

A passenger train was the first to arrive. The police and military were no longer standing like barricades on Parade Day, guarding the steps up to the carriages, as they had on my first train ride from Pyongyang to Gyeong-seong. They now waded deep into the crowd, waving their long batons as if they were farmers cutting hay with long, curved knives.

My brothers and I ducked between some of the carriages and bent down low so as not to be seen. When Unsik whistled that it was safe, we quickly climbed, one after the other, into a freight car with an open door.

We weren't alone. There were many people hiding behind boxes, including an old woman with a baby. They whispered to us with sharp Chulho-like tongues to hunch down low and be quiet. I could hardly breathe on the train once it got moving and the door was shut—there were just too many of us and no air.

We hopped off in the middle of the night at Eodaejin, a port town.

We walked, all of us silent, heads down, dragging our feet, weighted, I guess, by the coat of despair that hung on top of us. Our gang of seven was now six. Without Myeongchul's proverbs and stories, the silence was deafening.

Eventually, I caught the scent of fish and sea salt and then heard gulls cawing and the roar of waves crashing against rocks. The others stopped when they reached the shore. I kept right on walking, over the sand and into the waves, too tired and still in shock over Myeongchul's death to notice until it was too late that the water was freezing. I screamed when the cold hit me. I was angry at . . . well, everything, including that I couldn't even clean myself in the waves. I dragged myself out of the water and lay down in the sand. Covering myself with a blanket, I stared up at the sky. I'd never looked at the sky from the sea, over the top of which the stars curved, wrapping themselves around the earth like a baby's cradle or a mother's arms. It seemed so pure up there. For a moment I wondered what my life looked like, what Joseon looked like, from the stars.

UNFORTUNATELY, WHEN WE FINALLY WALKED INTO EODAE-  
jin's main market, we discovered that *kotjebi* from across the  
country had invaded it, much as they had done in Gyeong-seong.  
My brothers and I didn't want to stay and fight. We had nothing

in us, so we made our way back to Cheongjin, planning to go back to Pohwang Market and join up again with Hyekchul.

As when we had first arrived in Cheongjin, the train stopped in Ranam. While we waited for another train to take us to Pohwang, a policeman announced that all the trains had shut down, maybe for a few days, because of no electricity. Hungry, we timidly ventured into Ranam Market, hoping to stay on the outskirts, away from the gang whose leader had defeated me in battle.

We were scoffing bread sticks, candy, cigarettes, and *sool*, when suddenly some female merchants ran past us and some male vendors started yelling. A crowd had formed, and soon there was cheering. My brothers and I crept up and peered through the bodies.

Two gangs were fighting, five on five, or at least that's how many I counted. One gang was made up of a group of kids our age or just a little older. The other gang was a group of young men. I couldn't believe it: boys against men, and fighting right between a stall selling old furniture and a stall displaying farm tools.

The kid gang members were small, but they tossed around weapons that looked like two short sticks tied together with a chain. They swooshed these weapons in the air and then around their bodies. Then *flick!* the weapons moved hard and fast, striking the men across their knees, their ankles, even their stomachs. One member of the man-gang stumbled backward with a head



wound that swelled to the size of a football and from which blood spewed like a fountain.

"We can't stay here," I whispered to the others, not taking my eyes off the scene in front of me.

Chulho didn't need to be told twice. He was on his way out of the market before I even turned.

We walked to Pohwang, taking back alleys and an entire night to do so.

WE WANTED TO AVOID GANG BATTLES, BUT WE COULDN'T. For nearly a week in Pohwang Market, my gang met up with other *kotjebi* gang members, who egged us on to fight, sometimes me alone against their leader. A few times, though, all of us waged war. We knew we couldn't keep on running from town to town, so we gave in. Unlike the situation in Rajin-Seonbong, these *kotjebi* gangs were not operating only on the fumes of some mythical drug. They still had hope tucked away somewhere inside them, which meant they held something back in battle. Many were also new to the streets. Most lacked experience in tae kwon do and street fighting. Not once did any gang come near hurting us or chasing us away.

After a week of this and no Hyekchul, we decided to check the other markets to see if he was there. As we were walking out of town, we found ourselves surrounded by a man-gang. A tall, giant

Korean with shoulders the width of a cow said he'd been watching us and was impressed with our speed and strength. "But you lack a lot of skills," he said, "skills that if you don't hone, might get you killed."

*Like, really?* I thought, rolling my eyes. "We already lost a brother," I spat at him. I was readying myself for a fight. Instead, though, he sighed and stood down.

"I thought so," he said in a sad voice. "You're the guys who beat up the crew in Rajin-Seonbong but lost someone in the process?"

I grunted a yes.

"Come with us," he said, turning and starting to walk out of the market. "We'll help you," he added, waving a hand over his gang of five young men. I'd say all were eighteen or nineteen years old.

"How do we know we can trust you?" Chulho said with a snarl, not moving from his spot. "Maybe you're spies for the *Shangmoo*."

"You can't know," the man said, stopping and facing Chulho. "But you either trust us, wait and see, or leave and face a gang with that weapon that will tear your scalp off if you're not watching."

I shivered, for I knew he was right. Besides, it wouldn't be that bad to work under another gang. We would have to steal and earn won for them. But in return, we would be fed.

"What's your name?" I called out.

"I can't tell you," he said, taking a few steps toward me. "See, we're all dodging our military service. If we say our names and

you get arrested and tortured, you might spill who we really are.”

I sighed and looked at my brothers, who all nodded slowly.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll come with you.”

The men led us to an abandoned house on the outskirts of town, a one-room home with a kitchen the size of a small cupboard. The house was empty inside except for some plastic buckets the men used as their toilet and to collect water to bathe, piles of clothes and blankets, and cockroaches, lots of them.

“You can call me ‘Big Brother,’” the man said.

“Why are you avoiding your military service?” I asked, looking around at the chipped paint and walls that had concrete falling down from the corners. This house was in even worse shape than my home in Gyeong-seong.

“Please, no questions,” he said, raising his hands into the air. “I’ve told you too much already.”

“But you’d have food, be party members. You’d be safe.” I was unsure how to size this guy up. I was willing to trust him, but at the same time part of me was certainly not believing him. I wanted to tell him about my life in Pyongyang and how rotten it had become since I had left. “Join the army,” I wanted to shout at him. “You’ll be safe.” But I didn’t, for the same reason that Big Brother didn’t want to tell us his and his gang’s real names or their stories. “I just don’t understand. Why would you choose to be homeless rather than fight for our country?” I asked instead. I wasn’t expecting him to answer.

Big Brother laughed then, the way Young-bum and Chulho had laughed at me when I asked them questions at school.

"Look," he finally said, as if he were the schoolteacher and I was in first grade. "My gang and I don't believe in Joseon, because it lies to us. It says Joseon is a paradise and children its kings and queens. But children are dying from terrible starvation and diseases. Kings and queens don't die like this. The military are thieves," he said. "They don't protect people; they steal. I don't believe in the army, not anymore."

"What's that weapon? You know, the one that can tear the scalp off a person," I asked next.

