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HONEY
IN THE
WOUND

A NOVEL

JIYOUNG HAN

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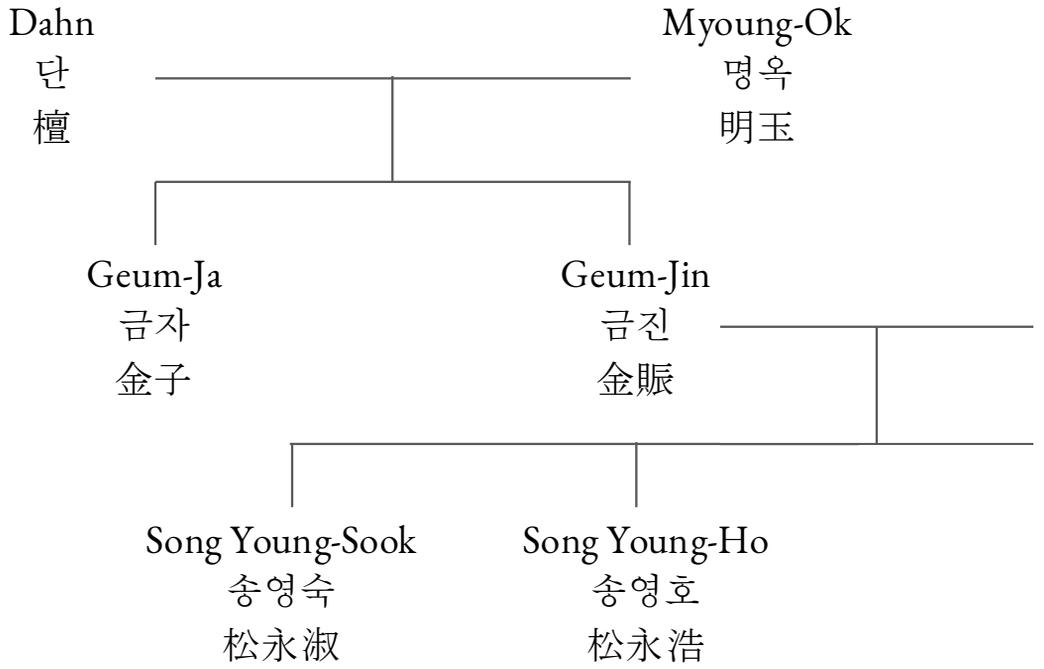
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*For those whose histories have been buried.
For those who have faced a second death.*



Song-sajang

송사장

松

Song Jung-Soon

송정순

松貞順

Song Young-Ja

송영자

松永子

Song Joon (Jun / Shun)

송준

松(本)俊

Matsumoto Rinako

松本 凜那子

Manchukuo

Baek Yong-

Woo

백용우

白龍優

Feng-nüshi

鳳女士

Meiyu

美玉

Tayiji

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太子

**HONEY
IN THE
WOUND**

PART 1
GEUM-JIN
금진
金賑

CHAPTER ONE

Unnamed mountain in the Empire of Korea, 1902

The twins departed this world with a cry, much in the way they came into it. At birth they cried, lungs chilled by the night air of their first breath. At death they cried, hearts chilled by the bayonets that tore through their kin.

Geum-Ja came first. Impatient to escape the womb, she writhed past her brother and pressed against the cervix before her budding eyes could perceive the light of her destination. She kicked her mother's intestines twice every afternoon to announce her readiness until one day she kicked herself out into the world. Geum-Jin was less eager to leave the warmth of his origin. He lingered in the space left to him by his sister, but was coaxed to emerge and relieve his screaming mother.

Myoung-Ok held the glistening newborns against her naked chest, sprawled on the floor of her hut. They were already as large as urns and she worried that her weakened body could not nourish two. The last hunting season had been sparse. The straw shoes that her fingers had reddened to weave were not selling in the village—few had money to spare after the middling harvest. Foraging in the mountain had always been enough for her, but would it be enough to give her children a good life?

Myoung-Ok was not accustomed to such thoughts of the distant future

and was unsettled by the stab of foreboding. She clutched her babies and wept, despair and joy spilling from her eyes. Despair and joy seeped from her pores, tracing paths of sweat down her tanned skin. Despair and joy flowed from her breasts, swirling out with her milk.

Geum-Ja took to the right breast, drinking in the salt of her mother's despair. Geum-Jin took to the left breast, drinking in the tang of his mother's joy. Their mewling, hungry mouths drew out the burden of feeling from Myoung-Ok's body and she calmed. Drunk with their first emotions, the babies were claimed by slumber, their mother's tenderness glistening on their lips.

