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Song of the Sword

An Excerpt (Chapters 1-6)

By Kim Hoon

Translated by Jung Ha-yun

Tears of the Sword

Flowers blossomed on each deserted island. The islands billowed like clouds as the evening sun lit the flowering trees. It seemed as if they might slip free of their moorings and drift beyond the darkening horizon. By the time the birds returned from this shore to their roosts on the dimming islands, the sparkling sunset had already hurried off to the horizon and died. At dusk, the remote islands were the first to be drawn into the shallow twilight and, at dawn, they were the first to be returned to the world by the rising sun. Out at sea, it was always the most remote islands that died first and came back first.

As the setting sun scraped the shimmering scales of light off the water, the sea blackened and surged with the tide, crashing against the cliffs, the rumble of the surf tossing in the darkness. My sight line extended no farther than the blackened bluff. This was the moment when the enemy fleet would swoop in once again on the dark crest of waves from the other side of the murmurous horizon, wings spread wide, bearing a mountain of guns and swords. I could not fathom the source of the enemy's rancor, and the enemy had no way of knowing the quivering depths of my own rancor. The sea was taut, swollen with a rancor that neither side could hope to penetrate. But that was all I had for the time being—no fleet, only my rancor.

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The Royal Prosecutor's Office had released me on the first day of the fourth lunar month in the year Chōngyu. The interrogation consisted of empty questions. The prosecutors, ultimately, asked nothing. They were chasing a phantom. I pitied their language. They prattled on, meticulously assembling an illusion of loyalty and justice. But the prosecutors knew nothing of the truth of the sea. In the interrogation chair I sat face to face with a ghost. The ghost lashed my body, the pain piercing me to the marrow. I lost consciousness many times, reeling back and forth between the phantom void and the splintering pain that crashed into my body like a cliff. Upon my release, I stayed for a time at a house outside South Gate. The High State Councillor, the Inspector-General, or the honorary ministers would no longer call on me, for I had been accused of a grave offense. They sent servants in their place, servants sent to simply show their faces as a gesture meant to console me as if there was such a thing as consolation in this world. Soon I began my journey south, passing my nights in the homes of the various town clerks who allowed me into their servants' quarters to soothe my aching, nearly broken back against the warmth of the heated floor. One month later, I arrived at Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul's office in Sunchōn to begin my sentence—to serve in the war stripped of rank and gear, wearing the white garb of a commoner.

The east wind, blowing in from Hansōng, Kōje, and Kosōng, carried the stench of rotting human flesh, along with the scent of the flowering trees. The sea air was laden with the acrid odor of rotting bodies and tinged with the fragrance of the damp forests, and the wind that drove the stench away from the shore carried floral scents on its tail. The coastline of Kyōngsang Province was blanketed with corpses, some with the head cut off, others the nose.

Behind enemy lines, beyond the battleground where shells and arrows rained down like hailstones, Chosōn naval forces were busy chopping off the heads of their enemies while Japanese soldiers sliced off Chosōn noses. The severed heads and noses were

salted and then presented to the superior officers as a means of keeping score. Since it was no longer possible to discern whether a given head or nose had belonged to an enemy or an ally, out at sea, all forces cut off the heads or noses of the dead. Local magistrates abandoned their villages long before the fortresses were destroyed. Enemy forces swarmed the inlets and killed the villagers who had taken refuge in the mountains, even women and children. The villagers were killed for no other reason than that they had noses in the middle of their faces.

I knew this because I had seen it. Chosŏn forces used hooks to fish out the floating corpses of their own soldiers, then decapitated them on the decks of their ships. Some kept a scythe on board specifically for removing heads. The beheaded bodies were tossed back into the water. Commanders on both sides received promotions based on the number of heads or noses they delivered, and were commended in carefully crafted messages from their respective kings. The headless bodies washed down from the Kyŏngsang coastline as far west as Sunchŏn and the Gulf of Posŏng and were shoved into the mud flats by the rising tide. The corpses seemed alive, squirming and twitching with the ebb and flow of the tides, but a closer look revealed swarms of maggots. Crabs and clams dug into the gash of each beheaded neck, and vultures descended upon them from the cliff tops with great speed.

During that month of travel back south, I was ill from exhaustion, drenched in a cold sweat each night, lodging in the guest rooms of rundown town halls abandoned by local chiefs or in the dirt-floored rooms of the servants who had stayed behind. In each village there were zinnias blooming magnificently between the weed-covered roofs, and the few villagers still breathing killed their children and ate their flesh. From time to time I came across ghosts poking their heads out from under aster vines at the clanking of my horse's bell, light flashing from their hollow eyes.

I had taken the horse at Kurye and he died on a hill en route to Sunchŏn. From the start he had been a starved and mangy

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packhorse, but when we arrived at the foot of the hill I noticed a limp in his forelegs. The horse staggered as if he were about to collapse, but in the end, he made it to the top before he died. His death was as serene as any natural death. He stretched his four legs, his hooves studded with worn-out horseshoes, and died with his eyes open. The horse stared at me and I gazed into his dead eyes, into the reflection of my disheveled, tangled hair. I abandoned the carcass at the side of the road and proceeded to Sunchŏn on foot.

As I approached the sea, a viscid wind blew along the shore, and the hot rotting smell of salted mackerel hung heavy in the air. The day I reached Sunchŏn, I reported to Governor Kwon Ryul's office as ordered, then made my way to the eastern shore, toward Yeosu. The sea that I re-encountered that day was utterly ungraspable in its immensity; I no longer had even a single ship under my command. I turned and saw dead bodies trapped by reeds in the mud flats. The half-spoiled uniform on one of the corpses revealed him to be a Chosŏn naval soldier, yet his head had been cut off. That head would have been transmitted through the Governor's Office all the way to the king's court where it must have been counted as an accomplishment of the Chosŏn navy. Looking into the open wound where his head had been, I saw again my reflection in the dead horse's eyes.