"It's a nunchaku, a martial arts weapon from China or Japan. Who knows. On the streets, it's deadly," Big Brother explained. "I run away myself when I see it coming out." Big Brother was like a mountain of hard gray rock. If he was scared of something, then everyone else should be, too.

"How are they getting them?" Chulho asked. I could hear something in his voice: curiosity. He wanted to find a way to get them and sell them.

"They're making them," replied Big Brother. "I mean, maybe someone somewhere is importing them from China to sell to the street kids. But mostly what I'm hearing is that the street kids are making them from oak wood they carve and chains they steal at the market."

"Should we make some?" I asked.

"No. Too dangerous. If that weapon ever got taken away and used against you, *whew!* I have a better weapon for you." Big Brother pulled from his backpack a handful of metal chopsticks, so slim that if they were hurled at someone's eye, I could see them slicing right through to the brain.

"We'll teach you how to use these to both annoy *kotjebi* enough so that they leave you alone and, if necessary, really hurt. But I'm a bit of a pacifist," Big Brother added. "Exert only the force that is necessary to help you survive. No more. There has been too much death already."

"We're with you on that one," Sangchul said.

"What's the deal?" I asked, eyeing Big Brother up and down. "Why are you helping us?"

"We need bodies, young bodies like yours, to steal for us in the market. You're quick and can get in and out before anyone knows anything has been stolen."

"You want us to work for you?" Chulho said.

"Yeah. Give us won and food. Maybe fight alongside us if we have to face a gang all together, not one-on-one. In exchange, we'll give you a place to stay and train you."

"Do we have any choice?" I asked.

"Yeah," Big Brother said. "You can go. It's cruel out there. Another one of you will die, I promise you that. But you can go whenever you want."

I pinched my eyes shut as my brothers huddled around me to



discuss what to do. Big Brother, I knew, was right. We had to join forces with him and his gang. It was the only way we had a chance at surviving.

EVERY SECOND OR THIRD DAY OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, my brothers and I would head out to the housing divisions and aim those metal chopsticks at the lowest beams of the fences, at the approximate height of a street kid's shins or knees. Against the old abandoned house that became our home for nearly a year, we aimed higher, as if going for a street kid's chest.

Big Brother didn't need to tell me, although he did anyway. The chopsticks were good only at a distance. So he put Min-gook in charge of building our endurance. Min-gook would have us run, barefoot, across the hills, marathon distances, in the heat of summer. And in fall, with sneakers on, we'd run the dirt paths that wove their way through the forests. We'd run the same paths in winter, our feet digging into the snow, adding extra tension to build up our muscles and strength.

Young-bum oversaw our weight-lifting training, using as weights small boulders he picked up in the fields. Big Brother and his gang started doing mock fights with us, during which I taught everyone tae kwon do kicks and punches. But mostly Big Brother taught us street fighting, including holds and how to bite. He and his crew also taught us some stealing techniques, like using two razors instead of one. By placing one razor flat, between our index

and middle fingers, another between our index and thumb, we could make large holes, shaped like half-moons, in our victims' bags, allowing us to steal even more, maybe even the entire contents of a bag. In battle, of course, holding the razors like this could be deadly against a victim's throat.

We stole money for Big Brother and his gang, and by autumn, we were fighting other *kotjebi* gangs alongside them, too. All the fights were easy. We ruled Pohwang.

By winter solstice 1999, my brothers and I were strong, just as strong as the men. And certainly stronger than any of us had ever been in our lives. My chest muscles rippled like the waves on the sea, and my leg and arm muscles when flexed were hard as steel.

**S**tarting in the spring of 1999, every second month or so my gang and I returned to Gyeong-seong for a few days just to check in, to see if our parents had come back. On my first visit, I went to my house and asked the old man who now owned it if anyone had come looking for me. He stared at me through hazy blue eyes, as Young-bum's grandmother had. He opened his mouth to say something, but then the younger man stepped between us and pushed me away.

"If you ever return here, I'll call the *Shangmoo*," he said, kicking me in the rib cage. "Get out of here and never come back."

I could have fought him, that man who stole my house. A burning hatred grew inside me whenever I thought of him. I knew, though, that if I punched him, he would never help me. I needed to believe that if my mother returned, he would at least tell her I was a *kotjebi*, so she could look for me.

Whenever I returned to Gyeong-seong, I'd sneak up to my old house and spy on it from the back of a bush, hoping maybe my parents might come out instead of this other family.

We boys shared few of our experiences in Gyeong-seong other than letting one another know that our parents still had not returned. We all choked on the tears that we refused to share. It was hard to go back there. It was like walking into a grave.

My brothers and I did talk, though, about how we would give anything to have Myeongchul back, even if that meant working underneath another gang like Big Brother's. None of us cared that much anymore about winning. But looking after ourselves to make sure we didn't lose another gang member? That was my new goal. I would fight to my own death. I knew that now.

These thoughts were swirling in my mind when, in the fall, on a visit back to Gyeong-seong, we came face-to-face with Young-bum's old gang, the *Jjacdari-pa*. Spitting angry, they wanted an "all together" fight. The leader of *Jjacdari-pa*, the boy who had busted Young-bum's lip open and forced him to lose a tooth back when we were still all going to school, was like a smaller version of Big Brother. Big and hard. He also had piercing eyes that dug their way into Young-bum. I knew that look now. It meant *kill*.

It was as though Young-bum had done something to really offend him. But all he did was leave—or, rather, get kicked out—because he kept back some won to buy his grandmother medicine. Big Brother had taught me that when my opponents became emo-



tional, that was weakness. Play on it. Make them angrier. So I did. I spat insults at the leader about how his gang didn't know how to fight, how mine had become fierce, how in kicking Young-bum out, the *Jjacdari-pa* had lost its only good fighter.

It worked, and our battle with the *Jjacdari-pa* was over in less than fifteen minutes. Every *Jjacdari-pa* member eventually ran off, the leader calling over his shoulder that they were heading to Rajin-Seonbong to take over the territory we refused to claim for ourselves.

I shook my head as he ran away and slung my arm around Young-bum.

"We should chase after him," Young-bum said.

"Nah, let him have the last word and Rajin-Seonbong. We have you."

IN THE SPRING OF 2000, MY BROTHERS AND I RETURNED from a trip to Gyeong-seong to find Big Brother and his gang gone. Their few things, including metal chopsticks and clothes, were all missing, too. Chulho and I figured that they'd been caught by the police or the *Shangmoo*. Or that they had just picked up and left for a better market. Either way, we weren't surprised. We assumed Big Brother was a target. The police don't take kindly to military dodgers. If caught, Big Brother would have been beaten, maybe even killed. Every male in Joseon must serve ten years in the army; females, seven years. I also knew that with Big Brother's

disappearance, our safe house was no longer safe. The *Shangmoo* would come looking for us soon enough. We, too, had to leave.

We talked as a group and decided to head to Eodaejin, the sea, and conquer the market that we had given up a year earlier, perhaps a little too quickly. This time, we would be ready.

