무궁화

Mugunghwa

e. morin

山은 녯 山이로되 물은 녯 물 아니로다
晝夜에 흐르니 녯 물이 이실소냐
人傑도 물과 갓트여 가고 아니 오도다

The mountain remains as it was, but the water is not the same.
Flowing day and night, how could it be the water of old?
Even the great are like the water: they depart and never return.

— 황진이 (黃眞伊), HWANG JIN-I

CONTENTS

Title Page
Epigraph
Act 1
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Act 2
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Act 3
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Act 4
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Epilogue
Glossary
Want Free Books?

ACT 1

CHAPTER 1

The basket had once been a book. I was having trouble forgiving the person who had cut it up.

In nineteenth-century Joseon, used paper could be cut into strips, twisted into cords, and woven into household objects, a technique called *jiseung*. It was a sensible use of valuable paper.

I had a shelf of university textbooks at home that I had not opened since graduating, while new books piled up on the floor beside it. I was in a poor position to complain about someone making use of an old book.

Still, I would have liked a complete sentence.

The basket on my worktable was shallow and round, with a thick rim. I supported the base as I turned it, feeling the ridges of the cords through my gloves. It was lighter than it looked. Most of the paper had darkened to brown. A few printed *hanja* characters remained visible, turning sideways or disappearing into the weave just as they began to look useful.

I enlarged my close-up on the screen. Two complete characters were visible near the base. I could read both, but together they told me very little; the surrounding words were folded inward.

Perhaps the book had already been falling apart before anyone cut it.

The measurements and condition check were finished. I could have closed the record. Instead, I searched for the two characters together to see whether they would lead me to a title. They appeared in more books than I had hoped. I went back to the photograph, trying to make out enough of the next character to narrow the results.

I couldn’t read it with any confidence. I entered the two characters in the record, attached the close-up, and noted the source text as unidentified. Then I returned the basket to its padded tray.

The next object was a wooden box from an earlier donation. I opened its record.

At noon, I went to the staff cafeteria. The woman behind the counter put an extra piece of rolled omelette beside my fish. She had stopped asking whether I wanted it after my second week. I thanked her and carried my tray to a table by the window.

I was still thinking about the box. According to its record, it had belonged to “the donor’s grandmother.” The donor’s name had been entered in full. I thought we could spare a little room for hers.

Her name had been in the papers for that donation all along. I had found it while checking something else, then gone back and added it to the catalogue, with a reference to the document. Finding the document again had taken longer than making the correction. It usually did.

This was much of my job in collections at the Seoul Museum of History. I was one of the junior staff, on a one-year contract, and I spent considerably more time reading other people’s paperwork than I had expected when I began studying history.

I ate two pieces of the omelette while they were still warm. My salary covered the rent and the ordinary expenses, with a little left for savings. I would have preferred a permanent job, but the work suited me.

Lee Subin came over with her tray. I moved my glass, and she sat opposite me.

“She gave you extra again,” Subin said.

I pushed the piece of omelette I had kept to the edge of my tray.

“You can have that.”

“Are you sure?”

“No. Take it quickly.”

Subin worked at the table next to mine. We usually ate together, though her idea of lunchtime depended on how close she was to finishing something. She took the work seriously and complained about the museum freely, often in the same conversation. When she was away, I kept finding things I wanted to tell her.

“Can you read my collection description when we get back?” she asked.

“The one from yesterday?”

“I’ve changed the opening. I’m not sure it’s clearer.”

“Send me both versions.”

“Just the first paragraph of each. Hyejin wants it by three.”

“I’ll look after lunch.”

She took out her phone and sent them over. I had heard enough about the description over the past two days to know which sentence was bothering her.

“Did you finish the box?” she asked.

“Yes. I found its owner’s name.”

“The grandmother?”

I nodded.

“What was she called?”

“Han Sunok.”

“Was there a photograph?”

“I didn’t find one.”

A name helped, but I would have liked to see her face, too.

Subin needed the larger worktable that afternoon to lay out a set of albums. I told her I had finished with it.

“Don’t let anyone put boxes on it,” she said.

“I’ll leave your name there.”

Back in the workroom, Subin cleared a space for the albums. I preferred her new opening and told her why. She thanked me without looking up.

Later, our supervisor, Yun Hyejin, came over with a folder. She read my notes carefully, often asking about something I had thought was settled, and when I needed more time to check, she listened to the reason. She also thought I should be applying for positions with more responsibility. I found her advice easier to follow when it concerned the collections.

“Jiwoo. Can you finish your current batch today?”

“Yes. I have two records left.”

“Good. I’d like you to start on the Yi family donation tomorrow.”

She put the folder beside my keyboard. The family had recently given the museum a collection accumulated over several generations: books and documents, household objects, writing materials, and textiles. The preliminary list ran to several pages.

“What documentation came with it?” I asked.

“A list from the donor and some older family notes. I’ll send you the intake photographs as well.”

“Have the dates been checked?”

“Some. The family dates part of the material to early Joseon. That still needs work.”

Behind the typed list were copies of handwritten pages. One had additions written sideways in the margin, and I turned the copy to read them. Someone had added names beside several entries, sometimes crossing out an earlier name first.

“Start by matching the material to the list,” Hyejin said. “I’d like an overview by Friday, with the sources for the dates and any questions we

need to ask the family."

"Are the original notes here?"

"With the documents."

I wanted to see whether the changes had made it into the donor's list.

After she left, I wrote *Yi family collection* under tomorrow's date in my notebook, then returned to the two records I still had to finish.

On the bus home, I considered cooking dinner. There was rice in the cupboard, and I could buy whatever else I needed near my stop.

My mother had taught my brother and me to cook before either of us moved out. I could make a good stew, and I enjoyed cooking when somebody was coming over. On my own, I tended to resent the interval between being hungry and having something to eat.

The restaurant was closer than the supermarket. I ordered spicy pork and rice.

By the time I reached my building, the bag was warm against my leg, and the smell of garlic had made me impatient. I changed and took the food to the low table, moving the stack of books on it to the floor beside my cushion.

The novel on top was one I had started at the weekend. The detective was questioning a man I was certain hadn't done it. I wanted him to ask about the housekeeper, who had disappeared from the story forty pages earlier.

I opened the rice and propped the book against my water glass. The pork was good, with enough sauce to mix into the rice. I ate slowly, occasionally putting down my chopsticks to check an earlier passage.

My phone lit up beside the book. It was my mother.

Can you come for lunch on Sunday? Hyunwoo is coming.

I read to the end of the paragraph, then finished the rice. It would be good to see my brother. I hadn't seen him for a few weeks.

My mother made good use of any sign that I was reading my messages. She remembered whatever I told her and asked about it again later.

What time?

One.

I'll come.

Have you eaten?

Yes.

What did you have?

Spicy pork and rice.

Did you cook it?

Bought it on the way home.

There was a pause.

Bring some containers on Sunday. I'll make enough for you to take some back.

I've still got yours.

Then bring those.

I took the containers from my last visit out of the cupboard and left them by my bag. Then I went back to the book.

A few minutes later, Hyunwoo sent me a message.

Sunday at one?

Yes.

Bring my book.

You said there was no hurry.

That was three months ago.

My brother was four years older than me and answered messages promptly enough that our mother sometimes mentioned it when discussing my other deficiencies. He had a permanent job arranging supplies and deliveries, kept a household budget, and usually knew what he was doing the following weekend.

Our parents occasionally suggested I should learn from him. He found this almost as irritating as I did. I had heard enough about his suppliers to know that I would rather spend the day with the donation papers.

I took a photograph of the novel with my thumb holding my place and sent it to him.

I'm reading it.

I can see that. Most people turn the pages, though.

I'll bring it on Sunday. Don't tell me how it ends.

Depends whether you bring it.

There was plenty of time to finish before Sunday.

When I finished the chapter, I cleared the table and washed up. Then I opened the novel again, intending to read another chapter before bed.

I didn't get far. I was still thinking about one entry in the Yi folder: a name crossed out and another added beside it. The first was difficult to read in the copy.

Tomorrow I would look at the original. Perhaps the family had corrected a mistake; perhaps the object had passed to someone else. Before I put either name into the catalogue, I wanted to know why one had replaced the other.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, I could read the crossed-out name in the original: Yi Jeongseok. The two lines through it were thin enough to leave the characters visible. Yi Seongjin had been added beside it, matching the donor's list.

The handwritten list was dated 1936, with no date beside the alteration. The entry described a wooden writing box, but there were several in the collection.

Among the documents was a letter from May 1958, in which Seongjin thanked his aunt for sending his uncle Jeongseok's writing box. His uncle had promised it to him while he was still at school. Further down, he mentioned a stain inside the lid.

I made that when I was twelve, he wrote. *He said I could have the box when I learned to put the stopper back in the ink bottle.*

Only one box in the intake photographs had a stain inside the lid: a dark patch in one corner, with a narrow streak towards the hinge.

I brought it to my table. The stain was larger than it had looked on the screen. Some ink had reached the compartment below, too.

I kept Seongjin's name in the working record and added Jeongseok as an earlier owner, citing the list and the letter. I noted the stain as well. The box's age still needed checking; the list established only that it had existed by 1936.

I returned the box to its tray, put the letter back with its envelope, and moved on to the next entry.

The next few entries were easier. School certificates gave names and dates, and a captioned album from the 1960s helped me identify faces in the loose photographs. Some appeared at different ages, with different people beside them.

Among the household objects was a sewing box with folded paper patterns inside, one of several entries listed only as “wooden box.” I had begun to appreciate the ink stain.

The family dated a smaller group of books, papers and textiles to early Joseon, based on an inventory compiled much later, with no supporting references. I added a question about earlier records.

Inside the front cover of one book, someone had written 李玹—Yi Hyeon. The inventory listed the same name beside several books, a chest, and a bundle of papers.

By Friday afternoon, I had sent Hyejin an overview, with references for what I could support and questions about the rest. There were fewer questions than when I started, though some had become longer.

She came over after reading it.

“Which part would you look at next?”

“The older papers. Some of the inventory entries may have come from them.”

“Start with those on Monday. I’ll send these questions to the family.”

I left a slip of paper at the page with Yi Hyeon’s name and closed the folder.

On Sunday, my father opened the door with his sleeves pushed up and took my bag while I untied my shoes. The smell of soybean paste stew came from the kitchen.

My mother came out and put a hand on my arm.

“You brought the containers?”

“Dad’s got them.”

“Good. Can you cut the green onions for me?”

Hyunwoo retrieved his novel before my mother had even unpacked the containers. He ran his thumb along the edges of the pages.

“All there?” I asked.

“I haven’t counted yet.”

“I left the ending in.”

“That’s considerate.”

He grinned.

I chopped the green onions while my mother finished frying the fish. I tipped them into the stew and tasted the spoonful she offered. The potato was soft enough to break against the roof of my mouth.

My father filled the rice bowls. Hyunwoo made room for the pot and put the novel on the windowsill behind him, safely out of reach of lunch.

My mother brought the fish to the table.

“I looked at the trains again,” she said. “There’s an early one that would get us there before lunch.”

My parents were planning two nights by the sea. My mother had chosen a guesthouse; only the train time was unsettled.

“How early?” my father asked.

“We’d have to be at the station by eight.”

“I’d like breakfast at home.”

“We can eat at the station.”

“Then we’ll have to leave even earlier.”

My mother laughed.

“All right. I’ll look at the later one.”

She showed him a photograph of the guesthouse balcony.

“There’s a chair out there,” he said.

“Yes. Two.”

He looked pleased with that.

A colleague had invited Hyunwoo to a baking class on Wednesday. He showed us a photograph of six bread rolls. Five were round. The last had split open and spread sideways.

“That one’s mine,” he said before I could ask. “They all tasted the same.”

My mother asked what had gone into the dough, and he passed her the recipe on his phone.

“How was work?” Hyunwoo asked me.

“I’ve started on a family collection.”

“How old?”

“The family dates some of it to early Joseon. I’ll start reading the older papers tomorrow.”

My mother looked up from the recipe.

“Are you working on it by yourself?”

“Hyejin’s supervising it. She’s sent some questions to the family.”

My mother handed Hyunwoo his phone and waited until I had finished chewing.

“Does the new collection mean they’ll renew your contract?” she asked.

“They haven’t said anything about that yet.”

“Have you asked?”

“Hyejin knows I’d like to stay. She’ll tell me when she knows.”

My mother nodded.

“You could apply to other places while you’re waiting.”

“I’m looking.”

“What have you found?”

“A collections position.”

I had saved the notice on my phone earlier in the week, read the requirements and enough of the description to know I could apply, then left the rest for later.

“Have you sent anything?”

“Not yet.”

“You don’t have to wait for a job exactly like the one you have. Your brother looked at several companies before he found his.”

Hyunwoo put down his spoon.

“I didn’t have a job then, Mum.”

“I know. I’m saying it would be good for him to have a few possibilities.”

I took another spoonful of stew before answering.

“I’d like to keep doing this work.”

“Of course. I don’t want you getting to the end of the contract and finding out there’s nothing after it.”

“It would be good to have it settled,” my father said.

“Yes,” I said.

I would have liked that too. I could imagine doing the work for another year without much difficulty. Preparing to explain to another museum why they should employ me was less appealing.

“Does that guesthouse do breakfast?” Hyunwoo asked her.

“I think so. I’ll check.”

My father leaned over her phone as they discussed whether to book the room with breakfast included.

I finished the fish, glad of the change of subject. I would still have to read the rest of the notice.

After lunch, my parents returned to the booking. Hyunwoo took the novel from the windowsill and came with me into the living room. We sat on the floor by the sofa.

“I thought the housekeeper had done it,” I said.

“Really?”

“She disappeared for half the book.”

“She went to her daughter’s. The daughter was having a baby.”

“Did it say that?”

He found the sentence near the beginning, before the detective had even arrived.

“I’d forgotten that.”

“I thought it was the lawyer,” he said.

“Why?”

“He was unpleasant.”

“That would have been too convenient.”

I had liked the ending once I had gone back to check it.

Hyunwoo’s phone vibrated. He read the message and began typing.

“Work?” I asked.

“A supplier. They’re finally telling me when the delivery’s coming.”

“When was it supposed to come?”

“Friday. I spent half the afternoon asking where it was. They said it was on the truck. Apparently the truck wasn’t going anywhere.”

From the other room, my mother called to ask whether the booking confirmation had reached my father’s phone. My father read it out to her.

Hyunwoo leaned back against the sofa.

“Are you seeing anyone?”

“Not at the moment.”

I’d met a man a few times the previous month. We had gone for dinner and back to my apartment. I had enjoyed his company. Neither of us had suggested much beyond the next evening we were both free.

“All right,” Hyunwoo said.

He picked up the novel again.

“Where was the bit about the clock?”

“Before they go into the study, I think.”

He found the scene and held the book between us.

“There,” I said.

“We both missed that.”

I read the next paragraph. This time, I could see how the doctor had given himself away.

When I went back to the kitchen, my mother had the containers open beside the pot. I washed the bowls while Hyunwoo dried them.

She ladled stew into the largest container, then looked through the pot for more potato.

“I’ve put plenty in,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“Do you want the last piece of fish?”

“Yes, please.”

She put it in a smaller container with some sauce. By the time I finished washing, she had fitted the lids and put everything into a bag.

“Keep it upright.”

“I will.”

My father came to the doorway with his shoes on.

“I’ll walk down with you.”

I took the bag from my mother. She held my arm briefly as I thanked her for lunch.

“See you,” Hyunwoo said from beside the sink.

My father and I took the lift down. At a crossing, he waited with his hands in his pockets. When the light changed, we walked on. Neither of us said anything for the next few minutes.

At the bus stop, I set the bag on the bench and sat beside it. My father sat down too. We watched the traffic until my bus appeared.

I thanked him for walking with me and got on. From a seat by the window, I saw him turn towards home. I raised my hand when he looked back.

I settled the bag between my feet. Dinner was already taken care of.

CHAPTER 3

On Monday morning, I began with the papers listed under Yi Hyeon’s name.

One short note was dated to the twenty-second year of Seongjong’s reign: 1491. I worked through it slowly, checking two expressions.

It was from a relative, replying to a request from Hyeon for a book. He was preparing for an examination, and the writer expected him to do well.

A family record written some generations later listed the offices held by his father, Yi Gyeom, including an appointment in 1493. His sister’s entry gave her husband’s name, their children, and a reference to another page.

Hyeon was listed between them. His entry gave his name and his place in the household, but nothing about an examination, an appointment, or a family of his own. His name matched the one in the note, the book, and the later inventory.

I followed the reference beside his sister’s entry. It led to details of her children’s marriages, but nothing more about Hyeon.

There might be a fuller account elsewhere in the collection. I noted the pages I had checked and reached for the next bundle.

What had happened to Yi Hyeon?

The next bundle contained letters. I kept them in their existing order as I checked the dates.

One was dated to the ninth lunar month of 1491. It began with thanks for a parcel of pears. The ink had faded along an old fold, but most of the writing was clear.

If there has been any news of Hyeon, please send word.

The writer referred to an earlier letter asking the recipient to make inquiries. He wanted a reply even if there was nothing to report.

Hyeon has still not returned.

A mention of Yi Gyeom farther down the page connected the letter to the family record. I couldn't identify the writer.

I copied the passage into my notes. One expression gave me trouble: it referred to people the recipient had been asked to approach, but I couldn't tell who they were.

Nothing in the letter explained Hyeon's absence. The writer seemed to assume the recipient already knew the circumstances. The rest concerned a payment and the pears.

I noted the date and checked the later letters for a reply. Perhaps someone had been able to send better news. There was none.

Among the earlier letters was one addressed to Hyeon and signed Choe Gyeongmun. It was dated to the first lunar month of 1491. Gyeongmun planned to visit on the fifth day of the following month.

Have the book ready, if you must, but let me eat before you begin.

I smiled and read on.

The book was the Analects. Gyeongmun referred to the passage about walking with two other people and finding teachers among them. I recognized the opening, but looked up the rest: follow their good qualities, and correct in yourself the faults you see in them.

Gyeongmun had found a use for this.

You say that correcting my mistakes does not make me your teacher. Yet you have learned something from them. Must I make better mistakes

before you acknowledge the debt?

Gyeongmun might have made Hyeon's argument less reasonable for the pleasure of answering it. I would have liked to see the reply.

He also wanted his copy of the Analects back. If Hyeon finished it before the visit, he could send it; otherwise, Gyeongmun would collect it himself. He had marked the passage he wanted to discuss.

If it was the same passage, Hyeon had been given plenty of notice that the argument was coming back with its owner.

I recorded Gyeongmun's name and the proposed visit.

I was glad someone had kept the letter.

In another of the family's inventories, Hyeon's name appeared beside a wooden chest containing clothing and papers. The contents were not listed separately, but someone had noted a split in the lid and a repair at one end.

Of the two chests in the intake photographs, one had a narrow piece of replacement wood across a corner of its lid. I marked it as a probable match.

The next photograph showed the lid raised. At one end, under papers and folded textiles, was a cloth-wrapped parcel, partly concealed by a newer wrapper. I could see one tie, but little of the cloth.

I sent Hyejin the photograph and inventory reference, then went over to her desk.

"Have you found something about Hyeon?" she asked.

"A letter saying he still hadn't returned. The writer mentioned an earlier inquiry."

"Does it say where he'd gone?"

"No. But this inventory lists some of his things in a chest."

She opened the photograph.

“Could Eunjae look at the wrapped material before I undo anything?” I asked.

Choi Eunjae was the conservator working on the donation. The intake notes recommended a closer examination of the textiles before they were unfolded.

“I’ll check when he can do it,” Hyejin said. “Have the references ready.”

She confirmed later that Eunjae could meet me at ten the following morning.

That afternoon, Jeong Minjae messaged me.

Dinner tomorrow. Seven? The place near my office.

Minjae and I had been friends since university. He usually supplied a place and time, sparing us several days of saying we should meet soon.

The one with the dumplings?

Yes.

Seven is fine.

Good. I’ll get there first.

Wait for me before you order.

If you’re not hours late.

Before leaving, I printed the inventory entry and photographs for Eunjae and put them with the condition notes.

Eunjae had cleared the larger worktable by ten. Beside the chest were two shallow trays and a camera stand. I laid out the inventory and intake photographs.

“Keep the wrappers with their contents for now,” he said.

We worked from the group numbers I had marked on the photographs, recording each layer before moving it.

The upper layers held papers in reused envelopes and folded cotton garments. Eunjae paused over a bundle wrapped in pieced cloth. A darker strip covered one edge, stitched through an older row of holes.

“A repair,” he said.

He followed the stitching around the corner and beneath the label the family had tied on for the donation. We moved the bundle into a tray.

At the bottom of the chest, at one end, was a smaller parcel. Its outer wrapper was the newer cloth I had seen in the photograph, patched at the corners and held closed with a goreum, the ribbon tie from a jacket, knotted around it. Through a worn patch, an older layer of cloth showed underneath.

“Can we open it?”

“Some of it. Let’s get it supported first.”

He slid a thin board beneath the parcel while I held the surrounding material clear. Once it was on the table, he examined the underside and folded edges before loosening the knot. The outer wrapper was sturdy enough to fold back completely.

The inner wrapping was older and softer, folded loosely around its contents. Eunjae eased the nearest fold back onto a small roll of tissue.

“That’s as far as this edge should go.”

Through the opening, a narrow slip of paper lay on a folded garment, one end tucked beneath the cloth. The writing was clear.

Yi Hyeon. Do not discard.

Eunjae glanced at the inventory.

“The same name?”

“Yes.”

With Eunjae holding the fold in place, I photographed the slip as we had found it. Then he helped me lift it onto a sheet of tissue. The back was blank.

I copied the wording into the parcel's record. There was no date or writer's name, and the garment would need to be assessed separately.

Someone had repaired the wrapping and kept the little paper inside. They might have known Hyeon's story, or only that the parcel was to be preserved. I wondered who had written the instruction, and whether they had imagined anyone would still be following it this long after.

I gave the pieces working references under the parcel's number, linking them to one another and to the photographs of their original arrangement.

We moved the garment on its board, still in its inner wrapping, onto a lined tray. Eunjae held the open edge while I lifted back one side to examine the sleeve and the seam beneath it. Near the wrist, a small repair drew two worn edges together. The lower part of the garment remained folded.

"Leave those folds until I've had another look," he said. "You can finish photographing what we've exposed."

He checked the board and tissue and returned to his other examination.

I photographed the exposed sections and sent him close-ups of the repairs. The goreum lay beside the outer wrapper, and the slip lay face up on its tissue in a small tray.

Before leaving, I took one final photograph of the garment as it lay. One sleeve was folded across the body of the garment, its cuff resting against a seam, with one edge of the cuff tucked underneath.

I saved the image with the day's photographs.

Minjae moved his bag off the chair when I arrived. His hair was shorter than last time, and he touched the side of it as I sat down.

“Too short?”

“It looks good.”

“Seoyeon said that too. Then she told me to stop checking it.”

Seoyeon was his girlfriend and, by now, a friend of mine too.

We ordered our usual noodles and a plate of dumplings. Minjae had spent the past month redesigning a restaurant booking page. I’d tested an earlier version for him and had somehow made reserving a table more complicated than it needed to be.

“Did you get it working?”

“Finally. We moved the option to change a reservation beside the booking time. People actually found it.”

“What did they do before?”

“Cancelled and started again.”

The dumplings arrived while he was explaining another change his colleague wanted. I knew which colleague before he said the name. He moved the sauce between us.

“Do you have to make it?”

“Probably. Then we’ll test it again.”

Once our noodles came, he put his phone away.

“Did you watch the trailer I sent you?”

“The film about the band? Yes. I’m not sure I could spend two hours with that singer.”

“He’s supposed to be irritating.”

“That still leaves me spending two hours with him.”

Minjae thought the drummer looked more interesting. Then he imitated the singer’s apology from the trailer, delivering it with considerably more anger than the actor had.

I laughed. “That’s not how he said it.”

Minjae tried again, lowering his voice when the waitress passed.

“So,” he said, “Saturday? Want to see it?”

I’d been looking forward to spending Saturday at home.

“I don’t know if I want to go out twice this week.”

“Just the film. We don’t have to do anything afterwards.”

I did want to see it. If we left it unsettled, I’d probably wait until I could watch it at home.

“What time?”

He checked the showings.

“Four twenty. Same cinema as last time.”

That left most of the day free, and I could be home for dinner.

“All right.”

He turned his phone towards me so I could choose our seats. I picked two near the middle, and he booked them.

I put the time in my calendar, then reached for the dumplings. There were two left. Minjae took one and pushed the plate towards me.

On Wednesday morning, I opened Tuesday’s final photograph before continuing with the garment.

In the photograph, the cuff’s edge was folded underneath. On the tray, it had turned back a little, exposing a narrow strip of the inside.

The sleeve still lay across the folded body in the same position. The outer wrapper and tie were on their separate supports.

I must have adjusted the cuff after taking the picture, though I couldn’t remember going back to it before leaving.

I checked the timestamps. It was the last image, and my notes recorded no later adjustment.

Before touching the cloth, I photographed the tray from the same position and took a closer view of the cuff. The small repair near the wrist lined up in both days' images. Only the cuff's edge lay differently.

I recorded the change with references to both days' photographs. If I had moved it, I should have recorded that too.

I asked Eunjae to look.

"I think I moved it after the last photograph," I said. "There's nothing about it in yesterday's notes."

He looked at the image, then bent over the tray.

"Have you moved any of the supports since then?"

"No."

He examined the edge of the sleeve and the support beneath it.

"Nothing seems to have shifted underneath," he said. "It's supported where it is now. Leave that edge alone until I've looked at the other folds."

I left the garment and returned to the letters.

I found a reply dated before the note about the book. The writer addressed Hyeon as his nephew and referred to him as a jinsa.

The title meant Hyeon had already passed the lower literary examination in poetry and composition. The letter mentioned his studies at Seonggyungwan, which had not given him an official post. He was now preparing for a byeolsi, a special literary examination that could lead to one.

Hyeon had sent an essay for criticism and asked whether he ought to change the opening.

Your argument is sound, but you take too long to reach it. Begin with the question you were asked.

I had received much the same advice at university. There had usually been a paragraph I was reluctant to lose.

His uncle recommended two passages to reread and asked for a revision before their next meeting. He wished Hyeon success in the examination and asked to hear the result.

I laid the reply beside the note about the book. He had already succeeded at something difficult, and was asking for help with what came next.

The essay itself wasn’t with the letter. I read the opening comment again. At least the argument had been sound. I could picture him rereading that first line of the reply before starting on the corrections.

CHAPTER 4

On Thursday morning, the goreum lay across the garment's exposed sleeve. Its separate support, beside the outer wrapper, was empty.

One end rested near the cuff; the other extended beyond the sleeve onto the lined tray.

In Tuesday's and Wednesday's photographs, the tie lay on its own support with both ends visible. The support was still in the same place.

Eunjae might have needed to look at it alongside the cloth. I looked for a note beside the tray, but found nothing to explain the change.

I could have forgotten an adjustment to the cuff. This would have meant picking up something I had set aside and laying it across the sleeve. I remembered leaving it on its own support.

I took a photograph before touching anything, including the empty support in the frame. Then I left the arrangement as it was and went to find Eunjae.

Eunjae came back to the table with me.

"I haven't moved it," he said. "I looked at the cuff with you yesterday, but left the goreum alone."

I showed Hyejin the photographs and explained the two changes.

"The cuff may have been me," I said. "Do you know if anyone else has worked on these pieces?"

"Not that I know of. I'll ask."

Subin had seen the trays but hadn’t touched them. No one else we asked could explain how the tie had come to be on the sleeve.

I had expected someone to say they had put it there.

“Let’s use the examination room for the next photographs,” Hyejin said. “You can stay with the material until you’ve finished.”

The first morning the room was free was Monday. Eunjae would help me arrange the garment before I photographed it. Each adjustment and the name of whoever made it would go into the handling record. No other work on the pieces would take place during the session.

I returned to matching the twentieth-century family letters to the donor’s list and finishing descriptions.

On Friday morning, nothing had moved. I photographed the tray anyway.

Later, Eunjae assessed the remaining folds and showed me where the cloth would need support. We could extend the sleeves and open the front for Monday’s photographs.

Before leaving, I covered the tray and put the garment’s references together with those for its associated pieces.

On Saturday, Minjae was waiting outside the cinema. Once we sat down, he held his bag of popcorn between us.

During the film, the guitarist and bassist kept turning up their amplifiers until the singer could barely be heard. Neither noticed the drummer leave until they finished the song. Minjae started laughing before I did; I could still hear him during the next scene.

“That was the best part,” I said as we came out. “They spent too long on the last concert.”

“They had to let us hear them play properly once.”

“They could have stopped after the first song.”

He began defending the encore. I was thinking about the goreum and its empty support.

Minjae stopped talking.

“What’s up?”

“Sorry. Something at work. A piece of material’s been moved, and nobody remembers doing it.”

“Do you have to go in?”

“No. We’re looking at it on Monday.”

He told me again why the encore was worth keeping. I listened this time. At the station, he was still humming the last song. I knew I would have it in my head by the time I got home.

On Monday morning, I put the goreum back on its support while Eunjae watched. He helped me move the garment onto the larger support in the examination room.

I opened the front along the folds he had assessed on Friday. He supported the cloth while I eased out the sleeves, adding small rolls of tissue where he directed me.

With the sleeves extended, I could see where the wearer’s shoulders would have sat. The repaired cuff was nearest to me.

I set the wrapping and goreum along the far side of the table, each on its own support. I moved the slip’s support beside the cuff, with the writing face up, so I could photograph the name with the garment it belonged to.

Eunjae checked the cloth and supports before leaving.

“That will do for this set,” he said. “Wait for me before you turn any of it over.”

He closed the door behind him.

I photographed the arrangement and recorded the folds we had opened, the supports we had added, and who had made each adjustment. The last was mine: moving the slip's support closer to the sleeve. I added the time and photograph's reference.

At the clear end of the table, I began the description in my notebook. Everything remained in view. Since taking the photograph, I had touched only my pen and notebook.

I looked up to check where the sleeve joined the body.

The cuff lifted.

A narrow gap opened between the cloth and the white tissue beneath it. The tissue stayed where we had put it.

Then the cuff moved towards the slip. It travelled perhaps a centimetre, drawing the cloth farther up the sleeve into a shallow crease, then settled.

I held my pen above the unfinished sentence. Both hands were well away from the garment. The door had not opened since Eunjae left.

I put the pen down and went along the table.

I crouched beside it, keeping my hands at my sides. The tissue roll beneath the wrist had not shifted. The cuff rested a little nearer the slip, with the crease still visible behind it.

Perhaps opening the garment had shifted its weight, or left a fold under tension. But I had seen the cuff lift clear of the tissue before moving sideways.

I held the back of my hand near the sleeve. I couldn't feel an air current. The slip lay flat on its support. The ends of the goreum hadn't moved.

I drew my hand away. I could ask Eunjae to look again, but I couldn't tell him I thought I had forgotten an adjustment.

The cuff stayed still.

My notebook was open at the other end of the table. I couldn't remember how I had meant the sentence to end.

I looked from the cuff to the slip. His name was still clear.

"Okay, Yi Hyeon," I said quietly. "You can stop fucking with me now."

"Then stop touching my clothes."

I looked up.

A young man stood on the other side of the table. He was looking at the garment. His mouth was set, and one hand gripped the loose cloth at his wrist.

I straightened and stepped back, though the table was already between us.

He looked a few years younger than I was. His dark hair was drawn up from his face, and he wore pale clothing with wide sleeves. His eyes moved from the camera to the lights, then past me towards the door. He turned back quickly and lifted his chin.

I nearly apologized. The words were there before I could think what I would be apologizing for.

He glanced at the garment again, as though waiting for me to move away from it.

I followed his look to the open front and the repaired cuff.

His clothes.

I looked back at his face.

I had called Yi Hyeon. Yi Hyeon had answered me.

CHAPTER 5

“Who are you?” he asked.

I had read his name in a letter more than five hundred years old. Whatever had happened to him should have been over for centuries.

My phone was in my pocket. Eunjae would come if I called.

What the fuck was I supposed to tell him?

Hyeon moved, and I stepped back. My heel struck a chair leg. I caught its back before I could fall.

He stopped. A trolley rattled past outside, and he turned sharply towards the door.

“Where is this? Why have you laid out my clothes?”

“For photographs,” I said.

“What does that mean?”

“Pictures. I was making pictures of them.”

“Who brought them here?”

“I did.”

“From my house?”

“No. Please. Give me a moment.”

I loosened my collar. My other hand still gripped the chair.

“Kim Jiwoo,” I said. “I work here.”

“What work?”

“At the museum. People give us things and we look after them. I read the papers to find out who they belonged to.”

It was what I said to donors.

“They belong to me.”

“Yes.”

The answer came out too quickly. For days I had been trying to establish that. He was furious that it had been a question at all.

He asked something else. A few words were familiar from the fifteenth-century Korean texts I had studied at university. I had read them with notes beside me, working slowly through the unfamiliar endings. Hearing them now, I couldn’t keep up.

“I’m sorry. Could you say that more slowly?”

He separated the words, visibly making himself wait between them.

“Who told you to bring my belongings here?”

“The person I work for. We… received them from your family. I haven’t met the people who brought them.”

“My father? Yi Gyeom?”

I knew where the name sat on the page of the family record.

“Your father is Yi Gyeom?”

“Yes. I am his son.” He looked around the room. “We live at my father’s house. My mother, my younger sister. I was there.”

“I’ve read some of your family’s letters. Your name was in them.”

“That is how you know me?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the slip.

“Kim Jiwoo,” he said.

I nodded.

“Some of what you say is difficult for me to understand.”

“You are difficult to understand too.”

“I will try.”

He looked back at the garment.

“And my clothes?”

He bent over the table and reached for them.

“Wait—the seam.”

He put one hand beneath the open front and closed the other over the sleeve. When he lifted his hands, the front rose slightly, slipped free, and fell back onto its support. His hands continued upwards.

He tried again. The garment barely moved.

He opened his hands and turned one over.

“Why can’t I lift it?”

“I don’t know.”

I didn’t decide to go around the end of the table. He looked up sharply, and I stopped.

“Your hand,” I said. “Can I—?”

I held out mine, palm upwards.

He looked between my hand and my face, then laid his fingers across mine.

There was a faint pressure against my skin. I could see the creases at his knuckles. I closed my fingers carefully around his hand, expecting the resistance of flesh, the shape of the bones beneath.

I could barely feel him.

Hyeon watched our hands as he tried to tighten his grip.

“What can you feel?” I asked.

“Very little. And you?”

“The same.”

He pulled his hand away. I had no hold on it to release. He folded it against his chest, covering it with his other hand.

I still wanted to call Eunjae. Hyeon was looking at me as though I might know how to help.

“Has this happened before?”

He shook his head.

The seam I had warned him about was still resting on its support. I had been afraid he would damage it.

“What happened to me?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

He kept his hands against his chest.

“We’re in Seoul,” I said.

“Hanseong?”

“Yes. This is the Seoul Museum of History.”

He repeated the name of the city.

“What year is it?” My voice didn’t sound like mine.

“The twenty-second year of His Majesty’s reign. The fourth year of Hongzhi.”

The same year I had found in the letters.

“We count the years differently,” I said. “That year is 1491 in our calendar.”

“Then what year do you say it is?”

“2026.”

He watched my face.

“Let me write it.”

My hand was still unsteady. I wrote the dates in characters, 1491 above 2026, and turned the notebook towards him.

“This is your year,” I said. “And this is the year now. By the same count.”

He read the two lines.

“How many years?”

I hadn’t written the difference. I had wanted him to see it without making me say it.

“Five hundred and thirty-five.”

“No.” He looked up. “You have counted something else.”

I kept the notebook turned towards him.

“That much time has passed.”

“That is impossible.”

“I know.”

“You cannot know it and say this.”

“I know what year it is.” My voice had risen. I made myself lower it. “I don’t know how you’re here.”

He read the dates again. His mouth moved, but I heard nothing.

“I was at home.”

I waited.

“I was at home,” he said again.

“I heard you.”

He lowered his eyes to his hands.

“My father. You found him in the papers.”

“Yes.”

“What became of him?”

“There’s an appointment dated two years after the year you remember. In the family record. 1493.”

“Show me.”

I took the folder of copies from my bag and found the page. The record was written in Classical Chinese; my notes were on a separate sheet.

“Here. His name, and the offices he held.”

I pointed out the later appointment, then withdrew my hand so he could read.

He went over the line twice.

“Then he was still serving.”

“Yes.”

My knees had started to shake. I pulled a chair to the table and sat before they could decide for me. He lowered himself carefully into the chair opposite.

“What else is there?”

“Other offices. A few dates. I haven’t found a fuller account yet.”

“My mother?”

“I haven’t found anything that tells me what happened to her.”

“You haven’t looked?”

“I was following the references to you.”

He stared at me.

“I can look,” I said.

“And my sister?”

“There’s an entry for a daughter here. Her marriage, then her children.”

I indicated the lines below his own name.

“Okjeong?”

“Is that her name?”

“Yes.”

He read the entry, following the line naming her husband, then the children.

“She wasn’t married,” he said. “I saw her yesterday.”

He stopped over the names.

“These are her children?”

“Yes. Two are named here. There’s another entry farther on that follows them.”

“Did she live long?”

“I don’t have a death date for her.”

I heard how it sounded as soon as I had said it.

“And my mother?”

I shook my head.

He sat back. His hands were together in his lap, his thumb pressing each finger in turn.

I wanted another page with something I could tell him. These were only the copies I had brought for work on the garment. None of it would let him go home and ask.

I put my fingers on the edge of the copy, meaning to look beneath it.

“Leave it,” he said. “Please. I’m still reading.”

I left the page between us.

When he looked up, I asked, “What’s the first thing you remember in this room?”

“You called my name. Why were you calling me?”

“Your name was on the paper beside the sleeve. I was looking at it. I wasn’t expecting an answer.”

He looked towards the slip.

“Is that when you saw me?”

“When you spoke. I looked up, and you were standing there.”

“Did you see me come in?”

“No. I don’t know how you got here.”

He looked down at the family record.

“I had gone to bed,” he said. “I had everything ready for the morning.”

His eyes stayed on the page.

Hyeon looked towards the door.

“I want to see outside.”

“You shouldn’t go outside yet.”

“Why?”

I glanced at his hands. I had scarcely been able to feel them. I didn’t know what would happen if he tried to cross a road, or how I could help if something went wrong.

“Give me a little time. We need to—”

“I want to see where I am.”

He stood. His eyes went to the copy once more before he walked around the end of the table.

“Wait,” I said.

He kept going. I got up and followed him.

“Hyeon. Please stay here for a moment.”

He turned his head, watching my mouth, then looked towards the door again.

His eyes settled on the metal handle. He reached towards it, but his hand stopped just short.

“What did you say?”

His voice was faint. I was close enough that I should have heard him easily.

“I said—”

The edge of his sleeve became difficult to follow. I looked at his face. His eyes were still clear, but I could see the grey door through the side of his cheek.

He turned towards me fully. His mouth moved.

I couldn’t hear him.

I reached for his arm.

He looked down at my hand, then raised his own. For a moment I could make out his fingers between us.

Then there was only the door.

My hand closed on nothing.

I took another step and stopped with my palm against the grey paint.

“Hyeon?”

The handle beneath my wrist hadn’t moved. The door was still closed.

I opened it. The corridor was empty. I looked in both directions, then stepped out.

“Hyeon, can you hear me?”

I waited. Perhaps he was answering and I couldn’t hear him.

I looked behind the open door and along the walls, trying to make out the edge of his sleeve. I had been able to see through him. That didn’t

have to mean he was gone.

“If you’re still here, stay where you are.”

I stood quietly, listening, then went back inside.

The garment lay on the table. I looked at his chair and the space where he had first appeared.

The copy was still out, open at the page he had been reading.

I went to the camera and found the last photograph I had taken before he spoke. The front of the garment had settled into a different fold where Hyeon had tried to lift it. The cuff lay nearer the slip. Everything else matched.

My notebook was open at the other end of the table, 1491 above 2026, in my own handwriting.

Had I been sitting here talking to myself?

I glanced towards the door, suddenly aware of how loudly I had called his name in the corridor. Eunjae hadn’t seen him. Nobody had.

I put a hand on the back of his chair. I could remember his expression when he’d asked to see outside, and how he had looked down when I reached for him.

I hadn’t felt his arm.

If I had imagined him, I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. But if he was still here, unable to answer, I couldn’t just stop looking.

“Hyeon,” I said again.

CHAPTER 6

I returned to where I had been sitting when the cuff moved, then followed the same route to the sleeve.

“Okay, Yi Hyeon,” I said quietly. “You can stop fucking with me now.”

I waited. The cuff hadn’t moved.

“Yi Hyeon. It’s Jiwoo. Can you come back?”

He had answered almost at once the first time. I stayed where I was.

Perhaps he had gone back to sleep. He had been in bed before he came here. I wanted that to be true, but he had still been trying to speak when his voice failed.

He might be waiting for me to do something, and I was repeating a sentence I had said by accident.

I went back to the photograph and enlarged the cuff.

Eunjae appeared in the doorway.

“How far have you got?”

I turned the camera towards him, then remembered that wasn’t what he was asking.

“I’ve taken the whole view. I still need the details.”

He came over to the table, into the place where Hyeon had first stood.

“Anything else moved?”

“The front shifted a little.”

He compared the photograph with the garment and checked the support underneath.

I wanted to tell him. He already knew about the cuff and the goreum, but I couldn’t find a way to begin.

“Get another view of that before we adjust it,” he said.

He stayed while I took the photographs. Each time I lowered the camera, I looked past him.

Eventually he turned to see what I was looking at.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. Sorry.”

He watched me for a moment.

“Have you eaten?”

“Not since breakfast.”

“Take a break when you’ve finished these. Send me the images first.”

After he left, I waited until his footsteps had faded.

“Hyeon? It’s me.”

Nothing happened.

My phone vibrated. Hyejin needed the updated list of references for the material from the chest. I had meant to send it before lunch.

Back at my desk, I checked the list against my notes and added the morning’s photograph references. Two pieces had the same number. I corrected it and checked the earlier entries again.

A colleague asked for the older inventory. I found the folder and handed it over. When I returned to the list, I couldn’t remember where I had got to.

I started from the top.

At lunch, I ate half a sandwich in the staff room, watching the time. I wrapped the rest, put it in the fridge, and went back to the examination

room.

For the rest of the afternoon, I worked between my desk and the examination room. Eunjae came back to help with the remaining views. I could keep my hands where he needed them and take the photograph when he told me it was ready.

As soon as we stopped, I looked beside the table again.

After he left, I called once more.

“Hyeon?”

Someone knocked.

I went to the door. It was a colleague looking for Eunjae.

“He’s gone back,” I said. “Try his room.”

I waited until they had walked away, then returned to the table and sat down.

I opened my notebook and read the last sentence.

Before I could finish it, I looked up again.

Hyejin came to the doorway while I was checking the last images.

“We need to secure the room in ten minutes.”

I looked at the time.

“Right.”

“Have you finished with the material?”

“Yes. I just need to finish the record.”

She left me to it.

I took one final photograph of the whole table, then closer views of the cuff and slip. I included the goreum and wrapping on their separate supports.

Eunjae came back while I was saving the files.

“Can we leave it like this?” I asked.

“On the supports, yes.”

We went over the cloth and supports together. Nothing needed adjusting. I added the final photographs to the record and made sure the files opened.

On a fresh page in my notebook, I wrote down what I had said before Hyeon appeared, where I had been standing, and where he had answered from. I noted how far he had gone before I lost sight of him. I couldn’t give an exact time, but it had been before Eunjae returned.

I left the notebook open beside my bag. Everything I needed for tomorrow was there. I still hadn’t moved towards the door.

