If You Lie With Me

by debbiechan

Summary

Unlike my “Sanctuary” series which imagines a life for Woon and Dong-soo after the canon story, this long story works entirely within canon; it re-tells the series. It is, in fact, a novelization of the series with a new precipitating scene; the story is shown only from the boys’ new perspective and with added scenes and dialogues.

NOW COMPLETE! PARTS FIVE AND SIX UP! Due to A03’s recent server crazies, I wasn't able to post the final installments easily. The character limitations seemed to change for chapters too, so the last two parts of this story (what AO3 calls chapters and what I call
"parts further divided into numbered sections resembling traditional chapters) were made into two parts instead of one. DONE NOW! It's been fun riding this baby home. Thank you all for your support.
CHAPTER EDITED 11/21/18 to include canon fact of Yeo Woon being branded by Heuksa Chorong at age twelve. Strange how it fit in with what I already wrote in "The Marks on Her Skin; the Marks on Us All"

Unlike my “Sanctuary” series which imagines a life for Woon and Dong-soo after the canon story, this long story works entirely within canon; it re-tells the series. It is, in fact, a novelization of the series with a new precipitating scene; the story is shown only from the boys’ new perspective and with added scenes and dialogues. I hope, though, that you enjoy more than that.

If Woon had not been so silent and if Dong-soo had been a less clue-less participant in the sweep of events, Warrior Baek Dong-soo’s final episode could’ve showcased its most compelling message: people’s lives are not pre-determined by the stars but determined by themselves. I’ve always argued that the script could’ve remained a tragic but consistent narrative if it had allowed its characters to mature. In a successful coming-of-age story, bravery helps—that is, pushing through boundaries, conventions, convenient deceptions. This story is another way I imagine Woon and Dong-soo could have navigated what Woon believed to be his dark destiny. This story, in rescuing Woon, also restores Dong-soo as a champion in a historical story; thanks to Lily and other fans, I realize how much the K-drama failed his character by not allowing him to accomplish what the historical figure is most famous for—in the script, Dong-soo is not even the hero responsible for stopping the coup against the Prince Heir; he merely staves off assassins at first and helps by accident while others do the real superstar work; neither is he shown to have he learned what his mentor called “the Living Sword” as any coming-of-age protagonist would do; he doesn’t understand his best friend.

For what it’s worth, Warrior Baek Dong-soo the K-drama may have tried to play both sides and shown that destiny and self-determination can work together. (I tried this game in my WBDS story “To Catch Heaven in Your Hands”). But if so, the script failed at that. As one fan said, the final episode sent the message that one isn’t allowed to fight for one’s life. Yeo Woon died in the end; he could’ve died in a way that justified the script. The worst sin of the script, though, may have been killing Dong-soo as a believable hero.

A sad ending is not necessarily a bad ending, but Warrior Baek Dong-soo’s is both. Woon drops his weapons and leaps to a useless death; Dong-soo holds fast to his sword, averts his eyes, and, believing Woon will kill him, is resigned to his fate. Woon is in Dong-soo’s arms again, but the script is miserably unconsummated. The ending is an inversion of everything Dong-soo stood for, and yes, some stories invert tropes. But the script doesn’t invert this trope in a satisfying way; it exploits and belittles the relationship between the main characters. It’s not even a decent Romeo and Juliet story because what Woon did to save Dong-soo and others isn’t revealed, isn’t shown to
heal those who cared for that tragic kid, and Woon’s story disappears, lost to history, no longer even a blip in subsequent events although Woon’s struggle had been the focus all through the series. Although Woon is the fail bad-guy, the fail-last episode hits all the wrong notes by making Dong-soo the fail good-guy. This story is for the fan who helped me understand that. This story sets Dong-soo and Woon on a different course and lets them grow up.

For Lily (Zofolli)

Sorry, not sorry for still writing to save Yeo Woon. I’ve watched so many K-dramas where guys die tragically—e.g., I knew Bidam in Queen Seondeok would die as a historical character, and I watched the script show him accept that his rejecting mother loved him, that the woman he loved also loved him, so when Bidam went down, it was sad, but he went down fighting like a man, chasing his own hubris and trying to reach his impossible love in the end. Woonie? He never had any reassurance of anyone’s love. By what miracle did he ever follow Dong-soo far enough to lose him in the end? So, what if Dong-soo had given Woon less to doubt sooner?

Genre: Boy-love, Shounen-ai, Hurt-Comfort, Romance, Coming-of-Age, Bildungsroman, Action-fusion historical K-drama

Pairing: Dong-soo x Woon (and a Woon x Queen Jung-soon scene be warned)

Warnings: Explicit homosexual sex (the first incidence involves arguably underage boys—two consenting seventeen-year olds—and LOTS of sex because this precipitating event changes the WBDS script), some violence, mentions of childhood abuse, no graphic exploitative depictions. Nothing peculiar. A het scene, oops. Thank you to the longtime fan of this pairing who encouraged me to write more sex scenes because I believed those to be my weak area, and practice is a virtue.

Screencaps and English subtitles are from the series. Only the first, from when Dong-soo and Woon were boys at the warrior camp, has been manipulated to include snow.
PART ONE

1. You’d Save Anyone

A man who jumps off cliffs jumps to conclusions (attributed to Confucius).

“What are you doing?” Woon whispered. Dong-soo’s eyebrows were white with frost. His face was close enough to breathe clouds of warm air onto Woon’s cheek.

“Ah, there you are.” Dong-soo smiled. “It’s going to be okay.”

Woon couldn’t remember—wait. There had been an argument. Woon had said the geese were flying downstream to nest because of the cold, and Dong-soo had countered that their arrows had spooked them further up the mountain. Dong-soo had already bagged one large goose. He said the best place to shoot them would be from the cliff-side. Woon wasn’t easily convinced, but Dong-soo could be convincing. They’d climbed up and up, warming themselves with the exercise, bickering about nothing and everything. The geese had been there—skimming over the icy water.

“How many fingers am I holding up?” Dong-soo asked.

“Four.” I’ve been in an accident.
"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

All the boys in the warrior camp would be observing their eighteenth birthday, as had been tradition on the mountain-top for five years now, on the coming New Year. Woon’s actual seventeenth birthday had been a few days ago. Dong-soo had given him a boiled egg—stolen from the kitchen—and then he’d asked for a bite. *Just a tiny bite, Woon-ah?*

Snow was falling. Snow? No one had expected snow before dawn when Sa-mo had sent the boys out to hunt game. Snow did fall in mid-November, though. Not often, but on hazy days like today, without warning….

*I fell into the water.*

Woon remembered now. Another argument. "*Step back.*" "*No, you step back.*" Woon wasn’t one to lose his footing. He wanted the shot because Dong-soo had already bagged a bird. He stepped forward, and the ground gave way. It wasn’t a long fall, but the water was so cold his body felt like it was being burned alive. Then a sharp pain?

*I hit my head. Oh, that’s what happened.*

Snow was falling fast now, and there was no fire. Woon noticed that he and Dong-soo weren’t wearing clothes—Dong-soo had on a quilted vest but was perfectly nude otherwise; he was lying on Woon like the weight of several blankets. Woon turned his head and saw a pile of drenched fabric.

"Yeah, I’ll make a fire downhill in a little while," Dong-soo said. "There’s not quite a cave but a little hole in a boulder I saw on the way up here. The clothes will dry up in no time, but Jang-mi told all the guys not to get the vests wet. Yours is ruined."

"No, you’re wrong," Woon said. "She said not to get them wet because the duck feathers inside the lining take forever to dry. When we get back, you need to rip the cloth open, soak the feathers in vinegar—that way they won’t get moldy and stink."

Dong-soo smiled, bright teeth showing. "You didn’t hurt your head that bad, I guess. You’re still smart."

"My head?"

"You’ve got a bump the size of a baby pumpkin," Dong-soo said. "Scared me half to death when I jumped in and saw all the blood streaming around. I guess you hit yourself on a rock and swallowed water."

Woon was quiet. He didn’t remember being rescued by Dong-soo.

"I did everything Sa-mo taught us," Dong-soo’s voice was proud. "I wasn’t even thinking of going in after you because the water is deep enough, and it isn’t fast—-but then you didn’t appear—*aish*, almost had a heart attack. I had already taken off the vest and cap because the climbing made me hot, so mine didn’t get soaked when I jumped in after you. See?" He tugged at his vest. "I tried to put my cap on you, but it wouldn’t fit because of that bump."

"We should make a fire." Woon attempted to get up, but Dong-soo pushed him down with the full weight of his chest.

"You’re not okay yet. Your lips were blue just a minute ago." Then Dong-soo lost his prideful act.
His voice dropped to a soft, worried hush. “Woon-ah, after I pulled you out and turned your head—*aigoo*, so much water came gushing out your mouth and nose, and *you weren’t breathing.*”

Woon stared at Dong-soo.

“Aish, don’t look at me like I stole your first kiss. I blew some air into your mouth. Can you—? Woon-ah, don’t be stupid and stay still a little while. Your mind is right, but you’re freezing. Scold me if you want. That might bring your body heat up.” Dong-soo then lay his cheek next to Woon’s and hugged him tightly.

The snow was still falling, more lightly now. Woon didn’t want to scold Dong-soo. It had been Woon’s own fault that he fell into the water. Maybe it was shock, but he didn’t feel frozen. It wasn’t peculiar to be naked with Dong-soo—the mountain camp boys bathed together all the time—but it felt strangely intimate. No fire, no clothes, no source of warmth but Dong-soo…. *has anyone ever held me like this? Why am I thinking about such things?* Woon wondered if his head wasn’t damaged after all; he felt that instead of being held down against the earth by his best friend, he was floating above it with him.

When Dong-soo was certain Woon wasn’t in danger of turning into a lifeless snowman, the two headed out, butt-naked, to the cave, gathering firewood along the way. “You okay walking?” Dong-soo asked. Woon was angry that Dong-soo even asked and pushed his shoulder against Dong-soo’s shoulder—a feeble attempt to knock Dong-soo off balance. Dong-soo had grown into a long lean pillar of martial arts poise in the past year, harder to topple than a giant Buddha. Both boys kept walking naked in the cold; this was basic survival training, not even on a par with some of the difficult and bizarre routines Sa-mo had forced the mountain camp boys to endure. Woon was wearing the one, good feather-stuffed vest. Jang-mi had sewn one for each of the boys this year; it was light, perfect for winter-wear, and it had never felt warmer.

Dong-soo made the fire which was roaring in no time; Woon hung the wet clothes on twigs planted into the cave’s clay floor. The boys sat on the ground, not saying anything to one another for a while, huffing from exertion. Woon felt the pain in his head throb. He wondered if Sa-mo would scold him. The camp wasn’t far; they could be back before dinner if the clothes dried fast enough. If they got back soon, there would be no need for a search party. *Nothing, this is nothing.* Maybe Woon could disguise his wound, but it would be difficult to keep Dong-soo from bragging about his amazing rescue.

Finally, Dong-soo spoke. “Woon-ah, I’m freezing. C’mere.”

It was terribly cold in the sun-less cave. Body heat made sense after all.

Woon didn’t think any more about it. He moved closer to Dong-soo, and Dong-soo embraced him. They fell sideways onto the clay, which wasn’t warm enough, even though the fire was high. Dong-soo flipped Woon over so that Woon’s back was facing the fire. The warmth of the fire on his bare legs, the jacket, Dong-soo’s body—Woon felt less cold. He understood he was being prioritized, protected. He didn’t complain. He didn’t believe he was hurt. He was *certain* he wasn’t hurt. What was this strange feeling? *He wanted to be held and protected this way.*

“I can see the bump.” Dong-soo said. “Does it hurt?”

“No,” Woon lied.

Dong-soo touched Woon’s head with his palm. “Does it hurt now?”

It didn’t hurt more than before. Dong-soo’s hand traveled to Woon’s cheek. That was a sensation
Woon didn’t understand; he and Dong-soo had fought for years; Dong-soo had always tried to punch Woon or whap him with a wooden sword. Woon had dodged every single blow. Dong-soo’s attempts to hurt Woon had been all about competition; Woon never doubted Dong-soo’s growing affection for all the boys in the camp and the way Dong-soo regarded Woon as his favorite, but… this touch. Dong-soo’s hand on Woon’s cheek lingered there. The touch burned the way the ice water had burned Woon’s body. The touch felt that strange and powerful.

“Oh, wait.” Dong-soo stretched the full length of his arm behind him, felt around for the feather-lined cap, found it, and tucked it under Woon’s head. “Better?”

“I told you it didn’t hurt.”

“Liar. Bumps on the head always hurt. I should know. I’ve had plenty of them.”

Woon felt Dong-soo’s hard arousal against his thigh. This wasn’t anything new. The boys had slept together for years. This time, though, instead of feeling Dong-soo’s massive cock through a blanket and sleep clothes—this time was bare skin against bare skin. Sa-mo had talked to them about what all the warrior-camp boys called their “things.” Sa-mo had said “things” were defiant, independent, and did not heed the most determined warrior’s orders. They needed to be ignored most of the time. “Pretend they’re not there,” Sa-mo said. “They’ll calm down if you ignore them.” If worse came to worse. their attention needed to be handled properly.

Every few weeks there was the same old lecture about how too much masturbation depleted a warrior of his strength, how it was a natural activity but to be done in private, in the outhouse, not near other people or where other people might possibly pass by. No boy in the camp was too innocent, though—every few months someone traded dessert or promised Mi-so a favor (“I’ll do your laundry duty for two weekends!”) to go to the village and score a naughty book. One kid had been caught playing with his thing when the barracks were supposed to be empty—but leave it to Sa-mo to be always on the prowl for an unaccounted-for warrior. Nearly everyone had been caught jerking off behind a tree. Not Woon—he was too smart for that. Dong-soo wasn’t smart. He’d been caught just a few weeks ago. Naughty thoughts were preoccupying everyone lately. Sa-mo said that was the way of boys their age—and boys who hadn’t been down from the mountain-top in years to see girls? “Save it for marriage,” Sa-mo warned. “Or never get married—and you’ll be strong like me.”

Woon felt like drifting off to sleep. His leg stirred against Dong-soo’s big warm cock. Woon’s voice was calm: “Don’t lose yourself and ooze all over me.” He added to the joke in a tired voice: “That would be disgusting.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re not that pretty.”

Woon shut his eyes. It’s so warm. Sleep would be sweet.

“Hey. HEY?”

Dong-soo sounded so alarmed that Woon was wide awake in an instant. “What is it?” His first thought: Wait, I am that pretty. He knew how some boys in the camp looked at him. The same boys had taken turns having crushes on Mi-so, and she on them (Woon never liked her--he thought Mi-so was a brat). Yes, I am that pretty. Before going to the camp, when Woon was only twelve, full-grown men had looked at him. Other children had joked that Woon’s father, a drunk who owed everyone in the village money, would sell Woon on the streets because Woon was that pretty.

Dong-soo was staring, pupils darkening. Woon felt his pulse quicken.
“I don’t think you’re supposed to go to sleep,” Dong-soo said. “Just lie still and rest. Sa-mo said when you get a bump on the head, you’re not supposed to go to sleep. Just lie here. I’ll watch you.”

Oh, that was it. Solicitousness. Dong-soo being Dong-soo and fretting like an auntie.

“I’m going to feel weird if you’re staring at me,” Woon said. “Not to mention you’re poking me with your thing.”

“Yours is hard too,” Dong-soo said.

It was. Woon hadn’t noticed. He felt flushed.

Maybe Dong-soo wouldn’t notice from the warm cast of the fire how red Woon’s face had become. Woon had never fantasized about bratty Mi-so or any drawing in a book. For years, he had thought about Dong-soo. Nothing too far. What is far? I don’t even know. Sa-mo had said naughty thoughts were normal. For Woon, they came and went like clouds; training held the field of focus. Taekwondo, acupuncture, the names of poisonous plants. Clouds cast a shadow on goings-on; some nights Woon shivered a little because of clouds.

“You’re staring at me.” Woon couldn’t even hear his own voice, he had spoken so softly.

You saved me. You’d save anyone. You’re obsessed with me because I’m the best at fighting. Because I’m the best at everything.

It’s not like you want to kiss me or anything. Stop looking at me like that. It’s not like I want to kiss you or anything. I’m not thinking right.

Stop. Staring.

2. What Happened Didn’t Happen

Whoever avoids sensual desires — as he would, with his foot, the head of a snake — goes beyond, mindful, this attachment in the world. —Buddha, Kama Sutta, 4.1

When Woon hadn’t sprung out of the water as expected, Dong-soo felt the horror he had felt when Sa-mo didn’t emerge from the fire so many years ago. In an instant, the world was rushed by Death —only this time by placid freezing water, not roaring fire. There had been no moment to waste. In the years since Sa-mo survived that fire, Dong-soo had always wondered why the seconds had passed in such black torture; yes, Sa-mo had walked, unscathed, toward Dong-soo in no time, but should not a loyal adopted son have flown into the fire after someone he loved so much? This time, Dong-soo would not wait. If the water below was full of jagged rocks or man-eating dragons, Dong-soo would fly towards Woon and die with him.

The water was deep, freezing, crystal-clear. Not far downstream there were rivulets of bright red blood. Sa-mo had trained all the boys in saving people from cold rivers. It would have to be Woon. It would have to be Woon. The rescue was simple; Dong-soo had outgrown Woon in height and weight in only the past year. There was an ample gravel shoreline. Turn his head, wait until the water spills out, blow air and more air.
The campfire in the cave crackled, and the red light shone in Woon’s eyes. He was pretty. Everyone knew it. Everyone knew that Woon was Dong-soo’s person, his rival, his best friend. What Dong-soo himself had not known, not until today, maybe not until this very moment, was how much….

Do I really need you so much I would die if….?

Dong-soo knew, because Sa-mo was always reminding him, that Dong-soo was an immature brat who didn’t think much before acting. There was the thought. The thought was there. Like a cloud full of rain. Vague, dark, lust itself. Then there was no stopping Dong-soo’s hand from reaching out and brushing the hair at Woon’s forehead. He’s not just pretty—he’s beautiful.

“Woon-ah, does it feel funny in your head? Are you dizzy?”

Woon shook his head; Dong-soo had never seen him look so vulnerable.

Woon cleared his throat, but his voice sounded less angry than he must have intended it to be.

“You’re creeping me out staring at me like that.”

I could stare at you forever.

“Get used to it. I’m going to watch you. Just look away if you have to.”

Woon did, gazing nowhere in particular. Dong-soo could see each long lash in detail. If the moments before Sa-mo emerged safe and sound from the fire had passed in ever-blackening torture, the moments now were pure as snow. The cave was cold, set apart from the entire world, and the only heat was the small circle around the fire. The center of the heat wasn’t the fire itself; it was somewhere deep in Dong-soo’s belly, spreading in luscious waves across his groin.

After a long time, maybe not a long time, but after the feelings were too much to bear, Dong-soo lay his face against Woon’s neck. His lower body moved in what he assumed was an imperceptible up and down, two brisk strokes against Woon’s body. Woon’s lower body responded, lurching forward.

“Woon-ah,” Dong-soo whispered. “This is ….”

Woon’s cock was rubbing against Dong-soo’s. The motion was deliberate, slow, maddening.

“I can’t stand it either,” Woon said. He threw a bare leg over Dong-soo’s thigh. Their hips were swerving, their groins struggling to find the best position. Awkward—they were facing one another.

Dong-soo flipped Woon over easily so that Woon lay on top—Woon was the lighter of the pair by far. Dong-soo’s palms found each of Woon’s buttocks, swept down Woon’s thighs to part them slightly so that all was aligned. The mutual humping began, faster now. Anxiety and pleasure together. No--not good. Yes--so good.

Woon opened his mouth wide but no sound came out.

Dong-soo kissed that mouth. This kiss is what felt the most wrong; the other parts of their bodies touching could be explained away as youthful sexual experimentation, some sort of mis-step, a natural happening like the ground giving way when Woon walked in front of Dong-soo to take that shot at the goose and fell into the river.

Dong-soo pulled away, stunned. His mouth was drawn back to Woon’s mouth.
As if discovering hell’s flames in heaven, Dong-soo felt heat purifying him even as it stung him. He pulled away again, trying to assess the feeling. Dong-soo became aware as his hands found Woon’s wrists, as his fingers folded into Woon’s fingers, as he looked into Woon’s moist eyes, that the situation was not only lover-like, it was love.

Dong-soo didn’t know people kissed this way. He tasted Woon’s tongue. Salt? Dried fish? Whatever had been in their backpacks for a snack. Woon’s hands were in Dong-soo’s hair, holding tightly onto the curls. Teeth clicked; there was a smacking sound. Dong-soo found his lips pulling away, returning to kiss Woon’s brow, his jaw, his throat, the corner of his mouth. That mouth would exhale delight and consent and then return Dong-soo’s kisses with wet passion.

At age twelve or so, Dong-soo had seen a pair of lovers press lips together behind a market wall. A brief, sweet peck—that was it. Dong-soo had pointed and laughed, and Sa-mo had whapped Dong-soo’s head for that. Dong-soo had imagined that he would kiss his true love, maybe that noble girl from years ago whose silk purse had been stolen—Dong-soo had pictured his lips alighting on hers like a butterfly. Wasn’t that the way kisses were supposed to be? Romantic and delicate? One touched a loved one with care and respect.

Whatever Woon and I are doing isn’t normal, is it?

Dong-soo and Woon were mouthing one another’s faces as if trying to eat one another. Not biting. Woon’s kisses weren’t that rough, but---

He’s acting a little crazy. Has he wanted to do this before? I don’t care. I’m crazy too.

It felt like fighting but not like fighting—what was that weak feeling? Dong-soo felt that breathless happiness like the thrill of fighting, even if he always lost to Woon. Dong-soo could not keep up with where his own hands were traveling. His fingers were on Woon’s hips; Dong-soo was trying not to press Woon’s body closer, but if such a thing were possible, he wanted to push Woon inside him.

“Ah!” Woon gasped against Dong-soo’s neck, and the rubbing against Dong-soo’s groin stopped.

Dong-soo wasn’t even aware of what had happened. When he noticed how soft Woon’s cock had become, a new excitement flew through Dong-soo’s body like a wildfire. “Woon-ah.” Dong-soo clutched Woon’s shoulders.

Woon pulled away. “I—”

Woon sat up, legs splayed on either side of Dong-soo.

“What’s the matter?” Dong-soo clutched his own cock because it was about to blow. “Woon-ah?”

The terror in Woon’s face was if all heat had escaped him, and he was going to turn blue from being cast into the frozen river of Reality. Woon rose, sat closer to the fire. “I’m sorry.”

Dong-soo was more worried about Woon than disappointed about the loss of a warm body over his, but, feeling overwhelmed within his own sexual situation, Dong-soo did what came naturally: he finished himself with a few quick strokes. His own release felt worthless, though, because Woon wasn’t looking at him.

What have we done? What’s going to happen?

Woon looked up. His eyes met Dong-soo’s with a solemn expression. Woon was a lonely person—Dong-soo knew that much. “I’m sorry,” Woon repeated.
“About what?” Dong-soo was confused now. “Woon-ah?” *Wait. Woon sometimes said the opposite of things, the backwards, upside-down of things.* “I didn’t hurt you, did I? Are you okay?”  

Woon shook his head, hugged his knees. He was sweating, but he still looked cold.  

A few moments passed. Woon chose a stick and poked the fire. “I started it,” he said. “It’s my fault.”  

“It happened,” Dong-soo said. He managed a small laugh. “I liked it, Woon-ah. I don’t think it was wrong. It’s like one of those things that happen in nature, not one of those things that proper folk in the cities are always making up. Rules change from place to place with people. Didn’t Sa-mo teach us that much? Nature, though…” Dong-soo stretched his arms as if waking up from a long nap. He wasn’t going to let Woon feel bad about anything. “Nature is….”  

“I know.” Woon poked at the fire. His long black hair was dry now, a few sweaty strands sticking to his forehead. “I thought I had more self-control.”  

The fire crackled. The moments passed. No right, no wrong, no clear light, no absolute darkness. Just the two of them, Woon’s loneliness, and Dong-soo wanting to take care of everything.  

“Hey, Woon-ah, don’t worry about it. I won’t tell anyone. It just happened is all.”  

Woon’s eyelashes were fluttering. He looked drowsy, not himself.  

“Don’t fall asleep. The clothes aren’t dry yet. We still have a bit to go before heading back to camp.”  

“Yeah, I know.”  

It was selfish; it was wrong; it was being seventeen years old, and Sa-mo would punish him if he had even a clue of what Dong-soo was thinking now, but Dong-soo’s mind and body went there. Dong-soo wanted Woon again. He wanted Woon in other ways. A line had been crossed; they were alone together; no one would know. Hadn’t Geol stolen a whole sack of rice cakes from the kitchen once and never been caught? Wasn’t it Gak who had managed to keep those dirty books hidden in the outhouse for two years without Sa-mo finding out? There was a vow among a few boys not to move the books, and those who didn’t know of the dirty books were never told; that was the blood vow; *no one told.*  

“Woon-ah?” Dong-soo decided to press his luck. “Remember the picture in one of Gak’s books—the one with the girl sucking on the guy’s thing?”  

Woon shot Dong-soo a look. Dong-soo was encouraged because it looked like Woon wanted to laugh but was holding back. There was a sparkle in Woon’s eye that wasn’t a reflection of the firelight.  

“You remember that picture, right? Woon-ah, you remember?”  

“I never really looked at all of them.”  

“Liar.”  

“I do remember that picture.” Woon poked at the fire.  

“If a girl can do that to a guy…” Dong-soo smiled and rubbed his palms across his own nude thighs. He rubbed his belly and happened on dry semen there. “Ha… I was thinking…. Can’t a guy
do that to another guy?”

Woon didn’t bother to turn his head—his eyes looked at Dong-soo askance.

“We have plenty time,” Dong-soo said. He knew he could be convincing. “If you do me first, then I will do you. Make it a contest. See who lasts longer. The one who lasts longer wins.”

Woon kept poking the fire with the stick. What was that serious look masking? Then Woon threw the stick into the fire. “Okay,” he said. “But you do me first.”

“You’re not going to back out?”

“No.” Woon looked Dong-soo directly in the eye. “You said it was a contest, right? I have never lost to you. So…. Woon narrowed his eyes. “See what you can do.”

Dong-soo was right before the fire, but he felt himself tremble. “I—I can do anything?”

“Sure.”

Dong-soo found the duck-feather cap and taking Woon by the shoulders, lay Woon on the ground and Woon’s head on the cap. “Be still,” Dong-soo ordered. “Don’t bump your head again.”

It was cute, Dong-soo thought, how Woon’s face went from competitive mode to startled as soon as his head was pressed against the cap.

Dong-soo startled himself by placing his own lips against Woon’s the way he had imagined his lips would land on his true heart’s love. Then as lightly as a butterfly, Dong-soo kissed his way down Woon’s throat and chest, pausing to flick each nipple. Why? Why not? Woon, so pretty, his skin rosy in the firelight, such a proud, strong boy and yet such a quiet person, someone whose eyelashes fluttered and who looked away like a girl—one of those modest, high-mannered court girls—

Yeo Woon? Lying here, giving himself to Dong-soo like this? Dong-soo didn’t want to bruise such a perfect person. Not like before, when things had been so crazy and lustful—this time would be slow and sweet. And Dong-soo wanted to savor it. It wasn’t a contest.

Woon’s fingers were already clawing the ground, and his “thing” was already fully upright by the time Dong-soo was breathing hard against Woon’s belly.

Dong-soo didn’t want to hurry by any means, so he palmed Woon’s inner thighs, kissed there, ran his fingers across the length of Woon’s shaft. Fascinating up close in the firelight. It was velvety and veined, not like his thighs which were smooth as candles. *Not at all the thing Sa-mo had described as an entity separate from a person.* No, it didn’t seem like an arm or a leg but like Woon himself. Dong-soo didn’t know how he knew, but as he ran his tongue from the bottom to top, he felt all Woon’s lithe, powerful self. Dong-soo felt privy to a deep secret; his excitement soared. Woon made a little sighing sound.

Dong-soo continued to lick, here, there, and he held onto the base of the arousal as it grew; a dew began to drip from the top. It tasted delicious, like the first sip of broth after being sick. Dong-soo took the whole tip into his mouth then, swirled his tongue around, felt a fire storm in his own belly as Woon couldn’t help but moan. Dong-soo began to move his lips up and down.

*Not too fast, not too fast, make it last.*

Woon tried to last. His hips bucked. Dong-soo’s lips stopped moving. He held onto the firm
bottom half, and his lips resumed a moderately-paced roll across the glistening top, but before Dong-soo could accelerate the rhythm to match his own rapid pulse, Woon’s hips squirmed; his right arm flailed; warm liquid shot into Dong-soo’s mouth.

Heart pounding, Dong-soo looked up. Woon was sitting up on his elbows.

“How long was that?” Woon breathed. “It’s… it’s… hard to keep track…. “ A slight laugh. “That wasn’t easy.”

“Just let me know when you’re ready to do me.”

“Did you--?” Woon looked amazed. “Did you swallow it?”

“What else was I supposed to do? It flies right into your mouth.”

“What does it taste like?”

“I couldn’t tell. It just went right on in.”

“Oh.”

No sooner had Dong-soo risen to his knees than he was tackled by Woon. Apparently Woon was a serious competitor. No face kisses, nothing seductive or sweet, just—

“Aigoo, that—that—” Dong-soo swept his fingers into Woon’s hair and felt the bump, the blood had dried into a thick scab as wide as two fingers. Even in his ecstasy, as Woon sucked, Dong-soo felt a pang of remorse. Maybe all this excitement wasn’t good for Woon’s injury. “That’s too crazy, Woon-ah. Slow down.”

“Oh what?” Woon’s fingers dug into Dong-soo’s upper thighs. “You’ll lose?” A loud, slurping noise. For someone who didn’t speak much, Woon could move his tongue all over like lightning.

Dong-soo had been sitting up; he threw his head back and eased himself into a lying position.

“I can’t—I can’t!” Dong-soo couldn’t. He was sweating so much he felt as if he’d been caught in a thunderstorm. Peals of thunder in his ears. The world shook; the very foundations of the world broke. Heaven fell to earth. Then….

A strange stillness. The fire crackled. No wind blew outside. It was still mid-day; he and Woon were still in a cold cave far from camp, together in an unknown world.

Why am I so scared right now?

Dong-soo was breathing hard; Woon was breathing hard. Dong-soo could see the top of Woon’s head, firelight reflected in smooth black hair, and one of Woon’s small hands lay curled against Dong-soo’s hipbone.

“You won,” Dong-soo whispered.

It was a relief that Woon crawled up to embrace him instead of moving away. Dong-soo closed his eyes. Are you lonely still, Woon-ah? This means something, doesn’t it? What is this?

Woon rested his face against Dong-soo’s neck. Hot breath, a strange clinginess—Woon wasn’t like this, so dear, so willing to show affection.

He wasn’t sure he had spoken those last words aloud, but it didn’t matter. The words faded into a dream about a wheat field, the wind blowing and the sun shining bright. Jin-joo was there, that annoying girl, with her little quiver of arrows. There was a row of children, all running and laughing, and Dong-soo was as free as when he had first broken from the bamboo splints, able to wave his arms and flip summersaults. Some game was going on; the person hiding was the most precious person in the world. Dong-soo was running with the children but looking for Woon.

Where is Woon? No one seemed to know, but everyone said Woon had been there moments ago. Where is Woon?

When Dong-soo woke up, Woon was asleep in his arms. Not blue-lipped, not delirious with fever, but breathing peaceful, measured breaths.

“Woon-ah?”

“Wha--?” Woon had never been a sound sleeper.

“How long have we been asleep?”

Woon looked at the fire, lifted his head to look towards the opening of the small cave. The light there was bright. “Not long at all. I don’t remember dreaming.”

“Is your head okay? Was that bullshit what Sa-mo said about not falling asleep when you hit your head?”

“Maybe.” Woon sighed, rubbed his eyes with the heels of his palms. “But I told you I didn’t hit it hard. I’m fine.”

“Weren’t we supposed to cook whatever we caught before we head back?”

“We should head back. The clothes are dry.” Woon began to sit up, but Dong-soo pressed him down.

“We have a perfect excuse. You fell. You hit your head. Everything got wet. Your lips were blue. We have more time.”

“Dong-soo-yah.” All at once, Woon’s voice was its old self, no longer dreamy and exhausted. “What happened should not have happened. We have to act like nothing happened.”

“Okay.” Dong-soo leaned forward and kissed Woon on the neck. “It shouldn’t have happened, but it did. I won’t tell anyone.”

“No one can find out.” Woon turned to face Dong-soo and embraced him. It felt, to Dong-soo, like Woon’s body melting against his. “Don’t tell a soul,” Woon said in his most authoritative voice. He was the most respected of all the boys. “No one can ever know,” Woon went on, a little desperate. “Not ever, in all our lives.” A voice becoming as foolish as any other boy’s in the camp. “Swear. A blood oath. Like with Gak’s books.”

“What do you mean?” Dong-soo’s lower body was pressed against Woon’s lower body now. The inevitable was already familiar. There was plenty time. “Do we have to cut our fingers with a knife and smear blood on our hands? That’s stupid.” Dong-soo was a little worried about Woon. Didn’t he trust his best friend? “You can’t be serious about—”

“You’re the stupid one.” Woon kissed Dong-soo on the mouth. It was a pleasant kiss, not deep, not light, but full-lipped, moist, and just right. Dong-soo thought that Woon must be the best kisser in the world, just like he was the best swordsman. “This is stronger than a blood vow,” Woon said in
a soft, conspiratorial voice. “You swallowed. I swallowed."

“What does that mean, then?” Dong-soo kissed Woon. “If we’re something more than blood brothers, then what are we?” The kisses were more languid this time. They kissed for a long time, as if the kisses were the answer to Dong-soo’s question, but Dong-soo was unsatisfied. What did any of this mean? They knew one another’s bodies better now. Dong-soo flipped Woon on top of him like before, and the rubbing against one another was less frantic. Dong-soo enjoyed the way Woon’s long hair brushed back and forth across his face with each thrust; Dong-soo kneaded Woon’s buttocks, swept his large hands up and down Woon’s back.

At the nape of Woon’s neck, Dong-soo felt bumps. Oh, that scar. When lightning hit a tree during a storm and a branch fell on him. He was so stupid to not tell Sa-mo. He tried to heal himself and caught a fever. Woon can be stupid when he’s trying to be brave. Dong-soo only wanted more to protect Woon, only wanted more to hold him closer, closer.

“This never happened,” Woon reminded Dong-soo in a breathless voice.

“This isn’t even happening now.” Dong-soo smiled. He didn’t believe Woon was serious, but who knew? Woon was mysterious … and very serious. Even through the haze of pleasure, Dong-soo thought, this really should not be happening, should it? That childish thought of doing something naughty and getting away with it only added to the excitement. Dong-soo was reminded of a time Sa-mo threw soju on a fire and the flames leapt, throwing sparks.

When Woon came, it was in a soundless but profound way; his body stiffened and then trembled as if stricken with a terrible sickness. Dong-soo was frightened because he himself had never experienced anything like that, but right away, Woon propped himself up on his elbows and looked fine. Content if not altogether peaceful. “Dong-soo-yah.” Woon dropped his chin to his chest, heaved a sigh, and smiled. “I won’t forget this, but--”

Before Woon could finish what Dong-soo knew was going to be a stupid remark, Dong-soo grabbed Woon’s shoulders and pulled Woon in for a deep kiss.

Like you have to tell me you won’t forget this? You’re funny, Woon-ah.

To Dong-soo’s surprise, Woon’s mouth began to travel down Dong-soo’s throat, laving the length of his clavicle, sucking on one nipple and sending reverberations of insane pleasure all through Dong-soo’s already incensed body. Woon then sucked so long on a place just above Dong-soo’s hip that Dong-soo was sure a bruise would bloom there. The pleasure was maddening, and then Woon took the tip of Dong-soo’s engorged organ into his mouth and ran circles around there with his crazy tongue.

“Woon-ah. Woon-ah.”

Dong-soo didn’t last the count of three. Woon was in his arms again. This was the best part—the strangest, most wonderful part—an affectionate Yeo Woon. Am I going to feel your arms around me like this again?

Dong-soo knew it wouldn’t happen again. It wouldn’t be like Woon said—this never happened—but it would all be a lie. They would tell the whole story except for this part, no problem.

Dong-soo kissed Woon on the forehead. “Okay, let’s go. The climb down the hill is easy, and we’ll be back way before dinner.”

Woon was grabbing clothes before Dong-soo could speak again.
“When we say you got hurt,” Dong-soo added, “Mi-so is going to hover over you like an auntie, feed you dried fruits, stay the night instead of going back to the village—and—and—she’s going to watch you in your sleep to make sure you don’t die.”

Woon groaned, already pulling over his second layer of winter waistcoat.

And so ended what for almost two years would be remembered like a dream. Dong-soo felt a little bit of the magic melt, like snow in his hand, the moment he walked out of the cave.

The trip home was odd, no bickering about anything, but the closer to the camp the two walked, the easier it was for Dong-soo to believe that nothing indeed had really happened. How could it have? Some boys were already there, bragging about the roasted rabbit that would be cut into jerky or the woodpecker that would be the evening’s meal. Dong-soo pulled out his un-plucked goose, and everyone gasped when Dong-soo said, “Sorry, we didn’t have time to cook it because Woon fell into the river and got hurt on the rocks. He has a nasty bump. I had to pull him from the water, and he wasn’t breathing, so—”

More gasps. The boys rushed forward. Jang-mi’s hands covered her mouth.

As if on cue, Woon staggered forward, caught himself on the edge of a table, and Dong-soo helped him to his feet.

“I’m fine,” Woon insisted. “I was fine for hours while the clothes dried. I just—I just forgot to eat is all.”

“That’s not just weakness from hunger,” Sa-mo said. “Noona, get him to bed right now. “He’s over-exerted himself in this cold. The body uses more energy in the cold. Mi-so, get him some broth.” Then came a scolding voice, the one Sa-mo never failed to use with his adopted son, even though everyone knew the man doted on Dong-soo: “Dong-soo-yah, you should’ve fed him something, cooked the goose while the clothes were drying.”

Dong-soo was right about Mi-so going a-flutter with concern. Jang-mi, also, was beside herself. Dabbing her crying eyes with her apron, she brought meat to the sleep barracks for Woon to eat. All the boys came, Sa-mo followed soon after, and in the commotion, Dong-soo didn’t have room to sit by Woon’s side and be the sole comforter anymore.

Woon drank all the broth, Sa-mo inspected the wound, and said Woon would be fine, that he needed to rest. Sa-mo then told everyone to leave, including Dong-soo, who felt not only forlorn but exiled, under nightfall. That night, Woon slept like the dead, with Dong-soo and Cho-rip on either side of him as usual, and in the morning, Woon was allowed to stay in for the rest of the day while the boys went through their usual training. The day after, Woon joined in the routine. It never happened. “I’ll do all the laps in half the time today.” Woon slapped his best friend across the chest. “Watch. I got to rest yesterday, and you are all tired.”

It never happened? Dong-soo thought about nothing else every time he jacked off—and that happened more and more often. The way Woon had stiffened and trembled. The way he had whispered “Dong-soo-yah.”

Yeah, right, it never happened.

Months later, when spring came, Dong-soo felt chilled, even on the hottest days, and goose-pimples rose on his skin—looking for all the world like little white flecks of snow.
3. The Marks on Her Skin, The Marks on Us All

You are going over Arirang hill. My love, you are leaving me. Your feet will be sore before you go ten li. Just as there are many stars in the clear sky, there are also many dreams in our heart. There, over there, that mountain is Baekdu Mountain, where, even in the middle of winter days, flowers bloom. –“Arirang,” Korean folk song, hundreds of years old, origins unknown.

After Dong-soo, Woon, and Cho-rip, were deemed fit enough to leave the mountain-top and fulfill proper warrior duties, Sa-mo took the three boys to live with him in his village home; he gave the three the room that Dong-soo and Woon had once occupied as twelve-year-olds. “My side,” Dong-soo said the first night when Cho-rip tried to claim his usual spot to the right of Woon. Somehow the positions were mixed up on the mat so that Woon wasn’t in the middle anymore; from left to right, the order went Woon, Dong-soo, Cho-rip. Woon couldn’t sleep because everything felt out of the ordinary, and yet, after the three had graduated from the warrior camp, nothing had been un-ordinary.

Cho-rip is being Cho-rip, Woon told himself. Dong-soo is being Dong-soo.

Dong-soo had been fidgety on the walk through the village, and his eyes had been popping out of their sockets looking at all the girls. “How pretty!” He had whispered the exclamation at every turn. “Pretty!” Cho-rip was annoyed and said that Dong-soo needed at least another ten years to train his mind before he could even consider such things as relations with girls.

Yet Cho-rip had bought a dirty picture book with all his spending money and lied that it was a martial arts book. Woon had said little, observed everything, his heart a stone.

“You are ready for your first assignment,” Sa-mo said the very next day. He said he trusted them all to escort a young lady Buddhist apprentice in a carriage going to a temple, but that they all should look to Yeo Woon as the example of proper, adult behavior. Woon, Sa-mo stressed, knew how to be diligent; Woon knew how to focus.

“It was just fifteen months ago that he fell into a frozen river,” Dong-soo grumbled.

Woon was surprised that Dong-soo knew exactly how many months.

“Fifteen months for you young ones is like fifteen years for a person my age,” Sa-mo said. “You learn; you grow; life changes so fast.” Sa-mo stroked his beard and betrayed the smallest parental concern. “If there’s an attack on the entourage, you’ll have time to see them coming from the hillsides. Don’t draw your weapons right away. You’ll be fine.”

“Yes, Captain,” said the three graduates said in unison.

Fifteen months had not seemed that long for Woon. Right away after that snowy day in Dong-soo’s arms, Woon had been able to pretend that nothing happened, but Woon was a good pretender. He had, after all, been pretending since the day he showed up at Dong-soo’s home. Why else would he have told Dong-soo that what happened didn’t happen? Woon very much wanted whatever happened to happen again but…. Before the vow with Dong-soo, Woon had made another vow. Woon belonged to the Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong. Woon did not belong to the family on the mountain-top; he did not belong with Dong-soo. In the past fifteen months, reoccurring thoughts of
Dong-soo’s warm mouth had not diminished—if anything, they were stronger, but the fear that the Sky Lord would call Woon back soon had hardened Woon’s resolve to release any longing for Dong-soo. The fear of the Sky Lord returning, as the months passed, had become such a weight that Woon was used to it. The fear was a hard reality. A stone.

Dong-soo? The boy was an open book. For many weeks, there had been no mistaking the confusion in Dong-soo’s eyes. How he would glance at Woon, turn away flushed, how he would be fine for days but while making jokes with the other boys, a random comment might fluster him, make him look at Woon with shining eyes and flaring nostrils. At these times, Woon’s pulse would race, but he would muster his self-control. Nothing happened. One day, alone on rocky path, far ahead of the others on a difficult uphill exercise, Woon had crawled off-course to cry, quietly, behind a shrub. It had been overcast, his eighteenth birthday, un-seasonably warm though. Woon lost the race to Dong-soo. When he met Dong-soo at the top of the hill later, the clouds parted, and bright sunlight poured over both boys. “You okay?” Dong-soo had asked right away. Sweet concern in his face, that tenderness Woon remembered from the snowy day.

“Yeah.” Woon had smiled, truly glad to be in the presence of his friend. “It’s true you beat me in some exercises, but never once have you beat me in hand-to-hand or in swordsmanship. I’m still the best, Dong-soo-yah.”

“You are,” Dong-soo had said. And then, “But I’ll be better one day, Woon-ah!”

The love in Dong-soo’s eyes hadn’t changed; he was playing along with Woon’s pretending nothing happened; Woon had felt glad that this was the way things were.

The other boys had come rushing to the top after that, one after another. “Dong-soo won?” “Hurrah, Baek Dong-soo!”

So, when had the blatant longing and lust in Dong-soo’s eyes gone away? Fifteen months like fifteen years? It had been sometime after that year twelve, after the anniversary of what hadn’t happened. Surely Dong-soo had realized that Woon was serious, that there would never be a stolen moment behind a tree, another kiss, another mention of the time, even an exchange of looks that acknowledged it.

Dong-soo stopped looking at Woon with lovesick expressions. Woon felt a loss, but by this time, he believed that his days were numbered, that it was only a matter of time before the Sky Lord sent a message. Woon was training a carrier pigeon as a camp project and couldn’t stop thinking about the messenger birds of Heuksa Chorong, about the magnificent falcon that belonged to the Sky Lord. Any hope that lived in Woon’s hard heart fluttered like a bird at odd moments and was still as soon as Woon told himself: Dong-soo is forgetting what I can’t stop remembering.

Woon prided himself on his memory. He could memorize anything in books. He could remember the tiniest details about any face he had only seen once; as a child, he had never been lost in the marketplace or the countryside. His secret shame was that he had forgotten everything that happened one week when he was twelve—it was the week his father died—and while that sort of trauma happened to other people, it didn’t seem like something that happened to him. The Sky Lord had said Woon ran a high fever that week, and Woon didn’t want to question that.

Woon didn’t like forgetting anything; he wanted to experience life, good and bad, to the hilt, and with all his senses intact.

“Follow Woon’s lead,” Sa-mo reminded the boys before they headed out on their first assignment. “He’s the alert one.”
The mission seemed easy enough. He and Dong-soo had met a boat from Qing at the port and didn’t even see the nun before she entered her carriage; so many other guards surrounded the traveling party. Three wagons on a typical merchant passage. Twenty guards. It seemed that the worse threat might be from petty thieves. Why had Sa-mo seemed so worried?

The Sky Lord would not be interested in a samini. Of course not.

Dong-soo kept peeking into the nun’s carriage with rude interest. Woon could see from the corner of his eye that the samini kept glancing at him, Yeo Woon. So, still, he captured the interest of women even though Dong-soo was taller, more broad-shouldered and unquestionably handsome. Woon smiled a tiny smile. Anything that would annoy Dong-soo made Woon smile.

“If she’s a nun, why is she wearing a hanbok?” Dong-soo asked.
“Aish, she’s an apprentice,” Cho-rip, who was at the reins, replied. Dong-soo was daft and childish, even though he was marvelously gifted at picking up information. What he didn’t care about he didn’t learn; he knew what he’d studied in Sa-mo’s books but knew nothing about how ill-intentioned people could really be; he came off as younger than he was. That earnest, dumb face. Maybe this was why women didn’t go for him.

Woon scanned the horizon. Boulders, shrubs, then the unmistakable tops of a few heads like small black rocks in the far distance.

Woon halted his horse. “Here we go.”

Dong-soo stopped too.

It was against Sa-mo’s advice, but Woon grabbed an arrow and fired a warning shot in the direction of the onlookers.

Right away, an arrow came speeding back.

A bandit raid ensured. Dong-soo was unperturbed; he had been hoping for something more challenging. “Assassins at the least.” Woon told him to guard the carriage. Dong-soo was an excellent swordsman, but he lacked the will to kill. He would use his sword better if he had someone to protect. Woon himself would kill. He used his sword to cut men off their horses a few times, but there were too many bandits. He told Cho-rip to follow him with the carriage; this would split up the bandits. The most able would follow the fancy carriage with the belief that it held the best goods; Woon could trust Dong-soo to deal with the fodder. Woon would handle everyone else by himself.
He did. Leaving Cho-rip to keep driving the carriage down the path, Woon turned his horse around and rode back into the pursuing group. He shot arrows, dodged swords, and stabbed a few men. He didn’t know how many men he wounded or killed, but it was the first time he had bloodied his sword. There were still too many bandits. He had to return to the carriage. It was caught in the mud.

What happened next changed Woon in a way that would be like a gift for the rest of his life.

Understanding that Cho-rip would be safe once the bandits discovered an empty carriage, Woon carried the samini away on his own horse. Her small hands around his waist bothered him at first; Woon didn’t like being touched because he liked being touched too much. He didn’t want to be reminded of Dong-soo. The young woman was hanging on for her life. Was she afraid? Woon felt himself overcome with a sudden desire to protect her.

It was a new feeling.

An arrow skimmed past, and Woon had no choice but to veer his body to the left; the move caused him and the young woman to fall off the horse.

They both lay facing one another in the tall grass.

*Dong-soo and I....*

The young woman was no older than Woon himself, and something in Woon’s expression at that moment must have affected her; she stared at him with a strange tenderness.

*She’s so pretty.*

The pretty little nun swallowed hard. Bandits were on their way.

*She’s just a girl. I will save her.*

Before helping her up, Woon noticed a strange marking on her neck.
It was a moment of peculiar intimacy he had not felt since that snowy day with Dong-soo.
Woon had his own mark. The day he’d passed his martial arts exams for Heuksa Chorong and had been awarded a sword, he’d been branded with the word “black.” Getting the brand had been
harder than the exam; he’d been proud that he hadn’t passed out from the pain. Some time later, he’d tried to cover the mark with a red-hot garden tool in the kitchen of the warrior camp because he didn’t want the others recognizing that he was part of an assassin guild; the Sky Lord would’ve expected that—he would’ve expected that, of course, of course. Woon did pass out from the pain then, woke up alone in the kitchen, tried to bandage the wound at the nape of his neck, was discovered days later with a fever by Sa-mo. Woon had tried to explain—it was that day of bad weather, it was day lightning hit a tree and a burning branch had fallen. Sa-mo had wondered why Woon’s hair hadn’t been singed, but didn’t ask further questions. He scolded him for not getting prompt attention and treated him for the fever.

Woon had to keep bathing with his top on, so the other boys wouldn’t notice anything suspicious. He had a reputation for being shy for a year.

Merely noticing the tattoo seemed like a violation of the nun’s privacy, yet Woon’s curiosity was sparked. He almost forgot the bandits—then he heard their neighing horses.

Not many. He could take them.

Right away, the leader, a woman, joked about the pair doing naughty things in broad daylight. Woon wanted to kill them all.

“Stand behind me,” he told the tiny nun, and after he’d downed a few men, intentionally trying not to kill them with simple martial arts moves, despite the deadly intent in his own heart, the most fascinating thing happened. There was the whoosh of a knife blade over his head. Woon was about drop and dodge the worse of it, aware he could not escape injury, and then—

*I’m safe. Someone saved me.*

The samini had shot the weapon out of the bandit’s hand with an arrow. She stood there, facing them all with her bow. Unbeknownst to Woon, she had carried it under her robes from the carriage. He had assumed she was bringing something precious, a holy scroll, a small idol. Imagine that—she knew how to shoot.

When the bandits left, she was still steely-eyed, holding the bow with practiced posture. *Afraid.*

Woon had to lower her hand or she would have stood there all day. There was no danger. *He* would protect her. That was his job, after all.

The samini had injured her ankle in the fall from the horse, so all there was left to do was hide and await Dong-soo and Cho-rip. She never told Woon her name, but she was a cultured, kind woman. She wasn’t a brat like Mi-so. Woon hadn’t interacted so much with anyone since leaving the mountain-top. It occurred to him that the Sky Lord wanted him to kill people, not protect them.

*Woon had avoided this simple truth for years.*

“Why do you have such a sad look in your eyes?” She asked him and promptly apologized for her boldness.

Caught off-guard, Woon said a very stupid, Dong-soo-like thing. “No, it’s nice.” He didn’t say much after that.

He began to worry after night fell; his friends had still not gone down the path and Cho-rip had not yet released Xue, Woon’s carrier pigeon, to find him. “It will be fine,” he assured the samini. “We’ll camp here, so you can rest, and I’ll bring you to the temple by early morning.” Woon built a fire, was lucky enough to shoot what he thought was a big woodpecker but turned out to be a
partridge, began to look for roots to cook for his vegetarian Buddhist companion, and planned to stay on guard all night. His worry about his friends was turning into outright fear when he heard a rustling noise. He drew his sword, but it was Xue, who alighted on his arm.

“Are you okay?”

As if Dong-soo needed to ask.

Dong-soo was rude all evening; he flirted mercilessly with the poor nun and stupidly offered her grilled partridge. He took off his shirt and covered her with it. Woon was annoyed at this point, after being so relieved that his friends were alive, and so when Dong-soo challenged him to a duel for the mere purpose of showing off in front of a pretty girl, Woon didn’t refuse. Part of him wanted to kick Dong-soo’s ass. Still, Woon didn’t want to make Dong-soo look like too much of an idiot or hurt him, so he paralyzed him with acupuncture needles and ended the match in seconds.

“1,378 to zero,” said Cho-rip.

The samini, obviously skilled herself in acupuncture, removed the needles, scolded Woon for using them to harm and not to heal, asked Dong-soo if he was all right, and Woon felt beaten. Dong-soo had won the match simply by arousing the girl’s compassion.

That was one way the world worked, Woon understood now. Compassion itself could be a champion.

It was a mystery, like the tattoo on the samini’s neck. No one else could see it in the dark.

Why would a Buddhist nun apprentice have such a mark? What kind of life had she led? What pain had she endured?

Later that night, Dong-soo had no trouble falling asleep on the ground, and Cho-rip fell asleep near him. The samini, perhaps someone who had been on-guard for years, a watchful person like Woon himself, chose to sit against a tree. Woon wanted to stay awake to protect her. He kept nodding off. At one point, early dawn, the young woman limped to return Dong-soo’s shirt to him. Of course, a Buddhist would practice compassion—she didn’t like stupid Dong-soo, did she? She had been looking at Yeo Woon all day the way people had always looked at his pretty face. Dong-soo had been shivering. Earlier that evening, the woman had also wrapped Woon’s only slightly bruised hand in a red swatch from her hanbok. Woon stared at the ribbon on his hand, stared from the nun to Dong-soo, remembered lying on the ground in Dong-soo’s arms, feeling protected, looked to the young woman who was falling asleep. Light from the rising sun hit that spot on her neck. That tattoo must have hurt her so much.

There was no reason not to fall asleep. The chances of being attacked again were low. Woon felt so sleepy. He remembered how sleepy he felt that snowy day.

I have my own tattoo, one that Dong-soo imprinted on me. There is no pain anymore, but it’s still on my body.

After delivering the young woman, who never revealed her name—something Woon found peculiar—to the temple, the three boys bowed. “Seongbulsahyeo,” they said in farewell to the head monk, as taught by Sa-mo, although no religion had been taught at the warrior camp except the religion of war.

Dong-soo went on and on about how the samini would be his future wife, how she was a fairy, the prettiest in the land, the daughter of heaven.
Cho-rip said she had been a hell-curse on them all and her looks did not impress him.

Woon folded his arms.

Turning to Woon with a sparkle in his eye, Dong-soo cooed. “She’s prettier than even you.”

Xue was inside Woon’s shirt now; that was the bird fluttering against his chest, not Woon’s own heart.

Back home, Sa-mo scolded the boys for the disastrous outcome of the escort mission. Yes, the samini had arrived safely at her destination, but people had died; the mission had attracted attention of the police; the boys would be punished; they would have to kneel and hold up sacks of grain for hours. During that ordeal, Cho-rip told Woon about why he and Dong-soo had been late to join Woon and the nun—Dong-soo had been following around some medicine man with crazy martial arts skills and had wanted to challenge the guy to a duel. “No one did anything wrong, but I get the feeling that if Dong-soo goes on with this stupid streak, we’re all going to be punished quite a bit.”

“Ah, forget it,” Dong-soo dropped his flour sacks and smiled sweetly. “I’ll make it all up to you. I’ll pay for drinks tonight.”

That night was the night Woon had been dreading for years.

The boys had been taught to drink by Sa-mo himself. Sa-mo had exposed the boys to every poison known to mankind, including alcohol, but he disapproved of indulgence in taverns. It was Dong-soo’s stupid idea to sneak out, but Sa-mo was right about one thing—being young meant being restless. Even Woon, who had been reluctant to go, went along. After the first drink was poured, Woon spotted the Earth Lord walking the streets and the stone in his chest flipped over.

The Sky Lord is near. Why did it really feel like heaven was going to fall to earth if the man showed up? It’s not like Woon believed that the landscape would catch fire and the ground would crack open as if meteors had fallen, but Woon’s own life would be thrown into some catastrophe, wouldn’t it?

Woon didn’t drink much. Later, on the path home, someone bumped into Dong-soo and naturally the fool made a fuss and took off after the person, but during the commotion, Woon spotted the Sky Lord sitting atop a tall stone wall. “Go after Dong-soo,” Woon told Cho-rip.

Woon knelt before his mentor.

Before he bowed, he noticed marks on the Sky Lord’s face. Had they always been there? A cut on the bridge of his nose, the faintest pink trace of where a knife had glanced by his left eye. Woon hadn’t seen the man close-up in years. Woon had forgotten about the marks. We all have our scars. We’ve all been marked in some ways—some of us more deeply than others ….

Woon bowed his head. Before him was the man who had chosen to follow seven years ago.

What had been Woon’s other choice? A life of humiliation on the streets? The man had given him a sword, food, clothing, initiated him into a secret assassin guild. Then he had cut Woon loose from Heuksa Chorong, allowed him to join Dong-soo’s family. Even as a child, Woon had wondered about the Sky Lord’s plan. The man must’ve known that Woon would grow close to this family. Woon even traded in his assassin’s sword to a metal-smith so he could get a smaller weapon fashioned out of his murdered father’s spear. He had followed Sa-mo and Dong-soo to a boy’s warrior camp. But so had the Sky Lord. Woon had watched him murder people there. He had watched the Sky Lord torture Commander Dae-pyo to death. After Dong-soo attempted to kill the
Sky Lord and failed, the notorious swordsman turned around in rage—“How dare you leave a mark on my body?”-- and Woon ran to Dong-soo. No, no, not him. Kill me instead. Kill me too. Woon had stood in front of his friend Dong-soo, only a child like Woon, and, understanding what the Sky Lord was capable of, Woon had spread his arms wide. Woon had expected to die with Dong-soo that night.

But the Sky Lord was a peculiar man.

He had kicked Woon out of the way. He didn’t kill Dong-soo. Had it been compassion that made him spare both boys then? Had it been something else? There was something about the man that liked to watch life; Woon knew because Woon was a watcher himself; but the Sky Lord … he had always seemed amused.

“He’s the one you will have to watch,” the Sky Lord had said of Dong-soo that night. Because Dong-soo had actually cut the invincible Sky Lord with a crazy, surprise move? Why? Dong-soo was a fool; he would never be as capable a swordsman as Woon. Was Woon going to be asked to seek out Dong-soo as a fellow recruit? Would Woon be called upon to kill Dong-soo?

No, you can’t have him.

“Let me pay you reverence,” Woon lied, head bowed. There is no way out. No, there must be a way out.

“You should have told me you had left the warrior camp.”

“There was no time.”

“And yet you had time to drink?”

Woon felt fear. Maybe this was the end. Maybe Woon no longer served any purpose for Heuksa Chorong.

“It was a joke, so don’t worry.”

The man went on to note that Woon’s killer instinct was tamed. He tossed a small stone behind Woon’s head, and Woon felt chided but not threatened. The man told Woon to keep watching “him,” and Woon did not have time to feel confused before the next question came: “How are your studies going?” A casual, paternal tone. Woon felt a twinge of what he had felt at age twelve, that maybe the man did have Woon’s own interests at heart, but how could he? He was the head of an assassin guild. Woon had spent years training to be a martial artist, to become a member of an elite squad that would serve noble missions defending people. Then, clever man that he was, the Sky Lord asked the perfect question.

“What is the difference between a martial artist and an assassin?”

Woon felt his voice falter, but he answered as truthfully as he could. He knew the difference between himself and Dong-soo. “It is the difference between whether you want to kill or not.” Woon found himself searching his mentor’s eyes for approval.

“Really?” The Sky Lord drew his black fan. It flapped open like a taunt, and he smiled. “Doesn’t matter. Martial artist, assassin—your hands will still be bloodied.”

Woon bowed his head again to apologize for his own failings as a pupil, and the Sky Lord told him that there would be plenty time to ponder the question. When Woon looked up again, the man was gone, and Woon, trembling inside, looked at his right hand; it was steady, as it had always been,
ready to kill as people had always told him it was—already stained with blood?

*This hand swept through Dong-soo’s hair.*

Woon swept that hand through his own hair. His stone heart was gone; maybe it was the one that his old mentor had thrown at him to mock him. Woon felt that it didn’t matter if he himself was born under a black star and was a destined killer or not; his heart felt love and pain again. He was twelve again, and he wanted to defend himself, only himself, with a sword. He was seventeen, and he wanted to be protected by Dong-soo. He was, in this season, speeding towards nineteen, and he wanted to protect. The pretty little nun—how could anyone not want to protect her? Assassin? Could he become an assassin? *Not if that meant leaving Dong-soo’s side.*

In subsequent days, Dong-soo was always getting into trouble, and all three boys would pay for that trouble because they were supposed to watch him. Dong-soo said he was dying to see the samini again, so off he flew to the temple, and what else could Woon and Cho-rip but follow and make sure that Dong-soo didn’t do something stupid? Woon made Cho-rip wait, and startled Dong-soo at the gate by touching his shoulder. Dong-soo almost leapt out of his skin.

“Really?”

Woon didn’t let go. His fingers rubbed Dong-soo’s shoulder. “Of course. I’m your friend, right?”

*It never happened.* Woon looked Dong-soo in the eyes. Bright eyes, happy eyes.

When the young woman walked past, Woon shoved Dong-soo toward her. Dong-soo would make a fool of himself surely. But he didn’t. The pair walked away together. Woon sat down, dejected, and saw a cabbage butterfly. It was small and white, like a snowflake going the wrong way, up to heaven instead of falling to the ground.
After some time, Woon became worried and walked further onto the holy grounds to check on Dong-soo. The clever girl had tricked Dong-soo into performing bows before the golden Buddha statue, and Dong-soo had fallen asleep on the sanctuary floor. *Dumb-ass.*

“Sir?” The samini recognized Woon.

“I came to fetch my friend. Please forgive him. He’s not very worldly.” Woon looked around. “He seems to have fallen asleep before the Buddha, and it’s a nice thing, wouldn’t you say? He needs the rest.” The poor girl was working at chores. Her ankle seemed fully healed, but she seemed fragile, someone who shouldn’t be at constant labor. “Is there something I can help you with until he wakes up?”

“Thank you, but I am attending to my duties.”

Woon picked up a broom. “Where did you learn the bow and arrow? You landed a perfect shot on that man.”

She seemed to not want to answer. “I was born to a high family. I studied many things like archery and acupuncture.”

Woon found himself sweeping leaves from the path. He was surprised she didn’t stop him, but he’d heard that refined ladies did not usually contradict men. So, did that mean she saw him as a man, not a peasant boy?
“You learned acupuncture?” she asked. “As a martial artist?”

“Oh, no. It was not one of the subjects taught at the school. I … got books and taught myself.”

Woon looked for more leaves to sweep. “I am not proficient. I only studied offensive methods because I am a warrior. I know very little about healing.”

Woon was not accustomed to making conversation, and she seemed particularly shy, although she kept raising her eyes to look at his face then lowering them again. Woon wasn’t sure how to handle this power he had over her; his pretty face had been an asset in getting him this or that woman’s attention, and he was served before others at a food stall. His prettiness garnered useless compliments, but he had more often been teased by boys, and as a child the predatory looks from older people on the streets had been unmistakable. He hadn’t grown as tall as the other boys; he was lithe, small-boned, and his looks were not threatening; Woon had considered that maybe his looks might be an asset in that an opponent would not anticipate someone like him could fight ….

but women staring at him? A nun staring at him?

Woon was uncomfortable, but he realized as he lifted trays for her and swept away more paths that doing these holy chores only made her like him more. That was fine; he liked her too. She fascinated him, in fact.

At last, Dong-soo emerged from the sanctuary, tripping over his own feet of course, and falling down the steps.

“We’ll be on our way,” Woon said.

Outside the gate, Dong-soo accused him: “Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for her too?”

“Says the fellow who literally fell down the steps. You’re a dumb-ass. Why would I like a samini? I said I came to help you. You’re the one who fell asleep.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up?”

“I was helping her.” Woon needed to lie. His plan to make Dong-soo make a fool of himself was shallow and stupid. “I was planning to say good things about you, but then you—”

Dong-soo’s face lit up. “I know! I’ll get some paints and show off my artistic ability! It’s sure to impress her! I’ll paint a mural on a wall of the temple.”

Woon considered for a moment. Of all the dumb-assery. Dong-soo was considering desecration of a Buddhist temple.

“Baek Dong-soo.” Woon sighed. “You are so impressive. You draw better than anyone I know. But it’s a sin to do something like that. She will think you’re a fool, and you will never be allowed back on the grounds again.”

“Oh no!”

The walk back home was torture for Woon. Dong-soo kept talking about his future wife, and Cho-rip kept making jokes about how like the nun, Dong-soo would never be married. “Dong-soo-yah, if you keep getting into trouble, I’ll be married before you. I’m not good-looking, but face it, one sentence out of your mouth, and who would want you in the marriage bed for all life-long? Aish, you are crazy. You talk about fairies. You want to paint temples!”

Dong-soo shoved Cho-rip with his shoulder so hard that Cho-rip almost fell off the path. “What? You sleep next to me in the bed, don’t you?”
Dong-soo turned to Woon. “And you--?”

Dong-soo froze.

Cho-rip, already off balance, stopped walking when Dong-soo stopped walking, and this time Cho-rip really did fall. “Damn it, Dong-soo!”

Woon had stopped walking too. That look in Dong-soo’s eyes had been blatant. He’d remembered. The same way flashes of intimate moments could make Woon stop in his tracks sometimes too. Dong-soo, that open book he was, was still staring at Woon, unable to speak past what he’d already blurted out: “And you--?” Woon had shared so much more than a bed with Dong-soo.

Woon and Dong-soo exchanged a conspiratorial look.

Woon held the stare. His mind echoed: And you, Dong-soo-yah? You—you—?

He finally lowered his eyes, aware that his eyelashes were fluttering like a girl’s. He felt ashamed. This had finally happened too. A mutual acknowledgement of that day. Woon’s heart was beating so hard he was sure everyone could hear it.

Dong-soo’s voice brazen and loud. “Eh, I’ll get married. I am Baek Dong-soo. I will be famous and desired by women everywhere!”

Cho-rip was brushing dust off his thighs. “More likely wanted by the police everywhere.”

Woon dared to look up.

Dong-soo was still staring. No fear. As if challenging Woon to yet another duel. Who did Dong-soo think he was? He never won. A memory raced back. It tightened in Woon’s throat. Dong-soo’s words that day before falling asleep. Dong-soo never said things he didn’t mean.

“You won, Woon-ah. I love you.”

4. Trust Me

_I do not see what use a man can be put to, whose word cannot be trusted. How can a wagon be made to go if it has no yoke-bar, or a carriage if it has no collar-bar?” --Confucius, The Analects 2.22

Dong-soo had never stopped wanting to grab Woon by the shoulders and throw him on the grass. Woon, so pretty and kiss-able. So were so many of the girls in the village with their tiny waists. Dong-soo wanted to put his mouth everywhere, on Woon’s rosy lips, on the pale fingertips of women who held painted umbrellas in the street and hid their faces from the sun. Dong-soo wanted to eat bowl after bowl of rice; there was never enough crispy meat on his plate; the world shone like a glazed cake; Dong-soo wanted to run up and down the streets with his mouth open, the wind blowing against him and his lungs aching from life. After the escort mission had gone all crazy, Sa-mo had scolded: “You boys must have an excess of energy.” Was that the reason for feeling so much all the time—all this joy, all this longing and pain, then the joy again?
The little nun though—oh, she was calm and lovely, like a lily floating on a pond. Didn’t Woon himself think she would make a good wife for Dong-soo? Why not a wife? What good was it to be a Buddhist and shut oneself off from the gorgeous word? So much to snatch—Dong-soo could feel the possibilities coming at him like arrows. Bring on danger—he would learn from danger! He had caught an arrow in mid-air during the bandit raid and saved Cho-rip, hadn’t he? Oh, there had been that fascinating old healer on the road who could knock over a dozen guys with his identification tag! Dong-soo wanted to meet him again.

More than anything else, Dong-soo wanted to be the greatest warrior the world had ever seen.

So much was happening so fast. There were constants, though. Sa-mo, home itself in a man—reassurance and love. Cho-rip, a brother—such a funny person, so devoted. Woon—another brother but … how to describe it? Woon was more. Woon was like part of Dong-soo. Was life really as treacherous as Sa-mo said it was? There were great valleys and mountains to travel—literal ones, emotional ones. Dong-soo was afraid of being afraid. The great Baek Dong-soo feared two things: the first was losing one of his precious people, and the second was remembering what fear itself was like.

One evening, Dong-soo felt pure terror. Dong-soo had been returning home after sneaking out to the temple yet again (what strange goings-on! What nobleman visited the samini in the late hours? Not decent! Dong-soo would have to investigate further!). Aish, people were awake; Dong-soo heard voices near the house—Cho-rip and Woon. And coming up the path was a scary person. A swordsman, an old guy but he was tall and muscular, dressed in black, prayer beads around his neck, a peculiar swagger to the way he walked—as if he had been wounded years ago but that had only made him more dangerous. Of course, Dong-soo stared at him. Who dared confront Baek Dong-soo? No nobleman, no policeman, no palace guard, no stranger frightened the great Baek Dong-soo!

The man walked right up to Dong-soo, his face close enough to Dong-soo’s to kiss him—in fact, for a moment, Dong-soo thought he might! —then as a clear insult, blew warm air on Dong-soo’s face. It was such an intimate and freaky thing, Dong-soo shuddered. The man chuckled and walked away.
Fear filled Dong-soo’s body, and he couldn’t breathe—why? Dong-soo had never thought of himself as someone good at reading peoples’ souls, but this man… this man was a dark force.

“Dong-soo-yah!” Cho-rip yelled and whisked Dong-soo away. Woon didn’t take the same path as Cho-rip and Dong-soo—and Woon was gone. Dong-soo was un-easy; the fear that had made him clutch his chest a moment earlier had abated, but where the hell did Woon go?

Cho-rip distracted Dong-soo soon enough with talk that the great Sword Saint was with Sa-mo now, that the medicine man with the amazing identification tag techniques had been indeed Sword Saint.

“No kidding? Sword Saint wants to meet me?” Dong-soo was sure that word of the great Baek
Dong-soo had spread; surely this was why Sword Saint had come to the village.

Cho-rip talked Dong-soo down from such delusions, and then who should show up but Jin-joo? The annoying bandit girl at the raid been none other than the annoying little girl from Dong-soo’s childhood. Dong-soo had remembered her eventually—no mistaking her. He was bad at reading people, but he never forgot a friend. Of course, upon joining Cho-rip and Dong-soo for drinks, the first person Jin-joo asked about was Woon—“your handsome friend.” How annoying. Girls loved Woon. Jin-joo didn’t know that Dong-soo recognized her. He told her to forget about Woon, and Jin-joo, Dong-soo, and Cho-rip drank the night away.
Drinking made Dong-soo forget everything scary and sad. Life was bliss, surely it was a blessing just to have been born and to have lived this long, but there wasn’t enough to satisfy Dong-soo yet. Dong-soo sat up that night, not remembering having walked home, and asked, “Where’s Woon?”

Cho-rip was face-down, so Dong-soo didn’t understand him well. “Not here yet.”

“What? He’s not the type to wander around!”

“Aish, I miss him.” Dong-soo lay back down. “I should go out and look for him.” He closed his eyes. “But I’m too tired to get up to piss, Cho-rip-ah.”

Cho-rip snored.

“Maybe,” Dong-soo whispered. “If I pretend I’m not interested in girls then they will all like me the way they like Woon. It’s the mysterious thing they go for. Mysterious. Yes, yes, I can be mysterious.”

Sometime before Dong-soo lost himself to a deep sleep, it occurred to him that there were so many real mysteries in the world that no one, not even scholars and monks and kings let alone dummies like himself, had any clue about. Did Woon know more about stuff that Baek Dong-soo? Not really. Dong-soo knew about all kinds of poisonous plants and ways to skin a rabbit. He was at the top of his class in everything except swordsmanship—there, Woon was the star. So, what was it about Woon that made it seem like he knew something no-one else did? If Dong-soo was an expert at anything, he was an expert at Yeo Woon—but even so, Woon was mysterious.

It’s because you don’t talk. It’s because you don’t blabber on like I do, and you stand there with that pretty mouth perfectly still. People think that you have some ideas going on in that head of yours when you’re probably just wondering what’s for dinner like the rest of us. Eh, Woon-ah. Can’t fool me.

Dong-soo pulled the blanket over his shoulders even though it was a warm night.

Always standing there with that mouth shut. Making girls look at your mouth. Because you have kissable lips, and you know that. You’re not so mysterious.... Where are you, anyway?

Cho-rip and Dong-soo slept most of the next day and missed Sword Saint entirely. The famous swordsman had left at dawn to visit Yeo Cho-sang’s grave, Sa-mo told them. Woon was back and didn’t look like himself. He looked worse than a hang-over, even though he hadn’t been drinking. There were dark circles under his eyes, his hair was un-washed, still full of the season’s humidity, bangs puffed out like parts of a dandelion. He wore a lost expression.

“What the hell happened to you?” Cho-rip tossed off the remark and left to piss in the bushes.

Something’s really wrong with Woon.

Dong-soo knew that he rushed to assumptions—hadn’t he thought that Sword Saint was a simple herbalist, that this famous man had come to the village to visit a mere warrior camp prodigy, hadn’t Dong-soo been absolutely wrong about Woon liking the samini when Woon had actually tried to help Dong-soo see the pretty girl again?

“Nothing,” Woon said. “I needed to walk around some. I’ve been restless lately.”

That made sense. But it didn’t make sense.

Woon had left when the scary man had left the previous evening in the same direction as the man.
Did Woon know the man from somewhere? Did Woon fight him?

“Woon-ah, you—are you hurt anywhere?”

“What makes you say that?” An annoyed look. “I’m just a little tired.”

Woon went straight to the room. In no time, he was asleep. Dong-soo made certain that Woon woke up in time for dinner, and Sa-mo scolded all three boys for being wanderers. All promised to stay put and properly greet Sword Saint upon his return.

They didn’t.

That evening, Dong-soo convinced his brothers to sneak out again. This was a matter of great importance, Dong-soo argued. The samini was being threatened. Another significant event occurred. Dong-soo caught the nobleman again in the samini’s room; he could see shadows from a window where it looked like the man was undressing the young lady. A fight ensued; in defense of the samini’s honor, the boys charged men who had accompanied the nobleman. Woon was spectacular, but he did not hold for long against two talented swordsmen. Were they trained at the palace?

The men’s swords were at Woon’s chest, and Dong-soo put his arm in front of Woon.

“You would give up your arm for a friend?” one of the men asked, astonished.

Dong-soo was still shaken. He laughed. “No, it’s not like that.”

_I would give up my life for Woon._
The man in the samini’s room turned out to be none other than the Crown Prince. Dong-soo didn’t recognize him at first, but Woon did, bowing right away. Dong-soo made quite the fool of himself, insisting that it was wrong for anyone to be in a woman’s room like that, admonishing Woon and Cho-rip for remaining on their knees before the man, and then the memory flashed, too late, of the Crown Prince visiting the warrior camp. Dong-soo begged for forgiveness for his capital offense, but the Crown Prince laughed, recognizing each boy in turn: “Baek Dong-soo, Yeo Woon, Yang Cho-rip. I am glad you have grown up so healthy. You are the future of this nation.”

The three boys left without further explanation of what the prince was doing at the temple, and the samini herself appeared, bowed farewell, not revealing her name, her eyes full of secrets. She trusted the three boys. What else could Dong-soo do but trust her back?

“She’s involved with the Crown Prince of all people,” Dong-soo said later over drinks. “That’s sad.” He felt sad for himself because if the beautiful girl was his Highness’ woman that meant she
was off-limits to any other man, but most of all, Dong-soo felt sorry for her—what sort of life did she lead that she had to pretend to be an apprentice Buddhist nun?

“It’s all a little disgusting,” Cho-rip said. “Royals get any woman they desire.”

Woon was distracted. He’d looked off since the previous evening. No longer tired but definitely not himself.

Late night already. The three would miss Sword Saint again. “Aish, I’m so stupid.” Dong-soo downed another glass. “I should’ve recognized the Crown Prince right away. Woon did. Why didn’t I see--?” Dong soo realized he was drunk. “Why didn’t I see what I should have seen?

“Keep drinking and you won’t be able to see your own hand,” Cho-rip said. “We should go home. The captain is going to be mad anyway. If we can’t get up in the morning, he’ll punish us worse than if we meet this Sword Saint late but sober.”

Woon was pouring rice wine into his own bowl until the liquid spilled over onto the table.

“Woon!” Cho-rip explained.

Woon stopped pouring. “Oh.”

“There’s something wrong with you.” Cho-rip turned to Dong-soo. “There’s something wrong with you too, Dong-soo-yah. I’m the only sensible one in the group. I may not be the best swordsman, but the both of you have problems. Serious problems.” He rose from the table. “Let’s go.”
As Dong-soo got up, another memory flashed. This one almost knocked him back into his seat. The scary man in front of the house. That man had been the one who invaded the boy’s camp, the one who had killed Commander Dae-pyo in such a horrible way, the one who had almost killed Dong-soo himself but spared him for some odd reason and only speared his shoulder—*aish*, he still had the scar. How could Dong-soo have not recognized--? Woon was there—he must’ve. And didn’t Woon follow the man?

“You go ahead, Cho-rip-ah.” Dong-soo slapped Woon’s hand as Woon was about to pour more wine into an already full bowl. “I have to stay behind and talk to Woon about the perils of too much drinking.” Dong-soo was a terrible liar. “No, that’s not it.” Dong-soo chuckled. “You see, I think he’s in love with the little nun too. He needs to get over it… ha, ha, we’re lovesick boys.”

“Whatever.” Cho-rip turned and began to walk away. “The two of you are strange.”

“Dong-soo-yah, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Woon mumbled, unconcerned. He was already following Cho-rip.

Dong-soo followed him, felt dizzy. “I know you don’t like the samini. I mean, whatever she is. She’s lying about being a samini—who would’ve thought that, huh? I was just telling Cho-rip a lie to be alone with you.”

Woon slowed his pace. “Lie? You know how to lie, Dong-soo-yah?”
“Everyone knows how to lie.”

Woon smiled. Dong-soo was glad to see Woon smile. He skipped along Woon’s side, leaned close, added, “I always lie to get what I want---little lies. Sa-mo falls for them…. Well, sometimes he does.”

“Ah, but you’re a terrible liar.”

“Am not!” Dong-soo was indignant. He thought for a moment, and then he was a little angry. “I’ve learned plenty things over time. You yourself are the one who taught me how to lie.”

Woon cast a dark look at Dong-soo.

They both knew what Dong-soo was talking about.

Dong-soo didn’t care. He threw his arm around Woon’s shoulder. “You’re a good liar, Woon-ah. A good liar and a good person. What are you in such a bad mood about?”

Dong-soo was surprised that Woon didn’t shake off Dong-soo’s arm. “Lies?” Woon’s voice was strange and whispery. “What do you know about lies?”

They were far from the tavern now, alone on a moonlit path. Dong-soo leaned in closer. “I know about lying with you.” His lips brushed Woon’s brow. “Lying with you so close I felt your heart beating the same as my own.”

This time Woon did push Dong-soo away. “You’re drunk.”

“Sorry.” Dong-soo wasn’t sorry. He was drunk, but he was happy not to be faking the whole it never happened business for a little while. “You looked like you needed a little affection.”

“Not that kind of affection.”

“What?” A sarcastic tone now. “I thought you were in love with the little fairy? I thought you were in love with half the women in the village.”

“You have that wrong. They’re all in love with you.” Dong-soo kept walking and scratched his head. “The little nun has something about her, though. Wouldn’t you say? Don’t you think? Aren’t you interested in women at all?”

Woon didn’t answer.

“I forgot something.” Dong-soo kept scratching his head. The rice wine was clouding his thoughts. “I was going to ask you something important.”

The pair walked in silence for a long while. Moonlight cast a glow on Woon’s face. He really was beautiful. Sad tonight, especially lonely looking, but Dong-soo saw what women saw. There was something about Woon that made him appear vulnerable even though he was strong and capable. Yet he never came off as a total goof… like….

“I’ll bet the nun liked you.” Dong-soo was suddenly curious. “What did you and she talk about after you saved her from the bandits?”

“Nothing. She’s never even told us her name.” Woon’s voice became sharp. “You have to get over her. She’s the prince’s woman.”
“Yeah, yeah. But she’s so pretty and kind. Are you sure you don’t like her?”

“She is kind,” Woon agreed.

The pair were closer to the house, passing a thicket of trees where the path narrowed, and the moonlight disappeared.

“Oh, I remember! I was going to ask you about that scary man who raided the camp when we were little! Who killed so many people? He was outside of the house the other night. You saw him, didn’t you?”

Woon froze.

“What’s the matter?” Dong-soo stopped walking too. “Did you fight him? Why aren’t you wounded? He—he’s—you aren’t wounded, are you?”

“I didn’t fight him. I didn’t follow him.”

“Then where did you go?”

What Woon said next was an obvious lie. As drunk as Dong-soo was, as distracted as Woon had seemed for a couple days, the moment felt cold and sober. “I know when there’s nothing to be done,” Woon said, “so I walked away to be alone.”

No, Woon had followed him. Woon was a curious person. Dong-soo was a curious person too. What had that awful man been doing outside Sa-mo’s house? When Sword Saint was there? A mystery.

It was a hot, humid night. A breeze blew in the darkness.

“Woon-ah,” Dong-soo said softly. “I can’t see your face, but I can feel your fear.”

“You’re drunk,” Woon said, and he started to walk again. “You’re making nothing out of nothing.”

“Aigoo, that would be you.” Dong-soo had to walk fast to keep up. “Nothing ever happened. You’re a liar.”

Woon didn’t say anything else. Everyone was asleep when they reached the house. The pair sneaked into their room and lay next to Cho-rip, who was snoring lightly. Dong-soo didn’t know how he knew, but there was a mystery, a dark one, that had lured Woon out into the night before and would again. Dong-soo threw his arms around Woon. “Don’t worry about anything,” he whispered as low as he could whisper.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Woon didn’t attempt to throw off Dong-soo’s arm. “Go to sleep.”

“I will make everything all right. I am the great Baek Dong-soo. Trust me. Trust me.”

Sa-mo had taught all the boys that trust was a matter of life and death between comrades; Dong-soo could not imagine the bond of trust among all the mountain warrior boys ever being broken, let alone that whatever held him next to Woon so closely might falter in the slightest. Still, it was strange: Dong-soo felt that Woon was afraid. He felt it was necessary to repeat the words.

“Trust me,” he said again and drifted off to sleep against Woon’s shoulder.
Dong-soo’s words and not the Sky Lord’s were what Woon chose to carry himself through despair in the days that followed. Woon believed he could not trust either men, that Dong-soo was a benevolent liar while the Sky Lord was a dangerous one. Dong-soo would continue to make nothing out of nothing for the rest of his life, but who knew what the Sky Lord had planned? The former liked to play for the joy he could bring other people; the latter played with peoples’ souls the way a cat would play with a mouse before biting its head off.

The Sky Lord had implied first that Sword Saint, then that the Crown Prince had killed Woon’s father. Since Woon had lost all memories of the night his father died, any lie would do. Woon had met Sword Saint and the Crown Prince; neither had impressed him as a killer. In fact, neither man impressed him at all. Sword Saint was so interested in Dong-soo, and why not? Everyone now knew the story of Dong-soo’s family being murdered for political reasons, and how Sword Saint had run off with baby Dong-soo, only to lose the baby, believing for almost two decades that Dong-soo was dead. The famous swordsman seemed delighted with Dong-soo and paid no mind to Woon. That one night— “I’ve been with your father all day, Yeo Woon. I’ve heard him asking me to care for you.” bullshit. Sword Saint, by all Woon’s assessments, was not Woon’s father’s murderer, but that was too much. The way the man suspected Woon from the beginning. Did he know that Woon was a hidden assassin? Did he know that Woon was not someone to trust?

Woon blinked at the morning light. He was lying awake in the boys’ room in Sa-mo’s house. Last night felt like a bad dream.

I tried to kill myself last night. I put a blade to my throat.

Woon got up and washed his face. He’d returned late last night so he’d slept well into the morning. It was surprising that no one had dragged him out of bed. Sa-mo was lax here; at the boy’s camp, everyone up at dawn. Sa-mo allowed his graduates to make their own choices; that in itself was a little scary. Woon wasn’t sure how much freedom he himself actually had. There were forces more powerful than his own sword in the world, but Woon knew his strengths. He was smart, careful, good at hiding. He didn’t want to make the wrong choices. Still, so many paths seemed dark and narrow; all of them led back to the Sky Lord.

Last night Woon had gone to Heuksa Chorong with the belief that the Sky Lord himself had murdered Yeo Cho Sang. He had bowed and asked the question obliquely. “Please tell me who killed my father.”

“Are you implying it was me?”

“No, I meant no disrespect—”

“It was Woonie.”

Woon had choked, his heart in his throat. The memories had flooded back like a tsunami overwhelming the shoreline. Woon had indeed gone to his father’s house with the intent to kill. There was a memory of a blade, his father’s flesh to the hilt of that blade, then the memory of his father’s bloody hands—Father. Father’s hands, the warm blood mixing with cold rain against Woon’s face.
The Sky Lord, the Earth Lord, other recruits—everyone had said Woon had taken ill, fainted that night, lost his memories—from high fever? That explanation had never made sense.

“It was Woonie.”

_I tried to kill myself last night. I put a blade to my throat._

The memories had come in flickers, but they had told one story: Woon was the murderer of his own father. Kneeling before the Sky Lord, stricken with this terrible new truth, Woon would have fallen on his own face, but he caught himself. He wasn’t aware that he was weeping until he saw drops of what he thought was rain on the ground. Shame and grief had overtaken him in a single breath. He had pulled out his blade and put it to his throat.

The Sky Lord had been unperturbed. “What difference will that make?”

Woon had heard his own tears in his throat then. “It makes a difference knowing.” It made all the difference. There had been a chance of escape before; there had been a life with Dong-soo; hadn’t it been easy to lie once?

The Sky Lord drew his own sword, and Woon prepared, as he had when he was twelve, to die. But the Sky Lord’s blade pushed the blade at Woon’s throat away. The man made Woon stand up. He made Woon feel small. He made a speech during which Woon felt echoes of regret, doubt, a longing for another life, a sense that that there was only submission to the great Sky Lord. He told Woon that Woon was still a killer.
The Sky Lord didn’t admonish Woon’s teary eyes, but he acted possessive of them. He had looked at Woon’s despair with fondness. “Don’t show this look to anyone else until the day you die.” He had laughed, as if all recruits came with death wishes, and such things pleased him. Something, something about how an assassin’s life is pain? It didn’t make sense, but Woon had nodded, pretending to understand, in fear for his life, whereas only a moment before he had forgotten how to fear for it.

Standing there and being told he had no choice in any matter, not even over the matter of whether to live or die, Woon, through shock and grief, had surmised: The Sky Lord is a dangerous man.
He’s even more dangerous than I remember.

Bowing his head, he had apologized in a soft voice to the Sky Lord for trying to kill himself. His heart, meanwhile, had apologized to someone else: *I’m sorry, Dong-soo. This would have driven a blade through your own heart.*

The Sky Lord had poked Woon in the forehead and raised Woon’s head. The touch felt like a violation; there was something calculated and familiar about it.

“You may lower your head,” the Sky Lord had said, as if repeating the words from a poetry book. “But never lose your focus.” He talked that way. In riddles. At that moment Woon had felt himself wanting to stay alive if only to find out what the hell the man was about, but he was still afraid.

Morning streamed through slats in the window in Sa-mo’s house, and Woon told himself: *I tried to kill myself. I tried to kill myself.*

There was no escaping the Sky Lord. Woon owed the Sky Lord his own life. There was no escaping Dong-soo. Woon owed Dong-soo his very soul.

“Eat your breakfast or Dong-soo will finish it for you,” Cho-rip said.

*Why would I try to kill myself? I’m stronger than that. Such a thing could not have happened.*

Breakfast tasted like sand. Woon could not stop remembering things about his father, although most of the memories from that lost time were still gone. Father had always said Woon was a born killer. The Sky Lord had said the same thing. The sort of person who kills his own father? How many choices were left for Woon now?

Dong-soo grabbed Woon’s bowl but instead of eating Woon’s rice, pushed the bowl against Woon’s chin.

“You’ll be useless all day if you don’t eat,” Dong-soo said. “And you’re making a bad habit of going out drinking alone at night. Eat this or I’ll make you eat it.” Dong-soo slammed the bowl on the table. “And drinking ruins your looks by the way.” A laugh. “So, stop it. You look like crap when you crawl in every morning. The ladies will forget all about you and start noticing me.”

Dong-soo knew that Woon wasn’t out drinking, but he wasn’t asking where Woon was going. Neither was Sa-mo.

It occurred to Woon: *they trust me.*

Woon picked up a spoon and ate. “I wasn’t drinking. I was walking around is all.”

“Whatever. It’s a bad habit.” Was Dong-soo going to stand there, arms folded, until Woon finished eating?

Woon decided it was easier to finish eating than to argue with Dong-soo. He ate all his breakfast in three more bites, dropped the spoon into the bowl, and mused: “How many bad habits does it take to make a bad person?”

“You can never be a bad person, Woon.”

The way Dong-soo has spoken that affirmation so casually was a shock. Woon himself didn’t believe that about anyone…. Except maybe Dong-soo. Dong-soo was too daft, pure, and trusting to
ever become a bad person.

Cho-rip burst into the room. “The captain wants to talk to us about our next mission! What do you think it will be? Do you think I’ll get to fight this time?” Cho-rip caught his breath and glanced at Woon. “Aish, you look terrible. Dong-soo-yah, why is that the captain never scolds Woon for going out at night?”

“I don’t know.” Dong-soo shrugged. “Woon doesn’t pick fights or get arrested or cause troubles like I do?”

There was no new mission; instead, a miraculous assignment occurred: the three mountain camp boys were assigned to the palace to be royal guard trainees, of all things. Dong-soo and Cho-rip were thrilled with the honor, but Woon was less than impressed. Would he be safe in the palace from the Sky Lord? Wasn’t the palace infested with spies from Heuksa Chorong? He vaguely recalled such a thing.

Jang-mi fussed over the boys, packed them snacks and wept. Sa-mo was annoyed by her tears. “They’re not going to die. They’re going to the palace,” he said. Woon knew that people died in the palace; there were stories on the streets about assassinations and poisonings. Sa-mo didn’t look as concerned as he had before he escort mission; he was beaming with pride; did he really have that much faith in his pupils’ skills?

“They’re just babies,” Jang-mi said, waving good-bye. “Not even twenty.” At that, Mi-so had cried too.

“There will be girls at the palace.” Cho-rip elbowed Dong-soo. “No Buddhist nuns there.”

Dong-soo promptly initiated a school fight with the other trainees no sooner than the boys were given their uniforms. Dong-soo called the other guys’ techniques baby-ish, the others wanted a tussle, and so Cho-rip, Woon, and Dong-soo whipped them handily. Of course, the three new recruits were punished and sent to a lowly position to be beacon watchers far from the palace proper. Dong-soo and Cho-rip were crushed, but Woon said, “at least this will be a break.”

A time away from spies and scheming court nobles, a place somewhere far in the hills.

Then Sky Lord met with Woon before the boys left and told him that he would be in contact with Woon via his messenger falcon. Woon, not knowing what task lay ahead, swore allegiance and decided he would make choices when he had more information. I still can make my own choices. He had left his own white carrier pigeon at Sa-mo’s before traveling to the palace. He still carried Dong-soo’s promise with him, though: I will make everything okay.
The beacon station was perfect by Woon’s standards. Open skies, high grasses, a mere tent to sleep in, not too different from the mountaintop warrior camp. The keeper seemed a little crazy and had a habit of calling Woon “son of a gisaeng” or “the pretty one” and holding forth about philosophical stuff, but that was mildly entertaining. He told his new helpers that they would spend most of their days collecting dung to light the fires. There were instructions about this and that, and all three boys had notebooks to write down job details. Dong-soo filled his book with drawings of the goofy-eyed keeper and random weeds growing from the cracked, dry soil. Dong-soo was a good artist, more observant than he gave himself credit for being. If Dong-soo ever grew up a little, he might get his sword under control, learn the specifics of killing a man.

“Pretty one,” the old man told Woon one day. “You work harder than the others, but you never say anything. Are you hiding something?”

Woon was taken aback. “What—what do you mean?”
“Eh, nothing.” The old man dismissed Woon with a wave. “You’re not like other youngsters your age. Too serious. Too refined looking. I thought you might be a character with a past, like a tragic guy in a storybook …. but maybe you’re just constipated.”

Woon began to believe the old beacon keeper might not be crazy.

Crazy Man did serve the boys special herbs for constipation for dinner that night though. The old man had a several nests of plants in the tent—he was learned in medicine? Woon recognized the herbs as a digestive stimulant and was careful not to eat much; Dong-soo ate a lot of food as usual but was unaffected by the plants; Cho-rip vomited in the morning and was sick all day.

Dong-soo and Woon set off in separate directions to collect fire-logs and dung, the latter which was always scarce. Woon had collected several small logs by mid-day and met Dong-soo, who was sitting on a boulder near a stream, lying under the bright sun, two logs beside him, napping like a fool.

“Dong-soo-yah! The old man is going to fuss at you!”

Dong-soo sat up.

“Oh look. You have enough for the two of us.”

“This isn’t enough.” Woon placed his sack down. “You know what he said. If the beacons aren’t kept lit, we’ll be executed.”

“Right, right, and seventeen beacon men were executed last year. Don’t tell me that you of all people believed that bullshit?”

“No,” Woon said. “That was the old man trying to get us to do our job. But a job is a job, Dong-soo-yah. You still have to do it right.”

“Eh.” Dong-soo lay down again. “This isn’t martial arts practice. I don’t want to.”

Woon had been scanning the skies for a falcon every morning. He sat down next to Dong-soo. Why not rest in the warm sunlight for a while? It was peaceful here. The stream sang. The two were alone together.

“What were you dreaming about?” Woon asked.

“You don’t usually ask such things,” Dong-soo said. He laughed. “I was dreaming about a pretty little Buddhist nun who looks like a fairy.”

“Liar.”

The moments passed. Clouds passed over the sky in large white shapes against the soft blue. Woon felt a strange happiness, but he knew that he would leave this place one day. He would leave this peacefulness. He would leave Dong-soo.

“We have enough logs,” Dong-soo muttered, half-asleep.

Woon had sometimes wondered about what “enough” meant. How many memories of happiness would be enough to carry him through the worst times. What it might mean to say “enough” to the Sky Lord—to say, “I can’t do that.” And to know that saying that would mean to die then.

Was dignity even something Woon could hold onto at all? Who could live as an assassin and claim
to be a good man? Was dignity something Woon could trade for another person’s life? He had thought about these things. Woon was already a terrible liar. What right did Woon have to even this one sunny day, and would another like it ever come?

For over a long year, about a particular snowy day, he had thought: *this is enough.*

Woon squinted at the sky.

*Nothing ever happened…. No, everything changed that day.*

Woon leaned over Dong-soo and kissed the corner of his mouth. “I want to remember you in the sun. Not only in the cold but in the warmth like now.”

*It could be enough. Just this time. Enough to hold me through whatever happens the rest of my life.*

Of course, Dong-soo kissed Woon back. Woon had expected that. Unlike that day ages ago, the first kisses were lingering, gentle ones. It was a long time before Woon undid the sash at Dong-soo’s waist and took off the shirt. Woon said nothing; Dong-soo whispered, “Woon-ah, Woon-ah” at moments. All their clothes were on the grass, and the kissing went on and on. Dong-soo’s body felt hot; Woon kissed all over; when his mouth reached the acupuncture point *ximen* just above the wrist, he felt a strange surge. He wanted to ignore it but couldn’t. The point was associated with grief and an excess of yin. As if a hot spot beckoned—*bite me, bite me.*

Woon didn’t, but he sucked the skin there. Dong-soo grabbed Woon’s arm and rolled him over. He was the one kissing Woon’s body now. He took Woon’s cock into his mouth and slurped with greed and passion until Woon cried out, not caring because they were so far from the camp. Dong-soo was next; Woon dug his fingers into Dong-soo’s thighs, and Dong-soo finally said something: “No, no, slow down—*ow, no, a little softer! You’re going to make it fly off!*” so Woon toned down his enthusiasm. When all was over, Dong-soo had pulled on Woon’s hair so hard, black strands fell out on the bright green grass.