Myoung-Ok came to know what she would name her children only after feeling their weight press into her arms: geum, or gold, in hopes they might prosper in a way she never had herself. The sudden provenance of this wish surprised her, as she had always been more concerned with the gold of a fallen gingko nut than with the gold of a coin.

Myoung-Ok was a child of the earth: when she was born, she slipped out of the womb and cratered into the rice paddy below, squirming in the mud before her mother could set down her sickle. Myoung-Ok's spirit was so drawn to the ground that the taller she grew, the lower she crouched to work the land. Her gaze drifted to insects flitting at her feet, or acorns hiding under fallen leaves. Her ears inclined to the dirt, listening to the sounds of roots expanding and animals burrowing into their dens. She was so preoccupied with the life underfoot that most people in her village pitied her as deaf and dimwitted, unable to fathom any other reason for her indifference to them.

Myoung-Ok shrugged off this condescension because she in turn believed people were petty and stupid. As many assumed her deaf, they did not cloak their words with grace while she crawled about. Myoung-Ok was thus witness to the judgment and duplicity laced into the daily squabbles of village life. She far preferred the warmth of the earth's embrace, allowing it to consume the salt in her tears and the iron in her blood to push life out from its depths in tribute. When she was a child, some swore they saw a trail of mountain garlic sprout in her wake as she ran crying from a scolding. Foot-

shaped clover patches still grew near the stream where Myoung-Ok once cut her heel on a sharp stone. Her downcast eyes could tell which herbs tasted the sweetest, but those same eyes seldom looked to the stars—the heavens never attracted the earthbound Myoung-Ok's esteem. Perhaps it was for this snub that she was given no gift for foresight: despite their mother's aspirational faith in geum, gold was not the metal to foretell the twins' fate.

Iron severed the viscera connecting mother, daughter, son. Dahn wiped his butcher's knife with a cloth. He was a large man, as tall as the roof of his hut and as broad as an ox. He had never encountered another person who stood taller than his chest, and was more likely to recognize the hair whorl atop a head than a face. But his heft made him no less gentle—he dipped the cloth in heated water and cleansed the weeping Myoung-Ok of her sweat and blood. He would wet, wipe, and wring, wet, wipe, and wring until the bowl was murky with human fluid. Dahn pressed his whiskered lips to his bride's damp hair and stroked his babies with his broad hands. When Myoung-Ok informed him of their names and her worries, he nodded and fed her the seaweed soup whose ingredients he had sold extra furs in town to acquire. He rose once the soup warmed Myoung-Ok's body and the sun hazed in through the door.

Dahn ascended into the mountain forest with his bow and arrows slung around his thick shoulder. Despite his enormous build, he softened his footfall so no beast could hear him approaching. Neither fallen branch nor leaf betrayed his location. Deer and boars had rarely ventured near his hut since new tiger tracks emerged in the nearby terrain a few moons ago, but Dahn knew he could not miss his prey today. The new urgency of fatherhood pushed him higher into the mountain forest beyond his usual hunting grounds.

Dahn scanned the forest floor for tracks or half-eaten leaves, though his thoughts lingered on his wife back home. The day he met Myoung-Ok, she had been rustling out of sight behind a tree when Dahn nocked an arrow and waited for what he assumed was a beast to rear its head. In the shock of seeing instead a young woman alone so high up the mountain, he stumbled and

let go of the bowstring. The arrow struck the tree not a palm's breadth from Myoung-Ok's face. She did not acknowledge her brush with the fatal point and continued to gather mushrooms in her skirt, pawing at a damp bed of dirt. Dahn approached to fetch his arrow and examine her for injuries. When he stood before her, Myoung-Ok paused her harvest and stared at his feet. She whispered something Dahn was too tall to hear and placed some mushrooms before him without once glancing up. She then bunched up her skirt and fled downhill, ears glowing red. Having caught nothing that day, Dahn bit into the pillowy flesh of the mushrooms the strange maiden had left.

The day after he had nearly killed the girl, Dahn set out west. He hoped to find rabbits whose fur he could sell to the hatmaker. He had not walked far when he crossed a spiky chestnut shell on the ground. Dahn thought this peculiar, as there were no chestnut trees in this stretch of the forest, but his hunt for movement in the underbrush remained unbroken by his curiosity. When he stepped over the second and third chestnuts, however, he suspected they had taken passage on the coat of a roaming beast. He quickened his pace in anticipation until he faced a buck that he felled with two shots. He sold its tongue for a rich man's feast, its antlers and testicles to a traveling medicine seller, its meat and skin to the butcher.

