenty officers and myself through Hanyang. The five-day mourning period issued by the royal court had ended, so shops were open again, vendors yelling out from their stalls as men and women streamed up and down the street.

With all this bustling of life, the capital ought to have felt less like a ghost village, but death was still heavy in the air. Everywhere around us were pale and solemn faces, and everyone was clad in pure white, the color of grief. The king had died. It was like the deadly frost of winter had already kissed the capital. Only the urchins seemed free from this spell, running through the crowd without a care.

We rode out of the fortress through the West Gate, and the road wound through a village of thatched-roof huts, then an overflowing grassland. Mount Inwang was only a half hour's journey away, but already keeping up was no easy feat. I rode on a pony named Terror, notorious for her many vices: she was a self-willed, quarrelsome, and tough little beast. Seeing her more glorious and quicker brothers charging ahead, she seemed determined to fling me off, the load slowing her down. I clung desperately to her and fixed my eyes on the officers, not wanting to lose them in the fog.

So focused as I was, I hardly noticed my surroundings. Faraway mountains unfolded, layer upon misty layer. The gentleness of the distant trees lasted only for a few paces, and all of a sudden, the forest grew tall and thick, trapping us in darkness like a cave of cruel and violent dreams. I pinched color into my cheeks, hoping no one would notice my blood-drained face.

“Search until the gong is struck, then return here,” Inspector Han's voice resounded from the front. “Now spread out!”

The torchbearers rode ahead and led us deep into the wooded base of the mountain. We combed slowly through trees and clear streams, thorns and bushes. The mist floated around us, sometimes leaping from craggy rocks. I gasped more than once. And one officer, startled, grabbed for his arrow only to see the mist drop and drag away.

The longer we spent in the forest, the farther we fanned out, and the more the isolation swallowed me up. My mind conjured growls

everywhere—in the murmuring of water, in the very rushing of blood in my ears.

What had driven Maid Soyi into such a fearful place? What did she have to hide? Or perhaps she was simply more frightened of the inquisition than she was of tigers. Witnesses—*innocent* people who had the misfortune of knowing a victim or suspect—were often imprisoned for months, beaten sometimes to death to obtain evidence.

“She’s probably cowering in a cave somewhere,” Officer Kyōn said.

I rode closer to him. The first time I’d laid eyes on Officer Kyōn, he’d reminded me of legendary royal investigators from tales I’d grown up listening to. Young men secretly sent out by the king to faraway villages to solve great injustices. He certainly looked the part: his black hair tied into the perfect topknot, revealing his chiseled face, strong jaw, distinctively edged full lips, and his athletic figure, rippling with lean muscles—all of which seemed to tell a story of bravery and honor.

I knew better now. If there was one thing Officer Kyōn had taught me, it was that brute strength was not a measure of a man’s courage. He could have muscles made of steel and yet a backbone made of mother’s milk—the only thing occupying his heart was love for no one other than himself.

As the swimming mist darkened to blue, reflecting the dimming sky, I felt no safer with Kyōn close by my side as we ascended the mountain slope. “It’s growing late,” I observed, hoping he would hear my silent question: *Should we not head back?*

“Didn’t you hear the inspector’s order? We search until the gong is struck.”

It looked like we were nearing the Hour of the Rat, though. Any later and we would be stuck outside, the fortress gates slammed shut on us. “But how are we—”

A twig cracked somewhere too close to us. Fear punched my chest as I stared to the side. “Did you hear that?” I whispered. My mind pictured Maid Soyi in the underbrush, but my heart saw only lurking teeth and claws.

Officer Kyōn gripped his bow tighter. “Lead on.”

We rode toward the sound, through countless trees, then around a large, moss-covered rock. My pounding heart slackened; it was only a deer. The creature watched us from behind the bushes, as still as a stone.

“Damn it,” Kyōn hissed, jerking the horse around. “She couldn’t have gone far. Royal guards always make their patrols around this mountain. She *has* to be nearby.”

“But why is the inspector so determined to find Maid Soyi?”

“She’s a suspect. Witnesses saw her leaving the mansion around the time Lady O ran out.”

That surprised me. I could hardly picture meek Soyi holding a kitchen knife, let alone carving the nose from the face of her mistress.

“I *will* find that bitch. No doubt I will. I’ve already arrested over fifty scoundrels while serving in the bureau. Almost as many as Inspector Han.”

I bit my lower lip to keep myself from grimacing.

“What is your life’s goal?” he asked, his voice tinged with amusement. “Let me tell you. You’ll get married, have babies, and keep on doing what you’re good at doing: serving. Serving your master, your husband, your children.” He tapped his head. “I know these things.”

