

WICKED FOX



INTENTIONAL BLANK

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KAT CHO

putnam

G. P. Putnam's Sons

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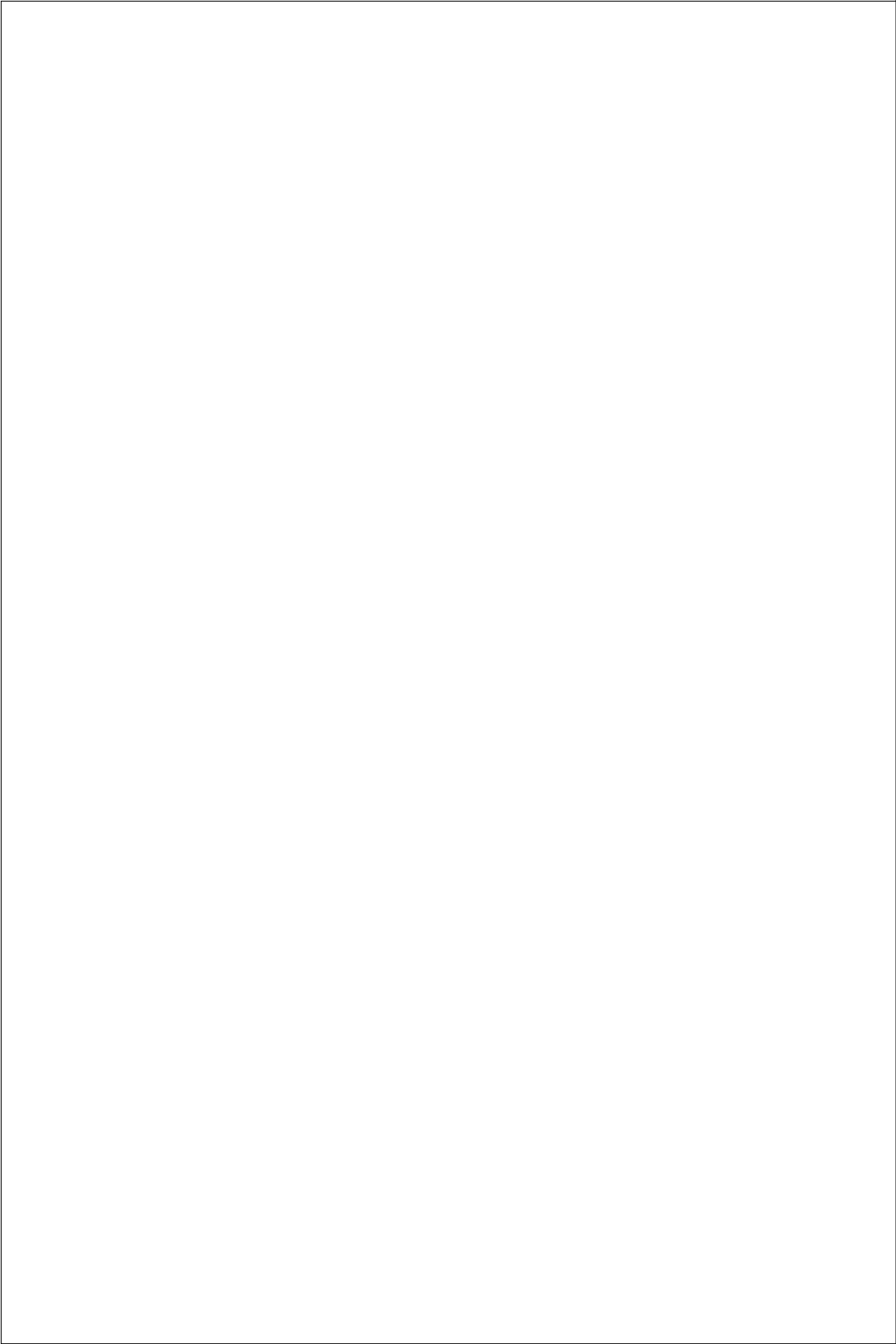
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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

For my mom and dad, Kello Katie and David Young Cho.

You taught me what love looks like.

사랑해요. 보고 싶어요.



INTENTIONAL BLANK

1

GU MIYOUNG'S RELATIONSHIP with the moon was complicated as are most relationships centered around power.

Her muscles vibrated with anticipation as she balanced on the edge of the roof. The moonlight made her skin itch, like a string pulled too tight. She breathed deeply to steady her speeding heart, and the stench of rotten trash filled her nostrils.

Her mother told her to be grateful for the power of the moon. It gave her strength, but sometimes Miyoung resented being strong.

Miyoung scanned the roads below. The streetlights were burnt out and had probably been so for a while. Miyoung didn't mind. She saw as easily in the dark as most did in broad daylight. In her opinion, the broken lights only helped the aesthetic of the buildings. Cracks spidered across the crumbling facades, decorated in blooms of mold. Perhaps a more optimistic soul would see a strange beauty in the pattern, but not Miyoung.

She pulled out her phone and dialed one of the two numbers saved in it.

"Did you find him, Seonbae?" Nara asked as soon as she picked up.

The way she stuttered out *seonbae* made the respectful title sound suffocatingly formal. As if she were speaking to an elder

twice her age, instead of Miyoung, who was only a year her senior. But Miyoung knew the younger girl used the title for multiple reasons, one being that two weeks ago her name hadn't even been Gu Miyoung.

"I tracked him to the same alley. He's been coming here all week—just haven't figured out which apartment he goes into."

"I've been trying to use the phone location app," Nara said helpfully. "It says you're right on top of him. Or is that your location? Click on your GPS."

Miyoung wanted to tell Nara to stick to communing with the spirits, but instead she swiped her screen and turned on the tracking option.

"Wait, now there are two of you." Nara fell into muffled mutters. Miyoung rolled her eyes to the heavens as she held her tongue. It wouldn't help to yell. Nara was nervous by nature, the side effect of her ability to see ghosts since birth.

Plus, Miyoung knew Nara meant well. But Miyoung didn't need good intentions; she needed a target.

To stop from pacing, she sat on the edge of the roof and let her feet dangle over the six-story drop. Gaining the high ground allowed her to stake out the area as well as her prey.

Still, she'd only seen him from a distance, going on the vague description from Nara.

Miyoung closed her eyes and counted to ten to settle her nerves.

Before her lay the cityscape of Seoul. The skyscrapers of Cheongdamdong, a mecca of entertainment and glamour, the home of fashion and K-pop. The soaring height of 63 Building, a symbol of the modernization of the capital city, sitting sentry beside the Han River. And the lights of Namsan Tower, where lovers

and tourists went to see the world at their feet. Miyoung sneered at her own worn sneakers, dangling over a trash-filled alley.

“What is he doing here?” Miyoung mumbled, mostly to herself, but Nara answered.

“The spirit says he goes there every night. Her death was too violent.” The other girl’s words became morose. “She needs justice before she can pass to the afterlife.”

Miyoung wasn’t sure if what she did was justice. Still, it was better than nothing. And if she had to kill, she might as well help a few wayward ghosts settle their grudges.

Not for the first time, Miyoung wondered whether putting all her faith in Nara’s spirits was a bad idea. She couldn’t feed without the power of the full moon. No, that was a lie. She *wouldn’t* feed without it.

The full moon increased her senses, opened her up to energy, allowed her to absorb it without ripping a man apart. So if she didn’t feed tonight, she’d have to wait another month or . . . she’d have to become a monster. She almost let out a laugh because she knew that even as the prey she chose were vile men, it didn’t mean she wasn’t a killer.

Still, she wouldn’t give in to her more base instinct, the one that wanted her to tear into flesh. To uncover the energy kept deep within every living creature. To drink that energy from a man without the need of the moon to channel it. No, she’d take it as gently as she could and pretend that she was a benevolent monster.

She’d failed this task only once, and she’d refused to feed any other way even when her mother begged. The only time she’d ever refused her mother. Miyoung’s body began to weaken within a week and didn’t recover until she fed at the next full moon. That’s

why her mother had her rules, one of which was *Never miss a hunt*.

But Nara was a gifted young shaman, able to contact spirits across the country. And no matter where Miyoung moved, Nara had found victims for Miyoung each full moon without fail. A useful ally to have.

“Seonbae?”

“What?” Miyoung asked, perhaps too gruffly.

“Be careful tonight. Many households banished evil spirits this month during Sangdalgosa. They might be wandering.”

Annoyed, Miyoung stood so she could start to pace again. “I’m not scared of a few spirits.”

Miyoung glanced down at the sound of a door squeaking open. She made out laughter and music from inside before the door swung closed, some kind of underground club. A man emerged. He was short and thick, his balding head pale white under the bright moon. She recognized the tattoo peeking through the wide collar of his shirt, an oversized spider he probably thought made him look tough but just accented his aging body in all the wrong ways.