Two days after he had nearly killed the girl, Dahn set out east. In his scramble up a rock formation, he pressed his hands onto something wet. He had crushed a ripe bokbunja berry between his fingers and its dark-red juice dripped down to his wrist. He did not need to look around to know there were no bokbunja brambles nearby. He wiped his sticky hand on his bearskin vest and proceeded to climb. When he rose up another boulder, he saw more bokbunja ahead. As with the chestnuts, Dahn followed the berries until the rocks plateaued into a cluster of bushes housing two large roosting pheasants. He pierced both necks with a single arrow, then traded their meat and feathers for some beef and rice wine.

Three days after he had nearly killed the girl, Dahn woke with eyelids heavy from wine and a belly fuller than it had been in months. He considered resting for the day but remembered he did not know what penury the next

season might bring. He set out south and wondered if he might see another trail of displaced fruits. It was not long until he stepped on a single red bean, its gleaming sisters marking a path up to the mountain spring. Dahn readied his bow as he climbed up to the water but lowered it when he saw Myoung-Ok washing her hair with berry-stained fingers, her discarded clothes and a pile of red beans lying on a nearby boulder. He was startled by his own arousal and moved to turn away when she repeated what she said to him the day he nearly killed her: "I feel your footsteps in my chest."

She beckoned him to her with a glance, as she had with her trails of nuts and berries. Dahn disrobed and joined her in the spring. The friction of their skin washed away the dirt on their bodies and warmed the water until the frogs jumped out in alarm. Her long black hair swirled on his back and his fingers tensed on her hips as they both shook with release.

A crow called out in the distance, bringing Dahn back to the need to provide for his newborns. In the last year, he had gone farther out from his edge of the mountain in search of game. The last time he went into the village to sell his furs, he overheard another hunter speculate that tigers were driving away the boars. Market stalls buzzed about a farmer whose calf was lost to an unknown predator in the night. Dahn reminded himself to check on the traps around his hut when he returned home, though he suspected the tigers were too clever to fall into them. Every week he encountered rotting animal carcasses sprouting thick clouds of flies. Angry claw marks appeared on old pines that could not defend themselves. Despite ample signs of their presence, the tigers had yet to allow Dahn even a fleeting glimpse of a swaying tail. But the heavens were not so cruel as to make all creatures so elusive. Before the sun lifted off the horizon, Dahn spotted a boar sniffing around thirty paces ahead. In a single motion, he shrugged the bow from his shoulder and let fly an arrow into the creature's eye and brain. He lowered his head over the fallen beast and thanked the mountain for its gift before swinging his catch over his shoulder and journeying into town.

As the smiling jangseung totems in the village outskirts came into view, Dahn raised his chin and let his coarse hair fall over his eyes. He fixed his gaze

above the heads of morning marketgoers to avoid the gawking and whispers floating around his elbows, something he had forced himself to do since he was a young boy whose extraordinary size attracted fear or derision. He had learned not to care what they said and let the crowd scurry out of his path. Dahn spoke to no one and no one dared speak to Dahn. Once he reached the butcher, he dropped the boar on the ground and held out his hand until the sufficient weight of coins fell into his palm. No further effort was needed. No one would cheat the mountain giant who was rumored to have crushed the skull of a charging bear with just his hands, the bear whose skin he wore every day as a warning to other bears, and perhaps to humans as well. With the butcher's coins jangling in his money bag, Dahn walked to purchase rice from the old grain seller who was either too ancient or too blind to cower in his presence.

“You better save up what rice you can, young man. Officials took most of it two nights ago to send off to Japan and there's only barley left for us,” said the old woman, slapping a sack of grains. “Their soldiers will be in your mountains soon too. I hear they want to hunt down tigers for their emperor.”

CHAPTER TWO

Unnamed mountain in Chōsen, Empire of Japan, 1915

Myoung-Ok kept her twins within her field of perception at all times. This was no challenge when they could only crawl around with bugs in her herb garden. But as the seasons passed, the twins' braids grew long and their legs began carrying them from her sight. Myoung-Ok would thus put her ears to the soil to listen for roots groaning as Geum-Ja climbed her favorite trees, or for the staccato of Geum-Jin's delighted hops when he chased a dragonfly. To ensure she could always hear them, she occupied the twins with earthbound pursuits—finding pinecones that generated seedlings when planted, digging for insects that signaled soil fertility. Myoung-Ok cultivated her children's love for the earth so that the earth would love them in return. Every day the soil crooned under the twins' eager attention, relaying to Myoung-Ok what their tender hands achieved through her lessons of the natural world. The pleasure of watching her children learn helped her to forget about the knots of foreign boot prints creeping up the mountain.