Wherever the war might have taken this head, it seemed to have made no difference to the dead in death. If, in the end, this endless war was an empty game, then this world was an empty place. From somewhere deep inside my body, perhaps from the unknowable depths of my bones, I could hear the sword weeping—*shup, shup, shup*. Rivulets of cold sweat traveled the length of my back. The dark sea churned with phosphorescent light.

Apricot Blossoms in the Mist

The wind rose and fell like a mountain range as it swept across the sea. Radish leaves had been hung on the barracks walls to dry, and the winter wind whisked them along the clay walls. The

ships in the harbor creaked and groaned in the wind through the night. The murmur of the surging tide filled the vacuum behind the sweeping wind. I thought I could hear—or was it a phantom sound?—the susurrus of silkworms spinning new thread, carried on the tail of the wind. At night, out at sea, there was always the susurrus, the sound beneath the sounds. Perhaps it was coming from beyond the horizon, carried not by the wind but the waves. It could have been grasshoppers rustling in the brush or a colony of rats gnawing crumbs in the distance. The sound could not have been mere hallucination—it was too clear for that—but the moment I discerned it the sound of the surf had engulfed it, until it came back to life again at the tail end of the wind. Even on nights when the wind slept and the moonlight-soaked sea was as still as a pool of oil, this ungraspable sound, this susurrus, could be heard coming from beyond the horizon, *skirr, skirr, skirr*. Perhaps it was the same phantom noise that could be heard at dawn, the very noise that roused me from sleep in the chill of a cold sweat, trailing me day and night. When I shook my head in the darkness to chase it off, the susurrus returned with the new wind, sweeping in again.

The harbor was never a safe place. Devoid of water routes for retreating, the harbor was in fact the most dangerous spot to be billeted. Nights when at the end of a heated battle I ordered the surviving forces to drop anchor in the harbor of a deserted island and gave the men and the ships a chance to sleep, the susurrus whirled in my mind like an invisible blizzard. By dawn, as I tossed in a cold sweat, the rustling had been transformed into the whoosh of oars, of tens of thousands of men rowing enemy ships, approaching my destitute shores from the other side of the black horizon.

If I listened hard, I could tell that the growing storm approached not only from the sea off Taema Island, which lay beyond the horizon, but also from up north in Uiju, along the banks of the Amnok River, where the Royal Court had fled. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. The storm bore down on us, rushing over every mountain and river along this peninsula, from the

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Amnok to the southern coast. On those wind-ravaged nights, the ships in the harbor jostled for space. I would wake my men and send them down to the pier to pull the ships onto the shore. At sea I was constantly fatigued, bathed in cold sweat.

During the summer of Chōngyu year, I would learn that the allied naval forces of the three provinces of Kyōngsang, Chōlla, and Ch'ungch'ōng, now under the command of my successor, had been annihilated in battle in the Strait of Ch'ilch'ōn, north of Kōje Island. Earlier that spring, I had been relieved of my command and taken into custody at the naval base in Hansan. The battle near Kadōk that immediately preceded my arrest had felt strangely slack. The enemies' will to fight was no longer palpable. It had felt more like pulling weeds from the fields than like war. When I withdrew my fleet from Kadōk and returned to the Hansan base, a representative of the Royal Prosecutor's Office was waiting for me. Right there on the pier, he had me tied up. The knot was so tight and tough that it nearly cut into my bones. According to the chief officer, I, Yi Sun-sin, Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces of the Three Southern Provinces, had been charged with contempt of the Royal Court, deceiving the king and disobeying the king's orders to attack.

In the moments before I boarded the cage-cart that would take me to Seoul, I surrendered my fleet, my men, provisions, firearms, gunpowder, prisoners, spears and swords and relayed administrative details to my replacement Won Kyun. He seemed eager to see me off as he affixed his seal to the bill of lading without verifying the quantity or the condition of the supplies.

Hansan had been my home since the summer of the year Kyesa, a year after the war broke out. The military forces and supplies that I handed over to Won Kyun were everything I had secured during my three and a half years in Hansan, which added up to eight-tenths of the Chosōn navy's total armament at the time. Now, all of it lay strewn about the water, a smashed array of scorched planks and headless, noseless corpses. The battle in the Ch'ilch'ōn Strait had lasted only one night and one day.

I would learn later that over a thousand enemy ships had swooped in that day, spreading their forces like the spokes of a wheel, while Won Kyun positioned his ships in a single line in the center of the enemy's formation, despite the fact that his men were spent from rowing for an entire day to reach Kōje Island from Hansan. This much I knew: Won Kyun was staggeringly belligerent, beyond anyone's control, even his own. Every battle served him alone. He held the misguided belief that there was something he could gain from the aftermath of battle. In the past, I had offered him countless enemy heads in order to appease him. Still his volcanic rancor and rage drove him to place the ships and soldiers inside the Ch'ilch'ŏn Strait, surrounded by enemy ships positioned to attack from all directions.

Won Kyun fled to the mountains on Kōje Island, stripped of his armor. He fled without a single sword, then sank to the ground beneath a tree where his fat body, gasping for air, received the sword of an enemy soldier who had trailed him ashore. Yi Ŏk-i, Commander of Chōlla Province's western fleet, also lost his life, as did Ch'oe Ho, Naval Commander of Ch'ungch'ōng Province, shipwrecked at sea.

In Hansan, while it was still spring and my cage-cart was ready to leave for Seoul, deckhands and officers had fallen to their knees and wept, blocking its path. Won Kyun had whipped the crying soldiers and shouted at them to make way.

— Stop the crying. The enemy will hear.

Won Kyun burdened my cart with a gift parcel of dried skate and seaweed for the king and the high officials in the capital.

— You have a long journey ahead.

— May fortune be with you in battle, Chief Commander.

Such was the nonchalant manner in which we parted.

A cow pulled the cart north for nine days and nine nights. At mealtime, my military escorts would follow kitchen smoke into villages and simply plunder, loading enough onto the cart to cover the next meal. It was not often that we came across villages

with food. The chief officer pressed his men to make haste, and the cart rattled on into the night. It seemed that the court wanted my immediate death. I shivered, bound by rope within the cage-cart.

