

조선 이야기

JOSEON STORIES



DEMOSAI I

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DEMOSAII

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JOSEON STORIES

A STORY IN FIRE, SALT AND IRON

36 SONGS · 9 ALBUMS · 3 TRILOGIES · ONE STORY

demosaii

Fire burns.
Salt preserves.
Iron remembers.
And a person writes.

A NOTE BEFORE THE STORY

The story was music first.

This story began as music.

Thirty-six songs. Nine albums. Three trilogies.

At first, each song carried a piece: a voice, a place, a name, a decision. Some belonged to a palace. Some to a marketplace. Some to an island, a battlefield, a kitchen.

Together, they began to form something larger.

JOSEON STORIES follows that thread across nearly six centuries.

It begins with a woman whose place in history is almost erased. It moves through writing, song, memory, paper, water, salt and iron.

People enter the story. Most eventually leave it. Objects remain. Words change form. Names disappear and return.

The music is part of this world, but you do not need to hear it before reading. This book is the story. The songs are its companion.

You may begin with either.

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The Three Trilogies



Fire

A woman is erased. A scholar writes. Writing becomes song. The uprising fails. The words continue.

Sea

A ship lies underwater for ten years. Four people meet at the edge of land. Paper rises from the sea.

Iron

The border breaks. Old categories collapse. A teacher writes names. A young soldier keeps what he cannot read.

A person. A song. A page. A boat. A name. A jar.

A dramatic, dark-toned illustration of a traditional East Asian building, possibly a temple or palace, engulfed in flames. The architecture features dark, tiled roofs with ornate eaves. Thick, billowing smoke rises from the burning structure, filling the upper half of the frame. Numerous small, glowing embers and sparks are scattered throughout the smoke. Silhouettes of several figures are visible walking along the ridges of the burning roofs. The overall mood is one of destruction and tragedy.

PART I

FIRE

What happens when truth is written.

피와 안개



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CHAPTER ONE

BLOOD AND FOG

피와 안개



THE KING'S PATH
GHOST FIRE

ECHOES OF THE EMPTY PALACE
THE BLOOD SEAL

At night the palace grows larger.

By day, the corridor is narrow with officials, servants, guards, petitions, sleeves brushing sleeves. After the third watch, all of that disappears. The roof beams recede into darkness. The stone path seems longer than it was in daylight. The king walks it alone except for a eunuch three paces behind him carrying a lantern. He does not need the light. He has known this path since childhood. His father walked it. His grandfather walked it. Kings before either of them wore the same stones smooth beneath their shoes.

At the end of the corridor is a door.

The king stops.

“Your Majesty.”

The eunuch speaks carefully. The king says nothing. The room beyond the door is empty. It has been empty for three months.

He knows this.

Every night he comes anyway. He never touches the door. A closed door can still contain a possibility. The moment he puts his hand against the wood, it will become only wood. The room behind it will become only a room.

Empty.

So he stands there. The lantern flame bends in the wind.

“Your Majesty. It is cold.”

The king looks at the door.

“The wind is cold.”

Then he turns.

The eunuch follows. The king's shadow stretches ahead of him along the stone, and he walks over it all the way back.

II

He first saw her when he was nineteen and still the crown prince.

Behind Gyeonghoeru Pavilion, a young court maid was carrying a stack of dishes.

One slipped.

Then another.

Porcelain struck stone and broke around her. The crown prince stopped. The maid dropped to her knees. What he noticed first was not her face. It was her hands. She did not reach for the largest pieces. She picked up the sharpest ones first, moving quickly from shard to shard before anyone passing behind her could step on them. Only when the dangerous pieces were gone did she begin gathering the rest.

He watched longer than he intended. Her name was Yeon-i. Her father was not recorded. Her mother had been a government slave in Asan. Yeon-i had entered the palace by one of the few paths available to a girl born where she had been born. She carried dishes.

She cleaned.

She waited.

The shape of the rest of her life had already been decided for her. That autumn, the crown prince sent for her. Yeon-i knelt before him.

“What is your name?”

“Yeon-i, Your Highness.”

“Can you read?”

“No, Your Highness.”

“What can you do?”

She thought.

Most people answered him quickly. They had learned that powerful men preferred certainty. Yeon-i looked at her hands.

“I carry dishes.”

For a moment he stared at her.

Then he laughed.

She raised her eyes, surprised. Later, he would remember the sound of that laugh and wonder when he had stopped making it.

III

In the year he became king, Yeon-i was brought into the inner palace.

She received no title.

No rank.

No place in the structure of women whose names could properly appear beside a king's. For a month, the Queen Dowager said nothing. Then one morning she summoned him.

“Your Majesty. Is she to be the mother of this nation?”

“No.”

“Then what is she?”

The king had no answer. There were words for everything inside the palace.

Queen.

Consort.

Court lady.

Servant.

Daughter.

Widow.

Mother.

Yeon-i belonged cleanly to none of them. In the records, that meant almost nothing. In his life, it meant almost everything. When state business ended, he went to her room. There he spoke differently. Not like

a king giving decisions. Like a man trying to understand how a decision had become necessary.

Yeon-i listened.

She rarely advised him. That was part of why he returned. At court, every answer arrived attached to an interest. A minister wanted a rival weakened. A family wanted an appointment. A faction wanted a sentence written one way rather than another. Yeon-i wanted nothing from him. Sometimes, after he had finished speaking, she asked one question.

“What do you think that man was afraid of?”

At first he thought the question too simple. Then he began waiting for it. A minister who seemed arrogant at noon might look frightened by midnight. A petition that appeared to be about law could become, in Yeon-i’s room, a story about a family afraid of losing influence. A punishment could reveal itself as revenge. The king began seeing things differently.

The court noticed.

Courts always notice changes before they understand them. One night he told her:

“I will give you a title.”

Yeon-i shook her head.

“You should have one.”

“No.”

“Why?”

She hesitated.

“If I have a name people can see, they will look at me.”

“You already have a name.”

“You know it.”

“That is enough.”

“For you.”

He watched her.

Yeon-i lowered her eyes.

“What can be seen can be erased.”

The king laughed.

Not cruelly.

He thought she was afraid of shadows. Years later, he would remember the sentence exactly.

IV

Removing someone from a palace does not require a blade.

It can begin with a whisper. That spring, people began saying a slave's daughter had clouded the king's judgment. By the time the words reached the marketplace, no one knew who had first spoken them. From the marketplace they entered government offices. From government offices they entered petitions. One petition became three.

Three became ten.

Once enough men had written the same accusation on paper, the accusation acquired the appearance of fact. The king rejected the petitions.

Then more came.

He rejected those too. Yeon-i stopped asking what the frightened men at court were afraid of.

She already knew.

In summer, she became ill. The royal physician came. Medicine was prepared. For several days the illness seemed ordinary enough to have an ordinary ending. Then it did not. On the third night, the king entered her room and knew before anyone spoke. Yeon-i lay awake but could no longer answer him. He sat beside her and took her hand.

It was cold.

“Prepare the medicine again.”

The physician lowered himself to the floor.

“Your Majesty—”

“Again.”

“Your Majesty, it is already—”

“I said prepare it again.”

No one moved for a moment. Then everyone moved at once. Another preparation.

Another bowl.

Another lamp.

Another hour.

None of it mattered. Yeon-i died before dawn. The official entry was short.

Illness.

A date.

The physician’s name. The medicine administered. Nothing in the wording suggested that a king had sat beside her until morning. Nothing suggested that she had once stood behind Gyeonghoeru gathering sharp pieces of porcelain before anyone could be hurt by them. She had no title. So there was no royal funeral. No proper memorial tablet. No grave marker bearing the position she had held, because officially she had held none.

A bier passed through the palace gate. Two elderly court maids followed it.

That was all.

The king did not. A king could not publicly mourn a woman the palace had never officially acknowledged.

V

After Yeon-i’s death, the king developed the habit of remaining on the throne after everyone else had gone.

The ministers withdrew.

The doors closed.

Servants changed the lamps.

Still he sat.

He often looked toward the place beside him. No one had ever sat there. It was not Yeon-i's place. That was precisely the problem. There had never been a place for her.

Winter came.

One evening the king stepped outside and watched snow cover the courtyard. Roof tiles disappeared beneath white.

Stone disappeared.

The edges of steps softened. For a while the palace looked as though nothing unpleasant had ever happened within its walls. A thought came to him. Snow covers everything.

Then another.

Why does it not cover that one place? He looked across the courtyard. There was no uncovered place. Snow lay evenly from wall to wall. The place was somewhere else. He returned inside. That winter, sleep became difficult.

VI

Then he began to see her.

First in dreams.

Yeon-i always stood with her back to him. He called her name. She began to turn. He woke before seeing her face. Later, passing the pond at Gyeonghoeru, he glanced into the water and thought he saw another reflection beside his own. When he looked up, there was no one there.

He said nothing.

Others did.

Among the court maids, stories began spreading. A light moving beneath the eaves. A small wandering flame. A voice heard where no one stood. Some called it ghost fire. One maid said she had seen the outline of a woman. Another insisted the sound came from the corridor leading to the empty room. No one agreed on what they had seen. They could not even agree on what to call the woman.

She had not been queen.

Not consort.

Not a woman important enough for the official language of haunting. There was no tablet to point to. No title to whisper.

Only a memory.

The king heard the stories. He ordered incense burned at an empty funerary hall. There was no memorial tablet inside. Every evening the incense was lit. Every morning nothing remained but ash.

VII

The following spring, the king summoned the court historian.

“Bring me the record of last summer.”

The historian obeyed. The king opened the volume.

There it was.

Yeon-i’s death reduced to the shape the state preferred.

Date.

Illness.

Physician.

Medicine.

Ingredients.

He read the list once.

Then again.

His finger stopped.

“Who supplied this?”

The historian looked down.

“I do not know, Your Majesty.”

“Find out.”

He closed the book.

“Ask the royal pharmacy who brought it in.”

A pause.

“And who paid.”

Three days later, a document arrived. The royal pharmacy had not paid. Another name appeared on the account. The king read it.

Folded the paper.

Put it inside his sleeve. For the rest of the day, he said nothing unusual. That evening he entered the throne hall and called for the eunuch.

“Bring me a brush.”

The eunuch bowed.

“And the seal ink, Your Majesty?”

“Yes.”

The brush arrived.

The royal seal.

Red ink.

The king looked at them. Then pushed the ink aside.

“Your Majesty?”

He took the folded paper from his sleeve.

Opened it.

The name remained where it had been that morning. He stared at it for a long time. When he finally spoke, his voice was almost gentle.

“The gentle king is dead.”

What followed survives in the annals.

Arrests.

Investigations.

Families destroyed by association.

Officials removed.

Punishments extended beyond the people first accused. Names disappeared from office registers while new accusations appeared in their place. The historian wrote. Sometimes because he had witnessed something. Sometimes because he had been ordered to record it. Sometimes because he had been ordered to record it differently.

The archive grew.

So did the uncertainty inside it.

VIII

When it was over, the king returned to the corridor.

No eunuch followed him.

No lantern.

He walked through darkness until he reached the door. For months he had stood before it without touching it. That night, he raised his hand. The wood was cold.

He pushed.

The door opened.

The room had not changed. That was almost unbearable.

A low table.

The place where a lamp had stood.

The wall.

The floor.

Objects had been removed, but the room still contained the shape of someone who was no longer there. The king went inside.

Sat.

Outside, wind moved beneath the eaves. Something tapped softly against wood.

Once.

Then again.

He did not look up.

“It is quiet.”

The words sounded strange inside the empty room.

He waited.

No one answered.

“Quiet, at last.”

He remained there until the lamps in the distant halls were extinguished.

IX

Thirty years passed.

The king's purges became history. History became records. Records became something younger men were expected to trust. A scholar named Yun-je did not. He was twenty-nine when he began comparing old cases that others had stopped reading closely.

Different years.

Different victims.

Different accusations. But in three separate purges, he found the same language.

Not similar.

The same.

The wording repeated so precisely that he began to suspect the sentence had existed before the crimes it described. He read the records again. Then reached for a brush. Yun-je did not know Yeon-i's story. He did not know about the empty room.

The incense.

The account from the royal pharmacy. The sentence spoken beside a sheet of paper thirty years earlier. He knew only what remained in front of him: records that had been rewritten, names that had disappeared, and language repeating where truth should have been.

So he wrote.

Not about a forgotten woman. About the system that had learned how to forget. And somewhere near the beginning of what he wrote was a thought that would follow him farther than he knew: Erase it, and someone will write it again. Burn it, and someone will remember.

The brush lifted.

The ink dried.

And the story moved into another hand.

THE ERASED NAME

AFTER CHAPTER ONE

RECORDED NAME

Yeon-i

OFFICIAL TITLE

None

PLACE IN THE PALACE

Unrecorded

MOTHER

Government slave, Asan

LITERACY

None recorded

GRAVE MARKER

None

She entered the palace through the servants' quarters. She carried dishes. She became important to a king without ever becoming important to the record.

When she died, the state had almost no language with which to describe what had been lost. No title meant no formal place in mourning. No formal place in mourning meant almost no place in history.

Her name survived anyway.