Dahn, too, noticed these boot prints, but observed with cautious relief their tendency to stay shallow in the foothills, still some distance from his family's mountain refuge. Whenever he saw concern groove into Myoung-Ok's brow, he stroked it away with a callused thumb and left a kiss in its place.

He would then turn to whittle bamboo into arrows and weave bowstrings from sinews and hides. He did not wish to be caught lacking should he need to direct his strength toward a manner of beast different from those he was accustomed to having in his sights.

When the twins were old enough to walk in silence, Dahn carved small bows from a mulberry tree and taught them to hunt. The children watched to mimic their father's soft tread. They saw from his gaze where to aim their arrows. They heard from his exhalations when they should release their bowstrings. They shifted with the loving corrections to their stances and allowed their chins to be redirected toward new targets in the distance. Geum-Ja and Geum-Jin conveyed their appreciation of their father's attention by excelling at their tasks.

The twins were equal in their prowess—as with nearly all their taught skills—until the moment the arrow struck its mark. Geum-Ja always shot out first to inspect her work while Geum-Jin followed, wiping away a tear at the loss of life. Dahn pretended not to notice this difference as long as his son's remorse did not lead to hesitation. Hesitation could mean hunger. Hesitation could mean death. After bowing their heads in gratitude to the mountain, Geum-Ja liked to skip ahead, carrying whatever she could of their haul. Geum-Jin preferred to hold fast to Dahn's thick pointer finger and assure himself of his father's presence.

When not trailing after one of their parents, the twins taught themselves how to play. They had never once met other children and so invented their own games. In the game they called "new noise," Geum-Ja would close her eyes and guess which bird or insect sound was her brother's imitation. No other person would have been able to distinguish Geum-Jin's shriek call from the real thing, but she could discern which had the signature breath of her twin and which were the true cries of the forest. In "find the treasure," one twin would hide a straw shoe for the other to find. Geum-Ja loved to hide: she savored her precious time alone to discover new crevices of the mountain. Geum-Jin preferred to seek, eager to show his sister there was nothing she could hide from him, for they were one.

Geum-Ja's favorite game was "flying." She would climb into the trees and jump from branch to branch, yelling after Geum-Jin to follow her. This was the singular game where he was not his sister's match. So rare was this imbalance between the twins that Geum-Ja did not notice her brother was not by her side the first time she climbed to the top of a tree and poked her head through the forest canopy. She gazed around at neighboring mountains she had never seen before, dumbstruck at the immensity of the world beyond her home. Her roaming eyes halted at the village walls and rice paddies in the distance. She had heard her mother and father speak of the village before, but seeing evidence of life outside of her own stoked a blend of curiosity and drive that words alone had never done. She reached for her brother's hand to acknowledge this fascinating discovery and realized then that he was not there to share in her revelation. She descended to a crying Geum-Jin who feared she had left him behind. She hugged and reassured him she could never leave him, for they were one.

Even as she reached her first monthly blood, Geum-Ja could not forget what lay beyond the foothills. When she asked Myoung-Ok about the village, her mother clucked and told her that life was better in the mountains.

"People bring the burden of expectation," she said. "Being trapped in that expectation is suffocating, even for the richest yangban in the village."

Geum-Ja did not understand her mother's words but made no mistake of her tone. When Dahn headed to the village to trade his furs, Geum-Ja climbed onto his jige carrier to accompany him. He grabbed his daughter and placed her down by her brother, patting her on the head. Geum-Ja did not understand her father's reason but made no mistake of his intent. She did not move from where Dahn had planted her and stared in his wake long after he was out of sight. Concern creased into Myoung-Ok's face as she heard a new timbre of sigh escape her daughter.

Myoung-Ok endeavored to push thoughts of the village from Geum-Ja's mind. She listened to the ants' chatter to discern where honey leaked from a new hive and taught the twins how to extract honeycombs without upsetting the bees. She took them to swim in the mountain spring and fed

them wild strawberries until their teeth and lips burst with red juice. She led them to a small grove where thousands of fireflies danced at dusk, their light an eerie flame licking at the trees. In these moments nothing existed for Myoung-Ok but the golden laughter of youth that had never known a day of anguish. When a distant yowl broke through the peals of the twins' delight, Myoung-Ok sat up from the grass and reached for her children.

"It's an animal. Sounds like it's in pain," said Geum-Ja.

"We should help it," said Geum-Jin.

The twins raised their eyebrows with such eagerness that Myoung-Ok laughed.

"All right, let's go help it. But you must listen to me if I say we need to go."