“I don’t wish to do any of that, sir.”

“But you will serve. That is fact, that is your fate.”

Fate. A shackle as solid as truth—unchangeable, unmovable. On the day of my departure, my sister had told me how long I was bound by the government to serve in the police bureau, away from home, from family. *For one generation*, she’d whispered.

My entire life.

That is, I would be free by the age of forty-one, as old as death itself.

A thunder of fluttering wings filled the sky in all directions, the birds overhead taken to flight. A shriek in the distance pierced the air; a terrified horse. Officer Kyōn charged ahead, while it took me a scrambling moment to realize what was happening. I jabbed my heels into Terror's side and followed him through the thicket, over the protruding roots, branches hitting my face.

Then we reached a glade and my heart stopped. Across the stream stood Inspector Han, his sleeve blood-soaked, his hand inching toward the sword at his side. A matter of paces away prowled a tiger, a deep growl rumbling from its white-and-black-striped chest. Powerful paws with sharp claws. The beast looked as large as Inspector Han himself.

"Do not move," he said, though not to us. Past the thick cluster of leaves was a horse struggling on the ground, shaking its head as blood continued to ooze from its wounded side. And hunkered down behind the creature was Maid Soyi.

Unable to look away from the scene, I hissed to Kyōn, "Shoot it!"

A muscle worked in Officer Kyōn's jaw. Clearly he was incensed at an order from a girl, but he drew out an arrow and nocked it to his bow. As he aimed, the iron point trembled. What resolve he had, I watched falter and crumble.

"I'll do it." I snatched the weapon from him and rode out into the glade for a better aim. My motion caught the tiger's attention. *Good.* My fear had reached its climax, and another sensation flooded in, a powerful longing that churned within me: the desire to matter.

Don't think too much about your target, my sister's husband had taught me on our hunts for birds and rabbits. Don't rattle your mind with possibilities. Focus on what you want and shoot it.

In one smooth motion, I aimed and released.

The arrow whistled and flew into the tiger's side with an audible thud. It let out a roar, startling me—and startling Terror even more. The shaggy pony nearly knocked me off as she jolted, then raced into the woods. The tiger charged after us, its snarling roar shaking my bones. Despite the wound, it was fast, quickly closing the distance between us. I could almost feel fangs sinking into my shoulder.

I dropped the bow and kicked Terror's side. *Faster. Please go faster.*

Suddenly, Terror rose on her front legs, tossing me into the air. Then I was rolling down sloping ground, wrapped in a whirl of green and brown. A sharp edge sliced me. My head struck something hard and pain burst. I fell into darkness.



Shadows swam in my head.

I was in a boat, floating on black waters under the night sky. My hands scrubbed, my neatly braided hair tied with a yellow cloth strip, I sat across from my brother and sister on a wooden seat.

“When will we be home?” My questions were endless. My brother's patience with me always impressed people, the calm way a boy so young would answer, weighing the inquiries of his younger four-year-old sister with solemnity.

“When we finish crossing the sea.”

“Why is there so much water?”

“Because ten thousand rivers are flowing through.”

“That's a lot of rivers.” I looked out onto the vastness ahead, and all I saw was a lonely stretch of darkness punctuated by a single moon.

“Listen.” My brother, my orabeoni, leaned out from the edge of the boat. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” I asked.

“A heartbeat in the sea.”

I strained my ear against the lapping waves, and I watched the foam crashing. “What is down there, orabeoni?”

“Turtles, jellyfish, shrimp. Many creatures.”

“Are they kind?”

“Yes, they are.”

I dipped my fingers into the waves, and gradually, I saw the land so close and yet so far away, illuminated by the moon and the glow of lanterns. Home appeared to me like an unreachable land of fairy maidens. And when I turned to tell my brother this, he was gone.



A breeze woke me. Bits of soil clung to my lashes, falling into my eyes when I blinked up at the sky. It was night, and I was alone and surrounded by ancient trees, hundreds of them. I struggled to my feet and all my bones cried out in protest. Knife-sharp pain sliced my head, and as I waited for it to ease, I glanced around.

Right, left, front, back. Each direction looked the same—rocks, branches, and rustling leaves.

I needed to escape this mountain. Low twigs and thorns caught my skirt as I stumbled, and in the wind, the swaying shadows of trees grasped for me. Desperate, I scrambled down the slope like an ant—tiny, insignificant, lost in a world of giants.

The slope led me to a stream and I pushed through the icy water, climbing over broken granite slabs and trying to keep my skirt from getting soaked. Then my feet slipped. My knees and hands landed on the slimy rocks, sending forth an explosion of icy water. I remained on all fours, too stunned to move, and slowly, as the cold bit into me, a feeling of helplessness pierced deep.

