UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

The Beautiful Dead

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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March 2015

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Prologue

Kim Jieun

“Try to see deep behind my eyes
Destiny won’t be denied
Don’t you know you’re what I need?
Flesh and bone, you’re gonna bleed.” - BoA – Scream

The animate corpses with gray lips and bloodless skin that drove taxis, and smoked cigarettes outside of Family Mart, waited patiently on the sidewalk beneath crooked rusted bus signs. Others enjoyed mixing soured milk into chipped cups of spoiled coffee at Café Bene. They might have frightened her if she had been alive, but if that were true she would not be viewing the city through the lenses of desolation colored glasses. The air was lifeless, not that she needed it. She stood in the necropolis of her hometown - Dead-Daejon. Dead-Seoul wasn’t much better; she knew because she often went there. For reasons she did not understand, the living appeared deceased. Who says we have to stay in the place that we died, among our ashes, or in our former homes?

Kim Jieun drifted down the streets of her girlhood. Occasional trips to the city of her troubled up growing would be enough. The brightly colored neon signs welcoming customers to cafes, grocers, and noraebang were now grime encrusted interpretations of themselves and only occasionally flickered their calls to commerce. It was an odd thing that she felt compelled to walk the streets of her old neighborhood at all. She saw a ghost of herself walking through the parking lot of the Presbyterian Church. It was a translucent nine year old Jieun that held the hand of a faceless adult. A real ghost would have seemed as solid and alive to her as an ordinary person would appear to the living; this was just a memory haunting her spectral eyes. The younger version of herself clinched the wooden
stick of a strawberry-chocolate crunch Piggy Bar, and made grand gestures for her companion. For a moment, she used the ice cream as an imaginary microphone to sing, but then decided that ice cream was better for eating than singing into and took a large bite. Memory ghosts made no sound that she could hear, nevertheless Jieun knew that between bites her private phantasm eagerly introduced the nameless adult to the empire of stuffed animals living in her bedroom and all of their favorite songs.

The memory girl thought she could accomplish anything. In the lands of the dead, everything was broken. That version of herself expected to grow into an idol, a doctor, or some other kind of human brilliance that everyone could adore. It had to happen because it was justice. If everyone thought she was the worst at everything now, then when she grew up she’d be one of the best. That’s the way the world was supposed to be. This was a happy time.

She could also remember a not so happy time, when she laid in bed next to her mother after a hard day at school. She couldn’t remember what they had done to her that time, but her classmates had driven her third grade self to ask “Do you think people who everyone is mean to will have a higher place in heaven?” Most kids probably didn’t entertain such philosophical thoughts, but in retrospect Jieun recognized herself as a nihilistic prodigy; even as a girl she understood that reality sucked. The real world wasn’t worth saving, and the only hope for that little girl had been a heaven where she would be loved more than anyone else. Well, now Jieun was dead and so far as she knew, like a reality TV show, the popular souls had voted her out of paradise.

Unlike the memory ghost, only she could perform real hauntings.
If the humans could see her now they’d call her the fat girl; obese, only she hadn’t been that way in life. It was just the way she felt. They made her feel fat, disgusting, horrible, unlovable; her consciousness obliged in shaping this, her spirit body, a vessel of firelines and plas, into her true form. While she was still alive, her elders always said the smiling girl in memory was extremely friendly, charming and loquacious. When Jieun was fourteen Misses Park, one of her mother’s friends who sometimes babysat, had smiled and said “Did you know that you’re the reason I decided for sure I wanted children?” Didn’t they ever ask themselves why she was so talkative?

The memory ghost danced down the sidewalk like a dead leaf caught in a swirl of autumn wind and gave her uneasy chills. The happy girl must have existed on a weekend or a day like Buddha’s birthday when she didn’t have to go to school. There had rarely been cause for jubilance on school days. They all hated her. The person who held her hand had no face. If her elders had bothered to wonder why young Jieun positively gushed at every scrap of attention they gave, they might have realized how lonely she really was. To a girl who had been starved for companionship, it didn’t matter what face the big person who paid attention to her wore, they were there. She likened the experience to a hungry person eating for the first time in days – the type of food was much less important than that she had any food at all.

She passed the pet store she often visited after school only a block from her former home. Fish were friends. In those days she stared for hours at small, bright, tropical fish, and lamented the 36,000 won price tag attached to the larger Jack Dempsies
and Red Devils that she could never own because a 10 year old had neither that kind of money or a large aquarium to put them in.

Nevertheless at least once a week, sometimes more, she managed to beg a thousand won from her mother to buy small gold fish from the feeder tank that would have otherwise filled the bellies of the larger prettier fish that she fantasized about owning. While in the pet store she often looked at the black ones with small mouths and bulbous eyes wondering “What’s wrong with you? Why do you have crazy eyes?” Her young mind assumed it must be a birth defect, and so she instantly liked them. Perhaps the deformity gave them super powers; secretly better than all the other fish.

At home, she had a fish bowl rather than an aquarium, and a large tabby cat. Sometimes her fishes disappeared in the night, and sometimes she’d come home from school only to discover their small lifeless bodies splattered a meter beneath the fish bowl on hard wooden floors. Time to get a new fish.

She liked to imagine the little creatures jumping and finding freedom a few moments before they inevitably stopped moving, only the fact that they had actually become fishy corpses never entered her thoughts. She never considered the cat as the culprit. In fact, she’d never considered the suffering of the fish at all when it lost its life. At least it seemed undignified to flush her pets down the toilet as her mother usually did. Nevertheless, in the end it was always just “time to get a new fish.” Fish were friends. Why didn’t I care about their suffering? Perhaps it was too painful to acknowledge the routine deaths of her aquatic companions. It was the reason she rarely gave them names.
There was a television in the window of 7-11. On important baseball days or during the Olympics, small crowds of pedestrians gathered round to watch their countrymen play games of athletic prowess, but most of the time they just streamed music videos of pretty girls and boys to draw attention to the storefront. It was odd that people on the TV did not appear to be zombie interpretations of themselves, while everyone who watched them seemed as if they’d be happier in crappy horror movies. Even in death it was as if her middle and high school elite mocked her, for there she saw the untainted television face of Ha Yubin, her nemesis.

It wasn’t that Yubin had been especially cruel while they attended school together; it was that she represented all that was wrong with the world. While Jieun had been alive Yubin might have been considered middle and high school royalty with the most friends, the coolest things (for the accessories she wore often became the coolest), and all around best life from what Jieun could tell. No one ever teased her. Everyone loved her. She was, in essence, the anti-Jieun. She wasn’t the type to catch Yubin’s attention. She imagined her rival purposely sat as far away as possible in the lunch room so as not to endanger her social status. Kim Jieun was poison; anyone known to have actually enjoyed friendship with her may have been condemned to equally untouchable status. She didn’t know why, the others just didn’t like her. Social awkwardness sealed her fate; her doom. She was too dorky, and often became lost in the contemplation of ideas far beyond her years.

It was therefore unfair and unjust that a twenty-four year old Yubin, who had always had everything come so easily when she was younger, should be living one of
nine-year-old Jieun’s small dreams. Yubin should be the dead one, or at the very least, poor, trapped in an unhappy marriage, and uneducated. Why should Jieun be dead, while people like that girl became famous? It seemed to her that some people were fortunate, while others were just born bad; very very bad.

She was not in heaven, but this didn’t seem like hell either. She had learned to do things. She could possess people, and force them to do things that were foolish. She could throw things… She could torment. She could hurt them. This made the ghost smile, for their pain became her pleasure. So she didn’t live long enough to graduate high school, so what? There were very few spirits who demonstrated her capabilities. Is this justice?

Perhaps she had died and become a new kind of elite, maybe she was the only one who cared enough to destroy the lives of people that needed destroying.

While possessing humans and breaking objects could be entertaining (it was quite pleasant to hear successful people scream), without question her most useful talent was the ability to possess physical objects and operate them as her own body. From there, she had discovered how to ride currents of electricity through networks, telephone lines, and even the power grid.

The sight of Yubin on television agitated her, and in a moment Jieun had had enough of meandering down memory lane. It was time to visit Yubin again. It wasn’t enough just to scare her. As the most successful one of her classmates who had arguably stolen Jieun’s dream, for she was living it while the ghost was not, Yubin had become the figurehead for all Jieun had endured. She had to know betrayal, in the way the ‘real world’ had unjustly turned on the spirit. She had to know humiliation, for the times Jieun
had been teased by the people Yubin represented. Jieun was balance; justice. Yubin must
doubt her place in the world, and the idol must know fear.

With these thoughts in mind, Jieun placed her hand on the pole supporting a
canopy of thick, black, buzzing, power lines. Her incorporeal form became distorted as
liquid swirling down an invisible drain as she bonded with the pole. Following the
physical connections from pole to cable she pushed into the power grid.

An instant later, she stood in Dead-Seoul.
Chapter 1 – The Lives of Idols

Ha Yubin

“Sad endings all day
I express myself in a new way
The way my heart beats in different electrifying ways
Don’t look at me like I’m a nagging little girl
I’m different.” - G.NA Top Girl

The sounds annoyed her. Walk into the kitchen to get a bottle of water, and “Da da da. Pahpahpuh. DA! DA! DA!” Rena sang the theme of the Amazing Race.

“Huh! Huueeeiiii!” Somi chimed in singing in off key tribal tones. A part of Yubin complained “With a voice like that, she doesn’t belong here,” but another recognized that as their primary rapper, Somi didn’t have to sing well. More importantly to SIITY, a Korean pop group, she was a magnetic and effervescent personality. She hadn’t spoken the thought aloud.

Rena gave the smallest member of the girl group a look that seemed to say “Your making my ears cry,” they paused, and laughed together. They continued in unison.

“DA DA DAH!” Somi beat boxed the softer pah pah puh sounds, and then both shrieked a second round of “DA! DA! DAH!” loud enough to make Yubin’s head throb. She winced and squinted, and when they stopped her expression was flat. Her eyes darted back and fourth between her group mates, wondering how they’d achieved this level of closeness. Now they were finishing each other’s songs. It wasn’t just Rena and Somi… It was Tae-eun too. If anything Rena and Tae-eun were even closer.

The only person that didn’t seem to fit into the group was herself, their leader, Ha Yubin. A part of her felt as if she should share in their excitement, embrace them as
sisters in entertainment, act as if she understood their achievement, but no, that would be unwise. Simpletons would always disappoint. She wanted friends who were intelligent, not lip gloss smacking, academic failure idol stereotypes like those around her. If she hadn’t been through the idol factory, well, Yubin was sure she’d still have an otherwise successful life. *Dumb asses.* The others well… They’d probably be working at elicit Noraebangs until they found some pretty rich guy to marry. It bothered Yubin to see the others so happy when she was not.

Idol life was really lonely.

“What’s up with you? Didn’t you get the news?” Somi asked.

“I read the email.”

“We’re going to America!” The maknae cheered.

Yubin spoke in a deadpan voice. “We’re going to be on the Amazing Race Asia,” She weighted Asia heavily “and there’s no guarantee that we’re going to America.”

Rena chided. “True, but Americans will watch it. Be happy! This is our chance to take our careers to the next level. International fame! Only one other group from Korea will be participating, and this is the first time they’ve ever had an all celebrity show.”

Rena, who now had crayon red hair for the “Haunted” promotions, had a good point. Yubin had doubts as to whether the Asian version of the show actually aired overseas, but still it was a gift of unprecedented publicity. She settled on giving the pair a smile of intensity caught somewhere between the overflow of excitement that the other two apparently felt, and the wall of separation she’d built up in response to that feeling. Everyone acted like this was like some kind of award for being an exceptional group, but
how could they really be a group when she, as their leader, didn’t even like the others.

“It’ll be great.”

“Okay Madam Grumpypants!” leave it to Somi to sling the neologisms of five-year-olds in her direction.

“Anyway… I was just getting some water so…” She felt awkward. Thankfully she was the oldest and could walk out whenever she wanted. If they had been her seniors, they might have invited her out to celebrate, and she’d have no choice but to accept. Yubin had distant memories of parties before their debut that extended far beyond the time she’d have liked to go home, with only a fraction of the sobriety, simply because the eldest person in attendance was a drunkard who insisted that everyone else match his shots of soju glass for glass. It seemed she often had the most sense.

“Uhmm.. Bye. I’m kind of busy.” She retreated to her bedroom, closed the door, and opened Facebook on her laptop.

A couple hours later, Yubin emerged from her cave seeking sustenance, and had been in the kitchen area when Tae-eun started playing her guitar in her room down the hall. Together, along with the two other girls, they made up SIITY, pronounced ‘city,’ a popular music group in Korea.

Yubin had eaten a sweet bun, two actually. How could she not eat them? There was a package of the delicious tongue teasing treats that tempted Yubin. They were just sitting there in a bag inside the wicker basket on top of their purple microwave… taunting… daring her to eat them. That was their purpose! There was no point in them being a part of this reality if not to be eaten, so in her own way she was doing the sweet
buns a favor by consuming them. She was helping them to fulfill their purpose! What could be better than that? They should be thanking her. Thanking her to eat them.

In the kitchen of the SIITY dorm the straw-colored basket atop the microwave was lined with a large crimson napkin that would have felt more at home in a fine western style restaurant. The microwave by contrast was far from anything you’d find in that sort of chef’s kitchen. It was quite small by the standards of professional cooks and sported playful black designs that swirled in a primal hypnotic dance over the plum colored surface. It reminded Yubin of tribal tattoos; not that she had ever had one! It was just easy to spy such things on TV, online, or on the bodies of people she sometimes worked with.

She wasn’t that kind of girl! Can you imagine having wrinkled sagging microwave tattoos all over your skin when you’re 60 years old? She shuttered. A nameless someone called in her mind Zebra ajuma! Ajuma…the Korean word for an aging woman. She groaned “Ugh!” They are so permanent! It wasn’t the enduring quality of the ink that bothered her, so much as the realization that she couldn’t think of anything important enough to either carry on her skin for the rest of her life, or be worth enduring pains of having her skin slowly ripped away during the tattoo removal process. That often leaves scars you know. If we last three years after our debut, I’ll get a SIITY tattoo to acknowledge how being a part of this group has changed my life.

The term dorm, strictly speaking, was a misleading one. The room adjacent to the kitchen was the common room featuring an enormous 63 inch plasma TV mounted to the wall, luxury navy leather couches and a glass topped cherry wood coffee table. House
plants were found in nearly every corner and at the ends of the furniture; tendrils of spider plant tumbled from the tops of high shelves and cabinets.

Yubin had said “It’s nice to come home and not feel like I’m still standing in the middle of the city” so she’d actively encouraged the creation of a small home forest. There were also, of course, security cameras in every room. Few people realized how little privacy was experienced by idols living in homes that were owned by their management companies. The cameras were for ‘their own safety,’ or so they were told, but everyone knew that footage was occasionally released to popular variety shows for laughs and embarrassment. It was part of the contract. The stars who lived there could either accept it or leave. Rather than a dorm, it would be more accurate to call the place a three bedroom apartment that was owned by BW Entertainment for their stars to live in.

Rena, now sat by the coffee table in the adjacent common room wearing tattered old pajama bottoms that literally showed glimpses of pale pink panties between unraveling navy threads. Her army green top had a hole the size of a 100 won coin above her right shoulder. If the skies of LA were choked with smog, the forested SIITY dorm living room in Seoul was saturated in Rena’s smug. It was not the attire you’d expect from the pop idol who was also the heir to BW Entertainment. Something must have happened with her father. Yubin suspected; it was the only time Rena ever went out of her way to look sloppy. The other girl looked up at the crinkling sound of the plastic sweet bun bag; she had been trying to memorize lines for her new drama.

“Unnie ya! You have crumbs on your shirt. How many of those things have you had?”
“One… TWO! What difference does it make!” Yubin said.

Rena chuckled and said “And that will be number three?”

Yubin’s eyes drifted to the hand that was reaching for another bun, and she had a stubborn set to her jaw. “So?”

Smiling, and sparing her friend’s feelings Rena added “Some of us might like to have some too.”

No one wanted to hear that their pleasures would make them fat. In the case of feelings from Yubin to Rena, no one wanted to hear that their friends regarded them as nothing more than a professional acquaintance. How could they be real friends? It wasn't that Tae-eun, Somi, and Rena weren't nice; they were in their own way. They were just all together too simple for Yubin's tastes. They never seemed to think about anything other than makeup, photos, and television. It was what made Yubin the superior soul.

Yubin, for example, liked photography. Not just taking selfies on her smart phone, or having pictures taken on a shoot, but hard core own your own camera, bring your own filter, detachable lens, capture the world as it truly is photography. She’d even developed her own pictures on occasion. In the digital age, she’d be surprised if people like Rena even knew what film was; much less how it was developed.

“Right! Well…” she pulled her hand away, “I didn’t realize that you hadn’t had any so I’ll just leave the rest right here.” She felt the urge to stuff another in her pocket. For the road... even though she had no plans of going anywhere. She resisted the temptation.
She left Rena to throw mental spite daggers at the man who surely annoyed her and learn her lines; she moved down the hallway back to her bedroom. Just then she heard the quirky chime of her Kakao Talk, aka Ka-Talk, and reached for her hand phone. There was a message from Kim Jieun, a girl from her middle and high school whom she’d started communicating with several months ago. They had not been friends when Yubin went to that school, Jieun was a couple years younger. In fact, Yubin felt embarrassed to admit that she didn’t even remember the face of the girl who was now her best friend. Although they never met in public and even now she could only imagine Jieun’s appearance based on her yearbook photo, her unseen friend provided something that Yubin sorely needed, a connection to the real world outside of stardom.

Her schedule was far too busy for them to meet in person. With music shows three times a week, frequent photo shoots like the Super Berry ads the next day, the filming of a soon to be aired TV Drama, variety shows, and countless TV interviews it just wasn’t practical for an idol to have an ordinary social life. Yubin felt that she was an odd duck for wanting contact with the outside world rather than relying on the comfort of her SIITY sisters, but she did.

Jieun: “’sup?”

Yubin felt grateful to Jieun for never getting mad if she didn’t reply right away, but this time she was able to respond promptly.

Yubin: “I luv cake! ... and sweet buns… and all other sweet thin...”

Jieun: “You’ll get fat if you eat them, and everyone will hate you.”

She had a point. The Korean media was a fickle thing, and never hesitated to point out which starlets seemed to have a bit too much curve compromising their s-lines.
Never mind that even the chubbiest girls in any idol group often made ordinary women feel like walruses by comparison.
Yubin: “Shut up, at least Rena said she and the others wanted some too when she stopped me”
Jieun: “kekeke. Who will let the air out of your big head if I don’t?”
Yubin: “I’m so thankful. —. — Seriously, Rena’s in one of her moods. She’s in the living room now wearing old pajamas with holes in them.”
Jieun: “Oh noez! Holey! She must B ebi!”
Yubin: “Oh shut up. She’s just mad at her Dad.”

Yubin: “Wah! Wah! I never had to audition! I’m so rich and famous. Wanaah!”
Yubin: “Life must be tough.”
Jieun: “Says the Queen of our high school.”
Jieun: “Oh. So you just want to be beautiful, smart, and talented. Popularity was an accident. You never
Yubin: “I just want 2 sing.”