WE CAME INTO EODAEJIN MARKET FROM THE WEST AND ON the offensive, tossing metal chopsticks at the knees and thighs of all the *kotjebi* we saw. They keeled over in pain and shock and then asked us who we were. I told them Chang, and that we'd come from Pohwang. That was enough. Most had heard rumors about us, either from other *kotjebi* or merchants traveling from market to market. We were known as the gang who had defeated the Rajin-Seonbong boys and who had spent a year training with a man-gang. It took only a few days for Eodaejin Market to echo with fictionalized stories of our triumphs, including training sessions that involved our slaying wild boar with our bare hands and hurling nunchaku with such precision we could skin the fur off a bear.

I'd laugh when I'd hear these stories but then wonder after: Was this how Kim Il-sung's childhood snowballed into such an epic? Myeongchul's words came back to me: *Folklore has a funny way of becoming truth.*

One thing was certain. My gang and I had become legend.

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IF MYEONGCHUL WAS OUR VOICE, CHULHO WAS OUR EARS. He would spend hours drinking and smoking with the merchants and flirting with the women, all the while learning their problems and discovering information, including how Joseon rebounded from the great famine caused when the United States launched a nuclear weapon at our eastern shores. Depending on who was telling the story, either hundreds or tens of thousands of people were killed in that attack, and those left alive suffered from all sorts of diseases. The country was being invaded, but Joseon was winning because all our supplies were going to Pyongyang to help our army and navy.

“Do you believe this?” I asked Chulho one evening at the train station, where we were sleeping.

“I think it’s just Pyongyang’s way of taking all the country’s food and *sool*,” he replied slowly, as if admitting something to himself for the first time.

“But for the merchants who give you an egg, a piece of tofu, for you to listen to them, you’ll believe anything, right?”

“Yeah,” he replied. He then smiled. “Somewhere in the middle is the truth.”

“Okay, but how do we know where the middle is?” Sangchul asked, joining us. He was nursing a wound on the palm of his hand. He had caught it on a metal fence while running away from a vendor.

“I have no idea,” Chulho answered, “but maybe we can figure it

out together." He looked at each of us. "Listen to the merchants. Most people talk and talk and talk and never hear a thing anyone else is saying. But try to really listen. Like when we bring food back every night to share with one another, try to bring home one story each to divvy up between us."

"Oh, speaking of merchants," Young-bum said, "they want us to work for them."

"Spit it out," Chulho said, facing Young-bum and folding his arms across his chest.

"Several of the fish vendors have asked if we could load and unload their crates and chase other *kotjebi* away," Young-bum explained. "In return, they'll give us food every day and some won if we don't steal from them."

"Just what Myeongchul wanted . . . a legitimate job," Unsik said in a hushed voice.

We all fell silent at the mention of his name.

"The merchants won't turn us in to the *Shangmoo* or the police?" Min-gook eventually asked.

"No. They assured me they wouldn't," Young-bum said. "They said we could steal from other vendors . . . enough that maybe we can survive through an entire winter if we save." He then turned and faced Sangchul directly. "They even asked me if any of us performed. I told them about you. If you want to sing for some extra won, sing. The merchants will let you stand on one of their boxes as a stage."



A quiet fell over us again. I don't know what the others were thinking, but I sure wished Myeongchul were around to perform, too.

MY BROTHERS AND I LIVED BY THE SEA IN A FISHING SHED that one of the merchants lent us.

During that summer of 2000, we spent our days in the market beating up other *kotjebi* and lugging fish, and our nights staring up at the sky and listening to the cackle of burning logs in Unsik's fires. I fell asleep to lullabies I swear I could hear coming off the sea, and woke to twisted bread being warmed on the bonfire.

I gained the confidence to speak to the vendors with whom I now worked, the way Chulho did. I would sit with these old sea-worn men on low stools around fires, waiting for customers, drinking *sool*, smoking their hand-rolled cigarettes, and listening, trying to really listen, to their stories.

The merchants told me that Joseon's prisons, particularly those near the border, were now bursting with women, many of whom were mothers, including pregnant women who were being forced to abort their fetuses.

What could pregnant women do to the government? I thought. What secrets did our mothers know to sell to the South or to America? But putting in my own opinion on things, Chulho had taught me, was not listening.

"Because the babies were conceived in China," one merchant

answered, as if reading my mind. "Maybe by Chinese husbands. Maybe by men from here but who have not lived in Joseon for a long time. Doesn't matter. Either way, Joseon now wants these babies dead. They're not pure North Koreans, you see."

"Children are supposed to be the kings and queens of Joseon," I finally quipped. What I was really thinking, though, was that my mother could be one of these women.

"It gets even worse," the merchant continued. "If someone from Joseon manages to make it through China to the South—Namjoseon—the government there will give them money and food, even a house to live in. Namjoseon will ask for all sorts of secrets and then, when all is said that is needed to be said, Joseon people are killed."

Everyone really did hate us, just as our eternal leader had always said. Maybe all along, the government was trying to protect us. Listening to the merchants made me more confused than ever. I didn't know whom to trust. Joseon really was an island on its own. And my parents? Where were they? I didn't even want to think about it. My gut hurt so bad from all the worry, I started drinking water all day long mixed with syrup made from the opium plant. It was the only thing that helped me forget on some days. On other days, *sool* was enough. And still on others, I had to beat someone up to feel as though I wasn't spiraling out of control.

A merchant who sold old refurbished radios told me that opium and alcohol were the gods of the streets. I had actually ap-

proached him wanting to buy one of his radios. I'd heard that new radios captured signals from Chinese, sometimes even Southern, stations. That's why, whenever my father was given a radio in Pyongyang, the government would put some device inside before he could bring it home, so the signals would be blocked, all signals except those from Joseon.

I left radio-less, with two bottles of *sool* instead.

"As a small child, I thought Kim Il-sung was a god," I told Sangchul on a lazy day in late summer as we floated in the waves of the sea, *sool* moving through my veins and making me tired, as I had started drinking in the morning. For a moment I felt the water cradling me the way the night sky seemed to do the earth. For a moment I had this experience in which I felt I was a star and someone far away was looking up at me. A calm moved through me, a peace I hadn't felt in a long time.

Sangchul wasn't saying anything.

"My father was kicked out of Pyongyang," I finally said.

"I know," he replied. "Why?"

"I have no idea. All he ever told me was that we were going on vacation. You know," I continued after a long silence, "I think the worst thing anyone can do to another human being isn't take away their home, their job, their parents. I think the worst thing anyone can do is make them stop believing in something higher, something good, something pure, a reason for everything—hope, maybe. God, maybe."

"Maybe hope and God are the same," he said dreamily.

"Maybe. And maybe the best oppressors know to take away our physical security, then our connection to loved ones, then hope, then dreams, and finally God dies along with everything else," I whispered. "Then we're dead until a savior comes along."

"Kim Il-sung was our savior," Sangchul said in a low voice.

"But who's going to save us from Kim Il-sung?" Chulho, swimming out to join us, chirped in.

"Maybe we can find ourselves a magic gourd to pull us all through?" I mumbled.



Every time any of us got a *shibwon*, we squirrelled it away in a plastic bag, which we hid under a stone near a birch tree. We wanted to save enough so that we could buy our food for the entire winter and not have to fight other *kotjebi* for the right to a part of a market to steal for it.