Was everything I had thought about myself—that I mattered—nothing more than a story in my head?

There's no time for sulking. Move on, Seol. I was good at doing that.

I took off my sandals and stepped barefoot from rock to rock, but the tears burning my eyes made it difficult to see clearly. I jumped too far, my feet slipping off the edge, and I was down again. The river ripped the sandals out from my grasp. “No!” I cried as they rushed away in the black current, sandals woven for me by my sister. The only thing I had to remember her by.

Move on.

My teeth were chattering and my lips blue by the time I reached dry land. I pushed into the trees again, twigs and stones pricking my bare feet, and the raw weather rattled my bones. I needed a fire. I pictured how I'd seen other servants spark them with rocks, not a skill I'd ever learned. All the while, thoughts of the tiger stalked through my mind. The wind through the trees was its breath, the crunching forest floor the scrape of its claws. Its growls rolled from streambeds.

The mountain was a tiger, and it was hungry.

I went on that way, not knowing the hour or direction. What felt like an eternity later, I saw light—the flicker of torches. I halted, keeping low as the figures moved among the trees, while behind them an ox pulled a wagon laden with crates. The torchbearers were quick-footed, five in all, big, lean men in dusty cotton clothing. In their midst was a gentleman on horseback, in a silk robe and a tall black hat. Beads of nobility were strapped around his chin.

All the men held clubs and swords. Guards, I considered . . . or bandits.

I slowly rose to run, but a twig snapped beneath my step. Holding

my breath, I watched one man turn in my direction, then gesture quickly. Without warning, a shadow of another man I hadn't noticed charged toward me, and his rough hand grabbed my arm, hard fingers digging deep as if to snap bone. The man dragged me over to the group. I could barely walk, and when he released me, I fell to the ground, prostrating myself before the gentleman on horseback. "Have mercy, sir!"

The gentleman slid off his horse, and as my head was lowered, I only saw his leather boots close to my hand.

"Do get up."

The tone made me look up. Under the starlight, I saw a long face, a strong jaw, and high cheekbones. The face of a woman.

"Now," she said, "what are you doing out here all alone?"

I was at a loss for words. What was *she* doing disguised as a man?

"You shouldn't venture onto this mountain alone. Come, we will accompany you to the main road."

I followed them, feeling much safer than wandering about alone—a group of people and a woman. A *woman*.

"You look at me strangely." She must have felt my stare on her disguise. "When I go on a long journey, I prefer to dress as a man. It is safer and draws less unwanted attention."

My lips formed into a silent, "Oh."

When we reached the road, I looked ahead, the capital waiting for me somewhere in the dark distance.

"Where is your destination?" the lady asked, standing still, waiting for my answer as her servants led the ox away from Hanyang.

It did not take me long to think of where I wanted to be. *Home*. The quaint hut I'd come to live in after escaping our first master and his plague-ridden household. The place Older Sister, her husband, and

I had lived for nearly a decade afterward as *napgong nobi*, outside-resident servants. We'd lived in relative freedom, except for when our second master pestered us for our annual tribute payment, so most of my days had been spent in freedom. I remembered those days so vividly, so fondly: the bright blue sky, the *mem-mem-mem* of the clear-toned cicadas. And sleeping without the fear of being rudely wakened, safe in the shadow of Older Sister's back turned to me. Sometimes in the winter when snow fell, she would discreetly turn and tuck the straw mat closer around me. But in Hanyang, I felt like a slave, and as dispensable as one. No one cared for me; they had left me for dead on the mountain of tigers.

"You are running away, aren't you."

A coldness blew right through me. "No, I would not dare, mistress!"

"We passed by officers earlier on the mountain, though they are likely now long gone. They said one of their damos had gone missing. And by the mark on your face, and from your uniform, you must be she."

I touched my scarred cheek, which burned with the memory of the glowing red iron, the sizzling of my skin.

"Go on. Run," she said. "Do not stay if that is not what you wish."

Her words left me stunned. "Why would you let me go, mistress?"

"Because I do not believe in indentured servitude. Your lower class was created by those who wish to oppress."

I nearly tripped over my own feet. Someone else had said this too. Before I could remember, the ox let out a loud groan and suddenly the wagon tilted. Boxes crashed to the ground, and one splintered open. Rolls of silk spilled out, and from them, square parcels that tumbled in the dark. *Books?*

I moved to help collect them, but the woman called in a sharp voice, "Just stay where you are."

I froze as the servants lifted the materials back onto the wagon. “Just a rut, my lady,” one man said. “Nothing is damaged.”