With a twin's hand in each of hers, Myoung-Ok descended the mountain trail toward the raspy yowling ringing through the tree branches. They came to a clearing where the noise emerged from a pit in the ground. All three peered over the edge to meet the eyes of a tiger, larger than a cub but not yet grown into full ferocity. It paused its cries to look up at Myoung-Ok and the twins, tilting its head to examine the new presence. Geum-Ja and Geum-Jin had never seen a tiger before and pulled at Myoung-Ok's sleeves in excitement. Before she could think of a way to help it without becoming its prey, she heard voices grow louder at an unfamiliar cadence. She signaled to her children to be quiet as she tried to identify who was approaching. Myoung-Ok could not understand their strange words, but when she counted at least six separate speakers, all men, she pulled her children into a bush beyond the clearing, willing it to protect them. The compliant branches wrapped around the trio in a thick tapestry of wood and leaves. Crouching low, she placed her hands over the children's mouths to stifle any noises.

"Don't make a peep. And keep still," she whispered.

Through slivered gaps in the leaves they saw men in fitted tan uniforms surround the pit. The tiger's howls began anew. The men spoke in rapid, excited inflections. One man placed a small white stick in his mouth and lit its end on fire. Smoke pushed out of his nostrils like an angry boar in the cold of winter. A mustachioed man across from him squatted and spat into the hole

below. The group's laughter intensified when the smoking man picked up a rock and threw it with great force into the pit. The resulting crack was followed by a screech unlike any sound Myoung-Ok had ever heard. She tightened her grasp over her children's mouths. The mustachioed spitter picked up his own rock and declared something that made the others whoop. He wound his arm theatrically and hurled the rock, trying to outdo his companion. The screeching crescendoed until another man removed a black tool from his belt, curled his finger into it, and pointed it to the ground. A terrifying, alien thunder boomed from the clearing. All nearby birds fled into the sky as the screeching muted into a whimper. The man flicked at the black tool and released another clap of thunder.

Geum-Jin's hot tears dripped down the fingers Myoung-Ok had clasped over his mouth. She held tight, pushing back the scream gated behind his teeth. Geum-Ja had not moved, her eyes fixed ahead. The tenor of the men's voices changed as they barked out commands. Two others dressed in hanbok came out into the clearing and lowered themselves into the pit without a word. The men in tan uniforms tossed one end of a rope down and pulled the tiger out, its body void of the muscular tension that once made it so formidable. The men kicked and nudged at the carcass to inspect its dirt-covered paws and cracked, bloody head. The two in hanbok crawled out of the pit and scurried to bind the tiger's paws to the poles they had brought. They lifted the poles to rest horizontally on their shoulders, the tiger hanging upside-down by its bound feet. Its pink tongue fell limp out of its open mouth. The wound on its chest bled in rivulets around its neck, a delicate red noose that dripped onto the ground. The uniformed men bantered as they trudged in procession back downhill.

Some time after the men's voices had faded, Myoung-Ok released her children. Saliva glistened on the teeth marks the twins had left on her fingers. They walked back to their hut in silence, glancing over their shoulders every few steps to check that those cruel, foreign words did not follow them home.

The twins were no longer permitted to play outside of Myoung-Ok's ear-shot. Myoung-Ok and Dahn did not have to enforce this ban, however, as Geum-Jin shadowed Myoung-Ok everywhere she went, locking her in an unending flow of conversation as if silence might invite memories of the uniformed men. In contrast, no words had left Geum-Ja's lips since the return home. She would sometimes climb to the top of the tallest tree next to their hut and sit for hours. When not aloft, she paced by the tiger trap behind the hut and stared out beyond the bushes, ears tuned in to the rustling chorus of forest life. Myoung-Ok and Dahn gave their daughter the space to make peace with her thoughts—so long as she did it within the boundary of their protection.

Geum-Jin struggled with this change in his sister. She refused to play their usual games and did not respond when he called her name. She would eat neither the fruits Geum-Jin foraged nor much else Myoung-Ok prepared. Untethered from his twin, Geum-Jin tried to calm the thump of disquiet in his chest. But slumber became elusive.

In the dark of night, under the sounds of his father's snoring and his mother's even breathing, Geum-Jin lay awake knowing that Geum-Ja, unstirring, was also not at rest. He eventually dozed off in silence, not wanting to feel the pain of offering a word that would not be returned. When he awoke again not long after he had shut his eyes, his sister was no longer lying beside him. Startled, he sat up and went in search of her. Geum-Ja was standing outside amid the soft trill of crickets, facing the forest with her back to the hut.

"What are you doing? Come back inside," he murmured as he approached, his voice drenched with sleep.