Yubin: “I’m not that good. No one cares if I’m smart. I’m not beautiful compared to Tae-eun.”
Jieun: “Talent?”
Yubin: “I have 2b popular 4 something.”
Jieun: “Big head. Keke”
Yubin: “I have 2b popular 4 something.”
Jieun: “UR the only 1 I can talk to.”
Yubin: “Talk to the others
Jieun: “They r glassy eyed dummies.”

Jieun: “Uh huh.”
Yubin: “I’m serious! U know the worst part?”
Jieun: “I’ll die if you don’t tell me.”
Yubin: “Shut up.”
Jieun: “Too late. You already killed me.”
Yubin: “Jieun!”
Jieun: “haha.”

Yubin: “Do u know what it’s like to feel what’s going on inside these idiots, and know that they have no reason to feel that way? Their crap adds to my crap, only they feel like the world is ending if they can’t wear their favorite shoes or something.”
Jieun: “You don’t know why they feel like that? I thought you were psychic.”
More than a few minutes passed between Yubin’s last message and Jieun’s response, and the effect of waiting made her feel both nervous and desperate at the same time. She checked her phone every few seconds to see if she had somehow missed Jieun’s reply. *Just say something already! I gave you the naked truth and you can’t give me a response?* The more silence she endured, the more she came to feel the quiet part of her that knew that everything she’d said about the other girls was a fabrication. She checked her phone again. No responses. She couldn’t understand why or how she’d become addicted to pushing the others away. She hated the feeling of being alone while surrounded by so many people, but an even stronger pulse inside feared not being alone with them. *Completely irrational.* She checked her phone again. *Oh, come on!*

Jieun: “So you think that because you’re psychic, no one can ever understand you?”
Yubin: “Kinda. I also want 2 do something important. The world wouldn’t be all that worse a place if we weren’t in it.”

Jieun: “Well. You’re just entertainers. I’m sure there’d be some heart broken fans if you disappeared, but if you four never formed SIITY some other group would be in your place.”
Yubin: “Exactly! You’re the only one who gets that.”
“I got tired of your unconcerned love
It feels terrible that I threw all my pride away
I’m sad. Is this all I’m worth?
The four letter word ‘LOVE’ worries me
I’m scared. You’re laughing.
You really suck.” - 2NE1 – Hate You

Earlier that night, when Rena returned home she found a Post-It note on her door with the words "Nice pants. See me." What a wonderful way for him to spoil her good mood. The note was attached to a computer print out of a picture that had just appeared in an online tabloid. She wore charcoal colored no-brand sweat pants and a crimson hoodie; she’d been on her way home from the swimming pool at the YMCA. Sure, her building had a pool of its own, but it was good to get out sometimes. Sometimes she went thrifting because she knew her Dad would hate it. Going to the YMCA for exercise also gave her a chance to volunteer for an hour or two each week as time permitted in her schedule. None of the other girls get this crap. The door rattled in its hinges when she threw it closed behind her. She took a few steps into the room that she and Tae-eun shared and stomped hard on the burgundy rug covering a hard wood floor. She twisted her heal on the spot for good measure. As if this singular act of defiance was insufficient, she jumped up and down with both feet two times in the same place. It made her feel better. Beneath the folds of the rug was a picture of her father; the CEO of her company, and the man who wrote the message. He didn’t have to visit her dorm, to deliver the note but he enjoyed it. He thrived on the antagonism; another way to own her.
Bastard. She quietly hoped that his plane would crash the next time he flew to Singapore or Japan. As soon as she had the thought, a splash of guilt drenched her for the reaction. She wasn’t a bad person. She wouldn’t wish death on anyone. As the daughter of the CEO of BW Entertainment, she knew that most people assumed she had a life of pleasure and luxury. Those who lived and worked closest to her however knew otherwise. It was no coincidence that she was one of the only two SIITY members to share a room with a group mate, and it was no coincidence that that group mate was she that was universally deemed to have the least musical talent.

She knew they were the least valued members in the eyes of their CEO. In fact, it was a recent accident that she'd learned that her income was approximately half that of other members. Considering that Korean entertainers, the women and men who actually appeared on camera, were already the lowest paid VIPs in the Korean entertainment business, she might as well be part of an inde band that no one outside Seoul had ever heard of. "You only have this job because you're my daughter!" She'd been told a thousand times. "If you were anyone else you'd have been fired before your debut!" Fortunately, however, she took comfort in knowing that her fans disagreed. She knew she was the best singer, except for perhaps Ha Yubin.

She couldn't help it if her dad was a destroyer. She couldn't help that he'd sacrificed his family to the gods of ruthless financial prosperity. He divorced her mother when she was only two, and then sued for custody when she was 10 when her mother needed more child support to cover the cost of raising a child in the affluent Gangnam community. Before that time, she was fairly certain that she was the poorest kid at her
elementary school. He didn’t care so much about her image back then. She and her mom lived together in an expensive one room that was about the size of a college student’s dwelling. It was practically a store room, but it likely cost more than a small house in Suwon; she imagined her mom stayed there so she could receive a quality education and, perhaps, meet quality men.

She lost a friend once when that girl’s mother screamed outside their home “I will not let my daughter stay in a place like this!” She was just visiting after school. Contrary to popular belief about the people who lived in Gangnam, she and her mom didn’t have the money to send Rena to expensive after school hagwans to improve her studies. The other girl’s mom had apparently been aghast at the shabbiness of their building when she’d come to pick her up and the two never met after school again.

Her dad remarried the woman he’d cheated on her mother with, and they managed to stay together for over a decade. Then they split up. Now he was single again, but he had a girlfriend. Rena hoped for that woman’s sake that he’d never marry again. She was closer to her former step mom than her own father. She’d met her when she was a toddler; it was like she had two mothers. Two mothers and a dickhead. At least she still had two parents. None of her friends had divorced parents.

She drove a Mercedes to high school, and everyone thought he must really love her if she received such wonderful gifts. Who else could drive themselves to school? What kind of young person had their own Mercedes? It was important to him for the world to know he could afford the best. She really wanted a Kia or a Matiz. Better yet a scooter to zip around in. A privilege, but not reeking of affluence. Something to call her
own and not such an obvious extension of his money. He'd sneered at the suggestion and asked "What, have you got shit for brains?" He usually saved his more colorful language for family “What kind of person turns down a Mercedes so they can drive a piss-poor Kia? And look at your clothes, I am embarrassed by you!” She twisted her heel into the rug once more. He’d often criticized her clothing when she wanted to be comfortable, or even similar to her peers.

They all thought he was a good man, strict, but doing his part; he napped or balanced his checkbook for an hour during church every weekend and filled the holy collection plate with checks with more zeros than she cared to consider. They sat at the back so they could leave first, but he always volunteered to be an usher so that he could be seen collecting money in the name of the Lord. He smiled and thanked the Father for a good sermon if everyone left in less than 50 minutes. He’d beam at her on the way home assuming that she’d share his enthusiasm “I think Father Cho is getting really good at this! 44 minutes and 52 seconds!” What’s the point of going to Church if you’re not thinking about anything they are saying?

There was only one service that met his time requirements, and she suspected that for him the worst part of traveling on the weekends was enduring two hour masses in unfamiliar congregations. He’d marched the entire family off the mountain during ski trips so they could rush to mass, and then hurry back up the mountain to keep on going. He’d then scream at everyone in the evening for moving too slow if he didn’t manage to ski at least 30,000 vertical feet that day. “The Altimeter” was a watch that tracked his
change in elevation. He would never skip Church – that was a sin, but by God he certainly loved to complain.

She could still remember the wild unhinged ghost behind his eyes when he grabbed her by the throat. She had defended her fashion during one of his tirades by whimpering “I like it.” It was an expression that no one but family members ever saw. Fortunately for Rena, the car nearly went off the road and his hands shot back to the steering wheel more out of necessity than restraint. She was fourteen at the time. She wanted to be comfortable. She didn't look that bad.

It'd be nice if he came down with a disease that forced him to live for a while without any skin. She could imagine the sting of physical contact with red raw, completely exposed muscle and she grinned at the idea of an attendant spreading a hospital blanket over him in that state. He’d be helplessly confined to that bed with no one to visit him. Bastard. It was hard to have sympathy for a man who cared more about dominating people with his wealth than having relationships with members of his own family. He would hopefully die old and alone, only she couldn't wait for him to snuff it.

She would never be fired - it was a matter of his pride. He couldn’t give up that kind of control over her. It justified his existence. She fantasized about the man lying helplessly on his death bed, trying to apologize, and she would whisper “I will never forgive you;” the last sound he'd experience on earth. Splash of guilt. I shouldn’t think like that. I’m a good person.

As a 22 year old idol however, she knew well that she could never give up the 'fantasy' life to take on a career in the culinary arts, marine biology, or criminal justice.
She was too old, how could she learn? Even if she worked for a degree, would-be employers would assume it was only honorary. She was trapped in her profession. She could never find a job within the same industry - who would hire the daughter of their competitor's CEO? She smiled a bit imagining her father’s reaction to the news that she'd just signed a contract with JYP.

*If only... The shame.* It would be a sweet day indeed.

She sighed. It was a dream she could never pursue. She had a duty to maintain her status as a coldly polite and presentable daughter. The wars between them were waged primarily in her head. Her inheritance depended on it. After two decades of abuse she’d earned it; he owed it to her. The smart thing to do was smile, keep her distance, and keep their interactions strictly professional. It’s the way he seemed to prefer it anyway. Every time she had been told that she was nothing, would be nothing, could be nothing and she believed it left a scar of honor; she no longer believed what he said.

She hadn't lived under the same roof for four years now, and she'd become a confident thing that he could never understand. She doubted that even now after four years he had even noticed. "See me." She already knew the conversation. She'd take the elevator to the top floor of the BW building, step into the corner office that was bigger than most one room apartments, and hear the line "Aren't you embarrassed? You want people to think you’re a pauper's daughter?" *I hereby apologize for being photographed in anything less than Versace.* One day the B in BW Entertainment would stand for Baek Rena; a woman's company. The best damn entertainment empire in the biz. *Damn him to hell.*
Just then, Jang Tae-eun entered with her laptop held in her left hand. She wore yellow PINK sweat pants, and a white tank top. She smirked a bit when her eyes moved to the small mountains created in the rug surrounding her group mate's heel.

“What did he do this time?” she was perhaps the only person that knew the extent of her family spawned madness.

Rena imagined that her father might actually crack her skull if he knew. He often threatened to do so but that, at least, had yet to happen. She'd confided a lot in her group mate, and she could imagine the words before the explosion - forced calm and a razor’s edge. "You need to be careful about what you say to people in the company. Have a little common sense. It looks really bad when a CEO's own blood bitches about their situation." The fury would come when she failed to say "I'm sorry" or speak any words at all. Speaking untruths often made her skin crawl with uncleanness, and she strongly suspected that he might finally beat her bloody if she told him to go to hell. She avoided both lying and being bloodied like flesh eating viruses, and would therefore say nothing at all. She loved Tae-eun for acting as the keeper of her secrets.

She plopped on her bed and turned her computer towards Rena.

Tae-eun said, “Cheer up! We’re going on a cruise before the Amazing Race.”

“Yeah and he’ll be there the entire time.”

“Relax. It’ll be just like a sales meeting, but on a boat. He’ll be in meetings with executives while we’re kicking it by the pool.” Tae-eun’s words made Rena feel better about the trip, though she was still angry. She truly was blessed for Tae-eun’s presence.
Tae-eun pressed play on a YouTube video, and asked, "Doesn't this look like you're dad's Lamborghini?" She hadn't looked at the screen yet, but the question that popped into her mind was a jaded "Which one?" Rena didn't want to think about him anymore, but to humor Tae-eun she glanced over. She didn't speak but the slack jaw contributing to the stunned expression on her face communicated her reaction more than a few words ever could. What the hell? Batman was driving the car.

"I'd like to see your dad dress like this!" Tae-eun grinned and clicked. There was a video, apparently taken from a police car, of Batman driving a black Lamborghini and being pulled to the side of the road.

"The Bat Mobile must have been in the shop!" Tae-eun giggled and kicked her feet excitedly in the air. Rena couldn't understand the English, but Tae-eun translated. She'd lived in the USA for two years before joining SIITY.

It says that he was driving to a hospital to entertain kids with life threatening conditions. He lives in the USA near Washington D.C. Apparently he spends more than 30 million won every year on comic books and super hero merchandise to give to sick children. Rena could feel her heart breaking, but she watched in silence. Tae-eun couldn't know how the story affected her; even she hadn't expected this reaction.

It had been more than ten years since Rena had felt what she then thought of as "Daddy envy," so it was a surprise to experience such a powerful pang of it at that moment. She'd come to accept her world as it was. Money did not buy happiness, even though the people who didn’t have it often believed it could. The cost of money was souls and suffering. To the rich, there could be only one; one thought, one purpose, one
man, one life, one concern, one self. All other things must be intimidated into submission, dominated, or destroyed. There was no middle ground for rich men, and families must become businesses in pursuit of mountains, forests and oceans made of green ten thousand wan notes beneath golden fifty thousand won note sunrises. Men like Batman could not exist. What would people think of a man who dressed up like a kid's character? That's what you hired other people to do. Such a man would be just a big clown. ...but this Batman is real. He was a CEO, and he made a whole lot of money in the chemical cleaning business. Judging from the article, he had a loving son and even made more money than her father.

Tae-eun scrolled down, "You see here's 'Batman,' standing beside a hospital bed with 'Wonder Woman.' Isn't it funny and amazing?" Rena nodded, but held her voice for a few moments to prevent it from breaking. "Incredible."

"I thought you might appreciate it."
Ha Yubin

Not so bright and very early, Yubin pried her eyes open with a force of will and stumbled groggily into the shower. She liked hot ones because it relaxed her muscles and the water rolled off her skin and splashed on the floor tiles taking with it all the residual tension from the prior day’s work. This was the dawn of promotions… one of the six to ten week blocks of time when life consisted of waking up, showering, practicing, filming, practicing some more, eating in the car, and sleeping almost immediately when she came home. At first the lifestyle hurt, especially the months before SIITY’s debut. It completely sucked, but now? It was amazing what a person could get used to.

Each time was like a dark hungry flame of depression had been kindled that burned and ate away at her. No time for friends (not that she had any), no time for family (would they forgive her?), no time for hobbies or anything else. There was just work, sometimes 16 hours a day working, working, and working some more. And the only thing she could do to keep the flames from consuming her entirely was to throw herself more completely into performing so that the very thing that caused her burden became the cure. Every day she spent at M!Net Music Countdown or some other show hearing the fan chants with her name, and those of all the other girls, made her feel a little more alive. Addictively so.

“Ha Yubin! Moon Somi! Baek Rena! Jang Tae-eun! Go! Go! SIITY for infinity we love you eternally! Go go!”

As her grogginess ebbed away, and hot water poured over her skin, another uncomfortable feeling touched her. It was the feeling of a camera following behind on a
variety show where she was supposed to act completely oblivious to that someone was filming. Like someone, or something was looming over her shoulder. She wanted to spin and readied a mental “Ah hah!” for whatever lurked behind her in the shower and prepared herself for an abrupt turn to face the intruder. She knew the thought was ridiculous, but something inside, a nagging at her intuitive second heart compelled her to believe. Someone was in the bathroom with her, behind her. She spun… and saw nothing more than the bathroom tiles that had been at her back. She sighed feeling even more a fool than when her mind started on its paranoid tangent. It was shameful to be unraveling. She’d just disappointed the most important audience she’d ever have in the world – herself.

The light overhead flickered. Something… Someone was there. She could feel it around her. She could sense that something had displaced the feelings in the room only, the sensation was almost physical. Not like someone had touched her, but as if someone had pushed on the air, which had in turn brushed up against her spirit. It wasn’t a physical thing, there wasn’t a cold breeze to toss her towel on the rack… it was more like taking in sensory input from a second set of nerve endings she hadn’t known she had. She finished rinsing, and called out to whoever was on the other side of the bathroom door, though in her heart she expected to neither see nor hear anyone on the other side.

Yubin called out, “Knock it off! You should be getting ready!”

It was entirely possible that someone was playing with the light switch. *It was possible!* Placing the switches on the outside of the bathroom always struck her as an annoyingly obvious design flaw in most Korean buildings. She took a breath, put her
hand on the handle, turned, and pulled the door open with far more force than strictly necessary.

Her room was empty. Her door was closed. No one had been playing with the lights. *Figures.* She was annoyed, but she was not certain if she was more annoyed by the fact that she had been wrong about one of her band mates pranking her, or for believing that she might have been right that they had. Intuition didn’t lie. She knew there was a presence, and yet she knew there’d be no one there when she opened the door. How could both be possible? *Did the lights flash or did I just blink? Was the shower too hot? Why did she think the presence didn’t like her? I’m frickin’ crazy.*

She wrapped one towel around her body, and the other around her head before stepping into the hall. She could see light beneath Rena and Tae-eun’s doorway, but nothing from Somi’s. No surprise. As group leader, it was her responsibility to make sure that everyone arrived to practice on time. In spite of the light she pounded on the door with the strip of illumination below.

“I hope you’re getting ready in there!”

“We are, unnie!” two voices answered back.

Yubin moved to Somi’s door and pounded quite a bit harder “Somi ya! Get your butt out of bed!” No response… Wait for it… Five… Four… Three… Two… One… She slapped the door with an open palm. “NOW!” On the other side of the door she heard a satisfying Somi groan. Yubin was now confident that she could continue getting ready.
Jieun scowled as Yubin stepped into the stairwell. Her rival headed to work. Apparently there really was something to her “gift.” The ghost had made no conscious attempt to manifest, and yet still, somehow, her rival had known she was there. As Yubin spun to face the wall behind her, spun to face Jieun, Jieun started… A poltergeist! Spooked by a girly pop bobble head! It was just one more thing to add to her list of worldly wrongness. Add that Yubin might be anything like her, possessing some kind of paranormal ability, and that Jieun had momentarily lost control, well, it was like using the last won in your pocket on a pack of Mentos and getting nothing but the yellows. She was nothing like her nemesis! It was all well and good to make the lights flicker, but doing it unintentionally was completely unacceptable. It was like falling down the stairs; a perfectly healthy, sober, able bodied person just shouldn’t do it. She had a duty to herself to be the best, and the best couldn’t make mistakes.

The motion sensors in the hallway triggered the light over Yubin. The sudden flood of brightness was another reminder that she had lost control. The ghost shot a death glare at the light, a symbol of all that caused her unpleasantness. The spirit organ in her chest, her center, burned like a hot sun, and she thrust her hand in the light’s direction shoving all of her violent excess energy at the fixture. The gesture wasn’t strictly necessary, but she imagined it was something an evil Queen might do, and she liked the thought of herself as a dark monarch. Yubin glanced over her shoulder again. Damn her! The light bulb exploded overhead sending jagged bits of glass raining down on Yubin.
The idol yelped in surprised, but it wasn’t good enough for Jieun. As Yubin fumbled her way down the stairwell in the dark, Jieun flared her center again and grabbed her foot.

Yubin tripped and tumbled down fifteen steps. The motion lights on the next floor came on. She tried to stand, moving slowly, but not enough for the motion sensors. The light clicked, and there was darkness.
“Ha Yubin! Where’s Somi?” Yubin limped into the practice room and sat in a folding chair next to her gym bag, both their manager and the choreographer looked annoyed.