The two panted against one another for a while, not speaking; then they kissed again, and the next position must have occurred to them both at the same time. Woon didn’t know how they got there, but as martial artists, he and Dong-soo were trained to seek out new moves as necessary, so it felt natural for Woon to be on top and Dong-soo to be lying beneath him, each sucking and fondling one another. The reciprocal pleasure was heavenly; it felt like being one person. How long they lay there, drenched in sunlight and ecstasy, Woon couldn’t know, but Dong-soo’s thighs pressed on either side of Woon’s head and Dong-soo finished first.

In the next moment, Woon was facing skyward. Whatever Dong-soo had done to make Woon climax had brought about pure forgetfulness—now there was only blinding sunlight, blood rushing in Woon’s veins and the noisy sound of Dong-soo’s breathing. Had the pleasure been so sharp that it was unbearable? That Woon had lost it? That he was left with only the luxurious aftermath?

“I didn’t know,” Dong-soo managed to huff, “that anything could feel so good.”

The two lay, exhausted in one another’s arms. It didn’t feel like *enough* to Woon, in the sense that he knew he wanted more, another day, and that wasn’t going to happen, but it was enough to reassure him somehow that he mattered in the world. Whatever this was between him and Dong-soo—this exquisite intimacy—it was vivid proof that he, Yeo Woon, could bring another person joy.

“This is good,” Dong-soo said. “This is really good.”
“It happened because Cho-rip isn’t around,” Woon said. “It can’t happen if he’s out with us in the fields.”

“Then we’ll just have to put something in his food,” Dong-soo said, “to give him diarrhea every once in a while.”

Woon nodded off for a while, and Dong-soo shook him awake. “I fell asleep?” Woon was surprised at himself.


“We need to make it back. We need to gather more logs before we do.”

Amazingly, Dong-soo agreed. It was as if he were so grateful for what Woon had initiated that he was willing to do Woon’s bidding for the time being.

There had been sporadic rainstorms throughout the week. That evening the tent shook from the rain. Woon had his first restful, dreamless night since arriving and when he woke up, Cho-rip was hugging Dong-soo who was wide-awake, staring at Woon.

Crazy Man was hovering over them.

“The skies are clear,” the beacon man said. “Off you go. You—” he pointed to Dong-soo. “The restless one who must be lovesick or something. You stay with me. I have a special task for you.”

“Lovesick?” Dong-soo sat up.

“Wandering around and clutching your heart in the night? Sssshh, aigoo.” The old man rolled his eyes. “You are sensitive. I’m going to give you a task to challenge your manhood.” Then the man pointed to Woon. “You, son of a gisaeng. You’ve spurned all comforts of women and the world. You either already know the pain of life or you will never learn. Bah with you. You may be too pretty to learn anything of value. And you.” Here he turned to Cho-rip. “You might be book-smart but go learn the ways of wolf-dung.”

Dong-soo muttered as the three beacon employees parted ways: “What a crazy man.”

“I heard you!” said Crazy Man. “Sit down with me and eat lunch today. I’ll show even a dunce like you how to pass the civil service exam. You do what I tell you, though. Everything I tell you!”

Later that day, Dong-soo shot the Sky Lord’s messenger falcon and cooked it like a chicken and then got himself bitten by a poisonous snake. The two events followed so quickly upon one another that Woon’s head spun, but it was Dong-soo who fainted. Just before falling onto the bed cot, Dong-soo asked Woon and Cho-rip about the snake wound: “Please don’t tell the old man. Embarrassing, you know?”

The point where Woon had felt the excess blood energy, ximen, on Dong-soo’s arm. Could Woon have warned him? There was no way the dolt would listen. Could Woon have known about the cave full of flower snakes where the old man had sent Dong-soo to fetch kimchi from a pot? He had no idea anything like this could happen. The wound is treatable. The wound is treatable. The pounding in Woon’s head seemed not to be; the fear grew moment to moment. Woon raided the old man’s cabinets for herbs and was caught by him.

Then Crazy Man insisted that Dong-soo’s arm needed to be cut off to save his life. By this time, the boys had carried Dong-soo outside the tent to be examined by their beacon station chief; Dong-soo was still unconscious, sweating and running high fever. The old man took out a knife. “Turn
your heads,” he told the boys. Woon flashed on a memory of what the Crown Prince’s guard had said: *You would give up your arm for a friend?* Cho-rip, his own body thrown over Dong-soo’s body, was begging—something about what it is like for a martial artist to lose his arm.

Stupid Cho-rip. He’d forgotten about Sword Saint, minus one arm but still the greatest swordsman in Joseon. But what good is a dead swordsman?

Woon heard himself speak in an authoritative voice: “Give me the knife.”

Woon had never used his acupuncture skills for healing. He knew where to insert needles to lessen pain and redirect qi, but he wasn’t sure what he was doing; he wasn’t sure anything he was doing would work. He calculated that there was a small chance that Dong-soo would die on the table, under his hands, but the risk was worth taking. Woon took the knife and made a small incision, the way Sa-mo had taught the warrior boys to do in the event of snakebite. He sucked at the spot the way he had earlier that day. The blood was bitter, and Woon was careful to spit it out quickly so he himself would not be poisoned.
Get more, get more. He sucked deeper and drew as much blood as he could until the area was white. Then he applied the angelica and purple parsnip and tied a bandage tight around Dong-soo’s wrist.

He’ll get better. He will. Or the crazy old man can still cut off his arm.

“Impressive,” the old man assessed and whistled through his teeth.

“That’s Woonie,” said Cho-rip. “He knows so many things. Did you see how he kept his cool?”

Cool? Woon didn’t feel cool. There had been a message attached to the falcon. Part of it had been torn away, but the one word left read “kill.” The others didn’t suspect Woon was an assassin; no,
of course they didn’t. They had wanted to eat freshly cooked game with Woon. The Sky Lord’s precious falcon, cooked to a crisp. Its message had been for Woon to kill the old man, hadn’t it? He wasn’t a crazy old man; he was too smart. He was an exile of some sort, someone that higher-ups wanted dead. Woon was also in the clear with Heuksa Chorong. When the messenger bird didn’t return, it would be clear that Woon didn’t get the command.

This time Woon was free.

Next time he might not be so lucky.

Next time, Dong-soo-yah, you may need to cut me off like a limb. Or someone may need to do that for you if you yourself won’t let me go. For the sake of your own life…. I won’t be able to be by your side anymore.

Dong-soo woke up mumbling about kisses and kimchi and chicken meat, and everyone but Woon laughed. Dong-soo wanted to get up and walk about. Woon guided him inside the tent and put him to bed with herbal tea; Woon was the newly acknowledged medical master. “Rest, rest,” he told Dong-soo, and Dong-soo pulled at Woon’s sleeve, attempted a kiss.


“Hush.” Woon considered his own wicked-ness all night, was not assuaged when Dong-soo hugged him in the darkness and muttered something about Woon having saved his life so now they were even; Woon’s heart felt black and lonely; his mouth still tasted poisoned blood; something was tainted about his relationship to Dong-soo.

That feeling passed, though. How could it not in this safe, isolated place?

The following day, Jang-mi and Mi-so and Jin-joo came to visit with food. The landscape, already vivid with natural beauty, was made brighter by the women visiting and seemed dull after they left. It was as if a tiny tsunami of colorful clothes, high-pitched voices and honey-cake snacks had come, gone, and left too soon. Woon, who didn’t even like sweets, was sorry Dong-soo had eaten everything. Cho-rip reported that Mi-so had smiled talking about how amazing Woon was; Dong-soo said that he had revealed to Jin-joo that he knew she was his childhood friend.

“Had her so fooled. Who’s stupid, eh? Who never forgets a face? Me, Baek Dong-soo.”

Dong-soo smiled when Cho-rip noted that Jin-joo had recognized Dong-soo all along as well.

Dong-soo seemed embarrassed too. “Eh, she’s not stupid either. She was a tough kid.” A little grin. “She kissed me when she was twelve. Aish, can you believe? Right in front of all the other kids.”

Woon tried to smile; he thought that maybe Dong-soo would act more hopeful that what had happened by the stream would happen again, but there was so much talk about women. Did Dong-soo really like to talk about women? Or was it that he caught whatever topic was being tossed about like a ball? Woon never spoke up much, and it seemed rude to him to talk about people the way Cho-rip and others often did. Eh, Dong-soo likes to capture people’s attention. The stuff about Jin-joo? Not boastful, really. He’s open like that—he lets people inside and he pours himself out. Talks and talks. Maybe one day he’ll end up like the old beacon keeper.

The old man made the boys wash his clothes, which were stinky and gross from having not been washed in months, then gather the washed clothes from the line when another storm, a real one this time, approached. Dark clouds gathered, and hard rain fell. There was no predicting the weather; there was no predicting the days of a life. Woon gave up watching Dong-soo’s eyes for clues. He
fell asleep that night and didn’t dream anything. He woke up, as always, too close to Dong-soo, and as always, wanted so much to touch him.

The storm had put the beacons out, washed away the dung and there weren’t enough logs; Dong-soo stole some from a near-by temple, but then more rain fell, and a horror occurred: the beacon station near the palace went out.

“This is what the old man was talking about!” Cho-rip was beside himself, shuddering. “Joseon would’ve been invaded if the beacons didn’t stay lit, and that’s why beacon-keepers kept getting executed! We’re going to die! Beheading, right? Didn’t the old man say death by beheading?”

It was a more than a serious matter; the old man confirmed that execution was imminent but that if a signal went up from the beacon station near the palace, all would be well.

“We can make it there by sunset,” Dong-soo said, and he stood up to run.

“You stay here, Cho-rip-ah.” Woon ran after Dong-soo.

Woon chased after Dong-soo at top-speed through the mountains until the two reached a high cliff.

“Woah!” Dong-soo slid his feet on the ground to stop himself before running off.

Woon was seized with terror. He’d been through this before. The ground would give way, except this time, the world would come to an end.

There was Dong-soo, leaning over a precipice. No…. no....

Woon yelled: “Baek Dong-soo!” Surely, the idiot wasn’t idiotic enough to jump into the water?

Dong-soo turned around and smiled. As if to say I will make everything all right. I am the great Baek Dong-soo. Trust me.

And everything was fine. By the time Woon had rushed to the cliffside in a panic, Dong-soo was already bobbing out of the water. Grinning ear to ear, Dong-soo called, “I’ll go first! You find another way.”

Woon took a moment to revel in Dong-soo’s audacity; the great Baek Dong-soo. Then an idea struck. Steal a horse. You’ll make it to the capital in no time.

Running alongside the main path to the city, Woon was lucky enough to spot a nobleman—none other than someone who appeared to be an inspector headed for the beacons too. Woon jumped him, then jumped the horse. Woon’s heart sung; lives were saved for certain; was he smiling? Yes, Woon felt himself smiling.

When Woon rode towards the main thoroughfare, he spotted Dong-soo. The poor man was on his hands and knees, breathless, exhausted, in the street.

“Baek Dong-soo!” Woon couldn’t stop smiling. And when Dong-soo jumped on the horse, Dong-soo hands landed, ever so discreetly, on Woon’s ass. Woon turned around and shot Dong-soo a look, but the moment was pure joy. Dong-soo leaned forward, panted against Woon’s back—so was the fool overjoyed to have been rescued? Just how long were his hands going to rest there?

“You stole a horse?”

Something seemed to nick Woon inside—like a thorn. And the black thorn in his heart belonged to
a larger, blacker self--the Woon kept hidden from the good pure Dong-soo. So, was this how Dong-soo saw Yeo Woon? As a person incapable of petty theft?

“Stealing is only a beating,” Woon shot back. His smile dimmed for a moment. “Not lighting the beacons is a be-heading.”

“You stole a horse,” Dong-soo laughed. “You’re becoming more like me every day.”

“I’m better than you!” Woon reached behind himself, gave Dong-soo an awkward one-armed hug on horseback. Dong-soo slapped the horse’s butt, and off the two went to the capital.

The palace beacon guard demanded identification. This was going to be a bigger mess than either had anticipated on the thrilling ride to the station.
“We’re interns,” Woon explained. “We were in a hurry.”

Something was wrong; surely the guard understood the importance of keeping the beacons lit. Woon negotiated a trade of the horse for a mere quiver of arrows. The guard insisted, “Just let it be known that I never opened the gates for you.”

Dong-soo and Woon agreed that they were being conspired against. Such were the ways of the palace. “Aish, what craziness.” Dong-soo wasn’t furious. His eyes looked older, hardened with the seriousness of the situation. “Are we so important to the Crown prince? We must bigger than we thought we were—huh, Woon-ah? Isn’t that something? We need to beat these guys,” Woon thought about but couldn’t mention that the old man at the beacon station was a person someone wanted dead. The only priority was staying alive themselves. The palace was a kill or be killed world. Dong-soo and Woon found a bridge from which to shoot flaming arrows, and Dong-soo aimed so that the arrows would follow a natural curve and fall directly onto the smoldering logs inside. He lit three beacons this way.

Woon’s heart was smiling again. _We’re saved, we’re—_

It started to rain.

Thunder. Darkness. A light mist, then a gentle, fine downpour.

Only the fourth and final beacon was un-lit. Dong-soo kept trying until he had used up all the arrows except one.

He gave the arrow to Woon.

Why _me_?

Dong-soo simply nodded. He simply trusted Woon.

Woon pulled back the bow and prayed, to no god in particular: _please, please._

After the arrow was released, Dong-soo shouted at it in that foolish way of his: “Fly! Burn it up!”

In spite of himself, Woon felt himself praying Dong-soo’s inane cries.

The beacon lit up.

Woon felt himself in Dong-soo’s arms. He felt his mouth being kissed but that was over too soon; he was being held. Being in Dong-soo’s arms was salvation itself. In this embrace, no other world with its threats of suffering and shame could exist. Woon had felt this joy one wintery day, then again under the scorching sun, and now, in the pouring rain. _Woon felt alive, alive, alive._

Three times, Woon had been saved.
Not fully letting go of one another, Dong-soo and Woon turned to watch the beacons burn, and when they decided to walk back to their beacon post, they were met by armed Royal guards and escorted to the palace.

Nightfall already. The palace, full of intrigues, its ornate rooms lit by glowing lanterns. Were they in trouble?
Far from it. The commander of the guards told them that they had done their duty and wanted to commend them. He scolded the inspector for losing a horse. Dong-soo nudged Woon and winked, but Woon’s heart was growing blacker by the moment. The assignment at the beacon post was over; Dong-soo and Cho-rip and Yeo Woon would be returning to royal guard training promptly. The crazy old man? A general in Ham-gyung province who had fallen out of favor with certain politicians. The beacon interns were fed the best meals they’d ever eaten, and even through they were tired, both said they wanted to head back to their old post right away. Dong-soo wandered away a bit from the East Palace, whistling. “Woon-ah, I’ll be back in a minute. I just want to take a little look.”

“You’ll see all this in better light when we’re working here.”

“I know—but look at this place.”

“You’re going to get into trouble.”

Woon folded his arms, allowed Dong-soo a few minutes and when he went to go check up on him, he saw a sight he didn’t expect. Dong-soo was standing right before the tattooed girl, the so-called samini. Dong-soo was about to touch her cheek. There was a look in his eyes like fascination. No, it was more than that.

Dong-soo’s hand—yes, it pulled away. *Dong-soo-yah, even a dumb-ass like you knows better than to touch his Highness’ woman.*

Woon’s heart. This time it was as if a whole Bramble of thorns had caught it. Woon stepped back. His foot made a crackling sound against a pebble that should not have been there. A whole border of pebbles along the smooth path? *Damn it, I’m not even watching where I’m walking. Assassin? I’m an idiot. I really AM becoming more and more like him. I’m going to be killed at this rate. Tomorrow, most likely. Maybe tonight….*

“Woon-ah?”

“He’s here too?” said the tattooed young woman. From the sound of her voice, nothing significant had occurred. But why had Dong-soo been about to touch her cheek?

“Woon-ah, look who is here!” Dong-soo pointed to the obvious third person in the moonlight.

“I—I—” Woon looked away.

“I wasn’t supposed to be out,” the so-called samini said. “I’ll be taking my leave. Blessings be with you.”

Dong-soo skipped to catch up with Woon. “Do you know what?” he was sputtering in his excitement. “The necklace I wear? This one?” He held up the broach that he had pieced together, the one years ago the Sky Lord’s sword had shattered with a swift whip across Dong-soo’s neck. “This broach belongs to her! She’s the little girl who lost it! Remember her? You and I chased a thief who stole her purse, remember? She lost this, and I kept it. Remember?”

“Yes, yes.” Woon was unimpressed.

“Destiny, don’t you think?”

“And Jin-joo was one of the bandits who attacked us on our first escort trip,” Woon said. “I guess that was destiny too.”

“Are you stupid?” Woon was so frustrated by now that he thought he might cry. He didn’t of course, but there was a pressure behind his eyes. He frowned in hopes that the pain there would go away. “Jin-joo likes you. The whole time she was at the beacon station with Jang-mi and the bratty one, she couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

“What? The girls—it’s you. Mi-so was trying to give you the biggest serving, so Jang-mi slapped her wrist. You were standing next to me. The girls are all about you—”

“You dunce. You can’t read Jin-joo’s eyes? Jin-joo even said something to Cho-rip about how she kissed you when you were kids. How you were supposed to marry her?”

“What?” Dong-soo laughed then waved his hand. “Psssssh. Oh that. That was years ago. She doesn’t like me like that anymore.”

Woon told himself that it was the excitement of the day that had him feeling so distressed, so exhausted, so vulnerable to foolishness like jealousy, but no, Woon wasn’t merely annoyed—the other world, the one that threatened everyone, had deep roots here in the palace.

“You keep saying it’s me the women fall for, but I’m beginning to think it’s you who will win them all in the end.” Woon attempted a smile. “The great Baek Dong-soo.”

“Really?” The fool seemed genuinely curious. “Why?”

“Because you’re a good person.” Woon didn’t say more but kept walking.

It was true. Dong-soo was good, and Woon wasn’t.

What had Woon done? One lie, another one. At some point, the Sky Lord, the Master of Lies, would call Woon and make Woon do … terrible things Woon didn’t want to do. Woon belonged to a darker world. He had to cut himself from Dong-soo, or the brambles would drag Dong-soo into the blackness—or was it too late?

6. Don’t Die; I am the One Who Must Kill You

By oneself is evil done; by oneself is one defiled. By oneself is evil left undone; by oneself is one made pure. Purity and impurity depend on oneself; no one can purify another. –the Buddha, the Dhammapada 165.

Dong-soo didn’t understand why his companions were less than enthusiastic about serving at the palace again. Cho-rip complained that the uniforms were uncomfortable. Dong-soo thought they were stylish. Woon complained about having to wear his hair in a top-knot. He had always been fussy about his hair. He said it would fall out being wrapped up like that constantly. As if. How ridiculous. Woon has so much pretty hair.

Right there among the dozens of other guards, Dong-soo felt flushed. He remembered the strands of hair that fell on the sunlit grass that morning, Dong-soo’s finger’s unclenching, Woon’s head in his lap.

Woon was uneasy about more than dress codes for Royal guards.
“I don’t like the palace,” he said when Dong-soo asked him about what was bothering him. “It’s a place full of politicians and … politicians—I don’t know about them. We can’t handle them they way we can swordsmen, Dong-soo-yah. There is so much going on here that we’ll never know about.”

Within the hour, Woon was proven right. Commander Im, the head of the Royal guard, the man Dong-soo knew had a special connection with Sa-mo and with the Crown prince, called the new recruits, the special mountain boys, only Cho-rip, Woon, and Dong-soo, away from the rest. “There’s deep trouble brewing in the palace,” the commander said. Seated in his office was none other than the tiny nun. She always looked tranquil, but this evening she looked worried.

“His Highness has ordered that she be escorted out of the palace. It is too dangerous here for her tonight. Because of the extreme situation, I can not leave. The three of you will have to figure out a way to get her out. The gates are being watched, and no one is being allowed to leave or enter without special permission.”

“But his Highness?” Dong-soo asked. “Can’t he give us special—”

“Has something happened to the Crown Prince?” Woon interrupted.

The commander didn’t answer. “Please do your duty and escort Miss Yoo Ji-sun out of the palace.”

So that is why the nun looked worried. Ji-sun. So that’s her name. Ji-sun.

Dong-soo felt honored to be trusted with the task, but his mind was too clouded with concern for the little woman—she was so helpless looking all time—to land on a solution for getting out of the palace that didn’t involve something terribly risky like scaling the walls. Leave it to Woon to keep shooting down all Dong-soo’s plans. Like arrows. He’s killing me here. Then Dong-soo was hit with an idea. All dead people, no matter their rank, leave the palace the same way.

Cho-rip was surprised there was more one corpse in the palace morgue.

“What did I say?” Woon looked as serious as Dong-soo had ever seen him. “The palace is a scary place.”

Disguised as corpse-carriers with masks over their faces, Woon, Cho-rip, and Miss Yoo Ji-sun carried a “dead” Dong-soo covered with literal blood from a corpse on a wagon through special palace exit.

Dong-soo was instructed by the nun to clean himself thoroughly to avoid infection, and once the party was far from the palace, the boys found a stream. “Please, Young Miss,” Woon said to the nun, and Dong-soo was struck by the polite tone. “You bathe first. I’ve taken care to bring the hanbok you wore before we all changed into the corpse-keeper clothes.” Woon took out a small rolled bag. “My civilian clothes and the men’s are in there too. The clothes escaped any infection, I’m sure. Most likely the stink as well.”

Miss Yoo Ji-sun bowed. Woon handed her the hanbok and slippers—there were private items too, carefully folded. Dong-soo felt a little awed that Woon had taken time to think of this step. Dong-soo had been proud of himself for discovering the way out, but Woon—where did Woon learn to be a gentleman?

“Please take your time,” Woon said as the little fairy walked away in the darkness.

“Shouldn’t we stay closer to guard her?” Cho-rip asked.
Dong-soo slapped Cho-rip on the chest. “Pervert. There’s no one here. Stay your ground and turn around.”

“Aish! You and Woon are the ones head over heels for that creepy little thing! Not me. I just want to make sure she’s safe, but she’s trouble, I tell you. Trouble.”

After all were clean, the party walked through the warm night air into the morning, and, suddenly, men dropped out of the trees. Who would they be but Gak, Yong, and Geol, three boys from the mountain warrior camp!

Dong-soo was over-joyed. “You made it down! I thought you would never make it down!” Were they strong enough? Then some “ooh, pretty!” remarks about the pretty lady changed Dong-soo’s mood. What did these heathens know about proper behavior around women?

The mountain boys shifted to joke-flirting with Woon. “Ah, you are more handsome than ever.” “Your smile hasn’t changed.”

And Dong-soo was more annoyed. There was, in this case, nothing he could do, in regard to the rules of society, to keep boys from picking on Woon’s prettiness. Woon didn’t seem to mind the usual ribbing, though. Dong-soo had never minded before; he found himself wanting to kick his old comrades in the shins, though.

Then the hills and valleys of the day began to dip and rise too quickly, even though Dong-soo had known they would. First Sa-mo showed up. Dong-soo was so happy to see him. Sa-mo walked straight to Dong-soo—ah, Dong-soo was still the favorite child—and expressed dismay over having heard that Dong-soo had been bitten by a snake.

“Could a mere flower-snake defeat the heaven-sent Baek Dong-soo?” Dong-soo shrugged and hoped Cho-rip wouldn’t launch into the story of Woon’s amazing medical rescue again.

“I was so worried at first.” Sa-mo’s face still expressed concern. “Jang-mi reminded me that you had been exposed to hundreds of poisons at the camp and were immune.”

“Actually.” Dong-soo scratched his head. He was uncomfortable with the attention he was getting before the captain had even acknowledged Cho-rip or Woon. “You—-we—-the books we studied may have missed some of the poisons out there in the world. I was in pretty bad shape until—-” Dong-soo laughed. “It was Woon who used the acupuncture skills he had studied on his own and who—”

“Aigoo, you should’ve seen him!” Cho-rip started to tell the story. “He inserted the needles like a master! He didn’t hesitate to cut the vein at Dong-soo’s wrist! He sucked—”

A blade flew through the air, past Dong-soo, and Sa-mo caught it before it hit Ji-sun.

The next blade flew, and no one moved, but Sa-mo did, and the blade stabbed Sa-mo.

“Sa-mo!” “Captain!” Everyone dropped to their knees to the fallen man’s side. Ji-sun too. No one thought to draw a weapon; Dong-soo thought, in his terror: please, someone else, fight now—how can I fight if my Sa-mo has fallen? My Sa-mo! My Sa-mo!

A peculiar man appeared. He carried a scimitar. He said, “Oh, so this is the girl Lord Hong was looking for. I will have to take her with me.” He had only one good hand. The arm which he waved in a mocking way had lost its hand above the wrist; an iron stump was fitted there. So, was he a swordsman or not? That stump—it could still kill a person just by—-
“You bastard,” Sa-mo spat, trying to rise, and Cho-rip and Dong-soo pushed the wounded man back down.

Gak, Yong, and Geol jumped him all together and proved incapable of handling him. The man was indeed a master swordsman. The man didn’t kill Dong-soo’s friends, merely said “you boys need to practice more.”

Dong-soo was on the verge of tears. He couldn’t move. Sa-mo was conscious, breathing deeply under his hand. The smell of blood. Dong-soo looked to Woon. *I can’t read people, I can’t read people, but what is wrong with Woon? He’s never been afraid in situations like this.*

Woon was standing now.

“No one seems to be any good,” the peculiar man said. He licked the blade of his weapon. “Nothing to taste. Only boys.”

*Why does Woon look like that?* Dong-soo knew how Woon’s body spoke. Woon didn’t want to fight. How strange was that?

“You.” The man stared at Woon. “You look like a doll.”

Still, Woon didn’t budge.

“Or you?” The man pointed at Cho-rip. “Or you?” He pointed at Dong-soo.

Dong-soo let go of Sa-mo. “I’ll take you on.”

“Back off,” Woon commanded. “He’s mine.”

Before Woon could draw his blade though, Sword Saint appeared, and it became clear that the odd attacker and he had a history. The scimitar lowered. The man asked Sword Saint what part of his body he would cut off this time, threw a smoke bomb and disappeared. Sword Saint rushed to his fallen blood-brother’s side.

“Sa-mo-yah!”

“I won’t die from the wound,” Sa-mo said and closed his eyes.

“Sa-mo!” Dong-soo yelled.

“Captain!” Cho-rip in a soft voice.

“Sunsegnim!” Dong-soo realized that Woon had never addressed his captain that way. Even in his fear, Dong-soo realized this.

Sword Saint told Dong-soo to carry Sa-mo and knew the closest place to get help, which was, surprisingly, a bandit hide-out. All the bandits who had attacked the wagon envoy were there; they were shocked to see the three escorts and reluctant to let anyone pass. Sword Saint called an unfamiliar name, and who should appear but a small man and Jin-joo.

The man was Jin-joo’s father, who Dong-soo recognized from his childhood. King of Bandits, was he? Also someone knowledgeable in medicine and another old man connected to the past—really, how had all these men come to know one another? At the moment, Dong-soo felt grateful that he had so many uncles.

“He’ll live,” Jin-joo’s father said of Sa-mo, as Sa-mo lay bleeding, “if he makes it through the
night.”

Other words were spoken. Something between Sword Saint and Cho-rip and Woon. Sword Saint was trying to figure out what had happened at the palace. Woon was right: the palace was a source of darkness. Sword Saint was here. The others—wouldn’t they help? They could right whatever was wrong anywhere. The adults would fix things.

Dong-soo wanted to believe that Sa-mo would be fine, but he wouldn’t wake up. Then as minutes passed and Sa-mo still had not woken up, Dong-soo could not be consoled.

The great Baek Dong-soo feared two things: the first was losing one of his precious people, and the second was remembering what fear itself was like.

The tears started, slowly at first. Not caring that all eyes were following him, Dong-soo left the house and found himself on the porch. He was weeping loudly now. There was a tree with a massive trunk growing right there. Its presence startled Dong-soo or else he would’ve kept walking. He heard footsteps behind him. Everyone was watching—Cho-rip, Woon, the fairy girl, Jin-joo. He didn’t care. There was no shame, only fear.

Dong-soo screamed. He threw himself against the tree and wept.

Sa-mo, didn’t you promise to always protect me?

Dong-soo wept for Sa-mo; he wept for his own weakness. How could Woon, who had come to Sa-mo’s home as a child and had grown to love Sa-mo as a son, be so strong? Woon had been fatherless and mother-less. Woon knew fear too and didn’t fall apart like this. Woon knew how to protect people; he didn’t need to be protected. And yet Dong-soo wanted to protect everyone, just as Sa-mo protected people. He wanted to protect all his precious ones. Woon, who had that sadness in his eyes. The little nun, who needed help so much now. The Crown Prince, who the boy’s warrior camp had trained for years to serve.

I am indeed a fool.

Dong-soo wept until he ran out of tears, and all the others, as if to confirm that Dong-soo was indeed a fool, walked away from the sight. Dong-soo looked up. Woon was still there. Woon’s eyes met Dong-soo’s with sadness, and then Woon too walked away.

An hour or so later, when Dong-soo was sitting, dejected, on a stump, Sword Saint approached him and said, “What can a man with a limp body do in the world?”

He challenged Dong-soo to spar. Dong-soo was glad for the opportunity. Each time he was knocked down, he rose with his wooden sword. “Teach me to fight! That way I can find the man who hurt Sa-mo and avenge—”

A whap across the legs. Dong-soo kept being hit and hit and thrown across the hard ground.

“Even if you become the greatest swordsman in Joseon, you won’t be able to do anything if you hold a grudge behind your sword.”

Dong-soo rose three more times, shouted each time, raised his wooden short each time, and was hit in the stomach, hit on the back, defeated.

“Only your heart can move your sword.” Those were the words Sword Saint left him. “Hold your sword with your heart.” He kept walking away.
Moments later, not far off, he could hear the air whooshing with the sound of fighting. Woon had challenged Sword Saint, hadn’t he? Woon would fare better, of course. Already, though, strangely enough, Dong-soo felt comforted. Weeping against the tree, he had believed that others had seen his weakness exposed. Now he believed that they would help him somehow. The great Baek Dong-soo. He was not heaven’s gift to the world. The heavens had gifted Dong-soo with the most precious people, ones who loved and supported him.

“He’ll recover soon.” Ji-sun’s voice. She sat down next to Dong-soo.

Dong-soo had met her as a child. He had been drawn to her then. Her broach had saved his neck from the Sky Lord. And Woon had run before Dong-soo with arms wide before the Sky Lord. That night, people had been destined to be Dong-soo’s precious ones.

“We share a deep destiny,” Dong-soo said.

“I was born to be a Buddhist nun,” she said. “That was my destiny.”

So she hadn’t been pretending?

She explained how the Crown Prince had been protecting her; from her tone of voice, it didn’t seem like she was his woman, more like she had grown up his ward.

“Since his Highness is stuck at the palace, I will protect you now.” Dong-soo rubbed his hands together awkwardly. “Not like… I mean, I will protect you like a friend and a brother.”

“No,” she said. “I must not endanger others. This life is mine to bear alone.”

“Stop it.” Dong-soo was angry suddenly. “There is no such thing as destiny. If there were such a thing, I would have lived and died a cripple.”

She looked at him and did not ask about the story.

“No such thing as destiny,” Dong-soo repeated.

“Do you really believe that?” It was clear that she didn’t. Who did? Everyone believed that the stars held peoples’ fates, that the heavens granted this son or that daughter to a parent, that Dong-soo’s friends had crossed his path because of heaven’s will. Wasn’t Dong-soo thinking just that a moment ago? Maybe it was so that heaven had given him his unusual strength, his precious Sa-mo, his idiocy that people seemed kind enough to overlook….

“A man can make his own destiny.” Dong-soo stood up. “I, Baek Dong-soo, will show you.”
When Dong-soo went to check on Sa-mo again, the determination he had shown before Yoo Ji-sun was gone. Jin-joo’s father was cleaning Sa-mo’s wound. Sa-mo was still unconscious. Feeling no shame, Dong-soo knelt beside his adoptive father, took his hand and begged, “Sa-mo, don’t die. I don’t want to be left alone.”

Sa-mo’s fingers moved in Dong-soo’s.

Jin-joo’s father took Sa-mo’s other hand and felt the pulse. There was no need for that—Sa-mo opened his eyes and spoke. “Dong-soo-yah, what are you talking about? Alone?”

“Sa-mo!” Dong-soo was crying again. “Sa-mo!”
“Shhh.” The man grinned. “Did you really think I was so weak as to die already? Even if I died, I would haunt you until you grew out of all your foolishness—and even after that.”

“Don’t talk too much,” warned Jin-joo’s father. “You might strain yourself.”

“Jin-gi, you give it a rest. I’m fine.”

“Hyung, Dong-soo here woke you up. I would wake up too if it were my own daughter weeping over me, but—”

“I’m fine, I tell you—”

Dong-soo was aware of someone at the door. He didn’t have to guess who it was. It was his other self, after all. He had sensed Woon’s footsteps—was that his scent? And here Woon thought he was a master at hiding.

Dong-soo turned around, confirmed what he had sensed. A spray of black hair, just the tips of Woon’s bangs—Woon standing outside the threshold, head bowed, listening, not daring to come in.

“Woon-ah! C’mere. Our captain is awake!”

Woon entered, slowly, with hesitation.

Dong-soo had wanted to bring the issue up for a while with Sa-mo, and maybe now wasn’t the best time, but here, now, feeling so close to his most precious ones, Dong-soo couldn’t help himself. “Sa-mo, Woon has been out of sorts lately. Tell him… tell him that you are here for him too, Sa-mo.”

“Dong-soo-yah,” Woon began. “I don’t think that--”


“It’s none of your business, Dong-soo-yah,” Sa-mo went on, “where a young man goes at night as long as he attends to his duties by day. Woon-ah?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“Is there something troubling you?”

“Captain, you should lie down.”

“Eh, forget it. I’m fine. All young men have troubles.” Sa-mo narrowed his eyes at Woon. “You’re a good boy and never fail at your duties, but remember that you have a family too, okay?” Sa-mo nodded for emphasis.

Dong-soo looked from Sa-mo to Woon. Woon looked embarrassed.

“You are family here,” Sa-mo went on. “The boys who just came down from the mountain—uh, aren’t they are supposed to be staying with Jang-mi?” Sa-mo turned to Jin-joo’s father. “That’s where they went, right?” A nod from Jin-joo’s father, and Sa-mo went on. “Those boys, Dong-soo, all of you are my sons—you got that, Woon? If there’s ever anything you need, you come to me.”

Woon lowered his head. “Yes, Captain.”
That night, Woon sneaked out again. Before he rose to leave, Dong-soo caught his arm.

“It’s good now, isn’t it,” Dong-soo whispered, “that Sa-mo is safe. There isn’t much to worry about.”

“I’ll be back,” Woon countered.

Dong-soo didn’t let go. “I heard you spar with Sword Saint. It didn’t go well when he sparred with me.” A soft chuckle. “Did he compliment your sword skills?”

Woon sighed. There was something about the sound—not frustration with Dong-soo’s meandering way of talking. Genuine sadness.

“Uncle said….” Woon’s voice trailed off, and his arm went limp in Dong-soo’s grasp. Woon was able to pull his arm away and stand up. “Uncle said I have a strong will to kill.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? If you can fight to kill, then you can fight to protect.”

“I’m not sure,” Woon said. “I don’t understand so many things. How far does one go to protect a person, when is it the right moment to kill, things … like that.”

“Really? I thought you knew all that stuff.”

“No, I don’t.”

Woon left.

The next morning, Sword Saint was standing in front of the house and gazing in the direction of the rising sun. Woon hadn’t returned. Sword Saint said that he felt uneasy, that Cho-rip and Dong-soo should head to the palace. Dong-soo was worried about who would care for Sa-mo, but Ji-sun said she would take very good care of him. Behind her, Jin-joo pouted. Dong-soo noted that the silly girl seemed to be acting very out of place in her own home. And why was she looking at him like that? Oh, it was probably because she had seen him crying like a fool. It was all too awkward, and Dong-soo was glad to hurry off somewhere else.

Cho-rip and Dong-soo were on their way when, passing Jang-mi’s house, they heard wailing. They rushed inside and came upon a frightening scene.

Gak, Yong, and Geol were lying unconscious on mats. Bloody bandages were strewn about. Jang-mi was wiping the boys’ foreheads with a wet cloth, crying, “aigoo, assassins came, assassins came.” In a corner of the room, Woon sat cross-legged, head bowed.

The next person through the door was Commander Im. It wasn’t only his military uniform that made everyone understand that a higher power had arrived; the man was tall, prepossessing and eagle-eyed. He was the Crown Prince’s best man. Dong-soo stepped back in awe---it’s going to be all right now, isn’t it?

The situation only became more confusing. As Commander Im assessed what people said, he appeared suspicious of Woon. He noticed a wound on Woon’s shoulder. Woon said it was nothing, but the commander demanded to look at it. Woon said he got the wound while trying to pass through the palace gates the other night with the Young Miss, but the commander told him not to lie, that the wound was made by a three-edged throwing star. “Palace soldiers don’t throw stars. That type is used by the mountain camp warriors.”

Jang-mi shook her washcloth at the commander. “Woon was here when I arrived. He was giving
the boys medical attention.”

The palace is a dark place, hadn’t Woon said that? Dong-soo did what any friend would do; he lied to keep Woon out of trouble. “Commander, sir—it’s true Woon didn’t get hurt at the palace. He engaged the assassins. He lured them away and got hurt then.”

Commander Im did not look convinced. “We’ll know the story when these boys wake up.”

Dong-soo exchanged looks with Cho-rip. Trust between comrades is a matter of life and death.

Gak was the first to open his eyes. “Woonie!” Gak’s expression was outrage at Woon, and then he seemed to notice where he was and what was going on. “Is everyone okay?”

“Everyone is going to be fine,” the commander said calmly. “Please tell us what happened. Who attacked you?”

“He… he was wearing a mask, so I couldn’t see his face.” Gak was looking intently at Woon who was looking down. Why did Woon look so sad? “Hey, if Woonie had only come earlier--! We were expecting you!” Was that Gak pretending to be angry? “This wouldn’t have happened if you had come on time!”

“Very well then.” The commander was satisfied. He instructed the boys to recover, told Jang-mi to take good care of them, and ordered Cho-rip, Woon, and Dong-soo to accompany him to the palace immediately.

As people were shuffling out of the room, Dong-soo overheard Gak say to Woon: “I’ll hear your explanation later. Thank you for keeping us alive.”

Once at the palace, Dong-soo became distracted; there were always so many things going on at the palace, the least of which were rules about duties still new to him. No sooner than the boys finished dressing in their spectacular uniforms than the apparent leader of the palace guards, the sallow-faced fellow who had challenged Dong-soo on the first day of training, arrived and told Woon that the Minister of Defense wanted to see him.

Weird. The other guards said that Sallow Face was the minister’s son. Dong-soo asked if Woon was in trouble; everyone said that an audience with the minister was special and more likely Woon was being singled out for being a notable recruit. Anyone in trouble with the minister, observed one guard, usually ended up dead.

Dong-soo, envious at first over the first remarks, felt uneasy about the second.

Cho-rip’s guard duty was near the East gate. Dong-soo and Woon were on a balcony nearby.
Dong-soo was trying his hardest to scan every speck of the horizon for trouble but still, he sensed Woon’s darkness. He was willing to wait for explanations about the trouble with the assassins until nightfall; guard duty took priority. Then, surprisingly, Woon began to talk.

“Why didn’t you ask me about my wound?”

Dong-soo didn’t take his eyes off the palace grounds. “Because I trust you.”

“Just in case, maybe…” Woon’s voice trailed off. “If it were the case that it was me who hurt them, Dong-soo-yah, you might be regretful.”

“What are you talking about? Jang-mi said she saw you. You saved their lives. I heard Gak thank
you himself.”

“Dong-soo-yah.” There it was again. That sigh of infinite sadness. “I don’t know if we’re cut out for this job here at the palace. Sa-mo… our captain may have not been right. We’re… not ready.”

“Are you kidding?” Dong-soo turned to face Woon this time. “Between the both of us, we’re perfect. You can think yourself out of any situation. Me…. Woon-ah, I know what my strength is. My uncle Gwang-taek told me. I have a heart. I don’t think, but I feel things. I just have to direct that heart to a single purpose and--”

Woon grabbed Dong-soo by the arm, the way Dong-soo had taken Woon’s last night, before Woon disappeared into the darkness.

“What about your own wound?”

“What?”

“Where the snake bit you.”

“What are you talking about?” Dong-soo smiled. “It’s fine. It healed fine.” For some reason Dong-soo didn’t understand, he was worried people might be looking at him and Woon. The way Woon was holding onto Dong-soo’s arm—it wasn’t like other guards didn’t casually interact with one another during duty. It wasn’t like friends didn’t touch one another this way. But the heat Dong-soo felt—could other people see whatever bound him to Woon? Was it a ring of intense light—like a halo?

Dong-soo could only stare at Woon.

Woon dropped Dong-soo’s arm as if it were a poisonous snake. “Nothing.” He folded his arms. “Nothing.”

Sure enough, there was an interruption. Commander Im wanted to see the new recruits again. Within the rest of the day and into the next morning, the highs and lows that Dong-soo had always anticipated would follow him through all the years of his life became so severe that he thought he might die from the rush of events. And at least twice, he was certain that he would die. Eventually, he would not be sure that he had any reason to live.

Cho-rip, Woon, and Dong-soo were gathered in the commander’s office and told about a royal order. The Crown Prince had been stripped of his title and his life was in danger. For crimes against the royal family, Sado was to be punished by being put into a rice box. No food and water. An execution.

“We’re going to rescue him,” the commander said, and Dong-soo’s heart, which had fallen into despair, was glad again.

“The royal order is that one of you three should take his place in the box while his Highness is secretly escorted out of the palace.”

The room became so dark and thick with mourning that even if anyone had spoken during the long, ensuing silence, Dong-soo would not have been able to hear the words.

“That person may not be able to come out alive again,” the commander added. As if such a thing needed to be said. Dong-soo heard the implication that there could be a rescue of the prince’s substitute, but he understood the command. One of the three boys was going to die.
“I’ll do it,” Dong-soo said.

Everyone raised their heads and stared with somber looks.

“Yeo Woon,” Dong-soo said, “you are the smartest, so you have to help the commander plan in the future. Cho-rip-ah, forgive me, but you are too easily startled for a job like this.”

The commander told Dong-soo that he was proud of him, and so it was decided. The commander then went on to say that the three boys were to stay on the palace premises that night and that Sword Saint would be informed of the royal order.

Walking into the sunlight to resume their posts, Dong-soo rubbed his hands together and smiled. “I have lived a meaningful life. I am Baek Dong-soo! Here I come!”

Cho-rip ran off.

Woon stayed. “Meaningful?” Dong-soo didn’t dare look into Woon’s eyes. He could hear the emotion in Woon’s voice and didn’t want an argument, not now. Whenever the execution was—tomorrow?—by that time, Dong-soo would compose himself, steady his heart, find the right words to say to Cho-rip, know how to say good-bye to Woon.

Woon walked away. Away from his post, Dong-soo noted, and hoped that Woon would not be punished, that Commander Im would understand.

Cho-rip appeared later to argue with Dong-soo. “You can’t do this.” Dong-soo said that a man should be allowed to die like a man. By nightfall, the three were called to the commander again and told that by decree of the Defense Minister the palace had been closed—no one could leave or enter. Cho-rip was ordered to get word to Sword Saint of his Highness’ demotion. After the meeting, Dong-soo sat on the steps outside the office for a long time. Woon was nowhere to be seen. Cho-rip, apparently resigned to what was going to happen, came to Dong-soo and, smiling sadly, poured him a drink. Dong-soo took it without a word.

The next thing Dong-soo was conscious of was waking up in a palace bunker, and the fog in his head was too familiar—he’d been poisoned enough by Sa-mo during training at the boys’ warrior camp. Cho-rip had drugged him. There was a note on the mattress.

This is my decision. Forgive me, Dong-soo, for not staying by your side.

At first, when the terror surged, it wasn’t suffocating. Dong-soo flung the door open and Woon was standing there. Dong-soo ignored Woon, walked right past him to find the commander, to fix everything, to save Cho-rip. Then Commander Im was repeating what Cho-rip had written, something about a decision, and the terror was not only pressing on Dong-soo’s body from the outside. Pressing from within and urging his body to collapse was Dong-soo’s own heart. Sword Saint’s words: What can a man with a limp body do in the world? Dong-soo felt himself lunging at his own commander. But Commander Im was stronger, throwing Dong-soo against a wall. Back and forth, the two men struggled. Dong-soo heard words about how it was possible to still save Cho-rip. That if the Crown Prince made it out safely, the order would be given.

“Is your head an accessory?” Commander Im was trying not to hurt Dong-soo physically, but those words….

“Yes, my head is only an accessory,” Dong-soo cried. “I don’t know how to use it. I only… my heart.”

The commander did not let go, even when Dong-soo pleaded, and Dong-soo fell to the floor,
“Get up,” ordered Commander Im. “What you have to do now is what was Cho-rip’s assignment. Go find Kim Sunseongnim and inform him of what has happened to the Crown Prince.”

A royal command.

Dong-soo got up. “Yes, I will go. Here I am, going.”

Dong-soo crossed the palace barricades easily, acquired a horse and new purpose. At Sa-mo’s he discovered that Sword Saint was missing and that there was a search going on for him. Ji-sun looked worried about his Highness, so Dong-soo took her by the hand and insisted that she return with him to the palace to see the Crown Prince before….

It was when assassins, dressed in civilian clothing, attacked, that Dong-soo regretted his decision to bring along the little woman. Dong-soo knew he had someone to protect; he could fight. Without even needing to draw his sword, he downed two men and chased off the rest of the group. He was a skilled martial artist after all. The day was widening with promise; Dong-soo could feel his lungs expanding with a sense of accomplishment.

Then he realized he’d lost Ji-sun.

He found her in the company of who else but—Jin-joo? The clever girl had snatched Ji-sun in the marketplace and hidden her after the trouble was over, then alerted Dong-soo.

“I don’t understand what is going on,” Jin-joo said, “but you should not take her closer to the palace. That’s where most of the danger is.”

Dong-soo was breathing easier; his mind was working. “Yes, yes, you’re right.” Assassins in the streets? “Something is very wrong,” he said, “Only a few people knew of the plan and the alternate plan. There has to be a traitor somewhere…” He flashed on the memory of a forlorn Woon on the balcony. “No, no.” Dong-soo laughed out loud. How could he even laugh in such circumstances, but the idea was so absurd. “There’s no way that Woon—”

Ji-sun looked at Dong-soo with intense eyes. No, how could a compassionate person suspect Woon? Yes, Young Miss felt fear. She wanted to see his Highness. Jin-joo was looking at Dong-soo with quite another expression. Dong-soo remembered what Woon had said about Dong-soo being clueless about Jin-joo’s feelings.

What a good, clever girl she is. And she’ll do anything in the world for me. It was a wicked thought. But Dong-soo needed Jin-joo to do something very important right now.

“Jin-joo-yah? Please, I entrust our fair lady to you. You will take good care of her, right? I have to go."

“Fair lady?” Jin-joo looked at Ji-sun and scoffed openly. Jealousy didn’t suit Jin-joo. But in some ways, Dong-soo noted, Jin-joo was very much like himself—an open book.

“I want to go with you,” Ji-sun said to Dong-soo.

Jin-joo grabbed Ji-sun by the arm. “Too dangerous,” Jin-joo and Dong-soo said in unison.

Dong-soo started to run, and after he had been running uphill for a long time, a sense of dread started to fall over him. The scheduled meeting place was deep in the forest, the landmarks easy to find, and Dong-soo had trained for years for such a mission. His heart told him something had
gone wrong, though; he knew this before he came on the bloody sight.

There, his Highness’ carriage. On the ground, bodies. Assassins’ bodies in black clothes, masks over their faces. Other assassins lifting dead comrades to carry off somewhere. Among all the fallen men was someone in a palace uniform.

“ Instructor Bok!”

Dong-soo made quick work of the two masked men there. He kicked them both down. He ran to the royal guard, and thank goodness he was alive.

Blood was seeping out the corners of his mouth though.

“Instructor Bok! Instructor Bok!”

“His Highness… danger.” More blood poured past the man’s lips; the smell of blood was everywhere.


Bok was trying to say something. Dong-soo brought his face closer.

“Woon….”

Dong-soo’s heart—it had never felt such terror before.

“Woon….” The man rasped the last word. “Traitor.”

The man died in Dong-soo’s arms. What he had said about Woon could not be true. If his Highness was in danger, then surely Woon was protecting him? Dong-soo was running, not knowing where he was going; he had run up and down mountains before as a mere child without losing his breath, but now he couldn’t breathe. Terror was choking him again. The trees were darker; their limbs were spreading out like black arms. Dong-soo couldn’t sense Woon anywhere. He ran, and he ran, and everywhere, the trees were demons, and he knew that there would be worse demons wherever he ended up. His heart told him that. He knew. He knew.

After a turn, there was a clearing. The sunlight fell over bright grass.

Kneeling, as if about to draw his sword but dead, in infinite servitude, was Commander Im.

Yes, dead. The blood had dried on his face and on his clothes. Dong-soo shook him and called his name, but the man was dead.

Wait. No. If his Highness’ best man was …. Where is his Highness? Dong-soo looked up and saw Woon kneeling, his sword laid across his knees. Dong-soo walked over.

Woon’s face was no less or no more lonely-looking, the same serious face Dong-soo had watched intently for years. There were tear tracks on his face.

Dong-soo didn’t feel relieved that Woon was alive; he didn’t feel sorry that Woon had been crying; what Dong-soo did feel was that sense of dread growing, the certainty that…

Woon was kneeling before someone in a reverent way?

Dong-soo turned around.
“Your Highness!”

Dong-soo threw himself on the body, felt the arms and legs, even if touching the Crown Prince was sacrilege; Dong-soo needed to confirm that His Highness was dead. “How could this happen to you? Why did this happen?” This was the end of everything; for years, Sa-mo had trained the boys on the mountain to protect his Highness.

*Failure. Utter failure.*

Woon was standing up, not meeting Dong-soo’s eyes when Dong-soo asked, “Was it you? Did you really do this? Did you kill his Highness and the commander?”

The evidence was there; Dong-soo’s heart was telling him that such a betrayal was impossible, but who could refute such evidence? Dong-soo didn’t have much of a mind; Commander Im had scolded him for being born with a head that was merely an accessory, but even a tiny child could figure out what happened. Who had Dong-soo found at the scene of the crime? What had Instructor Bok said? Woon… traitor.

Dong-soo raged; he was not even aware of what words he was using to question Woon, but it didn’t matter—Woon wasn’t answering. “Talk to me,” Dong-soo pleaded. “Have you gone insane? Are you still the Woon I know? What is happening?”

Woon’s voice was soft, like a scolded child’s. “This is fate.”

“What?”

“If I try to escape, there is no way out.”
Bullshit.

Time had stopped; the world had reached its end. Everything Dong-soo had felt about Woon flipped over; love turned to hate. Dong-soo landed one punch and saw blood at the corner of Woon’s mouth. He saw the four beacons lit in the rain. He punched Woon again. He saw Woon as a child, that haughty look. He saw Woon as a lover, those startled, dewy eyes. The third punch sent Woon flying off; he landed on his back and looked dazed. Dong-soo didn’t care.

Woon was strong; he sat up. Dong-soo could hit a man with less force, and the man would be half-dead.
“I don’t have excuses,” Woon went on. “Failures have no excuses.”

Failure? What the hell was Woon talking about? Who was he to talk about failure? What did Woon know about failure? Woon had always been the champion at everything. What was this fuck stupid talk about destiny? Woon was a crybaby. He didn’t care about Dong-soo at all. Woon had made a choice—a choice to betray years of training, to betray Sa-mo, his Highness…. Woon betrayed me.

“Yeo Woon, get up.” Dong-soo realized that his sword was pointed at Woon. Dong-soo’s body was shaking; his mind was shaking; his heart was gone. “I am going to kill you.”

Woon didn’t get up, so Dong-soo lunged. Dong-soo was, as he knew, incapable of fighting when his heart was not moving his sword. Woon easily dodged. Dong-soo kept spearing the ground; Woon, still woozy, kept rolling around. “Stop this or I’ll have to draw my sword too.” Woon sounded angry now.

“Do it!” Dong-soo’s voice was angrier.

Dong-soo kept swinging. Woon got up. “I beg you, Dong-soo-yah.” Woon threw dirt into Dong-soo’s eyes, and Dong-soo knew it was over. He had been blind from the start. He stood still a moment, then yelled like crazy.

How peculiar it was, that as the last echoes of that yell faded into the forest, the stillness resumed. The sun was still shining. His Highness was still dead. The world knew of the failures that were Baek Dong-soo and Yeo Woon, and the world didn’t care. Far off, a bird called. The world doesn’t care. Dong-soo laughed a little. Failure.

No, no, he would fight. He hated Yeo Woon. Yes, this was the end, and yes, Dong-soo was a failure at everything, but if he went down, this way, in his last fight with Woon, against Woon who always won, then maybe he could call himself a man.

He lunged at Woon again. He didn’t expect that Woon would kill him; he didn’t expect to kill Woon. He didn’t know what he was doing; all he knew was that he had to keep fighting, the way he and Woon had always been fighting, since they were children. Fighting, fighting. Dong-soo always losing.

Woon drew his sword.

Dong-soo felt his own sword glance flesh. Wait, no. Woon’s sword should’ve fallen on me too.

Dong-soo looked up. His vision was still blurry. Woon was still holding up his sword. Behind him—no, it wasn’t…. it was Ji-sun. Dong-soo’s sword had cut Woon’s side, ripped through Ji-sun’s pretty pink hanbok and into her body.

“Young Miss!” Dong-soo couldn’t cry any harder. He kept crying and crying. What had the poor little woman been trying to do? Dong-soo pulled his sword out of her body. The helpless little lady had been holding onto Woon’s waist. She fell over backwards. Woon’s sword clattered to the ground.

“Young Miss! Young Miss!” She closed her eyes.

Woon was just sitting there. “So, this is how it ends,” Woon said. “Young Miss is very brave.”

I swore to protect her. Dong-soo felt his heart go black with rage again. “Woon-ah, don’t die. I am the one who must kill you.”
As Dong-soo was fleeing the scene, carrying Ji-sun on his back, some of the horror abated. The woman was alive. Her good, pure, compassionate heart was still beating. Dong-soo was a miserable failure, but he could still help her, get her to a physician.

“Bring me back,” she said.

“What?” Dong-soo didn’t understand.

“I’m fine. I’m fine. I need to be with him.” Dong-soo understood right away that she had only ever cared about the Crown Prince, that he was her most precious person. In the same way that Dong-soo had cared the most for Yeo Woon—but that was all over now. He felt a connection to this woman now that was stronger than before. Maybe they could survive this calamity together?

“You need help,” Dong-soo tried to explain. “It was brave, but it was… Young Miss, you should not have followed me here. And for you to try to stop me and Woon from fighting the way you did? You must promise me that you will never put yourself in a dangerous situation like that again.”

“I didn’t try to stop you from fighting. Bring me back.”

Dong-soo was still running. He didn’t understand the part about not trying to stop the fight. Ji-sun was a Buddhist—she was compassion incarnate.

“Please, bring me back.”

Dong-soo stopped running. “What do you mean you didn’t try to stop me and Woon?”

“He killed his Highness. I saw the body. I need to be with his Highness.”

Dong-soo understood what Ji-sun had done before she spoke the words. She wasn’t going to die, either. Her voice was strong.

“I wasn’t trying to keep Woon from hurting you. I knew—I know how fast you both are, and I could tell neither of you … you weren’t trying to hurt one another by that point, were you?”

She had been watching. She had seen Dong-soo’s frustration and exhaustion; she had understood whatever it was that had made Woon do what he did, look so resigned and idiotic—that fatalistic fool. Why was Woon such a grotesque person? But Young Miss, you--

“I was trying to hold him still,” Ji-sun went on. “He wasn’t going to strike you. He had not been fighting back at all. Maybe he was going to knock your blade out of your hands so I….”

Dong-soo felt awe; behind that awe was a hint of another betrayal. Maybe Ji-sun had never been the fragile flower he had thought she was.

“I wanted to hold him still, so that your sword would kill him. Please take me back to his Highness.”

There was no refusing her now. And Dong-soo could not blame her either; she was still sin-less as far as his heart was concerned. He turned around and ran back to the clearing. What sort of person was Yeo Woon for having turned a perfect young woman like this into someone who would want him dead? Woon deserved to die.

But Dong-soo understood Ji-sun now; she was surely brave, as Woon had observed.
Back at the clearing, his Highness’ body was there, still leaning against the trunk of a tree. It was at that point that Dong-soo noticed that the blade inside the Crown Prince wasn’t Woon’s. Woon, surprisingly, was still kneeling next to his Highness, his sword across his knees like when Dong-soo first had come across him.

*I am stupid,* Dong-soo thought. *Why am I so stupid?*

The world slanted to one side, threatened to throw everything and everyone Dong-soo cared about into an abyss.

But the brave young samini nestled her body next to the murdered Crown Prince and asked, “Why did you go alone? Please take me with you.” She took his hand.

Dong-soo wanted to go too. *Take me with you, Woon, into whatever darkness I could not follow. Your Highness, this is my fault. What did my accessory of a head miss before that might have saved you? Cho-rip-ah? Where are you, Cho-rip-ah? Young Miss, Young Miss, please don’t die. You look like you want to die. Of all of us, you are the one who must live.*

Dong-soo was stricken with the ridiculousness of the scene—what did the bright sun, the wildflowers, and the free birds think of the strange, mourning people? He was vaguely aware that history would record the death of the Crown Prince, but here and now, everything seemed so insignificant. The tears that had fallen, from his own eyes, from Woon’s, were already gone. Ji-sun—that brave woman—she was not even crying at all. She looked at Dong-soo and said, “I’m sorry,” and she closed her eyes.

*She’s fainted,* Dong-soo told himself. He didn’t believe she was dead. He could sense her breathing.

“What do you have to be sorry about? I said I would protect you. I, Baek Dong-soo will bear all your burdens for you.” Dong-soo spoke what he knew was a foolish declaration to the unconscious maiden. He knew that, behind him, Woon was listening. He wanted to be able to say the same thing to Woon, because he knew now that Woon himself had not killed his Highness, no matter how guilty Woon may have been in some scheme of betrayal. *The palace is a dark place.* Woon’s fear for days, for months even. Why hadn’t Dong-soo followed him into the night? Why hadn’t Dong-soo stopped him?

There was nothing to do but scream. So, Dong-soo screamed. He screamed again and again. To the heavens. No words, not even a prayer. He screamed because his pain had no other release. Birds scattered.

And people came.

Dong-soo almost laughed when he saw the man in black with the prayer beads. The man who had attacked the boy’s warrior camp. The man who had blown on his face as if it were a dandelion. *So, this is how the heavens answer me?*

Woon was rising, unsteadily, clutching his side.

The man addressed Woon. “What happened? Why haven’t you taken care of the body yet?”

“You,” said Dong-soo to the man in black. “You were the one who killed them.”

The man was staring at Dong-soo with an expression that was banal, as if he were standing in a tavern about to order a drink, not before the body of a murdered royal.
This was who Dong-soo needed to fight. He picked up his blade, took a stance, charged with deliberation.

The man dodged the blow easily. “You really want to die?”

Of course he didn’t; Dong-soo knew that he would, though. He charged again, and this time, the man disabled him, caught his sword and grabbed Dong-soo by the throat. The man talked and talked. Through pain and fog, all Dong-soo could think of was this fellow is full of shit. “You are annoying,” Dong-soo said.

“I know who you are,” the man said. “Baek Dong-soo.”

“And you,” Dong-soo said. “You are the man behind all this.”

“No,” he said. “I am not. Keep this in mind. This will all be called history.”

The grip around Dong-soo’s neck tightened. Was this the moment he was going to die? He cast a look at Woon. There it was—the face Dong-soo loved. Helpless. What had this man done to Woon?

“I, Baek Dong-soo, will end you,” Dong-soo told the man.

The man laughed, punched Dong-soo with a sword scabbard. Dong-soo fell to the ground. Dong-soo saw black spots before his eyes. The man was laughing. “I wonder how far destiny will take you boys.”

The man walked to Ji-sun and asked Woon if she was the woman, and although Woon didn’t answer, the man lifted Ji-sun over his shoulder and began to walk away. Dong-soo tried to get up to stop him, but the black spots were spinning now. Tears were choking his throat that already ached from being choked by the man. There was a blackness in Dong-soo’s lungs; he couldn’t breathe.

Woon was following the man.

No, no.

Then, when the man was a little further ahead of Woon, Woon turned with final words. “You must live on, Baek Dong-soo. You must live so that you can take revenge on me. You are the one who must kill me.” And Woon kept following the man.

Dong-soo’s heart was following Woon but soon, even that heart had no strength to go further.

Dong-soo’s fingers clutched the earth.

The next thing in Dong-soo’s memory was a pair of hands on either side of his face. “Dong-soo-yah? Dong-soo-yah? What is wrong?” Jin-joo?

There were others around. Sword Saint, a mysterious woman. The mysterious woman asked Sword Saint to kill her for her sins, and when he wouldn’t, she promised, “I will return that child to you.” At first, Dong-soo thought she meant Woon, but then he was sure she meant the kidnapped samini.

Then he didn’t care. Other people were taking care of what he, Baek Dong-soo, had failed at doing. He couldn’t protect anyone. A bright leaf fell from the tree he was leaning against, brushed past his face. He could not bear any more shame. Even that was the realization of another failure, one the weight of a leaf, but it was enough.
Sitting there, in the sun-dappled midday, not far from the murdered Crown prince, Dong-soo left the world. The mind he had always been told was not there decided to hide.

To be continued in PART TWO.

While waiting for parts two and three, you may want to read the crazy comments Lily and I have been making in the comments section of "Sanctuary" and more recently in the comments section of "Whose Fault is it Yeo Woon Killed Himself?" https://archiveofourown.org/works/12743367?show_comments=true#comments I'm evolving on my position on this aggravating drama I love; I hope to fix the script from the inside out with the rest of what I write. Dong-soo-yah, get ready.
PART TWO

Chapter Summary

The novelization continues to deviate more from canon while telling the main drama story from another perspective. Woon returns to his life at Heuksa Chorong and faces Dong-soo and a new concept of Destiny at the wharf. After an unforeseen event, Dong-soo, Woon, and Cho-rip decide on paths that will determine how they will mature from boys into men. Sword Saint warns Woon against chasing the tail of a tiger. What will happen while the Minister of Defense and the Norons are in power? What will happen when the Sky Lord returns?

This part contains an explicit sex scene between Dong-soo and Woon that is crucial (yes it is) to the plot; there are mentions of childhood abuse. Readers sensitive to abuse issues may not want to read.

CHAPTER EDITED 11/21/18 to include canon fact of Woon's being branded at age twelve by Heuksa Chorong.

If You Lie with Me

PART TWO

7. Think About Dong-soo

My wish to see you is fulfilled only in dreams whenever I visit you, you visit me.
So let us dream again some future night, starting at the same time to meet on our way.
-- Hwang Chin-i, a gisaeng during Joseon era when love poetry was forbidden in Confucian society
Woon had tried to keep thoughts of Dong-soo away while recovering from the wound Dong-soo’s sword had left on his body. He dreamed about him. Memories of the night Woon killed his own father had been returning, piece by piece. The thunderstorm that night, Woon’s intent to kill, his father stealing the blade from Woon’s hand—there was nothing after that. Woon did remember stabbing his father though. He still felt responsible for the Crown Prince’s death. He still felt responsible for Dong-soo’s suffering.

In that dark building of Death that was now home, Woon felt responsible for Young Miss’s suffering too. He had asked Young Miss to kill him once. She didn’t want to kill Woon anymore.

Another day he had heard her say what he himself had muttered outside Commander Im’s office the day Dong-soo decided to die in the rice box: “I am no longer of this world.”

He understood what Young Miss meant. A feeling that was not actively seeking to end one’s life but not caring if one lived or died. Of walking through days, not fully awake, as if life had no purpose. Not feeling even sadness. Not even sadness—because the heart that was capable of
bleeding that sadness was gone.

Woon had always known himself to be capable of detachment, of hardening himself to difficulties, but there had been that one moment before returning to Heuksa Chorong, he had felt an invisible blade penetrate his chest and begin to dig a hole there.

“I’ll do it,” Dong-soo had said. He had volunteered to take the Crown Prince’s place and to die of slow suffocation in a rice box.

Logically, Woon knew that there was a possibility of rescue, but the look in the commander’s eye, the solemnity in the commander’s voice—had not the warrior camp boys all trained for this moment? To die for his Highness? Dong-soo’s next words had been the ultimate cruelty; he had said that Woon’s mind was needed to plan for the future, therefore Woon could not be the one to sacrifice himself.

The blade cutting deeper.

At that very moment, Woon was already a traitor. The Sky Lord had been in contact with Woon through palace spies; there was no escape; if Woon made a misstep, if he did not at least pretend to comply with commands, the lives of Dong-soo, Cho-rip, everyone Woon cared for would be in danger.

There was no longer a way to rescue anyone. The first order to kill Gak, Yong, and Geol had been easy enough to fix; Woon had stabbed all three in non-lethal places then told the other assassins he would take care of the bodies; then he had attended the boys’ wounds and stayed with them until Jang-mi showed up. Gak, who had recognized Woon that night, didn’t reveal Woon, but Commander Im—that man was too wary. No one else had suspected Woon. No one else. Woon, the traitor. The traitor, the one about to embark on a mission to assassinate his Highness.

And logically, of course, how could the plan to kill the Crown Prince fail? Woon had passed along all information he knew about the escape route; he could not have given fake plans without putting others at risk. He could not reveal himself for the same reason. Woon accepted himself as an assassin now, but couldn’t he still save the lives of at least his friends? He had clung to a hope. Then Dong-soo, Dong-soo offering his own life right then and there….

“I have lived a meaningful life. I am Baek Dong-soo! Here I come!”

Woon had paced the palace grounds the rest of the night like a man not awake, not even alive. I am not of this world. Even if there were some way that Woon could sacrifice his own self, offer to take Dong-soo’s place, that action itself would be a reveal; the Sky Lord would enact revenge.

There were tiny factors that could help Dong-soo, save everyone—serendipities, mistakes on the part of Heuksa Chorong. By dawn, Woon convinced himself that good luck and a strong wind, like whatever had flown that arrow to light the beacon that miraculous day might work out again. Nothing could save Woon from blame at this point, though. He made up his mind to confess his sins to Dong-soo. Dong-soo would alert the commander; Dong-soo might die with the knowledge that Woon had betrayed them all, but in the end Woon would have come clean—what else could he do? The act would be calling forth the tiger, but it would mean dying like a man—dying with Dong-soo. And so, yes, this was what Woon had decided was right.

Bright morning. He stood outside the room where Dong-soo had spent the night.

The door had swung open. Dong-soo, carrying a letter in his hand, had walked right past Woon.
Walked right past him? Dong-soo charged Commander Im, and then the truth had come out about Cho-rip taking Dong-soo’s place.

The humiliation of Cho-rip so easily making the sacrifice that Woon had taken all night to consider broke Woon right away. Cho-rip, that brave boy who had once been the most timid in the camp. And oh, Dong-soo’s reaction! Dong-soo wept. He beat the ground with his fists and wept. What words could Woon speak now?

*I am no longer of this world.*

*I can’t hurt him anymore.*

Woon sleep-walked through his assignment. The plan was for him and one of his Highness’ most trusted guards to accompany a booby-trapped carriage. At an assigned spot, Heuksa Chorong met his Highness’ entourage. The Royal guard was stabbed, and as he fell, his eyes met Woon’s.

*So now you know. So now you hate me. Goodbye. I am someone capable of killing his own father, so it’s only right that you hate me.*

“Open it,” the assassin squad leader commanded. He had overseen missions since Woon was a child, had trained Woon in all manner of blades, stars, and tiny weapons of espionage.

A new recruit opened the doors of the carriage.

The daggers had flown out like sleek black demons, whooshing with the noise of Death. Four assassins were killed.

Woon had not budged. A dagger had skimmed right past him. Woon was neither sorry nor glad to still be alive.

Also having stood directly in the line of fire but unharmed was the squad leader. He side-eyed Woon. “You didn’t know?”

Woon didn’t answer. When would the truth come out? Woon was not good at telling the truth.

“Then they must have already betrayed you.”

Woon was told to proceed with caution, that his betrayers might already be tracking him, but Woon walked with deliberation, knowing there was only one betrayer in this scenario and that he was not of this world, that this betrayer was being pulled towards the Sky Lord, to yet another realm.
The trees had been by-standers who didn’t care about the people who followed one path, nor felt sympathy with those who stood in place because they had no other choice.

Unlike most people, trees were rooted to one Destiny. Wasn’t Woon one of those fated ones? But he followed a path, under the illusion that he could make choices.

Trees, more trees, darkness and patches of light. Woon came upon the Sky Lord fighting Commander Im. He had never seen the Sky Lord nor the commander fight before, but he was not interested. He lowered his eyes and heard the rush of footsteps as someone ran to him—the commander? A surprise. Why would he leave a fight to confront someone as insignificant as Yeo Woon?

“So, this is your true self?”

Woon looked into his commander’s eyes. Again, Woon was about to condemn himself, but there was a look in the face so near his—unlike the guard before, Commander Im didn’t look surprised by Woon’s betrayal. Commander Im had suspected. Commander Im had left a serious duel to deal with this hideous betrayer. Commander Im was furious....

Woon felt his own soul return to his body; the pain returned with it, and tears welled in his eyes.

Commander Im raised his sword to kill Woon.

Woon prepared to die, but the Sky Lord’s sword blocked the commander’s sword.
“Woon has been our hope since the beginning,” the Sky Lord said. “You would cut down our future pillar of strength?”

Woon had not been able to watch. He stared at the ground. He had never heard praise like that from the leader of Heuksa Chorong before. He heard a bird call far away. He fought tears. He did not see, but he heard the sword slash Commander Im.

Then the casual request from the Sky Lord to Woon: “Do you want to finish him off, or shall I do it?” As if he were asking about a last serving of cake.

Woon knew the Sky Lord well enough now to know that the man had given him an illusion of a choice. There was no other choice but to kill Commander Im. To refuse would mean to be cut down on the spot. To refuse would mean to die like a man, and Woon wanted to be a man. He wanted to be that—but he knew at that moment that he had been walking through this day, past the trees who stood without any choices, that he was waiting for the right opportunity to prove himself. He knew exactly what he was waiting for now.

The right way to die.

What would it mean to die here? To die in defiance of the Sky Lord and his double-talk, his well-timed flattery and tricks? Commander Im would be dead anyway; Commander Im would die hating Woon anyway. The Sky Lord—did Woon want his own body to fall before this man?

Woon wanted to see Dong-soo. Woon wanted to reveal his shame before Dong-soo. What sort of death would have any meaning unless Woon finished what he had intended to carry out that morning—tell Dong-soo everything, die with him if you must, have your betrayal reflected in his eyes.

Woon had walked to the commander, whispered “forgive me” before drawing his blade, stabbed to kill, felt a single tear spill out of his own right eye as the sword ran its own destined path and came out the other side of the commander’s body. Woon pulled his weapon out gently, stepped back, noticed that the Sky Lord was standing, his back turned to the scene.

He’s not even proud of me. Again, there was some duplicity about the Sky Lord that Woon didn’t understand. Is there something about this that bothers him? Again, doubt. Sympathy. Did the Sky Lord understand Woon’s suffering? Did he, in some way, care for Woon? Woon had believed so once—before Dong-soo said: You won, Woon-ah. I love you.

And what had Woon won, exactly? He was going to hurt Dong-soo so much.

The Crown Prince was on the scene suddenly. His voice was grief-stricken. “Soo-woong!”

The Sky Lord put his hand on Woon’s shoulder at that moment. “Soo-woong, a great example of loyalty.”

And with the commander’s death, Woon’s soul detached itself from his body again. Woon was unlike the trees, not rooted to this world, but still waiting. Waiting for Dong-soo. Would a real choice yet present itself? He dared to hope, somehow certain that he would see Dong-soo soon.

Time had passed the way trees grew in one place. In one direction, twisting through suffering but always towards the sky. Time had passed in a slow, terrible dream, only Woon was too outside of time to be afraid.

The ensuing battle between the Crown Prince and the Sky Lord impressed Woon enough for him to be amazed by the Sky Lord’s skill. Not only his prowess with the sword but the way he enjoyed
toying with opponents, especially those who he deemed intelligent and worthy. The Crown Prince’s death was on Woon’s hands of course. Without Woon’s access to palace information, the assassination would not have been possible.

In a sunny clearing in the forest, his Highness died, face to the open sky.

“Clean up,” the Sky Lord ordered Woon and left the scene.

Woon had knelt before his Highness. Woon knew that the Sky Lord had made a choice, that the Sky Lord had chosen to murder people, but Woon himself had made another choice that he could not take back. He had chosen to relinquish his heart. He had over-thought everything. He should’ve given up long ago, given up on any hope, killed himself for the sake of protecting other people before roping Dong-soo, everyone, into all this. Yes, the ridiculous delusion that had made Woon plow through life and pretend that Heuksa Chorong was not his true home. That the Sky Lord was his only master, that Woon himself had chosen the life of an assassin.

No, this was not Destiny at all. Woon had made choices. Stupid, terrible ones.

Kneeling there, Woon could not thoroughly condemn himself. The Sky Lord was a worse murderer and the one who had ordered and designed the assassination of his Highness. But by all rights, according his own judgement or that of any Royal court, let alone the simple principles by which one defines loyalty to friends, Woon was a traitor.

_I was not born a killer, like my poor drunk father said I was. I was born with a heart and look what I’ve made of my life._

Kneeling before the Crown Prince, Woon could not stop thinking; it was all he could do. The sun was shining on his face. He became aware that he was crying again.

“I’m sorry,” he had heard himself say aloud to his Highness’ body. Blame fell on Yeo Woon like a shadow from a tree branch.

Blame because Yeo Woon was weak. His heart was timid, and his will was weak. “I cannot overcome him,” Woon confessed.

He was crying.

_My heart is gone._
When Dong-soo had shown up, as Woon knew he would, the words wouldn’t come. Woon didn’t know why he couldn’t, yet again, tell the truth, but maybe it was because Dong-soo’s pain had been so tangible. Like a third person standing between them. Like a tree rooted in the dumb ground. There was no getting through that pain. No path past it.

Woon had expected to be yelled at. “Are you insane? Are you still the Woon I know?” Woon tried to explain, and he couldn’t manage anything but some stupid line about fate, about how nothing could be done. It was, after all, some kind of Destiny that Dong-soo had shown up at this moment. Woon knew that his words were echoing his own father. Did he believe his own father that he was a destined killer? Did he really? All his life he had tried not to believe that.

Standing before his most precious friend, he felt that maybe becoming a heartless assassin was indeed his fate. What other punishment in life was there for a child who murders his own father? Who hurt his most precious friend so much?

If Destiny is Dong-soo, I deserve whatever he wants to do with me now.

Woon had expected to be punched; the blow threw him beyond this world into a dream. Fighting
not to lose consciousness, he saw a halo of sunlight over him, remembered a day by the purest stream in the world. It had been a day Woon had wanted to remember always. Being loved, being touched, being happy under sunlight among green grass.

“Get up.”

Woon had expected to be despised and beaten; he had not sure if Dong-soo would draw his blade today, but he had been prepared for that.

_Time to die._

But then, somehow, it wasn’t time to die.

It struck Woon that Dong-soo was being an idiot. _Dong-soo-yah, you’re being an idiot. I haven’t even said a word, and you can’t tell that there’s no possible way I could have killed the Crown Prince by myself? I’m holding my own sword._

They were fighting again, the way they had always fought. Like children. Woon had started yelling too. He forgot about wanting to be a man. There was no being a man around Dong-soo because Dong-soo was a child. Dong-soo needed to be protected. How had it ever been possible that Woon once felt protected by—?

_Bullshit._

Eyes smarting, jaw aching, head pounding, there had been no thought whatsoever that either one of them was going to hurt the other, but Woon drew his blade anyway. At that moment, he felt two tiny hands on his waist and he remembered carrying away a helpless young woman on a horse, how much he hated to be touched, and he thought, in that way he always understood the entirety of a situation in a flash, that Ji-sun wanted Dong-soo’s sword to spear through Yeo Woon and _then through herself because she wanted to die._

He and Young Miss were very much alike. She wanted to die because the Crown Prince was dead. Woon had wanted to die earlier because Dong-soo….

She didn’t die.

The moments that followed were horrifying, even to someone who had one foot in another realm. Woon watched one event follow the next as if he were perched in the unambiguous trees, but he was sitting on the ground, sorrier than ever, alive with guilt, trying not to feel. Still, he felt his love rise and fall like Dong-soo’s sword had against him—clumsily, without purpose.

There was no telling Dong-soo anything now, not with Young Miss lying wounded next to his Highness’ body. Dong-soo was a worse wreck over her pain than he had been over Cho-rip in the rice box. Yes, Cho-rip, still dying in the rice box? _Cho-rip-ah, I couldn’t say good-bye._

Woon wanted to be a man. He wanted his heart back. He wanted that heart in place so Dong-soo’s blade could pierce him through it.

Dong-soo was weeping enough for everyone there, so Woon’s tears dried. Ji-sun, that brave girl, never shed a single tear. She passed out, and Woon wished that for himself, but then the Sky Lord returned.

By the time the Sky Lord was carrying Ji-sun away like a prize, Woon was no longer of this world again; the travel between love and Death had been dizzying. Woon was walking away from Dong-soo, forgetting the last bits of his heart and any pain that was too much to bear. He waited until his
mentor was out of hearing distance and although he had not planned to say the words, maybe he had always meant to say them, from the beginning of the day, because, like hidden daggers, they flew out at the right opportunity: “You must live on, Baek Dong-soo. You must live so that you can take revenge on me. You are the one who must kill me.”

*

Woon then slept in the same room where he had stayed for mere months as a twelve-year-old. The bed faced away from the window. The room was spacious, one of many dark rooms in a luxurious, dark building. The sheets were smooth silk from Qing. The black sokgot felt cold, and every morning when Woon woke up, he remembered a little bit more about the night his father died.

Last night he had dreamed about when the Sky Lord had given the order. The Sky Lord had given the order after all. It was a requisite to becoming an assassin of Heuksa Chorong. One must kill one’s most precious person. It made sense; an assassin must have no attachment to the world, no heart.

It was still early dawn. Patches of dim light on gray sheets.

I'm not an assassin. I still have a heart after all. I have someone to live for. I have an attachment to this world.

Woon’s sense of attachment to the world had returned suddenly; he wished his memories about the night his father died would come back as easily. He remembered that he had indeed been feverish; no one had been lying about his being too sick to get out of bed. Days and nights in his room, people wandering through. Had the Sky Lord even visited? A sick, weak twelve-year-old. Why did anyone think Woon would make a good assassin? Is that why the Sky Lord had sent him away to the boy’s warrior camp?

The Sky Lord these days was more peculiar than the man Woon had come to know as a child. Not soon after arriving to stay at the dark hidden building of Death, after Young Miss was treated for her wound, after Woon’s slash, a mere cut, was looked at by an expert, the Sky Lord bought gifts of clothes and rare dried fruits and candies. He told them both would have scars but the scars might fade over time.

“That precious tattoo of the Northern Expedition was not harmed,” he had told Young Miss.

Woon had learned all about the tattoo. How it got there he didn’t know, but it was a map with specific routes and directions for invading Qing, the country that financed Heuksa Chorong. Defense Minister Hong and the ruling party of the Norons wanted it.

“You have your first badge of battle,” the Sky Lord had told Woon. “I’m not surprised it was Baek Dong-soo who gave it to you. I told you to watch that boy.”

The boys in the mountain-top camp had been told that their first cut by a sword would hurt worse than any other; Woon didn’t remember it hurting at all, but at the Sky Lord’s words about Dong-soo, the wound throbbed. Dong-soo.

It was then that Woon learned what happened with Dong-soo after the Crown Prince was killed.

“They say he’s gone mad. He can’t talk. He walks the streets. That other boy who was a palace
trainee, Yang Cho-rip? He and some girl always accompany him, so he doesn’t wander away.” The Sky Lord laughed.

*Cho-rip? Jin-joo? Looking after Dong-soo?* The fact that Cho-rip was alive was a small consolation if Dong-soo’s mind was lost to the world.

The Sky Lord had laughed again. “I didn’t think he was that pitiful, but maybe he’ll snap out of it. Sometimes the most tender men are the strongest because of the depth of their feelings.”

At those words, the Sky Lord had given Woon a meaningful look and a smile.

Woon had felt ashamed. *Tender?* His next thought was that Dong-soo couldn’t have lost himself this far; this was simply not true.

“Believe me,” the Sky Lord had said, as if reading Woon’s thoughts, and the idea that the man could read people so well frightened Woon. Woon was not accustomed to being frightened. He had lived with a hesitant, vague worry for his friends for years on the mountain-top, but now he felt his body come alive with terror. *Dong-soo.*

But the person he came to want to live for, the reason Woon returned fully to the world, was not Dong-soo; Woon’s heart came back moments later for Ji-sun.

She had been leaning quietly against an elegant chest of drawers in her ornate bedroom the whole while. Another ghost like Woon, she had spoken very little since her arrival.

“You,” the Sky Lord said to her. His voice was sharp. “You don’t belong to the palace or to that fake, deluded prince of yours anymore. I am the one who runs the state of Joseon. You answer to me from now on.”

If the man’s cruel words had been intended, as Woon suspected they were, to wake the poor woman out of her stupor, they succeeded.

Her wan face flushed. Features seized with fury, she hissed her reply: *“How dare you speak of him that way!”*

Woon felt her hand grab his short blade from his side. He could’ve stopped her hand before she drew it out. He wanted to give her the satisfaction of wielding it before the Sky Lord at the very least. He stopped her hand when she held the blade, the assassin’s knife, before the leader of Heuksa Chorong. She didn’t hiss when she spoke this time. She said, calmly, with a killer’s pure intent: “I’m going to kill you, and then I’m going to kill *him.*”

“Let her go.”

Woon had obediently stepped back. Despite being certain that she was not going to die that day, Woon was still afraid for Ji-sun. *The Emperor wants her. No, the Sky Lord won’t kill her.*

Young Miss was brave. She stepped forward with deliberation and stabbed the Sky Lord where she thought his heart was; she didn’t have the strength to sink the blade; Woon knew from the sound of the flesh tearing that the wound was not serious. The Sky Lord didn’t even flinch.

“What can you change by doing this?”

Woon had heard words like these before; the Sky Lord had spoken them as a plain fact when Woon held his own blade to his throat. Woon believed in his own powerlessness then, as he was sure Ji-sun believed in hers. Tears rolled down her face.
Woon’s heart was throbbing; it had returned fully because it ached with purpose. He wanted to defend the Buddhist apprentice who believed she was lost to a terrible fate. She knows now what it is like to stand before someone you cannot overcome. If there were only some way I could make things right for her….

“Give it up, woman.” the Sky Lord said. The blade was tossed to the floor. He left the room.

The stunned young woman had staggered to her bed. While she sat there, Woon noticed her tray of food, that it was untouched, that Young Miss had been weak for days now—why hadn’t he noticed how weak she was before?

He scolded her, “Are you trying to die of starvation?”

She was someone he could die for; if the Sky Lord was someone before whom Woon didn’t want his body to fall, Young Miss was a person Woon admired.

Woon knelt in reverence before the woman who had once taught him that compassion itself could be a champion.

He picked up his assassin’s knife and pointed it towards himself. Bowing his head, he said, “Please kill me. If you think it will wash away all sins, I will help you push the blade towards a fatal place with my own hands.”

She rose and began to walk away.

Think of something. Save her.

“If you starve yourself instead,” Woon had gone on, “you will surely join his Highness as you intend, but….” Woon had swallowed. Woon was indeed angry, but it would be difficult to make his voice cruel. In order to use the Sky Lord’s tactic, he had to mimic the Sky Lord’s tone. “Think about Dong-soo.”

Ji-sun looked at Woon in a new way. What did those dark, intelligent eyes see?

“You heard the story? Dong-soo has lost himself because he swore to protect you, to protect his Highness, and if you kill yourself, what will it do to him?” I beg you, realize compassion for Dong-soo, not for me. “You will be responsible for his own death—do you understand that?”

Speaking those words aloud, Woon understood what he was doing. He was identifying with Ji-sun. Her agony was about the Crown Prince and no one else’s. There was also someone Woon wanted to follow. Not into Death but into a deep place called Destiny, wherever those too exhausted by life lay down their will and relinquished choices. No more choices. So, was that why Dong-soo had gone mad?

I’m stronger than this. I’m…. Dong-soo-yah, I—Woon was confused. The assassin’s knife visibly shook in his grasp.

“Stop this,” she said.

“Are you…” Woon could no longer disguise the concern in his voice. “Are you going to stay alive?”

“I’ll eat,” she promised.

There had been nothing else to do after that. Woon had returned his weapon to its scabbard. He had
left the room, intent on living to protect Ji-sun because Dong-soo could no longer keep his vow to be her protector. Woon himself would wait for Dong-soo to return to his senses.

I will wait.

Remembering this, as light grew brighter in his room, Woon suffered.

Today was another day of suffering as a servant of Heuksa Chorong, but at least Woon had a purpose. He lived to watch over Ji-sun. He lived with a vague curiosity about what would happen next. Tonight there would be a special ceremony, one to honor Yeo Woon of all people.

The man the Sky Lord and the Earth Lord called “Pig” had left Heuksa Chorong, and Woon had been chosen to take his place as Human Lord. There would be resentment among the older squad leaders; already there had been whispers because the Sky Lord had bought Woon beautiful clothes, insisting that Woon wear his hair in a style to match the Earth Lord’s, and the Sky Lord had even told Woon to paint his eyes—no other man in the guild did that. When Woon asked why the unusually elegant clothes and the eye-paint, the Sky Lord said that the previous Human Lord had been unsightly, a pig, and that Woon was special. The logic had been peculiar: Woon should display not only his martial arts skills but his beauty to the others so that they would fear and respect him.

Showing off didn’t make sense to Woon. He sensed only envy in the building. The Earth Lord herself ignored him; she was difficult to read. Her own clothes were as beautiful as Woon’s, so maybe the leaders of the guild were supposed to look fancy, in keeping with the elaborate interiors of the secret buildings. No, that made no sense at all either. The Sky Lord himself wore strange coal-colored make-up around his eyes on occasion but never dressed like a man of leisure; he would never pass for anything but a scary thug on the streets. The Buddhist prayer beads around his neck? Had he killed a man to wear them as a prize? Certainly the man did not practice Buddhism.

Woon felt uncomfortable putting on his waistcoat with the polished metal details; he didn’t like sweeping one broad lock of his long hair through an engraved ornament—it felt like the thing might topple in battle—and the eye make-up made him feel like a gisaeng.

The induction ceremony that night was perfunctory, brief, most people there looked bored. The older assassins cast Woon suspicious looks. Woon didn’t trust a single one of them. The Earth Lord’s chair on the podium in the main hall was empty, like a rebuke. Woon had learned since arriving that the Earth Lord and Sky Lord were lovers. Had there been a quarrel? The Sky Lord had seemed out of sorts at the mention of her for some days now. Or was it that she disapproved, like everyone else, of Woon’s appointment at such a young age?

The first assignment was to deliver Ji-sun to Qing. To the Emperor of course. The instructions were precise. There was a paper copy of the Northern Expedition, copied from Ji-sun’s back, to be brought to an envoy at the wharf. Woon’s old squad leader would be with Woon. “Kill anyone who interferes,” the Sky Lord said, and that was that.

Later, word spread that arriving soon would be a palace spy. The lady would also be travelling to Qing. This young woman was fluent in languages, foreign medicines and cuisine, in a variety of fine arts and entertainment. Woon understood the description of a gisaeng, although no one used that word. He had heard of such women but had never seen one; he was mildly curious. No other woman but the Earth Lord visited the hidden underworld of assassins, but now that Woon considered it, there had to be contacts everywhere who were women—naturally, women who drank with palace insiders and shared their beds made excellent spies. No one had ever taught Woon such things. Woon wondered why in the world he had been appointed a leader of Heuksa Chorong
without being taught crucial cultural facts, but then it occurred to him that the Sky Lord assumed that he was intelligent enough to learn on his own.

Again—doubt about the strange way the Sky Lord gave him such boundless preferentiality.

*Does he really see me as the future of Heuksa Chorong? Me? I grew up in a poor village, spent most of my life on an isolated mountain-top with stupid kids. I’m well-read, I can fight better than almost any man in Joseon, but I’m still an ignorant kid.*

Woon wondered if anyone believed that he was legitimately favored by such a powerful man; the Sky Lord so often seemed as if he didn’t care whether Woon lived or died. Or maybe that’s the way he felt about everyone? Praise one moment, a death threat the next, and always a joke, always the poetic ramblings. And every moment the man drew near, one smelled a strong sweet scent because the man poured rice wine into his wide open mouth from a jug every day and spilled it on his clothes.

One night the Sky Lord opened the door wide to Woon’s room without knocking first. Woon was eating. He looked up, startled. He got up to bow, but before he could do that, the Sky Lord pronounced that Woon looked like shit. “You haven’t been sleeping. Those are ugly circles under your eyes.” A laugh. “No, don’t bother kneeling. Eat, eat. If you get any thinner, you’ll look like a woman. Can’t have that.” The Sky Lord took a swig from his jug and shut the door. In the hallway, Woon could hear him repeat the words, laughing. “Can’t have that!”

Woon visited Young Miss in her quarters often before the assignment, not without notice from everyone, but he didn’t care. He was shy and hesitant around her. The night he asked her if she resented him, he felt himself smile out of sheer embarrassment. Of course she resented him, but he was being stupid, like Dong-soo, and had blurted out the question, in hopes that she didn’t.

“I don’t resent anyone,” she had answered. “What would that change? *I am not of his world.*”

Woon had been taken aback by the words. Didn’t she want to return? How could she not be interested anymore in the lives of all those in the village or those still at the palace who had cherished her as a person, not as the physical embodiment of a military map?

“But for Dong-soo’s sake--?”

“I told you—I am not of this world.”

She didn’t have his own priorities, of course. It didn’t matter to her, really, whether Dong-soo returned to his right mind or not.
Even if she claimed to be beyond people around her, she didn’t act rude or detached. She still behaved like the proper noblewoman Woon had first met. She was deferential to everyone in Heuksa Chorong, kind with Woon. She addressed Woon as naeuri, a gentleman of high status. He continued to address her with respect and felt awkward that she was so formal with him, the man she had once wanted to kill. Again, he was awed by her resolve, fully aware that in so many ways she resembled himself—and that is what worried him most. She was not afraid to die, even if she had made a promise to live.

He believed that he lived to protect her, but then the Earth Lord returned and summoned them both. The Earth Lord’s first words to Woon made his heart stop and his chest feel cold. The beautiful woman, leader of Heuksa Chorong, stared at Woon and spoke in a regal voice: “You know that
once you are in Qing, you can’t protect her life?”

“What?”

Young Miss understood. She said that for the map on her back too many people had already lost their lives, and if she died, then it would all be over.

Woon begged her not to be like that; he asked the Earth Lord if there was any way to save the life of the mere girl who would be delivered to the Emperor.

The Earth Lord’s face was as stern as ever. “There is no way to save her life.”

Woon wondered why she was volunteering this information to him and Ji-sun. He didn’t panic; if he could not fight himself out a situation, he could think his way out. He could still save Ji-sun. He knew he had to speak with the Sky Lord, but he had never approached his master on his own before.

He didn’t have to; Woon was summoned.

It was the most peculiar meeting yet.

The Sky Lord introduced Woon to the gisaeng. She was Woon’s age and, surprisingly, modest looking. The Sky Lord waved his fan at her—“say your hellos.” She bowed, introduced herself as “Goo-hyang,” an obvious pseudonym. The Sky Lord didn’t look her in the eye. He didn’t look at Woon. “Once matters are settled, go with Goo-hyang and spend some time in the territory. She is familiar with it. A month should be enough.”

Woon wondered if this was a suggestion that he was supposed to sleep with the woman. Certain he had winced at the notion, he was glad both the young woman and the Sky Lord were not looking at him. Before Woon could wonder too much about what Goo-hyang’s life must be like, she was dismissed.

She sat down with a grace Woon had never witnessed, not even in Ji-sun’s mannered movements. She took one fold of her skirt in her hand and floated into a chair, remained there facing forward, her body postured in perfect obedience. A palace statue? No--a finished disciple of Heuksa Chorong. Something Woon had always been designed to become.
“Follow me.” The Sky Lord led Woon around the main hall, where the red candles were always burning, where the tall columns stood like deities, where those responsible for a hundred years of murders seemed to keep watch. The grief in the room had a specific grandeur.

It was a long time before Woon noticed that the Sky Lord had been perpetuating the silence for dramatic effect; he was like that. Manipulative. He was setting a stage—for what, Woon wasn’t certain.

“Can you feel it?” The Sky Lord asked the question with pride in his voice.

*This terrible place is his home.*

“Everything fades in the aura of the headquarters here,” the man went on. “I am the one who put the swords there.” As he gestured to a row of swords on the altar, he put his arm around Woon. The Sky Lord did that frequently—in front of members, in private meetings, the way one would touch a
good friend or a beloved child, but there was nothing affectionate about the contact. A little fond, maybe. Possessive, certainly.

Woon felt the Sky Lord’s fingers dig into his shoulder and crawl up his neck. Woon had never liked being touched, but the Sky Lord’s touches felt like warnings. Too often a large hand would grab Woon’s shoulder or his arm; his fingers would grasp the back of Woon’s head and bring it closer to make a joke or quote a line of poetry with that sweet wine breath. Woon already had been told directly that he had no control over his own life. Were not the Sky Lord’s touches communications that Woon did not even have control over his own body?

With his free hand, the Sky Lord gestured around the room. “I let my flesh and blood flow here.” He was talking about the institution of Heuksa Chorong, but Woon felt as though the man was claiming Woon for himself. Like an heir?

No, not that. Not like that.

There was nothing paternal about the Sky Lord. Woon remembered enough about his own father to know the difference. The two men were alike in enough ways: Yeo Cho-sang had beaten Woon, murdered Woon’s own mother and confessed to the crime, and yet, like the Sky Lord himself, had never failed to provide Woon with food and shelter. The Sky Lord had never beaten Woon, but the threat of death had always stroked Woon on the shoulder like the master swordsman’s hand at odd moments. The Sky Lord had never said, “I will kill you if you don’t obey me,” but no one disobeyed the Sky Lord and lived. Yeo Cho-sang had confessed to one murder; the Sky Lord to dozens, and who knows how many more he had ordered? These two men—it hurt Woon so much to remember anything about one that the pain felt like it was killing him, but there had been, in Woon’s childhood, a tragic, conflicted look in Yeo Cho-sang’s eyes. Woon still could not remember how that father had looked on the night of his death, but so many other times, the man could not disguise his genuine concern for his son. “Woon-ah, eat. You look like something that slithered out from under a rock.” “Woon-ah, I told you not to stay out. You’ll be kidnapped by someone who will beat you more than I do.” “Woon-ah, touch even a wooden sword again, and I will beat you until you are a cripple.” Yeo Cho-sang had been a weak man—Woon understood that now. A weak, pitiful drunk.

The Sky Lord was strong. He was beyond anyone Woon knew in intellect and swordsmanship.

Yeo Cho-sang had been afraid of Destiny and of his own child becoming a killer; the Sky Lord believed in Destiny and relished the idea that Woon was so talented at killing.

The Sky Lord was a little crazy though, not as crazy as Woon’s father. He drank too much too, but he never stumbled like Woon’s father.

Woon hadn’t remembered it until returning to this dark place, but the Sky Lord drank so much that he even carried a jug of wine with him on his horse. That rice-wine smell, even now, was overpowering. Yet, the man never looked intoxicated.
Whenever he drank, though, he touched Woon more. Maybe the drinking was an excuse to do that.

Woon hated being touched.

He had always hated it. He had only ever….