Yet I felt the eyes of the men on me. Their knuckles white, clubs tightly clutched as they shifted toward me. But the lady raised her hand, and they backed away, just as tigers might withdraw from fire.

“What did you see?” she said to me.

For a moment I fought confusion. Just books, meaningless to me. But I felt the test in her voice.

“I saw nothing at all,” I said.

She nodded, her approval gentle. “You may go on your way now.”

I wondered if this was a trap, for I couldn’t understand why a noblewoman would be so kind. I crafted my response carefully. “I cannot run. There is nowhere for me to go.”

“You have a home.”

“Home is the first place slave hunters are sent,” I said. And it was far from my brother’s grave. My promise had to be kept. “So I have no home now. I must be what I was bred to be.”

“And what is that?”

“A servant. I belong to the police bureau, so I should return. I will be obedient,” I assured her.

“A servant, you say. Look at your wrists; I see no master chained to them.”

“I am branded.”

“Old scars can be burned off.”

My heart beat, low and strong. Her talk was dangerous, rebellious, yet sweet as honey. “Burned off?”

“No one’s fate is written in stone, child.” She accompanied me farther down the road, which cut through a field of grass swaying in the breeze. Soon she would return to her servants and I’d have to walk this path alone. “Slave Jang Yeongsil, he knew this and ascended to

officialdom as a renowned engineer in the time of King Sejong. Even in ancient times, many slaves rose up to become generals because of their courage. No one was *born* into their glorious position, just as no one is born to be a slave.”

Who was this woman? I watched as she moved to tuck something back into her robe. A beaded necklace bearing an odd ornament: two wooden pieces crossing one over the other. A crooked and misshapen cross.

THREE

I SAT ON the edge of the pavilion veranda, surrounded by the familiar high walls of the police bureau. The clouds above me hid the stars and the sliver of moon, the midnight sky pitch-black, while the trilling of a lone bird echoed somewhere in the east.

My entire body burned with pain, but my head ached the most, half my hair crusted with blood. But Hyeyeon said that I'd be fine, that she'd bring her medical supplies to clean and stitch it up. So I waited for her with a cloth pressed against the wound.

I couldn't move even if I'd wanted to. The weight of those last hours—when I'd woken up alone in the forest and journeyed all the way back to the bureau, barefooted, with the mysterious lady—pinned me to my spot.

“So she came back,” an officer said as he passed by, slowing down to glance at me. “Thought she'd run away, like last time.”

“You should have seen her return, Officer,” the chief maid replied, walking alongside him with a rattling tray of cups. “Her hair was hanging by her face, and her dress—her dress!—it was soaked and torn like a beggar's.”

“Aigoo.” The officer sounded hardly interested.

Trying to block out their voices, I pressed the cloth and my hand against my ears. But I could still hear them, distant though they were now.

“Look at her, she is likely furious. Left behind for dead, she was—”

“Hush!”

The cause of their sudden silence, I could sense, was a few steps

away from me. My pulse leaped at the sight of Inspector Han taking a seat on the edge of the veranda, though not right next to me. He sat far enough for two people to sit between us. Then he spoke, his voice as deep and quiet as the night. “You weren’t left behind.”

I looked at his dusty leather boots, unable to form a response.

“I sent out men to look for you but called them back just now. I would never abandon one of my officers or damos.”

The weight in my chest lifted, just a bit. “Thank you, sir,” I said timidly to his boots.

Silence hung between us, and when I peeked up, I saw his head turned to me. But I couldn’t tell whether he was looking at me, for the shadow cast by his police hat made it impossible for me to see his eyes. “I had a little sister,” he murmured. “She would have been your age if she hadn’t died.”

I silently mouthed a word of gratitude to the dead girl, for reminding her brother of my life. Perhaps he would have left me behind otherwise. To most aristocrats, I was a mere servant, easily disposable.

“I’m indebted to you,” he said.

I blinked. “For what, sir?”

“I might not have lived if not for you.”

“It was my honor to serve you, sir. If only I had come earlier, then you would not have been wounded.”

“It was not my blood. It belonged to my horse.”

I recalled the horse struggling on the ground, its head nodding up and down. “Oh . . .”

“Come closer,” he said.

Surprise lit in me. Inspector Han had always kept his distance from all, officers and damos alike. I slid across the veranda, and once I was close enough, I wondered if he could feel the heat of my nervousness.

“Hold out your palm.”

I reached out and spread my fingers. He pressed a solid and cold object into my hand: a tasseled ornament, a *norigae*, like the one tied to Lady O's dress—but much different in color and shape. This one was an amber carving of a terrapin, attached to a long tassel of blue silk strings.