Eunjae took the camera from its stand.

“Anything else?”

I looked beside the table.

“No.”

He put the camera away and went out. I could hear him speaking to Hyejin in the corridor.

I stood by the repaired cuff.

“Hyeon?”

I waited.

“I have to go home.”

The words sounded wrong as soon as I said them. I had told him to stay here, and now I was leaving. I didn’t know whether he could hear me explain why.

“I’ll come back in the morning.”

I looked at the slip. If he appeared after I left, he would find the room empty. He might wait beside the table until somebody came.

I couldn't tell him how long that would be.

"Jiwoo?" Hyejin called.

I closed my notebook and put it in my bag.

At the doorway, I switched off the lights and looked back. In the light from the corridor, I could still make out the sleeve and the little support beside it.

I waited another moment, then pulled the door closed.

The latch caught. I locked it and checked the handle.

Hyejin was waiting farther down the corridor. I put the key away and followed her.

I had checked every piece we had brought into the room. I still felt as though I had left someone inside.

I bought dinner on the way home. At the counter, I had to ask the woman to repeat the total.

At home, I put the food on the kitchen counter and opened my notebook to the page I had written before leaving.

There was nothing there I hadn't remembered on the way home. I read it anyway.

I had called his name. He had answered. We had talked for long enough that I ought to have been certain there was another person in the room.

But I was the only one who had seen him.

I tried to remember anything he had told me that I could check. His father's name was already in the papers. So was his sister's marriage. I had shown him the record myself.

He had called her Okjeong, though. I hadn’t found that name. I wrote it down. If I found it somewhere, I hadn’t made him up.

I opened the food and carried it to the table. After a few bites, I remembered his mouth moving. He had looked down at my hand and raised his own. Whatever he was trying to say, he had wanted me to hear it.

I set my spoon down.

The room was locked now. Nobody would go in until morning. If he was still aware somewhere, did he know I had left?

I opened my laptop and brought up the photographs. I had those, a record of what we had moved, and the words I remembered saying.

I began with clothing used in rituals, then narrowed the search to calling someone back.

The results led me to descriptions of chohon, also called gobok. They concerned funerals. The accounts described clothing and the calling of a name.

Several pages referred to books without giving the passages. I found one of the titles in the university library’s catalogue. There was a copy available.

My alumni membership was still active. I looked up the closing time, put the unfinished food in the fridge, and packed my notebook and laptop.

On the train, I read the descriptions I had saved. They began with someone’s death. Hyeon had told me he went to bed.

I had no idea how to get from one to the other.

At the library, I found the book and two titles from its bibliography. I went through their indexes and marked passages on funeral rites, clothing, and personal possessions.

A reference sent me back to another book. By the time I found the passage, I had forgotten the question I meant it to answer.

After that, I wrote my questions down.

Why these clothes?

Then I added another.

What was the calling meant to do?

The closing announcement came while I was reading. I borrowed all three books.

The bag was heavy on the way home. I held it on my lap on the train, with my notebook open above it.

At home, I laid out the books beside my laptop and began with the marked passages.

In the account of gobok, someone carried an upper garment the deceased had worn onto the roof. They faced north and called the person by name, making three calls for them to return. Afterwards, the clothing was placed over the body.

The calling was a last attempt to bring the soul back to the body.

I wrote down the book and page number.

I had called Hyeon beside his clothes. He had answered from the other side of the table. But I had no body in front of me, no account of his death, and no reason to assume that repeating a funeral rite would reproduce what had happened that morning.

I opened the photograph of the parcel before we separated its contents.

The slip had been kept inside with the garment. The goreum held the wrapping closed. I had given each piece its own reference and put them on separate supports so we could examine them.

In Thursday’s photograph, the tie lay across the sleeve. Its support was empty. On Monday, I had seen the cuff move towards the slip.

I checked the dates against my handling notes. Wednesday's turned cuff could still have been an adjustment I had forgotten. But the other changes had brought separated pieces closer together.

I wrote that down too.

It was after three in the morning.

I returned to the parcel photograph. Someone had repaired the wrapping and kept the paper with the cloth. The instruction was still clear.

Yi Hyeon. Do not discard.

Perhaps keeping them together had mattered.

I couldn't establish that from a book about funeral customs. I could put the pieces beside one another again, though. I could keep the cloth supported, document the arrangement, and call him.

On a fresh page, I wrote down what I would need to check before moving anything. Then I added what I meant to ask him.

Come back here, if you can.

I read it once and left the notebook open.

I still didn't know whether he would hear me.

CHAPTER 7

I slept for a little over two hours.

On the bus, I kept closing my eyes, then opening them to see where we were. Before leaving the apartment, I had checked for my notebook twice.

I reached the museum before most of the others and went to the examination room. I unlocked it, then stood in the doorway for a moment before switching on the lights.

The chair opposite mine was empty.

I set the laptop at the clear end of the table and opened the previous evening's final photographs. The cuff was still close to the slip. The goreum and wrapping remained along the far side. Nothing had changed.

I opened my notebook to the page I had written during the night, then brought up the photograph of the original parcel. The slip lay on the folded garment, one end tucked beneath the cloth. The goreum held the wrapping closed.

I couldn't reproduce that arrangement without folding the garment again. Eunjae had helped me open it, supporting the worn places as we went. I wasn't going to undo his work on my own.

I could bring the smaller pieces closer.

I moved the goreum's support beside the repaired cuff, then shifted the slip's support a little closer, keeping the writing face up. I made sure both supports were clear of the cloth.

I recorded the adjustments and photographed the arrangement, then added its reference to the record.

Moving the supports and recording their positions had been familiar work. Now I stood beside the table with my hands at my sides.

“Yi Hyeon.”

My voice sounded loud in the quiet room.

“It’s Kim Jiwoo. I’m here beside your clothes.”

I waited.

“Please come back, if you can.”

There was no answer. The crease behind the cuff remained unchanged.

I had spent most of yesterday doing this. There had always been another way to say his name, another place to stand, another few seconds in which he might answer.

“Yi Hyeon. Can you hear me?”

Footsteps and the faint rattle of a trolley passed outside.

I looked down at my notebook. Perhaps I had brought the pieces together in the wrong way. There might be another photograph that showed—

The cuff lifted.

I stopped with my hand above the notebook.

A narrow gap opened between the cloth and the tissue beneath it. The support stayed where it was.

“Hyeon?”

The cloth settled again.

Then I heard my name, too faint to catch every syllable.

“Hyeon. I’m here.”

For a moment I couldn’t see anyone. Then a hand appeared near the sleeve. The fingers were clearer than the wrist, raised as though reaching for something.

His sleeve came into view, then his shoulder. He stood beside the table with one arm extended. Through part of his clothing, I could still make out the support behind him.

His face was turned towards the door.

“Hyeon,” I said.

He looked at me.

He was there.

His eyes moved over my face, then down to the table. His hand drew back against his chest.

“What happened?”

I nodded, although there was nothing to agree with.

“Jiwoo?”

“I’m here,” I managed.

“I can see you.”

My hands were shaking. I put one against the edge of the table.

“You disappeared. I couldn’t find you. I kept calling, but you didn’t answer.”

He glanced towards the door. For a few seconds neither of us spoke.

Then his eyes followed the garment’s sleeve to the goreum and slip beside it.

“You moved them.”

“I was trying to bring you back.”

I went around the end of the table slowly. He followed me with his eyes, but stayed where he was.

“Can I?” I asked, holding out my hand.

After a moment, he laid his fingers across mine.

There was a faint pressure against my skin. I could barely feel him. I had known to expect that, but I still wanted more weight, something I could hold securely.

“Is it the same?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He pressed his fingers against my palm. I could see the effort, though the pressure scarcely changed.

I looked back at his face.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said.

After a moment, he drew his hand back.

“I was trying to reach you,” he said. “Then I heard you calling. I thought you were still in front of me.”

“Do you remember anything between those things?”

He frowned.

“Between them?”

“After you reached for me. Before you heard me again.”

He looked down at his hand.

“Nothing.”

“Did it feel as though you were waiting?”

“I don’t remember waiting. I don’t know what happened.”

He looked around the room. The family record was back in its folder.

“There has been a night?”

“Yes. I stayed until we had to close the room, then took some books home.”

“About what happened to me?”

“About using someone’s clothes to call them back. Nothing described exactly this.”

“How long were you reading?”

“Most of the night.”

He watched me for a moment.

“I think you may need to stay close to the clothes,” I said.

His eyes went to the door.

“Because I walked over there?”

“Yes. The garment was behind us when you disappeared.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Stay near the clothes for now.”

“How near?”

“I don’t know. I can see you clearly here.”

He turned his arm, studying his sleeve.

“If you want to try moving, we could begin with a single step,” I said. “I could watch for any change.”

“And if there is one?”

“I’d ask you to come closer again.”

He was quiet. I remembered his voice fading before I could reach him.

“I can’t be certain that would work,” I added.

“Then I don’t want to do it yet.”

“All right.”

He looked at me as though expecting more. I didn’t press him.

“And tell me before you move these again,” he said, indicating the goreum and slip. “I want to know what you are trying.”

“I’ll explain first.”

He glanced at the chair beside the table.

“May I sit?”

“Yes.”

I drew it closer, and he lowered himself carefully into it. The repaired cuff remained within reach.

I brought my chair around to the same end of the table and opened the notebook.

“I’ll stay here,” he said. “Show me what you found.”

I went through the notes with him. He stopped me to ask about words, sometimes asking me to read a sentence again after I had explained it.

When I finished, he looked at the garment.

“Does it say how I can return home?”

“No.”

“Then what do we do?”

There were still references to follow. We might find where his house had stood, or learn what happened after he disappeared. None of that told me how to get him back to the morning he remembered.

I hoped there was something I hadn’t understood.

“You have other papers about my family,” he said. “I want to see them.”

“There’s a letter from the year you disappeared. We could start with that.”

I glanced at the laptop.

“I can show you a picture of it here. But the machine might frighten you.”

“More than everything else?”

He pressed his hands together in his lap, then straightened.

“Show me.”

I brought the laptop closer and turned the dark screen towards him.

“I’ve made pictures of the papers. I can show them on this.”

He studied the screen and the rows of keys beneath it, then nodded.

I pressed the button. The screen lit up.

Hyeon gasped and drew back, catching the loose cloth at his wrist. I took my fingers away from the keyboard.

“W-what is this thing?”

“It’s called a laptop. It’s a machine for working with writing and pictures.”

He leaned to one side, looking at the edge of the screen.

“You know printing with movable type? This can do some of the same work. There have been five hundred years of changes.”

I wasn’t sure the comparison helped. I knew considerably more about movable type than about what was inside my laptop.

“And it will help us?”

“I hope so.”

His hand loosened at his wrist.

“Then show me the letter.”

“I’ll have to change what’s on the screen.”

He nodded. I opened the photograph.

“The letter itself is in another room?”

“Yes.”

He leaned forward, though he stayed farther from the screen than he had from the paper record.

“I can make the writing larger.”

“Go on.”

I enlarged the image slowly. His eyes followed the writing as it moved.

He stopped near the top, where the writer asked for news of him. I knew where the next line was.

He found it.

“Still not returned,” he said quietly.

“Yes.”

“They were looking for me.”

“I think so. The writer mentions an earlier letter, asking someone to make inquiries.”

He read on to the end, past the payment and the pears, then went back to the top.

“Who wrote this?”

“I don’t know. I couldn’t find a name I could identify.”

He looked at the writing for a long time and said nothing.

Footsteps approached along the corridor. He turned towards the door and listened until they had passed.

“Who is out there?”

“Other people who work here.”

“Do they know I am here?”

“No.”

“Why haven’t you told them?”

“I haven’t worked out how to explain it.”

He looked towards the door again.

“Who decides what happens to my belongings?”

“The museum is responsible for them. Hyejin, my supervisor, decides what work we do with the collection.”

“And she does not know?”

“Not yet.”

He considered that, then looked back at the letter.

“When you leave again, where will you go?”

“Home.”

“And I stay here?”

I looked at the garment. He had disappeared when he tried to leave the examination room. I didn’t know whether he could get any farther now.

“Take the clothes with you,” he said.

“I can’t just take them out of the building. I’d need permission.”

“From Hyejin?”

“From her, and probably other people.”

“They are mine.”

“I know.”

“Then tell her I have come for them.”

I had barely managed to tell Hyejin that the goreum had moved. I couldn’t imagine explaining that its owner had appeared beside it.

“She might have to tell other people,” I said. “They could move the clothes, or ask someone else to examine them. We don’t know what would happen to you.”

Hyeon looked down at his hands.

“You trust her?”

“Yes.”

“Then ask her to tell no one.”

“I could ask. But I don’t know if she’d agree.”

He sat quietly for a moment.

“Then we should wait.” His hand went to the cloth at his wrist. “But I cannot remain here when you leave.”

I didn’t want to lock him in the examination room again, either.

“There’s someone else I’d like to ask first. Lee Subin. She works beside me, and she’s my friend.”

I also needed to know whether anyone else could see him.

“Does she answer to Hyejin too?”

“Yes. But I think she’ll hear us out.”

“What will you tell her?”

“It’ll be easier if she can see you.”

“And if she cannot?”

“Then I’ll have to explain.”

“Bring her.”

I sent Subin a message. She said she would be a few minutes.

“I’ll meet her outside,” I told Hyeon. “Just on the other side of the door.”

He nodded. I left the letter open on the laptop and went into the corridor.

CHAPTER 8

Subin came around the corner carrying her phone.

“Are you all right?”

“At the moment.”

“That’s a terrible answer.”

“I know. It’s about the things that moved. I’d like you to look before I try to explain.”

She put her phone away.

“All right. Show me.”

I opened the door. She stopped a few paces from the table.

Hyeon looked up from his chair.

She could see him. For a few seconds, that was all I could think about.

“Oh,” she said. “Hello.”

He rose.

“Lee Subin,” I said. “This is Yi Hyeon.”

They exchanged greetings. He spoke slowly, the way he had learned to with me.

She looked at his clothing.

“Are you one of the reenactors? From the museum programmes?”

He glanced at me.

“She’s asking whether you work here,” I explained. “Wearing clothes from the past so people can see them.”

“No.”

Subin looked at the garment beside him.

“Then who arranged this?”

“Nobody. This is the Yi Hyeon in the family papers. The man who went missing in 1491.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I am Yi Hyeon,” he said. “Kim Jiwoo called me here.”

“From where?”

“I do not know.”

“Jiwoo, if you’ve asked someone to help you with something, just tell me.”

“I haven’t. I was photographing the garment yesterday. I said his name, and he answered.”

“How much sleep did you get?”

“Two hours last night. But you can see him.”

“Yes, I can see a man. That’s not the part I’m having trouble with.”

I turned to Hyeon.

“Would you be willing to show her what we tried before? With our hands?”

He looked at Subin.

“Yes.”

“What are we doing?” she asked.

Hyeon held out his hand, palm down. After a moment, she raised her own beneath it.

His fingers settled across her palm. She shifted her hand upwards, trying to take a weight that wasn’t there.

“What—”

Her thumb passed through the visible edge of his palm.

Subin pulled back. Hyeon drew his hand against his chest.

I hadn’t pressed that hard. I hadn’t known it could happen.

She reached for my chair. I brought it closer and held it steady while she sat. Her face had gone pale.

Hyeon started towards her.

“I’ve got her,” I said.

He stopped, still close to the garment.

I crouched beside Subin. She leaned forward and closed her eyes.

“Are you going to faint?”

“I don’t know.”

I stayed beside her until she opened her eyes.

“I could feel something,” she said.

“Very little?”

She nodded, pressing her thumb into her own palm.

“It was the same for me.”

“And you weren’t going to mention that outside?”

“I didn’t think you’d believe me.”

“I would have liked the warning.”

“Yes. I should have told you.”

“I did not mean to frighten you,” Hyeon said.

“I know.” She swallowed. “Sorry. I need a minute.”

When she was ready, I fetched water. She drank it in the doorway, clear of the material, then returned to her chair. I closed the door behind us. Hyeon had sat down again.

“Tell me what happened yesterday.”

I told her about calling Hyeon, what he remembered, and the family record we had read. When I reached his disappearance, he interrupted.

“I was trying to hear you. I could see you, but your voice was farther away.”

“Where did you go?” Subin asked.

“I remember standing there. Then I heard him calling again.”

“This morning,” I added.

I explained the overnight reading and showed her the photographs from before and after I moved the supports.

“And he came back afterwards?”

“Yes. I can’t tell you exactly which part helped.”

She looked through the images. Her colour was better, though she still glanced at Hyeon’s hands.

“Are you dead?” she asked him.

“I went to bed,” he said. “Then I was here.”

“And you’re Yi Hyeon. How have you checked that?”

“I have told you my name.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” She looked at me.

I explained what he had told me about his family and the year he remembered. Some of it was in papers I had already read. I said that too.

“You have books as well,” Hyeon said. “There is one I borrowed from Choe Gyeongmun. The Analects.”

“There’s a letter about it,” I told Subin. “Gyeongmun wanted it back.”

“Have you found the book?”

“There are copies in the collection. I’d need to check which.”

“He marked the passage about walking with two other people.”

“That’s in the letter too.”

“The mark went onto the facing page,” Hyeon said. “He closed the book before the ink had dried.”

Subin leaned forward.

“He drew a line beside the passage. There was too much ink at the lower end. On the other page, there should be the same mark, turned the other way.”

“Did you see him do it?”

“Yes. He wanted to eat. He said he had finished marking it.”

“Can I look?” Subin asked me.

“Of course.”

She stood carefully. At the door, she paused.

“I’ll be a few minutes,” she told Hyeon.

He inclined his head.

After she left, I sat in her chair. He was looking at his hand again.

I wanted to apologize for asking him to demonstrate it. He had agreed, but he had still watched someone recoil.

Before I could speak, he looked up.

“She saw me.”

“Yes.”

“She spoke to me.”

“She did.”

He rested his hands separately on his knees. I stayed with him until Subin returned.

She brought a book on a tray. I cleared space away from the garment.

“There are two copies,” she said. “The other is much later. This has staining noted on some leaves, but no description of the marks.”

Hyeon studied the cover.

“Open it, please.”

He read the exposed page, then asked her to turn a few more. He couldn’t turn them himself. I found the passage in a reference text on my laptop so we could check the opening words.

Then he asked her to stop.

A line ran beside the passage, spreading into a thick, uneven patch at its lower end. On the facing page, a fainter mark reversed its shape.

“Here?” Subin asked.

“Yes.”

He looked at it for a long time.

“I told him he should have let it dry.”

I had been looking at the two marks, pleased to have something we could check. He was looking at a page his friend had spoiled before a meal.

“Have you shown him this before?” Subin asked me.

“No. I hadn’t looked at these pages. I didn’t know about the ink.”

She examined the marks again, then closed the book carefully and sat down.

“I’m Lee Subin,” she told him. “Jiwoo told you, but I don’t think I introduced myself properly.”

“Yi Hyeon.”

“I believe you.”

He lowered his eyes briefly, then looked towards me. I hadn’t realized how much I had been waiting to hear it.

“What happens when you leave?” he asked.

Subin looked at me.

“We secure the room at the end of the day,” I said. “The material has to stay here.”

“And he can’t go with you,” she said.

“Not without the clothes, as far as we can tell.”

“You left him here yesterday?”

“I couldn’t see him by then. I kept trying until we had to go.”

She turned to Hyeon.

“Do you remember being here without Jiwoo?”

“I remember only when he has been here.”

That didn’t tell us whether he disappeared when I left.

“I want to stay tonight,” I said. “Can you help me get permission?”

“All night?”

“Yes.”

Subin considered it.

“Tell Hyejin what happened to the cuff. Send her the photographs and ask to stay overnight to observe the material.”

“Without telling her about Hyeon?”

“For now. She might suggest a camera or want Eunjae involved, but it’s somewhere to start. I can find out what arrangements you’d need.”

“Would other people come into the room?” Hyeon asked.

“We’d have to ask,” I said.

He looked at the garment, then nodded.

“One night,” Subin said.

“For now.”

“And you need to sleep. You can’t spend every night reading and every day in here.”

Hyeon looked at my face. I was suddenly aware of how close the two of them were to agreeing about me.

“I’ll rest before tonight.”

Subin nodded.

“I’ll help you ask. And I won’t tell anyone about him while we work out what to do.”

“Thank you.”

She turned to Hyeon.

“That’s a promise to you, too.”

He sat a little straighter and inclined his head.

I described the cuff lifting in an email to Hyejin, attached the photographs, and asked to stay overnight.

Subin read it over my shoulder.

“Put tonight. You haven’t said when.”

I added it and sent the message.

“What did you ask her?” Hyeon said.

“Whether I can stay here with you tonight.”

He watched me reopen the letter. Subin drew her chair closer.

“Make it larger,” he said. “The part after my father’s name.”

I rested two fingers on the touchpad and enlarged the writing. Subin leaned forward beside me.

“Those are my father’s colleagues,” Hyeon said.

He indicated the lines beneath Yi Gyeom’s name. I had copied the expression into my notes without settling its meaning.

“Men who served with him. They kept writing after they were sent elsewhere. The writer is asking the recipient to approach them again.”

I added the explanation to my notes.

“Again?” Subin asked.

“This letter refers to an earlier one,” I said.

Hyeon pointed farther up the page.

“He wants an answer even if they have heard nothing. My father knew people in other places. If they asked the men they knew, someone might have heard where I was.”

“You think your father asked them to look for you?”

“He would have.”

He went back to the date.

“The ninth month.”

“What month was your examination?”

“The fourth.”

“Five months.”

Hyeon has still not returned. I had copied that into my notebook beside the date. He could see it by my hand.

“I hadn’t gone anywhere,” he said. “I was at home.”

“I know.”

“Does he think I left?”

“He doesn’t say.”

“The letter doesn’t tell us why you were gone,” Subin said. “It tells us they hadn’t stopped looking.”

He turned towards her. She let him consider that without adding anything.

“Is there more?”

I moved to the remaining lines: the payment, then the thanks for the pears. He read both.

“That is all?”

“Yes.”

“Have you found an answer to it?”

I wanted to explain that a reply might be elsewhere among the papers, or lost. But he was waiting for the answer I could give.

“I’ve looked,” I said. “I haven’t found one.”

“My father would have wanted an answer. Even if there was nothing.”

For once, none of us had another question ready.

The screen still showed the end of the letter, where the writer thanked someone for sending fruit.

“The part about me,” Hyeon said.

I brought it back.

He read the request once more. His shoulders had lowered, and he remained leaning towards the screen after he reached the end.

“I’d like to stop here.”

I took my hand away from the laptop.

“All right.”

He sat back, his eyes still on the writing.

“Leave it there.”

“I will.”

I closed my notebook.

My phone vibrated beside it. Hyejin had replied.

Come and speak to me when you can.

“She wants to discuss tonight,” I said. “I’ll go to her desk. Subin can stay here.”

“Of course,” Subin said.

Hyeon thanked her. I took my phone and went.

CHAPTER 9

In her office, Hyejin had the photographs on her screen. She turned it towards me as I sat down.

“These show a change in position,” she said. “They don’t show the movement.”

“I know. I’d like to stay tonight and record it.”

“You could leave a camera running.”

“I want to be there if it moves. To check what’s happening around it.”

She looked at me.

“How late?”

“Until morning.”

“And how much sleep did you get last night?”

“Not very much.”

“I can see that.”

I thought of Hyeon waiting beside the letter. I had left him in that room once already.

“I’ll rest before I come back,” I said.

Hyejin reached for the phone.

“One night. Go home this afternoon and sleep. You’re not working a full day and then sitting up until morning.”

“All right.”

She called to make the arrangements, then wrote down when I would return.

“You can stay. I’ll send the confirmation.”

My shoulders eased against the chair.

“And leave the arrangement alone,” she added. “Don’t decide to unfold it at three in the morning.”

“I won’t.”

“Finish those two descriptions before you leave. I want the recording and your notes tomorrow.”

I thanked her and went back.

Subin looked up when I entered. Hyeon was still beside the laptop, sitting upright.

“She agreed. I can stay until morning.”

“What did you tell her?”

“About the cuff moving. She wants me to record it tonight as well.”

“Record?” Hyeon asked.

“Make moving pictures. Like the picture of the letter, but showing what happens over time.”

“Of me?”

“Of the clothes. I’ll show you what it can see before we start.”

He considered that, then nodded.

Subin stood.

“I’ll check which camera we can use for that long. We’ll need power for it.”

“Hyejin said no more handling.”

“We can set it up without moving the material. Bring your charger and the books when you come back. Get some sleep first.”

Hyeon looked at me.

“You are going home?”

“For a few hours. Hyejin told me to rest before tonight.”

“I can work here while you’re gone,” Subin said. “I have descriptions to finish too.”

He looked between us.

He had stayed while I was with Hyejin. I held on to that.

“I’ll be back before she leaves,” I said.

He nodded. Subin went to fetch her laptop, and I opened Hyejin’s confirmation.

I finished the two descriptions, then went back for my bag. Subin had brought her laptop into the examination room. Hyeon sat beside her, watching her open a document.

“I’ll go now,” I said. “Call me if you need anything.”

“You will come back before she goes?”

“Yes. I’ll come straight here.”

He thanked Subin for remaining with him. She assured him she had plenty to do, and I left them to it.

At home, I set an alarm and lay down without opening the books. When it rang, I packed them and my charger, washed my face, and left again. Near the museum, I bought dinner.

They were talking when I returned.

“And they had already read what you sent?” Hyeon asked.

“Some of it,” Subin said. “I sent examples of my work with the application.”

“You chose the examples?”

“Yes.”

He turned towards me. I had expected to find him watching the door.

“Did you sleep?” Subin asked.

“A couple of hours.”

She saved her work while I put the books beside my laptop. We brought the small table closer to our chairs and unpacked the food, keeping it well away from the collection.

Hyeon leaned forward as I opened the containers.

“Rice.”

“Yes. The fish is grilled. These are cooked greens.”

“I know those.” His shoulders eased a little. “At least I know what you eat.”

“I thought we could start with something you knew.”

“Thank you.”

I set a spoon and chopsticks beside each portion of rice. Hyeon reached for his spoon.

His fingers closed around the handle. When he lifted his hand, the spoon stayed on its wrapper.

He tried again, easing his fingers beneath it. The spoon shifted against the paper. His hand rose without it.

Subin stopped opening her chopsticks.

“It is hardly anything,” Hyeon said.

“If holding it is the problem, I could—” Subin began.

“No.”

“All right,” she said.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

“I haven’t eaten.”

“I know. But do you feel hungry?”

He looked down at himself. We waited.

“No,” he said quietly. “Not yesterday. Not today.”

I had spent the morning thinking about where he would stay, then bought him dinner as though that settled another part of the problem.

He looked at the rice.

“I wanted to eat when I saw it. I know what it should taste like.”

Steam was still rising from the soup. The three open containers of rice stood along the table, and I had been hungry since before I left home.

Hyeon drew his hand into his lap.

“Do I need it?”

“I don’t know.”

I wanted to move the spoon away, but left it where it was.

For a while, we sat with the food in front of us.

“Would you like me to put yours aside?” I asked.

“You can leave it.”

He was still looking at the fish.

“Eat,” he said.

“We can wait.”

“For what?”

I had no useful answer.

“It will get cold,” he added.

Subin picked up her spoon.

“Thank you for bringing it, Jiwoo.”

She took some broth. I followed her, then ate a mouthful of rice. Hyeon watched the spoon go from my bowl to my mouth, and I had to make myself take the next bite at an ordinary pace.

“How is the soup?” he asked.

“Good. It tastes of radish.”

He nodded.

“What else is in it?”

“Kelp, I think.”

He was quiet for a while.

“At home, we made this with dried fish.”

“That’s how I make mine,” Subin said.

“Then perhaps it is the same.”

I separated a piece of fish from the bones and put it on my rice.

“Do you cook?” Hyeon asked.

“Sometimes. Not often for myself.”

“You live alone?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the soup again.

He asked about the greens next. Subin described how she prepared them, and he listened closely, as though a description might be enough. I returned to my rice.

CHAPTER 10

Subin checked the time as we put the remaining food aside. She packed her laptop while I turned the camera's screen towards Hyeon.

The garment filled most of the picture, with the goreum and name slip beside the sleeve. His chair was beyond the frame.

"That is what it will show?"

"Yes. Just the clothes."

"Could it show me?"

"I don't know yet. We can try separately, if you want. Hyejin will watch this recording, so I'm keeping you out of it."

"Show me before you show it to anyone else."

"Yes."

He studied the picture, then nodded.

"It can record our voices too," I added. "I'm turning that off so it won't record what we say tonight."

I switched off the microphone and started recording. Subin checked that the power lead was clear of the walkway while I wrote down the time.

"I'll come here first tomorrow," she said.

"When?" Hyeon asked.

"Around half past eight. When we usually arrive."

He looked at me.

"I'll still be here."

"Call me if you need to," Subin said. "I'll keep my phone on."

“Thank you.”

She turned to Hyeon.

“We can carry on talking tomorrow.”

“I would like that.”

His answer came more readily than it had when I left them that afternoon. Subin smiled, then looked at me.

“Get some proper rest after this, Jiwoo.”

“I will.”

I went with her to the door. She said good night to Hyeon before leaving, and he answered. I watched her go along the corridor, then closed the door.

Hyeon was looking at the place where she had been standing. I returned to the table and plugged in my laptop. The three books were stacked beside it, still full of the paper markers from the night before.

“Are you sleepy?” I asked.

“No. I thought I would be.”

I pulled my chair closer to the clear end of the table. My body had begun to settle into the idea of being finished for the day. I had eaten, and most of the other staff had gone home. At my apartment, I would have been choosing something to read.

Here, I had to stay awake long enough to notice if the cuff moved again.

Hyeon watched me take out my notebook.

“You are tired.”

“A little.”

“What will you do?”

“Watch the clothes. Read. Make notes if anything happens.”

“And if nothing happens?”

“I’ll still be here in the morning.”

I covered my mouth as I yawned.

“Subin told me there is no king,” he said.

I wrote 大統領　in my notebook while I explained how people chose a president. He wanted to know whether Subin could choose for herself, or whether her father would tell her whom to vote for. I explained that her vote would be secret.

He studied the characters again while I described how people judged candidates by their promises and past work.

“A man might promise something he cannot do.”

“They do that quite often.”

“And people still choose him?”

“Sometimes.”

He seemed dissatisfied with that answer. I couldn’t blame him.

He asked about examinations for government service. I explained what I knew about the subjects and promised to find some questions. When I told him women could take them too, we began talking about schools, and girls and boys studying in the same classrooms.

Hyeon looked towards the books.

“Okjeong asked to see the books I was studying,” he said. “She would want to know what they teach.”

“Did you show her?”

“Of course. She did not always like my explanations.”

“Would she tell you?”

“She would ask our mother.”

I smiled.

He asked about my own education. I told him about university, the fees, and the money people borrowed to attend.

“Then their families still matter.”

“Yes. Having money still makes things easier.”

“They can spend more time preparing.”

“And pay for more teaching.”

He nodded. I checked the camera’s recording again. When I turned back, he was looking at my notebook.

“What examination did you take for this position?”

“I didn’t take one. They looked at my qualifications and interviewed me.”

“What did they ask?”

“What I would do if two records disagreed.”

“And what did you say?”

“I’d try to find out why. If I couldn’t, I’d keep both accounts and explain where each came from.”

“Even if one was wrong?”

“If I knew which one, I’d say so. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t choose whichever I liked better.”

“That is sensible.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I would have passed your interview too.”

“I have asked you one question.”

I laughed. He smiled too, just barely.

“How long will you hold the position?” he asked.

“They employed me for a year. They might keep me, but Hyejin can’t promise anything until she knows whether there’s money for it.”

“The work will still need to be done. They should keep someone who knows how to do it.”

“I’d like them to.”

“And if they do not?”

“I’ll look elsewhere. I’ve already found a position I could apply for.”

“Have you answered?”

“Not yet.”

He waited. It was much the same expression my mother had worn at lunch.

“I like working here,” I said.

“You need not leave merely because you have applied elsewhere.”

“My mother said something similar.”

“Was she wrong?”

“No.”

I looked at the notebook. I still had the notice saved on my laptop, and there was no reason I couldn’t send an application.

“Would you answer?” I asked. “Even if you were happy with the position you had?”

“I need not accept it. But I would want to know what the post required.”

I put my pen down and opened the notice.

Hyeon leaned towards the screen.

“What work would they expect you to do?”

I wrote a few things in my notebook, where he could read them more easily: reading old papers, checking records, describing objects. He examined the first line, then went back to its beginning.

“You write it like this?”

“Across, from the left. Most writing is like this now.”

He turned his head slightly, as though the page might make more sense from another angle.

“And in the books?”

“Mostly.”

I opened one to the contents. He recognised the word for rites, but asked me to read the heading aloud.

“I know these words,” he said. “I would not have read them that way.”

“The spelling has changed. Some of the sounds too.”

“This is still eonmun.”

“Yes. We call it hangeul now.”

He repeated the name.

“I would like to read what you found.”

“I can help. We could start with the writing.”

He asked me to leave the book beside him.

I wrote the basic consonants and vowels. He knew most of the shapes before I finished.

“There are letters missing.”

“We don’t use all of them anymore.”

He indicated a place beneath the vowels. I added the little dot: ㆍ.

“Not that one?”

“Not in ordinary writing.”

He helped me add the missing consonants, correcting a stroke above a circle. I drew it again.

“What has taken their place?”

“It depends on the word. There isn’t one replacement for each letter.”

“Show me.”

I chose the heading he had recognised. In the notebook, I wrote 예 with 禮 beneath it, then 의례 with 儀禮. The Chinese characters were familiar to him. We worked through the modern readings.

“The same character,” he said, indicating 禮 in both words.

“Yes. But we write the beginning differently depending on where it comes in the word.”

He asked when that had changed.

“I’m not sure. I learned the spelling at school, not the history of every rule.”

“Tell me if you are uncertain.”

“I will.”

The spaces caught his attention next. I wrote 책을 읽는다 and read it aloud, then added 책이 and 책은 to show how the particles stayed attached to the noun.

“The spaces would help,” he said. “Once I know where you put them.”

He read the sentence again without waiting for me to begin.

We returned to the contents. Sometimes he wanted a word pronounced; sometimes he could read it but needed to know what the author meant.

A term for research materials took longer. I wrote its Chinese characters and explained that it meant things the author could learn from: papers, books, accounts of what people had done.

“The letters you have been reading.”

“Those would count.”

“Write the characters first when there are some. Then I can see what the word is before you tell me how to say it.”

“All right.”

By the time I stopped for water, the notebook page was crowded with characters, changed spellings, and lines joining one form to another. In the margin, I had corrected an explanation that had been too simple.

Hyeon was looking at the book.

“The heading above that one. Let me try it now.”

I brought the page closer. He began slowly, stopped at a word we had discussed, then went back to read it with the rest.

I kept my pen beside the notebook and waited until he asked.

We went back and forth between the headings and my examples. I filled another page, turning back to the first when Hyeon wanted to compare a word.

Between explanations, I checked the camera and noted the time. The arrangement hadn’t changed.

When I next looked at my phone, it was a little after six in the morning. I read the time twice. My back ached, and Subin wouldn’t be here for more than two hours.

Hyeon was looking at the book.

“Could we begin?”

I turned to the preface and opened a fresh page in the notebook. He worked slowly through the first sentence, then read it again once he understood how its parts joined.

The author went on to describe his sources. Hyeon recognised the word for documents when I wrote its characters. I explained the accounts gathered by asking people about the ceremonies they practised.

“He asked them himself?”

“Some of them. He also used accounts collected by other people.”

“Then he must say which.”

“He does. There are notes later.”

At the end of the paragraph, Hyeon told me what he thought it meant. I pointed out a qualification he had missed.

“Only the accounts available to him,” he said.

“That’s right.”

He went back to find the phrase. I rested my elbow on the table.

“Jiwoo?”

I opened my eyes. He was watching me.

“Sorry. Which part?”

“You could sleep.”

“Subin will be here in a couple of hours.”

“We can wait.”

I rubbed my eyes.

“Let’s do a little more. I can still help.”

He looked at my face, then back at the book.

“Then read this part with me.”

I moved my chair nearer, keeping the book between us. He began the next paragraph, stopping when he needed a word explained. One question made me realise I had left out part of a sentence.

“Wait,” I said. “I missed that.”

The letters had begun to blur. I blinked and moved my finger back along the line.

“Read from here once more.”

He began again. I held the page flat and followed him, ready for the next word he would ask me to explain.

ACT 2

CHAPTER 11

Subin arrived a little after eight. She set her laptop down and looked at me.

“I can stay. Go home.”

I stopped the camera, noted the time, and saved the recording. Hyeon watched me pack my charger.

“We’ll continue this afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Leave the book, then.”

I left it open beside the notebook. Subin took my chair and asked where we had reached.

At home, I set an alarm for noon and lay down in my clothes. When it rang, I showered, ate something, and went back.

Subin was typing when I opened the door. Hyeon sat beside her, reading from the screen.

“You look better,” she said.

“I think I can get through a whole sentence without falling asleep now.”

“Hyeon and I have managed quite a few while you were gone.”

Hyeon looked up.

“Subin gives me more time to work out the words.”

“I’ll remember that,” I said, putting down my bag and picking up a pen.

“What is in the rest of this building?” he asked.

“Offices. Rooms where we keep the collection. Galleries showing how people lived here. There are maps and photographs, and a model of the whole city.”

“As it is now?”

“Yes.”

“I would like to see that.”

“I’d like to show you. I don’t know how to get you that far from the clothes.”

He looked at the smaller pieces beside the garment.

“You brought those closer yesterday. Could we take one with us?”

“I don’t know whether one would be enough.”

He indicated the narrow tie.

“That was attached to my clothes.”

“The goreum?”

“Could you carry that?” he asked.

“No. We don’t carry collection material around in our pockets.”

“You could carry it another way.”

“It needs support. And Eunjae and Hyejin have asked us to leave the arrangement alone.”

“Would moving it damage it?”

“It could, if it bent or caught against something.”

“Then cover it.”

“There are rules about moving things.”

“Even when I ask you?”

I put down the pen.

“Your family gave this material to the museum. I’m responsible for looking after it.”

“They could not ask me. I am asking you now.”

Subin stopped typing.

“I don’t want you to damage it,” Hyeon continued. “I want you to carry it to another room, and bring it back.”

“That would still be moving it without permission.”

“I have just given you permission.”

“I mean permission from—”

“I know whom you mean.”

I glanced at Subin. She raised her eyebrows and waited.

Hyeon had a point. He was standing beside his own clothes, asking permission to leave the room. I was telling him he needed someone else’s.

“I can’t promise it will work,” I said.

“Then we can find out before we go farther.”

“You didn’t want to try yesterday.”

“Yesterday you asked me to walk away from the clothes. Now I am asking you to bring part of them.”

The tie lay flat on its support. I could move it without touching the cloth.

“We begin in here,” I said. “If anything changes, we stop.”

“And you stay beside me.”

“Yes.”

He nodded. I went to the cupboard.

“I’ll remember this next time you tell me not to move something,” Subin said.

“You should still listen.”

She turned back to her laptop.

I found a shallow box that would take the support without bending it. I packed tissue around the edges to keep it from sliding, then checked both ends of the tie.

“Tell me straight away if my voice sounds different,” I said. “Or if the room does.”

“I will.”

I lifted the open box and moved a few paces from the table. Hyeon came beside me, then looked back at the garment.

“I can still hear you.”

His voice sounded as clear as it had at the table.

“I can still see him,” Subin said.

I closed the box and settled it flat in a small bag with a rigid base. I held the bag level as we approached the door.

Hyeon stopped in front of the handle. He glanced at the bag, then back at the table.

“Open it.”

I did.

He looked into the corridor before stepping through. I followed him at once.

He turned towards me. His collar was clear. So were the fold beneath his chin and the fingers he raised between us.

“Jiwoo?”

“Yes.”

He took another step, then looked back into the room.

A short laugh escaped him.

“It worked.”

I smiled.

He looked down the corridor in both directions, then turned to Subin, who was watching from her chair.

“We’re going to see the city.”

“The model,” I said.

“Yes. Where is it?”

He had already begun walking. I pointed the other way.

He stopped, looked where I was pointing, and laughed again. Then he came back towards me, smiling openly now.

“Come, then. Show me.”

I went beside him, keeping hold of the bag. He was already asking what we would see first.

I had meant to take him straight to the model. At the entrance to the temporary exhibition, he stopped to read the heading.

“Hanseongbu,” he said. “You have kept the name.”

I explained that the office no longer existed, and the exhibition concerned its work. Beyond the entrance, documents lay in illuminated cases, with maps and descriptions on the walls. He looked around before choosing the nearest case.

“I would like to see this first, if we have time.”

“We have time.”

The label took him a while, but once he reached the original writing, he read steadily. I stood beside him. He was holding one sleeve clear of the glass.

After a minute, he looked towards the lamp above the paper.

“You have put a light very close to it. Where does the smoke go?”

“It doesn’t use a flame.”

He straightened to examine the fitting. I pointed out the wire and began explaining electricity. He listened until I reached the part I could no longer explain well.

“It makes light here,” he said, indicating the lamp, “although nothing is burning here.”

“That’s right. We still have to control how much reaches the paper. Light can damage it over time.”

He looked between the document and the lamp. There had been lights above him since he first appeared, but this one was close enough to examine.

“Does it illuminate the writing well enough?” I asked.

“Very well.” He bent closer again. “I can read this part more easily than the explanation you have put beside it.”

I found the corresponding passage on the label and read it aloud. He listened, then went back to the original. When he asked about a word farther down, I brought up the catalogue image on my phone so he could see it larger.

We stayed there longer than I had expected. Hyeon was interested in the wording of the requests and what the officials had done with them. He explained a phrase to me, tried another way when I failed to understand, and waited while I made a note. At the next case, he recognised the kind of record before he had finished reading its title.

Several papers had been written centuries after the year he remembered. I explained the dates when he asked. Sometimes he reread a passage with that in mind.

One case held a wooden chest used for family registers. He read the lettering, then studied its iron fittings. Scratches ran along the wood near the lock.

“Can you see the registers as well?”

“There are examples over here.”

He compared the open pages, looking for names and the details beneath them. For a while, he scarcely needed me. I read a nearby description while he worked through the columns.

A man passed us on his way out. He glanced at Hyeon’s clothing and gave a small nod, which Hyeon returned without leaving the page. I had seen reenactors in the museum often enough.

When Hyeon straightened, he looked around for the next case. Then he caught my eye.

“You were taking me somewhere else.”

“Upstairs. We can come back here.”

He gave the registers one last look and came beside me. At the stairs, he waited until I had started before following. I kept hold of the bag, and his voice remained clear when he asked whether the upper floor was open to visitors too.

CHAPTER 12

The Joseon gallery was quiet. A woman at the large map moved aside for us, smiling briefly at Hyeon.

He had already found the palace. His gaze followed the main street below it, then moved towards the smaller roads. I began to point out a place I thought he might know, but he was looking elsewhere.

“We used to go along here,” he said. “My father would take me with him when he had business nearby. There was a man who sold paper at this turn.”

I leaned closer. The turn was clear, though the shop was not marked.

“He brought out the cheaper paper first unless my father was with me. Once I went on my own, and he told me what he had given me was quite sufficient for practice.”

“Was it?”

“It was poor paper. The ink spread too much. I took a sheet back with the writing on it so he could see.”

He looked pleased at the memory.

“Did he change it?”

“He gave me better paper the next time. I had to remind him which sort I wanted after that, but he stopped telling me it made no difference.”

I followed the route he traced, trying to connect the streets I knew with his walk. When I asked about a building, he considered it.