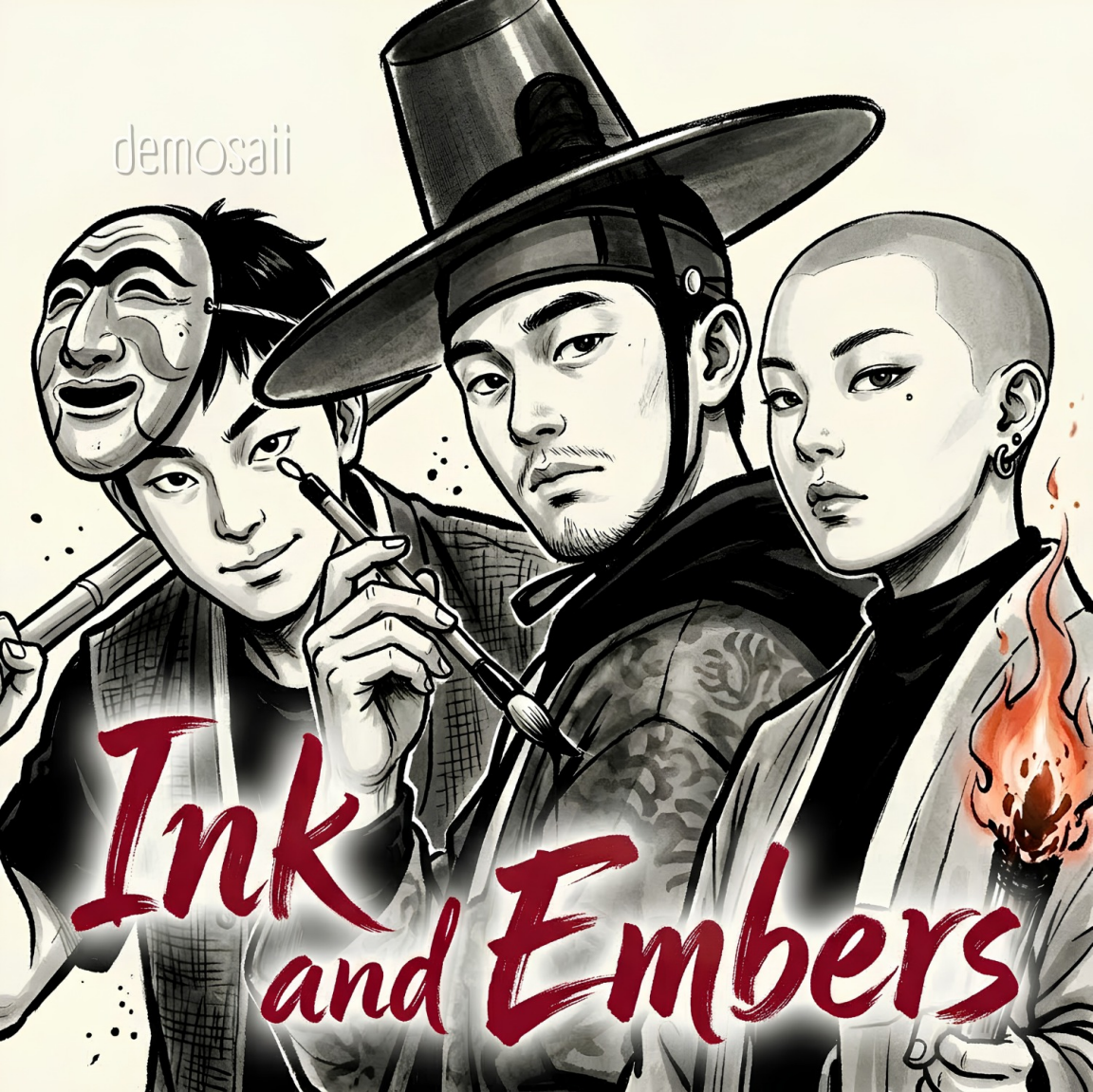
The King

He was nineteen when he first noticed her. A generation later, the records remembered something else: purges, arrests, accusations, red seals.

Between those two versions of the man lies a room the archive cannot explain. An empty room. A closed door. Incense burning before no memorial tablet.

History does not erase only by destroying documents.
Sometimes it erases by never creating them.

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CHAPTER TWO

INK AND EMBERS

먹과 불씨



A BLADE AT THE BRUSH TIP
THE WOMAN AT THE MOUNTAIN TEMPLE

THE MARKET STREET
THE LAST SIGNAL FIRE

Yun-je submitted his petition in the third month of the year he turned twenty-nine.

He had rewritten it three times. Not because the argument changed. The argument was simple. Over ten years, three purges had been carried out under three different circumstances. Different men had been accused. Different families had fallen. Yet the language of the charges was the same.

Not similar.

The same.

Yun-je copied the three passages beside one another and stared at them until the candle shortened. A fact does not repeat itself word for word.

A form does.

That was the center of the petition. He removed every sentence that sounded angry. Every sentence that might be called personal. He left dates, cases, wording, comparison. Ink without emotion. He believed precision would protect him. At dawn he put on his official robes, folded the petition, and placed it inside his coat. Three days later, he was in the state tribunal prison.

The questions came in different voices but always returned to the same place.

“Who told you to write it?”

“No one.”

“Who helped you?”

“No one.”

“Who read it before you submitted it?”

“No one.”

The interrogator leaned forward.

“Then you expect us to believe you wrote this alone?”

“Yes.”

The answer seemed to trouble them more than a confession would have. A conspiracy could be named. A solitary thought was harder to contain. He was spared the severest sentence. Instead, he was sent to Jeju. On the morning they led him from the prison, a man stood among those watching.

Yun-je knew him.

Three days earlier that same man had called him a loyal servant of the throne. Now he spat at the ground near Yun-je’s feet. Yun-je looked at him. The man looked away first.

II

The wind on Jeju does not pass.

It stays.

On the mainland, wind moves through a place and leaves it behind. On Jeju it finds the cracks in the walls, the gap beneath the door, the edge of a roof, and settles in as though the house belongs to it. The first winter, Yun-je could not sleep because of the sound. By the second, silence kept him awake. An exile was forbidden to work. An exile was also expected to feed himself.

The two rules existed comfortably together because no one responsible for writing them had to live under both. So by day, Yun-je went out with fishermen. He learned to mend a net badly.

Then less badly.

He learned where to place his feet in a boat and when not to speak while another man watched the water. At night he wrote. Paper was harder to find than food. At first he used the dirt floor. He drew characters with a twig.

Read them.

Changed them.

Then rubbed them away with his foot. One evening a village boy stood in the doorway watching him.

“Why do you write it if you are going to erase it?”

Yun-je looked at the characters beneath his hand.

“I’m not writing it to erase it.”

“Then why?”

“To remember it.”

The boy frowned.

“If you remember it, why write it?”

Yun-je almost answered immediately.

Then stopped.

It was a better question than the boy knew.

“Because memory changes things.”

The boy looked unconvinced.

Yun-je smiled.

“So does writing.”

The following year, the boy appeared carrying a bundle of paper.

Yun-je stared.

“Where did you get that?”

The boy said nothing.

“Did you steal it?”

Still nothing.

Yun-je sighed.

The boy held the paper farther toward him.

Yun-je took it.

He never asked again.

III

In the spring of his third year on the island, a young man came to Yun-je's hut.

He knelt outside.

"Master."

Yun-je disliked the word but did not interrupt.

"Your writing reached the capital."

Yun-je thought he had misheard.

"What writing?"

"Yours."

"My writing has never left Jeju."

The young man looked up.

"It has."

"How?"

"As a song."

Yun-je sat very still. The young man explained. There was a performer in Jongno.

A clown.

He sang about an official who wrote the same accusation three times and expected everyone to believe it three times.

People laughed.

The young man repeated one of the lines. It was Yun-je's sentence. Not exactly as he had written it.

But close enough.

He recognised the bones of it.

"Again."

The young man repeated it. Yun-je looked toward the folded papers in the corner of the room. Until that moment, he had thought writing lived where ink lived.

On paper.

In books.

In archives.

Things that could be confiscated.

Rewritten.

Burned.

But somewhere across the water, people were carrying his sentence without paper at all.

In their mouths.

Yun-je began to laugh. The young man stared at him.

“What is funny?”

“Nothing.”

Yun-je covered his eyes with one hand.

“A song.”

He had spent years worrying about paper. A song had simply walked away.

IV

Tal-swe had no family name.

In the market, no one cared. People called him Tal-swe because he appeared in a mask, and the name stayed. His performances were short. That was important. A joke that ended quickly gave officials less time to decide whether it was dangerous. At the Jongno crossroads, Tal-swe put on the mask of a nobleman. He clasped his hands behind his back.

Lifted his chin.

Walked slowly across the mat. The audience recognised the walk before he did anything else. Then Tal-swe caught his foot on his own stick.

He stumbled.

Nearly fell.

Never once unclasped his hands.

The crowd laughed.

A patrolman watched from the edge.

“One day we’ll arrest him.”

The man beside him asked:

“For what?”

The patrolman continued watching. Tal-swe had named no minister.

No official.

No family.

He had only walked. That was his skill. He left the accusation inside the audience. They supplied the name themselves.

V

The writing from Jeju reached Tal-swe one spring.

A trader brought it off a boat hidden between sacks of salt. Tal-swe could read a little.

Not enough.

He took the page to an old teacher drinking alone in a tavern.

“Read this.”

The teacher unfolded it. His expression changed before he reached the end.

“What?”

The teacher folded the paper again.

“Dangerous.”

“The writing?”

“The meaning.”

“What does it say?”

The teacher looked at him.

“Something simple.”

“That is dangerous?”

“The simplest things often are.”

Tal-swe made him read it again.

Then once more.

Three hearings.

That was enough.

A performer learned words the way a boat learned current.

By repetition.

By rhythm.

By knowing what came next before it arrived. Tal-swe took the paper back. Held one corner over the lamp. The teacher reached for it.

“What are you doing?”

“Learning.”

“You already learned it.”

“Exactly.”

The flame caught.

The paper curled inward. The teacher stared.

“What a waste.”

Tal-swe watched the last edge darken.

“They can take paper.”

He tapped his temple.

“They’ll have to work harder for this.”

Seven days later, Jongno had a new song. The melody was familiar. The joke was about a provincial magistrate too lazy to write a new charge, so he copied the same one three times.

People laughed.

They repeated the refrain. By the next month it was being sung in Kaesong. Later, farther north.

The words changed.

The meaning did not.

VI

On Songni Mountain, Jeong-an struck a wooden bell.

Her dharma name meant stillness and peace. For years she had considered this an error. She had grown up near the palace. Her father had served as Inspector General. During one of the purges, men came for him at night. Jeong-an was seventeen. She remembered almost nothing in order.

The floor.

Voices.

Her mother's hand.

Men at the door. Her father asking for his shoes before they took him away. Of everything that happened, that was what stayed.

The shoes.

A stranger fastening them. Afterward, her mother was made a government slave. Jeong-an lived with relatives. At twenty-three she cut her hair and entered the mountain. She thought silence would be enough.

Then prayer.

Then years.

None of them erased the memory. So she struck the bell.

Again.

Again.

One night she stopped.

“Buddha.”

The wooden striker rested in her hands.

“This is not a prayer.”

The mountain gave no answer. She had not expected one.

VII

The song reached Songni Mountain in autumn.

A man climbing with firewood was humming it. Jeong-an heard the tune first.

Then the words.

She stepped into the road.

“Where did you hear that?”

The man stopped.

“In the market.”

“Sing it again.”

He smiled.

“It’s a funny one.”

“Again.”

He sang.

Jeong-an listened until the end. The smile disappeared from his face before hers changed.

Three accusations.

The same words.

The same pattern.

One of the three had taken her father. The man with the firewood left. Jeong-an remained in the road. That night she did not sleep.

Nor the next.

On the third morning she placed the wooden striker beside the bell.
Put on her robe. Walked down the mountain.

VIII

She found Tal-swe in a tavern behind Jongno.

He was eating.

She stood across from him.

“Who wrote the song?”

Tal-swe looked up.

“I did.”

“No.”

He stopped chewing.

Jeong-an waited.

Tal-swe set down his bowl.

“It came from Jeju.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do.”

Tal-swe studied her.

“You don’t want that name.”

“I do.”

“Names are dangerous.”

“One of the cases in that writing was my father.”

The room seemed to become quieter without anyone actually lowering their voice. Tal-swe looked at the table.

Then at her.

He said the name.

“Yun-je.”

Jeong-an repeated it once.

Not loudly.

Enough.

IX

The signal fires rose on the twenty-seventh night of the tenth month.

One on Jeju.

One on Songni Mountain.

One in Jongno.

They were too far apart to guide one another. That was not their purpose. The fire meant only:

We began.

Tal-swe came to the marketplace without his mask. People who had watched him for ten years did not recognise him at first. He broke the stick he used for his drum. Took a torch instead. Jeong-an stood near the palace wall in her monastic robe. Someone behind her whispered:

“What is a nun doing here?”

No one answered.

Jeong-an raised her voice. She called her father's name.

Once.

For a moment there was only the sound of the crowd breathing. Then another person called another name. Someone else answered with a third.

Then another.

Then many.

Names crossed the marketplace faster than fire. People who had come to shout accusations began calling the dead instead. Names from old purges. Names from prison registers. Names that had disappeared from

households. Names spoken by people who had kept them quiet for years. By the time soldiers came, more than four hundred had been called. The uprising lasted less than half a day.

At dawn, the marketplace scattered. The fire that spread afterward was no longer a signal. It was simply fire.

Tal-swe survived.

He would spend the rest of his life unable to explain why. Jeong-an was taken, questioned, and eventually released. She returned toward Songni Mountain with smoke in her robe. Yun-je remained on Jeju. For ten more days. Then the order came to bring him back.

X

Before leaving the island, Yun-je burned his papers.

One stack.

Then another.

Years of writing lifted into smoke above the yard. The village boy who had once brought him paper was no longer a child. He stood nearby, watching. Yun-je called him closer.

“I need you to remember something.”

The boy looked at the fire.

“Why?”

“Because I cannot carry it.”

Yun-je held one last page.

“Can you learn this?”

The boy nodded.

Yun-je read.

Once.

Again.

A third time.

The boy repeated it back.

Not perfectly.

Yun-je corrected one word. The boy began again. This time he reached the end.

Yun-je waited.

“Again.”

The boy repeated it.

Yun-je smiled.

Then held the page over the fire.

The boy stared.

“You said I should remember it.”

“I did.”

“Then why burn it?”

Yun-je watched the flame take the edge.

“Because now I know where it is.”