"I can't. They're so loud," she whispered back, not breaking her distant gaze.

Hearing his sister's voice for the first time in days, Geum-Jin's eyes welled with relief.

"What? The crickets?" He ventured closer, hoping to keep her talking.

"They're crying."

"Who's crying? What are you talking about?"

Geum-Ja turned to her brother with an expression he had never seen her face hold before. The ice in her eyes snapped him awake.

“You don’t hear them. In the forest,” she said.

“Stop teasing me.”

“They’re afraid of what’s coming.”

Geum-Jin stepped away from the new unfamiliarity of his twin’s face, which, until this moment, had always been a reflection of his. “Come back inside. It’s the middle of the night.”

Geum-Ja looked at the ground. She said nothing and turned to the forest again.

“You’re scaring me,” he said, voice wavering.

She did not move. Geum-Jin stretched out his hand, wanting to touch her shoulder. He hesitated and retracted his arm, backing away toward the hut. He paused at the threshold, looking at his sister’s figure in the moonlight, and felt the emptiness of longing for the first time in his life. He did not understand where his twin had gone, but she was no longer within his reach.

“Geum-Ja, please come back to sleep,” he whispered a final time. She continued to face away from him as he lay down inside, head at the door. He kept vigil over his sister until he could no longer fight off the call of slumber.

The following dawn, Myoung-Ok and Dahn rose to an empty hut, their son curled up half outside the door. They searched all around their home, the latrine, the surrounding trees. When they did not see their daughter, Myoung-Ok put her ears to the soil. She could hear the dirt compressing under Dahn’s heavy pacing feet and the slight tremors of Geum-Jin’s agitated sleep. Sweat glittered across her temple as she strained to make out hints of Geum-Ja over the sound of her own accelerating heartbeat. But the earth was not responding to her daughter and she knew that Geum-Ja was no longer in the mountain forest. Myoung-Ok called after Dahn to scoop up their drowsy son and ran down to the village for the first time in over a decade.

The farmers starting their morning in the rice paddies were startled to see a woman emerge from the forest with a giant and a child. Their curiosity grew into shock when they recognized who it was. No villager had seen Myoung-Ok since she had led the giant back to her parents' small choga house and informed them that she would be living with him henceforth. Myoung-Ok's father was too drunk to either reject or accept his daughter's announcement. Myoung-Ok's mother eyed the boar that Dahn tossed at her feet as an offering, relieved to have one less mouth to feed. This story danced on the villagers' tongues for months after Myoung-Ok rode on Dahn's back into the mountain. Some reckoned that a boar was more than enough in exchange for a dull girl with no marriage prospects. Others swore they had not heard Myoung-Ok utter a single word before that day. Some even imagined that the giant would simply eat her in a mountain cave and she would never be heard from again.

Myoung-Ok marched past the farmers whose unburied memories stunned them into silence. The men left the fields to follow her in procession until they reached a small crowd gathering at a stretch of the village walls. Myoung-Ok pushed away a screen of whispering men and women to see a straw shoe and a girl's hemp jeogori shirt pressed into the mud by what appeared to be large animal tracks.

Myoung-Ok dropped to the ground and released a bitter wail that rattled the earth. The crowd startled as their footing shook and squawking crows launched into the sky. Dahn shoved stumbling bystanders out of his way and took his wife into his arms alongside Geum-Jin. His enormous chest absorbed the echo of her shrieks. The villagers turned away in pity, walking back to their homes and fields with their own grim conclusions.

An older farmer approached Myoung-Ok and Dahn as the crowd scattered to their day's labor. With an eye flickering over Geum-Jin's uncomprehending face, he said, "You're lucky it was only your daughter and not your son. Go home and make sure the tigers don't get him too."

For many mornings thereafter, Myoung-Ok rose before the sun and looked out toward the forest, her dry sobs ringing with the roosters' cries in the village below.

CHAPTER THREE

Unnamed mountain in Chōsen, Empire of Japan, 1917

After Geum-Ja's disappearance, the villagers dug traps around their homes to protect their families from tigers. While these covered pits may have warded off nocturnal prowlers, they did little to defend against other beasts with designs on the village children. Government officials had begun to sweep through the fields to abduct farmers' sons, cut off their braids, and force them into school to learn Japanese. In the early days, many farmers did not pretend to understand what it meant for the Empire of Japan to seize control of their country; their general lot in the secluded village had not much changed whether paying taxes to a Joseon yangban or a foreign official. But as the months passed, their backs ached from their sons' absence in the fields. Their stomachs atrophied from diminishing crop shares. When the boys of the village came home with angry switch marks that teachers left on their calves, there was no recourse for parents but the hope that the children might now study their way to a better fate.