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They said I had held the king's court in contempt and disobeyed a royal order to attack. . . . I no longer wished to live. Death was as certain as a cliff. My only wish was that my death would be swift, without interminable torture and interrogation. I longed to drown in my own bottomless torpor, where all that must be killed had been killed and the world had become a world in and of itself.

The end of the road that turned and twisted around to the far side of the mountain range was beyond my sight line, but I knew that the imperceptible road led to the king and the court and the royal shrine. I hoped that my war would end with my lifetime, with my death. But one can never know. Despite the apparent end, I could still clearly hear the rowing of my enemies, *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*, approaching from beyond the dark horizon. As the cage-cart clattered onto Map'o Wharf and entered Seoul, I shook my head, over and over, shaking off the susurrus. The rain was falling in Seoul, a light spring rain, and apricot trees on the little island of Pam-söm blossomed in the mist.

Return to the World

News of the defeat of Chosŏn's allied fleet reached me through Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul. Hansan naval base had been annihilated. Enemy flags flew at every port and island along the coast, and enemy forces had encamped in every warm, hollow inlet where the sea cut into the shore. At night, the drunken singing of the enemy echoed all around. Those villagers who had fled the war then returned during the few months of lull in the fighting had once again scattered. I did not know where they were hiding. It was late summer by then, and their abandoned fields were still green. Come fall, the enemy would reap the harvest.

The enemy prayed for the divine power of the Buddha dharma to guide them in battle. Banners reading "Wondrous Law of the

Lotus Sutra” were raised high over every enemy ship, blanketing the sea, rushing the shore. After the war broke out in the year Imjin, our search parties often found copies of the Lotus Sutra in the captain’s cabins of defeated enemy ships, containing passages such as this:

In the coming world, you shall all attain Nirvana. When the day comes, your land will be filled with pure and good bodhisattvas, and you faithful men and women shall sit in Buddha’s seat, dressed in Buddha’s robes. Dear Ānanda, you ought to know, Buddha shall not abandon mankind.

Some enemy soldiers erected shrines in their cabins and monks traveled with them on board warships. When my men captured these monks, they lopped off their heads and tossed their bodies into the sea. The monks held their palms pressed together at heart center in prayer position, chanting as they received the sword. Blood spouted from their mouths in mid-prayer. We did not carry sufficient provisions to keep captives alive. My men shredded the Lotus Sutra banners and used them to bandage injured soldiers. Their tight weave made the silk banners suitable for dressing wounds. My ragged soldiers also made shirts out of these banners. When they rowed, the brush strokes that made up 法, 經, and other Chinese characters were boldly displayed on their backs.

Once again, the enemy ships had roared in like a blizzard, their Lotus Sutra banners hoisted high. The battle line slipped into chaos. It was no longer possible to distinguish the front from the rear. Our forces were unable to either converge or disperse. Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul would have been well aware of the dilemma. Only impossibilities were clear. Governor Kwon did not have access to reliable intelligence. A shadowy rumor of our seemingly inevitable fate spread down the coastline and across the land.

Although I had reported for duty in Sunch’ŏn, Governor Kwon Ryul had not assigned me a post or position to complete my service as a soldier in white garb. I was on infinite standby.

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It seemed that I would never serve on a ship again. I wandered through the fallen ports along the coast, through villages deep in Mt. Jiri, and along the banks of Sömjin River. In the inland region, government offices had been restored with difficulty, but in the deserted villages not even a dog could be seen and weeds choked the unused wells. There were no men to be seen in any of the villages, and nothing of use remained, not even a single nail. In Jinju, I lodged in the dirt-floored room of a house that belonged to a local clerk in the village of Chogye.

I was surprised to learn that Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul would deign to call on me in this dirt-floored room. He had sent an agent ahead to inform me of his imminent arrival. I was told that the governor was stopping on his way to Jinju to inspect the troops. But Jinju Fortress had fallen in the summer of the year Kyesa. Kim Ch'ön-il, Ch'oe Kyöng-hoe, Hwang Myöng-bo, Yi Chong-in, and all 5,000 civilians and officials in the fortress were massacred. Not a single dog or chicken remained in the fields. Chinju Fortress had been left in ruins, and there was no longer any military facility for the governor to inspect. Such a visit could hardly be the purpose of his appearance in Jinju.

Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul arrived flanked by soldiers and patrolmen under his command. His horse was stout and splendid. Its mane was shot through with iridescent streaks. The governor did not enter my humble room, but sat at the edge of the narrow veranda. His men aligned their swords and spears and banners in the front yard. I stepped out onto the veranda and greeted the governor with a full head-to-floor bow.

— Yi Sun-sin, you do not mind if I address you informally?

He shrewdly reminded me of my status, stripped of rank and gear. At sixty, his voice was still loud and strong.

— As I am in white garb . . .

I did not complete my answer. We had met once before, in early winter of the year Pyöngsin a few months prior to my arrest. He had traveled all the way to Hansan to see me and report

that, according to intelligence gathered by the king's court, Kato Kiyomashi's squadron was sailing for the port of Busan, and I was to launch a surprise attack in the seas off Busan, then send Kato's head to the king. Such was the strategy set out by the court and now by Kwon Ryul's command as governor. I had simply replied, I ask that you respect my judgment as commander in charge. He turned on his heel and I held my ground.

The intelligence that the court had acquired, reportedly from double agents, was not trustworthy. At the time, the enemy was stockpiling massive quantities of military hardware on the wharfs along the Busan shore and nearby islands. To move my fleet through those islands would have proven perilous, both to our rear and to our side. The surf rose high on the winter sea. It would have been suicide to wait for Kato in formation for days on end on those rough seas.

Kato's head was what the king's court wanted, more urgently than any victory in this operation. Kato had led the first line of enemy forces during the invasion in the year Imjin. His men had taken Busan Fortress in a single day and then proceeded north in a procession of palanquins decorated as if for a spring blossom outing. Captured Chosŏn soldiers carried the palanquins on their shoulders. Pursued by Kato's forces, the king had been forced to flee all the way north to Uiju, and now the king thirsted after the political symbolism of Kato's beheading.