The paper disappeared. The words did not.

WHEN INK BECOMES SOUND

AFTER CHAPTER TWO



Yun-je

THE WRITER

He notices repetition
where the state calls it fact.
He writes.



Tal-swe

THE VOICE

He cannot preserve the
document, so he
memorises it and gives it
rhythm.



Jeong-an

THE FLAME

She hears the song and
recognises the pattern
inside her own past.

WRITE → CARRY → SPEAK

Ink becomes memory.
Memory becomes song.
Song becomes witness.



CHAPTER THREE

ASH AND SEED

재와 씨앗

THE LAST BRUSH
THE EMPTY MOUNTAIN

SHADOW ON THE ROAD
THE FIRST SPROUT

There were no windows in the state tribunal prison.

Yun-je counted the days anyway. Each morning, when food came through the door, he scratched one line into the wall.

Ten.

Twenty.

Fifty.

On the hundredth morning he looked at the marks and almost stopped. Then added one more. In the beginning he argued with himself. He rewrote the petition in his head.

Changed verbs.

Removed sentences.

Imagined a version careful enough to have saved him. By the second month, that ended. He thought instead about the marketplace. The people who had called names. The people who had followed words he had written alone on an island. After that came quiet. When he closed his eyes, he saw Jeju.

Not the house.

Not the guards.

Only the horizon.

A line with nothing behind it. The sentence was carried out in spring. On the last morning, the grass beyond the prison walls had turned green.

Yun-je noticed.

That surprised him. He had imagined the end of a life would make the world look different.

It did not.

Spring had arrived without asking what had happened in the capital. He remembered being a child. His father placing a brush in his hand. The brush had seemed almost as long as his arm. His father had said:

“A person who writes may live longer than a king.”

At four years old, Yun-je had thought this meant scholars lived to great age. Now he understood something else. A king could silence a man. A king would also die. Words had other ways to travel. When asked whether he had anything to say, Yun-je gave a short answer. They could silence one person. They could not silence every person who remembered. Then there was nothing more to add.

II

Tal-swe left the capital.

He carried no mask.

No drum.

For years those two objects had told him who he was before he entered a village.

A clown.

A performer.

A man people paid to laugh at. Without them, he did not know what to call himself. In the first village south of Hanyang, someone offered him water.

A woman asked:

“Where have you come from?”

“The capital.”

“They say something happened.”

Tal-swe opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

Then tears did.

He turned away, embarrassed.

The woman waited.

That evening, villagers gathered. Tal-swe told them what had happened. He did not sing. Did not imitate an official. Did not make anyone laugh. He told them about the marketplace.

The names.

The soldiers arriving at dawn. The people who did not come home. When he finished, no one applauded. The next morning he walked on. In the next village he told it again. Then in the next. The performer became a storyteller before he noticed the change.

III

In Gyeongsang, a farmer stopped him in a tavern.

“I know the man you speak of.”

Tal-swe looked up.

“Yun-je?”

“The scholar from Jeju.”

“You met him?”

“No.”

The farmer lifted his cup.

“But I read his writing.”

Tal-swe became still.

“You read it?”

“A page came through our village.”

“When?”

“Before the uprising.”

The farmer looked at his drink.

“I read it to my son.”

Tal-swe waited.

The farmer frowned as though searching for a sentence.

"I still remember some of it."

Then he began.

Not every word.

Enough.

Tal-swe listened.

Yun-je was dead.

The paper the farmer had seen was probably gone. Yet the writing sat inside a man who had once read it beside his son. Tal-swe had spent years believing he carried Yun-je's words because he had memorised them. Now he understood he was only one place among many where they had stopped for a while.

IV

The following year, Tal-swe met a young man on a mountain road.

The accent made him turn before the face did.

Jeju.

They walked beside one another for a time. Then the young man asked:

"Do you know the song?"

"What song?"

"The one about the same charge being written three times."

Tal-swe stopped.

"Where did you hear that?"

"I didn't."

The young man smiled slightly.

"I learned it."

"From whom?"

"The scholar."

Tal-swe stared at him.

“Yun-je?”

The young man nodded. They sat beside the road.

“Tell me.”

The young man recited.

Beginning to end.

Tal-swe heard lines he knew. And lines he had never heard. When the young man finished, Tal-swe asked:

“How?”

“He read it to me.”

“When?”

“Before they took him from Jeju.”

“How many times?”

“Three.”

Tal-swe laughed once.

Of course.

Three.

“And the paper?”

“He burned it.”

Tal-swe looked at him for a long time.

“Can you write?”

“A little.”

“Enough to write what you just said?”

“I think so.”

Tal-swe took paper from his bundle. The young man looked at it.

“You want me to write it?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Tal-swe shrugged.

"I remember well."

He touched the paper.

"This remembers differently."

The young man wrote until evening.

Slowly.

Sometimes he stopped and recited a sentence aloud before setting it down. Tal-swe did not help. He had his own remembered version. This was not his page to correct. When the young man finished, he placed the brush down. Tal-swe read only enough to recognise the shape. Then folded the paper. It was not Yun-je's original page. That page had burned on Jeju. What Tal-swe carried from the mountain road was memory returned to paper.

A copy made not from another document, but from a person. He placed it inside his coat.

And kept walking.

V

Jeong-an returned to Songni Mountain.

The path was the same. Her feet were not. Smoke remained in her robe. She washed it once.

Twice.

Three times.

After that, she stopped trying. She took up the wooden striker. The bell sounded exactly as it had before. That surprised her too. For years she had struck it hoping sound could cover memory. Now she simply struck it because it was morning.

Then evening.

Then morning again.

Spring arrived.

Plum trees opened along the mountain. Jeong-an thought of her mother's garden.

The memory came.

And went.

In summer, rain on the roof sounded enough like childhood to bring her father back for a moment. She did not push him away.

Autumn came.

Leaves turned red.

Then fell.

They looked like leaves.

Not fire.

That was new.

One winter, an old traveller climbed to the hermitage. He walked with a stick. Jeong-an brought tea. For a long time neither spoke. Before leaving, the traveller asked:

“What is your dharma name?”

“Jeong-an.”

“Stillness and peace.”

“Yes.”

He nodded.

Then continued down the mountain. Jeong-an stood at the gate. For the first time, the name did not feel like something another person had given the wrong woman. Perhaps she had simply taken a long road toward it.

VI

Years passed.

Tal-swe's hair thinned. His knees began deciding how far he could travel before he did. He used a walking stick. His singing voice roughened. So he sang less. He told stories instead. People still fed him.

That was enough.

One summer he reached a small village in Jeolla. Children gathered beneath a zelkova tree. Tal-swe told them the old story.

A palace.

A king.

A scholar.

Ink.

A marketplace.

Fire.

The children listened as children do when adults speak about a time so distant it feels invented. When he finished, they scattered.

All but one.

A girl of about ten remained. Tal-swe noticed her only when she spoke.

"Was it real?"

He looked at her.

"What makes you ask?"

"Your voice changed."

"When?"

"In the middle."

The old man smiled.

"Did it?"

"Yes."

The girl waited.

Tal-swe did not answer the question.

She went home.

VII

He returned to the village twice more.

The third time, the girl was twelve. He knew before reaching the market that he would not come again. The roads were becoming too long. His legs told him this without apology. He found the girl.

“You remember me?”

“Yes.”

“What did I tell you last time?”

“The palace story.”

“That is all?”

“The scholar.”

“Anything else?”

“The nun.”

Tal-swe nodded.

“And the clown?”

She smiled.

“He was foolish.”

“Very.”

He took her hand.

“This story will be yours someday.”

The girl frowned.

“I don’t want it.”

Tal-swe laughed.

“That has never stopped a story.”

She did not understand him.

That was fine.

She was twelve.

That evening he went to her house. Her grandmother received him. Tal-swe took out the folded paper he had carried for more than three decades. He placed it on the table. The grandmother looked at it.

“I can’t read.”

“Neither can I. Not properly.”

“Then why keep it?”

“Because someone could.”

She looked toward the room where the girl was sleeping. Tal-swe followed her eyes.

“No.”

The grandmother looked back at him.

“No?”

“Not yet.”

She wrapped the page in cloth. Lifted a floorboard.

Placed it beneath.

No ceremony.

No promise.

Just a piece of paper disappearing into darkness.

VIII

Four years passed.

No one lifted the board. The house changed in the small ways houses do. A jar broke and was replaced. A winter leaked through part of the roof. Someone patched it.

The girl grew.

The paper waited.

Bun-i was sixteen when she found it. She was cleaning her grandmother's room. The edge of the broom caught between two boards.

She knelt.

Pressed one.

It moved.

Bun-i lifted it.

Something wrapped in old cloth lay underneath.

She opened it.

Hanji.

Ink.

Lines of characters. She knew they were writing.

That was all.

She sat on the floor for a long time with the page in her lap. She had heard stories in the market as a child.

A palace.

A scholar.

A clown.

Fire.

One story had stayed with her because the old storyteller's voice had changed while telling it. She had known then, without knowing how, that it was not just a story. Now there was paper in her hands. She could not read a single word.

IX

Bun-i carried the page to the village teacher.

He took it from her. Read the first line.

Then the second.

By the end he was no longer reading aloud.

Bun-i waited.

“What does it say?”

The teacher did not answer.

“Is it his?”

“Whose?”

“The scholar from the story.”

The teacher looked at her.

“I don’t know.”

“Then read it.”

He hesitated.

Bun-i held out her hand.

“If I cannot read it, you have to.”

So he did.

She listened until the last word.

Then asked:

“Teach me.”

The teacher looked startled.

“Teach you what?”

“To read.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“You are a girl.”

Bun-i looked at the paper. Then back at him.

“That changes the letters?”

The teacher frowned.

“No.”

“Then teach me.”

“No.”

The next morning Bun-i sat outside his door.

He ignored her.

The following morning she was there again. On the third morning, the door opened. The teacher looked at her.

Bun-i stood.

Neither said anything.

He stepped aside.

She entered.

X

The first day Bun-i held a brush, her hand shook.

Not because she was afraid. Because she was pressing too hard. The teacher tapped the table.

“Again.”

She tried.

The stroke bent.

Too thick at the beginning. Thin at the end. Bun-i stared at it.

Ugly.

Uneven.

Nothing like the clean characters on the old page. The teacher reached for another sheet. Bun-i did not move.

“What?”

She pointed at her crooked mark.

“That is a letter?”

“Yes.”

She looked at it again. A thing she had been unable to enter all her life had opened because of one imperfect stroke.

Bun-i smiled.

The teacher sighed.

“Again.”

She dipped the brush.

Yun-je was gone.

The original page he had written was gone. Tal-swe was old and would soon be gone too. But something had crossed from one person to another, changing shape every time.

Writing.

Memory.

Song.

Story.

Paper.

Now a brush in Bun-i's hand. Years later, another scholar would be sent away for writing what those above him preferred not to read. His road would end where the land ended.

At the sea.

And beneath that sea, another kind of paper was already waiting.

THE FIRST PAGE

AFTER CHAPTER THREE

ORIGINAL

Destroyed

FIRST CARRIER

Unnamed boy on Jeju

LATER CARRIER

Tal-swe

SURVIVAL

Memory

RECREATED

Years later

FOUND BY

Bun-i, age sixteen



The page Bun-i finds is not the sheet Yun-je once held. That one burned. The words survived inside another person long enough to return to paper.

Bun-i cannot read what she finds. That is the point. For the first time in her life, unreadable marks become something she refuses to remain outside of.

The first mark Bun-i makes with a brush is crooked. It is still a letter.

It proves nothing in a court.
It changes a life.

INTERLUDE

WHAT FIRE LEAVES BEHIND

YEAR 0

Yeon-i dies.

+30

Yun-je writes.

+31

Yun-je dies. His original final page does not survive.

YEARS LATER

The words return to paper through memory.

BUN-I · AGE 12

The recreated page is hidden.

BUN-I · AGE 16

She finds it.

Fire destroys the object.
It does not decide what happens next.



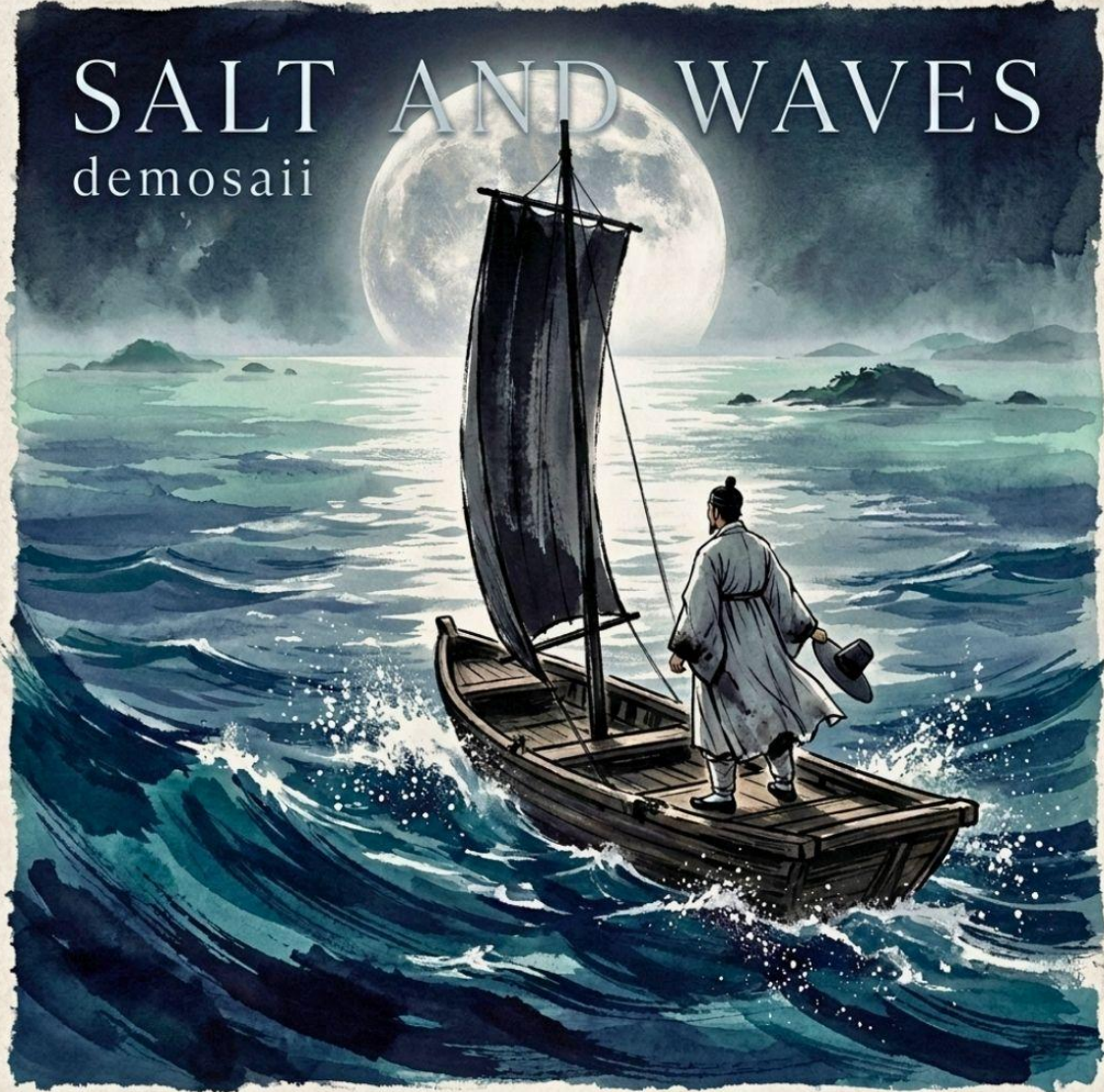
PART II

SEA

What the world tries to bury.