“I don’t know. She wondered off.”

Manager said, “Yubin! You’re the leader right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then act like it! It’s your responsibility to keep everyone together!”

Then Somi walked in with a bagel sandwich from Dunkin’ Donuts. Everyone looked at her, but her eyes widened in an expression of bewildered “What?” as if nothing had happened. Their manager snatched the half eaten sandwich out of her hand and slammed it into the garbage can causing both Yubin and Somi to recoil as if slapped.

“No more junk food while we are promoting you fat cow! You want to go join the Piggy Dolls and sell CDs to fat kids?” Although the words were meant for Somi, the glare behind them was shot at Yubin. They both bowed their heads looking chastened. He mumbled “What a morning!” under his breath.

“No, sir.” Somi murmured.

“That’s right…” Yubin thought. The maknae, that is to say the youngest member of the group, had every right to be ashamed, and yet it was somehow also Yubin’s fault that Somi didn’t know how to show up on time or stick to a diet. Yubin had never asked for the title. There wasn’t much benefit, and quite a lot of grief. Those other stupid girls couldn’t take the job seriously. She was only the leader because she was the oldest, and
she’d never be an equal partner with her manager because he was more than a decade older than she. The combination of his age and title entitled him to speak to them however he wanted.

“Now that everyone’s here let’s go. Take your positions.”

Yubin felt a sharp pain in her knee with each step and limped to her position in the practice room.

“What?”

“I was hurt this morning. I fell down the stairs.”

“You fell down the stairs?! During promotions? Yubin! How could you be so stupid?”

She had wanted to tell her manager that she hadn’t wanted to fall down the stairs, and she couldn’t help it if she felt like someone was watching her and made her feel uneasy, but she also knew that those words wouldn’t help at all.

“I’m sorry…”

“Sit down! We don’t need you stumbling around and falling even more. We’ll get you a brace, and have doctor Kang send you some Vicodin. Don’t move until he arrives! We’ll get you to the hospital after filming.”

For the second time that day Yubin was struck by the things it was possible to get used to. Get hurt outside of promotions and everyone screamed “Hospital! Hospital!” Injure yourself within the first three weeks of your comeback, and it was “Eat some pills and get back to work! We’ll get you checked out when we have time.”
What did that make her within this chaotic world she’d grown into? The waves of contempt flowing off everyone with the title of “Manager” or above made her feel hollow inside. It was one thing to have the general impression that they only cared about profits, and another thing all together that she really knew. She sampled the outside emotions simmering in that ghostly second heart of hers in the opposite side of her chest that seemed responsible for her psychic abilities, and she knew that to him her physical pain was nothing more than expensive broken merchandise. A man might be willing to crash his hundred billion won sports car if he thought he could make three hundred billion won in the process. They only cared when it might hurt profits, and while all the executives had private penthouses to call their own, she was trapped living with three morons that she hated. What was the point? She had expected to find more purpose in stardom. As it was, the only point she could see was to build more popularity.

She sighed. The show must go on. Soon she’d have a few minutes of cheers from all her adoring fans, and she’d remember why this was all okay, and why having some other reason to exist didn’t really matter. Until then and after that, it was going to be a very long day.
Moon Somi

“Tomorrow is going to be new, have high expectations
That's the fun of living, throwing your worries away
Everyone is probably the same, I won't be discouraged
With so few worries, with a smile, [Say] ‘bye bye’” — Kara - Step

The next morning at 9:00 AM all four girls were piled into a black idol van, with dark windows tinted nearly dark enough to match the outside paint. Though she still wore a brace, Yubin’s knee seemed to be feeling better; no doubt because she’d seen her eldest unnie pop a few Vicodin. They had all been awake much earlier, however by the time they were half way to the studio a wet rasp escaped Somi’s open mouth as her head tilted back toward the roof of the vehicle. As she slept, her mouth gaped like the opening of a charred volcano. They were on the way to a competitive variety show where they and an equally popular boy band would compete in challenges in the program’s weekly battle of the sexes.

The other women exchanged knowing glances upon hearing Somi’s sleep sounds and quickly covered their mouths. They giggled in spite of their best efforts to remain silent. Rena glanced at Yubin, who then looked at Tae-eun who was hovering beside the sleeping girl with the length of her index finger slowly descending into Somi’s mouth. Tae-eun’s face was a mask of eager concentration, while the others bit their lips to prevent a colossal outburst of laughter. Rena’s phone camera made a muted beep, and Tae-eun just as slowly fished her finger out of her group mate’s mouth without ever actually touching her.

Yubin searched the pouch behind the driver’s seat with her hand, and found a half used role of Scotch tape in its dispenser. Holding the roll of tape up and looking at the
person who had just penetrated Somi’s, mouth with her finger, she mouthed the words “Do it! Do it!” Rena smirked, and nodded. Tae-eun, perhaps finding the prospect of turning the maknae of the group into a Scotch tape piggy too risky, or maybe wanting to give the others a chance to share in the joke shook her head “No!” and mouthed the words “You do it!” Yubin released a quiet sigh of what sounded like exasperation and cut a length of tape from the dispenser.

The van stopped at what was most likely a red light or a stop sign and she stood leaning over the back of her seat with a cloudy ribbon of tape trailing from one of her fingertips. First, she attached it to the bottom of Somi’s nose, and then she smoothed the other half over the girl’s forehead. Rena squeaked, and choked on a laugh while whispering “Oh my god! She really does look like a pig!” This time it was Tae-eun who took a picture with her mobile phone. That pic was on its way to Twitter.

“Is she still asleep?” Yubin asked.

“Yeah… God! She can sleep through anything!” Tae-eun chortled.

Someone in the car teased “Piggy piggy piggy!”

The car moved again, and Yubin crashed back into her seat with a heavy kerflump; it was force enough to briefly rock the slow moving vehicle. The van bounced over a speed bump, and Somi’s eyes opened. She swatted herself in the face “Weh?” She clawed at the tape pulling at the tip of her nose.

“Oh my god!” Somi whined “Stop!” The others burst out laughing as she buried her face into the seat as if it were an enormous pillow.

“Forget to take your medicine this morning?” Tae-eun chided.
“I didn’t forget, I chose not to.”

“Really?! “ Rena squealed. “We are so going to win!” She guffawed so loud that
she might have been trying to make up for all of the little laughs she’d been holding
inside while Somi was asleep.

Somi sat up, and adjusted the volume of her hearing aid; it had been on the left
side which had been snuggled against the seat. Then, protruding the poutiest of her pouty
lower lips she complained “Why do you think I did it? They said there might be an eating
contest.”

Yubin added, “We were trying to be quiet, but I don’t think it was necessary. You
really can sleep through anything.” Somi smiled, and then quietly cursed herself for
doing so – this was a time for sulking. They played pranks on her while she slept. Still, it
felt good when they made it abundantly clear that they’d forgotten about her hearing
problems. She even forgot about them herself on occasion because of these women.

“Except when you are shaking the whole car with your fat belly.”

“Don’t blame me! Talk to the driver.” Yubin said “Driver-ya! Did I wake up
Somi when I fell on the seat?”

The man in his mid 30s looked up and met their eyes in the rear view mirror. He
answered “No it was all my fault.” Somi thought he might be a robot droning on his pre-
programmed response to just about all Yubin things. He always took her side (even if his
voice was lifeless)! Their driver could make watching a slug race seem interesting! … if
the slugs had fallen asleep… Do slugs even sleep? Would they be tired after a race?
Actually she kind of wondered what it would be like to watch a slug race. Would you build a mini stadium?

“Yes Yubin.” “I did it Yubin.” “You’re magnificent Yubin.” Always! It was hard to imagine how a man’s voice could be so dull while bestowing such favoritism. There was a twinkle in the eyes that met the girls’ in the rear view mirror, and a ghost of a smirk that touched his lips that suggested that he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Driver ya!” Yubin followed.

“Neh?” It was the lackluster affirmative sound of a man engrossed in his favorite television program, and had only five percent of his attention placed on the person with whom he was conversing.

“Remember when Somi was sleeping in the front seat when the wind blew us off the road last winter?”

“Neh. She was sleeping… like a bear in January.” Somi again caught the driver’s eyes in the rear view mirror from the back seat. I hate that twinkle. How could anyone believe this man lacked a sense of humor?

“See?” Yubin seemed to believe that the point was self evident.

Somi didn’t give the driver a chance to respond because she blurted “I was tired then, and so were you!” They had been tired! They’d been on the road after filming a music video in the snow for hours.

Yubin said, “We hit a pole!” and Tae-eun chimed in “… but none of us had to be told what happen after we got back home.”
Rena laughed and imitated a groggy Somi “Unnie! There are scratches on the car. What happened?”

Somi’s face grew hot and shifted to a color more akin to a strawberry than a human being. They all laughed; including her. All the others had woken up at that time. It was a side effect of the medication, or rather, not taking the meds. *You’ve gotta laugh if you’re not up for crying.* She understood the strength of being able to laugh at herself. In addition to being nearly deaf on her left side, and having partial hearing loss on her right, Somi’s body had become quite accustomed to stimulants on account of being treated for ADD. As a result, the times she did skip her medication often left her feeling lethargic and, more amusingly, extremely hungry. Today on their variety show, she would lead their team to victory in the eating contest in spite of being the smallest and skinniest member of the group.

There was a time when she went to Outback Steakhouse with Rena and ordered a fried onion blossom, slab of beef steak, a chicken sandwich, and a large Caesar salad before turning to her friend and asking “What do you want?” Rena asked if she was crazy, but Somi defended “I really like the food here! Now I can have take away!” The other woman went along with it, but at the end of the meal there were certainly no extra bags going back to the dorm, and the smaller woman had helped herself to Rena’s fries. “You know what I want? Cold Stone Cheese Cake Ice Cream with fudge topping! Let’s go get some before we go home!” The other woman gaped and said “You’ve got to be kidding me.”
Fortunately, it was extremely rare for Somi to skip her medication. She could not be the smallest of the SIITY sisters if she did! Her doctors often indicated that loss of appetite could be an undesirable side effect of taking Metadate, but in her mind this was just an added bonus. The only trouble was that she’d surely become the size of a house if she was permanently taken off it. It was like her body turned against her by trying to consume all the food she’d foregone once the drug was out of her system.

The sliding door of the van opened, they were at the studio.

*Those boys don’t stand a chance.*

It bothered Somi when people assumed she was an idiot, or worse, a poster child for ADHD. She didn’t even have the H because she was not hyperactive. She was just really enthusiastic about some things. It wasn’t that she didn’t like being teased. OK sometimes it was bothersome. It was just that for better or worse she really liked her own personality. Her quirkiness didn’t deserve to be lumped in with some mental condition. Most of the time she took her medicine, and as such, even if she naturally had hyperactivity, it wouldn’t be present. That’s what the medication was for! She knew that she was the air head of the group, and she had to admit there were times when she did some pretty airheaded things. She couldn’t deny it, but if people thought of her that way she wanted it to be for the right reasons! She hated when people assumed. On the other hand, part of the backlash of acceptance of her multiple disabilities was that people often forgot how hard she’d had to work to overcome them.

She hadn’t always been deaf in one ear, nor had she always had a hearing impairment in the other. It was hard to forget the time it happened; during recess at
school there were kids, mostly boys, daring each other to box each others ears. She had never heard of such a thing, nor could she imagine how it could be as painful as they made it sound so, wanting to show them that they were being silly, she volunteered for her own ear boxing. Not unlike the challenge of today, there’d been a kind of boys vs. girls rivalry at her elementary. As the kid’s palms thundered against the sides of her skull there was pain like she never knew existed in this world. She didn’t even know if she was screaming because even her own voice sounded faint to her. By the time she left the hospital, the doctors had suggested that she may have permanent hearing loss.

Even so, she loved dancing, and she loved singing. When she got her first hearing aid, she worked every week with a speech therapist to prevent herself from lapsing into deaf tones.

“What is that on your ear?” one of her judges asked after singing and rapping for her audition.

She bowed; feeling embarrassed and said “It’s a hearing aid, sir.”

“Really? I didn’t realize that you were hearing impaired.”

“I am deaf in my left ear, without it and I have partial hearing loss in my right. I work every week with my speech therapist not to lose my accent.” She felt ashamed.

The people at the panel leaned in to one another and conversed. She felt cold inside. Surely, they would disqualify her. _It doesn’t matter what I can do_, it was all about what everyone knew deaf ‘musicians’ couldn’t accomplish. Everyone else just practiced singing, dancing, a bit of rapping, but for her it was a constant struggle to make sure she didn’t forget how to talk properly.
“You think you have what it takes to be an idol?”

Without thinking she blurted “Of course I do! I would totally buy all of my songs!”

The judges looked at each other amused, and Somi amended her excited words. “I would totally buy all of my songs, sirs.” She offered a slow formal bow which marked a startling contrast to her abundant energy only moments before.

They looked at each other as if wondering what planet she came from and announced “Congratulations. We would like to invite you back for the final round.”

* * * *

“The score is tied with 200 points for SIITY, and 200 points for New Limit! In the last challenge you will have to eat black bean noodles! Whoever can eat most wins!”

It always struck her how interesting it was to go from near total silence in the studio one moment, to an explosion of light, sound and energy the next. It was as if there was some kind of gremlin hiding behind the backdrop with long fingers grasping an enormous cartoon lever. As soon as it pulled, suddenly everyone in the studio would be transported from the quiet world to the world of activity lights and sound. Then it’d flip the switch again, hoping to give all the humans in the TV studio a serious case of multidimensional whiplash. There probably wasn’t a gremlin behind the stage, but she really liked the magical place within her mind where cheeky green skinned long fingered whip lash creatures were entirely possible.

Lights on. It was nearly lunch time when the host announced the start of the eating contest. She heard the sound of shoe rubber clunking on the stage floor and
thought “A few years ago I watched at home, and never heard any feet on TV.” The noise was always drowned out by music and applause, and she wondered what about foot sounds were so bad that no one actually wanted to hear them on the television. She bet that if fans could hear the steps of her dance choreography, they’d pick up the moves even faster. Without her meds, Somi was easily distracted. She blinked a few times to return her focus to the competition.

The men’s group, New Limit, huddled together, as did the SIITY sisters, but there really was no decision to be made. “I’ve got this! I love black bean noodles!” Somi barked. It was time to entertain.

“I guess we should pretend like this is a tough decision for the sake of the camera.” Yubin added.

Rena said. “OK. Time is up. Turn around” and they all did.

The host boomed. “New Limit! Reveal your challenger!” Somi thought the arms of the guy who stepped forward were almost as big around as her neck, but she was not intimidated. In a way it would make the show even funnier. She eyed him up and down as he and the host engaged in friendly banter, when suddenly he turned to their group. Cameras rolling. She almost felt bad for the guy.

“SIITY! Name your challenger!”

Somi stepped forward looking especially frail in her thin white shirt and the harsh studio lights. Laughter erupted from everywhere! *I shouldn’t feel insecure about this.*

“Is this a joke?” the host teased “You can still back down if you want Rena to take your place.”
“Hey!!” Rena shouted from the line of girls who had not stepped forward “Are you implying something here!”

Somi imagined the thought bubble that would pop next to the host’s head once the show appeared on network television “Now I’ve really stepped in it!” and she laughed aloud at her mental theater.

“I can do this!” Somi said. “Just watch! I’m going to win!”

There was another round of laughter and scattered applause. The big man from New Limit eyed her and cackled incredulously. Rena added eagerly “It’s true! She has a secret weapon!”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“There is a hole in her stomach.” The host became quiet, as if he was unable to tell if this was a reference to a serious medical condition. “It’s true! Every time she eats something it just disappears into a black hole and it goes on forever!”

A few people laughed, and the host looked to very small Somi. “What do you have to say to that?”

Somi clapped and shouted with alarming enthusiasm; sometimes these outbursts gave her a near out of body experience – the exuberant girl who was thrilled to live in the moment, and the one that looked at herself from an outside perspective thinking “I’ll look adorable on TV.” She didn’t know which one was her real self, or if they were both the same.

“It’ll be totally useful in this competition!”
The host doubled over laughing at the unexpectedly powerful and cheerful response. “She doesn’t even deny it! Okay contestants! Take your positions!” She sat beside her competitor at the other eating table, and in a quiet voice she heard the guy say “You’re crazy you know.” That made her wonder if he too had a real self that loved these things even without the cameras.

She smirked and said “Better to be crazy than lose this challenge!”

“If you say so…” He would soon be a believer.

The host started the count down. “Hana! Deul! Set! GO!”

Somi filled her chopsticks with huge but manageable clumps of noodles time and time again and she tasted, savored, and swallowed. Her competitor seemed to be struggling with trying to fit too much in his mouth at once, and didn’t seem to pay any notice to the taste. One empty bowl beside her became two, which became three and so on. Bowls appeared next to her competitor as well. I love the taste of black bean noodles and I don’t have to worry about running out of them... but I really want something sweet to go along with them... I guess the won’t be offering any desert. Three bowls became four which became five, which became… She wasn’t counting, but there was counting…

“Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four!” Just a little bit more...

“…annnnndddd TIME!” Somi slurped the last noodles in her bowl which whiplashed and hit her in the forehead. Shizzam! Cuteness points! Her opponent seemed to have about a third of a bowl left, and tried to continue though the unfinished bowl was taken away from him.
“New Limit! How many empty bowls do you have?” The host pointed and counting erupted each time he moved his hand “One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Si--- Five and a half!” There was scattered clapping. “SIITY! How many bowls do you have?” There was already laughter as it was readily apparent that Somi was the victor. “One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six! Seven! Eight! Waaaaaaaaaaaaa!!! Moon Somi is the winner!”

Rena laughed, clapped and shouted “I told you she was our secret weapon!”

The host turned his attention to her competitor “So how does it feel to be, beaten by a girl? I think everyone pretty much assumed you’d take this one.”

Looking befuddled he said “I guess she really does have a black hole in her stomach! I’m so full I can’t even move! I can’t imagine it!”

“Somi?” the host said.

“I just really like black bean noodles, but now I really want some ice cream. Is there any desert?” Everyone laughed.

“You’re still hungry? Wow... but you’re so small. I think everyone assumed you were a sacrificial lamb. Maybe they didn’t want to get fat.”

“It just happens sometimes!”

“What happens?”

“I get hungry!” There was scattered laughter and applause.

Back in their dressing rooms, Somi changed her shirt which was dotted with specks of black bean noodle sauce, and the others cheered. “Somi is our champion!” I
hope they don’t forget about the ice cream. It sounds really good. She popped a half-dose of Metadate for the day.

“Do you think they’ll let us stop by Baskin Robins on the way to the Super Berry ads?”
The cameras at the photo shoot continually reminded Yubin of the light bulb that flickered in the shower, and the other that exploded in the stairwell the prior morning. Each flash accompanied an airy popping sound. They reminded her of the uneasy sense of being watched; the one she had right now. None of the bulbs in the studio exploded, but every explosion of light and sound from the camera flash made her feel more and more as if she should be dodging small shards of glass spewed fourth from the overhead fixture. Falling glass like tiny knives. *Something wants to hurt me.* She tried to tell herself that lights just burn out, and that sometimes the light bulbs go out in a bright poof of glory.