“Got him. I’ll call you back.” Miyoung hung up as she stepped off the roof. She landed lightly on the ground, creating a cloud of dust and stink.

The man stumbled drunkenly and Miyoung kept pace with him. As she moved out of the shadows, muscles flexing as she prepared for the kill, he dropped a soju bottle he’d been carrying. Cursing, he sneered down at the shattered glass. Miyoung hid herself from sight. It was a knee-jerk reaction, but unnecessary. It didn’t matter if he saw her. He would tell no one of what happened tonight except other spirits.

She was so caught up in her musings that she didn’t notice

when he started walking again, down the narrow streets, leading to where civilization gathered. She cursed herself for waiting. Another of her mother's rules: *Find somewhere private for the kill.*

The salty smell of boiling jjigae and the charred scent of frying meat surrounded her in smoke and steam. Bare bulbs hung from the corners of food stands. Their harsh light distracted the eye from the run-down, cracked plaster of the buildings beyond.

She'd just moved here and she'd already decided she didn't like it. She'd lived in Seoul before, among the soaring skyscrapers of Gangnam, or in the shadow of the old palace in Samcheongdong. But this new neighborhood was neither brand-new nor significantly historical. It just was. The air was filled with the scents of spicy tteok-bokki and savory pastries. Her mouth watered despite her disdain of the greasy food.

The man paused to stare at dehydrated ojingeo. The legs of the dried cephalopods twisted, brittle enough to snap off at the slightest touch, hard and fragile at the same time. It was a dichotomy Miyoung often pondered. If someone cut out her heart, it would probably be a twisted chunk of brittle meat like the ojingeo.

The man broke off one of the eight legs and stuck it in his mouth.

"Ya!" shouted the ajumma manning the food stand. "Are you going to pay for that?"

Mioung sensed a fight brewing and didn't have the patience to wait for it to resolve itself. So she broke her mother's final rule: *Don't let anyone notice you when you're on a hunt.*

"Ajeossi!" She slid her arm through the man's. "There you are!"

"Do you know him?" The ajumma looked Miyoung up and down.

“Of course, sorry about that.” Miyoung put down a crisp orange bill. “I don’t need change.”

“Whozit?” The man squinted at her through bleary eyes as she led him away.

Miyoung grimaced at the heavy stink of soju on his breath.

“It’s been so long. You were childhood friends with my father.” She turned them onto a less populated road. Trees loomed at the end of the street, a perfect cover.

“Who’s your father?” His eyes rolled up, as if searching his brain for the memory.

Miyoung almost said, *Good question*. She’d never met the man. So she built him out of her imagination as she started up a dirt hiking path. Trees rose around them, sparse at first, then thickening as she led him deeper into the forest, winding away from the road.

“You went to middle school together. I met you a few years ago. You came to our house. My mom made japchae.” Miyoung used any random detail that popped into her head. She wound through the trees toward the more secluded trails.

Her plan to take him farther was ruined as he finally took in their surroundings. “Where are we?”

Miyoung cursed.

“What is this?” The man yanked his arm away, spun around, and ran, clearly disoriented or he’d know he was headed further into the forest. It almost made Miyoung feel pity for the old fool. He barely made it a dozen steps before she caught him by the collar. He yelped, struggling to free himself.

She shoved him against the trunk of an ash tree, wrapping her fingers around his thick neck. She tasted his distress as she siphoned some of his *gi*—the energy that emanated from all living things. The energy she stole to be immortal.

“What do you want?”

Instead of answering him, Miyoung pulled out her phone.

Nara’s face filled the screen, a classic oval with pale skin and a brush of bangs. Her eyes wide with concern. There were bags under them, a souvenir of the past few sleepless nights she had stayed up to help Miyoung stake out her prey.

“Did you catch him?”

Miyoung turned the phone toward the frightened man. The sight of it pulled him out of his shock. His eyes took in Miyoung’s form: an eighteen-year-old girl with long limbs, dark hair, and a heart-shaped face. He visibly relaxed, lulled into complacency by her pretty looks. It only made Miyoung pity him more. Foolish man didn’t know beauty was the best camouflage for a monster.

“Is this him?” Miyoung ignored the man’s lurid stare, far too used to the look.

“Yes.”

Miyoung nodded and hung up.

“Who was that?” The man’s demand was rough, fed by agitation and the belief that he was not truly in danger. Her prey always made this mistake, every month like clockwork.

“She’s a shaman,” Miyoung answered because it didn’t matter what she told him and because, despite her morbid intentions, Miyoung was a proper Korean girl taught to respect her elders.

“Some quack fortune-teller?” the man spat out.

“People have no respect for the old ways anymore.” Miyoung clicked her tongue with disappointment. “True shamans do more than tell fortunes. They can commune with the spirits. As in the dead. As in the girl you killed last month.”

All the color leached from the man’s face. “How do you know?”

“Don’t you regret what you did?” she asked, as if the question was rhetorical, but she hoped for a sign of repentance.

As always, she was disappointed.

“Why should I be sorry? It was her fault.” The man’s face became bright red. “She should have kept quiet. I only tried to make her stop screaming.”

“Then you’ve made your choice and I’ve made mine.”

She felt the moon, heard it whispering to her, telling her to feed.

Miyoung let her energy flow, let part of her true form free.

The man gasped.

They wove behind her, nine tails made of moonlight and dust.

In this last moment before she took a life, she had a need to be her true self. No more lies or false facades. She’d show these men what took their lives in the end.

She gripped the man by the shoulders, letting his gi fill her until her muscles vibrated. The moon urged her to let go, to allow her baser instincts to take over. If she ripped out his liver, the process would be over in seconds. But Miyoung couldn’t bring herself to do it. And so she watched him die slowly, yet painlessly, as she siphoned his gi bit by bit. As simple as a person falling asleep.

While she became full, the man deflated like a balloon losing air. She loved the energy filling her, even as she hated herself for being a monster.

“Why are you doing this?” The man’s voice became slurred.

“Because I don’t want to die.” She watched the light fade from his eyes.

“Neither do I,” he mumbled just before he lost consciousness.

“I know,” she whispered to no one.

2

THE PC ROOM was hot with thirty running computers, though only three stations were occupied. It was stuffy and dark and smelled like the shrimp chips and instant noodles sold as snacks.

Ahn Jihoon loved it. He clicked with nimble fingers, his left hand glued to the hot keys, his right hand sweeping the mouse over the screen.

“If we don’t leave now, we’ll be late,” Oh Changwan said, his hands waving like anxious butterflies with nowhere to land. He’d long since logged off after losing his own game.

“Then we’ll be late.” Digital armies marched across Jihoon’s screen.

“I can’t be late again.” Changwan frowned. It highlighted his exaggerated features. His ears were too big and his nose too long. A puppy who hadn’t grown into his looks yet.

Jihoon knew being late wasn’t Changwan’s problem. His problem was being timid and having a family rich enough to care. As the eldest son, he held the weight of the Oh name on his shoulders, which was only doubled by wealth. It didn’t sit well on Changwan, who was prone to anxiety and merely mediocre at anything he tried. It made Jihoon grateful he’d been born poor.

“Changwan-ah, you always worry about the future instead of enjoying what’s happening now. You need to learn that life isn’t worth living if you’re not having fun.” Jihoon narrowed his eyes, searching for the final tower on his opponent’s base. He found it with a triumphant grunt, and the screen announced victory in bold green letters hovering over his Protoss army.

“Great, you won. Time to go?” Changwan asked.

Jihoon stood and shrugged on his navy-blue uniform blazer.

“Changwan-ah, no one likes a nag.”

Changwan scowled and Jihoon added a friendly smile. One that said he meant no harm but knew he spoke the truth. He wielded his grin like a weapon, a crooked tilt of his lips that revealed deep dimples. When he used it, few could stay mad. It worked, as Changwan gave a reluctant smile.

Outside, Jihoon took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of car exhaust and simmering oxtail from the seolleongtang restaurant down the street. He swung an arm around his friend’s shoulder as they walked in and out of the sun that peeked between the tall buildings.

“Is it me, or does the morning always smell fresher after the thrill of victory?”

“It smells like someone needs to clean their fish tanks.” Changwan scrunched his face at the seafood store. Jihoon followed his gaze to one of the giant glass aquariums, the bulging eyes of a flounder staring back.

The city bus pulled up, and Jihoon slapped Changwan’s shoulder cheerfully. “Come on, don’t want to be late.”

They were late.