SALT AND WAVES

demosaii



CHAPTER FOUR

SALT AND WAVES

소금과 파도

ROAD OF EXILE
OLD NET

BLACK SAIL
SUMBISORI

I

The decree was read in the morning.

The official was young.

His voice shook.

Su-gyeom noticed this before he noticed the cold.

“For the crime of troubling the realm with a brush...”

The official continued.

Exile.

An island at the southern edge of the kingdom. No date of return.

Su-gyeom knelt.

He wondered what the young official would say when he went home that evening. Would he tell his wife he had sentenced a man? Would he say he had only read what was placed in his hands? Would he remember Su-gyeom's face?

Probably not.

That was how such things worked. The state remembered the sentence. Not the voice that read it. They removed Su-gyeom's gat. Took his official robe. What remained were ink-stained fingers. He left Hanyang under guard. After twenty paces, he looked back. The gates had already closed. He had not heard them. Gates close quietly.

II

A thousand ri is not something a person walks.

It is something a person endures. Two guards travelled with him.

One ahead.

One behind.

His ankles were chained. His hands were not. Su-gyeom understood that this was not kindness. A prisoner with free hands could catch himself

when he fell. A prisoner arriving injured created paperwork. The state preferred efficiency. The rice fields changed.

Walls grew lower.

The air sharpened.

Then one morning Su-gyeom smelled something he did not recognise. By afternoon, he knew.

Salt.

At a roadside tavern an old woman placed a bowl of soup in front of him.

“I have no money.”

She did not answer.

She turned away.

One of the guards saw. He looked toward the road instead.

Su-gyeom ate.

No one mentioned the bowl again. At the last mountain pass, the world seemed to stop.

Sky ahead.

Nothing below it.

Then light.

Movement.

An enormous surface with no field boundary, no wall, no road.

The sea.

Su-gyeom had reached the place where land ran out.

III

The man who ferried him to the island was old.

His name was Gap-su. He sat in the boat with one hand resting on the oar and waited until Su-gyeom understood he was supposed to climb in.

No greeting.

No instruction.

Su-gyeom sat.

Gap-su pushed away from shore. For a long time there was only the sound of the oar entering water. Su-gyeom watched the mainland shrink. At last Gap-su asked:

“What did you do?”

“I wrote.”

“What?”

“What happened.”

Gap-su nodded.

The conversation ended. Later, someone in the village asked Gap-su about the exile.

“What kind of criminal?”

Gap-su repaired a net while answering.

“The kind with clean eyes.”

“What does that mean?”

Gap-su shrugged.

“The sea doesn’t ask what a man was on land.”

He pulled the knot tight.

That was all.

IV

An exile received a roof.

Food was his own problem. So Su-gyeom learned the things island life required. How to mend a net. How to turn seaweed so it dried evenly. How

to tell whether weather had changed by watching people who had already noticed. In his third month, a child appeared outside the hut.

“They say you know letters.”

“I do.”

“Write my name.”

Su-gyeom looked around.

“With what?”

The child pointed at the sand. Su-gyeom took a stick.

Wrote the name.

The child stared.

Then rubbed it away with one foot.

“Again.”

Su-gyeom wrote it again. The child erased it.

Again.

Seven times.

A week later there were three children.

Then seven.

They sat by the shore. Su-gyeom wrote characters in sand. The children copied them.

The tide came.

By evening there was no evidence of a lesson. That suited everyone. One afternoon Su-gyeom watched a wave erase an entire row of characters. A child laughed and began again. For the first time in years, Su-gyeom laughed too.

Bae-swe arrived in autumn.

He sailed at night. His sail was black. So was most of what people said about him.

Smuggler.

Carrier.

Man without a proper name. People called him Bae-swe because he had always belonged to boats more than to land. He transported whatever someone paid him to transport.

Salt.

Cloth.

Letters.

Occasionally books no official wanted crossing a harbour. He had survived because he followed one rule:

Carry.

Do not ask.

One night, unloading cargo, he saw lamplight from Su-gyeom's hut.

"So the scholar lives there."

Someone nodded.

Bae-swe went over.

Su-gyeom was writing.

"What do you write?"

Su-gyeom looked up.

"What do you carry?"

Bae-swe smiled.

"I asked first."

"The same thing."

Bae-swe glanced at the paper.

"I cannot read."

“You do not have to.”

Bae-swe thought about the answer.

Then left.

VI

That winter, Bae-swe heard a rumour.

Ten years earlier, a government ship had gone down near the northern shoal.

Records aboard.

Maybe money.

Maybe bodies.

Every version changed depending on who told it. One phrase remained. The truth is sleeping under the water. Bae-swe heard this in a tavern. He laughed with everyone else.

Then forgot it.

Or tried to.

Knowing less had kept him alive for thirty years. He had never opened a package he was paid to carry. Never held a sealed letter toward a lamp. Never asked why one man paid twice as much as another for the same journey. Questions created knowledge. Knowledge created choices. Choices created trouble. And yet, on the next run, his boat turned a little farther north.

Bae-swe blamed the current. On the run after that, it happened again. He blamed the wind.

VII

Gap-su had lived beside the sea for forty years.

Long enough that parts of his body predicted weather before the sky did. His hands knew nets. His knees knew storms. His eyes opened before

dawn whether there was work or not. Once, his house had been loud. His elder son worked boats. His younger son stayed close to shore. His wife complained about both. Then the sea took one. Illness took another. His wife lived long enough to wait for someone who did not return.

After that, the house became quiet. People asked why Gap-su kept fishing.

He never answered.

There were answers that became smaller when spoken. One thing he told no one: The night his elder son disappeared, a ship also went down near the northern shoal. Gap-su did not know whether the two events were connected. He did not even know why his son had been in that stretch of water. For ten years he had asked. The sea had answered the same way every time.

Waves.

VIII

The women of the island entered the water before sunrise.

On land, everyone knew the rules.

Age.

Family.

Rank.

Who bowed first.

Who spoke last.

The water cared about none of them. It cared about breath.

Cold.

Current.

Knowing when to rise. Ok-i was one of the island's best divers. Her mother had taught her. Her mother had learned from hers.

No book.

No official rank.

A body teaching another body what the sea allowed. Before dawn Ok-i carried her float toward the shore. She entered until the water reached her waist.

Then pushed away.

A breath.

Down.

Below the surface, sound changed.

Distance changed.

Light changed.

The island's rules stayed above. When Ok-i returned to the surface, air escaped in a long whistle. The sound carried across the water.

Sumbisori.

The breath of a diver returning.

Not a song.

Not a signal.

Simply proof that she had come back up.

Alive.

IX

Su-gyeom first heard it in spring.

He sat beside one of his young students near the shore. A whistle came from the water.

He looked up.

“What bird is that?”

The child laughed.

“That isn’t a bird.”

Another whistle.

“What is it?”

“Sumbisori.”

“Meaning?”

“The sound the divers make when they come back up.”

Su-gyeom watched a dark head appear on the water.

Then another.

That evening he sat outside his hut. The sound returned from far offshore. A breath taken after reaching the limit of the last one. He understood why the island listened for it. There were sounds that carried information without words.

Here.

Returned.

Alive.

Su-gyeom went inside. He left the door open.

X

That summer the water over the northern shoal became unusually clear.

Ok-i knew the place.

Everyone did.

Strong current.

Bad bottom.

Not worth the risk unless the sea offered a good reason. That morning she could see farther down than usual.

So she went.

The hull appeared beneath her slowly.

Dark wood.

Broken open.

Large enough that even underwater it was obviously not a fishing boat.

Ok-i circled once.

Then went closer.

Inside were chests. Seaweed moved through broken timber. Fish disappeared through gaps that had once been walls. One chest stood partly open. Something pale rested inside.

Paper.

Or what paper became after years underwater. Ok-i remained only until her breath told her to leave.

She rose.

The whistle of her return broke across the surface. She held the float and looked down. The ship disappeared again beneath ordinary water. She did not tell anyone.

Not that evening.

Not the next morning. The island had enough things belonging to land.

Its taxes.

Its exiles.

Its laws.

Its rumours.

Whatever lay inside that ship had already failed to remain on land once. Ok-i saw no reason to bring it back.

XI

By the end of that year, four people lived at the edge of the kingdom.

A scholar who had been exiled for writing. A smuggler who survived by not asking. An old fisherman who had spent ten years waiting for an answer. And a diver who already knew where one answer lay. They knew one another. The island was too small for strangers to remain strangers. Su-gyeom taught letters in sand. Bae-swe appeared when the moon disappeared. Gap-su went out before dawn.

Ok-i entered the water. Their lives crossed in ordinary ways.

A bowl.

A rope.

A boat.

A greeting on a path. None of them yet understood that the same sunken ship touched all four. Below the northern shoal, wood shifted with the current. Inside it lay paper.

Names.

A story no one above the water had read. Ok-i alone knew where it was. She had chosen silence.

For now.

Winter approached.

And then Gap-su's knee began to ache.

FOUR AT THE EDGE OF LAND

AFTER CHAPTER FOUR



Su-gyeom

THE EXILE

He teaches characters in sand because the tide removes the evidence.



Bae-swe

THE CARRIER

Black sail. Cannot read. Carry. Do not ask.



Gap-su

THE FISHERMAN

Forty years at sea. Ten years waiting for an answer.



Ok-i

THE DIVER

She already knows where the ship lies. She has told no one.

SU-GYEOM WRITES.
BAE-SWE CARRIES.
GAP-SU WAITS.
OK-I KNOWS.

SEA AND BONES

demosaii



CHAPTER FIVE

SEA AND BONES

바다와 뼈

THE STORM
SALT LETTER

THE SUNKEN SHIP
BENEATH THE WATER

I

Gap-su's knee had been hurting for three days.

The sky was clear. The harbour was quiet. Young fishermen sat in the sun repairing nets, their boats tied loosely because there seemed no reason for anything more. Gap-su stopped beside them.

"Tie them properly."

One of the men looked up.

"What?"

"The boats."

The fisherman glanced at the sky.

"There isn't a cloud."

"Take the nets in too."

Someone laughed.

Gap-su did not.

Forty years at sea had taught parts of his body things his eyes had not yet seen. His knee knew storms. The young fishermen trusted the sky. By evening, one of them would be wrong.

II

At midday the colour changed.

Not gradually.

The blue disappeared and something darker settled above the island. Gap-su stood in his doorway. Wind struck the village.

Then rain.

Then the sea came over the wall.

People ran uphill.

Doors slammed.

Roofs lifted at their corners. A fishing basket crossed the road without anyone carrying it. Gap-su remained on the porch until someone shouted at him to move.

He went inside.

Left the door open. There was little in the house that water could take which mattered to him now. He watched through the doorway. The sea he had worked for forty years no longer looked familiar. That did not make it an enemy. It made it the sea.

III

In the worst of the storm, Gap-su spoke.

Not loudly.

There was no point competing with weather.

“Ten years.”

Rain entered through the open door.

“Ten years since my son.”

He waited.

“That same night, a ship went down.”

His hands rested on his knees.

“I asked why.”

Another wave struck the wall outside.

“No answer.”

Gap-su looked toward the dark water.

“So I will not ask today.”

A roof tile broke somewhere beyond the house.

“If there is something left to take, take it.”

His voice remained level.

“And if there is something to return...”

He stopped.

“Return it.”

By dawn the storm had passed. The sky became pale. Water drained from paths. People came down from higher ground to see what remained. Gap-su walked to the shore. Sandbars had moved. Rocks that should have been buried were visible. The storm had changed the bottom.

IV

Bae-swe went out at first light.

After a storm, every familiar route became a question. A smuggler who trusted yesterday's channel could lose a boat today. So he rowed slowly. Measured the current. Memorised new shallows. Looked for what the storm had uncovered. At the end of the ebb tide, he saw black wood above the water. One curved section.

A bow.

Bae-swe stopped rowing. For ten years the ship had existed as a tavern rumour.

Government cargo.

Records.

Bodies.