In the early fall of 2000, we finally dug out the bag and counted our money. We didn't have nearly what we wanted—maybe only enough to go a month without stealing, and even that was a stretch.

We needed more, so we started stealing from the government farms, stuffing corn, peppers, lettuce, cucumbers, potatoes, and even poppy seeds from the opium fields into our bags. We sold the produce to the merchants.

We wore black long-sleeved shirts and pants that made us sweat. But the clothing helped keep us unseen, especially on the

darkest nights. We'd crawl through the fields, sometimes lying flat on our stomachs, using our elbows to pull us along. We needed to remain hidden from Worker Peasant Red Guards that doubled up when the first crops started to be harvested.

One time, when a full moon lit us up, I stifled a laugh looking around at all of us. We looked like a special ops unit. "My childhood dream was to lead a paramilitary group like us," I reminded my brothers. "But instead of laying bombs, scoping out enemy territory, maybe even acting as snipers . . ."

"We're stealing carrots," Young-bum finished the sentence for me.

"I guess dreams do come true," Chulho scoffed.

It wasn't that hard to rob the government farms, at least at first. The Worker Peasant Red Guards didn't seem well organized. It was easy to sneak past them.

As a result, I grew cocky, and perhaps that was my downfall.

One night, some of the guards caught my brothers and me when I thought it would be safe to just walk onto a farm.

They beat us with long sticks and locked all of us in an airless shed, which was so small and cramped we couldn't really move much.

I choked on the stench of manure, which, when the moon spilled in through the windows, I could see was piled from floor to ceiling in a corner of the shed in tin buckets stacked one on top of the other. In the morning, black and blue, we were told we had

two choices: Spread the manure on the fields as fertilizer or go to the *guhoso*.

I dry-heaved because I had no food or water in me to throw up, and not just from the foul stench. Some of the manure, the guards boasted, had been taken from the outhouses at the prisons. The manure was a mix of animal and human waste.

While my brothers and I worked, the guards chewed gum, smoked our cigarettes, and followed us to make sure we didn't run away.

CHULHO ARRIVED BACK AT THE SHED BY THE SEA ONE EVENING in the fall of 2000, announcing in a singsong voice that he had heard that in the nearby town of Hwaseong was a farm called Ilho. A merchant had proposed a deal: If we stole its only product, pears, we could keep half the stock for ourselves to eat or sell at other markets. For the other half, the merchant would give us thirty won per kilogram—enough, Chulho beamed, that we could coast through the winter months.

"We have to take this job," Chulho said, dancing around Un-sik's fire. He was drunk. "We can find a safe, warm place to live and just, well, rest through the winter."

*I know this farm*, I thought to myself as Chulho chattered on about his plan to steal the pears. Each fall in Pyongyang, my father would come home with a box of pears that he said were from Hwaseong. The pears were large, honey-colored, and dripping in



syrup that slipped down my chin and stained my shirts when I ate them.

"These are pears for our general," I interrupted Chulho. "They're for Kim Jong-il and the Pyongyang elite."

Chulho swatted me across the forehead. "Can you listen?" he spat. "I'm talking."

"No," I cut in. "Your plan is too risky. These are prized pears, the nectars of the gods. I have this sinking feeling. I don't want to do this one."

Chulho slapped me across the head again. "Get a grip!" he yelled. "If we can get enough pears, we can go back to Gyeongseong and Young-bum's house. If the house has been sold, we can buy it back with the profits from the pears. We can wait for our parents there. Stealing these pears is our ticket to a new life."

I was outvoted. Everyone wanted to follow Chulho to Ilho. Of course, I would never allow my brothers to go anywhere without me. If anyone was going to die in battle, I had vowed it would be me, so I tagged along, too. With every step, though, I had this terrible feeling that we were walking into a trap.

WE HAD TO WAIT SEVERAL DAYS IN THE STATION FOR A train headed to Hwaseong, and the night one came, the clouds sank on top of the mountains, covering their peaks. There was that stillness in the air, that omen of a storm.

When we arrived in Ilho, the first thing my brothers and I did



was find a safe place, an old wood log off the side of the road in the middle of a cluster of evergreens, where we would meet up if we got separated.

We then slid up toward one of the pear farms and hid ourselves in some haystacks in a neighboring field. I peered out through a tiny hole I made in the straw, studying the guards as they marched back and forth. I was searching for a break in their routine—a window to steal our way into the pear trees.

Nothing.

These Worker Peasant Red Guards were well organized and well prepared for thieves.

But the night guards, the two who came on shortly before midnight, were different. They were definitely locals, with hard accents and even harder, dirtier appearances. They were tired—I could tell by their sluggish gait—and stayed close to the outskirts of the farm, rather than weaving in and out of the trees the way the day guards did. One night guard carried a rifle, but I knew from my father that only the State Security Agency, the police of the federal government, ever had guns with real bullets. The State Security Agency wore a different uniform than these men, and it didn't care about farming. The *Shangmoo*, the police, and the Worker Peasant Red Guards who did care were never given real ammunition.

Under the battery-operated spotlight, which swooped into the pear trees and then out again, I could see that the other guard

carried a wooden gun painted to look real, much like the weapon my father had made for me when I was a child.

Every hour, right to the second, the two men took breaks behind a pillar to share a cigarette.

The spotlight, I also observed, didn't dig itself in deep enough to reach the center of the trees, which had been planted in neat rows, pruned to look like soldiers standing at attention.

"Here's the plan," I whispered to the others. "When the guards are smoking, with their backs turned, and the spotlight has begun its circle to the west of the trees, run, and run fast and far. Count out two minutes, then lie flat on your stomachs with your hands and feet stretched out. Watch for the spotlight then. It should float over you, because it floats across the periphery of the trees every two minutes. Right when the spotlight has left you, run again for two minutes and then lie flat again. The third time you do this, the spotlight won't reach you. Start picking the pears. You should be about in the center of the trees and able to pick as much as you want with no one noticing. When done, make your way back out the same way you went in, until you are close enough to see the guards again. When they go for a smoke, leave and head to the safe place."

The problem, though, was that we were all salivating at the thought of the taste of sweetness. I'd been hiding in the haystacks for hours, and my legs were cramped and hurt. My entire body tingled from a lack of circulation. Unsik told me later that he was

imagining baking the pears on the bonfire with chocolate. Young-bum was planning to eat a pear right on the spot.

We were overeager and took off running just as the one guard lit up the smoke but before the other had made it behind the pillar.

Min-gook, Chulho, and Young-bum were fast and hadn't seen our error. I was behind them and saw it all. The guards caught Unsik and Sangchul before the boys even made it into the trees. I managed to sneak into the orchard and hide behind a tree trunk. I watched the guards wrestle Unsik and Sangchul to the ground, then tie rope around their wrists. The guards then dragged my brothers across the stone path to their shed.

For a moment I felt paralyzed, not knowing what to do. Then I started to swear under my breath. We'd promised, we'd all made a vow that we would never leave anyone behind. Maybe everything had been taken from us, but we still had our word, and that meant something. I wouldn't betray my brothers.