“I don’t remember that being there. How old is this map?”

I showed him the date and explained it. He read the description with me, then returned to the place he had indicated.

“The street is still there. I suppose someone could have built it afterwards.”

“A lot could have changed.”

“Yes. I should like to see an earlier one, if you have it.”

“We can look for one.”

He moved his hand back to the turn where the paper shop had been, then lowered it.

We went along the cases. He stopped at books, at a piece of writing he wanted to read, and at a display of writing implements. There, he examined the brushes beside the inkstone with an expression I was beginning to recognise.

“Has someone arranged these as though they were being used?”

“Partly. They also need to be easy to see.”

He showed me where his arm would go if he were writing. The brush nearest the paper lay across that space.

“Your sleeve would catch it. It ought to be farther back.”

Once he had demonstrated, I could see what he meant. I said I would mention it to the exhibition staff. He seemed satisfied, though he looked back at the brush before we moved on.

The model of modern Seoul was farther on. First there was the gallery’s own model of the old city, and Hyeon stopped beside it.

The buildings spread out behind the barrier, their roofs divided by streets and small courtyards. From above, we could see through open gates into spaces hidden from a person walking past. Hyeon leaned forward, then moved to see along a narrow gap between two buildings.

He looked back at me with a smile.

“Come here. You can see the gate from this side.”

I shifted the bag to my other hand and joined him. I had overlooked the small opening. Beyond it, a courtyard lay enclosed by walls and the backs of buildings.

He pointed out the roof above it. I looked at the rows of tiles and the tiny edges where they met. He lowered himself to see beneath the eaves.

“Someone has taken a great deal of trouble with this.”

I had passed the model many times, usually on my way elsewhere. I stayed beside him while he examined the roofs and the joints in a gate. When he asked who had made it, I had to tell him I would find out.

“I would like to know how they did it,” he said. “There are parts I can scarcely see, and they have still made them.”

I put the question in my phone, then followed him farther along the barrier.

His pleasure lasted until he reached a group of buildings he thought he recognised. He studied them from two positions, frowning.

“This is wrong. There should be more space between them, and that roof wasn’t shaped like that.”

I read the description. The model showed Yukjo Street and the government offices along it in late Joseon. I explained how much time separated it from his own.

He looked again.

“I thought I knew which buildings they were. I know you told me some things would be later. I had forgotten.”

“Another reason to find an earlier map.”

“Yes.” He leaned closer. “But the street would still have been dirtier than this.”

I smiled.

“Something would have been left there. A cart, or wood someone hadn’t carried in yet. You couldn’t always walk where you meant to. My father complained about it whenever we went that way.”

“Do you think the person who made it should have included that?”

“Some of it. They have made the buildings so carefully. It looks as though everyone has gone away and tidied up before leaving.”

I tried to picture the cart he had described across the clear stretch of street, and someone turning sideways to pass it.

He had more to tell me as we continued around the model. Sometimes he recognised the arrangement of a street; sometimes he wanted to know whether a building was from his time. I checked the descriptions when I could. Twice, I asked him to repeat a name slowly enough for me to write it down.

At the other end of the model, Hyeon looked towards the next room.

“Is the present city here too?”

“In the model hall. Come with me.”

He stayed beside me, looking through the openings we passed. At the hall, I stopped just inside the entrance and let him go a little ahead.

The model of Seoul filled the room. Buildings crowded both sides of the river: small houses packed together, groups of pale apartment blocks, taller buildings lit from within above the lower roofs. Roads crossed the water and continued between them.

Hyeon looked towards the far end, then back across the nearest buildings. His hand had closed around the loose cloth at his wrist.

I came beside him.

“How much of this is the city?” he asked at last.

“All of it. Seoul has spread much farther than the old walls.”

A glass walkway ran out over part of the model. I stepped onto it with the bag. Hyeon looked at the glass, then at the bag, and followed.

Halfway along, he stopped. The roofs lay beneath his feet, row after row, and the river ran away from us in both directions.

He didn't ask anything for a while. I didn't try to explain.

When he spoke again, it was to ask where the old centre was. I helped him find it. He compared it with the rest, then followed the river, stopping at one bridge and another.

"People use all these crossings?"

"Every day. Some carry trains as well as other traffic."

I explained that trains carried people in groups along fixed tracks. He listened, then tried to follow a route across the river.

Nearer to us stood a group of apartment buildings. I told him about the separate households on each floor. When he asked how people brought their belongings up, I described lifts as well as I could.

"We have them in this building. I can show you one before we go back."

"I want to see that. There would be a great many stairs."

Hyeon noticed tiny windows, roads between crowded blocks, the way several streets met at a junction. He wanted to know which things had lights in the real city too. I told him about the streets at night, the shops that remained open, and the lit windows of people's homes.

"It doesn't become dark?"

"Some places do. You would find the main streets very bright. It depends on where you are."

Eventually, he wanted to know where we were. I pointed out the museum among the surrounding streets. Then he asked where I had gone that morning.

I showed him the direction of my apartment and followed the route as far as I could, explaining where I caught the bus and which part I walked. The small buildings became difficult to distinguish.

“You live in one of those?”

“Around there. I can’t make out which one.”

“And your books are there. The ones you told me about.”

“Most of them. A few are still at my parents’ house. I took one back to my brother when I went for lunch.”

“Was that something you were reading for your work?”

“A story. A man has been killed, and someone is trying to work out who did it. I thought it was the housekeeper for most of the book.”

“What had she done?”

“Gone away. I thought that was suspicious. I’d forgotten the part where it said she was visiting her daughter.”

He smiled while I told him how Hyunwoo had found the sentence. It was pleasant to have someone ask who hadn’t already reached the ending.

“I would like to read a story,” he said. “Once I can get through the writing more easily. You could help me choose one.”

“I’d like that.”

He asked where my parents lived. I showed him their part of the city and the journey I made on Sundays. The route was easier to explain once I remembered which shop I passed near the bus stop.

He had moved close enough that I could see the light reflected in his eyes when he turned towards me. I looked back at the model before continuing.

“You take the same road each time?”

“Usually. I know where I’m going that way.”

He asked to see my own neighbourhood again. This time, he followed from the museum without needing me to begin at the river.

We stayed until Subin sent a message asking whether everything was all right. I told Hyeon and wrote back. When I looked at the time, we had been away much longer than I had meant to.

“We should go back for a while,” I said. “I’d like to check the goreum.”

He glanced at the bag, then across the model once more.

“All right. Will you show me that machine on the way?”

I took him to the lift. When the doors opened, he examined the empty car before entering beside me. I showed him the buttons and explained what would happen.

He watched the doors close, then the changing numbers. I stayed where he could see me.

At our floor, he waited a moment before stepping out. He looked along the corridor, then turned back as the lift doors closed.

“I thought it would take longer.”

“It’s only a few floors.”

He considered that on the walk back. At the examination room, he went to tell Subin about the model. She stopped typing to listen.

While they talked, I took the box from the bag and checked the goreum. It lay as I had packed it, with the support still secure. I put it beside the garment and recorded the journey in my notebook.

Hyeon was describing the little roofs of the historical model. He wanted a photograph, close enough to see the gate he had liked. Subin helped me find one.

I brought it up on the laptop. Hyeon returned to his chair beside me, still explaining where we should look. I followed the street across the screen. This time, I could remember which turn he meant.

CHAPTER 13

I drew the stream across a fresh page of my notebook and put a bridge over it. Hyeon watched while Subin opened a map from the early twentieth century. We had tried following his route on the old map, but the smaller streets kept ending before he had finished describing them.

“This is the bridge near the paper shop,” I said. “You cross here?”

“Not when I go home. The shop is on this side too. You have to go back a little before you turn. There is a wider road, and then the lane.”

I rubbed out the bridge.

“You still need the bridge. I am using it to show you where I leave the road.”

I put it back, less neatly than before.

Subin brought her chair around.

“Could we begin at your gate instead? Tell us how you would go from there to the shop.”

“The lane runs past our gate,” he said. “You turn this way when you come out. There is another household at the corner, the Han family. Their outer wall continues farther along than ours.”

I drew the wall and wrote the surname beside it.

“Do you turn at the end of their wall?”

“Before it ends. There is room to pass, though you cannot see the next street until you are almost there. Then you go down towards the water.”

When I asked how far it was from the gate, he examined the drawing.

“I have never counted the steps. It is not far. We used to be told to stay within sight of the gate, but Okjeong would go as far as the corner and say she could still see it.”

I wrote *short lane* beside the line.

I could have described my walk to the bus stop in much the same way: the pharmacy at the turn, the building where someone always left delivery boxes. I did not know the street’s name. I had lived there for nearly two years.

Subin turned her laptop towards us.

“The ward name helps, but this map doesn’t show the households separately. I think we’re somewhere in this area.”

She indicated a stretch beside the stream. I put my pencil beneath the road Hyeon had described.

“These smaller lines could be the lanes,” Subin said. “But this map was made centuries after your time. I can’t tell you which was yours.”

“The gate should be on the other side.”

“Of this lane?”

“Yes. When you come out, the Han household is to your left.”

I moved the small square I had used for his gate. He traced the route again from the shop. This time, the two walks met.

Subin brought up a satellite view of the present city and found the same larger road. Hyeon bent towards the screen.

“There. That is the turning I meant.”

I enlarged the image. The roofs were wider than some of the streets. There was no gate where he was pointing.

“We have the turning,” I said. “We still need something that shows the lane beyond it.”

“My father had papers about the property. There may be a description.”

“I haven’t finished going through all of them. We can look for that.”

“Would it tell us where to go?”

“It might help us find the site.”

“And then we could go there?”

“We could. I can’t promise we’ll find anything from your house still standing.”

“I know what you have told me. I would like to see for myself. There may be something I recognise.”

I wrote the turns beneath the sketch and put a question mark beside the little square.

“That is because you do not know which house?” he asked.

“Which site. Yes.”

Subin asked whether there were property documents in the intake photographs. I opened the folder containing the papers from the chest and moved past a family letter and a folded list.

“Wait,” Hyeon said. “The one before that. Would you show me the whole paper?”

The sheet was larger than most of the letters. Its writing occupied a narrow section at one end; the rest was blank. I had photographed the whole sheet, then taken closer views of the writing.

Hyeon leaned closer.

“That is mine.”

“Your examination paper?”

“You knew?”

“Not until now. I photographed it with the other papers from the chest. I hadn’t reached it in the record.”

His name was clear in the identifying section, with his father's among the entries below it. I enlarged that part.

"I wrote this before I went to bed. It was beside the things I meant to take in the morning."

He indicated the last character of his name.

"There was too much ink here. I thought about beginning again, but I had already written the other names correctly."

The ink had pooled at the end of a stroke. I hadn't noticed it when I took the photograph.

"I decided it was readable," he said. "I left it."

Subin leaned forward. For a moment, none of us spoke.

"The original is in the workroom," I told him. "I can bring it here."

"Please."

Subin stayed with him while I fetched it. The sheet lay on its support among the papers from the upper part of the chest. I checked its reference against the photograph before carrying it back.

Hyeon stood when I entered. I set the tray at the clear end of the table and moved my notebook so he could sit in front of it.

The paper had darkened most along its folds. Here, I could see variations in the colour that the photograph had flattened, and a worn place near one edge.

Hyeon read the identifying section, then looked along the rest of the sheet.

"It was whiter."

"Yes."

He held his hand above his name, then drew it back.

"I had everything ready. I kept thinking I ought to read one more thing, but whenever I opened a book, I found something else I wanted to

check. In the end I put them away.”

I sat beside him. Subin came around to the other side.

“Were you worried about the examination?” she asked.

“Of course. I had spent enough time preparing that I did not want to discover I had prepared badly. Gyeongmun said I would make myself tired before I had even arrived. He wanted me to remember the question so we could discuss it afterwards.”

“The two of you would have talked about your answer?”

“He would have wanted to give his own first. Then I would tell him what I had written.”

A slight smile appeared.

“Could you show me the back?”

I didn’t want to turn it over without Eunjae. I brought up the other photograph. There was no writing there either. He studied it, then returned to the original.

“Who kept it?”

“The family gave it to us with the other papers.”

“I mean who kept it that morning. Who put it away?”

I put a copy of the inventory that listed his chest beside the tray. It recorded the chest as containing his clothes and papers, but did not name the person who had first gathered them. Some of the papers had been put into newer envelopes.

“My father might have kept it,” he said. “He would have known what it was.”

He examined the fold across the blank part.

“There was plenty of room left. Someone could have used it.”

“I’ll go through the older lists and the intake photographs,” I said. “We may find another reference.”

He nodded, still looking at his father's name.

After a while, Subin brought the notebook closer.

"Your residence is here too," she said, indicating the entry on the sheet. "It agrees with the ward you gave us."

Hyeon read it, then looked at my sketch.

"It does not tell you which gate."

"No. We still need the rest of your directions."

He studied the square and its question mark.

"The table where I left this was near the window. If I stood there, I could see part of the Han family's wall."

I took up the pencil.

"Which side of your house was that?"

He thought before showing me where the window should be, then described the space between the houses. I added it to the drawing.

When I reached to move the tray farther from the notebook, he looked up.

"Could you leave it there for now? I would like to look at it again."

I moved the notebook instead.

Subin checked the time while I finished adding the window.

"I need to get back to my desk. I have records to finish before I leave."

"Thank you for helping. Send me the references you were using?"

"I'll send them with my notes."

Hyeon watched her close the laptop and gather the charger.

"Thank you," he said. "I would like to look at the other maps with you when you have time."

“Tomorrow. Keep the drawing with the maps. We’ll need it.”

She glanced at the examination paper.

“Do you want that left here?”

“For now,” I said.

Hyeon nodded. I put the inventory copy beside its support, leaving the whole sheet visible.

Subin picked up her bag.

“I’ll be at my desk. Send me a message if you need me.”

She left the door open as she went, greeting someone farther down the corridor. I closed it after her.

The camera was still on its stand. Hyejin wanted last night’s recording today.

“You asked to see this before anyone else,” I said.

Hyeon looked at the camera, then at me.

“The moving pictures?”

“Yes. I need to send them to Hyejin.”

I copied the file to my laptop and opened it. The garment filled the screen, with the goreum and slip beside the sleeve, exactly as I had framed it. The time ran in one corner.

“That is last night?”

“The beginning of it. It’s very long. I can make it go faster.”

I sped it up. The numbers in the corner ran forward. Nothing else on the screen changed.

Hyeon leaned closer. He watched for some time before he spoke.

“I am not there.”

“No. Your chair was outside the picture.”

“And you?”

“Outside it too. I didn’t want Hyejin watching us.”

He watched the numbers pass midnight, then two o’clock. Somewhere in those hours, he had read the heading of a book aloud for the first time. The cuff lay still beside the slip.

“Nothing happens,” he said.

“Nothing moved.”

“We were there all night.”

“I know.”

At a little after six, the picture was still the same. I stopped it at the end, where Subin’s hand appeared briefly at the edge of the frame as she reached for the switch.

Hyeon sat back.

“She will see clothes on a table.”

“Yes.”

“And what will you tell her?”

I opened my notes from the night. I had recorded the time I started the camera, each time I checked it, and the time I stopped. Beside each check, I had written the same thing.

“That I observed no movement.”

He considered that.

“It is true.”

“It is.”

He looked at the still image of his sleeve a moment longer.

“Then send it.”

I attached the file and my notes to a message for Hyejin. Hyeon watched me press the key.

Before going to the site of his house, we needed to try the goreum outside. From the examination room's window, there was little to see beyond a section of the building opposite.

"We could go onto the museum grounds for a few minutes," I said. "We would stay near the building."

"Now?"

"If you want to. We can come straight back if the goreum does not work there."

He looked at the box beside the garment.

"Then I would like to try. You can show me which way we would go from here."

The goreum was still on its support in the shallow box. I checked that nothing had shifted, closed the lid and settled the box flat in the bag. Hyeon stood beside me while I noted where we intended to go.

He looked once more at the paper before following me out.

We took the lift down. He watched the numbers while it moved, then let a woman carrying leaflets pass before stepping into the lobby.

Beyond the glass doors, people crossed the open space in front of the museum. Hyeon slowed, looking towards the road, trying to see more than the doorway allowed.

I stopped a few paces from the exit.

"Before we go out, there are things I should warn you about."

He turned towards me.

"There will be things you have never seen, and some of them might shock or frighten you at first. It will be louder than it is in here. We can stop whenever you want, or come back inside."

I paused.

"I promise I won't let anything bad happen to you."

His expression softened, and a small smile appeared. He drew breath as if he was going to say something, then lowered his eyes to his hands.

“I don’t even know if I’m already dead.”

“I don’t know either, but I still promise.”

He looked up again and nodded.

Someone passed behind us, their shoes sounding across the lobby floor. Hyeon kept his eyes on mine until they had gone.

Then he turned towards the doors.

I went beside him and opened one. He paused at the threshold, looking across the grounds, before stepping through with me.

CHAPTER 14

The first bus passed while Hyeon was looking up at the buildings across the road.

He had been asking about the windows. I heard the beginning of the question, then the engine rose, and he stopped speaking. He followed the bus until it disappeared beyond the next building.

We were still close to the museum doors. He was as clear out here as he had been upstairs.

“That carries people,” I said. “It’s a bus.”

“I could see them.”

His voice was quieter than it had been upstairs. He looked back at the windows but did not finish the question.

Cars followed the bus. Hyeon watched the wheels and the people behind the glass.

A horn sounded.

He moved back so abruptly that his sleeve brushed against my jacket. He straightened and glanced towards the people near the entrance. A woman was searching her bag. Two men stood over an open leaflet. Neither had turned.

“It was farther down the road,” I said. “Someone sounded their horn. It wasn’t coming towards us.”

“I saw where it was.”

He adjusted his cuff. His fingers stayed there after the cloth was clear.

I had walked through this entrance twice that day without noticing what vehicles had passed. I had wanted him to see the city and had brought him into a succession of things I scarcely noticed.

“We can stay here for a while,” I said. “There’s no need to go towards the road.”

“I would like to see more than the doorway.”

I held out my left hand.

“If it would help, you can hold on while we walk.”

He looked at it, then at me.

“In front of everyone? Like a child being led?”

“You can. Look around. Nobody’s paying us any attention.”

Two young women in rented hanbok were photographing each other by the steps. Beside them, he looked like one more visitor who had dressed for the palaces.

The woman had found her phone. One of the men pointed towards the entrance. Hyeon watched them finish their discussion before looking back at my hand.

I left it where it was.

He put his hand into mine carefully. There was still the strange lightness I remembered from the examination room, but I could make out where his fingers settled between mine. When another engine grew louder, the pressure changed, so slightly I might have imagined it.

“We can walk this way,” I said, turning towards the quieter side of the grounds. “The road will stay over there.”

For the first few steps, he looked down at our hands whenever someone approached. A couple passed, talking about where to go after the museum. He waited until they were behind us before looking towards the road again.

He asked about the driver he had seen turning a wheel. I was explaining the controls when a motorcycle came through the traffic.

“He must keep his balance while watching all the others.”

Hyeon turned to follow it. I stopped explaining and watched it with him.

A bus pulled up farther along the road. Hyeon watched people gather at its doors.

“Do you travel in those, or do you have one of the smaller vehicles?”

“I take the bus. That’s how I came back this afternoon. I get on near my home, and it brings me here with everyone else who needs to come this way.”

He watched it pull away, then asked how I knew where it would take me. I pointed out the number on the next bus.

“What do those marks mean?”

“They’re numbers. We write them differently now.”

I took out my notebook and wrote the digits beside their corresponding Chinese characters. He compared them, asking me to read each one aloud.

“Each bus has a number, and each number belongs to a particular route,” I explained. “If I know which one goes near my home, I know which bus to take.”

He looked back at the road. When another bus passed, he searched for its number himself.

At a gap between the trees, the buildings across the road were visible almost to their tops. Hyeon stopped beneath the branches.

In the model hall, he had been able to bend over buildings like these. Here, he had to lift his face until I could see the underside of his chin. Light reflected from the windows, concealing the rooms behind them.

“Those are the floors you showed me?”

“Yes. Each row of windows is another floor. People use lifts like ours to get up to them.”

He counted a few rows, then stopped. A car passed with music audible through an open window. When it had gone, he remained looking at the road.

“What were you going to ask?” I said.

“I had a question about the people at the top. I cannot remember it now.”

“You can ask when it comes back to you.”

He looked towards our hands, then away.

“Everything makes a different sound.”

I listened. Traffic, a conversation near the entrance, something being wheeled over the paving. Birds in the trees. I could pick out each sound once I tried.

“Some of it will stop farther from the road. We can go towards the palace grounds. We’ll still be close to the museum.”

“Which palace?”

“Gyeonghuigung. It was built after your time.”

He repeated the name while examining the roofs beyond the trees. I told him construction had started in the seventeenth century.

“The museum is on part of its grounds,” I said. “Most of it was taken down later. What’s there now has mostly been rebuilt.”

He asked me to place that against the years he knew, then was quiet while we continued.

His hand stayed in mine. He did not ask to go back. When I paused beside a turning, he looked ahead to see where the path would take us.

On the adjoining palace grounds, there was more space between the buildings. Hyeon studied the tiled roofs, then looked beyond them.

He stopped, raising his free hand.

“I know that.”

Part of the mountain showed above the roofs and trees, pale stone between the green slopes.

“Inwangsan.”

He moved to one side, and I moved with him, until the view was clearer. I knew its outline, but I had never watched anyone recognise it.

“From our lane, you could see that part,” he said. “Not from the gate itself. You had to come past the Han family’s wall. Then it appeared above the houses.”

He indicated a stretch of exposed rock.

“That one?”

“Yes. The roofs were lower, so there was more of it. But that is the part I would see first.”

“Would it be ahead of you when you came out of the lane?”

“To the side. You would turn towards it if you went uphill. When I went to the paper shop, I went the other way.”

He showed me with his other hand, slowing the turn when I failed to follow. I tried to put the wall and lane back into my drawing. On the map, I had needed him to repeat the direction several times. Here, I could see what he was using to remember it.

“And coming home, you would see it again?”

“Before I reached the lane. The street opened a little, and I could see above the roofs. From there, I knew how much farther I had to go.”

He looked towards the buildings between us and the streets he meant.

“It should be over there. I cannot see the road, but if the mountain is there, and we are here—”

He stopped, looking back along the ridge.

“Not directly from this place. I would need to see it from farther along. The shape would be different.”

“We can compare it with the maps. This gives us something else to check.”

“Could we go there once you have found the street?”

“Yes. Once we have somewhere to start, we can work out how to get there. I’ll come with you.”

He nodded. I could not know what he would find, but I could help him look.

A horn sounded beyond the trees. The pressure in my hand changed again, but he kept his face raised towards the ridge until the noise passed.

“I used to see it nearly every day,” he said. “I did not have to go somewhere to look at it.”

A cloud moved across the sun, changing the light on the exposed stone. He watched that too.

“I would like to look from the street. Even if the houses are different. I could show you where I used to turn.”

I took out my phone with my free hand.

“May I photograph the view? We can show Subin when we get back.”

He nodded. I took the picture and turned the screen towards him. He leaned closer without releasing my hand.

“The stone there. Make sure she can see that.”

“It’s in the picture.”

He checked, then looked up again.

We stayed until he had followed the visible ridge from one end to the other. He asked whether we could see more from elsewhere on the grounds, and I went with him. At each new angle, he compared the view with what he remembered.

When we turned towards the museum, he was explaining the approach to his lane once more. I walked beside him and listened. His hand remained around mine as we came back within hearing of the road.

I sent Subin a message from the lobby. She reached the examination room a minute after we did, carrying her laptop.

“How was it?”

“There are more sounds than I expected,” Hyeon said.

He stood close beside me. We had let go of each other’s hands at the entrance while I found my staff pass. Whenever something loud had passed us, I had felt the pressure of his fingers change. I could still remember where they had rested.

“He recognised Inwangsan,” I said. “There’s a part of the ridge he used to see on his way home.”

I sent Subin the photograph. Hyeon showed her the exposed stone and described the view from his street. She saved it with the map notes.

“Eunjae’s coming to check the cloth before he leaves,” she said.

I put the box beside the garment and opened it. The goreum lay as it had before we left.

While I recorded the outing in my notebook, Hyeon sat near the maps.

“Earlier you told us about preparing the examination paper,” I said. “What happened before that?”

“My father came home late. I had waited to speak to him, but my mother told me to finish what I needed for the morning.”

“Was he often late?”

“More often that spring. There had been questions about papers from his office. Information about the northern troops had reached people who should not have had it. They were asking who had handled the papers.”

The family record listed his father as a jeongnang in the Ministry of War’s bureau for military preparedness.

“From the Ministry of War?”

“Yes. My father had handled some of those papers. He said they would find his name because he had done what he was supposed to do.”

I wrote that down and read it back. Hyeon corrected the last part.

“He did not say his name was on the paper itself. I did not see the papers. He said his part in handling them would be known.”

I changed the line.

He remembered a messenger at the gate but did not know what he had brought. His father was still going to the office. He had told Hyeon to continue preparing for the examination.

“There were things he was not permitted to tell me.”

Hyeon looked at the family record. We had found his father holding office two years later, but nothing explaining that spring.

“My mother kept asking when he would return. If he was late, she sent someone to the gate. Then she would ask again before they had time to see anything.”

His fingers rested beside his father’s name.

“Okjeong had been going to see a friend. My mother told her to stay home. She was angry about it. I thought it was better to let her be angry than tell her why.”

“What did you think might happen?” Subin asked.

“I did not know. My father said there was an explanation for his work. I believed him. But my mother was afraid that an explanation would not be enough.”

He looked away from the record.

“She wanted someone to protect me. A mudang. A woman who could perform a rite.”

My pen stopped.

“What did she say it would do?”

“That I could be kept out of danger until the questions about my father were settled. She wanted me to meet the woman. I asked whether she meant that I should leave the house. She said I would be safe, and afterwards I could return to what I had been doing.”

I wanted to ask several questions at once. Hyeon was still speaking.

“I told her I would not do it. My father had told me to attend the examination. I did not want to leave home or miss it because someone had said they could protect me.”

“Did your father know she had asked?”

“He was there the second time she asked. He said she should not ask again after I had answered.”

Hyeon glanced at the examination sheet.

“She was angry with both of us. Then she said I should see whether I had enough paper. I thought that was the end of it.”

He had never met the woman. When I asked about the night itself, he took longer to answer.

“Nothing I can remember. I went to sleep. The next thing I remember is this room.”

I recorded that, then listed questions about the military papers, his mother’s proposal and the woman she wanted him to meet.

“You think those things are connected,” Hyeon said.

“They give us something to look for. I don’t know what happened after you went to bed.”

“I refused her.”

“I’ve written that down too.”

He checked the line. I turned the notebook so he could read the whole account.

“We’ll look through the other papers for references,” I said. “You can read anything we find with us.”

CHAPTER 15

Before Subin could open her laptop, there was a knock.

Eunjae stood in the doorway with the condition photographs.

“Is this a visitor?”

“There’s something we need to explain.”

I turned to Hyeon. We had spoken about Eunjae but had not decided what to tell him.

“He helped me open your clothes. I think he needs to know why moving them matters to you. Are you willing to speak to him?”

“Will you tell him what you have told me?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will.”

Subin asked Eunjae to close the door. He put his folder on the clear part of the table.

“This is Yi Hyeon,” I said. “The man whose name is on the slip.”

“You mean a relative?”

“No. The man himself.”

Eunjae looked towards Subin.

“Jiwoo saw him on Monday,” she said. “I met him yesterday.”

He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Explain what you mean.”

I began with calling Hyeon's name, then described his appearance and how he had faded near the door. When I reached the next morning, Eunjae stopped me to check the positions of the goreum and slip. He had helped arrange their supports.

"Then the goreum," he said. "That's why I couldn't find anything."

"You saw him disappear. Did anyone else?"

"No."

"I've seen him remain here since," Subin said. "I haven't seen him disappear."

After a while, Eunjae turned to Hyeon.

"Is that how you remember it?"

"The part I remember, yes. Before that, I was at my father's house. I had gone to bed."

He gave the date he had expected to wake into, then his father's name and office. Eunjae listened without consulting the papers.

"I helped unfold that," he said, looking at the garment.

"I know. Jiwoo told me."

"It had been packed away for a very long time."

Hyeon nodded. Eunjae stayed quiet, one hand on his folder.

Eventually, he asked whether anything hurt. Hyeon said no, then answered his questions about sleeping and eating. He described the spoon remaining on its wrapper when he tried to lift it.

"And you can feel someone touching you?" Eunjae asked.

"Yes. Jiwoo can feel it too."

"The pressure is light," I said. "But it's there."

Hyeon held out his hand.

"You may try, if it would help you understand."

Eunjae hesitated before placing his fingers beneath Hyeon's. He looked at the contact for several seconds, then withdrew.

"I can feel that."

He examined his own fingers.

"What happens if I need to move the garment?"

"We don't know. That's one reason I wanted to tell you."

I explained what we had tried with the goreum: moving away from the table, then going through the galleries and onto the grounds. Hyeon had remained visible with it beside him.

"You took it outside?"

"In the box, lying flat in my bag."

"Without speaking to Hyejin?"

"Yes."

He came to examine how I had packed it.

"I'll need to compare this properly with the photographs."

Subin described the first test at the door. We answered his questions about the pieces we had moved. We had not tried the name slip alone or established how far Hyeon could move from the pieces without disappearing.

"I do not want to disappear again so that you can find out," Hyeon said.

"I wasn't asking you to. We need to know what you've already tried."

Hyeon nodded. Eunjae returned to his chair.

"Could you wait before telling Hyejin?" Subin asked. "Until tomorrow, while we think about how to explain this?"

"She's supervising the work."

"I'll tell her what I moved," I said. "But we don't know what would happen to Hyeon if the pieces were separated or sent somewhere else."

“You don’t know that she would do that.”

“No. She would have to take it further, though, and we can’t yet tell her what he needs.”

“I would like her to hear what I am asking before she decides what to do with my clothes,” Hyeon said. “If they are taken somewhere, I may have to go there. Or I may not be able to follow them.”

He glanced towards the door.

“I cannot speak to her afterwards if I am no longer here.”

Eunjae turned over a photograph and checked its reference.

“I can wait until tomorrow. Then we speak about this again. I need time to think too.”

He looked at Hyeon.

“And I’ll ask you then.”

“Thank you.”

Eunjae rose to finish the check. He worked through the comparisons without unfolding anything farther, explaining what he was looking at when Hyeon asked. I had watched him examine the same seams and repaired cuff before. Now someone beside him remembered wearing them.

He found no visible new damage, including to the goreum, and put the comparison photographs with his report.

“I’ll go with you to Hyejin.”

Subin moved her chair nearer Hyeon’s while I gathered my laptop.

“We’ll tell her what happened to the material overnight,” I said to him. “And that I moved the goreum today. I’ll ask about staying again.”

Hyejin was finishing a call when we arrived. We waited until she put down the phone.

“I’ve looked at what you sent,” she said. “Nothing moved overnight.”

“No.”

“Your notes say the same thing every hour.”

“There was nothing else to record.”

She nodded and turned back to her screen.

I had told Hyeon I would tell her what I had moved. I began to, then tried to think what I would say when she asked why. Every reason I had led back to the examination room.

Eunjae glanced at me. He said nothing.

“Was there something else?” Hyejin asked.

“Could I stay another night?”

“No. Nothing happened last night that needs you here for another one.”

She looked at my face.

“Go home and sleep. I’ll watch the rest of the recording tomorrow.”

I had nothing to add without telling her about the person waiting in the room.

“All right,” I said.

We went back. Hyeon was studying the sketch of his lane beside Subin.

“She said no to another night,” I told them.

“When must you go?”

“When we finish for the day.”

I sent the completed entry and closed the laptop. In the corridor, someone called goodbye, and a trolley passed our door.

“I can stay a little longer,” Subin said. “But I have to go home tonight.”

“You have already stayed while Jiwoo was away,” Hyeon said. “I am grateful.”

He looked towards the garment.

“What will happen when you close the room?”

“I’ll leave the pieces where they are and lock the door. I can come here first in the morning.”

“Would I remain awake until then?”

“I don’t know.”

He considered that.

“I do not want to remain here alone.”

“I know you cannot stay every night,” he continued. “I have seen how tired you become. But I do not know whether I would be able to call you.”

Subin and I could leave him our numbers. Hyeon could barely lift a spoon.

“I don’t want that either,” I said.

Eunjae leaned forward.

“You’re thinking of taking the goreum.”

“Yes.”

“You’ve only taken it as far as the grounds,” Eunjae said.

“If you began to fade, I’d bring you back,” I told Hyeon. “But I couldn’t do it as quickly as I did today.”

“And if you could no longer see me?”

“I’d bring the goreum back and try calling you again.”

Hyeon looked towards the garment.

“I do not know whether I would be safe here either.”

After a moment, Eunjae nodded.

I wanted someone to tell me which choice would be safe enough.

My contract was for a year. I wanted another one.

“I could lose my job if I take it,” I said.

“What would happen to you?”

“I’d have to find another one. I need it to pay the rent.”

His eyes lowered to the maps.

“Then I should not ask you to do it.”

I thought about the examination room after the lights went out. At home, there was a book on one cushion of the sofa and a blanket folded over the back. I could leave the lamp on beside him.

Hyeon waited while I thought.

“I could take the goreum home tonight and bring it back in the morning,” I said. “Would you like to come with me? You could stay at my apartment.”

“While you sleep?”

“Yes. You can sit near me. If you need something, you can wake me.”

“And tomorrow?”

“We’ll come back here and carry on with the maps and papers.”

Hyeon glanced at the examination sheet.

“I still want to find the street. And know what happened after I went to bed.”

“We’ll keep looking.”

He took a moment before answering.

“Yes. I would like to come.”

Eunjae sat back. I reached for the box.

“Tell me when you get there,” Subin said. “I’ll keep my phone with me.”

“I will.”

Eunjae rose and checked the clearance above the goreum before replacing the lid.

“If you’re doing this, I’ll help you pack it properly. Bring it straight back in the morning, before taking it anywhere else. Call if anything changes—with either of them.”

He secured the shallow box in a rigid outer container and showed me where to hold it while lifting. I put it into my bag myself.

On a fresh page of my notebook, I recorded the object’s reference, the time, where I intended to take it and when I would return. I set it out as I would have in the handling record. Beneath that, I put my name.

Subin packed her laptop, then showed Hyeon the photograph she had saved with our map notes.

“We can look at the maps again tomorrow.”

He checked it and nodded. I returned the examination paper to the workroom tray, then came back for my bag.

Eunjae was taking the final comparison photograph of the garment. The space where the box had been lay empty beside its sleeve.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” he said to Hyeon.

“I would like that.”

Subin waited at the doorway while I checked my phone and keys. I lifted the bag carefully, and Hyeon came beside me.

“Is your home far from here?”

“Farther than we went today. I’ll tell you where we are as we go.”

He looked once more at the table. I waited until he turned back towards me before opening the door.

I called a taxi through Kakao T from beside the museum entrance.

Hyeon watched me enter the address. Across the grounds, a bus was pulling away from its stop. He followed it with his eyes, then looked back at the screen.

“We’ll take a car tonight,” I said. “Just the two of us and the driver. He’ll bring us to my building.”

“Does he know where you live?”

“He’ll receive the address I’ve put here.”

I showed him the small map. Subin waited with us until the car arrived. She raised a hand as we got in, and I told her I would send a message from home.

The driver checked the destination with me. I settled the bag flat on the floor by my feet and showed Hyeon his seat belt.

“This goes across you. It helps keep people in place when the car stops.”

He watched me fasten mine, then let me draw his across and close the buckle. I didn’t know whether it could hold him. His sleeve lay over part of the strap. He was still examining it when the car moved.

He drew breath sharply and turned towards the window. The museum entrance slipped behind us. He twisted to follow it, then faced forwards as we joined the road.

The driver asked whether the temperature was all right.

“Yes, thank you,” I said.

Hyeon glanced towards him, then back at the window.

My left hand rested on the seat between us. His fingers found it.

I turned my palm upwards. He closed his hand around mine without looking down. The pressure was light, but when we turned, it changed.

CHAPTER 16

We passed people waiting at a crossing and a row of shops. Hyeon watched until they were out of sight. Then he looked into the car beside us. A woman sat with a sleeping child against her shoulder.

For a while he asked nothing. His hand remained in mine.

“Are we going towards your home now?” he said when the car slowed.

“Yes. We’re waiting for the other traffic.”

Cars passed across our path, their lights reflected in a shop window. When they stopped, we moved again.

“The people outside know when they may cross.”

“There are signals for them too. I’ll show you when we’re walking.”

Farther along, he noticed the map on the driver’s phone.

“Is that the same place you showed me?”

“Yes. It shows him the route.”

He followed the line as the car turned. A voice on the radio spoke quietly beneath the noise of the road.

As we went farther from the museum, I kept checking his face and the edge of his sleeve. He remained clear. Once, he caught me looking.

“What is it?”

“Just checking.”

He understood. His eyes went towards my bag, then returned to the window.

When we arrived, I released his hand to unfasten my belt, then helped with his. I paid the driver, lifted the bag, and got out, then came around to open his door. Once the car had gone, Hyeon looked up at the building.

“Which window?”

“It’s difficult to pick out from here. I’ll show you the view once we’re inside.”

He followed me through the entrance and into the lift, watching the numbers until we reached my floor.

I had left in a hurry that afternoon. A book lay open on the low table, and two more were on the floor beside the shelf.

“Sorry about the mess,” I said.

Hyeon looked past me.

“There are books everywhere.”

“I keep buying them.”

I took off my shoes and put the bag down, then moved the book from the sofa cushion and folded the blanket over the back.

“You can sit here.”

He had gone towards the window.

I placed the outer container on the cabinet beside the sofa, level and clear of the edge, then joined him. The nearest roofs were beneath us.

He stood well back from the glass, following the road until it disappeared behind another building. Below us, people waited at the crossing.

I recognised the delivery entrance opposite and the tree that hid one end of the pavement. I looked farther away while he studied them.

“The people are so small,” he said.

“You can see the whole crossing from here.”

He watched the signals. When the cars stopped, the people began to move. He followed one man to the far pavement.

I left him at the window and opened the box. The goreum lay as Eunjae had packed it. I replaced the lid.

Home. Hyeon’s here, I sent Subin.

Her reply came while I was putting my jacket away.

Good. Call if you need anything.

When Hyeon turned from the window, I showed him the message. He read it slowly and asked me to thank her.

I sent that too.

I set the research books and notebook on the low table. Hyeon came over when he saw the paper markers.

“We were reading this one.”

“Yes. I’ve kept our place.”

I opened it at the paragraph we had reached that morning. The author was comparing accounts of calling a person’s name with a garment they had worn. Hyeon sat at the end of the sofa, leaning towards the page while I moved the table closer.

I was hungry.

“I’m going to order dinner,” I said. “We can read while we wait.”

He watched me choose pork and rice on my phone. I showed him the restaurant on the map and explained that someone would bring the food to the apartment. He looked towards the window, trying to place it among the buildings.

I read the sentence aloud. He stopped me at a word, and I wrote its characters in the notebook. He gave me his understanding of the whole sentence. I read through the paragraph before agreeing.

The next page contained a quotation in Chinese characters. He recognised it and read more readily, his finger following beneath the line.

“Here,” he said. “Go back to what the author says about it.”

I turned to the earlier page. He pointed out where the explanation referred to the quotation, then asked me to read the modern wording again. We stayed with it until he was satisfied.

I had been too tired that morning to follow the comparison. Now I could see why he had wanted to return to it.

He looked at the reference beneath the passage.

“Is this an account from before my time?”

“I need to check which version the author used. There may be a copy we can read.”

“Write that down.”

I added it to the questions. He bent over the quotation again.

While he read, I went to the kitchen and took a bottle of water from the refrigerator. He looked up at the sound of the door.

“What do you keep in there?”

“Food. It stays cold.”

He came over. A few empty containers were stacked beside some eggs and a packet of tofu.

“There’s a machine that keeps the inside cold,” I said. “It helps the food last longer.”

“All the time?”

“Yes. I leave it running.”

“And these?”

“My mother sends food home in them. I have to take them back on Sunday.”

I poured some water into a glass, put the bottle back and closed the door. Then I turned on the tap to wash my hands.

His head lifted.

I left the water running for a moment so he could see.

“There are pipes in the building. They bring water into the apartment.”

“How does it reach this floor?”

“It’s pumped up. You can have hot water too.”

I moved the handle and waited. When the water warmed, I turned it off and dried my hands.

“The same water?”

“It comes through different pipes, then you can mix it here.”

He looked towards the refrigerator.

“And that machine—”

He stopped, then looked back at the tap.

“Say the last part again.”

I explained the two supplies more slowly. He had moved back from the sink. When I finished, he remained looking at the handle.

“Is there something you want me to show you?”

“No. I heard you.”

I put the towel down.

“The modern world will probably still be here tomorrow,” I said. “We can leave some of it until then.”

He looked towards the book.

“You could sit and read for a while,” I continued. “Or close your eyes. I’ll be right here.”

“I would like to go back to the page.”

I went with him and opened the book where we had stopped. I propped it so he could see it without holding it, then sat beside him with my water.

He read quietly. His finger moved beneath a line, stopped and returned to its beginning. I kept the notebook within reach, but he did not ask for it.

When my dinner arrived, I told him before going to the door. I thanked the person who brought it and put the bag on the kitchen counter.

The rice and pork were still hot. I ate at the counter, leaving the low table clear for his book. Once, he asked me to turn the page. I put down my chopsticks and went over.

“Thank you.”

I returned to my rice. His hands were together in his lap. I ate more slowly, looking up between mouthfuls. By the time I finished, he was reading without following the line with his finger.

I cleared the food and washed my bowl.

“I’m going to shower,” I said. “Through that door. I’ll be able to hear you if you call.”

“You will stay in the apartment.”

“Yes. I won’t be long.”

He nodded, and I took clean clothes from the cupboard.

I stood under the hot water until my shoulders eased. I could still feel the movement of the taxi, though I had taken that route often enough. I washed my hair and listened between the sounds of the shower.

Hyeon did not call.

When I came out in a T-shirt and soft trousers, he was standing by the window. The book remained open on the table. I rubbed the towel over my hair as I joined him.

The glass reflected our lamp. Beyond it, lights moved along the roads, and some windows showed the bright rectangles of televisions.

“Can you still see the people?” I asked.

“Some of them. I have been watching that doorway.”

He indicated an entrance below, where someone held the door for a woman wheeling a bicycle.

“They keep coming and going.”

I watched until the door closed.

“My father’s room faced the entrance to our house,” he continued. “When I came back late, he would hear me.”

“Did he mind?”

“He would ask where I had been. Usually I had been with Gyeongmun. Then he wanted to know whether he was well.”

He followed the lights of a car below.

“I would like to know whether he was.”

“Gyeongmun?”

“Yes. After I was gone.”

There were still papers we had not read.

“We can look for more about him too,” I said.

He nodded, then returned to the sofa while I hung up the towel and brushed my teeth.

“I’ll need to go to bed soon,” I said when I came back. “What would you like to do?”

He looked towards the window, then at the open book.

“I do not know.”

I sat beside him.

“Would you like some music? I have recordings of people playing. I can put one on the television.”

He looked towards the dark screen.

“We could watch?”

“Yes. If you would like to.”

He nodded. I turned it on, and he straightened as the screen lit up. I searched for a gayageum performance and started it with the sound low.

The first view showed a woman seated on a low platform, the instrument across her knees. Then the picture changed to her hands on the strings.

Hyeon drew back.

“The picture changes to show different parts,” I said. “She’s still playing the same piece.”

He watched the next change, following her hands until the view returned to the whole platform. Then he leaned forward.

“That is a gayageum.”