A story told more confidently by people who had never seen it. Now the hull stood in front of him. There was a government mark on the timber. Seaweed hung from what remained of the mast. Bae-swe moved closer. Then stopped again. He knew what the storm had done. It had not returned the ship. It had only made hiding it more difficult. Bae-swe could not reach what lay below.

For that he needed someone else.

V

Ok-i listened without interrupting.

When Bae-swe finished, she asked:

"Where?"

"The northern shoal."

Her expression told him before her words did.

"You knew."

Ok-i looked toward the water.

"I saw it in summer."

"And said nothing."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It was not mine."

Bae-swe sat down.

"There are government records."

Ok-i said nothing.

"And remains."

Still nothing.

"You saw those too?"

"Yes."

Bae-swe waited.

"Will you go down?"

Ok-i did not answer. For three days, he did not ask again. On the third evening she came to him.

"If I bring something up, who reads it?"

"The scholar."

She nodded.

"Then tomorrow."

Ok-i entered the water before sunrise.

She left her iron harvesting tool on shore.

Bae-swe noticed.

“You forgot it.”

“No.”

She pushed the float ahead of her.

“I am not harvesting today.”

She swam toward the northern shoal. Bae-swe followed in the boat but stopped where she told him to.

Ok-i breathed.

Then disappeared.

The wreck emerged below her.

Broken timber.

Current.

Seaweed moving through openings. She entered through the split hull. The chest she had seen in summer remained where it had been. She took hold of it. Underwater, its weight changed. So did everything else. She carried it upward. Her breath broke across the surface. Bae-swe reached for the chest. Ok-i pulled it toward the boat. Neither spoke until she had climbed in.

Then Bae-swe looked at the wood.

“Is that it?”

Ok-i breathed again.

“Yes.”

VII

They carried the chest to Su-gyeom's hut.

Water ran from the corners onto the floor. Ok-i stood over it. Su-gyeom looked from the chest to her.

“What is this?”

“I don’t know.”

She sat.

“That is why you will read it.”

Su-gyeom opened the chest carefully. Wet paper had become fragile. Some sheets separated. Others had joined together. Salt marked everything.

He worked slowly.

Ok-i remained.

So did Bae-swe.

Neither could read enough to know when something mattered. They watched Su-gyeom’s face instead. For a long time, nothing changed. Then his hands stopped.

VIII

The salt had destroyed much of the writing.

Enough remained.

A government seal.

An official hand.

Dates.

Payments.

Testimony.

Names.

Su-gyeom moved one sheet closer to the lamp.

Then another.

He recognised the structure before he understood every surviving sentence. It was not a list of prisoners. It was a ledger. People had paid for testimony. Statements had been purchased. Accusations prepared. Lives redirected by entries written as transactions.

Ok-i asked:

“What does it say?”

Su-gyeom did not answer.

“Scholar.”

He looked up.

“People paid for lies.”

Bae-swe leaned against the wall.

“About what?”

“About other people.”

“To do what?”

Su-gyeom looked back at the papers.

“Destroy them.”

He found the official seal again. The same machinery of government he knew from his own case. The same kind of authority that could take a written accusation and make it more real than the person denying it.

He stood.

Opened the door.

The sea was dark beyond the hut.

“They sent me here.”

Neither of the others spoke.

“To the edge of the kingdom.”

He looked back at the documents.

“And this was already here.”

He had believed exile removed a man from the center of events. Instead, the center had sunk before him.

IX

Ok-i remained beside the chest after Bae-swe left.

Su-gyeom was laying damp sheets apart to dry.

She asked:

“The people inside the ship.”

He looked up.

“What about them?”

“I left them there.”

“Yes.”

“If we disturb them...”

She stopped.

Su-gyeom waited.

“Should they be left alone?”

He considered the question.

Then said:

“Gap-su has waited ten years.”

Ok-i’s eyes moved toward the door.

“He does not know whether one of them is his son.”

“No.”

“And the others?”

“We do not know who they are.”

Ok-i looked down at her hands. Su-gyeom followed her gaze.

He understood.

“The papers have names,” he said.

“Not theirs.”

“No.”

Ok-i stood.

“Then tomorrow I go back.”

“For what?”

She looked at him.

“To begin finding them.”

X

At dawn she returned to the wreck.

No harvesting tool.

No basket.

Only breath.

Inside the broken hull were twelve sets of remains. Ok-i did not touch more than she needed to. There was no treasure to retrieve. No object worth bringing back merely because it could be brought back. She moved slowly through the space.

Looked.

Counted.

Twelve.

One might have been Gap-su's son. Eleven belonged to other families.

That mattered too.

Ok-i placed her hand briefly against the timber. She had no prayer prepared. So she used ordinary words.

“I came back.”

Then:

“We will learn who you were.”

Her breath shortened.

She rose.

XI

The sound carried over the water.

Long.

Clear.

Sumbisori.

Bae-swe heard it from the boat. Su-gyeom heard it from near the hut. Gap-su heard it from the shore. Without thinking, the old fisherman placed one hand against his chest. A diver had gone beneath the water. A diver had returned. That was what the sound meant.

Nothing more.

For now.

Ok-i climbed onto shore. Water ran from her sleeves. She looked toward Gap-su.

Only once.

He looked back.

Neither approached the other.

Not yet.

Behind them, Su-gyeom's hut held pages spread carefully to dry. Some words remained.

Some were gone.

Twenty-three places would later be counted where salt had removed the writing. Eleven of those places had once held names. For the moment, no one knew that number. They knew only this: The ship had not been empty. The papers had not been meaningless. And the people beneath the water had waited long enough without names.

THE LEDGER

WHAT THE SEA KEPT

ORIGIN	RECOVERED FROM
Government record	Sunken ship
TIME UNDERWATER	CONDITION
Approx. ten years	Salt-damaged
VISIBLE AUTHORITY	CONTENTS
Government seal	Payments, testimony, names

Some writing is intact. Some is gone. Later, twenty-three damaged spaces will be counted. Eleven once held names.

01 UNKNOWN CLERK → 02 THE SEA → 03 OK-I → 04 SU-GYEOM

Salt destroys part of the page.
It preserves enough.



섬과 별

ISLAND AND STARS

demosaii

CHAPTER SIX

ISLAND AND STARS

섬과 별

BIG DIPPER

AT THE TEMPLE GATE

THE WOMAN WHO RETURNED TO THE WATER

IEODO

They decided to leave in winter.

Before they could, Su-gyeom had to make a copy. It took seventeen days. He copied every surviving character. Where salt had destroyed the writing, he left white space. Bae-swe watched over his shoulder one evening.

“What goes there?”

“Nothing.”

“There was something.”

“Yes.”

“Then why not write that?”

Su-gyeom looked at the blank space.

“Because I don’t know what was there.”

Bae-swe pointed.

“Then what good is a blank?”

Su-gyeom rested the brush.

“It tells the truth.”

“What truth?”

“That something is missing.”

When the work was done, the original ledger and the copy lay beside each other. One was stained, damaged, marked by ten years beneath the sea. The other was clean.

Legible.

New.

Bae-swe looked between them.

“Which one goes north?”

“The copy,” Su-gyeom said.

Bae-swe shook his head.

“No.”

Su-gyeom looked at him.

“If we lose the original—”

“The copy stays.”

Bae-swe touched the old bundle.

“This has their paper.”

Another finger.

“Their seal.”

“Their damage.”

He looked at Su-gyeom.

“If we walk into Hanyang with only your handwriting, anyone can say you invented it.”

Su-gyeom said nothing. Bae-swe pointed to the copy.

“If we lose this one, the words still exist here.”

Then to the original.

“If we lose that one, we lose what proves where the words came from.”

The man who could barely read had understood the problem. The copy remained on the island. The original ledger was wrapped in oiled cloth, then hemp. Bae-swe placed it inside his coat.

II

For the first time in his life, Bae-swe raised a white sail.

Gap-su stared at it.

“They will see us.”

“That is why it is white.”

Bae-swe tied the final line. All his life he had sailed when the moon was hidden.

Avoided patrols.

Entered harbours without announcing himself. This journey was different. If they were stopped, they would stop. If they were questioned, Su-gyeom would answer. If someone asked what they carried— for once, the answer mattered. The Big Dipper hung above them. Gap-su boarded without being invited. No one had expected otherwise.

Then Ok-i arrived.

Bae-swe looked at her.

“You’re coming?”

She climbed into the boat.

“For a while.”

No one asked what that meant. They pushed away from the island.

III

Half a day later, Ok-i stood at the bow.

The island was becoming smaller behind them.

She watched it.

Not the mainland ahead.

The island.

Su-gyeom noticed first.

“What is it?”

Ok-i smiled without turning.

“When we reach land, what am I?”

Su-gyeom did not answer. She did it for him.

“A woman who cannot read.”

The island shrank.

“No family people there know.”

She looked down at her hands.

“Someone who lowers her head.”

Gap-su watched her.

Ok-i continued:

“Here I know the reefs.”

“The current.”

“Who can dive where.”

“If I tell someone not to enter the water, they listen.”

She finally turned.

“On the mainland, none of that comes with me.”

Bae-swe held the tiller.

“What about the ledger?”

“I brought it up.”

“Yes.”

“I went back for the dead.”

“Yes.”

“My part is finished.”

No one tried to convince her otherwise.

That mattered.

IV

Ok-i set down her float.

The iron harvesting tool remained in the boat. She tightened the ties of her jacket. Looked at Su-gyeom.

Then Bae-swe.

Then Gap-su.

To Gap-su she bowed. He did not know yet whether his son had been among the twelve. Ok-i knew more than he did.

Not enough.

She bowed anyway.

Then she entered the sea.

No speech.

No promise to return. No one called after her. They watched the water.

Time passed.

Long enough that Gap-su leaned forward.

Then, far away:

A whistle.

Thin across the surface.

Sumbisori.

Gap-su sat back.

Bae-swe took up the oar.

So did Su-gyeom.

The boat continued toward land. Behind them, Ok-i swam home.

V

They came ashore at a small harbour.

From there they walked.

Three days inland.

Then upward.

In a tavern near Songni Mountain, Bae-swe heard a story. Years ago, a woman in a nun's robe had stood before the palace with a torch. Now she lived at a hermitage above them and struck a wooden bell. Bae-swe repeated the story to Su-gyeom. Su-gyeom stopped walking.

"I know that story."

"The nun?"

"The beginning of it."

By afternoon, three men stood at the hermitage gate. Their clothes smelled of salt. Jeong-an looked at them once. Then at the wrapped bundle beneath Bae-swe's coat. She did not ask them inside. She placed a mat in the yard.

VI

Bae-swe gave the ledger to Su-gyeom.

Su-gyeom opened it.

Jeong-an read.

One page.

Then another.

Her hand stopped.

Su-gyeom watched her face.

"You know that name."

Jeong-an looked up.

"Yes."

"Who was he?"

She looked back at the page.

"The man who helped take my father."

No one spoke.

Jeong-an read again. Her finger moved farther down.

"This one too."

Another page.

"And this."

Su-gyeom sat opposite her.

"You knew all of them?"

"No."

She continued reading.

"But I knew their faces."

VII

Night came.

A lamp was brought outside. Jeong-an went through the names slowly.

"This one stood near the Queen Dowager."

Her finger moved.

"This one came to our house afterward."

Another.

"This one cried in front of my mother."

Bae-swe looked at her.

"Then helped destroy your family?"

Jeong-an's finger remained on the page.

"Yes."

Su-gyeong asked:

"Who wrote the ledger?"

"I don't know."

"Who ordered what it records?"

Jeong-an lifted her eyes.

"That I know."

She closed the document.

"The ledger has names."

A pause.

"I remember faces."

Bae-swe had carried sealed things his entire life. For the first time, he understood how much a document could fail to contain.

He asked:

“Will you come?”

Jeong-an did not answer.

VIII

She answered at dawn.

“When I was young, I came down this mountain carrying fire.”

The three men listened.

“I believed anger would make me useful.”

She looked toward the valley.

“It made me move.”

“That was not nothing.”

Then back toward them.

“But fire cannot be carried forever.”

She touched the closed ledger.

“This can.”

Bae-swe waited.

Jeong-an continued.

“I do not need to become fire again.”

She looked toward the names.

“I can remember.”

Whether that meant she would join them, none of the three asked. When they began descending, Jeong-an remained at the gate. Bae-swe had gone only a few steps when she called after him.

“Boat man.”

He turned.

“If you pass through Jeolla...”

She gave him the name of a village.

“There is a woman there who reads.”

“Why her?”

Jeong-an looked toward the hermitage.

“Because once, someone left her a page.”

Bae-swe memorised the village. Then continued down.

IX

After that, the public record goes dark.

No surviving document says where the three men slept the next night. No official record notes the ledger leaving Songni Mountain. No report identifies a smuggler carrying government evidence beneath his clothes. For a short time, the paper travels outside history. The record resumes elsewhere. That winter, the northern border was breached. News moved south faster than certainty.

Three fortresses were said to have fallen in three days. People began leaving the north. The state began looking for men.

Any men.

Farther south, someone reported seeing a boat with a white sail. The report was never confirmed.

X

On the island, Ok-i returned to work.

Morning.

Water.

Breath.

Evening.

The rhythms she had known before the wreck continued. That was important to her. A life did not become less real because something extraordinary had happened inside it. Sometimes she went back to the northern shoal.

Not to harvest.

She entered the broken ship and remained for as long as one breath allowed. By then, she had learned the twelve names. Not from the government record. The government had not kept them.

The island had.

A mother who had waited.

A sister.

An old neighbour.

Someone who remembered which men had vanished that night. Piece by piece, the twelve stopped being twelve.

They became names.

Underwater, Ok-i could not speak them aloud. She said them in her head.

One by one.

Then rose.

XI

On clear evenings, the northern horizon sometimes turned red.