Despite these hardships, life persisted. On summer evenings, villagers returned home from their labor and called in their children for supper as they always had. Most children played coy on the first call, claiming they heard nothing but the cry of the cicadas. On the second call, the more acquiescent youth turned homeward. On the third call, even the most rebellious

bid their friends farewell for the evening, ending the chorus of names as families tucked into their meals. The beautiful Soon-Hee was always the first to return home after hearing her name. She would race past her brothers to help with dinner and receive praise for being a dutiful young girl.

“Soon-Hee, come here,” her mother cried, stoking the fire under the gamasot to keep dinner warm. Soon-Hee often reported back stories of friends that her mother mined for gossip about the other families in the area. A few days ago, Soon-Hee had mentioned a friend’s complaints about having to bury heavy jangdok pots at home. Soon-Hee’s mother surmised that this family was likely hoarding extra rice in the jangdok and hiding it from their Japanese landlords. Kimjang season was still far off, and no one would bother with burying prepared foods in jangdok during the late summer. She chuckled as she wondered what new rumors she might glean tonight. But there was still no pattering of feet outside their choga house.

“Soon-Hee, if you don’t come here right now, you’ll be in big trouble! What has gotten into you today?” she yelled, getting up from the food and heading out to find her daughter.

“Soon-Hee, where are you?”

When she stepped out into the road by her home, several children ran past her in heed of their own dinner calls. None were Soon-Hee, nor was her daughter among the little ones coming toward her. Panic shot through her as she quickened her walking pace toward the field where children sometimes played. It had not been long since the crazy mountain woman had carelessly lost her own child and made an embarrassing scene in front of all the villagers. She started to run, swiveling her head left and right in a desperate bid to catch a glimpse of her child. She slowed at the sight of Soon-Hee near the edge of the mountain forest, skipping toward her with a clump of wildflowers in hand. Relief neutralized the panic as quickly as it had risen, which in turn slipped into annoyance. The woman ran up to her daughter, grabbed her arm, and spanked her across her bottom.

“Didn’t I tell you not to go by the mountain? There are tigers there that eat little girls like you!”

“I was just playing with a friend,” Soon-Hee wailed between gasps for breath. “I didn’t realize we were out so far—”

“Who was it, huh? That skinny little Choi brat? I knew she was a bad influence; don’t play with her anymore.”

“No, not her,” cried Soon-Hee, tears leaving a streak of clean skin on her dirt-covered face.

“Well, who was it?”

“It was a girl with yellow eyes.” Soon-Hee sniffled.

“What?”

“A girl with yellow eyes. She gave me these flowers and said she was gonna show me where they grew on the mountain.”

Her mother smacked Soon-Hee across her bottom once again for telling lies and pulled the sobbing girl home as the cicadas drowned out their cries.

Geum-Jin rose before the sun to set about his work. He softened his steps so as not to disturb his ailing parents, though their sleep had been heavy as of late. Myoung-Ok would tire herself from weeping so much the hut floor was covered in grass that kept dying under the weight of their feet. As soon as the grass yellowed, she would shed new tears and force more sprouts to appear. The hut was beginning to smell of rotting plants. The thatched roof also had not been replaced since the last monsoon season, when Dahn still had full use of his arms. Insects and mold-ridden straw fell from the roof while they slept, but Geum-Jin knew better than to tend to something his father took pride in doing himself.

Nearly a year after Geum-Ja had disappeared, Dahn returned from a hunt with his bearskin vest soaked in blood. Myoung-Ok dropped the plants she had been gathering and ran to her collapsed husband. Geum-Jin did not understand what beast could have hurt his father so. Based on Dahn’s grunts, Myoung-Ok knew to put a knife to flame and sink its hot blade into the gurgling wound on his shoulder. In a single flick she dug out the pieces of Japanese iron embedded within.

Dahn faded into a deep sleep. His enormous body emanated a fever that broiled the air inside the hut. Streams of sweat flooded the soft ground. Geum-Jin shuttled urns of water from the spring while Myoung-Ok ground medicinal herbs into paste mixed with the healing balm of honey and applied it to her husband's throbbing shoulder. A putrid yellow fluid trickled out from under the plaster after two days. Dahn's breathing turned erratic.