Still swearing, I ran until I caught up to Chulho, Min-gook, and Young-bum, who, being fast, were in the center of the farm with their bags already bursting with pears by the time I reached them.

Breathless, I told them what had happened.

Chulho shook his head, spat, and swore, too.

"We made a pact," Min-gook said.

"I know," I whispered.

We dropped our bags and walked with our heads lowered,

shuffling our feet, back toward the guards, our hands in the air to indicate our surrender. There was no point in trying to fight the guards to get our friends back. They were powerful men to begin with, but even if we overpowered them, the police and the *Shangmoo* would hunt us down until they found us. We had only one choice: Turn ourselves in.

THE GUARDS DIDN'T BEAT US. THEY LOCKED US FOR THE night in the shed, which luckily didn't have any manure in it.

In the morning, they walked us to the *guhoso*.

When we entered the main gate, we saw some *kotjebi* sweeping and others chopping wood with axes, all of them watched over by guards. There were two long buildings for the *kotjebi*: one for males, the other for females. When I walked, or rather, when the guards pushed me, into the building for us boys, I immediately saw the torn gray wool blankets piled in the corner, which moved with lice and other bugs. Four boys lay on the ground wrapped in some of these blankets, lifeless, like Young-bum's grandmother when I first met her. It was raining, and as I moved into the room, droplets of water dripped on me from the holes in the roof.

The kids in the *guhoso* ranged in age from ten to eighteen, which made me wonder where the little ones went. But I didn't have time to answer that question. My brothers and I tried to get out, of course, on our very first night there. But we discovered that the planks of wood nailed over the windows had been nailed

so tight we'd need a tool to jimmy them open. We were trying to pick the lock in the only door with a piece of metal Chulho had smuggled into the prison in his mouth when the manager and some guards unlocked it for us. As punishment for trying to escape, the *guhoso* manager tied Unsik to a pole, the way the police tied prisoners waiting for execution, in the center of the *guhoso* yard. For that night and the following day, Unsik wasn't allowed to eat, drink, or use the toilet. By the time he was let loose, he reeked of his own excrement.

After that . . . well, we never got much sleep, any of us. For one, there was no room to lie down, so we slept sitting up, cross-legged, leaning against one another. The older *kotjebi* made the youngest boys sleep near the drafty door and windows. The younger ones had coughs, moaned and cried, and urinated on us all night long. In the day, I could see that the little ones were so malnourished that their skin hung from their bodies like oversize T-shirts, but their stomachs shot out in front of them like they were pregnant women. I soon discovered why. When our meals came—twice a day—the older boys took all the food, which was pretty much always rotten potatoes, moldy and soft and covered in flies. The little ones were given the leftovers, which weren't much. Simply put, the older boys in the *guhoso*, many of whom were part of gangs, were killing the younger ones.

I was also kept awake by the girls in the other building moaning and groaning. Even though we were separated, I still knew



what was going on. Sex, lots of it. I may have left Pyongyang an innocent boy, believing that holding a girl's hand meant marriage and then babies. But I knew now that sex trailed poverty like alcohol. And girls—well, they had it bad if they were good-looking. That's why during the day many of the girls hid in the back of the jail, cutting their lips with sharp sticks and pulling out their hair. They wanted to be ugly, so the guards wouldn't choose them.

A few mornings each week, I'd awake to stare into the open eyes of a child, usually the youngest, who had died in the night. I kid you not, but sometimes in that place just before awakening, I'd see that dead boy walking among us, no longer sickly but alive and sparkling like the sun on the crest of a wave. He would see me, wave, as if waiting for me to say goodbye, and then leave . . . up, like a balloon full of helium on Parade Day.

"We've become murderers," I whispered to Chulho one night. "The state is clever. We'll kill each other before ever defying them."

EVERY MORNING, WE STOOD OUTSIDE IN SINGLE-FILE LINES, like we had done at school, while the *guhoso* manager did work selections. He sent some kids to clean the toilets, others to the mountains to find kindling and firewood. A few were sent to help cook in the kitchen, which basically meant skinning the potatoes, boiling them, and when not doing that, cutting wood. Some boys were also sent out to pick up *kotjebi* who had died in the market

and bury them in the hills. I'd seen them do this from the other side, the freedom side. Not realizing at the time that these were *guhoso* boys, I'd see these kids, watched over by guards, lug the stiff bodies from the market in old rickety wooden wheelbarrows.

What I picked up pretty quickly was that the *guhoso* manager had a racket going on. He sent the strongest *kotjebi* gang to Hwaseong Market to steal cigarettes and money for him and the other guards. At first, my brothers and I all slunk to the very back and scrunched our shoulders down to avoid being picked. None of us wanted to work for these *guhoso* skinny pigs, who would drink the alcohol that had been stolen for them at night, chain-smoke, and play card games like *sasakki*. These guards, when really drunk, would stagger and fall over us, looking for and calling out the names of the pretty girls. They were lost in their stupor and had come to the boys' building instead.

I hated the smell of them. All of them.

One day, however, the manager with a wide, pockmarked face chose Young-bum to go to the market. I guess something about the gang the manager had been using had ticked him off, because when he stood at the front, his eyes floated over his usual boys and went straight to Young-bum.

I had to be quick on my feet, because I didn't want Young-bum to refuse and be hung out on the pole, because that's what the guards did with any kid who said no to their work duty. I also didn't want Young-bum to go alone to the market or, worse,

with the other gang, who surely, when the guards weren't looking, would beat him up for interfering with their work.

I flung my hand high in the air and waved it at the manager. A guard dragged me out of the line and up to the front. When we stood face-to-face, the manager spat saliva onto my cheek. "What do you want, street boy?" he croaked.

Wiping my face with my sleeve, I told him about our gang, how we were one of the best. "We're fast on our feet," I boasted. I then told the manager that if he didn't believe me, to ask the merchants, because everyone in markets far and wide had heard of me and my gang.

The man looked at me with his beady eyes, which gave me the shivers. I saw nothing human inside him. "I know who you are," he finally said. "Everyone does. *Chang-pa*, the most feared gang in the province. I was testing you when I picked your street brother. I've been waiting for your gang to volunteer. My old boys have become weak. The merchants now hide their things from them. I want new blood . . . yours."

I inhaled deeply, thinking here was our chance to escape. We could overtake the guards at the market.

"Except you, him, and him," the *guhoso* manager said, pointing to me, Unsik, and Sangchul. "You three remain behind as collateral to make sure your gang will come back. I know"—he leaned over, his breath smelling of fish paste and day-old alcohol—"I know how you operate. You'll never leave anyone behind."

Before Young-bum left for the market, I pulled him aside. "You need to bring as much stuff as you can—including won, alcohol, desserts . . . whatever you can steal—back to this bastard, because my plan is to gain his trust. I want us, and us alone, to steal for him from now on. We will become invaluable to him so that he gives us extra food, and then somehow, when he is not looking, we'll run away."

MY BROTHERS RETURNED AT THE END OF THE DAY WITH bags full of cigarettes and alcohol, including the pricey and hard-to-find *takjoo*, North Korean rice wine.