More than anything, the king longed for the chance to offer Kato's head on the altar of the Royal Shrine and pour a cup of wine for his ancestral spirits.

I understood his desire, but I could not move my fleet. I could not sacrifice my troops for the sake of political symbolism. The future of Chosŏn depended on my mere handful of men. Still I lamented my incompetence, my inability to provide the king with his plaything, which led to my immediate indictment. During the time when I was under interrogation at the Royal Prosecutor's Office in Seoul, I learned that Marshal Governor Kwon Ryul had brought the charges against me, and the bureaucrats at the Royal

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Court of Justice were resolute in their accusations. I may have been obtuse about politics but was not ashamed of my obtuseness. And now Kwon Ryul had come to see me again, come all the way to this remote hamlet in the hills. This time he had come to deliver the news of the annihilation of the Chosŏn fleet two days before on the seas off the Ch'ilch'ŏn Strait, his eyes cast toward the horizon as if he were talking to himself. Many times he repeated the word, annihilation, leaving no room for doubt. Annihilation. There was no need to ask for details. I simply listened.

— My dear fellow, you must forget everything that went on at the Royal Court. That is a soldier's duty.

Kwon Ryul maintained an air of dignity that was frighteningly focused. As an army man, he had triumphed at Imjin River, at Yongin, at Suwon, at Ich'ŏn, and at Haengju Fortress. Deep within his body lay the well-guarded spirit of the bloodthirsty man who had made it through the dispossessed world of Asuras, which my own bloodthirstiness recognized. He was waging this war with his political might. When Won Kyun had hesitated to launch an attack, preferring to wait for support from the army, Kwon Ryul had summoned him and, after flogging Won Kyun with fifty strokes, had him hurled back to the Strait of Ch'ilch'ŏn. Kwon Ryul was a man capable of tying the Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces of the Three Southern Provinces, a man nearing his sixties, to the rack and then ordering him to be beaten with a club. Kwon Ryul was like an old deliberate beast. He spoke again after a long silence.

— Can you come up with a plan?

I felt a ball of fire surging from deep within me, something like a wail, or sorrow. Plan, ah, a plan. I wished I had died on the interrogation rack in Seoul. In this world without a plan, my life had been spared, only to send me in search of a plan, once again. I answered with great difficulty.

— The water's edge would be where a plan may or may not emerge. I will report to you after I examine the shore.

— Thank you. Proceed with haste.

Kwon Ryul left with his men. It was a two-day trip from Sunchön to Chinju. The battle in the Ch'ilch'ön Strait had ended two days before. Kwon Ryul had set out to see me upon receiving word of the crippling defeat. Had that been his plan? Once Kwon Ryul was out of sight, I ordered a servant to hone my sword. Dark blue clouds shimmered along the blade, which emitted a cold metallic odor. Was a sword hot or cold?—it was hard to say. I lifted the sword to my nose and drew the metallic smell deep into my lungs. It seemed to be saying, Stay alive, in this world without plan or purpose. Stay alive until you are prepared to abandon everything of this world. I left Jinju the following morning, at first light. A servant carried my sword. He was old and his name was Maksoe. I chose the shore route, via Hadong, Namhae, and Yösu. As I set out, the village clerk provisioned me with some millet, salt, and dried fish.

Sword, Moon, Body

In battle, the enemy would hold the key to my victory, and for the enemy, the key would lie in my two hands. That had been my belief since the declaration of war in the year Imjin. Or should I say that had been my hope, a hope that nearly suffocated me. Allow me to be more frank. I had hoped there would be neither a winner nor a loser in my lifetime—that would be my final absolution as a soldier. I had wished for the power to be a powerless warrior. But at sea, my battle position was determined by the position taken by my enemy. My final absolution, therefore, could never be achieved. Out at sea, I moved in lockstep with my enemy. Even in harbor, any move made by the enemy fleet meant that the position of my sleeping ships must change as well. At sea, there was no place to stay, and on those nights, as I tossed in bed, without a way to still my mind, my tired fleet slept soundly.

Once again, the sea unfolded before me, but neither the enemy's terms nor mine were clear. The sea was cold in the fading autumn sun, and birds let out isolated cries from afar. My sight

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line was fixed on the coastline of Busan and Kōje and Kosōng. Smoke signals rose from the islands scattered along this side of the horizon, as enemy outposts called and responded to each other. The signals changed from flame to smoke, from black smoke to white, but the message was indecipherable.

The day I arrived in Hadong from the dirt-floored room in the hills, I lodged at an abandoned farmhouse on the banks of the Sōmjīn River. Several village magistrates prostrated themselves along the edge of the port as I approached. They were no longer able to take up the posts to which they had been assigned on the many islands and ports now in enemy hands. They called on me at the farmhouse and sat in a circle in the front yard, weeping. Their crying felt scripted, like a ceremony staged on my behalf. When they were done, they hailed a ferryman and returned to the other side of the river. It seemed they had come to the cottage for the sole purpose of crying. Dusk fell on the river's edge, where a few lone herons stood gazing into their own reflections.

I watched the sun set on the river from the veranda while my servant, Maksoe, waded out into the water with his pants rolled up and cast a net. The ferryboat that had crossed the river was now returning, this time with a woman on board. She was the ferryman's only passenger. The woman carried a bundle on her head. At the water's edge she stepped ashore and walked toward the farmhouse. Her hemp-cord sandals were so worn that her padded socks brushed the ground. With her arms raised to balance the large bundle on her head, the straps of her petticoat were clearly visible beneath the hem of her short blouse. Her face was obscured, but her small, round shoulders and quick, childlike stride revealed her to be Yōjin. The recognition shocked me. The memory of a smell came alive within me, the raw and rank odor of an unwashed woman.

— My lord . . .

As our eyes met, Yōjin sank to the ground and began to sob. She struggled to contain her tears, but they kept pouring from her. Her whole body seemed to be weeping. The place where she had

hidden such deep sobs remained a mystery to me. It was a long time before Yöjin's tears were exhausted. The moon rose on the far side of the river. I gazed in silence until her quivering shoulders had relaxed.