By the time they reached the school, the front gate sat closed, a signal that class had started without them. Jihoon helped boost

Changwan over the side wall before climbing up himself. He miscalculated the distance and his pant leg caught.

“Aissi!” Jihoon grimaced at the long rip in the calf of his beige pants.

He’d had a growth spurt the past year, making him the tallest in his class. It also made him unintentionally clumsy.

The school was a U-shaped building with long narrow hallways, lined on one side by classrooms and on the other by wide windows facing the inner courtyard and sports fields. The building was old, and there was no central heat to warm the halls in the brisk fall chill.

They snuck into the back of the classroom with ten minutes left in homeroom. The teacher, Miss Kwon, was still addressing the class.

“I’d like to remind everyone that now is not the time to slack off.” She zeroed in on Jihoon. “Next year is your third and final year of high school. It’s our job to prepare you. And your job to learn.”

“Yes, Sunsaengnim,” the class chorused.

“That’s it for today,” Miss Kwon said.

The class president stood. “Attention. Salute.”

“Thank you,” the students chorused as they bowed in unison.

Instead of leaving, Miss Kwon walked down the aisle and knocked on Jihoon’s desk. “If you come in late again, it’s detention.”

“Yes, Sunsaengnim.” Changwan bowed so low, his forehead smacked his desk beside Jihoon.

“Saem, you say that like spending more time with you is a punishment.” Jihoon accompanied the words with a lazy grin.

Miss Kwon fought the smile that eventually bloomed across her face. “I’m serious, Ahn Jihoon.”

“So am I,” Jihoon replied without missing a beat. He widened his smile so his dimples flashed.

Miss Kwon let out a soft chuckle despite herself. “It’s my last warning,” she said before exiting the classroom.

As soon as she cleared the back door, the peace of the room erupted into the chaos of kids jumping up from their seats to join their friends.

Changwan shook his head. “I don’t know why teachers let you talk like that.”

“It’s because of my charm and good looks.”

“It’s because he’s so ridiculous, they have to laugh or else they’d scream.” Lee Somin stepped up to the boys’ joined desks. She was 158 centimeters of attitude packed in a petite package who’d known Jihoon since they were in diapers.

She glanced at the kid sitting in front of Jihoon. “Get lost.”

The boy scurried from his chair like a startled rabbit.

Jihoon took in his best friend. Somin dressed like a handbook for how to break dress code: her uniform shirt unbuttoned to reveal a graphic tee beneath; her nails painted black. Her hair was different again. Somin’s look changed with the seasons, a girl who could never make up her mind. It gave Jihoon whip-lash, but he also hated change. It took too much effort. Today her short hair was dyed bright red, and she looked as fired up as her locks right now.

Jihoon flicked a hand across a flaming strand. “What punishment did the vice principal give you today?”

“I had to kneel in front of the school this morning. Again.”

“You had to know you’d get in trouble for it,” Jihoon pointed out.

“You’re one to talk,” Somin retorted. “What are you going to tell your halmeoni if you get detention and the school calls her again?”

Jihoon's easy smile disappeared at the thought of his grandmother's reaction. Then he dismissed it. Concern took too much effort.

"You should care more. The school year is more than half over," she said with a pointed look at the changing leaves of autumn outside. Jihoon usually loved fall because it meant winter was right around the corner and then school would end. At least until it annoyingly started up again in March.

"So?" Jihoon asked, though he knew what Somin was going to say.

"So next year is our third year."

When Jihoon gave her a blank stare, she continued, "Our senior year and suneung exams. You're the bottom-ranked student in the second-year class right now."

"Someone has to be last when there are rankings," Jihoon pointed out.

"Why is everything such a joke to you?" Somin asked.

"I'm not joking. I just—"

"Don't care," Changwan and Somin chorused.

Jihoon shrugged with a rueful smile. He knew everyone thought he was an affable guy with nothing much going for him. That's how he liked it. The less people expected from him, the more they left him alone.

Somin was the only person in the whole school who continuously believed in Jihoon no matter what. Something he graciously forgave her for, due to their lifelong friendship.

"One of these days you're going to find yourself in a situation even you can't talk your way out of," she said.

"When that day comes, should I take a page from your book and punch my way out?" Jihoon mussed her hair.

Somin slapped his hand away. “Like you could. Look at those weak sticks you call arms. The only time you lift your hands is to shove food into your mouth or wipe your butt.”

Changwan cringed. “Somin-ah, not very ladylike of you.”

“And when did I ever claim to be a lady?” Somin tilted her head. A tiger eyeing her prey.

“Never.” Changwan lowered his eyes.

As his friends continued to bicker, Jihoon laid his head down to take a nap.

o o o

It was so late the sun barely lit the streets when Jihoon climbed the hill toward home, past the forest bordering town. The woods were welcoming during the day, frequented by hikers and families seeking a bit of nature in the bustling metropolis. At night, however, the branches looked more crooked and the leaves shivered from invisible beasts passing. Jihoon grew up beside this mountain forest, and he’d never dared set foot inside after night fell. A by-product of fables his halmeoni used to tell him of goblins and ghosts coming out at night to eat bad little boys.

“Late again, Jihoon-ah.” An old woman sat outside the medicinal wine store. Everyone called her Hwang Halmeoni. She was the oldest person in the neighborhood and claimed she’d stopped keeping track of her age years ago. Last she knew, she was ninety-two.

“It was a long day.” Jihoon gave her a wink.

“Studying or playing?” Hwang Halmeoni’s smile was knowing. She sat on a low wooden deck and peeled garlic into a bowl. The scent stung Jihoon’s nostrils.

“Playing.” He grinned. “Always.”

She clucked her tongue, popping a piece of raw garlic into her mouth. Jihoon hated eating it raw, though his own halmeoni said it was good for his health. Still, when Hwang Halmeoni held out her hand, he dutifully accepted a peeled clove.

“When are you going to make me the happiest man on earth and agree to marry me?”

Hwang Halmeoni chuckled, her eyes sparkling. “Your silver tongue is going to get you in trouble one day.”

“It already has.” Jihoon winked again. “Many times over.”

“Stop stalling. You have to go home and answer to your halmeoni.”

Jihoon sighed because she was right. He bowed and crossed the dark street toward his halmeoni’s restaurant and slipped silently into the second-floor apartment. He toed off his sneakers and placed them neatly beside his halmeoni’s worn shoes. A small form raced down the hall with a high-pitched yip.

“Dubu! Shhh.” He tried to quiet the tiny ball of fur. She ignored him and jumped onto his legs for the requisite petting.

Jihoon winced as a door opened.

“Ahn Jihoon!” his halmeoni yelled. “I was about to send the police to search all of Korea.”

Jihoon folded in a bow of apology.

His halmeoni had been pretty once. Proof lay in the old black-and-white photos on her nightstand. Now worry and age lined her face. A small woman, she only reached Jihoon’s shoulder, but he withered in the face of her anger.

“Halmeoni, you shouldn’t get worked up. Your high blood pressure, remember?”

“Where were you?” she asked sternly.

Jihoon didn’t bother with empty excuses. “You know where.”

Halmeoni clicked her tongue in disapproval. "You are such a smart boy and you waste your brain on those games. I'm not asking you to get into a top-three SKY university. I just want you to go to college. Your mother got married right out of high school. That is why she was helpless without your father."

Jihoon shook his head at the mention of his parents.

"I don't need to go to university to help out in the restaurant," Jihoon said. "Or maybe I'll become a famous gamer and buy you a mansion. Either way, I just want to stay here with you, not go to a fancy university."

His halmeoni frowned and changed tack. "I went to see a shaman. She said your soul is being shadowed by something."

"You should stop giving your money to those people. They're a bunch of scam artists. The only spirits they talk to are in a bottle." Jihoon mimed throwing back a shot.

"She said you'll soon see darkness. Don't you know what that means?"

Jihoon shrugged and walked into the kitchen to avoid the conversation. Whenever his halmeoni went on one of her rants about his soul, his stomach churned.

He hoped she wouldn't get the idea to exorcise him again.

"If you keep staring at the computer, you'll ruin your eyes." Halmeoni followed him into the kitchen. It wasn't a long trip. The apartment was as small as a postage stamp.

"I can't lose my vision or else I won't be able to look at your beautiful face." Jihoon gave one of his lazy grins and Halmeoni's lips twitched. She fought back the smile and gave him a glower instead.

"Don't try to sweet-talk me. You think I'm a fool who'll fall for pretty words?"

Jihoon wrapped her in a tight hug, engulfing her in his long arms. “I’d never think that. My halmeoni is the smartest woman in the neighborhood. Maybe all of Seoul.”

Halmeoni gave a resigned huff and a stern pat on the back before wriggling out of his embrace.