Woon fought thoughts away of Dong-soo. *Here, how could one even dare to bring a memory of peace and happiness?*

The Sky Lord kept talking; that poetry of his would go on forever; Woon recalled that during the battle with the Crown Prince, his Highness had screamed “SHUT UP!” and lunged at the man. The Sky Lord, still holding onto Woon’s neck, stepped up a platform, and Woon felt that the natural moment had arrived when he would be released, but it didn’t happen; Woon turned to move away, and the Sky Lord’s fingers clenched harder. Woon lost his balance on the stairs, caught himself, felt embarrassed because, if not the best swordsman, he was the quickest martial artist in the building, maybe faster on his feet than even the Sky Lord himself. No one, *no one* was more sure-footed and limber than Yeo Woon.

A faint chuckle. The Sky Lord let Woon go and approached the pyramid of swords.
“That last spot.’’ With measured emphasis, the Sky Lord pointed to the empty holder on the altar. “That is my last unrealized dream.’’

“Sword Saint,’’ Woon said. He knew little of the history between the two great swordsmen but enough to know that the two great swordsmen had once been best friends; one had joined the Royal guard at the palace, and the other had joined an ancient assassin guild. Sword Saint had once been involved somehow with the Earth Lord, the Sky Lord’s woman. The men of Heuksa Chorong gossiped like village old maids. Sword Saint was the Sky Lord’s greatest rival for another purpose, naturally: Sword Saint, even with only one arm, was the greatest swordsman in Joseon.

The Sky Lord opened his fan with a flourish and said that he would realize his dream. He began to brag about himself, like a vain god in a story, one who spoke the truth but could not help bragging. He said that anyone who crossed him would fall dead before him, that he was the one true essence that moved the Joseon nation. “I am a historical figure.’’

Woon stepped away, as far as he could step back without appearing to insult his master.

“You too,’’ the Sky Lord said to Woon, who was looking at the swords on the altar and avoiding his master’s eyes. “You too can become like me. However....’’ A deep sigh. “Will you choose to do it?’’

Another illusion of a choice.

“If you choose correctly, all this is yours. But...’’

Woon was on his knees right away. “This humble disciple will follow you forever, but I have one request. Please spare Miss Ji-sun’s life.’’

“I see.’’

Woon dared to look up.

“I see that you have feelings for her, but that is one request I cannot grant you.’’

Woon stood up to protest. “But--!’’

“Forget it!’’ The Sky Lord’s warning was now explicit. He walked to the altar and with his shut fan, hit the empty space for Sword Saint’s blade. “If you do not deliver the woman to the Emperor, this spot won’t be Gwang-taek’s but Woonie’s. The woman you care for will die right away.’’

Woon turned away.

No escape.

The following day became like the assignment to kill the Crown Prince. Woon walked through a forest that led him down one path, as if Yeo Cho-sang, that poor man, had been right all along—there is no escaping a fortune-teller’s prediction, no escape from Destiny. Is it true? Is it true that I, Yeo Woon, am a born killer? I am not going to be the one who cuts her down, but will I not myself be responsible for Ji-sun’s death?

He didn’t eat. He checked to make sure Ji-sun had done so. He felt a little feverish. He was sweating too much. He was working too hard to push away memories of his father. Yeo Cho-sang always put food on the table. Some nights only rice. Only rice. But Father always cooked rice.

Again, he hoped that something, anything would crack through the darkness. This time he could
not be so detached from his duty. He felt obligated to make certain Ji-sun was as comfortable as possible. When the foreign envoy at the wharf wanted her to strip to verify the tattoo and Ji-sun protested, Woon drew his blade. “Don’t,” she said and dropped her jacket to the floor. Before she could loosen her hanbok tie, Woon cut a small rip in her clothes with his blade in a move so fast no one knew what had happened. There was the tattoo visible on flesh. Woon insisted that the man would not be able to distinguish a fake tattoo from a real one.

“You may pass. The boat is ready,” said the envoy. The look in his eye said he already feared Woon’s blade.

Woon put her jacket over Ji-sun’s shoulders. There was nothing more he could do.

“Thank you, naeuri,” said the young woman who was going to Qing to die.

Woon’s old squad leader, fat in his aging years, slow-moving, and eyeing everything around him as if waiting for someone, was one of the party of four. Woon, Goo-hyang on his left and Ji-sun on his right, looked over his shoulder at the man and wondered if something was wrong; the aging assassin had been following too far behind for too long. There was no need. Other assassins had been assigned to accompany the four as far as the wharf in the event of a disruption. None was anticipated. No one knew of the boat’s departure. If the Sky Lord had any reason to believe word had leaked of the assignment, he would’ve been at the wharf himself to meet Sword Saint. For who else could stop Yeo Woon’s blade?

No one is coming, Woon told himself.

But people did.

Woon’s first instincts had proven right; the old slow man had been expecting someone. The two women were at the water’s edge, about to board, Woon was standing further away, at a point from where an enemy might attack. The fat squad leader, who was just behind Ji-sun whipped out his sword and held it across Ji-sun’s throat.

Woon bolted, sword in hand.

“Put it down.”

Woon had no choice. He threw his blade to the ground. But maybe this disruption was an opportunity.

“Sir, hand over the book of war,” commanded the man to the Qing envoy.

What was going on?

The envoy didn’t look as alarmed as he should have been in this situation. He cleared his throat. The book was passed over.

Woon waited. An opportunity would present itself.

A possible opportunity flew past him—a dagger thrown out of nowhere that stabbed his old squad leader in his fat shoulder, not mortally wounding him but knocking him to his knees. “You—you--! You were supposed to help!” He pointed to Woon. “Him! What happened to killing him?”

Dae-ung. The one the Sky Lord called a pig. The unrefined warrior with a metal stump for a hand. The man who had cut Woon’s true mentor, Sa-mo, with a scimitar when everyone still believed and trusted in Woon. Dae-ung, the former Human Lord.
Dae-ung, his scimitar held over his back, walked to Woon, cast him a look of disdain, and whispered: “Enjoying my job?” He then walked ahead towards the fallen man. “And you, old tired fellow, you’ve done your job here.”

The veteran assassin—how many years of combat had he seen? --could not believe he had been betrayed. “How could you?”

“Eh, you know I’ve always been like this.” Without another word, Dae-ung killed the man.

The blood spattered Goo-hang’s skirts. Dae-ung picked up the book of war, sauntered to the Qing envoy. “Didn’t I tell you it would happen as I planned? I plan well. I’m an excellent planner.”

Woon didn’t understand completely, but from what he remembered Dae-ung, whatever the man lacked in swordsmanship and social skills, he made up for in a talent for survival. Somehow the man persisted in aligning himself with whoever necessary to stay alive. So, the squad leader, envious of Woon, had wanted the new Human Lord dead? The Sky Lord, by all accounts, had stabbed Dae-ung and thrown him off the property, but somehow the crazy beast, perhaps more of a warthog than a pig, had survived to walk to the edge of this bridge.

“I’ll be sure to tell the Emperor of your accomplishments,” the Qing envoy said to Dae-ung. “And there’s nothing else to but board the ship! Let’s go!”

With that, the opportunity died. The destined path widened again. One pebble in the road kicked away by another? Woon began to walk forward, following the two women.

One moment later and the boat would have set sail, but Dong-soo arrived.

“Stop!”

The darkness splintered at the sound. There was no mistaking the voice. Everyone turned around. Woon’s first thought was he’s not lost, he’s in his right mind, he’s come to save us. Woon’s second thought was he’s back to not being in his right mind—he may die here.

But as the assassins on the lower deck charged up towards the man who was single-handedly running towards them, Woon knew—yes, yes, if Dae-ung had not shown up, the boat would have set sail. Dong-soo would not have caught us. This is the opportunity. Sword Saint is coming. Between Dong-soo and I, we will buy more time. We will—

Dong-soo had the serendipity of gravity working for him as he pitched himself from the upper level deck to the lower one and scattered members of Heuksa Chorong this way and that. It was a ridiculous sight. The darkness shattered right then. The sky broke open. Dae-ung let out a snortle that sounded not unlike a real pig’s.

Dong-soo stood still for a moment. He looked heroic. The wind was blowing his curls around his face, and sweat drenched his shirt—he had rushed here before anyone. “Don’t go,” he shouted at Ji-sun. He didn’t even look at Woon.

“I am someone who is already dead,” she said, her voice trembling. “I have to go.”

“Did not I, Baek Dong-soo say I would protect you?”

“Please don’t. This is my fate.”

“Stop that. Stop using destiny as an excuse!”
Woon took a step back; the words themselves seemed destined.

Dong-soo and the assassins engaged one another again. The men were no match for an enraged Dong-soo. Dong-soo cut one in the belly and threw the man at Woon.

It was then that Dong-soo and Woon looked at one another. They could not speak to one another, but the moment lasted long enough that people stepped back, certain that the two were about to draw swords against one another. Dong soo’s eyes were locked with Woon’s. Their eyes said what their mouths didn’t dare. Their hearts spoke to one another, feelings overlapping: You hurt me. I hurt you. You hate me. I love you. I should die by your hand. I should kill you, but, how can I? There are too many people here. There are too many memories. I remember everything about you. I never want to forget any of it. I want to hit you again. I need to hold you again. I’m so happy you’re alive. I’m so happy you’re alive.

"Naeuri", Young Miss said to Dong-soo. “Is it true that one’s fate can be changed?”

“Trust me,” Dong-soo replied. “All it takes is one step. Trust me.”

Woon felt a surge of jealousy. First, because Ji-sun was using the term of absolute respect that she had previously reserved for him, and second because hadn’t Dong-soo said trust me to Woon first? Trust me?

Woon himself still trusted Dong-soo. He watched Dong-soo take Ji-sun’s hand and run away.

Dong-soo slashed a few other assassins, but the Qing envoy called out to his own men: “Why is everyone standing around? Stop that man at once?”

“Your Excellency?” Woon’s address was deferential, but his tone was defiant. He knew the envoy feared him. “I’ll take care of this.”

Dae-ung whistled. “Oooh, yes. This is going to be something to watch. I hear he’s an amazing fighter. Why waste his energy on a baby though? But I guess, a kid like Yeo Woon wants to show off for the Emperor too. Why not? More stories to tell, am I right?”

“It’s a relief you are still alive,” Dong-soo said.

Woon smiled. “Yes.”

“Woon-ah, today you die by my hand.”

“Run,” Dong-soo said to Ji-sun. She looked from Dong-soo to Woon back to Dong-soo again. She turned around and ran.

Good. Woon was satisfied. We will buy her time.

The pair drew blades. They were playing. Woon knew Dong-soo’s style of fighting better than anyone. It was raw, aggressive, deadly. Woon was quick—he dodged every strike. He spun one way and threw his blade across in the opposite direction to distract his opponent. A trial match like so many on the mountain-top. If Woon wanted to hurt Dong-soo, Dong-soo would be dead. If Dong-soo wanted to kill Woon, Woon would have been forced to kill Dong-soo already. Did anyone watching understand that? Or were they enjoying a show? Dong-soo managed to corner Woon at one point. Woon pushed him off and their blades slid against one another, the edge of Dong-soo’s cutting across Woon’s cheek.

Woon put his hand to his face. He hadn’t expected this. He gave Dong-soo a look. What?
Dong-soo closed his eyes. That fool, genuinely penitent.

Ah, so Dong-soo had given Woon’s body yet another mark.

Who did Dong-soo think he was? Coming here, risking his own life, full of this protecting people bullshit, daring again to trust in Yeo Woon of all people when he, Yeo Woon, had been the traitor, the one who—

*Forget the pretense.* Woon felt an age-old feeling rise: *Dong-soo is an idiot. What an idiot Dong-soo is.* Woon stopped Dong-soo’s next offensive. Hairs were sticking to Woon’s forehead now and that annoying hair ornament hadn’t fallen but it felt clumsy. *Why am I sweating so much? I shouldn’t be sweating so much. This is nothing.* Woon was sick of fighting Dong-soo.

“You really think I won’t kill you? I am an assassin. Just like I killed the commander and the Crown Prince, I can kill you too.”

“Just try.” Dong-soo said.

A few more aggressive rallies. Dong-soo seemed stronger. How was that possible for a man recovered from madness? Woon defeated him easily though, as he knew he would—didn’t he always?—and held his short blade over Dong-soo’s face. One thrust forward, and the blade would hit the artery in throat that was certain death.

“Do it,” Dong-soo said.

Woon could not bring down his blade. Of course he couldn’t kill Dong-soo. What were people thinking now? Woon felt blood rolling down his cheek. This humiliation was proof before the whole world that Dong-soo was his precious person.

“You can’t, right? You can’t.” Dong-soo’s face was too close, looking directly into Woon’s eyes. “You’re not an assassin. Yes, I know. I know I’m weaker than you. But unlike you….” Woon felt his eyes cloud. “Unlike you, I don’t bow to some rotten destiny.”

How did he know that? *Stupid Dong-soo.* There had to have been talk, something among the uncles about Yeo Woon’s father and the black star curse. Or was this something Dong-soo had figured out with his own ignorant genius?

Woon’s knees went weak, and in that moment Dong-soo threw him off. Woon was about to lunge forward again, but a voice shouted “Enough!”

The moment Woon had been waiting for.

Sword Saint was walking down the dock, accompanied by Sa-mo.

The situation was terrifying to the Qing envoy and to Dae-ung, but everyone there was frozen in fear.

A swordsman of mythological status had arrived.

Sword Saint, amazingly enough, didn’t look at the envoy, at his beloved Dong-soo, at the scattered dead, or even at the despicable Dae-ung, but stared directly at *Woon*, as if trying to look through him. Woon felt ashamed. He was always disappointing people, no matter what he did. To be the one Sword Saint frowned upon first as he stepped past dead assassins towards the Qing envoy—what sort of dubious honor was that? Sa-mo, meanwhile, was scolding Dong-soo. “Brat! What were you thinking of? Coming here by yourself?”
But Sword Saint soon drew his sword at Dae-ung, who was literally trembling. “Honorable Sword Saint—please—“ The Pig’s eyes changed in a flash. “Oh my, look over there!”

On a walk-way over the shimmering water, not far off, two Heuksa Chorong men had captured Ji-sun.

“You were a little late, Sword Saint.” Dae-ung held up the book of war and was about to speak again, but a flaming arrow shot the book out of his hands. Woon looked up. A familiar quiver on a pretty woman’s back, her braid tied with a red ribbon—Jin-joo, the bandit’s daughter! The second flaming arrow demolished the treasured document.

At the same time, Cho-rip appeared. With only a wooden stick, he made easy work of the two assassins holding Ji-sun hostage. The black-clothed bodies plunged into the water. Cho-rip put his arm around the fair maiden. Woon bristled at the gesture—it was a disrespectful touch, but yes, Cho-rip, how brave, and yes, Ji-sun was safe. Everything would be all right now.

Dae-ung screamed. The Qing envoy, not aware at all who Sword Saint was, shouted at his men, commanded that everyone be killed.

“No,” said Dong-soo. “There’s no need for any more killing.”

The words were so peculiar that everyone turned to stare at the tall boy standing among the bodies of slain assassins. Sword Saint was the first to return his blade inside his walking stick.

“I know how to rid Ji-sun of her fate,” continued Dong-soo.

Who could believe such a thing?

No one moved. If Sword Saint wasn’t speaking or moving, then his party wasn’t going to move. The Qing envoy gave no further orders, and his men stood rooted to their spots, spears drawn but fear in their eyes. Goo-hyang looked curious, her head cocked to one side, as Dong-soo called to Cho-rip to bring Ji-sun and to bring, also, a ball torch.

Ji-sun stood in front of Woon, facing Dong-soo.

Dong-soo addressed her directly. “Tell me. Do you really want to challenge fate?”

She nodded.

“This is going to hurt. It is going to hurt more than anything you have ever felt in your whole life.”

She nodded again.

“Then turn around.”

She did. Over her shoulder, Dong-soo’s eyes met Woon’s. “There is nothing one can’t do once you set your mind to it. Nothing is impossible. There is no Destiny that can not be overcome. I, Baek Dong-soo, will show you.” He turned around to look at everyone; his eyes were not the look of a braggart, but they held the sorrow of a champion of compassion. “The map will cease to exist.”

People gasped.

The torch was flaming in Dong-soo’s hand. Woon had known what Dong-soo might do, but would he really--? How could he hurt Young Miss? What sort of bravery lived in this man? What kind of woman was Ji-sun? How much pain were they both willing to bear?
Tears rose in Woon’s eyes. He felt a throbbing at the nape of his neck—the brand covered by another burn.

Sa-mo couldn’t help himself. “You brat! Dong-soo!” he shouted.
“I will show all of you!” Dong-soo looked like a hero, even though his bottom lip had begun to tremble. “Ji-sun-ah, please drop your covering. I will burn a mark on your body.”

Woon couldn’t see it, because Ji-sun was facing him, but he knew that the cut his own blade had made, no deeper that than through the silk against Ji-sun’s skin, was there. Dong-soo was about to scorch Ji-sun’s flesh.

“It won’t be much,” Dong-soo promised, “but enough so that the map will be illegible. Prepare yourself.”

The flames did not leap high. There was a woody campfire smell, and black smoke rose around Young Miss. People looked away, one by one. Woon could not tear his own eyes away from the scene. He didn’t cry; he wanted to. Her brave face, Dong-soo’s suffering. Woon for a moment, caught a thought, and then it evaporated: Father thought he was beating me for my own good. He was afraid if I learned to fight, I would learn to kill. He hurt me … for my own good?

Woon was in fear that the hanbok might burn off and expose more of Young Miss’s body, but Dong-soo pulled the torch away, and she fainted into his arms.

I could not have done such a thing. Even if such an act had occurred to me to save her, I could not have gone through with it.

Defeated, in terror, as if they had witnessed the act of a god, the Qing envoy and his men scattered and fled for the boat. Some of them stumbled. In a moment, they were gone. In another moment
they were a black speck on a sparkling sea.

Dong-soo threw Ji-sun over his back. Everyone followed him.

Woon looked to Goo-hyang. “Please. You are knowledgeable in medicines, yes? You have to help her.”

The woman nodded and followed Woon after Dong-soo.

No one questioned Woon when he said that the young woman had the skills to help Ji-sun. The port authority of the wharf station gave Ji-sun his room, and Goo-hyang set up there, instructing everyone in what herbs to gather, calling for dry towels not wet ones, and finding cooking grease in the cabinet to apply right away. She even ordered the stall-keeper to feed the horses for the day because she planned to be there for hours. No one questioned Woon’s presence either; in fact, no one spoke to him, not even Dong-soo. Everyone was that worried about the unconscious young woman. Sa-mo was busy scolding his adopted son: “You should’ve run off with her! We could’ve found a way for a professional to remove the tattoo! Hyungnim was there; we could have easily fought off everyone!” And Sword Saint countered that avoiding more deaths was the best course of action, that frightening the Qing entourage was a spectacle of genius, that the speech about Destiny made an impression on everyone there.

Sa-mo had not quit ranting. “Still, my Dong-soo! Reckless! Something could’ve gone wrong! One idiot is all it would’ve taken! One man to run forward and decide to stab him!”

Everyone ignored Woon.

For hours.

Then word came that Ji-sun had woken up; the Bandit’s Daughter opened the door and, looking with suspicion at Woon, told him that the young woman’s life was not in danger. Woon had been leaning against a post since midday, and his back ached. His head ached. It was nightfall. The Sky Lord would be furious.

Dong-soo was inside the room with Ji-sun. He wasn’t going to speak to Woon after all. Why would he? After such a betrayal, what else was there to say? Their blades had crossed; Dong-soo had cut Woon, but Woon had won the actual swordfight as always; the greater victory, however, belonged to Dong-soo. He had protected Ji-sun, and Woon had failed to protect her.

Woon had to face the consequences of that failure along with the Sky Lord’s punishment.

Still, Woon was glad Ji-sun was going to be all right; he was glad Dong-soo was restored to his right mind and that his mind was stronger than ever, that he had impressed everyone, including the greatest master of all, Sword Saint.

Leaving would allow Ji-sun to remain in Sword Saint’s protection. Staying here would only bring the Sky Lord and trouble. Goo-hyang could arrive after Woon, even tomorrow or the following day. She could tell her own story; given her role in Heuksa Chorong, she probably came and went under whatever unforeseen circumstances befell spies. Woon was the Human Lord but still a disciple. He needed to report back.

He began to walk away from the wharf post. His legs felt unsteady. *These bridges are poorly built. I’m fine.* The air was humid; a rainstorm was approaching. Rain reminded him of the night his father died. The night his father died made him feel weak. *I’m a weak person, really. A martial artist but like porridge inside. Hold yourself together. You’re riding back to face him.*
Woon didn’t expect to be killed by the Sky Lord.

*My hands—my head—everything feels like I’m being stirred in a pot about to be cooked. I’m feverish—why am I so--?*

To get to the stables, there was no getting around Sword Saint and Sa-mo, who were standing nearby.

Sa-mo grabbed Woon by the shoulders and shook him. “Just where are you going now? You can’t go back.”

Woon didn’t say anything.

“Why did you become an assassin?” Sa-mo shook Woon harder. Woon felt his skull shake, his teeth rattle. “Didn’t I teach you better? Why did you do such a thing? Stupid child! Rotten child! You—” Sa-mo was going to unleash his full rage on Woon at any moment. Woon looked forward to that; anything was better than being ignored. His head hurt so much. His heart hurt so much.

“Stop it!” Sword Saint barked at his friend.

“But *Hyungnim*, Woon betrayed us!” Sa-mo let go of Woon right away, though.

Sword Saint looked at Woon with those wise clear eyes of his. “When did you start on the path of an assassin?”

*Does he suspect? Is he like Commander Im? Does he already know?*
A distant thunderclap. Other memories Woon had been fighting all day rushed him at the sound. Father hitting Woon over and over. Woon’s hatred of his own father. The Sky Lord asking, “Do you want to come with me?” Woon’s choice to follow a horse, not knowing where that horse would lead him, but then there was another choice. “Who is your most precious person?” And Woon, twelve years old, chose to kill his own father.

“Woon-ah, I asked you a question. Answer me.”

Woon, as always, could not speak his truth.

How could he? Yeo Cho-sang was beloved by these men; he was their blood brother. How could Woon tell them that the man was the village drunk who killed his wife, who beat his son, who in the end had been murdered by the sad failure of a person who stood before them?
“Fine,” said Sword Saint. “Go.”

Woon bowed his head in respect.

“Hyungnim!” Sa-mo looked to the heavens. “Aigoo, you know very well what sort of a place that is. How can you tell him to go there? He may not be able to return from such a dangerous place! You can’t—”

“So-mo-yah, weren’t you listening to Baek Dong-soo? A man makes his own Destiny.”

So Woon left and found his horse. He mounted it, and as he rode it slowly in front of the small wharf port where Sa-mo and Sword Saint still stood, looking over the fence at him. The small government building flying its state flags was high on a hill, safe from high tides, and the men too, were above Woon in all ways. Woon felt like he was still a child. There was so much to learn, but he would decide his own Destiny. He could do it.

A light rain was falling.

Woon was about to kneel his horse into a gallop, but someone pulled on his reins.

“Woon-ah, you can’t go back.”

Woon smiled. “You wouldn’t understand, Dong-soo-yah.”

“Maybe you should give me the chance to understand.” Dong-soo was holding tightly onto the reins with both hands now, looking up at Woon, but Woon turned his face away.

_Not now, please. The Sky Lord is getting angrier by the moment. Do you want blood-shed, Dong-soo-yah? I will only have more blood on my hands._

“I don’t know what happened to you, but Cho-rip said to trust you, that you had to have been forced against your will to betray us. And when Ji-sun saw the woman who was attending her, she asked after you. She said you were kind to her. I know you, Woon-ah.”

“You don’t. I made choices.”

“I saw you choose to give Ji-sun time to escape. You didn’t kill me. You’re not an assassin, Woon-ah. Why are you going back there?”

“Our uncle told me to,” Woon said.

“Don’t!” Dong-soo looked like he was about to jump on the horse, so Woon broke away, not riding away too fast so he wouldn’t toss Dong-soo to the ground.

“I’ll wait for you!” Dong-soo called after him. “Whether you like it or not, I’ll wait!”

The rain was falling hard now and so were Woon’s memories. Dong-soo as a child declaring himself king of the village. The nights Woon would wake up and Dong-soo would be staring at him, always wanting to fight. The nights Woon would wake up and Dong-soo would be staring at him, not wanting to fight, a more tender expression in his eyes. “Let’s go outside,” he would say nonetheless, and the two would fight anyway. Crossing blades, wooden swords in those early days. It was fun. It was not fun. Dong-soo wanted so much to beat Woon. Dong-soo wanted to be the Great Baek Dong-soo more than he wanted anything else. _Stupid Dong-soo. Ride away from him._ Then there had been that wooden sword Father had beat Woon with, and the wooden sword the Heuksa Chorong squad leader had given Woon. _This is how you kill a man, Yeo Woon._
Rain fell harder. Woon felt chilled. *I should not be this chilled. I’m coming down with a real fever. Why didn’t I realize this before? All day I was tired and sweating too much.* The fever was high. The rain was hard. On the day Woon’s arrow had miraculously lit that fourth beacon, the rain had been soft, a mere mist in the high mountains. It had been raining hard the night Woon had walked alongside the Sky Lord’s horse, intent on killing his own father. Woon had caught a bad fever that night too—so long ago.

More rain. A boom of thunder. Blinding lightning. The horse was never spooked by lightning—it was one of Heuksa Chorong’s finest mares.

Did Woon imagine it, or did the horse slip in the mud? Why would Woon fall against the dark wet mane? He was a martial artist. He fell against it and held on. A memory of trying to grasp air, but there was nothing to keep him from falling. The icy water had burned. *I’m so cold. I can’t stop shivering.*

Woon fell off the horse.

He dreamed about Dong-soo. Dong-soo saved him from the icy water and blew warm air into his lungs. “It never happened,” Woon said, and the snow turned to water falling into his mouth. His clothes were drenched. Dreams, dreams. Dong-soo holding him, saying that everything would be all right. The thunder-claps. A horse whinnying. No, Dong-soo was not here. Woon was still face-down in mud, still shivering from a high fever. He was only dreaming, wasn’t he?

Dreaming that his body was being thrown on a horse by the Sky Lord. The sweet smell of wine on the saddle. One by one people wandering into the room. “No one else is sick—it’s the trauma from watching his father die.” “I thought he was stronger than that—what a disappointment.”

Was he really sick in a bed or was he still lying in the mud? Dong-soo wafted through like a mirage, always smiling, not real. A taste of lemony water, so vivid. The rain was outside, pounding against the walls. Then it was on his face again, mixed with his father’s blood. His father’s bloody hands on Woon’s face. “I must be the first person you kill and the last.”

“Please take care of him.” Was that Ji-sun’s voice? “I’m fine. If I catch his illness, I won’t die. I’ve been through worse.”

Then Dong-soo’s voice, clear as a ray of sunlight breaking through the confusion: “We need to move him. I’ll carry him back home once the rain stops.”

So, Woon wasn’t dreaming?

He was dreaming. People surrounded him who should not be there. The walls were red, melting like the candles of Heuksa Chorong. Trees cast shadows over him again. Cold winds blew.

Sword Saint and Earth Lord, the gossiped-about lovers, spoke in hushed tones. “There’s nothing that can be done, Gwang-taek,” said the Earth Lord in that voice that was as majestic as she herself was. “Woon has to return. He is the only one who can keep Heuksa Chorong from falling into chaos.”

“I’ll devise a plan,” Sword Saint said.

It was only a dream about being protected; Woon could no longer be protected; *hadn’t Sword Saint sent him away?* Woon was dreaming, still lying, a pitiful mess in the mud and grass, a sick failure who had fallen off his horse. Any comfort he felt was some hallucination about a blanket—the reality was he was dying in a thunderstorm, wasn’t he? Tomorrow his body would be found. Not a
meaningful death, the sacrifice he’d offered before Ji-sun, but the death he deserved.

The Sky Lord was there, looking like he had when Woon was twelve, so no, it had to be a dream. No matter how strong the rice wine scent on the blanket, no matter how ominous that touch on Woon’s face, his shoulders, the deep poke of a finger at his throat. “I could kill you right now. I should. Everyone says you’re worthless to us now, but I’m never wrong. I’m never wrong. You are mine forever, indebted to me forever.”

A dream, not real—a dream. The Sky Lord’s hair wasn’t streaked with gray. He was younger. The Sky Lord doubtful if Woon was still sick. "You're not faking, are you? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Four."

"How old are you?"

"I am twelve years old."

Not a dream. There's Sword Saint, there's Captain Sa-mo, where is this room? I'm not twelve. They're looking at me because I'm answering the Sky Lord. I'm talking out loud to a dream.

Eyelashes batting. The Sky Lord again. His touch again.

No, not a memory—it couldn’t be—because the touch was too threatening. The Sky Lord’s hands were pressing Woon’s abdomen; then the hands were at Woon’s thighs; Woon covered the man’s hands with his own. “Stop! You can’t touch me there!” Woon was sitting up in bed now.

He looked around. Sword Saint, Sa-mo--their eyes were expression-less. Goo-hyang looked horrified.

I’m dreaming. Of course, he was dreaming. Because a bright spot through the tall trees where his Highness had died shone in the sky, and Commander Im rose from the dead to caution Woon: “Reveal yourself, and everyone dies. Look what you did to me. Look what happened to his Highness. Stay quiet.”

The dream about the icy river returned, and Woon shivered, and yet Dong-soo was not there to keep him warm. “Dong-soo? Please come back. I’m so sorry.” He wasn’t sure he was speaking. Wasn’t he supposed to stay quiet? His head hurt so much from Dong-soo hitting him. Dong-soo had hit him so hard. Dong-soo had broken Woon’s head, hadn’t he?

Thank you, Dong-soo-yah. I’ve lost myself, haven’t I? This is justice.

Flashes of cold to hot, day to night, hope to despair. Did someone say that Jang-mi was sick? Was that Goo-hyang saying that Jang-mi should suck on a cloth soaked with sugar and ginger for the cough? Woon tasted ginger in his own mouth.

Then Woon’s head didn’t hurt anymore. He opened his eyes. Goo-hyang was staring at him. “My lord, are you awake?”

I’ve been ill. How long?

“Rest. I’ll be back. You’ve had a bad fever. You’ll need to eat real food soon. Just rest.”

Woon closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he realized he was in his old room, the one he
Dong-soo? Not a dream. Dong-soo’s face was buried in his hands; he was crying that way Dong-soo did, without shame, hiccupping like a child.

Was someone hurt? Ji-sun? Had someone died?

Why was Dong-soo crying?

8. Eye of a Storm, Tail of a Tiger

Why abandon yourself in an instant’s rage?
Why fall for an impetuous spark of fire?
Life is but a fleeting journey of illusion,
so let us not drench it in tears of regret (of regret).

Ninano, ninano.

Oh, it feels good! Oh, it feels good! Butterflies
flutter in search of their beloved flowers.
Will a good liar live in happiness?
Will utmost sincerity bring you abundance?

His deceiving ways brought me tears only this once.
But I shall never let him fool me again.

Taepyongga, Song of Peace, by Jung Sain, Joseon era

“Dong-soo-yah?”

Dong-soo lifted his head. Woon sounded weak but back to his senses. “You’re okay?” Dong-soo wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “Did that pretty lady of yours tell you how sick you were?”

“She said I had a fever. Not that I almost died or anything like that.”

Dong-soo smiled. He felt embarrassed because Woon had caught him crying. It was only Woon, but still. “Yeah, you were sick but not that sick.”

“Why were you crying?”

“I—” Dong-soo sniffed and swallowed. He was sure snot still glistened on his face. You know how I am. Once I start, I can’t stop.”

“Is anyone hurt?” Woon sat up, apparently strong enough to do that now and not falter. His face looked too serious. “Is Young Miss—did anything happen to her?”

“She—besides the burn? It’s going to be fine.” Dong-soo didn’t know how to satisfy Woon without a flurry of words. “Everyone is fine. Ji-sun is up and about. Everyone is fine. Well, Jang-mi caught
your illness, but she didn’t run a bad fever. She’s the only one sick. She fussed over you and wanted to rub some ointment on your chest even though—” Dong-soo knew he was sputtering into his too-many-words territory. “Your pretty lady—Miss Goo-what is her name? Jang-mi doesn’t like her, and your pretty lady told her to get out, but Sa-mo was in the room and said Jang-mi kissed your face, and that’s why she got sick.”

“What?”

Dong-soo laughed at the memory of Sa-mo ranting about Jang-mi had done.

“Jang-mi is quarantined now and only coughing a little, complaining because she can’t leave her room. Don’t worry. Mi-so is looking after her. If Mi-so gets sick—ah well, you never liked Mi-so, did you?”

Woon wasn’t amused.

Dong-soo patted the mattress even though he want to pat Woon’s shoulder instead. “Don’t worry, please.” It was awkward to be talking to Woon after all this time, but Dong-soo wanted him to feel at ease. “Your pretty lady gave everyone herbs to ward off illness. Ah. Jang-mi doesn’t trust her, calls her a palace spy, a prostitute.” Dong-soo covered his mouth. “I’m sorry. Please don’t be angry. You know Jang-mi. She’s territorial. In a way, she raised us all since we were children.”

“I was sick for days?” Woon’s sharp eyes were scanning the room for clues. “How many days?”

Dong-soo counted on his fingers. “One, two, three, four… yes, today makes the fifth day since I found you lying in the mud. You had ridden away, saying you were going back to that assassin place, and I grabbed my horse too and was going to catch up with you—”

Woon lay back down. “I didn’t get far, did I? Was there trouble?”

“What?” Maybe Woon was still not all back. “Do you mean at the wharf?” Dong-soo spoke more gently. “Do you remember what happened? The boat didn’t take Ji-sun to Qing because—”

“Yes, yes.” Woon sighed. “I remember all that. I’m talking about when I was delirious. Did the Sky Lord—the man—” Woon’s voice became nervous, and Dong-soo himself felt nervous. “You know, the creepy man who attacked the boy’s camp? He’s the leader of Heuksa Chorong.”

“Yes?”

“Did he come here?”

“No.” Dong-soo was solemn now.

You talked about him, Woon-ah. I never saw for years how scared you were of him. All I knew was that you were lonely. For years, I never—why didn’t I follow you when you left to go somewhere alone? I am stupid, Woon-ah. I was a bad friend. You could have died so many times because I was stupid. You made it this far because you are stronger than I am.

“Woon-ah, don’t worry. That man went on a long journey.”

“What? He’s dead? Did Sword Saint—?”

“No, no, no. I’ll tell you more when you get a little better. You’re better now, I guess, but it’s only natural that you’re confused. I’m not going to help—you know how I go on and on. It’s not going to help if you don’t eat. You’re weak.”
Woon didn’t protest. He seemed stunned by the fact that Creepy Guy hadn’t come by.

As Dong-soo looked around for something to feed Woon, he still couldn’t stop talking. He mentioned that the house was pretty much empty of food and entirely empty of people. The pretty lady had gone to the market in search of fresh oysters for a stew, and Cho-rip was in the woods with Jin-joo in search of specific herbs. Sa-mo and Sword Saint were protecting people—just because, not that there was any trouble, please don’t worry. “It’s just—you never know. These times! Jin-joo’s father and some of the bandits may still be around Jang-mi, but hmm? I think she shoo-ed them away?” When Woon asked after Ji-sun, Dong-soo said that oh, he’d forgotten but she was at the market too—“She’s a restless person.” Dong-soo remembered that Ji-sun was going to pay for everything, that she had a purse full of silver and foreign coins. “You had foreign money in your clothes too. Goo—sorry, can’t remember her name—was always sending people out to buy stuff. Wait! I think we have lotus roots?” Dong-soo lifted a napkin. “Here they are!”

Dong-soo thought that the expensive dessert wasn’t fit for a recovering person’s stomach, but he put some on a plate anyway. “These were a gift from Goo-whatever to make nice with Jang-mi. What else, what else? If I cook rice, I’ll burn it like I always do.” He found two eggs that the pretty lady had been mixing raw into medicine concoctions. It had been scary to watch Woon that day he refused spoonfuls of soup and had tossed in bed, rasping, not breathing well from the congestion in his chest. The lady had pushed his lips open and blown the egg medicine through a straw into Woon’s mouth, bit by tiny bit.

Woon swallowed the contents of the cup Dong-soo offered him. The mountain-camp boys drank raw eggs all the time. Woon stared at the glazed root so long that Dong-soo decided Woon knew it was bad for a sick person. So, Dong-soo ate it.

“I’m glad you’re back to your senses, Dong-soo-yah.”

“Woon-ah?” Dong-soo was alarmed. “You’re the one who’s come back to your—” Then he realized Woon had made a joke. Dong-soo laughed, at himself more than the joke. “I’ll tell you the story about how I came back later. Jin-joo was the one who restored my mind.”

“Jin-joo?”

“Stupid girl. Can you believe she’s the one who brought me back from being an idiot?”

“You’re still an idiot. Jin-joo is a clever girl, whatever she did. She’s in love with you for some reason I can’t fathom.” Woon was drinking water from the second cup Dong-soo had brought. His face was thinner, but his eyes were bright, his complexion pinker. The pretty lady had even combed his hair.

“Your pretty lady—” Dong-soo wasn’t sure if now was the time to broach the subject, but he was dying to know. “She left your side only this morning. She’s very devoted to you.”

“I met her—I guess it was last week, but it feels like hours ago.” Woon shrugged. “No, she’s not my woman.”

“Ah, I didn’t think so.” Dong-soo was surprised he was so relieved, and then he was not surprised. He was fully aware how he felt about Woon. He also knew that there was nothing that could be done about those feelings, not in this world, not ever. “The ladies have always liked you,” Dong-soo said. “She really likes you.”

Woon looked under his blanket. “Whose clothes are these? They’re huge. And where are my baji
“Eh, don’t worry about your fancy clothes. Jang-mi washed them before she got sick. You’re wearing Sa-mo’s shirt, and the reason you’re not wearing any pants is because the pretty woman—I mean—what is her name?”

“Goo-hyang.”

“Goo-hyang carried out your piss every day in a bowl. She wouldn’t let me or Sa-mo touch you. After she treated Ji-sun, there wasn’t much to do but change the bandages twice a day and apply the same ointment. Jin-joo was put in charge of that, and you were—Goo-hyang was worried about you. She said it was important to keep your fever down or you would—” Dong-soo decided to leave out the part about the possibility Woon could’ve died. “She was like a real doctor.”

Woon groaned, obviously in embarrassment over the piss bowl. Dong-soo remembered how Woon was around women. He avoided them, didn’t he? He avoided everyone but mostly avoided women for some reason. Except Ji-sun. He seemed to like Ji-sun a lot.

“I don’t care about the fancy clothes. You can throw them out.”

“Lie down, Woon-ah.” Dong-soo felt worried. Woon believed he was home to stay? “There’s plenty time to talk later. Sword Saint and Sa-mo will have things to tell you, but Goo-hyang said it was important for you to rest. She seems to know exactly what you need.”

Amazingly, Woon lay down.
“Jang-mi really kissed me?”

“Don’t worry—it wasn’t on the mouth.” Dong-soo laughed. “Maybe it was. Sa-mo was furious. Ranting about how it was her own stupid fault that she got sick, but I think he would have yelled about it if she kissed you on the mouth. Hmm? I think she just kissed your… uh, cheeks and forehead or something.”

Woon began to speak in a sleepy, soft voice. “I was sick once, when I was a child.” He hesitated, as if he didn’t want to say more. “Before I came to live with you, I was sick in a strange house, and I don’t remember who took care of me then. I ran a high fever then too. People said it because I was temporarily crazy—because my father had just died. But—” Woon smiled. Then, curiously, he laughed. It was a strained, awkward laugh. “What do people know, right? I’m not like you. I don’t go mad. I get sick because I get sick.” Woon adjusted himself in bed, smoothed the sheets with his palms. “People are superstitious.”

Thunder. Then rain slanting with a gentle sound against the house.
“Ah, they got caught in the rain,” Woon said. “This season is so bad for it. I suppose they won’t be back soon.”

“Goo-hyang will ride back in the rain for you.”

“Our uncles won’t allow it. They will find shelter for the ladies.”

“You’re right.” Dong-soo crawled onto the mattress next to his long-lost friend, his Woon who had returned to him. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for so many things, Woon-ah. I will talk to you later. I will even explain what I’m sorry for, but for now, please rest.”

Woon looked at him with the same open expression of love Dong-soo had seen at the wharf. Dong-soo’s eyes and Woon’s eyes spoke the same words to one another. I’ve missed you. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know what will happen next, but thank you for being here. Thank you for being alive.

“I’m the one who should be begging for your forgiveness,” Woon whispered.

Dong-soo put his arm around Woon.

“Dong-soo-yah! Are you serious? I can’t now—you’re—” Woon didn’t push Dong-soo away though. “Someone might still come by. You know how your friends are.”

“What? You think I want to—no! You’re half-dead from sickness, and we’re just lying in bed together like we’ve done since… forever. Aigoo, GO TO SLEEP.”

Woon looked chided.

“Go to sleep,” Dong-soo repeated. “Who are you? A sex monster?”

And so they lay next to one another, not sleeping.

Dong-soo couldn’t help it. He had to talk.

“Why is that the only times I can get you to be open with me is when you’re not right in the head?” Dong-soo’s voice was whispy. He honestly did want Woon to fall asleep. “I was never sure what was in your heart for so long because I’m stupid and because… Aish, that one time after you were frozen and now this time after you were burning up with fever.” Dong-soo was smiling at the memories. “And why do you have to fall down before I can get you in my arms?”

“You’re forgetting the time I came to you” Woon exhaled the words so gently Dong-soo could barely hear. “When we were beacon interns. That day by the river. It was sunny and nice, and I was in my right mind. You were the one taking a nap. I told you I wanted to remember you in the sun. You forgot?”

“I didn’t forget,” Dong-soo defended himself. “I was making fun right now is all.”

“Ah, okay then.” Woon relaxed in Dong-soo’s arms. “You are truly back to your old self, but you’ve grown up a little too.”

“Me?”
Rain was whooshing softly around the windows—not a thunderstorm but a steady downpour.

“That speech on the wharf about destiny made people listen as if you were some state minister issuing a royal decree. I mean, you were impressive. And you fight better—I don’t understand why.” Woon sighed and closed his eyes. “You are still impulsive—not beyond doing crazy things like setting women on fire, but a little more….” Woon didn’t finish his sentence.

Dong-soo waited for him to finish, but within moments, Woon was asleep.

* 

Since Woon had been sick, stories about the past had come forward like parts of a shipwreck washing ashore. Dong-soo, as stupid as he knew he was, loved puzzles and had no problem figuring out what people were talking about eventually. But the relationships between his uncles, particularly Sword Saint and Jin-joo’s father, how everyone had come to know one another, if Creepy Guy and Scary Woman still had it going on—all these things were still murky. Palace politics were unfathomable, as Woon had always suggested. And Woon—even though Dong-soo knew more now about his past—Woon was still a puzzle.

That Goo-hyang worked for both the palace and the assassin guild was plain enough the night Dong-soo carried a delirious Woon to the wharf office, and the official there recognized her. Goo-hyang had bowed; the man had complimented her on her dancing at some palace event and then, gushing like a schoolboy, had praised her ability to treat sick people. “It’s nothing. Women learn these things,” Goo-hyang had smiled prettily then dismissed everyone from the room to tend to Woon. Before leaving, Dong-soo cast a last glance at where Woon lay on a make-shift bed of blankets on the floor, not far from the bed where Ji-sun, still drowsy from pain medicine, was recovering. Woon looked like Death—shivering, sweating, opening his mouth as if he wanted to speak—but at that point, Woon couldn’t even mumble; he would mumble incoherently for days later, though.

“Trust me,” the pretty lady had said later to Dong-soo’s uncles outside. “Heuksa Chorong knew about this incident before the police. The assassins were supposed to return immediately after the boat left. Someone should’ve come looking for me and the Human Lord by now, unless they presume we’re dead.” She had frowned, holding the bag of Woon’s muddy clothes. “We have to get out of here. They’re coming.”

“Why are you acting like you’re on our side?” Sa-mo had asked.

She didn’t look like a high court lady at that moment, not one of those women who lowers her eyes to men and feigns sweetness. She looked Sa-mo in the eye. She seemed weary, as if she had been fighting for years. “I’ve never been on anyone’s side,” she said. “I’m trying to stay alive.” She paused and gestured with her chin towards the building with the injured. “I’m trying to keep the Human Lord alive too. If his fever gets any higher, he’ll die or become a vegetable.”

Dong-soo had panicked at that moment and had wanted everyone to escape to the mountains. Sword Saint was the one who said calmly that home was the only place to go, that there was nowhere to hide, and if the time had come for his blade to cross the Sky Lord’s again, this time would be the last.

“Aish, those two.” Dong-soo stroked Woon’s hair as Woon slept. “They were friends once—I
know that much. What I don’t know is why they still haven’t killed one another after all these
years. Everyone says that they’re sword enemies now. Could you imagine us ending up like that?
Could you imagine?”

When Goo-hyang returned from the market, she peeked through the door: Dong-soo was wide
awake with his arm still around Woon. Seeing her, Dong-soo rose from the mat, put a finger before
his lips, whispered: “Shhhhh, he was awake for a while. He’s good, though--really good.”

Woon stirred, and Dong-soo returned to his own place next to his friend. “Shhhhh, you too. Sleep,
Woon-ah.”

Goo-hyang left the room. From the kitchen, Dong-soo could smell medicines boiling, hear his
uncles talking with the lady physician. Usually, Dong-soo would’ve paid attention; he was learning
that the most useful information came from listening to people talk. Maybe this was how the palace
worked; maybe this was why his own talking so much was a liability; listening and keeping quiet
was a strength one didn’t learn in books or in a warrior camp. But for the moment, Dong-soo
wanted only to touch Woon’s hair, reflect, be grateful his friend was okay.

So, today Woon had come out of a fire just as Dong-soo had? How long before this sickness had
Woon lived in darkness though? Dong-soo knew more now. He knew because that strange woman
who had begged Sword Saint to kill her the day of the Crown Prince’s death had come to Sword
Saint again and blabbed. On the day his Highness had died, she had acted like a guilty person, her
voice teary-sounding, but the day she showed up at Sa-mo’s, she looked hard-eyed and scary, all
assassin-like. Jang-mi was sick already, and Sa-mo had been ranting on the porch about how the
auntie’s filthy ways were going to kill her one day, and then he saw Scary Lady the same time
Dong-soo did and yelled: “Hyungnim! Hyungnim! Trouble! Get out here right away! Your woman
is here!”

Among many revelatory things, Scary Lady had said that Woon had been recruited by the assassin
guild at twelve years old.

Twelve.

“You’re not surprised, Hyungnim?” Sa-mo had waved his hands and rolled his eyes to the heavens.
“And yet you sent him back? To that horrible place?”

“It made sense,” Sword Saint had said. “Why else would Woon have turned against his friends so
quickly? He had to have been a plant from a very early age. I didn’t know, I confess, that he had
been so young. Chun-soo must have picked him out shortly before he came to live with you, told
him to sit by Cho-sang’s grave.”

“That’s disgusting.” Sa-mo had flailed his arms, begun pacing around the room. “A man murders a
boy’s father and steals the child away? What sort of monster--? Is it plain to you now that Woon
has been a prisoner of Heuksa Chorong all this time?”

“That’s not the case at all,” the beautiful woman with the sword had said. “The boy came to us of
his own accord. You both know what kind of man his father was. A drunkard who lived in
poverty, who embarrassed himself with fortune-telling? Maybe Woon wanted to escape that life.
Woon was treated like a prince by us.”

Sa-mo had thrown something at this point—Dong-soo couldn’t remember what, but people in the
room had jumped at the noise, and pieces of ceramic had flown everywhere; a sliver was caught in
Sa-mo’s own beard as he yelled: “Gwang-taek, is she fucking kidding? When are you going to ask
her to leave?”
“Enough!” Sword Saint had snapped the word, and everyone had been quiet for a long time.

Scary Lady stayed all day. She stayed for tea. She went for a walk with Jin-joo. Ah, that had been most peculiar—why Jin-joo of all people? A bizarre fact about that relationship would emerge later. For that moment, the big news had been that the leader of the assassin guild, this Chun guy, was gone. Scary Lady said he had left, supposedly for at least a year, off on a mission to fight the strongest swordsmen in many lands, to prove himself or something like that and would return to fight Sword Saint.

Cho-rip had brought more tea and had been dismissed. Jin-joo had brought a tray of desserts and had been dismissed. Scary Lady had not asked to see Woon, and she didn’t care about Ji-sun who was hiding in the shadows with Goo-hyang, tending to Woon’s needs, ready to take action should Scary Lady try anything too scary.

For some peculiar reason, Dong-soo had been allowed to sit near his uncles for a late night meager dinner of banchan and soju. The adults had been at a table. Dong-soo, at a corner of the room.

He was grateful that he had been allowed to listen; the last time he had been left out of a conversation, he had overheard about the Qing mission and had sped to rescue Ji-sun before anyone could even blink. Sa-mo was still mad about that.

_Saved her, though—didn’t I?_

There was still disagreement between Sword Saint and Sa-mo about whether Dong-soo was mature enough to be trusted not to run off and do something foolish. The wharf incident had somehow turned out well, but everything could’ve ended disastrously with the slightest tip of bad luck.

Even then, with Scary Lady, the uncles spoke of Dong-soo’s potential. Dong-soo was the offspring of Baek Sa-goeng, after all, and for some reason, Woon was important to Scary Lady and her assassin guild. Sa-mo was of the inclination: “Dong-soo and Woon need more training. Dong-soo is impulsive. I swear—that boy needs to be on a leash. Woon is a wounded, wounded child. He needs to be protected.”

Sword Saint didn’t disagree that Dong-soo was impulsive or that both boys needed training. “They need to learn so many things by themselves. Sa-mo-yah, can’t you understand that? Remember Dong-soo’s bamboo splints? If he had continued to wear them all his life, he would have never been able to run without them. We can’t protect these young ones forever. They themselves have others they want to protect.”

Long before the talk with the uncles, the gorgeous woman with the sword had told Dong-soo as much too. She had visited Sword Saint another night not long after Dong-soo had come to his senses and had ended up telling Dong-soo: “You have no right to a heart if you can’t protect who that heart loves.”

What a weird thing to say, and Dong-soo didn’t understand this part of the puzzle yet. What a weird woman.

Scary Lady and Sword Saint. _Lovers._ Uncle and this woman had been lovers—that much had been plain from the earliest conversations and from Sa-mo’s railing that it was time his blood-brother forgot the assassin he loved.

She sure visited him enough. He still hadn’t forgotten her, not after years and years. The two were drawn to one another even though they seemed so different.
That visit that had happened before Ji-sun’s rescue, Dong-soo had been in a restless, crazy state and had confronted Scary Lady and reminded her of her promise to return “that child.” He said he would accept Ji-sun’s body if she were dead.

The frustrating woman had not revealed anything and had spoken such nonsense that Dong-soo pulled out his sword. The woman had defeated Dong-soo easily, and her blade at Dong-soo’s throat, she had chided him, “Did you think you could beat me because I’m a woman?”

The truth was, Dong-soo thought he could beat anyone. Anything was possible. Blah blah, so what if the opponent was Lord Whatever of an assassin guild? (Dong-soo hadn’t known at the time that Scary Lady was near Sword Saint’s level of skill). What about her being a woman? Dong-soo didn’t have the peculiar squirminess around women that Woon did—nor this urge of Woon’s to protect specifically women. Dong-soo wondered if Woon’s mother had been a very weak, needy sort of woman. Dong-soo didn’t remember either of his parents. Woon’s family was a mystery—Woon had never wanted to talk about his dead parents, so Dong-soo had respected that.

No, Dong-soo didn’t look down on women or believe that they existed to be protected. Dong-soo wanted to protect everyone who needed to be protected—because wasn’t that simply the right thing to do?

“Get stronger,” the woman leader of the assassin guild had told him as she sheathed her sword. “You have no right to a heart if you can’t protect who that heart loves.”

And Dong-soo loved everyone.

Well, not everyone in that way.

There was the way Jin-joo clearly felt about Dong-soo. Stupid, stupid girl. For a while, Dong-soo hadn’t known what to do about Jin-joo’s feelings, so he had pretended that they weren’t there. But then the girl had devised a plot to rescue Dong-soo from the pathetic state that made him wander around hunch-backed, unable to speak, requiring supervision like a baby: Jin-joo locked Dong-soo and herself in an abandoned cabin and set the place on fire.

Yes. Dong-soo had set Ji-sun’s back on fire, but this was quite a different matter.

Years ago, the accidental fire, started by some neighborhood child knocking over a lamp had trapped Jin-joo behind roaring flames, and Dong-soo had saved her. That’s probably why the girl was still in love with him to this day. That was the same night Sa-mo had rushed in to try to save both children, so Dong-soo didn’t exactly have romantic memories of the occasion.

In any event, Jin-joo trusted that Dong-soo would save her again, but before he could break out of his idiocy, lift her in his arms and break down the locked door, both he and Jin-joo had breathed in enough smoke to be sick, and the place was well on its way to being burned to the ground.

Stupid girl. She’s almost as stupid as I am.

Sword Saint had insisted that Dong-soo thank Jin-joo for restoring a lost mind, so Dong-soo did. He had even given Jin-joo a friendly hug, but the girl held on too long. “You can let go now.” She had startled as if bitten by a snake, and Dong-soo had laughed.

Not much since Ji-sun was treated for the burn on her back and Woon was stricken with deadly fever had been laugh-worthy.

Woon’s illness itself had been scary enough, but then Woon had kept mumbling about blood, his father, and more terrifyingly, “don’t touch me there.” The sexual stuff was pretty evident to anyone
listening—and Woon’s moaning “what are you doing?” and “I can’t do this” had made Dong-soo’s heart stop. Was Woon giving away what had happened on the snowy day? The uncles had looked concerned, but neither said anything. Fortunately, Cho-rip and the women who infrequently visited the room—*aish, Ji-sun would’ve been upset*—missed Woon’s scariest, most fretful ramblings. Then one night Woon sat up straight, hands between his thighs and screamed, “Stop! You can’t--!” The rest had been garbled, lost in a half-sob.

There had been no mistaking the fear in Woon’s eyes.

*He’s not going on about me.* Dong-soo had felt a little sick at first, and then he had felt guilty for not understanding sooner.

Sa-mo said that he’d found Woon by his father’s fresh grave, that the boy had not been alone since that time. Nonetheless, both uncles suspected a stranger in the village because Yeo Cho-sang, as much as a drunk as he was, was not capable of such a thing. Goo-hyang, over-hearing the men speak, had walked by and, wringing a wet cloth in her hands over the ground, had made the statement like observing that the sky is blue: “The Sky Lord is capable of such things.”

“What do you mean?” Sword Saint had asked.

“How would you know?” Sa-mo had grabbed the pretty lady’s shoulder.

“I should know is all.” Goo-hyang had grabbed a fresh towel and started back to Woon’s room. Dong-soo tried to follow her, but Sword Saint stopped him. It was at that moment that Dong-soo remembered a wish he had made on the day of his Highness death: Dong-soo had wished to follow Woon into whatever blackness Woon was walking towards. That blackness began to surround Dong-soo at that moment. Smoke billowing from an unknown source, the suffocating blanket of darkness that was there even if you couldn’t see the fire. Dong-soo recalled the terror he had felt the day the Sky Lord had blown on his face.

*I can’t talk about this with Woon. He won’t talk.*

Over dinner with Scary Lady, Sword Saint asked his woman to leave Heuksa Chorong, that her life could be a life of joy if only she allowed herself to be protected by him, and she had insisted that there was no way she could do that and still protect someone else she wanted to protect.

Creepy Guy? Dong-soo had been confused, had munched on his sliver of jerky. *She wants to protect Creepy Guy?*

“And when Woon is better, he must return,” she had said.

*Woah, Scary Lady is crazy.* Dong-soo had been certain his uncles wouldn’t stand for this.

“Are you insane?” Sa-mo had been indignant. “Hyungnim, are you going to tell her, or am I? That what that man has done to a child is unforgivable. Who takes a twelve-year-old—”

“Was the Crown Prince any different?” The Earth Lord had asked. “The palace also recruited orphan children from villages all over and sent them to your warrior camp to be trained to kill.” The look she flashed Sa-mo had been murderous. “Don’t speak to me about how your people are different from ours. You go on missions without knowing why, only that you have been ordered by the palace, and you *kill*, the same as Heuksa Chorong kills. You’ve groomed boys to be like you—tell me this isn’t true.”

“Hyungnim!” Sa-mo had turned to his blood brother. “Tell her how we’re different!”
“Sa-mo-yah! What you’re talking about—we don’t have any evidence of anything. Only the speculations of people who listened to a feverish boy’s dreams. Didn’t you once say that Yeo Cho-sang’s fortune-telling was people reading their own worst fears in the entrails of chickens?” Sword Saint had turned to his Scary Lady lover. “Ga-ok-ah, you aren’t like this. Didn’t you once say that you were sick of swimming in rivers of blood?”

“Yes,” she said. She downed a cup of soju. “I am still sick of it. But I have no choice. Chun is gone for at least a year. The men won’t accept a woman as their leader. Qing will investigate the loss of the map. The Norons at the palace are still a threat. The Minister of Defense is not someone you alone can handle. Woon needs to return and serve as the new Sky Lord for the time being.”

Sa-mo had put his face in his hands. “Aigoo, this is madness. If you only saw the boy. He’s a mess. You can’t be serious.”

“What are you talking about?” Scary Lady kept drinking. Dong-soo marveled at her posture. She looked like the sort of person who could drink every man in Joseon under the table. “Yeo Woon is the best assassin I’ve ever seen in all my years. He has more intelligence and more importantly, less arrogance than Chun.”

Sword Saint had sighed at that moment. “The designated heir of the headquarters, is he? If Jin-joo had been allowed to grow up as your daughter, she would have become an assassin like you—am I right?”

Dong-soo, sitting in a corner, had almost fallen to the floor. Jin-joo was Scary Lady’s daughter? Sa-mo knew? Then how in the world---did that mean that the King of the Bandits--? Wow.

“Let me see Yeo Woon,” Scary Lady had said. “If he dies, he dies. I’ll deal with the consequences. Until then, there’s no other choice but him to return.”

Scary Lady had been escorted to Woon’s room, and Dong-soo had been surprised to find the space was more crowded than the main square on carnival day—EVERYONE was there. There were so many people, one couldn’t see Woon on the mattress. Ji-sun and Goo-hyang were folding towels in a corner—they didn’t even look up, but everyone else—oh wow, Gak, Yong, and Geol were carrying their swords! Cho-rip and Jin-joo stood closest to the door.

“Don’t—” Cho-rip had begun, his voice shaking. “You can’t take him away.”

“Step aside.”

Scary Lady’s voice didn’t work, so she pushed Cho-rip aside. Gak reached for his sword, so Sword Saint, as Dong-soo had been waiting for him to do, told everyone to let the woman pass, that she only wanted to look at Woon.

Scary Lady had knelt beside the pitiful body. Dong-soo had worked his way closer towards the scene, uncertain himself that the woman with the sword wasn’t going to do anything bad to Woon—no matter what Sword Saint seemed to think. But the woman just looked at Woon’s flushed, feverish face and spoke to someone else she knew was in the room: “Goo-hyang, will he live?”

“I think so,” Goo-hyang had replied. “He’s young and strong, but the fever is very bad. Another day of it this high, and he could—”

“Cure him,” Scary Lady had commanded.

“I will,” Goo-hyang had replied.
Sword Saint and Sa-mo then ordered everyone out of the room except for the girls who were attending the sick person. Jin-joo had protested that she, like Ji-sun and Goo-hyang, had been trying to cool down Woon’s fever too.

“Get out of this room,” Scary Lady had said to Jin-joo, and Jin-joo, head lowered, left like a scolded daughter.

Dong-soo was sent out of the room too, but he lingered at the door. As everyone was leaving the house, Gak mouthed the words to Dong-soo “do you want to die?” but Dong-soo didn’t care. The uncles and Scary Lady had allowed Dong-soo to listen until this point, and whatever had to do with Woon was Dong-soo’s business.

“Even when he gets better, it will be a week ….” Dong-soo had not been able to make out Woon’s physician-lady’s voice, neither Ji-sun’s. Damn refined women who spoke so softly. They knew about Woon’s condition but didn’t tell the whole truth to anyone but adults.

Scary Lady, who wielded a sword, spoke like someone who did—with force: “There’s nothing that can be done, Gwang-taek. Woon has to return. He is the only one who can keep Heuksa Chorong from falling into chaos.”

“Ga-ok-ah, don’t you see? This is the perfect time for change. There will always be snakes in the forests and rats in the cities. Rats are driven out but only for so long, and snakes shed their skins, and one danger is always being traded for another danger. Qing has always backed Heuksa Chorong and will appoint a new leader if you, Chun and Woon are gone.”

“Who said Chun won’t return?”

“To kill me, you mean?”

“Yes.” Scary Lady’s voice had grown even sharper and louder then. “Tell me right now—describe the Defense Minister in a word.”

“A rat,” Sword Saint had said. “He is nothing but a mere rat, sniffing everywhere.”

“A rat who carries dozens of diseases,” the woman countered. “A rat who can kill anyone of the people who care for. And can you describe the new leader of Heuksa Chorong who would be appointed by the Emperor? No, you can’t. You have no picture in your mind now. No one knows if that leader would be a wooden puppet or a live dragon. How can you protect anyone if you don’t have some control over the politics of this country?”

“She’s insane, I tell you.” Sa-mo’s voice. “That place never protected anyone. Does Woon even have a choice in this matter? Was he ever given a choice?”

“You realize,” Sword Saint had said to the woman, “that you’re assuming that Woon is up to the task? You believe this young man can assume a mantle of death and give orders to kill?”

“Yes.” The ensuing silence had been more than a little scary—because it seemed no one wanted to contradict the point.

“He can combat the Defense Minister, if that’s what you want,” Scary Lady had concluded. “I want to protect my daughter. You want to protect Dong-soo and Woon and all these people who call you family. The only way to for both of us to get our way is for my way to prevail.”

“Hyungnim!” Sa-mo, angry again.
“It’s Woon’s choice,” Sword Saint had said.

“Convince him.” Scary Lady had been unrelenting. “Do you want to protect him? Convince everyone. *This time is only the eye of the storm.* I’ve been through changes in the guild before; I know the best way to survive.”

“I’ll devise a plan,” Sword Saint said.

*  

Woon seemed to do nothing but eat after coming back from the worst of his illness. Dong-soo had known since he was a child that there was one thing that women liked almost as much as flattery or flowers and that was watching men eat—a curious phenomenon, but Dong-soo had learned to take advantage of it. At village food stalls, Woon’s pretty, forlorn looks may have garnered him first helpings, but once Dong-soo started stuffing his face and making yummy noises, all eyes were on him. Jang-mi was fond of saying that Dong-soo needed meat to live, and she loved to pile chicken, burnt to a crisp just the way Dong-soo liked it, on his plate. Dong-soo loved attention; Woon hid from it. Maybe Woon had never grown very big (but he was quick as lightning) because he’d never eaten much; Dong-soo loved to eat and had grown up big and muscled. Some people stared at Dong-soo eating because he ate rudely with his mouth open, but women loved to feed him—that was fun. Only one man could eat more than Dong-soo and that was Sa-mo; Jang-mi was in love with Sa-mo, and the whole village knew it. Sa-mo was getting fatter by the day because Jang-mi loved him.

One afternoon Ji-sun brought market pie, Mi-so had made a stew, Jin-joo had hand-rolled a dozen rice balls, and all had arrived at the same time to feed Woon. Sitting up in Sa-mo’s giant shirt, Woon looked thinner than he was, and when he nodded *thank you* to each girl, they tittered and drew closer to him, watching with delight as he ate their offerings.

“I don’t get it,” Dong-soo said to Goo-hyang. He’d watched Goo-hyang blow medicine through Woon’s mouth with a straw, after all, and Goo-hyang didn’t seem to be weird like the others about watching him eat. “Does his chewing stuff excite them? Or is it—is it something else?”

“It’s something else,” Goo-hyang observed coolly. “He’s a mother-less child, and they’re girls who haven’t had babes of their own yet. I think they want to take care of him. That’s all.”

Dong-soo wanted to take care of Woon too, but he was afraid Woon was going to choke himself on Jin-joo’s rice-cakes. It was a good thing Jang-mi wasn’t well yet, or every chicken in the village would be dead, and the woman would be hand-feeding Woon their over-cooked bodies, piece by piece.

When the day’s feeding frenzy was over, Goo-hyang shoo-ed everyone out. Woon slept like the dead after he ate. Goo-hyang had realized soon enough how vital Dong-soo was to Woon’s recovery, so Dong-soo came and went as he pleased in the room. She carried out the tray with empty bowls, bowed, and left for the evening. She was sleeping nearby with Ji-sun now. Ji-sun, in fact, to repay Goo-hyang for her untiring vigilance over Woon, was now pampering the Heuksa Chorong double agent with head-massages and market treats.

“Don’t keep track of favors,” Ji-sun had said when Goo-hyang insisted she would remember Ji-sun’s kindnesses.
Dong-soo overheard so many strange things in the house these days, and certainly all the relationships coming and going were strange, but Ji-sun—there was a puzzle of a girl. In mourning over his Highness, she had been capable of wanting Woon to die and of trying to hold him steady so that Dong-soo, who she knew didn’t want to kill Woon, could stab him. Later, Ji-sun had been willing to defend this same betrayer and assassin Yeo Woon with her own life if necessary. And what was this bond with Goo-hyang? Goo-hyang along with Woon were going to deliver Ji-sun to her death in Qing, right?

Love and Death, Death and Love. All so complicated. What did a wise and fair-minded person like his uncle Kim Gwang-taek see in that woman who was the lover of that wicked, wicked man who was behind so much carnage and murder? Ga-ok-ah, he called her. In his softest voice. As if he were speaking to an angel in a vision. She was beautiful and smart—wait, Woon was beautiful and smart. Ji-sun was beautiful and smart. But they weren’t wicked. Wait, Woon was an assassin, but he wasn’t…. no, no, no, it didn’t make sense. It was as if Uncle was always trying to see the good in everyone, and that in itself made Uncle blind. Was love like that?

Dong-soo had heard Sa-mo say that love was a distraction, but other people, women mostly, the ones who read romance books—was it Mi-so who had said that love was supposed to make the way clear and true? Something about how love puts everyone on the same level and makes the world right?

“Eh, Woon-ah.” Dong-soo lay next Woon on the mat and rubbed Woon’s head. “My head hurts.”

“Then why are you rubbing my head instead of yours?”

“An experiment.” Dong-soo laughed.

Woon closed his eyes. “If I go to sleep, do you dream about Mi-so’s fish stew?”

“Since when in your life have you eaten so much?” Dong-soo couldn’t help but stroke Woon’s cheek with his thumb. He told himself he was searching for stray food crumbs, testing the density of the flesh there because it was good if Woon was gaining weight back—but no, Dong-soo just wanted to touch Woon there. Woon didn’t mind. Dong-soo’s forefinger tapped Woon’s nose. “Hey, if all these people are bothering you, just tell me. I know you hate to be crowded.”

“It’s not bad.” Woon didn’t open his eyes. “I was sure everyone was going to hate me forever. I don’t mind them around right now. As long—” Woon hesitated. “As long as they weren’t all around when I was out of it. That … would’ve been embarrassing. They weren’t around, right?”

“No, no, no. Goo-hyang didn’t let people near because she didn’t want anyone to catch your sickness.” Dong-soo was telling the truth for the most part. Everyone had caught a glimpse of Woon at his worst, though. No one had forgotten the boy who had been reared in this home; no one could see Woon as anything but a reluctant assassin, someone who had been either coerced into the role or who had, for some reason, gone temporarily insane. “So,” Dong-soo continued. “You still don’t remember anything about when you were delirious? Not a thing?”

“No. Not a thing.” Woon nestled his head against Dong-soo’s shoulder. “It was the same way when I was this sick the last time. When I was twelve. When my father died…. I had a fever for a week, people said. I lost all my memories.” Woon was drifting away already, almost asleep. “Thing is, I was starting to get back some of those memories again. They were coming back again. I had some pictures before I fell off my horse.” Woon sighed. “I lost them. I don’t know….”

The peaceful moment was interrupted with Cho-rip rushed through the door and threw himself on the mat next to Woon. “Woonie! You’re so much better!” Cho-rip’s arm clasped his startled friend.
“What’s the matter with you, though, that you don’t leave left-overs for anyone else? You eat all the rice-balls? Jin-joo doesn’t even make good rice-balls!”

“Eh, Cho-rip-ah?” Dong-soo was curious about something. “I saw you talking with my uncles a while ago.”

“Yeah, they are all about plans for the future. For all three.” Cho-rip pointed to his friends, as if “three” needed clarification. “For Gak, Yong, and Geol too.”

“What sort of plans?” Woon was fully awake.

“Goo-hyang said I can sleep here again,” Cho-rip said. His change of subject was too obvious. “She said you’re not contagious. I’m glad. I was missing everyone, and the old men are boring. Did you know that Jang-mi has a terrible crush on Sa-mo? Do you think he is perfectly clueless about it?”

“What were the uncles’ plans?” Woon was insistent.

“Uh….” Cho-rip began to pull off his clothes. “Training, more martial arts, that sort of thing. You know what I told them? I don’t think I’m cut out to be a warrior. I did a lot of thinking while I was in that rice box.”

“Cho-rip-ah?” Dong-soo was surprised. “What are you saying? You’re as good with the sword as anyone here.”

“Are you kidding? I’m nowhere near the level that you and Woon are. And I may have graduated before others but… you know the truth, Dong-soo-yah, I lack something on the battlefield. There’s a certain bravery the other men have that I don’t.”

“Your willingness to take Dong-soo’s place for the execution,” Woon offered, “was the bravest thing I’ve ever witnessed.”

“Oh that.” Cho-rip sighed. “I would do something like that for a friend. Still, it was a passive sort of act. Raising a weapon just in time is an art at which I’m not truly. I deliberate too much. It’s one thing to hit a strawman with accuracy like I did on the mountain-top, but—I’m scared of blood.”

Dong-soo and Woon looked at one another. “It’s true,” Cho-rip continued. “How can a man who is scared of blood be a true warrior—even if he is willing to die to protect people?”

“You can’t leave us,” Dong-soo said.

“I’ve decided to take the civil service exam,” Cho-rip said. He smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll still be your friend. I’ll still visit.”

“Civil service exam?” Woon looked wary. “In what capacity? What do you want to do?”

“I’ve always been good at academics and investigation. I want to serve in library research. When I joined the warrior camp, I liked to invent things—I was building weapons and designing physical objects. I had no intention of doing any real fighting. But now…. “ Cho-rip had never looked more serious. “I want to research possibilities, build ideas, and design plans. My dream to serve in the palace.”

“The palace?” Woon didn’t disguise his distress.

Dong-soo was concerned about Woon’s concern.
“Yes, the palace,” Cho-rip said. “The Prince Heir still needs our protection. Sword Saint brought that up today. The son of the Crown Prince—well, the Crown Prince who was stripped of his title—will still serve this country’s needs the best. He is still the best opposition to the Norons and all those who will bend to the will of Qing.”

“I see,” said Woon.

“A library isn’t as dangerous as—” Cho-rip began and stopped himself.

“Eh,” Dong-soo joked. “Any one of us could fall off a cliff tomorrow or be bitten by a mad dog, right? That’s just how the world is. But Cho-rip is always going to be fine. He’s the great Yang Cho-rip!”

The three slept together that night, and in the morning, Dong-soo felt like it was old times again. Why couldn’t it be like it was before? Except Cho-rip was going away. The uncles wanted to send Woon away too; the horror of that had not completely settled. Woon was going to do as they asked, wasn’t he? Shouldn’t Dong-soo have grabbed him when he was still too weak to walk, thrown him over a horse and sped to the mountains? Couldn’t he and Woon have lived together in another land, far from the grasp of Scary Lady, maybe studying with the Shaolin as Sword Saint had done for so many years? The possibilities were only now occurring to Dong-soo as sunlight as he washed his face.

Woon was fully dressed, wearing part of the fancy Earth Lord outfit and an old shirt of his that Mis-so had found while looking extra bedding and sheets. Woon raised a cup of medicine from Goo-hyang. “I don’t need this anymore. I’m fine.”

Cho-rip stuck his head through the door and said that the uncles were ready to meet with Dong-soo and Woon, that they wanted to see them for breakfast on the porch. “They asked me to stay away,” Cho-rip said, looking peeved. “I guess you guys will fill me in later?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dong-soo said. “Unless we’re being sent on a secret mission or something.”


Sword Saint didn’t reveal much about Scary Lady’s visit except to say that she was insistent on Woon’s return and she had listed reasons why Heuksa Chorong would fall apart without him. Woon listened quietly, his expression dutiful and betraying no emotion, while Sword Saint said that Woon had always been the intended heir of the assassin guild. “If you joined them when you were twelve,” Sword Saint said, “you made a child’s choice that you can change. Cho-rip joined the warrior camp with one intent and has now chosen another path for himself. No one is bound to a single destiny.”

Dong-soo nodded fervently.

“What I want to know….” Sword Saint sipped his tea with his one good hand. “What your old captain Sa-mo and I need to know is where your allegiances currently lie. At the wharf, before Dong-soo found you in a fever in the rain, you were riding back to your life as an assassin.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dong-soo said. “Unless we’re being sent on a secret mission or something.”


Sword Saint didn’t reveal much about Scary Lady’s visit except to say that she was insistent on Woon’s return and she had listed reasons why Heuksa Chorong would fall apart without him. Woon listened quietly, his expression dutiful and betraying no emotion, while Sword Saint said that Woon had always been the intended heir of the assassin guild. “If you joined them when you were twelve,” Sword Saint said, “you made a child’s choice that you can change. Cho-rip joined the warrior camp with one intent and has now chosen another path for himself. No one is bound to a single destiny.”

Dong-soo nodded fervently.

“What I want to know….” Sword Saint sipped his tea with his one good hand. “What your old captain Sa-mo and I need to know is where your allegiances currently lie. At the wharf, before Dong-soo found you in a fever in the rain, you were riding back to your life as an assassin.”

“Yeah, sure,” Dong-soo said. “Unless we’re being sent on a secret mission or something.”


Sword Saint held up his hand. “Wait. I want to hear from Woon.”

“Where my allegiances lie?” Woon pushed away his plate of food. “I didn’t think that anyone here would accept me after I betrayed everyone.” His voice was so humble that Dong-soo felt his heart
lurch; how could Dong-soo ever have believed that Woon meant real harm against any single person he had lived among in the warrior camp or here in this village? The real Woon was a gentle person, not a killer. A supremely talented swordsman and martial artist, someone whose sword never hesitated—unlike Dong-soo’s own—but did Woon belong in that House of Blood with Creepy Guy and Scary Lady? No, hell no.

“I’m grateful for all the affection people have shown me here, but I think that the Earth Lord is right,” Woon said. “There are things I still need to do within Heuksa Chorong. I have a duty there.”

“What?” Dong-soo and Sa-mo exclaimed the word in unison.

“You mean you are willing to take orders to kill? From the Emperor? From the Defense Minister?” Sa-mo was flailing again. “Are you the child I raised? Didn’t your uncle ask you where did your allegiances lie?”

“I didn’t answer that question,” said Woon calmly. “I said I have a duty within the role I chose in Heuksa Chorong. I’m sure that the Earth Lord—” Here, Woon looked Sword Saint directly in the eye. “She understands what I’m talking about.”

“If you didn’t answer my question, then….” Sword Saint was answering Woon’s intense gaze with one of his own. “I’ll ask you again. Where do your allegiances lie, Yeo Woon?”

“With Baek Dong-soo,” Woon said simply. “With Yang Cho-rip. With Miss Ji-sun. With Gak, Yong, and Geol. With my uncles. With all those who have shown me kindnesses I never deserved and treated me like a human being, not like a weapon to be used in service of someone else’s vanity or self-interest.”

There was dead silence.

“I don’t understand.” Sa-mo’s anxiety made his voice a near-whimper. “Why do you want to go back?”

“Like I said, I have some things to do.”

“Are you going to explain what those things are?” Sword Saint asked.

Dong-soo thought he knew. “Are you going to try to protect the Prince Heir from the inside? Act like a double-agent or something? A palace spy like Goo-hyang?”

“No.”

Dong-soo felt crazy for a moment—one of those red-hot feelings surged in his chest that made him think he might punch Woon in the face. Then Dong-soo looked at Sword Saint. The man seemed to be satisfied with Woon, proud even.

Dong-soo calmed down. *Eh, I don’t know if the old man is right about everything either. He loves Scary Lady. He doesn’t believe that his old friend Creepy Guy did something bad to Woon as a kid. I think I will have to find some things out for myself. For one, ask Woon myself what’s up. For another… I don’t know. Cho-rip says he’s good at investigating. I can get better at that. I can get better at everything. I can learn to listen. I can learn to think before jumping ahead. I am the great Baek Dong—*"

“Ga-ok said she’d return soon for you and Goo-hyang,” Sword Saint told Woon. “I said I was going to get your answer first. I wasn’t going to give you up without your own say in the matter. If you had chosen not to return, you were going to come with me to the mountain-top with Dong-
“Mountain-top?” Dong-soo didn’t know anything about a mountain-top.

“Of course, you also have a choice,” Sword Saint said to Dong-soo. “Do you wish to train with me?”

“Brat,” said Sa-mo. “You’re the son of Baek Sa-goeng. Your uncle gave up his arm to save your life. You have trained all your own life for only one thing, so get on your knees and show your respect.”

“Yes!” Dong-soo got up from the table so fast, the cups and dishes rattled. “Yes, Sa-mo! I mean, of course, Captain!” He was on the dirt floor and rubbing his thighs. This was important stuff. Being the disciple of the greatest swordsman in all Joseon, maybe the entire world?

“Please train me,” Dong-soo said to Sword Saint. “I want to learn.”
Sword Saint laughed, and it didn’t strike Dong-soo as odd that his uncle would do that. Adults were always laughing at him. “You will learn,” Sword Saint said. His voice was fond, as Sa-mo’s always was. It occurred to Dong-soo that he was an orphan like Woon. but that surrounding Dong-soo had always, always, been people who put up with his weaknesses, who looked past his disabilities, who loved and encouraged him. Woon? What mentors had he had as a child? A drunk,
probably unstable, dad and then Creepy Guy and Scary Lady. It didn’t make sense why Woon didn’t want to stay and live with those who had honestly cared for him. At Sa-mo’s home, so many people besides Dong-soo himself had come to love Woon—why did the stupid-stupid insist on returning with Scary Lady to that dark place? What sort of hold did that place have on him?

“Woon-ah,” said Sword Saint, turning his attention to the quiet one still sitting at the table. “I know you intend to learn too. I know that you’re good at training on your own, but remember one thing.”

“Yes?”

“If you need to fight a tiger, then you must face it head-on.”

Woon looked startled.

“One doesn’t chase a tiger,” Sword Saint continued. “If you catch it by the tail, it will be more enraged than if you face it directly. Aim your sword for the throat and pass its fangs.”

Dong-soo wondered if Woon had any idea what Sword Saint was talking about.

“Catch a tiger by the tail, and it will play with you.” Sword Saint laughed again. “Tell me—do you want to be toyed with by a tiger’s paw?”

Woon bowed his head. “No, honorable Sword Saint. I won’t be toyed with. I will remember your words.”

Sa-mo wiped his mouth with a dishcloth. “Aigoo, honorable Sword Saint, is it? The eye of the storm, the tail of a tiger. The way Sword Saint and his woman talk.” The man looked more like a worried auntie than a seasoned captain. “I just want our boys to live as long as you and I have, Hyungnim.”

9. Alignments

Even if my heart cries, I can’t go forward with my clumsy self. When the scent of a lovely flower lingers, and the birds’ song is silenced, is this all a vanishing dream?

Like your two teary eyes, like withering dreams, the wind is blowing, the winds blow together. Even when the lovely flowers wilt and become stars, my heart is still at your side.

“The Moon is Crying; The Moon is Smiling” by Beige from the Chuno OST

MV by BeautifulYume

Cho-rip said he didn’t like prolonged good-byes, so he was heading out as soon as possible. Woon broke his rule about reaching out to touch someone before being touched first; he grabbed Cho-rip by the arm. “Cho-rip-ah? Already? How will you survive until the exam?” Woon offered to sell his mare for money for Cho-rip’s travelling expenses, but Cho-rip said that His Majesty had rewarded him and Dong-soo for their efforts in protecting the Crown Prince.

“He did?” Dong-soo was surprised. “I have money?”

“It came from the palace when you were all out of it, so the captain put it away. To save for
marriage or something. I’ll use mine now to study for the civil service exam, and besides, I have distant family I can stay with.”

“Family!” Dong-soo exclaimed. “You never told us that.”

“There are so many things you don’t know, Dong-soo.” Cho-rip looked like a first-year scholar already. “There are so many things so many people don’t know. This is why people need someone to research for them like me. I’ll be leaving tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll all see you again. And Woon —”

The look on Dong-soo’s face saddened Woon. Dong-soo looked so concerned that Woon was going to take up the life of an assassin again. Woon wanted to assuage him somehow, but what could be said? Dong-soo didn’t need to know everything.

Cho-rip made his case as if arguing before a court. “Woon-ah, if the fact that you’re a state criminal is what is holding you to Heuksa Chorong, you do understand that Sword Saint carries a badge from His Majesty. The badge gives whoever shows it freedom from the police. Jin-joo’s father and Sa-mo—they’re state criminals too, and they’ve lived under the protection of Sword Saint all this time. You can too. If you want to return—”

“I know all that.” Woon crossed his arms and smiled. “Everyone knows all that. Our captain bragged about the badge at the warrior camp, remember? And …” He smiled at Dong-soo this time. “I never said I wouldn’t return.”

“Yes.” Cho-rip nodded. “I just want you to be sure. And I want our Woonie to be careful.”

“I will be.”

That night was the last night all three friends slept together in the same room. Dong-soo kept saying that he knew that things could not stay the same way forever, but he wished that growing up wasn’t such a hassle. “It’s not that the great Baek Dong-soo is afraid of anything—it’s just that…” Dong-soo had pouted at the ceiling. “I’m going to miss you guys.”

Both Woon and Cho-rip had tackled Dong-soo at the same time and pummeled him with clothes and blankets.

Cho-rip left without much ceremony the following morning, on foot, before the hovering women could add more weight to his baggage. Mi-so had already rolled rice-cakes, but Jang-mi would have given him sacks and sacks of food. He hugged the best friends and then his captain. He bowed before Sword Saint. Without a word, he walked away, sword by his side.

Dong-soo was crying noiselessly. Woon felt an arm around his shoulder and then heard Dong-soo announcing to his uncles: “I’m taking Woon fishing today. I don’t know when Scary—the leader of Heuksa Chorong will arrive. If she comes today, Woon and I will be back before nightfall.”

“Of course,” Sword Saint said.

Dong-soo grabbed some supplies, and off the two went. Dong-soo said he knew the perfect little bay, not far by foot, where he and Sa-mo had always fished, a very pretty spot. The days had been sunny, so they would set up a little covered tent. That excuse didn’t fool Woon. Dong-soo wanted absolute privacy from any passer-by.

On the walk down the familiar road and up and over the un-travelled hills, Dong-soo didn’t say much. Woon waited for the questions, but they didn’t come. What had happened to the flood of words?
Soon enough, Woon could smell the life that gathered near water. The musky earth was full of salamanders, and the trees were full of dung-lined bird-nests. When he heard water splashing gently over rocks and became aware of the bright air that surrounded streams, he sensed that Dong-soo’s veins seemed to flow more freely and that his friend’s heart seemed to open up.

“Here’s the spot,” Dong-soo announced with a satisfied smile.

“Looks good,” Woon agreed.

The little tent was built quickly; sheets were thrown over the top and three sides, and the open side faced the stream. Dong-soo started the fire, although Woon said they might not even catch any fish and might have to eat cold rice-balls. “I always catch fish,” Dong-soo said, and it was true—Dong-soo had been the best at scoring game in the warrior camp. The two sat at the edge of the stream and cast their poles.

“You’re sure you’re up to going back?” Dong-soo asked finally. “I don’t mean to insult you. I mean, I know you’re smart and a good fighter but….”

Woon didn’t look at Dong-soo.

“When you were sick, you….” Dong-soo grabbed his fishing pole with both hands as if trying to steady his thoughts. “You didn’t sound like you wanted to go back there. I know you were unhappy there. The Scary Lady told us they got you so young, so you know you weren’t really responsible for stuff you did that young, especially bad stuff, especially if they threatened you. You know that don’t you?”

Yes, I am to blame. Dong-soo didn’t know about Woon killing his own father. What sort of twelve-year-old accepts that assignment?

“I stayed there of my own accord,” Woon said, staring at the clear water. “I made some bad choices” Woon didn’t want to get into this again. “I already said I have some unfinished business there.”

Dong-soo laughed. “Whatever. I know you’re not going to tell me what.”

Woon continued to watch the sparkling water as if it could wash him clean. But he knew it couldn’t. The best he could do was try to protect some of the people who he cared about, make certain that certain dark forces were less … dark.

“You said you don’t remember anything that happened when you had the bad fever?”

What exactly was Dong-soo trying to do? What did Dong-soo hear? Woon was a little nervous now.

“I told you,” Woon said. “I don’t remember a thing.”

It was a lie. Woon remembered a few things. Whatever pieces of the night his father had died that had returned to him before he’d fallen off the horse were still there. An image of the uncles standing with blank faces and Goo-hyang looking horrified seemed vivid as real life. Dong-soo hadn’t been there at that moment, had he? No one had said anything; maybe Woon hadn’t spoken intelligibly. Sleep-talkers often don’t. No one except fortune-tellers like Woon’s own father took dreams seriously.

“I don’t remember Jang-mi kissing me.” Woon attempted a laugh.
Dong-soo didn’t laugh. “Oh look!” The string at his pole twisted. “I got one!”

It was a large fish. Another one followed. Dong-soo always did seem to have the damn luck of a chosen god. The man who didn’t believe in destiny was always being saved from Death in the nick of time or, like now, catching fish after fish, while Woon, his pole right next to Dong-soo’s, was ignored.

“I put larger pieces of meat on my hook,” Woon complained.

“Never mind.” Dong-soo was already cutting the fish. “You catch all the women.”

“I don’t want any of the women,” Woon said, and that was the truth. “Do you?”

“Hmm.” Dong didn’t answer and began the process of tossing fish fillets on the frying pan. “You don’t want to cook, Woon-ah? I burn things, but I like things a little burned.”

Woon shook his head.

“Okay.” Dong-soo put a lightly braised piece of fish on a plate. “This is for you.”

“I’m not that hungry.”

“What happened to your eating everything in sight? You must be back to your old self. You haven’t eaten breakfast yet. You have to eat, or you’ll get sick again. Eat, eat.”

Woon did. “You sound like Jang-mi, but Dong-soo-yah….you didn’t answer my question about women.” He leaned back on the banks, genuinely curious. “What happened to your interest in every other woman on the street? Aren’t about the age when you should be thinking about marriage? Sa-mo even has money—"

“I don’t need a wife,” Dong-soo said. One side of his mouth lifted in a smile. “I was thinking of marrying Ji-sun, though. She’s the best girl of them all, after all, but I think she likes you.”

Woon smiled broadly. “Ji-sun is amazing, but….” He sat up and began to eat with relish. For some reason, the idea of Dong-soo having a good, normal life made Woon happy. “Jin-joo is the woman who adores you. She even restored your mind to you—at the risk of her own life. Don’t you know what a sacrifice that was, Dong-soo-yah? She would do anything for you.”

“Oh, that’s it for the fish.” Dong-soo had inhaled his portion and gulped from a bowl of clear tea. The grease from the oil left a shiny puddle in the cup. “I’m full.”

“Since when?”

“Since when?” Dong-soo laughed. “I just don’t want to fall asleep from eating too much. I want to sit here and talk with you all day.”

“Yeah?”

Woon was certain that’s not what Dong-soo wanted to do. Unless Dong-soo actually thought he could pull more information out of Woon. Woon wouldn’t talk. *Never.* Not about what he remembered during the bizarre, altered state that had been that fever. The fever had brought back memories of the fever when he was twelve. He didn’t remember why everyone in the assassin guild had been so disappointed in him, but they had been. Hadn’t Woon accomplished his mission and killed his most precious person? What had Woon done that was wrong? Probably tried to help someone, his father mostly likely, the way he had healed Gak, Yong, and Geol. Woon wasn’t a
natural assassin—he knew that now. *He was a bad person, but he wasn’t a born killer.*

“Woon-ah,” began Dong-soo with an unusually serious face. “I’m going to ask you something, and you better answer truthfully, or I’m going to punch you in the face until you tell me the truth. I swear on my father’s grave and on my mother’s grave, I’ll beat you into another fever if you don’t tell me the truth.”

Woon frowned. “I’ll beat you down first.” What? Another fight? Well, that made sense. It seemed only fitting to say goodbye to Dong-soo with a fist-fight.

“It’s not about any of your secrets about Heuksa Chorong. I don’t need to know what you’re going to do there. It’s not about what you remember when you were all delirious, although I don’t think you forgot everything—it’s fine, you don’t have to tell me about stuff. You had bad dreams, and I know that much. My question….”

Woon felt suddenly vulnerable, un-armed. He didn’t want to punch Dong-soo back anymore.

“My question is about you and me,” Dong-soo said.

That, Woon could answer.

Dong-soo seemed heartened by whatever expression Woon must have shown him because he continued with ease: “Woon-ah, did you ever feel like *I made you do* whatever we did that day it snowed? Did you ever feel like that was the only way you could get me to like you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean…” Dong-soo looked away, beyond the stream, towards the opposite bank. “I know it just happened the first time. And we were pretty young, but it still felt like something important, but after that….”

“I already knew you were my best friend,” Woon said.

“I know,” Dong-soo said, “but I know you never liked being touched.” Dong-soo swallowed. “Why did you let me touch you? Did you think--?”

“It was because….” Woon didn’t know how to put it in words. “It was because….”

Dong-soo turned to look at Woon.

“You made me feel good.” Woon heard his own voice tremble. “I felt safe when I was with you. I wanted… I wanted very much… I wanted very much….” Woon could talk anymore because his eyes were welling with tears. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Dong-soo was the one who was all heart; Woon was the one who was all mind.

Dong-soo put down his cup of tea, leaned over and kissed Woon on the lips. The kiss had long been expected. It tasted like grease and sweet fish seasoned with too much ginger root and some kind of flower. Once a kiss began with Dong-soo, it was hard to pull away.

It didn’t seem like any time had passed since the last time.

Right there, by the gently flowing stream, without even offering that they enter the small tent, Dong-soo lay Woon down and didn’t even strip Woon of all his clothes. He palmed Woon’s body like a man who was hungry to touch a specific body, and Woon’s body responded like it had been starved for touch by specific hands. For a long time, Dong-soo kissed Woon’s right cheek. It took a
while for Woon to notice that Dong-soo was kissing the scar his blade had made on Woon that day on the wharf. Woon realized: *Dong-soo left scars on both me and Ji-sun that day. He didn’t mean to leave a scar on me. If he’s this sorry about this scar, how sorry must he be about Ji-sun’s? I hope he marries her. I really hope he does.*

Then Woon realized that his shirt was being pulled up; his belly was exposed to fresh air, Dong-soo thumbed Woon’s hipbones and pulled down the pants and loosened the godarisokgot just so far. Just far enough so that Dong-soo could begin pleasuring Woon right away.

It was bright, easy pleasure. No urgency. Placid like the stream.

Woon had time to remember, and the memory was dark, but its darkness only made Dong-soo’s lips seem all the more caring and wonderful. The Sky Lord had mouthed Woon in a similar way on a night when Woon was twelve. That was all. That was enough. There had been the peculiar sense of not knowing what was going on but then understanding exactly what had happened. Echoes of village children saying, “Your deadbeat dad is going to sell you into prostitution.” The shame of having felt a rush of pleasure, nausea but also a sweet and sharp, overwhelming pleasure. The shame of knowing it was wrong and perverted. The shame of not having pleased the Sky Lord for some reason because the man said afterwards, in that bed that now smelled like sweat and rice wine, that Woon was too “small,” and “not ready,” but that he would be one day—but because the Sky Lord was never wrong about anything, never wrong. The distinct threat in that voice that Woon understood, even then in the burning fever, and never fully could face again. What he would not, could not, remember until the next fever.

That echo of that threat he felt whenever someone touched him.

*Except when Dong-soo touched him. Like this.*

Woon felt that distant cloud of an impossible hope draw closer and closer, felt himself on the verge of release. His mouth opened. He was losing thought, but he could still wonder. He hadn’t imagined it at all: *Dong-soo had said it, right? He had said, Woon-ah, you won. I love you. Dong-soo had said that.*

And Woon had felt safe. For the first time in his life? *Safe.*

Woon stiffened, shivered and relaxed without a sound. He felt tired already. He panted softly. He had let go so gently, like the water pouring over the low falls. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want Dong-soo to feel insulted because it all had happened too quietly, too soon. But there was still the whole day for more ….

He sat up and kissed Dong-soo soundly. That curly hair was ridiculous; it felt like home. “I thought you built the tent, so we could go in there,” Woon said. “The trees are shadow enough from the sun.”

“I know something.” Dong-soo said in a playful tone. “I know something I saw in Cho-rip’s naughty books.”

So, Dong-soo had been learning from books? Woon had wondered for maybe a full minute once if Dong-soo had visited a prostitute in the days Woon had been gone, just as Dong-soo had suspected that maybe Woon and Goo-hyang…. but of course not. Both Woon and Dong-soo shared one trait at least—they considered live women too precious to trespass. But Dong-soo would study up about love-making first in books, wouldn’t he? That was his way. Dong-soo would get married one day; he would be ready to be a skilled lover. He wanted to be the best at everything; he was the great Baek Dong-soo! Woon didn’t care one way or the other about being the best; he had specific goals
and they were to be completed one at a time. At the moment, he wanted Dong-soo to be happy.

“Bring the sesame oil,” Dong-soo said.

Woon was clueless.

Cho-rip had bought lots of books with His Majesty’s money. Maybe some of them were cooking books.

Woon made a face. “That sounds all kinds of wrong.” He picked up the flask of oil. “Sa-mo never found Cho-rip’s dirty books?”

“Cho-rip bought a lot of civil service study books too—ah, Sa-mo is easier to fool than we thought when we were kids,” Dong-soo said. “You yourself got past him for years. He never guessed that you were with that assassin guild. You think he would know.”

“You didn’t know either.”

“I was a kid, and he was a grown-up. Sometimes when I think about it now….” Dong-soo looked a little upset. “He should have protected you more and found out about this Sky Lord based on what all the uncles already knew, but….” A wave of the hand. “Anyway, I’m not mad at Sa-mo or anything. I know now that I can’t rely on my uncles for everything. There are some things I need to do on my own … or find out for myself?"

This new, older-sounding Dong-soo was attractive. Woon remembered the man who had stood on the wharf with his curls blowing in the wind, with his shirt plastered to his broad chest with sweat. The man who had given that speech about Destiny and stopped time right then in a voice so commanding the Qing’s guardsmen had stepped back and Sword Saint himself had listened with awe.

Woon wanted to touch that man in every way possible.

Dong-soo took off his own clothes first, then Woon’s. It was like being in the fever again, only without the pain and confusion. Dong-soo was kissing Woon all over; Woon was holding onto Dong-soo’s upper arms and returning the kisses. The clothes were being kicked around.

“This is going be messy,” Dong-soo whispered, “but we can wash in the stream later. I mean much later after we’ve done lots of stuff. There was every position in the world in one of Cho-rip’s books.”

“You’re crazy, Dong-soo-yah.”

“Yes.” A laugh. “But do you trust me?”

“Yeah.”

“I know a way.” Dong-soo kissed Woon’s neck and breathed in, readying himself for his next words. “I know a way I can be inside you the way a man can be inside a woman. It’s not difficult. I saw it in many pictures. It’s not disgusting. It won’t hurt if we use the grease we used to cook the fish.”

Right way, in that way Woon understood a person’s intent and saw all variables in the past and future all at once, Woon knew what Dong-soo meant.

“You really want to try that?” Woon asked.
“I want to, Woon-ah,” Dong-soo’s voice was pleading. “I want to…so much.”

Woon didn’t care. It didn’t seem like a big deal, not any more intimate than what he and Dong-soo had already done. “Sure,” Woon said. “I want to try it too.”

“Really?”

Woon was reminded of the contest in the cave. This sort of thing was fun with Dong-soo; it felt natural, not perverted. Actually, it did feel a little perverted, but that didn’t matter. Dong-soo was a pure person, as sweet as a puppy, and Woon took Dong-soo’s hand and kissed the fingertips.