The first time I touched Yöjin's body was in the autumn of the year Pyöngsin. The sea battles had been sporadic and tedious that fall. The enemy was intent on maintaining their prolonged siege of the fortresses in Busan and Ulsan, and our ground troops had been unable to drive them back out to sea. At the time, I was touring government offices in the inland provinces on a mission to ferret out corrupt officials. Several local clerks had fled upon learning of my impending arrival. There was one clerk who had caught deserters trying to sneak into the village but looked the other way for two sacks of barley. He worked for the office in Hamp'yöng. The clerk and three navy men were arrested. I ordered an officer to behead them, and they were executed on the grounds of a razed Confucian academy. During the execution, their families wailed until they fell unconscious. I ordered that the four heads be hung from the huge tree in the village center. In a mountain village near Hamp'yöng, a clerk had been arrested for listing an entire family as absentees in return for five *mal* of barley. I had him tied to a rack and ordered a flogging of forty strokes as punishment. The clerk was old and ailing. He must have taken his last breath at around the twentieth stroke. The penal officer did not notice and continued to administer the remaining twenty strokes. The old clerk's body was crushed and ran like porridge. I lodged at the guesthouse of the magistrate's office that night. I had been sitting alone, thinking about the club that pulverized the clerk's body, and also about his family, likely sharing a pot of barley porridge. I longed for a drink of pure, clean water.

Late in the night, the governor of Hamp'yöng arranged for a tray of food and wine to be sent to my room. Yöjin was the government-employed courtesan who arrived with the tray. She

said she was thirty at the time. Slave would have been a more fitting title than courtesan for her. The backs of her hands were dry and cracked, and her hair smelled sour. Her body was filthy, and she had a piercing gleam in her clear, clear eyes that made it impossible to hold her gaze. That night, I took Yöjin's body with the memory of the wide-open eyes of the heads hanging from the tree in the village center flooding my mind. It seemed as if those eyes were chasing me deeper into this woman's body. She felt warm and tight around me. Awash in the raw, rank odor of her flesh, my own body drifted away for a time, then returned. It seemed that Yöjin's body no longer held any shyness, as it undulated and overflowed into mine. As dawn broke, I noticed Yöjin crying, hugging her knees in a cold corner of the room. Her small, round shoulders shook in the darkness. I heard her crying behind me, cold sweat traveling the length of my back, and the eyes on the heads that I had hung on the village tree earlier in the day seemed to grow larger and closer.

— What has brought you here?

— My lord, I don't know how . . .

Yöjin lowered her head. My servant, Maksoe, was bringing in dinner: steamed millet and spicy stew cooked with radish leaves and mandarin fish that he had caught in the river. He had somehow obtained sun-dried radish slices and served those as well. Yöjin and I sat with the dinner table between us.

— Go ahead and eat.

But sir, this is your dinner table . . . I don't know what to say . . .

Yöjin looked up at me directly with her clear eyes. Her hair was tangled, and the backs of her heels were cracked and dirty. She must have walked a long way.

— Why have you come?

— I heard about your release . . .

Yöjin had not touched her spoon.

— Go on. Eat.

— . . . Yes, my lord.

The scent of the food seemed to fill the entire room. Yōjin's shoulders were shaking again, and she gasped as if out of breath. Beneath her tangled, disheveled hair, her two cheeks shone in the candlelight. Her shadow danced on the sword that hung on the wall behind her. Yōjin's hands trembled. She raised a spoonful of food and began to take small bites.

— Do not worry. Eat.

— . . . Yes, sir.

— Do you understand this? I am just a sailor, floating on the sea.

— . . . You are, sir.

For a while, we ate without speaking. She had a small mouth and the large brass spoon seemed even larger in her hand.

And what is it about my release that leads you here?

You seemed to find comfort in my body . . .

She had turned her head aside, and it was the mouth of her shadow on the wall that was speaking.

That night, I took Yōjin's body for the second time. Once again, she had not bathed. Once again, she seemed to discard the shyness of a moment ago without hesitation. A pungent, fishy odor spread from between her legs. I found sweetness inside her mouth and peace inside her body, peace mixed with desperation. When dawn broke this time, I still held Yōjin in my arms. I asked, Where will you go in the morning? . . . My question was a mistake. My lord, I pray you to slay me when morning comes. . . . Her voice told me this was not idle talk. I wrapped my arms around her hard and tight, as if I could crush her into pieces. A moan escaped her mouth. Moonlight gleamed on the sword on the wall, shimmering on the blade, illuminating the scratches left by many whetstones. I smelled dust and sun in her hair. I held her harder. She curled up into a ball and nestled deeper into my arms. Her small hands wiped the cold sweat from my back. A thick scar snaked from below her collarbone to the mound of her right breast. I could feel another long-healed scar on her back. I asked nothing about her scars.

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As it escaped the clouds for a moment, the moon flashed on the blade of my sword, pouring into the whetstone scratch marks. The color of the sword came alive, bright and milky. The sword appeared as cold as phosphorescence. Yöjin's long, slender neck seemed to tremble in my arms as she said, once again, My lord, I pray you to slay me when morning comes . . . Please send me away from this world . . . I took her again. The sounds coming from her throat were low and sorrowful. I wished I could slay her as easily as I held her. I wished I could thrust a sword into her body as easily as I thrust my body into hers. In the dark, my mind raced. Was it not possible for me to face my enemy with the same power I held over this woman? My body seemed to convulse at that impossible thought. For a little longer, I was not a warrior. In the morning woods, birds woke and began their chatter. That morning, I set out ahead of her. I did not ask her where she was going as I returned to the sea. I knew nothing of Yöjin's path in life. I had not asked anyone about her back in Hamp'yöng, not the governor, not anyone.

Phantom

Many things immense and evident were often out of sight. And because they remained beyond my sight line, it proved impossible to tell whether they were real or unreal. It seemed that the unreal was cloaked in the real, while the real wore the cloaks of the unreal. In my younger days, when I faced Jurchen forces in the mountains along the Duman River, the mountain ranges rolling across the continent were invisible to me, and on the southern coast, the sea seemed perpetually just out of sight. It was impossible to see what lay on the other side of a blizzard, and our big, evident enemy always emerged from that invisible place on the far side of the storm.