“Yes.”

He listened. The melody slowed, then gathered again, her left hand pressing the strings to bend the notes.

“I know the instrument,” he said. “I do not know this music.”

“It’s a later form. People have kept playing it and writing new things for it.”

“Where is she?”

“In a concert hall. This was recorded earlier.”

He looked along the edge of the screen, then settled back against the sofa.

The music was quiet enough that we could still hear the traffic. His eyes stayed on her hands. I stayed beside him through the end of the piece.

I set the recordings to continue, then showed him the book on the table.

“You can watch for as long as you want. If you’d rather read, this is here. Or you can choose something else from the shelf.”

“Any of them?”

“Yes. Some are from university. Others are stories. I can tell you about them.”

“Later.”

I moved the lamp so the light fell across the open page. The box remained on the cabinet beside him, clear of the table and curtains.

“My bed’s over there,” I said. “You can call me from here. You don’t have to come over.”

He looked towards it.

“If you need a page turned, or want something different on the television, wake me. It’s all right.”

His eyes returned to my face.

“And if you just want to talk,” I added. “You can wake me for that too.”

He did not answer at once. I waited.

“Is everyone in the future so kind?”

His voice was steady, but his eyes had brightened.

I smiled a little.

“No. And you haven’t seen me first thing in the morning.”

A small, watery smile appeared. I left my hand on the back of the sofa while he collected himself.

On the screen, the next recording had begun. A musician raised an instrument to her shoulder.

“What is that one called?”

“A violin.”

He repeated the name, following the movement of her bow. His hands had loosened in his lap.

I sat beside him for the beginning. I recognised the melody, though I would have had to look at the title to name it.

After a while, he glanced at me.

“You should sleep.”

“I will.”

I stood and checked my alarm. There would be time to get ready and return the goreum before beginning the day’s work.

“We’ll go back in the morning,” I said. “The books can come with us.”

“Leave that one here for now.”

“All right.”

I put my phone beside the bed and turned off the kitchen light. The lamp by the book stayed on. From the other side of the room, I could see Hyeon’s profile above the back of the sofa.

“Good night,” I said.

He turned.

“Good night, Jiwoo.”

I lay down and pulled the cover over myself. The music was low in the quiet apartment. I watched him for a few moments, then closed my eyes.

After a while, I opened them once more.

He was looking towards me.

I lifted my hand from the cover. He nodded, then returned to the concert.

I let my hand rest beside me and closed my eyes again. The music continued while I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 17

The music was still playing when I woke.

Hyeon stood at the window. Daylight had reached the buildings opposite, and the lamp beside the sofa was still on. On the television, a man was playing a piano.

“Good morning,” he said as I sat up.

“Morning. Were you all right?”

“Yes. I watched until it began to grow light.”

He was as clear as he had been when I went to bed. I had allowed for finding him gone, though I had made no useful plan for what I would do if he was.

“Did you close your eyes at all?”

“For a while. I could still hear the music.”

“Do you feel better?”

“I would like to look at things again.”

I washed, dressed and made toast while he watched a delivery truck being unloaded below. Before packing, I opened the box. Nothing had shifted.

There was still time before we needed to leave.

“Would you like to see something new?”

“Yes.”

I brought my laptop to the low table and sat beside him.

“There’s an encyclopedia I can show you. We can begin with something you know.”

I opened Korean Wikipedia and searched for the Analects. He recognised the title and leaned closer to read. I explained a few words whose modern forms gave him trouble, then showed him how the blue words led to other articles.

He asked who had written them. I told him how different people added information and corrected what was already there.

“And who decides whether the correction is right?”

I showed him the references and the record of earlier changes. Contributors could disagree, I explained, and an article could be wrong. I would check the sources before relying on it for our work.

He pointed to a reference.

“Show me where that leads.”

I opened it. He read with his shoulder close to mine, then asked me to open a second reference.

He asked what it cost to read them. When I told him it was free, he looked towards my shelves.

“I still like having books,” I said.

“I was wondering how you choose which ones to buy.”

“Sometimes badly.”

He smiled, then asked me to return to a heading we had passed.

His attention was different from the night before. When I misunderstood which passage he meant, he brought me back to it without losing his place.

I had meant to show him one article. By the time I looked at the clock, we had several open.

“We’ll need to leave soon.”

“Already?”

“Is there something else you want to find before we go?”

“The instrument with the bow.”

“The violin?”

“Yes. Could we read about that?”

I searched for it. He studied the photograph, then asked me to move down to the description. I had to look up one of the words.

“You do not know all of it either.”

“No. We can find out.”

I would have liked to stay there. My toast plate was still beside the sink, and I had a whole day’s work waiting. Hyeon pointed to the next paragraph.

“We really do have to go now,” I said.

“Leave this one.”

“I will.”

I closed the laptop without closing the article. While I packed, he went back to the window for one last look.

Hyeon kept his hand in mine throughout the taxi ride back to the museum.

Eunjae was already in the examination room. I set the supported box on the table while he compared the goreum with his photographs.

“How was the night?” he asked.

“Quiet,” Hyeon said. “I watched music being played.”

“And nothing changed?”

“Nothing I noticed.”

I told Eunjae about the journeys and where the box had stayed.

“No visible new damage,” he said.

I let myself sit down.

“We still need to speak about what happens next.”

“I know.”

Subin arrived, greeted Hyeon first and asked whether I had slept. Then she opened the maps.

Hyejin called me over to finish reviewing the footage and comparisons. Subin stayed with Hyeon while I went.

Hyejin went through Eunjae’s photographs in order. At the last one, taken just before we left, she stopped. The garment lay on its supports. Beside the sleeve, where the box should have been, there was only the tray.

I waited.

She moved on to the next file.

I corrected a photograph reference in the report, and Hyejin asked me to continue with the older papers.

When I returned, Subin and I brought up the intake photographs of papers associated with Hyeon’s belongings. He sat between us.

“Yesterday you said your mother wanted you to meet a woman,” I said. “There may be something about her among these.”

We went through several small papers: household accounts, lists and notes of only a few lines.

“Go back,” Hyeon said.

A narrow sheet lay beside a folded list. Its lower edge was missing, taking part of the last line with it. I had entered it provisionally as a household note.

I opened the individual photograph. It was written in eonmun.

“I think my mother wrote this.”

“Do you recognise her writing?” Subin asked.

“She wrote letters to her sister. Sometimes she gave them to me to take with other papers. She joined these strokes like this.”

He showed me two places, and I enlarged them. He kept his finger beside the second after I had finished. There was no date or signature.

“Could somebody else have written in a similar way?” I asked.

“Yes. But I would like to compare it with anything else you have from her.”

I noted the identification as provisional.

The opening referred to Hyeon’s clothing. He read aloud while Subin transcribed, slowing over a worn part.

Keep the clothing and the paper together.

I looked towards the garment and the name slip beside it.

“Does she mean that paper?”

“It doesn’t say,” Subin said.

In the next line, he corrected one word of Subin’s transcription.

When Bokrye comes again—

The rest ran into the missing edge.

“Do you know the name?” Subin asked.

“No.”

Nothing on the surviving part identified what she was supposed to do.

“My mother said I should meet the woman,” Hyeon said. “I did not. Could she have brought her to the house after I refused?”

“She could have. But this might have been written afterwards. We need to establish when, and who Bokrye was.”

He asked to see the neighbouring papers. One bore a much later date; another appeared to be a list made while repacking several groups of material. Neither gave us a reason to date the note.

When Eunjae came back, he brought the original from its tray. A darkened fold crossed the woman’s name.

“Was this kept with the garment?” I asked.

“It arrived in the same group.”

Hyeon asked whether the paper itself could tell us when his mother had written on it.

“Possibly something about its age,” Eunjae said. “I couldn’t give you the date of the writing from this examination.”

Hyeon read over Subin’s transcription and asked her to keep both possible readings of the worn word.

Yesterday his mother’s proposal had been something he remembered refusing. Now there was a name we could look for. I wanted it to give us more than it did.

“I’ll take this part,” Subin said. “Finding Bokrye and checking for related material outside these papers.”

“You’ve got your own work.”

“This is part of it. I can check the earlier files and follow references across collections. You and Hyeon can keep going through these.”

Her permanent role gave her access to older internal records and research resources I could not open from my account.

“If there are more letters from my mother, I would like to read them,” Hyeon said.

“We’ll keep those photographs together,” I said.

After lunch, Subin began her search while Hyeon and I examined two more papers. He stayed beside me when I returned to the catalogue entries on my laptop.

Near the end of the afternoon, Eunjae came back.

“Can we speak now?”

Subin brought her chair over. I closed the catalogue entry, leaving my place marked.

“I still think Hyejin needs to know,” Eunjae said to Hyeon. “She could put the clothes away without knowing what that would do to you.”

“Would she let me keep them?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what would she do about me?”

“I doubt she could keep it to herself,” Subin said.

Hyeon looked between us.

“Would these other people want to examine me?”

“They might,” I said.

“Could I refuse?”

I looked at Eunjae. Neither of us answered.

Hyeon rested his hands on his knees.

“Then I would rather you waited.”

Eunjae rubbed his forehead.

“We can’t keep this from her forever.”

“I want to understand more before we bring anyone else in,” I said.

“Could we introduce him as someone helping with the research?” Subin asked.

“She’d want to know where he studied,” Eunjae said.

“I could tell her,” Hyeon said.

“I know. That’s what makes it difficult.”

“I would be telling the truth.”

“Yes. But she’d want to know how we met.”

I could imagine giving Hyejin one explanation, reaching a question it wouldn’t survive, and inventing another. She had trusted my records before any of this happened. I didn’t want to start giving her things she couldn’t rely on.

Hyeon looked towards the garment.

“My family kept those clothes after I was gone,” he said. “Someone looked after them long enough for them to come here. I understand that they are important to your work.”

He looked at Eunjae.

“But they are my clothes. I wore them.”

“I know.”

“You have said they must remain in this room. You have also said it may be dangerous for me to leave them.”

“We don’t know how much danger there is,” I said.

“That is why I am asking.”

He looked towards the garment again.

“Who decided I should remain here?”

“Hyejin doesn’t know that’s what the restriction means,” I said.

“I know. But I did not agree to it.”

No one answered immediately. Somewhere in the corridor, a door closed.

Then Hyeon turned to me.

“I wanted to ask whether I might come home with you again tonight.”

“Yes,” I said. “You can.”

I answered before looking at Eunjae.

We had found Bokrye’s name. We still didn’t know what would happen if Hyeon were left alone.

Eunjae opened his folder, then closed it again.

“How long are you planning to do this?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“I would still like to go,” Hyeon said.

Eunjae turned towards him.

“Was last night all right?”

“Yes. I could see Jiwoo when he went to sleep. There was music, and I had a book.”

He glanced at me.

“I could call him if I needed to.”

I remembered him turning towards me from the sofa before I fell asleep. I had left the lamp on beside his book.

Eunjae looked at the goreum.

“I’ll help you pack it. Bring it straight back tomorrow.”

“I will.”

He held my gaze for a moment.

“If Hyejin asks where it’s been, we tell her.”

I nodded, then wrote my home address beneath the date in my notebook.

Eunjae checked the support while I prepared the box. Subin went back to her desk to save the transcription and intake references. Bokrye’s name remained at the top of our questions, with room beneath it for whatever she might find.

Hyeon read his mother's note once more before I closed the image.

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yes. We'll carry on tomorrow."

He nodded.

I put the books in my bag and recorded the time. At the door, Hyeon paused beside me.

"Could we watch the rest of the concert tonight?"

"The one with the violin?"

"Yes."

"Of course," I said. "I can put it on where we stopped."

CHAPTER 18

I had my phone out to call a taxi when Hyeon stopped beside me.

“Could we take a bus tonight?”

People were gathering beneath the shelter across the road.

“We could,” I said. “It might be crowded.”

“I would like to try.”

I put my phone away.

“All right. We’ll need to get you a card first.”

In a nearby convenience store, I asked the cashier for a Tmoney card. One was plain; another had a small bear on it, standing with its paws raised.

“You can choose,” I said.

“Why is it doing that?”

“I don’t know.”

He considered the plain card, then indicated the bear.

“This one.”

I asked the cashier to add enough money for a few journeys.

“It’s yours,” I told him. “I’ll keep it beside mine for now.”

“So we will use it again?”

“Yes. Whenever we take the bus or the train.”

I put it in the pocket beside my own card.

At the stop, I showed him the number we were waiting for. He read the numbers on the approaching buses until he found the right one.

His hand reached for mine as the doors opened. I tapped our cards separately and led him towards two seats farther back. A passenger looked up at his clothing, then returned to her phone.

He took the window seat. The bus moved while I was settling the bag on my lap, and the pressure against my fingers changed.

“You can sit back,” I said quietly.

He did.

I had taken this route so often that I sometimes reached my stop without remembering much of the journey. Tonight I watched the same streets with him.

At a crossing, two women in hanbok waited beside someone in jeans. One held the hem of her skirt clear of the road. Hyeon followed them until we had passed, then noticed a man asleep across the aisle, his head against the window.

When the recorded voice announced the next stop, Hyeon looked up at the display.

“That’s where we’re stopping next,” I said. “Ours is farther along.”

“Do they tell us every time?”

“Yes.”

A passenger pressed the button beside her seat. A light came on near the front.

“That tells the driver somebody wants to get off.”

He watched her pass her card over the reader by the door, then followed the new passengers as they found places.

The pressure in my hand eased as we went. He began pointing things out to me: the signal he recognised from the crossing, a delivery rider

waiting beside us. Once, he began a question and stopped to look at something outside. He did not seem troubled by losing it.

When we were near my stop, I told him we would get off next and pressed the button. We stayed seated until the bus stopped. At the door, I tapped the cards again, and we stepped down.

Hyeon watched the bus continue along the road.

“Would you like to take the bus again?” I asked.

“Yes. There was more to see than I could look at.”

“We’ll have another chance.”

I put the cards away. He took my hand as we began walking.

The restaurant nearest my building still had its door open. The woman behind the counter recognised me and asked whether I wanted my usual order.

“Yes, please. To take home.”

Hyeon studied the menu, then the people eating near the window.

“Do you come here often?”

“When I don’t feel like cooking.”

I had meant to cook again that week. I could not remember which day I had decided it.

We moved aside to wait. Hyeon watched the bowls coming out of the kitchen, then asked what I had ordered. I showed him the dish on the menu, explaining the modern wording and what was in it.

When the woman brought the bag, I paid and thanked her, then fitted the container into my backpack beside the books, keeping it upright. Outside, the smell followed us from my backpack. Hyeon glanced towards it, then up at my building.

I squeezed his hand before letting go to find my keys.

Upstairs, I put dinner on the kitchen counter and returned the boxed goreum to the cabinet. Hyeon sat on the sofa while I opened the laptop. The violin article was still where we had left it that morning.

We read while I ate. When he needed something farther down the page, I went over to scroll. He asked to see the instrument again, and we found a recording that showed the player's hands more clearly, then returned to the article.

After dinner, Hyeon asked to return to one of the research books. I opened it at the modern explanation.

"Before that," he said. "I would like to read the original first, and see whether I agree."

I turned back to the quotation. He read it aloud, then listened while I read the explanation again. He asked about two expressions. I helped with those, then left the book open while he compared the passages.

After a while, he indicated the reference beneath them.

"This one next."

I added it to our questions for the following day.

We still had nothing that explained the note we thought his mother had written. When I reached for another book, I left this one open beside it. He would want to finish the comparison.

When he finished comparing the passages, I found the concert I had promised to put on. I started it where we had stopped the night before.

Hyeon recognised the violin when it came into view. He watched the player's fingers move along the strings, then asked me to turn up the sound a little.

We stayed until the performance ended. He wanted to know the name of the piece, so I showed him where it was written. He asked me to save the recording so we could listen to it again.

I showered while he watched the city, and afterwards we sat with a book open between us. I had to look at the clock twice before accepting that it was time for bed.

Hyeon had been looking at the same part of the page for several minutes.

“Would you like me to turn it?”

“No.”

He rested a hand at his temple.

“Perhaps we should stop.”

I closed the book. His mother’s handwriting, Eunjae asking whether he could refuse, the bus, the card with the bear on it. It had been a great deal for one day.

“Would you like to lie down?”

His eyes moved towards my bed.

“On the sofa,” I said. “I can make it more comfortable.”

“Yes. I think I would.”

I moved the table and took away one cushion so he could stretch out, then arranged a spare pillow and sheet. He lay on his side while I lowered the lamp’s brightness.

When I came back from brushing my teeth, he opened his eyes.

“Do you want the music tonight?”

“No. Thank you.”

I left the lamp on.

“You can wake me,” I said.

“I remember.”

I smiled and went to bed.

I woke to my name.

At first, I thought it had come from my phone. I reached towards it, then heard him again.

“Jiwoo.”

Hyeon stood beside the bed.

“What is it?”

“I am sorry to wake you.”

I rubbed my eyes.

“It’s all right.”

“I could not stay lying there. I kept thinking.”

I moved towards the far side of the bed and pulled the cover back.

“Okay. Come and lie down.”

“Together?”

“Yes.”

“Is that allowed?”

I laughed a little, still trying to wake properly.

“Yes. It’s allowed. Come.”

He sat carefully at the edge, then lay down facing me. I settled on my side too, leaving a little space between us.

I had seen him across tables, beside maps and through the changing light of the city. Here, his face was close enough that I could make out each long eyelash when he lowered his eyes.

“What were you thinking about?”

“My family. And Gyeongmun. I kept trying to remember the last time I saw him. I know we spoke, but I cannot remember everything he said.”

“You don’t have to remember all of it tonight.”

“I was trying to think about something else. The article. What we read after dinner. Then I would remember something from home again.”

He paused to think.

“Okjeong used to come to my room when she wanted something. She would wait until I looked up, even if I told her I was reading. Sometimes she only wanted to tell me what somebody had said.”

“What did you do?”

“I listened. Not always patiently.”

The corner of his mouth lifted.

“I was thinking about that. There was no reason to think about it. But I could remember how she stood at the door.”

I knew the names of her children from the record, and where the next page carried her family. I knew very little about the girl who had come into his room.

“Tell me,” I said.

He told me how she had complained that he kept books where she wanted to sit. She had begun choosing the one he had left open and asking him what it said. Sometimes she stayed after he answered. Sometimes she took him away from it to settle an argument he had heard only her account of.

His voice became more even as he spoke. I asked what kinds of arguments.

“Whether she had promised to return something. Whether she had been told not to go somewhere. She liked to begin by telling me how unreasonable the other person was.”

I smiled.

“Did it work?”

“Sometimes. When she was right.”

He looked down.

“I would like to hear her tell me one.”

I wanted to offer him something more useful than the words I had.

“I know.”

For a while, neither of us spoke.

“I liked being outside tonight,” he said. “And reading here.”

“I’m glad.”

“When I lay down, I kept wanting to tell them about it.”

His voice had grown quieter.

“I thought Gyeongmun would want to see the encyclopedia. I wanted to show him how one account leads to another. Then I remembered that I could not ask him to come.”

He studied the space between our pillows.

“I do not know what he thought happened to me. Or what my father told him. I know they asked for news. But I do not know what they said to each other when there was none.”

“We’ll keep looking for that.”

“Yes.”

His hand had relaxed against the pillow.

“I wanted somebody to be awake.”

“You can wake me for that.”

“I know. You said so.”

He took a moment before meeting my eyes.

“I’m sorry I can’t send you home,” I said. “But you’re not on your own with this.”

I yawned and covered my mouth. When I lowered my hand, he was still looking at me.

“Yes,” he said. “Thank you.”

“You can stay here.”

“All right.”

Neither of us moved closer.

“You should sleep,” he said quietly.

“I’m getting there.”

A small smile appeared. I watched him close his eyes.

“Good night, Hyeon.”

“Good night.”

I could hear my breathing in the quiet room. I stayed facing him and let myself fall asleep.

I opened my eyes to find Hyeon watching me.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Morning.”

Daylight showed beyond the curtain, though my alarm had not sounded yet. When I asked whether he had rested, he said yes. He looked more settled than when he had woken me.

We had a little time. Now that I was properly awake, I was aware of how near he was, and of the space I had left between us.

He glanced at my hair.

“What?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

I ran a hand over the side of my head. The hair above my ear had flattened in one direction and stood up in another.

Hyeon smiled.

“You were warned,” I said.

“I remember.”

I sat up.

While I washed and dressed, he returned to the window. Over breakfast, he asked me to read one of our notes back. We spoke about the reference while I ate, then I packed the book and checked the supported box before putting it into my bag.

Hyeon waited by the door. When I joined him, he looked once towards the bed, then followed me out.

CHAPTER 19

We took the bus to the museum. Hyeon chose a seat where he could see the street. He knew what the announcement meant this time and turned towards me before I told him our stop was coming.

Eunjae checked the goreum while I recorded the return journey. He found no visible change.

Subin arrived with her laptop and a folder.

“I think I can place the road.”

I brought over the route we had drawn from Hyeon’s gate to the paper shop.

“An older research file follows the streets in this ward through later maps,” she said. “This bend is one of the places they could match.”

She showed us the road at different dates. Several lanes disappeared, but the larger turning remained.

“That is where you leave the road,” Hyeon said.

“I think so. We still need to put your household on the correct side of it.”

I opened the photographs of the property papers. We had found a reference to the house among the family lists, but had not yet worked through the separate sheets.

The first two concerned land outside the city. On the next, his father’s name appeared beneath the description of a house.

“Here,” Hyeon said.

The document named the ward and described the boundaries. A Han household stood along one side; a lane was named along another.

Hyeon supplied the neighbour's given name before I enlarged the cramped characters. It matched.

It was the first thing he had told me that a record confirmed without my showing it to him first.

"The Han household was to your left when you came out," I said.

"Yes. Their wall ran past the turning."

Subin placed the description beside the old map. This time, we could put his house beyond the corner rather than somewhere along the whole road. His remembered walk fitted the position. So did the direction from which he had seen the mountain.

She followed the road through the later maps, ending with the satellite view.

An apartment complex occupied much of the area: several long blocks with paths between them.

"Somewhere here," she said, marking a section near one end. "We can't carry every boundary forward exactly. But the road, the adjoining household and your route all point to this stretch."

"May I see them together?" Hyeon asked.

She put the old map beside the satellite view. While he studied them, I compared the document with my drawing. I kept the question mark beside the gate and added the photograph reference beneath it.

"Is this near enough for us to go?"

"We can get to the area where the house stood."

"Then may we go now?"

I had been at work for less than an hour.

"After my shift. I have things I need to finish first."

His eyes returned to the map.

"We'll go today," I said.

“All right.”

He asked Subin to return to the property description. We went over the route once more, then she saved the marked maps and sent them to me. I opened the photograph of the property paper again for Hyeon.

“I’ll keep looking for Bokrye,” Subin told him. “Let me know if you find the name anywhere else.”

“I will.”

After she left, I returned to Hyejin’s inventory checks. Hyeon helped me distinguish two boxes, then went back to following his lane on the map. I finished the record that afternoon and sent the revised entries to Hyejin.

While I labelled the remaining photographs, Hyeon asked twice about a line on the old map. The second time, he waited until I had saved my work.

“Does this path still exist?”

I brought up the satellite view.

“Part of it may follow this street. We’ll have to look when we get there.”

He sat back so I could finish.

At the end of my shift, he rose as I closed the files. Eunjae came in while I was recording our destination.

“Where?”

I showed him the marked map.

“How far is that?”

“Across the city. We’ll take the bus, then walk.”

He looked at Hyeon, then at the box.

“I said straight back, before anywhere else.”

“I know.”

“It came straight back,” Hyeon said. “This is somewhere else.”

Eunjae let out a breath that was almost a laugh. He went over the packing without saying anything more, then handed me the bag.

“Keep it level on the bus.”

Subin met us at the door.

“Tell me what you recognise,” she said. “Even if we need to correct the position.”

“Thank you for finding the road.”

She smiled at him and went back to her desk.

We took a bus for the first part of the journey, then walked uphill from the stop. Hyeon kept looking towards the mountain, though the buildings often hid it.

At a turn, he slowed.

“We would have come up from there.”

He indicated the lower street. I compared it with the map.

“Does the slope feel familiar?”

“Yes. The road was narrower.”

He looked downhill.

“Gyeongmun usually went the other way. Unless he had decided to come with me.”

“Did he come often?”

“Often enough that they stopped asking whether he would stay to eat.”

He pointed beyond the corner.

“I think we parted near there. He would remember something else to say after we had already said goodbye.”

I let him choose the pace. He spoke more easily than he had all afternoon, explaining where the road began to rise and where he would have turned towards the lane.

Then we reached the complex entrance.

Tall buildings stood beyond the gate. A broad path led between planted beds towards a courtyard. I opened Subin's image; our marked area lay farther in.

"We can go this way."

Hyeon followed me through the grounds. Someone had washing hanging behind an open window. He looked from it to the rows above.

"How many households are here?"

I found the number on my phone and showed him. There were more than two thousand homes across the complex. He read it, then looked towards the buildings beyond the courtyard.

At the far end, the ridge appeared between two blocks. He walked a few paces along the path until a different part came into view.

"This side."

I joined him. A building stood along one edge of the marked area. Before it were a bench, a planted strip and the path we were on.

"The lane would have come past here."

I turned the phone so he could compare it with the old map.

"We can't put the gate exactly."

"I know."

He looked at the ridge again.

"But we were here."

"This is the best match we have."

I lowered the phone. A boy came out of the building with a ball beneath his arm and ran to meet another boy farther along the path.

“My father’s room was towards the front,” Hyeon said. “He could hear people at the gate.”

I remembered what he had told me about returning late from Gyeongmun’s house. I smiled, then looked back at the buildings.

“There was a place by the wall where I used to sit with a book. It was quiet in the afternoon. My mother would ask why I had brought it outside when I had a room to read in.”

“Why did you?”

“Sometimes I had been in the room all morning.”

He glanced at me.

“And I could hear if Gyeongmun came.”

I smiled.

“My mother had mats brought out when the weather was good. She liked to sort things where there was enough light. Cloth, or papers somebody had put away badly. She would say it was a small task and still be there when I came back.”

He studied the ground before the building.

“I cannot place the rooms. I thought I would be able to.”

I put my phone away.

“Would you like to sit?”

He nodded. I settled the bag beside my feet, and he sat next to me. We could still see a narrow part of the ridge.

The boys were passing the ball between them near the edge of the path. One missed, and the other ran after it.

“I knew the house might be gone,” Hyeon said. “I still wanted to reach the gate.”

His hands rested together in his lap.

“I kept thinking about arriving. I did not know what I expected to happen after that.”

I rested my hand on the bench between us. After a moment, he put his into mine. I closed my fingers around its faint pressure while he looked across the courtyard.

That morning, I had been pleased when the property description fitted the road. Now I tried to imagine him coming home along it, with a gate to pass through and somebody inside expecting him. I knew how to add a location to a record. I had put the phone away because I could not think of anything useful to do with it.

We stayed while the light began to change on the buildings. Somebody called from above. One of the boys looked up, answered and collected the ball before heading towards a door.

The pressure of his hand changed.

“Would you take a picture? With the mountain, if you can.”

I stood and found an angle that included the ridge, then showed him the photograph.

“That one.”

I saved it with the maps and sat beside him again. He took my hand without waiting for me to offer it.

“We have the property paper now,” I said. “We can compare the other household records with it.”

“I would like to do that.”

After a while, he looked towards the entrance.

“We should go back.”

“We can stay longer.”

“I have seen where it is.”

I waited until he stood, then lifted the bag. Near the entrance, he stopped and looked back once. I stayed beside him until he turned towards the street.

My phone rang as we walked down towards the bus stop. My mother's name appeared on the screen. I moved beneath a shop awning and answered.

"Have you left work?"

"I'm on my way home. I'll get dinner near my building."

"I've made stew. I can put some in the freezer for you. Tell me when you want to come and get it. We'll be back on Sunday night."

"That would be good. Thank you. Did you book the trains?"

"Yes. Your father got his later departure. He says we'll still have time for lunch when we arrive."

I heard him say something in the background. My mother laughed. They had found four restaurants, and he wanted her to look at all of them before they chose.

"I'll send you the booking details."

"Please do. And send a picture when you get there."

She asked how the collection was going. I told her we had located a house mentioned in the older papers.

"Is it still standing?"

"No. There are apartments there now. I went to have a look after work."

"By yourself?"

"I'm with a friend."

Hyeon glanced towards me.

"All right. Go and have dinner. Let me know about the stew."

“I will. Give Dad my love.”

I put the phone away.

“Are your parents well?” Hyeon asked.

“Yes. They’re going to the sea for a couple of nights. They’ve booked a room with a balcony. Dad was pleased there were chairs.”

I smiled, remembering him looking at the photograph across the lunch table.

“He likes having somewhere to sit outside.”

We began walking again.

“What is your mother like?”

I thought about how to answer. I usually described her when she had asked something I did not want to answer, or sent a reminder I had already seen.

“She remembers things you tell her. Even if you only mention them once. She’ll ask about them the next time she sees you. She likes to have something useful to do.”

I told him how she packed food for me after lunch, finding more potato for the container because she knew I liked it. If I thanked her and stayed in the kitchen, she usually found something else to send home. My father would take the bag and walk with me to the bus stop.

“Does he wait with you?”

“Usually. We talk a little, then sit until the bus comes.”

I told him about Hyunwoo too: four years older, with the same company for years, remembering to return borrowed things. Hyeon asked what his work involved, so I explained about supplies and deliveries while we waited at the crossing.

“He’d come for lunch the last time I was there,” I said. “We’d both read the novel I told you about. I gave it back to him, and we spent part of the afternoon going through the ending.”

The light changed. As we crossed, Hyeon asked how the writer had concealed the answer. I tried to explain without giving him the whole story, then found myself telling him about the people I had suspected instead.

At the bus stop, I watched for our number. The courtyard photograph was ready to show Subin in the morning.

Hyeon took my hand again.

“Tell me about the book.”

“From the beginning?”

“Yes. You have already told me you were wrong. I would like to know what persuaded you.”

I began with the housekeeper while we waited for our bus.

CHAPTER 20

By the time we reached my stop, Hyeon wanted to know more about the lawyer. He also thought I ought to have remembered that the housekeeper had gone to help her daughter before deciding she had committed a murder.

“I did remember it when my brother showed me the page,” I said.

“After you had finished the book.”

“Yes.”

He looked pleased with himself. I told him what the lawyer had said when questioned, though Hyeon had to wait while I reconstructed the conversation.

We bought dinner near my building and went upstairs. I returned the box to the cabinet. While I ate, he asked more about the people in the book. I kept having to separate things the writer had told us from things I had decided for myself.

“I should borrow it again,” I said. “Then you can read it.”

“Would your brother lend it?”

“Probably. I’ve only just given it back.”

I sent Hyunwoo a message. He replied asking whether I had forgotten the ending already. When I told him someone else wanted to read it, he asked who.

A friend.

A friend you haven’t mentioned.

Yes.

There was a pause. Then he said I could collect it, but asked me to return it sooner this time.

“He’s said yes,” I told Hyeon.

He smiled.

After dinner, he asked whether the daughter ever appeared in the story herself.

“Briefly. At the beginning.”

“Then I would like to begin there.”

“We will.”

I sat beside him. We left the books closed and talked about what he expected from the story. He wanted to know what authority the detective had to ask questions, and whether people could refuse to answer. I explained what I remembered, then admitted I would have to look some of it up.

“You have not told me who did it,” he said.

“Do you want me to?”

He considered that.

“No. Not yet.”

Before I showered, we looked at the courtyard photograph and the map. Hyeon indicated where we had stood, and we added his observations to the notes for Subin. When we finished, he asked me to leave both images where we could find them again.

When I came back from brushing my teeth, Hyeon was still on the sofa, looking towards the window. I turned down the lamp. The spare pillow was beside the bed.

“May I lie there again?”

“Of course.”

I moved my pillow farther over as he came to sit down.

I had thought about asking him myself in the bathroom. The invitation had seemed easy in the middle of the night; awake, I had spent longer deciding how to say it. Now he was arranging his sleeve beside the pillow.

I lay down facing him, with the same small space between us.

“Thank you for taking me today,” he said.

“I’m glad we went.”

“I would like to see the paper again tomorrow.”

“I’ve kept the reference with the maps.”

I wanted to ask whether he felt better, but he had already told me what he wanted to do next. I turned off the kitchen light, leaving the lamp beside the sofa low.

“Good night,” he said.

I answered and closed my eyes. After a while, I opened them again. He was looking at me and smiled slightly when I noticed.

I smiled back before letting my eyes close.

The next morning, I sent Subin the courtyard photograph and our notes. At the museum, I put them with the property description while Eunjae examined the returned goreum. There was no visible change. I recorded the journey, then began my work.

We had the property paper open when Subin came in.

“I’ve found a Bokrye.”

Hyeon stopped reading. She brought her chair around and opened her laptop. An entry from the court annals appeared beside a modern translation.

“A study of enforcement against practitioners mentioned this ward. I followed the references around the time you disappeared.”

“Show me the date,” Hyeon said.

Subin enlarged the heading: the twenty-second year of Seongjong’s reign, the twelfth day of the fourth lunar month.

“The examination was on the seventh,” he said.

“And you went to bed on the sixth?”

“Yes.”

I put the dates beside each other in my notebook. The report had entered the record less than a week after the last night he remembered.

The Inspectorate had reported the arrest of a female practitioner named Bokrye. She had conducted prohibited rites at a private household in the same ward as Hyeon’s family home. Following her examination, she had been expelled from the capital. Her native place was given as Chungju.

The household was not named.

Hyeon read the entry, then returned to the date.

“This is when they reported it. She may have been arrested earlier.”

“Yes,” Subin said. “We don’t have the date of the rite.”

He asked to see the original text. She enlarged the printed column, and he worked through the passage himself.

“It calls the rites illicit.”

“That’s the charge recorded here,” I said.

He read to the end. The next entry concerned another matter.

I opened the note we thought his mother had written and placed it beside the report.

Keep the clothing and the paper together.

When Bokrye comes again—

Hyeon read the incomplete line.

“She was expected to return.”

“That seems to be what it says,” I answered.

“And the report says they sent her away.”

“If this is the same woman.”

He looked at me.

“She was in our ward. At the time I disappeared.”

“Yes.”

He returned to the report.

“My father had people asking questions about papers from his office. He would not have wanted another inquiry at our house.”

“Did your mother ever tell you where the woman came from?” Subin asked.

“No. She only said she could keep me safe.”

He rested his fingers against the edge of the table.

“I did not ask her name. I was too busy telling her I would not agree.”

Subin turned back to the references.

“I’ll look for her in the Chungju records. There may be something else about the arrest, or another account naming the household.”

“Please keep this page,” Hyeon said. “The whole entry.”

“Of course.”

She saved it with the date and reference. I left the two documents open beside each other.

“Which paper did my mother mean?” Hyeon asked.

I brought up the intake photographs. The narrow slip carrying his name had been found with the garment. His mother’s note had arrived among the associated papers, in a group that had been wrapped and rearranged more than once.

“It could be the name slip,” I said. “There’s nothing here that identifies it.”

He studied the photographs.

“Someone kept both of them.”

“Yes.”

“And this note.”

He pointed to the incomplete line about Bokrye.

I looked again at the older wrapping, its patched corners and newer layers. Whoever had gathered the papers had preserved words that might once have needed no explanation.

Subin glanced at the time.

“I have a meeting. I’ll come back when I’ve followed the next references.”

Hyeon thanked her. She left her saved copies with us and returned to her desk.

For a while, we sat without speaking.

“I keep thinking about my mother beside the table,” Hyeon said. “She was looking at my examination paper. She asked whether I had everything ready.”

He brought his hands together in his lap.

“I thought she meant the examination.”

“We haven’t established that the rite happened at your house.”

“I know.”

His voice was sharper than before. He looked down, then loosened his hands.

“I know what the report says.”

I put my pen down.

“I’m sorry. You do.”

He looked towards the garment.

“But I cannot stop thinking about what she might have been preparing while I answered her.”

I had reminded him of the missing evidence because it was easier than answering that. He remembered his mother asking an ordinary question on the last evening he had spent at home. Now he was wondering whether she had meant something else.

I stayed beside him.

After a while, he asked me to put the note away and leave the report open. Then he wanted to see the funeral account we had been reading before he first came home with me.

I found the marked passage about calling a person’s name with a garment they had worn. He read the quotation, then asked to see the beginning of the section.

We worked through it together. He distinguished a term for clothing from a broader one I had taken to mean belongings. I corrected my note and put his reading beside the quotation.

“This does not describe what she did,” he said.

“No.”

He looked back at the report.

“Then I want to know what happened before they arrested her.”

I added the question to our notes.

Hyeon stayed with the report until I had finished a catalogue entry. Then he asked to see the other papers kept with the note, including those without names.

“Please do not choose only the parts you think I would want to hear.”

“I’ll show you what we find.”

We went through the photographs together. Most of the papers concerned ordinary household things: a payment, a list of cloth, a letter mentioning an ill relative. Hyeon helped with two names and asked me to note where a fold interrupted a sentence.

None named Bokrye.

Subin came back near the end of the afternoon. She had found further orders against practitioners, but nothing naming the household or saying whether Bokrye had returned.

Hyeon looked again at the unfinished line in the note.

“If this was the woman, my mother might not have known where they had taken her.”

Minjae’s message arrived the following week, while I was describing a stain.

He wanted dinner. Seoyeon could leave work at seven, Doyun had agreed, and I had apparently reached the limit of invitations I could answer with a promise to check later.

Doyun’s last message to me was still unanswered. He had sent a photograph of a bookshop display ten days ago, a novel I had once lent him propped in the window, and I had read it and meant to reply. I had not thought of it since.

Hyeon was reading the photograph on the other screen, following a line beneath a fold. My phone vibrated again.

Have you got a new boyfriend?

I typed no, then added that I had been busy.

I noticed. That was my question.

I turned the phone face down.

“Is something wrong?” Hyeon asked.

“No. My friends want to see me.”

“You may go.”

He returned to the photograph.

We had gone home together every evening. He had begun asking to lie beside me without the hesitation of that first night, and I had begun straightening his pillow before he asked. In the morning, I looked towards him before reaching for my phone.

“Minjae thinks I’ve started seeing someone.”

“Courting?”

“More or less.”

“Because you have not seen him?”

“Because I haven’t answered properly.”

“Is he the friend who took you to the film?”

“Yes. There are three of them, usually. Minjae, Doyun and Seoyeon.”

Minjae and Doyun had known me at university. Seoyeon had met Minjae later; by now, she knew enough about both of us to question his stories before he finished telling them.

“Would they come to your house?” Hyeon asked.

“They’ve been before.”

“Would you mind if I met them?”

I took my fingers off the keyboard.

“No. I’d like that.”

He looked pleased.

“What would you tell them about me?”

“The truth, if you’re comfortable with that.”

I had thought about telling Doyun on nights when I had a question for someone who knew me. By morning, there was work to finish and another page for Hyeon to read. I had not even answered his photograph.

“They’ll find it difficult to believe,” I said. “But they’ll listen. And they’ll keep it to themselves.”

“You are certain?”

“About them, yes.”

He looked at the photograph again. The paper belonged to a household whose door he had expected to open a few mornings ago.

“Then I would like to meet them.”

I asked whether they could come to mine instead. I had someone staying with me whom I wanted them to meet, and something to explain in person.

Before sending it, I wrote to Doyun separately. *Sorry I never answered. I’ll explain tonight.*

Minjae sent three messages. Seoyeon said she would come directly from work. Doyun asked what he should bring.

By the time Subin came back, I had agreed to dinner at half past seven. I told her about the evening.

“Good,” she said. “You’ve barely seen them.”

“I saw Minjae before all this.”

“I meant since.”

It had been a short enough time that she ought to have sounded unreasonable. I looked at the work spread across our screens, then at Hyeon beside it.

I finished the entry I had begun before Minjae's message.

ACT 3

CHAPTER 21

At home, I put the goreum on the cabinet and cleared the low table. Hyeon suggested moving the taller stack of books to the end, where nobody would knock it with an elbow.

“Is Minjae the one who speaks most?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“And Doyun?”

“He’ll speak when he has something to say.”

“Does Minjae stop long enough?”

“Sometimes.”

Hyeon smiled. I was looking forward to watching them meet.

I ordered dinner for four and put out the cups. Then I straightened the bed, taking more trouble with the blanket than anyone coming to eat would notice.

“They know you’re staying here, but not the rest. Are you still all right with telling them?”

“Yes. I would like to meet them.”

“You don’t have to answer everything they ask.”

“I know.”

Doyun arrived first, carrying drinks and dumplings. He took off his shoes and stopped when he saw Hyeon.

“This is Hyeon,” I said.

Hyeon greeted him. Doyun returned the greeting, glancing at his clothing.

“It’s good to meet you. I’ve brought too much food.”

“That happens when Jiwoo lets everyone bring something,” Seoyeon said from the doorway.

Minjae came in behind her. His eyes went from Hyeon to me.

“Oh.”

I took Seoyeon’s coat before he could continue.

We found places around the low table. Hyeon asked about their journey, and Seoyeon described the train she had nearly missed. Minjae was unusually quiet.

“So,” he said at last. “Someone staying with you.”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Since last week.”

He looked at Hyeon again.

“Are you going to explain the clothes?”

“I was about to.”

I put down my cup.

“There’s something I need to tell you. It isn’t going to sound believable.”

“That’s encouraging,” Minjae said.

“Hyeon appeared at the museum while I was examining a garment. It belonged to him.”

“What do you mean, appeared?” Doyun asked.

“He was standing beside the table. I hadn’t seen him come in. He remembers going to bed at home, then hearing me call his name. The

year he remembers is 1491."

Nobody spoke.

Minjae laughed.

"Sorry. What?"

"The twenty-second year of His Majesty's reign," Hyeon said. "Jiwoo says you number it differently now."

Minjae looked between us.

"Have you rehearsed this?"

"No."

"Jiwoo. You invite us over to meet someone, and now you're telling us he's from five hundred years ago?"

"I am twenty-four," Hyeon said.

Minjae opened his mouth, then closed it.

Seoyeon was watching me.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

I explained about the family papers, the garment and what had happened when Hyeon tried to leave the museum without it. Minjae kept looking at Hyeon's hands.

"I still think you're playing some kind of joke."

"I'd rather it were," I said, and looked at Hyeon.

Minjae stopped smiling.

I turned to Hyeon.

"Would you be willing to show him? You don't have to."

"If it would help him believe you."

Hyeon held out his hand.

“You may put yours beneath it.”

Minjae hesitated, then extended his palm. Hyeon laid his fingers across it.

“Can you feel him?” I asked.

“A little.”

Minjae raised his hand, trying to take the weight of Hyeon’s fingers. Then he brought his thumb around the side of Hyeon’s palm.

I saw it pass through.

Minjae pulled back so quickly that his elbow struck the sofa.

“Shit.”

Hyeon withdrew his hand.

The room went quiet. Minjae stared at his fingers.

“Did I hurt you?”

“No.”

Seoyeon leaned forward.

“I saw that.”

Minjae nodded without looking up.

Doyun had moved closer.

“Does that happen with everything you touch?”

“Most things. I can feel Jiwoo’s hand, but I cannot hold a spoon.”

“And you can sit there?”

“Yes. Sitting has not been a problem.”

Doyun looked at the cushion beneath him.

“I don’t know why I thought that would make more sense.”

Hyeon smiled.

Minjae pressed his thumb against his opposite palm, then looked at Hyeon.

“I’m sorry I pulled away.”

“I was surprised when it first happened too.”

“You were?”

“I thought I would be able to pick up my clothes. I could scarcely move them.”

Minjae nodded slowly.

Seoyeon looked towards the cabinet, then back at Hyeon.