The manager stuffed a twisted bread stick into his mouth and, spitting crumbs everywhere, announced in front of all the boys that he had made the lineup again, that from that day on, my boys, and my boys alone, would go to the market.

Being the *guhoso* manager's favorite didn't mean life was good for us, though. Sure, he didn't make me, Unsik, and Sangchul do chores. I no longer got toilet duty, which meant loading our feces into buckets and carrying them to the oxcart for other boys to take to the farms to be spread as fertilizer by yet other boys captured while trying to raid the farms. I also didn't have to scrub the buckets afterward with pebbles in the cold river.

But we didn't get any extra food. And the other *kotjebi* gangs in the *guhoso* didn't like that we were all of a sudden the *it* boys. Four guys jumped me when I was alone one afternoon circling the

*guhoso* grounds, getting exercise. The skin over my rib cage was bruised blue from being kicked so much and so hard in the same spot, and it hurt to breathe. At night, the other *kotjebi* gangs knew to stay away because my gang was all there to protect me, but by day, Unsik, Sangchul, and I were free game. And as the leader of the gang, I was the main target. Whenever the other boys had a chance, they would kick me in the groin or back, punch me in the stomach, and poke me in the eyes.

Sangchul, Unsik, and I started volunteering to do chores again, begging to collect wood on the mountain. Because we had to spread out, the manager always assigned extra guards for this duty. Every night, Young-bum would sneak me a pack of cigarettes and some bread, which I'd slip the next day to a guard to let Unsik, Sangchul, and me stay close to him to act as our heavy, to keep the other gang members away.

One day, about a month after we arrived, the manager called Young-bum and me into his office. "I'm going to send you and your guys to the special forces unit. You can become military. You are the bravest boys I've ever met," he told us.

"When?" Young-bum asked, wide-eyed and eager. We both had discussed that it was just a matter of time before the merchants got to know who we were and started hiding their goods when my boys walked into the market. Then the *guhoso* manager would move on to a new gang and we'd miss the opportunity, whatever it was, to escape.



"Next week," the manager said, beaming. I didn't believe him, though. For one, I knew as the son of a father in the military that the military only allows kids starting at the age of eighteen to begin their mandatory service. No child can start younger than that. I was fourteen. Chulho, our eldest, was fifteen.

So, of course, that next week turned into next month. Youngbum and the market crew were getting exhausted stealing as much as they were to make the guards happy.

My gang and I were more trapped than ever.

**M**aybe because of the darker days that came as we approached the winter solstice, the night guards began to drink more and more. When they did, they became brutal, coming in and beating us kids for no reason and taking more of the girls. The girls, when I saw them the next day . . . Well, let's just say something about them had left. They looked out with eyes that seemed to be coated in frost, blinking slowly, as if they were living in a place where time moved backward. They wouldn't tell anyone where they'd been. But I knew. Street girls became *yu-ryeong*. Street boys became dragons breathing fire until they got themselves killed.

One morning I found a guard passed out on the ground outside our door, his face stuck to a thin layer of frost. It dawned on me as I watched him drooling and grumbling in his drunken sleep state that there was a way we could escape.

I flicked my fingers at Young-bum, indicating I wanted to have a meeting. He trailed behind me as I walked around the circumference of the building, as if getting some exercise. Around the back and away from the guards, I whispered my idea to him.

THAT NIGHT, WHEN THE GUARDS LOCKED US IN OUR BUILDING, my boys and I started phase one of my plan. Earlier in the day, Sangchul had scooped a long, slim piece of metal from the garbage. Chulho and I used it to pull out the nails across the window, but it was hard. The nails were in tight. It took us several hours, in fact. Light was just starting to stream in through the window when all the nails were loosened.

That day, my brothers stole more alcohol from the Hwaseong Market than they ever had. They also stole food, including dried fish and clams.

When the manager saw it all, his greed came well before his responsibilities, just as I had hoped. He jumped up and down and clapped, his jowls flapping like flags. He shouted: "Tomorrow is a day off for the *kotjebi*. Tonight, we will have a festival."

The manager let my gang and me stay out past the usual time to pass the food and alcohol around. By midnight, the guards and manager were rip-roaring drunk, singing revolutionary songs at the top of their lungs.

The guards eventually passed out one by one, in such synchronicity it was like watching the close of a performance at the Mass

Games in the Rungrado Stadium in Pyongyang. That's when the *guhoso* manager locked us boys in our building for the night. But my gang and I stayed awake and listened to the manager stumbling around, trying to wake the other guards to get them to drink with him.

"The roll of thunder at Kim Jong-il's peak," he sang in a booming baritone voice.

"How many *kotjebi* does it take to change a lightbulb?" he then called out.

"Four," he replied, since all the guards were asleep. "Because you're all so stupid!" He then threw rocks against the outside wall of our building.

Finally, I heard his body fall to the ground with a thud.

Then I heard his snoring, which was almost as loud as his singing.

My boys and I pulled the plank away from the window. We then pushed open the glass and jumped out.

We climbed over the wooden fence and ran at full speed, side by side, down the dirt road, not stopping until we reached the train station.

WE GOT OFF AT GILJU, WHERE WE DECIDED WE WERE ALL too weak after our stay in the *guhoso* to fight against other *kotjebi*. The best way to survive the winter would be to surrender to the first gang we faced. We would work for them.

The gang we met was called *Kim-pa*, and it had strong fighters; some even knew tae kwon do. They'd been homeless for a long time, but they hadn't developed any real strategies to steal. My gang taught them our techniques, including how to whistle and use sign language in the market to communicate orders to one another. I also taught them the importance of having two homes and how to communicate by laying a certain number of stones. "If, for example, there are three pebbles placed in a spot you all agree on—and it must be a spot hidden away, so the police and other gangs can't mess with it—it means that one of your brothers has come back and found it too dangerous to stay. Maybe the police or the *Shangmoo* are sniffing around, or another gang has taken over the place. Three pebbles means to go to the other safe place," I explained to their leader, Kim.

"Where did you learn all this?" he asked.

"When I was a child, I played army with my father and sometimes my mother. We would reenact many of Kim Il-sung's great battles against the Japanese, especially the one near Bocheonbo Mountain."

The *Kim-pa* had been in Gilju for a year and worked for many of the merchants. Because we were part of *Kim-pa*, these vendors shielded us when the police or the *Shangmoo* came. Some of the merchants even said we were their very own kids and not *kotjebi*. The vendors let Sangchul sing on New Year's and on Kim Jong-il's birthday on February 16.



I need to say that, despite all of our hard living—cigarettes; alcohol; bad, rotten food; opium—Sangchul's voice was still magnificent. His falsetto was a cascading waterfall that softened even the most hardened hearts. "In the valley where there are no tigers, the fox is king," I imagined Myeongchul would have said after this winter.

Indeed, in Gilju, we had no predators.

Our first mistake was moving on.