The year Imjin had had an ominous beginning, as had the year before and the year before that. A phantom by the name of Kil Sam-bong had ridden with the clouds, spattering blood across mountains and streams. Rumors spread that he was fostering an

insurgency in the valley of P'ia-gol, deep in Mt. Jiri. Patrolmen brought two vagabonds to the Royal Prosecutor's Office, and they had divulged Kil Sam-bong's name and his activities. The two beggars had been captured in the northern province of Hwanghae-do; nevertheless, they seemed to have detailed knowledge of Kil Sam-bong's movements and whereabouts in his hideout down south in Mt. Jiri. Nobody knew who Kil Sam-bong really was, but people all across the country claimed they had seen him.

Some said Kil Sam-bong was a farm hand from Ch'önan, a stout man in his sixties with a bronzed face; some said Kil Sam-bong was thirty years old and had a pale face, with a white beard grown all the way down to his waist; some said Kil Sam-bong was not a leader but a mere soldier among rebels who could walk 300 *ri* in a day; some said Kil Sam-bong's surname was not Kil but Ch'oe and that he had disbanded his troops years ago and died in Pukch'öng in the northern province of Hamgyöng-do; and some even said that Kil Sam-bong took his troops to Japan the year after our incumbent king had risen to the throne and that he would lead Japan's imminent invasion, after which, once the Chosön king had surrendered, Kil would rule Chosön as a vassal under Japan's Lord Chancellor Toyotomi Hideyoshi.

The phantom Kil Sam-bong seemed to pop up everywhere, but Kil Sam-bong was nowhere to be seen. The air was thick with bewildering scents, but he left no other traces. Government troops searched every remote village and beach but failed to capture Kil Sam-bong.

The question "Who is Kil Sam-bong?" was eventually replaced by "Who among us is the real Kil Sam-bong?" With this shift, the phantom Kil Sam-bong began to shed blood. The first to be identified as Kil Sam-bong was Chöng Yö-rip. At the time, he had resigned from public office and sought sanctuary in Chinan, his hometown. When patrolmen from the Royal Prosecutor's Office raided his house, he killed his son and his colleagues, then stabbed himself with the same sword. One of his writings, which

read, “All the world is public property, and thus belongs to no single individual,” had been confiscated as evidence and sent to the authorities in the capital.

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Chŏng Yŏ-rip’s suicide seemed to expose the phantom Kil Sam-bong, making it quite real. Then the phantom reappeared in the form of Ch’oe Yŏng-gyŏng, a literati scholar from Chinju. He had once used the sobriquet “Sambong,” in his younger days. His accusers said that Ch’oe had refused government positions even when the king personally appointed him and that he despised the High State Councillor Chŏng Ch’ŏl, considering the man little more than a mere insect. Tied to an interrogation chair at the Royal Prosecutor’s Office, Ch’oe Yŏng-gyŏng’s body had been torn to shreds. He died in jail before the prosecutors were able to determine whether or not he really was Kil Sam-bong. But his death cleared the way for the prosecutors to regard and treat him as Kil Sam-bong. Still, in jail, he had always sat upright in a neat and compact position, never resting his back against the wall, the expression on his face serene and unchanging. When his family came to visit him, he wrote a single Chinese character for them to see—正, meaning righteous.

— Do you understand this letter?

He spoke those words and died. Along with these two men—Chŏng Yŏ-rip and Ch’oe Yŏng-gyŏng—a thousand people close to them died on the interrogation rack. Family members and kindred spirits of these two men, those who drank and celebrated with them, those who had exchanged letters with them, those who defended them, and those who criticized their accusers had all been taken away and slashed or crushed. For days on end, corpses were wrapped in straw mats and borne away through one of the city’s gates reserved for the dead. Those who buried the corpses were brought in and executed in turn.

One moment, the king would be gazing into a Chinese landscape painting, and the next moment he would order more prisoners to be dragged out and killed, almost as an afterthought.

An eighty-year-old woman was flogged to death, and an eight-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl each died after their knees had been crushed. The children had failed to understand the investigator's orders to confess what they had witnessed. The enforcement officers wept as they lashed, snapped, twisted, and burned the accused, and, in turn, those weeping officers were tied to the interrogation rack one by one. High State Councillor Chŏng Ch'öl supervised this bloodbath. Chŏng Ch'öl was not a man I understood. True, he was deft and diligent. He killed with the steadfastness of a farmer tending his fields. Between killings, he passed the time writing voluble expressions of his longing for Taoist seclusion and solitude. His words were both nihilistic and flirtatious. The ceaseless killings he carried out on the king's behalf seemed to be intended to reaffirm the mechanisms of power. Yet there had been over a thousand Kil Sam-bongs put to death, and no one had seen the real Kil Sam-bong.

At the time, I had been stationed at the Eastern Naval Base in Yŏsu. On occasion, while entertaining royal messengers and their subordinates with food and drink, I would receive news from Seoul of Kil Sam-bong. I tried to envision Kil Sam-bong, but he failed to materialize in my mind. Kil Sam-bong remained a phantom, potent and undeniable. Like the enemy across the sea, Kil Sam-bong remained out of sight. My sword could not slice through an enemy I could not see. I felt an unbearable itch beneath my skin. I longed for a drink of pure, clean water. My battle seemed limitless, like fighting a cloud. A phantom cannot be pierced. A phantom swallows the sword.

One evening in particular, as I listened to the drunken ramblings of the royal messengers, I felt that Kil Sam-bong must be the king himself. The king and the entire pack of high officials at the Royal Secretariat, the Border Defense Council, the Office of the Censor-General, the Office of the Inspector-General, all put together. Their communiqués were the deep forest where Kil Sam-bong had taken roost.