“Whatever,” Woon mumbled. The words were a little garbled because of the fingers in Woon’s mouth, but Woon liked the taste of Dong-soo, every part of him. The sesame oil was rich on those fingers. *Sesame oil of all things.* Maybe it would be like gliding like a fish in a pan, all too quick and easy. *Nothing.* But if it made Dong-soo happy….

It wasn’t difficult at all, as it turned out. Dong-soo seemed concerned about it, as if initiating an ordeal. He lifted Woon’s legs as if they would shatter if dropped, like glass vases or something: Dong-soo positioned them around his chest and said, in a voice that made Woon want to laugh, “It shouldn’t hurt. I mean, people push stuff out with no problem all the time, and I know I’m big, but I don’t see why someone as big as me can’t go in.” Woon had felt Dong-soo’s greased fingers tenderly exploring at the same time—one, then two. Woon couldn’t help it: he laughed.

“What? What’s the matter?”

“I feel like you’re about to stuff me like some goose.” Woon heard himself giggling like a child. “I mean—the oil smells just like what Jang-mi uses when she cooks.”

“Stop. You’re ruining the mood.” But Dong-soo was laughing too.

Dong-soo quit laughing when he entered, though. For Woon, there was no sensation beyond that of mild pressure. Dong-soo, though, looked enraptured, and that itself was exciting. “Woon-ah.” Even before Dong-soo started to pump, Woon felt his own breath catch. Watching Dong-soo’s face was thrilling. “Woon-ah, we’re fucking. We can do it.”

Woon held his own cock and augmented his excitement that way. Being with Dong-soo alone anytime, anywhere was its own brilliant world, none that anyone else needed to accept or understand, even if Woon understood that it was plain to many of their close friends that Dong-soo and he shared a special bond. *If they only knew.* Woon smiled as he threw his head back. The sizzling delight—it felt like a parody of a consummation bed, except it didn’t. It felt like an actual joining of two bodies, something two passionate lovers would do on the day before one of them was going to embark on a long and dangerous journey. Were there not poems written about these things? A man going to war, the beloved giving herself in marriage right before? Only in this case, two men…. Why not?

“Woon-ah, Woon-ah”

The man was so euphoric that Woon was a bit afraid the great Baek Dong-soo might cry. But he didn’t. He came hard, digging his nails into Woon’s thighs, gritting his teeth, and a slow growl, so unlike the yelling sound Woon was accustomed to hearing from Dong-soo whenever the fool was angry or upset, escaped through those clenched teeth from somewhere deep in Dong-soo’s throat. *Why did he hold back?*

On noticing that Woon hadn’t finished, Dong-soo dropped Woon’s legs, the same which he had treated so gingerly before, and set about sucking Woon greedily. The pleasure this time set Woon
thrashing and bucking against Dong-soo’s face. The curls on top of Dong-soo’s head were wet with sweat. Woon clutched them and cried out. Birds flapped their wings outside, flying away. Woon shook, spilling again. Strange—that had never happened before. But with Dong-soo, who knew what would happen?

Grease had messed up some of the clothes strewn about, but no matter. Dong-soo and Woon took time to catch their breath, and Woon didn’t even get his turn because Dong-soo loved fucking Woon too much. The next position was better. Dong-soo took Woon from behind, a pose Woon had always associated with homosexuality—maybe he had seen it somewhere in a book or children had spoken about it in a disparaging way. But it felt vaguely good. More grease, more depth, Dong-soo’s large hands stroking good places, and somewhere deep inside, a spot that tingled, that made Woon feel like he wanted to piss but also like he wanted to seize with pleasure. He couldn’t quite release from just being rammed there by Dong-soo’s cock, but it was a curious sensation. He panted for a long time. The blood pounding in his ears and the twitching sensation in his hole and the relentless beating from Dong-soo’s cock became too maddening, though, and so Woon finished himself with his own hand, mouth open, no sound, the pleasure too intense and too deep inside his body to have a release in the outside world. It’s was like the pleasure bathed his soul and that was that.

Dong-soo held onto Woon’s hips for a long while afterwards. He was hissing this time, and again, he groaned when he released.

When Woon got his own turn at last, he greased his own hands thoroughly, not liking the smell nor the sensation of the oil, but, once inside, the tightness was so unlike masturbating that he gasped right away. And it was Dong-soo who was enclosing Woon this way; the pleasure shot through Woon’s whole body as if a lightning bolt had struck him.

There were more positions, a lot more sucking, and maybe it was still morning when Woon felt he had been through a long fight. His knees and palms were bruised from kneeling on the ground, there was a cut on his thigh, and his insides felt weak. His ass felt bruised too, despite the oil, and his stomach didn’t feel too good either—he hadn’t had much breakfast, and he was a little worried he might vomit. Luckily, at this point, Dong-soo looked drowsy.

Woon kissed his neck, and both Woon and Dong-soo fell asleep for who knows how long.

When they woke up, Woon observed that their clothes were a mess of grease and semen and stinky.

“What else is a clear stream for?” Dong-soo said.

They washed their clothes in the water, laid them in the sunlight, and went for a swim. The water wasn’t deep. Woon felt like a kid again, on the mountain with the boys, bathing after a long day of hiking. He had never been the one to instigate the splashing, but he splashed Dong-soo.


“Are you going to catch more fish, Dong-soo-yah?”

“Nah, you forgot we have rice balls.”

“They’re wet,” Woon said. “We washed all the clothes.”

“No, I saved them,” Dong-soo said. “I put them right over there on the grass.”
Dong-soo indeed had. Woon was surprised he hadn’t noticed. The pair ate on the bank. Dong-soo said that he had brought a knife in his sack. There was the sack, perfectly dry, and who knows what else it held.

“Are there more blankets in there?”

“Shuriken for you—I don’t know. Just in case. A smoke bomb. Some first aid supplies. The great Baek Dong-soo comes prepared.”

“I’ll snag a bird or a squirrel later.”

The frying pan was still next to the fire which had long been stamped out.

Woon kissed Dong-soo on the neck. “You planned all this.”

“Are you still hungry?”

“Not for food.”

The water was a little cold. “Let’s go in the tent. I want to lie next to you.” Woon didn’t understand why he said such things aloud. They sounded unlike him—vulnerable, sweet. But he wanted Dong-soo to say such things back. And Dong-soo did.

Dong-soo put his arm around Woon as they walked to the flimsy little tent. “I wish I could protect you, Woon-ah. I wish I could hold onto you forever, but I know I can’t.”

After the two crawled into the shelter, Dong-soo continued, “I know I said I was going to tell you the reasons why I was sorry—”

“Stop,” Woon said. “You don’t have to say anything.”

Dong-soo seemed to understand. After this morning, there was really nothing else left to say.

The place still reeked of sesame oil, and Woon still hated the fact that everything smelled like some auntie’s kitchen. The jug was still pretty full.

“You have enough oil to fry a whole boar,” Woon observed.

“You want a boar?” Dong-soo laughed. “I’ll kill a tiger for you if you want me to.”

“Right. You brought enough rice cakes for us to be here for more than a week.” Woon lay next to Dong-soo. The hard ground felt better than the silk sheeted bed he had slept in since he was first brought to Heuksa Chorong. The favored one, Yeo Woon. Here, he was truly favored. Here, he was safe. Here… Say it again, Dong-soo-yah. Please say it. I don’t want to leave without hearing you say it again. I’m a fool. I know that you’re showing me how much you care about me, but do you really… do you really…?

Outside the tent, the birds had settled again; they were accustomed to the occasional commotion of fishermen in the area. A sparrow chirped. A gull made its long crying sound. Woon was reminded of when Dong-soo had killed the Sky Lord’s messenger falcon. Peculiar things like that happened. Dong-soo showed up just in time. At the wharf in time to save Ji-sun. He had followed Woon in the rain to discover Woon lying face-down in the mud with a burning fever and had saved Woon’s life—-for what? The second time? Dong-soo, Dong-soo. If it weren’t for you, Dong-soo….

Every time Woon lay in Dong-soo’s arms, he thought it would be the last time. “We’re going to
stay here past night-fall, aren’t we?” Woon said. “We’ll head back home in the morning, right?”

“I don’t see why not. If Scary Lady shows up tonight, she can just wait.”

“It’ll be cold. We didn’t bring blankets.”

Dong-soo laughed. “No colder than that day in the snow.” He hugged Woon closer. “I’ll keep you warm. You’re not even tired, are you? We can do more?”

Woon didn’t want to confess that he was sore. He could wait a little while; he didn’t know when he would be in Dong-soo’s arms again, but this time he had the feeling he would be with him another time.

“I’m going to do what I want,” Woon volunteered. “One of the things I want to do is disassemble Heuksa Chorong piece by piece so that whatever building of Death the Sky Lord is so proud of is smaller whenever he returns.” He didn’t know why he had said that. Maybe he didn’t want to leave with Dong-soo alone with fears of the worst.

“Really?” Dong-soo physically startled. His grasp tightened around Woon. “Is that all you want to do?”

Woon was silent. He wasn’t going to tell Dong-soo anything that might frighten him.

“I worry. I worry about that Creepy man. When that man returns, he’s going to meet my teacher and ….”

“And what?”

“That man is such a force.” Dong-soo looked beyond worried; he looked a little desperate. “That man wants to kill Sword Saint. I don’t care what good friends those two were in the past. I know… I know from experience…” Here, Dong-soo looked ashamed. “I know how badly things can go, even between friends.”

“You don’t think that Sword Saint will kill the Sky Lord? He’s the better swordsman. The Sky Lord himself told me as much.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.” A cloud passed over the top sheet and darkened the shelter. Woon couldn’t make out the expression on Dong-soo’s face well. “I’m afraid something will go wrong,” Dong-soo said. “I’m afraid you’ll get into trouble you can’t handle, but even more than that—I’m afraid I won’t live up to my master’s expectations and get into worse trouble. Hell, you know how much trouble I got into at the camp and later every time I sneaked out of Sa-mo’s house. I’m lucky, but sometimes…. And then there’s always the fear that I’m going to lose you again.”

“Dong-soo,” Woon said in his most calm voice. “Whatever happens. Listen to me. If the worst happens. Even if I die or if you die or if we both die together….”

“Aish, why are you being so morbid?”

“I said, listen to me, Dong-soo-yah.”

Dong-soo listened.

“Whatever happens,” Woon continued, “even if we can’t be together in this life…. Woon felt the tears welling in his eyes again and was glad for the stray cloud passing over the shelter. “In our next life and even after that, I will always be by your side. Like now.”
Dong-soo didn’t say anything. Woon hoped that Dong-soo might repeat the words he had said that snowy day. *I love you, Woon-ah.* But Dong-soo lay his head next to Woon’s, and that was enough.

The bank on the other side of the stream looked close enough, steeper, more jagged with rocks, and the woods were darker. Woon wasn’t afraid of going forward. He would always be with Dong-soo.
To be continued in PART THREE. The next installment will deviate more from the canon script than previous installments but will continue to include iconic scenes. The story is told only from the POVs of Dong-soo and Woon. For those who have seen the drama, the childhood arc has been reincorporated into the storyline, palace intrigues have been cut and dialogue has been added.
PART THREE

Chapter Summary

The drama script, in contradiction to the titular character and historical hero’s grand speech on the wharf, destined both Dong-soo as victims. This chapter makes Dong-soo, not only Woon, an agent in his own future. Dong-soo needed more information and to understand his own sword to be a true hero; Woon needed familial support and love for his unknowns to be known. Meanwhile canon events continue to be fleshed out (ahem) in this novelization. I added dialogue to clarify what a visual medium implied with the actors acting, with the fight scenes’ stunning choreography, and with the original script’s poetic nuances. Woon, obviously, didn’t have Dong-soo’s reassurance in the drama, but in it he still managed to overcome much of Chun’s abuse, lies and mind-fuckery as his path led him towards the historical coup against the Prince Heir. I added and subtracted scenes like in previous chapters. I hope you appreciate this new-fangled novelization.

And explicit sex scene ahoy! Remember the prison scene in the Defense Minister’s estate? I wrote what everyone wanted.

CHAPTER EDITED 11/21/18 to include canon fact of Woon’s being branded at age twelve by Heuksa Chorong.

If You Lie with Me

PART THREE

Summary: The drama script, in contradiction to the titular character and historical hero’s grand speech on the wharf, destined both Dong-soo as victims. This chapter makes Dong-soo, not only Woon, an agent in his own future. Dong-soo needed more information and to understand his own sword to be a true hero; Woon needed familial support and love for his unknowns to be known. Meanwhile canon events continue to be fleshed out (ahem) in this novelization. I added dialogue to clarify what a visual medium implied with the actors acting, with the fight scenes’ stunning choreography, and with the original script’s poetic nuances. Woon, obviously, didn’t have Dong-soo’s reassurance in the drama, but in it he still managed to overcome much of Chun’s abuse, lies and mind-fuckery as his path led him towards the historical coup against the Prince Heir. I added and subtracted scenes like in previous chapters. I hope you appreciate this new-fangled novelization.

And explicit sex scene ahoy! Remember the prison scene in the Defense Minister’s estate? I wrote what everyone wanted.

10. Nothing

Better than a thousand hollow words is one word that brings peace. --the Buddha from the
Good-bye was not good-bye. Not yet. Instead of anxiety, there was a sweet lull that Dong-soo knew would die. Like Jin-joo always said when the hyacinth bloomed: *Enjoy this while you can. Nothing is forever.* Dong-soo didn’t understand why girls liked flowers so much, but he liked ruminating about stuff when the weather was pretty and when people he loved were happy and calm.

“*Sunsengnim,*” Dong-soo addressed Sword Saint one morning in the courtyard over breakfast. “If everyone leaves, won’t the son of the Crown Prince be without our support?”

Sword Saint smiled. “The Prince Heir is a clever child. Before Soo-woong and many of my sources at the palace passed to the World Beyond …”

Here Woon put down his spoon. He looked sad. Okay, Woon wasn’t happy and calm, but he wasn’t exactly the most upbeat person in any room. At least he hadn’t left Dong-soo’s side yet.

Sword Saint noticed Woon’s expression. “Soo-woong told me of how the Prince Heir studies all night in his room to avoid assassins. His scholarship impresses the king and worries the queen who wants the child out of the way. Do you know of another rumor told about in the village? How the prince went out walking one day without his purse and with only one guard?”

“How careless!” Sa-mo sputtered. “Is no one advising that child?”

“He doesn’t do foolish things like that anymore,” Sword Saint said. “And there was an assassination attempt that day. “It was a day that our mind-less Dong-soo who could not even talk or change his own pants had escaped our home. Before Dong-soo could be caught, you know what he did?

Everyone sat up, alert. They’d missed this bit of village gossip somehow.

“With one bare hand, Dong-soo caught an arrow aimed for the Prince Heir. The assassin fled.”

“See! See!” Dong-soo bobbed up and down. “I can do that! I have such quick senses!”

“Eh,” Sa-mo was not impressed. “You have the luck of a devil. And don’t brag. Your uncle has so much to teach you.”

“Yes, Captain.” Dong-soo bowed his head.

“And you, Woon-ah.” Sa-mo turned his attention to the young man wearing an over-sized Sa-mo shirt over silk baji from Qing. “Don’t think for a moment that learning to perfect your sword will be easy. Did that man—did that Chun teach you anything?”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.” Sa-mo nodded at Woon. “You learned from me, didn’t you? I know you’re smart, but your job—besides whatever it is you have planned—is going to be to grow up, like Hyungnim said, right.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Sa-mo’s face softened, the way it often did. Dong-soo was used to that. Sa-mo switching from a
scolding father to a nurturing mother—he had always been both to all his children. Sa-mo gestured with his chin at Woon’s food. “And eat. Eat like a warrior. Do you want to die of starvation before you even begin this journey of yours?”

No one had arrived for Woon and Goo-hyang, so as the days passed, Dong-soo tried to pretend that no one was coming. Near the house, for hours each day, Gak, Yong, and Geol were dueling with one another or Sa-mo. Their footwork and sword skills needed honing, Sa-mo said. The boys would apply to be Royal guards very soon, and their job would be to look after the Prince Heir.

Ji-sun, free as a bird now, no-one out to kidnap her, was as tiny as a bird and kept saying she didn’t want to trouble anyone, but her appetite was enormous for such a small person. Woon kept bothering her to eat and seemed to care for her very much. Jang-mi was delighted to cook her all the meat the silver found the pockets of Heuksa Chorong travelers could buy. Jin-joo rolled her eyes over the fact that Ji-sun knew so much about book-learning and acupuncture and even archery but not about daily life; Ji-sun decided to teach the noble lady how to shoot a rabbit, skin it, and cook it herself. “If you’re going to stuff yourself around here, you may as well learn to be useful.”

Then one morning Ji-sun surprised everyone and said she was going to start a business buying whatever was in demand in the market and selling it for a modest profit. She asked Jin-joo’s bandit family for help in purchasing and transporting goods and setting up a stall. Woon put his hands on his hips, whispered to Dong-soo: “What a good idea. This is your doing. You allowed her this choice.”

And Ji-sun set out to the Bandit Hide-away, determined to make Honest Men out of the wandering thieves Jin-joo had grown up with. Even Jin-joo, who had never really liked the girl because Ji-sun was so …. pretty…. was impressed with that boldness. And the bandits, of course, were all about making more money.

Jin-joo still didn’t trust Woon, though.

“I don’t understand why he’s going back,” she said to Dong-soo. She carried a basket of cooking utensils from Yang-mi’s for Ji-sun. “Are they going to kill him if he doesn’t return? He’s a magnificent swordsman. He could take on any one of them if they come for him.”

“You mean your mother?” Mi-so had countered. “Would you want him to kill your mother?”

“That’s right,” Dong-soo said. “Why is your mother going back? I don’t get that either!”

“She… she….” Jin-joo was at a loss. “She said she would always protect me. “I think it has something to do with that.” She stopped walking. “Woon! I was there when the Crown Prince was killed. Woon walked away with that man! Woon stayed away. I don’t know why—”

Mi-so pouted. “Why are you so distrustful of our Woonie? Didn’t you like him once?”

“Yeah.” Dong-soo narrowed his eyes at Jin-joo. He tried to take the basket of heavy items from her, but she shoved Dong-soo’s arms away. Always doing things for herself, stubborn girl. “Jin-joo-ah, you’re so weird. Didn’t you once say that Woon was … ah, what was it? The most sensible of us? Oh, I know what else. You said he was beautiful.”

Mi-so repeated the word in a sing-song: “Beautiful.”

“He is. I never liked him like that. OR for that stupid reason.” Jin-joo frowned. “Dong-soo is too fond of Woon. If I were Dong-soo, I would still be angry. Woon left his best friend just like that, and it makes no real sense why—”
“How do you know?” Mi-so countered again. Apparently, Mi-so was a staunch Woon defender. Dong-soo was glad. “Maybe,” Mi-so continued, “the men know things they’re not telling us.”

“No,” Dong-soo said. “We don’t know everything, but we do know enough. Woon wasn’t exactly a willing assassin. He did leave us, though. I was upset about that.”

“You forgot yourself and went crazy and stopped talking.” Jin-joo looked upset herself. “You lost your mind over Woon…. And over that pretty little Ji-sun.”

“Aish,” Mi-so sighed. “Your jealousy is so obvious.”

Dong-soo wondered who Jin-joo was more jealous over—Ji-sun or Woon? The pretty ex-nun had cried and cried thanking Dong-soo for burning the tattoo off her back and ridding her of her fate; it was clear to Dong-soo that he had won Ji-sun’s ever-lasting affection, but the young woman didn’t hold Dong-soo in her heart—she was talking about merchant matters now. Did Jin-joo—in that stupid, obsessive girl way of hers, notice the way he and Woon looked at one another? The way he and Woon spoke to one another without even talking?

“I’m not jealous,” Jin-joo said. “I’m just worried that Dong-soo will get hurt again.”

She seemed to mean it. Mi-so even went “aww, Jin-joo-yah.”

Jin-joo went on: “Dong-soo-yah, you say I’m weird? You know the truth. Woon was weird since he was a kid. He’s … I don’t know… broody. Who can know what he’s planning? He’s… ah, weird.”

Dong-soo laughed. “I like weird people.”

That seemed to please Jin-joo. Dong-soo knew that she was a sweet girl at heart, even if she was in love with a dunce like himself. Look at how she was helping Ji-sun.

“That wasn’t true. Dong-soo liked some people more than other people.

He loved Woon.

How could Dong-soo consider women right now while Woon was here, still sleeping next to him every night in their childhood room in Sa-mo’s house? Still breathing in Dong-soo’s arms when the sun rose? Woon had not been a light sleeper in the warrior camp days, but now—why was it that he slept so well? Was it the great Baek Dong-soo himself who made the difference? Woon had never been held with love. Dong-soo wondered about Woon’s mother, how long she lived, how she had died…. No way, Woon won’t say anything.

Woon didn’t make any more goodbye speeches. Dong-soo considered questioning him about this or that—but decided against disturbing him; he would kiss and hug Woon as soon as they undressed, and by unspoken agreement, before things could go further, both would lie down, quietly deflating their desires or else jacking off into rags that they would wash along with their faces in the morning. It was too risky—and akin to sacrilege to do anything more. In Sa-mo’s house.

Then there was that night. When Sword Saint had almost scared the shit out of Dong-soo.

Woon was taking off his clothes. He wore Sa-mo’s shirt often. Dong-soo liked him in that shirt. Dong-soo couldn’t remember Sa-mo having lent his clothes to anyone else; maybe the shirt made
Woon feel special—Woon certainly looked cute and delicate in the big shirt, sleeves all rolled up but always falling down anyway, and when Woon took off his baji, the shirt hem reached to his knees. *I have to stop this. I have to stop thinking of Woon like he’s a girl. I may get married one day.* Then the moment the boy in the big shirt sat on the bed mat, Dong-soo threw his arms around him. “I want to fuck you. I need to fuck you.”

Woon laughed lightly. “I don’t think so.”

“Please?”

“Let’s go outside then.”

That was easy enough.

Woon gathered the mat in his arms. “Find another blanket,” he ordered Dong-soo. “It’s chilly.”

The perfect spot was not far from the house, far away from the common path, near a bridge, surrounded by shrubbery, open to a sky full of stars.

Woon had been right—it was damn cold. So they didn’t strip completely, and under two blankets, Dong-soo did what he hadn’t seen in a book. While sucking leisurely on Woon’s cock, he decided to take a swig of oil and prepare the hole with his greasy tongue instead of his fingers. The act made Woon startle; to Dong-soo, a tongue seemed gentler than a couple nailed fingers, and besides, he wanted to kiss Woon there. He’d kissed Woon everywhere else.

Fucking Woon was what Dong-soo *had* to do, like eat or breathe.

Not making noise was what both Woon and Dong-soo needed to do because people might be nearby; holding back reminded Dong-soo of Sa-mo’s painful endurance tests in the warrior camp. Holding back somehow added to the excitement. Dong-soo finished first—with Woon’s amazingly limber legs stretched straight and his feet at Dong-soo’s ears—Dong-soo not even sure how they’d come to that place. They dropped to the ground; Dong-soo kissed Woon’s face all over and sucked him off sweetly. Then Woon was so sleepy, and Dong-soo said it was okay to head back.

“So that was that?” Woon seemed a little happier, though.

“Thanks, Woon-ah.” The thanks was not for the remark but for the fuck in the cold weather.

Then outside the house was Sword Saint, standing there, looking at the sky.

Dong-soo and Woon froze. The mat and blankets were in their arms.

“We were looking at the stars,” Woon said.

Dong-soo appreciated the quick lie, but he, Woon, and Cho-rip had often drunk soju and lain on the courtyard table to look at the sky on many nights. They had never needed to wander off.

“Dong-soo-yah.” Sword Saint was still looking at the stars. Why was he up anyway? He always went to bed early and woke up early. “We were supposed to start training at dawn tomorrow. We can’t wait for long to head to Girenhyeop.”

“Yes, Sansengnim. Forgive me for forgetting.” Dong-soo noted that his master trusted Woon enough to mention the location of training.

“I’m sleepy, Uncle,” Woon said. He took the bedding from Dong-soo’s arms—and discreetly, the
bottle of sesame oil Dong-soo was carrying beneath the bundle. “I’ll be heading inside.”

“Goodnight, Woon-ah,” Sword Saint and Dong-soo said.

“Why is it Woon won’t be training with us?” Dong-soo asked. “Gak, Yong, and Geol are training with Sa-mo, and Woon’s skills—”

“He is on his own path,” Sword Saint said.

Dong-soo didn’t question his master. He planned to question him on other things later.

“You are on another path,” Sword Saint continued. “I don’t know how long your training will take. At least a year. You are more talented than you yourself know. Your father was a great swordsman. The Baek line was famous for its martial artists.” Sword Saint paused. “That was only one reason the Defense Minister made sure that all your cousins were killed and gave the order that your family should be killed from your father onto the third generation of ancestors after your survival.”

Dong-soo felt a little sick every time he thought about that fact. Why was his master bringing that up now?

“It is important to continue the Baek line.”

Did Sunsegnim know what was going on—the stuff under the stars with Woon?

“I know you are young and probably have not thought much about these things,” Sword Saint continued, “but after some years have passed, a man considers marriage along his path.”

Oh yeah, he knew.

“Jin-gi is amused that his daughter is so fond of you,” Sword Saint went on. “I think the two of you make a good pair.” Sword Saint was smiling the way he would smile at two children playing on his knee, not as if he were discussing an adult subject like marriage. “Sa-mo, for some reason, prefers the gentle lady Ji-sun for you. He thinks you and she balance one another.”

“Sa-mo never married,” Dong-soo said. “He said marriage… uh… he said it depletes a warrior of his strength….” “Dong-soo cocked his head. He was curious. “Why did you never marry, Sunsegnim?”

Sword Saint laughed. He was a man who laughed easily and often. “I always wanted to marry. There were always circumstances that got in my way.”

“Like?”

“Duty to the Crown…. Other things.”

“What can be more important than love?” Dong-soo wanted to know. It was still hard to imagine, though, that Sword Saint and Scary Lady were truly in love.

“Nothing,” Sword Saint answered. “Go to bed now.”

When Dong-soo was inside, Woon was wide awake and worried. He wanted to know what was talked about. Dong-soo said that mostly training was talked about, that it didn’t seem that Sword Saint had caught on, although Dong-soo had been scared enough to nearly have a heart attack for a moment there.
“Are you telling me the truth?”

Dong-soo nodded. *I’m a liar. Because I don’t want you to feel bad, Woon-ah.*

“You’re staring at me, Dong-soo-yah. Why?”

Dong-soo had not been aware of looking at Woon in any particular way; he always stared at Woon. He was feeling something special, though. He knew it would be years, maybe a lifetime, and his feelings for Woon would never change. Circumstance would get in the way. Marriage might get in the way. Like Woon had said on the fishing trip—even if Death got in the way… *don’t think like that. I, Baek Dong-soo will always protect everyone.*

“Dong-soo-yah?” Woon looked more worried than before. “Dong-soo-yah? Why are you staring at me?”

Dong-soo smiled.

“Love,” he answered.

Woon’s face relaxed. For a moment he looked as pleased as Dong-soo had expected he would, but then, Woon being Woon, he lay back, pulled the covers to his throat and frowned. “This makes everything harder.”

“Why?”

Woon rolled over, facing away from Dong-soo. “Nothing.”

Woon fell asleep. Dong-soo hugged him. They slept that way until morning.

And that morning, Scary Lady arrived.

Mi-so announced the news. Her voice rang in the courtyard. “She’s here! She’s here! That terrible, terrible woman is here!” When everyone was awake and out to see, Scary Lady was standing in the early light with two colorful packages in each hand.

“I made food for your trip, Gwang-taek,” Scary Lady said in a peculiar voice. She sounded… kind?

Dong-soo had no idea that assassins could cook.

“Baek Dong-soo,” Sword Saint said with authority. “Get the bag you packed. We leave now.”

Dong-soo bowed. He cast a desperate look at Woon. When Dong-soo emerged from the room again, others were showing up—everyone, Jang-mi, the mountain-camp boys, and from far away, Jin-joo was dragging Ji-sun, who was a slow runner, by the hand. Goo-hyang was holding her skirts and holding her own pace—odd how graceful the woman was. She seemed to glide across the dirt path like a spirit.

Sa-mo was strangely congenial with Dong-soo. “Do what your uncle tells you and don’t get into trouble.”

“I’m not a little child, Sa-mo.”

“Yes, you are. Just don’t come back one. Got me?”
Woon had changed into his fancy clothes. He gave the over-sized shirt, folded neatly, back to Samo and bowed without a word.

“Arish, don’t fuck up, brat.” There were tears in the big man’s eyes.

Gak, Yong, and Geol took turns hugging Dong-soo. Sword Saint found his walking stick with the sword inside, and Dong-soo carried his master’s bags along with his own. Sword Saint carried only the gifts from his Scary Lady lover.

“I’ll see you when I see you,” Sword Saint said to Scary Lady.

“Jin-joo,” Dong-soo said to the stupidest girl in the world. “Please look after Ji-sun.”

“I’ll wait for you,” Ji-sun said. She was looking at both Dong-soo and Woon with a fond but peculiar, suspicious look—she was a strange one, that little nun. Ex-nun. Merchant, whatever.

Mi-so and Jang-mi cried and cried.

“Please don’t cry,” Dong-soo said to the young woman and the auntie. “It’s not forever. It’s…. it’s....”

“Then what is it, Dong-soo-yah?” Mi-so had the most whiney voice. No wonder she annoyed Woon so much. “What sort of dangers are out there for you and Woon? Cho-rip is gone too. What will we ever do without you? How can you say such a thing to us? Don’t cry? It’s not forever? It’s a long time! It’s time. Time is something. Time is—”
“Nothing.” Dong-soo finished for her. And he looked with Woon with love as he said the word.

And with that, everyone parted.

11. Everything

_Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?_ –Lao Tzu

Woon and Goo-hyang had followed the Earth Lord on their horses, and no words had passed between the three of them. Upon entering at the headquarters of Heuksa Chorang, the three passed guards standing on either side of the door. The guards bowed. The Earth Lord told Goo-hyang to go to her room.

Woon bowed before the Earth Lord.

“What do you want of me? I’ll do what—”

“Get up,” she said.

“What?”

“I told you to get up, Woon.”

“But you out-rank me?”

“You are the designated heir. Chun said so.” She walked up the steps to the altar, as the Sky Lord had done the day he had bequeathed the guild to Woon while in the same breath threatening to kill him. She gestured to the swords. “He’s not here right now, and you are the new Sky Lord. Do you understand what that means? I will tell you what that means.” She walked down again, with the slow pace of a queen, to where Woon, still kneeling, was trying to remember if there was a protocol to this ceremony. He was uncertain if he should rise now or later. He had never understood the Earth Lord. She seemed to resent him immensely at times.
“Water flows from a higher place to a lower one,” she said. She moved in her silk garments like a stream rolling towards a calm and wide bay. “This place is no different. Your skills surpass all those here.” She paused, a haughty figure on the bottom step. Her eyes, even in the darkness of the room, were piercing. “I accept your respect. In fact, I require it. But get up, Yeo Woon. You are the Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong.”

Woon got up.

“The rest of you.” She raised her head, addressing the other assassins. “Leave now.”

Woon felt shakier than he had expected to feel. His uncles had said that he would be taking over the assassin guild but had not mentioned his becoming the new Sky Lord. How was that possible? The title belonged to the man on a journey killing the best swordsmen in the world.

“Did he--the Sky Lord—was it he—he--” Woon didn’t how his voice faltered.

“One day you will understand, but Chun cares for you.” The Earth Lord turned her gaze to the windows; they were thickly screened, yet the dim light flowing through made her expression clearer. Woon recognized, for the first time, the resemblance between himself and the woman standing before him. The small thickly-lashed eyes, long nose and full lips. The proud, stand-offish way she held her face. Even the way she wore her hair in an ornament so it made a high tail over long black hair was like his own. She was fine-boned, an excellent fighter, but no one trusted her—she was difficult to read. She must’ve endured years of struggling to prove herself—a woman, the favorite of the Sky Lord, his lover even. Everyone here… they must have envied, doubted,
“Cares for me?” Woon could not conceive of the Sky Lord caring for anyone—did that not go against the principle of assassins not acknowledging their own hearts? If there was anyone the Sky Lord cared for, he cared for the Earth Lord—no, he seemed to be obsessed with her in some way, but how could he care for Yeo Woon, someone he barely knew, someone he had always treated like another piece on a baduk board?

“You don’t know him,” The Earth Lord said. “I know you resent him for sending the young lady to Qing.”

Woon looked at the floor.

“I would resent him for that if I were you. He had a choice in the matter. He’s stood up to the Emperor before. He has found ways. He got rid of a slave’s tattoo on Goo-hyang’s back—she was born to a noble family and branded the daughter of a traitor. In return for removing the tattoo, an illegal act, she was indebted to Heuksa Chorong for life. This is how Chun wins people. This is how he moves the politics of Joseon and countries beyond. He and not the palace decided the fate of the Crown Prince. He and not the Emperor decided the fate of your samini.”

“Then should I not resent him?” Woon asked.

“I am trying to tell you what a powerful man he is.” The Earth Lord paused. She swallowed as if what she was about to say was difficult. “And this very powerful man does indeed favor you. He did not want you to have attachments to anyone but him. He favors you so much that from the day you entered this place, you were his chosen successor. He wanted one. He chose you, not me.”

“Why?”

Woon didn’t know. There were flashes of memories. Chun on his horse. “What is your name?” Woon refusing to answer. The village boys calling Woon’s father a murder, and Woon turning on them, getting his head whapped hard but crushing them and the boys fleeing in terror. Woon then turning on himself and stabbing his own hand over and over with the stick that had beaten the boys. Chun appearing again. “Why did you do such a stupid thing?” Chun bandaging the wounded hand. Chun touching Woon’s hair. The touch that was a shock because no one had ever touched him that way…. 
The Earth Lord didn’t answer Woon’s question. Instead, she said. “He’s told me that he wants to give you everything.”

Everything?

“He cares for people in a cruel way,” the Earth Lord went on. “You may have observed this.”

Woon hadn’t expected to be so rattled on his first day back. He had expected Goo-yang to be by his side. He had expected to be told about mundane business matters, given perfunctory assignments. The Earth Lord was supposed to explain his new role in the guild, not speak to him of private matters like the Sky Lord’s character.

Woon felt unsteady. Memories. He sometimes tried hard to summon them; at other times, they emerged without being called and he tried to push them away.

“I could kill you right now. I should. Everyone says you’re worthless to us now, but I’m never wrong. I’m never wrong. You are mine forever, indebted to me forever.” The fever so hot, the Sky Lord’s large hands, so cold and clammy while parting Woon’s thighs—

“You told me once,” Woon interrupted his own thoughts by addressing the Earth Lord, “that a heart was the death of an assassin. I don’t understand how… how you say he could care for
anyone.’’

“When we speak of a heart here . . .” The Earth Lord looked less regal and more like an ordinary woman. “We speak of over-fond attachments. Love is unnatural. One can’t love and be an assassin. But one can still drink with a comrade, fight alongside one, respect and honor others. And Chun . . . Chun, for as much as he himself loves the excitement of this life, he has always understood that others do not.”

Why was she telling him these things?

“He’s cruel because cruelty is what controls people,” she continued. “He’s a leader.” She walked up to the altar again and sat in her seat. She gestured to the seat next to her, the one reserved for the Sky Lord. Woon walked up and took it. He felt small, though, as if he were a child on his first day of disciple-hood in a religion he knew nothing about.

“He’s not cruel when he doesn’t have to be.” Was the Earth Lord going to speak of nothing else but the man she loved, the apparent dark twin to the other man she loved, Sword Saint? She lied to herself; she was an assassin with a heart that held two men. Woon was confused, but he could wait for the point of all this.

“Your friend, Baek Dong-soo,” the Earth Lord said, and Woon felt his heart skip. “When that child was only a baby, Chun was ordered to kill him. Chun refused. You want to know why?”

Woon didn’t ask. He waited to be told why.

“The man doesn’t hurt innocent children.”

Is that true? Woon wanted to laugh out loud.

“Kim Gwang-taek gave up his right arm to the guillotine to prevent Dong-soo from being boiled alive in oil. I suppose you’ve heard that story about everyone’s beloved Sword Saint?”

Yes, Sword Saint. A good person . . .

“You see, one man you may admire—this new master of your friend, Dong-soo, and this man you have come to suspect and resent, the master of Heuksa Chorong, are not so different. They both cared for the life of an innocent child.”

Did the Sky Lord really believe he could not hurt an innocent child? How innocent was I truly, though, if I decided to follow him? If I had already said yes to his order to kill my own father?

“I want you to know this about him,” the Earth Lord continued, “because he is who he is. Not evil. Not good. A powerful man who spared your best friend and who always . . .” Her voice repeated the word with emotional emphasis. “Always wanted the best for you, Yeo Woon, and for you to advance in your talents.”

Her words now struck Woon as pleading. In a court, information is given in exchange for mercy. What did she want?

“He is capable of self-sacrifice.” More pleading. “There was a time he tried to free me from this place at the cost of his own life.”

There was no way this could possibly be true. From everything Woon knew about the Sky Lord, he kept his lover at his side the way he kept everyone next to him—he was a possessive man. To let her go would mean to release her to his greatest rival, Sword Saint.
Then the Earth Lord told a story about a time when the Sky Lord was a mere apprentice at the
guild and Kim Gwang-taek was a trainee in the Royal guard at the palace. Gwang-taek had come
to take his love away from her life of killing, and the Sky Lord, then known as Wang Yong, had
told the pair to leave. It had been Ga-ok herself who had changed her mind, fully aware that the
current Sky Lord, her father, would kill Wang Yong for his betrayal. At the wharf where a ship
waited to take the lovers away, she had pointed her sword at Gwang-taek and told him that there
was no future for the two of them. Later, her first love, Wang Yong, had been tortured. Later,
Wang Yong had killed her father and had become the new Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong. Even
later, two lovers had joined as leaders of the ancient assassin guild, bound together forever by
sorrow and blood.

Woon had listened, fascinated, with no compassion for anyone in the story. Why Sword Saint had
fallen for this woman was beyond Woon. And Woon was beyond compassion for those bound to
what they believed was a destiny of murdering people.

“I don’t understand one thing,” he told the Earth Lord. “The tradition exists that every Sky Lord is
 suppose to kill the previous one in order to gain the title. But our leader isn’t dead—he is on a
journey. Why am I being given the title and the position?” He placed his palms on the armrests
 of the chair the Sky Lord sat in. “Because the Sky Lord said so?”

“He did.” The Earth Lord swallowed hard. Woon thought he saw her eyes moisten, but in this
dark place he couldn’t be sure. “Chun fully expects you to surpass him in swordsmanship one day. He
knows that you must kill him.”
Woon couldn’t help but raise a corner of his mouth in a slight smile.

*That is everything to me. When the Sky Lord returns, I am going to kill him. I’m an assassin, after all, am I not?*

“He tried to save you too once, Woon,” the Earth Lord added.

*Impossible. What do you mean?*

“I didn’t want you to remain here. The squad leaders thought you were talented but too *emotionally unstable* to become an assassin. This was after you took ill, after your father died. There were petitions to kill you, but….”

Woon had figured as much. “He sent me away. He sent me to the warrior camp on the mountain-top.”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t he know that would only make feel more conflicted when I returned?”

“He had faith in your loyalty to him. He trusted in your abilities. He saw you as his only heir. He….”

Woon tried to look the Earth Lord in the eyes, but she turned away, somewhat unsettled. What did she want? *What?*

“It won’t take him long,” she said, “to take care of all those powerful warriors he wants to challenge. A year, maybe two. When he returns….”

“He’s supposed to fight Sword Saint when he returns, right?”

“Woon?” The Earth Lord looked at Woon. The desperate request was in in her eyes, and Woon understood at last. “Those two men have never been able to finish a battle. Neither is able to kill the other. You are the one who is meant to finish Chun.”

*She wants me to spare him.*

“I am far from his level,” Woon said. “I don’t think this is a matter to be considered right now. My feelings, his feelings—they have nothing to do with anything.”

*They have everything to do with everything.*

The talk was over as far as Woon was concerned. The Earth Lord had revealed her card. He added, “Is there anything else you need to tell me? Are there any assignments from the Emperor or from the Norons I need to know about?”

“Qing has been quiet. The palace knew of your illness.” The Earth Lord rose, looking as uncertain as Woon had ever seen her. He felt his own power. *I am the Sky Lord.* “Other things I know you’ve heard about from Gwang-taek,” She continued. “The former Crown Prince’s guards were dismissed, and the Prince Heir is unprotected by enemies.”

Woon had heard that indirectly from Dong-soo. Gak, Yong, and Geol were training hard to be the young prince’s guards.

“The elderly man you served at the beacon camp was a disposed general. He has been reinstated as a naval commander. He will be an ally of the Prince Heir, no doubt, and the Noron party is none
too happy about that.”

More information Woon had heard from Dong-soo.

The Earth Lord talked as she and Woon walked out of the headquarters: “I imagine that the Minister of Defense will be contacting us soon.”

“I think I’ll pay the Defense Minister a visit myself tomorrow morning,” Woon said. “For the moment, I’m going to train. I haven’t trained since my illness.” He felt fine but believed he should make the excuse that Goo-hyang should accompany him in case he fell ill. Then he remembered that he was the Sky Lord and didn’t need to make excuses.

He had wanted to spare Goo-hyang from questioning while the Earth Lord was in this peculiar, talkative mood. Should the Earth Lord indeed send for the young woman, he wanted to be in the room with Goo-hyang. _I am the Sky Lord. I can revoke any order from the Earth Lord._ Woon could protect Goo-hyang in the way he had not be able to protect Ji-sun. He and Goo-hyang were cut from the same cloth. They had both been chosen by the Sky Lord, marked by him for some purpose, treated like his… pretty whores, was it not like that?

_The heavens will fall on you, Chun. All those in this place who you’ve kept under your boot … we will escape._

Woon changed out of his blue silk clothes with the brass details and decided to get rid of the clothes forever. He would wear them once last time tomorrow to impress the Defense Minister. He put on black clothes to train. He called for Goo-hyang. He told her that he was Sky Lord now and that she would be his assistant. He may send her on an errand, as a mole, to the palace from time to time, but she would no longer be entertaining there, nor would she be performing elsewhere. She would be stationed at the headquarters, near Woon at all times. “Don’t ask me questions,” he said. “Just do as I say, and there will be less trouble for you.”

She bowed, her eyes sparkling like the new jewels in her hair. “Yes, Sky Lord.”

She came with him to the training field and sat and watched him meditate for a few minutes. Woon had felt unsteady for so long, still felt unsteady when he rose and as he moved through familiar stances. There was no one more sure-footed than him in the land, though. He could not recall ever having lost his footing—that day he fell into the icy river didn’t count because the ground gave way. There had been that time he had stepped on a pebble border out of stupidity in the palace courtyard because he’d been jealously following Dong-soo and Ji-sun. But that—that would never happen again. And there had been the time the Sky Lord, his fingers on Woon’s neck, had made Woon stumble before the altar of swords.

_I will never stumble again._

Woon ran long lengths and took high leaps and tumbles. He would not draw a weapon today. He sped up a tree and flipped over backwards, landing on his feet. He raced towards another tree, his mind clear as the speed of flight, and as he stepped up the tree, he heard the words plainly, as if they were being spoken in his ear at that very moment. The Sky Lord’s voice: “This never happened. Tell a soul and you die. Nothing happened here tonight.” The Sky Lord’s forefinger poked Woon on the forehead. Woon felt as if a bullet had shot him there. Nonetheless, his body on fire, he performed a double backflip off the tree and dropped to the ground in a ball, rolling away like a noiseless wad of paper in the wind.

“My lord is impressive,” Goo-hyang said when Woon rolled to her skirts’ edge and rose to his knees. “I’d heard of your skills but I had not witnessed—”
“This is nothing—” Woon stopped. He didn’t want to sound like he was bragging. He didn’t want to say anything to make the girl believe that he was interested in a ... special companion? Surely, Dong-soo had been over-interpreting when he said that Goo-hyang was too devoted to Woon. That was jealousy; he and Dong-soo were both prone to foolishness like that, and women doted on Woon often—it didn’t mean anything....

“I’m not so impressive,” Woon said. “I’m tired, in fact.” He managed a weak smile. “I’ll be retiring for the day.”

“Shall I have food sent to your room? You haven’t eaten all day.”

Woon assumed detachment. He was the Sky Lord; Goo-hyang was an employee. “Yes,” he said. “Make sure that food is sent to my room three times a day. I prefer to eat alone.”

“Even for dinner?” Goo-hyang looked confused. “Would you not like it if I came with wine and played the bipa?”

Woon’s composure wavered. “No, no.” He felt himself flush. He was not attracted to Goo-hyang, yet he didn’t want to disappoint her. “I am sure your playing is as good as everyone says. I prefer to eat alone is all. I’ll be going now.” He turned around. He stopped in his tracks. “And please, if the Earth Lord sends for you, send word that you are my assistant and that you will not meet her without me. Tomorrow, early morning, arrive at the gates with your horse. We’ll be travelling to Hanyang.”

*

The Minister didn’t make Woon wait.

“I know you are gifted at martial arts,” the Defense Minister said after tea was poured, “but was that really enough for you to become the Sky Lord so quickly?”

Woon sipped his tea. “Your Excellency, please show respect.”

“What? What did you just say?”

Woon looked the Defense Minister and issued a challenge: “I said please show some respect.”

Lord Hong’s chest heaved; his eyes darkened. Next to minister’s side, Goo-hyang looked worried.

“I am the leader of Heuksa Chorong.” Woon continued to stare. “Because I am young, you think I can be controlled?”
“Brat.” The minister’s words were measured, not angry. “Are you going to be this impertinent with everyone? Do you really have a death wish as it has been rumored?”

At that moment, the minister’s guard, that foolish man with the wild hair who had been standing nearby, drew his sword and brought it against Woon’s neck.

Woon smiled.

“Not too long ago,” Woon said, “when I was a palace guard trainee, Your Excellency called for me and took note that I was aligned with Heuksa Chorong. You are a clever man. In fact, you are the one who gave me the soundest advice I have ever received. You said that before weak men, I should become an impassible mountain. That is what I plan to do. Paying a visit to you today was only a courtesy.”

Woon rose, gestured for Goo-hyang to follow him. She looked puzzled. She bowed at the minister whose eyes were narrowed.

“I will take my leave,” Woon said. Before he passed the door, he shot a glance at the wild-haired swordsman. “I heard that you were choked by one hand to unconsciousness by the previous Sky Lord.” Woon didn’t say anything further but made sure that the guard understood that Woon could defeat him as easily.

Boo Gwan, the minister’s deputy, sputtered, “Your Excellency! Are you going to let him leave after what he just--?”

Woon and Goo-hyang were in the hallway, but Woon heard Lord Hong mutter: “So, while the tiger is gone, a wily fox becomes the master?”

Upon leaving the minister’s house and requesting that their horses be brought to them, Woon took note that Goo-hyang’s head was not bowed in the manner of a reverent, acquiescent palace lady. Her head was held up high.

Woon was still trying not to grin over the fox remark. He understood that he was still young; he planned to grow up. Who is the fox and who is the tiger? Are not both supposed to protect their own? You are right, Lord Hong. Strength isn’t everything. I have cunning too, and I have
everything planned. If you get in my way, your Excellency, I will kill you too.

12. Who was Wang Yong? Who was Yeo Woon?

He who knows the enemy and himself
Will never in a hundred battles be at risk;
He who does not know the enemy but knows himself
Will sometimes win and sometimes lose;
He who knows neither the enemy nor himself
Will be at risk in every battle. -- The Art of War by Sun Tzu

Your heart, your heart, blah, blah, Sunseongnim was always going on about how the heart moves the sword and how one must listen to the stillness there, whatever. Dong-soo was told that he needed to relearn the basics—footwork, standing still, breathing in measure with his movements, finding his heart. His heart? His heart was full of noisy longings, and yet Sunseongnim told him to listen to it.

Starting out, Dong-soo had been full of purpose but on hearing Sa-mo’s warning (“Do what your uncle tells you and don’t get into trouble”), Dong-soo had begun to feel conflicted—do I challenge my teacher now or later? Am I even a worthy pupil? Aish, this is already too hard! I know what I want to do, but when is the time? I don’t know who I am, but I know I need to find out some stuff about Woon!

One morning, on the path to Girenhyeop, while meditating, Dong-soo heard his heart speak a truth and found his courage. Dong-soo had not realized that in Sword Saint’s instructions, the answer had been there all along.

Dong-soo rose and spoke to the man rolling tea-balls on a tree stump.

“Sunseongnim, I swore to follow you to the mountain, but there is something else I need to do first.”

“Oh?”

“I have to turn back.”

“Why?”

“I have to pay a visit to Yeo Cho-sang’s village. There are some things I need to learn about Woon’s past. I need to question the people there.”

Sword Saint sighed. He didn’t look pleased.

“Woon isn’t your opponent. If there is something you need to know about him, don’t you think he would have told you by now?”

“He is my best friend, and Sunseongnim, I know this in my heart because you told me to search it—I know that there are things Woon will never tell me, and I can’t move my sword in alignment with his unless I know his past.”
“In alignment with his?”

“Yes.” Dong-soo bowed. He didn’t understand why the moment required a bow; he only understood that he was in defiance of his master and saying peculiar things. Dong-soo himself didn’t quite understand what he was saying. He did know that he had wanted to go the village for some time, though. He did know that he wanted to investigate matters—ever since Cho-rip had mentioned that his own strength was research, Dong-soo had begun to consider that his own feelings were too rough and untamed, that he needed to temper them with a sharper mind, that with a strong mind and a pure heart, then maybe, *maybe* he would be worthy of being Sword Saint’s pupil.

“Sit down,” Sword Saint said.

Sword Saint passed a hand-sized chunk of pasty, boiled tea leaves to Dong-soo. “Roll them into very small balls like this?” Sword Saint held up a green ball the size of a pea. “Sa-mo didn’t show you this, did he? I learned at the temple that this tea is good for balancing qi.”

Dong-soo rolled. He waited for his master to speak again. He listened to the wind and the birds and his own heart learning patience.

“I had a best friend once,” Sword Saint finally said. “Not one like your uncles, not a blood brother. Someone who was dearer to me than they are.”

Dong-soo already knew who *Sunsengnim* was speaking about. “Dearer?”

“We were so much alike at one time,” Sword Saint said, and he smiled at the landscape, at memories Dong-soo couldn’t see. “We were both orphans, like you and Woon. We learned to fight among bandits, and we joined one pirate ship after another. Then there was a terrible storm—ah, that is a story that would keep here all day and delay your journey! And the shipwreck.” Sword Saint laughed one of his pleasant laughs.

*Delay my journey? He’s allowing me to go back?*

“It seemed like Destiny, but maybe it was only because he and I were both so clever and strong that we were the only survivors. A monk found us on the shore, clinging to one another, exhausted, half-drowned. We stayed at the temple. We learned to pray. It was a strange time. We were boys still—a little younger than you are now.”

“The Sky Lord,” Dong-soo said.

“Yes.” The smile on Sword Saint’s face disappeared, but the affection in his eyes did not dim. How was it possible that this man still held such feelings for a murderer? “Wang Yong and I fought one another in those days quite a bit; we enjoyed the competition. Whenever his sword crossed mine, I don’t think I ever felt so much a part of someone else. I find it interesting that you say you want your sword to be aligned with Yeo Woon’s—because I do understand that you believe you are the same person as this man in a way.”

Dong-soo didn’t understand what his master understood exactly. He was merely glad that *Sunsengnim* was talking to him now.

“Wang Yong and I were different after all, though.” Sword Saint said. “I was wrong.”

*You and the Sky Lord are not me and Woon. Don’t worry about that.*

“Never doubt that Chun of Heuksa Chorong doesn’t still carry his past with him, though. He wears
his mala from the temple. He remembers his friendship with me. I still want….” Sword Saint’s voice trailed off, a tea ball rolling and rolling like an obsession between his thumb and forefinger.
“I still want to return him to his old self.”

“Is that still possible?” Dong-soo asked. “After all he’s done?”

“I don’t know.” Sword Saint said. “But do understand that there is no such thing as a truly evil man. Men are not born evil; the sufferings of the world make them that way.”

“Yes, but—don’t people make choices?”

“You’re right.” Sword Saint laughed again. “You’re right, Dong-soo-yah. People make choices. You’ve decided to go back to Yeo Cho-sang’s village this morning. What an interesting choice. I’m keeping you from your duty by rambling so much. Why don’t you head back now?” Sword Saint scooped up the tea balls into a little sack and rose.

“Sunsengnim, if I may….” Dong-soo thought that if he was going to be rude today, he may as well go all the way. “What happened with the … uh… lady…. The one at the assassin place….? Was it because of her---?”

Sword Saint laughed so loud it seemed that the leaves on the trees rustled on their branches from the noise. “Ah, what misfortune that was. By the time the two friends could grow beards, it seemed that destiny had caught us again. But as you said, people make choices—is there such a thing as destiny? I, a palace guard, and he, an assassin, and what should happen? We loved the same woman—that itself was a destiny. Ga-ok, well, she has made her choice. I was not the man she chose.” Another laugh, a melancholier one. “The heart loves who it loves. If he loved her still, though, he would let her go. I believe he loves her, but…” Sword Saint nodded. “I would say that you have much to learn about love, but love teaches its lessons to us before we are ready to grasp their full meanings. Love itself is a blessing, but first it has to cut into the heart like a plow into the earth… Maybe…”

How weird is it that Sunsegnim is talking about his love life.

“Maybe Chun will let go Ga-ok again after all?” Sword Saint then made the most wistful of observations: “When we were young, I believed he loved her the way I loved her.”

Dong-soo didn’t understand this part. The Sky Lord, the Creepy Guy, didn’t fit with Sword Saint’s description of a youthful man who made friends, prayed at a temple, fell in love of all things.

The silence for a while was terrible. It was as if the very word love had stricken the scene with like an omen—or at the very least, with bad memories and anxieties for the future. Dong-soo couldn’t hear even a bird chirp. The wind wasn’t blowing.

“Dong-soo-yah,” Sword Saint said, “follow your heart. Remember that what you want is not as important as what others need. Love means putting others before yourself. Wang Yong forgot that, I believe. Maybe he never learned that truth thoroughly in the first place, but I believe he forgot it. I believe we can all learn to love others more than ourselves because that is such a simple truth.”

“Sunsengnim, it sounds simple but….” Dong-soo bowed his head. “Like everything you say…. I think it’s easy to love but difficult to love well. Does that make sense?”

“Ah, Dong-soo-yah, you’re getting smarter.” Sword Saint whapped Dong-soo lightly on the butt with his cane. “Go down the road now. I will be waiting for your return.”
On the long walk back, Dong-soo wondered if he had missed one bit of information, if people had just failed to tell him, or if people honestly did not know and were too polite to discuss the matter but…. *if Jin-joo is the daughter of Scary Lady, loved by both Sword Saint and Creepy Guy* then….

Wasn’t it likely that the King of Bandits was not Jin-joo’s real father but that she was the daughter of one of the two old friends? Which one? Dong-soo saw the physical resemblance between Scary Lady and Jin-joo—the slender face and cat-like eyes. He had to admit that the two women shared over-all good looks—both were too mannish and bossy, though. Jin-joo didn’t seem to take after any of the father candidates in terms of looks or personality. *She’s got none of Sunsengnim’s wisdom—she’s got no common sense at all. And forget Creepy Guy—Jin-joo may be a little stupid, but she’s very nice and not creepy at all. But who knows. Maybe there’s a little creepy in that girl somewhere?*

A mystery for another day. Mi-so and Jang-mi were probably already giving Jin-joo hell about it, but it wasn’t any of Dong-soo’s concern. Whichever dad, Jin-joo had a good pedigree in swordsmanship, didn’t she?
Within a few hours, Dong-soo reached the village where Yeo Woon had lived with his father.

Before nightfall, strolling through the marketplace, Dong-soo learned plenty. No one in the village knew who the tall, affable young man asking questions about Yeo Cho-sang was, but everyone had a story to tell. The old drunk was legendary. His house was still as it had been when his body had been found. It took Dong-soo all day to find someone who would take him there. People claimed to be busy, but they also said the house was “bad luck.” Yeo Cho-sang was all about bad luck. And his death had been horrific.

“Murder,” everyone said right away when asked. Two murderers at the very least, maybe a gang of criminals. There had been a stab wound in the back—deep, fatal, and another in the belly, just as deep. Obviously, Cho-sang had put up a fight because his hands were ripped from having caught a blade with his own fingers.

“He had been a great swordsman once.”

“Oh, years before he took to the bottle he was in a brotherhood with great warriors—they even came to visit him!”

“He was always prattling on about people he knew. A former Royal guard named Jang Dae-pyo was his best friend. Cho-sang had been in the royal guard with him once—deposed because of politics, they say. Maybe it was all a lie, but who knows, who knows!”

“There was a butcher friend, Sa-mo, a man who could kill twenty men with just his meat cleaver—and another friend who was supposedly a former assassin of Heuksa Chorong—ah, what is he now? Cho-sang said he is King of Bandits now! But there was also the legendary Sword Saint! He was seen in the village not too long ago! Is it possible that Cho-sang was not lying about being friends with these great warriors?”

Two boys, around the age Dong-soo and Woon had been the day they first met, brought Dong-soo to the Yeo house and said that no one taken it over, let alone plumbed it for goods because of “bad luck.” Some village men had buried the body, they said. The son, Woon, had been gone for weeks before the murder, probably sold into slavery to pay off the old man’s debts.

“Nah.” Dong-soo smiled. “I heard he grew up fine. Went into the Royal guard, actually.” It wasn’t a lie.

“Really?” One of the boys looked like the type who would believe anything. “Someone said that Yeo Cho-sang’s son was seen sitting on the grave the day after his father was buried. A ghost, they said.”

“Yeah,” said the other kid. “Some people think Yeo Cho-sang killed the kid just like he killed the mother.”

Dong-soo put down the ceramic soju bowl he was looking at. “What? Killed the mother?”

“Oh, everyone in town knows that,” the kid went on. “My dad said no one can prove it—because there were no witnesses, and it’s not like the police care what goes on with poor people anyway. And Yeo Cho-sang buried the woman right away so---”

“He bragged about it, people say,” piped up the other boy. “Hey, don’t you think it’s creepy here, mister? Why are you so interested in Yeo Cho-sang?”

“He’s a friend of a friend,” Dong-soo said. “How old was the son when the mother died?”
“A baby, I hear,” said the boy who would believe anything. “The mom was always fighting with the dad because the dad hated the baby. Said the baby was born under a black star. Said the baby should be killed.”

“Black star? Killed?”

“Oh, Yeo Cho-sang was a fortune-teller.” The older kid who seemed less frightened of the house walked up to the door with Dong-soo and peered inside. “Looks normal enough in here. I guess they were a normal family, but drinking does weird stuff to people. I’ve seen it. Someone like you must’ve been around taverns, right? Yeo Cho-sang didn’t just drink in taverns—the story goes he drank at home, on the street, all the time, and he had no job, just selling what his wife could sew, and then he started telling peoples’ fortunes to pay off debts. Thing is, he was good at it, so people were a little scared of him—the way they’re scared of this place now. Anyway, people still talk about how he might have killed his wife. After the baby was born, he read the baby’s horoscope and it….”

“Baby was a DESTINED KILLER!” blurted out Believe Anything Boy.

“Eh, maybe Yeo Cho-sang was a bad fortune teller,” said the more reasonable boy. He walked back to join Believe Anything Boy who was keeping a safe distance from the house. “In any event, the mom, as you can imagine, went crazy over that fortune. Didn’t believe it at all. Yeo Cho-sang said the child should be killed, or at the very least kept away from fulfilling his destiny or some nonsense… but the way Yeo Cho-sang would go on about it when drunk, people got the idea that he was going to kill the baby one night and so….”

“Yeah, people put two and two together,” Believe Anything Boy said in a hushed tone. “They said that the night the mother died, she was trying to stop Yeo Cho-sang from killing the baby, so he killed her instead.”

“There’s no evidence of course,” said More Reasonable Boy.

“Yeah, but she just up and died,” said Believe Anything Boy. “A perfectly healthy woman. She was way younger than the old man. Everyone says it was suspicious.”

“Could’ve been bandits, like with Yeo Cho-sang,” said More Reasonable Boy. “That guy had a weird past.”

“But then there are the stories that he was bragging about killing her when he was drunk!” Believe Anything Boy’s voice was still hushed. It was as if he didn’t want to disturb ghosts. Maybe the ghosts, who knew the truth, would be offended by the rumors?

“He was telling people he killed his wife,” More Reasonable Boy said, “to scare his creditors. So they wouldn’t mess with him, y’know? Maybe it wasn’t true.”

Dong-soo felt sad. There was no way to verify the truth, but Woon had not grown up with his mother. His father had harbored resentments against him from birth.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” Dong-soo told both boys. “I’m going to look around inside for a while.” Then, before he walked into the house, he turned. “Oh, one more thing. Is there anything either one of you can tell me about the son, Yeo Woon? Do people talk about the boy at all? He’d be about my age now.”

The boys looked at one another and tried to remember.

More Reasonable Boy looked back to Dong-soo. “His father never let him use even a wooden
sword. Kept at him about that Black Star thing. That’s right. I remember now. Yeo Woon was beaten by Yeo Cho-sang all the time because the kid was always practicing martial arts and getting caught by his dad. Dad beat him up good.”

“Then one day the kid just disappeared,” Believe Anything Boy said.

“Disappeared,” More Reasonable Boy concluded. “Unless that stuff about his being a ghost on his dad’s grave is true—*which it’s not*—he just disappeared.”

Dong-soo nodded. “Ah, good evening then.”

The boys skipped away. Dong-soo could hear them debating as they descended the path. More Reasonable Boy was wondering if it was true that Yeo Woon was in the Royal Guard because the fellow in the house looked like a bull-shitter. Believe Anything Boy said that Yeo Woon was probably still alive, not a slave or a prostitute, but fulfilling his Black Star Destiny and off somewhere in a foreign land, murdering people for a living, an assassin maybe. “Eh, you’re crazy!” More Reasonable Boy shoved his shoulder against Believe Anything Boy, and Dong-soo smiled, his heart full of sadness.

Small objects in the home confirmed poverty but not destitution. Clothes, cooking utensils, bins full of nails and small tools. Woon, as evidenced from one small shirt on the floor, had his own room. The rolled up sleeping mat and the wash bowl were covered with spider webs. What had once been a pile of books in one corner was now a long-abandoned, crusty ants’ nest. The book pages stuck out of the dirt, and for a moment, Dong-soo considered kicking the structure over. He didn’t.

Dong-soo spent the night outside the house, not far from Yeo Cho-sang’s grave. He paid his respects, bowed once. “Your son is a very brave man. I don’t know what really happened in your family, but it sounds like things were… very sad. I want you to know that Yeo Woon grew up to be someone with a good heart who tries to protect people. He’s made mistakes, but he’s a very a good person. And oh, by the way, sir, there’s no such thing as Destiny. I, Baek Dong-soo, son of your friend Baek Sa-goeng, will prove it to you.”

Lying under the stars, Dong-soo wondered about the two stab wounds on Yeo Cho-sang’s body. The men who buried the man must have been right about that much. Did Heuksa Chorong kill Woon’s father? A gang of assassins who then took Woon? *Why hadn’t Dong-soo’s uncles told him about Yeo Cho-sang’s drinking*—? They had to have known. Did they know about the black star business and that the father beat his son? Why did Woon smile whenever Sa-mo whapped Dong-soo over the head? Woon never did anything growing up to earn a whapping from Sa-mo; it was always Dong-soo who got into trouble. A whap from the head from Sa-mo was love, though—it wasn’t a beating from a drunk father who may have killed his wife. Woon knew the difference, Dong-soo was sure.

It had only been a few days since parting from him, but Dong-soo missed Woon so much.

*Men make choices. What choices are you going to make now, Woon-ah? What choices? I can’t wipe away the past, but if only I could protect you now.*

*No, that isn’t fair to you. I know you want to protect yourself. Ever since your father denied you a sword.*

*One day, one day, our swords will be aligned, and we can both fight to protect those who need us. Right, Woon-ah?*
Dong-soo looked up at the stars. They all shone brightly. No destiny there. White stars. Whatever ones were black—well, their influence did not reach this world at all, and no one saw them. *Black stars, black stars—black bullshit.* Woon’s father had been full of bullshit. Dong-soo glanced at the mound of dirt not far away. “Forgive, sir. I, Baek Dong-soo, will show you how a man makes his own fate.”

13. **Who is Chun? Who am I?**

*I dislike death, however, there are some things I dislike more than death. — Mencius*

Woon’s arrogance with the Defense Minister was met with strong retaliation. Not at first. Woon was caught off-guard. He kept training. Alone. Mastering precision. He’d heard of the tale that Sword Saint could throw a bean in the air, spin around and slice the bean in half before it fell down again. Woon learned to do that in a week.

He decided not to get rid of the clothes given to him by the previous Sky Lord. There was still envy and doubt in Heuksa Chorong. Dressing like any other member would have diminished his status.

He kept Goo-hyang from the palace but allowed her the occasional visit to the Defense Minister’s home when the fat man entertained. She was a known spy and her presence was always requested; Goo-hyang said that Lord Hong had no interest in her as a woman and the minister wasn’t given to carousing at his gatherings; he talked business with Norons and her attendance was for decoration and to show off her known connection to both the palace and the Emperor.

Woon made what he thought were stealth visits to Sa-mo’s village. He watched Ji-sun’s futile efforts to start her business. He decided to help her by setting up a vendor to give her a fur cap from Qing for whatever price she offered. The vendor gave the cap for free. Woon, watching not far away, sighed at the man’s incompetence then in the next moment marveled at Ji-sun’s sense of justice. She insisted on paying the man for the worth of the rare cap. She knew that sheep’s wool was not grown anywhere in Joseon. She gave him a priceless hairpin. At first, the man refused, but then he took the pin.

The man gave the pin to Woon, and Woon wondered: *Did this come from the Crown Prince? How will I ever make things right with you, Young Miss? I took you on a path to be killed in Qing. I was responsible for the death of your beloved Crown Prince. Is there nothing I can do to help you now?*

He decided to have more fur caps ordered and made accessible to her, so her business would thrive.

Then one evening Goo-hyang reported that Woon’s presence was requested at a dinner with the Defense Minister.

It was a small gathering. In attendance were the deputy, the wild-haired guard, and surprisingly, the minister’s son, Sa-hye, that sniveling-faced boy who had initiated the courtyard rumble that first day Woon, Cho-rip and Dong-soo entered the palace as Royal guard trainees. Goo-hyang took her place next to Woon this time instead of her usual seat next to Lord Hong.

“We didn’t finish a meal last time,” the minister said. “I believe that this time we can be more cordial to one another.”
Woon was suspicious of the small talk throughout the meal. He didn’t drink the wine.

“Goo-hyang’s absence at the palace has been noted,” Lord Hong finally said.

Silence.

“At first, I believed that the new Sky Lord had grown too fond of our Lady Goo-hyang and was keeping her for himself,” the minister went on, “but then I discovered that the Sky Lord’s affections were elsewhere.”

Woon and Goo-hyang looked at one another, not understanding.

“What? Did you think I wouldn’t have you trailed?” The minister laughed. His laugh was deep, resonant, satisfied. “Sky Lord, you may still have a thing or two to learn about evading my own men.”

Woon was a few steps ahead, but he couldn’t see how the minister could use Woon’s helping Ji-sun’s business against him; it was a benign act that had nothing to do with either the palace or the Emperor.

“The young woman who had the tattoo on her back has started a trader group,” continued Lord Hong. “She’s becoming quite successful thanks to you. You realize that she and all the people in her group—I can change their fates with a single command?”

And Woon understood.

“She’s done nothing to you,” he said.

“I have something I wish for you, Sky Lord, to do for me.”

Hong’s son—he looked younger than Woon and people said Woon looked young for his age—that Hong Sa-hye with the tiny eyes and blank expression of a salamander, spoke next. “Our spies have brought us information about the Crown Prince’s—I mean the deposed Crown Prince’s—guards. They are bitter and out for revenge. They were overheard plotting to assassinate my father. The bastards are going to attack tonight.”

“They’re very capable swordsman,” the minister said. “But of course, you can handle them, can’t you?”

“Your men, surely—” Woon began.

“You’re a man who cares to defend others, are you not? Will you prove yourself to me and kill these bastards who want to assassinate the Defense Minister of our nation?”

Woon couldn’t help it. He felt his lips part and no words come out. He had no response.

“You can kill them, can’t you? You’re an assassin.” Lord Hong smiled. “But will you?”

The previous Sky Lord had stood up to Lord Hong, the stories went. Time and time again, the men of Heuksa Chorong spoke of it. The Pig said it, “Chun refused his gold, so I took the job.” Was there no hold the minister had on the man? That Sky Lord loved the Earth Lord, and everyone knew.

The Earth Lord could’ve left Heuksa Chorong under the protection of Sword Saint, the superior swordsman, but how far away does one have to travel to escape the manipulations of the palace?
Woon touched the rim of his glass of wine with his forefinger. Woon himself could’ve travelled with Sword Saint under his protection too, had Woon not been intent on his own goals. He knew the risks when he returned to Heuksa Chorong. He’d made a mistake. He’d exposed his heart.

“You’ll stay after dinner?” Lord Hong smiled. “The attack should occur well after they believe I’ve retired for the night.”

“Ride back,” Woon told Goo-hyang through gritted teeth. “It could become dangerous here later.”

The satisfied smiles around the table were too much to bear.

Later that night, when Woon returned, Goo-hyang would meet him at the gates and tell him that the heart, the more one tried to hide it, the more it revealed itself. Before the altar of swords, the Earth Lord would approach Woon as well and tell him that to nurse a heart was the death of an assassin. Woon would not only feel the shame of having killed two men who fought alongside the Crown Prince but the indignity of having to hear advice from women about his tender heart.

At the moment, though, he had no choice but to kill.

*How is this any different from being under the boot of that old pirate, Chun?*

Dinner was over; the servants cleared the table; the men continued to stare at Woon with that odd contempt.

Woon turned to Lord Hong: “I imagine that the reason you’re truly requesting my help is because your guards can’t handle two swordsmen trained at the place. I won’t do you a favor. I’ll demand a fee, like any assassin.”

“How much money do you think it takes to encourage a tiny business like that? Nothing.” Woon looked around the room with a menacing frown. “I want gold. An assassin’s wages.”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be facing these men in direct combat.” Woon had fought them before, in what he had believed what defense of Ji-sun at the Buddhist temple. Woon was a much better fighter now. “Do you have Chinese double blades in your arsenal?”

“Of course. Are you proficient at them?”

“Of course.”

The looks around the room had changed. The men understood that Woon could kill any one of them. All of them left for their own homes.

Woon positioned himself in the darkness outside the house.

When the men came to assassinate the Minister of Defense came, Lord Hong, in a gesture of insane boldness, was standing on his front porch. The assassins pulled down their masks to reveal themselves and called the man a monster. The minister’s guards, naturally, proved no match for former Crown Prince’s guards. One by one, Lord Hong’s men, holding up night torches and swords in awkward stances, were picked off.

Before more men could be hurt, Woon emerged from the shadows.
“Woon! You fiend!”

Woon was accustomed to insults. He would never be comfortable killing. He was good at it, though. His face was expressionless this time.

He blocked a double attack with his two blades.

He spun around and delivered a fatal blow to one assassin.

As the other was escaping, Woon threw his other blade and hit him in the leg.

The man stretched his sword towards the Minister of Defense.

Woon stabbed the man in the neck and the blade came out the man’s throat. The assassin’s sword was only a hand’s length from the minister’s belly as the assassin knelt there, spewing blood, dying.

Lord Hong arched an eyebrow. “Why is the weather so bad?”

The assassin fell.
At Heuksa Chorong, Goo-hyang was waiting for Woon at the gates. Her presence surprised him. She asked if there was anything he needed, if she should draw a bath. He felt ashamed; she was truly not offering her body to him but was offering comfort. She had seen his exposed heart, just as whoever had trailed him in the village had.

“I thought,” Woon confessed, “that I could hide my attachment to those people.”

“The heart,” the gisaeng said, “the more one tries to hide it, the more it will reveal itself.”

“I am trying to be a leader is all.”

“I want to help you.”

“Here,” he said, tossing her the purse that held gold. “Keep this in your room tonight. Tomorrow before dawn, take one of our men, one of our deep spies—someone you know but someone I don’t—and have this man escort you to the palace. I want you to bring the money into the court and deliver it to the right person.”


“What for?”

“A gift,” Woon said. “An anonymous gift to the coffers of the Prince Heir. I may not ever be able to make up for what I did to the Prince Heir’s father, but I can take blood money from Heuksa Chorong and return it to the nation.”

Inside the headquarters, Woon walked up to the altar of swords, took out his sword, knelt, and stabbed the floor with his blade. A single tear rolled down his face.

*The men who wielded these swords. They only escaped lives of blood and killing with their own deaths by the sword.*

He heard foot-steps. How did the Earth Lord know he would be coming here?

She stepped out of the shadows. “You are wielding your sword with your heart, Yeo Woon. I can feel it. Didn’t I already tell you that nursing a heart is the death of an assassin?”

Through his shame, Woon also felt anger. “That heart was buried long ago. Without it, my sword had no purpose in this life. Now that my heart is guiding me, who are you to say that I am going to fail and die? How many years have you yourself lived with your own heart exposed to everyone?”

“You’re being insolent and speaking nonsense.”

“Tell me, Earth Lord, where is your own heart? It beats to protect someone, doesn’t it? You would do anything to protect the man who lived here with you, am I right?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said. “You’re too young to understand these things.”

“But not too young to be the new Sky Lord?” Woon’s voice was shaking. He made it stop shaking. His next sentence was spoken with calm authority. “I may not know what you expect of me, but I know what I expect of myself. I will do things my way here.”

“If you think you can defeat what Chun built,” the strange woman said, “you can’t. If you think you can escape this place, you can’t. If you want to live free, be the Sky Lord, but rid yourself of attachments to the outside world.”

“I don’t know why you echo his lies.” Woon rose and pulled his sword out of the ground where it had left a scar. “You’re wrong. I can defeat Chun.”

The Earth Lord looked alarmed.

“And escape?” Woon smiled. “You are the one who has made yourself a prisoner here. You won’t have to escape Heuksa Chorong once it no longer exists.”

And with that remark, Woon walked away.

The following morning, the Earth Lord requested Woon’s presence for breakfast in the courtyard and said that the guards had noted Goo-hyang’s departure before dawn with a masked man. The Earth Lord said that she should be consulted if there was going to be any action among spies in the palace, and Woon said that the day’s business was nothing. No deep spies were being awakened, no terrible intrigues were going on.

“It is wise not to act in response to your own feelings, Woon,” the Earth Lord said. “If you feel any humiliation by any minister of the court and try to retaliate, you may find yourself being paid back three-fold. Chun knew this, and he avoided palace politics. The webs there are too intricate. He did
not like playing with all the nasty bugs, he said. He preferred face-to-face combat. He was proud of how he confronted them. He avoided who he didn’t like and killed who he wanted to kill."

Woon laughed. “Are you telling me I should kill the Minister of Defense?”

“Why do you insist on acting like such a child? In the absence of your mentor, I’ve been trying to teach you what he would have done. I’ve been telling you to rid yourself of attachments to the outside world. Don’t be guided by emotions.”

“Why would I want to be like him?”

“Fine.” The Earth Lord set down her spoon. “Do you know why I stayed with him? Yes, my heart stayed with him. What good would it do if he were distracted by anyone outside this place when his pride is here? When his purpose is here? Love, although you are truly too young to know this right now, is about being like-minded.”

Woon thought the conversation was futile. He had no interest in the woman’s stupid love life.

“You’re of the age when young people make bad choices in love,” the Earth Lord went on.

Woon didn’t laugh again, but he wanted to. Who in the world chooses to fall in love with the head of an assassin guild and his greatest rival at the same time?

“One of the reasons Chun sent for Goo-hyang was so that you would have a companion within the guild who suited you,” the Earth Lord said. “You can keep her close here. She is someone you can protect. She is like you. Anyone else… anyone else you may hold in your heart—you need to forget.”

Woon rose. He bowed. “Thank you for the morning’s company, but I prefer to take my meals alone in my room.”

Walking back to that room, Woon thought about what a sad and contradictory person the Earth Lord was. If he could, if she would only follow him one day, Woon would free her from this House of Blood.

Alone, sitting on his bed, Woon thought The Earth Lord is like me in too many ways. And that was frightening. And then he remembered another woman about whom he’d thought the same: Ji-sun. And yet another, whose servitude to her role as a gisaeng and whose defiant eyes continued to unsettle Woon: Goo-hyang.

There’s a man I want to be more like, though. I can’t be him, though, not in this life-time. I wonder what you’re doing right now, Baek Dong-soo.

14. Three Years Later

All alone, I see the moon so bright, as I sit on fortress walls.  
My sword held close tonight I keep the watch with anxious heart.  
Yet somewhere in the darkened night, a pipe lulls worry away. –Admiral Yi Sun-shin, “At Hansan Island Fortress,” Joseon era poem

After the first year passed, Dong-soo was full of worry. He felt lonely and anxious. He knew he
wasn’t ready to return. He had forged his own sword, left the training area to acquire new weaponry, had not yet mastered them all, understood that Sunsegnim wanted more and more from him.

After the second year, Sunsegnim made a meal for the first time in a long time. Dong-soo had been learning to cook; he didn’t burn the rice anymore. Sunsegnim made seaweed soup and told Dong-soo about the day he was born. “Your limbs were deformed because your mother had bound her waist and delayed the birth. She was afraid you would be discovered and murdered. When you were found, the Minister of Defense acquired a decree to have you boiled in oil. That’s when I used my badge from the king to save you. In return for your life, I gave up my arm.” Dong-soo said he could never repay that sacrifice, and Sunsegnim said that Dong-soo would honor not only his master, his father, who gave his life for the Crown Prince, and his mother, who died on Dong-soo’s birthday, giving her life for Dong-soo, but that Dong-soo would honor all Joseon soon. “Dong-soo-yah, you will become the greatest warrior this nation has ever seen.” This was the dream of a boastful child. To hear these words from his master, Dong-soo felt unworthy but knew he had to fulfill this role. He dropped to his knees. “Sunsegnim, I will become that warrior.”

Dong-soo stopped counting the months, was vaguely aware of the moon waning and growing full again. It must have been a couple months before the new year that Sunsegnim decided it was time to return.

“There is only one thing you have not mastered,” he said. “The Living Sword is a balance between Life and Death. You do not know when to kill.”

“But?” Dong-soo was confused. “You taught me to spare life. I thought I was to use my sword to protect at all times.”

“One has to kill without hesitation but without revenge,” Sunsegnim said. “I myself have not mastered the Living Sword. I regret not killing the former Human Lord of Heuksa Chorong when I had the chance. I cut him piece by piece each time I encountered him—first, his thumb. Then his hand. He is not a man who heeds warnings. There are some men who are unredeemable.”

Creepy Guy?

“Maybe.” Dong-soo was not reluctant to bring up the proposition. “Maybe your old friend, the Sky Lord, is one of those men.”

“Maybe.” A sorrowful look passed over Sunsegnim’s face. “My heart will know when my sword crosses his again.”

The two started down the mountain path. Dong-soo wondered how long it had been since the Sky Lord’s return, how Woon had been dealing with that. Dong-soo had not heard anything news from his home village in quite some time. There had been no time on the mountain-top since the second year passed. There had been no loneliness in the alone-ness. Dong-soo had felt Woon in his heart.

The first person Dong-soo encountered in the village was Ji-sun. She was leaning over a crate of ginseng. He smiled. She seemed to sense his presence then turned around like lightning, a bow in her hands. The arrow shot at Dong-soo, and he caught it with his left hand.

“You’ve come back!” Her face looked shocked. “We were all worried.”

“Why are you so jumpy?”

“Bandits attack our storage all the time.” She lowered her weapon.
“Bandits?” The only bandits Dong-soo knew of were Jin-joo’s group.

“No, no, not them,” Ji-sun said quickly, reading Dong-soo’s mind. “They are part of my merchant group now—they’ve given up their thieving ways. There are petty thieves everywhere, not difficult to deal with. Most of the time our merchant group shoos them away. One time, Woon—”

“Woon?”

“I caught him disabling thieves outside the gates.”

“He’s been back here?”

“I think so, but he never comes inside to talk to anyone. I wanted to speak with him that one time, but he merely looked at me and took off. He had knocked out all the thieves. He didn’t kill anyone. I haven’t seen him since.”

Later, Dong-soo bowed before his adoptive father, Sa-mo. Mi-so was eager to tell the news that Cho-rip had passed the civil service exam and surprise! Cho-rip was not Cho-rip at all—for years he had been using a pseudonym; Cho-rip really belonged to one of the most noble families in Hanyang and was now serving the palace library.

_Hiding for years like Woon._ Dong-soo smiled. _My two best friends were not who they said they were, and I never knew._

“And Jin-joo—ah, where is she?”

“Off selling or buying things for the trader group, I guess.” Mi-so was too eager to offer the next bit of information. “Remember the painter guy? Kim Hong-do? He was everywhere? He wanted to draw everyone’s martial arts poses? He was always sniffing after Jin-joo? He is still sniffing after her. He told Cho-rip he wants to marry her.”

“Really?” That would take care of one of Dong-soo’s problems. Jin-joo being married off sounded nice.

Sa-mo was eager to see how much Dong-soo had learned, and Dong-soo was happy to display his prowess in a match. The duel lasted less than a blink. Mi-so and Jang-mi clapped and jumped up and down.

“Eh, my body is stiff,” said Sa-mo. “Three years training and you’re pretty good. You remind me of myself in my prime.” The old butcher shrugged. “More like your teacher in his prime. He’s the great one. Have you truly surpassed him?”

Jang-mi looked around. “Where did Sword Saint go?”

“To wander,” Dong-soo. “He’s like that.”

“He’s like that,” Sa-mo agreed. “Even when we were together, he was alone.”

That reminded Dong-soo of Woon again. Alone-ness. Woon had always practiced aloneness like a master.

“I need to catch up with my Sunsegnim,” Dong-soo told everyone. He wasn’t yet accustomed to being without his teacher by his side.

As he left, he heard the women saying how much Dong-soo resembled Sword Saint now even
though he was not his blood son, how handsome Dong-soo looked with his hair pulled up, and how amazing his martial arts skills were. Dong-soo considered how once upon a time, he would’ve have been happy to overhear such words, but now they made no difference; they fell like soft rain on a tender leaf and rolled off. Dong-soo knew there was so much he still had to learn; he was indeed the greatest swordsman in Joseon now, but there was so much, so much more to learn.

He knew, without knowing how he knew, which path Sunseongnim had taken. A dirt path not far from the old Bandit hide-out, a wooded area, a place not travelled by villagers.

“Is it strange to be among them again?” Dong-soo asked. “I’m so happy, but you seem a little distant.”

“I’m always glad to see old friends, but there’s one old friend I’m not sure I want to see so soon.” Creepy Guy.

“Are you looking for him? The Sky Lord?”

“Waiting for him.”

Dong-soo sensed that his master wanted to be alone. “I’ll be going,” Dong-soo said. “There are places I want to see.”

On the path back, Dong-soo heard the thunder of hoof-beats. A hundred? An army? This was worth investigating. Again, he knew without knowing, that his heart was drawing closer to Woon.

*

Loneliness. Woon had spent most of his life not knowing anything but loneliness, so the loneliness of three years was not difficult for him. Time passed the way it usually passed, one goal at a time. One skill in martial arts surpassed another; he invented his own techniques; he requested new weapons from Japan; he learned to sneak past the most vigilant guards without detection. He was certain that no one could match him for speed and stealth now, that few could challenge his swordsmanship.

He was not, however, so proud as to be unaware of what he lacked. He was deficient in body mass and brute strength, he had only average stamina, and any martial artist was susceptible to distractions or bad luck. Still, a dead bird falling out of the sky between two swords could just as well be turned into an advantage as into a disadvantage. The key was to use all one’s senses, not only one’s eyes. Woon practiced dueling blind-folded with some of Heuksa Chorong’s best men.

One day he sat in a still forest. He wore a new white waistcoat over black clothes. Goo-hyang had been adamant about gold details and some brightness; he preferred all black. His hair was shorter; Goo-hyang had crimped and styled it, painted his eyes. His eyes were closed. He was listening to the sound of his heart beating, listening for the slightest change of direction in the wind. When a pine needle fell from the tree above him, he drew his sword and cut the needle in half.

Two years. Am I ready to challenge the Sky Lord?

He stood up, walked out of the shadows and sunlight glared off the white waistcoat Goo-hyang had insisted he wear. A distraction in battle. He would discard it.
Despite Goo-hyang’s protestations, he had gradually started to care less about his appearance as his men gave him more and more respect. Down had gone the high pony-tail that made him resemble the Earth Lord. The blue silk clothes were eventually burned in a pyre. Woon disliked bright colors; to distinguish himself from the lower-ranks, he had clothes made from the finest black broadcloth. One morning, while washing his hair, he found a knot in it. He took a knife and chopped off the length of a hand.

Goo-hyang had insisted on trimming it the next day.

It was after she trimmed it and was combing it that she spoke up.

“You avoid me. I try to give you solace but—”

“It’s best for you if you don’t know too much.” Woon had grown practiced at making his voice sound distant. “You already know too much.”

“I know more than you think I know,” Goo-hyang replied in that mysterious way of hers. Her words bordered on insolent but were never overly-familiar. That she was in love with Woon had been plain for a long time.

“I wonder why the Earth Lord remains here,” she said that evening. “She leaves to visit that daughter of hers in the village somedays, but is she waiting for the Sky Lord—I mean, the Sky Lord of old—to return? It has been almost two years now, and given his talents, he should have completed his task.”

“He’ll return.” For some reason, that particular evening, Woon was allowing Goo-hyang to braid his hair. Talking to her was a comfort. For some reason, her fingers brushing against the nape of his neck as they grabbed another lock did not annoy him. He hated to be touched, but Goo-hyang was practiced at touching people, wasn’t she?

“Where is he then?”

“I don’t know.” Woon himself had begun to wonder after the first year. “Maybe he needs to train before he can battle with Sword Saint.”

“There’s a chance he’s dead.”

If he’s dead, then I can’t kill him.

Woon didn’t mind her hands touching the scar on his neck; she knew all about the brand of Heuksa Chorong. She wasn’t branded; in fact, the Sky Lord had removed a tattoo of hers that marked her the daughter of a traitor in exchange for her becoming his slave, a gisaeng, a spy.

The purpose of braiding the hair had only been to unbraid it again? What was Goo-hyang doing? “This will put a fine crimp in your hair,” she explained. “It’s a style that was fashionable among young yangban some years ago. The humidity in the warm months will fill your hair when it’s this shorter length, but if you allow me to style it like this, it will stay smooth.”

“I really can’t be bothered.”

“Appearances are important,” she said in a soft voice. “I understand how you grew up, not caring much about these things, but in order to achieve what you want, you will have to impress authorities with more than your intelligence and martial arts.”
Woon sighed. “I see.”

“We can compromise. A little eye make-up. A new waistcoat, not so dark.”

Woon felt her palms rest on his shoulders. How long had it been since someone had laid hands on him that way—with sincere affection?

“You’re lonely, my lord.”

Woon felt as though she had already un-dressed him; he was exposed.

She had been bold that evening. Her hand moved across his clavicle over his shirt and further down. Her fingers spread across his chest. “Allow me to stay with you.”

He took her wrist and gently removed her hand from his chest.

“Is it true?” She asked. “Do you hold Yoo Ji-sun in your heart? The Earth Lord believes you do.”

“No, it’s not like that.”

Goo-hyang took a step backwards.

Woon put his hands on his knees. “I want her to be well. I was not able to protect her before so—”

“I see. You don’t favor me either?”

He wanted to make sure Goo-hyang knew his exact intentions. “It’s important for your own safety that—”

“Baek Dong-soo.”

“What?” Woon had been so startled his heart had skipped. His chest had grown cold. He didn’t know what Goo-hyang had heard or what she could have possibly meant by mentioning Dong-soo’s name.

“The days following your fever two years ago,” she explained. “I wouldn’t allow anyone else in your room because that man was the only one who made you smile.”

“Yes, yes.” Woon had been so nervous. “He’s my best friend.”

“I’ve seen many things,” Goo-hyang said. “I have lived in many countries. I know about men loving other men.”

Woon had realized, at that moment, how small and stupid he still was in the world, how much he didn’t know yet about the ways human beings interacted with other human beings—and here, he had always believed he was so observant.

“You and Baek Dong-soo were more than friends two years ago. I saw you leave the house together one night with mats and blankets. I saw the way … the loving way you looked at one another.”
Woon could not deny anything. He turned his face away.

“Two years is time enough for the fires of a first love to die out. When he returns, his feelings may have changed. I hope you are prepared for that.” She had not sounded jealous. She sounded sincerely concerned, and Woon understood that her feelings for him were not trivial. “I understand,” she continued, “that first loves can linger in a heart, but they are always not practical or possible.”

“Thank you,” Woon said, “but Baek Dong-soo is a memory now. I think only of the future.”

“Of course.” With that, Goo-hyang had bowed. “You are a man of purpose and resolve. An impassable mountain. I have not forgotten your words to Lord Hong. I will take my leave. Good night, my lord.” And she left, a cloud of grace in her bright skirts, her hairpin catching all the light in the dark room and disappearing like a star.
One day Woon's blade split a pine needle in half. One day Woon walked in the forest and believed that he was strong enough to overcome Lord Hong, the Sky Lord, any man who stood in his path, but the ways of women were still a mystery to him. He had still been watching over Ji-sun, taking petty assignments and the Defense Minister’s gold, to make sure that she and her friends were safe from any and all palace dangers; Ji-sun’s merchant business was thriving. A small issue like that mattered. When Dong-soo returned, he would be proud of her; she would make a good wife for him. Or Jin-joo, who was involved in the business as well. She was the one most suited for Dong-soo, but that man—Hong-do, the painter—was following Jin-joo around like a puppy. Maybe Jin-joo’s feelings had changed?

*Feelings change.*

Goo-hyang’s feelings mattered too. Woon wasn’t sure how to deal with them. Cutting down a man was easier. Woon didn’t believe Dong-soo’s feelings were very mutable; neither were Chun’s. The former Sky Lord would return to the House of Blood he had built.

Then the third year was near passing, and still the former Sky Lord had not returned.

But the former Human Lord did.

One day, Woon heard a commotion in the entrance of the headquarters and a familiar voice. Over the sounds of guards scrambling to defend the building, Dae-ung spoke: “A rotten smell rushes to my nose. Sky Lord, you bastard, come out, come out!”

Woon showed himself.

“Where’s the Sky Lord?” The Pig looked confused.

“He left a long time ago. I’m the Sky Lord now.”

“A brat like you? Eh, you’re a custodian. Ga-ok-ah? Ga-ok-ahhhhh?”

The Earth Lord appeared.

The Pig’s face showed genuine fondness. “I’ve missed you.” He walked up the steps to the altar and touched her cheek with his stump of a metal hand.

The Earth Lord shoved his arm away. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t touch her!” Woon snapped.

“Heh, heh.” The Pig looked unrepentant. “It wasn’t a part of my body that touched her. This isn’t a hand.” He held up the stump. “Not a real hand, you see.”

Woon was never so disgusted with a person.

The Pig turned to face the door. “ANYWAY. Listen to the Imperial Order! Ever since the Sky Lord killed me and threw me out of this place, I’ve been waiting to return from Qing for payback, and I’ve come with direct orders from the Emperor.” He looked from the Earth Lord to Woon, beaming. “Nothing you can do or say. Imperial Order, heh.” He cleared his throat. “You can come in now!”

A man entered. A foreigner. Bald, middle-aged, trim hair over his lip. He wore red robes in the style of nobleman from Qing and carried a long sword in his hand.
“I give you Jang Ryang, the new Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong.” The Pig smiled his twisted smile. “Pay your respects.”

Woon had no choice but to bow. The Earth Lord bowed as well.

“You two.” The Pig pointed at Woon and the Earth Lord. “I’ve been assigned to discuss the first mission with the higher-ups. Is there somewhere we can meet? Yes, somewhere private. Ga-ok’s chambers will do.”

“Fine,” the Earth Lord said. “It’s not like you haven’t barged in there before. I don’t care. I sit there with Woon sometimes to talk about business.”

She led the way. Woon and Dae-ung followed. “Wipe your filthy mouth,” Woon whispered to the Pig. “You’re drooling.”

He laughed.

The first order from Qing was to kill the Sky Lord. And by the Sky Lord, Dae-ung meant the missing Sky Lord, the man who had betrayed him, stabbed him, tossed him outside the building like trash.
“Why?” Woon asked. “I don’t remember the Sky Lord ever having done anything to insult the Emperor.”

“The new Sky Lord kills the previous Sky Lord, is that not the tradition?” The Pig chose to stand while Woon and the Earth Lord were seated. Woon was reminded of Chun, who often did the same thing—a gesture of dominance. “Ga-ok-ah, my lady, it was the same with your father, wasn’t it?” The Pig looked at the Earth Lord who looked away. “It hurts, but that’s the way it goes, right? Ah, the smell of this place. I missed it. All the heartache. The secrets and heartache. I will just love crushing the man who hurt you all. Honest. I’m that sort of a person.”

The Pig leaned over the Earth Lord’s chair. “You really don’t know where the Sky Lord is? You’re so beautiful even when you’re quiet.” He was too close to her face. The Earth Lord was too nervous about the long-anticipated visit from Qing to protest. She obviously hadn’t predicted the order for Chun’s head. Neither had Woon.

The Pig looked at Woon with a look Woon recognized from childhood, an amused look Woon now understood after all these years. “Brat, did you become like Ga-ok?”

Woon lowered his eyes.

“You don’t have the charm, though.” The Pig pronounced.

“Ah, so I set myself up,” Dae-ung said. “The Sky Lord took the scroll I made of the world’s best fighters and left. I made him leave for a while, and now I can’t find him.”

Amazing. He knew the Sky Lord’s weakness and lured him away from this place—for what reason? So that at the wharf that day the Sky Lord would not interfere with his scheme to board the ship to Qing and impress the Emperor. And now the Pig is back for revenge.

A few days later, the former Human Lord, who interestingly enough, had not asked for his former position back and had not asked what position Woon was now assuming in the guild, returned with information acquired from, of all people, the Defense Minister. The Pig had become aligned with
that piece of nastiness.

His talent for persistence is amazing. He’s more like a cockroach than a pig.

The meeting took place with the new head of squads, the new Sky Lord from Qing, the Earth Lord, and Woon.

“Lord Hong informs me that his intelligence says the Sky Lord is back in Hanyang.” Dae-ung said. “The Sky Lord is after a swordsman who is not on my list. A former assassin here. You’ll recall him, Ga-ok-ah. He served as your guard when you were a young, young, pretty thing?”

The look on the Earth Lord’s face was pure fear. Woon didn’t understand.

“There’s a price on Hwang Jin-gi’s head.” Dae-ung was chuckling at the Earth Lord’s distress. “Ten thousand yang. Oh, he’s a great traitor, and no bounty hunter can touch him. His skills are said to be on a par with the Sky Lord’s.”


“So, unless anyone has any objections to the new Sky Lord taking the old Sky Lord’s head—” Here, the Pig glanced at the Earth Lord. “The next plan of action—”

“I have no objection,” the Earth Lord said. “I understand the rules of Heuksa Chorong. But even so, do you think such a thing can be done? Surely, you are aware of Chun’s skills.”

“Ha, he will wet his neck and wait for me. I have Lord Hong’s army waiting for him too. All I need is for you to secure the location of Hwang Jin-gi. If you do that for us, then we will be waiting for the Sky Lord. If you do that, then maybe….” The Pig smiled. “The kind man who left the guild and adopted your little baby will be spared? We only want Chun’s head, not your precious secret family, you understand.”

The Earth Lord rose. “I don’t know the whereabouts of Hwang Jin-gi. The Minister of Defense is known for being a crafty person. I don’t know what lies he told you. I don’t know the whereabouts of the Sky Lord.” She left the room.