IN THE SPRING OF 2001, WE LEFT GILJU, LANDING IN KIMCHAEK, mostly by accident because we had hopped the first train headed out of the station, not realizing it was going south when we wanted to go north. While Kimchaek was on the coast, which I liked, we didn't stay long. There was little food, for one. Kimchaek was the closest sea city to Pyongyang that we'd visited, and I think most of its food, particularly fish, was going to the capital. We stuck around the train station waiting to go somewhere else. One *kotjebi* told us the tracks were being repaired. Another said there was no electricity. Whatever the reason, there were just no trains running anywhere.

Our nights were spent in total darkness. None of the people living in the train station dared light a candle, a pinecone dipped in resin, or a kerosene lamp, fearing the police would see and raid the place. So my brothers and I found ourselves huddling close together, dodging bats and drunken men falling on top of us. The

room stank of waste, for no one dared leave in the night to go outside and use a toilet. There were some women who sashayed around the station whispering, "Do you want a nightflower?"

I certainly knew now what was going on.

"I died a long time ago," a woman, who I was pretty sure was one of the nightflowers, told Chulho on our third day. I glanced quickly at her and then away, not wanting to embarrass her. I got enough of a look to know she'd been pretty once, with full lips and round eyes. Her hair was frizzy, but she looked clean. "I was sent to Rodong-dal-ryondae," she said, her voice faltering at the mention of Joseon's main prison, where few ever left alive, or so I had been told.

I came to realize then that everyone had a story. Everyone was affected by the famine—everyone outside Pyongyang, that is. I sometimes felt, listening to people tell their stories to Chulho, that there was a competition to see whose story was worst.

I got up, not wanting to hear this woman's sad tale, and walked to the other side of the station, where a young street girl, maybe my age, fifteen now, was rubbing a tin cup with a dirty rag. I'd been watching her since we arrived. She made me think of the orchid Kimilsungia, bred special for our eternal leader, with her watery black eyes set in the center of her bright, oval-shaped face. Something stirred inside me. Something fresh and light when I thought of her.

"Can I sit beside you?" I asked, lighting up a cigarette. By now,

I was chain-smoking so much that my fingertips had turned yellow.

"Yes," she said in a voice that chilled me like the winter wind, for she had the accent of Pyongyang.

"Are you from the capital?" I asked as I knelt down beside her. She really didn't need to answer. I knew. What I really wanted to know was, had she been forced to leave, too? I had believed for so long that my family was the only one. So far, I'd never met another *kotjebi* from Pyongyang.

"This world is not for the living anymore. Tread lightly, for all the dragons now fall," she said in a steely voice, which made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end the way the *yu-ryeong* did.

"You're a seer!" I exclaimed with a gasp.

The young woman turned to face me. Her complexion was smooth, and the whites in her eyes were bright. She wasn't suffering from malnutrition, at least not yet. Her brown irises had yellow dots, like a spiral pathway lined in candles.

"I left my body a long time ago," she continued in a soft, low voice. "Now I can only see the dead. And there is death around you."

I swallowed hard. "Are you sure?" I then shook my head and admonished myself. *I don't believe in fortune-tellers, I scolded myself. They sell folk stories, not facts.*

"I see you going to the South," she continued, ignoring my

question. "I see a hand taking yours." She then smiled. "I see you becoming a teacher. But before this happens . . . you need to remember to tread lightly, for all the dragons now fall."

"She's crazy. Don't listen to her," an old woman said, coming up behind me and pushing me to get up. I dusted my pants off as the old woman sat down beside the girl.

"Go," the old lady said in a creaky voice, like a rusted door hinge. "This girl has been hit in the head and knows nothing anymore."

WE FINALLY TOOK A TRAIN TO EORANG, JUMPING FROM the car when the train was still in motion. I landed hard, sending a shock through me, and rolled until I came to a stop in some mud. That was definitely an omen of what was to come. The merchants at Eorang Market beat us with clubs and told us to go away. They refused to discuss any arrangements for us to watch their stalls in exchange for food. One man told us we were all wild and crazy and couldn't be trusted. I wanted to tell the merchants about the gang in Rajin-Seonbong Market. Now, those boys were wild and crazy, high on the drug nicknamed ice that they got somewhere from someone who was importing it from China. This drug was made in laboratories and not grown in fields like our opium. But the merchants all plugged their ears, not wanting to talk to us at all.

The Eorang Market gangs were not strong, and we knew we could take them and take control of the merchants by fighting



back. But we needed a few weeks of training, running the hills, lifting stones, mock fights with one another. We had become soft as kings in Gilju. We needed to become warriors again, the way Big Brother trained us, and refind that hunger that became fuel that we used to conquer foes. We decided that until we were ready, we would steal from the government farms instead of fight for territory in the market.

What I didn't know then was that we had all become dragons, too sure of ourselves and too coddled. We weren't as sharp as we had been. This was to prove to be our fatal flaw.

W

e headed out of the city on foot, the sun setting behind us, walking along the dirt roads, which eventually became mud paths weaving in and out of the hills of Orang County in North Hamgyeong Province. The air was fresh and filled with the scents of pine and cedar. No matter which direction we looked there were mountains.

"There is a rock somewhere near a river around here," Chulho said, "that the locals say brings good fortune. Make a wish at the rock, and it comes true."

"How does it do that?" Young-bum asked.

"Some spirit lives inside it."

"*Shan-shin-ryong-nim*," I whispered.

"You know it?" asked Young-bum.

"I've heard of the spirit," I replied.

"Follow me," Chulho said, walking out in front.

“Where?” I asked.

“Up there,” he said, pointing to a nearby mountain and rock face that stretched up for hundreds of meters, with slopes and slabs that made me think of the story of Kim Il-sung’s daring march, the *Learning Journey of a Thousand Miles*.

“That story was folklore, you know,” I said to Chulho, who had already started to climb.

“What story?” he called out.

“The one in which Kim Il-sung walked as a child from China to North Korea. It was made up to make us think he was a god. You know,” I continued, watching Chulho’s technique, “you’re as good a climber as any mountain goat. From now on, I nickname you ‘Ram’!”

It took us a couple of hours to clamber up the mountain, digging our hands into the *huecos* to pull ourselves up, thrusting our bare toes into the crevices to give us support. But it was worth it. When we finally reached the top, it was as if we were gods looking down. From this vantage point, Joseon looked like a painting worthy of the halls of Pyongyang’s finest buildings, a painting of swaying fields and tall evergreen forests framed by mountains. The sky was dyed pink and orange by the setting sun.

I could see for miles, including the government fields that lay low below us in the valley. Looking at the fields from up here was like looking at the stars from the sand: I felt everything was in order. Innocent. Pure. Peaceful.

The mountain had a flat top with two large polished patina boulders set side by side, touching each other.

I couldn't help but think as I closed my eyes and felt the sun on my face that this place had been built by a hand reaching down from the stars, putting things just so. Maybe that was how the lake in Baekdu Mountain had been formed.

WE LIVED AT THE ORANG TRAIN STATION PART-TIME, AND every few days we headed to the sea to bathe in the warm water.

We stole by night—potatoes, carrots, and cucumbers—which we sold at the market for food, *sool*, and cigarettes. The merchants soon began to trust us and left their goods out, knowing we were buying not stealing. And the other market gangs, fearing our reputation, left us alone.