She took his hand and placed a yellow paper in it. Bold red symbols stood out against the bright background. He recognized it as one of the talismans she hung inside the front door.

“What is it for?” Jihoon held it with two fingers like it was a rotten banana peel.

“A bujeok from the shaman for warding off evil. Keep it with you.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You say I’m smart, so do as I say.” Halmeoni folded his fingers around the paper.

He finally conceded and stuffed it into his pocket. “Fine.”

“Good boy.” She patted his rear in approval. “Now eat your dinner before it gets cold, and then take the dog out.”

o o o

Twilight had become full night by the time Jihoon led Dubu out for her walk. Clouds covered the moon, so the road was lit only by lamps, which lengthened the shadows along the asphalt.

The angle of the street sloped so steeply, the buildings leaned to stay straight. Land was at a premium in the city, but Jihoon’s neighborhood retained its quaint short buildings, winding around crooked roads so narrow that cars had no right to be on them.

The dog, no higher than Jihoon’s calf and white as the moon, had no interest in going to the bathroom. She stared down the dark road with her ears perked.

“You going or not? If you have an accident inside, you’ll have to answer to Halmeoni.”

Dubu let out rapid fire barks and took off so quickly, she wrenched the leash from Jihoon. With a curse, he ran after the dog, almost falling down the steep street.

Jihoon stopped in front of Hwang Halmeoni, who was still peeling her garlic. “Have you seen Dubu?”

“She ran past barking like a samjogku. I think she was heading toward that little playground.” Hwang Halmeoni held out a peeled clove and Jihoon accepted it, though he still hadn’t gotten the garlic smell off his skin from earlier.

The playground sat at the base of the road, adjacent to the first line of trees.

“Dubu!” Jihoon yelled, hoping she’d hidden in the plastic jungle gym.

No such luck, as her barking answered him from the woods.

Jihoon whistled, hoping it would be enough to gain her return, but she didn’t emerge.

Misty clouds hung heavy in the sky. He didn’t like the idea of going into the woods when even the light of the moon was absent. A shiver ran down his spine and goose bumps rose on his skin.

Jihoon clicked on his phone light, squared his shoulders, and entered the woods.

“Dubu, come on, girl,” he yelled loud enough for his voice to echo back.

At night, the shadows became a menacing gray of shapes reaching for him. Ghosts and monsters shifted in his peripheral vision.

It didn’t matter that he’d stopped believing in those things long ago.

Night and darkness made a believer of everyone.

Something pulled his sleeve and he spun around with a shout an octave higher than he would like to admit. Jihoon half expected to see a leering dokkaebi with rotting teeth and malicious intent, story monsters used to make kids obey their parents.

It was a branch.

He laughed to release his jitters.

A shape darted past and his laugh became another yelp.

“Dubu!” Jihoon took off after her. He was going to wring that dog’s neck. He’d go to the pet store and buy an exact replica of Dubu. His halmeoni would never know the difference.

Jihoon tried not to twitch at every noise or rustle of leaves. He kept his eyes straight ahead, refusing to glance into the shadows surrounding him.

He finally caught up with Dubu and scooped her into his arms. She wriggled, clutching something in her teeth. Jihoon hoped to the heavens it wasn’t a rat. She dropped it, and he jumped back in case it was still alive.

With a fair bit of embarrassment, Jihoon realized it wasn’t a rodent but a shoe. More specifically, a girl’s sneaker.

“Oh, good. This is exactly what I needed. I’m so glad we went into a dark, terrifying forest to find this.”

Wandering back through the woods with a wriggling Dubu in his arms soon revealed that Jihoon was good and lost. He couldn’t even find a hiking path to give him some semblance of direction.

In his arms Dubu’s body vibrated with a low growl. Nervously, Jihoon glanced around, expecting to see some wild beast approaching. But there were only shadows and trees.

It seemed Dubu was reacting to nothing, or perhaps a wayward squirrel had scurried past. Then Jihoon saw one of the shad-

ows by an old oak shift until he made out the shape of a lurking creature. The beast growled, an echo of Dubu's. Jihoon clamped his hand around the dog's muzzle to quiet her. At first he thought the animal was warning them away, until he realized it faced the opposite direction.

As he stepped back, his ear adjusted to the sounds. They weren't growls. They were words.

"Wait . . . Fox . . ."

Before Jihoon absorbed this new fact, Dubu shook her snout free of his grip and let out a tirade of barks.

When the hunched figure turned, the light of the moon slanted over its face.

Jihoon gasped.

Its features were distinctly human, with ruddy, rounded cheeks and a hooked nose. Still, Jihoon knew this was no ordinary man. It stood, revealing a stocky build with biceps as wide as Jihoon's thighs.

"S-sorry." Jihoon couldn't stop his voice from shaking. Something about this creature pulled him back to a time when he was a little boy cowering under his sheets.

"A human. Wrong," it said. The rumbling voice sounded like gravel scratching under metal.

Dubu launched herself out of Jihoon's arms. She tumbled against the dirt-packed ground, then surged forward. The beast swatted the dog away like a fly. With a yelp of pain, her small body slammed into a tree before crumpling into a limp pile.

Jihoon hurried toward Dubu but found his path blocked by the creature.

Stay calm, he thought. It's what they always said to do when you're faced with a predatory animal. And Jihoon had no doubt

that this creature, despite its human features, was a wild thing.

“Look, I don’t want any trouble.” Jihoon kept his voice low. “I’m just going to take my dog and leave and not talk about this to anyone.”

In the blink of an eye the creature attacked, and a beefy arm hooked around Jihoon’s neck. It smelled like overripe fruit and body odor—not a good combination.

Bristling whiskers pressed into Jihoon’s forehead as the beast sniffed him. Jihoon tried to strain away, but the grip around his neck was too strong. The harder he struggled, the tighter the stranglehold became.

Jihoon imagined dying alone in the middle of the forest. How his halmeoni would worry. How his body would be found days later, bloated and unidentifiable.

“Ya!” A voice shouted behind them.

The beast whirled so quickly, Jihoon’s head spun.

When everything settled, he blinked in surprise. Jihoon couldn’t decide if he was imagining things because of lack of oxygen or if a girl really stood there. If she was real, she couldn’t have been older than Jihoon’s eighteen years. Her eyes were sharp and her lips peeled back from her teeth. It made her look as wild as the creature choking him. She was slim and tall, perhaps a head shorter than Jihoon. Her feet moved into a fighter’s stance, pulling his gaze down her long legs. She was missing a shoe.

“Let him go, dokkaebi saekki-ya.” She spat in the dirt.

Puzzle pieces clicked into place, like finally remembering a word that had hung just out of reach. The beast holding Jihoon looked like the stocky, hunched goblins in his halmeoni’s stories. Except dokkaebi didn’t exist.

The dokkaebi let out a bellowing laugh. “Take him from me, yeowu.”

The girl’s eyes flared.

Jihoon knew this was an uneven match, but he didn’t have the courage to tell the girl to leave.

She grabbed the dokkaebi’s thick thumb and with a quick jerk twisted it off.

The beast wailed in pain. His arms loosened, dropping Jihoon.

Fear made Jihoon’s muscles weak as he fell to his hands and knees, wheezing to pull in precious air.

There’s no blood, Jihoon thought, as he dry-heaved. *Why is there no blood?*

In fact, the thumb cracked off like a piece of porcelain snapped from a vase.

The creature hunched, cradling his injured fist. His face was now so red, it clearly reminded Jihoon of the crimson-skinned dokkaebi in his old children’s books.

Jihoon stood on shaky legs, the girl now between him and the dokkaebi, the thumb still in her hand. She squeezed her fist closed until her knuckles cracked. White powder flew from her palm. The dust wove in and out of the moonlight as if the girl had cast a spell. Then Jihoon realized the clouds covering the moon had parted. It lit the scene with a silver pallor. Everything that had once seemed ominous now softened to the haze of a dream. The shadows shifted. A glow of shapes coalesced around the girl in a wide fan.

No, not a fan.

Tails, as bright and pale as the moon.

She looked like a warrior queen, fierce and unforgiving. And as untouchable as the ghostly tails dancing behind her.

Memories flooded Jihoon of Halmeoni reading him fables from the yellowed pages of her books. Stories where foxes lived forever. Where they became beautiful women to entice unsuspecting men. Where those men never survived.

Now he understood why the dokkaebi had called her *yeowu*—fox.

“Gumiho,” Jihoon whispered.

The girl’s head whipped around, her eyes bright as fire.

Jihoon knew he should fear her, but instead he felt a strange fascination.

The clouds reclaimed the moon, making the shadows bleed. The darkness took over until Jihoon couldn’t see a thing.