The puzzle came together now. There was a daughter. Jin-joo. The name itself meant pearl—what was born out of great suffering yet was precious. The weapon the Earth Lord was most proficient at and famous for was the Black Pearl, a ball she threw with deadly speed. And the father of Jin-joo? Sword Saint. A child from that man would’ve been killed on sight at birth. She would be killed now if Chun knew, wouldn’t she? Hwang Jin-gi must have left the guild with the baby or else escorted the Earth Lord when she was pregnant to a far place where the baby was born and then adopted Jin-joo.

So, was Jin-joo the one the Earth Lord lived to protect?

Woon had Goo-hyang confirm Lord Hong’s investigations about the old Sky Lord. Woon learned that the Earth Lord was visiting the old Bandit Hide-out and that the minister had discovered that Jin-gi still maintained connections there with old friends, despite his success with Ji-sun’s merchant group. The Bandit Hide-out was a busy but secret place. Soon enough, Lord Hong knew where the Sky Lord was and how quickly he was closing in on Jin-gi.

The new Sky Lord, Jang Ryang, came to the headquarters with Dae-ung and ordered Woon to join them. The Earth Lord was nowhere to be found.
Followed by a government army in supposed pursuit of the traitor Hwang Jin-gi, the assassins Woon, Dae-ung and Jang Ryang from Qing rode to the old Bandit hide-out. The mission was to kill Chun.

The horses kept a leisurely pace. The new Sky Lord knew nothing about Yeo Woon and did not seem interested in him until now. He seemed to want to know more about the old Sky Lord, though. He pulled up his horse next to Woon’s. “Are you frightened?” The new Sky Lord asked Woon. “To be seeing this Chun again?”

“No,” Woon said simply.

The horses’ hooves made a roaring sound along the path. Behind the horses, dozens of soldiers on foot. Woon was accustomed to stealth entrances; this arrival would not be a surprise to anyone. There would be time for innocent people to escape.

Or maybe there wouldn’t be time?

Woon rushed his horse to the forefront of the group, turned the mare sideways and raised his hand. “Stop!”

“What’s the problem, Brat?” The Pig asked. “Do you need to take a piss?”

“This isn’t the way Heuksa Chorong does things. The sound of an approaching army? We’ll give time for everyone to escape once they hear us.”

Jang Ryang nodded. “He’s right.”

*Maybe he’s a good swordsman, but he’s not impressing me. He can’t defeat the old Chun I knew, let alone the one who may have refined his skills.*

“I’ll go ahead first, scope out the territory, see if Chun is near,” Woon said. “By the position of the sun, it’s almost the end of *sashi*. If I don’t return by *oshi*, it’s alright to descend with all your men on the hide-out.”

Woon rode ahead for a while, jumped off his horse, and then, a shadow among shadows in his black clothes, he felt like the person he had always been—the reluctant assassin, the hidden protector, or perhaps one who was waiting to be saved from the darkness himself. That opportunity had come once in Baek Dong-soo. Woon, for almost three years, had been creating his own opportunities. He had no idea what he was going to do today.

He almost walked right into the Sky Lord.

The Sky Lord looked no different. It was as if he hadn’t changed clothes since the day he left—the black shirt was raggedier, the mala swung from his neck as the man stepped back, the smell of wine and sweat wafted from his body.

He laughed, as if back at the headquarters, surprised to find a messenger bowing, offering the latest box of gifts from Qing or an envelope expressing a note of deepest gratitude from a Noron now forever in his debt. The Sky Lord’s face beamed with that old pride in himself. “You,” he said to Woon with pleasure in his voice. “You look terrible.”

The Sky Lord reached forward and touched Woon’s hair. “What happened here? You cut it?”

Woon didn’t respond. He didn’t feel anything. He stood there, not feeling.
“These clothes aren’t …. good.” The Sky Lord shook his head. “You don’t look like someone in charge.”

“I’m not,” Woon said. “The Emperor appointed a new Sky Lord. I’m with him now as well as a brigade of Lord Hong’s men. We’ve been sent to kill you.”

The Sky Lord’s hand went from Woon’s hair to rest on Woon’s shoulder. “Oh? I heard the horses. That was what all the ruckus was about?” The thumb pressed deeper, and the fingers gave Woon’s shoulder a gentle shake. “Do you believe you have the skills to overcome me now?”

Woon flashed to a memory of kneeling before the slain Crown Prince. *Forgive me. I cannot overcome him.*

The Sky Lord’s face drew closer. “I expect you’ve grown, and I like a good fight but……” A snort. “I’m here for something else today.”

The Sky Lord let Woon go and began to walk away, laughing. “No worries, no worries. I’ll make short work of what I came here for, and then you and your stand-in Chun can go back. I’ll take care of the fake later.”

Woon followed the man: it was an old habit to do so; it was raw instinct, but it didn’t seem like the time to challenge the Sky Lord.

In the courtyard before the cottages of the Hide-out, the Sky Lord paused to call “Jin-gi! Come out!” Woon stayed hidden in the shadows. Bandits drew swords and picked up stones.

*Damn, there’s Jin-joo. She’s scared.*

Jin-gi emerged, sword by his side. He bowed to the Sky Lord. “You are here, my lord?”

Jin-joo ran to her father’s side. “What is this about?”

“Daughter, go inside.”

Jin-joo took one step back, not looking like she would comply fully. She stared at the Sky Lord, and he—*he smiled at her.*

“I heard you’ve become very strong. The rumor is that you’re as strong as I am.”

“I apologize.”

“Don’t worry. When I defeat you, then all the better for me. Now, draw it. Your sword.” The Sky Lord gestured as if beckoning a servant for more wine.

A stern look from Jin-gi to Jin-joo, and the daughter went inside. As she entered the house, another woman came out. *The Earth Lord.*

The Sky Lord’s face showed its weakness. He was no longer a devil-may-care master of weaponry, the “historical figure” who toyed with people and amused himself with the thrill of the chase because what else was there. He stared at the Earth Lord with open longing.

“Why?” He said at last. “Why are you here?”

“Stop this,” she said.

“You know I can’t.”

*
“A person named Jang Ryang has come from Qing. He’s an imperial representative and—”

“Ga-ok-ah, don’t say anymore. Qing? I suppose that means the Pig is back too? I should greet them all, everyone who wants a piece of me--don’t you suppose?”

“They can be here any moment. You should—”

“I never stop,” He said and walked past her. “You should know that.”

Jin-joo had walked out of the house again. Jin-gi’s sword was drawn. “Daughter!”

“Father! How can I go inside if you’re out here?”

“Jin-joo-ah, if you see me fall, you can absolutely have no thoughts of revenge—do you understand?”

“Father!”

The Sky Lord was known for not drawing his weapon until the very last particle of time before a fight began—his sword appeared from thin air, and then the first parries were fast—the blades shot off blinding glares of sunlight. Woon watched with keen interest. Jin-gi was a great swordsman but slower than the Sky Lord. He kept up with him, but he would be defeated.

Woon had known that Dae-ung would not follow orders and would arrive before oshi. Woon heard men climbing the cottage rooftops. The arrows flew and hit jugs of water, fruits on tables, a few bandits.

“Keep shooting,” came Dae-ung’s voice, “until you hit something important, will you?”

Jin-gi and the Sky Lord had not quit battling. Jin-joo had drawn her bow, and the Earth Lord had drawn her sword. Woon stood, his hand poised on his short blade, waiting.

Then an arrow hit Jin-gi’s thigh.

“Father!”

Another arrow hit the Earth Lord in the back, and the woman collapsed in Jin-joo’s arms.

“Mother!”

“I’m fine, Jin-joo-ah. I’m fine.”

Jin-joo would not be consoled. She wept and screamed. “Mother! Mother!”

The Sky Lord caught the next arrow aimed for the Earth Lord with his hand. He batted away other arrows with his sword.

Dae-ung raised his hand. “Stop it with the arrows. This is getting interesting. A family reunion.”

Woon walked over to where Dae-ung and the new Sky Lord stood--Lord Hong’s noisy inefficient army behind them. “We should bring the Earth Lord and her daughter back with us,” Woon said. He knew his pleading for the women’s lives was transparent. What assassin cared for such things? “There’s no imperial order against them.”

“I’ll leave that for Hong to decide,” said Dae-ung. “He’s a little angry with Ga-ok-ah right now. See, she told him that she’d killed Jin-gi a long time ago, and look, turns out that—Shhh, I want to
The Sky Lord had knelt beside the crying Jin-joo. He was growling like a tiger. “What did you say, girl? Did you call this woman your mother?”

Jin-joo nodded.

“Ga-ok-ah! Tell me!”

“Enough of this!” said Jang Ryang who stood next to Woon. “Is he the third Sky Lord, the one we were sent to kill?”

Woon nodded.

The man drew a poison arrow and threw it. It hit the kneeling, distracted Chun in the back. He turned and pulled it out. “Ga-ok-ah!” His voice was beastly. “TELL ME!”

“She’s yours,” The Earth Lord said, trembling. “We have to get her out of here. Please, Chun. Please. She’s your daughter.”

Woon couldn’t see the Sky Lord’s expression.

“Please help me save her.”

Swordsmen had surrounded the Sky Lord now. He stood up, fought them off easily while Jin-joo helped her mother back into the house.

The Sky Lord faced Dae-ung, Woon, and Jang Ryang.

“So, you’re the man from Qing? An imperial military officer? I’m interested in what you can do. Draw your sword.”

A battle seemed to begin in earnest, two beautiful swords with gold hilts flashing in an open space lit by the high sun. Then, without warning, the Sky Lord turned away and sped into the house.

Jang Ryang looked around, puzzled, put his sword on his shoulder, and with measured steps, as if he thought he might be walking into a trap, followed Chun inside the house.

They’ll escape. He’s no match for the Sky Lord. No one is. I’m not ready to fight him myself. No, not yet.

But it wasn’t over.

“You have to kill Hwang Jin-gi,” Dae-ung told Woon. “What? Don’t give me that look. You don’t want to do it? I represent the Emperor, Brat, and you have to do what I say.”

Woon looked over at Jin-joo’s father. The man pulled the arrow out of his leg and stood up. “So, Woon? Looks like you have become a devil.”

Jin-gi knew that Woon had re-joined Heuksa Chorong of his own free will. Did he, like Jin-joo, never fully trust Woon? Did he mean those words? It didn’t matter. Woon could deliver a non-fatal blow—he’d done that before—a deep cut between the third and fourth rib.

“Maybe I am a devil,” Woon said and drew his blade.

Woon fought Jin-gi. Even with his wound, the man was impressive. Woon landed a cut on Jin-gi’s
left shoulder and held his blade against his neck.

“Do it,” said Dae-ung.

Woon didn’t.

“Do it. Why are you so dramatic about these things? You were like this with that boy on the wharf too. It makes a very pretty picture when you hold a knife over someone for so long, but I think… I think it makes some people suspect you don’t want to get blood spattering your pretty—oh did I say pretty? You don’t have a pretty face. It’s a little girly but not pretty. Are you a girly man? Or are you a man, Yeo Woon?”

At that moment, swordsmen dragged out the Earth Lord, her clothes bloodied, her face tear-streaked, and tossed her to the ground.

“What are you doing, Woon?” A plea from the Earth Lord. “You can’t kill Hwang Jin-gi!”

“Do it.” A laugh from the Pig.

Woon would make his move now. Between the third and fourth rib. “Do not blame me, please,” he said in a soft voice as he drew back his blade.

“Stop this!”

Woon looked up.

There is no such thing as Destiny, but there was always Baek Dong-soo.

The man who walked towards the scene was taller, stronger, wearing soft blue and purples like azaleas Woon had seen earlier that day along the path. He carried a traveler’s back-sack and a sword. His hair, once so long and unruly, was worn in what looked like a failed top-knot, a little bush of a pony-tail. Lighter hair, maybe bleached by the sun on the mountain-top. Had he trained every day for almost three years?

*Three years.*

Time was nothing; it seemed to have slowed down as Dong-soo walked towards Woon. Woon was not aware of holding his sword in the position to strike Jin-joo’s father. His eyes met Dong-soo’s eyes.

“Woon-ah, put away your sword.”

Woon blinked. He couldn’t move.

Dong-soo drew his own sword and lay it, with curious gentleness, on top of Woon’s blade. The gesture caused all other swordsmen around them to draw their own weapons.

Dong-soo pressed Woon’s weapon down slowly, and Woon smiled.

“You,” Dae-ung said to Dong-soo. “You must still be out of your mind. Aren’t you the crazy boy still?”

Jang Ryang walked over and put his own sword across Dong-soo’s neck.

Dong-soo breathed in, breathed out. “Someone taught me that the sword is not wielded by the hand but by the heart.”
In one spectacular move, Dong-soo caught the great military officer’s wrist and disarmed him. Dong-soo’s sword clanged against Jang Ryang’s sword. “Only those who truly understand the heart can wield a sword,” Dong-soo said. He looked at Woon.

*What are you doing here, Woon-ah?*

*Three years, Dong-soo-yah. What happened in three years?*

*I trust you. I will wait for you.*

*Wait for me. There is time. Time is nothing, Woon-ah.*

*You are still making nothing out of nothing?*

*Nothing matters anymore because you are here.*

*I will wait for you. I will always be by your side.*

Jang Ryang sheathed his weapon. “Your martial art skills are great, but you’re still young.” He walked away, beckoning with his hand for others to follow.

“What? What?” Dae-ung was confused. “You—Woon, hurry and finish Jin-gi off.”

Woon was smiling, not paying any mind to the Pig.

“You’ve become so much better,” Woon said to Dong-soo.

“You’ll be hearing about me in the future,” Dong-soo said. “Joseon’s Greatest Warrior. Baek Dong-soo”

Woon smiled broadly. *His childhood boast. Only now he speaks the words without boasting.*
Woon sheathed his sword.

“What!” The Pig was not happy.

“The reason we came here was to get the Sky Lord’s neck. I have no desire to kill innocent people.” Woon glanced at Dong-soo. He didn’t want to take his eyes off Dong-soo.

“You…” The Pig was at a loss for words. He looked around. “Why is everyone leaving? Is this boy so dangerous? What--?”

Woon bowed before the Earth Lord who was sitting on the ground. He cast one last look at Dong-soo.

I’ll wait for you.

Woon turned to leave, and Dae-ung, chided for the first time since he’d arrived, walked alongside Woon, in fear of Dong-soo’s blade, in need of Woon’s protection. Woon was still smiling.

Baek Dong-soo, Joseon’s greatest warrior.

If the pupil was here, then so was the master. That meant the long-awaited battle between the old friends and rivals would come to pass. As Woon walked the sunny path away from Dong-soo, he tasted Death in his mouth as he smiled, and still, he could not stop smiling. The taste of Death, this time--would it bring a feeling of resolution? There was something satisfying about hitting a marker in time, not a death exactly, a moment that meant the next moment was coming.

In his mind, Woon saw a sundial, the marker pointing North and signifying the end of sashi, time for sleeping snakes to come out.

Dong-soo quickly assessed the wounded: Jin-gi’s shoulder was fine from Woon’s slash. Three bandits were dead from arrows. Scary Lady had a poison arrow in her back but was alive. Dong-soo carried an antidote in his sack and gave it to her.

“She’s Heuksa Chorong. Why didn’t they take her?” Jin-gi asked.

“They were sent to kill me too,” she said. “I betrayed the Defense Minister. Didn’t you see Woon bow to me? He spared us both.”

15. After I Die, I Want to Be the Wind

Little bird, weary of a lifetime in rancor and sorrow,
you cough blood while singing, then swallow it again;
you came to this world to carve it deep with sorrow by your blood,
your tears have constantly clouded a myriad ages.

This southern region is secluded, you can hide in exile;
The moonlight is so dazzling, shrouding this dawn in desolation,
your song at such a dawn startles fish a thousand leagues under the sea,
makes infant stars at the sky's edge shudder. – “Nightingale” by Kim Yeong-Nang

Dong-soo quickly assessed the wounded: Jin-gi’s shoulder was fine from Woon’s slash. Three bandits were dead from arrows. Scary Lady had a poison arrow in her back but was alive. Dong-soo carried an antidote in his sack and gave it to her.

“She’s Heuksa Chorong. Why didn’t they take her?” Jin-gi asked.

“They were sent to kill me too,” she said. “I betrayed the Defense Minister. Didn’t you see Woon bow to me? He spared us both.”
Dong-soo understood. There were going to be people who still doubted Woon.

“Where’s Jin-joo?”

“I sent her on an errand.” Scary Lady looked around. “She’s fine. Don’t worry about her.”

Dong-soo felt himself worrying nonetheless.

Jin-gi ordered the rest of the bandits to evacuate the premises, said that the location was finished forever now that Hong knew its location.

Scary Lady wasn’t scary when she showed concern for others. She refused the antidote at first, claiming someone else needed it. Jin-joo’s father said that not even if “he” were bitten by a viper would he die, and then Scary Lady relented and took the medicine.

Dong-soo understood then that both were talking about Creepy Guy. So, before Dong-soo had shown up, Creepy Guy had been there and had been struck by a poison arrow as well?

Jin-joo’s father fretted aloud about his daughter—he said she didn’t have the skills to stave off too many of Hong’s men, should any return.

“She’s fine,” Scary Lady whispered. She was woozy yet walking, her arms held on either side by Dong-soo and a limping Jin-gi. She leaned into Jin-gi. “He’s protecting her.”

“Then no viper will touch her, my lady.”

So Scary Lady knew Jin-joo’s father. What was it one of the men in the village had said about Woon’s father’s friends? That one was a member of an assassin guild? Hwang Jin-gi?

The man who was protecting Jin-joo, the one who no viper could kill? Was the answer as to who was Jin-joo’s father …. the murderous, horrible Sky Lord?

Scary Lady became even less scary when taken to Sa-mo’s home to recover, she was visited by Sunsegnim, who fell on his knees by the bed and was brought to tears by his beloved’s condition. The woman took the famous swordsman’s hand in hers and smiled through her weakness with a kind face Dong-soo had never seen her show.

“Are you in pain, Ga-ok-ah?”

“She’ll be fine,” Dong-soo said. “She’s had an antidote. And Jin-joo is fine—she’s off somewhere.” He was perplexed, if not annoyed that Sunsegnim had not asked after Jin-joo.

Sunsegnim wasted no time informing Dong-soo that the Prince Heir had summoned both he and Dong-soo to the palace. “We have to hurry. This is an important matter. The father of the Prince Heir, his Royal Majesty, wants an audience.”

It had been such a long time since Dong-soo had walked there, but the last time had been with Woon and Cho-rip. Woon’s dread of the place now informed Dong-soo consciousness with every step. Outside the Prince Heir’s house, three masked guards jumped Dong-soo. A brief tussle ensued between an unarmed Dong-soo who dodged three expert swordsmen easily, and when a tall young man, a man in royal robes who eerily resembled his murdered father, stepped out onto the courtyard, the guards pulled down their masks.

“Gak! Yong! Geol!” Dong-soo was so happy. “Why are you rascals still playing tricks on me?”
“Dong-soo-yah, your skills have improved!” Gak shouted, and the mountain boys all hugged Dong-soo.

The Prince Heir was delighted to meet the Baek Dong-soo spoken so highly of by his guards. His Highness said that this disciple of Sword Saint’s would be receiving an appointment in his Majesty’s army today. “Not a traditional position,” the young man explained. “His Majesty is awarding you a special position to serve inside and outside the palace like Sword Saint’s. Our understanding is that you will inherit his position one day and represent Joseon as its greatest warrior.”

Dong-soo bowed.

The Prince Heir himself brought and served the tea before the king of all Joseon. The only other guests besides the usual eunuchs and attendants were the beautiful young queen and her father. All was going well until the queen sipped the tea and fainted dead away.

“Your Highness!” “Jung-soon-ah!” “My Queen!” “The Royal physician!”

The first thought in everyone’s mind was poison.

Dong-soo knelt before the king. “Forgive me, your Majesty, but in the time it will take for a doctor to arrive, her Highness could pass. Please allow me to treat her.”

The king consented, and Dong-soo took acupuncture needles out of his back, and to exclamations and intakes of breath, actually patted the queen’s back in an attempt to dislodge any foreign materials. After working on her for a moment, Dong-soo announced, “She’s unconscious but not in danger from poisoning.”
“You know medicine?” The king was suspicious.

“I will vouch for him,” Sword Saint said. “I do not know medicines to the extent Baek Dong-soo does. He studied and taught himself well.”

“The tea—how do you know the tea is not poisonous?”

There was a silver utensil on the tray next to queen’s cup. Dong-soo stuck the spoon into the queen’s tea. “The Prince Heir served the tea himself as a gesture of honor,” he said. “He would never poison the queen.” Dong-soo smiled and drank from the tea-cup himself. “This tea is not poisoned.”

Everyone stared.

So, on Dong-soo’s first day back at the palace, there had been suspicious of poison, rumors and uproar. The palace poison scandal would prove to be a big deal and would tie not only into Ji-sun’s merchant group but to Woon at Heuksa Chorong.

Dong-soo, because of much acclaim from Sword Saint, the famous martial artist much beloved by his Majesty, was personally assigned to investigate the matter of tea incident. Someone was trying to frame the Prince Heir as having tried to harm the queen. It so happened, as was well known to all in the court, that the Defense Minister was responsible for transporting all ginseng to the Royal pharmacy.

*The Noron faction is up to something. I don’t know anything about politics. I’ll find out where the ginseng actually came from, but I don’t know why the queen fell ill from ginseng. Who falls ill from a rare tea that doesn’t hurt anyone?*

Cho-rip showed up at Sa-mo’s home; he not only brought a warm hug for Dong-soo but some fragments of the tea from the palace. Cho-rip was a royal librarian there now! Dong-soo couldn’t get used to calling his friend by his yangban name, and no one else could either. In Sa-mo’s house, Cho-rip was Cho-rip. Scary Lady and Jin-joo’s father were staying there in the home too and away from everyone. Dong-soo felt their presence only in how happy Sunseongnim was, happier than Dong-soo could recall ever have seem him.

“This root isn’t ginseng,” Ji-sun, who had been growing the stuff for her merchant group, said after sniffing and inspecting what Cho-rip brought. “It’s josam, a fake ginseng sold to the unsuspecting for a high price.”

Josam, Dong-soo knew, was a root to which some people reacted with rashes, swelling and a weakening of the pulse.

Ji-sun, Dong-soo, and Mi-so discovered in the market the next day that actual finest ginseng that usually went to the palace was being sold to whoever could pay the exorbitant price; someone was making a profit. Lord Hong?

The following night, the former Human Lord, the one who had wounded Sa-mo three years ago, the one Sunseongnim had cautioned Dong-soo not to seek vengeance against, came to the house with the intent of murdering Ji-sun. Jang-mi and Mi-so, who had been with Ji-sun at the time, said that the man with the scimitar said his orders were to kill Yoo Ji-sun, and Ji-sun had begged for him to spare the other women. Scimitar Man had said “Sure. I can be generous. You know, I was once sent to kill Baek Dong-soo when he was out of his mind, but there’s a Buddha in me. I figured why kill a poor crazy boy?” The man with the scimitar, according to Ji-sun, had bowed and told the two other women to run.
The story had surprised Dong-soo when he heard it. *There’s a Buddha in me.* But Ji-sun’s observant eye had been responsible for even more vital information.

At that moment Scimitar man had raised his weapon against Ji-sun, a masked man had appeared with a sword and put the blade to Scimitar Man’s throat.

The masked man seemed to be walking away with Scimitar Man when Sa-mo came out with his butcher knives and said, “If you won’t kill him, I will.”

At that moment, Dong-soo and his master returned.

Dong-soo had watched the rest of the incident with his own eyes. Masked Man had flown off at that very moment, so Dong-soo had only seen a blur of black.

“Dae-ung!” *Sunsengnim* had called out. “I should have ended you long ago.”

The rage on Scimitar Man’s face had been like a wild animal’s. “Do it then. Instead of cutting off another piece of me.” He had kicked up his leg. “Here, I still have limbs.”

*All human life is precious* is what Dong-soo had been taught. At that moment, even as he heard his master’s words about wanting to end the man’s life, Dong-soo had so much wanted to honor *Sunsengnim’s* teachings. There was a way. Dong-soo knew of a way. And so, Dong-soo had taken the hidden needle from his clothes and inserted it in the man’s shoulder, all the way into his body, so that the man could never in his life hold another weapon.

Right away, Dong-soo had understood that this was a humiliation greater than death to Scimitar Man. The man dropped his weapon and wailed. The wailing went on and on. Dong-soo tried to explain that the damage was irreversible but that at least he still had his life. Scimitar Man ran off into the woods.

“The man in the mask,” Ji-sun had said right away. “The one who saved my life. I would recognize those eyes anywhere.” She pointed. “Yeo Woon.” Dong-soo tried to see exactly where Ji-sun was pointing—far left, a darkness with no landmarks.

Woon.

Dong-soo had run off like an arrow. Soon, he had spotted a figure dressed in black running just as fast, almost out of reach. Dong-soo had jumped as far as he could jump and tackled Woon by the knees.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Dong-soo, with some effort, pulled Yeo Woon back. Woon had thrashed in his arms like a fish caught in a net. “Let me go, Dong-soo-yah. This… is… none… of … your—”

Dong-soo had pinned Woon to the ground. “Yes, it is my business if it’s you.”

Two eyes and the face covered by a mask and yet Dong-soo had known everything Woon was feeling. Regret, sadness. Why?

“Thank you for saving Ji-sun’s life. Thank you for sparing Jin-joo’s father.”

Woon had quit struggling by this point, so Dong-soo pulled down the mask.

*That beautiful face. Why so desperate?*
“You don’t understand. I’ve been killing people. I’ve killed innocent people. Under Lord Hong’s orders.” Woon had been panting, not from exertion but from something inside that was hurting. “I was sent to kill all merchants who had dealt with Lord Hong’s ginseng trade. Ji-sun wasn’t a frequent buyer, but she was—she was on the list—and I—”

Dong-soo had not believed it. But at the same time, he knew that Woon would not lie to him anymore.


Dong-soo had let Woon’s wrists go. Woon sat up on his elbows then, but Dong-soo’s lower body still pressed him to the ground.

“Everyone is at risk.” Woon’s angry voice. He wasn’t lying. “Even you. Heuksa Chorong has always been involved in illegal businesses. We sold fake ginseng to the Defense minister and didn’t know what he was going to do with it. Now everyone is at risk because of what happened at the palace. There’s no protecting everyone.”

Dong-soo had stood up at that moment. He towered over Yeo Woon, who still lay there, uncertain, calling himself a murderer, still trapped at Heuksa Chorong. “Didn’t I, Baek Dong-soo, say I will make things right? Don’t worry. Trust me.”

Woon stood up too. “Many people will die,” he had said, not in that way people gamble, knowing that the coin could fall on one side or fall on the other side, but with absolute certainty. “Don’t follow me. Stay away from me, Baek Dong-soo.”

And with that, Woon had disappeared into the darkness.

Dong-soo tried to steady his heart during the following days, but Jin-joo had not yet returned. The fact that people said she was being protected by Creepy Guy seemed to satisfy Sunsengnim enough but worry Dong-soo more. The fact that Lord Hong seemed to have some hold over Woon worried Dong-soo.

All over something as trivial as tea?

News of a palace kitchen maid who had hung herself. Cho-rip discovered that ginseng that crates of ginseng had been burned in secret within the palace. General Seo, recently appointed Naval Commander, was removed from his position for investigating a shipwreck and questioning a man with “If you don’t tell me the truth, I’ll cut off your head with my sword, you mother-fucking liar”—aish, the Crazy Man. The Norons said the ship had been attacked by the Japanese; the king was listening to all evidence; all navy men who survived the wreck were in jail and awaiting questioning. Ji-sun and Dong-soo discovered in the market-place that black market merchants had been waiting for a naval ship carrying rare ginseng.

Then one late evening, when Dong-soo was walking with Ji-sun some distance from Sa-mo’s house and far from people, Dong-soo saw Ji-sun’s eyes shift to the far left in the darkness. Her eyes, not her hand, pointed this time.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Woon has taken care of the problem. There is no need to draw my sword. He’s protecting Ji-sun.
And then Dong-soo saw billowing smoke. He ran towards it.

The jail where the navy men were being kept had gone up in fire that was still consuming the building. Dong-soo knew fire, how quickly it spread, how the fumes burned inside one’s lungs and tore down the beams of structures before people understood what was even happening. Some men had escaped their locked cells—aided by the fire, no doubt. Those who had attempted to escape had been cut down outside the doors with swords.

Dong-soo stood among the police and the townspeople throwing water on the leaping flames. His feet stood on the blood of men in white prison clothes. The blood still fresh, red. Through tears in the clothes of the murdered men, scorched flesh still smoldered—it smelled like goose-meat cooking.

“Many people will die.”

One man was alive. He straggled forward, a sword-cut on his side, not much blood.

“How did you survive?” Dong-soo asked him.

“I—I was told to lie down and play dead.” The man looked disoriented.

“By who? What happened?”

“I was told to tell the truth about everything to General Seo, that Lord Hong made us lie about the Japanese. He—the young man—he cut me, told me to lie down. He—he said to tell the truth to General Seo. Please get me to General Seo.”

“Young man?”

“A young man, dressed all in black.” The wounded navy man leaned against a brick wall. “He looked too young to be mixed up in all this.”

Woon. Dong-soo flashed the police his badge from his Majesty, told them to protect the survivor with round-the-clock guards, that he was a vital witness, and left. Dong-soo knew where Woon might be.

There’s something not right. There’s something not right. Woon is going this way and that. Trying to protect, having to serve rotten people. Blaming himself again. I remember. I remember. We’ve been through this before.

Sure enough, there was Woon, right outside the Defense Minister house. Woon’s double blades were drawn. The minister was holding a sword too, in an admirable stance—who knew the man could fight? Well, he was a yangban—they were all trained in such things. Surrounding the pair were the minister’s guards, an incompetent bunch.

Dong-soo watched Woon and the minister exchange parries. Woon was intent on killing Lord Hong—that he would do that in another moment was plain. That he would be arrested for the crime and be executed—that was plain too with so many witnesses. This is suicide, Woon.

Dong-soo shot a coin across the courtyard and hit Woon in the hand.

Woon winced from the pain.

Dong-soo walked up to him. “What are you doing?”
Woon cast Dong-soo a murderous look. “Baek Dong-soo, don’t meddle.”

Woon lunged for the minister again, and Dong-soo put his sword in front of Woon’s chest. “Stop it. What do you think this will change?”

The look Woon gave Dong-soo this time was peculiar. Woon swallowed. The angry look was gone.

“Ah, so you are Baek Dong-soo?” The Defense Minister smiled, and now Woon’s rage was rekindled. Woon stared at the minister as if he would not hesitate to kill him even if it meant walking through Dong-soo’s sword.

“The friendship between the two of you is touching,” The minister went on. “I appreciate it. The bonds of friendship have always been looked upon with favor by me. Now, please, boys, put away your swords. Not here. Not in front of my house. My family is sleeping inside.”

At that moment, the minister’s scraggily-haired guard appeared holding a knife to Ji-sun’s neck.

“You left her alone, Dong-soo!” Woon was incensed.

“Drop your weapons!” The minister barked.

“Let the woman go,” Woon said.

“Of course.” The minister said.

Dong-soo and Woon dropped their weapons. There was no attacking the men with open-hand combat either--because of Ji-sun. Dong-soo turned to her as soon as the blade was removed from her neck. “Please don’t worry. Go back home and wait. Please---don’t worry.”

She nodded and left.
Dong-soo and Woon were put into Hong’s prison. Imagine that. His estate had a prison. Their weapons were confiscated, including all of their hidden throwing blades and needles. They were left on a shelf near the prison door, so Dong-soo surmised that both he and Woon would be released soon, that the minister had something to discuss with them, some plan, some deal, but first the man retired for the night.

Dong-soo sat on the floor in the cell he shared with Woon.

Woon was seething quietly. Dong-soo knew this Yeo Woon. He hadn’t encountered him for years, but this was the Yeo Woon who at the warrior camp hid his true feelings with a burning will to accomplish this or that, to scale a mountain in the quickest time, to swim the fastest, to read all the books and answer the questions, knock over the straw-men with his sword and then hit the right straw spots to kill.

“What are you running away from?”

No answer.

“Woon-ah, what were you thinking trying to kill the Defense Minister? You’d be executed for the crime, and there would still be corruption in the palace.”

Nothing.

“Have you forgotten everything about us? What you said? How you and I—we’re best friends.”

At that, Woon rolled his eyes. “We’re not anything like that. I threw you away as a friend long ago.”

This nonsense was too much. Dong-soo grabbed Woon by the collar, forced him to stand and was about to punch him in the face. But the open tenderness with which with Woon looked at Dong-soo told the whole story. Woon still said the opposite of things, the backwards, upside-down of things.
“I’m sorry.” Dong-soo dropped his hands and turned around. He wasn’t going to misunderstand Woon anymore. He wasn’t going to let his own feelings run away with him. He’d come too far in learning how to balance his head and his heart. His soul was one and the same—one part pouring out into the world and one part taking in.

Woon was confusing, though.

“There you go again,” Woon said. “What are you apologizing for?”

“What?”

“I’m the one who’s the assassin. I’m the one who killed the Crown Prince’s ex-bodyguards.” Woon paused long enough for Dong-soo to turn around and confirm the truth by looking into Woon’s eyes. “Have you forgotten that I am the one who betrayed the Crown Prince in the first place? Did you know that I was the one who opened the gate to let the Sky Lord into the warrior camp so that all those people and Commander Dae-pyo could be murdered? You only remember me begging the Sky Lord to spare your life. I am still responsible. If I spared only you—” Here, Woon’s voice faltered.

Dong-soo’s heart was thrown—everything was off balance; for a martial artist, this was fatal. A flame blew this way, then another way. There was no way to tell which way the wind was blowing, only that the flame was tossed.

Woon-ah.
Woon didn’t stop talking. “I am an assassin. The old Sky Lord could stand up to Lord Hong, but I was unable to do that. I was demoted from the position of Sky Lord under orders from the emperor and now someone else is Sky Lord, but the old Chun is back. I have trained for three years, but I cannot overcome—”

Dong-soo slapped Woon across the face. Blood spattered across the room. Woon wiped his nose and there was blood on his fingers. Dong-soo had hit Woon harder than he’d intended, but whatever. “Shut up.” Dong-soo shook Woon’s shoulder. “Why are you talking like this? Didn’t you promise me--?”

“What? Hasn’t it always been this way? I’m making the wrong choices—and you---”

“What about me?”

Woon half-smiled. “Greatest warrior in all Joseon. You left Ji-sun alone and let Hong’s man catch her. What is this bullshit about protecting everyone, anyway?”

Dong-soo had never seen Woon this angry. Then, as the flames were flapping this way and that in Dong-soo’s own heart, there was a moment of balance and pure clarity. He wants to die.

Dong-soo grabbed Woon by the collar again. “What’s the matter with you? What happened?”

“What do you mean? Nothing’s changed.”


Dong-soo felt like crying. “Everything’s changed. Don’t talk to me about nothing, Woon-ah.” A heavy sigh. “Stop it…. I still believe in you. I will never give up on you. You are a good person.”

“Says the man who told me not to die because it was he who would kill me.” Woon looked deeply into Dong-soo’s eyes. “Why didn’t you? Back in those days—” Another vague smile. “You were so foolish and proud. It would’ve been better if you’d just killed me and spared me more bad choices. And spared yourself the bother of chasing after me now.”

The pain of those old words. Why had Dong-soo ever said such a thing? He would regret having said such words all his life.

“You can’t even bring yourself to land a decent punch on me now,” Woon continued. “Kill me? Did Sword Saint turn you into a monk on that mountain-top? I saw you in the market-place with Ji-sun. You make a nice couple—the monk and the nun.” Another smile. Woon looked down, those eyelashes fluttering. “A perfect pair.”

“Woon-ah, stop.”

“The speech you gave about Destiny?” Woon had never spoken so much. Why was he still talking? That in itself was a little frightening. It was as if he was lapsing into another fever. “I believed you. I thought that I could make my own destiny, but I’ve followed one path all this time. I can’t envy you—I’m not you is all. I’m not a monk, I’m a killer, I chose this darkness, I’m—”

“Don’t.” Dong-soo could feel Woon slipping through his fingers. “Woon, don’t give up. Didn’t I promise I would make it all okay? Please. If there is something you cannot bear, I will bear it for you.”

Woon returned his gaze to Dong-soo’s face and stared. Woon’s eyes were brimming with tears now. He didn’t speak.
Dong-soo couldn’t speak. His fingers tightened on Woon’s black clothes.

They were in Lord Hong’s prison; they were caught in another strange world from which neither could escape, only Woon seemed to be suffering, and Dong-soo didn’t know how to free him, how to pull the both of them away and into light and safety.

“I don’t understand you,” Woon said at last.

Dong-soo was aware of a tear rolling down his own cheek.

Woon shifted his weight, as if was he tired. Woon? Tired from standing? As if being near Dong-soo was draining the strength from Woon’s body.

“Old friend?” Woon’s voice sounded very strange.

“Woon-ah?”

“I know you can’t put your knife through my chest now,” Woon said, “but can a monk still fuck an assassin?”

Woon fell against Dong-soo; his weight should not have been enough to knock Dong-soo onto the ground, but Dong-soo fell, shocked, Woon lying on top of him, his hands on either side of Dong-soo’s face.

“Fuck me.”

There was something not right about the request; it was as if Woon was telling Dong-soo to kill him. Or was it that Woon was asking Dong-soo to save him? Which was it? It was crazy. There were guards outside the doors. Dong-soo had been taught to control his sensual desire. Even so, Woon’s chest was heaving against Dong-soo’s. That beautiful face was so close.

There’s nothing about this that is right.

“There’s more to us than this,” Dong-soo attempted. He was aware that he was stroking Woon’s hair as he spoke, making everything worse. “We’re more than friends, but we don’t have to--”

Woon kissed him, and there was no resisting that mouth. Pressing against Woon’s lips was like leaning against a door Dong-soo expected would give way; when Woon’s lips parted, the taste was better than what Dong-soo remembered. He wanted to savor the kiss, but Woon was in a hurry.

There’s something wrong. So wrong.

“What’s the matter?” Dong-soo felt uncomfortable, even as he loved his bajji being pulled down.

“All I said is I want you to fuck me.”

“And what I said is that--you and I are—I mean, don’t you remember?” It was hard to concentrate when Woon was stripping himself, not totally, just from the waist down, already aroused, his hipbones white and prominent even in the low light.

“You and I are what? Aren’t we this, Dong-soo-yah?” Woon and Dong-soo still wore their shirts, and Woon’s face was already in Dong’s lap. The hot breath exhaled with Woon’s words made it harder for Dong-soo to think.

“Why are you acting like this? You’re acting like…. “ Dong-soo had to say it. “You’re acting like you’re going to leave me soon or something.”
“Like I’m going to kill the Defense Minister no matter what?” Woon ran his tongue up and down Dong-soo’s cock and pressed his palms, hard, against Dong-soo’s inner thighs as if trying to keep them from closing in and crushing his skull.

“What?” Dong-soo was horrified even as his body was being transported in pleasure. “You can’t do that. I will talk you out of that. We’ll talk—right? And let’s not…. Let’s not….” Dong-soo grabbed Woon’s hair and pulled the head up. “Don’t.”

Woon’s eyes were wild, full of love and grief. “Don’t reject me,” he whispered. “I’ll talk to you later.”

Dong-soo let Woon go. It was a demented agreement, but it would have to do. Woon returned to sucking Dong-soo’s cock, and Dong-soo tried to maneuver Woon into position so the cock-sucking could be reciprocal—Woon smacked Dong-soo’s hands away.

The sucking wasn’t supposed to last long; it was meant to make Dong-soo wet.

Woon grabbed Dong-soo by the shirt. “Fuck me.”

“I could hurt you.”

“You won’t. You’re dripping.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t care if you do.” A strange little laugh. “I was hurt a long time ago, so I don’t feel anything anymore.” Woon’s fingers opened and closed on the fabric against Dong-soo’s chest. “I don’t know. I don’t know.” Woon sounded a little crazy. “You know how an assassin’s star makes a tiny wound and the blood seeps out long after it hits?”

Dong-soo didn’t know what Woon was talking about, and then he thought that maybe he did know—knowing only made Dong-soo even more resistant to go along with whatever Woon wanted to do.

“You don’t know anything about killing people, Baek Dong-soo. Nothing. And don’t tell me you know anything about pain. I do. You know what pain is? You know that burn on my neck? I did it myself. It wasn’t a branch falling on me after lightning hit. You’re so stupid. Did you ever find a tree split by lightning after the storm? I burned myself to get rid of a brand that marked me as an assassin when I was twelve years old. I burned myself in the kitchen. That was the last time I felt pain, Dong-soo-yah. Nothing’s hurt since then—you can’t hurt me. Nothing can.”

Dong-soo’s heart, as Woon spoke, felt like it had been held under a red hot iron. “Woon-ah.”

“You can’t hurt me. I know how you really feel about me.”

Woon pulled on Dong-soo’s shirt and slid himself beneath Dong-soo’s body in a flash. Before Dong-soo, with reflexes that were now faster than Sword Saint’s, knew what was going on, Woon had his thighs around Dong-soo’s waist. The pair were locked together; they had always been in this embrace; they would be bound this way forever.

Dong-soo needed to fuck Woon. He had been taught to rise above need. He knew that Woon had tricked him into this position; Woon always won every game.

Woon-ah, you won.
Dong-soo watched as Woon winced with the first thrust—the same face Woon had made when hit by the coin in front of Lord Hong’s house—so the pain wasn’t that bad after all. Woon wasn’t hurting. Dong-soo pushed and pushed, because Woon wanted it, because he, Baek Dong-soo wanted whatever Yeo Woon wanted and because the sight of that face distracted from suffering was good—enough to justify any wrongness. No, this isn’t wrong. This is us. Woon-ah, Woon-ah.

Woon’s eyes became heavy-lidded, his face relaxed, the vague light from pyres far away showed Woon wasn’t crazily aroused (and oh how Dong-soo had remembered too often during the past three years those times Woon had looked crazily aroused), but at least he was happy to feel Dong-soo inside him.

The heat flooding Dong-soo’s body made him feel guilty again; there was no balance at all; everything was roaring need.

“Woon-ah!” Dong-soo had gasped the name, too loud, but he didn’t care if the guards outside heard.

It was if he’d trained for three years so he could fuck Yeo Woon.

Dong-soo was stronger now, he had more stamina and he knew from his studies in acupuncture where he should stimulate Woon—the so-called sweet spots. Dong-soo raised Woon’s legs a little higher and before thrusting again, pressed his forefinger under Woon’s belly button, above the invisible line Woon’s cock made pointing upwards. Here was the spot guan yuan. Dong-soo poked his finger there-- soft flesh yielding, yin catching yang. Woon gasped right away. Dong-soo pushed deeper with his finger, released the spot and gave Woon’s open mouth a deep, wet kiss. When Dong-soo resumed fucking, Woon was pushing back with his hips, making a slight coughing sound with each thrust. As Dong-soo’s lower body overpowered Woon’s lower body, Woon lay back, lost to ecstasy. The cough sounds quit, and Woon’s mouth stayed wide open, his eyes dazed, unfocused.

Slow at first, then harder, deeper. Woon closed his eyes. Dong-soo was aware of sweat pouring down his own face. Is this what you really want? Is this? Dong-soo fucked Woon so deep and hard that Woon turned his head to one side and opened his eyes. Another deep thrust, and Woon flung his face to the other side. He was going to climax without a single touch to his cock. Woon bucked forward, resisting, holding onto the pleasure, his eyes not meeting Dong-soo’s.

“Woon-ah.” Not hastening the pace, Dong-soo pushed with cruel precision. He knew what he was doing now. “Woon-ah, we’re more than this.”

Woon clenched his fists.

Dong-soo let go Woon’s thighs for the final moment, so that he could lean closer to Woon, get a better look at that face that was avoiding his gaze.

“Woon-ah, I love you.”

The warm liquid shot across Dong-soo’s hair and who knows where else. It was dark in the prison cell. Dong-soo finished after a few more calculated strokes inside Woon’s body then collapsed next to him. He rolled Woon into his arms. There was sticky semen on Woon’s hair and forehead, and Dong-soo licked it off. Woon had always tasted delicious, better than anything else in the whole world, better than milk or miso or the crispy skin of over-cooked goose. Woon tasted like snow and spring and the first time Dong-soo had ever looked at someone and thought: how pretty, how pretty, then how amazing, how smart, then who is this person? And too soon: I love this person. And eventually: How is it possible to need someone so much?
Recovering took longer than Dong-soo had expected. Hadn’t Woon said they were going to talk? Dong-soo thought Woon might fall asleep—didn’t he do that? Dong-soo’s hand felt around in the darkness for clothes. “We need to get dressed.” Woon didn’t argue, pulled on clothes, crawled off, sat stunned against the wall.

“Woon-ah,” Dong-soo began.

“Give up on me,” Woon whispered in the dark. “It will put your mind at ease.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“You don’t know what kind of person I am.”

“Yes, I do.” Dong-soo sat next to Woon. “If you’re still blaming yourself for everything in the past, remember you were a child and that—”

“What I never told you is that I took an assignment to kill my own father,” Woon said. His words were abrupt. They didn’t sound like a confession, as if Woon wanted forgiveness or understanding. “I was twelve. The Sky Lord said that in order to become a member of the guild I had to kill my most precious person, so I chose my father, and I am the one who killed Yeo Cho-sang.”

“You’re not the person who killed Yeo Cho-sang,” Dong-soo said in his most quiet voice. “I know you believe that—”

“You know?” Woon’s voice was shocked.

“Look, I don’t know what happened that day, but I went to your village and questioned people there. As far as I could gather from rumors and speculation, one thing did stand out very clearly, your father had two separate blade wounds from two different weapons, one in the back and one in the belly. I confirmed this with the men who buried him.”

Silence.

Dong-soo allowed Woon a little time to process the new information and went on. “I know you were in a fever after. I don’t know what you were told. I don’t know what you may have dreamed up, but—”

Woon was crying. Soft sobs. Woon wouldn’t be the kind to cry in a way that made any noise. Dong-soo’s arms were around him right away. Did Woon feel too warm? Was it fever again? “What’s the matter? Are you sick?” Dong-soo couldn’t remember Woon crying out-right before. A memory of tear-tracks on Woon’s face as Woon knelt before the Crown Prince’s body. All those years at the warrior camp—not a tear? How much did I miss, how much did you hold back, Woon-ah?

“But I remember,” Woon said, not ashamed, maybe not even aware that he was crying. “I remember holding the blade towards—” A gasp. “My father caught it.” At the same moment, Woon caught Dong-soo’s upper arms. The jail cell was pitch black now; Dong-soo couldn’t see Woon’s face as the memory was seizing him, but he heard awe in Woon’s voice, all tears gone: “My father caught the blade with his hands.”

“Woon-ah,” Dong-soo said. “The villagers said your father had injured his hands. His hands were sliced as if he’d caught a blade in a struggle.”

“He… my father turned the blade on me—he was—he was going to kill me.”
In the absolute blackness, Dong-soo was sure of one thing: his love for Yeo Woon stood fast—a bright, unwavering light. This moment was more intimate than what had come before.

Woon’s fingers tightened their grip on Dong-soo’s shirt. “My father held the blade over his head, and I was sure I was going to die—”

There was no doubt that the Sky Lord was the one who made the first cut, who had thrown a knife into Yeo Cho-sang’s back. Woon would remember. It would be all right. If Woon remembered all that for himself, maybe this wanting to die business would stop—how could Woon live as a young man if he could not forgive the boy he had once been?

“I can’t—I can’t—” Woon couldn’t talk. Little ah sounds came out of his throat.

Woon hands slid down Dong-soo’s arms; they were holding Dong-soo by the wrists now. “What else do you know?” Woon’s voice was hoarse. “Tell me.”

“Tell me what you’re remembering right now.”

Woon let go Dong-soo’s wrists, dropped his head into Dong-soo’s lap and wept. “It’s bits and pieces. I can’t—I can’t—” Woon wasn’t allowing himself to remember more.

Dong-soo stroked Woon’s hair, felt Woon’s forehead. No fever. “It’s okay. Don’t try so hard. Just rest for right now. I’m here. I’m not giving up on you.”

Woon listened, amazingly enough. Maybe it wasn’t time yet to remember. He fell asleep, head resting on Dong-soo’s lap, and Dong-soo fell asleep, back to the prison wall.

It was not quite dawn, the light gray through the window, when Dong-soo heard footsteps, and the Defense Minister appeared.

“What a charming sight,” the minister said of Woon who was still asleep under Dong-soo’s arm. “If the two of you keep running after one another, you will be caught like moths in a flame. The great swordsmen of the generation preceding yours—moths, mere moths too.”

Woon had stirred by this time and was sitting up. “Your Excellency, if you keep running after people who can kill you, you’re going to die in a way less merciful than fire.”

Woon wakes up like a tiger. I thought he was exhausted. He’s dangerous again.

“You’re forgetting one thing, Yeo Woon,” the minister said. “Sword Saint and the Sky Lord wielded heavenly swords all these years, but they never could challenge me. Who truly moves this nation? I do. Men like you and your good friend here. Don’t worry. I won’t have you imprisoned for long. Your kind are always of use to me.” The minister walked away. “We’ll discuss conditions later—I’ll be back after my morning meal. I’ll send something for the two of you to eat.” He looked over his shoulder. “Unless the both of you haven’t already satisfied yourselves otherwise.” A laugh.

Dong-soo and Woon sat, dejected, next to one another as the sun rose.

“You’re not going to try to kill him again, right?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“I’m trying to get a case brought to His Majesty. Cho-rip has already proven that the Royal maid who hung herself in the palace was poisoned. General Seo—and I know you had something to do
with that—has a witness against Hong about trying to cover up shady business deals and blame it on the Japanese. There are ways to bring down people without … killing them, Woon-ah.”

“I know that, but…”

“But?”

“Yes, maybe your plan may work to bring down the Defense Minister, but sometimes there is no other way to bring down a bad man but to kill him.”

A long silence ensued. Dong-soo knew that; his heart didn’t totally believe it, though. Hadn’t Sunsegnim told him exactly what Woon was saying? But since Dong-soo had leapt to the conclusion at the Crown Prince’s murder that Woon needed to be killed, Dong-soo didn’t want to indict a man and kill him carelessly. Would Dong-soo’s heart know how to make that decision when the moment came? Maybe even Creepy Guy, as Sunsegnim hoped, was capable of being redeemed.

Another person entered the jail. This time a military officer of some sort. Dong-soo recognized a navy cap, but he’d never been at the palace long enough to understand emblems indicating rankings.

“From General Seo,” the man said and threw a slender metal file into the cell. “He knows you’re here with … Son of a Gisaeng? He says he’ll trust you to help his case against Hong.”

Dong-soo and Woon unlocked the cell and broke out easily, knocking out the guards as the sun was coming up, pink and yellow, in the East.

“Are you coming back with me, Woon-ah?”

“I have something to do.”

Dong-soo felt a sliver of worry but it was only a sliver.

“If time allows you,” Woon said, “make a trip to Donghae. There’s a Japanese settlement there that deals with josam, the fake ginseng. Heuksa Chorong bought josam from the Japanese. We sold to Hong, but we didn’t—we didn’t care after we sold to him what he did with it. I was after profit, Dong-soo-yah.”

Dong-soo didn’t ask why Woon would be after making money; the idea that Woon would be pursuing money for his own sake seemed out of character; Dong-soo would find out later.

“Yeah.” Dong-soo nodded. “And oh… Woon-ah?”

Woon looked at Dong-soo attentively.

“Don’t die… Don’t die because….”

A slight smile, a happy one this time. “Because you’re the one who has to kill me,” Woon added.

Dong-soo smiled back, and the two parted ways.

*Trust that everything will be okay. I, Baek Dong-soo, will make it all okay.* Dong-soo told himself to trust in his own heart, and he headed for Donghae before going home.
It would seem that wherever Dong-soo went, any display of his martial arts skills made people step back in fear or made some fool step up to challenge him. He didn’t want to boast that he was Joseon’s greatest warrior, but he didn’t want to hide the fact either—how did Sunseongnim navigate fame and attention? Hadn’t Woon always said that getting attention for being the best was troublesome? Ah, Kim Gwang-taek and Yeo Woon—shy people. Maybe they didn’t enjoying messing with strangers as much as Dong-soo did—ah, the look on people’s faces when they realized that the dopey-looking, big, peasant boy was a master swordsman! Ha! Or maybe Sunseongnim and Woon plain just didn’t like to fight as much as Dong-soo did. And what was
wrong with a little attention—not too much—just a little for the right reasons? As a kid, Dong-soo used to get in fights and fall into ditches, get nabbed by the police, scolded by Sa-mo. Better to be whispered about as “that amazing warrior” than “that annoying brat,” right? Dong-soo kicked away a few Japanese, grabbed a box of fake ginseng and made his way home before early evening.

He was running into the courtyard, full of himself, glad that he had spent a meaningful night with Woon, holding a box of josam under one arm, and he saw Mi-so standing with her head bowed, weeping as if someone had died.

Someone had died.

“What happened?”

“Jin-joo came back and—” Mi-so could barely talk because she was crying so hard.

“Is Jin-joo okay?”

Others came out of the house. Why was that peculiar man, the artist Hong-do here? The one who was always sniffing around Jin-joo? Cho-rip stood solemnly at the house gates, his nobleman robes blown by the wind.

Dong-soo, not knowing how he knew, understood that someone had died.

Ji-sun, in her delicate way, without tears, told the sad story, because the others would not. Jin-gi and Jin-joo, she said, had come back with Sword Saint who had been carrying the body of Jin-joo’s mother. Someone, a foreigner, a man appointed by the Emperor to lead the assassin guild had been sent to kill the Sky Lord, the man who was protecting Jin-joo—“I don’t know where he is now,” Ji-sun said. “The Sky Lord, I mean.”

“Who killed Jin-joo’s mother?” Dong-soo knew the answer, but he couldn’t bear how slow Ji-sun was going about in telling the story.

“This man, Jang Ryang. The Sky Lord fought him off, we were told. The lady Ga-ok died sometime later in the night from her wounds. A doctor came, but it was too late.”

Ji-sun took Dong-soo by the shoulder. It was an unusual gesture for her; she led him away from the others. “Jin-joo is distraught,” she whispered. “Sword Saint said he was going to take care of the body, so that is being done as I speak to you now.”

“Take… care?” Dong-soo didn’t understand.

“From what I could gather, Miss Ga-ok told people before she died that she wanted to be the wind. To fly free over the mountains and rivers and through the trees. The way she could never be free in this world. Sword Saint is cremating her body according to a Buddhist tradition. He took Jin-joo, Jin-gi, Sa-mo and Yang-mi up to a wooded area not far—”

“I should go.” Dong-soo’s heart was in his throat. Jin-joo’s mother had passed the night he and Woon were in the jail cell, in another world of grief.

“Yes, you should go,” Ji-sun said.

The path was well-travelled, and the smoke was easy to follow. Dong-soo paused with his hand against a tree and watched the scene for a while. Flames cast a vivid glow over the faces of people Dong-soo loved. Sunseongnim still held the torch. “If you hold her in your heart, she is not gone,” he said. He looked as though he had been weeping for a day and had no more tears. Sa-mo was
standing at attention, his arm around Jang-mi. They looked as though they were paying their
respects to a high-ranking official—not an assassin. And then Dong-soo remembered—they knew
Scary Lady in one role mostly and that was as a mother to Jin-joo. The two most loving parents
Dong-soo knew were honoring this woman who was mother to Jin-joo….

_Sweet Jin-joo. Stupid girl. She never did anything wrong to anyone. She really loved that Scary
Lady._

Jin-gi was weeping. “My young lady, my young lady!” he called—in reference to Ga-ok, of course,
since he usually called Jin-joo “daughter.” He held Jin-joo’s shoulders as he continued to sob, “My
young lady!”

And Jin-joo? She was kneeling. From where Dong-soo stood, her grief was so terrible that Dong-
soo knew he could face a hundred swordsmen before he could face Jin-joo tonight. As the flames
climbed higher and the body on the pile of sticks blackened, Jin-joo’s moans became like a
wounded animal’s.

Dong-soo took one step back, then another.

_I’m not grown yet. This isn’t my place._

That night in the house, Jin-gi stayed in Dong-soo’s room. Jin-joo slept at Jang-mi’s, and Dong-
soo couldn’t sleep because he could still remember her crying. The sounds still cut him like knives._Sunsegnim_ paced outside in the darkness.

_“The Sky Lord and Sword Saint,” Jin-gi said, “agreed to cross swords in ten days.”_

Dong-soo sat up. “They’re still going to fight?”

_“Those two.” Jin-gi’s voice was weary with grief. “They can’t stop themselves now. The funeral is
tomorrow morning. You will have to come to that, Dong-soo-yah. Jin-joo-yah needs to see your
brave face there.”_

And so, the next morning, on a cliff-side, a few people gathered and took turns scattering the ashes
of the former Earth Lord of Heuksa Chorong across the water and into the air.

_“Be the wind and wait for me.”_ _Sunsegnim’s_ words frightened Dong-soo a little because they
made him think of Woon.

_“In your next life, be born as an ordinary woman.”_ Jin-gi’s words were sad. An assassin is not an
ordinary person; an assassin is a prisoner. Dong-soo had no right to dip his own hand into the urn
of ashes but he made his own wish for the poor soul: _In your next life, be a free person. Live free.
You aren’t scary after all. Jin-joo still loves you, doesn’t she?_

Jin-joo tossed the last of the ashes. “Mother, in your next life, be born as my mother again. Let’s
spend more time together. I… I didn’t have enough time to get to know you in this life.”

The ceremony was over, and people walked away. Jin-joo sat in the grass and wept. Dong-soo
didn’t know what to do or say, but he knelt beside her. He felt like a fool; he had always treated Jin-
joo so badly, made fun of her, used her to run errands, taken advantage of her feelings for him.

_“Jin-joo-yah, please don’t cry. Please. I’m here for you. I will protect you.”_
“Shut up.”

Dong-soo felt he deserved that.

“My mother said the same thing,” Jin-joo went on. “She said she would protect me.”

It was at this point that the peculiar painter, Hong-do, stepped forward. “Baek Dong-soo, do you realize what you’re saying? How are you supposed to protect everyone? *By yourself?* You can’t be everywhere at once! You are assigned to protect the Prince Heir! You have sworn to Miss Ji-sun that you will protect her! You say something like this to Jin-joo now—*I will protect you, I will protect you*—and what does it do? You remind her of—*aish*, have you no common sense?”

It had been a long time since Dong-soo had been scolded in such a way. And by such a young man at that—Hong-do was *what*—no older than Cho-rip or Woon? What right did he--?

“Jin-joo-ah?” Hong-do was kneeling next to Jin-joo now. “Anytime you want to see your mother, just tell me, okay? I will let you see her.”

Jin-joo looked like she didn’t understand what the painter was talking about, but neither did she care to understand.

Hong-do took out his sketch pad.

Dong-soo looked up and noticed that the three women, Jang-mi, Mi-so, and Ji-sun had stopped some distance away and turned around; they were staring at Dong-soo’s little humiliation by the painter. Dong-soo wondered what sort of entertainment this was for them and wandered away into the high grasses. He stared across the open valley; as the sun shone on his face and the wind blew his clothes, he held fast to his sword. *Yes, I can protect her. Yes, I can protect the Prince Heir.*
can protect Jin-joo. I can protect all of them. Why can’t I?

Hong-do finished his drawing and gave it to Jin-joo.

She smiled.

The three women watching made some cooing noises, like birds. Mi-so was crying.

For some reason Dong-soo couldn’t identify, he was jealous. He didn’t like Jin-joo that way, he was certain of it but…. he wanted to be the one to make her smile. He still wanted to be the one to protect her.

But maybe—and here his heart caught a light like a tiny candle at the idea—it was good that there were other talents besides swordsmanship in the world. Jin-joo needed other people besides Baek Dong-soo.

As for Baek Dong-soo, the greatest warrior in Joseon—ah, the artist is right. I can’t protect everyone by myself. I’m going to need help.
PART FOUR COMING UP.

That ginseng arc, hoo boy. Not everyone’s favorite, I know, but we did get the prison scene in it. PART FOUR will wrap up the ginseng intrigue, and more of the story will pitch Woon into the palace again where he catches the eye of the queen herself (I’ll be fulfilling a long-time fandom request for Woon/Evil Queen hanky panky soon). All these matters of palace plotters and ancient grudges and childhood traumas and uncertain allegiances can really complicate your average sageuk; this story is told only from the viewpoints of the two boys in the coming-of-age tale as they learn their, um, swords and hearts. More to come! Man, sageuk are so long and complicated but this is really fun to tell.

Also, this story makes issues of Woon’s abuse integral but not the main focus of the story nor the device for getting the main pairing together; I recently realized that when I wrote “Sanctuary,” I took Dong-soo at his word ("I will bear what you cannot bear") and assumed he was the stronger one; I made him the stand in for Woon’s trauma. I didn’t want to put Woon through suffering I’d seen hinted in the series. Other stories I wrote didn’t want to deal with childhood abuse directly; pedophilia terrified me. This novelization treats childhood abuse in the canon story but as Woon would’ve seen it: “another log on the fire” to his greater sin of betraying his filial duty and misunderstanding his poor drunk, weak father. I still believe Chun had a proclivity for young boys (he’s shown twice being touchy feely with boys—who else is? Not the genuine father figures in the show—really now? Did this murdering controlling drunk just love kids that much he had to touch them so much?) This story also attempts a backstory for Chun, a character I have no sympathy for but who Ga-ok and Sword Saint loved. I really tried to confront some of my greatest dissatisfactions with how dark themes were handled in this script.
PART FOUR

Chapter Summary

I’d hoped this would be the last update, but there are still TWO MORE PARTS. AO3 won’t let me upload more than so many words into a fourth installment.

The days count down to the show-down between Sword Saint and the Sky Lord. Dong-soo faces challenges while trying to understand and protect Jin-joo. Goo-hyang continues to put the hoochie-koochie moves on Woon. The Sky Lord drops a bombshell revelation on Woon.

The battles continue—the one between Woon and his past, the between the enemies of the Prince Heir and the rag-tag band of palace outsiders defending the future king, and of course, the ongoing one between Dong-soo and Woon. I found myself sticking faithfully to canon more than I expected in the latter part of this story and added description and dialogue (so much dialogue to speed up or to clarify the script).

Those who avoid girls and palace politics and only read for sexy timez, skip to the end of section 17 of this installment and proceed from there.

slight edit 11/21/18

If You Lie with Me

PART FOUR

Thanks again Zoffoli/Lily

Forgive minor errors; I fix them often after I post. I used to be paid for writing and editing, but this is working for fun and against time and still trying to put out a pretty product. I proof twice then post, so you can read sooner, but there are always errors. I am only running on coffee and love for my ship to get this baby out--

Screencaps in this chapter are not manipulated at all; I kept all the crappy subtitles (aish, so many bad subs out there—sorry again but I like showing pictures now—this drama had great outdoor scenes, and I can’t even capture how good it looks with my caps).

#SAGEUKPALACEPOLITICS #NOTMUCH #NOTSORRY #OOPS!!WOONIEGOTSUICIDALAGAIN #CANONNOTCANON #LOVE #ISASKINGYOURBOYFRIENDTOKILLYOU #ILOVEYOUALL
16. My Revenge Falls from Heaven like Rain; Rain is Cold, Death is Cold, and Revenge is Cold

*The world is not one person’s world but the world’s world.* – Mozi, *Lïshi Chunqiu*

“Eat outside,” Woon said. “If you spill anything inside one of the buildings, you’ll be thrown out again.’

“No one in the Hong estate would feed me or care for me,” Dae-ung whined to Woon. “This is my true home. I am ever so grateful to you, young Lord.”

Dae-ung had been paralyzed to the point of not being able to hold a sword again, neither could he raise his stump hand with enough force to punch a person, but Baek Dong-soo had been wrong about the permanent effects of the needle. Bit by bit over the space of a few days, although not able to hold a spoon or chop-stick, Dae-ung taught himself to bring a cup to his lips.
Woon had ordered men to feed and dress the despicable man. Maybe he should’ve let him die, but Woon told himself he was curious about the man’s state. What had Dong-soo taught himself about offensive techniques via needles? Woon had no compassion for the Pig, but as Dae-ung taught himself to drink porridge from a bowl, Woon was reminded of stories Sa-mo used to tell about a boy who could not bring a spoon to his mouth. Dong-soo had been that little boy, someone teased by others in the village for his weakness. Dong-soo had told Dae-ung he would never hold a weapon again, but what did Dong-soo know of this man’s persistence? In some ways, it was like Dong-soo’s own, and had not Baek Dong-soo, the village cripple and outcast, become Joseon’s greatest swordsman?

“Give me just a little wine?” Dae-ung pleaded.

“Do you want to look even more pathetic?” Woon countered.

“A little, just a little to take the shame away….” In the next moment, Dae-ung’s woeful face lit up. “Oh, I know! I’ll make a bargain with you. If you give me a bottle, I’ll tell you about my meeting with the Sky Lord.”

“What? You’re lying.”

“Do I lie?” Dae-ung put down his little cup of water. “I’d been sent to search for him. In fact I found him. This was all before Baek Dong-soo caught up with me. Why is such a kind boy like you friends with such a fiend, tell me!”

Woon stared. The Pig worked for the Defense Minister; the story was plausible.

“Ah well, the information was supposed to be for Hong---I was going to give it to him, but his men sent me way when they saw my state. I didn’t have time or…” Dae-ung laughed his high-pitched, squealing laugh. “I didn’t have the inclination to say a word anymore. What do I care if the Sky Lord lives or dies, right? Hong is the monster now. Heuksa Chorong is the place that has taken me in, so…” Dae-ung looked around, smacking his lips. “Ah, I love this place.”

“Heuksa Chorong still wants the Sky Lord dead,” Woon said. “What happened to your ties with the Emperor and the current Sky Lord?”

“Hmmmm.” Dae-ung glanced at the headquarter windows, as if to check if Goo-hyang or others were nearby. “I’ve considered something. This foreign military person isn’t much, don’t you think? He couldn’t defeat our old Sky Lord the first time we went after him—he fled like a frightened little bunny at the sight of your friend. Hong would do the job, maybe—but eh, he showed me no respect, so what do I owe him?”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You, Yeo Woon, took me in, and you’re the one who’s shown a little mercy every now and then.” Dae-ung picked up his cup with his quavering limbs and displayed its emptiness before Woon. “If you give me a jug of wine—for what else do I require now? What else will ease my suffering?—I can tell you where the Sky Lord is, and you, you with all your cleverness and strength, will put an end to him, right?”

“I see.” Woon sat down. “You want revenge on Hong who spurned you, on the Sky Lord who tried to kill you, and you want nothing but a jug of wine for me to take out your revenge?”

Dae-ung smiled. “Yes?”

“Did the Sky Lord look well?”
“Actually… ha…. No.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Earth Lord is dead. After your nasty Baek Dong-soo did this to me, I dragged back along the way where I’d seen him last to confirm that he was still in the area. I wanted to give Hong good information, you see.”

“The Earth Lord?” Woon was shocked. He felt a whole wall of his plan give way. He’d wanted to save her. He’d wanted to free the Earth Lord from the Sky Lord. But…. she’d freed herself in her own way.

“The Sky Lord saw me. In this condition, I couldn’t escape so easily.” Dae-ung shrugged.

“Why…. How did she….?” Woon didn’t know what question to ask first. “The Sky Lord let you go?”

“He was all tear-stained and blood-stained. Aigoo, looked terrible.” Dae-ung smiled with happiness at the memory. “I asked him what was the matter, and he said that the moon no longer rose, and the sun no longer set, and there was no night and no day, or something horribly poetic—you know how he is.”

Woon stared.

“He didn’t even seem to notice my pitiful state. He didn’t even seem to care,” Dae-ung went on. “He leaned against a tree and muttered something about how Ga-ok-oh is gone, and I figured he’d be sitting there for a long time—you know how he is about her. He’s pretty ripe at the moment. One little swipe of the blade, and he’ll fall like persimmon from a high tree. Don’t you want to do it, Yeo Woon?”

“How did the Earth Lord die?”

“According to Hong’s sneaky people, Chun was in an abandoned house with his daughter, and the Earth Lord went there too to build a warm, happy family life—maybe she brought a meal to celebrate a reunion? Oh, I don’t know, probably to warn them that sneaky men with stabby things were coming. One of the many assassins sent after the Sky Lord killed her. I only wish it could’ve been me—ah, how I wanted revenge on that man. Killing his lady hurt him.” Here, Dae-ung clattered his teeth in glee, a disgusting gesture. “Poor Ga-ok. You know our dear lady. Always butting in to protect her man. I guess she—”

Woon got up and started to walk away. “I have no interest in any dealings with you.”

“What? What? I can tell you where the Sky Lord is!”

“Give the information to your Qing representative, not me.”

“But what about some wine?”

Woon turned around. “This will be my first and last warning to you. Don’t do anything foolish. You’ll end up dead this time—for certain.”

Dae-ung smiled. “Yeo Woon, you’re so young. Don’t you understand that being foolish is the beginning of all wisdom? How else do you think I’ve stayed alive so long? You, in all your cleverness—ah, Brat, you need a drink more than I do.”
A few hours later, Woon saw Dae-ung nodding off on the courtyard steps outside the main building. There was a jug of wine balanced between his knees. Like most men in the guild the Pig could hold his liquor, but only the old Sky Lord had been able to wield a sword, leap like a ninja, look like a commander of men while intoxicated. Woon vaguely remembered the Sky Lord taking naps on his horse while drinking too much.

“Brat,” Dae-ung called. “I miss Ga-ok. You don’t do at all. You really don’t do at all. You look a little like her, but you’re no fun at all.”

Right away, Jang Ryang called a meeting to say a small coalition would be headed out to the area Dae-ung had last seen the Sky Lord. He wanted Woon for back-up. “This Chun is indeed dangerous—it may take the both of us to take him down. The last time I fought him, he was like a man possessed.” Jang Ryang wanted Dae-ung there too. “Dae-ung is not to be under-estimated. He’s still clever, no matter how incapacitated he may be.”

Woon decided not to venture forth an opinion, but if by his guess, Jang Ryang was the one who had killed the Earth Lord, then Jang Ryang would die tonight.

Goo-hyang met Woon outside Woon’s room before Woon was about to change for the assignment. “There’s a look in your eye.”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t have to do the Defense Minister’s bidding. Didn’t you say that Baek Dong-soo can defend everyone now? The Prince Heir, Miss Ji-sun? But if you—”

“Please don’t worry about me. This has nothing to do with the minister.”

“Pardon me, my lord.” She bowed, holding her skirts as she did, the light catching the color in the folds of her clothes and in the jewels in her hair. She was given to gestures like that, even in this dark place so unlike the palace. “I worry because the morning you were released from the minister’s prison, you went right back to his house and met with him. You told me that day that Baek Dong-soo had the plans in motion for His Excellency to be take down for his crimes, that everything was going to be fine and yet—”

“How do you know I met with Hong?”

Goo-hyang bowed again, a slight nod of her head this time. “The minister has over one hundred employees. I have many connections in the palace. Your visit did not go unnoticed.”

Woon smiled. “I see.”

“All I’m asking—” she began.

“Please don’t ask,” Woon said. “You don’t need to know what happened between me and the minister that day. You don’t need to know what is going to happen tonight. It’s better for you if your own hands stay clean, and….”

Her eyes were full of glistening concern.

“It’s better if you don’t worry,” Woon finished. “I’m an assassin. You’ve worked here for years. Don’t you understand that?”

“Other men who served here,” Goo-hyang said, “sought to avoid the danger of other men’s swords. You have a look in your eye, like I said. There’s a danger within yourself.”
She had that way of stripping him bare.

“If you’re meeting with the minister, you’re in a tiger’s den. I realize there are things you want to do, but—”

“I’m going with the new Sky Lord to help him kill the old Sky Lord,” Woon said quickly. “I know you’ll wait for me, but I promise—it won’t be a long wait.”

Woon stepped inside his room and changed into assassin gear—darkest clothes full of hidden stars. He put on his swords, a short blade easy for throwing, a longer blade on his back. He noticed the cloth draped over the carrier pigeon cage. Goo-hyang had taken over the responsibility of feeding Xue and cleaning the papers every evening.

Since Woon had brought the bird back from Sa-mo’s on the day the Earth Lord had come for him, he had neglected the bird’s training. Xue was more a pet than a messenger. Carrier pigeons from Heuksa Chorong were lost all the time. It so happened that the little bird Woon had begun training from a downy chick had grown into a spot-less white bird; he told himself Xue was pretty enough to look at, like a flower in this dark place.

Like Goo-hyang.

On the ride to kill the Sky Lord, Dae-ung seemed steady and sober enough to accompany six assassins and Woon and Jang Ryang.

Woon remembered Dae-ung’s words and knew they were true.

_Yeo Woon, you’re so young._

Woon was often unsure if he was making the right choices.

He remembered his meeting with the minister right after the night with Dong-soo.

“I have something to do,” Woon had told Dong-soo, and right away, Woon had sneaked into Hong’s house again, past the guards, intent on not being lured into the courtyard like last time, certain he could kill the Defense Minister this time. Hong had not been surprised that General Seo had arranged an escape for the ally of the Prince Heir.

“I know that Baek Dong-soo serves his Majesty,” the minister had said, “but you? How did it feel to have your blade near my throat?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t kill you with one strike.”

“Sit down. I have a proposition for you. Trust me. It’s one you won’t regret.”

“I only regret not killing you.”

“I thought you valued the lives of your friends—oh and profit. An assassin’s wages.”

Woon had sat down.

“Why don’t we reconcile?” the minister had said, reaching behind his seat and presenting Woon with a full chest of gold.

Woon had blinked. “That’s not going to make me do your bidding.”
“I’m going to be in a spot of trouble,” the minister had continued. “Your friend, Baek Dong-soo, is going to present a case that will be difficult for me to handle. I need a back-up plan.”

Woon had tried to guess who Hong wanted him to kill this time.

“I need you to intimidate someone, one of my deputies, into being the scapegoat for me. You see, if the blame falls on me that I made the queen suffer—”

“Her Majesty has recovered,” Woon said. “The palace maid who prepared the tea, and the navy soldiers who can testify against you are all dead. What makes you think you’ll go down?”

“General Seo warned me,” Hong answered. “He has a habit of teasing like that. I understand it will be difficult for me to combat some evidence compiled against me.”

“Why should I help you?”

“Because if I go down, so will others.” Here, the minister had smiled. “What makes you think I can’t easily finger other ginseng traders in my defense? There’s that woman you saved when all the others were dealt with. You didn’t keep your end of the bargain, did you? How is it right for you to keep any gold I offered with you let that trader group go, and here I am, being overly-generous, offering you even more gold—*are you that naïve, Yeo Woon*?”

Woon had surmised that he was. He would have to trust that Baek Dong-soo could really have the Defense Minister indicted and executed.
“All I’m asking for is that you intimidate one of my employees—trust me, he’s not a person who needs to walk this world anyway. He’s cowardly, useless, old and his eyes are bad. He does, however, have several children and a wife, all of whom he would hate to see perish. If I were to be put in a bad situation—say, arrested—this man needs to step up and confess to all my crimes.”

Woon had understood.

“Hold your blade to his throat instead of mine and assure me that you got his word. That’s all.” The minister shrugged. “Then this gold will be yours. You want it, don’t you? And the man may not need to confess at all. The trial may go my way without your help. And still, this gold will be yours. Not a bad deal, right?”

More gold for the coffers of the Prince Heir. Would the trial go Hong’s way? Woon figured the chances were even. A coin toss.

Woon had gone to the deputy’s house and threatened him. Before mentioning that the man’s wife and children would be in danger, Woon had pulled down his black assassin’s mask so that the man could identify his abuser if worse came to worse.

If Dong-soo’s trial before the king didn’t go as planned. If the Defense minister had to be taken down another way. If….

Dying in order to achieve his goals had always been one of the scenarios for which Woon planned. In fact, after leading so many people to Death, wasn’t Death itself Woon’s just end?

Dae-ung pointed the way. The small band of men with the intent to kill the former Sky Lord began to walk to the place by the stream where Chun reportedly sat, mourning Ga-ok, weak from hunger and still wounded from having fought off attackers.

Woon was certain Jang Ryang would perish during this encounter. If there was one thing Woon understood, as young as he knew he was, it was the power of obsession. Obsession drove Dae-ung to stay alive, did it not? Then there was the Sky Lord’s obsession with the Earth Lord—he would take revenge for her death. And Dong-soo….

_Dong-soo has always been obsessed with me._

_“Didn’t I promise I would make it all okay? Please. If there is something you cannot bear, I will bear it for you.”_

_There was the Sky Lord, not despairing, his back against a tree as Dae-ung had describing, but walking up the hill that his assassins were travelling down._

Jang Ryang drew his sword.

* 

Jin-joo was gone for a long time the day of the funeral. Dong-soo worried about her, so after she
returned, he walked straight into her room without knocking.

It was worse than Dong-soo expected. Hwang Jin-joo wasn’t sobbing; she was sitting on the floor. She looked a little tired, but there she was—that bright-eyed girl who never went anywhere without her bow and arrows. The quiver lay next to the bed.

“It’s me,” Dong-soo said. He sat next to her. “I knew you as a child. When you’re really upset, the most upset, you don’t cry. You yell at people or you—”

“I’m sorry.” Jin-joo hugged her knees. “I shouldn’t have told you to shut up.”

“There you go,” Dong-soo said. “You yell at people or you get all nice. It’s okay to be sad. It’s okay to cry. Cry all you want.”

“There’s only so much crying a person can do.”

Dong-soo wondered if that the painter’s drawing had made Jin-joo feel that much better?

No way.

“I’m here for you. I wasn’t lying about that. You can say anything you want to me. If you feel like dying because you are so sad, I will sit here with you until you don’t feel that way. I will tell you that I don’t have a mother to remember and what I know about my own mother makes me sad too, so you must remember all the good things about this mother you met not long ago—because you have that.” Dong-soo felt his speech starting to rush. “If you feel anything crazy—like if you want to take revenge for her death or something like that, I can talk you out of it. If you want to—”

“Dong-soo-yah, stop. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to take revenge.”

Maybe Dong-soo didn’t know Jin-joo as well as he thought he did.

“Are you sure you remember me as a child? Don’t you know who I am now? If something’s bothering me, I take action. I don’t sit around and cry.”

Dong-soo felt more worried than before. “Where did you go today?”

“Do you know what my mother’s last words to me were?”

Dong-soo felt terrible. Did Scary Lady die in Jin-joo’s arms? From what Sunsengnim had said, Jin-joo arrived with the doctor too late, but woah, parting words—? Sunsengnim hadn’t said anything about that. He had said that the two lovers of the woman had been there—each had begged the woman not to die. Did Jin-joo beg too, but Scary Lady could not even live for her own daughter? Had the assassin’s wound been that terrible?

Is it true? Do most assassins perish by the swords of other assassins?

Dong-soo thought of Woon; he forgot Jin-joo’s question. Is Woon in danger right now? It would be just like Woon to put his body in front of someone else... Dong-soo remembered lying on the ground, about to be killed by the Sky Lord, and a twelve-year-old Yeo Woon running to stand in front of Dong-soo. A boy had spread his arms wide and wordlessly begged the Creepiest Guy Dong-soo had ever seen to spare Dong-soo’s life. Woon, please don’t do anything stupid like that again.

“Dong-soo-yah?”

“My mother told me that the head of the assassin guild, that horrible man, was not my father.” Jin-joo bit her lip. “She had only told him that--so he would protect me and take me somewhere safe. My real father is Sword Saint.”

Dong-soo wasn’t surprised. “They all know then, don’t they?” Most people had suspected.

“I only have one father as far as I’m concerned.” Jin-joo was biting her lip harder, so she wouldn’t cry. “The man who raised me is my father. He’s even the one who gave me my name. My mother left the assassin guild for a year with him, then she gave me to him as a baby, then never came back—well, until a few years ago for some reason. Maybe she was fed up with the whole assassin business. I kept hoping she was going to leave that place, but she never did.”

Again, Dong-soo couldn’t help but think of Woon.

“She didn’t even name me.”

“You have a pretty name, Jin-joo-ah,” Dong-soo said. He’d always thought that the stupid girl had the prettiest name.

“My father named me for a little black pearl my mother used to throw—a little assassin’s weapon used to disable people. He said to me that I could do that to a man’s heart too—hit it so he was helpless.” A little laugh—Jin-joo’s tears didn’t fall. “But so far it hasn’t worked out that way.”

Dong-soo felt guilty. Guilty for not loving Jin-joo. He didn’t know what to say. He cleared his throat. “Hong-do seems to like you.”

Jin-joo didn’t seem to even hear the painter’s name. “I went back to the place my mother died today,” she went on. “That scary man was there. He was so heart-broken. He was just sitting by the stream, looking all messy and like he was about to die himself.”

“Jin-joo-yah! Do you know how dangerous that man is?”

“He’s not. At least he wasn’t with me. He cooked for me in that abandoned house. He went to the village and bought me a little silk purse.”

“That’s when—” Dong-soo was beside himself with horror. “He thought you were his daughter then! Didn’t he get angry when he found out the truth? Aigoo! He could’ve—he might have—why didn’t he kill you?”

“I yelled at him.” Jin-joo smiled. “I yelled at him and told him to get up. I said that my mother would not want him to act like that.”

Dong-soo couldn’t believe it.

“I know he’s killed hundreds, maybe hundreds of hundreds of people,” Jin-joo said. “I know he’s a very bad man, but….”

Dong-soo waited. Jin-joo was breathing with a little effort, trying not to cry. He, Baek Dong-soo, was here for her.

Jin-joo must have read all the attentiveness his eyes, his sincerity or something like that, maybe his need to be comforted by her instead of the other way around. Jin-joo lay her head on Dong-soo’s shoulder. “Don’t worry so much. I knew I could talk to him. He said he would have saved me
anyway because I was her daughter. He said that love is crazy like that.”

Well, that much Dong-soo believed. Love is crazy.

“They’re still going to have a match,” Dong-soo said. “Sword Saint and this… Creepy Guy. In a few days. They’re going to try to kill one another. I don’t see why. As if the winner gets to have the lady’s heart or something. I don’t think that makes any sense. I think she already chose.”

“I know they’re going to fight.” Jin-joo sighed, and Dong-soo patted her hair. “I’m going to try to stop that.” Another heave of her chest. “Who—who do you think she chose in her heart, Dong-soo-yeah?”

“Both,” Dong-soo said. “I’m sure she chose both.”

*  

Three of Heuksa Chorong’s best men fell out of the trees to attack the Sky Lord. The Sky Lord cut
them all down. Other assassins leapt from nowhere to attack. One bounded off the body of a slain assassin, and although he was charging for the Sky Lord’s throat, his own met the Sky Lord’s blade. Blood spurted as the Sky Lord pulled the blade out. Then he sheathed the sword.

Woon understood that though the Sky Lord looked a little confused at the moment because the former guild’s men were attacking him, the man would not have to draw against the assassins again.

“What’s the matter with all of you? I’m still your leader.” The Sky Lord looked as if he’d cleared the table of dust with a gentle swipe of his hand instead of killing people. As if he’d been surprised by how dirty the table was. “This is how you greet me?”

The assassins left alive bowed, as Woon knew they would.

Woon himself stood behind Jang Ryang, ready to help. Dae-ung was further behind, hidden.

“I am here,” Jang Ryang announced.

“I know,” the Sky Lord said.

Woon took a deep breath as the two men took their fighting stances. Jang Ryang’s sword was already drawn; the Sky Lord’s fingers hovered over the hilt of his own sword. His signature stance. A matter of pride. He drew after an opponent; the sight alone was terrible. This prelude to the performance was a warning: I am faster. I am so fast. My hand is right here, hovering like a dark sky threatening a whirlwind of Death. You may not even feel yourself die.

“Watch, Woon. You may learn something.”

Woon had no time to be taken aback by the Sky Lord’s words when the fighting began. One, two parries. The two swords paused, smashed against one another; the Sky Lord kept walking forward and bearing down. Jang Ryang whipped out his sheath to push back the Sky Lord’s amazing strength. Woon marveled: was there any overcoming such offensive power? Even against the long sword and long sheath, the Sky Lord was about to knock the military officer to the ground. Jang Ryang leapt backwards, two high acrobatic jumps that Woon had seen Dong-soo perform often. In a similar situation, Woon would’ve rolled away, less visible a target and would have sprung to his feet in an unpredictable spot.

Jang Ryang charged again, and in a surprise move, the Sky Lord appeared to dodge the sword but at the same time, while facing away from Jang Ryang, the Sky Lord thrust his blade all the way into Jang Ryang’s chest.

Dae-ung whistled.

The Sky Lord sheathed his sword. Jang Ryang fell to one knee, then fell to both knees.

“Such a master,” Jang Ryang said, coughing blood. “Why do you stay in such a small country?”

Before the Sky Lord could answer, Jang Ryang had leapt up again, his sword in motion for more, but the Sky Lord was fast, faster than the foreign military commander, and the whirlwind of Death had descended. A dagger was stuck in Jang Ryang’s neck. Blood was pouring down the man’s body like a waterfall.

Woon had not even seen the Sky Lord draw the dagger.

“For five thousand years,” the Sky Lord said, “more than half the land your country possesses has
belonged to Joseon.” He twisted the knife. The Qing soldier’s weapon dropped out of his hands. “And you should not have touched Ga-ok.” The Sky Lord pulled out the dagger, and a dead man fell.

Woon knew that he himself was not ready to fight the Sky Lord.

“Yeo Woon,” the Sky Lord said. He came closer and closer. He didn’t smell of drink so much as blood from conflicts days ago. He put his hand on Woon’s shoulder. “Let’s go.”

The Sky Lord mounted Jang Ryang’s horse. The assassins who had survived the Sky Lord’s blade and Dae-ung kept a wary distance as they un-tied their horses, and the Sky Lord laughed—not his usual laugh. A melancholy one.

“Get out of my sight,” the Sky Lord to Dae-ung. “I don’t want to see you back at the headquarters.”

The Pig had the good sense not to respond. He was gone into the dark woods before the Sky Lord had even finished his sentence.

When the Sky Lord saw the guards outside the headquarters, he said to Woon: “You don’t need them. I’m here.” Then, curiously, he asked Woon to dismiss them. The guards, not able to disguise their fear over the Sky Lord’s return, scattered. Like animals fleeing the butcher.

An assassin is not supposed to fear Death. Is that what Woon had always been taught? Woon had always faulted himself every time he feared it; he had thought himself cowardly and unlike the Sky Lord, Sword Saint, Dong-soo—and even Cho-rip who, without hesitation, had chosen to die in the rice box for the Crown Prince and for Dong-soo.

The Sky Lord has always been full of lies and bullshit double-talk. Heuksa Chorong is a sandcastle. Drenched in blood but still a sand-castle. I can still kick it over. I can still... return gold and more gold to the coffers of the Prince Heir. To the people of Joseon.

Goo-hyang was waiting inside the door. Her face revealed no surprise when Woon walked in with the Sky Lord. She bowed a deep bow, to the floor, her skirt puddling in ripples of blue, before her former master. “Welcome back, Sky Lord.”

“Woon, I trust you’ve done a good job here.” The Sky Lord’s voice sounded distant and tired. “I need to borrow my old home for a while. There is no place better for cleansing the body.”

Borrow?

The Sky Lord looked around. His eye lingered on a far corner of the room, on the gayageum where the Earth Lord would sit and play while the Sky Lord painted in ink.

“I meet Gwang-taek in a few days. You’ll help me prepare.”

“You need my help?” Woon didn’t understand.

“You can hold your own against me. We’ll practice.”

Woon nodded.

“You.” The Sky Lord nodded at Goo-hyang. “No one else should prepare my bath. I’ll need you to
stitch a wound on my back. A poison arrow pierced it. I seared it with a hot iron, so it wouldn’t open but it will have to be opened again.”

The man looked from Goo-hyang to Woon, and added. “I can tell just from looking at you two that it didn’t work out. I thought both of you had strengths you could merge to take charge of this place, but it looks like—” A slight smile—the Sky Lord of old, the man who noticed things and liked to mock people. “You seem to be keeping a distance from one another. Ah, that’s fine. You’re too alike anyway.”

Woon and Goo-hyang looked at one another. Woon felt embarrassed and was surprised that Goo-hyang looked embarrassed—or was that look the shame of a servant who had disappointed a master?

“It’s like you’re my own children. It would have been a little perverse,” the Sky Lord continued. He had that way. It was the man himself who was perverse.

“I’ll draw the bath now,” Goo-hyang said and began to leave.

“No, stitch me up here,” the Sky Lord said. “Get some alcohol for disinfectant. He began to walk towards the altar of swords. “I spent my whole life here. Odd how it doesn’t seem like home anymore.”

“Shall I bring you some drink and food?”

“Something to eat?” The man nodded. “Sure. I won’t be drinking. Drinking was a comfort. I thought the two of you would be a comfort once. I thought that the whole while I was losing her to Gwang-taek, I could find comfort, but nothing was a comfort. It’s all over now.”

The man was limping towards the altar. He was injured, but he was an invincible monster. Woon knew better than to move from where he stood; the Sky Lord required a witness to this scene; he always needed an audience.

“Fighting was everything,” the Sky Lord spoke to the swords. “I know you felt something of the same thrill as I did. Yeo Woon; I know you had a drive to be the very best. I saw you work hard. I saw you take pride. What I didn’t see was you take pleasure. Why is that?” A slight chuckle. “Did I take that away from you too? The way I took it away from Ga-ok?” The Sky Lord spread his arms wide before the altar of swords. “I’m so good at murdering people. I murdered you all, and now there is only Gwang-taek left.” He turned around. “Actually, it wasn’t a long list of great swordsmen—and most of them weren’t even worth my sword. I didn’t even bother to kill them. A few I left sputtering and alive here in Joseon.”

A thought occurred to Woon—it was just a spark of a thought. Once the Sky Lord was dead, those men might be useful to Woon.

“I have to meditate here,” the Sky Lord announced.

Woon remembered the Sky Lord’s meditating. He would banish everyone from the elaborate headquarters, sit before the altar of swords and drink himself into a stupor for a few days. He would emerge, call for the Earth Lord, paint a red spider lily, go out and terrorize someone; the men gossiped that he would pick a fight with the Norons, refuse an assignment, throw insults around about the Emperor, kill a random person.

The Sky Lord was staring intently at Goo-hyang, who lowered her eyes.

*What did he do to her?* Woon felt his breathing getting deeper. He wasn’t afraid. His purpose was
growing stronger. He felt that even if he himself was incapable to taking vengeance on the Sky Lord, if the task was Sword Saint’s, then Heuksa Chorong’s dismantling was Woon’s job; piece by piece the Bloody Sand Castle would fall apart and dissolve into the clear water and float way downstream.

“I have some things to think about before my fight with Gwang-taek,” the Sky Lord went on, “and the two of you are the only ones I can rely on now. I have always been able to find my strength here, but now that she is gone…” He looked at the gayageum. A forlorn smile. Woon had no sympathy for it. “She didn’t want to be here, but her music was enough. Neither one of you want to be here, either—do you think I don’t know that? But I need you here, and that’s what matters. Now here is my dilemma….”

The Sky Lord folded his arms and walked down the steps.

“I need Gwang-taek too. He was the last great warrior I felt excited about fighting. When I defeat him, what else will be left for me?”

The Sky Lord stopped walking. He stopped short of walking right into Woon. “You watched me kill that fake Chun. Did it look like I was having fun to you?”

Woon didn’t know what to say. The question wasn’t rhetorical; it was a master’s question to a pupil, and as always, Woon would fail at answering it. He chose not to answer this time.

“He was too easy to kill. It wasn’t fun. The Sky Lord is the god of heaven. My revenge falls from heaven like rain; the rain is cold, death is cold, and my revenge is cold. Of the three lords of Heuksa Chorong, and you know this, Woon, I am the one who is above you all. The Earth Lord was supposed to stay by my side; this was just the way it was.”

Woon could only stare. Did the man really believe all that mythological, hundreds-year-old guild nonsense? Had years of drinking and his current grief made him mad?

“I know what you’re thinking. There has always been more than one Chun. Ha, you think I don’t know it? I’m not a real god, but I have always been your leader, and you have always been under my boot.” A faint glimmer of happiness in the man’s eyes at the memory of all that power. Then, in an instant, the happiness was gone. “The position was passed along to the strongest, like from one divine king to another, sometimes from a father to a son. It was cruel of her, don’t you think—it was cruel—for her not to give me a child?”

Woon’s body went cold when the Sky Lord’s arm stretched forward and the hand touched Woon’s shoulder.

“I always knew you could reach heaven, Woon.”

This was a lie. The Sky Lord had not chosen Woon to be the designated heir of Heuksa Chorong. In the man’s following rambling speech was the confirmation of what Woon was thinking.

“Before I left three years ago, I asked her to come with me. She refused. Her heart stayed here. With Gwang-taek. I was angry. Who doesn’t know that story? Who wouldn’t be angry? Aren’t you a man? Wouldn’t you be angry? I remember when I told you that that little tattoo girl was doomed to die, that girl you barely knew, your eyes went crazy. Was she even your lover? I knew my woman for years and years; we were like brother and sister; we were like husband and wife; we were like Sky and Earth. Yes, I was angry.” The Sky Lord’s eyes were flashing with anger again. “All these three years, I missed her. But heart had been leaving me for a long time. She wouldn’t stop dreaming about him. Ha, you know what, Woon? I believe I began to lose her heart to
Gwang-taek the day before I met you. A little angry boy on a dirt path. A little angry boy.”

Woon looked into the Sky Lord’s eyes. There was no longer any anger there, but no regret either, only a sad story.

“She’s the one who always said nurturing a heart is the death of an assassin, but I wanted her heart. I guess I killed her if I nurtured it. I’m the one who killed her—but hey, killing people is what I do.” He cocked his head with a half-smile. “I decide these things. I decide when people live and die.”

What are you trying to tell me? You said I had no decision in matters of my own life or death. But I can live how I want. I can die when I want.

“I kept her close. I kept you close too. See what this Chun has done? Even when I was gone for three year, neither one of you—not you, pretty Goo-hyang, not you, Yeo Woon—would leave this place.”

The Sky Lord drew closer, his face to close to Woon’s face.

There could not be more to this speech. Woon was not sure he could bear the hand on his shoulder without flinging it off. Yet he had always withstood the Sky Lord’s touch. He was not able to overcome him. He had always been in awe of him, and now, there was an awful pity that joined that the veneration and fear.

“I saw boys your age on my journey,” the Sky Lord said. “I asked them to bring me food and drink from their homes and from their villages; I asked them for information about the warriors I was
looking for. None of them had that look you have. Those eyes looking at me right now. Those eyes that looked at me years ago. Any one of those boys I could've made an assassin. But you were like a divine gift.”

Woon could stop looking into those lying eyes.

“Destiny?” The Sky Lord spoke the word as if he were asking a sincere question of the universe, not as if he were tossing one of his usual taunts at Woon.

_Don’t you dare talk to me about Destiny._

“Bah!” The Sky Lord pulled his hand away.

Woon felt as if the man had lost the staring contest and wondered for a moment if the Earth Lord had not been his weakness, as everyone said, but his strength—if without her, there was more of a chance that that the Sky Lord could be taken down. His external wounds were nothing; judging by the Sky Lord’s words, the Earth Lord’s death had cut a giant hole inside the pitiful man.

“What are you waiting for?” The Sky Lord said to Goo-hyang, even though Woon was certain that the man had wanted the gisaeng’s audience all along. “Go fetch antiseptic, cloth, and a sewing kit.” He glanced at Woon. “If that tattoo girl is still in your heart, bring her here. You need a companion. It’s no good to be alone.” He looked back to Goo-hyang who was rising from a deep bow, one from the waist this time. _So reverent, still. Why?_ “You stay close to him no matter what. Whoever he brings here, treat her with respect.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Woon could not help but inhale deeply with frustration.

“Leave now,” the Sky Lord said to Woon. As the Sky Lord turned his back, of course, he kept talking. He always kept talking. The Crown Prince had yelled “SHUT UP” to the Sky Lord during the battle in which the Crown Prince would die. Did the Sky Lord listen? Woon couldn’t remember. The Sky Lord had simply killed his Highness.

“… Keeping someone by your side is important,” the man was going on. “It is satisfying. Holding onto someone’s heart is … exciting. _This is life. Everything else is death._”

Woon felt hot then cold; he couldn’t remember everything about the Sky Lord’s touch. After Woon’s father’s death, during Woon’s fever, that had been the feeling. _He touched me like that. He really did that._ The Sky Lord had touched Woon in anger, in drunken fit of sorrow. Woon’s body, if not his mind, brought back the cold, clammy hands—the memory flew through like a draft in the room and left.