At the end of the potato season that year, 2001, when I was confident we had this town, I had a dream that disturbed me to my core.

Young-bum's grandmother was in it, wearing a long white dress. She was years younger than she was when she died. She was beautiful—breathtaking, even. She didn't look at me, though. She was crossing a river, walking on water, carrying in her arms a boy dressed in black. I could not see the child's face. She disappeared on the other side of the river in some bulrushes.

I awoke, panting, the words of the young seer I had met at the train station in Kimchaek playing over and over in my mind: *This*



*world is not for the living anymore. Tread lightly, for all the dragons now fall.*

I WAS STILL THINKING ABOUT THE DREAM WHEN WE STOLE our way onto a government potato farm.

The guards had caught another *kotjebi* gang earlier in the evening and were beating them in the shed. We could hear the boys' screams moving across the fields with us. Their capture allowed us to go unnoticed.

As I plucked potatoes and stuffed them into my bag, I heard a fist or a bat or something hit hard flesh and bone. For a moment I stopped what I was doing and looked around. Chulho, digging, hissed for me to get a move on.

Then I saw a light dance across the crops.

I stopped what I was doing and crouched down low.

It was Chulho, not Unsik, who gave three long whistles, meaning danger, time to leave and quick.

I whisked my bag onto my shoulder and ran at top speed, weaving in and out of the crops, hoping to lose anyone who might be on my trail. As I drew near our safe spot, though, something made me stop. I whistled for Chulho and Min-gook, who were up ahead, to come back as Sangchul and Unsik pulled up alongside me.

"Where is Young-bum?" I said, breathing heavily, catching my breath.



"Maybe in there." Min-gook motioned to some nearby pine trees.

I looked up at the sky, which was cloudless. The stars seemed to shine brighter than I'd ever seen them before. The constellation Ursa Major was directly above me. I stared at the brightest star, Chilseong, and all her children that made up the Big Dipper.

Chulho tugged on my sleeve, trying to get me to run. But I brushed his hand away. "They have Young-bum. I know they do," I said.

"We need to get out of here or else we're all going back to the *guhoso*," Min-gook said.

"Trust me. I heard . . . I heard . . . *I heard* . . ." I was stammering now, my thoughts moving quickly, the way Min-gook ran.

"What did you hear?" Chulho demanded.

"The sound of a club on flesh," I finally managed to get out. "The sound didn't come from the shed where the guards were beating the other *kotjebi*. The sound came from outside."

Once again, the seer's words came to me: *This world is not for the living anymore. Tread lightly, for all the dragons now fall.*

"Something bad has happened," I said in a hushed voice. "I know it. I need to go back."

I WALKED TOWARD THE MAIN BUILDING OF THE FARM, crouching low in the crops in the hopes that maybe, just maybe, I was wrong and the guards didn't have Young-bum. Then, if the

guards didn't see me, I could scamper away once I knew we were all safe.

The screams from the shed had stopped. As I drew near, all I heard coming from inside was the sound of muffled whimpering. I swallowed hard, knowing the guards had abandoned torturing the other gang to look for us.

Suddenly, a light shone in my face. I stood up tall on shaky legs and raised my hands into the air.

"Get out of here," a gruff voice said to me.

The flashlight moved from me to a guard who was holding up Young-bum. Young-bum's head hung down and loose, as if he were a puppet whose handler was waiting to go onstage.

"Take your friend with you," the guard growled.

I moved cautiously toward Young-bum, half expecting to be walking into a trap. But neither guard moved to capture me as I lifted up Young-bum's face and studied his wounds. Blood dripped from his mouth, eyes, and nose.

The guard carrying Young-bum pushed him into my arms, turned, and walked away.

I must have been a giant that night, for I lifted Young-bum onto my shoulders and walked with wide, strong steps across the potato field. I didn't stop when I saw the others, who were waiting for me. I didn't stop at the pine trees, bundled together as if a child had planted them. I marched until I reached the Orang River, where I laid the moaning Young-bum, seeping blood onto

my clothes and mumbling sentences I could not make out, on the sand on the bank.

My brothers soon joined me, kneeling by Young-bum's side the way they had when Myeongchul was hurt.

Unsik passed me a pinecone smeared with resin, which I lit with my trembling hands, not really wanting to see the full extent of Young-bum's wounds. I bit my lip to stop myself from screaming out loud when I could see. The entire right side of Young-bum's neck was bloodied and blue, soft like paper floating on the sea. I felt that if I touched it, it would break into a thousand bits and disintegrate.

Young-bum's breathing was short and raspy, like his grandmother's before she died.

I quickly tore off my shirt and had Unsik dip it into the water. I then patted down Young-bum's burning face.

Unsik held one of Young-bum's hands. I held the other, while Sangchul shone the pinecone up for all of us to see.

Young-bum opened his mouth, but his voice was too faint to hear. Wheezing with the effort, he twisted my hand around and pulled me down close to him.

"Go find your families," he said in such a quiet voice that I had to repeat the sentence for the others to know what he had said.

"When you find my father, do not tell him I died. Just say I left the group."

"You're not going to die," I started to protest, but he pinched my hand hard.

He seemed to smile, and for a moment his entire face looked sun-kissed, as it did when we lived on the beach in Eodaejin. His eyes looked like dew drops sitting on leaves in the morning. He didn't look at me. Or anyone else, for that matter. He just stared out, into nothing, and stopped blinking.

Stopped breathing.

His hand in mine fell lifeless.

I started to cry, as if all those other times I wanted to weep, the pain had just collected on the other side of a big dam. This, however, was the final blow that broke it. All my grief exploded.

I gathered Young-bum into my arms and just held him, crying into him, not letting go.

"You're my brother!" I screamed, my voice echoing against the large boulders near the river. "We're a team. You can't go!" But like that very first day when Young-bum had taken me to the market, he had already left before I could finish what I wanted to tell him.

The others crowded around Young-bum's body and me. No one could sleep. No one said a word for the longest time.

At last I said, "My grandfather told me that love burns brighter than any star, so bright that love can be seen and felt from one end of the earth to the other. One day, when those children on other

planets see our dead earth, it will be your light they see, not Kim Il-sung's or Kim Jong-il's. But the light of people like you."

The owls called and the beetles and tiny insects pitter-pattered around me on their suction-cupped feet. At the darkest part of the night, I saw those lights again, blue and white, moving south with the wind. The *shan-shin-ryong-nim*.

I then heard my heartbeat, followed by distant bells.

Young-bum had arrived wherever it was he was supposed to go.

MY BROTHERS AND I STAYED WITH YOUNG-BUM'S BODY FOR two days, singing and talking to him, all of us, as if he were still there. I bathed his stiff body in the river, washing away all the blood. I combed his hair with a brush I made from sticks. I then placed him in my own T-shirt, so he would remember me.

Chulho found the rock that some peasants said was home to *shan-shin-ryong-nim*. On the third day, at the base of that rock, we dug with our hands a shallow grave for Young-bum and laid his body in it.

The boys and I roasted potatoes and found *gamtae*, a wild berry that Young-bum liked to eat, often fistfuls at a time. We set these on large ferns as plates for Young-bum to take to the afterworld.