In the absence of anything else that could be tied to one of the five senses, the flashing lights linked with the sense of being followed. By the time they arrived at Super Berry, she was quite certain that some gruesome fate would befall her, and yet the premonition wasn’t specific enough to be put to any practical use. Its only purpose was to unsettle her. *This gift is a bunch of bullshit.* At the variety show, Yubin’s eyes had nervously traced the stage lights above. She hoped that any peculiarities would be chalked up to side effects of her medicine. *Shards of glass. An impaling.* Somi stuffed her face. Now every flash of the camera at the Super Berry shoot felt like a crack in her reality extending a little farther under the weight of a horrible prophesized event. A small pop, a dead light, another rupture within her comfortable albeit lonely little world.
Yubin raised the pink cup of Super Berry yogurt and delivered a bright smile in
direct contrast to the darkness within that she felt. A flash of light split the room. She
might have mistaken it for lightning if not for the cameras drinking in her image and the
photographer issuing commands. “OK this time with the spoon…. Good…” Flash. The
light returned. Flash flash… Each one another explosion. Flash flash flash. Fingers
touched the switch in her mind that would then cause the lights to burst overhead. Flash!
Flash!

“Look confident!”

The red and white dress she wore poofed beneath her waist like a different girl’s
costume she’d seen on TV as a child. The person in that commercial happily dropped into
a surreal ocean of milk and liquid strawberry; Yubin by contrast felt like the Little Bo
Peep of the Kingdom of Berries. That girl was happy and free, but Yubin wished that she
herself could excitedly splash down a waterslide of liquid flavor and have berry sheep to
watch. At least the dress is cute, but instead of the missing shepherd’s staff from the
imaginary Little Bo Peep costume, perhaps she held an illusory scepter. Both long sticks,
but hers bound her to a life of envy and ten-thousand masks that must be worn in public.
Ten thousand masks. She also wore them at home. This costume is playful and fun. It was
necessary to find at least one thing at the moment that was worth appreciating.

A sour smell filled her nostrils, as if the food in her hand had gone bad. “I hope I
don’t have to eat that…” she murmured so only she could hear.

She said “Something’s wrong with mine. It smells off.”
One of the assistants closed with her, sniffed, and took a bite of her yogurt. “It tastes fine,” he proclaimed. *Liar.* He brought the cup to the photographer who also tasted, seemed to enjoy the flavor, and motioned abruptly for her to get back to work. She heard him something that sounded like “I don’t know,” followed by “The yogurt is fine. Let’s continue where we left off” in a much louder voice. Even so, the assistant promptly placed a freshly opened cup in her hand.

Yubin had never tasted an unholy concoction of soured milk, urine, and rotting fruit, but if she had, she imagined it might taste something like Super Berry Very Cherry fat free yogurt. It smelled horrible. *Why?* Everyone else seemed to enjoy it. No one else seemed to think anything was wrong. How could a product they planned to sell be so revolting? That day was the first she’d ever experienced the snack, and she could not understand how any sane person could enjoy the stuff. *These are the things that they fail to tell you before becoming an ido-...*

Mr. Park raised his camera. Her vision changed; the light created by studio lamps became the ethereal gloom of twilight. A rushing sound filled her ears as if she stood only a short distance from a waterfall. Physical objects seemed old, worn and faded. It would be difficult to imagine any other type of light in the room. The photographer remained, but in place of everyone else were grotesquely elongated shadows that mocked the human form. An instinctive atavistic fear in response to the vision painted demonic faces with shrieking heads, fanged mouths, and horned skulls swirling deep within layered shades of darkness, but after the initial shock some of the apparitions instead seemed to possess an alien beauty that charmed her. She turned her attention to the now
tattered box lights, and the dusty surface of the floor, and it occurred to her that if everyone in Korea had suddenly died, and this was the first someone had glimpsed the studio in 200 years, it would probably look something like this. It was the dead world – a place where nothing could survive. It felt as if she should cough, but instead Yubin became curiously disassociated from her body.

Mr. Park, the only person not to become a shadow, had knobby shriveled fingers draped with what seemed like fleshless sags of skin. He smiled when he lowered his camera, but his eye sockets were empty. The charming brown eyes that welcomed her when they arrived at the shoot had been replaced by puddles of blackness that undulated and threatened a life of their own. As soon as she had the thought, a small tendril of darkness, no larger than a toothpick reached from one socket, and splashed on his corpselike cheek leaving a mark like an inky tear. She tried to scream, but instead there was only a high pitched squeal in her skull. Nothing physical. His skin was pallid and… her vision returned to normal. There were no human shadows; Park seemed just as inviting as he always had. At least, before he’d said her yogurt was fine.

She could hear the photographer issuing commands, but she paused for a long time before following any of them. The presence of real world sounds helped to ground her in reality. Other people might have shrieked, jumped, run away or walked off the set under the same circumstances but Yubin had frozen. She could feel her pulse pounding hard in her chest, neck, and even her ears, but it wasn’t until the world returned to normal that she had been aware of any physiological response. *I’m going crazy.* It was a revelation that she found especially distressing. She couldn’t afford to let on. *Smile. At*
the end of the day it didn’t matter if she was crazy or not, so long as people believed that she wasn’t. She took comfort in knowing that she had a job to do, and used it to anchor herself in the present.

The photographer started “Now take a big bite!” but as he began his second sentence, her vision shifted back to the post-apocalyptic dead world. An all too wide skeletal grin beckoned and he motioned with the camera. *No eyes!* “Show us how delicious it is!” His voice seemed far away as if speaking from beyond the waterfall sound in her ears. Her sight returned to normal. *What the hell?* Her body felt light, as if experiencing a runner’s high. She tried not to show any sign that something had happened, but a look of panic must have shown on her face.

The yogurt still smelled like rotten fruit. Yubin noticed Kim Taehoon, one of her manager’s assistants, enjoying a cup as they shot her. *Enjoying!* He raised the cup as if to offer encouragement. Her vision shifted again, this time the assistant was no longer a shadow person while he had her attention. At least his dead image had eyelids, but it was as if his eyeballs had been replaced by black marbles. Dark purple bruising manifested on the back half of his body which contrasted with the clammy bleached skin that paled in comparison to his usual healthy pallor. His fingers looked waxy. His shirt had decayed and frayed, the top button had come off, and she caught glimpses of what seemed to be a Y shaped incision and rail road track pattern staples holding together the skin of his chest. Her vision returned to normal. She felt like she might be sick. She touched her hand to her head to feel the comforting warmth of her own skin. She tried to recall the last instructions she had been given. *I’m not crazy. I have no time to be crazy.* She listened to
people chattering in the background. She embraced the comforting sound of a distant radio, and tried hard to prevent anyone from knowing that she had briefly departed from reality. The assistant raised his cup again while offering another encouraging smile and a blissfully normal thought came to her “I still don’t see how he can eat that stuff.”

It was something about biting. “Huh?” she said. A big bite? Had she heard the first part right? She thought she must look really stupid at that moment because she was not entirely certain if the photographer had actually told her to eat. Mentally rushing toward small signs of normalcy murmured “Way to promote an empty headed idol stereotype Yubin.” Was he seriously asking her to take a bite, or was her wild imagination playing an especially cruel trick?

“Take a bite and smile! Really big! Like this kimchi!” Even when her vision was normal, the yogurt seemed unholy. She had liked Mr. Park when she met him before, but at that moment she knew he must be some kind of smiling devil… It didn’t matter if he was living or undead. No mortal man could be so cruel as to order anyone to eat Super Berry Very Cherry bile churning yogurt. The assistant must have been eating ice cream or some other brand. A moment of awkward silence settled between idol and photographer, and he continued in what she thought was a sterner tone.

“A big bite on three… Let’s see that smile! One…”

Oh god. Her vision flickered back and forth between the real world and the dead world so quickly that it became hard to focus. She reached for the spoon. “Two…” Her hand skipped in her own vision as if watching a film that had large blocks of frames
missing from the footage. Time seemed to be lost in the space between the two perceptions. The spoon had become full of Super Berry Very Cherry Yogurt.

“Three!”

*It’s coming… Nooooooo!!!* Her own hand thrust the spoon into her mouth, though she didn’t want it to happen. Her eyes pinched shut, and her lips grew tight as if she’d swallowed a lemon. Her vision was normal. Yubin knew that she’d be smacking her lips and trying not to taste anything for the next hour when she heard the voice again “Again! This time make it look delicious!”

She looked at the spoon in her hand, her vision eerily skipped as if dozens of frames had been cut out of a silent movie. She didn’t remember taking another scoop and wondered how it had become full again. There it was completely full and mocking her. On the count of three. *One two three!* This time she managed a weak smile in spite of the vile jelly poisoning her tongue and slithering down her throat.

“Better!” the photographer said, he no longer deserved the honor of a name even if it was only in her thoughts. “Again! This time make it wonderful! One… Two…” She concentrated on the act of smiling as another blast of the vile nectar assaulted her senses. She thought “I’m a pro.. That’s why I can do this,” but every bite unnerved her as if her body was somehow not her own. She saw the spoon coming to her mouth again, and this time she was certain; she most certainly did not remember filling it with more putrid slime or moving the spoon closer to her face. She wasn’t controlling that part of her body.

*Smile.* She tried hard to do it, but she could feel her insides crawling as if her esophagus had suddenly decided that it wanted to relocate itself to the tips of her fingers.
Smile. She knew that her fans would see a mouth that said “I love you…” but she wondered if they would read the hatred, and fear of the consuming insanity welling up in her eyes. Smile. Her eyes widened only a moment before she lost the sense of touch throughout her body. The world was filled with twilight again, and she was not consciously moving her hands, and yet she could see one scooping more yogurt. Her fingers were shriveled, dead, and not her own. It was as if she were watching a recreation of the event with footage from a head mounted camera that had passed across the desk of editors for a new horror flick. She could see the studio again in normal light. The spoon was in her mouth again, but she didn’t remember putting it there. She could feel a gag coming but she forced it down. Smile.

Fear crept through her like a rising tide filled with fanged fish, barbed squid, and plenty of abyssal creatures that wanted to eat her. Her hands should have been shaking, but instead her heart pounded so fast and so powerfully that she could hear it in her ears. Block it out. She tried hard. She teased the camera with a playful “Delicious!” It’s the only way to finish quickly. Was that her voice? She knew that it was the photographer that was calling “Beautiful!”

It was as if something else was pushing inside her head, forcing her to give up her rightful place within her body; it was like being pressed in a crowded subway, but instead of her body moving aside it was her spirit being jostled and her bones and flesh were the train. She hardened her resolve and instinctively pushed back on the intruding force with all her might.
Sm-.. The thought didn’t have time to finish because there was nothing. Dark splashes of earthy color and indigo sparkles washed over the obsidian landscape within her mind, and she recalled retching. Some minutes later she awoke and the pretty red and white dress was covered in her own brand of Very Cherry vomit.

Only then she could smell something vibrant and delicious. *Cherry? Was this what I should have smelled this entire time?*

She spoke to herself though anyone present was free to hear “What happened?”
Chapter Two - Wicked Things

Ha Yubin

Somi shouted at Yubin from across the room. “Unnie ya! How can you do this to our schedule? Now we’ll never sleep!” Most fans didn’t realize that sometimes during promotions, idols needed about a kilogram of makeup to hide circles surrounding their tired eyes. They were all in it together. Together, they could all savor success; they all labored under the same exhaustion. Looking at her round face and street clothes in the dressing mirror, she didn’t feel like answering. With her eyes moving to the softball sized light bulbs around the mirror’s perimeter she imagined them popping like giant wads of bubble gum. Exploding, like the light the other morning.

“You’re not really sick, right? We can’t afford for everyone to be sick again. Ugh! How can you be so picky! The yogurt really isn’t that bad!” Somi was one of those girls who could be a joy to be around occasionally, but this was not one of those times, and she was wrong. The yogurt really was that bad! At least until... She tried not to think about it. She wasn’t crazy. Certainly not crazy.

These thoughts were part of the reason why Yubin did not reply to her band mate, the other part was because she knew Somi was right. She said “We really will be up all night” as she watched Taehoon scurry out of the room with her puke stained clothing. She doubted Somi could hear her from her own dressing station. I wonder if they could darken the stains and turn this into a vampire or zombie promotion, our song is “Haunted” after all. They would be up all night taking SIITY group photos. Speaking only to her self she wondered “How could it taste so bad, but smell so sweet at the end?”
They must think I’m a total brat. There goes Yubin promoting again. This time it’s the spoiled idol image.

Just then she heard the quirky chime of her Ka-Talk, and reached for her hand phone.

With a heavy sigh Yubin slumped in the swivel chair that was typically used when the small army of cosmetologists and assistants applied her makeup. She spun fast enough to make onlookers wonder if she was trying to become sick again. Her hand phone chimed again. She replied and explained the visions, and horrible scent and taste of Super Berry Very Cherry fat free yogurt that others seemed to love.

Was I hallucinating? the unnerving sense that she had not at times been in control of her body, and the fact that she had been constantly reminded of the popping light bulb in her room that morning.

“Huh?” she mocked herself, and then continued typing.

There was a long pause between the last of Yubin’s messages and Jieun’s reply, and a whisper in the back of Yubin’s subconscious, her second heart, warned that she might have startled her friend. She couldn’t imagine why her outpouring would be alarming, but her ‘gift’ was at work
Psychic empathy. Some idols became famous because they were pretty or talented; Yubin possessed both of these qualities, but the true secret of her success was that she possessed an uncanny ability to sense what the people around her were feeling, and then push emotional suggestions into them to make them feel like they were the only other person in her world no matter how crowded or busy the environment. Just convince yourself to feel the desired emotion for a split second, and push that feeling out and away, into someone’s heart. Of course, her own insecurities often masked this talent, but when she was confident it was like language, spoken language, body language, acted as a vessel for a psychic connection between herself and the souls of everyone around her.

It was an irony that a person who lived most of her life in front of her entire country could rarely show her actual self. One day she would be like BoA, Beyonce, Madonna, or Bada. Say what you will about Bada’s current sales, but the fact that the SES star was still releasing CDs after 19 years of stardom in Korea was nothing short of legendary. The woman had been a celebrity for as long as Somi had been alive! Like all the other great entertainers that came before her, she too would one day be able to do or say whatever she wanted because she was who she was, but that day was not the present and she had not yet become a legend.

Her label could still afford to drop her, albeit grudgingly, if she stepped too far out of line.

Jieun: “You know I felt that way sometimes when we were at school together. Not exactly but you know, no one could ever see me. You don’t have to apologize; I know you never noticed me. It’s okay. I accept that.”
Finally the reply came, Yubin smiled, a real smile, as she felt overwhelming warmth of love for the girl, her friend. There was also guilt at reading those words, they were true, but mostly she wondered how she could be so lucky.

“Yubin ya! Unnie!” It was Somi again, she had decided to get up, walk over, and shout at her SIITY-sister at close range rather than hollering at Yubin from across the room when she didn’t have a reply. Yubin hadn’t noticed that she moved closer. “Why are you smiling like that? Does Unnie have a boyfriend? You know we’re not allowed, but tell me anyway!”

Quickly, she smiled again, this time in exasperation and typed “Gomawo.”

“She does! I think she is blushing!” Somi’s voice quieted conspiratorially. She looked over her shoulder as if she were a character that might make display of talking into their watch in a spy movie and would raise suspicion if they existed in real life.

She pressed on “So who’s the lucky guy?”
“Lonely.”

The ghost withdrew the tendrils of spirit that controlled Yubin’s mobile phone and scowled. A girl like that couldn’t know a thing about “lonely.” How dare she even presume to know what it was like to experience real loneliness. Kim Jieun had been the queen of loneliness; she lived it, she died it, and now... I’m not a queen... I’m a goddess of being alone.

The Yubin that groaned and twirled herself on the swivel chair was not the pretty electronic Yubin that had appeared on the television screen at 7-Eleven. Looking at her now through the barrier between worlds made her seem appropriately decrepit, animated and deceased. The way she should be.

Even as she thought the words, an indefinable part of herself felt ashamed, and recoiled. Yubin really was lonely, perhaps not the kind of loneliness Jieun had experienced when she was alive but there was something genuine about her rival’s emotions. From what Jieun could tell, she had never made a point to socialize with the others outside of work, and had always spent her break time hidden away in her room or visiting home. At least they want to be her friend. I never had the option. It must be nice to be so well loved that you can discard friendships so easily.

What was Yubin’s problem anyway? She seemed to have no friends outside of work. Sometimes all four singers seemed to joke around, and Yubin would forget herself – even smiling on occasion, but then as soon as they got home she’d push them away not bothering to extend anything but the most common courtesies. There were acquaintances
of course it seemed like hundreds of them, but how many of them did she confide in? The only person with that honor that she knew of was herself.

If Jieun had a body, she would have shivered. Instead a pulse of cold tension washed through the thermometer shaped center of power in her chest and dissipated. That she was starting to regard Yubin as anything other than a rival was just wrong. It was sick and violated her morality. There was no way that she and Princess Everything That’s Wrong With the World could have a friendship. She only talked to her to find her secrets and exploit them. Yubin had to know betrayal after all, as the figurehead for the kind of people that had made her hate herself, punishment was required to be especially wicked.

It was at that moment that she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Had she lost weight? Idly, the geek part of her mind wondered if the fact that she could see her reflection at all implied that spirits reflected or emitted some kind of light that was invisible to humans. The conscious and emotional part of her mind wondered how it had happened. She hadn’t been obese in life, but in death she’d become accustomed to thinking of herself as the chubby fingered beached whale of a girl that people dread to look upon… if she were visible of course.

She strolled down the path in her mind that had lead her up to this point. For the first time in her life she had a good friend. She had possessed Yubin and made her puke all over herself. That was funny! It had been far more difficult than she expected, and could not establish a consistent hold on the host. Apparently Yubin’s psychic abilities provided her with some kind of resistance to possession, because her spirit kept
rebounding and knocking Jieun out. Nevertheless, she had walked for a few minutes in
her shoes, and got to feel what it was like for everyone to adore her.

*Wait, a friend?*

She had not found a friend in Ha Yubin! That bitch represented everything that
was corrupt in this universe that had made her life a living hell!

“Damn you! Damn you for breathing! I fucking hate you!”

Memories for the unsettled dead where tangible things. Faceless students that in
their navy uniform blazers, and bowl shaped haircuts laughed at her – transparent
specters that suddenly packed into the makeup room. She snarled the word “Kill…” at all
of them, deep under her breath and ashamed of the past that stabbed her in the form of
memory phantoms of people who were not yet dead. As the memory came into focus, she
could see young middle school faces. Yubin was not among them, but there was someone
who had been almost as successful in his own right who was.

The only difference was that he hadn’t stolen one of her dreams. Had she survived,
she too would have gone to a top university, likely one that was even better than his.
Jieun had been damned smart, even precocious. Academic success was more or less a
foregone conclusion. Dreams however were things you desperately wanted but knew in
your heart could never be true. Still, Choi Minho laughed as she sat there on her knees, in
the lunch room, crying, her school uniform soaking up a puddle of her own sick. A tear
rolled down her cheek and splashed into the acidic brown circle of vomit. He’d been a
ring leader…pointing, and through him, everyone else started laughing.
Damn Yubin for muddying her thoughts; that… that girl who had everything. She moved to the wall and touched the power outlet, a sensation as if the floor suddenly dropped from beneath her filled her as her spirit body distorted, swirled, and pushed into the power grid.