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That evening, the royal messenger also mentioned that Nam Sa-go, a geomancy scholar in Seoul, had predicted war in the year Imjin. Nam Sa-go was a professor of astronomy at the Office for Observance of Natural Phenomena. One night, he sat beside an old astronomer and noticed the morning star dimming. As he looked up at the sky, the old astronomer had said, This is an omen of my death. A grin spread across Nam Sa-go's face. It is not you who will die, he had said. Indeed Nam Sa-go died a few days later.

According to the messengers, hundreds of young men, all from renowned literati families, were now running rampant in the city center, clowning around like lunatics or fiends. Youthful scholars, wearing their Confucian hoods, slid through the streets of Chongno in a long serpentine trail, each man with his back bent low and his hands holding the waist of the person before him; they were shaking and slithering like a snake. Some cried, some laughed, some raved, some raged, some were drunk, some vomited—all crowded together and danced about like goblins or shamans. These young scholars, so well versed in the writings of Confucius and Mencius, had taken to the streets and were acting out beastly mating rituals in broad daylight. The game was called the Climbing Song. Seoul's citizens came together outside the city gates every day, at Mt. Nam, Mt. Kwanak, Mt. Muak, and drank and sang and danced into the night. "The World Shall End Now That Peach Trees Are in Bloom" was the song they sang. Ghosts were heard wailing near the city walls, scaring off the soldiers charged with guarding the royal tombs.

The very night I sat drinking with the royal messengers, an officer at Pangdap Point named Kim Ok-ch'ŏn had deserted. Heavy with a hangover that morning, I learned of the incident. The senior officer at Pangdap Point had sent one of his men to make a report. I ordered the troops to block the ports and wharfs within the jurisdiction of the Eastern Naval Base. I also sent an officer to

Kim Ok-ch'ön's hometown of Kangjin with orders to bring me Kim's head. Kim Ok-ch'ön had taken a small boat from Odong Island pier and made it far out to sea before a band of oarsmen from Yöch'ön caught him. He had a young woman with him on board, and the boat was loaded with three sacks of rice stolen from the base, bedding, salt, and a cauldron. The two were tied up and brought back in together. Kim Ok-ch'ön had passed the military examinations and entered at third level rank the previous year. He was twenty-two years old and was skilled in martial arts and archery. His body may have been bound, but his face still glowed with youthful vigor. His sharp nose gave him a dogged air.

— Where were you headed?

— I simply wanted to live. I was trying to get to a faraway island, anywhere but here.

I ordered him to kneel down on the stone platform outside the office of the magistrate and instructed an officer to behead him. Kim Ok-ch'ön raised his head mere moments before he was to receive the sword. His eyes were still capable of dominating his opponent. I could feel the untamed pride of this young man.

— I beseech you, my lord . . .

— You may speak.

— We still long for life. Take my life, but please let her live.

Please pardon this woman, my lord. She is fine and kind. If you will, take her. Please just let her live.

I called out my orders to the officers.

— Proceed.

All day long, soldiers passing through the marina of the Eastern Naval Base gazed at Kim Ok-ch'ön's head hanging from a pole, displayed at the checkpoint.

The woman, bound with rope, had watched every moment of Kim's execution, her eyes intent as if she were reading a book. Her expression had been calm throughout. In the moment when the sword sliced through the air and reached the man's throat, her clear eyes had followed the sword.

I let her go. Soon I learned that she went down to the riverside and hanged herself from the branch of a black pine. Oarsmen brought her body to the courtyard of the magistrate's office. They stuffed the woman's limp and extruded tongue back into her mouth and pressed her lips closed. In death, she seemed to be gazing into the distance.

I ordered my men to arrest her father, an old fisherman. He had been the one who secured the boat for the runaway couple, a wooden vessel that had been requisitioned by the navy. It had no sail, only paddles. It was beyond my abilities to imagine which faraway island this young couple had hoped to reach on a boat with no sail. The fisherman's eyes flashed angrily as he glared at his daughter's body.

— That boat is mine, my lord, not yours. It was my boat that I gave to my daughter.

His body tied to the interrogation rack, the old fisherman screamed as he was given a flogging of twenty blows. He labored to endure through the excruciating pain of the beating, but his neck gave way at the twentieth stroke. The fisherman's wife and son were waiting on the other side of the gate with a wooden pallet. The son lifted the spent body of his father onto the pallet and carried him home.

I had a town clerk from Pangdap Point brought in as well. The investigation had revealed that this clerk helped Kim Ok-ch'ŏn steal three sacks of military rice. The clerk faced other grave charges as well, including draft dodging and harboring a deserter. I sent my men to search his house. All of his crops and cattle were confiscated and taken to the naval base warehouse. I had him executed and sent his head back to Pangdap, to be hung at the base.

The royal messengers left for Seoul that same day. I saw them off at the base entrance. That evening, I went up to the archery field and shot fifteen arrows. The raw odor of fog rushed in from the distant sea as Kil Sam-bong's phantom danced beyond my target. Where was I to aim? The target seemed to sway. The wind whirled

about with no sense of direction or order. My arrows could not find their target. As the sky grew dark, I retreated from the archery field, the target left unscathed.

This Body Still Breathes

The coastline seemed utterly empty. Nothing in sight but mountains and rivers. At each port I approached on foot, I saw two or three broken battleships that had washed ashore and burrowed into the sand. All of those ships were beyond hope, without a single plank worth salvaging from their half-burned hulls. I was walking from Kwangyang Bay in the direction of Kurye when the enemy began to come ashore, driving coastal refugees inland. At the same time, refugees from the inland territories were fleeing south toward the shore. The refugees coming from opposite directions would encounter each other on the road and inquire about the places left behind. There was no shelter to be found, but still they kept moving, drawing upon deep wells of strength, as if their only solace was to keep moving. I did not ask them where they were going. Those who could not continue fell behind on the roadside, waiting to breathe their last breath.

Winter was approaching. The villages had been deserted save for the magistrates, their beards grown long and white. They were as indignant as they were impotent. I ate the food that they served me and slept in the lodgings that they offered. I had nothing to report back to Governor Kwŏn Ryul, nothing in this world. All I had to send to the Governor's office were short messages asking after his health followed by straightforward accounts of my progress.