“I don’t know what to ask you.”

“You may ask me about myself,” he said. “You need not take my hand.”

“Right. Sorry.”

For a while, nobody spoke. Minjae reached for his drink, then put it down unopened.

Eventually, Seoyeon asked where Hyeon had lived.

“In Hanseong. Jiwoo and I found the place where my father’s house stood.”

“Is it still there?”

“No. There are other homes now.”

He told them about the house and his family, and how we were trying to learn what had happened after he disappeared. Doyun asked whether we knew why he had come here.

“Not yet,” Hyeon said. “My mother knew a woman who performed rites. We think she may have come to our house.”

I told them briefly about Bokrye and the records we had found.

“And who knows about all this?” Minjae asked.

“Subin and Eunjae,” I said. “Not our supervisor.”

“Why not?”

“Hyeon needs the clothes. I’ve been bringing part of them home so he can leave with me. Hyejin could stop that.”

Hyeon looked at Seoyeon.

“I do not want strangers deciding where I must stay.”

“I wouldn’t either,” she said.

“Please don’t tell anyone yet,” I said.

Doyun answered first.

“We won’t.”

Seoyeon agreed. Minjae looked at Hyeon for a moment.

“I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you,” Hyeon said.

The doorbell rang.

All three of them turned towards it.

“Dinner,” I said.

Minjae watched me get up.

“That’s it?”

“What?”

“You tell us all of that, and now you’re getting dinner?”

“We ordered it.”

“I know we ordered it.”

“I can leave it outside.”

“No. Get the food.”

When I returned, Seoyeon was asking Hyeon about his examination. I opened the containers while he explained how he had prepared for it.

Minjae reached to help, then stopped.

“Sorry. Can you eat?”

“No. I tried to lift a spoon, but I could not hold it.”

“Do you feel hungry?”

“Not that I have noticed.”

Minjae glanced at the food.

“Is it all right if we eat?”

“Of course. Jiwoo used to stop eating whenever I watched him.”

“I still do sometimes.”

“I have told him he need not.”

“You have.”

Hyeon smiled at me. I handed Doyun the dumplings.

We ate. Minjae ate without saying much, though he kept glancing at Hyeon.

“So you’ve been going around the city?” he asked eventually.

“Some of it. We have been taking the bus.”

“You wanted to get on a bus?”

“I wanted to know how it felt.”

“Fair enough.”

“He has his own card,” I said.

“It has a bear on it,” Hyeon added.

“Why a bear?”

“I asked Jiwoo. He did not know.”

“I still don’t.”

Seoyeon laughed. Minjae shook his head, but he was smiling now.

Hyeon told them about the roads he had begun to recognise and the visit to his family's former home. When he mentioned the apartment complex, Seoyeon asked about the house that had stood there.

He described the gate and the lane, and she asked whether he remembered its width.

"Enough for a cart to pass. Not comfortably if somebody was coming the other way."

"That sounds like a place I went to this week."

She took a notebook from her bag and showed him a sketch of a narrow entrance with a stair behind it.

"We're trying to change the entrance without losing too much space inside."

Hyeon asked why it needed changing. She explained, then showed him the adjoining wall and the corner that made the work difficult.

He leaned closer to examine the drawing.

"Does that wall belong to the same building?"

"No. That's the problem."

She found a photograph on her phone. Hyeon asked to see the other side, and she drew something in the margin to explain.

I ate while they talked. He had begun pointing to parts of the drawing without looking towards me first.

Minjae leaned over her shoulder.

"You're going to spend the whole evening talking about that wall."

"You asked me about work on the way here."

"I was being polite."

Seoyeon rested a hand against his knee.

“You can try it again.”

Hyeon smiled at them. I looked down at my bowl.

Minjae reached for another dumpling.

“Speaking of people who don’t listen to explanations, you should have been at my meeting today.”

“Absolutely not,” Doyun said.

Minjae told us about six people who had spent the afternoon arguing over where to put a button on a screen. He used the food-ordering page on my phone to explain what had gone wrong.

“People kept missing it. Every single one looked somewhere else.”

“Then why did you not put it there?” Hyeon asked.

“That is an excellent question.”

“Did the people deciding have to use it themselves?”

Minjae stopped.

“No.”

“Then perhaps they should.”

“I would have liked you in that meeting.”

“I would not,” Doyun said.

Hyeon laughed. Minjae looked delighted.

Doyun mentioned that his own afternoon had been spent tracking down paperwork for a university purchase.

“Did you find it?” Hyeon asked.

“I found who was supposed to have it.”

“Did they?”

“No. That’s tomorrow’s problem.”

Hyeon laughed again.

Minjae settled against the sofa and looked at me. I knew that expression.

“Don’t.”

“I haven’t said anything.”

“You’re about to.”

“I was going to tell Hyeon how we met.”

“Go on,” Seoyeon said.

Minjae grinned.

“He was the only person in the lecture hall who looked like he knew what was happening, so I asked for his notes.”

“You were in the wrong room,” I said.

“I didn’t know that yet.”

“You stayed after you found out.”

“The lecture was interesting.”

“It wasn’t your course.”

“I worked that out.”

Hyeon was smiling already.

I had lent Minjae my notes, then gone looking for them because I wanted to revise. He invited me to eat while he finished copying them. When I said I was going home, he bought enough food for both of us anyway.

“You stayed?” Hyeon asked.

“I wanted my notebook.”

“Then he came back the next time,” Minjae said. “Without the notebook.”

“You asked me to.”

“Yes.”

Doyun put down his cup.

“He asked me to join you the following week because he was worried you’d leave as soon as you finished eating.”

I looked at him.

“I didn’t know that.”

“You stayed,” Doyun said.

Minjae was reaching for the last piece of chicken. Seoyeon was wiping sauce from her notebook, and Hyeon had turned to Doyun to ask what we’d talked about that evening.

I had wanted them to meet. Now I wanted them to stay longer.

We made tea. Minjae asked whether Hyeon had watched a film, then began suggesting things we could watch together.

“No,” Seoyeon said after the second suggestion.

“You haven’t heard the third.”

“I remember the third.”

“It’s good.”

“You fell asleep.”

“I was tired.”

Hyeon looked between them.

“Is it a story?”

“Most films are,” I said.

“Could we stop if there is something I don’t understand?”

“Whenever you want.”

By the time Minjae remembered another title, they had arranged to come back on Saturday. Doyun would bring dinner, and Seoyeon offered to show Hyeon more of her drawings.

I had expected to arrange another evening eventually. Somehow they had already made plans.

Hyeon sat beside me while Minjae tried to describe the film without revealing its ending. His fingers came to rest near mine on the cushion. I turned my hand slightly, and he touched it before returning his attention to the conversation.

When they finally began putting on their shoes, Minjae looked around the apartment.

“I thought you’d found someone and forgotten us.”

“I hadn’t forgotten you.”

“I know.”

He smiled at Hyeon.

“I’m glad we met you.”

“Thank you. I am glad you came.”

“Saturday, then.”

“I shall look forward to it.”

Seoyeon hugged me at the door.

“I’m glad you told us.”

Doyun waited by the lift while I took out the empty food bag.

“You can still call,” he said. “Even when you don’t have anything figured out.”

“I know.”

He touched my arm before joining the others.

When I went back inside, Hyeon was standing beside the sofa.

“You have good friends.”

“Yes.”

“I liked meeting them.”

“They liked you too.”

He smiled.

“I think Gyeongmun would have liked Minjae.”

“Why?”

“He would have asked why Minjae stayed in the wrong lecture. Then argued that staying was sensible.”

“Would you have agreed?”

“Certainly not.”

I laughed and began collecting the cups.

“Gyeongmun used to come to our house without sending word first,” Hyeon said. “Sometimes I would hear him talking before he reached the gate.”

“Did you mind?”

“I would tell him to lower his voice. Then ask him to finish what he was saying.”

He smiled at the memory.

“We were supposed to take the examination together. I keep wondering whether he passed.”

“We could look for that.”

“Would his name be recorded?”

“If he passed, he may be in the pass rosters. They usually give the father’s name and where the family lived, so we’d know we had the right person.”

Hyeon gave me the name of Gyeongmun’s father and where the family had lived. I wrote them beneath Gyeongmun’s name.

“I would like to know whether he did well.”

“We’ll try to find out.”

He nodded, then looked towards the cups waiting on the table.

“Should I help you put things away?”

“You can tell me where to put the books.”

“The tall ones should not be near the edge.”

“I remember.”

He smiled, and I went to clear the table.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I could still hear Minjae’s laugh in the apartment, though there was only the refrigerator and the occasional sound from the road.

Hyeon rubbed his thumb along his cuff.

“Can I hold you?” I asked.

His hand stopped. For a moment, I thought I had asked too much. Then he nodded and moved closer.

I put an arm around his back. The contact was slight, familiar from his hand. He raised his arms hesitantly, resting one hand against my shoulder and moving the other around me.

I could feel where it was.

He lowered his head beside mine. The loose edge of his sleeve lay across my wrist, visible more clearly than I could feel it.

“Thank you.”

I nodded against his hair.

I had wanted to comfort him. I hadn't realised how much I wanted him to hold me too.

I shifted my hand along his back. He came nearer.

We stayed while the lift stopped outside and another apartment door opened.

After a while, he spoke near my shoulder.

“May I stay here a little longer?”

“Yes.”

I left the cups where they were.

CHAPTER 22

When I woke, Hyeon's hand rested on the blanket between us. I put mine beside it. He opened his eyes.

"Good morning."

I moved my hand nearer and felt the slight pressure as he turned his palm towards mine.

I had spent part of the night trying to remember how his arms had moved around me. Now his face was half against the pillow, and I could have stayed until I was late for work.

My phone vibrated. I left my hand where it was for another moment before reaching for it.

Minjae had sent three films for Saturday, with pictures and descriptions that made each sound equally reasonable. Seoyeon had approved one. Doyun asked whether Minjae had actually watched the other two.

I showed Hyeon the pictures and read the descriptions. He chose the one about a family trying to keep a shop open.

"Why that one?"

"I would like to know what happens to them."

I sent his choice. While I dressed, Minjae asked what Hyeon wanted to know before we watched.

"Does he mean about the shop?"

"About anything."

Hyeon considered, then said he wanted to know how the people in the film had been chosen.

By the time I finished breakfast, Minjae had begun an answer, Seoyeon had corrected part of it, and Doyun had suggested waiting until Saturday.

“They are already discussing it,” Hyeon said.

“They do that.”

He smiled. I finished washing the cups I had left beside the sink.

At the museum, I opened my notebook to Gyeongmun’s name, with his father’s name and the part of the city where his family had lived.

Subin had begun searching when I sent the details the previous evening. After we returned the box, she showed us a later examination record.

“I found two people with similar names. This one has the family information you gave me.”

Hyeon leaned towards the screen.

“That is his father.”

The birth year matched too. He returned to the examination date.

“He passed.”

“Yes.”

The pleasure in his face made me smile before I had read the rest.

“I knew he could. He used to say he would have to find someone who could endure his compositions.”

“Did you?”

“I corrected them.”

The year was 1501.

Hyeon examined the original heading, then looked at me.

“Ten years?”

“After the examination you were preparing for.”

“He was thirty-four.”

His name had not been on the list of successful candidates from 1491. Now we had found a later success.

“I should like to know what he wrote,” Hyeon said.

Subin opened a catalogue entry for his collected writings. The edition was much later than his life; descendants had gathered the surviving pieces for printing. Its reference to his examination success matched the record.

In the digitised volume, Hyeon asked her to stop at the account of the writer’s life.

“He had a son.”

“The introduction was written by him,” Subin said.

Hyeon returned to the beginning and read the son’s name aloud. He had never heard it before. The account named a wife from the Kang clan and recorded several appointments.

Near the end was the year of Gyeongmun’s death.

“Sixty-nine.”

Hyeon turned one hand over in his lap.

“He grew old.”

“Yes.”

“I wonder what he looked like.”

Subin waited until he raised his eyes.

“Please go on.”

The contents listed poems, letters and prose pieces, some dated and some not. Hyeon helped with the titles while I searched the transcription for the characters on his name slip.

There was one result.

The essay addressed a young man who wished to change his teacher. Gyeongmun began by considering what the student expected to learn, and whether he had given his teacher time to answer his objections.

Hyeon stopped in the first paragraph.

“Here.”

His finger hovered beside his name. I enlarged the page, and he read slowly enough for me to follow.

“Yi Hyeon, my companion in study, once refused to call me his teacher on account of the faults he had learned to correct in himself by observing me.”

I knew the argument. In a letter in the museum collection, a younger Gyeongmun had demanded credit for his useful mistakes.

“He has left something out,” Hyeon said.

“What?”

“He wanted me to address him as my teacher when he borrowed my paper. He would take it from my side of the table, then say he had provided me with an opportunity to practise generosity.”

Subin smiled. Hyeon read on.

“I had hoped to gain honour from the passage, but he distinguished so carefully between a teacher and an occasion for learning that I gained only a correction.”

“That is better.”

Gyeongmun admitted he had enjoyed provoking his friend more than settling the question. Then he returned to the young man, asking what he could learn before deciding how much respect his teacher deserved.

Hyeon’s name did not appear again.

“Is there a date?”

Subin found the note at the end and its corresponding year in the catalogue.

“Sixty-two,” Hyeon said.

I nodded.

“He was still telling people about it.”

In the essay, Hyeon was a fellow student who had once corrected him. Gyeongmun had moved on to the young man’s question.

Hyeon stayed with the words.

“I remember when he marked that passage. He shut the book before the ink had dried.”

“We found the mark.”

“Yes. He was hungry. He had finished explaining why I ought to acknowledge him, and he wanted to go and eat.”

I remembered the dark line and its fainter reflection on the facing page. We had used it to check that Hyeon knew the book. Now the man who had spoiled it had reached sixty-two and found another use for their argument.

“I should have liked to answer this,” Hyeon said.

I waited.

“I would have been sixty-two as well.”

After a while, Subin asked whether he wanted printed copies.

“The whole essay, please. And the account at the beginning.”

“I’ll include the references.”

She went to collect them. I stayed beside him.

“What was he like when you first knew him?”

“Very pleased with himself.”

“Before the useful mistakes?”

“He had those already.”

He smiled slightly.

Subin returned with the original text and transcription, with dates and source details on a separate sheet.

“I’ll leave these with you.”

Hyeon thanked her, then asked me to open the essay. I laid the account of Gyeongmun’s life beside it.

“His child wrote this about him.”

“Yes.”

“He knew him for longer than I did.”

The account described a man who had continued studying after early failures, served in several places and returned home when his health made travel difficult. His son wrote about the books he kept nearby and the pupils who came with questions.

“He would have enjoyed that,” Hyeon said.

He looked towards the essay.

“He used to say we would have to make our children study together. Otherwise mine would grow unbearable without anybody to correct them.”

“What did you say?”

“That his would have enough to do correcting their father.”

His mouth curved, then his eyes returned to the son’s name.

“I thought I would know him.”

Hyeon had expected to watch the boy grow up, visit the household and find fault with the lessons his friend gave him.

Now he knew the name.

I waited until he asked to read on.

We went through Gyeongmun's appointments. Hyeon explained a title I did not recognise, then asked to see where his friend had lived away from the capital.

I opened the map.

"He went quite far."

"Yes."

"He would have sent me something about the road. Probably before he had put his books away."

He studied the route.

"I am glad he went. He wanted to do useful work."

We marked an appointment to investigate later. Other letters and prose pieces might tell us more. Hyeon wanted to read them, but the essay was enough for the moment.

I had entries to finish. Hyeon stayed beside me, occasionally asking about a word in the modern account.

When the questions stopped, he was reading the first sheet again. I finished a description, saved it and began the next.

The paper moved.

Hyeon had brought his fingers to the lower corner and drawn it across. The sheet bent, slipped, then settled beside the stack.

He looked back at his hand.

I took mine off the keyboard.

"Did you see?"

"Yes."

For a moment, neither of us moved. Then he reached for the next corner.

It took longer. His fingers lost the edge once; he adjusted them and tried again. The page rose far enough to pass over the one beneath it.

He laid it down and smiled.

I remembered him trying to lift a spoon from its wrapper. When I put my hand beneath his, there had been so little weight that I could hardly tell where it ended. His grip had become easier to feel since then, especially when he wanted me to know he was still beside me.

Now he had moved two pages himself.

He went back to the first. I began reaching for it out of habit and stopped.

“I can try,” he said.

“Of course.”

He took the edge slowly. This time, I watched his face. He was concentrating on a task he must once have done without thinking.

When the sheet was in front of him, he looked at me again, still smiling.

I wanted to write down the time. I left the notebook where it was and let him read.

Eunjae came in later to check a support. Hyeon looked up with a smile.

“I turned the pages.”

“Of the copies?”

“Yes.”

I described what I had seen. Hyeon moved a sheet clear of the other papers and showed him.

“Was that easier than before?” Eunjae asked.

“I could not do it before.”

“Does it feel different?”

Hyeon considered.

“I can feel the edge more clearly.”

We recorded the change. Hyeon followed my pen, then corrected my description of the first movement.

“The corner slipped.”

I added that. He returned to the essay while Eunjae finished with the support.

Before leaving, Eunjae glanced at the garment on its supports, then paused beside his chair.

“I’m glad you can do that.”

“So am I,” Hyeon said.

We spent the afternoon between my work and the pages. Hyeon chose two of Gyeongmun’s letters for Subin to save. She had requested an older reference for her search and was waiting for the copy.

Before leaving, I put Gyeongmun’s essay and the account of his life in a folder, keeping the pages in the order Hyeon asked. He waited while I secured the box.

On the bus, he took my hand after we sat down. He was watching the buildings outside, his fingers resting across mine. When he noticed me looking, he smiled a little and kept them there.

At home, I put the box on the cabinet and the folder on the table. I opened it, and Hyeon slowly drew the first sheet towards himself.

“Would you tell them?”

“My friends?”

“That I can do this.”

I sent a message. Minjae replied almost at once, asking what he was reading.

“Something written by my friend.”

I typed his answer and added that we had found it that morning. Seoyeon said she was glad. Doyun asked whether Hyeon wanted to tell them about it on Saturday.

He read the words on my screen.

“Yes. If they would like to hear.”

I sent that too.

He read while I ate. Afterwards, I sat beside him.

The essay was short enough to finish quickly, but Hyeon stopped at several lines to show me how Gyeongmun would have said them. Sometimes he lowered his voice and leaned towards me as though others in the room ought not to hear. Once, he began smiling before reaching the end of a sentence.

“That,” he said. “He would do that when he thought he had found a very good objection.”

His careful explaining voice grew quicker when he was remembering Gyeongmun rather than explaining him.

“He used to do it during instruction. I would tell him to wait, and then he would spend so long looking pleased that I had to ask what he was thinking.”

“What was it?”

“Sometimes he had noticed a mistake. Sometimes he merely wanted to make me lose my place.”

He shook his head, smiling.

“One morning I refused to ask. I was determined to finish the passage we had been given before he began. He sat without speaking for so long that I thought he had gone to sleep.”

“What happened?”

“He was reading. When I looked at him, he asked why I could not leave him in peace.”

I laughed. Hyeon looked pleased that I understood.

“When I can write again, I should like to put that down.”

“The story?”

“Yes. He has written about what I said to him. I remember a few things he said to me.”

We returned to the advice for the young man. Gyeongmun wanted him to ask clear questions and listen through the answers, even when he believed he had found a fault.

“He sounds more patient here,” I said.

“More patient than I remember.”

“Would you have liked learning from him?”

Hyeon considered seriously.

“I should have liked to hear what he had learned. And to tell him when I disagreed.”

“I think he would have expected that.”

“Yes.”

He sat nearer, his shoulder touching mine. I rested my arm along the back of the sofa behind him.

I had first read Gyeongmun’s letter alone at work, wondering what Hyeon had written back. Now he was beside me, explaining the essay before I had found the words for my next question.

He brought his fingers to the corner of the sheet. I kept my hand beside my knee.

The edge slipped once. He caught it again, turned the page, and continued.

CHAPTER 23

Hyeon had put the household note and arrest record beside each other by the time I finished my first catalogue entry. A corner of the note had caught beneath the other page. He worked it free with two fingers.

“Is there something you want enlarged?” I asked.

“I can read it. I was trying to think what might come after this.”

When Bokrye comes again—

The copy ended where the original did.

“My mother said the protection would be temporary,” he continued. “I understood that I would still have to attend the examination. I thought she wanted me to meet the woman before it.”

He looked towards the note.

“I was more concerned about what she would ask me to do than about what she might do herself.”

I put my notebook between us and wrote down a question.

What was Bokrye expected to do when she returned?

Hyeon watched me write, then went back to the papers. I worked through another two entries, trying not to reach for the pages whenever he moved them.

“The reference arrived,” Subin said when she came in.

I saved my work.

“It was in the older collection of official papers. The reference only gave the heading, but they've sent the whole page.”

She opened the image. Part of the inner margin disappeared into the binding. A report occupied the upper half of the page, with a short reply beneath it.

I followed the familiar characters into the sentence, recognised Chungju and reached the word that made me stop.

Hyeon had read further.

“She died.”

Subin nodded.

The reply concerned the woman expelled from the capital under the earlier order. Bokrye had reached her native place and was now deceased.

The report was dated later in 1491. It gave no separate date for her death.

“Does it say how?” Hyeon asked.

“No. It's a reply to an inquiry about her whereabouts. I checked the surrounding material.”

He asked for the preceding page. While he followed the copied order to its date, I opened the arrest record beside it.

The references matched.

“So they knew where she had gone.”

“They had a report from Chungju,” Subin said. “We don't know who else would have known.”

Hyeon drew the household note closer.

“When she comes again,” he read.

For a while, none of us spoke.

“If my mother was waiting for this woman, she might not have known what happened to her.”

“That's possible,” I said.

He looked at the incomplete line.

“I never met her. I do not know what she looked like, or what she believed she was doing.”

“There may be something she told someone before she died,” Subin said.

“I would like us to look.”

“We will.”

He brought his fingers to the instruction above Bokrye's name.

Keep the clothing and the paper together.

“If she was expected to come back for these, my mother would have had to keep them.”

He looked towards the garment.

“What if it did not end by itself?”

I put down my pen.

“What if someone had to come back and do something else? My mother might have been waiting for her because I could not return until she did.”

The note gave no indication of what Bokrye had intended to do when she returned.

“It would explain why the instruction was kept,” I said.

“My father told her she should not ask again. Afterwards she wanted to know whether I had enough paper. I thought she had begun worrying about the examination instead.”

He looked down.

“I would like to believe that.”

I waited until he looked up again.

“What do you want us to find next?”

“What she was supposed to finish.”

Subin brought up the earlier order.

“There may be more references, but I don't know how much they'll tell us about the rite itself.”

Hyeon looked at her.

“Do people still practise? Are there women now who might understand what she was doing?”

“Yes. There are practitioners. I know someone who has worked with them on oral-history interviews. She might be able to introduce us.”

“I should like to ask.”

I had been thinking about another document, another collection that might contain Bokrye's name. I hadn't considered whom we might sit down with.

“We could arrange a conversation,” I said.

Hyeon looked between us.

“I would like to meet her before you tell her about me.”

“Of course.”

“Only a conversation, Jiwoo.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll ask for an introduction,” Subin said. “We can begin with the papers.”

I wrote down Hyeon’s questions about what Bokrye had left unfinished, why the clothing and paper needed to stay together, and what separating them could have changed. When Eunjae came in, he offered to prepare photographs showing the arrangement.

Subin took the references to her desk to contact her colleague. Hyeon brought out Gyeongmun's essay, and I finished the work I owed before the end of the afternoon.

Before leaving, I sent Eunjae our questions and packed the goreum.

Outside, Hyeon stopped before I turned towards the bus stop.

"Could we walk a little first?"

"Of course."

He didn't mention Bokrye. I didn't either.

We followed the pavement along the museum grounds. He watched a car join the traffic, then moved his hand beside mine. I opened my fingers. He took them and continued walking.

At the crossing, he noticed the signal change before I said anything. He kept hold of my hand as we crossed.

On our first outing, I had watched for what frightened him and tried to anticipate the next thing. Now he was looking into a shop window while we waited for someone to move their bag, and I had time to notice how his thumb lay against mine.

"Is the film on Saturday long?"

"About two hours."

"Will you be angry if I ask questions?"

"No. We can pause it."

"Minjae has already explained some of the actors. I should like to understand what they are doing."

"He'll be happy to explain."

Hyeon smiled.

"Doyun said he would bring dinner."

“He will.”

“Then you should not order anything before he arrives.”

“I’ll remember.”

He had begun noticing what I ate and when I forgot to do it, sometimes reminding me before I realised how late it was.

At the bus stop, he let go while I took out our cards. When the bus came into view, he took my hand again.

Subin’s message arrived while I ate dinner. Her colleague had arranged an introduction to Seo Myeonghui, a practitioner who could meet us the following evening. She wanted clear copies of the papers and information about where they had been found.

I read the address and time aloud, then put the phone between us.

“Has she said what she thinks?”

“She hasn’t seen the papers yet.”

I looked up the route. We could go straight from the museum. I would need to tell Eunjae about taking the goreum.

“I would like to meet her,” Hyeon said.

“I’ll tell Subin.”

Before I could write back to Subin, he put his hand beside mine.

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course.”

He knew I would have to. He asked anyway.

His fingers moved over mine. I left the message open while he read the address again.

When he nodded, I sent our answer.

Eunjae had printed the photographs at two sizes: one showing the whole parcel, the other making the repaired stitches large enough to follow.

“The dates are on the backs,” he said. “Including the ones taken after we opened it.”

I put them with the copies. We left after my last entry, taking the box and folder. On the bus, Hyeon followed the route on my phone.

Ms. Seo met us at the door. She was older than my mother, with grey at her temples and glasses hanging from a cord. She repeated Hyeon’s name, then showed us to a table near the window.

I set down the folder and box.

“This contains a piece of the clothing. It needs to stay on its support.”

“Do I need to see it outside the box?”

“We’ve brought photographs.”

“Then let me look at those.”

I left the lid in place.

She followed Eunjae’s photographs through the opening of the parcel, noting what had been together and what we had moved afterwards. We could not tell her who had repaired the wrapping or added the later layers.

Hyeon read her the household note, including the unfinished line about Bokrye. Its date was still uncertain. He thought it was his mother’s writing, but wanted to compare it with her letters.

“What were you told the woman would do?”

His hand stopped beside the paper. He glanced at me, then turned back to her.

“Before I explain that, I would like to know whether you mean to do anything with these.”

“Today?”

He nodded.

“No. You asked me to read them and speak with you.”

“If you thought there was something that ought to be done?”

“I would explain what I thought and why. We would discuss it.”

She waited without moving the box.

“The person named on that slip is me,” he said.

“Yi Hyeon?”

“Yes.”

He gave his father’s name, their ward and the title he had held after the lower examination. Then he told her the date of the last night he remembered.

“The sixth day of the fourth month. In the twenty-second year of His Majesty’s reign.”

“Seongjong,” I said. “1491.”

She took off her glasses.

“I was preparing for the examination the following morning,” Hyeon continued. “My mother wanted me protected until the danger concerning my father had passed. She had spoken to a woman about it. I refused to meet her.”

He paused.

“My father agreed with me. I went to bed believing there was nothing more to discuss. When I next knew where I was, Jiwoo was beside my clothing. In the museum.”

She looked towards me.

I described hearing his voice, seeing the sleeve move and finding him beside the table. When he tried to leave the room, he had disappeared. The following morning, I brought the name slip closer to the garment and called him back.

I explained that he could travel with the goreum, did not feel hungry or sleepy, and had recently begun moving sheets of paper.

“Other people can see him too. And feel him, a little.”

She looked at his hands.

“May I?”

He offered one. She placed her palm beneath his fingers and raised it slightly. They moved with her hand, but there was so little resistance that she stopped before she had meant to.

“Thank you.”

He withdrew his hand.

She returned to the photographs, then read the household note again.

“I have never met someone in your condition,” she said. “But there are practices intended to protect someone by making them inaccessible to harm.”

“Would the protection end by itself?” Hyeon asked.

“Not necessarily. Some acts are understood to require another act to release the person. That might explain why the clothing and paper were kept together.”

She touched the copy’s margin.

“We would need to know what was done in the first place.”

Hyeon leaned forward.

“Then someone might have needed to come back.”

“Possibly.”

“She was sent away,” he said. “Another report says she died later that year.”

She read both records, following the reference connecting them.

“Could someone else finish it?” he asked.

“I would need to understand what had been started, and what completing it would involve.”

His fingers came together.

“But if it could be finished, would I return home?”

“To your family?”

“Yes. To the morning I should have woken.”

She took a moment.

“No,” she said. “Not from anything I know.”

Hyeon stayed bent towards the table.

“Calling someone back means bringing them into the world again,” she said. “It cannot return them to an earlier time.”

He looked at the paper beneath her hand.

“Whatever happened to you, the years continued without you. Your family lived through them.”

“Even if we discover what she meant to finish?”

“Even then. If we can bring you back fully, it will be here, in the present.”

Hyeon sat back.

Ms. Seo left the papers where they were. He drew the household fragment aside until the arrest record’s heading was visible.

The twelfth day of the fourth month.

He read it, then looked at the later report.

“My mother would have—”

He stopped.

A door closed somewhere beyond the room. Ms. Seo stayed with us.

I wanted to put my hand over his. His hands were together in his lap, and I could not tell whether he wanted to be touched. I moved my chair nearer instead.

He looked towards me once, then returned to the heading.

For him, the report had been made days after he went to bed. For me, it was one more date in a notebook full of them. He already knew how old his friend had been when he died.

After a while, Ms. Seo gathered the photographs, leaving the note and reports before him.

“May I keep these copies?” she asked. “I’d like to read them again.”

Hyeon nodded.

“I would still like to know what happened to me.”

“So would I,” I said.

“I’ll look for what she left unfinished,” she told him.

“Please.”

I separated her copies from ours and wrote my number, with Subin’s name beside it.

Hyeon watched my pen. When I finished, he turned towards Ms. Seo.

“I would like to leave now.”

“Of course.”

I packed our papers and the box. At the door, she told him we could speak again when he wanted to.

He thanked her.

CHAPTER 24

Outside, I checked the next bus. Hyeon followed me to the stop without asking to see the map.

On the bus, he sat by the window. I put the bag between my feet and offered him my hand. He laid his fingers across it.

Near the place where I usually bought dinner, I asked whether he minded stopping. He shook his head, then watched the reflection of our hands in the glass until I told him we had arrived.

At home, I returned the box to the cabinet. Hyeon sat on the sofa.

While I put dinner in a bowl, he drew the book towards him, worked a finger beneath the cover and found the marked page.

“Would you like the lamp nearer?” I asked.

“Thank you.”

I moved it, then sat at the end of the sofa with my dinner.

Once, his fingers went to the page’s lower corner, then returned to his lap. The same passage was open when I took my bowl to the sink.

I put our folder on the shelf.

“We can leave those until tomorrow.”

“Yes,” he said.

When I came back from washing up, he closed the book and rose.

I folded back the cover on his side of the bed. He lay facing me, his hands beside the pillow.

I turned down the lamp. His eyes stayed open as mine began to feel tired. He had said almost nothing since we left. I listened to the refrigerator and the traffic below, keeping my hand on the pillow between us.

He looked at it, then at me.

“I thought I would see them again.”

I moved my hand closer until my fingers touched his.

“I know,” I said.

A tear gathered at his lower lid and ran towards his temple. He blinked, and another followed.

“My father,” he began. “I wanted to ask him—”

His mouth stayed open for a moment, then closed.

“I’m so sorry, Hyeon.”

He nodded slightly. His fingers shifted beneath mine.

“I thought my mother could tell me.”

He tried once more to speak and could not.

After a while, he turned his hand and held mine.

“Will you hold me?”

“Yes.”

I moved nearer and put my arm around his back. He came towards me at once, lowering his head beneath my chin. His forehead touched the collar of my shirt.

I settled my hand between his shoulders. The contact was light, but I could feel him lean into it. He moved closer until the space we usually left between us had gone.

I adjusted the cover around us.

“I’m here,” I said.

He nodded against me, one hand closed on my shirt.

After a while, he said Okjeong's name.

"I miss her. And Gyeongmun."

I rested my cheek against his hair.

When he lifted his face, I brought my fingers to the wet line on his cheek. The tear was easier to feel than his skin. He closed his eyes at the touch, then lowered his head against me again.

I held him as his tears began to ease. His hand loosened on my shirt. I stroked his back once and left my palm between his shoulders.

Hyeon looked up.

"You can sleep," he said.

"I can stay awake a little longer."

He shook his head, very slightly.

"Stay here."

"I will."

He lay against me again. I rested my head on the pillow and stayed awake with him for a while.

Later, as I began to drift, he lifted his face towards mine. I opened my eyes. He looked at me for a moment, then closed his eyes and rested his cheek against my chest.

I woke before the alarm.

Hyeon's cheek rested against my chest, his hand near the collar of my shirt. I felt the slight pressure of his fingers when I moved and stayed still for a moment.

He opened his eyes when I shifted on the pillow, then lifted his face.

"Good morning," he said.

“Morning.”

“Did you sleep?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the arm I had kept around him.

“You stayed.”

“I said I would.”

“I know.”

He settled nearer. I moved my hand along his back and let it rest again.

My phone lay beyond his pillow, its screen dark. There was no reason to get up yet.

“Were you comfortable?” I asked.

“Yes.” He looked up. “I was glad you were here.”

I touched his hair near his temple. He leaned towards my hand.

He had let me do that while he was crying. Now he watched my face as my fingers moved, and I found myself taking longer than the gesture required.

I had been noticing his mouth for days. Usually there had been something he was saying that I ought to listen to.

He turned towards me, moving his hand from my collar to the side of my neck.

I could feel it.

His eyes went lower for a moment, then returned to mine.

“Will you kiss me?”

I took a moment to answer. I wanted him to hear it before I moved.

“Yes.”

A small smile appeared. He watched me lean closer, then lifted his face to meet me.

His mouth was soft against mine, with the same slight resistance I knew from his fingers. I felt his lower lip move as he answered. The contact was faint, without the warmth of someone breathing close to my face.

Then his hand moved along my neck, and I felt him turn towards me.

When I drew back, he followed a little before opening his eyes. His hand rested beneath my ear; mine remained against his cheek.

“All right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

He looked at my mouth again. This time I knew why.

I smiled.

“Had you wanted to?” he asked.

“For a while.”

“How long?”

I had spent enough time pretending to read while he leaned over a book beside me that I could not have given him an exact moment.

“I don’t know.”

“You could have asked.”

“So could you.”

“I have.”

I laughed quietly and kissed him again.

This time he closed his eyes before I reached him. His mouth moved against mine, a little more certain. Afterwards, he remained close, and I stroked my thumb beside the corner of his mouth.

His smile eased as he looked towards the light at the curtains.

I waited.

“They used to be awake before me,” he said.

“Your family?”

“My father. My mother too.”

His fingers loosened beside my neck.

“I keep thinking about what they would have been doing.”

I brought my arm around him again. He lowered his head against my chest, finding the place he had rested before.

For a while, I listened to someone opening a window in the next building, my hand resting on his back.

When the alarm sounded, he lifted his head. I silenced it, and he glanced towards the kitchen.

“You will need to eat.”

“Eventually.”

“Before you leave.”

“Yes.”

I kept my arm around him for another minute. Then I sat up, and he moved onto his own pillow while I got out of bed.

At the bathroom door, I looked back.

He was watching me.

I smiled before going in.

When I came back, Hyeon had laid the account of Gyeongmun’s life beside the essay.

“Which ones would you like to bring?” I asked.

“These. And the two letters Subin saved.”

“I can open those at work.”

While the bread toasted, I packed the papers and settled the goreum's box in my bag. Hyeon stood at the window.

We sat on the sofa while I ate. After a while, he looked at me. I looked back, and he smiled.

I forgot about the toast in my hand until he glanced towards it.

I finished eating while he sorted the pages he wanted to the front.

Before we left, I straightened the bed. His pillow had moved towards mine during the night. I put it beside mine and smoothed the cover around both.

Hyeon waited near the door. I lifted the bag and went to him. When I reached for his hand, he opened his fingers at once.

Eunjae checked the returned goreum while I recorded our journeys, including the visit to Ms. Seo.

"Did she want anything opened?"

"No," Hyeon said. "She looked at the photographs."

"I left a set with her," I added. "She's going to study them."

Eunjae looked over the support and replaced the lid.

"Let me know if she asks for anything else."

Subin came in while Hyeon was arranging the copies beside my keyboard.

"How did it go?"

I looked towards him. He set the last sheet down.

"She said the protection might have needed another act to end it. She could not tell us what Bokrye did."

"Is she going to help?"

“She will look at the papers again.” He paused. “She also told me that I cannot return to 1491. Even if we discover what was done.”

Subin’s hand stopped on the back of the chair. She sat down.

“I’m sorry.”

Hyeon nodded.

“I would still like to know what my family did afterwards. Whether my mother asked someone else to help when Bokrye did not return.”

“We can start with her letters,” Subin said. “See whether there’s any mention of the woman, or another attempt.”

“And the clothing,” Hyeon said. “Someone kept it all that time.”

“We’ll look at the later papers too.”

Subin opened the correspondence list and showed him where she intended to begin. I wrote down his questions.

When he looked over my notes, he pointed to the last line.

“Put ‘what they tried’ there.”

I changed it. He nodded, then laid Gyeongmun’s essay beside the notebook.

Subin said she would return after checking the first group. She touched Hyeon’s shoulder as she rose, and he looked up at her.

“Thank you.”

After she left, I put my hand beside his. He turned his palm towards mine. Our fingers stayed together until he drew the essay closer with his other hand.

“I should like to read the letters.”

I opened the two files Subin had saved. The first asked about the recipient’s journey and apologised for a gift Gyeongmun had sent for the recipient’s child.

“What has he sent?” I asked.

“A book.”

I found the word, but could not confidently read the phrase beside it.

“He had copied part of it. The rest was not ready when the man left.”

Hyeon read further, then smiled.

“He wanted the child to begin before he had finished.”

“Did he do that often?”

“He did it to me once. He gave me the beginning of something he wanted me to read, then kept asking whether I had reached the part where I would need the rest.”

“Had he finished it?”

“No. He said I was reading too quickly.”

“That seems unfair.”

“It was.”

We read the letter again, slowly enough for me to follow Gyeongmun’s joke at his own expense.

“His son must have known what that was like,” Hyeon said.

“Having to wait for him?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the name in the account of Gyeongmun’s life.

“Please keep the letter.”

“I will.”

I saved it with the source details, then opened the second. We read its beginning before I had to return to the catalogue.

Hyeon kept the first letter open on the other screen, occasionally asking me to enlarge a line.

I corrected a photograph linked to the wrong object, then began comparing a name with the donor's list. When I looked up, he was watching me.

"What is it?"

"Nothing."

I raised my eyebrows.

He smiled.

"I am pleased."

I took my hands off the keyboard. Before I found an answer, he turned back to the screen.

For several seconds, I watched him pretending to give the letter his full attention.

Then I returned to the name on the donor's list.

I had to read it twice.

CHAPTER 25

That afternoon, Subin brought a list of household correspondence to go through. Several dates remained uncertain, and she had found nothing new.

Hyeon read it while I finished my last catalogue entry. Before we left, he returned to Gyeongmun's letter.

"May we read the other one at home?"

"Of course."

I saved both letters for later and packed the copies. Eunjae looked over the goreum's support before we left.

Hyeon waited until I closed the bag, then came nearer and put his hand in mine.

At home, I secured the box on the cabinet and opened the second letter on my laptop. Hyeon leaned forward to read while I ate dinner.

He explained a phrase about the recipient's studies. When I read the sentence aloud, he corrected my pronunciation.

I tried again.

"That is better."

I smiled and took another mouthful.

After washing my bowl, I returned to the sofa. Hyeon was still at the sentence we had been reading.

I sat closer until our shoulders touched. He looked up, and I brought my hand to his cheek.

He turned towards it. When I kissed him, his fingers settled against my wrist, and he answered more readily than he had that morning.

I could feel his mouth move. I wanted to stay long enough to learn it.

When we parted, he kept his hand on my wrist.

“I was going to ask you something,” he said.

“What?”

He glanced towards the laptop.

“I cannot remember.”

I laughed softly.

“It may come back,” he said.

“Mhm.”

He moved closer, and I put my arm around him. I brought the laptop nearer so he could read without leaning away.

We found the sentence again. Hyeon began explaining it, then paused to look up at me.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head, smiling, and returned to the line.

I stayed close enough to read with him.

Subin’s message arrived while I was looking at a dinner menu.

We had returned from the museum early on Saturday afternoon. Gyeongmun’s essay lay ready for Doyun, with the modern reading beside the original.

Another correspondence list described a letter attributed to Hyeon’s mother, addressed to her sister and dated 1494. Its summary mentioned

a woman she had consulted about the clothing after an earlier woman had failed to return.

“Three years,” Hyeon said.

“Yes.”

“She asked someone else.”

“It looks as though she did.”

Subin was still trying to locate the full letter.

“I would like to read the original wording.”

“I’ll tell her.”

He stayed with the date while I replied. I saved the reference.

When I put my phone down, he glanced at the menu still open on it.

“Doyun is bringing dinner.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you choosing more?”

“In case there isn’t enough.”

“He asked what everyone wanted. You answered.”

I closed the menu. Hyeon returned to the essay with the satisfied smile of someone who had prevented an unnecessary expense.

Doyun arrived first, carrying two bags.

“Don’t order anything.”

“I haven’t.”

“He was looking,” Hyeon said.

Doyun set the bags down and smiled at him.

Seoyeon brought drinks. Minjae brought food for the film, which apparently made it different from dinner.

There was enough of both.

Hyeon sat beside me on the sofa. He put his hand near mine, and I turned my palm towards him.

Minjae looked at our hands.

“Oh.”

“Sit down,” I said.

He sat on the cushion beside Seoyeon, still looking at us.

“What happened to not having a boyfriend?”

I reached for a carton with my free hand. Doyun passed me the chopsticks.

“Let him eat.”

Minjae leaned back against Seoyeon’s knees, pleased with himself. Hyeon’s fingers moved against mine.

Before the film, Hyeon brought Gyeongmun’s essay to the table and showed them where his name appeared. Minjae laughed at the story about the borrowed paper. Doyun took longer over the accompanying letter, asking Hyeon about two characters in the original.

“Can I keep this?” Doyun asked.

“Yes. I brought it for you.”

Seoyeon wanted a copy too. I promised to print one at work.

Minjae picked up the remote.

“Are we actually watching a movie tonight?”

“We are,” I said.

The film opened with a father and son trying to get a large box through a narrow doorway. Each time the father told him to turn it, the son struck the frame with the other end.

Hyeon laughed. Minjae turned towards him, grinning, and missed the father walking into the box himself.

“Look at the screen,” Seoyeon told him.

“I was!”

“You weren't.”

As the story continued, the family discovered that the father had hidden a bill and refused help from a neighbouring shopkeeper, even though they could not afford to complete an order.

“Why doesn't he tell them?” Hyeon asked.

“Pride,” Seoyeon said.

“That seems a poor reason.”

“It is,” Doyun said.

Hyeon looked pleased when the daughter arranged an agreement with the neighbour. Her father was considerably less pleased.

“He should thank her,” Hyeon said.

“Thank you!” Seoyeon told the television.

Later, the father asked his son about an offer of work in another city. He listened without interrupting, then returned to his dinner.

Hyeon grew quiet beside me.

I turned my hand over on the cushion. After a moment, he took it.

We watched the rest that way.

The shop completed its order. The son accepted the job. On the morning he left, his father kept looking for things he might have forgotten, until the daughter reminded him that his bag was already by the door.