*This is what my life adds up to.*

It would make her feel better if someone died.
Ha Yubin

The next Sunday all of SIITY’s members were rewarded with a rare day of rest. On Saturday evening Somi, Rena, and Yubin chatted in the forested common room, while Yubin checked to make sure that she had the last of her things. She planned to spend the day visiting her Mother in Daejon. Just as she finished zipping her bag, the door opened and Tae-eun, the SIITY member who was often called away for special projects entered the room.

She was SIITY’s meet and greet girl because she was by far the prettiest, if somewhat lacking in vocal talent. Her long black hair shimmered like starlight, and was the color of the black emptiness between moon, sun and stars. She had naturally pouty lips, and had been told for years by jealous women that she wasn’t allowed to wear mascara anymore because her lashes were naturally long. They had a gentle bend like the bristles of Monet’s paint brush must have had each time he touched color to canvas in creating San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk. I envy her. It was her picture that young men posted in their ugly green lockers during military service more often than any other SIITY member, and her face was often the one responsible for conjuring guilty fantasies in the mental shadows of unavailable men.

She turned her too perfect face to the trio, and seemed to contemplate whether she even wanted to speak. Rena quickly closed her laptop, and Yubin thought she looked tired. Tae-eun’s bottom lip quivered for an instant and threatened to become a frown.

“She looks cranky” Somi whispered, but Yubin could sense the aura of stale dry sadness that sometimes clung to Tae-eun upon returning from these excursions. She met
Yubin’s eyes, and she could feel unspoken words pass through the vacant space between them. It was a long brooding emotion that Yubin associated with the defeated middle-aged, and these brief moments with Jang Tae-eun. It was not the discomfort of an run of the mill midlife crisis, but rather the somber acceptance of not merely unfulfilled, but brutally slaughtered dreams. She wasn’t always like this. She’s probably just pitying herself because she has to do extra work. Yubin couldn’t help it, management picked the schedule.

You have everything. I want to die. It wasn't her own thought, but it brushed against her and seeped inside as if it was some how a part of her. Her gift was as if she had a second heart, an empty heart, on the opposite side of her chest that was made for holding the thoughts and feelings of others. Nevermind. That would be pointless. Once again, the sentiment was not hers. It was delivered with a depreciating edge of... What? Bewilderment? Self-awareness? Whatever it was, it was new, though she could not imagine what could possibly be so bad as to provoke this reaction. The self loathing thought deadened and she no longer cared whether she lived or died. These girls are such drama queens. Did you seriously think you’d become famous without doing any work? That thought was clearly her own. Tae-eun would not kill herself that night.

She stood as if to welcome and comfort the newly arrived SIITY sister, but Tae-eun averted her gaze, grumbled “Hi” and kicked off her shoes. She hadn’t bothered to place them together near the door. The turn to skulk toward her room was abrupt, and the closing of Tae-eun’s door forced a chill wave of listlessness to wash through Yubin. To the other girls, the sound had only been tired and subdued, but Yubin felt dirty; she didn't
understand why. It seemed like she should help, but Tae-eun was just another pretty fool
with absolutely no justification for her emotions. How stupid would she be if she reached
out to Tae-eun only to find that she was all worked up over not having enough time to
watch a movie, or if she was told she couldn't cut her hair. *Deal with it.* She felt guilty for
the thought, but hardened her resolve. That resolve faltered when she realized her eyes
followed the path Tae-eun had taken to her bedroom.
“I used to be nice, soft and tender
but if I keep going crazy like this
you’ll change me into something bad
It is like I am your puppet” – Brown Eyed Girls – Abracadabra

The door closed behind her, and she gazed at herself in the mirror. The word “Broken” fell unintentionally from her expressionless lips. She stared into her own brown eyes wondering if something had changed since the last time she saw them. She wondered if these eyes were different eyes than those she could see in the mirror four years ago. She said “I am broken,” but she couldn’t see any difference in the eyes looking back at her. It seemed like there should be but, she had the same body parts as ever.

Memories stirred as she looked at her self, her eyes lost focus. The first time she returned to her room after one of these encounters there were dark streaks of mascara staining her bloodless cheeks. The sight of her sleeveless chiffon cocktail dress with its V shaped neckline and sensual silky texture had pushed her into a horror stricken rage. It stirred her to expel the garment from her body. She remembered the sensation; the pressure rising in her skull, the heat of shame in her face, the crumples of navy fabric in her fists and seams that complained with ripping sounds as she tried to throw the garment before it completely left her body. She hated it and all it represented.

She recalled the sounds of her sobs of years ago – they echoed in her mind like a fire cracker in an empty concrete room. They say that the sense of smell is that most linked to memory, but reliving that psychic explosive propelled her mind into the recollection of something like an out of body experience. The face she saw was a mockery of herself, beautiful, horrifying. Had she looked at herself in the mirror back
then, or had the conscious part of her soul left her body so she could watch the experience? Perhaps, this memory was just an interpretation of how she assumed she must have looked.

Her eyes were large almond shaped bleeding diamonds if blood was the color of charcoal, and diamonds were chestnuts. Her full lips had continually transmorphed between stiff lines of forced calm, to deep mudskipper frowns, to muted stretched howls of white toothed agony that were punctuated by trembling sobs. It was a cycle. She had pursed her lips trying to regain composure at the end, but soon her mouth once again twisted downward, and stretched open in a silent scream before trying once again to catch her nerve.

It was seeing her own teeth in that scream that unnerved her. She seemed as if she were in physical pain, but the Tae-eun of the present simply could not comprehend how a girl could be so harmed. It was just sex, nevermind that it was her own memory. People don’t show their teeth when they are sad unless they are writhing in agony. How could that be herself that she watched? Intellectually, she knew it had happened; it was a cold awareness that attached itself to the majority of her sexual experiences. She tried hard to feel a little of that pain in the present, but every attempt left her feeling a little more empty. I am broken.

She shouldn’t be like that. She recalled locking herself in the bathroom for two hours, hugging her naked body, and running water so Rena wouldn’t hear or see what she experienced. That person wasn’t the Tae-eun of the present. It had been a different girl. She looked in the mirror, and she had the same eyes. How come I can’t cry anymore?
She had been 17 at that time, but now she was 20. There were no tears on her powder puffed cheeks. Moving away from the mirror, she connected with the girl in her vision she had been idealistic. Tae-eun smiled. She couldn’t cry, but she still remembered what it was like to believe that anything was possible. *I was such a stupid girl.* She remembered what it must be like to be an idol… fans adoring, making music, dozens if not hundreds of people ready to jump to fulfill her every need. She could imagine that everyone loved her, and she would always be happy. She remembered what she had done that night; she considered the consequences if she should choose not to perform in the evenings through the small hours of morning. Quietly, she mourned the death of dreams. They had been replaced by the certain knowledge that she was both the prettiest and least talented of all SIITY members. She didn’t have any love, just a whole lot of people wanting to fill her.

It was a terrible disappointment to learn that she wouldn’t be writing and performing her own songs. Somehow, her naïve childhood mind always assumed that the performers were responsible for writing the songs in their albums. It was difficult to get into the meaningless songs she had to perform, and as a result she danced like a robot – precise, calculated, and completely unable to adapt to the dancers around her. There were no longer any illusions of entertainment grandeur. She was just gorgeous. *What’s the point of being gorgeous anyway?*

She most envied Ha Yubin because she had talent. Perhaps she didn’t make men salivate every time she entered a room, but she was pretty. Tae-eun could stand a little less salivation. She couldn't blame Yubin for having the gift, but she wished she could.
She remembered the first time before she had even signed her contract. Manager Beck was a man nearly twice her age, wore a pink collared shirt, stylish black suit, and a wedding ring on his finger. He might have been attractive to women his own age, but at that time he stretched even the far distant limits of what might be called Oppa. He invited her to his office and explained that he was trying to decide between her and one other girl. He held a camera, wanted to take more pictures, and Tae-eun obliged. This was not a professional shoot because the device in his hand was a simple digital camera. There were no photography lights, and she assumed that the photos would be used by him alone to compare her and her unknown competitor in days to come.

There were several outfits – a formal gown that glittered like freshly minted gold and made her fantasize about accepting an Oscar. There was an ugly gray high school uniform that might have been borrowed from her younger sister, a leather cat suit that made her wonder if she too knew kung fu like Trinity in The Matrix, and a Samsung Lion’s baseball jersey, hat, and catcher’s glove. Finally there was the black bikini. She had been permitted to change in the restroom, but when she finished modeling the swimsuit Manager Beck, asked "Aren't you going to remove that?"

The blinds were closed. An uncomfortable silence fell between them. Beck said “You don’t have to of course, but this is about making good impressions.” When she didn’t answer right away, he reached for his heavy expensive black pen that had its own holder made of white marble and his name engraved on the side in white gold letters. He moved as if to make a damning note near the top of her file. “I’m the number one person you want to make happy right now.”
Tae-eun wanted, more than anything, to become a star. Beck had the power to give her that, but she didn't expect this. The notion of being without clothing in front of a man was foreign, but it was just a peek. A small sacrifice in pursuit of the dream. If the other girl refused, she’d be in for sure. *I have to do this.* She nodded hesitantly and pushed her fingers beneath the dark bands of fabric at her hips. She hesitated again, slightly bent, hunched at the head of the panty removing position, and preceded.

Beck stood from his desk when the bikini bottoms had been pushed half way down her thighs. He loomed closer. She could smell the musky scent of his cologne; nothing a boy her age would wear. He did not have the camera. She could hear his greedy breath. She felt his calloused hand smooth over the softness of her hip. His other hand reached behind and pressed to her back, and she had not even removed her top yet. Her face blanched when one of his wiry rough hands pushed through the crinkled mass of black hair between her legs, she could feel her hands shaking, she could feel the red heat of shame in her cheeks when a finger skirted about the opening of her sex.

"Sit down" he ordered and she was thankful to no longer be standing in the baleful contact of his hands. She attempted to persuade herself that it was all okay with thoughts like “Normal girls don’t become famous because they are too afraid to do these things.” It helped a little, but not completely. Even that relief, was short lived because she could see his hands moving to unfasten his belt and lower the zipper of his pants.

It was eerily difficult for her to remember the details of her first sexual experience. There was some surprise at the vague taste of salt in her mouth as he pushed himself inside, in retrospect; she imagined that it must have been sweat. The next distinct
memory she had about the experience came from the aftermath – the sense of being branded. She had been sore between her legs in the days to come and the unfamiliar pain, the discomfort, gave her the prolonged feeling that she had become his. It wasn’t a matter of choice; it was just the way it was. The blood she found in her underwear in the next day haunted. In spite of the pain, it was as if the splotches of crimson had been placed there by a ghost to remind her that life had irrevocably changed.

“Why can’t I remember?” she said in the present as she sat alone in bed with her laptop. She wasn’t really paying attention to what she clicked on, Facebook, memes, videos of cats that hiccuped and farted at the same time. It just seemed like she should be doing something. It wouldn’t look right if Rena came in only to see her sitting with her covers pulled up to her waist staring into nothing. *A person should remember their first sexual experience.*

It was only him for a year or so. She received some of the best training Korea had to offer, and even before her debut people made a habit of leaving her small gifts of encouragement and affection. He could have intimidated her into putting out, and deep down part of her realized that he probably would if she had said no. Instead, however she just went with it spinning lies to herself about appreciation, and avoiding dramatic conflicts that could end her career. As the encounters became more regular, she imagined that he secretly loved her, and would one day leave his wife so they could be together. He wasn’t raping her; they were carrying on a relationship. There was pleasure in that, it was a beautiful fantasy. As long as it continued, she could still imagine herself becoming the kind of idol she hoped to be.
Unfortunately the fantasy only lasted a few months. Two days before her 18th birthday she was asked to entertain other men of whom she had no personal knowledge. She knew what they were, some powerful newspaper owner, or the director of an entertainment television program. There were investors who would help the company prosper and every one, she was told, was the number one person she must make happy. It didn’t seem to matter what they were personally like.

The group name “SIITY” was theoretically supposed to be composed of all group members’ names, but Kim Inyoung, a girl who was extremely pretty but lacking Yubin’s vocal talent, had been removed from the roster within just a few months of training. Refusal to comply with entertainment requests would surely mean Tae-eun’s name would appear on Korean Wikipedia next to Inyoung as a member who left before the group had officially started.

The first time she had entertained was hard. As if being forced to have sex with one strange man that she didn’t know wasn’t bad enough, there had actually been two that night. By the time she finally returned home, she was crying and hating herself in the mirror. When the memories initially came to her as she searched her eyes in the reflection there were only images, but now sitting in bed there was something else – feelings. Her manager didn’t love her. She wasn’t a girlfriend. She was just an expensive whore.

She sighed, and said “What of life now?” She didn’t have the same kind of dreams she once believed in. There wasn’t even anything holy or worth revering these days. Her sister usually called her a bitch for saying “No.” when she asked Tae-eun to put
in a good word in with her company so she too could become a star. *I don’t feel anything.*

*It’s just sex.* No, it’s more than sex. *I don’t know what, but I can’t steal my sister’s chance to find out.*

“I don’t have any dreams anymore.”

She didn’t want to die exactly, but she wished there was something different. If she had refused to take off her clothes the first time with manager Beck, would she be happy now? Would she have finished high school or become a university student? Everyone thought she couldn’t sing. She was always told that she was a mediocre dancer. She knew her talent, and her eyes burned when she thought “There’s nothing else I’m good for.” It was close enough to crying in the present, even if no tears fell. She didn’t want to die exactly, but the only other option was to keep on living.

She mourned the loss of her innocence. She heard the faint rumble of Yubin, Somi, and Rena in the common room discussing what god only knew. No one would touch Yubin because she was the star singer. Rena was the daughter of the CEO. If Somi had been exploited, she didn’t show any sign of it. In spite of her acceptance, perhaps the presence of hearing aids on each ear made executives feel like they’d be fucking a retarded girl. Maybe it’d be seen as an insult to send her to VIPs, so they picked from other BW Entertainment idols. For a moment, she envied the girl’s deafness.

“I’m a really terrible person aren’t I? I just wished I was a retarded girl… only I know she’s not really retarded.” She felt shame for thinking of her group mate in that way. “I want them all to have excuses so I can envy them.” In her mind, she acknowledged that she wanted a fantasy where she could still sing, but no longer be
herself. She ached for a shield to offer protection. *If I had it now, would it make a difference?*

Sex. She didn’t care about it. It was the lack of caring about the act that bothered her; she wanted it to be beautiful or terrible. *I want it to be something.* She wondered if part of her soul had broken off one night. She imagined her face pressed into a pillow. There were nameless hands gripping her hips from behind. *Is this when I broke?* She imagined blowing on a white fuzzy dandelion in bright sunlight. The seeds caught the wind and swirled off in every direction. If those seeds were her subconscious’s metaphor for the soul, she honestly wondered if it would even be possible to recover all the fragments.
Ha Yubin

Yubin went to her home in Daejon, where she enjoyed her mother’s cooking. She supposed the others would stay together in Seoul all day. It was true that there were times that, as a celebrity, she had dined on cuisine prepared by the world’s greatest chefs. It was also true that eighty percent of her meals made hospital food look good as they were prepared to be consumed on the road inside of black idol vans with windows that seemed so dark from the outside that they might have been slabs of granite for how opaque they were. It didn’t matter whether she compared it to fine dining, or fast food her mother’s cooking was always the best.

She understood that eating wasn’t only about nutrition, it was about community. The measure of a meal’s greatness was how well it could anticipate the needs and pleasures of the person who would eat it. So why do I push away from the others so much? Her mother had changed her diapers and watched Yubin grow into the young woman she had become. The food she made understood her cravings and nutritional needs in a way that was not unlike how Yubin could reach out to producers, record label management, and her audiences. She savored the salty taste of her mother’s beef and thought “It’s like a psychic gift.”

Just then her mother derailed her thoughts of pleasure by mentioning the local news, something Yubin rarely had enough time to pay attention to anymore. “Do you remember Choi Minho? He went to your high school. He was in your class, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, I remember him.” She spoke before filling her mouth with a wad of kimchi, and there was pleasure in knowing that her mom could be so satisfied by watching her
daughter eat so eagerly. “We used to talk sometimes. I think he was accepted to Sogong University. He was really popular.”

A small frown crossed her mother’s face; apparently Yubin had not picked up on the undertone of discomfort. “He’s dead. Actually, the funeral is two days from now if you want to go.” Tuesday, good. No music shows, and we should be finished with the Super Berry TV ads by… FUNERAL?! Her mom accurately discerned her daughter’s silence and pause with her metal chopsticks only centimeters from her mouth as shock, so she continued. “They think he was murdered, but they are not entirely sure about how. They found him in a locked room, stabbed… many times.”

The skin of Yubin’s face, ordinarily fair, bleached to the color of white bone. Her hands began to shake, and she felt a red and black haze threaten to descend upon her. “Mur…dered?”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost Yubin. Are you okay? Were you close?” Her breathing was ragged, but she did not feel sadness. She was scared. Too many bazaar events had surrounded her those past few days. Light bulbs exploded in her mind, one by one. She imagined strings of holiday lights at Christmas or New Years, and lines of tiny light bulbs bursting outward and combusting with the tinkle of shattered plastic and glass on the pavement below. Pop! Pop! Pop! Oh god, make it stop!

“I-I’m fine.” She said in a shaky voice, “I need to know more information… A locked room? This isn’t some kind of murder mystery?” but before she had even finished the question she knew that her mother would not oblige. She shook her head “Well, it’s
certainly a mystery, but I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have troubled you… I shouldn’t distract you from your career.”

“No please! I need to know! What happened?” Her mom looked a little taken aback by the vehemence sounding in her daughter’s voice. The older woman’s eyes narrowed and she became suspicious “Who is this boy to you? I don’t remember you being so upset when Kim Jieun died a few years ago.”

“What?!”

Yubin didn’t feel like the last time she passed out was her fault, what with the strange force pressing on her soul and all. She was not some silly helpless girl! She was not some damsel in distress from an ancient black and white film that needed to be sheltered and protected from the world! There was no sound; light bulbs exploded. She saw the fabric of the strawberry girl dress swallowing up reddish globs of Very Cherry vomit. There was Jieun’s face peering at her from the yearbook photo; immortalized in her mind; frozen in time as the 14 year old girl Yubin had never noticed. Never noticed, at least, when they went to school together. The picture smiled at her like an animated portrait from an old Harry Potter movie.

She could imagine what it might be like to hug, or be hugged by, her friend at a time when it was sincerely needed. She was herself but the girl looked the same as in that year book photo. Hi Jieun! I finally have time today! Do you want to meet up? There was a voice in her head that she imagined was Kim Jieun’s. Her own imaginary voice replied. Oh I already saw that movie, but I don’t mind watching it again! She was talking on the phone. Yeah I know! I always get a chance to see them before they are out.
I love you. No… she would never say that. Jieun may take it completely the wrong way. Neither of the girls were lesbian – lesbians didn’t exist in Korea. Jieun might think being a star entitled Yubin to eccentricities that she did not possess, but she felt something for her. I love Kim Jieun! … my best friend in the world. A silent emptiness that crept into her ears disoriented.

Dead.