Ok-i could not tell whether she was seeing sunset or distant signal fires. The sea offered no explanation. That was one reason she trusted it. It did not pretend to answer questions it could not answer. So Ok-i began doing what the sea did not.

She told.

While rowing, she sang the old Jeodo song her mother had taught her. Into the spaces she knew by memory, she began placing names. The twelve from the wreck. Then other names she had learned from the story that had travelled to the island.

Yun-je.

Tal-swe.

Jeong-an.

The girl who had found writing beneath a floor and learned to read because of it.

Bun-i.

Ok-i had never met most of them. That no longer seemed important. Stories had crossed farther than people. Ash had carried a seed. Water had carried names. Now the road carried the ledger north. Ok-i remained where she was. And waited for the next breath.

THE WHITE SAIL

AFTER CHAPTER SIX

ISLAND



OPEN WATER - OK-I TURNS BACK



MAINLAND



SONGNI MOUNTAIN - JEONG-AN READS



THE ROAD NORTH

A black sail is useful when a man wants not to be seen. Bae-swe has spent most of his life beneath one. For this journey, he raises white cloth.

Ok-i does not leave because she is afraid. She leaves because the mainland would make her smaller than the sea does.

Jeong-an once carried fire. Now she carries witness. The ledger contains names. She remembers faces.

For once, the journey is not hidden.
Then history loses sight of it anyway.

INTERLUDE

NAMES BENEATH THE WATER

Ten years beneath water.

Seventeen days to copy what remained.

One white sail.

One woman returning to the sea.

Three men walking inland.

A witness on a mountain.

Then silence in the record.

Then the north is breached.

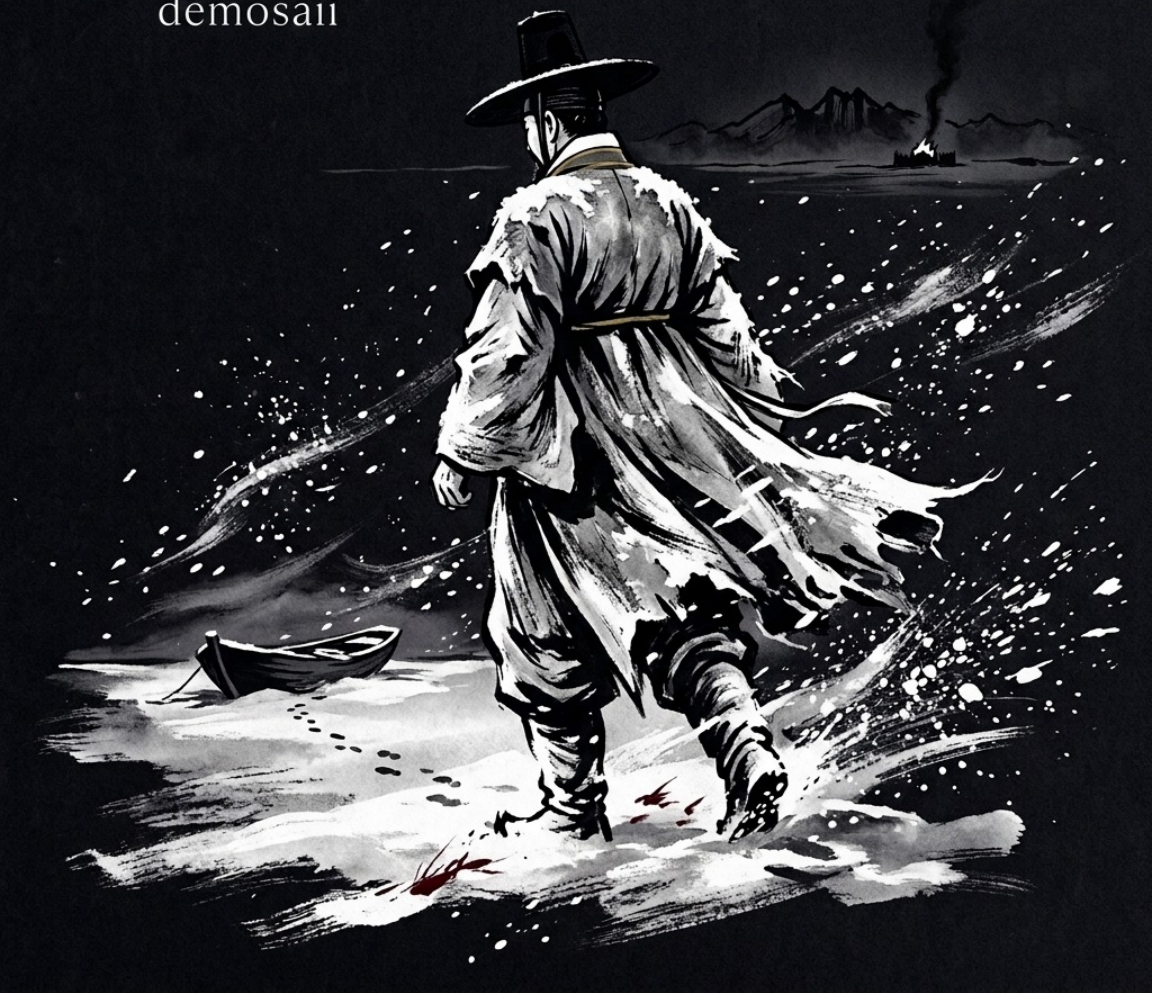
PART III

IRON

What remains when memory becomes responsibility.

SNOW AND IRON

demosaii



CHAPTER SEVEN

SNOW AND IRON

눈과 쇠



LOWERING THE SAIL
THE ANVIL

GATHER
THE EMPTY LINE

I

Three days before the harbour changed, Bae-swe left the boat in Jeolla.

Su-gyeom and Gap-su waited. Bae-swe carried the ledger. He found the village Jeong-an had named.

Small.

Rice fields beyond the houses. Children reciting characters inside one room. He stood outside until a woman opened the door. She was forty-four. Ink marked two fingers.

“Are you the teacher?”

“Yes.”

“A woman on Songni Mountain told me to find you.”

The teacher’s expression changed.

“Jeong-an?”

Bae-swe nodded.

He took the wrapped ledger from inside his coat. Placed it on the low table. Bun-i looked at the salt-marked cloth.

“What is it?”

“I was told you would know better than I do.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the only one I have.”

She unwrapped it.

Her hands stopped when she saw the government seal.

II

Bun-i read for three days.

Bae-swe slept in an outbuilding and waited. He did not ask what she found. Waiting beside sealed things without asking questions was one of the few skills he possessed in abundance. On the first day, Bun-i read the

surviving text. On the second, she went back through names and dates. On the third, she counted what was missing. Twenty-three salt-eaten spaces.

Eleven where names had once been. That night she closed the ledger. Bae-swe was sitting outside. She carried it to him.

He stood.

“Well?”

Bun-i looked at the bundle.

“These names are late.”

He frowned.

“Late?”

“They should have mattered years ago.”

“Do they not matter now?”

“Yes.”

She handed the ledger toward him.

“But something else is happening now.”

He did not take it yet.

“You read it for three days.”

“Yes.”

“And now you give it back?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Bun-i looked toward the dark road beyond the village.

“Because you are carrying the old names.”

Then toward the schoolroom.

“I need blank paper.”

Bae-swe took the ledger.

Wrapped it again.

Placed it inside his coat.

III

When he returned to the harbour, the morning looked ordinary.

That was the last ordinary thing about it.

They needed rice.

Water.

Three days more and they might have reached Hanyang. Bae-swe went ashore alone. A merchant gave him a price twice what it had been.

Bae-swe laughed.

Offered half.

The merchant did not laugh back.

“Rice is scarce.”

“Since when?”

“Today.”

Bae-swe looked at him.

“Not yesterday?”

“No.”

He should have understood then. Instead he counted the sacks. Across the dock, a crowd had formed. Bae-swe knew the shapes crowds made.

Celebration.

Argument.

Execution.

Bad news.

This was bad news.

IV

Rumours reached him in pieces.

The north had been breached. The Jurchen had crossed the frozen river. Three fortresses had fallen. Refugees were already coming over the passes. Without luggage, someone said.

Just walking.

Then another rumour reached the dock. The state was pardoning criminals. At first people laughed.

Then stopped.

Exiles.

Slaves.

Bandits.

Men with old sentences. Anyone able to fight could come north. Serve, and the crime would be erased. Someone near Bae-swe said:

“They hunted them yesterday.”

Another answered:

“They need them today.”

Bae-swe said nothing. For thirty years he had been precisely the kind of man official notices warned people about. Now an official notice was asking him to come closer.

V

Su-gyeom knew something was wrong before Bae-swe spoke.

“What happened?”

Bae-swe told them.

The northern border.

The fortresses.

The refugees.

The pardon.

Su-gyeom looked at his coat.

"The ledger?"

Bae-swe did not need time to answer.

"It waited ten years."

He looked toward the road.

"It can wait another day."

"And the people coming south?"

Bae-swe shook his head.

"Some of them cannot wait until tonight."

Gap-su remained seated. His hands rested on his knees. Su-gyeom looked at Bae-swe for a long time.

No one argued.

Bae-swe lowered the white sail.

Folded it.

Left the boat.

That was the last time he saw Su-gyeom and Gap-su.

VI

Two streams of people occupied the road.

One south.

One north.

The people going south carried things.

Blankets.

Bowls.

Children.

Bundles tied with rope. Whatever could be taken from a life quickly. Those moving north carried less.

Sometimes nothing.

Men who had already lost houses. Men whose names were written badly in official books. Men whose names were not written at all. Bae-swe joined the northern road. After three days, he reached a village where a young official stood on a table reading a royal decree.

“Those able to fight...”

People listened.

No one stepped forward at first. Then an older man did.

Another.

Three more.

Soon the clerk stopped counting aloud. Bae-swe waited until near the end. The official lifted his brush.

“Name?”

“None.”

The official looked up. Bae-swe waited for the question that usually followed.

Family?

Origin?

Register?

Instead the official lowered the brush.

Nodded.

That day, there were many men whose names did not fit neatly on paper.

VII

Farther north, a forge had been burning for three days.

The smith had worked there forty years. Now he worked alone. His assistants had gone north before him. Even the boy who operated the

bellows had left. So the smith fed the fire himself. Worked the bellows.
Returned to the anvil.

Again.

Again.

People brought iron. He did not ask what anything had been. A
prisoner's chain.

A cooking pot.

A broken tool.

Iron fitting from a scholar's brush handle. Small pieces became
arrowheads. Large pieces became whatever was needed. A villager once
began explaining where a pot had come from. The smith interrupted.

"Iron?"

"Yes."

He held out his hand.

"Then give it."

The forge answered every story the same way.

Heat.

Hammer.

Work.

VIII

On the fourth day, a temple bell arrived.

Not whole.

Someone had broken it apart on the mountain so it could fit on a cart.
For a century it had been struck so people could hear it across valleys.
Now it arrived in pieces. A monk walked beside the cart.

He said nothing.

The smith asked nothing. One fragment still held half the figure of a celestial musician. The body ended where the metal had broken. The smith picked it up.

Stopped.

Only for a moment. Then placed it into the furnace. Later the shape would be gone. The metal would not.

The hammer fell.

IX

News of the northern breach reached Bun-i's village two days after Bae-swe left.

This time there was no ledger on her table. Only the memory of it. Names from ten years ago. Twenty-three missing places. Eleven missing names. Around her, new names were already arriving. A cousin who had not returned. A son last seen on a northern road. A household seeking relatives. Rumours carried faster than records could be made. Bun-i understood what was happening.

The old ledger had shown her what happened when names arrived too late. The next morning she packed paper.

Ink.

Cloth.

What she needed to care for people. Someone in the village watched her.

"Where are you going?"

"North."

"What for?"

"To write."

"What?"

Bun-i tied the bundle.

"Names."

X

She had been teaching for years.

Before that she had done what villages require of people who are useful.

Helped at births.

Wrapped wounds.

Sat beside the sick. Stayed beside the dying when family could not.

She knew bodies.

She knew writing.

The north needed both. Before leaving, Bun-i opened a fresh sheet. She wrote the date. Beneath it, she left one line empty.

Looked at it.

At sixteen she had found writing damaged by time but still present. Three days earlier she had read a ledger where salt had removed names entirely. Those blanks meant someone had once been there. Then had been lost. This blank was different. No name belonged there yet. Because the person who might fill it was still alive. Bun-i folded the page. Put the ink inside her coat where her body could keep it from freezing.

Then left.

XI

Snow began on the road.

Bae-swe walked north with the ledger against his chest. Far ahead, men were being arranged into lines. In another village, the smith raised his hammer. The temple bell no longer looked like a bell. Farther south, Bun-i walked with paper and ink. One old record had passed through her hands and gone north again. She carried only blank pages. Behind her, the village disappeared in snow.

Ahead, every road narrowed toward the same place. The state had once separated people into careful categories.

Official.

Exile.

Slave.

Bandit.

Criminal.

Now the border was failing. The categories were moving toward one line. Bun-i placed a hand over the ink inside her coat.

Still liquid.

Still warm.

She continued north.

ARCHIVE VII

BUN-I

SIXTEEN / FORTY-FOUR



SIXTEEN

A page she cannot read.



FORTY-FOUR

A ledger she can.

28 YEARS

At sixteen she finds a page she cannot read. At forty-four, another damaged document reaches her. This time she can read every surviving word.

The ledger goes north again. Bun-i packs blank paper.

One blank means something was erased.
The other waits for someone still alive.



The Smith

Unnamed. Forty years at the forge. Chain, pot, tool, bell. If it is iron, it can become something needed now.

쇠와 피

IRON AND BLOOD



CHAPTER EIGHT

IRON AND BLOOD

쇠와 피



THE FIRST LINE
I LISTEN FOR THE NAME

TWO STEPS
THE SEAL

I

They told Bae-swe to stand.

He looked at the place indicated.

“Here?”

“Here.”

“In this line?”

“Yes.”