“This was a gift I wanted to give my sister on her birthday, but never got to. Hold on to it until I fulfill my promise to you.”

“Promise, sir?”

“Tell me. What is it you most desire?” he asked. “And I promise it will be yours.”

Still staring at the ornament, unable to believe my eyes, the truth slipped out of me before I could weigh its full implication. “*Home*.” His gaze drifted to the brand on my cheek, and I opened my mouth to quickly erase that request. “I mean—”

“Then when the investigation is over, I will return it to you.”

“Sir?”

“Your home. I will send you back.”

I froze, and as his words sank in, my heart rocked back and forth in shock. He would send me home . . . The place that whispered to me through the familiar smiles, the familiar scenes, the familiar patterns of each day: *you belong here*.

Brother had once told me that when you long for something too badly, and for too long, it begins to feel like a faraway, unreachable dream. That was how home had begun to feel to me. But Inspector Han had just reached out and placed that hope, a solid promise, into my hands.

Real. So real.

“You are not a palace nurse sent here because of low grades,” he observed. “So how did you end up in the bureau?”

It took me time to collect my thoughts, scattered in dozens of

directions. At length, I spoke, my voice cracking. “I was a nobi servant, a property of my master, Lord Paek. I was different from other servants who were only bound to their masters by a contract; Lord Paek *owned* me. So when he decided to sell me to a nearby police bureau in Inchon, I had no choice but to go. Then . . . then my sister overheard an officer telling his superior something.”

“What was that?” he prompted.

“The officer said, ‘You might regain Commander Yi’s favor if you sent the servant girl. She is strong, and the police bureau needs strong damos.’ And so they transferred me to the capital.” I worried my lower lip, wondering if Inspector Han could truly keep his promise. “I am indentured for one generation.”

“There are ways to end the indenture sooner.”

“With money? It would take me too long to earn enough, sir.”

“Freedom can also be received through government favor. I will make sure that you return home by the new year. Until then, keep that *norigae* safe.”

“Of course, sir,” I whispered, believing him. “With my life!”

Quietly, we sat side by side, staring ahead at the sky above the police bureau walls. The clouds had moved, revealing a splinter of the moon that glowed skeletal white.



All night, I couldn’t sleep and just listened to the *drip, drip, drip* of water falling into the rain catchers. My heart full and able to think of little else, I repeated the scene of me shooting the tiger in my mind so many times that the memory itself began to fade, like a sketch folded and opened once too often. The memory of the Mount Inwang incident was irresistible. Of Inspector Han, his eyes widening at the sight of me, his eyes seeing something in me no one else

had seen before: the empress in me, rising, holding her bow steady. Perhaps he had felt a sense of indebtedness mixed with admiration. Perhaps this had led to his realization that I deserved more kindness? That I deserved a reward—to be returned home?

When the morning arrived, my mind whirled, filled with crashing waves of nervous excitement and exhaustion. It took me a while to recognize that people were conversing inside the servants' quarter.

“It has begun!”

“What has?”

“Commander Yi ordered Maid Soyi’s beating for running away, and now Inspector Han is interrogating her. Come quick!”

I wanted to know too, why Soyi had run, what had scared her. I changed out of my nightgown and bound my breasts; the hanbok uniform required the waistband of the skirt to go around my upper chest. Then I donned a long kwaeja vest over my garments, securing it with a sash belt. Once presentable, I followed the distant sound of Inspector Han’s voice to its source, the main courtyard.

I walked around the crowd of civilian spectators and dove into the flock of people, elbowing my way to the front. No one blocked me now, so I had a clear view of Inspector Han; he paced before Maid Soyi, who was tied to a chair.

I observed the dark shadows beneath her eyes and the blood staining her pale lips from biting down too hard. I frowned as the sight of her probed at something in me, something important that I had forgotten. Then a memory swept into my mind.

I do not believe in indentured servitude.

Was it a coincidence that Soyi’s mistress shared the same rebellious idea as the mysterious woman? More pressing, if Soyi had indeed murdered Lady O, why kill the woman who had offered her the gift of equality?

Inspector Han's commanding voice broke into my thoughts. "Do you know why you are here?"

"Because I am Lady O's personal servant, sir."

"She had many personal servants—but only one who blatantly lied." After a beat, he folded his arms and took a step closer. "You informed a damo that you'd woken up early to see if your mistress had had a good night's sleep before raising the alarm. But you knew of her disappearance long before then, didn't you? A witness saw you leaving the mansion soon after Lady O's disappearance."

"I . . . I was asked to keep an eye on her."

"Asked by whom?"

"Lady O's mother."

"For what reason?"