Goo-hyang, in a moment of confidence, had told Woon about being recruited by the Sky Lord at a very young age. She had been born into a good family, but her father was a traitor, and she’d been branded a slave. The Sky Lord had bought her. In exchange for removing the slave tattoo, the Sky Lord promised her an education.

What sort of education?

Woon didn’t know exactly what it took to begin to groom a fine court lady into a gisaeng and a spy, but he could imagine.

_Why is holding onto someone against that person’s will exciting? Is possessiveness exciting to the Sky Lord? Control? Why does that matter so much to him?_
“I thought I would feel something when I got revenge on the man who killed Ga-ok. Revenge? It is meaningless. It’s the end of everything, but I still have to think about that some more.”

The Sky Lord is a simple man. How could he have known a woman for so long and not understood how to love her?

“I’m tired now, Woon.”

Woon took those words as his cue that he was dismissed; he walked out of the building slowly, hoping that he would not be called back.

I learned long ago that there is no such thing as holding onto someone’s heart.

At the alcove, Woon picked up the weapons he’d taken off—as a gesture of respect when the Sky Lord said no one was needed to guard the headquarters. Not a blade bloodied, nothing to clean. The equipment felt heavier, though. Woon hadn’t participated in the fight but standing in the room before the altar of swords with the Sky Lord, had taken fortitude.

Revenge? I have no experience with revenge.

All Woon knew was that he wanted the Sky Lord dead. He wondered if revenge would be the end of everything, if it would be cold like Death. The Sky Lord often lied, but he was sometimes right about things.

The end of everything.

He thought of Goo-hyang alone with the man. He didn’t like picturing her alone, stitching up the Sky Lord’s wounds, his naked back exposed to her. But he knew she had been through worse.

An assassin’s star cuts so clean and then it bleeds later—you don’t even realize you’ve been hit. Why did I say that to Dong-soo? I was crazy from seeing him again that night and on the verge of another fever of guilt. He didn’t know what I was talking about. It’s like I’ve really become Chun. Talking in riddles.

Hating himself for that, Woon sought his room, tried to forget.

He was good at hiding, good at forgetting. The trick, like learning how to slice a bean in half with his blade, was to drift out of the present and focus on something else, to turn one thought over and over his head: The Sky Lord will dead soon, he’ll be dead, he’ll be dead, he’ll be dead.

Then it will be over.
17. The Bite of the Blade

가 Even though a tiger is biting you, if you gain awareness, you will live. – traditional Korean proverb
The trial before the king failed.

All the evidence Dong-soo had presented had been stunning and had resulted in Lord Hong being arrested. Evidence of josam being burned at the palace. The queen’s father saying that she had always been sensitive to josam since an early age. General Seo had made the painter Hong-do draw the shipwreck landscape to show that a Japanese attack would have been impossible from the area. The Japanese arrows found at the scene of the crime were proven fake. Then the key witness, the survivor of the jail fire, testified: the Defense Minister’s underlings had killed the survivors of the ship carrying josam—not true ginseng—to be brought to the palace.

Within two hours, as the Defense minister was being tortured, one of his deputies arrived. The deputy wailed about his guilt, expressed his devotion to the minister, confessed that the crimes were his doing and his alone.

Defense Minister Hong was released.

“Some Japanese envoy came and said that the ships from Japan really did attack,” the painter Hong-do told Dong-soo the next day. “I can’t believe it. The news is all over the palace. The envoy apologized on behalf of Japan, so the king is throwing a banquet is honor.”

Dong-soo, a palace appointee. went to the banquet with Hong-do, who was a palace artist, and during the whole fancy-fancy, there was a display of martial arts. Dong-soo recognized the
Japanese envoy; he’d been there at the settlement Woon had told Dong-soo about. The Japanese envoy had challenged Dong-soo to a duel there, but Dong-soo had been too busy scouting for josam and had run off, promising the man a good fight later if he asked for Baek Dong-soo in Hanyang. Dong-soo knew a man who loved fighting when he saw him. This guy was an accomplished samurai. At the palace, he chopped down all the palace fighters, including the mountain boys, now the Prince Heir’s guards, in the exhibition, and then looked around and boasted, “Is it true that there are no martial artists in Joseon?”

Gak, humiliated, sitting on his butt in the dirt, looked up at Dong-soo.

Dong-soo felt his hand grip his sword hilt, but Hong-do grabbed his arm. “Now is not the time. You really don’t understand the palace, Dong-soo. If you display your strength now—”

Hong-do didn’t need to say more. Dong-soo nodded.

*I’m still too young. I’m still learning. I need other people, even people as young as Hong-do to guide me. Listen. Keep listening. Stop boasting, stop talking so much…. and look around for what the world is trying, without words, to tell you.*

Back at the village, Jin-joo said she had run into Creepy Guy.

“Aigoo! He’s—” Dong-soo stopped himself. *Listen to what she has to say.*

“I guess he was looking for me. I guess he had been following me.”

Dong-soo was terrified, but he restrained himself from showing his fear to Jin-joo.

“I asked him if he would not fight my father—I mean, Sword Saint. I don’t know. I keep thinking about him as my father, so it’s hard to stop. I meant it when I said only one man is my father, but—” Jin-joo’s hands waved around. “I made the same mistake with the assassin man. ‘I called Sword Saint my father right then and there. Of course, he knew. Everyone knows. My mother even told him right before she died.”

Dong-soo waited. Here was Jin-joo, safe and sound. Creepy Guy apparently had no intention of harming her, or he would’ve done so by now. Then again, Creepy Guy harmed people in slow and creepy ways… look at how he’d messed up Scary Lady… *and Woon.*

“He said that he treasured all the kind things I said to him.”

“Really?” Dong-soo wanted to believe that.

“He said the kind things I said he kept in his heart.” Jin-joo covered her own heart with her hand. “He even touched his heart like this.”

Dong-soo felt sad. It was all so sad. A mother, a hidden daughter. Two old friends fighting one another like that. To the death.

“Do you think they’ll really fight, Dong-soo-yah?”

Dong-soo nodded. “I think so.” Again, Dong-soo knew a man who lived to fight. His own Sunsengnim was not one of those men, but Creepy Guy was.

*Sunsengnim* didn’t seem like he was going to change his mind about the appointed duel. He asked Dong-soo to spar with him on a few occasions. Each time Dong-soo marveled, as usual, at his teacher’s skills, and at his own ability to match them. There was a fluid grace, though, to
Sunsengnim’s movements that seemed to come with a lifetime—no, several lifetimes of practice. Dong-soo felt humbled whenever he watched the man perform the simplest moves.

Then one day Sunsengnim clutched his side.

“It’s nothing,” he said. “Pains of an old man.”

“This wasn’t happening on the mountain.”

He laughed. “You didn’t notice. I could ignore old man pains not long ago. But the seasons pass, and men weaken. You’re a young warrior, and I’m an old warrior. I’ll still be able to fight in a few days. The pains won’t get any worse in a few days.”

Dong-soo was worried. The way Sunsengnim had clutched his side—that had been a sharp pain, one that could throw a great warrior off balance.

As if Dong-soo didn’t have enough to worry about in the days before the approaching battle, as always, bad stuff happened. Bad people caused bad stuff—people in the palace, that man with the Scimitar from Heuksa Chorong, and then there was this Japanese samurai too. There was an assassination attempt on the Prince Heir, Ji-sun got herself thrown in jail and tortured, Sa-mo was thrown in prison too, and Jin-Joo disappeared, this time for too long—
And to make everything worse, Woon made Dong-soo doubt himself. Doubt his own ability to protect people.

First, the king wanted to throw another banquet to thank Dong-soo for saving the life of the queen and to make-up for Joseon’s embarrassment by the Japanese when Kenzo—that was his name—the Japanese guy who fought in that beautiful kendo style—that Kenzo smacked up all the king’s men. Sword Saint was supposed to beat up on Kenzo, but claiming that this would be too easy, he asked his Majesty if his apprentice, Baek Dong-soo could take his place. Earlier, at Sa-mo’s house, Cho-rip had alerted Dong-soo that during the big fancy-fancy, an attempt would be made on the Prince Heir’s life. At the palace Dong-soo saw another Japanese fellow—seriously, the man was seven feet tall—some wrestler guy Dong-soo had tussled with at the settlement. Dong-soo assumed he could take on everyone; he didn’t want to bother Sunsengnim before the big match.

Dong-soo did handily knock down a few assassins outside the Prince Heir’s house. He used the blunt end of his sword and few kicks, meaning to knock them out, but the mountain boys took the men’s pulses and said they were dead. “We’re every so grateful,” Gak said. “We couldn’t have handled them on our own.”

I don’t know my own strength.

Cho-rip—no, Dong-soo should call him Deputy Hong for that was his true noble name—told the young Prince Heir as he was leaving his home—to pretend not to know about assassins, that something was up with the queen, with the Defense Minister and the Japanese. Keep an eye out, Cho-rip warned. It was best to act like nothing was wrong. Dong-soo knew already he was out of his depth—palace politics were beyond him, yet Cho-rip—no, Deputy Hong—was in his element.

The queen? Hadn’t the queen’s father called Dong-soo into a palace fancy room to thank him for his service? Hadn’t the queen looked at Dong-soo with her pretty face and acted like she wanted him on her side? Hadn’t her father sent wheelbarrows of silk and precious goods to Sa-mo’s house that Mi-so had squealed over, but Sunsengnim had frowned over. “Don’t trust gifts from the palace. Not from the queen.”

Before the exhibition match, Kenzo wanted to try out the new fancy bone bow that came from the Prince Heir himself. He aimed for the target board then swung around and shot an arrow in the direction of the king.

Everyone gasped.

Dong-soo tried to catch the arrow, but as sometimes happened, it zoomed through his curled hand. The arrow hit a would-be-assassin standing behind the king.

Guards surrounded Kenzo, pulled away the assassin—the fluffy-haired guy Woon had once described as being in Hong’s service but who had once served in disguise as the Prince Heir’s guard.

Palace intrigue. The pieces locked together in Dong-soo’s mind, but—wow, so many pieces!

Dong-soo knew who to point his sword at. That goddamn Japanese Kenzo. It made sense. He was aligned with bad guys.

Kenzo shot Dong-soo a bored look and whispered: “I just saved the life of the king. Didn’t your friend the librarian tip off your household last night? I’m not the person you should be worried about.”
But didn’t Dong-soo already stop the assassins?

Kenzo’s expression didn’t change. Why did the man want to help? All Dong-soo could read from the samurai was that he wanted a good fight with a great swordsman—oh! But at the right time, at the right place, without interference.

“I saw your father come over the palace gates. Isn’t he a butcher? Scum like him aren’t allowed here.”

“Sa-mo!”

Sure enough, Sa-mo had gone to the Prince Heir’s house. He was sitting on the giant’s head when Dong-soo found him. Wow, Sa-mo holding his own with the mighty wrestler. Sa-mo was arrested, and so were the mountain boys when it was discovered that the assassins were former guards of the Prince Heir. That made no sense to Dong-soo. It was a horrible mess and yet another attempt to frame the young son of the murdered Crown Prince.

Cho-rip right away set about researching the human resources department to prove that the identifications of the murdered assassins were fake, that Cho-rip’s underling must have been reached by the Defense Minister, that there had to be an original book proving the true identities of the fake guards somewhere.

Somehow the former wild-haired employee of the Defense Minister was charged with treason; Kenzo was a hero.

Cho-rip—no, Deputy Hong—so good at investigation, as he’d promised he would be.

Dong-soo returned home to find that Ji-sun’s merchant trade had been implicated in the ginseng business, all the goods confiscated, and Ji-sun herself had been arrested—

Dong-soo didn’t wait to hear more. “Please hold on, Miss.” He ran all the way by foot to the palace. He was there by nightfall. He felt stupid for not having gone by horse, but he was there, sneaking in, knocking out the guards, rushing past the cells, looking for her. “Ji-sun? Young Miss? Young Miss?” She is the best woman in the world. How could anyone do this to her?

He came to a cell with the door wide open and the lock itself cut in half by a sharp blade. He picked up the two pieces.

No one else could have done this but … Woon.

Before long, Cho-rip had the identify of the library registry official who was fleeing with the book identifying the men who had posed as guards of the Prince Heir, and Dong-soo was hot on the man’s trail. The moon was high in the sky. Dong-soo was running; the man was skidding across a moonlit path.

Suddenly, Woon was there.

The registry official was kneeling in front of a black-clothed assassin. Woon’s sword was drawn, but the man before him was only bleeding from the palm of his hand. Woon held the book—it had to be the book that would save Sa-mo and the mountain boys.

“Woon-ah! Put down your sword.”

Woon sheathed it. Dong-soo walked over. The man with the cut hand fled. Dong-soo noticed that besides the book, Woon held an identification tag—so Woon had spared the man? He had been
sent to assassinate him, most likely, but had confiscated the tag to prove his death.

“What are you doing?” Dong-soo asked.

“This is for her.”

“I need the book.”

“I’m taking care of this.”

Woon, indeed, looked like he was taking care of everything.

“Where’s Ji-sun?” Dong-soo didn’t understand why Woon hadn’t brought her back home.

“Are you stupid? Do you want her arrested again?”

The look on Woon’s face was condescending. Dong-soo remembered that look. Growing up, Woon had to be the best. He would tell all the boys that he would win this competition, that competition, and then he would. He would tell Dong-soo to stop worrying about trying to be number one, that it was not worth his trouble, because Yeo Woon was the best.

“Where did you take her?” Dong-soo knew of only one place. “That Creepy Guy is back. Can you handle him by yourself? You didn’t—you didn’t take her to the assassin guild, did you?”

“Don’t worry. She’s much safer with me than she is with you.”

“But Ji-sun--"
“Dong-soo-yah, I said not to worry. You look like you’re planning your wedding already.”

What the hell….

That condescending look from Woon again. “Listen—there’s someone else you have to save tonight. There’s going to be an assassination attempt tonight on Sa-mo in his prison cell. I refused the job. It was given to the Japanese samurai. If you hurry, you can stop it. But make sure that Sa-mo stays in prison. I don’t have time to explain.”

Woon was right. The safest place for Sa-mo was in prison. The safest place was Ji-sun was with Woon until matters were settled. Dong-soo fought off the assassin sent to kill Sa-mo—why Sa-mo? An attempt to provoke Baek Dong-soo, who had sent back the gifts from the queen? Why dissolve the merchant group? Dong-soo stomach felt sick; he couldn’t eat when Cho-rip came to say that she had been tortured the day she was arrested—and yet Dong-soo had not arrived in time. Woon had. People who supported the Prince Heir were all in danger. Sunseognim wasn’t the one
looking after the court anymore.

Sunsegnim looked tired; there was something he wasn’t revealing. “Don’t worry,” he told Dong-soo. “Why shouldn’t I look this way if my blood brother is still imprisoned?” The weight of his impending battle with Creepy Guy? Dong-soo suspected a real illness.

Cho-rip said that there would be a trial before the king the following morning; there was evidence he had found to help the Prince Heir, but without the book identifying all the original guards, the chance of freeing Sa-mo and the mountain boys was less likely.

Dong-soo was wandering the courtyard, feeling unworthy. What good is it to be Joseon’s greatest swordsman if I don’t understand what’s going on? If I can’t move politics? If I can’t---

A bright hanbok shone at the gates.

“Ji-sun!”

Dong-soo ran to hug her.

“Are you all right? Were you hurt badly?” He stepped back to look at her. “Can you walk? Did they—”

“I’m fine.” She was trying to look at ease, but Dong-soo could tell she wasn’t. “I was cared for. Goo-hyang is at Heuksa Chorong. Her skills are very good. She—”

“Woon?”

“He asked me to give you this.”

Dong-soo hadn’t noticed. How could he not notice? Why did he not notice things that were right there before his eyes whenever he was swept away by his emotions? Ji-sun was holding a book. It was the book Woon had taken from the registry official, the book needed in the trial before the king.

The book freed the mountain boys, but it didn’t indict the Defense Minister.

A Japanese man was framed, with the support of the Defense Minister, and Kenzo testified that the swords used against the Prince Heir were indeed made in Japan, forged of metal found only in Otkang from volcanic eruptions. Again, Kenzo apologized on behalf of Japan, and again, Kenzo was a hero. The minister had wriggled his way out of yet another bad situation.

After the mountain boys were released, Sa-mo’s case proved a little trickier. Being someone of the cheonmin class on the property of the Prince Heir was a crime, but since the adoptive father of Sword Saint’s apprentice had been defending a royal, an exception was granted.

All was well for a moment, then Jang-mi reported that Jin-joo had been missing since forever. Her father said that since the trader group had been demolished, everyone had been trying to scout for goods to rebuild it, but Jin-joo was on a strict curfew.

“She never keeps curfews,” Dong-soo said.

The painter Hong-do showed up. “Is Jin-joo here? I’ve been looking everywhere. I haven’t seen her since yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Dong-soo felt himself panic. Jin-joo’s father, maybe, was used to his daughter not
coming home, but Hong-do was sniffing after the girl all the time. If even he didn’t know where she was right now—

Hong-do continued, breathlessly: “After we got word that Miss Ji-sun was broken out of jail, Jin-joo was looking for her—”

_Stupid girl. Because she knew I’d be worried. And because I had other things to do. Stupid girl. By herself? All by herself?_

Baek Dong-soo, the greatest swordsman in Joseon now understood that even he could not solve a problem alone

“I thought I’d follow Jin-joo around to make sure she was okay. You know how she tends to go places she shouldn’t go.” Hong-do smiled in that goofy way of his whenever he thought of Jin-joo. Dong-soo was irritated. Hong-do hadn’t known Jin-joo very long, and what right did he have to act like he could protect her? Didn’t he know Jin-joo could beat Hong-do up easily? Hong-do could hold a paintbrush but not a sword or bow. Who did he think he was?

“So, you were with her?” Dong-soo was irritated. “Then you lost her?”

“Yes. We were in the market when Jin-joo decided that it was Woon who knew where Ji-sun was.”

_Clever girl. I never told anyone that._

“You should’ve seen her. Running around asking everyone if they’d seen a man with a small face, who is not very tall and skinny. Is this friend of yours that skinny a fellow, Dong-soo-yah?” Hong-do smiled again at the memory of Jin-joo. “I lost her in the market.”
Woon… Dong-soo felt his heart tighten at the name.

Jin-joo is lost. Dong-soo told himself not to get sick. He would find her; if he got too emotional, he would not be able to protect her.

Dong-soo told everyone to look everywhere. Sunsegnim wasn’t around; the old swordsman was somewhere practicing. Dong-soo felt a twinge of fear—maybe Sunsegnim could help, maybe the Sunsegnim was that ill and should not be left alone, maybe—no, Jin-joo might be in trouble. Dong-soo needed to find her right away. Jin-joo had not come home.

Jin-joo didn’t return that night either.

A meeting was held around the dinner table. Dong-soo updated his teacher.

“She’s been meeting with … uh…. “ Dong-soo didn’t remember Creepy Guy’s real name. “She’s met the man you’re going to fight soon. She likes him because he was kind to her, but —Sunsegnim, doesn’t he want revenge? Wouldn’t he want to hurt you by hurting Jin-joo?”

Sunsegnim looked distant. “My old friend would not do this. It’s not his way.”

He asked that everyone keep looking for his daughter, but curiously, he did not refer to Jin-joo as his daughter; it was as if he had acknowledged Jin-gi as Jin-joo’s true father. Sunsegnim kept practicing for his match with Creepy Guy.

On the third day, Hwang Jin-gi disappeared. Dong-soo looked through forests high and low late
The next morning, Dong-soo was in tears. Maybe Jin-gi had found her. Maybe the daughter was safe with the father, but there was also the chance that both were in danger. There was also the possibility —

*Don’t even think about that.*

The search team went out again. “Start from the beginning,” Sunseongnim had said. Cho-rip, Ji-sun, and Yang-mi went from house to house in the village again, and Mi-so, Hong-do, and Dong-soo walked the merchant section downtown. Hong-do wore a solemn expression, and Mi-so cried and couldn’t even ask people after Jin-joo. Dong-soo scolded Mi-so—he said that if she wanted to see Jin-joo again, then she better start bothering villagers about when was the last time they had seen the stupid girl with the long braid who wore boy’s clothes and ran around with no manners, asking this and that, grabbing apples and forgetting to pay for them.

An arrow shot through the air and hit a post next to Dong-soo’s ear.

A message was attached.

Dong-soo un-scrolled it, and his eyes widened in fear.

“Don’t follow me,” he said, knowing that Hong-do would not follow. “I know where she is. It’s too dangerous. I’m going to go save her.”

Dong-soo was off and running towards an abandoned barn not far away, one he was sure he had passed the night before. Why hadn’t he looked inside? There had been missing slats in the walls. Moonlight had shown nothing, no one. Why hadn’t gone closer and searched the place? The barn on a hillside, too far away. Dong-soo had been tired. Why hadn’t he walked up the hillside?

If he’d walked up, he might’ve been shot by a poison arrow.

The handwriting that was Woon’s read: *Careful, booby-traps may still be in place. I disabled most of them, I think.*

The one who had shot the arrow with the message? Not Woon. An assassin from Heuksa Chorong. In the periphery of his vision, Dong-soo had seen the man fleeing the marketplace.

Dong-soo reached the barn. Maybe Woon was still nearby?

Dong-soo heard Scimitar Man’s voice inside.

“Try and kill me again, little bitch, and your father gets another arrow. He can’t take another arrow. He’s bleeding so bad already. Hmm, maybe another arrow would be merciful?” A snorfle. “Come at me, then. I mean, a clever girl like you can manage to untie herself again and—”

Dong-soo flung open the door.

“Dong-soo-yah!” Jin-joo didn’t yell the name like she was glad to be found. She had yelled like she was afraid for Dong-soo.

“Oh, but this was not the one who the little boy was supposed to give the message to?” Scimitar Man didn’t look disabled anymore. He could hold up his metal hand. He waved at Dong-soo. “The men I hate were supposed to come one by one, so I could take revenge. The Sky Lord’s daughter was to lure them here, and then the good, protecting men—the ones who think they’re better than
“What are you doing?” Dong-soo asked because he truly didn’t understand.

“Look around you. See how badly your needle hurt me? I could build all this!”

Dong-soo looked at the walls and the ceiling. The place was rigged with wires and arrows. Old tricks of Heuksa Chorong.

“Come any closer, and your friends die.”

“Don’t worry anymore,” Dong-soo said to Jin-joo. He himself tried not to worry, not to feel rage, but Jin-joo’s face—she’d been beaten over the past few days. There were purple welts on her forehead and cheeks.

“Don’t come closer,” she said.

“If you come closer, arrows will pierce their heaaaaarts,” the disgusting man was singing the words. He was crazy. Dong-soo thought he might understand this sort of crazy—it was wounded animal crazy. Yet, hate for this wounded animal was making Dong-soo want to kill. Next to Jin-joo, the dearest girl with the swollen face, was Jin-gi, her father, unconscious on the straw, three arrows sticking out of his back. How long had he been lying there wounded?

“Of course, they will die anyway. Little girl, do you want to see Baek Dong-soo die first or Hwang Jin-gi?”

I have a Buddha in me, this crazy man had said once. This was the man Sunsengnim had regretted sparing? He would die today.

No, no, no, don’t get overly-emotional. Negotiate.

“What is it you want?” Dong-soo asked.

“That’s an old song. Come up with something fresh. Nobody really knows what I want. I want to be respected, but no one give me any respect.”

The crazy Buddha in Me Guy cut a string with his good hand—the hand was that capable—and an arrow shot out of nowhere. Dong-soo tried to catch it, but it slipped through his curled hand.

Jin-joo, bless her quick reflexes, twisted her head, and the arrow just missed hitting her. What a girl. She sat there, tied to a post, her ear to her shoulder.

Dong-soo’s eyes filled with tears.

“What kind of martial artist are you, Baek Dong-soo? Can’t even catch an arrow?”

Sa-mo burst upon the scene. “What?” He was overwhelmed by what he saw. “Dong-soo! What’s going on here? I got a message from some little kid that—”

“Sa-mo,” Dong-soo said, composing himself. “Step outside now.”

“Dong-soo! I can help!”

“Please stand back.” Dong-soo’s voice was so quiet and commanding that Sa-mo did as told.

Dong-soo stood still. He listened. He listened to the heart of a wounded animal. The crazy Buddha
in Me Guy was breathing terrible deep breaths; his teeth were clacking with rage. Outside the open slats, someone else was breathing with measured anticipation. Why hadn’t Dong-soo heard those breaths before? He was now aware of a presence he had sensed the whole time. On one side of the barn, watching the scene, waiting, was a frightened ghost. Woon.

“Listen to me, listen to me,” Crazy Buddha in Me Guy sputtered. He picked up a crossbow. “You think you’re so amazing. The whole world thinks you’re so amazing. Let me see you stop these arrows? Hmmmm? Little girl? Warrior Baek Dong-soo will die now.”

“Jin-joo, close your eyes.”

“Dong-soo-yah.” She was crying.

“I said close your eyes because I might have to kill this man. I can stop the arrows.”

“Dong-soo-yah.” A flood of tears. Of course, Jin-joo wouldn’t close her eyes.

In the time it would take a spark to light a flame, the cross-bow arrows flew and Dong-soo reached inside his belt with his right hand and threw a dart at Buddha in Me. The dart hit Buddha in Me’s wrist, not his heart, and Dong-soo caught the deadly cross-bow arrows with his left hand just before they could pierce his own chest.

“You didn’t close your eyes, Jin-joo-yah.”

That was the excuse Dong-soo gave himself as to why he didn’t kill Buddha in Me. Jin-joo would’ve seen that.

“No!” The man was outraged. Dong-soo wasn’t sure if the outrage came from the fact that Dong-soo was so great that he could catch arrows flying with cross-bow speed or from the fact that yet again, someone had spared his worthless Buddha in Me life. “No! NO! NO!” He picked up a lit torch. “Do you all want to die together? Do all of you want to die?” He kept repeating the words, but they were turning into choked sobs. “All of you? Want…. to… die?”

The torch burned in Scimitar Man’s hand. He waved it around.

It was a worthless threat. Dong-soo could tell the man was already defeated. Dong-soo knelt to untie Jin-joo. “Help me, Sa-mo.” Sa-mo didn’t need to be asked twice; he was already lifting his blood brother onto his shoulders and out of the barn.

“How did you catch the arrows?” Jin-joo asked. “How did you do such a thing?”

“No one ever respected me,” Buddha in Me was wailing. “No one has ever treated me as if I were ….” Sobs, no more words. Utter defeat.

At the house, Sa-mo said that Jin-gi’s wounds were not deep, not serious, and that both father and daughter were suffering from exhaustion.

“I had plenty of medicinal herbs in stock,” Ji-sun said. “They need rest more than anything else. Jin-joo should be up and about soon. She’s insisting she’s not hurt, that the bruises on her face don’t hurt anymore, that the man didn’t really hurt her badly.”

“He hit her,” said Hong-do, horrified. “He punched her face with that … metal hand of his.”

“Nothing’s broken,” Sa-mo said. “He didn’t hit her that hard. He was probably trying to intimidate her more than anything else. I… don’t understand the man. He was definitely trying to lure people
with Jin-joo to kill them. Did you see how everything was rigged with arrows? But then when he had his chance to let the arrows fly, right after Dong-soo spared him—he just lost his mind and let us walk out of there.”

“Jin-joo will be okay.” Dong-soo tried to reassure Hong-do, a man who had probably seen very little violence in his life. “Jin-joo’s pretty tough.”

“Dong-soo,” Hong-do said. “Let’s step outside.”

On the porch, facing a clear blue sky, Dong-soo wished he would have been able to catch a glimpse of Woon—what exactly had Woon been doing there? Waiting for Dong-soo to mess up? Had Woon been waiting to swoop in and save the day? But something about Woon’s breathing--? Why couldn’t Woon come in and face Dae-ung? Why had he been waiting for Dong-soo?

Dong-soo felt disheartened. He knew he was about to be scolded by a righteous Hong-do, and that didn’t make him feel any better. He saw Ji-sun, of all people, following Hong-do out of the house and wondered about her intentions. Was she there to make peace?

“I guess you feel great about yourself, Baek Dong-soo,” Hong-do said. “Jin-joo is all dizzy from exhaustion and the medicines for pain and whose name does she keep repeating? Yours, Dong-soo.”

Dong-soo wasn’t listening. He unrolled the message from Woon in his hand.

“What’s that?” Ji-sun asked.

The less people knew about Woon the better. His movements didn’t need to be tracked; suspicions didn’t need to be roused; Hong-do didn’t even know that Yeo Woon had returned to Heuksa Chorong. General Seo had once referred to “the pretty boy” in Hong-do’s presence, and Hong-do vaguely knew that some rogue friend of Dong-soo’s was working in the shadows somewhere but…

“Nothing, nothing.” Dong-soo rolled the message up and tucked it into his sleeve.

“Jin-joo,” the painter went on. “She… it’s obvious to everyone how she feels about you. Not understanding a woman’s heart like that isn’t what a real man should do.”

People were talking about hearts all the time. *Hearts, hearts.* Dong-soo couldn’t bear Hong-do’s accusatory look, so he looked to Ji-sun, expected to find a comforting look there, and saw instead those intelligent eyes searching his face with curiosity.

Dong-soo turned away.

*The sky is so blue.*

*Woon, you sent the message.*

*You found Jin-joo before any of us.*
I may have been the one who caught those arrows, but if not for you....

“Let’s eat,” Ji-sun suggested. “It’s already been a long day.”

Hong-do nodded, and he and Ji-sun walked away. Dong-soo kept staring at the blue sky.

Right now, there are people who think I’m a hero, and there’s Hong-do who thinks I’m not the hero because I don’t know Jin-joo’s heart.

Wasn’t it you, Woon, who saved us?

Isn’t it you, Woon, whose heart is with mine right now?
The morning Dong-soo rescued Jin-joo and her father from Dae-ung, Woon would make a decision that blew back into his face like Destiny. Woon was sure that Dae-ung wanted to die, and then he was sure that, as always, the man was determined to survive at any cost.

*Sword Saint didn’t kill him. The Sky Lord didn’t kill him. Dong-soo didn’t kill him. But am I not a true killer?*

After watching Dong-soo leave the booby-trapped barn, Woon peeked inside through one of the many broken wooden boards. Dae-ung, wailing, looked less than a man—Woon couldn’t even call him an animal. Only a monster would’ve kidnapped a man’s daughter, tortured her with words and beatings, used her to lure the men who wanted to protect her into a booby-trapped barn. Not thinking twice about it, Woon tossed a coin that knocked the lit torch out of Dae-ung’s hand. The building caught fire easily—all that straw.

He meant to walk away but turned around. He watched the fire, the patterns of yellow and orange climbing the blue sky. He wanted to be certain the building collapsed.

*He should’ve died so many times before.*

Woon had wondered where Dae-ung was that very morning; squad leaders had told him that the Pig had taken cross-bows and supplies from storage and run off, looking crazy. Woon had laughed,
wondering if the man was out for revenge against the Sky Lord, but something in his heart made him ask in which direction Dae-ung fled. Woon travelled with the two squad leaders, followed the paths he knew a wounded animal might take, put up his hand when he saw the booby traps in the grass. “Disable what you can find,” Woon had ordered. Bearded men were accustomed to taking orders from a small-waisted, boyish looking leader now; in three years, Woon had earned the position of Sky Lord. Even though the old Sky Lord was back, Woon was the man in charge. The old Sky Lord had gone out into the forests to train for his match with Sword Saint—he didn’t seem to have any interest in Heuksa Chorong anymore.

When Woon had reached the abandoned barn, one glimpse through the slats had horrified him. Jin-joo was bound, bleeding, and her father looked dead. Woon right away had ordered both his men to find Dong-soo, and he himself had stood, listening to Dae-ung’s ramblings about vengeance until Dong-soo came.

“Don’t put your hands on my father!”

“I didn’t, little girl. I will put my foot on him, though!”

And Dae-ung had kicked the daughter and kicked the father and kicked the daughter again.

“I feel sorry for you both,” Dae-ung had sing-songed. “It’s not your fault you’re here. It’s not my fault I’m the bad guy. It’s the will of heaven. It’s only right that I get my revenge on the men who tore me apart, bit by tiny bit. Heaven threw me this opportunity. Heaven threw you to me, Hwang Jin-joo.”

Woon winced at the memory of the words. As he watched the black smoke from the bright fire rise into the blue sky, he felt no guilt over Dae-ung’s death.

Then he noticed a body crawling along the landscape—a human slithering through the grass, not wounded, only covered in ashes. Dae-ung was trying not to be seen, or maybe he was sick from having inhaled smoke. He looked like a large snake who had eaten too big a prey and needed to find a place to sleep and digest.

Woon watched, amazed, as Dae-ung crawled to a pond, cupped his good hand and brought water to his mouth.

The will of heaven?

Woon considered walking over and stabbing Dae-ung through the neck but, disgusted, he walked back to Heuksa Chorong. Will of heaven, Destiny, good fortune, bad fortune…. Of course, there was no such thing—or had his father been right? Had there been something in the stars that had blown that arrow to light the beacon that rainy day? What fate kept returning Dong-soo back to Woon, back and back again? Why had Father died, though? A choice. Woon’s own choice.

There was no telling on what side a coin would land. Woon knew he was smart; he understood he had skills; he could shoot a coin with deadly spin and speed from a great distance and knock the lit torch out of Dae-ung’s hand, and yet, there was no telling on what side that coin would land.

He’d had enough of it. Spinning through the void with a purpose and expecting to land sure-footed but never knowing when he might find himself in unknown territory. Woon himself was a double-sided coin--working with the minister, loyal to his friends.

He’d had enough of it when Ji-sun was tortured. At the news from Goo-hyang, he’d run to the palace and watched. She was strong. Young Miss bore the leg-screwing, the pain of two poles
pushing against her spread apart thighs. She’d screamed without making noise. In the prison cell, her mouth was bloody as if she’d bitten her lip. She told him that it had not gone on for long.

Woon knew he was being lured by the Prime Minister. “This is all because of me,” he had told Ji-sun.

She had refused to leave with him at first. She wanted to prove her innocence.

Innocence? He’d had enough of innocence. Who could stay innocent in this world? There were those who needed protection and those who could protect them. The rest--?

Coins flung through the air, coins to be played by people who knew how to gamble and murder, coins stolen and lost. Life was a random series of exchanges. Woon wanted to prove himself. He needed to prove himself. That maybe he had been used before, was still being played for a fool by the Defense Minister, but it wouldn’t always be that way.

Woon had had enough of his own weakness. He’d gasped at Jin-joo’s bloody beaten face. He had wanted to go inside, cut Dae-ung to shreds. Memories had flashed. The wooden stick Father held; he had brought it down against Woon’s body over and over. A wooden stick Woon himself had held high. “Is it true you killed my mother?” Woon’s father not denying it. Woon bringing down the stick. Blood from Father’s face dripping into the rice.

Woon had decided that Baek Dong-soo needed to be the one to save Jin-joo. Woon had been too angry, memories smothering him, his hands not as steady as he wanted them to be. The fear that Dae-ung had done something worse to Jin-joo than beat her was making Woon’s eyes cloud. Dong-soo would arrive in time.

He’d had enough of Dong-soo too, though. That night in Hong’s jail—Woon wanted to block that whole night out. It never happened. Dong-soo the savior, Dong-soo the greatest swordsman in Joseon, Dong-soo insisting If there is something you can not bear, I will bear it for you. Didn’t the stupid man realize what an impossible task that was? Did he think that because he had overcome deformed limbs to become a master of martial arts that he could overcome everything? That he could make Woon’s own weaknesses disappear, that he could hold Woon up? With what? Those big hands couldn’t protect everyone all at once.

I don’t need your protection, Dong-soo-yah.

Woon was weary of Goo-hyang too. Of her hovering over him like a mother. “Are you all right?” “Did you sleep?” She’d even suggested that Woon and Ji-sun looked well-matched, that Woon could choose to leave Heuksa Chorong and start a new life. She’d even had the nerve one evening when Woon was sitting, drinking alone in the headquarters, to bring up Baek Dong-soo.

“You can leave this place,” she had said. “How long are you going to allow the Defense Minister to treat you like—”

“I told you. I have things to do here.”

“Your friend, Baek Dong-soo, can help you.”

“Please.” Woon had put down his bowl. He disliked the taste of alcohol, but he wanted to sleep better. “I can do things myself.”

“Maybe you need to visit your friend before you move further with your plans.” She had been standing behind Woon, so had been unable to read her expression. “I told you this before, but the heart, the more one tries to conceal it, the more it will reveal itself.”
Woon had not felt embarrassed; too many people knew already. But what they didn’t know was that Woon didn’t need Dong-soo; he loved him, but he didn’t need his help. Just seeing Dong-soo made Woon crazy; just thinking about him made everything worse.

The Sky Lord? Woon had expected to be annoyed, if not utterly shredded on the inside, by the man’s constant blabbering, but the Sky Lord avoided people, didn’t drink, spent most of his time practicing by himself for his appointment with Sword Saint.

Although the Sky Lord had made it seem that Woon would be sparring with him on a regular basis, Woon had fought the Sky Lord only once. The Sky Lord had requested the match in a peculiar way; for one thing, he had requested it. Not ordered it. Not "Yeo Woon, meet me at nightfall to spar" but "do you want to test your skill?" The match had been over in no time.

Woon’s speed, always excellent, had improved in three years. For a few parries in the moonlight, Woon ran literal circles around the Sky Lord, jumped two steps up a tree and landed, his sword crashing against the Sky Lord's sword with the added impetus of a fall. But after that, no contest. Fighting when the Sky Lord came bearing down with his intimidating strength, his one blade against Woon's two, was impossible--Woon had been pushed to the ground. He rolled away and stood up, and it was over--the Sky Lord's blade was at his neck.

"You'll be better than me in no time at all," the Sky Lord had said.

Woon believed that. He also believed the Sky Lord would be dead before Woon could prove himself a better fighter.
"Thank you for the fight." Woon bowed.

"You brought the girl as I asked," The Sky Lord noted. "Don't let her go."

Woon had not known what to say. His instincts had always told him to reveal as little as possible to everyone, but to ignore the Sky Lord's assumption would be disrespectful to Ji-sun, "It's not--" he had heard himself say. "She's not here for the reason you think she is. I'm not going to keep her against her will."

"Are you saying I kept Ga-ok against her will?" The Sky Lord had looked heavenwards. It had been a bright night, one filled with stars. "It was her choice to give her body to me. But her heart...."

Woon had not been in the mood for a long, mournful speech. "Are you sure you want to stay outside tonight?"

"I've been sleeping outside for three years. I've come to like it. Keep sending food. No wine, just food. If I need you again, I'll send for you."

*No. Don't be called like a dog. Act now.*

After too many nights of wondering when the Defense Minister would send for him again, if the Sky Lord would send for him again, after having had enough of feeling like he’d had enough, Woon went to Goo-hyang. She was used to his dismissing guards and wanting to speak to her in private, but when he didn’t sit down, she didn’t either, and she realized Woon was going to ask something important of her.

"Tell me everything you know about the Shadowless World," Woon said.

She lowered her eyes. "The Sky Lord never told you?"

"No." Woon wasn’t ashamed to admit it, but the man who had brought him to this dark headquarters years ago had never taught him anything, not a thing about swordsmanship, only scraps of Heuksa Chorong’s history and maybe some of it lies; what Woon had learned about the rules of the place he had garnered from others who lived here, mostly from Earth Lord, even the Pig, and now Goo-hyang was the only one he could trust.

"The system was devised so that no more than two people would be in contact with one another at the same time, and how the Shadowless World works is ...." Goo-hyang raised her head and looked at Woon. "The way it is *supposed to work* is that a spy such as myself can know of only one other spy in the palace, but that isn’t the way it’s worked out. We are aware of one another. We don’t all know who we are, but those who have been in the Shadowless World for decades have learned—"

"How many operatives, would you say, does Heuksa Chorong have in the palace?"

"Thirty? At the most, forty. Eunuchs, maids, higher ranking noblemen. The Shadowless World has been dormant since the death of the Crown Prince."

"How do you know this?"

"The Sky Lord left. He was the one who sent orders to activate missions. Then he left, and ...."
Woon smiled. “And he left Heuksa Chorong to me.”

“Do you want to activate the Shadowless World?”

Woon nodded. “I want to put it on notice. Do you know how to do that? Is there a command?”

“Yes. I know the key-word. I will need your seal, and I will pass the word to the palace, and by tomorrow the Shadowless World will be waiting for further instructions from the Sky Lord.”

Woon heaved a deep sigh. “Then yes, do that.”

“Is there anything else?”

“No.” Woon felt some of the day’s weariness lifting. He had done so little all day, trained in early hours and read books in the afternoon, but nothing is as exhausting as patience. Woon wondered if he was acting too soon, but if he didn’t act now, how long would he be able to stand playing the role of a leashed dog? And that leash was staked to a sword. Woon needed to use that sword. He would wield it tomorrow. *In a true test of his strength.*

“I’ll be going out tonight,” he added.

Woon could tell by Goo-hyang’s expression that she was worried for his safety.

“I’ll be out for only a little while,” Woon said. “I’m going to visit a friend.”

Her face softened. She understood.

* 

Sneaking past trained guards had never been a problem for Woon; these days he could slip past anyone, but he knew that Sword Saint was a man of man of extraordinary senses. Sure enough, as fate would have it, the man was outside Sa-mo’s house in the middle of the night and turned his face in the direction of Woon’s approaching steps.

Woon decided to show himself.

“How have you been, Woon-ah?”

Woon nodded. “It’s good to see you, uncle. I hope you are well. I heard you visited the Royal physician.”

“Oh that.” Sword Saint smiled. “Not to worry. I’ll be fine to fight Chun. You’ve seen him?”

“Yes. He’s ready.”

“Ah, good.” Sword Saint rose from his seat. “I’m enjoying the night air. I expect you’re here to see Dong-soo. Tomorrow there’s a big event--the Prince Heir is making a journey to pay his respects to the grave of his new adopted father, Prince Hyo Jong. You’ve heard about this?”

“Yes.” Woon felt exposed. How could one not under Sword Saint’s gaze?

“Ah, it was all the doing of the friend you knew as Cho-rip. He’s become quite the advisor to the Prince Heir now, trying to secure his lineage to the throne. It’s a risky business, but I’m not involved in palace politics. Dong-soo and others---” Sword Saint’s gaze became more intense. “You know that the young prince will be putting himself in danger in the open on the journey to the memorial site. Assassination attempts are expected.”
“Surely.”

“I’ll be taking a long walk.” Sword Saint said, breathing deeply. “The night air is good for my lungs. There’s a clarity under the darkness that there isn’t in the busy daytime. I’ll sleep in the morning while Dong-soo is guarding the young prince. My date with Chun is so soon.”

He was a few steps away when he turned around. “Woon-ah?”

“Yes?”

“If I don’t see you again…. “ He coughed. A persistent cold? Did even Sword Saint exhaust himself and catch colds? “If we don’t meet for a long time, please know that sometimes a man can get so caught up on a goal that his chosen path appears to be his destiny even if it is not.” Sword Saint smiled. It was a kind smile that bothered Woon. “What am I saying is that I know you had a set plan when you left….but you can always return.”

Woon bowed his head.

Sword Saint disappeared into the night, and Woon went into Dong-soo’s bedroom through the open window.

Dong-soo was waiting for him, sitting on the mat in a relaxed lotus position, palms on his knees, eyes alert and catching the moonlight.

“Are you okay?” Dong-soo asked.

Woon nodded.

The two stared at one another for a long time. There was a blank space between them, no exchange of emotions, and Woon understood that Dong-soo was holding back, waiting for him.

“Woon-ah? I asked if you’re okay?”

Dong-soo can never bear a long silence. May as well just tell him the truth now and be done with it.

Woon exhaled a long breath. “I can’t seem to sleep at night.” He stared at Dong-soo who knew the reason why. “I’m fine, though. I didn’t come to talk to you about that.”

Dong-soo rose and, right away, was standing too close. “What is it?”

“Tomorrow. The march to Hyo Jong. It’s going to be dangerous.”

“I know. That’s why Sa-mo and I and the whole trader group are following the prince’s guards.”

“I’ve been given the assignment by Lord Hong to kill the Prince Heir.”

Dong-soo’s eyes widened, but he didn’t look as shocked as Woon expected he would be. Dong-soo put his hand on Woon’s shoulder. “Come home.”

“Listen to me,” Woon said. “There is going to be an ambush along the way, on the mountain path, but this first one is a distraction. You should be able to handle it easily. Heucksa Chorong will be sending fodder, new recruits. They are men picked to die.”

“Woon-ah.” Dong-soo’s face crumpled with concern. “You… you allow this?”
“The real attack will take place at So Nyung Won. Your group may have anticipated this. It’s a ghost town because of the plague last year, so there are many places for assassins to hide. Hong knows that Sword Saint won’t be protecting the prince. Dong-soo-yah, do you know? He’s ill. He’s been to see the Royal physician twice.”

“What? The Royal physician?”

“This is what my sources tell me. He seems to be preserving all his strength for his match with the Sky Lord.”

Dong-soo looked stricken now. “He’s …. He’s been distant, unconcerned with anything but that fight. Do you know what the illness is?”

“No. But he’s strong. I don’t believe any illness will keep him down for long.”

Dong-soo took his hand away from Woon’s shoulder. Woon felt the hand’s absence. Dong-soo was lost in worry for his teacher; Woon needed to hurry and tell him what was more important at the moment.

“Please listen to me. I’m going to ride a horse into So Nyung Won to kill the prince.”

“What?”

“Hong expects me to engage you. He’s betting I’m stronger than you are. He exchanged a few parries with me outside his house, but he’s no judge of swordsmanship—all he knows is what the Sky Lord told him years ago—that I was a prodigy seen every one-hundred years. And the Sky Lord…. He’s given to exaggerations.”

“You—what? You’re going to do this?”

“There will be archers everywhere. Tell Cho-rip to make sure the prince is wearing strong armor under his royal clothes.”

“Woon-ah, what are you going on about?”

“No one can know the prince is wearing armor; you will have to pretend that you are unprepared for a massive ambush at So Nyung Won. When I come at you, you will have to try to kill me.”

“What?”

“My life, the lives of everyone you care about will be at risk if you don’t make it look like I’m an assassin. You will have to try to cut me down. No one can know I came here tonight. Not the guards, not Sa-mo, not—”

“Come home, Woon-ah. You don’t have to do this. Sword Saint—I can—we can protect you.”

“No. Sword Saint is on his own path or else he would be protecting the Prince Heir tomorrow. And you…. Woon swallowed. His throat felt tight. “You can’t protect me. You have to protect the Prince Heir. I don’t want… I don’t need…” Don’t cry, damn it. “Don’t talk about protecting me, Dong-soo-yah.” Woon’s voice grew firmer, angrier. “Listen to me. Don’t worry about me. Tomorrow, I’m going to draw my sword against the Crown, and you are going to have to try to cut me down, and if I am worth what I think I am, I will be able to escape. If not…."

“Woon-ah.”
“It will be an honor to die by your hand.”

Woon was out the window before Dong-soo could stop him. Dong-soo didn’t call after him.

*Good. He’s not going to alert anyone. He’s not going to tell anyone. He’s going to go along with everything I say.*

*The prince’s entourage was supposed to leave at dawn. Three ambushes would take place; the first, a distraction to make the party believe the worst had passed after the assassins were easily overtaken; the second was in the abandoned town where Woon was expected to be successful against Dong-soo; the third was at the stables where any survivors from the onslaught in So Nyung Wong would grab horses and head for the memorial site. If Woon knew Dong-soo, the best strategy would occur to him; Dong-soo would skip the stables and head through the forests straight to Hyo Jang.

Woon had no fear, and he trusted in Dong-soo.

He trusted that Dong-soo would draw his sword against him in So Nyung Wong, and Woon was not afraid to die.

The morning of the assassination plan, Lord Hong asked Woon: “Are you confident you can bring back the head of the Prince Heir?”

The minister’s son interrupted before Woon could answer: “I’ll catch all the other guards, Father. I promise. I’ll clear a path.”

The Japanese samurai stood with his arms folded. Woon thought Kenzo looked downright petulant. He had not been assigned the job because, clearly, the Defense Minister loved tormenting the reluctant assassin, Yeo Woon. Woon hated Kenzo. Woon hated everything about being in the minister’s office, being envied, favored, looked upon as a freak with a tender heart for women and old friends from a peasant village.

“Can you kill your best friend?” Lord Hong asked. Woon answered that it was not necessary to kill Baek Dong-soo in order to kill the Prince Heir, merely get past him and hurry to cut the prince’s throat. The Defense Minister seemed satisfied with that. “Remember, I’ll have witnesses reporting back to me. All I want to see is your loyalty to me.”

Woon’s plan, as always, had never been to show any loyalty, but that in order to surpass a mountain, Woon would have to first work with the Defense Minister. *Work as in war.* That meant blood shed to prevent more blood being shed. Dong-soo didn’t need to understand this; even Sword Saint had spent a life regretting not killing Dae-ung.

“Loyalty?” Woon smiled a half-smile. “You’ll see me work today. I am an assassin. My sword will be pointed at the Prince Heir only because it will cut through him to get to you, Your Excellency.”

The minister laughed at that. “You’re sounding more and more like your predecessor every day. Chun-soo liked provoking people, Yeo Woon, but let’s just say… he had a better sense of humor.”

Woon chose a fast horse, a black gelding. As Hong Sa-hye had promised, he had captured Sa-mo
and the trader group. Woon rode by in time to see all his friends tied up and on their knees before Lord Hong’s government guards. Jin-joo was even there. *Jin-joo protecting the Prince Heir with her bow and arrow. Jin-joo, you are an amazing girl.*

She spotted Woon. “It’s Woon!”

“Woon?” The expression on Sa-mo’s face cut like a blade. His next word cut deeper. “Bastard.”

“What is he doing?” asked Jin-joo. “He’s not--?”

“He’s going to kill the prince,” said the minister’s son. “There’s nothing you can do or say about it because you’re trash and a butcher. Nothing you can say or do.”

“True,” said Sa-mo. “But you won’t be arresting my family today.”

“What?”

“Look under my sash.”

Hong Sa-hye, that sniveling faced little idiot, stuck his hand there and pulled out Sword Saint’s badge from the king—the one that granted immunity to whoever carried it. So Sword Saint, in his own way, had come on the journey?

“A royal command, you little mouse,” Sa-mo said. “You have to un-tie us.”

As the officers were untying the former bandits/now traders for Ji-sun’s merchant business, Sa-mo cast a look at Woon that was so full of disappointment that Woon could not bear it.

*Dong-soo didn’t tell anyone. He didn’t say anything to Sa-mo.*

At So Nyung Won, the guards at the end of the procession were easily overtaken by assassins who leapt out of abandoned houses. The main street was a straight path, and all eyes were on Woon’s black horse as it charged down. No one noticed the archers on the rooftops.

The prince’s carriage was at the end of the street—and there was Dong-soo guarding the prince. Woon could see Dong-soo measuring the speed and distance of the horse, and when the horse was close enough, Dong-soo took a flying leap, stepped on a bench, flew further---

Woon calculated the swiftness of the leap and when Dong-soo would draw his sword. As Dong-soo’s blade aimed for Woon’s throat, Woon leaned backwards on his horse. One hand on the reins, his head on the horse’s rump, he lay perfectly horizontal as Dong-soo’s sword swept over him. He heard the whoosh, and then heard Dong-soo land somewhere on his feet, too far behind the horse.
You’re too strong, Dong-soo-yah. You were throwing your whole weight into that blow across my neck. Thank you. That strength threw you too far away. You’ll have to run to catch up with me.

Woon dismounted, kicking away the first person who approached him. That person happened to be Cho-rip. Clutching his belly, Cho-rip fell to his knees.
There was a clear path to the Prince Heir. No archers in sight yet. The Prince Heir was a very young, no older than fifteen, sixteen? He looked so much like his father, the same clear eyes. He was aware that assassins were charging everywhere, yet he was not afraid.

Woon raised his sword and charged. This would have to be it. Dong-soo was approaching from behind.

The arrow hit the Prince Heir in the chest.

Dong-soo screamed: “YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Everyone was screaming. Woon spun around.

Suddenly Dong-soo’s sword was against Woon’s. Two offensive strikes, both hard and fast—Woon blocked them. All the prince’s guards, every last one, had surrounded Woon.

“I’ll take care of his Highness,” said Dong-soo, and he ran into the carriage, leapt on the prince’s body, tore open the clothes. “Your Highness, your Highness? Are you okay? Are you okay?”

The worst was over.

Or maybe it wasn’t.
Those who surrounded Woon believed that Woon was a traitor. Just as three years ago Woon had betrayed them and aided the plot to the Crown Prince, this time they had seen with their own eyes Woon try to kill the Prince Heir.

Woon had gone back to Heuksa Chorong of his own free will, hadn’t he?

For what purpose?

Woon was a bad person, a destined assassin.

Cho-rip looked at Woon with disgust. “Woon, how could you have changed so much?”

The mountain boys looked furious. How could Woon blame them? Their one duty above all was to protect his Highness.

“You can’t fight us all off,” Geol said.

Woon smiled. “Really?”

“Please, Woon.” Gak betrayed himself. “Just leave. We don’t want to hurt you.”

Woon disabled them all in a flash, hitting them in the stomachs and over their necks with his wrist as he still held his sword. Then Woon didn’t run away; he walked away.

Woon met Kenzo at the stables where, predictably, the Prince Heir’s party never showed up.

“The archer missed, and then Baek Dong-soo was too strong?” Kenzo sounded confused.

“The archer hit the target,” Woon said. “I told you already.” Kenzo wasn’t very bright. “The Prince Heir must have been wearing armor. And I told everyone—His Excellency as well—that Baek Dong-soo would not be easy to overcome.”

“I thought you were supposed to be stronger than this Baek Dong-soo.”

“Maybe I am.”
Kenzo challenged Woon on the spot, and Woon had his blade at his neck in two moves. The samurai dropped his weapon. “This Baek Dong-soo is strong, but I’ve crossed blades with both of you—you’re better.”

“He was distracted today,” Woon said. “He thought the prince was injured. I wouldn’t fight him if I were you—unless you want to die.”

The next morning, after a restless night and too much soju which Woon threw up, Woon noticed that Xue’s cage hadn’t been changed. Woon looked around for Goo-hyang and couldn’t find her anywhere.

“The Sky Lord came looking for you yesterday,” a squad leader told Woon. “I said you were out, but I didn’t mention the assignment. He asked for Goo-hyang, and they left together. They’ve been gone since.”

Woon began running towards the streams where the Sky Lord camped. He was barely outside the perimeters of the guild when he saw Goo-hyang, a spot of bright purple against the deep green horizon. He stopped, drew a huge breath, not at all relieved. Then he sped towards her.

When he reached her, she looked as poised as ever, not a hair out of place. That didn’t keep Woon from feeling cold inside. He held out his arm, so she could step up an incline. She took his arm the way a lady in the palace would on a staircase. Around them, mockingbirds called. The air was humid, full of small flying bugs.

“Are you…?” Woon didn’t know how to put the question. “Did he….?”

“I spent the night with him,” she said, “but it’s not what you think.”

She sounded like she was telling the truth.

“He just talked. He asked questions about you. He wanted to know how much you remember about the night your father died? He seemed very interested in that?” Goo-hyang was looking at Woon as if she wanted to know too.

Woon didn’t answer. Back at the headquarters, Goo-hyang told him that she’d heard about the mission to kill the Prince Heir. The squad leader had told her. Woon said that the mission failed.

“You’re keeping things from me,” she said in a soft voice.

“Do you….?” Woon stared at her. She looked clean and fresh, not a smudge of dirt on her face or clothes. “Do you think I’m becoming a monster?”

“Why would I think that? You saw your friends yesterday? That worried you. And you didn’t sleep.”

Woon had to wonder why she looked so calm, why she always looked like she could take on more and more; she, who had gone through who knows what kind of life, here she was concerned about someone other than herself.

“You’re drinking too much at night,” she said. “You’re not like the previous Sky Lord.”

That observation unsettled Woon. Of course he wasn’t.

“He wants to see you today.”
Woon sat down. “What if I choose not to go? Do you know what Sword Saint told me the other night when I went to visit Dong-soo? He said something about how a man can follow a goal to the point of obsession, so much that his path seems like Destiny.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But maybe Sword Saint doesn’t understand your choices. From what I see, if you don’t go to the Sky Lord now, you might be running away from your own past.”

Woon didn’t know what to say.

“All I know is that you’re hurting,” Goo-hyang went on. “I don’t know about your plans. What is Destiny, anyway? Look out for your heart first. Please, my lord, you’re not the devil you think you are or other people may think you are or… even the devil the Sky Lord thinks he made you to be.”

It sounded to Woon like the Sky Lord had something he wanted to say, that Goo-hyang wanted Woon to hear what that was. Woon wasn’t in the mood for the Sky Lord’s rambling, but he found him by the stream, a fishing pole cast into the water.

“Sit.”

Woon did. He was already tired.

“You find being the leader of Heuksa Chorong burdensome,” the Sky Lord said.

“I don’t.”

“You don’t have to lie.” The Sky Lord tossed his bait out further into the water. “When I was in your place, I found many parts of the job burdensome, but my sword was always thirsty for blood. The excitement—that was what I lived for. And now…."

Woon didn’t want to hear any more of it. It was the same song of grief he’d heard before.

“What is it that excites you, Yeo Woon? Your heart isn’t dead like mine. I don’t want your heart to
die before its time. Once, I thought you would follow my path—because I decided these things. But now I realize…”

What? What do you realize? That you’re not the god who moves the world?

“If there’s no lust for blood in you, then what moves your sword? If there’s no woman in your heart, what’s there?”

Woon didn’t answer.

“Your heart may be clouded by something,” the Sky Lord said.

Woon tilted his head and looked at the sunlight on the water. Clouded? What clouds a man’s heart? Self-doubt? The fear of disappointing someone? What did the Sky Lord know about these things? He was a man who had always believed his own lies and loved a woman with such a terrible love that he kept her in his grip until he squeezed the lifeblood out of her and she died. Wasn’t that how it was? The Sky Lord was no one to talk about the ordinary doubts and fears in other peoples’ hearts. Who was he to sit here with his stupid fishing pole and lecture—

“You didn’t kill your own father, Woon.”

Woon heard the words, but he wasn’t sure he heard them.

“You didn’t kill him. I don’t know if you remember anything after you woke up from that fever…” The Sky Lord was looking over the water, both hands holding onto his fishing pole. “I guess all your life you believed that you were the one you killed him.”

Woon thought he was being tricked again. His breath felt uneven. His face and hands were already numbing. “I clearly remember—I remember my blade going through his stomach. I killed him. I killed my father.”

“No, you didn’t. Your father impaled himself.”

“What?”

“You couldn’t do it. You stopped just short of putting the blade in. Your father was already dying, though. The one who killed your father…. Do you really not remember?”

The Sky Lord was looking over the water. The memories were flickering in Woon’s mind again. Black sky, rain, thunder. Stop, stop. Woon could always stop the confusion before-- lightning would flash on an image, and Woon would shut his eyes and the blade would go into his father’s stomach, and Woon would feel the pain of that. A blade driving through flesh--blood, pain. Stop, stop. And it would be over: a blank feeling like Death would settle over him.

“The one who killed your father,” the Sky Lord said, “was me.”

A shock behind Woon’s eyes ignited the memory.

Woon saw his father’s hand held high, the fingers dripping blood, the blade he had stolen from Woon’s hand about to come down on Woon---and that’s when the Sky Lord threw his sword. From his horse, the Sky Lord threw it. The blade flew like a lightning bolt in the heavy rain and hit Yeo Cho-sang in the back.

Dong-soo said there were two wounds.
The Sky Lord stabbed my father. My father stabbed himself.

The lightning flashed again. Woon saw his father’s hands this time. He saw Yeo Cho-sang’s hands grabbing his son’s hands. Woon felt his own hands being pulled, felt the blade enter flesh, but Father was the one who was pushing the blade in. That tearing sound again, the pain again, a difference this time--

So I never… I never…?

“There was never a killer inside you. There is no such thing as a black star like your father told you,” the Sky Lord went on. “I told you that you were a born assassin. There is no such thing in the whole world. What your father believed in—that nonsense—I thought it would make you want to kill, but—”

“So my father died because of something that doesn’t exist in this world?” The blood was rushing back to Woon’s face and hands. He felt hot. “I thought I would have to carry the burden of my father’s death the rest of my life!” Woon was angry, his eyes stung, but he wasn’t going to cry in front of the Sky Lord. He had not done that since the day the man had told him that it was Woonie who had killed his own father.

“Don’t show this face to anyone else until the day you die.”

The man who said that had enjoyed tormenting an innocent recruit; the man before Woon today was trying to catch a fish and confess a crime. How many crimes? How many lies? Did the Sky Lord really expect forgiveness?

“I suppose you blame me,” the Sky Lord said.

Woon tried to steady his voice. “No, I’ve come too far to blame anyone for all that happens in this life.”

“You have come far.” Again, the Sky Lord pulled out his bait and threw it out as far as he could throw into the stream. “You have lived so much in your young life. I don’t know what your plans are. I never had a plan, really. I may have simply looked for something that made my heart race.”
Woon was silent for a long time, aware of the blood rushing through his body, his pulse quickening, his anger forging a new desire.

“You really don’t blame me?” The Sky Lord sounded a little pitiful. “The past is the past after all, isn’t it?”

“One can’t go back and rewrite it,” Woon said. “I’d rather cut it out of my memory.”

And that much was true. Woon still wanted to forget. Forget it all.

“But isn’t true,” Woon went on, “that to become the true Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong, I must kill the old Sky Lord?” Woon put his hand on his sword to show that he was ready to draw it. “Is that not the rule?”

“True.” The Sky Lord’s voice sounded tired. “But please give me more time.”

Of course. The appointment with Sword Saint.

“You will have another opportunity,” the Sky Lord said.

Woon swallowed tears. He got up and walked away. He might not have another opportunity.

There was never a killer in me? There may be one now.

*

The day of the match between Sword Saint and the Sky Lord came and went without news. Spies were scouting the forests and streams for signs of survivors. Woon was waiting in his room, lying on the bed, imagining that the two old friends were fishing, that the Sky Lord was still talking.
Sword Saint listening with saintly patience. Wouldn’t there be a prelude to the fight? Tea and banchan. Revelations and confessions. Maybe the Sky Lord would say something to Sword Saint to make the swordsman loose his balance, the way Woon now had lost his.

_ I don’t know who I am. I don’t know what I’m waiting for. I don’t care. I don’t._

Goo-hyang burst through the door without knocking. “My lord!” Her chest was heaving.

Woon sat up. “Who won?”

“It’s not that,” she said. “I’ve just returned from the palace. The Shadowless World is activated. I have news.”

What could be so important? The palace didn’t know about the match between the two swordsman—or did it?

“Sword Saint has gastric cancer,” she said. She pressed her hand to her chest. “He won’t survive his match with the Sky Lord.”

“But…” Woon was trying to think. “He looked strong. There’s no guarantee that he still can’t---”

“The Royal physician said that Kim Gwang-taek has a few weeks left at most. His illness is that critical. The Defense Minister only became aware of this illness this morning. Before that, he still had his eyes set on killing the Sky Lord.”

Woon was surprised. “Still?” Then it made sense. “I suppose the Norons have to answer for the death of Jang Ryang.”

“Word of the match was all over towns and villages, so the pair were easy to spot. They’re on the North side of Mount Sam Gak—and the minister sent his son and a troop of archers there today to kill the Sky Lord.”

Woon rose from bed. “He’s not one who can easily be handled by troops.”

“What are you going to do?”

Goo-hyang’s hands caught Woon by the elbows. She was facing him, looking up at him expectantly.

Woon shook her off. “I’m going there. The North side of Mount Sam Gak.”

* On his way up the mountainside, Woon saw Sa-mo coming down. So, the two fighters were being well-observed? They may as well have battled in the public square.

Further ahead, he saw Dong-soo walking, too hurriedly, as if had a purpose as urgent as Woon’s, and trailing him was Jin-joo. When Jin-joo fell behind, Dong-soo grabbed her hand and pulled her forward. Jin-joo was breathless; Dong-soo didn’t notice.

Woon cut through the forests to the northern side and saw an abandoned house. The wood had been ravaged recently by swords. How long had the two great fighters been at it? Were they inside? Woon approached noiselessly and looked inside the building.

Sword Saint was panting, his one hand on one knee, the stump arm dangling in its sleeve. Amazing. The legendary warrior trained by the Shaolin to fight with one arm. Amazing.
“Do you want to take a break?” The Sky Lord asked.

“No.”

Sword Saint threw himself into the air with such speed and power that Woon was shocked; the blade in Sword Saint’s arm could have easily thrust itself through the Sky Lord’s throat as the amazing swordsman fell towards this opponent—was the master not that precise? Instead Sword Saint’s blade—the move was deliberate, and Woon saw this with his own eyes—landed against the Sky Lord’s blade, and the two old friends began a series of parries—elegant, swift, and preposterous.

They looked like they were fighting to kill, but were they?

They seemed to be re-enacting old moves, the choreography of a lifetime of duels.

Sword Saint kept aiming for the Sky Lord’s feet. The Sky Lord was drenched in sweat, but he didn’t look like he was enjoying himself. He kept backing away, standing still for a long moment, then charging forward with deadly intent. Sword Saint dodged him, didn’t fall for any of the Sky Lord’s intimidation tactics. At least one other time, the Sky Lord was wide open, and Sword Saint didn’t take advantage of the opportunity to cut him.

So the Sky Lord cut Sword Saint.

A shallow cut across the chest.

Sword Saint staggered. He coughed.

“Do you want to take a break now?” The Sky Lord asked this question with what struck Woon as uncharacteristic compassion.

“Maybe,” Sword Saint said, smiling. “Maybe we should go outside for some fresh air.” He coughed some more. “We’re stirring up dust.”

The two sheathed their swords and walked outside. Woon followed, undetected.

“Are you well?” The Sky Lord asked of Sword Saint. “Are you truly well?”

“I could ask the same of you.” Sword Saint asked. “Let’s not make this last longer than we have to, though. We’re not as young as we used to be.”

The Sky Lord was stretching into his death stance—his legs far apart, his fingers hovering over his un-drawn weapon. Eyes lowered, voice sober, the Sky Lord said, “Gwang-taek, thank you for having made my life worth living.”

“You too, old friend. Thank you.”

Hong’s officers arrived on the scene. The battling swordsmen did not appear to notice them, but Woon stepped up to Hong Sa-hye, put his sword against the sniveling young man’s throat. “Fall back,” Woon said.

The minister’s son didn’t listen.

In a flash, Sa-hye called to the archers, “Shoot them!”

Woon was so surprised that all he could do was watch the arrows as they flew.
With his blade, Sword Saint batted away arrows that were going to hit the Sky Lord’s chest, and at the same time, the swinging gesture of his arm left his own chest wide open—the Sky Lord struck the fatal blow.

Sword Saint fell to his knees.

Woon’s arm and sword fell away from Sa-hye’s neck, and the minister’s son didn’t waste a moment running away from the scene.

“Gwang-taek, you fool…. Do you know why you’re a fool? This morning you were fishing without a hook?” A laugh. “You fish without a hook.”

The two swordsmen, one dying, the other standing unsteadily with his sword dripping blood, looked at one another with fondness.

“I wanted to get you back to your old self,” Sword Saint said.

“You’ll be with her soon,” the Sky Lord said. “She’s been waiting for you.”

The Sky Lord sheathed his sword, and as he did, Woon heard “Sunsengnim! Sunsengnim!”—a voice that made Woon’s heart clench.

By the time Dong-soo and Jin-joo arrived and were kneeling next to Sword Saint, the Sky Lord was gone. Woon was still watching, not far away. If anyone were to turn around—there Woon would be in plain sight, but there was such crying going on, mostly Dong-soo’s crying—oh, Dong-soo, you can go on. When you cry, I’m afraid you’ll never stop. But you do stop, don’t you? You will stop, won’t you?

When Sword Saint took Jin-joo’s face in his hand and called her “Beloved daughter,” Woon felt that the intimacy of what he was watching was too much, and it wasn’t right for him to stay any longer. He turned and started down the mountain.
At first, Woon expected that the Sky Lord would send for him. It was the Sky Lord’s blade who thirsted for blood, it was the Sky Lord who was obsessed with new challenges. Or was the Sky Lord waiting for Woon himself to come to the forests?

News of Sword Saint’s death was all over the provinces and beyond. Goo-hyang wanted to know why Woon didn’t want to attend the funeral.

“You belong there.”

“I don’t. I would make others uncomfortable.” Woon paced around the headquarters as he had been doing for hours. “My uncle spoke his last words to me when I visited the house. He said a man could change his path. He said, *If I don’t see you again--*. He knew those would be his last words to me.”

“My lord? Is there something I can do for you?”

“He didn’t leave me anything else.”

Goo-hyang nodded. “I’ll draw your bath.”

Woon was still in a daze, unsure of the Sky Lord’s plans, growing clearer about what Sword Saint had planned for the future. Goo-hyang had reported that the Sky Lord had stormed the Defense Minister’s house, tortured the minister’s son by twisting the tip of a sword into the young man’s neck, and ranted over the archers ruining the match between the two great swordsmen. The minister had then told the Sky Lord that Sword Saint was a dead man anyway, days from succumbing to cancer. The Sky Lord had tossed Sa-hye to the floor and said that he wouldn’t kill him, but that the Hongs, father and son, were dead to him now anyway.

*Sky Lord, you still need to kill. You’ve been calling yourself a dead man since the Earth Lord passed, but what sort of dead man has a blood-thirsty sword as a legacy?*

*Uncle, you never went to fight the Sky Lord with the intention of killing him.*

*Uncle, what did you leave behind? Most of what you had in this life—your wisdom, your teachings—you left these things to Dong-soo.*
It only seemed to follow that the next person the Sky Lord would challenge would be Sword Saint’s disciple, Baek Dong-soo.

“If there is something you cannot bear, I will bear it for you.”

No, no, that’s not the way it is supposed to be, Dong-soo-yah.

Woon found that his bathwater was warm; Goo-hyang had heated pots over the stove and tossed herbs and flowers into the water. He submerged himself, holding his breath for a long time.

*Dong-soo knew about the two wounds.*

*Dong-soo went back to my father’s village.*

Moments flooded back. Three years ago, before Dong-soo left with Sword Saint for Girenhyeop and Woon went back to Heuksa Chorong: “Woon-ah, did you ever feel like I made you do whatever we did that day it snowed? Did you ever feel like that was the only way you could get me to like you?” Not long ago, in Hong’s prison cell, Dong-soo’s voice had sounded unnaturally patient: “If you’re still blaming yourself for everything in the past, remember you were a child....”

Three years ago, Dong-soo had wanted to force answers out Woon, but now....

*He knows. Dong-soo knows. He knows everything.*

Woon was running out of air, and the memories he wanted most to suppress were pounding in his skull. The aftermath of Father’s death, the fever. The Sky Lord drunk, standing at the foot of
Woon’s bed.

When Woon pushed his head out of the water, there was Goo-hyang standing over him.

Woon startled. She looked as poised as ever. Why wouldn’t she? How many men had she attended at their baths? She was holding a ceramic jug in one hand and a small tin of ointment in the other. “You never even allow me to dress you,” she said. “I made the bath with salts and scents to relax you. Take your time here.”

She was invading his privacy, but he didn’t know how to ask her to leave.

“This is for your hair.” She began to rub the ointment into his scalp and to pour warm bathwater over his head. “You’ve been neglecting your appearance again.”

He didn’t protest. Her fingers felt nice.

The water lapped the sides of the tub as she rinsed his hair. He closed his eyes, and she brushed her fingertips over his shut lids. He didn’t want her to leave. If she would only stay this way, always—touching him like this—surrounding him with gentleness and sweet smells and holding her soft fingers over his eyelids—

But she spoke.

“My lord, I’ve offered myself to you before in hopes that I could be a comfort…”

Woon’s heart sank.

“I know that forgetfulness is a temporary comfort,” she went on in a whisper, “but please, now it is time to bury the past and make new memories. Is it not possible for you to look beyond forgetfulness in my body? I promise you that there is true pleasure here.” Her voice was enchanting. Did she speak to other men like this—or was she truly in love with him? “I can give you memories to keep… even…” Her voice was softer than water. “Even if you will not be keeping me in your heart.”

Woon put his hand on her wrist. His hand was dripping, and her wrist was wet from bathing his hair. He was naked, and she was offering herself to him. The situation required the truth. “I don’t know how to explain this,” he began.

“I’m being selfish,” she said.

“No, no. You’re not. You’re not a selfish person.”

“Aren’t you curious?” she asked. “If you—with me, you can sleep well tonight.”

“I am…” Woon could not see her face because she was behind him. He could only hear her delicate breathing. He felt a steady pulse in the small wrist he held. “I am curious,” he admitted. “And you’re very beautiful, but—”

“But.” She couldn’t disguise the grief in that one word.

“I told you I didn’t know how to explain it.”

She tried to take her hand away at this point, but Woon didn’t let go.

“It’s the Sky Lord who bothers me,” Woon said. “The idea of you and the Sky Lord, and I—”
“The Sky Lord?”

“It’s not what you think. I don’t care that you’ve been with other men. I don’t care how many men. I don’t care about any of that.”

Woon’s grip was tightening on Goo-hyang’s wrist. Her fingers were spreading apart. A ring shone on one knuckle. The fingernails tapered like white gughwa petals. *A woman’s hand is so small.*

Woon dropped the hand.

“The Sky Lord hurt you,” Woon said. “You don’t have to tell me. I know that he took you against your will.” Woon swallowed and went on. “I’m the Sky Lord now, and I don’t want … I don’t want to be your master at all. I can’t bear such a thing—can you understand that much?”

A small intake of breath behind him.

“Please,” Woon said. “I’d like to be alone now.”

“Of course.”

Goo-hyang left, and Woon still couldn’t see her expression as she left the room, but she was dabbing at her eyes with a cloth.

Woon sat in the bathwater until the water felt cold. He’d never made a woman cry before in his life, not even bratty Mi-so who had always cried about everything and nothing. Woon had always ignored her, walked away when the girl came after him with her whiny supplications. *Is there something I can get for Woonie? Anything you need?*

There was no forgetting anything in the past. No forgetting anything. If there was something Woon still didn’t remember, he knew he would remember it somehow, sometime. He got out of the water, wiped himself off, lay in a fetal position on the floor with his head on his arm.

How many more humiliations were in store for him today? The Sky Lord was going to call on Baek Dong-soo instead of Yeo Woon. *Dong-soo-yah, you’re stealing my kill. Dong-soo-yah….*

*I miss you, you dumb-ass.*

Woon began to jack himself off aimlessly. He didn’t want or need Dong-soo’s protection. For Sword Saint to have finished off the Sky Lord would have been fitting, but for Dong-soo to do this job? It was the palace that had ordered Dong-soo’s parents’ deaths—if anyone, the Defense Minister should be the one Dong-soo should be seeking to kill, but the Sky Lord?

There would never be anyone in the world who could frustrate Woon more than Baek Dong-soo. Or comfort Woon more than Baek Dong-soo. *You won, Woon-ah. I love you.*

Woon opened his mouth. He wanted to call out to the world that there was no other path. That he would be bound to Dong-soo forever. Images of Dong-soo’s broad chest, memories of his large hands sweeping across Woon’s back grew more vivid. Woon threw back his head and grimaced. *No other path, no other path.* If only he could run away. He didn’t want to feel like this. He didn’t want—

He shuddered.

The brief pleasure and release hadn’t felt like much. It reminded Woon of whatever happened when he drank enough to feel comfortable then threw up. Being at Heuksa Chorong was a misery;
being without Dong-soo was a misery. Woon lay on the floor a long time, felt cold, and still wanted to kill the Sky Lord.

You won, Dong-soo-yah. This time, you won.

18. **A Saint, An Assassin, and a Dead Man**

*If you talk about a tiger, it will come— traditional Korean proverb*

Dong-soo leaned against the tree with his forehead resting on his arm. He did not weep. Everyone had wept at the funeral. Sa-mo had been a little crazy. "Why did he fight if he knew--? Aigoo, what the fuck is gastic cancer, anyway?" Everyone else had spoken words in memoriam, everyone had asked Dong-soo to say something. The ashes had long been scattered to the wind. Dong-soo had said, "He said to live a life full of blessings." Of all the many things Sunseongnim had said over the past three years, those seemed the most fitting. "What the hell?" Sa-mo was still not satisfied. "How can we be blessed if he’s not here?"

Dong-soo wondered where Woon was. Why had Woon not come? How could there be a life of blessings without Woon?

Remembering Woon’s dark eyes, the way they would look murderous but playful all at once, would lead to remembering Woon’s full lips and the things they said, confusing things, sometimes the most tender or heart-wrenching things and often nothing at all but they were lips Dong-soo wanted to press with his own, and then there was the way the wind would blow through Woon’s hair—Woon’s hair was always so pretty, like a waterfall.

Woon’s not liking burdock roots, Woon’s not being able to drink much, the way he didn’t seem to try to be the best at everything but naturally was the best—but he did try, didn’t he? He tried so hard all the time to be the best, as if he were trying to run away from being the worst person in the world. And Dong-soo knew why. Because a terrible person had made him feel that way. But that same person was someone who Sunseongnim could not kill. That same person was someone Sunseongnim had saved from Death. Dong-soo had watched that with his own two eyes.

That person had been Sunseongnim’s beloved friend.

Dong-soo missed his own beloved friend. And missing his friend also meant remembering his friend’s sweet smooth thighs, white ass, those small pink nipples that Dong-soo would suck from flat circles until they stood stiff and high as the dark cones of wildflowers and until finally, finally Woon would make those little mewing sounds Dong-soo wanted him to make—Dong-soo died for those sounds.

Memories of all that didn’t do. Dong-soo pulled down his baji. He was out in the middle of nowhere, but if someone caught him, the way Sa-mo had, years ago in the warrior camp, Dong-soo didn’t care. Dong-soo pumped himself thinking about how Woon’s face looked when Dong-soo was fucking him hard and good. Woon didn’t look happy that often. He looked happy being fucked. Sometimes he outright smiled through hard breaths.

After Dong-soo released, there was only emptiness. There had been only emptiness since Sunseongnim died. No warmth, no joy, even Sunseongnim’s will had been creepy. He’d made Sa-mo promise that if the Sky Lord won, Sa-mo must show Dong-soo the wounds. At first Dong-soo had
refused to look at his teacher’s nude body—what a violation, what an unholy thing. Even though Dong-soo didn’t practice any religion, he didn’t think it was right to study how Sunsegnim died. But then he got it. He understood the natural, if bleak, order of things. If Baek Dong-soo was to become a truly great warrior, he needed to understand Life and Death, to know how a sword cut, how it killed.

He needed to know, especially, how the Sky Lord’s sword worked. Because the Sky Lord would be Dong-soo’s next opponent.

Dong-soo had unclothed his teacher’s dead body before the funeral, studied the wounds. After the funeral, Dong-soo had run into the woods, and he’d been here for three days now.

No warmth, no joy, a cold task before him.

He picked some berries. He walked to a stream and washed his face. As morning went on, he found himself on the path home. He paused by a favorite spot where a wealthy merchant lived, looked across his shallow pond to the small pavilion on the other side. The sun was shining bright. The world looked so peaceful.

He heard Mi-so running towards him. He knew her particular gait. He figured she wanted to whine at him to come home. *I’m already coming home, Mi-so. Why did you come all the way here?* Was it that Jin-joo was crying and there was no one to comfort her? Dong-soo couldn’t comfort Jin-joo. She’d lost the mother she’d barely had the chance to get to know--and now a father she’d never even called *father*. Jin-joo needed to cry. Hell, everyone needed to cry.

He didn’t understand Mi-so’s words when she stopped, panted. “Dong-soo-yah, please avenge my father.”
Then, in a shock of understanding, Dong-soo felt to see if he was still holding his sword—of course he was. “Where is he?”

“He’s a horrible, horrible man. He’s the same man, Dong-soo-yah. I watched him cut my father’s throat that day. He killed so many people in my father’s warrior school.” Mi-so was breathless from running. “He says--he says he’s waiting for you.”

“I asked where is he? At the house?”

Mi-so nodded.

Dong-soo bolted, running as fast as he could. Mi-so ran after him. “Dong-soo-yah! Wait! Wait for me!”

The house was so far away. When Dong-soo slowed down, Mi-so told him that the Sky Lord had been sitting outside in the courtyard all morning, not harming anyone, waiting for Dong-soo.

It was dark when Dong-soo reached the house.

Once there, Dong-soo told Mi-so to go inside. Jin-gi, Sa-mo, and Jin-joo were standing around a seated, weary-looking Sky Lord. The man looked up. “Oh here you are. Are you ready?”

Dong-soo nodded.

The Sky Lord got up.

Sa-mo put his hand on Dong-soo’s shoulder. “Please be careful.”
Dong-soo looked from his adoptive father to Jin-gi. “Watch Jin-joo. Keep her away.”

“I’ll stay away, Dong-soo-yah,” she promised. “I don’t want to do anything to interfere or distract you.”

The two swordsmen moved beyond the courtyard into an open space.

Dong-soo drew first. He thought it was strange that the Sky Lord had his back to him, that he did not draw yet. Then he understood that the man was trying to intimidate him, and he expected the Sky Lord to answer a first blow.

So Dong-soo aimed for the Sky Lord’s neck with all his force—to kill, to avenge Mi-so’s father as she had asked.

The Sky Lord whipped around, met Dong-soo’s blade.

Another offensive from Dong-soo, another answer. Then the two were caught against one another. They were both tall men, equally strong. Both read one another’s strength and neither pushed against the other. Dong-soo stared into the Sky Lord’s eyes. They were full of pain.

He’s the best swordsman in the world, not me. He’s the best.

Dong-soo back away.

The Sky Lord stabbed the earth with his sword. “Gwang-taek, is this what you have left me? You gave your life and left me… this?”

This time the Sky Lord took the offensive. He kicked the sword out of the ground with his foot and charged Dong-soo. Dong-soo blocked the attack.

“Can I kill your disciple, Gwang-taek?” The Sky Lord’s voice was strange and mournful. A growl started deep in the man’s voice. Dong-soo heard a tiger rousing. He knew a man who loved to fight.

The serious battle began right then. Dong-soo wasn’t avenging anyone; he wasn’t fighting the man who killed his commander and Mi-so’s father so many years ago; he wasn’t fighting the man who had held Woon prisoner at Heuksa Chorong and had done unspeakable things to Woon as a child. Dong-soo was using all his skills against another set of skills. One sword against another sword.

The fighting rolled into the streets. The Sky Lord had been pushed to the ground. Frightened villagers were screaming and running from the sight. Dong-soo became aware of the person he was fighting—a person, not a disembodied sword. He remembered that Sunseongnim had always taught him to wield the sword with his own heart and to read the heart of his opponent.

The Sky Lord? Did the Sky Lord even have a heart anymore?

The Sky Lord was sitting on the ground and pushing back against Dong-soo’s sword with his arm, the strength of one damn arm. Dong-soo held his sword with two fists.

This man is a beast. How can he be so strong?

Slowly, slowly, the Sky Lord rose to his feet. He thrust his sword forward. The blade would’ve hit a kill-spot, but Dong-soo dodged.

Sweat was running into Dong-soo eyes by now. The look on the Sky Lord’s face was that of a
walking dead man.

He knew. He knew I could dodge that.

Both swordsman backed away and held classic stances, swords high over their heads. They would charge one another again.

Dong-soo had never known what he would do until this moment.

Read his heart.

Listen to his heart.

Dong-soo heard the sounds of villagers watching, their frightened whispers—maybe there was a spy among them. Dong-soo watched the Sky Lord’s chest heave. He didn’t look intimidating. He looked like a beast that was old, wounded, ready to die.

His heart is suffering.

The swords flew at one another.

Dong-soo’s sword was at the Sky Lord’s shoulder. It stopped short of cutting the Sky Lord’s head off. The Sky Lord turned his face and looked at the blade.

The Sky Lord rose.
He looked at Dong-soo with disdain. “You won’t kill me. You can’t. From what I see, you wield the sword with your heart.”

Dong-soo stared.

“Find your anger.” The Sky Lord pointed at his chest. “Stab me right here. You need a reason to kill me? Don’t you have a reason?”

The man wasn’t going to quit.

Dong-soo raised his sword again.

The men fought again. Swords clashed, pushing the action further and further down the street. The Sky Lord was quick—he spun in circles in a way that reminded Dong-soo of the way Woon moved. This was a man who had killed hundreds of people, who had enjoyed killing people. Did he regret any of that? Did he know their names? Had he thought about their families? Did he even remember what he did to Woon? Was he only sad about the woman he lost, about the best friend who he loved to fight who wasn’t around anymore? How could he have cared for anyone? How could the suffering in his heart compare to the suffering in Dong-soo’s right now?

Yet the Sky Lord’s heart was calling for Dong-soo’s sword to run through it.

Dong-soo did feel anger through his own suffering. How can a man take a twelve-year-old boy and touch him there?

Dong-soo dropped to his knees. The Sky Lord’s blade whooshed over his head. Dong-soo stabbed the inside of Sky Lord’s thigh, close to the groin. Blood poured on the ground.
The Sky Lord watched the blood spill and, amazingly, rose and stood on both legs as if he’d only been scratched by a prickly bramble instead of stabbed by a sword.

“Do you know, Dong-soo,” the Sky Lord said, “that Gwang-taek fishes without a hook?” A slight chuckle.

There was a stronger limp to the man’s usual limp as he walked away. Dong-soo heard him mutter, “So this, Gwang-taek, is what you left me?”

No sooner had Dong-soo sheathed his own sword that he heard familiar footsteps.

Woon was furious.

Woon was a step away.

Woon pulled out his short blade and aimed for Dong-soo’s abdomen.

One slight motion and Dong-soo blocked the blade with top of his sword sheath.

It had all happened so fast. The speed at which Woon had thrown his assassin’s blow at Dong-soo had literally flung Woon’s body against Dong-soo. Woon was pressed there, chest against Dong-soo’s chest. Woon’s hand was touching Dong-soo’s shoulder.
“What are you doing?” Dong-soo whispered.

“That was my best strike,” Woon whispered back. “You’re the greatest warrior in Joseon.”

“Why are you here?”

Woon had been holding on for too long. He pulled away.

“If you’re the greatest warrior, then I’ll become the greatest assassin.”

Woon stomped off. “I’ll come for you after that.”

Dong-soo didn’t understand. He would later. He was too tired now.
The Sky Lord was wounded. He was tired. But still, Woon knew too well, the Sky Lord was not prey. He would still be difficult to overcome.

The moment was here.

Years ago, Woon had followed a man’s horse to Heuksa Chorong to become an assassin. Today, Woon was finally that assassin.

The Sky Lord looked up from the rock where he was sitting. “You’ve come, Woon.”

Woon bowed. “Sky Lord, you never once taught me anything. You never shared your wisdom with me. You gave me assignments.”

“It was your choice to follow me.”

Still defending himself. No regrets.

“Yes. I made my choice. But from now on, I will do things my way. I won’t have you give me assignments anymore. I won’t have you tell me to bring a woman here or there. You took other choices away from me and now—” For a moment, Woon forgot what he had planned to say. “Whether it’s a heart or a life, I will take it all. My decisions, not yours.”

“I see.” The Sky Lord rose. “It’s time.”

He walked into position. The Sky Lord had always walked with a slight limp. The wound Dong-soo had made in his thigh made the limp more pronounced, but the man was invincible. He stood in his signature stance, his fingers hovering over his sword and whispering stories of Death.

Woon drew both his blades. The old sayings … if you speak of a tiger, he will come. If you don’t lose your mind when fighting the tiger, you will live. If you find your hand in the tiger’s mouth, push deeper and deeper because your blade will reach the tiger’s heart and kill it. Better to lose an arm than your life.

It was time to face the tiger.

The first parries were fast. The Sky Lord was swift, but Woon spun twice, three times, still kept coming, faster each time. The Sky Lord paused, took a step back.

He rested his sword on his shoulder. He looked like he knew he would die. “I made you like this.”

You did, didn’t you?

The moonlight was unnatural. It fell through the trees in all directions. Light was splintered and deflected, the way Woon’s memories had always felt so broken. Darkness and Light in shards over the past.

The Sky Lord waited.

Woon stood with his short blade held high over his head. He spun it with a flourish.

I won’t hide from anyone anymore. I won’t. I won’t even hide from myself.
Swords crashed against one another. Memories cut through Woon’s consciousness. “Do you want to follow me?” The Sky Lord’s hand sweeping through Woon’s hair. “Woonie did it.” The Sky Lord saying that the murderer of Woon’s father was a twelve-year-old assassin. “Those are good eyes.” The tears still clouding Woon’s vision when the Sky Lord told him that. “Don’t show this look to anyone else until you die.”

The Sky Lord’s strength pressed against Woon’s two blades.

“What’s the difference between a martial artist and an assassin?” A long time ago it had been a question Woon couldn’t answer.

*If I can take something by shedding blood, I’ll take it.*

The beast’s terrible power pressed against Woon; Woon escaped yet found himself on his knees, facing away from the Sky Lord’s sword; the oppressive weight again was bearing down on the two blades Woon held above his head.

Woon tucked his head down, rolled away.

The Sky Lord stood up, stabbed the ground with his sword, kicked it, and attacked.

Woon and the Sky Lord were facing one another. Woon was at a disadvantage against that boulder of a man. Both drew to strike at the same time.

Woon was quicker.

Woon’s sword plunged into the Sky Lord’s belly. The sound was familiar. *Father.* The sound of flesh and blood. *And another time.* The Sky Lord’s cold hand pushing inside Woon—the unexpected pain, the wet sound. “Stop.” The Sky Lord had not stopped. Woon had kicked the bedsheets. The smell of liquor, blood---and like now, a terrible confusion.

The Sky Lord staggered, looked down at his wound. Woon staggered, not sure he could stand.

The Sky Lord’s hand reached forward, touched the nape of Woon’s head, fondled his hair.

The old brand of Heuksa Chorong throbbed.

“That’s it,” he said. The hand moved to Woon’s shoulder, patted it with approval. “That will do it.”

Woon looked into the Sky Lord’s eyes.

*Is there really nothing left for me but the life of an assassin? I’m not you? I’m not you.*
Woon pulled the blade out like lightning. The Sky Lord took a step back, shaken from the motion but not the pain.

He began to walk away.

Woon didn’t know what to feel. Was it over? The tiger was still standing. He was going somewhere to die, but he was still standing. He was a mighty person, a terrible swordsman.

Woon fell to his knees.

It felt like a gesture of respect; it felt like an admission of weakness; Woon still felt small, awed, too young.

The Sky Lord stopped walking. He’d heard the thud of Woon falling to the ground. “Woon-ah?” A tired voice. “Don’t follow my path.”

Woon turned his head. He wasn’t going to take orders from the man anymore.

*I forsake this life. I forsake this man’s path.*

Woon felt the tears in his throat.

*I forsake it all, Dong-soo-yah.*
“I’m doing things my way from now on,” Woon told Dong-soo the following evening.

The gray curtains that covered the all the windows of Heuksa Chorong made Woon’s bedroom as dark as any other room there. Woon, sweaty from sex, was lying in Dong-soo’s arms.

Dong-soo’s fingers swept away a lock of hair sticking to Woon’s face. “I still can’t believe I’m in this secret place. The looks the guards gave me when we walked in. I thought they were going to shit themselves.”

“You can’t come here again,” Woon said. He was glad to be with Dong-soo, but his goal was immovable. “I can do what I want because I’m the Sky Lord, but word will arouse the palace if you visit too often, and I’ll be suspected as a mole there once my plan is activated.”

“What plan?”

Woon said nothing.

A memory floated up, like a dream to the surface of clear water. Woon had been sitting, eyes shut, meditating by the river, huge boulders around him. He had felt so tiny in this world, a toy in Hong’s games. He had risen, drawn his blade. In a flash, slashes in the rock boulder had spelled: FAST SWORD ERASES PAST.

Dong-soo buried his face in Woon’s hair, kissed his ear, his neck. “I still don’t understand why
you brought me here. Besides for—I mean, I was dying to see you—” Dong-soo covered Woon’s chest with his own, kissed Woon’s forehead. “If we can’t see one another again like this then why- -?”

“I want to know something.”

Dong-soo rolled away.

“About the Sky Lord? You watched the fight. I felt you there. What is there to know? I’m sure your people told you what happened after.”

Woon lowered his eyes. There hadn’t been time to talk since Woon fetched Dong-soo, ordered him to follow, deliberately exposing the route to the guild, and of course—once the two were in Woon’s room, their hands had been all over one another, what talking? It was time to talk, but Woon didn’t want to. He needed to—there was always that difference.

“Woon-ah?”

“I fought him.”

“Yes, I thought so. The state officials said there was a deep wound on his body. No one else but you could have reached him. But you didn’t kill him.”

“That’s the official story? That I didn’t even do that?” Woon laughed softly. The laugh jostled the one of Dong-soo’s arms still lying under his. “Yes, I know what happened. Goo-hyang told me that there was an ambush as the Sky Lord was walking away to die. How Hong’s officers baited him with Jin-joo. He stopped in the streets at the sight of her, and the bastards shot him with arrows. They bragged about how they shot him. Dae-ung delivered the killing blow, he’s telling everyone, with a specially crafted cross-bow.”

“Yeah.” Dong-soo nodded.

“The officers were impressed that the Sky Lord shielded the girl’s body with his own. How does Jin-joo feel about that?”

Dong-soo sighed. “I don’t know. She came back crying. She’s… kind of a mess. I mean, he saved her life, but she’s confused.”

“I imagine so. The Sky Lord killed her father.”

“He killed a lot of people.”

“Baek Dong-soo, he lived a lifetime of killing people, of wounding people, of setting people like the Earth Lord on a death path. So, he saved Jin-joo—? Does that redeem him?”

Dong-soo rolled back over and hugged Woon tightly.

“You want to know why I didn’t kill him?” Dong-soo asked.

What a stupid question. That’s exactly what I need to know, Baek Dong-soo.

Woon felt angry again; he also felt allied with his other half. What he didn’t understand, Dong-soo would understand. He waited for an answer.

“When Mi-so found me in the forests, I was so sad about Sunseongnim …” Dong-soo lowered his voice. “And missing you so much too. Because one sadness seems to bring on other sadneses, I
think.” Dong-soo sighed. “Mi-so was pale… and she looked so panicky, Woon-ah. She told me: *Please avenge my father, Dong-soo-yah.* I had no idea what she was talking about. She said that the Sky Lord had been sitting outside Sa-mo’s house all day. That she had approached him with a knife, and he had said *kill me if you want.* That Jin-joo had yelled at him and tried to drag him off a bench—seriously, the stupid girl had tried to drag him off. Sa-mo tried to fight him, but everyone stopped that. The Sky Lord just sat there. Everyone was *how do you dare come here?* They hadn’t forgotten—they kept on and on about how he killed Commander Dae-pyo of the warrior camp and Kim Gwang-taek, family to the people of the house so *how dare he*—and all the Sky Lord could say was that he was waiting for Baek Dong-soo. He sat there, waiting all day. He was waiting for me, and it took me until evening to get there with Mi-so.”

Woon felt himself stiffen. He didn’t want to be held by Dong-soo anymore. “I still don’t understand why you didn’t kill him.”

“He was surprised too,” Dong-soo said.

Woon turned his face to look at Dong-soo. “Why?”

Dong-soo touched Woon’s cheek. “Woon-ah, his heart was already half-dead. He wanted to die. He came there to die.”

Woon still didn’t get it. “I heard him mock you. I heard him say *So this, Gwang-taek, is what you left me?*”

“Haven’t you known him longer than I have? I only read his heart while I was fighting him. He was mocking himself. He knows that *Sunsengnim* was the better man.” Dong-soo’s thumb began to stroke Woon’s face. “Woon-ah, Woon-ah, he wasn’t going to hurt you anymore.”

Woon felt a shock.

*Dong-soo really does know.*

“Everything he did… everything he did to you, all the lies he told, all ways he hurt you when you were a child—that was in the past, and you can overcome these things.”