He wanted to convince himself it had all been a trick of the light. He almost could as his eyes adjusted and he saw the girl, now tailless without the moon.

The dokkaebi let out a guttural growl and charged.

The girl met the goblin head-on. It pushed her back, her feet digging divots in the ground.

Jihoon never tore his eyes from the fight, as he bent to scoop up Dubu’s limp form. She seemed too light in his arms, but he saw her small chest rise and fall with relief.

Mere meters away a battle played out that Jihoon thought he’d only see in his video games. A dokkaebi versus a gumiho. A goblin versus a fox. The two were so evenly matched that any ground gained by one side was soon lost again.

Jihoon started to flee, then stopped. He couldn’t force himself to take another step. What kind of person would he be if he abandoned the girl after she’d saved him? Not the boy his halmeoni had raised.

Already annoyed at his conscience, he called out, “His right side!”

The girl glanced over, the distraction enough for the dokkaebi to sneak under her guard. The goblin twisted her around, choking her in a headlock.

“His right side!” Jihoon repeated.

If dokkaebi and gumiho were real, then maybe his halmeoni’s other tales were real. The ones that said dokkaebi were good at wrestling but weak on the right.

The girl’s eyes lit with understanding, and her lips pursed in new determination. She leaned all her weight to the right, but the dokkaebi had heard Jihoon’s advice as well. It pulled out a strip of gold paper decorated in red symbols—a bujeok—and placed it over the girl’s heart with a meaty fist. She screeched, pain etched in the piercing sound. The talisman stuck to her like a fluttering badge.

Her legs shook and she started to lose ground. The dokkaebi’s arm tightened and her eyes widened, showing fear for the first time. At this rate, she’d lose more than ground.

Jihoon was not a brave boy. So he was already regretting his half-formed idea as he put Dubu down. He took two deep breaths, clenched his teeth, and took off in a sprint. He barreled headfirst into the dokkaebi’s right side, under the arm that held the girl. The three tumbled to the ground together.

Bodies collided. Limbs grappled madly. The girl twisted until she sat atop the dokkaebi, whose meaty fist looped around her slim neck. Its other gripped Jihoon by the hair.

“Kill the fox,” the dokkaebi kept repeating. “Kill the fox.”

Despite her predicament, the girl didn’t struggle. She wore the calm look of one who had complete control. Perhaps she’d become delusional from pain and lack of oxygen.

The girl placed her hand against the dokkaebi’s heart, her long fingers splayed across his chest.

The beast jerked. The hand holding Jihoon tightened until he felt the sharp pain of hair being ripped from his head. Jihoon let out a yelp and gritted his teeth as he tried to pry open the thick fingers holding him.

The dokkaebi's legs flailed as if the girl were choking him instead of the other way around. Her eyes were unblinking, dark, and depthless. Sweat beaded over her pale skin.

Around her shadows danced, like smoke caught in a vortex. The phantom tails wove through them.

The atmosphere thickened, the autumn chill replaced by sweltering heat. There were waves in the air, the kind that rose under a hot summer sun.

The dokkaebi's fists tore at more of Jihoon's hair. The heat and pain combined to blur his vision, as white dots danced before his eyes. He watched them coalesce into ghosts that raced through the forest. He watched them fly away and wished he could join them.

Wait for me, he tried to shout. One stopped. A girl? And glanced back at him before sprinting into the darkness.

The howls of the dokkaebi echoed through the trees. The goblin convulsed—leaves crunching and dirt flying—until its body jerked in a final death throe like a fish flopping on a deck.

The smoke dissipated. The girl's tails faded. The air cleared.

She sat upon the dokkaebi as calm as a child perched on her favorite reading chair. Her hand was still spread over its chest. Then the beast's body began to crack, fissures racing along its ruddy skin.

The dokkaebi imploded into scattered dust as the girl stood.

"You killed it," Jihoon sputtered.

"I saved your life." She stepped over the particles of dead dok-

kaebi until she loomed above Jihoon. "Make sure I don't regret it. You will tell no one about what you saw tonight."

He nodded furiously.

She frowned at the bright yellow paper still plastered to her chest and tried to rip it free. With a hiss of pain she snatched her hand away.

Jihoon stood and reached for it. But she retreated from him, her lips twisting in a snarl.

He held up his hand, palm out. "Can I help?"

She watched him carefully but didn't move as he reached for the bujeok. The talisman came away as easy as plucking a leaf from a tree. As he wondered what magic had let him remove it when the girl, obviously much stronger than he was, could not, the bujeok dissolved in his hand.

The girl lurched forward and Jihoon barely caught her as she fell. The momentum sent them both falling to the ground.

She convulsed like a person being electrocuted. Foam spilled from her pale lips as her eyes rolled back.

Jihoon wasn't sure what to do. He'd heard once that if someone was having a seizure, you should put something between their teeth. And while he debated his next move, she stilled.

"Hello?"

No reply.

He leaned in to check her breathing.

She rocketed up, slamming into his forehead as she gagged. Jihoon fell back as something bulleted toward him. It hit him on the cheek before rolling away, and the girl crumpled into an unconscious heap.

Jihoon, lying in a pile of leaves and dirt, turned his head to glance at the object. It was a bead, small and opalescent as a pearl.

Sitting up, he reached for it—then almost dropped it as it pulsed against his palms. His hand trembled as he recognized the pattern of the steady *thump*, like the beat of a heart.

A silver line speared from the pearl, a thread connecting him to the girl's heart.


Jihoon's fingers became numb so quickly, it seemed as if the warmth had been leached from his skin. And the thread pulsed, growing brighter, thicker. Jihoon felt a wave of fatigue overtake him. He almost fell back to the ground when the girl's eyes flew open, zeroing in on the bead.

Jumping up, she snatched it away. A growl rumbled in her throat. A terrifying, beastly sound. The rage that twisted her face wiped away the clouds of fatigue from Jihoon's brain and replaced them with fear.

She retreated so fast she was a blur. Leaves spun and branches cracked as she sprinted into the trees.

With nothing but the sounds of the forest for company, Jihoon was suddenly aware he was all alone again. And still lost.

A rustle pulled a yelp from him. Then he relaxed again as Dubu limped over and flopped into his arms with a whimper. Jihoon, hands shaking, pulled her close and buried his face in her fur.



HAVE YOU EVER wondered where the gumiho came from as you lay awake fearing the full moon?

Some say the first gumiho came from the land to the west, traveling down the peninsula to settle in the mountain forests they preferred. Some say the first true gumiho arose in Korea before the country claimed the name. That tale begins as Prince Jumong—the Light of the East—founded the Goguryeo Kingdom.

There lived a fox, already over five hundred years old, who watched the activities of humankind with curiosity. She was strong and sleek, and hunters coveted her beautiful pelt. No matter how fast their bows, they were never able to catch her. Even Prince Jumong, the grandson of the water god Habaek, renowned for his hunting skills, could not catch her. Out of one hundred arrows shot, he hit his target one hundred times, until he came up against the fox.

She wandered into Prince Jumong's hunting grounds every day. Her reasons were not quite known. Some said she loved the prince. Others said she liked to mock him with her presence. But who can truly know the motivations of the ancients?

After she'd lived for a thousand years, the fox had gathered an exceptional amount of gi.

Through this energy she transformed herself into a human. A beautiful woman loved by any man she met, but never for long.

So she walked the earth alone, not quite human, but not quite beast.

A fox who loved the mortals she mimicked.

Until she could not love them anymore.

3

JIHOON WAS DREAMING. He knew this even though there was nothing to particularly signal this. It was just an overwhelming sense of knowing.

The forest was silent as he wove through trees made silver by the moonlight. Fog obscured the forest floor, so he couldn't make out his own feet. For all he knew, he floated above the ground, as his steps made no sound. In fact, nothing did. No rustling of leaves from wind or birds. No snapping of twigs from scurrying creatures. No noise of any kind broke the complete stillness of the woods.

He'd never been aware while dreaming before, but it had been a strange night all around, so what was one more weird thing to add to the pile? He remembered hearing someone say that if you could lucid dream you could make yourself do things, like breathe underwater, or fly. He mused over it a moment, then took two running steps before leaping into the air . . . and fell to the ground with a thump. Twigs and leaves dug into his cheek as he fell on his face.

"What are you doing?"

He jerked up to stare into the empty forest. Then he stood and looked down the path. Nothing. When he turned back, she stood there. Her eyes hooded by shadow. Her arms folded. Her tails fanned behind her.

At the sight of her, the woods came alive again. The whistling of

wind blew at her long hair. Leaves crunched as he took a step back. And the call of a far-off bird echoed dimly as he stared at her.

"What's happening? Why are you here?" Jihoon tried not to stutter.