"It is indecent to say—"

"This is a murder investigation, Maid Soyi. Do not withhold anything from me."

Her gaze flicked to me, as though she had sensed my arrival from the start. "As I told the damo, my mistress had a lover. And when I saw her sneaking out at night, sir, I followed. She had mentioned Mount Nam often, so I wondered if she had gone there."

"Tell us what you saw."

"I was walking down the street. It was the curfew hours, so everyone was asleep. I took the long way around to search as many alleys as possible, and walked toward Mount Nam—" She stopped. Though tied to a chair, she managed to sit straighter. A sudden clarity lit her eyes as she looked up. "I remember now. I saw someone."

Everyone fell still, no longer whispering and speculating among themselves, and the silence amplified the sound of a young nobleman fanning himself. He stood with his manservant near the front, garbed in a robe of violet that glowed in the sunlight. He had shining

jet-black eyes, arched brows, and a seemingly perpetual smirk; condescension seemed carved into his face.

“What did this person look like?” Inspector Han asked. “Answer me and do not leave anything out.”

“It was a man on a horse. He was wearing a blue robe. There was something suspicious about him, seeing him roaming at curfew. But it was too dark to see his face clearly, and he rode off before I could approach him.”

There was an intake of breath among the spectators, and everyone but the young noble frowned. He was still fanning himself, and the corner of his lips rose higher.

“And what time was it when you saw this man?”

“A little before dawn,” Soyi answered.

“Why were you still on the streets so long after midnight?”

“I searched for my mistress, and when I couldn’t find her, I returned to the mansion. But then I thought of how furious Matron Kim would be at me. She *had* ordered me to watch over her daughter. I grew so fearful that I went out again, to look for my mistress one more time. I was determined to even search Mount Nam.”

Inspector Han arched a brow. “You could have easily shared this. Instead, you ran away. Only two types of people run: children and the guilty.”

“I heard someone had seen me leave the house, and I was afraid.” Her once neatly plaited hair now hung loose, and through the black strands, she peered up at the inspector. “My mother was executed for a crime she didn’t commit. I was afraid the same would happen to me.”

“So that is your reason. And you would say you were on good terms with your mistress?”

“I . . .” She paused for the briefest moment. “I was.”

“Then is there any reason as to why Lady O would have specifically referenced you? Why she expressed anger toward you in her diary?”

My hand leapt to my throat. Diary? The police had never discovered Lady O’s diary. The inspector was bluffing, but Soyi seemed to believe it. The whites of her widening eyes made her pupils look even blacker. “She . . . she wrote about me?”

“She did, but about what?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

Time slowed as I clutched my collar, wanting to know the truth—and yet frightened of it. Could I have read a person so wrong that I’d looked a murderer in the eye without even sensing it?

“As bad as things are,” he whispered, “you could make them less so by telling the truth. But once I find the truth, no one will believe anything you say. Take control before it is too late. Think about what I have told you.”

Soyi looked sideways and locked her gaze on me, her eyes bright and feverish. “I swear, I would never hurt her.”



Soyi’s gaze haunted me as I watched the damos untie her wrists and legs, then drag her back to the prison block. Her bound state flooded me with a sense of pity and almost guilt. I would be returning home soon, while she might never leave this place.

The interrogation now over, the spectators dispersed, looks of disapproval or pity etched into the lines of their faces. I was ordered to clean the blood off the interrogation chair. Soyi’s blood. As I did, I noticed the young noble still lingering.

Our gazes met across the police courtyard.

He did not look much older than me. Nineteen, perhaps. He was handsome in a too-perfect and hostile way, like the beauty of a

winter's night: moonlit snow, gleaming icicles as sharp as fangs, and a bone-chilling stillness.

With a gasp, I ducked my head and rigorously scrubbed at the splattered blood. Even when the redness rubbed off, I continued wiping at it, all my attention centered on the footsteps approaching me. On the shadow looming over me.

Swallowing hard, I peeked up. My heart slammed against my chest when I saw the young noble towering above me.

“Are you Damo Seol?”

Immediately I jumped to my feet, held my hands together, and bowed. “Neh.”

“You are the damo assisting with Lady O’s case, I hear.”

“I am, sir.”

“You must have seen her corpse.” He gazed down at me with an air of too-sweet friendliness, and his left cheek twitched. “What did she look like?”

I blinked, caught off guard by his question.

“Is it true?” he pressed. “The rumor that she was a great beauty?”

“I—I cannot say, sir.”

He arched his brow. “It is not a tricky question, girl.”