Woon felt his body flood with warmth, none of it shame. He felt himself pressed against Dong-soo’s body, aligned in that way they had learned when they were seventeen. Woon didn’t feel like he was being held up or rescued—he was settling into his natural place. He wasn’t comforted—he still felt an aftermath of pain. Whatever he’d experienced when the Sky Lord, dying from Woon’s final strike, had staggered away was still with him, but… Woon didn’t feel as small and confused as he had the night before.

“I’m not you,” Woon whispered, feeling nonetheless that stating the obvious was a stupid Dong-soo thing to do. “I’m not very compassionate.”

“I don’t know about that,” Dong-soo said.

“I think,” Woon went on. The thought was only now occurring to him. “I think I know now why I tried to stab you after you didn’t kill the Sky Lord.”

“I wondered about that at first.” Dong-soo clutched Woon’s shoulder, pushed his lower body against Woon’s. Woon felt his own arousal press Dong-soo’s as Dong-soo continued to talk in casual voice: “I felt that you were angry. Then I felt your love for me. It was pretty… confusing.” A little breathy laugh.
“I was angry, but mostly it was because I was remembering things.” Being in Dong-soo’s arms and the narcotic of pleasure eased talking about the memory. Dong-soo was rubbing his crotch harder against Woon’s. “I knew that the Sky Lord told me to kill my father—I had a vague memory of it—but when you were fighting him, I remembered it clearly. How he had said that in order to become an assassin, one had to kill one’s most beloved person.”

“Woon-ah.” Dong-soo kissed Woon deeply on the mouth.

When Dong-soo’s lips moved away, Woon’s mouth stayed open, unable to tell anything but the truth. “You are my most beloved person.”

“What?” One of Dong-soo’s hands was clutching Woon’s ass now. “So you had to kill me?” Dong-soo smiled.

“I don’t know, I don’t know.” Woon slowed the rhythm of his body against Dong-soo’s into soft wave after soft wave. “I had never in all these years accepted the role of an assassin, no matter what I said. But I knew I had to kill the Sky Lord. I felt I had to. I still think he needed to be killed, Dong-soo-yah.”

“You wanted to be an assassin that night?”

“Didn’t I tell you as much?”

Dong-soo’s hand ran up Woon’s spine, pressed against the base Woon’s skull, an acupuncture point Woon knew well—ya-men—and the hand, fingers spreading, cupped Woon’s head. “Don’t let him haunt you. You’re not the Sky Lord. Come back to me.” Dong-soo, his hard cock insistent, thrust himself against Woon; he threw one leg over Woon’s knee as if to catch him; the leg hooked Woon’s and held him fast.

Woon half-smiled at the memory of the Sky Lord’s last words to Dong-soo: “Gwang-taek fishes without a hook.”

“I have things to do,” Woon said. “I can’t come back.”

“Kiss me.”

Woon did. Dong-soo tasted like home. But Woon couldn’t go back—

“I have things to do, Dong-soo-yah.”

“I don’t understand.” Dong-soo rolled Woon over so that Woon was on top. An achingly nostalgic position. Woon spread his legs apart, began to rub frantically against Dong-soo, not knowing how else to answer Dong-soo’s confusion.

“Why can’t we be together like this? Why?” Dong-soo was gripping Woon’s elbows, looking into Woon’s eyes.

“We are. We always are.”

“Aish.” Dong-soo arched his back. “You always say that.”

“Because I mean it. I’m always with you. Even if I die.”

“Shut up. Stop talking about dying.”

Woon was already fighting it, his arms shaking, trying not to let go. But the intense pleasure had
risen too fast, and he lost. He didn’t make a sound, only let out a long breath. Dong-soo followed soon after and caught Woon in his arms.

“You’re not going to tell me what your plan is?”

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

“But you’re going to let other people know.” Dong-soo licked sweat from Woon’s face. “I’m not sure how I feel about that. I feel left out, for one thing.”

It was then that Woon was aware of someone outside the door. Maybe she had been there a long time; maybe she had only arrived. Dong-soo, with his acute senses, had been aware of her all along. Goo-hyang was Woon’s most trusted confidante right now and a palace spy. Woon was also hurting her. He would hurt other people before he would save the Prince Heir.

“You won’t be left out, Dong-soo-yah,” Woon said. He kissed the corner of Dong-soo’s mouth.
“Don’t ask me any more questions. Just lie with me tonight.”
Angst and intrigue. I know plenty of you fast-forwarded through all those scenes where the palace was plotting this or that—I like that stuff, to be honest but I got swept away with the boys).

I love comments. Writing for a small fandom is a lonely business most days.
PART FIVE

Chapter Summary

IT’S NOT OVER YET! AO3 allows only so many characters per chapter so, ha, continue to the FINALE in their next chapter section. POSTED NOW WITH THIS CHAPTER.
The Queen and the Norons plot against the Prince Heir; the Queen plots against the Defense Minister; Woon and the Queen use one another towards a mutual goal, and things get sexy-sexy before Woon knows what’s happening; Woon’s allegiances are suspect; Cho-rip and Jin-joo discover the true relationship between Dong-soo and Woon, and Dong-soo and Woon doubt one another.

I worked hard on these last installments, streamlining the script (even a short sageuk like WBDS is so complicated), studying palace maps, attempting to make the historical coup as presented in the drama more plausible in this story (but still action-packed), and sticking to my muskets about restoring Dong-soo as a hero in a Coming of Age. As for Woonie, he gets a sexual education in this installment and resolution in the next.

19. Chasing the Comet’s Tail

Long ago on the Eastern Shore
The Wae Troops came across to the place
Where the Gondaipa was feeding our pleasures.
At this, how the beacons flamed our shores!
And where, hearing three brave Hwarang were roaming in the hills,
The Moon lent its light for their path.
The Hwarang took it for a star lighting their way.
And one cried out it was an ill-fated comet!
A comet? See it now disappearing behind the hills.
What sort of comet does that?

--“Song of the Comet”
by Master Yungchong, the singing of which was said to create miracles in Korea
“Is there anything else I bring you?” The auntie set down a giant tray of the tavern’s best dishes on Dong-soo’s table outside. She beamed at him. “You’re the apprentice of Sword Saint, right?”

“Uh, yes.” Dong-soo smiled and returned to drawing in his notebook.

Being known far and near as the greatest swordsman in Joseon had its perks. The Prince Heir had commissioned Dong-soo to write a book expanding on Sword Saint’s book, the *Muye Jebo* (which had been confiscated, presumably by the Defense Minister, and burned by the Sky Lord around the time Ji-sun had been kidnapped). There were two things Dong-soo loved—martial arts and drawing. Sa-mo had shooed him away, insisted that Dong-soo couldn’t work in the village in peace and quiet, but everywhere Dong-soo had travelled, people knew his name. Aunties offered him free meals, but he always paid them double from his little purse. On what else did he have to spend the palace’s silver?

Being known far and wide as the greatest swordsman had its downsides. Guys always wanted to fight Dong-soo.

“Hey!”

A giant sword smashed across Dong-soo’s tray of food. He was quick enough to move away his notebook and quill in time, but the bottle of ink tipped over.

*Oh, good—it’s not all spilled. I can still work here.*

“Are you Baek Dong-soo? The apprentice of Sword Saint?” The man had an accent. Dong-soo
didn’t know much about other countries. He knew that the sword lying across the broken tray was a *sang-su* sword. Dong-soo asked the foreign man if the sword wasn’t too big for someone like him to wield, the man became enraged, Dong-soo dodged, kicked his attacker in the stomach and for good measure bopped him on the head with the Prince Heir’s assignment. The man fell over unconscious. Dong-soo unrolled the manuscript in his hand and called to the tavern lady. “Please, another serving. I’ll pay you for the spilled soup.”

It was after Dong-soo finished that meal and was absorbed again in drawing that Hong-do and Cho-rip appeared.

“What? You guys? Why are you in Naju?”

Being the greatest swordsman in Joseon came with huge responsibilities. Hong-do and Cho-rip had come to bring Dong-soo back to Hanyang. The Prince Heir was in trouble.

“It all started with a fortune teller,” Cho-rip said. “Her ramblings spread all over the market. *The Prince Heir must die. The Prince Heir must die for the sake of the country.* It was terrible. Everyone was talking.”

“But—what’s the big deal about that? Who believes that crap?” Dong-soo asked the question and couldn’t help but think about Woon’s father and the superstitious people in Yeo Cho-sang’s village. Woon’s father believed in a black star—a crazy idea like that killed people.

Hong-do went on to explain that a shaman’s bad luck doll had been found buried near the Prince Heir’s house, that the fortune-teller’s craziness had reached the ears of the king, but the doll was too much—if someone had trespassed the property, there was treason in the air. The fortune teller was arrested and tortured, but she died without revealing if anyone had been hired to spread such ugly words—*the Prince Heir must die for the sake of the country.*

“Then on the same night the fortune-teller was executed,” Cho-rip said, “a red comet crossed the sky. I saw it myself. It fell near the palace—I thought it was a shooting star, but it was too large. Of course, everyone took this for a horrible omen.”

“You know how people are,” Hong-do added.

“I don’t know what you expect of me.” Dong-soo shrugged. “I can’t catch a comet.”

“It’s the Defense Minister,” Cho-rip said. “It’s all the doings of the Defense Minister. I don’t have proof, but… since you’ve been gone, a fight club has started up—it’s very popular. From the looks of it, someone is recruiting the best fighters from winners in the club as well as turning a profit from ticket sales. Hong and his men are frequent visitors. I think Hong is starting a secret army.”

“And Jin-joo,” Hong-do said. “She’s obsessed with that fight club. At first, she was just buying tickets to watch, but now I’m afraid she’s fighting men there. I caught her one day in a mask—you don’t think she’d do that, Dong-soo? Hide her pretty face and pretend to be a man just so she can participate in a low-life fight club?”

Dong-soo stood up. “I’ll get a horse and ride back with you now.”

* Jang-mi hit Dong-soo upon his return, scolded him for wandering away from home so often, then asked if she’d hurt him.

“Oh no, auntie, I’m fine.”
Sa-mo hugged Dong-soo, Ji-sun bowed her head at him politely, and Mi-so ignored him—instead she whined at Cho-rip about why he never visited anymore—was it because he was a big important palace guy now?

Aigoo, she likes Cho-rip again. I thought it was Woon. She’s going to land on Cho-rip though—I can feel it. Cho-rip is a nobleman, right? Girls find that stuff very attractive, more so than martial arts skills. Even Woon’s pretty face can’t compete with money. I’m learning things about the world. How about that? Baek Dong-soo is growing up.

Dong-soo wanted to know where Jin-joo was, and Ji-sun said she was helping out making money for the merchant group. “I’ll show you.”

She led Dong-soo towards the village square. “Her father doesn’t like it at all, but Jin-joo is a great fighter. Today is her second fight, and she’s going to be making a lot of money. I tried to stop her, but—”

“Yes, I know how she is.” Dong-soo couldn’t help but smile. “Are you sure she’s okay?”

“She’s been watching fighters for weeks—most are clumsy nobodies, she says. I trust she knows what she’s talking about. She picked an opponent a few days ago and helped the trader group so much with her winnings.”

Ji-sun also had more scary information about the army the Defense Minister seemed to be gathering. “The market price on wrist bands and iron has doubled recently, but iron is always sold out. Sa-mo says that someone seems to be making swords—not just a few but many, many swords.”

What no one had said aloud yet was for what reason did the Defense Minister need an army? He had always hired assassins, by the dozens, to do his dirty work out of Heuksa Chorong. If Woon wasn’t cooperating with him or—if this job was bigger than what Heuksa Chorong could provide, then what exactly was the minister planning? Did another assassination against the Prince Heir require an army? Was this army planning to march past the palace walls?

Dong-soo was greeted by this person and that person as he and Ji-sun made their way through the village. Everyone said he should take on an opponent in the fight club. An easy win, everyone said.

The Defense Minister wants to kill the Prince Heir. He needs to do this with or without the support of Qing, but he needs the support of the people of Joseon—that’s why he set up the fortune teller. Who knows what Hong promised her family if she died with the words “The Prince Heir must die for the sake of the country!” on her lips?

Men dressed in garish clothes were in the streets announcing the day’s line-up of fights. People told Dong-soo that Hwang Jin-joo’s fight was sold out because her last fight had been that much of a crowd-pleaser. If he and Ji-sun wanted tickets, they’d have to pay double to a scalper.

Dong-soo took out his purse.

The first person Dong-soo saw in the building was the son of the Defense Minister. Hong Sa-hye was seated in the balcony at a table along with some other fancy palace guys and noble-looking men.

The Defense Minister’s fingers are so deep into all this, it’s like that time snakes got into Jin-joo’s chicken coops and kept sneaking back for more and more eggs. How did we solve that problem? I
Dong-soo startled when he saw Jin-joo. She was on the stage and looking for all the world like a slim young man wearing a black mask. She carried her bandit’s sword and a ridiculously large fish tray for a shield. Dong-soo was about to step forward and drag her away, but then he saw her opponent—right away, Dong-soo could tell the man was a nobody. If anyone could read a big, brawny worthless fighter just by the look in his eye, it was Dong-soo.

Dong-soo looked at Ji-sun.

Ji-sun smiled a knowing smile.

Jin-joo whipped her sword around for show a few times, allowed Big and Brawny to thrust his big sword at her just so she could dodge with grace and aplomb, and when Big and Brawny whipped out a tiny dagger from his belt, Jin-joo held up the ridiculous fish tray and blocked the little knife.

Everyone applauded.

Then Jin-joo kicked Big and Brawny down with her foot and held her blade to his neck.

“The winner!”

I remember now. I had to sit in wait and kill every single one of those snakes. Jin-joo’s hens didn’t lay for months, though. Jang-ni said that the soup she made from the snakes made up for the eggs, but Jin-joo refused to eat the soup. Silly girl. She’s probably still mad at those snakes.

“DONG-SOO-YAH!” Jin-joo was overjoyed to see Dong-soo. She went on and on about her win. She said something about how it was her second win and how when fighters won a third time, they disappeared somewhere—she was going to find out where.

“No,” Dong-soo said, thinking of the Defense Minister’s army. “You’re not going to do that.”

“Baek Dong-soo?” One of the fight club officials approached Dong-soo with a purse of coins. “It would honor us if you give the audience a demonstration of your skills.”

“Oh, of course.” Dong-soo pushed the hand with the purse away. “But I won’t take your money. Put me down as an official participant. Can I fight right now?”

“Yes, yes.” The man was so happy. “But are you sure you don’t need the money? We pay in advance because even if you lose, you might need a doctor to look after your injuries but…. The man was suddenly embarrassed. “Ah…. you won’t need a doctor.”

Dong-soo entered the arena to wild cheers. He wasn’t even carrying a weapon. His opponent stepped up—a fierce looking man with unkempt facial hair. He was carrying a smooth wooden bat, the kind used in children’s games.

A club is a decent weapon if you have absolutely no skill whatsoever in the sword or confidence in your own fists. Dong-soo felt sad for the man, so he prepared himself not to hit him too hard.

Dong-soo took a stance, and as the man charged, Dong-soo kicked. The man was thrown over the railings into the audience.

“Victory!”

The applause didn’t sound like dozens of people clapping—it was like the noise of a foreboding
somehow, maybe the rush of a speeding comet. Dong-soo couldn’t see the individual faces of the people cheering him. He felt sad that people liked this sort of display. Sunseongnim had taught that martial arts were about protecting people—he had never once mentioned anything about how people would be entertained by them.

“Your winnings? Sir?” Someone was following Dong-soo as he walked from the stage. “Your winnings?”

Dong-soo turned away another purse. “I don’t need money. Just record my victory like everyone else’s. I’ll be back.”

“And what are YOU doing here?” Hwang Jin-gi’s voice.

Ji-sun covered her mouth. Dong-soo was glad to see the King of the Bandits and didn’t understand why Jin-joo looked terrified all of a sudden.

“Naeuri, hello, what brings you here?” Jin-joo was making her voice sound extra-deep. Oh that’s right—she’s supposed to be a man.

“Naeuri? Naeuri?” Jin-joo’s father was restraining his anger. “I had to pay double price to get in here. Didn’t I warn you about--?” He grabbed Jin-joo by the ear and led her out of the building.

“It’s just as well,” Dong-soo said to Ji-sun. “This was all too dangerous for her and....” He lowered
his eyes. “I’m sorry, but I can’t accept money for fighting. That’s just not right.” He pulled out his purse and gave it to Ji-sun. “My salary from the palace. Just take it. I know your merchant group was decimated by the Defense Minister. I don’t need travelling expenses now that I’m back home. Just take it.”

Ji-sun held the bag. Dong-soo saw it in her eyes—if she couldn’t argue with Jin-joo, then she couldn’t argue with Dong-soo either. “Thank you,” Ji-sun said.

Walking outside, Ji-sun and Dong-soo saw the father-daughter pair. Jin-gi still held Jin-joo by the ear. She was pressing her mask to her face, hissing that she was doing important work. Ji-sun held up her hand. “Don’t get involved. This is between the two of them.” So Dong-soo stopped in his tracks; he kept watching the scene, though.

Jin-gi was telling Jin-joo that it was time that she stop running around acting like a boy, that she was well past the age of marrying, that if she didn’t start acting like a real woman soon, no one would want to marry her.

“Aish, but look at Ji-sun. She’s my age and not married either.”

“Yes,” scolded Jin-gi, “but look who she’s walking next to right now.” He pointed in Dong-soo’s direction, and Jin-joo’s eyes behind her mask looked surprised. She’d only now noticed she was being stared at. “Jin-joo-ah, her father went on. "Don’t you get it? You’re fighting men, and it’s Miss Ji-sun who is walking home with Dong-soo!”

At that, Jin-joo burst into tears and ran off.

Dong-soo sighed. Snakes that invaded chicken coops, ministers who plotted against the palace, and Jin-joo …. Martial arts didn’t have the answers on how to deal with everything. A sang-su sword was easy to handle; a club was easier. Jin-joo? Aish.

* *

The following evening Dong-soo took his sword and set off alone—or at least he hoped no one would follow him, but he figured that his curious friends and family would eventually show up at the fight club. Jin-joo caught up with him before he reached the building entrance, already swarming with ticket buyers.


“I can fight!” Jin-joo was skipping to keep up with Dong-soo’s gait. “I can do this myself, Dong-soo-yah. You don’t have to do everything—this is simple. All I have to do is win my third match, and I can find out where the winners go and infiltrate the minister’s army! I can—”

“Stop it, Jin-joo-yah.”

Without hesitation, the doors of the fight club were opened for the masked young man and the famous warrior Baek Dong-soo. Dong-soo scanned the arena, and this time what he saw made him take a step backwards. Next to him, Jin-joo gasped.

Sitting in the balcony were the Defense Minister, that weird samurai Kenzo, and Yeon Woon.

Woon’s eyes met Dong-soo’s, and then Woon looked away.
Dong-soo kept staring. It had been some weeks since the old Sky Lord’s death, since Dong-soo had last seen Woon. There was something different about Woon’s hair? Oh, Woon looked prettier—like he was more at ease now. The hair was a little longer, and he wore it a way that reminded Dong-soo of their days at the warrior camp—bangs past the eyebrows and some of that long black hair pulled back into a thin ponytail. So pretty. Even the scar on Woon’s cheek was pretty—it was a thin pink line now, and it kept him from looking absolutely perfect, but still—all those waves of hair past his shoulders. The ribbon around the ponytail was red? Yes, a very fancy, shiny fabric. And the waistcoat Woon was wearing was black but had striking red details—flowers of some sort. Spider lilies?

“What is he doing here?” Jin-joo was alarmed. “Do you think he’s going to try to kill you?”

“Ah…” Dong-soo didn’t want her to worry, but he didn’t know how much to tell. “I’m quite certain that Woon isn’t here to kill me. He’s just watching.”

Dong-soo found it hard to take his eyes off Woon, but he asked the area manager if he could fight next. There was no problem with that, and the fight was announced, much to the delight of the audience.

“Make your bets! Make your bets!” the announcer called.

“Auntie! Auntie! Look! Look! It’s Dong-soo!” Mi-so’s high-pitched voice.

“Shut up! I can see him too!” Jang-mi’s voice.

Of course they’d come. In no time, Jin-gi and Sa-mo would be here too.

“One of the fighters is too weak.” Woon’s voice. Dong-soo could clearly hear Woon from the balcony. Dong-soo could hear a drop of water falling from a leaf—of course he could hear Woon’s voice. “This won’t be any fun to watch,” Woon said.

“Oh, not having fun?” The Defense Minister’s deep voice. “Do you want to step up then?”

“I will.” That was the samurai.

And it was decided. The announcer declared that a new opponent would enter now—a talented swordsman from Japan to face the mighty Baek Dong-soo!

The samurai stepped onto the stage. Dong-soo noticed that as the “great bounty hunter Jang Tae Saan” exited the stage, he shot a glance towards the balcony, and Yeo Woon gave the bounty hunter a nod.

“What’s going on?” Dong-soo asked Kenzo the samurai.

“I want a good fight,” Kenzo said. “Isn’t that the same for you?”

Dong-soo looked at the balcony again. The Defense Minister was grinning. “Who do you bet on?” He asked Woon.

“I am going to have to stick with my old friend,” Woon said.

Dong-soo was puzzled by that remark. Why was Woon challenging the Defense Minister so openly?

“I’ll bet on Baek Dong-soo,” Woon said.
“Really?” The Defense Minister laughed. He turned to one of his deputies and whispered something. “Really, now?” More laughter.

Kenzo and Dong-soo drew their swords and stared at one another amid the roaring sounds of the crowd. The Defense Minister’s laughs were still lingering beneath the cheers of “Go! Go! Fight! Fight!”

A samurai’s purpose is to take a head as quickly as possible.

Dong-soo knew that Kenzo would charge first; he blocked him, threw him against a post of the stage. The exchanges went like that. Kenzo was quick and powerful; Dong-soo didn’t want to injure the samurai. In no time, the sand in the time-glass had run out. The announcer said that the match would resume after a short break.

“Why is that guy so strong?” Jin-joo was amazed. She offered Dong-soo a cup of water from a tray provided to the fighters. “I didn’t think anyone here was any good.”

“That’s the guy who caused the ruckus at the palace,” Dong-soo said. “He’s aligned with the Defense Minister against the Prince Heir.”
“Really?”

Dong-soo winced at the taste of the water. *Could it be? Yes, it was.*

The fighters were called back to their places. Dong-soo knew that he’d been drugged, but he’d been poisoned so many times in his life, he figured he’d just make the best of it and defeat this guy as quickly as possible without a kill and a mess.

Kenzo charged. Dong-soo deflected the blow but fell to his knees.

“What’s wrong?” The samurai looked puzzled. “You must have terrible stamina.”

Dong-soo got up. His vision was blurry. *This Is bad, very bad.*

Another charge. Dong-soo swung out of the way and brought his sword down to block a second attack, but he wasn’t fast enough—Kenzo’s blade had pierced him in the shoulder.

“Dong-soo!” Sa-mo’s voice.

Kenzo was twisting the tip of the blade deeper as Dong-soo, trying to avoid the pain, was sinking towards the ground. Why wasn’t the samurai thrusting the blade in all the way?

Dong-soo fell on his butt, and Kenzo stood over him.

Some cheers, some hisses. From the balcony, Dong-soo could hear voices that sounded more distinct than any of the noises in the room. They were strange voices, though, not quite themselves, as though being spoken underwater.

The Defense Minister: “What’s the matter? Do you have sympathy left for Baek Dong-soo?”

Woon: “It’s not a fair fight. It’s no fun if it’s not a fair fight.”

The Defense Minister: “It’s a bloody fight club. People make bets, people lose or win huge amounts of money. How old are you? What did you expect when I brought you here? A fair fight?” The minister laughed. “Did you come here for fun? It will start to get fun when we watch Dong-soo die.”

“Get up! Get up!” The crowd was chanting to Dong-soo.

“I thought you were the greatest warrior in Joseon,” said Kenzo.

Dong-soo got up. “I haven’t even started.”

Dong-soo took a stance. Kenzo kicked him with his foot to the edge of the stage.

“I don’t give a man more than one chance,” Kenzo said. “You’ve disappointed me. Are you going to fight me? If not, prepare to die.”

Dong-soo got up again.

He heard Jang-mi crying. Mi-so’s wailing.

He heard Jin-joo: “You saved me from the fire when we were little! You saved me from the fire when we were grown! You saved me and my father from that horrible man! Save yourself, Dong-soo-yah! It’s a dirty trick! It’s a dirty trick! You can overcome a dirty trick!”
He heard Sa-mo, confident and proud, yelling: “You are the son of Sa-goeng and the apprentice of Sword Saint! Overcome it!”

Dong-soo’s head rolled to one side. He was not going to overcome it.

He drew his blade, and Kenzo drew his, and that moment, the time glass splintered with a loud noise. Shards went flying everywhere—the little pieces catching light and falling on the stage as if to celebrate hangawi.

“Woon,” boomed the Defense Minister. “Did you throw something?”

“I told you. This wasn’t fun.”

The announcer was shouting that the match was a forfeit. There was commotion and yelling, people rushing the stage, arguing about bets.

Dong-soo felt his legs giving way and people catching him by the arms. He looked up towards the balcony. Woon wouldn’t look at him.

Woon-ah. Woon-ah.

Jin-joo was not doing a good job holding Dong-soo up on his right side, and his last thought was *I’m so sorry, Jin-joo-ah* as he lost consciousness and fell on top of her.

*
It was dark. Dong-soo was in his bed and Ji-sun had finished checking Dong-soo’s wound and changing the bandage. “It’s not deep,” she said. “He could’ve killed you with this hit. Why didn’t he?”

“I think he wanted a good fight,” Dong-soo said. “I’m not sure if he ever caught on that I was drugged, but even if he did, he’s the kind of fighter who doesn’t like that sort of thing. I know he’s with the Defense Minister, but I’m not sure why.” Dong-soo rubbed his shoulder. “It hurts a little, but I think it’ll be fine. Thanks.”

“But in the end, by what Jin-joo said, the samurai did say he was going to kill you. He did decide to kill you in the end. You’re very lucky the time glass fell over.”

Dong-soo smiled. “The time glass didn’t fall over. Someone—”

“YOU SNEAKY LITTLE BASTARD WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE? I CAUGHT YOU, YOU—YOU--!”

Jin-joo’s voice outside. Both Dong-soo and Ji-sun stared at one another.

“Why are you here? Were you worried because he’s still alive? Are you here to kill him? Well, don’t touch him. Don’t. Listen, Woon, I lost my mother and my father. I’m not going to lose him too.”

Dong-soo couldn’t help but smile. As if Woon could be caught. Ji-sun gave Dong-soo a strange expression—she was always giving Dong-soo strange, knowing expressions when it came to Woon. Did she know something?

“I am not here to harm him,” Woon said in a soft voice. “You and I are the same.”

Dong-soo listened as Woon’s footsteps approached Dong-soo’s bedroom window. Jin-joo had apparently been satisfied enough with Woon’s response—or shocked enough into letting him proceed.
When Woon leapt inside, Ji-sun startled. “Naeuri!”

“Please, Young Miss, I’d like to speak to Dong-soo alone. It would be best for you if you didn’t know about some things.”

Ji-sun nodded and left the room.

“Woon-ah?” Dong-soo was confused. “Isn’t it dangerous for you to come here?”

“Are you okay?”

“It’s nothing. Ji-sun says Kenzo didn’t push the blade in deep at all. I fainted from the drugs, but they weren’t deadly—I’m fine.”

Woon looked relieved.

“You let Jin-joo catch you in front of the house?” Dong-soo really didn’t understand Woon, not after all this time.

“When I fought the Sky Lord,” Woon said, “I promised myself that I wouldn’t hide from myself anymore or hide from anyone. It’s not always practical, though, in my line of business, to be fully open. I can’t risk putting other people in danger, but…”

Dong-soo’s eyes met Woon’s eyes. Not hiding--what do you mean, Woon-ah?

“I don’t see why I should hide from your friends. I’m your friend too, right? I don’t want them to hate me or suspect me anymore. I mean….” Here, Woon looked away, as if he couldn’t bear an unspoken request in Dong-soo’s eyes. “They have to know what we mean to one another as childhood friends. Bonds like that—they’re not easily broken.”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway,” Woon continued. “My people told me you were back in town, but I had no idea you would be at the fight club. Hong dragged me there to surprise me. That bounty hunter you saw? He’s one of my operatives. He’s one of the greatest fighters in Joseon. He and another fighter, Baek Myeon Seo-saeng, known as the Hundred Faces Scholar because he disguises himself as a book salesman or other people when he’s really an assassin for hire, were two of the warriors that the Sky Lord fought, deemed worthy enough to leave alive—and I decided to recruit them for my purposes.”

“Purposes?”

“I need good men working for me if I’m going to disassemble Heuksa Chorong.”

Right. Woon had told him that over three years ago. So, that was really happening?

“It was hard proving myself to them. I had to fight them both. I fought them both at the same time. Blind-folded.”

“No way, Woon—your skills must be improving like crazy!”

Woon smiled a tiny smile out of the corner of his mouth. “They said they expected the beast that was the former Sky Lord, but instead they found out that they were going to be hired by this kid. A kid, they said. Now, good money is one thing. I knew they would work for me for money. But I had to fight them to earn their respect. So I had to put on a show. Goo-hyang helped me make an
elaborate spectacle of it all—the blind-fold was nothing, but it impressed them. Then Goo-hyang told them that I defeated the former Sky Lord. Jang Tae-saan and Baek Myeon Seo-saeng are now my two best men. They’ve done good work for me.”

“Such as?”

“They’ve found out Hong is building muskets. He’s training shooters. He’s not only acquiring fighters and bringing soldiers from Japan, but he’s making gunpowder. This is going to be a massive coup against the palace. Not only against the Prince Heir but against the king himself.”

So that was it. Revolution. Dong-soo was silent.

“I haven’t figured out how to stop it. I don’t think there’s any way to stop it, only to fight it. But since Heuksa Chorong is in Hong’s pocket, I’m going to be fighting from the inside.”

“I see. What do you expect me to do?”

“What you always do. Fight it from the outside.”

Dong-soo heaved a deep breath. “I can do that.”

“And another thing. I don’t know much about it. But the omens and the fortune tellers? They’re going to keep cropping up. The red comet was fake. I don’t know how it was done, but it was fake. There is probably going to be something else like it. A fake star, maybe a shower of falling stars.”

_Woon, Yeo Woon, son of a man who cursed his son with the destiny of a black star._

“Woon-ah?”

“What?”

Dong-soo opened his arms, and Woon came to him.

They embraced. Dong-soo picked up a handful of Woon’s hair and bunched it. He breathed in Woon’s scent. Once, long ago, Woon had smelled like the outdoors, like pine and honeysuckle. Now he smelled like fancy oils, like he bathed often and walked in rooms where incense burned. But beneath those fancy fancies, there was a unique Woon scent. Dong-soo had been by Woon’s side at twelve-years-old, had loved him body and soul for ten years since, how could he not know that pure good smell—? A little like rice cooked just right, a little like a wheat field when the wind was blowing over it.

Woon pressed his face against Dong-soo’s neck, his mouth open against Dong-soo’s ear. He stayed that way. The pair didn’t move. The embrace was enough; they both wanted to cling to the moment as well as to one another.

“You think you’re the only one who can sneak—!” Jin-joo stifled a loud gasp as she leapt through the window, and Woon and Dong-soo leapt apart. Dong-soo was amazed that he and Woon had been so literally wrapped up in one another that they hadn’t heard the stupid girl approaching.

“I—I wanted to make sure you were okay.” Jin-joo looked from Dong-soo to Woon. “I wanted to make sure that this assassin person wasn’t doing anything bad.”

“He wasn’t doing anything bad,” Dong-soo said. He was aware of his heart thumping with terror. It never did that in battle; he was afraid of hurting Jin-joo.
Woon put on his murderously serious face, rose from the bed and threw a leg over the window’s edge. “I told you that you and I are the same,” he said to Jin-jo. “Dong-soo is my friend.”

And Woon was gone.

There was a long, terrible silence.

Jin-jo spoke first. “Dong-soo-yah? It looked like he was kissing your neck?”

“Jin-jo-ah,” Dong-soo began.

“Look,” she said. “I grew up on the road travelling town to town with my father. I saw a lot of things. I know about people. You think there aren’t bandits in our group like that? I know about men who love men. I know about women who love women. I just never thought…..” She looked dazed. “I didn’t think in a million years that you were like that. I mean—weren’t you always going on about this pretty girl or that one? I thought you liked Ji-sun?”

“Jin-jo-yah, I can’t lie to you.”

Her eyes began to well with tears.

“Jin-jo-yah, I love Woon.”

She clasped her hands. “I think… I think I’ve always known that. I mean, it makes sense, but….” She looked away, a sweet look on her face. Where was she looking? A past where they were children? Those innocent days when nothing was this complicated?

“It’s just the way it is, Jin-jo-yah. Please don’t tell anyone else.”

“Does Cho-rip know?”

Dong-soo shook his head. But now that he thought about it, maybe Ji-sun suspected.

“It’s been a long day,” Dong-soo said. “I’m pretty tired. Is it okay if we don’t talk about this right now?”

Jin-jo nodded. “Sure. I mean, whatever you say. I mean….” She was fighting tears. Dong-soo was sure she would cry up a storm as soon as she was out of his sight, and he didn’t want to see that. Funny, he had never felt so close to Jin-jo, but his heart was telling him that if he tried to comfort her right now, it would only hurt her more. “I’ll go now,” she said. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Let me know if there’s anything you need.”

“Thanks, Jin-jo-yah.”

“Good-night, Dong-soo-yah.”

“Good-night.”

* 

Heuksa Chorong was losing money.
The fight club was making money; the merchants who traded with the guild were out of stock; men from the guild hired out for grunt-labor or security were being hired out of the fight club.

Woon wasn’t able to make his usual anonymous deposit to the Prince Heir one month. He called a meeting of the Norons and asked for protection money.

They called him a thug and said they wanted no part of his demands. Lord Hong’s sniveling son smiled.

Woon said that if anyone wanted to back out, they could do so, no problem. One of the ministers stood up. “I’m out,” he said in a haughty tone.

Woon slashed him with his short blade across the chest. The man fell.

The Defense Minister later told Hong that he would deal Woon a part of the fight club money. Not a big cut but a decent one. “In exchange for your help with what I’m planning, of course. You’ve been too independent and contrary lately. Have you forgotten our alliance?”

“Not at all,” Woon was seated across the table from Kenzo. He glared at the samurai. He hated the samurai. “I’ll work with you. What I don’t understand is why you’ve brought in the Japanese.”

“Kenzo isn’t the only reliable swordsman I’m bringing onboard,” Hong replied. “Heuksa Chorong has a long-established history, but given the troubles of recent years, many of your best men have passed on to the Other World. You, however…” Hong had the most ingratiating smile. “You are a
man of great skill.” Another smile. “It’s a shame you don’t have the common sense of your predecessor. You may learn to mind your own business when necessary, but…. ah, we’ll see. We’ll see.”

That evening Woon asked Goo-hyang how badly the man he had slashed had been injured.

“Badly,” she said. “I treated him well enough so he could ride a horse out of Hanyang. I did as you asked and told him never to show his face here again.”

“It’s time to disassemble Heuksa Chorong.”

Goo-hyang looked frightened. “Yes, I know that’s your goal, but …. Your life will be on the line. This place has a one-hundred-year-old history and ties to businesses and the palace. It won’t be easy.”

“I never expected it to be. That’s why I asked you to activate the Shadowless World. That’s why I asked for ledgers of briberies Hong’s people have made to government officials here in Hanyang and in outer regions. That’s why I’ve been gathering information, piece by piece—”

“My lord, there’s something you should know.”

“What is it?”

“The Shadowless World has something—it’s not twice verified, but it’s important enough for your attention. There’s a meeting of the Noron party tomorrow, and her Majesty is supposed to attend. We have a location—the residence of a nobleman’s niece who was recently widowed. The young woman is away at a temple with her mother, so the home is unoccupied. Her uncle has given the key to the Defense Minister, and the Norons are meeting in secret, presumably to discuss the plot against the Prince Heir.”

Woon laughed. “I wasn’t invited.”

“The minister doesn’t want you to have all the information. I do believe that what you did today will go a long way in earning his trust.”

“The queen you said?” Woon spread his fingers on the table before him. “From what I understand, she despises Hong.”

“Yes, she does.”

“I wonder what she would think of someone like me?”

Goo-hyang didn’t ask what Woon was thinking, and he was grateful for that.

The night of the secret meeting, Woon sneaked into the abandoned residence and waited behind a screen door. He stood patiently as the ministers walked in, somber, their bright clothes ridiculously conspicuous for a secret meeting at night, and he smiled to himself as Lord Hong asked them to form two lines at the door for the entrance of Queen Jung-soon.

Woon watched through the screen door as the queen walked in alone. Woon presumed that her guards and escorts had been left behind outside. The spectacle both impressed and amused him. This was indeed a special meeting. The Norons bowed to the floor. It was at that moment, Woon decided to show himself.

Everyone was kneeling before her Majesty, so no one noticed Woon but the queen herself. She
looked at him without surprise. Apparently, she didn’t know who was or who wasn’t supposed to be in the house, and Woon was dressed in fine clothes befitting a wealthy young man.

“Your Majesty,” Woon said in his most formal and gracious tone and dropped to one knee. Like a soldier. Right hand clutching his sword.

At the sound of Woon’s voice, the Defense Minister’s head shot up. “Sky Lord!”

The queen looked to the minister. “Your Excellency, is there a problem? What is this Sky Lord? Who is this young man?”

“Forgive me, your Majesty.” Woon rose from his bow. “I am not supposed to be here. I am someone who is sometimes employed by his Excellency. I discovered the location of this meeting and was curious. I entered the house before everyone arrived. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

He bowed his head gently, and when he lifted his head, his eyes met the queen’s and held her gaze. He knew how to do that. He’d been doing that with women since he was a peasant boy standing in line at food stalls. Women liked his face. They took notice of his eyes.

The queen was no different. She wasn’t young, but she smiled like a girl at Woon.

On his way out, Woon cast a glance at the Defense Minister. The man was fuming. In the alcove, Woon could hear Hong begging a thousand pardons from the queen, and her responding “please, let’s get on with business and forget the young man’s impudence. He says he was merely curious—but you can tell me about him later.”

That was all Woon needed to hear.

He got past the guards at the house entrance with two shoves and one acupuncture needle in the third’s neck.

Goo-hyang did ask later where Woon went, and when he told her, she asked why he did such a reckless thing.

“This isn’t like you,” she said. “You don’t do reckless things. You’re steady—like a mountain.”

“A mountain?” Woon shook his head. “You think too much of me. I am merely someone who is trying to move some stones in the world.”

He flattened his palm against the table again. “So that was the queen. You’ve seen her, I suppose. She’s prettier than I thought she’d be.”

“Yes,” Goo-hyang said. “She’s very pretty—and very intelligent too. And as I’m sure you know, she’s a very dangerous woman. I don’t understand why you want her attention.”

“I’m a dangerous person myself,” Woon reminded Goo-hyang. “I’ve laid a trap for her.”

*  

“The Queen wants to see you,” Hong informed Woon the next day. “To reprimand you for your rude appearance. Because only I can get in touch with Heuksa Chorong, she contacted me.”
“And you turned me in?” Woon feigned a smile of contempt.

“I have an important relationship with her. You? I need you, but Kenzo will suffice if you won’t learn your place.” The Defense Minister looked genuinely nervous. “I’m warning you, Sky Lord, your impertinent behavior is getting out of hand. Her Majesty can have your head. If she decides to imprison you, not even I can save you.”

Woon showed up at the queen’s house at the palace before his assigned time. He’d presented his pass to the palace, but at Gyeonbokgung, the queen’s guards were startled to see a strange man. In the garden, under an elegant pavilion were her Majesty and her father.

Woon knew he had to impress the queen, so he put his hand on the hilt of his sword to alert the guards that he would be fighting them. In his peripheral vision, he saw the queen smile.

Instead of drawing his sword, Woon drew a handful of acupuncture needles from the inside of his chest pocket. He kicked one guard to the floor, swung around once, disabled two guards, swung around again, kicked two other men down, and stuck the needles into other guards. The rest of the men backed away.

He looked in the direction of the pavilion. He tossed his hair back. He knew exactly what he was doing. Even if his hearing had not been trained to be especially acute, he still could read the queen’s lips as she spoke to her father.
“That’s amazing. I must make that man mine.”

Woon had not expected her to take his bait so soon.

He walked up the pavilion steps. “Why did you send for me, your Majesty?”

“You’re a rude boy,” the queen’s father said.

“I’ll speak directly,” said the queen. “Join me.”

“You sound like you’re asking me to betray the Defense Minister.”

The queen laughed. She had a girlish laugh. In the late afternoon air, Woon was reminded of wind chimes.

“You’re distorting her words,” said her father. “If she had someone as talented as you at her side, it would be like having her own army.”

“He’s intelligent, Father,” the queen said. “Give him credit. He understands I have no affection for his Excellency, and I’m wondering how he knows that.”

“Jung-soon-ah, watch your words. He’s an assassin. He’s… not like us.”

But the queen had already turned her eyes to Woon. “Join me. The Defense Minister is the Defense Minister. I am the queen.”

“What do I get in return?”

“I can give you anything you want. Fortune, prestige. Anything you want.” She paused for emphasis and flashed her eyes. “Any dish in the world. Any bit of bone or flesh.”

“I’m not that shallow.” Woon felt uncomfortable. He’d been subject to Goo-hyang’s advances, but the queen was brazen. Was it because she was the queen? Had she ever been denied?
Woon decided he needed to step back; maybe he was indeed wading into waters too swift and dangerous. “I’ll think about it.”

“I’m not a patient person,” the queen said. “And I’ll need you to prove yourself to me first. It’s obvious to me that you like challenges. You’re smart, you are capable of investigating, and this guild you belong to—His Excellency tells me it has a long and ancient tradition. Now, martial arts are a fine skill, but I need to see more. I need to see what how much power and resolve you truly have.”

Woon was fascinated. She was seducing him with his own ambition. “What exactly do you want me to do to prove myself?”

“Bring me the head of the king.”

Woon’s mouth fell open. “I’m sorry?” He composed himself. “Your Majesty, your joke is too much.”

She laughed again, more heartily this time. “Yes, I was making a very poor joke. How about this—there’s another martial artist who I hear is the greatest in all Joseon. His name is Baek Dong-soo. Can you bring me his head instead?”

Woon felt the game was over. *Hide yourself from no one?* Here he was, pretending to be who he was not to the queen of his country and getting Dong-soo in mortal danger once again.

He bowed. “I regret to tell you, your Majesty, that you’ve asked me to kill the one person I cannot kill.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!”

The queen stared at Woon. “You’re making excuses and trying to make me beg.” Her chest was heaving. “Or is it that you just want a harder challenge? All right then, I’ll give you one. Hear me and hear me well. If you are capable of bringing me the left arm of the Defense Minister, then I will be allied with you. If I am allied with you, then the Defense Minister doesn’t have to know, and you will profit from both of us.”

Woon narrowed his eyes. *The left arm of the defense minister?* The Sky Lord had spoken in riddles, but his were drunken nonsense. The queen was testing Woon.

By the time Woon had returned to his room, he had figured out what the queen meant. A left arm was a secondary support. Who was the Defense Minister’s right hand? His son, Sa-hye, and for the moment, Kenzo and his legion of Japanese warriors were the arm. The Norons were those who Hong manipulated, but they were a body and not an arm. An arm was a singular person. Who was this trusted person? None other than Hong’s closest deputy, Boo Gwan. Taking out the man would be simple enough, but Woon didn’t want to kill him. In fact, a better way to show the queen the power of Heuksa Chorong would be to have the man arrested.

With the help of the ledgers Goo-hang had provided and with a series of notes passed hand to hand from the Shadow World the queen had no idea existed, Woon had the deputy arrested for bribery the following morning. A eunuch from the Shadow World delivered Xue in a cage to the queen within an hour of Boo Gwan’s arrest. The note read: *The Defense Minister’s deputy has now been arrested. If you let this bird fly, Boo Gwan will be released. If you keep the bird, he will be killed.*

Goo-hang ran to headquarters with the news that court maidens had overheard Hong pleading for the life of his deputy before the queen. “He apologized to her father for suspecting her, but it was
plain that he suspected no one was else was capable of gathering information on Boo Gwan bribing scholars to help students pass exams. He told the queen that it was not a good idea for the man to be absent before what was being planned. That the deputy was needed and that his crimes could be questioned later. He was cordial enough, but--”

Woon was smiling. “Hong thinks the queen is trying to put him in his place. What a peculiar place the palace is. Everyone is always fighting to maintain dominance.”

“That is the way the world is, my lord.”

“Yes, yes, you’re right.”

* * *

Xue flew back to Woon’s bedroom window.

She arrived at the same moment Goo-hyang was lining a new cage, and the bird hopped from the ledge onto Goo-hyang’s finger.

“She likes you more than me now,” Woon said.

“There’s a tiny silk pocket tied to her foot,” Goo-hyang observed. “And a note inside.” She passed the bird, white wings flapping, to Woon’s wrist.

Woon un-scrolled the note, expecting to smile at the queen’s response, but what he read made him blink:

Return in secret by the time of chukshi. The farmers will still be sleeping, but the oxen are awake and ready to plow the field. Tonight, you may discover a secret garden.

“What is it, my lord?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Woon tried not to look flustered. “She wants to see me again. I’m not sure why.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” Goo-hang looked puzzled. “Information from the queen about the coup?”

“Yes, yes.” Woon burned the note in a candle flame. “She’s acting very quickly.”

He requested dinner and water, no strong liquor. He knew Goo-hyang had sensed the shift in his demeanor, and he appreciated how she always read him so well and left wordlessly when he didn’t want to talk.

When it came to women, Woon was accustomed to his looks opening doors but not to those doors actually leading to bedrooms. Touching her Majesty was outright treason, and here she was inviting him to her home in the dark—was it a trap? She was clever. Bring me the Defense Minister’s left arm, after all, had been a clever command. Plowing fields, discovering secret gardens—phrases used for ordinary sexual proposals, as far as Woon knew.

Not that he knew that much. He read things, heard things. No woman had sent him a message like that before.

For a moment, Woon considered consulting with Goo-hyang—then he checked himself. He would simply go find out for himself tonight what her Majesty wanted.
He slipped past the guards like a ghost, not even trying. Security was pitiful—armed eunuchs. On the garden balcony, the screens were a hand’s length open. He peeked inside. There was the queen, facing the full moon. Her black hair was down past her shoulders. She wore pale underclothes, a shimmering robe, and a placid expression.

Woon leapt into the room.

“Are you serious?” He asked. “Is this part of the deal?”

“It’s part of your reward,” she said. “Or is it my reward?”

“What?” Woon scanned the room. One latticed lantern was lit with a tall candle inside. Incense burned in a small pot. The bed was round, screened with a pink lace curtain. Nothing seemed amiss. No one was waiting to arrest him.

“How many times have you killed people?” She laughed a laugh like tiny bells. She was even more youthful looking with her hair down. “I didn’t think you were the kind of man to be worried about a little treason?”

Woon lowered his eyes. “I should be taking my leave now, your Majesty.”

“Please take off your clothes.” *Why is she talking in a normal tone? Anyone outside can hear.* “Consider that a royal command.”

Woon didn’t raise his eyes. He whispered, “You do realize that I could kill you right now, and no one would be the wiser?”

She laughed again. “Why do you say the most exciting things? And why are you so nervous? From the looks of it—no, it can’t possibly be—you’ve never been with a woman?”

“I haven’t.”

“Really?” She didn’t seem that surprised. “You’re young. And you’ve worked hard, I imagine, to reach such a high position. The Emperor himself knows of the Sky Lord of Heuksa Chorong.”

She took his hand at this point. “Look at these fingers,” she said. “They’re so graceful and slim. Like a nobleman’s. And this hand doesn’t feel calloused either.” She was holding his hand with both hers now. “Why isn’t this hand rough and cruel?”

“I don’t spend every moment beating men senseless with my own fists,” Woon said. “An assassin’s work requires precision and planning. Most of what I do as a leader of a complex organization isn’t with my hands.”

“I see.” She let go his hand. “Yeo Woon, if you’re going to be in my service, there are some things you will have to learn, and I will teach you. First things first. You and I are both people who don’t play by the rules, but if you’re going to be allied with me, I am your superior, your elder in all things, and the queen, is that clear?”

Woon looked into the woman’s eyes. She was old enough to be his mother. She was a person who used sex as a means to power. Why else would she have married the king?

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“I don’t take off anyone else’s clothes. That’s beneath me. I don’t know if you know much about ways of royalty, but I never undress myself either. Take off your clothes and then take off mine.”
“Yes, your Majesty.”

He couldn’t figure out how to remove the top layer of underclothes—there was a button of some sort hidden from view. He was worried about tearing the sheer fabric.

“You really never have been with a woman, have you?”

“Why would I lie?”

The queen showed him how her top came off. She pulled her other layers down, and her small breasts revealed themselves. Clouds of fabric remained bunched, modestly, around her waist. So, was this how women presented themselves in the bedroom? Or was this how the queen did? Was the only woman Woon ever going to lie with in his life the queen of his country? He may as well try to make a good impression.

He took her by the shoulders and used his most reliable asset: he looked into her eyes.

Her breath slowed. “You’re quite beautiful,” she said.

Woon was sure that he was the one supposed to be saying that, but no matter. He awaited further instruction, but none came.

He couldn’t bring himself to kiss her mouth. He kissed her neck. While his lips were there, he whispered what he guessed might excite her. “This is one of the three places where if my blade stabs, the person will surely die.”

That little laugh. “I’m sure you’ll kiss me in the other two places?”

Woon kissed down her neck, cupped one breast and was startled by how soft it was—he’d never imagined touching a woman’s breast. He wasn’t sure how aggressive he should be, but when he took a nipple into his mouth, she sighed wildly, and the memory of Dong-soo’s own lips aroused Woon. The act itself was perverse enough; it was a lie and a betrayal to be thinking of Dong-soo and nursing at the queen’s breast. It was making Woon’s pulse race, though, and he lingered there, enjoying the fingers that ran through his hair.

Woon had not expected to like any of this. But it was nice. Nice to be appreciated.

His mouth let go the nipple; his hand pushed the breast up gingerly and kissed the place beneath—“Here, right here—if I stabbed here—the valves of your heart would be cut.”

He kissed lower. His two hands palmed a slim waist—she was so small he was afraid to hold her—he might do some accidental damage with a fingernail—maybe the queen didn’t care, maybe women were stronger than he feared, but the queen wasn’t Dong-soo, and all this was too dainty and nerve-wracking. “Here,” he whispered. “The third place. Your dan tian. Below the navel, where you breathe, the center of your life force. A thrust upwards and I will hit any one of your vital organs.” He sucked on the flesh there for a moment. Woon sensed a life-force at the spot—it was controlled and controlling, like the woman beneath him. He pressed his fingertips deeper into her skin.

She’s not fragile. She’s Queen Jung-soon of Joseon. She’s plotting to kill her adopted son.

“Kiss me between my legs,” she said. “Would I die from that?”

Woon had seen pictures in the books Gak hid when the boys were fifteen, sixteen, seventeen on the mountaintop warrior camp. Woon was talented enough when it came most physical endeavors.
Woon didn’t plan on embarrassing himself. He threw up folds and folds of silk and was surprised to find the darisokogot missing. The queen had lied; she’d removed that undergarment herself, and waiting between her spread thighs was a triangle of smooth black hair and a pink nest of fleshy folds Woon had seen depicted in drawings. The part under the hair did, indeed, like so many poems said, resemble like a flower.

A strange sort of flower. Maybe one that grew deep in the ocean.

It tasted as if it had been bathed in jasmine for the occasion. Woon laved the length, finding if he pressed further, flesh yielded another layer. Unlike a man’s cock, the place was a mystery of folds. If his face insisted on sinking deeper, the queen’s hips would rise, liking that. His tongue found the entrance, a deep wet cave in the middle of everything, and he thought that might be where he should play, but his nose was pressed against a spot higher and whenever his nose pushed the nub there, her hips flinched. She verified that nub’s importance by reaching for it and starting to rub the spot with her own forefinger.

Woon lifted his head to figure what was going on. The queen moved her finger away to show him what looked like the tiniest button-rose, and she resumed her frantic rubbing.

Woon returned to kissing the strange folds under her hand. He thrust his tongue as far as it could reach into the wet entrance.

A long while of this and a dense liquid was smearing Woon’s face; its familiar scent, the readiness for sex, filled his nostrils. He wanted to fuck this interesting person; he couldn’t help it. He wanted to because she wanted him that much. She was rubbing that hooded little rose like crazy, and her thighs were sweating. Despite how powerful she was, the queen wanted him, Yeo Woon.

At that moment, she grabbed the top of his head—pretty hard.

“You can go in now.” Her voice was hoarse. “But before you release, you have to pull out.” She was not only holding on to his hair, she was yanking it for emphasis with each word. “You’re capable of controlling yourself, aren’t you? I can’t risk a child.”

“Yes,” Woon said. “Please let go of my hair.”

That bell-like laugh.

“I wouldn’t hurt this pretty hair for anything in the world. Now, do continue—" She paused for air. Woon found it difficult to believe women could be so aroused. “I will be pleased to have played such an important role in an up-and-coming young star’s education.” Her hand was stroking Woon’s hair gently now.

Star.

She had no clue what that word meant to Woon. Black star. Rising star. Notorious assassin. Star, star.

Woon crawled over her, and she guided him inside. It didn’t feel strange; it didn’t feel otherworldly. She was wet and warm; it felt like sex; it reminded him vaguely of ponds overrun with lotus and reeds and the heady smell from blossoming trees in early spring. He didn’t want to kiss her or look her in the face; he lay his head against her neck and pumped at a leisurely pace. She held him in what could scarcely be called an embrace: her hands rested lightly on his shoulders. No passion, no love. Woon was inside her yet acutely aware of the distance between himself, a peasant, and the queen of Joseon. Each time Woon pushed forward, though, her insides clutched
him if her arms didn’t. Her lower body rose to meet his measured thrusts.

Then she took his hand and guided it to the nub. She lay two of his fingers on the spot and rubbed over his fingers with her own, showing him the rhythm she wanted—one much quicker than what his hips were pushing.

Then she took away her hand and let him take over.

He didn’t have to conjure any images, remember Dong-soo, feel anything but her. What he was doing, here, now, in the queen’s bedroom, was exciting enough. Treasonous. Tender but without the intimacy of real lovers. Like part of a contract, like a bond between killers, and like a lesson between a mother and child.

Woon took his time. He panted against her ear, aware that his breath was making her own stagger. He wanted to prolong her pleasure, to prove himself the prodigy everyone had always said he was.

When she shook, like a branch in a rough wind, she whispered, “don’t stop,” so he didn’t stop rubbing her little nub, and he didn’t stop thrusting forward, over and over. She kept shaking, like a person with palsy, like someone who was dying. It was a little scary. She didn’t make sounds—good, because who knows who might hear? Her little hands were clenched fists against his back, and she thrashed one final time, knocking her crotch hard against his. Then she fell away, finished. “Pull it out now.”—a severe voice, a command.

Woon did.

The queen sat up, as if it were any other evening, as if she were composing herself after having sneezed. She put her hand between her two nude breasts, heaved a gentle sigh, and pointed to a pile of cloths on a nightstand.

Woon understood.

He took a cloth and, on his knees at the queen’s bedside, began to stroke himself vigorously.

“I was impressed,” the queen said.

Woon shot into the cloth at those words.

She said that she never dressed herself so that he would have to do that for her—and that he was free to leave then. Woon found the task of putting a woman’s clothes on more difficult than making love to her, but he lived through it, put on his own clothes, and gave the queen one last look before he went out.

“I’m still not sure why you asked me here tonight. You don’t seem to me to be….” He tried to think of the right word. “You’re not a frivolous woman, your Majesty.”

“You really don’t understand?” She had picked up a hairbrush and was tidying her hair now. “I was moved by you when you sneaked into a secret meeting and dared to look directly into my eyes. That you somehow found out about the location of that house moved me. Your pretty face moved me. Do you know that the minister had everyone attending that night sign an oath in blood? I’m sure a man like you knows about the coup his Excellency is planning. If the coup fails, all our heads roll—” A smile. “Or so he thinks.”

“You have a back-up plan?”

“You’re my back-up, Yeo Woon. Of course, the coup won’t fail because I trust that you’re that
good of an assassin, but an oath made on paper with signatures in blood is just as good as the one we made tonight in flesh, wouldn’t you say? In the event that those who plotted against the Prince Heir are found out, I will turn against the Defense Minister....”

“I see.” Woon had expected as much. He had counted on exactly this.

“You’ll get me that ledger with the bloody signatures, Woon, to make sure these men perish. The page with my mark will be torn out. There can be no record of my involvement.”

Woon nodded. He slid the screen door open. and moonlight poured in. “I will do what you command.”

“I was going to tell you this later, but you always seem to be one step ahead of everyone. I appreciate that. Good night, young man.” She looked overjoyed, her eyes clear and vibrant in the brightness of the large moon.

“Good night, your Majesty.”

*

Dong-soo slipped into the stables near a yangban house where a secret meeting was supposed to take place. A row of palace officers had passed by, and Dong-soo didn’t want to be seen. He was a good martial artist, but stealth wasn’t his strongest asset. He was here to see who was at the meeting; he had no clue what he might do. He thought he’d seen a royal carriage. The queen?

Someone else was in the stables too. Someone breathing in a frustrated way.

“Go back,” Yeo Woon said. “This isn’t your business.”

Why does he sound so angry?

“So this is your business?”

“I don’t have time to discuss this. Please, leave now.”

“Woon-ah?” Woon seemed unsettled, too tense. “What’s the matter with you? Did something bad happen?”

Darkness was concealing his face, but Woon’s body startled. “How did you find out about this meeting?”

“I’m not as stupid about palace affairs as you think,” Dong-soo said. “Give me a little more credit. Just like you have your informants, I have a Hong of my own.”

“You mean Cho-rip? He investigated for you?” A small laugh. “Well, good for him, but what good are your martial arts here now? What can your saintly sword do here? Is there anyone you need to protect?”

“Woon-ah?” Dong-soo was confused.

“I don’t get you and your need to protect people,” Woon’s voice was strangely sharp. “How many times have you failed to protect people in the past? Your compassion never changed anything. Maybe I’m the one who is going to change things.”

“What are you talking about? What’s into you right now?” Dong-soo sighed. “Are you killing people again? Is that it? Isn’t there enough blood on your hands?”
“I didn’t kill anyone.”

“Did you have someone killed?” Dong-soo was getting tired of going through this with Woon over and over again. “Do you really think killing the way you do is the way to fight the power in that meeting?”

“I told you I didn’t kill anyone. You have no reason to act so high and mighty with me.” Woon lowered his head. Something was churning inside him—Dong-soo could feel that old guilt rising in Woon’s chest as Woon breathed. “I’m not a perfect person,” Woon said, “but your saintly sword —”

“I’m not a saint,” Dong-soo snapped. “What happened?”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Woon snapped back. “I fucked someone.”

Dong-soo didn’t hear what he thought he heard. There were locusts croaking in the distance. Dong-soo had a moment of fear—he remembered the Sky Lord. Then he felt angry. Woon is a grown man. A grown man who makes his own decisions.

“What did you say?”

“I’ve always had to do filthy things in order to move the world, in order to protect people. I don’t pretend to be anyone else. I didn’t get lessons from our uncle. I was inducted into Heuksa Chorong, and I do things my way. I do what people like you are unwilling to do.”

“Did you just say you fucked someone?”

“I fucked someone, I fucked someone.” Woon repeated the words in a quieter tone this time. “I said what I said, Dong-soo-yah.”

Dong-soo felt his heart tremble. Why was it doing that? Why was Woon saying what he was saying?

“Who?”

“You don’t need to know.”

“Then why did you tell me?”

“Because you’re a compassionate do-gooder who looks down on me.”

“Can you shut up about that?” Woon doesn’t really think that about me, does he?

“Because you always think you need to protect me. And you think I belong to you or something like that. I fucked someone.”

Dong-soo grabbed Woon by the collar. “Woon! I said shut up.”
Woon struck Dong-soo with an open-hand right on the shoulder where Kenzo had stabbed. Where Woon knew it would hurt. Before Dong-soo knew what was happening, the two were throwing punches. Woon had always been a master at hand-to-hand. He caught himself on the rafters and swung himself to land a kick on Dong-soo’s belly. Dong-soo landed on the floor, stood up and grabbed Woon again. This time Woon grabbed back.

Dong-soo lifted Woon off his feet. Woon’s face was close enough to kiss.

Woon swallowed. He stared at Dong-soo, murder in his eyes, his lips trembling.

Why am I fighting Woon? Dong-soo was reminded of that horrible time when the Crown Prince died. He had been so unfair to Woon then. He hadn’t had known all the details.

Dong-soo put Woon back down. “You said you did it to protect someone. I guess I don’t need to know who you’re protecting, but you saved Ji-sun once. You saved Jin-joo and her father. All this is for the Prince Heir, right?”

Dong-soo sat on the floor. He felt like the floor had pulled him there. He put his face in his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I asked you who. I don’t need to know your business. But it’s not true that I look down on you.”

Not a word from Woon.
Dong-soo felt his throat tightening. “I think you’re an amazing person.”

Woon was silent.

“I’m sorry,” Dong-soo went on. “I’m sorry. I do think you belong to me. I can’t help that. I do want to protect you. I don’t know how, of course—because you’re a better fighter than I am. You always have been. I’m sorry.” Dong-soo stopped talking because he knew he was going to start crying if he said anymore.

Woon sat down next to Dong-soo.

“I wanted to become aligned with the queen,” he said. “She’s been meeting with the Norons secretly. They’ve even signed this ridiculous oath in blood to ensure their loyalty to one another. They want to kill the Prince Heir, kill the king and put the son of Crown Prince Sado’s consort, Prince Eun Jun on the throne. If the coup fails, Hong will escape, though. You know he always does.”

“It was the queen. You … and the queen?”

“All I wanted was her to trust me. She hates the Defense Minister and would easily betray him in order to save her own neck, but…."

Was Woon going to tell him the worst part of the story? Dong-soo was wishing that he wouldn’t.

“She called me to her bed. It became part of the deal.”

Dong-soo let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding in. “That’s treason.”

“I’ve killed people, Dong-soo-yah. I’m the leader of a secret criminal organization. I’m not a good person.”

“Woon-ah?” Dong-soo felt a tear fall from his eye. He knew that in the darkness Woon couldn’t see it. “What have I been trying to tell you all these years? Haven’t you understood how I feel from all we’ve been through? I believe in you. I believe in that despite all the things you’ve done—I can’t say I agree with them all—your heart is a good heart, a pure heart. I believe you will come back to me.”

The two sat together for a while. Dong-soo wondered what Woon was thinking. Usually he could sense Woon’s feelings, but tonight there was a distance between them. Locusts hummed. The moments passed.

“What are you doing here?” Dong-soo asked. “Are you spying on the meeting like I am?”

“No,” Woon said. “I want to antagonize Hong and to show the queen that I support her. I’m going to burst in uninvited to this meeting.”

“Woon-ah! Isn’t that a dangerous thing to do?”

“I have to do this to prove who I am. Palace politics is a game like this. It’s more dangerous for you to be here.”

“I’m coming with you. If nothing else, I can fight.”

Woon was getting angry again. “No, you can’t. Didn’t you hear what did I said? Your martial arts are no good here. And the last time I tried to antagonize Hong—at the fight club—I almost got you
killed. All I did was bet on you, and he had you drugged. That was to answer me. That’s not going
to happen again.”

“Who’s protecting who now? Please don’t underestimate me, Yeo Woon.”

This time Dong-soo could feel Woon turning a thought over and over in his head.

“Okay,” Woon said at last. “You can follow me. But don’t draw your sword. We’ll knock out the
guards, and then I’ll just say a few words to those assembled. Is that clear?”

Dong-soo got up. “Are you going to introduce me?”

“Sure,” Woon said. “I’ll tell everyone you’re my wife.”

Dong-soo was certain Woon was joking, but he felt the pain in his heart lifting as he and Woon
headed for the secret meeting.

Knocking out the guards was easy.

The Defense Minister was speaking: “We have two hundred swords and twenty muskets. The
shooting stars will announce the beginning, and a red comet will appear within view of the palace
soon after muoshi, when the moon is bright in the sky—"

Woon kicked down the screen doors, and there, sitting on the floor were a dozen men, including
the samurai Kenzo, and behind a screen, the queen of Joseon herself.

Everyone except Hong and the queen startled.

Guards drew blades on Dong-soo and Woon.

“Please escort them out quietly,” her Majesty said.

Dong-soo saw Woon and the pretty queen exchange a look. Dong-soo left without waiting to be escorted.
From the alcove he could hear Hong say, “What’s the meaning of this? I didn’t invite you, Sky Lord.”

“A secret meeting?” Woon’s most sarcastic tone. “If only the king were here, I’d say this were the royal chamber.”

“How dare you!” The ministers were all chiming their outrage now.

“Of course,” Woon said. “I’ll be leaving now. This isn’t a place for a lowly peasant like me.”

Outside, Dong-soo stood for a moment in front of the house with Woon. “Why aren’t they going to arrest us?”

“It would reveal their location and cause a scene.”

Dong-soo sighed. “She’s beautiful.”

“She is,” Woon agreed. “I have to get back now.” He walked a few steps away and turned. “Thank you Dong-soo-yah…. I mean, thank you for not making any trouble tonight.”

Dong-soo felt a pain in his heart again. Why was there always pain when it came to loving him?

*I’ll wait for you, Woon-ah. I’ll wait until you come back to me.*

As was usually the case with Dong-soo, when things were going bad for him, more bad stuff happened. The following day, Jin-joo and Cho-rip caused more pain in his heart. A small skirmish with a bunch of fellows trying to kill him happened, but that was easy enough to deal with—the
feelings of his friends was a more complicated matter.

The morning began with a visit from Cho-rip who told Dong-soo that, because there was no more news about the coup and all that was known was that it was happening, Cho-rip had told the Prince Heir everything.

Dong-soo gave Cho-rip the information about the plot against the king and the plans to put the Prince Eun Jun on the throne. He also said he knew that a red comet was going to signal the start of the coup. “That means the comet you saw last time was totally fake. It came from the east, right? That means someone was lighting a huge kite in the hills there. If I go investigate the area today, I should find remnants of that and maybe evidence for a new launching.”

“How did you find this out?”

“Woon.”

Cho-rip frowned. “You met with him? Why would he tell you this? How do you know you can trust him? Dong-soo-yah, you saw for himself that he tried to kill the Prince Heir.”

Dong-soo had never explained that. Woon had wanted to be undercover once. He didn’t anymore. So right away, Dong-soo said as much to his old friend, but he could tell that Cho-rip was unconvinced.

“This could be a trap.”

“No, no, Cho-rip-ah.” Dong-soo didn’t really have time to persuade a rational person. Dong-soo wasn’t good at arguing, and he wanted to investigate the hillsides. “This is Woon we’re talking about.”

Cho-rip folded his arms and looked a little sad. “We’ll see. I also have to tell you that General Seo will be here later to discuss matters with everyone. If the Defense Minister has an army, and the Norons are behind him, it’s very likely he’s bribed officials within the palace itself, and this will be an internal coup.”

Dong-soo nodded and headed out.

He was ambushed before he got very far. He recognized the men who jumped him—they were a few men who had been waiting their turn as participants in the fight club. Dong-soo didn’t have to draw his sword. He knocked them over without breaking a sweat and wondered why in the world Hong would be so stupid as to send a mere twelve men to kill the mighty Baek Dong-soo?

Sa-mo and Jin-joo appeared, both brandishing weapons.

“What did you think you were doing?” Sa-mo shouted. “Did you think you were going somewhere alone? Why do you always do that? Don’t you know there are people who can help you?” He cocked his head to one side at Jin-joo. “I couldn’t stop her. But you remember, she was extremely helpful at the wharf when she shot her little arrow and burned the copy of the map of the Northern Expedition.”

“Little arrow?” Jin-joo was insulted. “My arrows are the same size as anyone else’s!”

Dong-soo caught sight of a large straw hat. *Wait. That’s Scimitar Man.*

Sa-mo and Jin-joo turned around to see what Dong-soo was looking at. Scimitar Man broke into a run, and Dong-soo, Sa-mo, and Jin-joo chased after him.
Eventually, Scimitar Man tripped in the street.

“Spare me, spare me,” he pleaded. “I had nothing to do with the men who attacked you. I swear.”

“Listen to his crazy whining,” Sa-mo said. “What men attacked you, Dong-soo-yah?”

“Some of Hong’s recruits from the fight club,” Dong-soo said. “I thought the Defense Minister didn’t have the sense to do that. And I guess you—” He pointed to Scimitar Man with a smile. “You are still angry about that day in the abandoned barn.”

“What are you talking about?” Jin-joo looked incensed. “I’m still angry about that day! After what this filth did to me and my father?”

“Spare me,” Scimitar Man said, “I have repented my ways, and I’m living a quiet life.”

Sa-mo kicked the man. “Then why were you running away? He took out his butcher knife. I wasn’t going to use this on a human being.”

“Captain,” Dong-soo said quietly. “Please let him go. What will it change if you kill him?”

“What?” Sa-mo and Jin-joo gasped the word in unison.

Dong-soo knew the man was lying; he knew the man was a cockroach, that he would survive time and time again, that he was still capable of hurting people. Dong-soo also remembered: *You know, I was once sent to kill Baek Dong-soo when he was out of his mind, but there’s a Buddha in me. I figured why kill a poor crazy boy?* He remembered what Woon had said about Dong-soo’s inability to protect people. Still, looking at Buddha in Me, Dong-soo remembered a pitiful man who instead of killing himself and everyone in that barn had wailed and wailed and let Dong-soo and Sa-mo carry the injured people outside.

“Let him go,” Dong-soo said. “We should pity him.” He turned to face Buddha in Me. “Get up and go now. Please, before I change my mind.”
Buddha in Me gave Dong-soo a look he would remember all his life.

Sa-mo and Jin-joo were silent. Jin-joo cried all the way to the hillside. There, they forgot about Buddha in Me and diligently began a search for evidence. Sure enough, they found torn paper, many more fully constructed kites, and three baskets full of gunpowder. They shredded the kites on the spot and, feeling accomplished, carried the baskets towards Sa-mo’s house. “Jin-joo, do you want to rest?” Dong-soo asked her as he watched her struggle with the weight of the basket.

“I’m fine, Dong-soo-yah,” she said. “Please don’t worry about me.” She gave him a knowing look. “Please don’t worry about me ever again. You do that too much. I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

She’s obviously not fine.

The three decided to skip the main path through the village. The sound of horses and measured marching like that of soldiers made them stop dead in their tracks. Jin-joo put down her basket. “I’m going ahead to look.” Dong-soo walked up a slight incline and peeked through the brush.

The Japanese.

He waved for Sa-mo and Jin-joo to come take a look. There were twenty men.
“It’s soon,” Sa-mo said. “I hope General Seo has something new to say today.”

General Seo didn’t.

Seated around the table were the old general, who Dong-soo would always recognize as the crazy old beacon-keeper, Jin-gi, Jin-joo, and Sa-mo. Jang-mi and Mi-so, who were mostly confused by the palace goings-on and were more concerned about keeping everyone fed, were preparing tea and snacks in another room.

“Where’s Cho-rip?” Dong-soo asked.

“Still at work,” General Seo said. “Oh thank you, my lovely girl.” He took a tray of sweets from Mi-so, and as the eldest at the table, ate first, signaling that it was proper for everyone else to eat. Dong-soo knew table manners like these now—Sunsengnim had made sure of that. “You know how Deputy Hong is—always the busy, busy scholar.”

Dong-soo was a little anxious. He excused himself and walked out the door. He looked at the sky turning darker blue as the sun was coming down.

“Dong-soo-yah!” It was Hong-do. “Deputy Hong’s horse was right behind me from the palace. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here.”

Dong-soo was relieved that Cho-rip was safe. He was surprised that no one had singled out Cho-rip out for his allegiance to the Prince Heir by now; maybe the palace librarian was just that crafty at staying out of trouble. “Oh no, Hong-do—why would I be surprised you’re here? You’ve always helped us. You even marched with us with the Prince Heir on that dangerous visit to his uncle’s gravesite.”

Hong-do looked embarrassed. “Ah, well, you see.” He shifted his feet. He tugged at the string of his nobleman’s gat. “The only reason I began to hang around all of you was because of Jin-joo, and now—well, now I’ve accepted the fact that Jin-joo and I…She’s….”

Dong-soo sighed. Not these romantic things. I can’t bear these romantic complications.

“She’s meant for you, Dong-soo-yah.” Hong-do cleared his throat. “But I’ve grown fond of the Prince Heir, and I am even more aware now of my duty to serve him.” Hong-do’s face brightened. “Do you know what? His Highness has decided to honor my devotion and has appointed me your assistant. I’m supposed to help you draw your martial arts book.”

Dong-soo laughed. “What? My drawings aren’t good enough?”

“Oh no, it’s not that.” Hong-do waved his hands in frantic apology. “His Highness was quite impressed with your talent. It’s just that I’m an official palace artist, and he wants you to research more martial arts techniques for soldiers on horseback and make initial sketches. I’ll be doing the drawings is all. You’ll be writing the book.”

Cho-rip appeared.

“I wasn’t able to verify your information,” he said in a brusque tone to Dong-soo. “I still don’t trust Yeo Woon. I wouldn’t bother bringing his words up to anyone inside.”

“I disagree,” Dong-soo said. “What else do we have besides his information at this point?”

There was a little more, it turned out.
Ji-sun spoke first. She said that there were papers circulating in the village with symbols of bad omens printed on them. The papers said that the Prince Heir was going to kill the king to avenge his father.

Dong-soo looked at Cho-rip. *This just confirms what Woon said, right?*

“The Norons need the people’s support,” General Seo said. “Oh thank you, dear.” He took a bowl of wine from Yang-mi and drank. His drinking was the signal that everyone else could pour from the jug. No one else did. “Can’t risk the people rushing the palace in another rebellion after the coup. They need to believe that the stars and the moon pre-destined the deaths inside the palace. People might love their sweet prince, but they listen to fortune tellers. Ha! Sometimes I think it’s fortune-tellers who run the world, not the people who study to pass civil service exams.” And here, General Seo winked at Cho-rip and Hong-do.

Then Dong-soo made his report—about the arrival of the Japanese, about the destruction of the comet kites that supported what Woon had said, about the plans to kill the king.

“It’s not a coup just against the Prince Heir.”

“The king?” General Seo took another bite out of a cake. “I don’t think the king should be told a word of this.”

“Frightening the king with suspicious information would be a terrible thing to do,” said Cho-rip. “This could still all be information planted to disguise another plan and target the Prince Heir specifically.”
“Oh no, I trust our Son of a Gisaeng,” said General Seo. “And this fellow here—” He pointed to Dong-soo. “He’s worth ten of the mighty Sword Saint. I’m sure he could fend off fifty, a hundred, eh two hundred swordsmen by himself.”

“That may be true,” Sa-mo agreed, “but Dong-soo said this Hong monster has muskets. Twenty muskets and the best shooters. What martial artist can go against guns?”

“Hmmmmmm.” The general grinned one of those crazy grins of his and reached for the last sweet on the table. “We’ll just have to hope that those musket men get taken care of.”

Sa-mo rolled his eyes. “The coup could happen any day now.”

The meeting was dismissed. Ji-sun, who had spoken little the whole time, deferring to men as was her way as a proper lady, took Dong-soo aside and said that she trusted in Yeo Woon too. Dong-soo smiled and hugged her shoulder. “Thank you,” he said.

Mi-so, who Dong-soo remembered had a lovey-dovey thing for Cho-rip, asked him if he would like to go for a walk to catch up on old times. Cho-rip, being the clueless man he was, agreed. Jin-joo, probably trying to avoid Dong-soo, said she would go with them, Mi-so shot her a look like musket-fire. Hong-do left the house with a sad expression.

Sunsengnim had not taught Dong-soo about how to handle intrigues, big or small. He had said to live a life full of blessings. Maybe, Dong-soo considered, he was supposed to stay away from all that was going on with his friends. But his heart felt connect to all theirs—he wanted to protect them.

And his own heart felt restless.

No sooner had he gone to his room and lain his head on the pillow when a black blur flew through his window.

Woon!

Woon put his finger on his lips.

“The coup is tonight,” he whispered.

“Tonight!” Dong-soo sat straight up. “What?”

“The Japanese are here.”

“Yes, yes.” Dong-soo nodded. “I saw them coming.”

“Together with their forces and Hong’s army, there are around one hundred men. This morning Hong called a meeting and asked me not to return to my headquarters tonight. I’m supposed to be stationed with the Japanese. I was given essential plans, not all. Palace guards were bribed, so we’ll be entering tonight easily—Hong, his son, his deputies, myself and Kenzo, and an army of one hundred.”

“Right past the palace gates?” Dong-soo couldn’t believe it.

“Hong is supposed to go to the king’s chambers with a small party under the guise of assassinating
the king. But while he’s there, he and his deputies will kill the assassins.”

Dong-soo swallowed. “Wait—where will the rest of Hong’s army be?”

“I don’t know—everyone has been given an assigned hiding place until called for. All I know is that after killing a few of his own men, Hong is going to rush the king’s quarters with a declaration of emergency, saying that the palace has been invaded at all gates by hundreds of assassins and that the king must be protected at all costs. The dead men on the doorstep will be… props for the play. Because Hong is the Defense Minister, of course his Majesty will call for all official troops to protect the king. This will leave the Prince Heir’s house undefended.”

Dong-soo was finding it difficult to breathe. “How—what—I don’t know what’s to be done.”

“You have to go there tonight. There’s more than enough time. The coup is set to begin before dawn. Inshi, the hour of the tiger. You have to protect the Prince Heir.”

“You mean the army is going after the king?”

“Yes, but you have to go alone tonight to protect the king. Hong will be waiting to hear of the prince’s death before the real assassins rush the king. He’ll be waiting a long time because the Prince Heir won’t be killed. Wait at Gangnyeongjeon and don’t engage anyone until you get my word. There will be muskets in that army, Dong-soo-yah. I’ll be there to support you after I take care of a little business. But it’s important you go alone.”

Woon’s not going up against the shooters, is he?

“Are you listening to me, Dong-soo-yah? Head straight for the king’s quarters and go alone. It’s too dangerous for anyone else. And in the name of all you value and want to protect, please don’t let anyone know about the coup tonight. I’m going to try to get word to General Seo today, but—”

“Business? What business do you—?”

“I’m the one who’s been assigned to assassinate the Prince Heir, so I have time to do other things while Hong is waiting for the word that the prince has been killed. And while—”

Dong-soo clutched Woon by the shoulder. “You’re what? They don’t suspect you?”

“Dong-soo-yah, listen to me. This is a war. You can’t be compassionate with anyone—it’s going to be a kill or be killed situation. You can’t protect anyone without killing tonight.” Woon was pressing Dong-soo’s shoulder now too. They were mirroring one another in their position on the bed mat and in their concern for one another. Dong-soo was aware of their breathing together.

“The sun is already going down,” Dong-soo whispered. “Doesn’t Hong know you’re out?”

“I don’t have much time. I was at Hong’s house when there was a commotion.” Woon shook his head and managed a wry smile. “The former Human Lord, that man who just won’t seem to die, was captured by Hong’s men. Seems he betrayed Hong by trying to get some of the former fight club members to kill you. I trust you managed them just fine—”

“Oh that.”

“Hong ordered his men to beat Dae-ung until dead. He was watching the torture with some delight. Hong’s face…” From the look on Woon’s face, Woon didn’t want to remember more. “Anyway, that man escaped being killed again. Hong was called away by his son who said that the queen was having some fit about which officers were trustworthy, and his Excellency’s presence was required
at the palace. I was told to go where the Japanese are stationed. Hong told the men to hold the torture until he returned—because he wanted to witness it, I guess.”

“What a disgusting man.”

“It should be a little while before Hong discovers I’m not where I’m supposed to be. And even in the event he does discover….” Woon smiled again. “He’s accustomed to my disobedience.”

“Let me get this straight. I go to the king. You’re going to be at the Prince Heir’s house. How many people will be coming after the Prince Heir?”

“Don’t worry about that. I can handle them. Kenzo will be with me and a few others. I’m supposed to kill the prince, and you’re right—Hong suspects me. If I betray the Defense Minister, Kenzo is supposed to kill me.”

Woon smiled, but Dong-soo didn’t.

“Dong-soo-yah, I can handle Kenzo. You know that.”

Dong-soo nodded. The enormity of the upcoming night was starting to fill his head. “All that you’re doing--this is so dangerous, but—” Dong-soo pressed his fingers into Woon’s shoulder. “Thank you so much. Thank you so much.”

Woon wasn’t finished. “Where’s Cho-rip?”

“What?”

“I said you shouldn’t tell anyone, but—”

“He went for a walk with Mi-so and Jin-joo.”

Woon winced. “That may not be enough time. I have to get back now.”

“Woon-ah?”

Woon looked at Dong-soo and knew exactly what the question in Dong-soo’s eyes was.

Dong-soo-yah, you’re crazy--why now?

Because we may die tonight.

Dong-soo-yah, you’re a fool. I love you, I love you.

I love you, so why can’t you kiss me?

After staring into Woon’s eyes for a long moment, Dong-soo felt himself talk aloud. “Please. If we die, I don’t want someone else to be the last person you kissed.”

“How can you say something so stupid?” Woon’s voice was gentle. “I didn’t kiss her…”

“You didn’t?” Dong-soo wished his voice hadn’t sounded so pitiful just now.

“I didn’t…” Woon hesitated. “… not on the mouth.”
Dong-soo grabbed Woon and pulled him closer. He didn’t need pictures of Woon and the queen in his mind right now. He glared at Woon. He felt possessive, afraid, uncertain—all those things Sunsegnim had taught him were death to a warrior.

Dong-soo didn’t care. His senses shut down, and he kissed Woon roughly on the lips.

Woon returned the kiss. Dong-soo’s hands were running through Woon’s hair. Woon’s tongue was flicking against the roof of Dong-soo’s mouth. The kiss was deepening; Dong-soo’s blood was rushing and pounding in his ears—

A creaking sound. The door opening.

“Dong-soo-yah, I don’t understand Mi-so. She’s just so—”

Dong-soo turned to see Cho-rip standing at the threshold. Cho-rip looked as if he’d seen a ghost—no, as if he’d seen a whole graveyard of ghosts rise and fly towards him.

Cho-rip didn’t move. Woon didn’t move. Dong-soo finally took his hands out of Woon’s hair.

“I guess,” Cho-rip said in a weak voice. “This explains a lot of things.”

Why does this keep happening? What am I supposed to say?
Amazingly, Cho-rip turned his pale face to Woon instead of to Dong-soo. Did Cho-rip feel more betrayed by Woon? Was it Woon who was hurting Cho-rip with this? Why did Cho-rip--?

“Yeo Woon,” Cho-rip said in a calm voice. It was obvious that he was working hard to steady his voice, so the effect was eerie. Cho-rip sounded ghost-like himself. It was as if some cold and disapproving ancestor from years and years ago had appeared to deliver a curse. “Dong-soo may believe your lies, but I don’t. I understand the charm you work on people. I understand how someone as good and kind as Dong-soo can fall under your influence, but I promise you—I won’t let you hurt him… or anyone else again.”

“Cho-rip-ah!” Dong-soo was frantic. “I don’t have time to explain now, but trust me. Woon is still the friend we knew. And what you saw—I can explain that too. Honest. You and Woon are my oldest friends. I love you both—and you have to understand—”

“I understand, Dong-soo.” Cho-rip shook his head as if trying to shake himself back into the present. Or maybe he was trying to shake the image of what he’d just seen from his mind. “I’m sorry I walked in without knocking. This used to be our room. I didn’t think I had to knock. This used to be our room.”

And with that, Cho-rip left.

Woon looked devastated. His lowered his head. He sat on the bed mat and didn’t move for a long while. “I told you from the beginning that this never should’ve happened. I told you. You and I—we never should’ve…”

“Woon-ah.”

“I was going to need Cho-rip inside the palace. I was going to enlist his help against the coup. That’s all ruined now. He’ll… he’ll … never trust me again.”

“No.” Dong-soo didn’t believe that. “He’s in shock. He’s our oldest friend. We can make this right again. I made it right with Jin-joo.”

“It’s too late. The coup is going to happen soon. I can’t have him in the way.”

“What are you talking about?”

“And I’m serious about your protecting people for real this time, Dong-soo-yah. Don’t risk your compassion on the battlefield tonight.”

Woon was serious about not having much time left: he rose and jumped out the window.

“Wait!” Dong-soo whispered. He knew his calling Woon was stupid. Woon wouldn’t listen. Dong-soo buried his face in his hands. What do you mean you can’t have Cho-rip in the way? Oh gods, Woon. What do you mean by that?

Dong-soo knew better than to try to catch up with Cho-rip.

He didn’t have the fortitude to face anyone else either; he understood that he needed to find his balance again if he was going to face an entire army late tonight and that he couldn’t do this at home. He had no choice but to leave, right now, before Jang-mi served dinner, before anyone noticed his distress.

He ran into Jin-joo outside.
Right away she asked him what the matter was.

Right away Dong-soo blurted out that the coup was tonight and that he had things to do. “Please, don’t tell anyone else. This is very important. It’s too dangerous.”

“Woon was here,” she said.

Dong-soo was sorry for calling her a stupid girl all his life. Jin-joo was amazing. All his life she had been there for him. He may have saved her life, but she was always by his side. She’s the one who pulled him out of his stupor after the Crown Prince died and restored his mind to him. Jin-joo had always believed in him and loved him no matter what.

And he probably needed her right now more than she needed him.

“Cho-rip caught me and Woon kissing in my bedroom. He—he just stomped off. I’m not sure he’ll ever forgive us.”

“Dong-soo-yah!” Her first word was loud, and then she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Why do you guys keep doing stuff like that right here in your father’s house? I mean—I understand how you can be, rushing into things, but isn’t Woon supposed to be the smart one? Is this because your new passion—”

“No, no, it’s not like that.” Dong-soo shrugged. “It’s been going on for over four, five... years.”

Jin-joo’s eyes widened. “Years? Then what the—what where you two thinking? And why didn’t Cho-rip figure it out? I thought he could figure out anything.”

Again, Dong-soo shrugged.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jin-joo concluded. “There’s more important stuff happening at the palace. Cho-rip will worry about that instead.” She searched Dong-soo’s miserable face. “Please don’t worry, Dong-soo-yah. He’s not really a palace noble with all these Confucius-whatever ideals. You’re forgetting all the time he spent with peasants like us. And he STILL spends time with us. We don’t care about who is who and who loves who. I saw how he and Mi-so were looking at one another tonight. Do you think a man who has his eyes set on a little peasant girl like her—I swear he’s going to marry her if she bats her eyes one more time—do you think he’s going to really care about you and Woon? You have to give him a little more time.”

Dong-soo breathed out and considered what Jin-joo had just said. “Okay. That’s possible. He looked really angry though.”

“Look here, Dong-soo-yah.” Jin-joo was still whispering, but even her whispering could take on a bossy tone. “I’m still a little upset myself. I’m angry you kept this a secret from us—I understand why—but it ended up hurting ….” She wasn’t going to be a blabbermouth and say me. She sighed and found her strength again. “You ended up hurting more people this way. And maybe you hurt Woon too—because no one trusted him. And if your friends knew that you, you of all people, the apprentice of the great Sword Saint, trusted and loved Woon—”

“Oh no, Jin-joo-yah, I can never tell my Sa-mo.”

Jin-joo looked thoughtful. “Okay, maybe not.” She put her hands on her hips. “But you should’ve have told me and Cho-rip. You should probably clear it up with Ji-sun too—because people think you might marry her, and she might be expecting the same thing, and—”

Maybe Dong-soo was looking too chided because Jin-joo suddenly looked guilty.
“Eh, you have somewhere to go. Worry about this later.” She smiled. Her smiles at Dong-soo were always full of love. “You’re the greatest warrior in Joseon. You saved me. You can save the king and so many hundreds and hundreds of people. Go and remember all the things the father I never knew, the great Sword Saint, taught to you, and be his… legacy tonight.”

Dong-soo stared. Jin-joo could be a great statesman if she wanted to be. A speech like that. She could make speeches in the royal assembly.

“Go on now,” she said. She tapped him on the shoulder. “Go protect people.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dong-soo felt better. “Thank you, Jin-joo-yah.”

*

Along an untraveled path, trying to clear his mind, Dong-soo couldn’t forget what Woon had told him about Buddha in Me. The last time Woon had seen the man, the man’s eyes had looked different. If someone had asked Dong-soo to explain what was changed, he couldn’t have described the depth of surprise and gratitude in that crazy face.

It was still evening; there might be time to save Buddha in Me from a painful death. Dong-soo found himself headed for the Defense Minister’s house.

Looking around, he saw the army, sitting around, eating rice rolls, waiting for the big night. Not far, not guarded at all, wrapped in a straw mat and bleeding from the head was Buddha in Me. He could tell from the man’s face that he was still alive. Dong-soo scurried away to a nearby well, grabbed a bowl and ladle that he’d remembered lying there, filled the bowl, and jumped the minister’s gate with ease and without spilling a drop of water.

Dong-soo knelt next to Buddha in Me. “Here, have some water. You haven’t had anything all day, have you?”

Buddha in Me could only stare. He gulped from the ladle. “Why… why are you doing this?”

Dong-soo undid the ropes binding the straw mat. “Can you walk? Or am I going to have to carry you?”

“Are you joking? They pounded me like hell with bats, but this is nothing. I’m an invincible man, Baek Dong-soo.”

Dong-soo smiled. “The gate isn’t high at all.”

He watched with surprise, though, as Buddha in Me took a running leap, scaled it, and went staggering off with what was definitely an aching body. He didn’t seem to have any bones broken, though.

Amazing.

Dong-soo figured he himself needed a little energy for the rest of the night, so he snagged a rice roll while Hong’s men weren’t looking.
Maybe these men aren’t going to be that much trouble after all. But Sunsengnim always said to never underestimate an opponent. All together they will be trouble. Then there are the Japanese—Kenzo must have chosen really well-trained samurai.

At the thought of Kenzo, Dong-soo’s thoughts darkened again. Kenzo would definitely discover Woon’s betrayal. Hong was the sort who would make sure Woon was killed. After all, hadn’t Kenzo almost killed Dong-soo himself at the fight club if Woon hadn’t shattered the time glass?

Passing townspeople as the sky darkened, Dong-soo saw running and confusion. He grabbed a man by the elbow and asked what was going on.

“You haven’t heard? The police all over Mok Myuk! They’re arresting people and calling them bandits! We didn’t do anything—I swear! They’re taking women and children!”

“What?”

Another man stopped at the sight of Dong-soo. “You’re the apprentice of Sword Saint! You have to stop them! You grew up here! You have to protect the people!”

In a moment, Dong-soo realized everything.

Hong couldn’t have me killed. He couldn’t have me arrested. He didn’t have the power or means because the king favors me. Or Hong just didn’t have the time. This is a distraction—this is exactly what this is. He knew that I wouldn’t know the time of the coup. He knew I would rush to this place and try to see what was going on and try to protect old friends.

Hong is trying to keep me away from the palace.

Fine. Let’s just see how long he can do that.

Dong-soo started running into the streets to look for policemen. Everywhere he turned, he didn’t see a single one. He figured they were all congregated somewhere together. That made sense. First, Dong-soo would hear story after story of woe, and it would be a long while before he discovered the perpetrators all in one place. Yes, that all made sense! Counting on the compassionate Dong-soo to go from person to person, to look for individual officers making arrests!

But of course he would have to eventually find them all—Hong knew that. Then the police would make a display of authority, Dong-soo would plead and plead for the people in what everyone knew was his innocent way, but when it came time for Dong-soo to draw his sword, the policemen would scatter! Yes, yes, it all made sense! Dong-soo would have to track down every single one, and that would take some time. So much time, all night maybe.

Dong-soo would save time if he looked for the police officers now and took out the whole bunch—no questions asked.

The BOOM of a loud explosion stopped Dong-soo dead in his tracks.

Dong-soo ran towards it.
Strange, but there were no townspeople around. Then he came upon one body after another of fire-scalded palace officers. Spears and caps tossed around. Flames burning in random spots on the ground and quietly consuming a couple of the bodies.

A little boy was being carried away from the scene by his mother. "But Moomom. That man was nice to me! He’s hurt! He gave me candy to send letters to people!"

“He’s—I don’t want you to see him in that state! You shouldn’t have run towards the explosion!”

“Mom, I just want to give him a candy! He doesn’t look good! Mom, I just want to make him feel better!” The child began to wail. “He said he was going to do something important when he told everyone to get away—I knew he was going to save us all. I know he made the big noise!”

The mother and child didn’t even look at Dong-soo as they sped past him.

Dong-soo turned another corner and came upon the most amazing sight.

There, sitting on the ground, bleeding from the side, was Buddha in Me. Standing not far away was Kenzo. Kenzo looked up at Dong-soo, unsurprised.

Dong-soo ran to Buddha in Me’s side. “What happened?”

“Isn’t the fire pretty?” Buddha in me whispered the words. “Pretty fire, pretty fire.”

The smell of gunpowder filled the air. Flames burned all around.

“Oh, well, I will surely die of it.” Buddha in Me snapped at Kenzo. Then he smiled. “A stab like this is nothing!”

“Someone broke him out of the minister’s home not long ago.” Kenzo said.

“I’ve lived a rotten life, Baek Dong-soo, but you’ve made a person like me good two days in my life.” Buddha in Me looked at Dong-soo with the kindest expression. “There was that day I spared you when I thought you were a crazy boy and not worth killing. I don’t know—maybe you reminded me of myself. I took pity on you.”

“You put gunpowder everywhere and lit a torch and killed all the policemen?” Dong-soo didn’t understand.

“First he cleared the village of the area. He warned people,” Kenzo said. “He was crazy enough that he warned the policemen too. I was walking by, and I overheard him ranting about how he was going to kill them all. So I stabbed him.”

“A stab like this is nothing!” Buddha in Me snapped at Kenzo. Then he smiled. “Oh, well, I will surely die of it.” He looked at Dong-soo again. “But I pulled the sword out again because I’m very strong. And I lit the gunpowder. You should’ve seen the bad people flying about! It was like I blew a dandelion apart with a single puff of air! I was very glad.”

Dong-soo didn’t know what to say. Buddha in Me had indeed saved many people.

“I was very glad because of a little boy—did you see him on your way here? He’s so sweet, and I’m glad I saved him. He’s the one I used to send messages to lure men to the girl in the barn. I gave him candy and he brought her adoptive father there—he brought your butcher father there. Ahh, that was all very bad of me, forgive me.” Another smile. “Oh that’s right—you already have. You are a great man, Baek Dong-soo. A greater man than even Sword Saint. Look what you’ve done. Even without your sword. Look how you’ve saved... saved.... so .... many...”
Buddha in Me died looking at Dong-soo with perfect gratitude.

Dong-soo closed his eyes.

He stood up and turned to Kenzo. “What I don’t understand is why you’re here.”

“That friend of yours, Yeo Woon.”

Dong-soo had been prepared for this night to be dizzying. He was prepared to face anyone or anything. He could bear anything. But why did Woon’s name always make his heart stop?

“I always thought it was odd,” Kenzo continued, “that you were with him when he made all that commotion at a very important meeting. I think his Excellency didn’t like your friend before that, though. He doesn’t trust him? Anyway, our assassin wasn’t where he was supposed to be tonight. I went out to look for him because I figured the minister would want to know his whereabouts.”

Woon’s fine. Woon has always been able to take care of himself.

“Myself,” Kenzo said. “I believe Yeo Woon is a ruthless man, but he has some sympathy towards you that is his weakness. I don’t care. If he’s your weakness too, then that makes it easier for me to deal with the both of you.”

He’s presuming I know about the coup. And he’s not very smart. He’s probably parroting something Hong said about Woon being my weakness.

Kenzo’s face was expressionless. Dong-soo wondered if all samurai were trained to hold that expression or if that bland look was unique to Kenzo. The samurai went on: “I saw General Seo, that artist from the palace, and the librarian coming from the direction of your house, Baek Dong-soo. The minister’s son was with me, and I sent him ahead to alert the minister. I’m not worried—I don’t think an assassin really has any business with you scum, but the minister is always concerned about the palace people finding out too much.”

“You’re giving me a lot of information. Do you think Hong would like you doing such a thing? And here you think he’s worried about Woon.”