Hoi! She pointed her index finger to Kim Jieun. Hoi! Jieun replied and touched the tip of her finger to Yubin’s. A spell was cast. Best friends forever.

Dead. The absence enveloped her. The place Jieun once occupied in her mind was now a horrible oubliette, a hungry tenebrous void from which nothing and no one could ever return once consumed. There was a sense of vertigo. Impossible. It was unfortunate for Yubin that she would soon have some rationalization to do; because this time, she really fainted.
"I got tired of your unconcerned love
It feels terrible that I threw all my pride away
I’m sad. Is this all I’m worth?
The four letter word ‘LOVE’ worries me
I’m scared. You’re laughing.
You really suck.” - 2NE1 – Hate You

The door closed behind Yubin leaving an ominous silence in her wake. Tae-eun had drifted off to her room which left Rena and Somi together in the living area. Rena said, “So what are your big plans for the weekend?” Somi blushed.

“What? It’s a simple question.”

“I think I might go to Anyang later.” Somi replied, averting her gaze.

“Anyang?” Somi nodded without replying to the question, so Rena continued.

“Why on earth would you want to go all the way out there?”

“I don’t want to say.”

“Why?”

“You’ll laugh at me.”

Rena laughed. “I already laugh at you, so what is different?”

“It’s just different.”

“You’re not going to tell me?”

“Nope.”

“Seriously, why?”

“Not telling.”

Rena sighed and resigned herself to Somi’s secrets. She paused for a moment and redirected the conversation. “Do you have time to go out for food?”
“I think so. My plans aren’t until late. Where do you want to go?”

*Until late?* What could she possibly be up to? She looked Somi up and down and recalled the slight redness in her cheeks when she first inquired. *I’ll bet she has a boyfriend that she’s keeping secret from everyone.*

“How’s onion blossom?” Rena asked.

“You always agree to Outback!”

“You always agree to Outback.”

“They have really good food!” Somi clapped her hands and cheered.

As soon as they’d made plans, Rena’s ringtone interrupted the conversation with the old BoA song “Atlantis Princess.”

*I WONDER WHAT IT’S LIKE AT THE OTHER END OF THIS VAST OCEAN. IT’S PROBABLY SOMETHING DIFFERENT FROM –*

“Yobuseiyo?” She and Tae-eun had been practicing Atlantis Princess as a cover track, and somewhere in the process both women had decided to put the original version of the song on their hand phones.

The voice on the other end of the line was her father -- the last person she wanted to talk to. Nothing had happened to make her dread his conversation anymore than usual; it was just that he was always the last person on the planet she wanted to hear from. If a somber police officer had been on the other end of the line to say “I’m sorry to bother you at this hour, but are you Baek Rena? I’m afraid I have some bad news…” the call would have been a significant improvement.
The voice said “Do you want to go to Ganga for dinner tonight? You should be there in two hours.”

“I - I already made plans for dinner tonight with Somi.”

“You see her every day. She’s not going to care if you cancel.”

“But –“

“It is important to me that you be there, and for that reason you should do it.”

“Can she come too?”

“No! Damn it Rena, this is a family dinner! I shouldn’t have to ask twice. Be there in two hours or I’m going to be really unhappy.”

Rena sighed and responded “I’ll be there.”

She didn’t know if her father actually liked Indian food, but Ganga was a somewhat expensive restaurant in Gangnam, and frequenting such places struck her as a form of worship to the gods of the almighty won. She doubted he would see it that way with his fanatical obsession with going to Catholic mass every Sunday, but it was very clear what he put his faith in. It’d been a while since she read the bible, was there any passage that suggested that he could buy his way into heaven? Oh well. What was done was done. She didn’t know if she would take it if given the option to follow a new path in life instead of being a star, but she wished that she could find some way to at least have the option.

She sighed again.

“Somi, my dad just called. I don’t think we are going to Outback tonight.”
Somi protruded her bottom lip, clinched both of her small hands into fists, and audibly pouted with a noisy “Hmp!” but her expression softened and then became a smile. “It’s totally fine Unnie. It’s not like we had plans ten minutes ago.”

Relieved, she grunted “Thanks!” but sighed again. Congratulations! You’ve won a night of verbal battery and awkward conversation!

“I better get ready.”

* * *

When she arrived at Ganga her father had already been seated. The shirt he wore to dinner was a pale green Armani thing and she thought he should button at least one more button on his chest because it exposed a gold crucifix lined in tiny diamonds against his skin. The man often dressed as if he thought he were a movie gangster. Someone forgot to tell him that successful people don’t normally dress like that in real life.

The rust red colored walls seemed oppressive to her, although they were likely intended to make the place feel warm. Most people go to restaurants with people they like. The warm walls and soft overhead lighting would likely make others feel closer to those they dined with. Closeness usually meant affection, but with goose flesh threatening to swallow up her arm, and the way her heart pounded a hand full of beats quicker than it should, it felt more like stepping into a cage with a frightful lion. In fact, of the two she might have chosen the lion. Sure, it seemed docile for the moment, but anyone who bothered to look closer could see its terrible jaws, sharp claws, and powerful muscles; it could attack at any time.

“I ordered the Tandoori chicken for you so they could start cooking.”
Gee thanks Dad. She liked the Tandoori chicken, but it would have been better if she had chosen it. Before she joined him, he sat alone at the table. A ‘family dinner’ meant just the two of them since her parents divorced, and the man held very a little affection for her mother.

“Thanks.” She said, not knowing were this was going.

He asked “Do you know anything?”

“Anything? About what?” It was an odd question even by his standards. It was as if he were following up on a discussion that she did not remember having.

“Anything.” He reiterated as if that made perfect sense. “About life... What you are doing... I’m trying to make conversation here.”

“Well...” She hesitated. It was a very general question, and she knew she could give many answers, most of which he would care very little for.

“Yubin went to see her Mom. Somi is going to Anyang for something.”

“Anyang? What the hell is in Anyang?”

“I have no idea.” She really didn’t.

Her dad laughed with heaving groans that made him sound like he was having a lightening flash asthma attack. It was normal for him. “That’s a lot like leaving New York to go visit Ratfuck, Jeolla. Does she have family there or something?”

“I seriously have no idea. Maybe she has a cousin or someone is moving.” It was possible, but she doubted it. She wouldn’t share her suspicion that her band mate had a boyfriend. Her Dad was, after all, the CEO of their company and boyfriends were very much against the rules.
He chuckled and shook his head. His eyes rolled as if he knew all about Somi. “She’s an odd one. When they told me they wanted to bring on a deaf girl I thought they were fuckin’ crazy but she has really got something… She’ll never be the lead vocalist but people enjoy watching her.”

It was true, it was nearly impossible to be in a bad mood when Somi was around. “She’s not really deaf you know. With her hearing aids she can talk to us just fine.”

“Yeah but you know… If she didn’t have them she’d be shit out of luck.”

“Yeah… I guess that’s true, but she does have them.” Rena shrugged.

The waiter arrived with her Tandoori chicken, and something Rena could not identify was set in front of her father. She wanted to ask, but the answer wasn’t important enough to allow him to believe they actually had a friendly relationship. Asking such a simple question might inadvertently encourage him to invite her to more of these meetings. *It’s better not to ask.*

“Your chicken looks good. They make really good food here. I don’t normally go for Indian but…” He trailed off motioning with his hand. “This is a really high end restaurant.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good.” Rena confirmed.

An awkward silence settled between them as they picked at their meals. She tore at the chicken with two forks, looking down at the meat. She could hear restaurant sounds around her, silverware clinking and occasionally scraping against ceramic plates. Idle conversation of people she didn’t know. Each time the door to the kitchen opened she
paid attention to the whirring of what must have been fans inside. It was as if all the sounds around them filled the empty space between them that should have held conversation.

“The reason I asked you here” her father said “Is because I’ve decided that you should go to Yonsei University.”

Her hands stopped; frozen in place by the revelation. She looked up at the man sitting across from her completely unsure of what to say. She hadn’t even applied to Yonsei, or any other university for that matter. *I suppose I’m supposed to receive an honorary diploma from one of the top schools in the country.*

“I don’t have a major.” She followed. There was no point in pointing out that she didn’t have the grades required to make it into such a school.

“You can choose any major, and once you’ve finished with your undergraduate course work you are going to participate in their MBA program.”

“I haven’t applied.”

Seeming smug, her father added “You don’t have to because you’ve already been accepted after I made a very generous donation of a new auditorium and a new lab for their mechanical engineering department.”

“I see…” She expected as much. If her dad taught her anything about Korea, it was that with name recognition and money anyone and anything could be bought. It didn’t matter what her grades would be, Yonsei would want her simply because she was famous. She wouldn’t even have to attend-
“Don’t think you’re going to be able to just skate by without ever going to class like most idols. You are going to go to every single class and take every damn exam. I’ve worked too hard to build this company for you to fuck it all up when I leave it to you.”

Stunned by the back handed opportunity that had been force upon her, her mouth hung open. *I can actually go to my classes, and be an idol? Wow... How? Just how?* Then the latter words settled on her “too hard to build this company for you to fuck it up” Would it kill him to have just a little confidence in her, or trust in her good sense? She was tired of being regarded as the shit on his boot. *Bastard! Now I don’t even want to go to school!*

“Are you going to sit there and glare at me, or are you going to say something?”

She couldn’t find any words, and she knew the wrong ones could push him into one of his terrifying rages. His voice was tighter now, the lion that met her stirred. It yearned to attack.

“I… My schedule. You know how hard they work us. I have to practice, and there are TV performances.”

He slapped his palm down hard on the table. Her glass of water rattled next to her plate. “No one is going to fucking miss you if you are gone!” Other patrons looked over. She thought she heard the electronic shutter of a mobile phone camera. The lion’s voice dropped into a low growl “The only reason you have this job is because of me. We both know that you aren’t like other idols, and no one is going to care if you miss a few TV appearances because they aren’t looking at you anyway. They don’t need or want you. You are only there because I tell them to have you. I have very generously pulled some
strings to get you into one of the top universities in this country and you should be fucking weeping with gratitude, because you and I both know that you are too lazy or stupid to have made it into a school like this on your own. I am happy to do it because you are my daughter, but you need to understand that everything you have now is because of me and I will not be disrespected by your bullshit excuses!”

“Fine.” The word was clipped, and she had no intention of advancing the conversation. *All he wants is to dominate my life. I can’t have any job but the ones he plans for me!* Never mind that the job that had just been offered to her in no uncertain terms was exactly the one that she wanted. The offer was impossible to appreciate due to the means by which it was given. Her father seemed to regain some of his composure and sat upright once more.

“When I brought you into the business I expected your brother would have taken my place, which is why I helped you become an entertainer. He would have been a better choice.”

It was amazing how a year and a half could distort a person’s memory. Her father and brother hadn’t had any better a relationship than she did, in fact, it had been worse in many ways. Her brother hated the Korean entertainment industry. She, at least, had never screamed at him or called him a douche to his face. She was coldly polite in most public situations. She also hadn’t chosen one of the ‘useless majors’ just to spite him. *I haven’t been to school. I guess that can still change.*

“Unfortunately he’s gone now so I have to work with what I’ve got. I’d rather keep it in the family, and you’re the only child I have left.”
It was about eleven when she heard the front door slam. She poked her head out of their room and saw Rena standing in the hall wearing all black and looking about as sour as a citrus cocktail. Somi also opened the door to her room, but instead of merely peeking, she strode completely into the hall with a rectangular gym bag over her shoulder. Rena, equally as surprised to see Somi as Tae-eun, stirred from her troubles enough to say “I thought you were going to Anyang.”

Somi replied “I am. I told you it was late. I’m going now.”

“So late?” Tae-eun asked.

“Yeah… It’s a late appointment.”

Tae-eun frowned. She knew exactly what a late appointment would mean for herself, but the younger girl seemed hardly dressed for it with her hair in a pony tail, very little makeup, blue Adidas sport pants, and a purple Nike Dri-fit jacket.

“Dressed like that?” She asked.

“Yeah! I’ll be working out.”

“… in Anyang?” Rena asked.

“It’ll be after midnight by the time you arrive.” Tae-eun added.

“Yeah and I have to go so…” Somi looked back and fourth between them and scurried mouse-like toward the front door to evade further questioning. She opened the door and with her hand poised on the handle she chirped “Byyyyyeeeee!” in a happy sing song voice. Tae-eun followed. Before she could close the door however, Tae-eun
intercepted Somi. Holding her arm, she said “Show us what is in the bag, and then you can go.”

“Oh my god! It’s nothing. Towels, change of clothes, you know, stuff you’d need for working out.”

Towels and a change of clothes indeed. She probably had a skimpy little dress in there that was cut half way down her thighs. “Bullshit! I know what you are up to!”

Rena’s eyes widened as if taken aback on Somi’s behalf, but even Somi, for once, seemed cross.

“It’s none of your business what’s in my bag!” Somi said.

“Tae-eun ah… Relax, this is Somi we are talking about. Do you really think she’s up to no good?”

“It’s not her I don’t trust…” Tae-eun grumbled.

“Well you are sure acting like it!” Somi complained.

Rena said, “Let her go…” Tae-eun had to be physically lead from the front door.

Somi shut the door, and on a normal day Tae-eun would have been able to imagine her literally skipping down the hall toward the elevator. That night, however, the closing of the door seemed harsh, and instead she thought of her group mate moodily stomping as if the carpet had personally offended her on her way to be raped by some powerful business man.

“What has gotten into you?” Rena asked.

“She shouldn’t be going out like that.” Tae-eun said. “It isn’t right, being all secretive and late at night.”
“You go out all the time. Heck, sometimes you don’t even come back until mid-morning.”

“That’s exactly the point.”

“Oh I see, so you get to go out and have fancy dinners and entertainment with clients, and we don’t.”

There was no humor in Tae-eun’s bitter laugh. “Is that what you think I do? Don’t talk about things you obviously know nothing about.”

Rena took a deep breath, and squeezed the hand of her best friend. She had never seen the other woman so agitated and protective before.

“Let’s not fight. You’re right. I don’t know what you do, and I wasn’t trying to upset you. I just don’t think Somi is doing anything wrong. Honestly, I think she has a boyfriend she doesn’t want anyone knowing about. Why else would she go to Anyang? Do we ever do any business in Gyeonggi-do?”

“Music Core. That’s in Ilsan.” It was a matter of emotional inertia that pushed her to retort, but in truth Rena’s words had calmed her. The only reason they went to Ilsan was because that was the location of the MBC Dream Center, the television studio used to film one of the top three Korean music shows every Sunday. There was also the Drama Park right next door but all in all, Rena was right, her special projects rarely required Tae-eun to leave Seoul.

“You’re sure she’s not lying?”
“Somi?” Rena asked. “Her idea of a good lie would be to say she was going out to eat chicken for five or six hours. I think she really is going to Anyang. If I had to guess, she doesn’t want to lie to us so she’s saying a bunch of nothing about her actual plans.”

Rena had a point. It probably was nothing, but what if it wasn’t? Well, there was nothing that could be done about it now. Somi did have the gym bag, but that could be a clever ruse to throw them off her tracks. Clever… by Somi standards. Then again, Somi wasn’t exactly the type to make such an elaborate cover with alternate clothing for herself.

“Alright…” Tae-eun said. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?”

“For being a bitch just now. I’ve just been doing a lot of thinking today. Being an idol isn’t exactly all it’s cracked up to be, you know?”

“Yeah… I guess. You want to talk about it?”

“I’ll be fine.” Tae-eun said. “What’s up with you?”

Rena sighed. “I just had dinner with my dad.”

“Why don’t we go to the living room and talk about it?”

“That would be good. I think I’ll be ready for a little noraebang in a few minutes.”

Tae-eun nodded. “A little noraebang” was code for “I’ve had a bad day and need to blow off steam.” They had their own machine connected to the giant plasma television on the wall, and they sometimes sung together to help each other feel better. Tae-eun still felt lost in her thoughts from after her ‘special assignment’ before, but her emotions were quieter now and it was obvious that Rena at least needed comfort. They sat on the blue leather couches and Rena began.
“He wants me to go to school, and already has me accepted to Yonsei University.”

“Congratulations! It’s a dream school. You should be happy.”

“I know but…”

“I know.. We’ve been friends long enough that I know the pattern. Let me guess, he told you that you are going to go whether you like it or not, and somehow managed to slap you in the face twenty times in the process of telling you.”

“Pretty much. He also told me that he intends for me to take his place as CEO of the company when he’s gone.”

“Wooooooow.” Tae-eun was surprised. She knew that Rena hoped that she would take over the company one day, but it sounded like this was the first confirmation from her father that it would actually happen. “This is really big news. How do you feel about it?”

“I’m torn… I wanted this for myself, but now I feel like I don’t have any choice except to do it. If I go to classes and study hard I might make good grades but then he wins because he’ll take the credit. As long as I do what he tells me to do it’s not really me doing it anymore.”

Tae-eun sighed and touched her friend’s hand for encouragement. “You are both really stubborn people. This is exactly what you wanted right? A chance to get an education, and one day make this company your own. I say you should do it.”

“Why does he always have to tell me that I’m worthless in the process? “
“I don’t know, but you’re not worthless. You’re my best friend. It’s his loss that he can’t appreciate you. Once you have your education you can do anything you want.”

“How?”

“Well… Anything, if you have a degree you can look for any number of jobs. I wish I could get one. Yeah, you’ll probably take over the company when he’s gone, but don’t think of it as doing what he says. Think of it as giving yourself a chance to do that or anything else once you’re finished. You don’t have to tell him that you are considering other options.”

Rena nodded. “I know he’s full of it. I know I’ve got talent. I just hate how he takes every chance he gets to control me.” She reached for the microphone and then to the universal remote that would turn on the TV display and noraebang system.

“Have you picked out a song?”

“Yeah.” Rena said. “I was singing it the whole time on my way home.” She pushed the numbers for her song selection and a semi-old song by 2NE1 filled the speakers. As Rena bellowed her “I hate you! Eh eh eh eh eh eh eh. I’m fine living without you”’s Tae-eun felt a sense of sad joy for the girl because even if she couldn’t see it, Rena’s father had just given her a future outside of performing.

Tae-eun could feel the sand in the hourglass of her career slowly trickling away. People like her were expendable; everyone said she couldn’t sing and she believed them. She was gorgeous, but beauty would fade. When no grains remained in her professional hour glass, they’d just turn it over again and a new girl who was not even old enough to finish high school would take her place; Jang Tae-eun would be forgotten. It would make
sense for me to envy Rena, but I don’t. Rena wasn’t like Yubin, whom Tae-eun most certainly did envy. No, there wasn’t room for that kind of poison in their friendship.

She marveled how a song that no doubt was intended to describe a broken romance could equally be applied to Rena’s life. Rena sang “No matter how much I put up with it, and put up with it. It wouldn’t end. I-I wanted to hear the words -‘I love you.’ I grew tired of your unconcerned love.”

Why couldn’t she make such a song? She sighed and let Rena’s singing carry her away to adolescent memories of hope and possibility that no longer burned inside her. She could see her self standing on a stage filled with drifting fog that rolled across the floor from stageside fog machines; mysterious indigo lights from many directions painted the vaporous white tendrils of smoke. She held an acoustic guitar and began as song that she had written.