Hyeon laughed when she held it up.

At the credits, Minjae announced that the father had been the most difficult person in the film.

“He was trying,” Doyun said.

“Eventually.”

Hyeon looked towards the television.

“I thought he might ask his son to stay.”

“He didn't want him to give up the job,” Seoyeon said.

“He did not look happy.”

“He probably wasn't.”

Hyeon considered that.

Then he asked whether the actor playing the father had appeared in other films.

“Loads,” Minjae said, reaching for his phone.

“Is he a father in those too?”

“Probably in half of them.”

They looked through his films until Seoyeon announced that she was choosing the next one. Minjae objected.

When he asked Hyeon what he thought, Hyeon looked at me.

“It's up to you,” I said.

He chose one of the films. Minjae immediately began explaining why it was a good choice.

They stayed a little longer, helping clear the table before leaving. Doyun put Gyeongmun's essay carefully in his bag. Seoyeon reminded me about her copy.

At the door, Minjae told Hyeon to send him any questions about the actors.

“I shall.”

“You don't have to wait until Saturday.”

“Thank you.”

I closed the door after them.

Hyeon was still smiling.

I heard the lift doors close down the hall. The apartment was quiet again.

“Did you enjoy it?” I asked, carrying the last cups to the sink.

“Very much. I hope they come again.”

“They will.”

Hyeon was sitting on the sofa when I finished cleaning up. I joined him, and he took my hand.

“Your friends noticed us,” he said.

“I think so.”

“They seemed pleased.”

“They like you.”

He looked at me.

“I was not sure what to say if they asked about us.”

“Neither was I.”

“In my time, there would have been nothing I could say.”

I turned towards him.

“And now?”

“Now I would like to say I am courting you. But I do not know whether it means the same thing.”

“I’d probably call you my boyfriend.”

He considered the word.

“Does that mean we intend to marry?”

“Not necessarily. It means we’re together because we want to be. We don’t have to decide anything beyond that yet.”

“And you would not be seeing someone else?”

“No. I wouldn’t.”

“Neither would I.”

I moved closer, resting my arm along the back of the sofa.

“Is that what you want?” I asked.

He nodded, but his eyes moved towards the cabinet.

“I cannot go anywhere without you, Jiwoo.”

“I know.”

“You would have to keep bringing the clothing. Even if we wanted to meet somewhere, I could not come on my own.”

“And I can’t promise when that might change.”

“I do not expect you to.”

I held his hand a little more firmly.

“You know I’d still help you if we weren’t together, don’t you? You don’t have to be my boyfriend to stay here.”

He looked at me.

“I know. That is not why I am asking.”

“Good.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

I brought my hand to his cheek.

“I like being with you. I’ve wanted to kiss you for longer than I’ve been admitting. And when you aren’t beside me, I find myself thinking about

what I'll tell you when I see you again."

He leaned towards my hand.

"I think about you too," he said.

I smiled.

"Then I'd like to be your boyfriend."

"I would like that."

He moved closer and put his hand against my neck.

I thought he was going to say something else, but he kissed me instead.

When we parted, he stayed close, his hand resting beneath my ear.

"May we tell your friends?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Tomorrow?"

"If you want."

"Yes."

I put my arm around him, and he settled against my side.

"Minjae will be pleased," he said.

"He will."

"I think Seoyeon already knew."

"Probably."

He rested his head against my shoulder. I kissed his hair.

After a while, he lifted his face.

"Jiwoo?"

"Mm?"

"I would like to kiss you again."

I smiled and turned towards him.

The next morning, I typed a message to our friends saying that Hyeon and I were together, then added that Minjae could stop asking.

Hyeon read it over my shoulder.

“Is that enough?”

“It tells them.”

“Will he stop asking?”

“No.”

“Then perhaps you should leave that part out.”

I sent it as it was.

Minjae replied at once.

I KNEW IT.

Seoyeon was pleased for us and promised to speak to Minjae about behaving himself. Doyun congratulated us both.

Hyeon read the replies again. When Minjae began explaining how long he had known, he leaned closer.

“Should we tell him we were present?”

“He thinks we need the account.”

Hyeon smiled. I left the phone on the table and went to find my jacket.

Eunjae was working that Sunday. After the goreum’s morning check at the museum, we would go out together, the first time since we had said it aloud.

I had been thinking of somewhere by the river, but Hyeon remembered a bookshop we had passed on an earlier walk, with books in its window, and wanted to go inside.

My parents would be home by evening. I could collect the stew on the way back.

I packed the supported box and found my keys.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He took my hand as we left.

CHAPTER 26

I had just finished recording the goreum's return when Subin called from the doorway. She was covering the Sunday shift.

"The letter's here."

"The whole letter?" Hyeon asked.

"Photographs. There's a transcription too. They arrived last night."

The letter had been filed with the recipient's household papers. Its reference had changed when the collection was rearranged.

Subin opened the photographs. A worn fold crossed the writing on the first page; the second was clearer.

"That is my mother's writing," Hyeon said.

I brought up the photograph of the household fragment. He compared the two, then showed me the same word in both.

"She made this stroke like that. I remember it from her letters."

Subin opened the transcription beside them. The letter began with household matters: someone who had been ill, a question about cloth. Hyeon read those too, though I was waiting for the passage mentioned in the older list.

"Seolok," he said.

"The practitioner your aunt recommended to your mother," Subin said.

His mother had met her outside the western gate. Seolok had examined the preserved clothing but refused to begin without knowing what Bokrye had already done.

There had been another inquiry about Bokrye. No answer was included.

Hyeon corrected a word in the transcription and asked Subin to enlarge the end of a line.

“She is asking whether her sister has heard anything further. And whether Seolok might speak to someone who knew Bokrye.”

Subin entered the correction.

Hyeon stopped reading aloud.

“What does that part say?” I asked.

“She has not moved the books from my table.”

Subin enlarged the sentence. He read it again, then asked her to return to the date.

“Three years?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the date for a while.

“I left them there because I would need them in the morning,” he said.

I put my hand beside his. His fingers rested across mine, but he kept looking at the screen.

“Does she say anything else about them?”

“Not that I can see,” Subin said.

Beneath that sentence, his mother returned to the inquiry she wanted her sister to make. I wondered whether she had written the letter in his room, with the books still beside her.

“She could have put them away,” Hyeon said.

Neither of us answered.

After a while, he asked to see the rest of the letter. Subin showed him the reverse of the second sheet. He read to the end, then returned to the front. There was nothing more about the clothing or his books.

“May I have copies of all of it? Both the photographs and the transcription.”

“Of course. I’ll include your correction.”

She went to print them, leaving the letter open.

“My father used to complain about her writing,” Hyeon said.

“Was it difficult to read?”

“Sometimes. She said he answered quickly enough when she was asking him to bring something home.”

I smiled.

“He told her a letter should be legible even when it contained no requests.”

“And was the next one?”

“It contained more requests.”

He smiled too, briefly.

“She wrote to me when I was away. Usually to ask whether I had eaten, or to tell me what she had already arranged.”

I looked at the passage about the clothing. She had arranged that too.

“I wish she had listened when I refused,” he said.

“I know.”

“She kept trying to bring me home. I am glad she did.”

He found the sentence about his books again.

“I would like to tell her I have read this.” His fingers shifted across mine. “I would still ask why my answer was not enough.”

I held his hand while he read.

When Subin returned, she put the copies beside us.

“I’ll look for Seolok’s name in the material we have.”

“Please.”

Hyeon checked that both sides of the letter were there. I opened the folder for him.

“I would like to read it again tonight.”

“We can.”

He placed the last sheet with the others, then left his hand on it.

“But we were going out.”

“Yes.”

“Then I would like to do that.”

I closed the folder and put it in my bag.

Before leaving, we sent the new material to Ms. Seo, including the passage about Seolok refusing to begin. Hyeon read the message before I sent it.

I packed the goreum, and we went outside.

“Which way?” he asked.

I pointed towards the bookshop. He took my hand, and we began walking.

Hyeon stopped at the bookshop window. The book he remembered was still there, though he had become interested in the one beside it by the time I reached the door.

“We can go in,” I said.

“I know. I am trying to read this cover.”

There was a price sticker over part of the description. He leaned to one side, then gave up and followed me inside.

He went straight to the poetry shelves. After looking through several titles, he showed me a book he wanted to read. I took it down and held it

open for him.

The first poem was about someone preparing to leave a house. The person staying behind kept remembering things they ought to take.

Hyeon read it twice. He asked to see another, then returned to the first.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yes. May we read a little more?”

I turned the page.

When another customer wanted to pass, Hyeon moved closer while I made room. I kept reading until he reached the end of the poem.

“Would you like it?”

“Yes, please.”

I closed the book and kept it in my hand.

At the fiction shelves, I found a novel I had nearly bought a few weeks earlier. It was about two sisters travelling together after years of not speaking.

Hyeon read the description over my shoulder.

“Have you read anything by this writer?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I should like to know what you think.”

I added it to his book.

The shopkeeper packed them together. Hyeon thanked her, and she told us to come again.

Outside, he wanted to see the covers once more. I held the bag open while he looked, then we continued down the street.

We walked without deciding where to go next, stopping occasionally when something caught his attention.

At a shop selling ceramics, Hyeon wanted to see the cups displayed in the window. He examined their shapes and asked about the glazes.

When he finished, he turned towards me. His hand came to rest against my wrist.

I thought he was going to ask another question.

“Jiwoo.”

“Yes?”

“Would it be all right if I kissed you here?”

I looked along the street. There were people passing on the larger road, though nobody was near us.

“Yes.”

He hesitated.

“I am asking whether anyone would object. Because we are both men.”

“Some people might.”

“And what would happen to you?”

“Someone might say something. I wouldn't like it, but we could leave.”

He looked towards the road again.

“Has that happened before?”

“Not to me. Not while kissing someone.”

He nodded, considering my answer.

“We don't have to,” I said.

“I know.”

He kept hold of my wrist.

“I would still like to.”

I put the books down beside my feet and turned towards him.

He touched my cheek, then leaned closer. I met him halfway.

His mouth rested against mine. I felt his fingers move near my jaw, and when I drew back, he was still looking at me.

“Was that all right?” I asked.

“Yes.”

He smiled, then looked down at the books.

“I want to walk a little longer.”

I picked up the bag and offered him my hand.

He took it, and we continued towards the next crossing.

At the next crossing, we waited beside a woman with a shopping trolley, then followed her across when the light changed.

Hyeon wanted to know whether there would be time to read before dinner. I thought there would. He had more poems to read, and I had committed myself to finding out why the sisters were travelling together.

“I should like another date,” he said.

“We’re still on this one.”

“I know. I am asking about another.”

“Yes. We’ll have another.”

His mother’s letter was still in my bag. We would read it again tonight. My own mother’s stew could wait until tomorrow.

For now, he was looking ahead for the bus stop.

“This one?”

“Yes.”

I shifted the bag of books to my other hand when we reached it. He kept hold of my hand until the bus appeared.

“Next time, I should like to go to the river.”

“We can.”

He stayed beside me while I found our cards.

When we arrived on Monday, Subin had photographs of two more sheets waiting for us. A colleague had found them among the papers filed near his mother’s letter. They belonged to his aunt’s reply.

“This answers the letter we read yesterday,” Subin said.

Hyeon came beside her as she opened the photographs.

The reply was addressed to his mother by name.

“Jeonghwa,” Hyeon said. “My mother.”

The first page thanked her for the cloth she had sent, requested another piece, and apologised for something his aunt had promised but not yet delivered.

“She always wanted more of whatever had arrived,” Hyeon said. “My mother used to read those parts aloud.”

On the second page, Seolok’s name appeared near the middle.

Hyeon read the passage twice.

“She asked where the paper bearing my name had been fixed before the garment was closed.”

“Fixed?” I asked.

“That is the word.”

His aunt had repeated Seolok’s question on her behalf. Jeonghwa had shown her the clothing and paper, but apparently hadn’t known how Bokrye had arranged them during the rite.

“Seolok was asking about the original arrangement,” I said. “Not how the parcel was stored.”

“Yes.”

While Subin requested the remaining correspondence, I opened the earliest photographs of the parcel. The name slip lay partly beneath the folded garment, near the cuff. Several layers of wrapping had been repaired, and the parcel had evidently been opened more than once.

“We don’t know where the paper was before it was wrapped,” I said.

Hyeon studied the photographs, then asked to see the garment before we had opened its front.

I found the images from our first examination. He stopped me at one showing the sleeve folded across the body.

“That edge is turned out.”

I enlarged the image. He drew one side of his own robe across his chest, showing me where it lay beneath the other.

“When I wore it, this part was inside.”

“Could someone have folded it differently for storage?”

“Yes. But I would like to see beneath it.”

I marked the photograph for Eunjae.

When he returned, we showed him the letter and the image. Hyeon demonstrated the overlap again.

“If the paper was fixed inside the garment,” I said, “there might be something beneath that edge.”

Eunjae looked through his condition notes.

“I was going to examine the support there before transferring it. We can look.”

CHAPTER 27

At the examination table, Eunjae placed additional support beneath the front of the garment while I took a photograph. He eased back the overlapping edge, following Hyeon’s direction without pulling the cloth flat.

A short line of old needle holes lay away from the seam.

“Could it have been a repair?” Hyeon asked.

“I don’t see a tear beneath it. There’s no structural reason for stitching across this area. We should compare the holes with the paper.”

The name slip had small punctures near one edge. I had photographed them during the original condition check, but hadn’t connected them to anything.

Eunjae examined the slip on its board, then brought the photographs to the same scale. Two openings in the paper corresponded closely with holes in the fabric. He pointed out a slight distortion along the worn edge.

Hyeon leaned closer.

“Someone put it there?”

“The holes line up,” Eunjae said. “There’s no thread left.”

“Could it have been done much later?” I asked.

“Yes. I can’t tell you when.”

Hyeon looked at the garment again.

“May we see how it might have been arranged?”

I printed a photograph of the inner front and a copy of the slip. Eunjae marked the openings we were comparing.

Hyeon came around to Eunjae's side of the table.

"The other way," he said.

Eunjae turned the photograph. Hyeon pointed to the collar.

"There. That is how it would have lain against me."

I cut around the copy of the slip. Eunjae placed it near the marks.

"We don't know which way the writing faced," he said.

Hyeon studied the arrangement, then reached towards the paper copy. It shifted beneath his fingers. He moved it carefully until the marked openings were beside one another.

Eunjae held the photograph steady while Hyeon followed the overlapping edge towards the ties.

"Then keeping the paper beneath the sleeve would not have been the same."

"It would keep them together," I said. "But it wouldn't recreate this."

Hyeon looked from the copy to the original garment.

"Can we send these photographs to Ms. Seo?"

"I'll send them with the letter."

Eunjae returned the cloth to its resting position. I photographed the arrangement and recorded what we had examined.

Hyeon stayed beside the table until the name slip was secure on its board.

"Thank you," he told Eunjae.

"You were right about the collar."

Hyeon looked once more at the garment before following me to the clear end of the table.

There, I attached the correspondence and photographs to a message for Ms. Seo. Hyeon asked me to distinguish between closing the garment and wrapping the parcel.

“What would the paper have been doing there?” he asked.

I added the question and sent the message.

Hyeon studied the photograph showing the paper against the garment’s inner front.

“I would like to know how to finish it.”

“So would I.”

By late afternoon, there was no reply from Ms. Seo. Subin had requested the remaining correspondence, and Eunjae would examine the paper more closely when he had time.

I closed the working folder.

“Do you still want to go to the river?”

Hyeon looked up from his book.

“Yes.”

“We can leave when I finish this.”

He marked his place while I completed the last record. I packed the goreum and collected my things.

Hyeon left the new letters on the table.

“We can read them tomorrow.”

“All right.”

We took the bus towards the river. Hyeon watched the streets through the window, occasionally pointing out something he recognised.

On the way, I messaged my mother that I would collect the stew another evening that week. She replied asking whether I had eaten.

At the riverside path, Hyeon stopped to look across the water. The buildings on the opposite bank were catching the last of the afternoon light. A bridge stood farther along, its supports reflected beneath it.

“May we walk that way?”

I nodded.

He took my hand, and we followed the path towards the bridge.

There were people running, cycling and walking dogs. Hyeon watched a small dog refuse to sit for a photograph, then smiled when it ran towards its owner’s bag instead.

Farther along, the path widened. I bought a drink from a convenience store near the steps, and we walked together until Hyeon stopped beside a railing overlooking the water.

“Have you come here often?”

“Sometimes. Minjae likes walking here after dinner.”

“With Seoyeon?”

“Usually. Doyun comes too, when he’s free.”

“I would like to come with them.”

“We can ask.”

“And you?”

“I’d like to come with you again.”

He smiled and turned back towards the river.

We found a place to sit. A boat passed beyond the bridge, and Hyeon followed it with his eyes until it disappeared behind one of the supports.

“Have you come here with someone before?” he asked. “Someone you were seeing?”

“No. There was a man I saw a few times before I met you. We usually met for dinner.”

“Did you enjoy seeing him?”

“Yes. But I think he wanted more from it than I did.”

Hyeon turned towards me.

“He wanted to spend more time together. I kept finding reasons to go home.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Eventually. He’d already noticed.”

I took another drink.

“I liked him. I just didn’t want to make much room for someone else in my life.”

Hyeon looked at our hands resting between us.

“And now?”

“Now I’m glad you asked me to come here.”

He raised his eyes to mine.

“I had hoped you would enjoy it.”

“I am.”

He moved closer, and I put my arm around him.

Later, we bought dinner from a stall farther along the path and found another place to sit beneath the bridge.

The lights came on along the opposite bank while I ate. Hyeon pointed out their reflections on the water, then asked about a taller building beyond them.

“I don’t know that one,” I said.

“We could look it up tomorrow.”

“I’ll remember to.”

When I finished eating, he turned towards me.

“Jiwoo?”

“Yes?”

“When this is finished, I would like to arrange somewhere for us to meet.”

“At the river?”

“Perhaps. Or somewhere else. I would like to be able to arrive before you.”

I glanced at the bag beside us.

“When you can travel without the goreum.”

“Yes.”

He looked towards the people passing behind us.

“I would like to go out in the morning, visit places, speak to people. I could decide where we should meet and send you a message.”

“You could.”

“And you would come when you finished work.”

“I would.”

He sat looking at the path for a moment.

“I enjoy going with you,” he said. “But I would like to be able to bring you somewhere myself. You have had to arrange nearly everything.”

“You chose the bookshop.”

“Yes. But you still had to take me.”

I rested my hand beside his.

“I understand.”

He placed his fingers across mine.

“I have been thinking about the things I would like to show you. I cannot know what they are until I have seen more.”

“We’ll have plenty to explore.”

“I would like that.”

He looked towards the bridge again.

“And I would like to be able to buy you dinner.”

I smiled.

“I’d accept.”

We stayed until the air began to cool. Then we walked towards the road, stopping beneath the bridge to watch the water moving around its supports.

On the bus, Hyeon watched the river disappear behind the buildings.

At home, I returned the box to the cabinet and put our books on the table.

My phone lit up while I was taking off my jacket.

Ms. Seo had replied.

She wanted wider photographs of the garment’s inner front, including the surrounding seams and ties. She agreed that Seolok’s question concerned the arrangement during the rite, rather than how the objects had been stored.

Before anyone attempted to change anything, she wanted to discuss what the attachment might have been intended to do, and whether other actions would have accompanied it.

I sat beside Hyeon and showed him the message. He read it twice before I set my phone on the table.

“She is careful,” he said. “Good.”

I opened the hard cover of his poetry book, which was still too heavy for him to lift. He turned the pages to his place himself. I opened my novel

beside him, and we read together until he found a passage he wanted to show me.

On Wednesday afternoon, I prepared the photographs and handling records for Ms. Seo, distinguishing the day Hyeon first appeared from the morning I called him back.

Hyeon read through the descriptions.

“You have written ‘opened’ here too.”

“That was the wrapping. The second one was the garment.”

“Will she know which you mean?”

I corrected the wording, then sent the records from my own account, with Eunjae’s observations about the punctures.

Ms. Seo could see us on Thursday evening.

My mother had messaged again about the stew. I told her I would come on Sunday.

Before we left the following afternoon, Hyeon made sure our folder contained the complete letters, not just the passages mentioning Bokrye and Seolok.

CHAPTER 28

We reached Ms. Seo's rooms while there was still light at the windows. She had arranged our photographs across her table, with the handling records beside them.

Hyeon greeted her while I put down the box.

"I've read the letters," she said. "There's something I want to check about the order in which the garment was opened."

She took us through the photographs, stopping occasionally to ask about an adjustment or the time between examinations. When we reached the image taken immediately before Hyeon first appeared, she brought it closer.

"The name paper was already separate?"

"Yes," I said. "Beside the cuff."

"And you had opened the front."

"That morning."

She looked towards Hyeon.

"What do you remember?"

"I had gone to sleep at home. The next thing I remember is hearing Jiwoo speak."

"What did he say?"

"I was speaking to the clothes," I said.

"That is not quite what you said," Hyeon told me.

I looked at him.

“You told me to stop fucking with you.”

Ms. Seo glanced up from the photograph.

“I didn’t know he was there,” I explained.

She smiled briefly.

“And what did you say to him?”

“That he should stop touching my clothes,” Hyeon said.

She made a note.

“And the following morning?”

“I put his name slip near the garment and called him. He came back.”

She brought the photograph of the inner front beside the household instruction.

“Seolok’s question is important because it concerns something your mother couldn’t demonstrate. She had the paper and the garment, but didn’t know how Bokrye had arranged them during the rite.”

Hyeon leaned towards the photographs.

“If the paper was originally attached inside, opening the clothing may have begun to release something held there,” she continued. “Calling your name may also have mattered.”

“Then why am I like this?”

“I don’t know. The paper wasn’t in its possible original position, and we don’t know what else Bokrye did. We may also be missing something she enclosed with you. Whatever happened may have been incomplete.”

“Could that be why I appeared without a body?”

“Possibly.”

Hyeon examined the photograph of the needle holes.

“Would putting the paper back allow us to finish?”

“Closing the garment may have been what held you apart,” she said. “I want to understand that before we try.”

He straightened.

“Then I do not want it closed until we know more.”

“Neither do I.”

She drew a blank sheet towards her and wrote down the possible sequence: the paper within the garment, the front closed over it, and the later opening and calling.

There were no instructions for what should happen between those actions.

“Could completing it give me a body again?”

“It might,” Ms. Seo said.

Hyeon looked down at his hands. He pressed his fingertips together, then separated them.

“I would like to feel things properly,” he said. “To eat. To become tired when I have done something tiring.”

He glanced at me.

“And to go somewhere without Jiwoo having to carry my clothing.”

I took his hand beneath the edge of the table. His fingers settled against mine.

“I’d like to see the originals,” Ms. Seo said. “And speak to the conservator who found the punctures.”

“Eunjae. I can ask him.”

“You would only be examining them?” Hyeon asked.

“Yes.”

“I would like to be there.”

“Of course. Could I come next Tuesday morning?”

“I’ll ask Hyejin,” I said.

Ms. Seo wrote down the visit.

“And if we do attempt it, have someone else with you,” she added. “You may need help afterwards.”

I opened my notebook. I imagined passing Hyeon a bowl at breakfast and feeling its weight leave my hand.

Then I wondered what I would do if he felt ill.

I wrote *medical help* and stopped. If he needed a hospital, there would be nothing for them to look up.

“Jiwoo?”

Ms. Seo was holding out a photograph.

“Sorry.”

“I’d like to keep the wider views and the comparison showing the punctures.”

I separated them from our copies. Hyeon slid the letters together on the table, and I returned them to the folder with the remaining photographs.

At the door, he thanked her.

“I hope we can arrange Tuesday,” he said.

“So do I.”

Outside, the light had begun to fade. I looked up the route to the bus stop.

“Are you worried?” Hyeon asked.

“About trying it?”

“Yes.”

“A little. I’m also thinking about what happens if it works.”

He looked towards the traffic.

“I have been thinking about that too.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Food, mostly.”

I smiled.

“What would you want first?”

He considered it as we started walking.

“I have not decided. There are rather a lot of things I would like to try.”

“We’ll have to make a list.”

“I think I should like to choose them when I can taste them.”

“All right.”

He took my hand, and we walked towards the stop.

We reached the bus stop early and sat beneath the shelter. Hyeon studied the route map for a while, then turned towards me.

“I would like to write down my questions before Tuesday.”

“We can do that tonight.”

“I want to know what she intends to do before I agree to anything.”

I nodded.

“When my mother asked me to accept the protection, she had already decided it was necessary. I could ask questions, but she wanted me to give her the answer she had chosen.”

He looked down at our hands.

“I do not want that to happen again.”

“It won’t. You can decide whether we go ahead.”

“I know. Ms. Seo has said so.”

He rested his fingers over mine. Across the road, a delivery driver was loading boxes into a van.

After a while, he returned to the map, following the route of our bus until it arrived.

At home, I secured the goreum on the cabinet and heated my dinner. Hyeon opened the folder on the table and slid out the sequence Ms. Seo had written.

While I ate, he examined our list of practical arrangements.

“We should prepare some clothing,” he said.

“I’ve got things you could wear until we know what fits.”

“May I see?”

I took him to the wardrobe and laid two shirts and a jumper on the bed.

Hyeon examined one of the shirts, running his fingers along the collar.

“I remember this one.”

“I wore it when we went looking for your house.”

“Yes.”

He looked at the jumper beside it and asked about the fabric. I held it open so he could see the shape.

“It might be too big,” I said. “We won’t know until you can try it.”

“I would still like to have it ready.”

I folded the garments and cleared a shelf for them.

When I returned to the table, Hyeon had slid a clean sheet beside Ms. Seo’s proposed sequence.

“How would she know she was ending the rite, rather than beginning it again?”

I wrote it down. His next question was what he would need to do when she called.

“Whenever we try,” I said, “I’d like someone else with us.”

“Doyun?”

“He’d come. I’ll talk to him, and Subin and Eunjae.”

I wrote to Hyejin about Tuesday, describing Ms. Seo as a specialist in ritual practice who might help interpret the attachment. It was true.

I looked at my leave balance. If it ever worked, I wanted some time at home with him.

Hyejin answered before lunch on Friday. Ms. Seo could visit Tuesday morning.

I sent her the details, then went to tell Eunjae.

Hyeon turned from the photograph of the garment.

“Tuesday?”

“Tuesday.”

Eunjae opened his calendar.

“I’ll get the room ready.”

For once, there was nothing more I could accomplish by rearranging the folder.

I closed it.

“We’re going out after work,” I told Eunjae.

“Good.”

“To look at clothes,” Hyeon added.

“Have you decided what you want?”

“Some of it.”

“He’s been examining my wardrobe,” I said.

“That did not take very long.”

Eunjae smiled.

We had time to look at clothes before meeting Doyun for dinner.

Hyeon went first to a display of shirts folded by colour. He stopped at a dark green one, with a collar and two pockets at the front.

I took it down for him. He examined the cuffs and asked about the fabric.

“It's fairly soft,” I said, rubbing it between my fingers.

“Would it be comfortable to write in?”

“I think so.”

He studied the shirt a little longer.

“Would you put it on?”

“For me?”

“I would like to see how it looks when someone is wearing it.”

I found my size and tried it over my T-shirt. Hyeon waited near the mirror while I adjusted the collar.

“I like that colour on you.”

I looked at myself again. I usually bought whatever was comfortable and didn't require much thought.

“Maybe I'll get one too.”

“I would like that.”

I took it off and photographed the one he had chosen.

At the trousers, Hyeon took longer. He wanted pockets and preferred darker colours. I showed him a few different cuts and explained the sizes.

He examined a pair with torn knees, then moved on without asking me to take it down.

I noted the ones he liked. There was little point buying anything fitted until he could try it himself.

Near the counter, he stopped at a display of scarves.

A dark blue one caught his attention. I unfolded it, showing him the narrow fringe and the weave.

He asked what it was made from. I read the label and let the fabric run through my hands.

“This one would not need to fit,” he said.

“No.”

“Could we buy it?”

“Of course.”

I held it against my neck so he could see its length. He came closer, looking at where it fell against my jacket.

“Do you like the colour?”

“Yes.”

“So do I.”

“It’s yours, then,” I said.

“I will wear it when I can.”

I folded the scarf and took it to the counter.

Hyeon stayed beside me while I paid.

CHAPTER 29

Doyun was waiting at a small restaurant near the stop. He moved his bag from the spare chair. Hyeon sat opposite him while I secured the goreum beside my leg.

We explained the possible attachment of the name slip and what Ms. Seo wanted to examine next.

“What would you like me to do?” Doyun asked.

“When we know enough to try, could you come?”

“I can work that out once there’s a day.”

“And drive us afterwards, if we need it,” Hyeon said. “I would like you at the museum too. If something happens, Jiwoo will have things to do.”

“He’ll have several things to do even if there’s only one.”

“I can hear you.”

“We know,” Hyeon said.

Doyun smiled.

“Tell me when you have a date. I’ll see what I need to move.”

Hyeon thanked him. Doyun asked about the shopping bag, and I showed him the scarf.

“Good colour.”

“We found a shirt too,” Hyeon said, “but I should try it before buying it.”

“Did Jiwoo try it?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“He ought to have bought it.”

“I probably agree.”

The food arrived before I could answer.

Hyeon asked about something Doyun had mentioned the last time we were together. They spoke more quickly than Hyeon and I had in his first nights here. He stopped Doyun over one unfamiliar word, listened to the explanation, then went on with his question.

I ate and listened.

As we were leaving, I mentioned taking Hyeon to the river again.

“Tomorrow?” Doyun asked.

“If the weather’s all right.”

He told us to wait, then returned from his car with a folded picnic mat.

“Better than sitting on the ground.”

“You carry that around?”

“I keep forgetting to take it out.”

“May we borrow it?” Hyeon asked.

“That’s why I brought it.”

“Thank you.”

“Bring it back whenever. I’m unlikely to remember it before then.”

On Saturday, nearly three weeks after Hyeon had first answered me, I packed Doyun’s mat, our books and something to drink. Hyeon glanced at the folder on the table but left it where it was.

We took the bus to the river and walked farther along the bank than we had on Monday. People were eating on the grass, and a few had

stretched out beneath hats or jackets. I found a place beneath a tree and spread the mat.

Hyeon opened his poetry collection at a marked page.

“I wanted to read this one here,” he said.

I took out my novel while he settled beside me.

The sisters had arrived at another unfamiliar town. Neither was particularly pleased about it, and I was beginning to suspect they would spend the whole journey wishing they had travelled separately.

A breeze caught the corner of Hyeon’s page. I moved the bag to shelter his book, and he thanked me without looking away from the lines.

We read for a while.

When Hyeon reached the end of his poem, he returned to the beginning. I had finished another chapter before he closed the book.

“Was it different here?” I asked.

“A little. I think I understood something I had missed.”

He looked towards the river.

“I should like to read more of his work.”

“We can look for it.”

He leaned against me, and I put my arm around him.

As we watched a boat pass beneath the bridge, Hyeon mentioned Doyun.

“I would like to see him more often,” he said. “And Minjae and Seoyeon. I always think of things I meant to ask after they have gone.”

“We could invite everyone over next weekend.”

“Would you?”

“Of course.”

He smiled.

We listened to people passing on the path behind us. After a while, Hyeon turned towards me.

“I wanted to thank you, Jiwoo.”

“For what?”

“For everything you have done since we met. Finding the letters. Speaking to Ms. Seo. Bringing me here.”

“You’ve done a lot of the work yourself.”

“I know. But I could not have done it without you.”

I held his hand.

“I’m glad I could help.”

He looked across the water.

“When I have my body back, there are things I would like to do for you.”

“I’d like that.”

“I have been thinking about it.”

I watched him for a moment.

“You know you don’t owe me anything.”

“Yes.”

“I mean it.”

He turned to face me.

“I know you do. But I would like to give you things because they would make you happy.”

There was nothing I wanted to argue with in that.

I had been thinking about telling him for days. Sometimes when he was reading beside me, or when he reached for my hand, I came close to saying it. I hadn’t planned to do it here.

“I love you,” I said.

Hyeon’s eyes stayed on mine, his lips parting slightly.

“I love you now,” I continued. “And I’ll love you whether we get your body back or not.”

His hand came to my cheek.

“I want you to have it back. I want you to do all the things you’ve been telling me about.”

He leaned forward and kissed me.

I touched his face, feeling the light pressure of his mouth. He kissed me again, his fingers moving behind my neck, and then he laughed.

It was a small, delighted sound. He put his arms around me, and I held him as closely as I could.

“Jiwoo.”

I drew back to look at him.

His hand was still against my cheek.

“I love you too.”

I covered his hand with mine and kissed his palm.

He rested his forehead against mine. For a while, neither of us spoke.

Eventually, he settled against my shoulder.

“I have wanted to tell you,” he said.

“So have I.”

Behind us, a bicycle bell rang. Someone called to a friend farther along the path, and the voices faded.

My book was still open on my lap. I closed it and set it beside his.

Hyeon looked up at me.

He was smiling.

We stayed by the river for another hour. Hyeon read a poem aloud, and we talked about it while the light shifted across the water.

Eventually, the breeze grew cool enough that I reached for my jacket.

Hyeon watched me pull it on.

“Is it cold?”

“A little.”

He held his hand out towards the water, palm up, then lowered it.

“I cannot tell.”

The scarf we’d bought the day before was still tucked beneath the jacket. I took it out and removed the tag.

“Would you mind if I wore this?”

“Of course not.”

“Only until you can,” I said.

“Then you will have to give it back.”

“I will.”

I wrapped it around my neck. Hyeon looked pleased.

“I think you chose well,” I said.

He reached for the end of the scarf, his fingers brushing the fabric before settling against my collar.

I kissed him.

When we were ready to leave, I packed our books and folded the mat. Hyeon took my hand as we returned to the path.

At the crossing, I looked at him, remembering how he’d laughed when I told him I loved him.

“I love you,” I said quietly.

He smiled.

“I love you too.”

The signal changed. We crossed together.

On Tuesday morning, Hyeon was reading through our questions when I came out of the bathroom.

“Have you thought of anything else?” I asked.

“One thing. If we attempt the rite, I would like to know when she intends to call me.”

“When in the rite?”

“Yes. I want to know what will happen before that, and what I should expect.”

I added the question beneath the others.

At breakfast, I checked the time twice, although we had plenty of it. When I reached for my phone again, there was a message from my mother. She would keep the stew in the freezer until the weekend, she wrote, but next time I should tell her who I had been so busy with.

Hyeon touched my wrist.

“We will not be late.”

“I know.”

I left the phone beside my plate and finished eating.

Before leaving, I packed the supported goreum and our questions, then wrapped the blue scarf around my neck.

Hyeon straightened one end where it had folded beneath my collar.

I bent to kiss him. He smiled when I drew away.

I picked up the bag, and we left.

At the museum, Eunjae looked over the returned goreum while I took the folder to Hyejin. She had agreed to Ms. Seo's visit, with Eunjae handling the originals. I answered her questions about the photographs, then returned to the examination room.

Subin went to meet Ms. Seo at reception. By the time they arrived, Eunjae had laid out the garment, name slip, wrapping and ties on their separate supports.

Hyeon rose to greet her.

"We have brought our questions," he said.

"Good. I have a few more after reading your photographs."

Eunjae showed her the inner front, exposing the needle holes while keeping the surrounding cloth supported.

"Would you show me how that part lay when you wore it?" she asked Hyeon.

He drew one side of his robe across his chest.

"The other front came over here. This part was beneath it."

She came nearer.

"The photographs made it appear farther from the wearer."

"It would have lain against me."

Eunjae brought over the scaled comparison.

"Could the writing have faced him?"

"Either face could have been against the cloth."

Ms. Seo asked to see how the garment would close around that position.

Eunjae had prepared paper outlines from the photographs. We arranged them at the clear end of the table, with a copy of the name slip beside the marked holes.

Hyeon guided the overlapping front into place. Most of the paper disappeared beneath it.

“And the outer wrapping was separate from this?” Ms. Seo asked.

“Yes,” Eunjae said, showing her the repaired folds.

“Seolok was asking about something done before the garment was closed. This is the position I wanted to understand.”

Hyeon opened the copied front again.

“Then we can show her what my mother could not.”

Ms. Seo nodded.

Eunjae returned to the original garment and adjusted the lamp.

Below the possible attachment, a shallow crease crossed the inner surface. I had seen part of it in an earlier photograph, but the changed light showed another short line intersecting it.

I took a wider view, followed by a close photograph.

“Could the name paper have made those marks?” Ms. Seo asked.

“Not all of them.”

Eunjae pointed to a line extending beyond the paper’s edge.

“Another piece of paper?” Hyeon asked.

“Possibly. Or a fold made during storage.”

I opened the intake photographs. The sleeve concealed the part we needed.

“Do we know what else was kept with the clothing?” Hyeon asked.

“I can compare the museum’s inventory with the older family list.”

Ms. Seo asked for the aunt’s letter. Hyeon found the passage concerning Seolok.

“Does she mention anything besides the name paper?”

“Not here.”

He read the surrounding lines, then brought over the household instruction.

“Clothing and paper. It does not say how many pieces of paper there were.”

The fragment ended before the rest of the instruction.

I saved the photographs while Eunjae settled the cloth. We moved to the smaller table, and Subin brought another chair.

Ms. Seo laid the new images beside her proposed sequence.

“We need to check the crease and those lists,” she said. “But I can show you what I have in mind.”

She brought the copy of the name slip towards the marked position.

“I’d put the paper here, close the front over it, then open the garment and call you.”

“Would we have to sew it on?” I asked.

“We can hold it there on a support,” Eunjae said. “There’s no need to sew through the old holes.”

Hyeon looked towards the original garment.

“I would not have to put it on?”

“No. It’s too fragile.”

He nodded, then returned to the paper outlines.

“When would you call me?”

“Once the arrangement is ready,” Ms. Seo said. “Stay near us so you can hear and answer.”

“I could not hear Jiwoo when I began to disappear before. Could changing the clothes do that again?”

“Possibly.”

“What would you do?”

“I’d stop.”

“And if stopping did not bring me back?”

She did not answer immediately.

“I don’t know.”

Hyeon looked down at the outlines. I kept my hand beside his. After a moment, he put his fingers over mine.

“I still want to investigate it.”

Ms. Seo nodded.

Subin accompanied her to reception. I sent Hyejin our notes while Eunjae put the room in order. Then I opened the donation file.

Hyeon sat in the chair beside mine while I found the earliest inventory.

CHAPTER 30

Subin stopped by before lunch with a photograph of a household account. Hyeon joined her in comparing readings of a character neither was entirely certain about.

I left them to it and returned to the donation records.

By the end of the afternoon, I had sent Ms. Seo the new photographs and references. Eunjae would continue examining the creases. Ms. Seo agreed to meet us again the following evening.

At home, while dinner heated, Hyeon glanced towards the television.

“Could we listen to some music?”

“Of course. Anything in particular?”

“The piano.”

I found a recording of two pianists sharing the same instrument. Hyeon leaned forward as they began, following the movements of their hands.

Partway through, he asked me to go back.

“I missed what the player on the left was doing.”

I restarted the passage. He watched closely, occasionally following the pianist's movements with his own fingers.

When the piece ended, he remained looking at the screen.

“Would you play it again?”

I started the recording from the beginning. This time he settled beside me to listen.

On Wednesday, the donation list referred me to another inventory we didn't have. A note said the family had retained the papers alongside some household objects. I followed the surviving references to an entry concerning Hyeon's examination.

He came nearer when I turned the screen.

“That is my certificate.”

The description mentioned a white paper and a letter congratulating his father. There was no image.

“From when you passed?”

“Yes. My mother wanted to see it as soon as I came home. I had to wait while she called my father. Then my sister wanted to hold it.”

“Did you let her?”

“Eventually. Her hands were clean. She showed them to me twice.”

I smiled.

“I was very pleased with it,” he said.

“You were allowed to be.”

“I know. I wanted people to ask.”

“Did they?”

“Enough of them. Gyeongmun said I would become impossible if anyone else congratulated me.”

“Had he?”

“Yes. He felt he had done his part.”

He looked at the entry again.

“I kept taking it out. My father told me I would damage it if I carried it about much longer. I would have liked to show you.”

“I'd like to see it.”

“The handwriting was very good.”

I looked at him. His smile widened.

“It was. I was pleased about that too.”

The entry told us nothing about how the garment had been packed. I noted the separate archive and sent Subin the reference.

Hyeon asked me to leave the examination entry open.

When I returned from taking a call, he was still reading it.

That evening, Ms. Seo laid Eunjae’s drawings beside the paper outlines. He had marked where supports could bring the garment's fronts together without straining the damaged edges.

Eunjae had examined the crease under different lighting. He thought it was more likely to have formed during storage. There were other folds across the cloth, and he had found nothing further to suggest another object had been enclosed there.

I had compared the intake with the earlier inventory. Neither identified another paper inside the clothing. The retained documents appeared in separate entries for correspondence and examination records.

“We’re still waiting for the family’s full list,” I said.

Ms. Seo read the entries I had brought, then returned to the photograph of the punctures.

“Keep following that. But I think we have enough to proceed. We have the clothing, the name paper and the ties. The attachment gives us a position for the paper, and your account tells us what happened when the garment was opened.”

Hyeon looked towards the outlines.

“You think we can finish it?”

“I think we have enough of the arrangement to attempt the release.”

Ms. Seo went through Friday's sequence again with the paper outlines, showing Hyeon when she would call his name.

"And that is when I should answer?" Hyeon asked.

"If you can. Stay near us. If you hear me before you can see us, follow my voice."

He studied the paper outlines.

"You cannot be sure it will work."

"No. I think this gives us a way to try."

He looked at me.

"I would like to."

I put my hand beside his. He rested his fingers over it while we discussed when.

I wrote to Hyejin describing a supported reconstruction of the garment's original closure, to document the position of the name paper. Eunjae would handle the cloth. Ms. Seo would observe.

Every part of it was true. I had been leaving things out for weeks. This time I had chosen exactly which words would let her say yes.

I asked Eunjae whether the room was free on Friday afternoon.

He replied before we reached home. It was.

Hyeon read the message again, as though there might be something about Friday I had overlooked.

"Then Friday," he said.

The next morning, Hyejin approved the work and my day off. Eunjae would let us in for the afternoon. Doyun invited us to dinner that evening and confirmed he could drive us after the attempt.

Hyeon wanted to invite Minjae and Seoyeon too.

By lunchtime, everyone had replied.

At Doyun's, Seoyeon was taking plates from a cupboard while Minjae searched among the cartons.

"He ordered another dish after the delivery had left," she told us.

"It's coming separately."

"There's already food."

"And soon there'll be more."

Hyeon went to look. I put the supported box on the sideboard and handed Doyun the picnic mat.

"You didn't need to bring that back tonight."

"It was by the door."

"For several days," Hyeon said without turning round.

"Did you use it?" Doyun asked.

"Yes. We read by the river."

"Some of the time," I added.

Hyeon glanced at me. Seoyeon looked between us, then continued setting out the plates.

Hyeon sat beside me and asked Doyun about a photograph on the wall, taken on a trip with his brother. He wanted to know where they had gone and whether the walk was as steep as it looked.

The extra food arrived before Doyun had finished explaining. Minjae brought it in, looking pleased.

Hyeon leaned towards the chicken.

"That is one of the things I would like to try."

"We can get this tomorrow," Minjae said.

"We could," I said.

"I have watched you eat quite a lot of things," Hyeon said. "I ought to have decided by now."

“You don’t have to choose one,” Seoyeon said.

“For the first meal, I should.”

Doyun asked what else he liked the look of. Hyeon named noodles from the restaurant near the museum, grilled meat and the fish my mother had made.

For weeks, I had been describing whatever was on my plate. He had remembered things I had forgotten eating.