His prompting lifted the dead woman out from a pool of memory. Her bluish face surfaced, the staring eyes, the purple bruise over her gaping mouth, the dark hole where her nose ought to have been. Death had drained Lady O of every ounce of beauty. It was impossible to imagine who she had once been when all I could think of was what had happened to her—sliced, stabbed, murdered.

“Sir,” I whispered. “I cannot imagine what she looked like before she was . . . killed.”

Before he could ask any more questions, Senior Officer Shim stalked over, and I had to withhold a breath of relief.

“Finally!” The young noble’s voice pierced the air. “I *did* want to speak with you, Officer Shim!”

The much older Officer Shim looked like a stray dog that had to fight daily for food. Tall, seemingly scrawny, his face emaciated. Yet he possessed surprising strength and was far more streetwise than even Inspector Han himself. I took a step back and hid behind him.

“Young Master Ch’oi Jinyeop.” An uneasy edge slid into Officer Shim’s voice. “Why are you still here?”

“You look as though you have not slept in days.” The young master snapped his fan shut, then held his hands behind his back. “I hear that once a murder occurs, police officers do not return home for weeks, too absorbed in the investigation to rest.”

Officer Shim kept quiet, still waiting for an answer.

The young master let out a breathy laugh. “You dislike small talk as usual. Very well. I came to inquire if it was true, the rumors of her affair.”

“I am not permitted to share information freely.”

“Inspector Han’s order, I suppose? You obey everything he says. If the rumor is true, perhaps Lady O deserved to die. A woman who cannot be honorable . . . it is better that she die than live and bring dishonor to her family.”

“Your father must be ashamed to have a son like you.”

Officer Shim’s remark startled me, but what surprised me more was the young master’s calmness. Amusement glinted in his eyes. “What irony, hearing such an insult from a *seoja*, a bastard abandoned by his own father.”

A muscle worked in Shim’s jaw. “Whether the victim was deserving of death is not up to anyone to decide. No man or woman, noble or slave, ought to be killed without the sanction of the ruler.”

The young master’s gaze shifted to the space behind Shim, and

I followed his gaze and saw Inspector Han passing by, too occupied to notice us.

“There goes your master, Officer Shim.” With one smooth motion, he flicked open his fan, airing his manicured face again, and under his breath he said with a smile, “Only dogs and horses long for a master.”

The young master strode away with long and measured steps, his manservant scrambling behind him. Once he was far enough away, I said quietly to Officer Shim, “He asked me about Lady O’s beauty, but I told him nothing, sir.”

“Good.”

I waited, and when he said no more, my curiosity got the better of me. “Who is he?”

“The son of Third State Councillor Ch’oi. A philandering drunkard, I hear.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but why does he care so much about Lady O?”

Officer Shim looked at me. At once, my eyes dropped below his chin to avoid his gaze, and I ended up staring at the braided scar across his neck. Some whispered he’d tried to hang himself, though most claimed that a criminal had tried to strangle him.

“Inspector Han told me you had the curiosity of a magpie. I see that now,” he said, warmth in his voice. “The young master was betrothed to Lady O when they were children. They never saw each other’s faces. Perhaps that is why.”

“He must have been infuriated when he learned of the affair.”

“Indeed. His side ended the engagement two months ago after hearing the rumor.”

I knew people like the young master, namely Kyōn. Men who thought so highly of themselves, men who rarely experienced

humiliation, and when they did, drew out their swords with vengeance in their hearts, unable to let the slightest slander pass them by.

“Inspector Han interviewed him earlier today,” Officer Shim continued. “Apparently, he was at the House of Bright Flowers when the murder occurred, and he named five people who could vouch that he never left the house that night. Sons of government officials.”

The impossibility of the investigation sank into me. “Wealth and power must make a man untouchable, sir.”

“You were raised by servants, so of course, you must see aristocrats as gods,” Officer Shim said, as kindly as an older brother. “But wealth and power also make a man err in his arrogance. That is what Inspector Han said. If he was indeed involved, we will find a careless trail of evidence, Seol.”



The small entrance of the prison block, monitored by two guards, waited ahead as I approached with a tray at noon, bearing a bowl of water and a cloth. It was my duty to keep beaten prisoners alive, though sometimes Commander Yi instructed that witnesses be left unattended to, that the fear of death might wring the truth out of them.

“Who are you here for?” one of the guards asked.

“Maid Soyi.”

“Follow,” he said, opening the gate, then disappearing inside.

I tried to balance the tray with both hands as I stumbled through the drafty darkness. Water sloshed out from the bowl. As my eyes adjusted, I saw the narrow passage, the ground layered with dried mud crumbled into dust. On either side of me was a line of cells built of logs, with planks nailed vertically to keep prisoners from escaping, and tiny barred windows that offered a glimpse of skylight.