"This is a dream, but how you got here I'm not sure. It's worrisome."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked, but she didn't answer.

Her head cocked to the side, her eyes lifting to the moon as if listening to a faraway call.

Then, without warning, she yanked him behind a clump of thick bushes.

His yelp of surprise was muffled by her hand.

"She'll hear," the girl whispered. There was steel in her voice.

Her words were enough to keep him silent. Hadn't he just learned to believe in monsters?

Every movement of the woods became a threat. The howl of wind through branches. The snap of twigs as creatures skittered. A rustle to his right. A flash of pale movement.

"Was that—?"

The girl shushed him and held up a thin arm, pointing to their left.

A lithe shape lurked among the trees, almost invisible. Its graceful movements made no sound, like the mist of fog sifting through the forest. It had a sharp snout and pointed ears, thick red fur, and bright eyes. And behind the fox wove nine tails.

The gumihō paused, her head perked up, eyes tracking toward their hiding place. Jihoon held his breath. The fox stepped forward when a crack echoed from farther in the woods. She took off toward the sound in a flash.

Jihoon finally exhaled and glanced at the girl. She let a handful of stones drop in a rain of thuds.

"Who was that?" Jihoon asked.

"My mother. She doesn't like humans."

"And you do?" Jihoon rose, and the movement made his head spin.

"I don't hate them," she conceded. "Though it's worrisome that you're here."

"You said that before. What does it mean?" The forest tilted to the left, then to the right, like the sway of a ship on the sea. He felt like he was being pulled somewhere he didn't want to go and tried his best to hold on to this place, this dream.

"Why did you pick up my bead?" she asked.

"Your bead? You mean that pearl?"

"Why were you in the forest tonight?"

My dog, he tried to say, but bile rose in his throat instead of words.

"Do you feel like the world is lopsided?"

"Did you know I'd be in the forest? What did you want with my bead?" The girl's voice sounded garbled, like it was processed through a synthesizer before reaching his ears.

"What's happening to me?" Nausea rolled through him, thick and sticky, as the surrounding trees did tight pirouettes.

She watched him curiously. "When the body wants to wake it doesn't matter what the mind desires."

"I'm waking up?" Jihoon asked. "Then why do I feel so funny . . ."

Before she could reply, the forest floor fell from under Jihoon's feet.

He dropped into darkness, his screams absorbed by the earth as it swallowed him.

4

MIYOUNG WOKE SLOWLY from the dream. It took her a moment to realize she wasn't in the forest but in her new bedroom. In a wrought-iron bed piled high with pillows. Large windows beside her bed let in the moonlight. She glanced at the clock and the bright numbers glared back at her: 3:33 A.M.

The memory of the dream clung to her like a film of grease covering her skin. Forest and mist and that boy. She rarely dreamed, and when she did it was never quite so vivid. It felt as if he'd walked into her mind. *It's worrisome.* She'd said it in the dream and she thought it now.

She'd heard tales of gumiho who could walk the dreams of their victims. Driving them slowly mad before ripping out their livers. But she'd never done it herself, never thought it was a skill gumiho still possessed. Perhaps they didn't. After all, she hadn't meant to share a dream with that boy. Maybe she was just thinking about that boy and her subconscious had gotten out of hand. It made sense that she'd be stuck on thoughts of him, after all, he'd been there when she'd lost her bead . . .

Miyoung turned onto her side and pulled open her nightstand drawer until the bead rolled gently into view. It shone so bright, she wondered if it emitted its own light or merely reflected the moon's.

She stared at the stone—a *yeowu guseul*—a fox bead. Myth said every gumiho had one, but she'd never given them much thought. Nara sometimes went on about them, comparing them to the human soul.

Maybe Miyoung should have listened more to the shaman's harebrained theories. They were varied and long-winded, so Miyoung had ignored most of them. She remembered the shaman warning that if a human ever gained control of the yeowu guseul of a gumiho, he could command her to do his every bidding. And there was the story of a gumiho that lost her bead but still fed, slowly becoming more and more of a demon.

Closing her eyes, Miyoung rolled the stone across her palm. It sparked along her skin like static electricity. Or residual energy. It didn't feel like the gi she'd absorbed from that ajecossi. That had been bitter and stale. This tasted fresh and bright. The boy? But she hadn't fed from him. Why would his energy be in the bead?

But she could guess the answer. He'd touched it, held it directly. And it had absorbed his energy. She'd felt a boost of energy that had woken her, disoriented on the forest floor. Had the bead transferred a bit of his gi to her even when it wasn't inside of her?

If he had known what power he held . . . but he obviously hadn't. And she had it now; it was safe. Or as safe as it could be like this.

She didn't know why she'd been driven to save that boy. But his actions afterward confused her more. How he'd stayed. How he'd charged the dokkaebi after knowing full well the danger.

Miyoung squeezed the bead in her hand. The boy was not what she should worry about right now.

She needed to figure out a way to reabsorb the stone. She might not know much about the myths that surrounded a yeowu

guseul, but she knew its proper place was *in* a gumiho. Already she felt an emptiness in her, like a puzzle piece ripped from her middle, leaving a gaping hole.

Climbing out of bed, Miyoung padded her way down the hall toward her mother's room.

The shower ran in the master bathroom. Steam sat heavy in the air, so thick it almost choked her. It lit a panic that she calmed with deep breaths. Ever since Miyoung could remember, she'd been afraid of water. A phobia so deep she refused to even take a bath. Her mother despised any sign of weakness in her daughter, so Miyoung did her best to keep it buried.

The water was turned off and Yena stepped out of the shower. Through the curtain of steam Miyoung saw the crisscross of white scars on her mother's bare back.

Miyoung once asked about them, and Yena said it had been humans. Done when she was too young and too weak to heal fully. Miyoung sometimes wondered if they'd scarred more than her skin.

As the mist dissipated, Yena wrapped herself in a robe. And she was back to being perfectly stunning. She was tall and willowy, with jet-black hair and dark eyes to match.

Everyone who met them said Miyoung looked exactly like her mother.

Miyoung always said thank you with a ninety-degree bow. After all, Yena was the epitome of beauty. Her perfection made men regret the time they spent on blinking.

"Miyoung-ah, what are you doing?"

"I needed to talk to you." Miyoung tried to think of how to explain her unsettling dream in a way that wouldn't reveal her mistake.

"Is it about Monday?"

Miyoung blinked. “Monday?”

Then she remembered. Her new school.

“I’m okay. It’ll be like every other school. I’m used to it.” It was true. Miyoung was the perpetual transfer student. Never somewhere long enough to lose the label.

“It’s a good school, though this neighborhood is not as nice as our old one. But of course we couldn’t stay there after your . . . indiscretion.” The way her mother said it, with a tinge of blame, made Miyoung purse her lips. As much as she hated to move, they were often forced to relocate because of one of Miyoung’s mistakes. And Yena’s irate mood each time reminded Miyoung that her problems were a burden on her mother. Perhaps it was not smart to reveal her latest mistake so soon after her last.

“I’m sorry, Mother, I didn’t mean to do it and the girl survived.”

Excuses, excuses, just useless excuses.

“But you still almost exposed us by losing control with a human. And in broad daylight.”

“I was just trying to get her away from me! She wouldn’t stop pushing me so I pushed back—.” Miyoung cut off with the sinking realization that her words echoed the ajeossi in the forest. *“It was her fault . . . She should have kept quiet. I only tried to make her stop screaming.”*

Miyoung hated how much she had in common with the evil she hunted.

“I don’t need your excuses,” Yena said, breaking into Miyoung’s thoughts. “Just do what I say and everything will be fine.”

“Actually, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“I know what you’re so worked up about and it’s fine.” Yena waved away Miyoung’s concern. Not the reaction she was expecting.

“It’s fine?” Miyoung couldn’t stop the gallop of her heart. Was

it not that bad, revealing her identity to a human and losing her bead in the process?

“I didn’t mean to—” Miyoung began.

“Don’t lie to me, daughter. I know you siphoned your last victim again. You still can’t go for the quick kill.”

Miyoung almost let out a sigh of relief. So Yena didn’t know about the boy or her bead.

“I don’t mind doing it the slow way.” Miyoung could have given a dozen excuses. Her way there was less mess, less screaming, less blood. But she knew those weren’t the real reasons and so did Yena.

“Your desire for human approval is why you’re weak.” There it was, her mother’s disapproval of the half of Miyoung that was human. The half that came from her father.

“It’s hard to live among them and not care,” Miyoung muttered.

“Living among humans is a necessary evil. If we want to feed every month, then we must be where the food is.”

Miyoung winced at her mother’s choice of words, but she nodded. “And if one of them knew what we were?”