I walked into Kurye at night and drank alone. Wine seemed to bring me closer to all that remained distant. I thought of the mother I had lost two months before. At the time, I had been passing through my hometown, Asan, on my route south to begin my sentence to serve in white garb. The day that news of my mother's death reached me, the officer from the Royal Prosecutor's Office who was escorting me did not press me to get on the road.

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Instead, I sat alone all day in one of the servant's rooms at a local merchant's house. Quite a bit of time had passed since I had arranged to have my mother brought to Sunch'ön, where she would be closer to my command post at the Western Naval Base and the T'ongje Base. Upon hearing of my release from jail, she had left Sunch'ön and was headed for Asan aboard a cargo ship sailing down the southern coast, then up the West Sea. The trip would take six days. My mother had arranged to bring a coffin with her on the ship. She died alone as the ship arrived in Asan and was laid out in the coffin that had traveled with her. I was told that her body felt as light as a fallen leaf. Given my position, I could not arrange a funeral for her, so I sat alone all day in the merchant's house. Whenever I had paid her a visit in Sunch'ön, she had received me in a formal way, keeping the proper distance from her son. As I entered her room, she would lift her ailing body, smooth her hair and straighten her bedding. She was slight, nothing more than a handful in my arms. My mother's body had the warmth and smell of an old hearth. When I held her, she would turn away shyly.

— Go on, go. Take revenge for your country.

Those were her words, repeated every time I turned to leave. I would have preferred it if she had pestered me a little. Two months had passed since her death, and her body would now be decaying in the ground. I drank by myself until I was drunk. My back ached thanks to the rain. It was a chilly, late autumn rain. I kept on drinking, picturing my mother's body and the rain falling on the refugees sleeping as best they could in the open air. The wine saturated my body like rain. When I woke from my stupor, as dawn approached, it was still raining. Having gotten drunk without a bite of food in my stomach, I felt a familiar burn. I tossed and turned in the empty room, listening to the rain. I no longer had a reason to keep going, nothing left to uphold or to gain.

That morning a royal messenger by the name of Yang Ho arrived. He had come directly to me without stopping first to see Governor Kwon Ryul. He carried a message from the king. As he

revealed the scroll, I wondered for a moment if in reality this man was an official from the Royal Prosecutor's Office sent to poison me at the king's behest. I walked down the steps to the courtyard and bowed before the scroll. Then Yang Ho opened the scroll and proceeded to read it out loud. The king's rhetoric was formidable.

I, the king, command you. Alas, the navy is now the only resource this kingdom can rely on. The dreaded blade has flashed again and we have now lost the forces of the Three Provinces in a single battle. Who now shall protect the many villages by the sea? Now that Hansan has fallen, there is nothing left for the enemy to fear.

Clearly word of the defeat in the Strait of Chilcheon and the loss of Hansan Naval Base had reached the king. Yang Ho read on.

I have only my own lack of virtue to blame for removing you from your post and demoting you to serve as a commoner. I have brought the shame of defeat upon myself, I have no excuse. No excuse.

It was beyond my ability to comprehend how the king could utter such words to me, the convict who allegedly held his court in contempt and deceived him. I doubted my own ears. I pitied the king, and at the same time, I feared him. In my experience, pity and fear were two sides of the same coin. The king had used the might of his most powerful subjects to destroy other equally powerful subjects. Still, Yang Ho was reading from the scroll.

I hereby restore you, although you are in mourning, to your appointment as Commander of the Eastern Naval Forces of Ch'olla Province and Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces of the Three Southern Provinces of Ch'ungch'öng, Ch'olla, and Kyöngsang. I command you to reunite the forces

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by comforting the men and retrieving the deserters, to recover our naval territories and to secure our stronghold so as to reclaim the dignity of our military. You are in command of punishing any soldier who has violated martial law. There is no effort too great. What more need I say, for I am well aware of your selfless dedication to serve the cause of the kingdom at the sacrifice of your own body.

I shuddered with the realization that I had not escaped my fate. I was once again Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces of the Three Southern Provinces, the Lord High Admiral. I was again Commander of the Eastern Naval Forces of Chölla Province. But I was a commander-in-chief with no forces to command. I could not see how I could forgive the king, let alone uphold him. However, my military power would have to be rebuilt in a place beyond the king's reach. This much I knew. And I would be rebuilding it in order for it to be destroyed. This knowledge was the source of any power I had, the reason I had no need to defend myself even if, in the end, I were found guilty of holding the court in contempt and of deceiving the king. My mind raced with the emptiness of the sea. Not a single nail remained to be salvaged along a shore littered with headless, rotting corpses. Enemy smoke signals rose from distant islands. Hansan Naval Base had gone up in flames. Then I became aware of the stillness that had saturated my mind, the stillness of a man with nowhere to hide. In a land of death, there would be no path to life. From deep in the core of my body a fresh heat appeared. It began to bubble up inside me, something like lust, like hunger. Yang Ho unwrapped the bundle he had carried here from the king and laid out before me a sheet of paper, a fine brush, and an inkwell, and then he retired to the magistrate's office. There, he would await my reply.

I sat alone the entire day. Across the wide, empty sea, big, fearsome beings were swooping in. *Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh.* The sound of the enemy rowing myriad warships kept breaking

through. The susurrus grew louder, then louder still, coming closer and closer. I shook my head to rid myself of the phantom noise. I broke out in a cold sweat and shivered as the chill ran up my spine. I sat alone until evening fell, until Yang Ho sent a servant to hasten my reply. Then I lifted the inky brush and began to compose my response. The sentences would never flow easily. I struggled to finish the letter, settling for empty formalities and clichés. I took a long look. Then I raised the brush again to execute the final sentence. As the ink seeped into the paper, I saw this last line as my sword aimed at the king, aimed at the whole world. I wished this one sentence had the force to eviscerate the whole world.

As long as this body still breathes, the enemy shall not look down upon us.

Yours faithfully,

Yi Sun-sin

Commander-in-Chief of the Naval Forces
of the Three Southern Provinces