His feet moved before he did. Only half a step.

Backward.

Thirty years of survival lived in those feet. When a patrol appeared, move. When a light crossed the water, disappear. When a route closed, find another. Bae-swe had spent most of his life becoming difficult to find. Now someone was ordering him to remain exactly where he could be seen.

“Hold the line.”

He planted his feet. The ground was frozen beneath them. He did not feel brave. He felt badly trained for standing still.

But he stayed.

II

The soldier beside him did not know who he was.

That helped.

The young man wore government armour that did not fit properly. One shoulder slipped whenever he moved. He pulled it back into place. A moment later it slipped again.

Bae-swe watched.

“Leave it.”

The soldier looked at him.

“It keeps falling.”

“Yes.”

The young man adjusted it anyway. Two months earlier they might have stood on opposite sides of an arrest. The young man was a government soldier. Bae-swe was a pardoned smuggler. Today the distinction had been reduced to distance. One man standing beside another. The soldier’s hand shook around his spear. Bae-swe noticed because his own did too. Neither mentioned it.

He did not ask the young man’s name. There would be time later, he thought. Or there would not.

III

The drum sounded.

After that, Bae-swe remembered pieces.

Noise.

Feet sliding.

A hand against his shoulder. The line giving ground.

One step.

Then another.

His body knew what to do.

Turn.

Find space.

Move.

He did not.

Neither did the young soldier. Nor the man on his other side.

The line bent.

It did not break. Later, Bae-swe tried to remember the moment he decided to hold.

There was none.

He had not suddenly become courageous. The man beside him had remained standing. So Bae-swe remained. The man beyond him remained because someone beside him remained. One body borrowed steadiness from another.

That was all.

Bae-swe had lived alone for so long that this seemed almost impossible. He had believed survival belonged to the person clever enough to escape. That morning he learned another kind. Sometimes a person survives because someone beside him does not move.

IV

When the sun rose, the young soldier was still there.

The shoulder of his armour was still wrong. Bae-swe handed him water.

The soldier drank.

Returned the bottle.

Neither spoke.

Bae-swe could have asked then. Where are you from? How old are you? Who waits for you? What is your name? Instead he looked ahead. The young man did the same. The name remained unasked.

V

Three days later, the northern force withdrew.

No one trusted the news immediately. Men remained in position. Weapons stayed close. Rumours contradicted one another until evening. Then the line finally loosened. The following morning ceremonial drums sounded. The king came to the front. This was not the king whose palace had begun the story generations earlier. That king was long dead. The throne remained.

Another young man now sat upon it. Most of the people in the field had never seen him before. He dismounted and walked toward them.

"The north has withdrawn."

The men listened.

"You held the line."

No one answered.

"The pardons promised to those who answered the call will be honoured."

A small movement passed through the crowd.

Relief, perhaps.

Or only breath.

"The promise was made in my name."

The king looked across them.

"It will stand."

Then Bae-swe stepped out of the line.

VI

"Your Majesty."

The king turned.

"Speak."

Bae-swe had no prepared words.

"A man died yesterday morning."

The field quieted.

"Not in the fighting."

The king waited.

"He was one of the pardoned men."

Bae-swe continued.

“Ten years ago, he stole salt.”

A few faces shifted.

“He carried the pardon inside his clothes.”

Bae-swe looked directly at the king.

“It bore your seal.”

A pause.

“He believed it.”

The king said nothing.

Bae-swe asked:

“What was that paper?”

When the king answered, his voice was steady.

“The pardon covered service in this war.”

Bae-swe waited.

“Outside that service, the old law remained.”

Silence.

“I did not make that law.”

The king looked across the men.

“But I sit above it.”

That was not an excuse.

Not quite.

Perhaps the king knew that.

“The commander acted according to the law as it stands. I will not punish him for obeying it.”

Bae-swe nodded.

“I understand.”

He did.

That was the difficult part. No one needed to have lied. The paper could be genuine.

The seal genuine.

The law correctly applied. And a promise could still prove smaller than the person who believed it.

VII

“One more question.”

The king waited.

“When this is finished, what are we?”

Bae-swe gestured toward the line.

“Today we stood together.”

No answer.

“Tomorrow?”

He thought of the young soldier beside him.

The loose armour.

The water bottle.

Two shaking hands.

“Today the man you call soldier and the man you call criminal stood on the same ground.”

Bae-swe looked at the king.

“Does that remain tomorrow?”

The king did not answer. Perhaps there was no answer a king could safely give. He could promise a pardon. He could sign an order. He could change one law. He could not promise what every office, village register, commander and frightened neighbour would do the next morning. During that silence, Bae-swe put his hand inside his coat. His fingers found the wrapped ledger.

Salt-stained.

Damaged.

Carried from the sea. Names connected to purchased testimony and old destruction. The one person with enough authority to receive it stood two steps away.

Two steps.

That was all.

Bae-swe closed his hand around the bundle. He remembered the man who had trusted another sealed paper. He looked at the king. Then withdrew his hand.

Empty.

The king watched him.

“What is your name?”

Bae-swe almost smiled.

“None.”

The king considered this.

“Then let it remain so.”

Bae-swe returned to the line. The ledger stayed against his chest.

VIII

At the rear of the field, Bun-i was listening for names.

People called her a healer. She corrected them when necessary. There were things she could help. And things she could not. She knew the difference.

She brought water.

Cleaned what could be cleaned. Wrapped what could be wrapped. Sat beside people who should not be alone. But she had come north for another reason too. Bun-i leaned closer to a man whose voice had become difficult to hear.

“Again.”

He tried.

She caught only part of it.

“Slower.”

He said the name again. Bun-i repeated it back.

“Is that right?”

A small nod.

She dipped her brush.

Wrote.

She did not ask for the number assigned by the army.

She asked:

“What did they call you at home?”

Sometimes the answer changed.

A childhood name.

A village name.

The name a mother used from a doorway. That was what Bun-i wrote.

IX

On the third day, she ran out of paper.

So she wrote on cloth. When the cloth ran out, she used wood.

Broken boards.

Pieces of shafts.

Anything that could carry ink. On the fourth morning, Bun-i held up her brush to a living soldier.

“Your arm.”

He pulled back.

“Why?”

“Your name.”

“I am standing here.”

“Now.”

He frowned.

Bun-i waited.

“If later someone needs to know, I want them to be able to read it.”

“That is bad luck.”

“Then stay alive long enough to complain about the ink.”

The man stared.

Then, reluctantly, held out his arm.

Bun-i wrote.

He looked at the characters.

“It will wash away.”

“Good.”

He glanced at her.

She continued:

“That means you were alive long enough to wash it.”

Another man came.

Then another.

Eventually she stopped counting. One of them was young.

About twenty.

His armour did not fit correctly at the shoulder. Bun-i had seen many faces by then. She did not know that Bae-swe had stood beside this one. She asked his name.

He told her.

She wrote it.

X

When the fighting ended, twenty-three people lay beneath the rear tent.

Bun-i had written nineteen names. Four lines remained empty. Not because anyone had erased them. Because she had reached them too late to ask. She looked at the blank lines. In the old ledger, blanks meant that salt had taken something once written. These were different. The people had existed. Their names had existed. Only the moment to hear them had passed.

Then came the sound of a horse.

One rider.

Moving fast.

The messenger dismounted carrying a royal order.

Folded.

Sealed.

No one opened it. The fighting was over. People believed they knew what came after. A temporary pardon ends. Old categories return.

Soldier.

Slave.

Bandit.

Criminal.

Men began standing. Even some who should have remained lying down. No command had been given. Still, another line formed. The sealed order remained in the messenger's hand. Fear had already supplied its contents.

XI

Bae-swe's hand went inside his coat again.

Bun-i saw.

“Take your hand out.”

He turned.

“What?”

“I know what is there.”

His expression changed.

“I read it for three days in Jeolla.”

Bae-swe said nothing. Bun-i looked toward the unopened royal order.
Then toward the men waiting.

“That paper did not save the people written inside it ten years ago.”

“It can show what happened.”

“Yes.”

“It can show who—”

“Yes.”

Bun-i looked at him.

“But will it save these people today?”

He did not answer.

“If you take it forward now, it may not destroy them.”

She nodded toward the bundle beneath his coat.

“It may destroy you.”

“So we do nothing?”

“No.”

“That sounds like nothing.”

Bun-i shook her head.

“We keep it.”

“For what?”

“For later.”

“How much later?”

“I don’t know.”

Bae-swe laughed once without humour.

“A useful answer.”

“It is the only one I have.”

She told him of people from an older reign. Some had refused authority and lost their lives. Others had refused by walking away from office and disappearing into the mountains. Both were remembered. The lesson, Bun-i said, was not that one choice was braver. Only that refusal had more than one shape.

“Dying is not the only way to refuse.”

Snow began settling on the edge of the tent.

“Living can be refusal too.”

Bae-swe looked at her for a long time. Then took the bundle from inside his coat. For the first time since the island, the ledger left the place against his body. He held it toward Bun-i. She did not take it immediately.

“If I give it to you,” he said, “what will you do with it?”

“Nothing.”

“That is your answer?”

“For now.”

“How long?”

Bun-i looked at the wrapped paper.

“Until someone asks.”

Bae-swe opened his fingers. Bun-i took the ledger. His hand came away empty.

“Good,” she said.

Behind them, the royal order remained sealed. No one yet knew what it said. Bun-i placed the ledger beneath her clothing. Beside it, she kept her ink warm. The names from ten years ago rested against the names she had written that week. One set had waited. The other could not. She had learned that memory required both. Knowing when to write. And knowing when to keep something safe.

Snow continued falling.

The line waited.

The order remained unopened. And Bun-i walked away carrying the names.

THE LINE

AFTER CHAPTER EIGHT



Bae-swe

Thirty years surviving by movement. One day surviving by not moving.



The Unnamed Soldier

About twenty. Armour too large at one shoulder. Bae-swe gives him water and never asks his name.

For one day, categories fail. Government soldier. Pardoned criminal. Former exile. Man without a name. The line does not ask what they were yesterday. Only whether they remain standing now.

The king is a descendant of the throne from the beginning of the story. Not the same king. The same institution.

Before the king: Bae-swe reaches for the ledger. His hand comes out empty.

Later: he gives the ledger to Bun-i. His hand becomes empty again.



CHAPTER NINE

SPRING AND RUST

봄과 녹

FROZEN FIELD
MY GRANDFATHER, SEE

THE SALT JAR
THE SEAL - FIVE HUNDRED YEARS LATER

I

They said they had won.

The farmer asked what they had won.

No one answered.

The ground was still frozen. He pushed the spade down. It entered a little and stopped. Two years without proper ploughing had hardened the field. It would take days to open. The farmer had not gone north. He had been told he was too old. His son had gone instead.

Twenty years old.

Old enough, apparently. The previous winter had emptied the house. First the grain meant for eating. Then what remained. At last they opened the seed jar. Seed was not food. Seed belonged to spring. Everyone knew that. They ate it anyway. Now spring had arrived and there was nothing to plant. Still, the farmer went to the field. His wife had asked:

“What are you planting?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then why turn the soil?”

He put on his coat.

“In case something comes.”

Seed from a neighbour. A government ration.

A relative.

Luck.

He did not know. The ground had to be ready before the answer arrived.

So he worked.

II

The spade struck something.

The farmer assumed stone. He moved slightly and tried again. The same resistance.

He crouched.

Brushed frozen soil aside. Dark cloth appeared.

He stopped.

There had been fighting near these fields. He knew what winter could hide. Slowly, he uncovered enough to understand.

A young man.

A piece of armour still caught at one shoulder. The farmer reached out. Turned him carefully.

His son.

For a moment there was no field.

No spring.

No war.

Only a face the farmer had known before it had learned to speak. Then he saw movement.

Small.

Breath.

The farmer leaned closer.

Again.

Alive.

III

His son had left in autumn.

People said:

“They took him.”

The farmer always corrected them.

“He went.”

He did not know why the distinction mattered. Only that it did. The boy had decided quickly. Within three days, a life that had always belonged to the field was walking north. On the morning he left, the farmer had meant to say something.

Come back.

Eat when you can. Do not be foolish. Do not be brave merely because someone is watching.

I am afraid.

Any of those would have worked. Instead he had stood beside the gate and nodded. All winter, the unsaid words remained. Now the farmer put one arm beneath his son.

Then the other.

Lifted.

His knees almost failed. The young man was too light. That was what the farmer noticed. Twenty years of feeding a child should have weighed more. Twenty years of rice.

Illness.

Growth.

Work.

Arguments.

Laughter.

A person raised for twenty years should not have felt so light. The farmer carried him home. The field remained unploughed that day.

And the next.

And the next.

Spring came anyway.

IV

The young man lay down for forty days.

Of the first two weeks he remembered almost nothing. His memories returned in pieces.

Steam.

His mother boiling cloth.

The ceiling.

Pain in one shoulder. Rain against the roof. His father coughing outside. People came to see him.

“You came home alive.”

“You were fortunate.”

“You survived.”

He nodded because they were correct.

He had survived.

Sometimes he wondered what exactly had survived with him. When rain came, his shoulder hurt before the first drop. One morning he laughed at this. His father looked in.

“What?”

“My bones know the rain.”

“That happens when you get old.”

“I’m twenty.”

“You complain like you’re eighty.”

They both laughed.

It hurt.

The young man laughed anyway. There was something among the belongings that had returned with him.

A small bundle.

Oiled cloth.

Hemp.

Still closed.

He knew who had given it to him.

Nothing more.

V

It had happened on the day the fighting ended.

The woman who wrote names called him behind a tent. He recognised her immediately. She had written on his arm.

“Come here.”

He did.

Bun-i took a wrapped bundle from beneath her clothing.

Held it out.

“Keep this.”

He did not take it immediately.

“What is it?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Why?”

“If you know, it becomes heavier.”

He looked at the bundle.

“Why me?”

Bun-i studied him.