“Then we’d take care of them, of course. Their mortal lives are so easily ended.” Yena said it so flippantly that Miyoung’s heart stuttered. Could she have killed that boy? Snapped his neck and left his remains to rot? The thought made her shiver. But maybe that was her problem. She wasn’t ruthless enough.

“What is it?” Yena asked, her eyes shrewd.

“I’m just feeling off,” Miyoung said. “This place is so unfamiliar and having to hunt so soon after moving.”

“It couldn’t be avoided,” Yena said sharply. “You refuse to hunt without the moon.”

"I know." Miyoung wondered how to broach the subject she really wanted to ask about. "Actually, I noticed a few books while I was unpacking. One of them was about fox beads."

Yena gave a short laugh. "Those fairy tales? Things humans made up to tell their children. There's no such thing as a fox bead."

Miyoung frowned, her hand clenching in the pocket of her robe where that mythical object rested. Could it be that in her mother's hundreds of years she'd never actually seen or felt her own bead?

"Miyoung-ah, I'm tired. It's been a long night. No more talk of fantasies and what-ifs."

"Yes, Mother." Miyoung felt defeated.

"I worry sometimes that I let you have too much freedom with your dramas and shows." Miyoung's heart sank, fearing a new rule or restriction about to be declared. "Don't let those fantasies warp your brain. You have to stay alert always. We must protect each other. It's only the two of us against the rest of the world."

Miyoung nodded. The words were something Yena often said, as easy as any other parent would offer a comforting hug. But Yena didn't hug. In fact, she rarely touched Miyoung at all.

"Mother?"

"Yes?"

Miyoung tried to screw up the courage to tell her mother about her bead and the strange boy in the forest. But she couldn't push out the words.

"Good night."

"Good night, Miyoung."

5

JIHOON OVERSLEPT, WHICH wouldn't usually bother him, except it was Saturday and he was supposed to help in the restaurant.

He shuffled down the hall to look in on Dubu. She lay curled in her small bed. With a low whimper, she tried to limp over.

"Oh, you brave girl," Jihoon crooned, giving her a gentle hug. He still wasn't sure if he was mad at Dubu or relieved she was okay. Probably an even mix.

He'd been up half the night with thoughts of goblins and gumihos. Halmeoni used to tell Jihoon stories about dokkaebi tricking humans and nine-tailed foxes eating the livers of men. Horror stories camouflaged as fables to teach lessons. But those types of stories were supposed to stay in books, not come to life and almost choke him to death.

He'd tried to convince himself last night had been a vivid hallucination. But he couldn't ignore the bruise on his temple, a reminder of the girl's head coming into contact with his. And the strange stone that had come out of her. His fingers still tingled from it, like it had sucked out his very energy.

When Jihoon shuffled down the rear staircase, the sound of the bustling restaurant greeted him.

Voices drifted up from the back room, but he ignored them until the words *animal attack* stopped him in his tracks.

“Thank you for coming to let us know, Officer Hae,” Halmeoni said.

“Detective.”

“Sorry, Detective Hae.”

“We’re letting the neighboring apartments and businesses know so they can be on the lookout. It seemed like a wolf or a wild dog came down from the mountain, so be careful.”

Jihoon froze, absorbing the words. Animal attack? Like a fox?

“We’ll let our customers know,” Halmeoni said as the door opened. “Come by anytime if you’re in the mood for a good home-cooked meal.”

The door shut, and Jihoon heard his halmeoni make her way to the front kitchen.

Jihoon wondered if the animal attack could be connected to that girl.

He shouldn’t worry about her. She’d told him not to speak of last night, so it would be easiest to forget it completely.

As he entered the back room, Somin swung through the kitchen door, balancing a tray of dirty plates. Her graphic tee and ripped jeans were covered by the knee-length apron for Halmeoni’s restaurant.

“What are you doing here?” Jihoon blinked owlishly at her.

“Your halmeoni said you were sleeping like the dead. She didn’t want to wake you, so she called me and my mom. It’s a madhouse out there.”

There was no accusation in Somin’s voice, but his shoulders hunched with guilt.

He’d been helping out in the restaurant kitchen since he was little. He used to sit for hours, cutting the tails off soybean sprouts

and pinching closed the shells of dumplings. Now he was glorified waitstaff and delivery boy.

"I was going to call you," Jihoon said, tapping a serving spoon against the counter as he considered his next words.

Somin was always available when he needed a sounding board. And after last night, he definitely did. Since they'd grown up together, Somin had heard all of his halmeoni's fables, too.

But the girl's threat still rang clear in his head: *You will tell no one about what you saw tonight.*

So instead, he asked, "Did you ever believe in dokkaebi?"

Somin thought a moment. She was one to take questions seriously when asked by a friend. "Sure, when I was younger. I heard there's an app now that talks to kids in a dokkaebi voice to scare them into eating their vegetables."

"Not the dokkaebi our parents used to scare us. Real ones."

Somin laughed—the sound grating on Jihoon's frayed nerves—but sobered at his serious expression. "Jihoon-ah, you know dokkaebi aren't real."

"Of course I do," Jihoon said firmly, trying to convince himself more than her.

"You know you can tell me if you're having problems." Somin tilted her head. "Or delusions."

"Ya!" Jihoon protested, throwing the spoon at her.

Somin snatched it out of the air. She'd always been the more athletic of the two.

Jihoon flopped over in defeat, letting his head fall onto the counter. What was the point in trying to figure this all out? He'd never see that girl again. "I need caffeine."

"Well, you're in luck." Somin pulled a packet of instant coffee

out of her apron pocket. Jihoon perked up at the sound of the ripping foil.

“You can’t find a way to inject it directly into my veins?” Jihoon asked as Somin used the emptied packet as a make-shift stirrer. He took the mug gratefully. The coffee burned his tongue, but he didn’t care. “You’re a goddess,” he said on a sigh of satisfaction. “One day they’ll build temples to you. Shrines with your likeness.”

Somin chuckled. “Come out front when you’re feeling full human.”

When Jihoon walked into the front kitchen, Moon Soohyun, Somin’s mother, was bickering with Halmeoni over seasoning.

“Mrs. Nam,” she said, “if you add too much fish sauce, then it’ll overpower the flavor.” She gestured wildly with her wooden ladle, and Somin snatched it from her mother’s hand before it knocked over a pile of pots.

“I’ve smacked your bottom with that ladle and I can do it again,” Halmeoni said.

“Mrs. Nam, everyone has loved your cooking for years. But even you have to admit you’re getting old. When you get old, your taste buds and your vision are the first to go.”

Halmeoni tsked. “I don’t know why I let you hang around.”

Somin’s mother grinned. “Because you love me so much.”

“I just grew used to you,” Halmeoni muttered. “You’ve been running around this place since you were in diapers with my Yoori.”

Jihoon’s heart fell into his stomach. He didn’t like to be reminded about how his mother and Somin’s grew up together. They’d played together, gone to school together, gotten pregnant together. But Somin’s mother had stayed and his had left.

"I like your cooking." Somin hugged Halmeoni. "Maybe I'll marry Jihoon-ah, and then I'll get to eat it every day."

Jihoon finally spoke. "Who says I would even marry you, Lee Somin? You know I hate it when other people tell me what to do."

"Jihoon-ah!" all three of them said with varying degrees of affection and scolding.

"Oh, look at our Hoonie." Somin's mom pinched his cheek with a devilish glint in her eyes. He only allowed it because it was her and she knew it. "You're lucky, Mrs. Nam. Saves you money on stepladders with a grandson who can reach the tall shelves."

He held back a laugh.

"Stop teasing him," Halmeoni said.

Somin's mom let Jihoon go, but he wasn't free for long. Halmeoni turned Jihoon's face to examine him. Her eyes zeroed in on the bruise on his temple. "What happened here?"

"Nothing," Jihoon said too quickly. He could only imagine where his halmeoni's superstitions would take her if she knew about last night.

Halmeoni stared at him so hard he practically heard her thoughts. She was deciding if she would push the subject or not. She let it go along with his chin. "I had a dream about a pig last night," she said.

Jihoon looked over to Somin for clarification. She shrugged.

"It brings good fortune. So you two should study hard." Halmeoni swept her ladle between Somin and Jihoon.

"Yes, Halmeoni." They gave twin bows.

"Eat yeot. It'll make the knowledge stick."

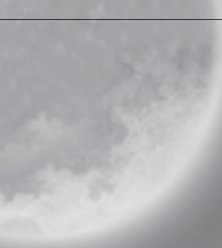
"Yes, Halmeoni."

"Here, take this out to table three." Halmeoni handed him a tray of stews, still boiling in their stone pots.