There were members in the audience of all backgrounds, rich, poor, middle school students and fans in their thirties. There were even a few foreigners. They swayed to the music; Korean fans waved light sticks and home made signs with her name drawn in LED and blacklight responsive letters. Some of the foreigners held up Zippo lighters. The air shimmered above flickering gold and red flames; she knew her words touched those fans in a thousand different ways – one story that became an infinite number of stories because it gained a new meaning for each new set of ears it touched.

“Tae-eun ya! I’m finished. Are you okay?”
“Yeah.” She smiled her sad smile again, and put her arms around Rena. Tae-eun could feel a forgotten something inside herself stirring and struggling to stay alive. She hugged Rena tightly. “I was just dreaming.”
Baek Rena

She got the call at the ungodly hour of 8 AM on her off day. Had it been a work day 8 AM might have been average, or even a bit late, but during one of those uncommon instances when she was actually allowed to sleep like an unmedicated Somi the BoA song was quite a bother.

“Yobuseiyo?” She croaked in her groggy voice.

“The car is coming to bring you to Yonsei Severance Hospital. Yubin was admitted” It was Manager Beck.

“Mo-?” She started. “What happened?”

“Yubin passed out again while having dinner with her mother last night, and we decided to have her looked at here in Seoul. They kept her overnight to make sure she’s okay.”

After ending the call, she alerted Somi and they were on their way. Tae-eun was already gone – she had a special project and a variety show scheduled. Rena noticed that Somi had an angry red cut on her right forearm.

“What happened to your arm?” Rena asked.

Somi looked up from texting on her hand phone and said “It’s nothing. I just fell.”

“You fell and managed to cut your arm?”

“Well… Obviously I hit something sharp on the way down, didn’t I? It doesn’t hurt, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

Rena pursed her lips, in fact, she was more concerned about Somi than she was about Yubin. Maybe Tae-eun was right. Her worry for Yubin paled even in comparison
to that she would feel for the hospitalization of a non-idol. When it all came down to it, they were commodities. Ignoring a symptom of a possibly serious underlying condition could be a very expensive mistake. They went to the hospital for everything. Usually, fainting was just a side effect of exhaustion and the company was in no real danger of permanently losing one of its assets. Besides, the temporary loss of money stemming from canceled appearances was easily made up for by the wash of sympathy and gossip pouring in from the fan community. *Drama sells.*

“I guess you’re not going to tell me what you were doing in Anyang.”

“Nope!” Somi grinned. “I told you, you’ll laugh at me!”

“Well, if you get into any trouble, just promise me that you’ll tell me okay?”

Somi sighed, it was rare to see her exasperated due to that it was usually her exasperating everyone else, but this time she was. “Honestly Unnie! It’s nothing to worry about! I would tell you if I was in trouble. I was actually having a really good time!”

Rena nodded. “As long as I have your promise to tell me if something is wrong.”

“I prom--ise.” Somi spoke loudly weighting every syllable. Rena was not completely convinced.

When they arrived, their agency had provided Yubin with the usual lavish VIP suite that was more like a five star hotel than a hospital room. She had apparently been awake and disoriented when she arrived, but the doctor gave her something to help her relax and she had been sleeping for hours. Yubin’s mother, Somi, and Rena were all there waiting for her to awaken.

“A-ma!” Somi shook Yubin’s mother’s arm “Unnie is awake now!”

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Yubin’s eyes opened slowly, she blinked a few times trying to focus. “I’m going to kill her.” Yubin said.

_I thought she passed out with her mother. Why would she want to kill someone?_

“Kill?” Rena asked. The comment was bewildering.

She was astounded when Somi clapped her hands excitedly and added “Kill who Unnie? I’ll help you!” _Can’t she take anything seriously? If she was with a guy last night and he hurt her, she’d probably think it was all a dumb mistake._ In spite of her reaction, Somi’s antics had a bazaar way of causing people to briefly forget their surroundings. Rena noticed that it wasn’t only she who stared at the youngest completely baffled by her actions. Seeming abashed Somi amended “She must have a really good reason, or she wouldn’t have said it. Right?”

Yubin sighed and shook her head. At first, it seemed as if her voice had been angry, but then it was just tired “No it’s fine. I just… think I have a stalker. Mom, what you said on Sunday about Kim Jieun, was it true? I mean… Did she really die? The same Kim Jieun from school?”

Somi exploded “But mother said that it was a man who died! Was it your boyfriend?” _Speaking of boyfriends… She really has no finesse!_

Rena thought Yubin agreed, because she impatiently shushed the younger girl. _Yubin has a boyfriend?_ She raised an eyebrow in her direction.

“I don’t have a boyfriend. It’s not what you think. A person I’ve been chatting with claims to be Kim Jieun.” It was curious to see Yubin choke; she rarely showed these kinds of emotions to Rena or anyone else for that matter. Even as she thought it, large
tears dampened the white fabric of Yubin’s hospital gown. “We were good friends, or at least I thought we were. You mean to tell me she’s really dead?”

Rena didn’t exactly understand the relationship between Ha Yubin and Kim Jieun, but it was pretty clear that the other girl was someone special. She never knew what to say in these situations. It was as if simple words weren’t good enough, so she said nothing. She wanted to comfort, but really what could she say? It wasn’t her pain, and it was pain she knew absolutely nothing about.

Yubin’s mother chimed in but she did so with trepidation “She committed suicide, but this is really old news. I can’t believe you didn’t know.”

“When did it happen?”

“Oh I don’t know… Maybe a year after you left school?”

“A year! Exactly… I was already in Seoul. I didn’t really pay attention to what was happening in Daejeon after I signed my contract. I didn’t realize.”

Finally, having a moment of insight that might shift the conversation to a potentially dangerous matter she added “So if your ‘boyfriend’” she gave Somi an accusing look “is really someone pretending to be your friend from junior high school, who has really been sending you all those messages? It’s kind of scary don’t you think? Someone actually knew that you were friends with her before, and that you had no idea that she died…” It was unnerving. *It must be someone close. Driver maybe?*

“Actually,” Yubin said embarrassed “We weren’t friends before. We started talking on Cyworld a few months ago and now we use Kakao Talk. I had to check my
yearbook to remember what her face looked like.” A bit of color filled Yubin’s cheeks, and she looked away. “I don’t know who it could be, but I’m going to find out!”

Somi, unable to hold her tongue this long blurted “Don’t tell manager Beck! He’ll kill you if he thinks you’ve been giving personal information to a stranger!”
Ha Yubin

She should have known. Someone at your high school dies so soon after your graduation, it was the kind of thing a person should know about, and yet she didn’t. Everything from her hometown went right over her head, and in the back of her mind, Yubin wondered how far disconnected from her former life she had truly become. It was hard to guess what a person didn’t know if she had no reason to suspect that there was some kind of information she was missing.

On the other hand, it was just a suicide. In her country, sixty out of every 100,000 people did it each year, and no small number of them were young people buckling under academic pressure. Not everyone who chose to die could make the headlines… but this was Jieun. Why her? She had to remind herself that it just wasn’t possible for the Jieun she’d befriended to be the real Jieun that died, and so there really was no point in mourning. She hadn’t even known the girl, and yet still, a hole gaped inside that wasn’t there before.

Yubin imagined that she would confront the imposter Kim Jieun with a very calm, however firm text message to inform that the charade was up. Unfortunately for both parties, as soon as she started typing her stony façade quickly erupted into accusations that would make even the nastiest of nasty girls blush accompanied by many many exclamation points.

There was no reply.

Yubin attended Choi Minho’s funeral on Tuesday and that night, out of respect for her mourning, her SIITY sisters, family, and manager all gave her the space she
needed to grieve but every one of them made sure that she knew that company was only a
phone call, or in the case of her group mates, a knock on the door away. Her mourning
was a façade, or rather the one she mourned was not Minho, but someone who had died
five years ago. It wasn’t even the death of that girl that hurt her, it was the destruction of
the idea that maybe they could’ve been friends. Now, she was empty. There was no one
left to call her friend. Occasionally other idols, actors, and actresses sent Kakao Talk
messages to condole her; however they would be easily ignored by closing the program.

The next day there’d be several tens of messages awaiting her response. Amazing
how rumor travels and no one wants to be known as the bitch or asshole who didn’t
sympathize with Ha Yubin. Some instead posted twitter messages, a social media
advertisement to say “Hey fans! I care!” Never mind that Yubin had never actually hung
out with most of them. She glanced at the program one more time before closing. Im
Minji from Girls’ Club? I haven’t even met her yet! Yubin sighed. Should I make a list of
everyone whose popular right now, cross out names of those who sent me gifts or text
messages, and send everyone who remains “Thanks for not being a superficial robot”
cards? Whatever, it wasn’t important right now. When if I really had been close to Choi
Minho? Do they think I’d really want a bunch of strangers reminding me that he’s dead
every five minutes? It wasn’t important; it really wasn’t important. She could feel her
chest rising to unleash another sigh. The fact that she was sitting in a hospital bed
wouldn’t help the gossip. I’ll have to send out a mass message thanking everyone for
their concern, and to let them know that I am fine. I’ll be the Queen Bitch of the TV if too
much time goes by without a thank you.
She sat alone in her room staring at the ceiling, contemplating everything that had happened in the past few weeks. Choi Minho and Kim Jieun... dead. She had eaten her dinner in bed; she didn’t taste it. I am seeing zombies. She wasn’t entirely certain if it was the world that was breaking or just her. She hadn’t even bothered to return the plate and her silverware to the kitchen. She was a well documented neat freak.

There wasn’t much she could find about the real Jieun, but Minho had been stabbed multiple times in a locked room. I must really be out of it if I’m not picking up anymore. She had searched Naver for the story on the internet, and police were no closer to catching the killer than understanding how exactly his murderer had escaped. Her eyes moved to the light switch, and a mental echo of the light bulb burning out overhead in a bright poof of glory ricocheted through her mind. The day I vomited.

The room was dark. The only light came from the screen of the laptop sitting on the desk several feet away. As she gazed into the darkness of the room she thought she could see shapes, and demonic faces lurking within. She was not afraid. They were a curiosity, like watching for similar images in clouds on a spring afternoon. “I am not afraid.” She said it to reassure herself. She saw dark things because this was a dark time. She was confronted by a heart breaking mystery. Her friend was gone. That must be the reason. There were no evil things lurking within the shadows. Kim Jieun... Dead. More than four years ago. Insane.

Her mind began to wander, and then sprint towards a scattering of incongruous memories. More than once her hair dryer hadn’t been where she left it, and what about
the time she found her eye shadow open and left face down on the bathroom floor? Had Rena borrowed it, or had something else moved it? What about the hair dryer that had gone missing? Was it supposed to somehow be a reminder to drip dry more often? There was that time when she came into her room to discover that the TV was on. What about the time when her alarm on her clock had been reset to 4:44 in the morning? Stupid pranks. Her misplaced shoes and the toppled stack of magazines must surely be coincidence. They were not the work of some unseen malevolent entity. Never the less, it was odd. She had a very good memory, and wasn’t one to leave a scattered stack of magazines just sitting on the floor. She felt someone watching. Insanity. It must be the stress of the job.

At that moment she heard a loud crack and her entire computer desk rattled as if something had hit it with a hammer. She thought one of the drawers was now slightly open. I am not insane. Quickly, she leapt to her feet. The instant her hand touched the light switch, the light above her exploded in a violent flash and showered Yubin with glass. She hadn’t even had time to flip the switch before it exploded. She yelped, but was too frightened to scream. She backed away until her shoulders were pressed against the wall. The initial contact with something solid made her gasp. She jerked in surprise.

Her computer screen changed, as if an unseen hand moved her mouse and typed at the keyboard. The web browser opened, and was promptly directed to the Cyworld homepage of none other than Kim Jieun. Yubin’s hands shook, her muscles tightened, she was afraid to move from her position. Every breath was a deafening thunder in her ears. She could feel her bottom lip trembling. The word processor opened. Someone or
something was typing. “N...o one…” each key stroke seemed to take a century to appear and yet also sprung into existence like a fork of terrible lightning. When the entity had finished there was a message. “No one will believe you.” She had the emotional impression that someone was laughing a bitter cruel laugh that yearned to see her suffer.

Then her comforter and all the sheets on her bed exploded with life and attacked. Linens were hurled in Yubin’s direction, but instinct took over and she ducked out of the way. The toilet flushed in her personal bathroom. The fork from her unwashed plate levitated, prongs leveled and readied to impale her. Tears began to fall, but her adversary was unmoved. An unseen force grabbed the front collar of her shirt and hurled her against the wall. The fork sped toward her so fast that it imbedded itself in the drywall only centimeters from Yubin’s face.

A pair of scissors from the desk opened, and snipped the air to intimidate. A single open blade was like a giant steel tooth that fixed on her. She could imagine terrible rows of the horrid things in a robotic mouth chomping; removing her fingers as easily as she cut beef with meat sheers at a bulgogi restaurant. There was blood in her mind’s eye. She had palms with no fingers and ragged dripping flesh where they had once been. Her real fingers tingled and twitched sympathetically to the mental vision, and she imagined splatters of red against white walls discovered in the pure white light of the morning sun. All in under two seconds.

The violent blades sped toward her.

Yubin wet herself; hot urine spilled down her pant leg. She was sobbing; the cutters stopped what seemed to her only a millimeter from the skin between her eyes. She
believed she could feel the cool steel tickling her skin. It moved of its own accord and pressed itself to her neck taunting, daring her to breathe.

She sobbed, but at that moment a helpless halo of courage surrounded her “Is this how you killed Choi Minho?” This spoken act of defiance was all she could muster, she collapsed on the floor sobbing and fearing for her life. The hot urine tingled and itched within her jeans; she was humiliated. The scissors dropped to the floor. She shook, and felt completely alienated from reality. A silence descended upon the room that was so heavy that Yubin thought that she would never return. It was difficult to breathe.

She heard typing at her laptop keyboard and willed her self to look at it. The web browser had redirected itself to the private journal of Kim Jieun, a lonely girl whom Yubin had never noticed, a girl who could never be seen because she believed she was both undesirable as a friend and equally unpretty. She hated the Yubins and Minhos of the world. One of the few times she could remember being the center of attention she had thrown up all over the large white tiles of the school’s cafeteria. Jieun had remembered the acidic goo with small chunks of yellow and white spreading out over the surface. Once again, Yubin saw images of her own blood. Red splatters on white paint, they would find her mutilated fingerless corpse the next morning in new uncaring sunlight.

The young Jieun couldn’t have helped it, she had been sick but her parents encouraged her to go to school anyway. The popular kids pointed and laughed. They were beautiful. Jieun had been haunted by the sight of her own tears splashing into the widening puddle of her own vomit. The popular ones never had accidents like that. Jieun blamed them for killing her. They made her hate herself.
The entries that were displayed were full of emotions that were oddly reminiscent of those Yubin had come to share with the ‘imposter’ Jieun over the past few months. Here was a girl who was always lonely, even if every day she was surrounded by hundreds of other students. The others were just waiting for her to make a mistake so they could gossip. They loved rumors that seemed specifically calculated to make her feel terrible. They derived pleasure from witnessing her follies, and lumping her into the stereotypes of the type of untouchable dorky girl that everyone supposedly knew she was. She believed no one wanted to understand, or was even capable of understanding, her aspirations and emotions, and had considered her own soul to be naturally far superior to those around her. As Yubin recognized more commonalities between herself and young Jieun, so too did she feel epiphanies in her second heart that were not her own. Could the ghost read her mind? Did Jieun understand the way her words moved her?

Yubin had no idea how long she spent reading Jieun’s electronic diary, but time had passed and she could sense an epiphany… a sympathetic understanding between herself and her attacker. Her supernatural empathy burned, and she was not alone. Although she tried to click on the next link to read the next entry, the web browser minimized and the word processor returned to the foreground.

Jieun got her.

When they went to school together, they could not have been more different. Sitting in the dark room in the blue white light of the computer monitor, Yubin realized not only that Jieun was dead, but that she was currently the best friend she had in the world. If all of the events in her life had been stripped away leaving only emotions as
base materials from which to build a new story, the young Jieun’s tale seemed like it could have been her own if she had sojourned into an alternate universe.

“No one will believe you” was highlighted and then vanished. It was promptly replaced with two simple words “I’m sorry.” Jieun was right, no one would believe her.

Yubin could see a new sliver of light; her bedroom door opened.
Chapter Three – Firelines and Fox Tails

Kim Jieun

“You’re a good person for loving me first,
You were the one that taught me how to love,
[So I’ll] Never forget you” – T-ara – “Time to Love”

When Rena received the call from her father she was there. When he slapped the
top of the table with his open palm and snapped “No one is going to miss you if you are
gone!” she was watching. She watched as Tae-eun helped Rena feel better by listening to
her sing “Hate You” in home norae bang, and she watched as the prettier girl quietly
choked in a pool of her own broken and pureed dreams. Had she known Tae-eun in high
school she’d have despised her on basic principle. She was too beautiful. Now she saw a
new kind of beauty; the charm of suffering and transcendence of that suffering; hope
where none reasonably could be found. The more she watched, the more she knew. These
are all lost girls. Rena, Tae-eun, even Somi… in one way or another. She too had been
lost in life and now she was in death. The patron saint of all lost girls. She laughed
derisively. I’m not a saint.

She chuckled again and said “I am a lot of things, but a saint is certainly not one
of them.”

The one person whom she did not intentionally follow was Ha Yubin, her
childhood enemy. It was strange to feel ashamed for what she had done. It was stranger
still to feel an absence of guilt for being ashamed. I should, shouldn’t I? Feel guilty? The
plan was simple, it was morality. Anything that harmed Ha Yubin and people like her
must have been righteous and therefore good. Therefore pretending a friendship with Yubin to learn and exploit her emotional weakness must have been holy.

Right? No…

A real friendship had developed; an aberrant departure from her morality. As much as she’d have rather lowered her mortal flesh into an ancient well filled with water snakes and deadly vipers than admit it, it was true. She cared for her former enemy; the girl who was not who she believed. I misjud-… No, that was one word she would not allow herself to think. In death, new life, she had become judgment incarnate, and was therefore incapable of that other foul word. Surely… of course.

She sighed her ghostly sigh, and continued to stalk SIITY members as they went to their private party. People laughed and chatted. All in attendance seemed to have a good time. If Yubin just so happened to be there while she followed Tae-eun, Rena, and Somi so be it.

If she had actually misjud-, well she knew the horrid word, Yubin… she would be invalidated. Kim Jieun had been born to suffer, she died to hate. A knot of furious emotion had burned in her center like a rosy bulb at the end of a fiery thermometer. Without it, what could she be? I don’t feel hate now. In memory, she saw Yubin crying on the floor as she tormented her enemy. “I-Is this how you killed Choi Minho?” Yeeees. It was. Most of the living looked like zombies from this side of the barrier that separated the living and the dead. Her traitorous spectral eyes followed Yubin’s pallid face as she passed the modest bar that curved in a wavelike pattern with ethereal violet and azure LEDs. Her not-adversary Yubin was fine in the present, but the sight of her face
punctured the boundary between present and memory allowing the sobs during the previous attack to leak through. *What am I? What am I...now?* If she had been born to hurt, and died to hate, losing this core component of her identity would mean that everything she’d endured had become meaningless. What she thought had been righteous anger kept her alive in this incorporeal form, she was still here, but now the anger was gone. *Am I supposed to suffer in shame for what I have done the rest of my life?*

“Am I?”