At sunrise, Myoung-Ok ascended to the spring to bathe and instructed her son to look after his father. She would go to the village apothecary and buy medicine, for there was not much else they could do on their own. Geum-Jin nodded, shedding tears in silence. He wiped away Dahn's sweat and fed him what small spoonfuls of barley gruel he could, ignoring the noxious smells oozing from his father's body. At sunset, Myoung-Ok entered the hut with her hair shorn to her ears and a paper packet in her hand. She patted Geum-Jin's head and trailed her fingers down his braid. She unwrapped a small, acrid brown ball from the packet and placed it into her husband's discolored mouth. Dahn woke up three days later, holding on to life for the cost of his right arm and his wife's beautiful black hair.

With Dahn unable to move his arm or use his bow, the responsibility of hunting fell on Geum-Jin. The first time he went out to hunt on his own, Myoung-Ok ran after him and forced him to take off his fur skin.

"I won't have my only son also mistaken for a beast."

Geum-Jin whittled his own arrows, tracked prey, and learned to broker a fair price for his offerings at the market. While he could not deny a certain pride at growing into his duties, he did not enjoy his descents into the village where girls running about with long black braids reminded him of what his family had lost. But he knew he must put his parents' needs before his own comfort and endeavored to secure provisions for them every day. He threw himself into his labors, as eager to be of use as to keep distracted from the fear that Geum-Ja's loss was his fault. He could not bring himself to tell his parents about the last night he had seen his sister—had he simply begged her to stay or dragged her inside the hut rather than returning to sleep, she might never have been taken by the tigers at all.

The drumbeat of self-blame grew louder in the night, and Geum-Jin struggled to sleep. The slightest tremor in the hut was enough to rouse him: his father's dream-soaked grunts, his mother's tears, the body aches he bore from his daily work. Once awake, he would lie in the dark for hours, the night song of mountain insects haunting him with memories of the games his other half so adored.

On yet another restless night, Geum-Jin stirred with the urge to relieve himself. He slipped out of the hut with practiced ease, his father's snoring steady behind him. Although the moon shone bright over the passing clouds, he did not need light to find his way to the latrine. He faltered nonetheless a few paces from the herb garden, where a figure stood watching him. He froze and stared back, afraid of what it would do if he moved.

"Are you a ghost?" he whispered.

The figure glided forward and embraced him. Geum-Jin nearly lost his balance from the force of his sister's arms, grown furry and thick. The soft, tan face he had always known blurred as he blinked away his tears.

"How are you here? We thought you—"

"Come with me."

Geum-Jin stepped back out of his twin's grasp. "What are you talking about? Uhmuhni and Ahbuhji will be so relieved to see you—"

"No, it'll be better if they don't know I'm here." Geum-Ja's eyes flashed yellow.

Geum-Jin wondered if he were dreaming, for his true twin would never suggest deceiving their parents in a time of need. "But . . . you're home."

"My home is now beyond these mountains, on terrain untouched by people. This land will soon be lost. We have to leave." Her long black hair cascaded into stripes along her back.

Geum-Jin stared. Was this truly his twin? She spoke with that voice he knew better than his own, but her words felt strange. Doubt tugged down the corners of his mouth. "Uhmuhni and Ahbuhji aren't well. They haven't been since you disappeared. They can't leave this place. Please, come back. I know things will get better if you just come back."

“No, our parents can’t leave. They belong to this mountain, and the mountain will care for them in its own way. But you and I are different. We can still go somewhere human destruction can’t follow us.”

Geum-Jin stepped away from the creature before him. Her eyes shifted from yellow to black with each breath, tufts of hair growing and receding from her broad face. His head started to shake of its own accord.

“No,” he said. “I can’t do what you did.” Tears no longer clouded his eyes. Heat seeped into his ears. “I won’t do what you did.”

“It’ll be harder to find game here,” she said, voice louder. “The forest is shrinking to meet the demands of men. Beasts that roamed these lands are fleeing north. But the tigers can protect us.” Geum-Ja walked forward and embraced her brother again. “Come with me.”

“Please, stay with me,” he replied into the fur of her shoulder.

Geum-Ja tensed at her brother’s plea, her yellow eyes glowing wet under hooded black lids. She grabbed his wrists with fingers that flashed into claws. Letting her tears fall into his palms, she said, “Rub this into our parents’ feet while they sleep, and their souls will not run from their bodies. But don’t tell anyone I was here or the medicine won’t work.”

She slipped into the darkness, where three pairs of yellow eyes blinked at Geum-Jin before disappearing.

Geum-Jin returned to the hut and dabbed his parents’ toes with the balm in his hands. He lay back in his covers and stared at the rotting ceiling, wondering whether he had dreamt up a being that both was and was not his sister.

The next day, Myoung-Ok and Dahn rose, feeling better than they had in months. Outside the hut, they discovered a freshly slain deer and a pile of ginseng roots, large pawprints trailing away into the forest.