“Then get back in here. I’m going to finish fixing the seasoning in this next dish for table six,” Somin’s mother said before resuming her bickering with Halmeoni.

Somin gave Jihoon a smile and an eye roll as she also picked up a tray.

Jihoon followed, for once grateful for the chaos that was his life. By the end of the lunch rush, he’d almost completely forgotten about fox-girls and goblins.



WHEN THE FIRST gumiho neared the age of a thousand, the Silla Kingdom joined forces with the Chinese Tang dynasty and overthrew much of what used to be Prince Jumong's Goguryeo. It brought with it the rise of Buddhism.

Nine (gu, 九) was the symbol of the dragon and, therefore, the symbol of the king. It was the symbol of longevity, the symbol of immortality.

Nine nations were to submit to the Silla dynasty. They built the grand imperial dragon pagoda with nine tiers. The largest of its kind in all of East Asia, it symbolized the power of Buddha and Silla.

The fox grew eight extra tails.

Nine tails for power.

Nine tails for immortality.

6

MONDAY MORNING, MISS Kwon quieted the class to start homeroom. As the kids settled, she didn't launch into morning announcements as usual. Instead, she cleared her throat and glanced at something written in her notebook. "We have a new transfer student today: Gu Miyoung."

She gestured to the open door.

The girl moved quietly into the room. That was what Jihoon noticed first.

He half rose from his seat at the shock of seeing her. The dozens of times he'd thought of her over the weekend, he never imagined she'd do anything as boring as attend school. Let alone *his* school.

In the sunlight her face was striking. All angles and planes, a straight nose, and dark eyes framed with long lashes and curving brows. The boys in the room sat up straighter, like they were all puppets with their strings suddenly pulled taut.

"Introduce yourself." Miss Kwon invited Miyoung to step forward.

"My name is Gu Miyoung." She bowed. "My mother and I recently moved to Seoul. Please take good care of me." It was the generic introduction of any new transfer student, but the way she said it held an edge of warning: *Stay away from me*. Her eyes were

hard as they swept over the room. Jihoon waited for them to find him. But she didn't even pause when she saw him.

"I think I'm in love," Changwan whispered.

"Stop drooling." Jihoon didn't spare his friend a glance. He was too busy staring at Miyoung, who refused to meet his gaze.

"You may sit by Lee Somin," Miss Kwon said.

Miyoung took her seat, keeping her head down and thwarting Jihoon's attempts to catch her eye.

Miss Kwon finished the morning announcements as the bell rang. As soon as she left, the room erupted into chatter. While the teachers moved from classroom to classroom for each period, the students gained a few minutes of freedom to gossip and eat forbidden snacks previously hidden away.

Jihoon usually used the break for the latter, but this time he pushed back from his desk, stepping toward Miyoung.

He was beat to the punch by Baek Hana.

"Transfer student," Hana said. She was pretty in a traditional way: classic oval face, pert nose, and rosebud lips. Her straight bangs perfectly styled, her pleated skirt perfectly pressed. She reminded Jihoon of a porcelain doll, if dolls had judgmental eyes and sharp tongues. "Where'd you transfer from?"

It took Miyoung so long to answer, it seemed she intended to ignore the question. Finally, she said, "Jeollanam-do."

"The whole province of South Jeolla?"

"Gwangju." Another clipped answer.

"I have cousins in Gwangju." Hana smiled, but it held no kindness. "You're very pretty. Who was your plastic surgeon?"

Jihoon rolled his eyes at the barb. Everyone knew that Hana had begged her parents for double-eyelid surgery; just because they denied her didn't mean she was above plastic surgery. He saw

Miyoung's hands clamp, two tight fists folded together. He wondered if she did that to save Hana from a well-deserved punch in the mouth.

"Do you need something, Hana-ya?" Somin asked, and half the class stopped their conversations. Some settled in for the show.

Hana squirmed under Somin's stare. Jihoon didn't usually find pleasure in other people's discomfort, but he felt a grim sense of satisfaction as Hana's eyes darted back and forth between Somin and Miyoung. She seemed torn between playing with her new target and preserving her own skin.

Hana lifted her chin and Jihoon couldn't help but think she'd made the wrong choice. "I'm saying hello to the new transfer."

"Well, you said it. You should sit before the teacher gets here."

"Sure, whatever." Hana shrugged, a jerky movement filled with nerves. Everyone knew better than to cross Somin.

"I didn't ask for your help," Miyoung said, and heads across the room turned to stare in surprise.

"Excuse me?" Somin asked, and Jihoon got the impression of two powerful forces pushing against each other.

"From now on keep out of my business." Miyoung's words were low but easily heard in the silent room.

Jihoon watched Somin's jaw flex, like she held back a biting retort. But he knew her. She rarely succeeded in curbing her temper.

It was as if the whole class held their breath, waiting for the thick tension in the air to break.

Instead, the door opened and the math teacher, Mr. Hong, entered.

o o o

Jihoon watched Miyoung throughout the class.

She sat a row up and across the aisle from him. Her hand took quick notes as the teacher lectured. He stared at it, remembering how she snapped off the dokkaebi's thumb. He shivered involuntarily.

Jihoon scribbled a quick note and leaned into the aisle, casting a furtive glance at Mr. Hong. The teacher was watching two kids try to solve problems at the board, tapping a split bamboo branch on his palm. He liked to crack it against desks when kids fell asleep, and Jihoon knew that before corporal punishment was outlawed in schools Mr. Hong would have used it directly on the kids.

"Ya," Jihoon whispered.

Miyoung's hand stopped writing, but she didn't look over. Jihoon tossed the paper. It hit the edge of Miyoung's desk and fell to the floor.

Miyoung continued taking notes as if nothing had happened.

"Ya," Jihoon said again, his voice the urgent gravel of a whisper-shout.

A foot dropped on top of the note, and Jihoon grimaced as the teacher picked it up.

"Gu Miyoung, it seems Ahn Jihoon would like you to meet him after class," Mr. Hong said. It earned muffled laughter from the other kids. "The two of you, follow me outside."

In the hallway, they sat on their knees, their hands raised in the air. A punishment they'd have to continue until the class period was over. Already, Jihoon's arms ached.

"You should have caught it," he said.

Miyoung ignored him, staring straight ahead.

"You *could* have caught it. I've seen your reflexes."

She still didn't answer.

In the sunlight filtering through the windows, she was striking. Almost delicate looking. But Jihoon remembered how fierce she'd been in the forest, effortlessly squaring off against the monstrous dokkaebi.

He tried again. "About the other night in the woods—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Miyoung interrupted him.

"But—"

"I just moved here. I don't know the area. Why would I be in the woods?" Miyoung's face was set, her eyes clear. She seemed so sure of herself he almost believed her over his own memory.

He started to speak again.

Mr. Hong tapped on the glass and mouthed, *No talking*.

Jihoon lowered his head and tried to ignore the ache in his shoulders.

The bell rang, a shrill noise that broke the silence and marked the time for gym. It hurt to lower his arms after holding them up for so long. When Jihoon stood, his legs trembled, the pricks of a thousand needles creating a shiver of pain.

As he struggled to his feet, a group of girls descended upon Miyoung, who didn't seem to have any issues shaking off the physical effects of the punishment.

"Your face is so small. You could be a model," one of them cooed. "I'm jealous."

"Your skin is so clear. What foundation do you use?" asked another.

"I don't wear any," Miyoung said, her voice cold and dismissive.

The other girls didn't seem to get the hint as they continued to pepper her with questions.

"Ahn Jihoon." One of the girls zeroed in on him. "Hitting on the transfer on her first day? It's so unlike you."

Jihoon shrugged by way of answer.

"Does Lee Somin know you're crushing on the transfer?" Jihoon glanced over to see Miyoung's reaction, but realized she'd taken this opportunity to disappear.

"Lee Somin knows you're talking about her behind her back." Somin stepped out of the classroom, her arms crossed. The girls jerked upright, like army privates faced with their colonel.

"You should change for gym class," she said. The girls nodded and scurried away.

"Somin-ah, if you keep doing that, no one will ever talk to us again." Jihoon threw an arm around her shoulder in a light choke hold. The movement was more to support his still weak legs than anything else, but no one had to know.

"Is that a bad thing?" Somin jabbed him in the side so he loosened his grip. "What did you want with the transfer?"

"Just trying to be friendly." Jihoon said. He didn't want to discuss the confusing mystery that was Gu Miyoung right now.

"I don't like her. She's rude."

"You don't like her because she's not afraid of you," Changwan said, joining them.

"No one cares about your opinion," Somin said and the two began to bicker.

"Come on." Jihoon threw his other arm around Changwan's shoulders, turning the three of them into a unit. "You can work off that extra energy in gym."