The samurai didn’t blink an eye or lift an eyebrow. “His Excellency knows you’ve figured out most things. And it doesn’t matter what you know anyway. I like that look of concern on your face. It tells me you’re worried about your friend and that you’re worried about the massive army his Excellency has gathered. You’re one swordsman. Only one swordsman. There’s nothing you can do.”

“You’re wrong.”

“You’re very stupid. The history of Joseon is going to change, and you, one man, dares to stand against all this power and tell me I’m wrong?”

“You’re wrong, Kenzo, because you think power is important and not purpose.”

“How can you have purpose without power?”

Dong-soo felt the full intensity of his love for Sunsegnim and all his friends returning to his heart. “You have it wrong. “How can you have power without purpose? A man’s heart wields his sword. If his purpose is strong enough, it can go against any power.”
Kenzo looked up into the sky at that moment, and Dong-soo’s eyes followed his.

A shower of stars were dropping from the Eastern sky.

Wait. Jin-joo, Sa-mo and I got rid of all the kites. They made more? Isn’t it too early for the coup to start? Is this a first sign? I thought the coup was supposed to start with the comet?

“Excuse me.” The samurai didn’t change his expression. “I have to be going now. I’ll see you later at the palace.”

If you do not have strength, you can't even dare to state your purpose.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT INSTALLMENT (AO3’s Chapter 6, MY PART SIX AND THE FINALE—FOR REAL THIS TIME). The coup winds up, and the ending is a surprise. Section 20 reminds us that stars fade and the sun appears.

From the rough world to your arms, I go flying like a bird.
Thank you all for your patience with this story. AO3 server issues have been giving me issues with uploading, but this archive is my fave of those out there!
PART SIX

Chapter Summary

The historical coup progresses in a more plausible way than in the television series. Cho-rip petitions the Prince Heir to have Yeo Woon killed. Recognize the canon story? Feedback appreciated! I was nervous about this installment.

I’m surprised that I stuck to a goal of telling a novelization as if Woon and Dong-soo had been given half a fighting chance to become honest heroes. So what is this genre? Sexy bildungsroman?

It was fun to ride this baby home. Thanks to everyone who supported me.

Thanks to everyone who supported me. I'm always so happy when people are happy in a small fandom. When I wrote for DBZ so long ago, a single fic would get 100 hits the first day of publication and I'd think nothing of it; I didn't check Bleach fic hits because I had my own site that didn't record them on the front page; on AO3, though, when I see two or three more readers have come by, I get giddy—or when someone asks to link photos of my plushies to a blog in Vietnam, I LOVE IT that our boys are still loved.

There were only two slightly manipulated screencaps in the last installments: the one in PART FIVE came from the stable scene where the boys were glaring at one another, close enough to kiss. It was pitch dark in the series (lol), and I tried to brighten it as best as could. I placed the cap in my story where Cho-rip comes upon our pair by Dong-soo’s window. The second manipulated cap is found after the Dong-soo/Woon sword fight in the wheat field.

Future readers? As Dong-soo said, "Whether you like it or not, I'll be waiting." I don't believe in Destiny either. You either take this interpretation of events or leave it--your choice. BUT Woon and Dong-soo live here, in this romantic melodrama about two boys who grew up in crazy, cruel adventurous times and changed the course of a country while determining their own lives too. They're not only in that big messy awful k-drama meant for a prime-time Korean television spot, they're here too--for YOU.

Maybe I’ll be back. I’m waiting for Ji Chang Wook to come back from the army and make a sageuk. *puts on headphones and listens to K-pop*

Oh—and for those of you who need to console yourselves, the historical Yang Cho-rip, aka Hong Guk-yeong, died in exile for political overreach and involvement in an assassination attempt against the queen.

20. Stars Fade, the Sun Appears

From the rough world to your arms, I go flying like a bird.
“Are you going to tell me where you were today?” The Defense Minister asked Woon.

“Why shouldn’t I come and go as I please?” Woon sat cross-legged, wearing his best silk and most casual expression, across from the minister’s son, in the main office of Hong’s home. “I didn’t like the idea of being confined with the Japanese in sub-par housing. I was planning to show at the appointed time.”

“But what if that time changed suddenly?” Hong nodded at Sa-hye. “My son here tells me that General Seo met with Baek Dong-soo today. It’s probably nothing to be concerned about, but the general is the king’s most trusted confidante. What if he’s been sent to alert the king of some special matter?”

“So what? Woon looked bored. “We’re moving tonight anyway.”
“We’re moving now,” Hong said. “Still, even if Seo were to see the king right away, we will win.” He turned to his son again. “Dong-soo broke the stars, but he didn’t know about the extra gunpowder for more. Alert everyone. Send up the signals.”

Woon looked down so that his eyes wouldn't give away his worry.

“Sky Lord, there’s only one thing I want from you.” The Defense Minister could sound like a reprimanding father when he wanted to, and Woon had never feared his voice. What he didn’t like tonight was how nervous Hong’s voice sounded. It betrayed the situation’s gravity; if even Hong was anxious, who knew how many things could go wrong during the coup?

“As you know,” Hong went on, “Heuksa Chorong and I have always had a complicated relationship. All I need is for you to kill the Prince Heir, kill him quickly and efficiently. If you do that, then everything else will go well. Your friend, Baek Dong-soo—he’s strong enough to survive this night … perhaps. I can’t guarantee his survival, but … ah-ha, you still favor him so much.” Even tonight, the man would try to torture Woon a little.

Woon swallowed.

“If you don’t do your job, however, I will do everything in my power to see that your friend dies and to make sure that Heuksa Chorong goes down in flames.”

Woon nodded. “I said I’d keep my part of the deal.” He lifted his head and looked Hong in the eye. “Haven’t I always killed for you?”

Hong snorted. He gestured with his chin to his son. “What are you waiting for? I said give an order for the signals!”

*

The walk from Hong’s home to the palace was a short one; the Japanese would ride from their quarters and join Hong, his son and deputies, Kenzo, Woon, and the fight club army at the palace gates.

The sight of men carrying lit torches, swords, and guns in the streets terrified all onlookers. Woon and Kenzo were at the front of the march, and Woon had a clear view of people fleeing in terror from the approaching army.

Earlier, before his arrival at Hong’s house, he’d followed Cho-rip and Hong-do to a tavern. It was his hope that the two were still there. Woon’s first plan had been to tell Cho-rip about tonight’s coup and have Cho-rip alert General Seo—then Seo would keep the king from ordering all palace guards to his Majesty’s residence. Now that General Seo was back at the palace, Woon thought the safest place for Cho-rip was far, far away from the action.

It’s a wonder Cho-rip hasn’t been targeted before.

Woon had already imagined it: the fighting would start, Cho-rip would come up with a risky plan but die in defense of the Crown he honored so much. Right now, Cho-rip was in a fragile state of mind from what he’d discovered about Dong-soo and Woon’s true relationship, and he was probably half-drunk from staying out with Hong-do.
Best scenario, he passes out in the tavern. Worst scenario, he arrives at the palace and dies before the coup is halfway begun.

Woon was scarcely aware that these specific worries were tumbling around in his head when he spotted who else? The palace scholar so mistrusted by the Defense Minister—walking straight up the street.

Around the corner from which Cho-rip had turned was the painter Hong-do. Woon saw the painter hesitate, then step back behind a building.

Woon held up his hand. “Stop!”

The Defense Minister asked Woon what he was doing.

“This is Deputy Hong, your Excellency,” Woon said. “He’s the one you were worried might be bringing unwanted information to General Seo.”

Cho-rip looked dazed and more than a little intoxicated. He stood there, not understanding, as Woon drew his blade and approached him.

“Forgive me,” Woon whispered, and he stabbed Cho-rip.

“Woon?” Cho-rip’s body crumpled from the blow. “Why--?”

“Please don’t move.” This was for the best. He’d stabbed his old friend between the third and fourth rib, hitting no vital organs. Woon pulled the blade out. “Just fall, please.”

“Look at the sky,” Cho-rip said, still leaning against Woon’s shoulder. “Shooting stars.”
Woon felt his chest tighten. “Please, fall down.”

Cho-rip was drunk. “Is that a red comet too?”

He fell to the ground.

Woon knew that Hong-do would bring Cho-rip to a doctor. He signaled with his hand for the army to follow him down another road, one that wouldn’t expose the hiding painter.

The Defense Minister asked Kenzo to verify who the Sky Lord had just killed—was he the man Kenzo had seen leaving the area of Baek Dong-soo’s home? Kenzo said he was.

“Yes,” the minister said. “I recognized Deputy Hong Guk-yong. The Sky Lord killed him very well.” Hong smiled as he walked. Woon noted that Hong kept looking up at the sky, but Woon himself didn’t look up—the sky would be a black nothingness now, devoid of any more signaling lights or fake omens.

“Starting early was better,” Hong said. “By now, the Japanese, our palace guards, the villagers—they’ve all seen the lights we sent up. And who knows—maybe even the king himself has seen the red comet that will burn a hole through his reign.”

*
Over hundred men walked through the palace arched entrance, past armed guards who kept staring straight ahead. Even Woon felt his heart beat faster; the rebellion against country and king had been planned so well that Japanese soldiers and an assassin like himself could walk right into the palace as if it were a country tavern.

Hong paused in the center of the courtyard. It was a bright night, full of fixed stars, the moon almost full. The breeze blew the peacock feather in the minister’s cap. He looked uneasy, less of a leader than he had always looked in study halls or secret meetings. “I’ll be waiting at the king’s residence,” Hong told Kenzo.

The men split up. One band followed Hong straight ahead, north. Another group followed Kenzo and Woon to the Prince Heir’s house. And most of the soldiers went to assigned hidden locations that only the minister and his son knew.

*It’s not unusual for the grounds to be so quiet. People are sleeping. Who saw the comet? Did it frighten them? Are they afraid that the heavens will fall down upon them?*

Dong-soo dismounted his horse at the front gate of the palace and showed his badge. “I’m an unranked officer. I need to be inside tonight.”

He was told that no one, not even the highest ranked military officers, were being allowed access to the palace.

_Nasty man. What is he proud of? He thinks he’s a part of some big historical moment? How does he know he’s on the right side? How does he know who he’s protecting? Why is standing there knowing that kings and princes and who knows who else might die because he—! PEOPLE CAN BE SO--!

Dong-soo didn’t know what people could be like; he didn’t understand why they made what seemed like indefensibly rotten choices; all he knew was that he wanted to fight the terrible power that was threatening people he loved.

He ran around the perimeter of the palace until he found the right-sized tree, then he climbed it and with the skill Sa-mo had praised as soon as Dong-soo’s splints had come off, even before Dong-soo began to study martial arts, Dong-soo flung himself into the air and jumped over the wall.

Even though he knew the palace pretty well, he wasn’t sure where he was.

Right away four men appeared with spears. Dong-soo didn’t know who the men were aligned with—if they were Hong’s men or as yet untainted officers—but he remembered what Woon had said about no room for compassion in a kill or be-killed war.

_I can’t lose anyone I care about this war._

Dong-soo’s sword struck down the men around him.

Woon had said to protect his Majesty, but Dong-soo was worried about Woon. Before grabbing a
horse to ride to the palace, Dong-soo had come across Hong-do carrying Cho-rip on his back. “Yeo Woon did this,” the painter had said. Cho-rip wasn’t dead. If Woon had wanted Cho-rip dead, Cho-rip would be dead, but there was no explaining that to Hong-do who wore a wounded, fearful look that said: *How can you still believe in Yeo Woon?*

Dong-soo still believed in Woon, but Woon had struck down Cho-rip. What if Cho-rip were indeed badly injured?

_Woon knows how to not kill people. He didn’t kill the mountain boys when he had the chance years ago. Still, Woon said this was a kill or be killed war. Dong-soo shook his head. Cho-rip, please live._

Dong-soo spotted Japanese soldiers turning a corner. Yes, he knew this way. The covered walkway led towards the East gate. The way towards the Prince Heir’s house.

_Am I doubting Woon? How can I doubt Woon? He’s putting his life on the line, and once he’s found out, Kenzo is supposed to kill him._

Dong-soo followed the envoy of men into a covered corridor. Sure enough, Woon and Kenzo were at the head of the line.

_Let’s just get this over with._

_“Yeo Woon!”_

Everyone turned around. Not a single sword was drawn. The men knew who Baek Dong-soo was.

_“Baek Dong-soo!”_ Woon snapped. “Wouldn’t a great swordsman like you be guarding his Majesty tonight?

_He thinks I’m an idiot. He told me to go to the king’s residence. He also thinks I came here to protect him, and he’s going to hate me for that. I don’t give a fuck, Woon. I’m going to do just that, whether you like it or not._

Woon gestured to that bounty hunter from the fight club and said, “Wait for me outside this hall.” The bounty hunter left with a few men, apparently those the bounty hunter was in charge of, and the soldiers left were two neat rows of Japanese.

Dong-soo rushed forward, cutting down one Japanese after another. Twenty men fell as easily as Dong-soo drew five natural, measured breaths.

He found himself standing in front of Kenzo and Woon.

_“Kill him,”_ Woon said to Kenzo. “I don’t want to watch. If you can’t kill him, I’ll have to, so make sure you kill him.”

With that, Woon walked away, not so much as a glance in Dong-soo’s direction.

_“I’ve been waiting for this moment,”_ Kenzo said to Dong-soo.

_“Your life ends tonight,”_ Dong-soo replied.

Drawing his blade, Kenzo sunk deeply and rose, assuming the classic _kendo waki tori_ stance. Dong-soo mirrored him.

_A samurai aims to cut a man’s head off in one blow. I’m going to go for your heart._
The two men rushed one another. Dong-soo leapt higher than it appeared his sword would strike and the distraction proved fatal to the samurai; Dong-soo’s blade stabbed, pulled out.

Dong-soo landed on both feet. Kenzo fell to his knees.

“I have no regrets,” Kenzo said. Those were his final words. The samurai fell forwards, dead.

Dong-soo sheathed his sword. He stood there a moment, unsure where to turn—the king’s residence, Gangnyeongjeon, wasn’t too far ahead, but it seemed too far. The Prince Heir’s house was a short walk and—**Woon.** Didn’t Woon say something about how Hong would be waiting to hear that the Prince Heir was dead before the king was truly threatened?

*Damn you, Woon. Are you going against the muskets by yourself?*

Dong-soo set off towards the prince’s house.

*

A bell sounded.

Woon tried not to smile. *It’s begun. Hong got Seo to give the order.*

Official troops were being called from the entire palace to guard the king’s residence. The path was clear now for Woon and his small army to kill the Prince Heir, **but**... the path was also clear for no officials to interfere with Woon’s plans to find the musket men and kill them before they made their assault on Gangnyeongjeon.

Woon was annoyed that Dong-soo had shown up in the wrong place, but at least now Kenzo and his Japanese were out of the way.

Woon stopped in the courtyard of the Prince Heir’s house and held up his hand.

“From here, I go alone,” he said.

One of the fight club idiots had the audacity to point to the five guards at the door who were pointing swords in the direction of the trespassers.

“Shut up,” Woon said. “Stay outside the house, and if anyone shows up, kill him. That’s all. Or is that too difficult?”

Woon stepped up to the door, kicked two guards down with his foot, disabled the rest with the blunt end of his sword. He stood for a moment surrounded by obviously unconscious, not murdered, men, then Woon walked back down to where the assassin team waited.

“Here.” Woon tossed his long sword to the ground. All the men except for the bounty hunter exchanged odd looks. Jang Tae Saan kept his eyes focused on Woon. Woon said, “I’ll be back,” and walked back up the steps. He took his boots off at the prince’s door and went inside the house.

The mountain boys, the Prince Heir’s most trusted guards, met him with drawn swords.

*Yeowoon, what are you doing?” “Woon, go back, please.” “If you don’t turn back, I’ll end you right here, I swear.”*
The prince, at his desk, looked calm. That face so much like his father’s. “You know this man?”
The prince picked up a long pole axe, the same one with which Crown Prince Sado had fought the Sky Lord. “Please move,” he said to Woon.

“The Defense Minister Hong Dae-ju has started a rebellion,” Woon explained. “But I can’t go anywhere right now, your Highness.” Although Woon was still armed—a short blade worn on his back, hidden darts in his clothes—he spread his hands in a gesture to show he meant no harm. “I’m here to protect you. First, I have to tell you that the rebellion is against your grandfather the king.” Woon explained the coup as completely as he needed to, not leaving out a single detail—except for the queen’s involvement. “You have to stay here, your Highness.”

“I need to see the king!”

Woon bowed. “For the sake of your safety, please stay where you are.”

The mountain boys had lowered their weapons. “Woon-ah?” Gak’s voice was shaky. “Is Dong-soo coming?”

“Dong-soo is here,” Woon said. “I heard his footsteps outside. He’ll protect you here now.”

Stupid Dong-soo. If Dong-soo was going to insist on chasing after Woon, then Woon was going to make Dong-soo work harder and make himself extra useful.

Woon excused himself and stepped outside. The same fight club man who had questioned Woon
before wanted to know if the job was done. Woon didn’t answer.

“Hey! Why aren’t you answering? I need to verify the kill and report back—hey! What if you betrayed us?”

Woon drew his short blade and put it at the man’s neck. “I was never on your side.”

At those words, Jang Tae Saan pulled out his weapon and stood behind Woon. Everyone else drew weapons. The fight club men faced Woon and the bounty hunter.

“I’m not the one who’s going to fight you.” Woon said. He pulled his blade away and flung the fight club man forward. “Look behind you.”

Standing there was Baek Dong-soo.

“Yo, Yeo Woon!” Dong-soo looked crazy confused as Woon and his bounty hunter ran away.

The first discovery Woon and Jang Tae Saan made was a lucky one, but a deputy’s hat, unlike the dark heads of fight-club men or the shooters, reflected light from pyres all over the palace. Hong’s second deputy, Myung Ju, was hiding very near the prince’s house. Woon knocked him out and found a ram’s horn on his belt. “This is the signal to call for a retreat,” he told the bounty hunter. “Stay here. Blow this at the crack of dawn, no sooner, no later.”

“Yes sir. Take care, sir.”

Jang Tae Saan was a loyal man. A good-natured man. A servant of Heuksa Chorong. Woon had often wondered about the men who took filthy jobs like bounty hunters or assassins. He knew that his own story involved more than a series of bad choices. He wondered how many of his men would be able to turn their lives around once Heuksa Chorong was dissolved.

_Is there such a thing as living another life when one has been born in darkness and never seen the sun? Would a man like Jang Tae Saan rather die by the sword than change his ways?_

The waiting game with Hong would be a game of nerves; Woon had seen how nervous Hong had been earlier. How long would it be before the minister sent someone to check on Woon and Kenzo? Woon needed to uncover the army in the shadows; this was his strength, after all. Dong-soo was a great swordsman lacking in stealth.

Woon watched the moon travel across the sky. Dong-soo must have realized he needed to stay put and protect the Prince Heir.

Woon was getting frustrated as the time passed. He sped this way, that way, all across the dark palace, knocking over pyres to hide himself better. He was accustomed to missions by moonlight. Hong’s soldiers weren’t. He’d gone far, across the bridge over black waters at the Gyeonghoeru Pavilion when he spotted a group of a mere six men under a staircase. He killed them all but one.

“Where are the shooters?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where did you see them last? If you tell me, I’ll wound you. If you don’t—”

“They were following you—behind Kenzo—I don’t know, I don’t know.” The man was sputtering. “In the direction of the prince’s house.”

Woon cut the man’s throat. _Bloody fight club—isn’t that what you called it, Hong?_
On his way back towards the East palace, Woon saw Hong Sa-hye, the gatkkeun of his military cap catching moonlight and swinging like bright pearls with his brisk steps. So, his father was fed up at last. He had sent the son to see if Baek Dong-soo had arrived and messed up the prince’s assassination—and for that, Sa-hye needed back-up. Sa-hye was quietly gathering the army to follow him. The knocked-over pyres, no doubt, were making him more and more suspicious with every step.

Woon followed him. “Come out!” The rat would call, and more rats would appear. But where were the shooters?
Woon ran ahead of Sa-hye. At the end of the covered corridor, Woon felt a hard poke in between his shoulder blades.

A deep voice spoke: “His Excellency said that if anyone found us, he should be killed. Shouldn’t you be with him at the king’s by now?”

Woon smiled. The shooter was stupid. Asking an assassin a question and giving him time to kill the questioner three times over? Woon, blade drawn, spun around, but then the shooter fell to the side, an arrow sticking out his back.

Other men with muskets appeared out of the shadows.

So did Sa-mo and Jin-gi.

Woon didn’t have time to approach the shooters with his short blade before Sa-mo had cut down three men with his two butcher knives, and Jin-gi—this man is truly the swordsman the Sky Lord said he was—had cut ten from behind. That left two shocked men, at some distance, emerging from their hidden place, muskets raised.

“Who—who are you?” One shooter looked nervous.

“You filthy bastards.” Sa-mo threw a knife and knocked down the nervous shooter. Blood spurted everywhere. By that time, Woon had reached his friends.

The last man aimed at Woon. Woon was fast; he picked up a slain body and held it in front of himself as a shield.

“Woon!” Jin-joo’s voice?

Woon hadn’t known if the bullet would go through the dead shooter. It hadn’t.

When he dropped the body with the intent of rushing the twentieth and final shooter, Woon saw that the last man was dead. Jin-joo’s arrow had felled him.

She had saved Woon’s life before the shooter could pull the trigger.

Woon stood there, feeling particularly blessed by Dong-soo. The fool told everyone. He didn’t do what I asked.

“How did you get inside the palace?” Woon didn’t know what else to say.

Jin-joo shook her head. “Yeo Woon, you men think you can do everything yourselves. What do you think? We were all so worried about you and Dong-soo. We didn’t even have horses. This little girl and these two men with their fat bodies ran all the way over here.”

“Going against muskets.” Jin-gi shook his head in gesture like his daughter’s. “What were they thinking?”

Sa-mo was breathing hard. A very fat man indeed. Woon couldn’t believe he ran all the way to the palace. “Where… where… where is Dong-soo?” Sa-mo managed to huff.

“At the Prince Heir’s house.”

Woon heard footsteps. He shoved Jin-joo out of the way. Sa-mo and Jin-gi jumped to hide. Marching past were Sy-hye and what looked like the rest of the army.
Sy-hye gave a whistle as if to call the shooters and kept right on marching towards the prince’s house.

Woon’s face must’ve given him away because Jin-joo whispered, “Don’t worry Woon. You of all people should know. Even General Seo said it today. Dong-soo all by himself can take on fifty men, a hundred men, two hundred men.”

This is boring. This is crazy-making. Woon’s fine. If something was wrong, I would know. My heart would know. I’m crazy bored. How long has it been already? I guess I’ll just stay here. Okay, I guess the prince is just going to stare at me. I guess Gak is just going to stare at me. Geol is going to keep an eye on the windows and Yong is going to stare at the door. What am I going to--?

A few of Hong’s men burst through the door.

Given the blown out candles and the dead quiet of the place, the men had no doubt been expecting to find a slain Prince Heir instead of Joseon’s greatest swordsman. Dong-soo slashed them, and then he, the mountain boys and the prince stepped outside, weapons drawn, to see if there were more assassins.

There stood the Defense Minister’s son with an army of men bearing spears, swords and torches behind him.

“How dare you set foot here?” The Prince Heir was holding his father’s pole axe. “Throw down your weapons.”

“Says a dead man.” The young Hong gestured at the army.

“Please, your Highness.” Baek Dong-soo turned to the man who looked so much like his father at that moment. “I can fight them.”

“I can use this weapon. I’ve been training.” His father’s stubbornness too. The father who was so hell-bent on that whole Northern Expedition. “Let me help you.”

“No!” Gak shouted. “Go inside with us. Please trust Dong-soo. The king would not want to you to do this. Please.”

The Prince Heir nodded. He looked to Dong-soo. “You’re the disciple of Sword Saint. I will trust you.”

Dong-soo bowed his head.

“Kill him!” Hong Sa-hye shouted.

The mountain boys and the prince were walking back inside the house as the first rows of men charged. Dong-soo leapt from the top of the courtyard steps, knocking down who knows how many men. He swung this way, swung that way, killed one man after another. He saw the fear in the eyes of the remaining soldiers. They were tough guys from villages, recruited from a fight club, trained only in the most basic tactics of war.
Dong-soo knew that if he didn’t kill them all, they would be tortured for information and killed anyway. They were traitors.

“What are you doing?” The minister’s son was frantic. “Kill him already!” He was looking around, as Dong-soo was, for the shooters.

Woon must have taken care of them. Dong-soo felt his heart surge with purpose. He grabbed a sword from a fallen soldier’s body and walked forward.

The fight club soldiers knew to make a circle formation around a dangerous man. Dong-soo was picking off swordsmen who challenged him, and then the spear-carriers made their move at Sa-hye’s command.

They surrounded Dong-soo who ducked and slashed their legs with his swords. It took some effort, still, for Dong-soo to push the roof of spears off.

He killed the men.

He was sweating hard by now. Dong-soo and the soldiers were spattered with blood. Dawn had broken, and fresh red blood shone on the courtyard ground.

There were still traitors pointing their swords at Joseon’s greatest warrior. The Defense Minister’s son, in his bright blue officer’s uniform, stood by the gate. “Kill him! Kill him!”
fell to the ground. Dong-soo joined the circle, chasing men to kill.

A loud horn sounded, and to Dong-soo’s shock, the men froze where they stood.

“No,” said the minister’s son. “No! **KILL HIM!**”

One man rushed forward, and a black blur came out of nowhere, striking the man down.

Woon!

Woon crossed his two blades in front of himself; the blades flew apart like wings, killing two men on either side of him. Then Woon stabbed the men Dong-soo had knocked to the ground for good measure.

The remaining men, six or seven, stood still, unsure what to do.

“Dong-soo-yah, it’s been a long time since we’ve been together like this.” Woon’s arm was still stretched out, his sword pointed at terrified men.

“Woon-ah.” Dong-soo threw back his exhausted head. “I had this.”

“Weren’t you ready to die with me tonight?”

“It’s dawn,” Dong-soo said.
“No, no,” Sa-hye wailed. “Noooo.”

The weird horn was still blasting, over and over. Aigoo, so loud.

Jin-gi, Sa-mo, and Jin-joo were running upon the scene. As they approached, Woon, inexplicably, ran away.

“It’s you! The son of that Hong monster,” Sa-mo said to Sa-hye. “I knew you’d be causing trouble one day.”

Sa-hye hesitated. “Retreat! Retreat!” His men fled. Sa-hye looked at Sa-mo’s butcher knives and ran away too.

“Where—where did they all go?” Sa-mo asked. “Should we--?”

Jin-joo was already on her way, but her father grabbed her arm. “Stop! I don’t know, but Dong-soo, we should protect his Majesty. You get there first.”

*

Dong-soo arrived at the king’s residence. No sign of Woon but the strangest sight before him.

General Seo’s military commanders, weapons drawn, were facing off in a line against the Defense Minister and officers drawn from all over the palace.

“Withdraw your men now,” said the minister.

“Your coup ends now, traitor,” said Seo.

“What are you talking about? I’m defending the king.”

“Traitor! Traitor! Traitor!” To Dong-soo’s ears, the crazy old beacon keeper’s words sounded like a schoolboy taunt. But this time Seo had the right guy; Hong was the biggest traitor around.

“Attack them,” commanded Hong. “They are threatening the Defense Minister’s authority.”

The commander of the palace troops told his men to back away, and they did.

“What? What?” Hong was shocked. Some of these men Dong-soo recognized as those under Hong’s own command.

At that moment who but his Royal Majesty should appear. “What? What do I see? Will everyone put down their weapons?”

One of the men behind Hong seemed to make a last ditch effort. He ran with his sword drawn towards the king.

Dong-soo threw his sword and hit the man in the back.

Everyone turned around, and the king, the Defense Minister, and General Seo, if not many else, recognized the unranked officer.

General Seo smiled his crazy smile at Dong-soo. Dong-soo, feeling the sweat pour with blood down his face, smiled back.
Woon was sitting at breakfast in the queen’s house nearby. Her father had poured tea.
“So, the coup failed,” the queen sighed.

“I have the ledger here.” Woon pulled the book out from his chest and thumbed through the pages of bloody signatures. “You really did cut your fingers with knives and sign this. How brutal.”

“I thought you could kill the Prince Heir easily,” the queen said. “A stab to the neck? To the heart?” She smiled. “To an area below the navel?”

“Remember there was a person I told you I could not kill? The warrior Baek Dong-soo stopped the coup.”

“The warrior Baek Dong-soo?”

“He’s my oldest friend. I may have an allegiance with you, your Majesty—” Here, Woon bowed. “But I could not betray him.”

The queen looked worried. Her father looked terrified.

“You over-estimated me,” Woon said graciously. It was, in fact, not Woon, but Baek Myeon Seo-saeng, the man known as the One Hundred Faces Scholar, who had sneaked into Hong’s residence and stolen the ledger. Baek Myeon Seo-saeng could hide weapons in books and take on any disguise. “I could not kill the Prince Heir when it was Dong-soo who wanted to protect him. You see, Dong-soo is my dearest person.”

The queen sipped her tea. “You’re going to help me, aren’t you?”

“Because you took my advice and with my help, I may add, secured the commander of the palace officers on your side, I am certain you’re safe.”

The queen looked wary.

“You being prosecuted would devastate the nation, cause great pain to the king, the Prince Heir, and all your subjects.” Woon opened the ledger and showed the place where the queen and her father’s signatures had been. “The pages have been expertly removed.” Only a master like Goohyang could’ve taken them out and re-sewn the book. “History will never record that they were there.”

The queen’s eyes met Woon’s eyes. “If you get a commendation for saving the life of the king, please don’t forget me. We are good allies.”

Woon got up to leave. “Thank you for the pleasant breakfast.”

*

The fight club warriors were easily found and arrested. The palace’s next problem was trying to find the Hong father and son pair. They had simply walked away when Dong-soo had killed the assassin of the king. Woon found out this bit of news as he was making his way in the early light across the quiet palace grounds. No one seemed to notice the young man in fine clothes. The officers were shouting at one another about where to look, that the Hong pair could simply not have vanished into thin air.

Turning a corner, Woon found himself facing the scowling old Hong and the shivering young Hong. Destiny?

“You betrayed us,” said Sa-hye. “Do you want to die?”
“Shut up,” said the minister. “He could kill us right now.”

“An assassin never fears death, but why should I bother to kill the two of you?” Woon laughed. A genuine, loud laugh—he never laughed like that. “You’re going to be executed.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Didn’t you once describe yourself to me as a mountain, your Excellency? You’ve crumbled. You’ve crumbled. Don’t even bother looking for your book of bloody loyalty. It’s gone. I took it.”

Woon kept walking towards the king’s residence, where he would personally deliver the ledger to General Seo.

*  

After Sa-hye was arrested trying to sneak out the North gate and still no one could find the Defense Minister, Dong-soo knew where he would be. The heart of ambition had one goal and that was to rule Joseon. Sunsengnim had taught him that much about reading peoples’ eyes and looking into their hearts.

Dong-soo headed for the throne room, and sure enough, there was the disgusting man.

“You ruined it all,” Hong said. “I tried to kill you as a baby, and I made a bad deal. Your teacher gave his right arm to save your life, and look where I am now, being chased. What do you, Baek
Dong-soo, know of true power? Sword Saint didn’t know anything but martial arts. What do you know of the men who built this country with their blood and stood behind this throne? We are the ones who bore the burden; we are the ones who suffered the weight of true power.”

The Defense Minister got off the throne and drew his sword. He walked towards Dong-soo, but his sword was shaking in his hands, and Dong-soo felt only pity.

“Joseon was made by people like me. When I die, it will be my blood that feeds this country.”

Dong-soo’s voice was soft. “Today was the result of your endless greed. A tragedy. Nothing more.”

Hong dropped to his knees. “Let me die the way you want.”

* *

When Dong-soo returned home, the first person who grabbed him and hugged him was Ji-sun. She dropped the tray she was carrying; milk spilled everywhere, and she cried. Dong-soo remembered that Jin-joo had said he had to tell her about him and Woon.

“She’s been worried sick about you,” Hong-do said.

“Everything went fine, fine.” Oh no, more intrigue. Not palace intrigue this time, but intrigue nonetheless.

Cho-rip was awake, and Mi-so, weepy-eyed, was tending to him. Cho-rip didn’t say anything when Dong-soo told him about how Woon had hurt Cho-rip to fool the minister, how the wound must’ve been expertly made, how Woon had helped defend the nation, and how General Seo said that Woon would be awarded for his turning in the ledger.

“Sa-mo!” Jang-mi burst into tears. “Is he injured? Is he all right?”

“I’m fine!” Sa-mo walked in. He looked like he’d been swimming he was so sweaty, but Jang-mi hugged him anyway, and Dong-soo was amazed that he hugged her back. “Oh please,” Sa-mo said, blushing. “Everyone look away. This is adult stuff.”

After washing up, eating as much as Jang-mi could cook, and explaining as much of the night’s events as he could remember, Dong-soo asked Ji-sun to come look at his horse with him because he thought the mare had a bad leg.

She didn’t, of course. It was just an excuse to talk to Young Miss.

“Jin-joo told me I needed to tell you something.” Dong-soo began. He petted the horse’s mane. The hair was coarse, black, and needed to be combed. He was reminded of Woon’s hair and how it was always kempt, even on the most humid days in the warrior camp, Woon had the shiniest, prettiest hair. Sometimes it got puffy, but he kept it clean. It shone in bright light. Tonight, fighting those guys, it had whipped around the way water splashes at the foot of a tall waterfall. When people saw Woon, they often saw a man in black, an assassin—but Dong-soo saw someone pure as water, someone who had always struggled to go the right way….

“It’s…. it’s….” Dong-soo had no idea how to tell her. “It’s about me and Woon.”

Ji-sun lowered her eyes. “I know.”

“What?”
“I mean, when I was at Heuksa Chorong, all he could talk about was you. It was clear to me that you were his most special friend. You don’t have to explain.” She kept her eyes lowered. If she knew the extent of the relationship, she wasn’t going to go anywhere near that subject. “I’m fully aware of what people expect, of what your father wants for us.”

“Yeah.” Dong-soo was relieved. Ji-sun was such an intelligent, observant person. “The captain wants all these things for me. He has money saved up for my marriage and stuff.”

“It’s Jin-joo who loves you. It’s Jin-joo you should be talking to. I don’t need anything from you, Naeuri. You…” She looked up this time, her eyes full of gratitude. “You changed my life. You gave me the idea that I could rewrite my own destiny. But Jin-joo—she’s the one who can give you a family life and children.”

“Uh….” Dong-soo hadn’t expected the conversation to go this way.

“Jin-joo is your special friend too.” Ji-sun said. She smiled a little, that delicate smile of hers, patted Dong-soo’s horse with her tiny hand, and walked away.

But Woon. I don’t think I can marry anyone. I don’t know what she’s talking about.

Dong-soo didn’t show up at the palace the next day. Everyone at home seemed to be sleeping late and recovering from the excitement. Dong-soo was still excited; he was expecting Woon to show up, but Woon didn’t.

Late in the afternoon, Hong-do showed up to check on Cho-rip and said that there had not been any formal plans for a ceremony, but the gossip was that a great banquet would be held for Dong-soo and his rag-tag band of outsiders who had stopped a coup. Word on the streets was that children were already singing songs about the great Baek Dong-soo who fought one hundred assassins.

“He really did,” exclaimed Jin-joo. “That part is perfectly true!”

Ji-sun smiled, and no one else seemed to say much. Hong-do added that the Hong father and son pair had already stood trial before the king himself and were to be executed soon. Their heads would be displayed on posts before the front gates.

“You should go,” said Sa-mo. “The Defense Minster ordered the death of your father. You should go to the executions in the name of Baek Sa-goeng.”

Dong-soo nodded. He didn’t want to see blood, but he didn’t want to disappoint his adoptive father. Would Baek Sa-goeng want him to be witness to that sort of justice?

“Cho-rip is doing much better,” Ji-sun added. “I told him not to get out of bed, but he did. He’s walking around. His wound wasn’t deep, and you know him. He wants to return to the palace right away.”

“Really?” Hong-do beamed. “That’s amazing.”

Mi-so pouted. “He comes here, and even if he’s stabbed, he leaves.”

When Dong-soo returned to his room, there was a note pinned with an acupuncture needle on the window ledge. It read: Take the road towards the old Bandit Hideout early tomorrow morning. Past the large pond where there’s a wide open wheat field. You, me, Cho-rip ran away from Sa-mo there as children. Jin-joo would bring her bow. You said you were king of the village. I was your
Dong-soo was up before the sun. He packed a small bag of snacks, a bottle of soju, and a bottle of sesame oil and took off with a happy heart.

To his surprise, Woon was already there as the sun was rising. Dressed in black, a small-waisted figure, one man against a vast field of golden grasses and a pale blue sky streaked with pink and yellow.

Dong-soo dismounted, and his mare began patiently munching wheat.

“It’s over,” Dong-soo said to Woon when he reached him. “It’s over and you can come home now.”

“It’s not quite over,” Woon said. “I still have some business. I’ve obtained identification plaques of dead villagers for the remaining members of the guild. I may still have to convince them to start new lives. As far as Heuksa Chorong’s ties with businesses and with Qing, all that will disappear once the buildings and its records burn to the ground.”

Dong-soo breathed in the fresh morning air. “Woon-ah, they’ll never find you. Not any of the Emperor’s men. If you come back and live with me, I’ll….” He stopped before he could say I’ll protect you.

Woon smiled.

The two began to walk, side by side, through the tall grass.

“I killed men,” Woon said. “I lived the life of an assassin for years. I know now….” Woon’s voice lowered. “I learned that it was the Sky Lord who killed my father, not me, but I still made the choice to follow the Sky Lord. I still made the choice to kill my father when offered that choice. It doesn’t matter how old I was, I still made that choice….”
Dong-soo listened. He knew now to listen and not interrupt or presume.

“If I had known how heavy my sword would become, I would have not have taken up the sword. I know what you’re going to tell me. That the palace wants to award my skills, that they may offer me back my position as a guard, maybe to the Prince Heir but…”

Dong-soo felt his heart tremble a little.

“I hate the palace. I want to live the life of an ordinary person. I’ve never known what it’s like to be… ordinary.”

Dong-soo had to stop him there. He grabbed Woon by the hand, and turned Woon to face him. “Forget that. Just forget that right now. You’ll never be an ordinary person. Remember I told you that there was no such thing as that DESTINY crap? Woon-ah, you were never born under a black star, but you were born with extraordinary gifts. All your life, that idea *I am a killer, I am a bad person*—that messed you up. You thought you were either running away or running towards something, but you know what?”

*Why does he always have to look at me with those eyes that make me want to fuck him? I’m forgetting what I want to say.*

“Woon-ah, please, you can’t run away from the responsibility of those great gifts.”
Woon smiled again. *It’s so good to see him smile.* “Ah Dong-soo-yah, you’ve grown up so much from the idiot I remember.”

“I’m still an idiot,” Dong-soo said.

“Yes, if you weren’t, I probably wouldn’t be alive right now. I told you not to tell anyone about the coup, and if your friends hadn’t shown up—” Woon actually laughed. It was a sweet laugh, not like the laughs of men who laughed freely, coarsely, openly around tables in taverns. It was a beautiful laugh. Dong-soo couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard it. In the warrior camp when Woon was a boy? “Do you know it was Jin-joo with an arrow who shot a man with a musket who was aiming right at me?”

“I’m not surprised. She’s like that.” Dong-soo laughed too.

Dong-soo let go Woon’s hand, and the pair walked a little more, in circles, in silence, happy to be together. Woon’s horse had wandered towards Dong-soo’s horse; the two horses side by side were munching peacefully.

“I don’t want to marry anyone,” Dong-soo said.

“Oh?”

“I mean, you never plan to, so why can’t I make that choice too? Why do I have to do what everyone expects me to do? Jin-joo already knows, and you know what? It would be … cruel to marry her just so older people are pleased and just so the Baek line can continue. Because you, Woon-ah, are my most—” He was going to say “special friend” the way Ji-sun had, but instead he said “beloved one.”

Woon didn’t say anything at first. Then he touched the bag on Dong-soo’s horse. He knew what was inside. “If you marry, especially if you marry someone as wonderful and understanding as Jin-joo, there’s no reason why you can’t have it all. You can choose us both.”

“I don’t want that, Woon-ah.”

“The Baek line? All your cousins, your father, your family murdered—”

“I know about that. You know what Sunseongnim taught me? That a legacy isn’t only in people having babies and more babies. He didn’t have children, you know. A legacy is in what people do. My legacy will be my sword. My legacy will be people--those who I can save with my skills. Is that not something to leave behind in the world?”

“You do make a good case for breaking that poor girl’s heart.”

“Woon-ah, I have it all figured out now. You don’t like the palace? We can get a house in the country with our salaries as guards. We can take shifts protecting the prince so you don’t have to be around the palace all the time--don’t you think his Highness would reward us by letting us do that? We could see each other every few days, far from that fancy society you hate so much. There’s nothing weird about two old friends living out far away. He spread his arms. “In a spot like this. We could have land cleared beyond the old Bandit Hideout and still be a quick horse-ride from the palace or Sa-mo’s—”

“No, no, you’re crazy.” Woon was laughing again.

Dong-soo grabbed Woon’s face. “You can’t say *no* to me.”
Woon answered Dong-soo with a kiss. Dong-soo kissed back, and then their bodies melted into the inevitable.

Smashed grass where their bodies fell was soft enough, and although the early morning breeze was chilly, Dong-soo and Woon didn’t feel it as their clothes came off.

“Why are we always doing this outside?” Woon asked.

“Because it’s pretty,” Dong-soo pointed to the sky with one hand and thumbed Woon’s nipple with the other. “But if we shared a barracks in the palace or if we had a house—”

“Shut up already. We’ve got all morning to fuck.”

They did. As the sun rose in the sky, tiny bits of grain got into Woon’s black hair and sparkled there, prettier than any jewels Dong-soo had seen on any noblewoman. Woon’s body was familiar to him now, but he had never held it enough, and Dong-soo knew that even if he held Woon every day for the rest of his life, it would still not be enough. He wanted to be with Woon for all the lifetimes. And hadn’t Woon said the same almost three years ago? That even if they died, he would always be by Dong-soo’s side?

The morning felt like perfect freedom. Dong-soo could not remember being so happy since he was a child. Not since running through fields after the splints came off. The world had been full of possibility then; the world was overflowing with hope now. And Woon, Woon was here.

By the time the sun was directly overhead, hot on his shoulders, Dong-soo was leaning over Woon in what was the best position for them. Woon, smaller and lighter, could bend his body with ease around Dong-soo’s body. Dong-soo had the stamina and strength to pound Woon long and hard. They’d been fucking like this on the grass for a good while—Woon lying on strewn clothes, his hair a mess, and Dong-soo holding Woon’s thighs high, rocking back and forth.

Dong-soo sometimes let go one thigh while Woon lifted his ass above the ground and supported himself on two elbows; Dong-soo would press under Woon’s navel at the spot guan yuan; Woon would throw his head back so that Dong-soo could stroke Woon’s cock—gently, ever so teasingly, to prolong the ecstasy.

Then, when the pleasure was as high and bright as the sun in the sky, Dong-soo stopped.

He held himself inside Woon, savoring the way their bodies made a small heaven all around them. This is perfect. How could anyone ever convince me this is wrong? I love him so much.

“Don’t stop,” Woon breathed.

What? Was he tired? They’d been at it for pretty long.

Woon’s hair was sticking to his face. His lips were glistening. “Please, please.”

Woon wasn’t the type to beg. Dong-soo started again, more insistent this time, deeper, bending Woon’s knees, and thrusting forward to hit that sweet spot in way that wasn’t at all sweet. Each thrust sent Woon’s body sliding upwards, across smashed grass and folds of clothes. “Better?”

Dong-soo’s voice was hoarse with lust. “Better?”

“Don’t stop.” Woon was on the verge, eyes closed. Dong-soo loved it when he could make Woon climax this way, without Woon having to do a damn thing to his own body except lie there with Dong-soo in this heaven on earth.
Not that Dong-soo didn’t love to watch Woon stroke himself, but this was way better. Maybe, Dong-soo told himself in these last moments, this was winning—because Dong-soo had never won a single match against Woon. *Not one.* Not in swordsmanship anyway. But no, this couldn’t be just that, because *ah, look at him.*

Woon thrashed, head to one side, then to the other. Dong-soo felt his own shoulders shake. One of Woon’s hands grasped at the air, caught nothing. Woon opened his mouth wider and let out a slow moan as he came. Dong-soo lost himself at the sight of that, pulled out, and caught Woon’s hand that was still flailing in the air.

*No, no, Woon-ah. You win. I love you. I love you.*

* *

Woon spoke to the members of Heuksa Chorong that evening and issued the Final Command. They were to turn in their weapons to the armory and start new lives. Each member, from the highest squad leaders to the men who cleaned and cooked, were given fake identifications and told they could live as free men. Each was given a bag worth three months’ pay and told to start a new life. “You won’t be persecuted nor prosecuted for your crimes; in return, all I ask is that you never speak of Heuksa Chorong to anyone. Tomorrow the buildings will be burned, and it will be as this guild never existed.”

The disbelief in the assembly room followed Woon through the rest of the day. Woon understood it.

Woon wondered if a life with Dong-soo was possible. No, not the way Dong-soo had described it. Woon *wanted* to return to him. Then again, he *didn’t* want to return to him. He hadn’t really anticipated that he, Yeo Woon, someone with the singular vision of killing the Sky Lord, erasing the past, and tearing down Heuksa Chorong, would make it this far.

The night of the coup Woon had not been afraid to die.

Now Woon was afraid to live.

An ordinary life? He told himself he wanted it so much, as much as he wanted Dong-soo, but Woon had never tasted an ordinary life. If he himself was dreading putting away the sword, how could he ask rough men who worked for him, those who had only known a life of the sword—*and by the gods, who knows what had driven them to that life?*—to throw down their blades and pick up plows and spades and become simple farmers?

“But it’s a life one hundred times better than getting more blood on their hands,” Woon said to Goo-hyang. “The pain of taking a life is something they try to deny, but it can eat them from the inside out. Assassins can be dead before they die.”

Goo-hyang had looked peculiar all day. Woon assumed it was because Heuksa Chorong would burn soon.

“But you want to farm?” he asked her. He smiled a little. He wanted her to see an idyllic picture in a storybook. “Buy seeds at the market, plant them, plow the field?”

Her eyes widened. Woon immediately regretted his words—did she think he was asking her to live
with him? *Aish, I asked her to plow the field.*

In truth, he thought that he might live in exile. He didn’t deserve her. He didn’t deserve anyone, really. He had committed so many crimes. He had given all of the guild’s money to the state, but how would he pay back for innocent lives he had taken?

The dewy look in Goo-hyang’s eyes made him change the subject—quickly.

“I want you to take my bird,” Woon said. “You know the whistle; she comes to you. Please let her fly often. Please—”

“There’s news from the Shadowless World,” Goo-hyang said.

“I thought I gave the command to disassemble—”

“I made a decision that this news was too important, so I held off putting the Shadowless World to sleep.” Goo-hyang breathed out loudly. “The Prince Heir was told by your friend Deputy Hong that you were the one who killed his father. Deputy Hong outed you as the leader of Heuksa Chorong and petitioned for your death. According to the information gathered, you are to be assassinated, and the only one who can carry that out is Baek Dong-soo.”

Woon blinked. “That’s impossible.”

“The information has been verified several times over.”

Woon knew it in his heart to be true. He felt his heart, which had been so glad that very morning, fall into darkness. “Arrange a meeting with Baek Dong-soo and Cho-rip. This has to be a mistake.”

Goo-hyang bowed.

*Even if this isn’t a mistake…. It will be okay. Dong-soo will make it okay.*

*

The following evening, Woon was supposed to arrive at a private meeting room in an elegant yangban inn by *sashi*, the time of the sleeping snake. As it turned out, Goo-hyang had told Dong-soo and Cho-rip to arrive earlier, and the snake was very much awake.

Woon was walking up the path towards the inn when he saw Dong-soo and Cho-rip walking down. The pair were arguing. Woon wasn’t sure he was hearing sounds; their words had the muffled, low reverberations of the death drum before an execution. The Defense minister and his son had been beheaded that morning, and the news was everywhere. *Maybe that’s my own blood pounding in my ears?*

“Woon tried to have us killed back there!” Cho-rip shouted. Loud words moving in a slow wave. “Why can’t you believe that?

*Killed?*

There were tears in Woon’s eyes, but he clearly saw Dong-soo shove Cho-rip and almost knock his good friend down.
“He saved your life so many times, Cho-rip-ah! You can’t continue to talk about him like this!”

“I gave him a chance. I did what you and Mi-so and everyone pleaded. I gave him a chance. You saw his answer with your own eyes.”

“How do you know that was Woon’s order?”

Cho-rip wasn’t shouting anymore. “Don’t you get it, Dong-soo-yah?”

“Yeah, yeah, I believe in Woon’s lies. Lies, lies. I’m telling you he’s not lying. Why can’t you trust him? Even Mi-so told you that you were wrong. Her father was killed by an assassin of Heuksa Chorong. Killed by the real man who killed the Crown Prince. Even the girl you like trusts Woon. Now can’t we clear all this up? Everyone knows Woon isn’t lying, so I don’t understand what you have against him!”

“See?” Cho-rip’s voice was mournful, and the tone of it was making Woon’s lip tremble. “You really don’t get it. It doesn’t even matter if Woon is lying. The simple truth is that Woon is a criminal of the state. He is the leader of an organization financed by an enemy of Joseon and one that has committed crime after crime against the Crown.”

“I’ll fix this,” Dong-soo was choking back sobs. “Woon can’t die.”

Woon saw Dong-soo clench his fists. Dong-soo continued to speak with great difficulty: “I was at the execution this morning. Are you going to stand there and tell me that Woon deserves a death like that? That someone like him and the Defense Minister are the same? I am going to talk to the Prince Heir myself.”

Dong-soo was crying now. Dong-soo who, once he started crying, didn’t stop for a long while.

“There’s no case,” Cho-rip said. “Even if Woon didn’t kill the prince’s father, he was still involved in the assassination. You yourself were witness to that. What son is not going to want to avenge his father?”

Dong-soo grabbed Cho-rip, rested his face against his old friend’s shoulder and bawled. Huge, terrible sobs.

Woon couldn’t hear anymore. He took another pathway and entered the inn from the back entrance. Goo-hyang and the squad commander were still in the private room. They jumped to their feet when Woon entered.

The squad leader dropped to his knees. “Forgive me, Sky Lord. Please kill me.”

Woon was holding back tears. “What happened?”

Goo-hyang drew a deep breath. “I acted without your orders, Sky Lord.”

“I figured as much. What happened?”

“I was trying to protect you. Given all the information from the Shadowless World--” Goo-hyang was looking Woon directly in the eyes. Did she not see his pain? She looked fierce, like someone who all her life had made hard choices. “There’s no way out for you now. I know you think these people are your friends but…”

Woon asked the question one last time in a breaking voice. “What happened?”
“I drugged them.”

*Of course drugs don’t work on them. The three of us passed all the tests at the camp. Sa-mo made us immune to almost every poison in all known regions. Cho-rip, Dong-soo and I would need ten times the amount—no, you wouldn’t know that-- even you with all your medical knowledge--slipping them a little bit in wine—no—no--*

“They pretended to asleep and—”

“When I drew my sword,” the squad leader interrupted, “Baek Dong-soo put his blade to my neck. He let me go. He and the other man walked out, arguing. Please, Sky Lord. I thought that this was going to save your life. Please kill me.”

Woon looked from the man on his knees to the woman standing.

*I’m not going to kill anymore. He doesn’t know that, but she does.*

“You betrayed me,” Woon said to Goo-hyang. “I … I needed to ask for their forgiveness. I still need to see the Prince Heir. Maybe … maybe I can tell him my truth. I don’t expect him to forgive me, but… I need to bow before his Highness… and…”

She didn’t look penitent. She was looking at Woon with concern.

*What does her love for me mean if she doesn’t understand my love for my friends?*

Dong-soo was always talking about the heart, the heart, the heart. Woon thought he knew what a heart was. He thought he understood it best at times like this very morning when he had been in Dong-soo’s embrace, but now, when he knew he was going to die, he understood it better. This was the heart he had come to know as a child and had lived with his whole life—this longing, aching heart. This heart that could not atone enough, that had a little black stone deep inside.

“Cho-rip and Dong-soo too,” Woon said. “I must ask for their forgiveness.”
That the prince made a habit of studying late into the night had been known around the palace since Woon was a guard trainee; the one day Woon, Dong-soo, and Cho-rip had been banished to the beacon station, even before the three boys had dressed in their new uniforms, someone had mentioned that even as a child, the Prince Heir stayed up until dawn to be on the alert for assassins. Woon could only imagine such a vigilant life.

* All his life he waited for me. All his life he hated the man who killed his father.

Woon walked pushed back the silk curtain and walked into the prince’s study the same way he had the night of the coup. Gently, with his heart open, aware there was nothing to give to the young man whose father Woon had watched die. Not even Woon’s own death would bring back the
young man’s father.

Woon’s feet in his socks made no sound as he walked closer to the desk. The prince didn’t look up from his book.

“Forgive my rudeness, your Highness, but you were looking for me?”

The prince looked up. Too mature for his age. Too calm.

“I am Yeo Woon. Deputy Hong spoke of me.”

“You’ve come so far. Please sit.”

Woon waited. He was a peasant, and the young man before him was royalty—such was the proper order. Woon knew a little of what royalty was like from his encounters with the prince’s father and his adoptive mother, but for all their intelligence, those people had struck Woon as ambitious, flawed, full of the world’s desperation. There was something about the Prince Heir that deeply moved Woon. The young man seemed sad, wise and innocent all at once.

“I don’t know who you are, really,” the prince said at last. “But please tell me how my father died.”

What could Woon say? He began to remember. Remembering for Woon was always a visceral journey. The day the Crown Prince had died, Woon had felt so helpless, aware of his own failings, damning himself for having walked right into the prison of Heuksa Chorong. The Sky Lord had been so terrifyingly strong. The Crown Prince had fought with determination, with all the purpose and heart that Dong-soo said was the source of all strength, and still the Crown Prince had not been able to overcome the Sky Lord. The Sky Lord was stronger.

Woon stammered. He spoke of the prince’s father’s skill with the giant pole axe. He found himself describing how the match took place in a sunny clearing surrounded by dark trees, how the battle moved back and forth out of that spot, and the two men’s faces went dark and light, light and dark as they moved outside and back into that sunlit space. He described how the Sky Lord like to talk—how he went on and on with his bad poetry, and how the Crown Prince told him to shut up.

“He told the Sky Lord that if he wanted to talk garbage then to go home and do it there.”

Woon felt his voice shaking. He saw the prince’s eyes narrowing, looking at Woon more intently, and Woon lowered his own gaze.

Woon said that the Crown Prince had stabbed the pole axe into the ground—here, Woon glanced at the weapon on the Prince Heir’s desk—and had fought with the sword as well as any martial artist Woon had ever seen. He even tripped the Sky Lord at one point, and the Sky Lord sat on the ground. “His face was dripping sweat. He wasn’t talking anymore.” By this time the Crown Prince had been cut twice. The last time the Crown Prince was cut, the Sky Lord impaled his shoulder to a tree. The Crown Prince whipped his sword with all the fury in his heart and broke the Sky Lord’s sword. “Then the Crown Prince with all his strength pulled himself out from the sword piece pinning him to the tree.”

The Prince Heir shut his eyes at these words.

Woon understood the feeling. He knew what it was like to feel an invisible sword from years ago run through you. He didn’t want to tell the rest, but he went on. Even though talking about the Sky Lord meant remembering the Sky Lord and feeling all the swords on the altar in Heuksa Chorong running through generations of assassins, one by one, and spearing Woon, the last Sky Lord, at the
“The Sky Lord took the cut piece that was left of his sword and ran it through your father’s chestbone,” Woon said. “The Crown Prince lay against a tree and looked heavenwards. There was… there was… I saw shadows of leaves and shapes of sunlight on his face. He looked… peaceful.”

“Did he speak any last words?” The Prince Heir asked. The voice was calm, but the prince’s eyes were moist now.

Woon felt flushed. “I’m sorry to tell you that I don’t remember them exactly. He said something about the Northern Expedition. It was… a strange moment, and I was…” There was no describing Woon’s own sorrow that day. “All I can say is that the moment he died, he was dreaming of the Northern Expedition.”

There was a long silence, and the Prince Heir spoke. “You have a sincere face. But there are three reasons why you cannot be forgiven. The first is that you aided in the death of my father. A son must be true to his filial duty. The second is your contempt for the Royal court. By contempt I mean an organization such as Heuksa Chorong—”

“Heuksa Chorong has been disassembled, and its buildings will be burned to the ground tomorrow,” Woon interrupted. “Forgive my interruption, but please don’t worry about the guild anymore. I myself live with a regretful past that I cannot escape. I will bow ten thousand times before your father’s grave. If you kill me, it will be too kind. You may cut off my arms. I promise you that any contempt for the court—I have tried to rectify it. I have given back all the wealth of Heuksa Chorong to the people—”

“That was you? The anonymous contributor?”

Woon didn’t say anything.

The Prince Heir continued. “There was one last reason. It was that I do not sleep well. Knowing that there is someone like you who walks this world, someone who can slip past any guards like a ghost and step right into my house the way you did tonight—how can I ever rest in my own bed knowing Yeo Woon is alive and ready to kill me?”

“I swear,” Woon said. “I defended you the night of the coup. I will never harm you.”

The prince looked into Woon’s eyes. Woon felt that the prince was looking into Woon’s black heart as well.

“I forgive you.”

“What?”
“I said I forgive you.” The young man’s eyes were red-rimmed. “It goes against my better judgement, but I trust you.”

Woon felt a tiny shock. Once again, was he being saved? Why?

“I don’t know how you heard about my plans to have you arrested,” the prince continued. “I spoke to no one but Deputy Hong and my mother. My mind was made up. Hong had presented a good case, a scholar’s case against you, and I know it was difficult for him, since he had been your childhood friend, but my mother—”

Woon’s heart felt blacker.

“She reminded me that acts of the past can be redeemed. At the time, I thought she was overwhelmed because you saved the life of her husband with that ledger. But she said she had seen your eyes and she knew you to be a good person. Now that I’ve seen those eyes myself and heard you speak, I remember my father telling me if I could read a man’s eyes, I will have learned half of all I need to know.”

Woon couldn’t remember, but had his own uncle said something similar once? One night when Woon was going to sneak out to see the Sky Lord, Woon lied and said he was going for a walk. Had Sword Saint read the pain in Woon’s eyes then? Yes, Sword Saint had said “Our mouths can lie, but our eyes can’t.” Woon had pretended he hadn’t heard those words; he had buried them until this moment.

“I am still learning about the world and about people,” the young prince admitted. “But I believe you did not lie to me tonight. Leave in peace, Yeo Woon.”

Woon nodded, but his heart was far from peaceful when he rode away from the palace.

* 

Cho-rip and Dong-soo had been drinking outside Sa-mo’s house when Woon arrived. The darkness in Woon was suffocating. The table in the courtyard had been lit by one candle, but that candle was
low now and flickering in the breeze. Woon couldn’t make out his friends’ faces.

“Even if it’s over like you say….,” Dong-soo’s voice sounded so weary, still full of tears. “If you tell the Prince Heir what happened tonight, that will only make things worse for me when I speak to his Highness. Don’t you even want to give Woon a fighting chance?”

Cho-rip rose. “Stop trying to convince me. My decision doesn’t lack any faith in you. I want to protect the prince. I want to protect the court. I want to protect you, Dong-soo-yah. Isn’t that what Sword Saint taught you and what our captain always taught us too? We can’t think of our selfish desires. We have to be willing to throw away what’s sentimental and useless and fight for the greater good.”

“Yang Cho-rip.” Dong-soo’s voice sounded exhausted.

“I’m going back to the palace.” Cho-rip wasn’t drunk. He stepped away like a man with a purpose. Woon knew that he was walking through the pain of a stab wound that he, Woon, had inflicted only days ago, and through the pain of all of Woon’s betrayals: Woon against the Crown Prince. Woon lingering at Heuksa Chorong so long and never telling anyone why. Woon in a strange and intimate embrace right there in the bed the three best friends, youngsters fresh from the mountaintop training, had shared.

The shame of it all. How in the world could Dong-soo have ever thought it was possible—a house? Living together in a house?

Dong-soo heard Woon’s breathing before Woon stepped into the courtyard. He put down his bowl of soju and peered into the darkness.

“Woon-ah?”

Woon stepped forward. “Would you have accepted the assignment to kill me?”

“What?”

“I mean, you serve the Crown. It’s the right thing to do.”

Dong-soo was on his feet and holding Woon by the shoulders. “I’m going to speak to his Highness tomorrow.”

Woon took note that Dong-soo hadn’t answered his question. Woon didn’t want to doubt Dong-soo, and he knew that the right thing to do was to obey the law and kill a killer, but still, what would Dong-soo do if he had to make the choice?

“I spoke with his Highness a little while ago,” Woon said. “He forgave me. It’s done.”

Dong-soo began to cry again, not ridiculously this time, slow tears running down his cheeks. “I knew it. You’re innocent. You saved everyone. Only Cho-rip couldn’t see that.”

“I’m not innocent. Cho-rip helped me see that. The Prince Heir helped me see that.” Woon couldn’t look at Dong-soo. It was difficult to feel his touch. It’s never been strange to feel his hands on my body. “I’m here to beg your forgiveness.”

“Woon-ahhhhh.” Dong-soo made a face that was a half-smile, a half-grimace of frustration. “I know you could never have set up what happened at the tavern, so what on earth are you talking about?”
“I didn’t set that up, but other days, in other ways, I’ve almost had you killed. I’m a killer. Your life would have been easier if you’d never met me.”

“Shut up right now.” Dong-soo dug his fingers into Woon’s flesh. Woon wrestled himself away, and Dong-soo, not expecting that Woon would do such a thing, stood with his hands in mid-air as if still holding Woon. Dong-soo’s mouth and eyes were wide-open in shock.

“I’m sorry,” Woon said. “The Prince Heir may have forgiven me, but I’ve known all my life that I will never be able to forgive myself. How can I stay with you? I’m going to go far away. I’m going to live in exile.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Please don’t follow me.”

“You know I will.”

“I can hide—you know that. For now….” Woon looked up. His eyes met Dong-soo’s. “Get some rest. I’m not going anywhere tonight. There are still things I have to do with Heuksa Chorong.”

Dong-soo was staring, pupils large and dumbfounded. It was clear Dong-soo had not absorbed the truth of Woon’s words.

“How can I stay with you?”

“Believe me, I am truly leaving Hanyang.”

“But you said you’d never leave me my side.”

Woon felt his heart waver. His mind was made up, though. “Dong-soo-yah,” he whispered. “That much is true. Wherever I am, I am with you.” Woon inhaled. “I love you.” Then he turned around.

“Woon-ah, wait!” Dong-soo was yelling as if he didn’t care who heard. “Woon-ah!” But he wasn’t following.

Ah, good. Let him sleep tonight. By the time he realizes I’m serious, it will be too late. I’ll be too
far away for him to catch up. I’ll have hidden all traces of my comings and goings. I’ll be alone again.

Alone, Woon understood now, was where he deserved to be.

*

Woon had never slept well, not in all his years, unless he had slept next to Dong-soo. He didn’t sleep at all that night, but after hearing the Prince Heir confess that he himself was a poor sleeper, Woon figured that sleeplessness was another way to atone. Nodding off to nightmares, the headaches and shoulder pains that came with restless nights, the chronic anxiety, the dreary exhaustion….

Goo-hyang had helped once with all that. Her making sure he ate a full meal every night, her pleasant-tasting teas, her supportive words.

He didn’t trust her anymore.

As dawn was breaking, Woon toured the buildings of Heuksa Chorong and found them suspiciously quiet. A sense of dread fell over him. When he walked into the weapons storage room, he understood everything.

She’s going to be waiting for me in the assembly room, of course. She still wants me to escape somewhere with her. She’s tricking me again, and so I’ll have to trick her too.

There she was, sitting as elegant as ever at the desk; her complexion, hair and clothes shone brighter than all the candles at the altar of swords.

“IT’s a quiet morning,” Woon said to her. “Did Jang Tae Saan and Baek Myeon Seo-saeng leave already?”

“Yes, they did.”

“I’m surprised you’re awake. Did you expect to have breakfast with me? I always take my meals alone.”

“No, Sky Lord, I was merely waiting for your next command.”

Woon could feel an unnatural fury starting to flow in his veins. “Everything is too quiet.”

She wasn’t looking at him. “Half the men have left already.”

“Why….” Woon didn’t want to raise his voice. “Why are you lying to me?”

She looked up.

“I told them to drop their swords and leave,” Woon continued. “I had expected to talk to some of the men personally today, to sway them to leave. I thought that some would want to watch the buildings burn—as part of a necessary ritual. Before dawn, I went looking everywhere. When I checked the armory, there was not a single weapon there. What game are you playing this time?”

“It’s not that,” she began. Her expression composed itself. “What I believe the men felt was—”

“Stop.” Woon’s voice was sharp and cruel. “You’re a spy and a good one, so I know that whatever
is going to come out of your pretty mouth next is going to be a lie most people would believe. I’m here to tell you that I’m an assassin and a good one. You may think that I’ve forsaken killing, but trust me, I will still protect my friends. I know that you are determined to carry out some demented plan because you… you have a misguided idea of what love is. You are my enemy, Goo-hyang.”

She looked scared.

Woon drew his short blade out a hand’s length from its sheath. “Do you want to die? Tell me what you did.”

“You wouldn’t—”

“Yes, I would. You’ve set up Cho-rip or Dong-soo to be killed, haven’t you?”

Tears started to well in her eyes.

Woon pulled his blade out completely and held it by his side. “When I returned to my bedroom last night, I noticed that some papers from my desk were missing. Not important papers but ones that I’d crumpled when writing a note to Dong-soo a day ago. I was trying to find the right words to give him directions to a meeting place. Why did you take those papers?”

“I—I—”

“Tell me.” Woon grabbed her wrist. “No, I won’t kill you right away. I will cut off your fingers one by one until you tell me.”

“Sky Lord?” She didn’t believe him.

“Throw away the notion that I will ever live with you. I’m going to go far from Hanyang and live alone. But if you tell me now what you’ve done, if you confess, I won’t kill you.”

She started to cry. Woon held her harder by the wrist.

“Goo-hyang!” He shouted the name. “Who did you ask to meet me at the wheat field where Dong-soo, Cho-rip and I played as children? Who is going in my place to try to kill that person and when? TELL ME.”

“I had a letter sent to the palace this morning.” Goo-hyang sobbed the words. “I had a letter delivered to Deputy Hong.”

Woon dropped Goo-hyang’s wrist. “You sent Jang Tae Saan and Baek Myeon Seo-saeng to meet him.”

“They’re riding with the squad captain and our best assassins to the field to kill Deputy Hong. You have to understand—it’s because they want to protect you—”

Woon didn’t hear what else she had to say. He was running out the headquarters and jumping on a horse. Didn’t Cho-rip say last night that there was no convincing him? Maybe he didn’t want to meet with Woon, letter or no letter. Maybe he wasn’t at the field at all. But if he was there….

* 

Dong-soo didn’t want to talk to anyone. He didn’t want to think or feel, but crazy thoughts and crazier feelings kept him awake all night. He did want to do something, but he had to wait until
morning before he could ride to the palace and make sure that Cho-rip hadn’t further antagonized the Prince Heir. Dong-soo had this nagging feeling that Cho-rip wanted to prove himself to the Prince Heir somehow by indicting the new hero Yeo Woon. Was Cho-rip really that ambitious?

And what of Woon himself? How could he have sunk this far back into doubt and fear? Was the mere fact that Cho-rip wanted him dead enough to make Woon run away?

At dawn, Dong-soo ran out of the house to saddle his horse. Sa-mo was already in the courtyard picking up plates and bowls from Dong-soo’s previous night with Cho-rip. “Hey! Where are you going? What’s it with you and not cleaning up with yourself? Didn’t your uncle teach you better?”

“Sorry, no time to talk now.” Dong-soo hadn’t told a soul how much trouble Woon had been in or that he’d been forgiven by the prince. Why worry them? “I have to go to the palace.” Dong-soo attempted a smile. “I work there, you know.”

Sa-mo snorted and started for the house with a tray full of dirty dishes.

At the palace, Dong-soo was stopped by General Seo outside the library. “Hey, hey, hey!”

“Good morning, have you seen Deputy Hong?”

“What is it with you boys today?”

Dong-soo didn’t understand. “Sir? I mean, General?”

“The scholar ran out of here not too long ago—he went straight to the Prince Heir’s office waving a letter and then he came running back just as fast—”

“Oh no.” Dong-soo felt his heart shake. No, no, Cho-rip-ah. It’s all been settled. Don’t mess it up.

“I tried to ask him what was going on, but he was—oooh, crazy looking. Didn’t know that boy could get so passionate about anything. Tell me, Dong-soo, is there a girl involved?”

“Where is he now?” Dong-soo felt himself getting more panicky.

“That was the most peculiar thing.” The general stroked his beard. “He ran out like a firestorm from the library—this was just moments ago. He was carrying his sword. Imagine that—a scholar carrying a sword instead of a pen!”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“Not exactly.” General Seo looked at Dong-soo with suspicion. “He was muttering something about Son of a Gisaeng though. Why would he do that? He kept saying the nerve of Woon—the nerve of him to ask me to meet us at our place. Something about a pond and a wheat field? Our place? Where’s that? Hey—did you boys have a fight or something?”

Dong-soo took one step back. “I’m sorry, General Seo. I’ve got to go. I’ll explain later.”

Dong-soo was off at a break-neck speed. He had never kicked his horse so hard or yelled for her to run. She ran. She sensed Dong-soo’s urgency.

Cho-rip brought his sword? Did Woon really send that message?

*I’m coming. I, Baek Dong-soo, will make it all right.*
Woon’s worst fears were confirmed when he rounded the pond and saw the figures in the distance in the tall grass. Cho-rip was fighting, amazingly holding his own against Heuksa Chorong’s best assassins. Cho-rip wasn’t bad—he’d been third in swordsmanship behind Dong-soo and himself at the camp, but how long had it been since he’d held a blade? Why had he brought it with him today? *He expected to fight me? He came believing I would kill him? Cho-rip-ah?*

Cho-rip was on his knees, though, when Woon’s horse was close enough to shout “STOP!”

The assassins stopped. Woon was still their leader.

Woon fell to his knees next to Cho-rip. Cho-rip looked like he’d been hit by shuriken in several places, slashed in the torso—his clothes were bloody. “Cho-rip-ah. Cho-rip-ah.” Woon tried to take his friends unsteady body by the shoulders.

“Don’t touch me!”

Woon didn’t move his hands away. He held onto Cho-rip lightly.

“Don’t you get it, Woon? As long as you exist….” Cho-rip coughed. *How injured is he? There’s blood in his mouth. Please, Cho-rip-ah, don’t die. This is my fault.*

“Whether these men acted on your command or not,” Cho-rip went on. “They are killers and will always be killers. You are a killer too. Why do you think you’re alive now?” Another cough.

Woon didn’t know. *Why am I alive now?*

“Do you think Sword Saint was too weak to kill you? He just wouldn’t kill you because he took pity on you. But think about how many people you killed. Our commander at the boy’s camp, then Commander Im, the Crown Prince—so many, many—”

Woon had told himself as much. Here was his oldest friend speaking the words out loud.
“I saw the Prince Heir this morning and told him you tried to kill me and Dong-soo last night. So I’m sure he sent guards after me this morning to see if you were going to try it again. It was the right thing to do-- Woon, can’t you see that? The Prince Heir needs to understand that as long as you exist, he is in danger. That means the country is in danger. Woon, if you are alive, even Dong-soo is in danger.”

Cho-rip was falling over, coughing, still talking with difficulty. Woon was looking at the sky, his heart shattering. I can’t live in exile. He’s right. I have to die. I don’t want to die. It would hurt Dong-soo, but... for only a little while. Only for a little while.

“So many people died.” Cho-rip didn’t need to argue his case further, but the words kept cutting Woon. “They died because of you. It was all your fault, Woon.” Cho-rip fell to the earth, bleeding and coughing. “All ...your... fault.”

Woon stood up. His men were looking at him solemnly.

“Drop your swords and leave,” he said.

No one did.

Woon realized how tragic his face must’ve appeared to them, how vulnerable, how weak. He reminded them that he was the strongest swordsman they had ever seen. “This is the final command. Whoever refuses will die.”

The weapons were placed, one by one, on the ground. The assassins rode away.

Cho-rip was heaving hard breaths, bent over, not dead but maybe dying.
Woon was trying to think of a way to kill himself, and then, the Destiny Dong-soo had taught him to not believe in came riding towards him, kicking up dust. Or maybe it was just an opportunity presenting itself.

*Dong-soo.*

The assassins were long gone. Woon was standing over Cho-rip’s ravaged body.

Dong-soo ran to Cho-rip and held him up. Cho-rip was unable to focus his eyes. “What happened?” Woon could see the confusion in Dong-soo’s eyes. “Woon-ah? What happened to Cho-rip?”

“I did it,” Woon said. “He tried to kill me.”

“What?”

Woon walked away, slowly and purposefully from the scene, leading Dong-soo as far away as he could from the sight of the assassin’s abandoned swords. “Baek Dong-soo, I told you. I am a killer. I don’t know why you ever expected me to be anyone else.”

* Dong-soo didn’t know how to fight Woon’s thinking right now. It was like trying to fight Destiny itself. Even if Destiny was a made-up thing, Woon had constructed it into his own palace of flesh and blood. Why? Why?

“It was all over, Woon-ah. It was good. You could have come home to me.”

“For a while, for a very short while, I thought I could do it.” Woon was looking somewhere far away. Beyond the fields. “But I realized it was all a delusion. What do you expect of me? I am a criminal of the state. I am a killer. If you really do care for me….”

“Woon-ah.”

Woon drew the sword on his back. “You’re going to have to find it in your heart to kill me.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“Do you want me to face a trial? I’ll turn myself in. I’ll be tortured and beheaded.”

Before Dong-soo knew what was happened, Woon charged Dong-soo. Dong-soo drew to defend himself. Woon’s blades were flying. His techniques were not formal; Woon had trained himself. He fought with a long blade and a short assassin’s knife.

Dong-soo blocked both. “What are you doing? I could hurt you.”

“When have you ever lost against me? When? If you won’t kill me, then I’m going to kill you, Baek Dong-soo. The same as I did with Cho-rip. Because I’m a killer, and I’m going to prove it to you.”

Dong-soo had not fought Woon in forever. Woon’s skill was merciless. Dong-soo had to spin, duck, use every defensive technique he knew. But after a few parries, he found his sword against Woon’s waist. He held it there, not slashing.

Woon shot him a condescending look. “I don’t have time for your compassion.”
Woon kicked Dong-soo’s sword upwards with his own and cut Dong-soo’s arm with his short blade. The two fought for what seem like years; Dong-soo was exhausted from the terror of Woon’s intent. Blocking Woon’s two blades again, Dong-soo looked into his beloved one’s eyes. *Can you really kill me, Woon? Can you--?*

“Dong-soo-yah.” Woon was breathless from exertion by now. “Get serious. You will have to try to kill me.”

From the periphery of his vision, Dong-soo saw that the Royal guard had arrived. He could see the white uniforms of Gak, Geol and Yong. They were tending to Cho-rip and had the good sense to stay far from the sword fight.

*If Woon wanted Cho-rip dead, Cho-rip would be dead.*

Dong-soo’s heart was beating fast; his arm was bleeding, the pain of that and whatever Woon was trying to do was terrible, but Dong-soo’s mind was starting to clear.

*Woon isn’t trying to kill you at all. Woon is trying to die. He’s been trying to die for a long time. He’s been holding onto you like a frightened child, but because… because you keep him alive….*

Dong-soo couldn’t finish his thought because Woon spun around and instead of coming after him with his blades, Woon’s arms pushed against Dong-soo’s chest with all his might—as far as he could push.
Dong-soo didn’t fall but he went staggering away a good distance.

Woon backed away a few steps. “The Royal guard are here.” He took another step back. “I guess I have to show them who I truly am.”

Dong-soo looked to the Royal guards. They were picking up swords. Oh no, of course. Just like when the Crown Prince had been slain and Dong-soo had missed the fact that Woon was holding his own sword and that another sword was piercing the Crown Prince’s body, Dong-soo had yet again missed something so crucial. Other men had been there and hurt Cho-rip.

Woon, you’re lying.

A tear rolled down Dong-soo’s face. He put his hand to his heart. What happens now? Woon-ah? Why are you doing this to me?

“Put up your sword. This fight isn’t over.” Woon’s voice was commanding. Dong-soo indulged him for the moment because he wasn’t sure what Woon might do otherwise. Dong-soo took a classic stance.

“Woon-ah, we can still go back to the way it was before.”

Woon was taking steps backwards. Why?

“Dong-soo-yah. You were my only sanctuary. I believed when I was with you, I could live under the sun. I was happy for a while. It was… enough.”

Woon ran towards Dong-soo and took a leap, a spectacular leap that only Woon could hike towards the sky. Dong-soo understood in an instant that this is why Woon had wanted the distance between himself and Dong-soo—to make a running leap, to fly like a bird over Dong-soo’s body and—

Dong-soo saw Woon’s black shape overhead.

No.

Dong-soo dropped his sword before Woon dropped his own blades, and Woon fell into Dong-soo’s arms. The force of the fall sent both men tumbling to the ground.

Dong-soo’s arms were wrapped around Woon. He was going to impale himself on my sword. He was going to impale himself on my sword. He was—

Woon was limp. As limp in Dong-soo’s arms as if he’d actually accomplished his mission and stabbed his own heart with Dong-soo’s sword.

“Woon-ah?”

Woon stirred. Dong-soo gripped him even more tightly. “Woon-ah? Woon-ah, are you okay?”

Woon lifted his head from Dong-soo’s shoulder. Dong-soo rose to his knees. He couldn’t see Woon’s face, but he wasn’t about to let go of Woon—not for one moment.

“Why did you drop your sword?” Woon sounded stunned.

“I know why you dropped yours.” Dong-soo’s voice was cracking. Tears were rolling down his face.
“They’re…they’re staring at us.”

Not letting go of Woon, Dong-soo turned around and saw the line of officers. Someone had already ridden off with a wounded Cho-rip.

“Gak!” Dong-soo called. “Gak! Come here! By yourself! You come here right now!”

Dong-soo noted that all the Royal guards had their swords in their hilts, and Gak was no different. Gak ran to Dong-soo and knelt before his two old friends.

“His Highness said we had to kill Woon if Cho-rip was in any way hurt,” Gak said. “It was a royal command. What am I supposed to do?”

Woon tried to wrestle away from Dong-soo’s grip, but Dong-soo was too strong, and Woon was too dazed. “Woon, you shit, stay where you are, or do you want me to knock you out? I’m trying to save your life here. Will you listen to me for once? For once?”

Gak looked like he was about to cry.

“Listen, Gak, tell all the guys to pick up Woon’s swords and my sword too. I’m riding away with him.”

“But——”

“No, it’s not a crime.” Dong-soo made his voice sound firm, and he swerved away gently from Woon’s body, letting go the embrace but not letting go of Woon. He held Woon by the wrists now. Woon’s face looked half-drowned; his eyes were heavy-lidded and his pupils unfocused. “Look in my breast pocket,” Dong-soo told Gak.

Gak stuck his hand there and pulled out Sword Saint’s badge. The white badge from the king that granted immunity to whoever carried it. The badge that Sa-mo had shown the minister’s son in order to avoid arrest on the march to So Nyung Won.

Gak heaved a huge sigh of relief. “Of course Sword Saint gave you that. I’ll tell everyone. I’ll tell the Prince Heir what we saw here today too and——”

“I’ll talk to him myself later,” Dong-soo said. “For the time being, bring me my horse. I’m getting Woon out of here. Woon-ah, get up.”

Woon was as compliant as someone mindless from delirium. Dong-soo checked his forehead, but no, Woon’s body temperature was cold not feverish. That was unusual for someone who had been sword-fighting for so long, so Dong-soo worried.

“I’m not dead,” Woon said.

“No,” Dong-soo answered. “You’re not.”

Woon wasn’t hurt, but he looked utterly broken. He got up and dropped to his knees again in a half-faint. His hand caught Dong-soo by the shoulder, and Dong-soo lifted him up. Woon could stand. He could walk.

He needed to hold onto Dong-soo.
Dong-soo guided Woon to the horse, told him to get on her and take the reins.

“Where am I supposed to go?” Woon sounded like a child. He was astride the horse now. “There’s nowhere for me to go.”

“Heuksa Chorong.” Dong-soo mounted the mare and took Woon by the waist. This was like when they had ridden away together on the same horse that day to the beacons. That day they had ridden to save both their lives.

“Heuksa Chorong.” Dong-soo pressed his body close to Woon’s. “Take your time. I know where it is, so don’t steer away from the path. Go slowly. You’re not yourself. You’re in shock.”

Woon didn’t disagree.

Don’t fall down, Yeo Woon. Don’t fall into that darkness again. If you do that, I’ll dive right in and get you out. I swear. I’ll dive in right after you.

21. Dear Sky
Dawn that was given to me, dear sky that embraces me….

Wake me up, wake me up…. So that the darkness won’t swallow me again.

--original Warrior Baek Dong-soo OST

WBDS OST music on YouTube

It was over. Even Woon’s love for Dong-soo felt tainted now. How many times had Dong-soo saved him? Wasn’t Woon even capable of making his own choices? Of ending his own life? Was Woon supposed to be Dong-soo’s bitch the way he’d been the Sky Lord’s?

The horse strode to the entrance of the House of Blood. Goo-hyang, someone else who had fooled Woon’s heart, was waiting there. The Living World had already fallen away, though, so it didn’t matter. Where was Death? Death by execution and torture was too good for Woon; he would starve himself; he would die somehow. They could all watch—it didn’t matter.

Woon dismounted first, walked a few steps and fell to his knees.

Goo-hyang, a blur of bright clothes, was running towards him, but Dong-soo was already holding him.

“It’s the fever again,” Goo-hyang said. “Get him inside.”

“It’s not,” Woon protested.

After Woon lay down and refused to walk inside the headquarters, Goo-hyang felt his pulse, checked his pupils, and confirmed that no, it wasn’t the fever; Woon was in a state of shock.

“That’s what I thought,” Dong-soo said. “He tried to kill himself.”

Goo-hyang gasped.

What’s with her? She never knew—all this time? She herself never wanted to escape this world?

“Yeo Woon.” Dong-soo’s voice wasn’t fearful. Dong-soo wasn’t crying. For some reason, Dong-soo was covering Woon’s body, right there on the ground, his chest pressed against Woon’s chest, and what was this scolding voice? “Yeo Woon, I thought I was the stupid one. What the fuck are you thinking, after all you’ve been through? Did it ever once occur to you that you could kill yourself but that maybe if you did, you would kill me too? I can’t live without you.”

How romantic and foolish. “Of course you can.” Woon closed his eyes. For some reason he felt frozen. His body was ice-cold, and his mind felt jostled. He couldn’t remember exactly why he was here. There had been a sword-fight, right? He had been trying to get Dong-soo to kill him?

“He gets this way. I think the fever can come back. He remembers being hurt with his body, and it makes him sick.” Dong-soo was talking to Goo-hyang. Woon opened his eyes. Over Dong-soo’s shoulder, Woon could see her, the pain in her eyes, her hands clasping one another. “I know about medicine now, Goo-hyang. I read books for three years. But more than books, I know Woon.”

“Don’t say anything to her!” Woon snapped. His head hurt. What Dong-soo was saying—it was true. Remembering anything felt bad. Woon deserved to feel bad. If there was such a thing as
oblivion in Death, he wouldn’t have sought it.

“Ha, you’re mad? That’s good.” Dong-soo pressed a warm hand on Woon’s cheek. “You’re coming back.” A warm kiss on Woon’s forehead. “Remember the ground giving way when you fell into the icy water? That was an accident. Stuff like that just happens in this world. People? They’re different. They make choices like you said, but what do we really know about the choices they made?”

I’m so tired. I’m cold. Why do you love me, Dong-soo-yah? It don’t understand a word you’re saying.

“This is shameful,” Woon managed to say. “I need to stand up.”

“What’s shameful? You’re the strongest person I know. I’m not even talking about how smart you are and how good you are with the sword. I mean look at all you’ve lived through. Your father? He lied to you and he hurt your body. The Sky Lord. He lied to you and he hurt….?” Dong-soo didn’t finish.

Woon was shaking he was so cold, but looking at Goo-hyang, another person who had lied to him and hurt him, the thought struck: Has she killed someone before? Woon knew so little of her past and had often assumed it had been more wretched than his own. She had always tried to protect people, but hadn’t that been how Woon suffered through Heuksa Chorong? She had been trying to protect Woon by having Cho-rip killed. Cho-rip had been trying to protect the Prince Heir by having Woon killed.

I’m not special. I don’t want to face life.

I need to ask for Goo-hyang’s forgiveness too.

The memory came back in a rush—the way memories always did. Woon had thrown himself in the air, expecting to feel the worst of the pain, wanting to feel the worst of it—the knife in his father’s belly, the Sky Lord’s hand inside his body, the horror and the guilt and the humiliation he had tried to forget for years—and instead of the worst of the pain–

He’d fallen into Dong-soo’s loving embrace.

“Fuck you, Dong-soo-yah.”

Woon began to shake so much that Dong-soo, who’d been so composed, finally lost it and grabbed both of Woon’s hands in his. “Woon-ah, what’s happening to you? I’m here. I’m here.”

“I’m scared!” Woon blurted out. And with those words, he burst into tears.

He had never really cried hard. Not that he could remember, not since he was a child and maybe not even then. He tried to swallow the sobs, but he couldn’t breathe, and they forced their way out, his throat making ugly rasping sounds and his whole body convulsing.

“Woon-ah, Woon-ah.” Dong-soo was holding him. Dong-soo raised Woon to a sitting position and pressed his face against that wide chest, the one Woon had loved to lie against so much for years now, and Woon wept.

And Woon remembered: Woon remembered the first time Dong-soo held him and what it felt like to be loved.

By the time the sobs diminished, Woon was aware that he wasn’t being held up, that he was sitting
on his own, leaning against Dong-soo, and that Dong-soo was running his fingers through Woon’s hair.

“I’ve never been afraid to die,” Woon whispered. “I-I don’t know how to live. I don’t have any idea—”

“I’ll help,” Dong-soo said. “You don’t like my idea about a house?” A small laugh. “We’ll work something out. Look, you’ve been alone for so long, you don’t know any other way to be. I thought you were smart. Hey, I guess you are—look what you just figured out all by yourself. I could never have done that. You know exactly what you are afraid of. Only the wisest, best men in the world can do that—”

“Stop.”

“Why should I? I love everything about you.”

“I mean, I haven’t figured out anything. I’m a mess.”

“If you’re a mess, then I’ll sit right here with you until you’re less of a mess. If there’s anything we both know, Yeo Woon, it’s that nothing in this world stays the same forever. Seasons change, babies are born and old men die, and you know--boys grow up into men. Oh, and there’s another thing, friendships grow stronger if you let them. Didn’t you know that?”

Woon looked around. Goo-hyang wasn’t anywhere.

“There are some burdens you don’t have to carry alone,” Dong-soo went on. “You are my most special—I mean, my beloved one. If you don’t allow me to help you then… that itself throws a burden on me. Can you understand that, Woon-ah? We’re like… two parts of one soul.”

The buildings of Heuksa Chorong were surrounded by huge trees; it was a dark and intimidating place even when the sun was high in the sky. Although Woon sensed it was the middle of the day, there was no sunlight. Still, he no longer felt the drafts that ran between the ancient buildings. He remembered the day by the stream when he and Dong-soo were beacon interns and the hot sun shone on his nude body.

He put his arms around Dong-soo. “Forgive me. I mean, this time forgive me for forgetting who we are to one another.”

“You won’t do it again?”

Woon held Dong-soo face in his hands. What a handsome face, what good, earnest eyes. It was impossible to believe that such a person existed, that the boy Woon had longed for years ago and had pushed away time and time again understood Woon’s heart as if it were his own.

Woon kissed Dong-soo gently on the lips. “Sunsengnim,” he said, smiling. “I learned my lesson today. I wanted to protect you. You can protect yourself.” Woon had always known the full lesson, though. *I won’t get crazy like this again, I swear to you.* “If I hurt myself, I hurt us both.”

Later, Dong-soo told Goo-hyang that she should report to the Prince Heir and tell him all that Woon had done in the service of the Crown. Dong-soo wanted to make sure that Woon’s role in the coup was properly understood. “You won’t be incriminating yourself.” He handed her Sword Saint’s badge. “Three mornings from now, bring this back to me in the same field where you sent Cho-rip and the assassins to meet today. Woon won’t be there. I’m keeping him away for a while. No, I don’t know how long. You can tell the prince and everyone else that Woon and I... we’ll be taking a leave for a bit. No one needs to know where we are.”
Woon was eating. Goo-hyang had prepared a light dinner. He had an appetite—that in itself surprised him.

“You like the outdoors, right?” Dong-soo smiled at Woon. “I like it too. To tell the truth, it’s been a little crazy at the palace lately. We both could use a break.”

Goo-hyang packed her bags that evening and walked out the building with Xue in a covered cage. Woon reminded her to let the bird out for exercise often. “She needs to fly.”

Goo-hyang bowed. She looked as poised as the first time Woon had met her, no trace of the day’s tempest in her eyes. “Thank you, my lord,” she said, “for not despising me.”

Woon never saw her again.

When nightfall came, Dong-soo helped Woon set the buildings of Heuksa Chorong on fire. The two watched them burn from a distance. The dark trees caught fire too and fell with loud hissing noises into the raging flames.

The fire lasted past dawn, and because a wide moat and a hard-travelled path surrounded most of the establishment, the fire didn’t reach the woodlands and died to a smoldering pile of blackness where it had begun. Black scraps flew into the air like birds, and the smell was strangely not unpleasant—maybe ancient oils and even more ancient secrets gave off a deep, rich scent like a lost forest? Woon thought he felt the ghosts of souls escaping with the smoke. How many souls had been enslaved there?

*Over. It’s really over.*

“Have you seen enough?” Dong-soo asked.

Woon nodded.

*Six months later, Dong-soo was completing his shift at the Prince Heir’s house and walking towards the South gate in his civilian clothes.*

“Hey! Hey!” General Seo never spoke in a normal tone. He was always either blustering noisily or whispering a secret so loud it was clearly meant to be overheard. “There you are, Baek Dong-soo! Wasn’t Son of a Gisaeng supposed to get off with you today?”

“Oh that.” Dong-soo scratched his head. “That’s a little premature, don’t you think? His Majesty is ill, but he’s not dead or anything.”

“It’s always best to plan for the future when it comes to these things,” Seo said. “If the court
moves to Suwon, the queen wants you and Woon to start a martial arts school in the area. I have no idea where she got such an idea, but she said it would be putting your talents to their best use.”

“Really? You heard that?”

“I’ve got good ears, my boy. Ears to the little whispers in the air!”

“Ah sure, I see. Good evening, General Seo.”

Once outside the palace and meeting Woon who led the horses, Dong-soo mentioned what General Seo had said about the martial arts school.

“Really?” Woon looked happy. “That would beat standing around all day. I thought your plan was to take shifts.” Woon rubbed his shoulder. “I thought you liked excitement and fighting.”

“My book isn’t anywhere near done,” Dong-soo said. “I get to work on it in the library a lot.” He felt bad for Woon. “I’m sorry you don’t like the palace. If you want, you can ask to train recruits or something? Would that be better?”

“No, it’s ok. It’s really not so bad being in the same house all day with Gak, Yong, and Geol. And I like his Highness too.”

The pair were riding home. Home for the time being was a small room in the village. Dong-soo had told Sa-mo that it was closer to the palace, that he and Woon didn’t want to be in the way now that Sa-mo was married to Jang-mi. Land was being cleared for a house nearby, and no one seemed to find anything peculiar at all about Woon and Dong-soo living in a house together. Cho-rip was building Mi-so an estate in a fancy fancy area of Hanyang, where Cho-rip’s father lived. It was weird to think of little bratty Mi-so making her way into yangban society, but hey, that girl could do anything.

Cho-rip had said that the wedding would be soon; he’d said that Dong-soo and Woon, the Joseon heroes for whom a great palace feast had been held only days after their return from that extended camping trip, would be invited to the wedding but…. Woon and Cho-rip were still not the friends they used to be. Dong-soo was sure time would take care of that rift. Woon and Cho-rip weren’t so sure. Dong-soo had made Woon promise he’d go to the wedding at least; Woon couldn’t refuse Dong-soo anything these days. Dong-soo chuckled to himself at that last thought—Yeah, Woon not refusing me anything these days makes for some fun in that tavern bedroom.

“Should we stop by Ji-sun’s new shop and get something to eat there?” Woon asked.

“Nah.” Dong-soo wasn’t hungry. “The tavern has good meat. And Ji-sun’s been meeting with that new guy from out of town. We don’t want to disturb that.”

Woon smiled. “Intrigue. You’re so sensitive to that sort of thing now.”

“Speaking of intrigue….” Dong-soo lips stretched into a broad grin. “General Seo said that it was her Majesty who recommended us to head a martial arts school. I wonder why she did that?”

“You know why.” Woon kicked his horse into a gallop. “Because she appreciates my talents!”

“Woon-ah! Woon-ah, where are you going?”

Dong-soo followed Woon’s horse until he found himself in the same spot where he and Woon had played as children, near the same field where Woon had tried to die, where Dong-soo had caught Woon in his arms.
There was a line of small kids playing nearby with wooden sticks.

“Damn,” Dong-soo said. “I was hoping we could be alone.” It had been a long time since he and Woon had fucked under the wide open sky.

One of the boys knocked another boy down. The other boys ran away laughing.

Woon jumped off his horse. “I guess that kid doesn’t have a Jin-joo to come to the rescue like you did when boys picked on you.”

“She still comes to my rescue. Sa-mo hit me on the head the other day for stealing a piece of meat off his plate, and Jin-joo said I needed the meat because I’m a great warrior and he’s a fat old man.”

Woon laughed. That beautiful laugh Dong-soo loved to hear.

“Jin-gi still bothers her about becoming an old maid, and she says she’ll become Queen of the Bandits before going marrying that silly painter and living in high society.” Just thinking about Jin-joo could make Dong-soo happy too. What amazing friends he had. “She’s already Queen of the Bandits, though—even if those bandits are merchants now. She’s not even second in command to Ji-sun. She’s Queen.”

Woon was walking to the boy who had been pushed down. “Hey,” Woon said. “Do you want me to show you how to hold a sword?”

The boy could only stare.

“Here.” Woon took the boy’s hand and raised him to his feet. He moved the boy’s wrist so that the stick was in proper position. “That’s how you hold a sword.”
The boy looked at Woon with awe. Then he ran away in the direction of the other kids.

“What have I always told you about your gifts being too precious to waste?” Dong-soo was still smiling. “You will make a great teacher.”

“Dong-soo-yah, the kid was scared of me and ran the hell out of here.”

“I don’t know. I remember wanting nothing more than to be a great swordsman at that age.”

“Were we really ever that young? We used to be about that big.”
Dong-soo breathed in deeply. “Maybe we should head back. The sun is setting.”

“Yeah.”

On the ride back, Dong-soo reminded Woon that he had once referred to “a time in the sun” and how it was “enough.”

“Oh? When?”

“You said that in the fields that day. That bad day. I try not to think about that day too much, but… after seeing you with that kid…. I don’t know, Woon-ah. I need to ask you—are you okay now? Is the sun shining on you?”

Woon tossed back his head. The horses were making a soft sound on the well-travelled path. The wind was gentle. Dong-soo’s heart beat in rhythm with Woon’s heart. The horses’ steady hoofbeats matched that natural pace, and everything seemed to be moving peacefully towards one direction. The sky was huge—the setting sun coloring it with hazy pinks and yellows.

“I wake up to your face every morning,” Woon said. “You’re the sun, Dong-soo-yah. And still, it’s not enough. Not for all the lifetimes.”

“Yeah.” Dong-soo liked that answer. “I love you that much too. Let’s keep going.”
The horses kept going.

“Right through all those lifetimes,” Dong-soo added. “Right through all of them.”

END

Thank you for reading this story. I wielded my pen with my heart.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!