At last, the guard stopped. Keys jangled, then the cell gate creaked open. “Call for me when you’re done.” And he locked me in.

Soyi was too weak to acknowledge my presence, resting her back against the wall, her legs stretched out before her. Her bloody hands lay almost lifelessly by her sides, palms out. Like me, she had been punished for trying to escape, except with a less permanent wound than my own. Not a branding of the cheek, but the common beating of the legs, with a stick that a flogger had swung with the force of an ax.

“I’m here to clean your wounds.” I crouched before her and lifted her skirt slowly. The blood must have crusted onto the fabric, for her lips fell open in pain, as though I were peeling off her skin. I managed to hike her skirt up around her waist. The torn undergarment revealed ripped skin, a sight that left me nauseated.

“This might hurt just a bit.” I soaked the cloth and wiped her wounds, and immediately she turned as pale as death. Beads of sweat formed along her temple, and biting her pale lips, she swallowed her scream.

“Endure it,” I urged, holding her trembling leg down to clean around the torn skin rolled up along the gashes. If I didn’t clean her well in this damp weather, I knew her wound would rot, and its smell would fill the whole prison. “Endure, and stay alive.”

“Stay alive,” she whispered. Faint. As though the pain had reached an unbearable level. “I’m going to die here, I know it.”

“You don’t know the future.”

“The future. One needn’t be a shaman to know it.”

I continued to press the cloth against her, my fingers gleaming red.

“Mother told me this, that even dogs become troubled before a storm arrives. They sense the rumbling of a faraway thunder, and I

can feel it too.” Her eyes turned glassy as her brows puckered together. “The trembling of the earth.”

I wanted to ease her despair somehow. But I also knew that if she had committed murder—no matter how much I might sympathize with her—she was deserving of punishment.

“You never know,” I said. “Perhaps the storm will come, then pass by.”

Soyi shook her head, and while she had hesitated before Inspector Han, she opened to me, as easily as a clam in hot water. “Why do I have to be me? Why couldn’t I have been born a lady?” she said, emotions infusing her voice with color. “I am one mere servant among ten thousand of them. The worst part is . . . the police can kill me and it will make no difference.”

Not knowing how to ease her fear, I quietly dipped the cloth into the bowl and squeezed out the blood, a smoke of red unfurling in the water.

“But perhaps I am a killer.”

My hand stilled in midair, the cloth dripping red water onto my skirt.

“My mistress told me that hate is like murder. And I despised her.”

I squeezed the cloth one last time, then set it aside on the tray.

“She called me her sister, her equal. So I thought she would understand my longing to be free.” A tremor shook her solemn voice. “She said she wanted to keep me by her side because she cherished me. I, her equal? I wept every night after dressing her and brushing her hair—sad each time she refused my request, terrified when she criticized me for this longing to be mistress over my own life.”

“Is this why your mistress wrote about you?” I said, playing along with the inspector’s bluff about finding Lady O’s journal. “Is this why you fought with her?”

“I asked for my nobi deed,” Soyi said, her confession slipping so easily out of her lips, unaware that I was recording every word in my memory. “I had asked her before, but this time I was determined. I wanted my nobi deed, to end our mistress-and-servant contract. But she wouldn’t give it to me.”

“But why *would* she give it to you?”

“She promised to return it to me on my eighteenth birthday.”

A question that had burned at the corner of my mind now resurfaced. “You said Lady O doesn’t believe in indentured servitude. Is that a common idea here in the capital?”

“Common? No.”

“What kind of people believe it?”

Her dark gaze steadied on me, as though suspicious.

“You are a lowborn, but a noblewoman called your status man-made,” I explained. “I don’t understand why she would say so.” I bound her wounds with a fresh strip of cloth. “Please, tell me.”

“Lady O was a Catholic rogue. Converted two years ago. She told her mother that she valued this teaching over blood relation.”

“Catholic?” The teaching that was prohibited and punishable by death, knowledge smuggled in from the West. “And you didn’t think to tell the police?”

“It had nothing to do with her murder. You must swear not to tell this to anyone, or Matron Kim will sell me off like a dog as soon as the inquisition is over. I’m sure that Lady O’s lover killed her. It is *him* you need to find.” Dragging her skirt down, she whispered, “So many questions from you.”

“I am just curious.”

“No, it is more than curiosity.”

Her words crept into me like a deep chill, and it took a moment for me to realize that she was right.

“Mere curiosity, truly,” I repeated, rising to my feet and slowly dusting off the strands of straw, my thoughts drifting away until I found myself staring at the deep pool of my past. A pool I was frightened to reach into and touch—afraid of smoothing my fingers around the edges of something awful.