“And breakfast?” Seoyeon asked.

“Toast.”

“That looked good?” Minjae asked.

“The second piece.”

“There was very little wrong with the first,” I said.

“You scraped it over the sink.”

Doyun passed me the chicken.

“Start with something you both like.”

“I like toast.”

“So do I,” Hyeon said. “I expect.”

He watched me take a bite, then touched the corner of his mouth to show me where the sauce had caught. I reached for a tissue.

“Is it sweet?”

“A little.”

I described the coating and the meat beneath it. Minjae disagreed about the spice; Seoyeon reminded him that he had reached for his drink after every piece.

“Then I should find out for myself,” Hyeon said.

“We’ll order some.”

“Tomorrow?”

“If you feel like it.”

“I think I will.”

I pictured him at our table, choosing a piece and objecting to whichever part of my description I had got wrong.

While we ate, Seoyeon showed us a coat she had tried on. Minjae had told her it suited her, then asked how much it cost.

“These are separate questions,” he said.

“Do you still want it?” Hyeon asked her.

“Yes.”

“Then I think his first answer was the useful one.”

She turned the phone towards Minjae.

“Thank you.”

“I did say she should get it.”

“After looking up three other coats.”

Hyeon asked to see them. By the time they had finished, he agreed with Seoyeon about the coat and with Minjae about one of the jackets.

Doyun asked what time we wanted to leave the next day.

“Early enough that Jiwoo will not spend the whole morning looking at the clock,” Hyeon said.

“We’re expected in the afternoon.”

“I know.”

Doyun suggested a time. We agreed.

“And afterwards?” Seoyeon asked.

“Home, probably.”

“With the chicken,” Minjae added.

“Eventually,” Hyeon said. “I would like to put on my clothes first.”

“The shirt?” I asked.

“We should get it tonight.”

“You still can’t try it on.”

“I would like it to be there.”

He looked as though he had been waiting to tell me.

“Then we’ll go on the way home.”

I showed Seoyeon the photograph, and Hyeon explained the sleeves and two pockets. Minjae asked whether I had bought anything too.

“He has enough,” Hyeon said.

“Thank you.”

“We looked at his first.”

“Did that help?” Seoyeon asked.

“Yes.”

He left it there. Minjae looked at my shirt, then at the photograph, and nodded with more understanding than I wanted from him.

After dinner, we stayed while Doyun made coffee. Hyeon asked Seoyeon to choose our next film. He had enjoyed the last one, he told her, apart from the ending. Minjae disagreed.

They were still arguing when I looked up the shop’s closing time.

“Finish this next time,” Hyeon told Minjae as we left.

“I’ll prepare.”

“So will I.”

He was still smiling when we reached the lift.

At the shop, the green shirts had moved. Hyeon found them before I did.

“Here.”

I took down the size I had worn last time.

“If the shoulders do not fit, can we bring it back?”

“We can exchange it.”

“Then we should take this one.”

He led me to the mirror. I held the shirt against him, its collar beneath his chin, and he studied the colour beside his face.

“I still like it.”

“So do I.”

“You said that when you were wearing it.”

“I meant on you.”

He looked at my reflection.

“You can borrow it.”

“I haven’t bought it yet.”

“Then you should.”

He chose the dark trousers with no holes, asking me to hold them beside the shirt while he compared the lengths.

I paid and kept the receipt.

On the way home, he stayed on the side where I carried the shopping bag. At a crossing, he looked inside.

“They are there,” I said.

“I know.”

He smiled up at me.

On the train, I kept the clothes on my lap. Hyeon watched me smooth the handles where my grip had creased the paper.

“You do not need to hold it so tightly.”

“I don’t want to leave it behind.”

“I would remind you.”

“I know.”

I loosened my hand. When more people boarded, he stayed close, his sleeve beside my wrist.

At home, I cleared a drawer for his clothes, moving the towels and pillowcases to another shelf. I took out an old phone and a charger I no longer needed and put them on the floor.

“What are you hoping to find?” Hyeon asked.

“A reason to keep these.”

“Have you?”

“No.”

I left them to sort later.

The shirt and jumper we had chosen before were still folded together. I laid them beside the new clothes.

“Which should I wear tomorrow?” Hyeon asked.

“Whichever you want.”

“The green one, then.”

“You’ve chosen quickly.”

“I have been thinking about it for some time.”

I showed him how the cuffs folded back.

“You can wear it over the plain one too.”

“Would you show me?”

I put them on, leaving the green shirt open at his suggestion. He watched long enough that I checked the buttons.

“What?”

“I like that.”

“The shirt?”

“You in it.”

I stopped looking at the buttons.

He came closer and kissed me. For a moment, I left my hands at my sides, still wearing his clothes. Then I brought one to his cheek.

He kissed me again, then stepped back to let me change.

I took the shirts off more slowly than I had put them on. I had changed in front of him before. This time, I kept thinking about helping him with his cuff, then his hands finding the buttons down the front of my shirt.

Before I reached for my own clothes, he kissed my bare shoulder.

I put the other clothes in his drawer and found a bag that would take the green shirt without crushing its collar.

“Will you mind if I leave things out sometimes?” he asked.

“You’ve seen the kitchen table.”

“Those are books.”

“They still take up space.”

“I might leave a book here.”

“You already do.”

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose I do.”

As I folded the shirt, I imagined him reaching past me in the morning for something he wanted. His cuffs would need washing. There would be clothes of his in the basket, and days when we had both run out of socks.

I left the bag near the door.

Later, I turned off the brighter lamp and lay facing him, close enough for our hands to meet on the pillow.

“Are you excited?”

“Yes.”

He glanced towards the bag.

“I would like to know what it feels like.”

“The shirt?”

“That too.”

His fingers moved against mine. I had become good at noticing the small changes in their pressure.

“To hold you,” he said.

I turned my hand beneath his.

“I would like that.”

“I know.”

He smiled, then looked down at our hands.

“There is something I wanted to ask you.”

“Tell me.”

“When you called me back before, I could hear you. I remember wanting to get back to where you were.”

I remembered the empty space near the examination-room door. His voice when it returned.

“Yes.”

“If that happens tomorrow, will you keep trying to find me?”

I moved closer.

“Yes.”

“Even if it takes longer before I can answer.”

“I’ll keep trying to reach you.”

He studied my face, then nodded.

“I would like to hear you.”

“I’ll call you.”

I kissed him. His hand came to the back of my head, and I stayed close after our mouths parted.

“Have you been thinking about that?”

“A little. I wanted to tell you before we went.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“I have been thinking about coming home too.”

“In the shirt.”

“Yes. And sitting here. I wonder whether I will be tired.”

“You might be.”

“Then I could sleep.”

He looked towards my pillow.

“You won’t have to wait for me to wake up,” I said.

“I might wake before you.”

“You can go back to sleep.”

“I might want to talk to you.”

“Then I’ll wake up.”

His smile widened.

I wanted to see him sleepy. I had woken in the night to find him reading, or looking back at me and asking whether I needed anything. I wanted to make tea while he stayed in bed, then come back and find him reluctant to move.

“You say that now.”

“I’m saying it in advance. Remember it tomorrow.”

“I will.”

He stayed close while I grew sleepy.

ACT 4

CHAPTER 31

On Friday morning, Hyeon came to the table while I made breakfast. We had plenty of time, but I found myself taking larger mouthfuls than usual.

“Doyun has not written to say he is outside,” Hyeon said. “So you have time to finish.”

I ate more slowly while he told me about the poem he had read before I woke.

When Doyun’s message came, I washed my plate and Ipicked up the clothes from beside the door. Hyeon waited while I packed the supported goreum.

I reached for the blue scarf.

“You might want this later.”

“Bring it.”

I put it with his clothes and closed the bag.

“Ready?”

“Yes.”

He held out his hand. I took it, lifted the bags with the other, and we went down to meet Doyun.

“Did you get the shirt?” Doyun asked as I put the clothes beside me.

“Yes,” Hyeon said. “And the trousers.”

I secured the goreum box. As Doyun pulled away, Hyeon asked whether we could stop somewhere on the way home.

“Where would you like to go?”

“We have not decided.”

“Then tell me later.”

Hyeon turned to me.

“We could take the food home.”

“If you’d like.”

“I would. Then I could take as long as I wanted.”

I smiled and moved the clothes away from the edge of the seat. I had added a clean towel that morning without knowing whether he would need it. Now I wondered what else I should have brought.

Hyeon touched my hand. I left the bag alone.

When Doyun asked about the shop, Hyeon told him he had found the shirts while I was studying the photograph.

Doyun glanced at us in the mirror. I looked out of the window, still smiling.

At the museum, Doyun helped carry the bags to the entrance.

“I’ll be downstairs. Let me know when you want me.”

Hyeon thanked him, and we went to the examination room.

Eunjae had moved the larger support to the centre of the table. Ms. Seo stood beside it, her marked drawings near her elbow. Subin was setting out two bottles of water for afterwards. Hyeon thanked her as I put down the clothes.

I left the bag beneath a chair and brought the box to Eunjae.

Once the goreum was settled beside the garment, Hyeon told Ms. Seo he would like to begin. I joined him where he could see the name slip, his sleeve brushing mine.

Eunjae brought the supported paper within the open front. Hyeon's name disappeared as Eunjae drew the overlapping cloth nearer, keeping his hands beneath the supports.

Hyeon stood straighter, his hands together in front of him.

Ms. Seo spoke his name clearly. She told him where we were, that we were opening what had been closed around him, and that he could answer us here.

While she spoke, I looked towards the place where his hand had first appeared when I called him back.

Hyeon said my name, and I turned immediately.

Ms. Seo turned to Eunjae. He eased the front back across its support.

The writing came into view.

"Yi Hyeon," she said. "Come towards us. Answer if you can."

"I can hear you."

His voice was close to my ear. I had heard him there asking for a book, correcting something I was reading, telling me to look up when I had worked too long.

He reached for my hand. I lifted it to meet him.

For a moment, I felt each of his fingers.

Usually I had to keep still and let him settle his hand over mine. Now his fingertips pressed against me as soon as they touched. I turned my palm towards him, and the pressure followed.

"Can you feel that?" I asked.

He looked down at our hands.

"Yes."

His fingers moved again. I could follow them without looking.

He began to smile. I stepped nearer, waiting for his hand to close around mine.

For several seconds, it stayed there.

Then the pressure became harder to follow.

His hand was still against mine. He moved his fingers slowly, and I felt the faint contact I knew.

He stopped. I kept my palm turned towards him.

The garment lay open.

He brought his other hand to my wrist. I waited for its pressure to strengthen.

After a while, he let it fall.

“Now it feels as it did before.”

I looked from his face to his collar and sleeve, wanting something to have changed where I had not yet thought to look.

Ms. Seo said his name again. He answered as clearly as he had when we arrived.

We waited.

Subin stood beside the smaller table, her hand withdrawn from the water bottles. I could read the label on one of them through Hyeon’s sleeve.

My hand closed on his before I could stop it.

“Hyeon.”

“I am here.”

When I looked again, the sleeve was whole.

He followed my glance to the bottles.

“I thought I would be able to take that.”

“So did I.”

My wrist had begun to ache. I moved it slightly, and his fingers followed, careful and light.

“I don’t think we will get more from this today,” Ms. Seo said. “We have had an answer from you, but I haven’t brought you back fully. I don’t know what I would change if we tried again.”

Hyeon looked towards the open front.

“We put the paper back, and you called me.”

He studied the place where his name lay, then turned to me.

“I do not think anything more is happening.”

I nodded. It took longer than it should have.

“All right.”

Ms. Seo asked Eunjae to settle the pieces. I moved back to give him room, Hyeon staying beside me.

Once the slip was secure on its own support, she explained what we needed to look for next.

“More about the first closing. What Bokrye put together, and how it was kept afterwards. I don’t know whether we have everything she used.”

I thought of the crease on the inner front and the inventory that had sent me to another list.

“We’ll go back through what survives.”

Hyeon nodded without looking away from the table.

Before leaving, Ms. Seo came back to him.

“I’m sorry this wasn’t enough.”

“Thank you for trying.”

His voice was quieter than it had been at the start.

I collected the clothes. The green collar was visible inside the bag. I folded the paper edge over it.

Subin offered to carry them. I kept hold of the bag, and she touched my arm before letting me go.

I wrote to Doyun while Eunjae returned the goreum to its box.

Hyeon watched me secure it, then walked with me to the door. He looked back once before we left.

Doyun rose when he saw us. He looked at Hyeon, then at the bag.

“We would like to go home,” Hyeon said.

Doyun took the clothes. Outside, he opened the car and waited while I settled the box.

Hyeon sat beside me again.

For a while, we drove in silence. At a crossing, a woman stopped to press the lid back onto her drink, then hurried on.

Hyeon was looking out of the other window.

I brought my hand nearer. He rested his fingers over mine.

“It felt different,” he said.

“Yes.”

“For a little while.”

I could still remember where each finger had pressed, how easily I had followed them when he moved.

I wanted to ask him to try again. He would have, if I had asked. Instead, I held my other hand over his, leaving space for the contact he could make.

“I thought there would be more,” he said.

“So did I.”

Near home, Doyun asked whether we wanted to stop for food.

“We have some.”

“Have you eaten since breakfast?” Hyeon asked.

“Not yet.”

“Then you should when we arrive.”

Doyun carried the clothes upstairs. While I unlocked the door, Hyeon thanked him for waiting.

“Of course.”

He left the bag just inside.

“Write if you want anything.”

“I will.”

His hand rested on my shoulder for a moment before he left.

I returned the goreum to the cabinet. Hyeon went to the window while I took off my jacket and shoes.

In the bedroom, the drawer was still partly open from that morning. I set the bag on the bed, and Hyeon came to stand beside me.

The green shirt had creased across the front. I unfolded it and smoothed the fabric.

“Would you like it hung up?”

He tried to lift the cuff. Its edge shifted beneath his fingers, then slipped back against my hand.

I waited while he tried again.

Finally, he drew his hand away.

“I thought I would be doing this. Taking the clothes out. Choosing what to wear.”

“I know.”

“I wanted you to see me in this one.”

I lowered it onto the bed.

“I wanted to see you too.”

He sat beside the shirt while I unpacked the rest. The towel came last.

“When did you put it in?”

“This morning.”

“What was it for?”

“I don’t know. In case you needed it.”

I sat beside him while he ran his fingers along its folded edge.

The jumper and socks we had left behind were still in the drawer. I had imagined coming home with things he had taken off stuffed beneath the new ones. Now everything could go back where it had been.

Above us, a chair scraped back and a cupboard closed.

“What if we cannot do more than this?” he asked.

“I don’t know yet.”

“We did what she thought would help.”

“There are still things we haven’t found out.”

“There may always be things we cannot find out.”

I left my hand near his.

“Yes.”

“I wanted to eat with you tonight. I wanted to come home and put away my clothes. I thought I might be tired enough to sleep before you did.”

His mouth moved without quite becoming a smile.

“I had thought of so much to do.”

“You can still want those things.”

“I do.”

He looked towards the clothes.

“I want to bring things home too. To carry what we choose. I would like to put my arms around you without having to think about whether you can feel it.”

I moved closer. His hand rested against my wrist.

“Neither of us knows when that will happen,” I said.

I wanted to give him a date, something to put beside the one we had already waited for. I could have said soon. He would have known how much I wanted it to be true.

I turned my hand beneath his.

“You have a home here. That doesn’t have to wait.”

“I want to live here.”

“Then we will.”

“Like this?”

“If this is what we have. I want you here with me.”

I touched the green sleeve beside his knee.

“We can keep the clothes. We can keep going out. You can leave your books wherever I’ve left mine.”

He glanced towards the table.

“There are quite a few places.”

I bent to kiss him. His hand rose to my cheek, its familiar lightness against my skin.

When I drew away, he stayed close.

“I still want my body back.”

“I know. We’ll keep looking for a way.”

He nodded.

“I would like to be angry about it for a little while.”

I stayed beside him. He looked at the shirt, then away.

My phone sounded in my jacket pocket. Neither of us moved.

After a while, he said, “I wanted to hold the bottle of water. She put it there for me. I had already decided that was the one I would take.”

“The one nearer the chair?”

“Yes.”

I remembered the label, the space I had been waiting for his hand to cross.

“I saw it.”

He nodded, then leaned towards me. I brought my face near his so he could rest there.

We stayed until the light from the window had moved off the bed.

When I shifted, he looked up.

“You should eat.”

“In a minute.”

I kissed his forehead and rose.

In the kitchen, I heated rice and fried an egg. Hyeon sat at the table, then pointed towards my jacket.

“Someone wrote.”

Seoyeon had asked how we were, and Minjae had sent a message about the food. I sat beside Hyeon before replying.

“Would you tell them?”

“Of course.”

I wrote that the attempt had not brought him back fully and that we were home together. I showed him before sending it.

“And thank Doyun again.”

I did.

“That will get cold,” he said.

I put down the phone and ate. When I reached for my drink, I remembered the bottle at the museum.

Hyeon looked at my plate.

“You could put more pepper on it.”

I added some.

“Enough?”

“You are the one eating it.”

I took another bite. It was better.

Seoyeon replied while I finished. They could come over if we wanted company.

“We should thank her,” Hyeon said. “And tell her we would like to see them soon.”

“We still have the film to choose.”

“Yes. Tell her that too.”

I sent the message and left the phone beside my empty plate.

After washing up, we sat on the sofa. Hyeon left his poetry book closed between us and asked me to sit nearer.

He kissed me, his hand lightly against the back of my neck.

“You can put your arm here.”

I laid it behind his shoulders. He moved closer until I could feel him against the inside of my wrist.

I put the book on the table and settled beside him. The small pressure was easier to feel once I stopped adjusting where I sat.

Later, Hyeon stood beside the bed while I put away his clothes. The smaller things fitted along one side of the drawer, the plain shirt beside the jumper.

When I picked up the green shirt, he said, “At the front. Where I can find it.”

I folded it and laid it where he wanted. He looked into the drawer before I closed it.

I returned the towel to the shelf and the scarf to its hook, then washed and changed for bed.

Hyeon lay facing me while I turned down the lamp. I moved nearer, leaving my hand beside his on the pillow.

He touched my face.

“Are you comfortable?”

“Yes. Are you?”

He settled closer.

“Yes.”

I turned my hand beneath his and closed my eyes. His fingers rested against mine as I fell asleep.

CHAPTER 32

Hyeon asked for his aunt's letter before we left on Saturday.

"The whole one. I want to read what she wrote before Seolok's question."

I moved it to the front of the folder. At the museum, Eunjae looked over the goreum and settled it on its support. I took Hyeon to the small workroom, where Subin had cleared a table.

"Here," he said, finding the passage.

I left them reading while I went to hang up my jacket.

Hyejin was waiting by my desk.

"Come into my office, please."

I went back to tell them.

"We'll be here," Hyeon said.

Eunjae's comparison photographs lay on Hyejin's desk. In the last one, the space beside the sleeve was empty.

"I checked the collection yesterday morning. The goreum wasn't there. Eunjae told me you've been taking it home."

"Yes."

I sat down. Then I took out my notebook, opened it at the first entry and turned it towards her.

She read the reference, the time, the address. My name beneath it. She turned the pages until she reached Friday.

"You recorded all of it."

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t give it to me.”

I had no answer for that either.

“I told you to leave it here. Why have you kept taking it?”

Hyeon was in the next room. I could take her to him. He had asked us to wait.

“I can’t explain it,” I said.

“I relied on you to tell me what was happening.”

I had no answer.

“I spoke to the director yesterday,” she said. “Your employment ends today.”

She placed the notice on the desk, beside my notebook.

There was work on my desk I had meant to finish that morning, a reminder in my calendar for Monday.

“Today?”

“Yes. You’ll receive thirty days’ pay. I need your card and the collection key. And I’ll need to keep this for now.”

She closed the notebook.

The key caught in my pocket lining. I held the fabric down to free it, then placed both beside the notebook.

She said the goreum was being secured with the other pieces. I stopped thinking about Monday.

“Has it been moved?”

“It’s being put away.”

“Ask them to wait.”

“There’s someone in the workroom. I need to go back to him.”

“Subin will help you collect your belongings.”

My chair struck the desk as I stood.

In the corridor, my phone sounded.

Come back now.

Subin was at the workroom door. I went past her.

Hyeon stood beside the table. The letter was open where I had left it, but I could see its writing through his sleeve.

“Jiwoo?”

“They moved it into storage,” Subin said. “I asked them to leave it. He tried to follow, but we couldn’t get through the collection door. By the time I brought him back—”

I reached him before she finished and caught his hand between mine. There was a slight pressure against my palm. I held my breath to feel it.

“I’m here.”

“I could not hear her properly.”

“I’ll get it back.”

Subin took out her phone.

“I’ll ask Hyejin again.”

She stepped into the corridor. Hyeon tried to tighten his fingers against mine. I could see the movement, but scarcely felt a change.

“Why did they take it?”

“She found out I’d been bringing it home.”

“Can we explain?”

Hyejin would have to tell her superiors. If they wanted him examined, we still didn’t know whether he could refuse. I needed the goreum beside him before we risked that.

“We need it here first.”

“What?”

I repeated it louder. His eyes went to my mouth.

I brought my arm behind his shoulders as I did on the sofa, but there was nothing firm enough to draw towards me. He had to move himself.

His free hand found my collar. That morning, he had put it there when I reached past him to turn off the alarm, asking me to stay a little longer.

I would have stayed if I had known.

“Look at me.”

He was already looking. He was frightened, and I had nothing better to tell him.

“I want to come home with you.”

“You will.”

The answer came before I could stop it. Yesterday, I had told him we could keep living together as we were. I had been sure I could give him that.

I lowered my head so he could touch my cheek.

“Stay with me.”

“I am trying.”

Subin returned.

“She won’t bring it out.”

“Tell her I won’t take it. I just need—”

“I told her.”

Hyeon turned towards her, then searched my face.

“Did she say yes?”

I shook my head. His fingers stopped against my cheek.

“You will keep trying?”

“Yes.”

I said it again, close to his ear.

“I remember. I’ll keep trying to reach you.”

He nodded, then said my name so faintly I could hardly hear it.

“I’m here.”

His mouth moved again. I bent nearer, but no sound reached me.

“I can’t hear you. Hyeon, say it again.”

He tried, his brows drawing together as he shaped the words. Then he took his hand from my face and reached for me with both arms.

I moved into them. There was a faint pressure at my neck. I held still, afraid that if I shifted, I would miss the last place where he could touch me.

“I love you.”

He watched my mouth. I could not tell whether he had heard.

The pressure went. His arm was still beside my neck, but the table showed through it. I put my hand where his back should have been and found nothing I could hold.

“Please. Just a little longer.”

He drew back to see my face. His mouth moved.

I am trying.

I had asked him twice. He was already doing everything he could.

“I know,” I said, my voice breaking. “I know you are.”

I wanted to take it back, give him something other than another demand. I told him I would find the pieces and call as soon as I could get near them.

He lifted his hand.

I reached to meet it. Our fingers overlapped, and I waited to feel them. Then I could see the cupboard behind his face.

He was still looking at me when he disappeared.

“Hyeon.”

I turned my raised hand, searching for the touch, then stepped into the place where he had stood.

“Hyeon!”

Subin caught my arm. I shook her off before I knew it was her.

“Sorry.”

She stayed beside me. Someone opened a drawer in the next room.

He had answered after disappearing before. I tried to remember exactly what I had said.

“Yi Hyeon. It’s Kim Jiwoo.”

I waited. The drawer closed.

“Can you hear me?”

Subin called him too, leaving time for an answer.

“We need to get nearer.”

At the collection door, I reached for my key. My fingers closed on the fold of lining I had pulled loose in Hyejin’s office.

I tried the handle anyway.

“I’ll get her,” Subin said.

Light showed beneath the door. Someone was still inside.

I pressed the handle again.

Hyejin came down the corridor with Subin.

“Let me stand beside the pieces. You can stay with me. I won’t touch anything.”

“Your access has ended.”

“Then bring the goreum out. Just here, outside the door.”

“No. You need to step away from the collection.”

I could hear someone moving inside. I knew the cupboards and the labels on the drawers. I wanted to tell her where to find it, as though she had refused because she didn’t know.

“Please. Just a few minutes.”

She waited until I took my hand away.

“Collect your things with Subin. The rest will be dealt with through administration.”

She left. I stayed until Subin touched my wrist.

“Come back to the workroom.”

At the doorway, I turned towards the table, expecting Hyeon to ask what she had said.

There was only the letter.

“Sit down for a minute.”

My hands had begun to shake. I put them between my knees, but it made no difference. I remembered the pressure at my neck. I had stayed still for it. I had felt it go.

“He was still trying.”

“I saw.”

“He thought I was asking him to—”

I stopped. Subin crouched beside me.

“He knew you were trying to keep him here.”

I wiped my face. I had not realised I was crying until I touched it.

“Could you hear him? At the end?”

She shook her head.

I wanted her to have caught one word I could take with me. I had kept speaking while he tried to answer.

“I should have been quieter.”

“Jiwoo.”

She put her hand over mine.

“You were there. He saw you.”

Her hand lay firmly across my knuckles. I could feel each place where she touched me.

“I’ll be here until this afternoon. If I hear him, I’ll call. Straight away.”

“He heard me before. When we had the pieces together.”

“Then we’ll try to reach him again.”

She stayed until I could let go of her hand, then went to fetch my bag.

Eunjae came in while she was away.

“Subin told me.”

I got up. He stopped beside the chair, leaving the place where Hyeon had stood empty.

“Hyejin asked me where the goreum was yesterday morning. I told her you had it. She asked about the other times too.”

“She said.”

“I didn’t tell her about Hyeon.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I should have.”

“You were here with us yesterday.”

“Yes.”

He had helped arrange everything, then packed the goreum for our journey home. I had thanked him before leaving.

“I didn’t know what to say. I thought there might still be a way to explain it.”

“To her?”

“Yes.”

“Or to me?”

He looked up.

I wanted to be angry enough to hurt him. He was standing in front of me, and Hyeon wasn’t.

“I was afraid for my job,” he said. “She was asking what I knew. I’d helped you, Jiwoo. I thought I might lose it.”

“I’ve lost mine.”

He went still.

“She’s dismissed me. I gave her the key.”

“I’m sorry.”

I rubbed my thumb where Hyeon’s hand had rested. I had rent to pay. I would need work, an answer for the application asking why I had left my previous position.

Eunjae had been thinking about those things yesterday while I imagined taking Hyeon home in his new clothes.

He had still helped us. He had lifted the damaged cuff carefully, waited while Hyeon asked to see the paper. He had never treated him as part of the collection.

“I understand.”

I meant it, but I didn’t want him to look relieved.

“If you had told me she knew, I wouldn’t have left him in here.”

His mouth opened, then closed.

I could not know what would have happened if I had stayed. They might have made me leave sooner, moved the pieces anyway. I knew only that Hyeon had said he would be here when I came back, and I had walked away.

Subin returned with my bag.

“I’m sorry,” Eunjae said again.

I had nothing to give him. After a moment, he left.

Subin had packed my laptop. My notebook was still on Hyejin’s desk. I gathered the working copies into the folder, then stopped at the letter.

One corner was turned up where Hyeon had moved it.

“He asked for this.”

“Then take it.”

I tried to straighten the corner. It would not stay flat. I left it as it was and put the letter at the front.

Subin held my jacket while I found the second sleeve. The scarf brushed my chin. Hyeon had touched it before we left.

I stood with one hand on the blue fabric until she said my name. Then I checked that my phone’s sound was on.

At the stairs, I took the bag from her. I wanted to stay in the workroom until the museum closed, close enough to hear if he answered. But the pieces were behind a door I could not open, and Hyejin had told me to leave.

“Thank you.”

Downstairs, a woman shook rain from her umbrella and called two children back from the exhibition entrance. I stood aside to let them through together.

Subin walked outside with me.

“How will you get home?”

“I’ll take the bus.”

She squeezed my arm, then went back inside. I watched the door close behind her.

At the crossing, I turned towards the place where Hyeon usually stood. I had done it without thinking. I waited for the light with my hand half open beside me.

At the bus stop, I sat at one end of the bench and opened the message I had shown him on the journey there, about the copies Subin had found. Then I closed it, keeping the phone in my hand in case she called.

On the bus, I tapped my card. Hyeon’s was beside it in my pocket, the bear still holding up its paws. I found a window seat and put the bag on the floor so there would be room beside me.

The bell sounded for the stop near the bookshop.

I stayed on the bus.

I took out my key before I reached the apartment.

Inside, I put down the bag and turned towards the door to tell Hyeon I would get the letter out. I had already opened my mouth when I remembered.

I shut the door.

His poetry book was on the low table. Everything was as we had left it that morning: the glass beside the sink, the space on the cabinet where I usually secured the goreum.

The scarf came loose with my jacket. I hung up the jacket and laid the scarf over the sofa arm.

My notebook was on Hyejin’s desk. The page I had written the first night he disappeared was in it.

I took out the folder instead and found the photographs from the morning I called him back, with the arrows I had added afterwards.

The garment had been open. The name slip was beside it. I had called from the place where he first appeared.

I knew the sequence. I followed it in the photographs anyway.

“Yi Hyeon. It’s Kim Jiwoo. I’m at home.”

I waited.

“Can you hear me?”

Someone passed in the corridor, keys jingling. I listened until they reached their door.

I had only copies. Looking at photographs could not bring the originals together. I had known that before opening the folder.

I left it open.

I found the marked page in his poetry book. He had read these poems while I read my novel, sometimes wanting to discuss one before I had finished my sentence, sometimes waiting until I looked up.

I read the opening line aloud.

At the second, I stopped. I wanted him to tell me what he thought of the first. I could read to the end without knowing whether he had heard any of it.

I replaced the marker and closed the book.

I set my phone face up on the table. Subin was still near the materials. She would call immediately if she heard him.

I tried to sit down.

After a few minutes, I went into the bedroom.

I took the green shirt from Hyeon's drawer and held it by the shoulders. There were two pockets on the front. He had liked the fabric because it looked comfortable to write in.

Yesterday, he had tried twice to lift the cuff. He had wanted to unpack his own clothes, and I had done it for him.

I would have done it again. Every time, if that was what we needed.

I sat on the edge of the bed, the shirt across my knees.

There had been room for him before we bought anything. He had asked which pillow he could use, and I had moved it close to mine. He had opinions about where I left my books and how long I could claim to be getting ready before I went to wash.

That morning, I had been thinking about Subin's copies and catching our usual bus. There would have been another morning, another chance to stay in bed when he asked.

I gripped the shirt at its side seams, then put it beside me and covered my face.

Yesterday, I had been able to tell him we still had our home while we kept trying. He had lain facing me when I went to sleep.

I wanted that evening back. I wanted to sit beside him while he was angry about the attempt and let him stay angry as long as he needed. I wanted to hear him tell me to put more pepper on my food.

I wiped my face and reached for the shirt. I had creased it by holding it too tightly. I smoothed the fabric and folded the sleeves in.

At the front. That was where he had wanted it.

I put it back and closed the drawer.

Back in the living room, my phone was still dark. I picked it up and wrote to Doyun.

I've been fired. They put the goreum away. Hyeon has disappeared and I can't reach him. I'm home.

I sent it before I could make it sound less abrupt.

He called almost at once.

“Jiwoo.”

I sat on the sofa.

“I got back to him before he went. He could still hear me for a little while.”

Doyun was quiet. I heard him move something, then a door close.

“I’m coming over.”

“All right.”

“I’ll tell Minjae and Seoyeon. Is Subin with you?”

“She’s still at work.”

“Then I’ll see you soon.”

I put down the phone. For a while, I stayed seated, with the shirt put away and the book closed in front of me.

CHAPTER 33

When Doyun arrived, he took off his shoes and came straight to me.

“I’m sorry.”

He put an arm around my shoulders. I held on to his jacket, my face against his shoulder, until I could let go.

He went to fill the kettle.

“Tea?”

“Yes.”

“Have you eaten?”

“This morning.”

“Seoyeon said they’ll bring something.”

Doyun sat on the floor with his back against the sofa. We had spent afternoons like this complaining about work or whatever had annoyed him. Usually there was something to say about the small difficulty that had brought us there.

“I don’t know what I’ll do about work.”

“We can look when you’re ready.”

“I liked that job.”

“I know.”

He stayed beside me while the tea cooled.

The room was growing dim when Minjae and Seoyeon arrived with food. She carried it into the kitchen while he stood beside me, his coat still in his arms.

“Doyun told us.”

“Thank you for coming.”

“Of course we came.”

He put his coat away. Seoyeon was taking off hers when I recognised the collar.

“You bought it.”

“Yesterday.”

“The one in the picture?”

“Yes.”

She held it by the shoulders. Hyeon had examined the other coats on her phone before returning to this one.

“He agreed with you.”

“He did.”

“So did I,” Minjae said. “He thought I took too long about it.”

I remembered Hyeon listening to their argument, pleased to have found something to agree with Minjae about.

“I wanted to show him,” Seoyeon said.

“I’m glad you got it.”

She laid the coat on a chair, then found the larger bowls without making me get up.

While they warmed the food, Doyun moved the photographs onto the folder. I put the poetry book beside the lamp.

I ate a little while Minjae and Doyun discussed which containers could go straight into the fridge. Seoyeon told them to leave those until we had finished.

There was no reason for anyone to whisper. I was grateful that they didn’t.

Subin arrived while we were eating and sat beside me.

“Nothing?”

She shook her head.

“I stayed as long as I could.”

“Thank you.”

Seoyeon brought her a bowl. Our shoulders touched while she ate.

For a while, I managed to eat too. Then Minjae began asking Seoyeon whether she had chosen the film and stopped before finishing.

“I found another with that actor,” she said. “I was going to send it to you for him.”

“The father?”

“Yes. He’s difficult in this one too.”

I remembered Hyeon’s pleasure at the idea of finding out whether the actor would be troublesome in another family.

“He’ll have questions,” Minjae said.

He put down his spoon.

“I liked the questions.”

“So did I,” Seoyeon said.

My throat tightened before I could swallow another mouthful. I put down the spoon.

“I don’t know how to be here without him.”

Nobody answered at once. Subin set her bowl on the table.

“I can do things. I got the photographs out. I can follow them. I know what worked before.”

I heard how fast I was speaking and tried to slow down.

“I opened the drawer. His shirt’s there. I bought it because he wanted it, and now I can’t even ask him—”

Seoyeon came nearer.

“What did you want to ask him?”

“Nothing important.”

She waited.

“Whether he still wanted to go to the bookshop.”

I rubbed my hand over my mouth.

“He asked this morning. I said we could. I had the whole afternoon to spend with him.”

Doyun moved my bowl aside and left his hand on my arm.

“I thought we could keep living here. Yesterday, when it didn’t work. I told him we could still have this.”

Subin’s hand settled against my back.

“He wants to be here.”

“I know.”

I bent forward, trying to breathe slowly enough to continue.

“What if he’s trying to answer? He heard me before. What if he can hear me now and I can’t hear him?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

Doyun kept his hand on my arm. Seoyeon passed me a tissue without asking me to look up.

“I said I’d keep trying.”

“You are,” Doyun said.

“I came home.”

“You couldn’t stay there.”

The tissue tore as I wiped my face. Seoyeon put another in my hand.

I had been trying to get him out of that room. Now I was here, with food growing cold and people waiting while I cried. I wanted to tell them I was sorry, but when I opened my mouth, Subin drew me towards her.

I let her hold me. For a while, I could only hear the others moving quietly around us.

When I sat up, Minjae was in the kitchen with the bowls. Seoyeon gathered the used tissues while Doyun brought me water.

“Did everyone eat?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Subin?”

“I ate.”

Nobody asked me to finish my food. Doyun covered the bowl and put it in the fridge.

Subin lifted the copy of Hyeon’s aunt’s letter from the folder, its corner still turned up.

“He wanted to read that today,” I said. “The whole letter.”

“He said.”

Most of it concerned cloth and something his aunt would be late sending. She had written those requests beside the questions about bringing him back.

They had continued eating and sending things to one another while they tried to find him. I had read those passages before without thinking about what it took to continue.

Subin turned to the working copies.

“Have you got the archive reference?”

“It’s on my laptop. I sent it to you on Wednesday.”

I found the message beneath the description of the examination paper. The donation records distinguished documents the family had retained from those given to the museum.

“I asked for this,” she said. “We haven’t had the list yet.”

“He said that was his certificate.”

“The white paper?”

“Yes. He wanted to show me.”

I remembered his pleasure at finding the entry. I had wanted to see what he had brought home to his mother.

“The family may still have it,” Subin said.

“They’ve got papers we haven’t seen.”

“And they may know more about how things were kept before the donation. We could ask them directly.”

We needed to know what Bokrye had left together. Our records accounted for the materials after they reached the museum, but not the years before, when the chest had been opened, its wrappers repaired and its contents rearranged.

“I need to speak to them.”

“About Hyeon?”

“Yes. About what happened today too.”

Minjae was drying a bowl while Seoyeon found room in the fridge. Doyun had returned to the sofa.

“I don’t know how to begin telling them.”

“You can bring the papers,” Subin said. “We can go through them together.”

I found the family’s contact number in the donation correspondence. They had given it to the museum, not to me. I no longer worked there.

I had refused to tell Hyejin about Hyeon because he had never said I could. He had not said I could tell his family either. I wanted to ask him before making that decision. For now, I could begin with the documents.

I entered the number into my phone.

My thumb stayed above the call button. That morning, I had explained where I took the materials, admitted I had no permission and asked to stand beside them. Each conversation had left me farther from Hyeon.

I wanted to tell someone who he was.

I pressed the button.

A man answered after several rings.

“Mr. Yi? My name is Kim Jiwoo. I worked on your family’s donation at the museum.”

“Yes?”

“I’m calling about Yi Hyeon. The clothing and the papers kept with it.”

Subin stayed beside me through the pause.

“What have you found?”

“There’s something I need to tell you. Could we meet in person? I have working copies to show you, and I’d like to ask about the documents your family retained.”

“Is this a request from the museum?”

“I’m calling for myself. I was dismissed this morning.”

“Why?”

“I took the goreum home without permission.”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Was anything damaged?”

“No. The materials are secured at the museum.”

“And the museum knows you’re contacting me?”

“No. I’m not speaking for them.”

I sat straighter.

“I found references to documents your family retained, including Yi Hyeon’s examination certificate. I think they may help explain how the clothing and papers were kept together. I’d like to show you what I found.”

He asked which records I had been reading. I gave him the archive reference and the date of the household instruction.

After a few seconds, he asked whether I could come the following afternoon.

“Yes.”

“At two. I’ll send you the address. Bring what you’ve been reading.”

“Thank you.”

After the call, I kept the phone against my cheek for a moment.

“Tomorrow. At two.”

“I’ll take you,” Doyun said.

Subin gathered the relevant pages. I added the household instruction and Gyeongmun’s account. I could show the family what we had found and ask what they knew about the documents. I did not know how much more I would tell them.

I wanted Hyeon beside me. He would have read something I missed or asked to explain a phrase himself. I would have been happy to sit there while he took over the conversation.

I closed the folder.

Mr. Yi’s address arrived. I showed Doyun, then drank the rest of the water.

Seoyeon and Minjae left after making sure there was food for tomorrow. Minjae touched my shoulder and stood for a moment before saying

goodbye. Seoyeon held my hand and told me to call if I needed them.

Subin went through the folder before putting on her jacket.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you for staying with him.”

She looked at me.

“He’s my friend too.”

I held the door for her.

When I returned, Doyun was rinsing the cups.

“I can stay tonight.”

“Please.”

I went to get a blanket and spare pillow. The bed was still made. I took what I needed from the cupboard without turning on the bedroom lamp.

Doyun reached for the blanket. I moved the folder to the table beside the poetry book and gave him the pillow.

“You can go and lie down. I’ll hear your phone from here.”

“In a minute.”

He settled the blanket over his legs. I sat at the other end of the sofa, my hand near the book, and stayed a little longer.

I had put the papers in order three times before Doyun parked.

The household instruction came first, then the letters and references to the documents the family had retained. I had practised explaining them at the traffic lights, stopping whenever Doyun glanced towards me.

“You don’t have to start with the papers.”

“I know.”

Subin leaned forward from the back seat.

“We’ll be with you.”

I closed the folder. Mr. Yi’s building was across the road, with plants on two balconies and a delivery scooter beside the entrance. I had been looking at it without realising we had arrived.

I took my bag and got out with them.

CHAPTER 34

Mr. Yi opened the door before we had finished introducing ourselves through the intercom. He looked at the folder under my arm, then stepped aside.

An older woman joined us while we took off our shoes.

“My aunt. She helped us go through the things before the donation.”

Mrs. Yi poured tea. There were sliced apples on the low table. Doyun took an armchair while Subin and I sat on the sofa.

“You said you were dismissed yesterday,” Mr. Yi said.

“Yes.”

“Was it something to do with our donation?”

“I took the goreum out of the museum without permission. More than once.”

“Was it damaged?”

“No damage was reported in the checks. It’s secured with the rest of the collection.”

“Then why did you take it?”

I reached for the folder, then left it closed.

“There was someone who needed it.”

He looked towards Subin.

I had meant to begin with the documents. I had wanted to ask Hyeon before telling his family about him. Now I couldn’t, and I needed their help to reach him.

“Yi Hyeon,” I said.

Mr. Yi glanced at his aunt.

“The man whose name was with the clothing?”

“Yes. During the examination, I read his name aloud. He answered.”

“Someone answered?”

“He was standing beside the table. He told me he had gone to sleep before his examination and woken when I called him.”

Mr. Yi sat back.

“You’re saying you saw him?”

“Yes. We spoke.”

I told them about his parents and sister, the letters we had found, and the protective ritual his mother had arranged.

“You believe he’s been here all this time?” Mr. Yi asked.

“I don’t know exactly what happened to him. But he recognised his mother’s handwriting. He helped us read the letters.”

“I spoke with him too,” Subin said.

“Many times?”

“Yes. We were trying to find out how to bring him fully here.”

Mrs. Yi turned to Doyun.

“And you?”

“I’ve met him several times. He came to my flat on Thursday. We had friends over for dinner.”

Mr. Yi looked at me.

“Has he been staying with you?”

“Yes. When I brought the goreum home, he could come with me.”

“Where is he now?”

“I don’t know.”

I took a breath.

“Yesterday, when the materials were put away, he began to disappear. I couldn’t hear him or feel him anymore. We’ve been trying to reach him since.”

Mrs. Yi pushed my cup nearer. I picked it up and held it.

“How old is he?”

“Twenty-four.”

“And he knows how much time has passed?”

“Yes.”

She considered me for a moment.

“What is he like?”

I looked up.

“He likes having people to talk to. He asks a lot of questions, but he has opinions about the answers too.”

Doyun smiled.

“He’s good company.”

“He’s proud of his examination,” I said. “We found a reference to his certificate. He was particularly pleased with the handwriting.”

Mrs. Yi smiled.

“He wanted me to see it,” I said.

I looked towards the plant by the window, its watering jug beside it.

“We haven’t found the original,” Subin said. “That’s one of the documents we hoped you might still have.”

I opened the folder and put the household instruction on the table.

“This arrived in the same group as the clothing. The surviving instruction says to keep the clothing and the paper together.”

Mr. Yi moved the apples to make room. His aunt leaned forward.

“My father used to say some of those things.”

“About the chest?”

“That parcel. I could look through papers with him, but once, when I reached for the wrapping, he stopped me. Everything inside had to stay together.”

“Your father remembered that too,” she told her nephew.

“He was particular about it,” Mr. Yi said.

“Did they know why?” I asked.

“My father said it belonged to someone who hadn’t come home,” Mrs. Yi said. “I thought it meant he’d died somewhere else. But it was always that parcel. There were other things we could move.”