“I am forty-four.”

The young man waited.

“You are twenty.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the answer.”

He frowned.

Bun-i held the bundle closer.

“You may live a long time.”

That frightened him more than the bundle. Still, he took it.

“Do I open it?”

“No.”

“Do I give it to someone?”

“No.”

“What do I do?”

“Keep it.”

By evening, groups leaving the field had begun scattering onto different roads. The young soldier carried the closed bundle beneath his clothes. He never reached the village road. His father found him later in the frozen field. The bundle was still with him.

VI

He could not read.

That turned out to matter. Had he been able to read, curiosity might have won. He might have opened the wrapping. Taken the contents to someone educated.

Asked questions.

Carried it to an official. Destroyed it from fear. No one would ever know. But Bun-i had told him not to open it. And the marks inside meant nothing to him anyway. So he did not. His mother kept a large onggi jar in the kitchen.

Salt.

Enough to last through winter. The young man knew something simple about salt.

It lasted.

And things kept dry inside it lasted too.

That was enough.

One morning his mother went to market. His father was outside. The house became quiet. The young man carried the wrapped bundle into the kitchen. His shoulder was still weak.

He worked slowly.

He removed salt.

Bowl after bowl.

Enough to make space deep inside the jar. The bundle remained closed.

Oiled cloth.

Hemp.

Nothing exposed.

He placed it inside.

Covered it.

More salt.

Then more.

Until there was no sign anything had been hidden there. He closed the jar. Tried to move it back. It sat slightly wrong.

He noticed.

Moved it again.

Too far.

Again.

His shoulder hurt.

Eventually the jar stood where he remembered it standing before. The next morning he heard his mother move it.

He lay still.

She opened the lid.

Took salt.

Closed it again.

Nothing happened.

The sound became reassurance. Morning after morning.

The jar moved.

The jar returned.

Still there.

VII

Sixty years passed.

The soldier became an old man.

Eighty.

Hard of hearing.

His shoulder still announced rain. His granddaughter was fifteen and learning to read. Her teacher gave the students an assignment: Ask an older person about the past. Bring back a story. Her grandfather was the oldest person she knew. So she went to him.

“What was it like when you were young?”

He thought.

Then began telling her about an ox.

She listened.

The ox had been stubborn. Then came a field.

Then rain.

Then a year with too much rain. Then a year with too little.

Then seed prices.

“Grandfather.”

He continued.

“Grandfather.”

“What?”

“The war.”

He became quiet.

The granddaughter noticed.

“What about it?”

A long pause.

“Everyone went.”

“Why?”

“Because it felt like we had to.”

“Did someone order you?”

“No.”

“Then why did you go?”

Her grandfather looked at her.

“I was twenty.”

VIII

He showed her his shoulder.

“This still hurts.”

“After sixty years?”

“When it rains.”

She laughed.

“My bones cry.”

That made her laugh harder. Then he laughed too. He told her his father had found him in a field.

Carried him home.

That he had spent forty days lying down. That the first two weeks were almost gone from his memory. Then he mentioned a woman. The granddaughter leaned forward.

“What woman?”

“She knew letters.”

“What was her name?”

He thought.

“Bun-i.”

“What did she do?”

“Wrote names.”

“Whose?”

“People’s.”

The granddaughter frowned.

“People already have names.”

Her grandfather looked at her.

“Yes.”

A moment passed.

“Sometimes that isn’t enough.”

Then he told her the woman had given him something.

IX

“What?”

“A bundle.”

“What was in it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You never opened it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“She told me not to.”

The granddaughter stared at him. Sixty years was a long time to obey one sentence from a stranger.

“Where is it now?”

The old man said nothing. She thought he had not heard.

“Grandfather?”

He looked at her.

“The bundle. Where is it?”

A long silence.

“I don’t remember.”

X

The granddaughter never knew whether that was true.

Perhaps at eighty he really had forgotten. People forgot roads.

Faces.

Rooms.

Names.

Why not one hiding place? Or perhaps he remembered the kitchen perfectly.

The heavy jar.

His mother’s footsteps. The scrape each morning when she moved it. Perhaps I don’t remember was simply the last form of keeping it safe. The granddaughter nearly asked again.

He looked tired.

She did not.

At school, her teacher asked what story she had brought. Other children had stories about battles.

Officials.

Journeys.

Her grandfather had given her an ox.

A field.

Rain.

So she told the teacher about the ox. She kept the other story. Not because she had decided it was important. It simply stayed with her. Years later she told someone:

“My grandfather went to war when he was twenty.”

That person remembered part of it. Then told someone else.

Details changed.

The center remained.

A young man.

A field.

A woman who wrote names. A bundle no one could find. The paper disappeared from memory. The story of the paper did not.

XI

Five hundred years after the bundle was hidden, the kitchen no longer existed.

Neither did the house. The field had become something else.
Boundaries changed.

Roads changed.

The kingdom itself had become history. The ground remained. People excavated the place where the kitchen had once stood.

Brushes.

Measurements.

Gloves.

Soil removed slowly. Someone found ceramic beneath the old floor level. A large onggi jar.

Mostly intact.

It was documented before anyone moved it.

Then opened.

Salt.

Still inside.

The excavation slowed.

Layer by layer.

Salt removed.

Then cloth.

Hemp.

Beneath it, oiled wrapping.

Someone said:

“Paper.”

A gloved hand reached down.

Stopped.

Long ago, another hand had stopped over the same record. Bae-swe's hand, two steps from a king. That time, withdrawing it had been the right choice. This time was different. No one named inside the record could be endangered by reading it. No carrier would be arrested for possessing it. No witness had to choose between truth and survival. The wrapping was opened.

At last.

Inside lay paper marked by age and salt. The government seal was still visible. So were surviving names.

Payments.

Testimony.

Evidence of lies purchased centuries before. There were damaged spaces too. Places where something had once been written and no longer remained.

Someone read.

They could read.

Five hundred years earlier, Bun-i had looked at those names and said they were already late. She had been right. They were late then. They were later now. But late was not the same as lost. The names were read. And this time no one could erase them by making the reader disappear.

Fire burns.

Salt preserves.

Iron remembers.

And a person writes.

THE SALT JAR

AFTER CHAPTER NINE



The Soldier

About twenty when Bun-i places the wrapped ledger in his hands. He cannot read. She tells him not to open it.



The Granddaughter

Fifteen. Learning to read. She asks where the paper is. “I don’t remember.”

After forty days recovering at home, the soldier hides the unopened bundle inside the family salt jar. Oilcloth. Hemp. Salt above it.

The young man knows no theory of preservation. He knows a kitchen. Salt lasts. That is enough.

Five hundred years after the hiding, the kitchen is gone. The jar remains beneath the old floor level. Inside: salt, cloth, paper, writing, the government seal.

Preservation does not always require understanding.

THE LEDGER

NINE HANDS · SIX CENTURIES

The ledger is never truly owned. Each person holds it for a time. Then it moves.

01

AN UNKNOWN CLERK

Someone writes the ledger: names, payments, testimony, a government seal.

04

SU-GYEOM

He reads what survives and makes a copy. The copy stays behind. The original continues north.

07

THE SOLDIER

Twenty years old. Unable to read. He does not open the bundle.

02

THE SEA

The ship sinks. The ledger lies in saltwater for ten years. Some writing disappears. Enough remains.

05

BAE-SWE

The ledger crosses water, road, mountain and battlefield. Two steps from a king, his hand comes out empty.

08

THE SALT JAR

An ordinary kitchen object becomes the ledger's longest resting place.

03

OK-I

She is the first person in ten years to carry it upward.

06

BUN-I

She has already read it once. Now Bae-swe gives it to her. She keeps it only briefly.

09

A GLOVED HAND

Excavation. Soil. Salt. Cloth. Paper. This time, reading is safe.

THE TIMELINE

SIX CENTURIES · NINE CHAPTERS

YEAR 0

YEON-I DIES

Chapter One · Blood and Fog

+30

YUN-JE WRITES

Chapter Two · Ink and Embers

+31

THE UPRISING FAILS / YUN-JE
DIES

Chapters Two-Three

APPROX. +32

THE WORDS RETURN TO PAPER

Chapter Three

+65

BUN-I HEARS THE STORY

About ten years old.

+67

THE PAGE IS HIDDEN

Bun-i is twelve.

+71

BUN-I FINDS THE PAGE

Sixteen. She learns to read.

+88

THE GOVERNMENT SHIP SINKS

The ledger goes underwater.

+98

FOUR PEOPLE MEET AT THE
EDGE OF LAND

Chapters Four-Five

+99

THE WHITE SAIL

Chapter Six

+99

THE NORTH IS BREACHED

Chapter Seven. Bun-i is forty-four.

+100

THE LINE HOLDS

Chapter Eight

+100

THE FARMER FINDS HIS SON

Chapter Nine

+101

THE LEDGER ENTERS THE SALT
JAR

After forty days recovering.

+161

THE GRANDDAUGHTER ASKS

Sixty years later.

+601

THE JAR IS FOUND

Five hundred years after the hiding.

THE CHARACTERS

THREE GENERATIONS



THE KING

THE THRONE

Unnamed. Once considered gentle. Yeon-i's death changes him. The king in Chapter Eight is his descendant.



YEON-I

THE ERASED NAME

No title. No secure place in the official record. The story begins with the space left where she should have been.



YUN-JE

THE WRITER

A scholar exiled for writing what he sees. His words become song. He does not survive. The words do.



TAL-SWE

THE VOICE

A market performer without a family name. He turns dangerous writing into something paper cannot contain.



JEONG-AN

THE WITNESS

She loses her family to a purge, enters the mountain, later comes down carrying fire, and years afterward reads faces behind the ledger's names.



BUN-I

THE READER / RECORDER

Sixteen to forty-four. A page teaches her to read. A ledger teaches her what happens when names arrive late.



SU-GYEOM

THE EXILE

Sent to the sea for writing. He becomes the first person able to read what the sea kept.

THE CHARACTERS · CONTINUED



BAE-SWE

THE CARRIER

Black sail. White sail. One road north. One line. One empty hand before a king.



GAP-SU

THE ONE WHO WAITS

Forty years at sea and ten years with a question that receives no answer.



OK-I

THE DIVER

She sees the wreck, brings the record up, and chooses the island over the mainland.



THE SMITH

THE ONE WHO CHANGES SHAPE

Unnamed. Forty years at the forge. If it is iron, it can become what is needed now.



THE SOLDIER

THE ONE WHOSE NAME IS NOT ASKED

Twenty. Armour too large at one shoulder. He cannot read. He keeps the ledger anyway.



THE FARMER

THE FATHER

Too old to go north. He works the frozen field and finds his son there.



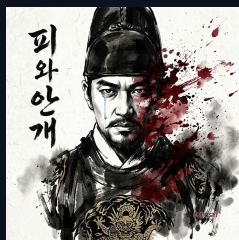
THE GRANDDAUGHTER

THE ONE WHO ASKS

Fifteen. Learning to read. She does not find the paper. She keeps the story of the paper alive.

THE MUSIC

9 ALBUMS · 36 SONGS



BLOOD AND FOG

1. The King's Path
2. Echoes of the Empty Palace
3. Ghost Fire
4. The Blood Seal



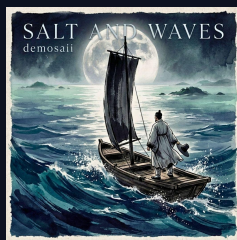
INK AND EMBERS

1. A Blade at the Brush Tip
2. The Market Street
3. The Woman at the Mountain Temple
4. The Last Signal Fire



ASH AND SEED

1. The Last Brush
2. Shadow on the Road
3. The Empty Mountain
4. The First Sprout



SALT AND WAVES

1. Road of Exile
2. Black Sail
3. Old Net
4. Sumbisori



SEA AND BONES

1. The Storm
2. The Sunken Ship
3. Salt Letter
4. Beneath the Water



ISLAND AND STARS

1. Big Dipper
2. The Woman Who Returned to the Water
3. At the Temple Gate
4. leodo



SNOW AND IRON

1. Lowering the Sail
2. Gather
3. The Anvil
4. The Empty Line



IRON AND BLOOD

1. The First Line
2. Two Steps
3. I Listen for the Name
4. The Seal



SPRING AND RUST

1. Frozen Field
2. The Salt Jar
3. My Grandfather, See
4. The Seal - Five Hundred Years Later

THE STORY WAS MUSIC FIRST

When I began JOSEON STORIES, I was not beginning a novel.

I was making songs.

One voice led to another. A king led to a scholar. A scholar's writing led to a performer. The performer led to a child. Then the story moved farther than I expected: to an island, underwater, into a ledger, onto a battlefield, into a kitchen, and finally beneath the ground.

At some point I realised the songs were no longer separate pieces. They were carrying the same thing.

Memory.

Who gets remembered. Who is allowed to write. What happens when a record is destroyed. Whether a story can survive without its original page. Whether a name matters if no institution keeps it.

Music gave me a way to let the story change voices. Prose gave me a way to see what happened between those voices.

That is why this book does not replace the music. And the music does not replace the book. They are two ways of carrying the same story.

Across these chapters, almost everyone eventually disappears from the record. Their lives cannot continue for six hundred years. The things they pass forward can.

A sentence. A story. A name. A piece of paper.

In the end, no single person saves the ledger. Each person only carries it as far as they can.

Maybe that was the story I was writing all along.

Not about preserving something forever.

About carrying it far enough for the next person to take it.

— demosaii



LISTEN

THE MUSIC OF JOSEON STORIES

NINE ALBUMS · THIRTY-SIX SONGS



SOUNDCLOUD · [demosaii](#)

YOUTUBE · [demosaii](#)

OFFICIAL JOSEON STORIES SITE

The story was music first.
You can return to it there.

조선 이야기
JOSEON STORIES

Fire burns.
Salt preserves.
Iron remembers.
And a person writes.

demosaii