There was no response because she was alone in the world of souls. The underworld did not crawl with restless spirits. In fact, even though the physically dead greatly outnumbered the living, very few individuals continued their lives as spirit entities on this plane of existence. Of those she had met, most preferred to dwell in communal lairs – family shrines or sites of tremendous death and pain – hospitals, former brothels for comfort women, sunken ships, and military bases. A few followed specific individuals who had become their anchors for a few months at a time. A few ghosts chose to stay in their old homes, or temples. Almost none chose to drift throughout the cities as she did, alone, for years at the time.

She did not know why. Perhaps it was just that in life she had been accustomed to living alone. She didn’t know if there was such a thing as moving on, although she could sense that it was possible to become nothing. She’d seen no evidence of Heaven or Hell, although where she stood might be Purgatory, only it didn’t feel like Purgatory, not that she had any way to know what Purgatory should feel like.
Jieun could also see firelines – the name she gave to streaks of energy that represented a person’s life force, and that of the world around her. The people attending the party pulsed with them as they mingled. Non-sentient lines in the natural world were white, hot, and aggressive. Both could be touched, as she could touch any person at this party, but natural firelines burned on contact. The lines that made spirits were gentler, woven into intricate patterns like thousands of colored threads composing a single hanbok. The substance created by these patterns was called plas, or spirit matter. In spite of the fact that the living appeared to be animated corpses from this side of the barrier, they were lambent spirits; real lifeless bodies were as dark coal by comparison. The few times she had the chance to watch a person die their personal ‘light’ became blurry in the minutes to hours proceeding their death, then a bright flash on her side of the barrier, and nothing.

Suddenly realizing that she had been staring at Yubin, she quickly forced herself to look at random patrons at the bar. The man she watched was a foreigner, about twenty two, of Latin American decent. He wore a red and gray coat and a baseball cap with a bill that seemed just a little too rigid to be fashionable. “Rapper.” She then thought “Someone from overseas.” She didn’t like him. He wasn’t as pristine as Korean idols, they all went to training camps to learn how to look like bad boys, but foreigners that looked that way? You never knew what kind of criminal you might be dealing with. It was then that he noticed the man sprinkle some powder into his drink. No one else seemed to notice. He then ordered another drink and carried the pair of glasses to Jang Tae-eun.
He spoke to her in English, and although she could not understand the meaning of
the words, another side effect of being dead was that she could naturally interpret the
meaning of thoughts that were used by people to string together words in spoken
language. Had she been a living person at the party she would have likely only
understood “Hello beautiful…. you .. speak… English” but as she was, she understood
the full meaning “Hello beautiful. They told me that you can speak some English.

Tae-eun replied “Ung! I lived in the United States for two years.”

“Well then I’m T-Ro and I brought you a drink.”

She gave him one of her heart stopping smiles and accepted the drink. She said, “I
know who you are and it is nice to meet you.” Under normal circumstances, Jieun might
have actually been happy to see that Tae-eun was making friends outside of K-Pop, but
the drink she held was the one that had been tampered with. A flush of irrational molten
anger boiled inside of the ghost as Tae-eun took her first drink. She swiped her hand
through the stem of the glass, but it was ineffectual. Moving things in the physical world
required more effort, and she had not yet formed the kind of bond required to easily move
things in Tae-eun’s presence.

No!

As irrational as her hatred for Ha Yubin had once been, she felt a sudden and
overpowering need to protect Tae-eun in this situation. These are my lost girls, damn you!
As Tae-eun daintily covered her mouth and laughed, flirting with the foreigner, Jieun
tried to summon the strength to knock the drink from her hand. She tapped into the
protective passion that she felt, this new unfamiliar line of fire; it merged with her center.
Tae-eun raised the glass to take another drink. Jieun roared, and strained toward the vessel with all the energy she could manage. She felt light headed, and pinched her eyes shut; she heard a small satisfying plop of liquid on the ground and took a completely unnecessary breath of relief feeling confident that she had achieved her goal. She heard or rather sensed Tae-eun bark “Hey! Watch where you’re going!” in Korean and began to relax, but when she opened her eyes, she saw that the glass was still mostly full. She hadn’t been able to summon enough force to knock the drink completely out of her hand. Tae-eun thought that someone had bumped into her.


Jieun howled in frustration, though only she could hear. She could throw a grown woman up against the wall, if her intent was to psychologically torture or physically kill her rival, but now that she wanted to accomplish the first good thing that entered her thoughts in more than half a decade, she doubted if she could generate enough force to blow out a candle.

Yubin tensed across the room mirroring Jieun’s frustrated fury. The well worn path of their interaction made it easier for them to sense each other, even though tonight her not-adversary was the one she hoped to avoid. *The shame. How could I have done... YUBIN!!* She had an epiphany. Jieun whirled around to face Yubin whose visage had gone paler than usual. She didn’t want to hurt Yubin, but staring into the other woman’s eyes forced her to confront pain that the site of Yubin’s face could easily conjure; the drabness of their old student uniforms and the people of whom she was reminded; the
sense of being helpless and ignored on the cafeteria floor surrounded by a puddle of her own sick, the heart break of knowing that no one living or dead would ever miss her.

There were older memories. She heard the echo of a sob in her consciousness – her own sob. The cries of an 8 year old who had come home from school hundreds if not thousands of times completely unable to understand why other kids hated her, and why it was so hard to make friends.

The thermometer shaped organ in the center of her chest, for that was what it was even if it was a spirit organ, swelled and throbbed as if it were about to burst under the pressure of so many engorged passions that defined who and what she was. Jieun screamed again, did an about face, and thrust an accusing hand towards Tae-eun’s glass as if it alone were responsible for a lifetime of pain. She imagined the glass laughed at her. The wall of force slammed hard enough against the object that it toppled from Tae-eun’s fingers. The ghost felt satisfaction, knowing with certainty that the glass had cracked moments before it hit the ground.

Tae-eun would be safe, hopefully. The drink was gone. She looked back toward Ha Yubin and felt an uncanny sense of entwined relief and gratitude. Tae-eun complained in the distance about clumsy people and her wet clothes, and retreated to the bathroom to dab off her clothing. In the meantime, Jieun was unable to prevent herself from staring at Yubin. So much hurt the woman’s face could inspire, and yet she had become a friend. What exactly was the nature of their relationship?

She put a ghostly hand on Yubin’s shoulder and said “Thank you. I really am sorry for what I did to you. I want to make it up and… I think… we just saved Tae-eun.”
She began to channel a tendril of herself into Yubin’s mobile phone to send her a ka-tok message. *God texting Yubin is so much easier.* Electricity however, was a slow vehicle compared to the speed of thought. Before she could even begin to craft the message she heard “I know, and I love you too.”

*Love?* She hadn’t said that, but Yubin apparently understood how hard it had been for her to say those words. She hadn’t realized Yubin could hear them. The other woman’s undead looking lips smiled, but they never formed the vocalization that Jieun heard. *How did that happen?* She wasn’t certain she had ever been loved.

There was a light emptiness in the air surrounding Jieun. It was the void of expending so much fiery passion. The amount of energy required to knock the drink from Tae-eun’s hands could have killed Yubin, Minho, or any other member of her former school’s elite twenty times over. *Why am I just a weapon?* The world seemed hazy, and she became lost in thought.

When she finally snapped out of it she saw Tae-eun again leaving the party with this T-Ro, two empty glasses were on the counter; the ghost felt cold. *Stupid girl! Don’t you realize!*  

Forgetting about Yubin and the other, Jieun slipped into the limousine with Tae-eun and the foreign celebrity. It was very clear to Jieun that Tae-eun tried to explain to the man that in Korea recreational drugs were almost unheard of, but apparently he was unable to grasp her meaning. He blew a very small pinch of white powder in her face and she silenced… Moments later, her eyes became unfocused, and he removed nose plugs that he had apparently been wearing all evening.
“Now that you’ve met my friend Burundanga things should be easier. Don’t worry I’ll get you home safe in the morning.”

Tae-eun smiled and said. “Okay.”

“Why don’t you give me your cell phone?”

“My phone?” Tae-eun asked.

“Give me the damn phone!”

“Okay.” Tae-eun did.

T-Ro opened the mobile phone app and said “Give me a kiss for a picture.”

Tae-eun complied, but not in her usual professionally seductive way. It was as if she had lost the ability to refuse or even question direct commands, yet her eyes seemed otherwise lucid. T-Ro took a picture of her lips on his. He switched to video mode and said “Tell me that you love me.”

“I love you.” Said Tae-eun.

He tapped the screen to start recording. “Tell me you love me and give me a peace sign.” He demonstrated, and filmed the displays of affection. He told her to kiss him and she complied, but did so in a way that she seemed oddly cognizant. She was just… unable to refuse a direct request.

It was eerie to watch. As he reached for his zipper, Tae-eun’s light began to blur. Her fireline began to flicker and her eyes went out of focus. Shit! Tae-eun fell to the side, and the foreigner made similar exclamations. Tae-eun was dying. Jieun didn’t know if it was possible to stop the dying process once the light began to weaken and blur as Tae-eun’s did. She tried to shake the woman’s shoulder but of course it was ineffective.
No! No no no no no no no... Jieun moaned. I’ll never wish I was pretty and popular again. Desperate and acting more on instinct than actual knowledge, Jieun… stepped into Tae-eun as if she were going to possess her, but did not shove Tae-eun’s spirit completely out of the way. It was a bit like spooning when ‘spooning’ to her actions could be likened to ‘a bit wet’ in the tumult of summer monsoon season. As the pretty girl’s spirit blurred and began to separate from Tae-eun’s body, Jieun reinforced those bonds in a protective sleeve of her own spirit energy.

“Ughh!!” She and Tae-eun cried in unison; the process was excruciating.

This was not a real possession, in the way that she had taken control of Yubin on several occasions… A healthy person’s body had already been set in motion. It didn’t need special instructions to keep on going. Tae-eun was dying. Her organs wanted to stop moving; to let them continue along the path they had been set upon would bring disaster. Jieun had to make a conscious effort to keep them moving. Nearly every heart beat and every breath needed her conscious attention. It was more like possessing a computer that had not already been running when she slipped in, than a living person.

The effort took all of her willpower and concentration as she denied Tae-eun’s spirit the liberty to separate itself from her body. Mortal and not-so-avenging ghost alike became unaware of their surroundings. Like a thousand armed goddess Jieun could imagine her hands gripping Tae-eun’s heart, squeezing, using her own energy to make it beat so it no longer had to use energy of its own. Another set of arms forced the girl’s lungs to rhythmically expand and collapse, though they did not want to. The girl’s body
wanted to do none of the things that Jieun forced it to do, but she wasn’t about to let her
die now that she had been claimed.

You are mine and you are not allowed to die.

* * * *


Squeeze. Thump-thump. Breathe in. Breathe out. Jieun had no sense of how long she had
been forcing this pattern, until she saw a white light, and then felt a furry clawed hand
pulling her shoulder.

“No!” she shrieked, and tried to force herself back into Tae-eun’s body.

“Shhhhhhhhh…” said the other voice. It was gentle.

“I … won’t let …her… die!” She reached for Tae-eun’s body, but the unknown
entity pulled her farther back. She saw Tae-eun’s light wink out. The girl was gone.

“What is wrong with you! I was saving - ” She turned sharply and gasped upon
seeing the creature lurking behind her. An anthropomorphic fox-woman with one.. two..
three… four… nine tails sat on one of the side seats between Jieun and Tae-eun’s body
and the shielded driver of the stretch limousine. Jieun knew that the creature was part of
the spirit world, because she did not seem a corrupt interpretation of a living being. She
was, in fact, resplendent.

“You did.” The fox said in ‘as a matter of fact’ tones. “My granddaughter will
live.”

“Gumiho! Trickster! She just died! Didn’t you see her fading light?”
“She’s not dead, and yes, yes I am.” The fox matron grinned with a tongue lolling out of one side of her mouth.

“Trickster!” She wanted to check on Tae-eun but that would mean turning her back on the fox spirit. She knew what she had seen. Tae-eun’s firelines had just winked out of existence. There was nothing she, or anyone else could do to save her.

“Don’t be such a babo. Tae-eun lives, if you just get it into your head to look at her, you will see.”

Alive like me? Come to think of it, she hadn’t seen the blinding blue-white flash that had accompanied other deaths, the white she saw was more of a glow. Tae-eun might have become a restless ghost and… and… well preventing the girl from dying was one thing, but Jieun wasn’t at all ready to accept her as an eternal traveling companion. If the idol lived on as a ghost she’d take her to the hospital, find her a nice little community to live in with friends who liked her. She most certainly would not invite her to become an eternal partner. There were limits to how much a soul could reform in one night.

“I thought you said I saved her. If I just made her like me by accident because of what I just did, I am not…”

“Turn around” the fox woman said.

“So you can eat my liver? Not a chance! Never trust a gumiho.”

“You don’t have a liver.” That struck the ghost girl as an extremely low blow.

“You’re not a man, nor are you alive. Besides, those stories were completely exaggerated. You get hungry one time, instincts kick in and… Anyway. Certainly a
human like you has never been misjudged.” The fox woman motioned a clawed finger in a twirling motion. “You bought me enough time to repair and awaken her.”

“Awaken?”

The fox woman responded with the same twirling motion of her finger. Jieun finally relented, and faced Tae-eun.

“You humans trick yourselves more than we ever did.” The fox laughed, Tae-eun was naked and covered in blood. There seemed an exceptional concentration of it on the quivering woman’s lips, chin, hands and chest. Nevertheless, she seemed unwounded. Her shredded clothes sat in a crimson lump on the limousine floor and where there was once a solid roof in the vehicle, metal seemed to have burst upward and outward. Jieun and the fox who crept closer, could see the night sky. The fox continued “That is... if that is what you still are.”

All of this, the unexpected carnage was too much for Jieun to process, so she left the last comment unanswered.

“Where’s the foreigner and the driver?”

The fox woman gave Jieun another one of her animal grins with her long pink tongue lolling out of her mouth. “The driver has no doubt run half way to Busan by now in his very poopy slacks. The foreigner however...” She cocked her head to one side, and motioned outside the vehicle. Jieun pushed her head and shoulders through the top of the vehicle and saw a nearly unidentifiable mutilated corpse, both legs were missing and one arm. T-Ro’s face looked more like a platter of samgyap-sal than human flesh. She lowered her head back into the vehicle and looked to the delirious shivering Tae-eun.
“One blessing she may have is that she won’t remember much of this… that drug he gave her… nasty stuff.”

“You did this?”

“All I did was repair her spirit, which you, thankfully, held to her body until I arrived. Not many people like you could have managed it. Have we been practicing?”

The fox grinned and winked, but Jieun found herself annoyingly reminded of her shame and loss of identity. “All of this…” She motioned to giant claw marks in the upholstery that Jieun hadn’t taken in before. “Was Tae-eun. She’s not actually my granddaughter. She’s my great great great great grand daughter.”

Jieun seemed confused.

Suddenly growing impatient, the fox woman replied. “Fewer tails. Less fur… usually. Are you just going to sit there gawking, or are you going to help her? She’s your responsibility.”

“Mye?!” Jieun protested. “She’s your grand daughter!”

“Help her.” The fox said curtly, and vanished. Just… like… that. Just as mysteriously as she came, Jieun and Tae-eun were once again alone.

“How am I supposed to do anything with her.” She grabbed Tae-eun’s arm as if to lead her out of the limousine, expecting the gesture to be futile. To her surprise, Tae-eun mindlessly allowed herself to be guided. What changed? People are going to ask questions when they find a mauled, nearly limbless corpse on the side of the road and a mangled limousine.
An eerie disembodied voice reverberated in the air around her. “I’ll take care of the limo. Think fox.” The voice laughed as if teasing Jieun “I believe there’s someone else with whom you have a connection.”

She was unnerved. “I am the ghost. I thought only I was allowed to speak without a body.” When she looked at Tae-eun she no longer appeared to be undead to her spectral eyes, and she had four and a half (one had been partially severed), glowing, spirit fox tails.
Jang Tae-eun

Tae-eun never made it to the ER, however if she had she would have tested positive for toxic amounts of the ‘zombie drug’ scopolamine in her system. Although small amounts could be used to cure motion sickness, larger amounts of the chemical that had been breathed in or ingested could result in the total annihilation of a person’s free will, and the ability to form new memories while the drug remained in their system. It could also result in a person’s death, which in Tae-eun’s case nearly happened.

Instead she found herself in the back seat of a stretch limo cold, and covered in blood. She didn’t ache but she could taste the ruby salt on her lips. It made her hungry. She felt as if she should exit the vehicle, but when she felt her naked cheeks peel from the leather seat she became very aware of her nudity. She paused and only then noticed the… hole… in the roof above her. It was as if Godzilla had reached down looking for a snack and only just missed grabbing her. She felt an urging… a whisper to get out of the car, but she was nude. People would see her. Of course being naked in front of people was nothing new to her but in public?

Fox.

She crawled deeper into the car, when the word occurred to her. Fox. Why the hell was she thinking about foxes? She licked her lips. She tasted blood. It was delicious. It was only then that she looked down at her slender fingers. She could see blood caked beneath her finger nails and Fox. There it was again… For a moment she could imagine her hands much bigger than they were, muscular, and hirsute. A terrible claw was attached to each one of her finger tips. Fox. Fox change. What were these notions?
She reached up and turned on the interior light and gagged. She didn’t see a mere puddle of blood on the floor, it was as if the liquid and automobile carpet combined to make a bloody red swamp. She found the giant clawlike rips in the seat and without knowing why touched them with her fingers.

Her hands were too small to have made them. Why would I have made them? These thoughts were strange indeed. Change! Change what? She touched the tattered leather again with her fingers. Now! She felt heat in her hands… as if they and only they had come down with a deadly fever… They were larger… and hairier… Then the feeling spread throughout her entire body. Sweat beaded up on her brow and her legs grew longer, stronger, powerful, and furry. She saw claws sprout from the ends of each of her toes. There was no pain only… heat… as if her body were melting and reforging itself. She felt panic in her ears. She screamed, but her voice sounded more like an animal’s snarl. She tried to sit up but immediately hit the top of the vehicle. She felt as if she had grown to nearly one hundred and fifty percent of her normal size.

Small. Fox. Small. The strange impulses pushed her again and… without understanding why she imagined her now truly massive hands shrinking down into cute little fox paws. What an odd idea but… if she could become large. Small. Smaller.

Change.

As if someone were holding her hands and guiding her through how to pluck the strings of a guitar for the first time, her terrible hands did change… She felt flushed with heat all over again, like she had come down with the same fatal illness. She wanted to pass out, she closed her eyes and then… she felt healthy again. She tried to gasp and say
“Oh my god!” but all that escaped her mouth was a startled yipping sound. *What am I?*  
*What... happened?*

Just then her Kakao talk broke the quiet from inside her purse. She ran to it, not at all finding it strange to be walking on all fours and pawed the device from inside the bag. A message had arrived from someone called Kim Jieun. *Yubin’s so-called boyfriend?*

“Good job. It looks like I am your guardian. Now, I suggest you steal someone’s laundry and change back so we can call Ha Yubin. She will be coming for you.”

*Okay...* She thought, but all that escaped were baffled fox noises.