I placed Jeonghwa’s letter beside the fragment.

“This was written three years after Hyeon disappeared. His mother was still trying to find a way to bring him back.”

Mrs. Yi studied the transcription.

“Does he know?”

“Yes. He read it with me.”

I showed her the passage about the books Jeonghwa had left on Hyeon’s table. She read it without speaking.

“He asked for his aunt’s whole letter yesterday,” I said. “Not only the parts about bringing him back. He remembered his mother reading the other parts aloud.”

I reached for the copy, but Mrs. Yi was looking at me.

“He is your lover, is he not?”

My hand stayed on the paper.

Mr. Yi watched me over his cup. I couldn't tell what he thought.

They had let me explain, and I had begun hoping they would help. I didn't know what my answer might change.

"Yes."

A car passed below the balcony.

Mrs. Yi nodded. Her nephew set down his cup.

"What can we do to help?" she asked.

I took a breath.

"We need to reach the materials. He's answered before when we've brought them together. If we can hear him, we can find out what we should do next."

"You've been trying to bring his body back," Mr. Yi said.

"Yes. We made an attempt on Friday, but it wasn't enough."

"And he wants that?"

"He does."

Mrs. Yi looked at the letter.

"Then these letters are what he has left of them."

I nodded.

"There are documents your family retained that we haven't seen," I said. "We were waiting for a list."

"I remember the request," Mr. Yi said. "I'll find out where it got to."

He looked between Subin and me.

"I don't know what to think about all this. But the papers are there. We can look at them."

Mr. Yi reached for his phone.

“I’ll ask whether we can see them today. Or bring them here for a while.”

He gave his name and explained that we needed to see the donation urgently.

While we waited, Mrs. Yi passed me an apple slice on a small plate. I took a bite.

“Yes, Kim Jiwoo,” Mr. Yi said. “He’s here with me.”

He listened, then put down the phone.

“Not today. They won’t let us see the pieces or bring them here.”

“Even with you?”

“Even with me.”

They had asked for me by name. By tomorrow, Hyejin would know where I had spent the afternoon.

I looked at the mark my bite had left in the apple.

“I’ll send the request in writing,” he said.

Subin helped him with the message.

When he had sent it, his aunt drew the intake photograph nearer.

“There’s something else. We didn’t give the museum everything in the chest.”

“The papers you kept?” I asked.

“Some had been folded with the clothing. We took them out and filed them with the other family documents.”

Subin leaned forward.

“Folded inside the clothing?”

“Some of them,” Mrs. Yi said. “I don’t remember exactly where.”

“We thought they’d be better kept flat,” Mr. Yi said. “The examination papers went with the other certificates. There were letters too.”

“Do you remember which papers came from the parcel?” Subin asked.

“Not all of them. My brother made notes when we sorted it.”

“Are there photographs from before you separated anything?”

“A few, I think. We’d have to find them.”

Mrs. Yi looked at the household instruction again.

“I thought keeping the papers with us was enough.”

“We don’t know yet what was needed,” I said. “The earlier letters suggest that the arrangement mattered. We need to find out what was there before anything was moved.”

“Then we should look at the notes,” she said.

Mr. Yi called his sister about the retained papers while his aunt went to the cupboard.

“Would you move that chair?” she asked Doyun. “I need the bottom drawer.”

He helped her take out two folders. She carried the thinner one herself.

“My sister will check her boxes,” Mr. Yi said when he finished. “We’ll start with what we have here.”

Mrs. Yi opened her folder to a handwritten list with later additions on loose sheets. She found the section by a folded corner and placed it beside my copy.

Doyun moved the cups while I opened my laptop. Mrs. Yi fetched her glasses.

I had been afraid they would ask me to leave or say I had misunderstood the letters. When she asked about Hyeon and me, I had thought I might lose the little ground I had gained.

Now she brought a chair to sit beside me, close enough to read the screen.

“Show me the examination entry.”

I enlarged the writing. She adjusted her glasses and reached for her brother's list.

"Here?"

I turned the laptop towards her.

"Yes. That's the one."

Mrs. Yi matched the reference to her brother's list.

"This one. He moved it with the other examination papers."

Mr. Yi brought a broad folder from the cupboard. Each paper had its own support, with a loose list identifying them. His aunt showed him which cover to open.

I saw Hyeon's name first.

李玹.

The ink was dark against the unevenly aged paper. A pale brown line followed an old fold. I could see the firm beginning of each brushstroke and the finer line where it lifted.

Subin came beside me.

"The jinsa examination," I said.

The date was the third month of 1489. Two years before he went to bed expecting to wake for another examination.

"His?" Mrs. Yi asked.

"Yes."

I checked the name and result again. He had passed. Someone had recorded it and given him this paper to take home.

"This is his."

Mr. Yi moved the list so I could see the whole sheet, including the faded seal near the date.

Hyeon had been right about the handwriting.

“It is very good,” I said, smiling.

“The writing?”

“He told me to look at it.”

“Then take your time.”

Subin moved my laptop clear of the original.

I had seen his name in books and letters. I knew how he wrote it himself. Here another hand had recorded the result he worked for.

The chair across the table remained empty.

“I wish he were here.”

“I would like to hear him explain it,” Mrs. Yi said.

We stayed there for a while. When I was ready, I asked about the list.

“My father made this when we decided what to keep,” Mr. Yi said.

A note beside the certificate’s entry referred to the clothing parcel. Mrs. Yi followed it to the thinner folder and brought out two supported pieces: a later sorting label and a narrow sheet of older paper.

“He kept what had been around it, even when he thought the writing wasn’t important.”

The label identified the certificate removed from the folded garment and referred to the older sheet.

I needed the lamp to read the small writing near its crease.

“Bokrye,” Subin said.

“After her work,” I read, “the white examination paper was left folded within Hyeon’s clothing.”

The baekpae. Not the answer sheet he had never filled in.

The passage also named the small paper bearing his name and instructed that the papers, clothing and ties be kept together. It did not describe

what Bokrye had said or how she fixed either paper in place.

It wasn't Jeonghwa's hand. Hyeon would have known whose it was.

"Both of them," Subin said.

"Yes."

Near one of the certificate's folds were two small punctures, with a narrow band of wear below.

"Could you turn the lamp a little?"

Mrs. Yi adjusted it.

"The photographs from Tuesday?" Subin asked.

I opened them. The garment's shallow crease ran below the possible attachment for the name slip, crossed by a shorter line farther along. The slip's edge had ended too soon to account for it.

The certificate had been folded much smaller before being flattened for storage. I compared its surviving creases with the cloth.

"It could have fitted there."

"We should show her."

I could see the possibility without making the marks agree exactly. The older note recorded something the photographs could not: this paper had been with the clothing after Bokrye's work.

Mr. Yi set the sorting label beside it.

"My father took it out of the garment."

"It says he did."

Mrs. Yi compared the household instruction with the older note.

"We kept the instruction with the clothes."

"The lower part was already missing. It doesn't name everything."

"But this names the white paper."

“Yes.”

With Mr. Yi’s permission, Subin photographed the certificate and notes. I watched the pale fold passing through Hyeon’s name.

It had been folded away with him, then given a place among the other certificates while the family prepared the donation.

I could follow those actions now. I wished we had followed them on Friday.

Subin sent the photographs to Ms. Seo with Tuesday’s comparison. When she called, Subin answered beside the table.

“The original is here. So is the note.”

Mr. Yi nodded when she looked towards him.

“Yes. We can stay.”

“She can come this evening,” Subin told us. “She wants to examine the paper itself.”

“Here?” Mrs. Yi asked.

“If that’s all right.”

“Of course.”

Mr. Yi sent the address. Doyun offered to drive us afterwards. They arranged it without making me explain again.

I straightened, my back aching.

“Could we take it with us when we try?”

Mrs. Yi was already nodding.

“Yes,” her nephew said. “If this is something you need.”

I had prepared to explain how it would be kept, who would handle it and when we would return it.

“Look after it,” he said.

“I will.”

“My father wanted it kept. So did his father. I would like to know we can still do that.”

“We can. I’ll bring it back.”

“And when he comes back, bring him here,” Mrs. Yi said.

I held the edge of my chair.

“I’ll tell him you’d like to meet him.”

“You can have a meal with us. Both of you.”

She said it as she had offered tea.

“Both of us?”

“You will be coming with him, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll set places for you both.”

I looked towards the dining table. There were four chairs, a cushion on one and a folded shopping bag on another.

“Does he like any particular food?”

“I don’t know yet. He hasn’t been able to eat. He can sit with us, but he can’t taste anything.”

“Then we will ask him when he gets here.”

“He has suggestions about my food.”

“Quite a few,” Doyun said.

“He thinks I need more pepper.”

“Do you?”

“Sometimes.”

“We’ll have some on the table.”

I laughed. I could imagine Hyeon noticing it, then looking at me when he understood.

“Thank you.”

Mr. Yi’s sister sent a photograph of the boxes she had opened. He replied that we had found the certificate and asked her to keep the other notes together.

Doyun gathered the cups. This time, when Mrs. Yi offered more tea, I drank it while it was still warm.

CHAPTER 35

We ate at the dining table before Ms. Seo arrived. Mr. Yi brought an extra chair, and his aunt passed the dishes while Subin kept her phone beside her bowl.

I ate more than I expected. Mr. Yi asked which donated books Hyeon had recognised, then about an inscription his father had identified. After dinner, I found the photograph of it and turned the screen towards them both.

“He would have liked knowing that,” I said.

There were questions they could ask Hyeon when he came. I began remembering them for him.

When Ms. Seo arrived, she thanked them for letting her visit, then asked me whether there had been any contact since yesterday.

“No.”

She touched my arm briefly before sitting.

We had covered the certificate while we ate. Mr. Yi opened its folder, and I laid the narrow note beside it.

Ms. Seo studied the folds and punctures, then asked for the garment photographs and our comparison with the name slip. Subin enlarged them while I read the note aloud.

“This gives us something we couldn’t account for,” she said.

“The certificate?”

“The note places it inside the garment after Bokrye’s work. On Friday, we brought the smaller name paper back into relation with the clothing, but we didn’t have this.”

She returned to the folds.

“These marks are consistent with the note. They suggest the certificate may have been part of the arrangement, though we still don’t know exactly what Bokrye did. Its connection to Hyeon may come from having been enclosed with him, rather than simply from bearing his name.”

“Is that why I could feel his fingers so clearly, but only for a moment?”

“Possibly. We brought the name paper back into place and felt a change. If the certificate belonged to what kept him concealed, we may have strengthened the connection without ending the separation.”

I looked down at my hands.

We had been making room for a body Hyeon still couldn’t bring with him. The paper that might have helped was in a cupboard I could see from this table.

I pressed my palms against my knees. Subin moved beside me, and I lifted my head.

“We thought we were looking after it,” Mrs. Yi said.

“You were. It’s here.”

Her nephew moved his chair nearer hers.

“If we take it back with the other things,” I asked Ms. Seo, “does that give us a better chance of reaching him?”

“Yes. We have a stronger basis now.”

“Could he hear me?”

“That’s what I want to try first. Bring the originals together and open the way for him to answer.”

She removed her glasses.

“I can’t promise he will. But I can see something we were missing.”

I had hoped the family could help us gain access to the museum. That request was still waiting. Now we had something else to bring with us.

“All right.”

“We’ll need the garment, the small paper and the goreum too.”

“There’s no reply to my request yet,” Mr. Yi said.

“We’ll see what they say,” Subin said.

Ms. Seo asked for a transcription of the new note. Subin and I prepared it while she studied the comparison.

A crease had worn through one character. I left a gap instead of smoothing the sentence. Beside the passage about the white paper, I added the family’s reference.

I had done this work all week. Tonight, when I reached Hyeon’s name, I checked the original before continuing.

I sent the transcription and photograph. Ms. Seo read the last line.

“Let me know as soon as you hear about the museum.”

“I will.”

Mrs. Yi walked her to the entrance while Mr. Yi found a rigid outer cover for the certificate.

“This has room for the support. It can go with you.”

Subin helped him settle the document inside. I watched the cover close over Hyeon’s name, then took the folder in both hands.

It was lighter than I expected.

Mr. Yi gave me a copy of the sorting sheet. His aunt returned with the older note in a separate cover.

“Take this too. She may need to examine it again.”

“Thank you.”

She looked at the folder.

“You can tell him we’ve kept it.”

“I will.”

I thanked them again at the door.

Mrs. Yi touched my sleeve.

“We’ll hear from you soon.”

“Yes.”

In the lift, Subin offered to hold the folder while I put on my jacket.

“Just the bag.”

She took it. I left the jacket open and kept the certificate across my arms.

Doyun waited while I sat in the car. Subin put my bag behind me and got into the back.

When I could speak to Hyeon, I would tell him he had been right about the handwriting.

I rested one hand along the folder’s edge, and Doyun pulled away.

On Monday morning, the certificate remained in its protective cover on the low table, the older note and our transcription beside it.

I left them there and went to make breakfast. Mr. Yi called while the bread was in the toaster.

“They’ve replied. You still can’t see the pieces. They’ve offered me a meeting later this week.”

“Did they say when we could see them?”

“There’s no date.”

The toaster sounded. I stayed where I was.

“I’ve sent them the sorting photographs,” he added.

“Thank you.”

“Has Ms. Seo said anything more?”

“She wants to bring the certificate to the museum and try calling him.”

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke.

“Tell me if there’s something else we can do.”

“I will.”

One edge of the toast had darkened more than the other. I ate it at the kitchen counter.

They had kept the paper for centuries. It could remain safely in its cover for another morning. I knew that. I had no idea what another morning was like for Hyeon.

I had eaten half a piece when Subin’s message arrived.

Can you talk?

I called her.

“They’re bringing the pieces out for me this afternoon,” she said. “To compare with Mr. Yi’s photographs.”

“The goreum too?”

“Everything. You and Ms. Seo could come.”

“Does Hyejin know?”

“No. She’ll be in a meeting. I can bring you up.”

On Saturday, I had asked again and again to stand beside the pieces. I could still see how Hyejin had looked at my hand on the door.

“And if she finds out?”

“I could lose my job.”

“I don’t want that.”

“Neither do I. But I can’t reach him by myself. You’ve got the certificate. I can get you to the table.”

“When?”

“After lunch. Call Ms. Seo, then tell me when you can get here.”

“All right.”

I thanked her and ended the call.

There was somewhere to take the folder. I could carry it to the room where Hyeon had first answered me.

Ms. Seo listened while I explained Subin’s offer. I had the old note and Eunjae’s drawings to bring with us.

“Would we do what we did on Friday?” I asked.

“I want to see the certificate beside the garment first.”

“And then call him?”

“Yes.”

“I want him to know what we’ve brought.”

“Then tell him,” she said. “I’ll wait.”

“He asked me to keep trying if he couldn’t answer.”

“I remember.”

Ms. Seo could come that afternoon. I told her Doyun would collect her on the way, then called him.

“I can take you,” he said. “Give me a few minutes to finish here.”

I gave him her address.

“What do you need to bring?”

“The certificate. Some working copies. Clothes.”

“The green shirt?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ll write when I’m leaving.”

I sent Subin the time and finished the toast before packing.

The green shirt was at the front of Hyeon’s drawer. I packed it with the plain shirt, trousers, underwear and a towel.

I checked the certificate’s support and closed its outer cover. The older note went in its separate folder, alongside my drawings and transcription.

Everything was ready well before we needed to leave. I went through Eunjae’s drawings again, following the folds and the limits he had marked for moving them.

Doyun arrived while I was putting on my jacket. He took the clothes, and I carried the certificate across my arms.

In the car, I rested the folder across my knees.

“We’ll get Ms. Seo first,” Doyun said.

I nodded.

“Seoyeon and Minjae know,” he said.

“What did you tell them?”

“That we’re going back. That we found something we needed. They’ll be free after work.”

“Minjae asked whether he should order anything.”

“What did you say?”

“To wait until we hear.”

“Thank you.”

Doyun looked over his shoulder and pulled away.

Subin had written to say the pieces were ready.

Doyun parked and handed me the clothes while I kept the certificate level across my arms.

“I’ll wait downstairs,” he said. “Or outside, if you need the car.”

“I’ll call.”

Ms. Seo took my smaller bag. Subin met us at the stairs and handed us visitors’ badges.

I fastened mine, remembering my old card on Hyejin’s desk.

At the collection corridor, I waited while Subin used her card. I knew the sound the door made when it released.

The examination room was open. The garment lay on its larger support, with the repaired cuff towards the side where I had worked. Beside it were the name slip and goreum. The wrapping lay farther along the table.

I stopped just inside.

“Everything on the list is here,” Subin said. “They looked over the supports before leaving.”

I looked at the place where Hyeon had stood on Saturday.

Subin cleared the spare board beside the lamp. I lowered the certificate onto it and put the clothes beneath a chair.

We opened its cover together, keeping the support steady. The pale fold passed through Hyeon’s name.

Ms. Seo studied the garment photographs while I read the older note aloud. We matched the reference against the family’s sorting label.

“Both papers,” she said.

“Yes.”

Using the photographs, we compared the certificate’s surviving folds with the position suggested by the note.

“Leave the original paper flat on its support,” Ms. Seo said. “It can extend into the opening without going beneath the cloth.”

We rehearsed the movement with copies.

Subin hadn’t asked Eunjae. I didn’t ask why.

Then, following his marked limits, Subin and I adjusted the garment on its board and checked that nothing had slipped.

We lowered the certificate’s support into the prepared space. Its name faced the place where the garment would have surrounded the wearer. The smaller slip came nearer on its own board, while the goreum remained beside the closing.

On Friday, I had been looking at a space we could not explain. Now the paper the family had taken out was there.

“Does that give you what you need?”

Ms. Seo compared the arrangement with the note, then removed her glasses.

“It gives us a possibility we couldn’t try on Friday.”

I closed the drawing and moved my working copies away from the originals.

“You can stand here,” she said. “Where he heard you before.”

I went there.

Ms. Seo named the room, the garment and the papers, telling Hyeon we were there to reach him. Subin listened from the other end of the support.

“Call him now,” Ms. Seo said. “Give him time to answer.”

I took a breath.

“Yi Hyeon,” I said. “It’s Kim Jiwoo.”

CHAPTER 36

“Jiwoo?”

I heard him from the other side of the table. My hand rose before I knew where to put it.

“I’m here.”

“I cannot see you.”

“I’m in the examination room. Subin’s here too. We’ve brought your certificate.”

“The white paper? Say something else.”

“Yes. We went to see the Yi family. They’ve kept it with the examination papers. I saw your name.”

His sleeve appeared near the chair, then his hand, held out towards me.

“Here,” I said.

His gaze found mine. He came nearer, and I put my hand beneath his.

There was the light pressure I knew.

“I heard you.”

“I said I’d come.”

He stayed close while Subin greeted him. He answered readily this time.

“The certificate is here,” I said.

I showed him without letting go. He leaned towards the writing.

“That is mine.”

“You were right about the handwriting.”

He smiled lightly as he examined the paper.

Ms. Seo came nearer.

“We believe this paper belonged to the arrangement Bokrye left. The family took it out before the donation, so Friday’s attempt was made without it. We’ve brought it back into relation with the clothing and the smaller paper.”

“Can you finish it now?”

“We can try. Do you still want us to bring you fully here?”

“Yes. I want to go home with Jiwoo.”

His fingers tried to tighten around mine.

“Stay where you can hear us,” she said. “We’ll tell you when to come towards us.”

Hyeon let go while I joined Subin. We brought the supported front across the prepared space, keeping the cloth’s weight away from the papers.

Ms. Seo named him and the things that had been enclosed with him. She told him where we were, and that we were opening what had been closed around him.

At her direction, we eased the front back.

The writing came into view.

“Yi Hyeon,” she said. “Come here and answer us.”

“I can hear you.”

He drew a sharp breath. Then his feet struck the floor as he ran towards me.

I caught him with both arms.

He came against me hard enough that I had to step back. His arms closed around my neck. I held him between the shoulders and at his side, feeling his weight against my chest.

“Jiwoo.”

His voice was against my ear.

I tried to answer, but he drew back to kiss me. His mouth was warm. The hand at my neck held me where he wanted me, and I caught his face between my palms.

He laughed against my lips.

I kissed him again. His hands moved down my back and pulled me towards him.

I could feel each place where his arms pressed, the movement of his chest, the breath he took when I kissed the corner of his mouth.

“You’re here.”

“Yes.”

I tried to say it again. The first sound broke in my throat.

I felt the tears before I could lift a hand to them. One reached the edge of my mouth. I tried to take a breath without making another sound, and it came out badly.

Hyeon touched the wet line beneath my eye.

I could hold him. I was holding him, and still I could not get enough air to tell him.

He smiled so openly that I tried to smile too. Then he kissed my cheek and wiped the other one.

“I had things to say,” I managed. “I can’t remember them.”

“Tell me later.”

I held his wrist. The tendons moved as his fingers brushed my temple. When I turned my face into his hand, he brought his other arm around me.

I let him hold me.

My forehead rested beside his neck. He was warm there too. When another sob came, he held me closer.

“I am here.”

“Yeah.”

I had kept my hand raised after he disappeared, waiting for the pressure to return. Now I gripped the cloth at his back, and it stayed in my hand.

“I couldn’t reach you.”

“I know.”

“I kept calling.”

“You reached me now.”

I nodded against him. For a while, I could do very little else.

When I lifted my head, he wiped another tear with his thumb.

His laugh came readily. I began laughing too, though it made another tear fall.

I drew him towards me.

“I love you.”

His arms tightened.

“I love you too.”

I closed my eyes.

After a while, his fingers moved to my collar, straightening the edge caught beneath the visitor’s badge.

At the other end of the table, Subin moved her chair. I had almost forgotten there were people with us.

She was smiling, with one hand pressed against her mouth.

“Subin,” Hyeon said.

“Hello again.”

He laughed and went to embrace her. She held him at once.

“Thank you,” he said. “For staying with me.”

She nodded, and he hugged her again.

When he came back, I held out my hand. He took it firmly, then turned towards Ms. Seo.

“Thank you for bringing me back.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“So am I.”

He looked at me as he said it.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“I think I would like some water.”

Subin pointed to the smaller table. He went to it before I did and took the bottle nearest the chair. The plastic gave beneath his fingers. The seal cracked as he opened it. He put the cap down and drank. I watched his throat move.

“Mm. Cold.”

He drank again, then caught a drop at his lip with his thumb.

Then he noticed the clothes beneath the chair.

“You brought the green shirt.”

He took it from the bag and ran his fingers over the fabric near a pocket. Then he brought a cuff nearer and pushed the button through.

He rubbed the edge between his fingers.

“I would like to put it on when we get home.”

Doyun’s message arrived while we stood there. I wrote that Hyeon was back and we would come down soon.

I'm by the entrance.

Hyeon leaned towards the screen.

"Tell him I am hungry. I would like the chicken we had at his flat. You said we could take it home. And rice."

Minjae had offered to order. I added the request to my reply.

"And tell Seoyeon I would still like to see the film."

I sent the message. Hyeon put his arm around my waist, and I leaned against him while Doyun replied.

"Are you ready to go home?" Ms. Seo asked.

"Yes," Hyeon said.

Subin looked over the cloth's support while I gathered the working copies. Before she covered the certificate, Hyeon came beside us. She left it open while he followed the writing beneath his name.

"Which did you read first?" I asked. "When you got it. Your name, or the part that said you'd passed?"

"The result. I wanted to see what they had written beneath my name."

He bent closer to read it again.

"My father read the whole thing," he said. "Then he read it again when my mother asked."

I waited beside him until he straightened.

"They have kept it very well."

"They wanted me to tell you that. Mr. Yi and his aunt helped us find it."

He listened while I gave him their names.

"They'd like to meet you. Mrs. Yi invited both of us for a meal, whenever you're ready."

"I would like to thank them. Should we bring something?"

I smiled before I could answer.

“We’ll work it out.”

He stepped back so Subin could close the cover. Ms. Seo took the certificate while I packed the working papers.

Hyeon put the green shirt away and took the bag’s handles before I could reach for them.

“I can carry it.”

When I took my jacket from the chair, he held it while I found the sleeves.

I looked at him for longer than I meant to. He came nearer and kissed my cheek.

“I’ll finish here,” Subin said. “You can go. Will you let us know when you’re home?”

“I will,” Hyeon said.

He hugged her once more. When I thanked her, she held my arm briefly.

“Take him home.”

Hyeon carried the clothes to the door and held it open for Ms. Seo.

The garment lay on the table behind him. The goreum was beside it, on its own support.

He stepped into the corridor.

I followed.

He held out his hand. His fingers closed around mine as readily as they had in the room, and we went downstairs.

Doyun rose when he saw us. He put an arm around Hyeon’s shoulders, then paused with his hand against his back.

“Good to see you.”

“And you.”

Hyeon hugged him properly. Doyun smiled at me over his shoulder.

“Hungry?”

“Very.”

“Minjae’s ordering. Do you want the same sauce?”

“Yes, please.”

Hyeon took my hand.

“Then I can find out whether you described it properly.”

“I did my best.”

Outside, he stepped nearer to let someone hurry past towards a bus. I could feel his shoulder against mine.

He drew a breath, looked up the street and lifted the bag.

“Come.”

Ms. Seo sat in front with the certificate level across her knees. In the back, Hyeon set the clothes beside us and fastened his seat belt.

“You should put yours on.”

I did. He threaded his fingers through mine, then watched Doyun adjust the mirror.

He rested his head against my shoulder.

“Tired?”

“A little.”

I kissed his hair.

“You can rest.”

“I know.”

His hand stayed firm in mine.

Doyun glanced back.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” Hyeon said. “We would like to go home.”

Hyeon sat up when Doyun turned into our street.

Outside, Ms. Seo passed me the covered certificate. We thanked her while Doyun looked up the route to take her home.

“I’ll come back,” he told us.

“We’ll keep some for you,” Hyeon said.

Minjae and Seoyeon were waiting by the lift with the food. Hyeon set down his bag.

“Hello.”

Seoyeon reached him first, putting both arms around him. He held her while she laughed against his shoulder.

“I’ve brought your dinner.”

“Thank you. I am very hungry.”

“That’s good. There’s quite a lot.”

Minjae seemed uncertain where to put his hands. Hyeon settled the question by embracing him.

He held on, then patted Hyeon’s back twice.

“You took your time.”

“I know.”

“We got the rice.”

“Good. I would like you to stay and eat it with us.”

“We were hoping you’d say that.”

In the lift, Seoyeon asked how he felt.

“Tired,” he said. “And very pleased.”

He looked towards me. I was smiling before I had thought of anything to say.

Upstairs, I put the certificate and note safely in the cabinet while Seoyeon and Minjae carried the food into the kitchen.

I found Hyeon in the bedroom. He had changed into the trousers and plain shirt and was folding his old clothes at the foot of the bed. Then he put the green shirt on over the plain one, leaving the front open as he had liked it when I wore it for him.

He turned back the first cuff and held his wrist towards me.

“Like this?”

“Yes.”

He did the other himself. I wanted to straighten the fold above the button and keep my hand there, but I waited while he finished.

At the mirror, he moved aside so I could stand beside him. The trousers were a little long; the shirt fitted across his shoulders. He pushed his hands into the pockets and looked at me.

“It suits you,” I said.

He brought one hand to my waist and kissed me. When he drew back, he waited for me to look again.

I did. He kissed me once more, then put the remaining clothes away.

Seoyeon had brought the food to the low table. Minjae was arranging cushions with his usual confidence that someone else would find room for his legs. He looked up at Hyeon’s shirt.

“Good choice.”

We sat with our backs against the sofa while Seoyeon passed the rice. Hyeon took the chopsticks I offered and chose a piece of chicken.

For a moment, he chewed without speaking.

“It is sweeter than I expected.”

“I said a little.”

“You said a little,” he agreed, and took another bite.

He wiped the sauce from the corner of his mouth. I was smiling so much that he began to smile too.

Minjae moved the second carton nearer.

“Try this one. There’s more sauce.”

Hyeon finished his first piece before choosing another. This time, he picked up the spoon beside his bowl, turned it once in his fingers, and took some rice with it.

The doorbell sounded. Doyun had brought drinks.

“Come and have some,” Hyeon called.

While I found glasses, Hyeon moved the cartons to make room for the drinks. Doyun settled beside Minjae, who began explaining which chicken he should try first.

I sat beside Hyeon again. My rice had begun to cool.

He put a piece of chicken on my plate.

“You liked this one.”

The coating gave beneath my teeth, and the sweetness was stronger than I remembered.

I took some rice. Hyeon rested his knee against mine and went back to eating.

CHAPTER 37

Conversation continued around the table as people reached for the cartons. Minjae complained when someone put a glass where he wanted to rest his elbow.

Hyeon moved it for him, then asked Seoyeon about the film. She had chosen a comedy about two sisters running a guesthouse. One wanted to keep it; the other wanted to sell.

“I’d watch that,” Minjae said.

“We can watch it when you’re feeling rested,” she told Hyeon.

“Tomorrow?” Minjae asked.

“Let them have tomorrow,” Doyun said.

Hyeon looked at me before answering.

“We will let you know.”

He drew the nearer carton towards himself and chose a smaller piece.

“You ordered well,” he told Minjae.

Minjae accepted the compliment with a nod.

Hyeon yawned when Doyun offered him another drink.

“Tired?” Seoyeon asked.

“A little.”

I poured it for him. He drank, then leaned against my shoulder.

When Seoyeon began clearing the table, Hyeon carried his bowl and chopsticks to the sink. Minjae put the remaining chicken into a smaller container.

“There’s some for tomorrow.”

Hyeon came back to sit beside me while I finished my rice.

Subin’s message arrived. She was home and wanted to know whether we had eaten.

I showed Hyeon.

“Tell her we have. Thank her again, and say I would like to see her soon.”

I wrote that we both would. He watched me send it, then laid his hand on my thigh.

“Have you told Mr. Yi?”

“Not yet.”

I sent Mr. Yi the news. His reply arrived while Doyun carried the glasses into the kitchen.

I’m so glad. I’ll tell my aunt.

Hyeon read it twice before giving me back the phone.

By the time everyone was ready to leave, Hyeon was yawning through Seoyeon’s answers about the film. She promised they could talk more about it another day.

At the door, he thanked them for coming. Seoyeon embraced him, then kissed my cheek.

“Get some sleep too.”

“I will.”

Doyun was the last to leave.

“Call if you want anything.”

“Thank you.”

When I closed the door, Hyeon slipped his arm around my waist.

“I enjoyed that.”

“So did I.”

He rested his cheek against mine. I could feel him smile.

I took the last glasses into the kitchen. He followed, then caught my hand.

“Come.”

In the bedroom, he took off the green shirt and laid it over the chair.

I found soft trousers and a clean shirt for him to sleep in. He put them on the bed while I took the towel from the shelf again.

In the bathroom, I showed him which way to turn the control for hotter water. He found a temperature he liked, and I left the towel within reach.

While the water ran, I put away the remaining papers and bags and pulled back the cover on his side of the bed.

He returned in the clean shirt, with the towel around his shoulders and his hair loose and damp. I had never seen it down.

“Those trousers are comfortable.”

“They’re old.”

He sat beside me and dried his hair. After a moment, he lowered the towel. He put it into my hand.

“Here.”

I pressed the water from the hair beside his face. He closed his eyes, then leaned towards me and kissed me.

His hand came to the back of my neck. Mine slipped beneath his shirt and rested against his back.

“I like your hand there.”

I moved it slowly over his skin.

“Here?”

“Yes.”

I wanted time to learn where he would ask me to leave it, what would make him move nearer.

Then his head lowered onto my shoulder.

“Come to bed with me.”

“I need to wash first.”

“Then you should do that.”

When I had showered and brushed my teeth, he was sitting against the pillows with water beside him.

“I brought some for you too.”

I drank before turning down the lamp.

The mattress dipped as he settled onto his side. I lay facing him, and he took my hand to kiss my fingers.

“Nearer.”

I moved towards him. His arm came around my back, and I rested my head against his shoulder.

His chest rose against mine, and his shirt warmed where my hand rested.

He kissed my forehead.

“You should sleep too.”

“I will.”

“Soon.”

I kissed him. He smiled against my mouth, then drew me back against his shoulder.

He said we should try the noodles next. I told him we had time.

He began to answer, then trailed off.

His next breath was deeper. I lifted my head enough to see his closed eyes and relaxed mouth. When I eased a strand of hair from his cheek, he shifted without waking.

I lay down again.

The refrigerator started in the other room. I pulled the cover higher over us.

His next breath moved the fabric beneath my cheek. I left my hand against his chest and closed my eyes.

When I woke, Hyeon was rubbing his face against the pillow.

“What time is it?”

I checked my phone.

“Later than usual.”

He drew me nearer, and I put the phone down.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. I would like to stay here a little longer.”

He kissed me.

I stayed.

By the time we got up, he was considering Minjae’s leftover chicken for breakfast. We had toast instead. I took the bread out before it burned and set the jam on the table. His foot rested beside mine while we ate.

“This is good,” he said.

Hyeon put on the green shirt again while I found a jacket he could borrow.

“I would like to go to the bookshop.”

He looked towards the museum bag beneath the desk. I took a smaller one from the wardrobe.

“There’ll be room for whatever we bring back.”

He packed our water and carried it for the walk.

The window display had changed. Hyeon noticed before I did, stopping at the place where the poetry book had been. He read the new covers, then opened the door for me.

The shopkeeper greeted us while Hyeon took a book from the low table. He showed me the contents, then opened a story about two neighbours arguing over the plants on their shared roof.

I leaned nearer to read with him.

He turned the page.

“Wait. I haven’t finished.”

He turned it back and waited while I caught up.

On the next page, one neighbour asked why the other’s plants seemed to have grown overnight.

We read until someone needed the shelf behind us. Hyeon closed the book around a finger and stepped aside.

On the way to the counter, he asked what I was choosing.

“I haven’t finished the one about the sisters. I haven’t read much since we bought it.”

“I still want to know what happens to them.”

“I’ll bring it out tonight.”

At the counter, he asked whether the writer had other books. The shopkeeper pointed to another collection near the window.

“Next time,” he said.

I paid, and he thanked her before putting the book into our bag.

Outside, he took my hand with his free one.

“Coffee?” I asked.

“And something to eat.”

Hyeon chose the table by the window, then came to order with me. He wanted coffee with milk and asked which cake I usually liked.

“The lemon one.”

“Then we will have that.”

He ordered while I added my coffee and paid. By the time I brought the tray, he had opened his book again.

He moved it aside and tried the coffee.

“I think I would like it sweeter.”

“There’s sugar by the counter.”

He went to get some, added a little and tried again.

I cut the cake. He offered me the first piece, then took another for himself.

“Would you stay by your pots all day?” he asked, glancing at the book.

“I’d probably keep looking through the window to see whether anyone had moved them.”

He drank his coffee. His cup was close enough to the book that I nearly moved it farther away. Before I could, he shifted it himself.

When we had finished, he put the book away and suggested the river. He lifted the bag and took my hand at the door.

We took the bus to the river and walked down towards the water, keeping clear of the bicycles. At a bench farther along, Hyeon set the bag beside him and rested his shoulder against mine.

A man was trying to persuade his dog to continue walking. It had found something beside the fence. Every time he took a step, it sat down.

“He should let it finish,” Hyeon said.

We watched until the man stopped pulling at the lead. Then Hyeon opened the collection between us.

After another page, he asked what I thought of the neighbour’s answer. He disagreed, then showed me the passage he wanted me to read again. I read it while he held the page open.

When he turned it, I put my arm along the bench, and he leaned against me, holding the book where we could both see it.

At the end of the story, he closed it and turned towards me.

“I love you.”

It took me a moment to answer.

“I love you too.”

He put his hand over mine. We sat with the book closed in his lap.

We stayed until the shadows had moved farther across the path. Hyeon looked towards me when I shifted to check my phone.

“Do you want to go home?”

“We could get the noodles on the way.”

“I would like those.”

He put the book away and rose, offering me his hand. I took it while getting up. He kept hold after I was standing.

At the restaurant, Hyeon pointed to the choices he remembered. He carried the food home and asked me to keep the receipt so we would know what to order again if he liked it.

I put the containers in the fridge. Hyeon held out his hand, and I followed him into the bedroom.

Once we had put away our jackets, he took off the green shirt and laid it over the chair. Then he came to kiss me, his hand against my cheek.

“I was looking forward to being alone with you.”

“I’ve been looking forward to it too.”

We sat on the bed with our knees together.

“About what we began last night,” he said. “I would like more of that.”

“So would I.”

He looked down at the hand he was holding.

“I should tell you that I have not done this with anyone. I know something about it. Or I think I do. The men I studied with had quite a lot to say, though they disagreed too much for me to believe all of them.”

He took a moment before continuing.

“I thought I would marry first. And then I would find out. I hoped I would like the person.”

His eyes stayed on mine.

“I am glad it is you.”

“So am I.”

“Who decides who does what? I heard that it depended on who began. Who approached the other person.”

“We decide together. Normally I top, but you can tell me what you want.”

His eyebrows lifted.

“So you want to fuck me?”

“I—yes.”

The surprise gave way to a smile. He looked down at our hands.

“I am a little nervous. But I do want to try it this way.”

“We can take our time.”

He nodded, then watched my face. He brought his hand beneath my chin and turned my face towards him. I put my arms around him.

“I thought I would be better at talking about this,” I said.

He waited.

“I haven’t done this with someone I love before.”

“But the man you told me about?”

“I liked him. I didn’t love him.”

He brought both hands to my face and kissed me. When he drew away, he stayed close.

“Then you can be nervous too,” he said. “You have been taking care of me. I would like to know when you need something.”

I had expected questions I could answer. I brought him closer and rested my face beside his. He held me until I could speak again.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

When I moved back, he was smiling.

“I am still a little nervous,” he said. “But I do know what I want. I want you, Jiwoo.”

I could feel myself smiling. He saw it and moved nearer.

“Come here.”

I kissed him. When he put his arms around me, I went willingly.

When we drew apart, his lips were flushed.

“There's something I should explain first,” I said.

He waited.

“Most people like to rinse beforehand.”

“Would it be better?”

“It might make you feel more comfortable. It's up to you.”

He considered that.

“I think I would like to.”

“All right.”

“How?”

I explained as simply as I could. He listened, then asked a few questions before looking towards the bathroom.

“Will you show me?”

“Of course.”

I went ahead of him and showed him what he would need. In the cabinet beneath the sink, I found the lubricant I had not used in months.

“We'll use this later,” I said.

He took the bottle and turned it over to read the label before giving it back.

At the shower, I adjusted the water until it was warm. He put his hand beneath the stream.

“A little cooler.”

I turned the control. He tried again.

“Yes.”

I answered his remaining questions, then left the towel within reach.

“Take your time,” I said. “I'll be in the bedroom.”

“All right.”

I touched his arm. He caught my wrist and held it for a moment.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course.”

He let me go, and I closed the door behind me.

In the bedroom, I turned down the lamp. The light caught the edge of the pillow and the green shirt folded over the chair.

I pulled back the cover and smoothed the sheet. From the cupboard, I took the extra pillow I used for reading and set it within reach. I laid a towel across the bed and put the lubricant beside my water glass.

Then I moved the pillow.

I looked at it for a moment before putting it back.

My hands were unsteady. I pressed them against my thighs and sat on the edge of the bed.

Through the wall, I could hear the water running.

I had imagined I would be more certain. I knew what I liked, and I knew how to be careful, but I didn't yet know what Hyeon would enjoy. He would have to tell me.

He had said I could be nervous too.

I looked towards the bathroom door.

I wanted to be good at this for him. Not just careful—good. I wanted him to feel what I felt when he kissed me and stayed close.

The water stopped.

I heard him pull the towel from the rail. Then came the quieter sounds of him moving about the bathroom.

Everything was ready.

The bathroom door opened. Steam came into the hallway, carrying the soap he had used. I heard his bare feet on the floor.

I stayed where I was and waited for him to come to me.

CHAPTER 38

He stood in the doorway with the towel still around his shoulders and nothing else. The hallway light was behind him. He looked at the bed, then at me.

“You have made it darker.”

“Yes.”

He came to where I sat. The towel slipped from one shoulder, and I caught the end before laying it on the chair beside his shirt. I was grateful for something simple to do with my hands.

His skin was warm and still damp along his collarbones. I put my hand there, and he closed his eyes.

I drew him nearer and kissed the centre of his chest. His fingers came into my hair. When I kissed his stomach, he drew a breath and brought his hand beneath my chin.

“Come here.”

I raised my face. He kissed me, then reached for the hem of my shirt.

“May I?”

“Yes.”

He helped me pull it off. I reached for him again, but he was already looking at the rest of me.

“I wanted to see you.”

He smiled and kissed my shoulder while I undressed. I had thought quite a lot about how to help him feel comfortable. I had given less thought to being looked at myself.

When I sat beside him again, he touched my hip, then the line of my thigh. He took his time, and I let him, though I still wanted to find something to say.

I kissed him instead. He lay back, drawing me with him, and turned his face when I kissed beneath his ear. His arm came around my back.

“Hyeon.”

“Yes?”

“Can I show you something I like?”

“Of course.”

He looked pleased when I told him what I wanted.

“Show me where.”

I could do that. I guided him, and he settled between my legs, looking up at me once before lowering his mouth.

His first touch was careful. I put my hand in his hair, and when he tried again, my breath caught.

“Like that?”

“Yes.”

He watched my face when I spoke. I let my fingers rest against his head without guiding him. When he changed what he was doing, I caught his shoulder.

“Hyeon.”

He looked up.

“Can we… stop there?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No. Quite the opposite.”

His mouth curved.

“You liked it.”

“Very much.”

“Good.”

He looked pleased with himself. When I drew him towards me, he came readily, kissing me before I had finished reaching for him.

“Your turn,” I said.

I kissed his throat and chest. He drew me nearer by the shoulders, then moved beneath me when I reached his stomach.

“Is this all right?”

“Yes.”

I continued, and he closed his eyes. When I asked him to turn over, he took the extra pillow and settled against it. I kissed the base of his spine, then lower. He drew a sharp breath and gripped the sheet.

“Jiwoo.”

I paused.

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No.”

He looked back at me.

“I would like you to keep going.”

I did. He shifted towards me, and when I drew away, he reached back for my hand.

“More.”

I kissed his shoulder.

“We can take our time.”

“I know. I am asking.”

I smiled against his skin. He had understood me. I could stop explaining for a moment.

“All right.”

I reached for the lubricant. He watched me open it, then settled against the pillow again.

“Tell me if something doesn’t feel right.”

“I will.”

I began carefully. He was quiet at first, then turned his head towards me.

“It feels strange.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No. Just wait a moment.”

I kept still while he took a breath and adjusted the pillow beneath him. Then he reached for my wrist.

“Now.”

I continued slowly, stopping whenever he asked. After a while, he moved towards my hand instead of away from it.

“Is that better?”

“Yes.”

He looked back at me.

“I think I am beginning to understand.”

I kissed his shoulder. He laughed a little, then turned onto his back and held out his hand.

“I want to see you.”

I came nearer. He touched my face before drawing me down to kiss him.

“Are you still nervous?” he asked.

“A little.”

I was glad he had asked. It let me say it without finding a way to begin.

“So am I,” he said.

“Do you want to wait?”

He shook his head.

“I want you here.”

I kissed him again. When I moved between his legs, he brought one arm around my back.

“If you need me to stop, tell me.”

“I will.”

He held my gaze.

“And you will tell me too?”

“Yes.”

I moved slowly. At the first resistance, I stopped and waited while he drew a breath.

“Stay there,” he said.

I did. His hand moved over my shoulder, then settled against my neck. After a moment, he nodded.

“All right.”

I went carefully, keeping close enough for him to touch my face. When we were together, I rested my forehead against his.

“Jiwoo.”

“Mhm?”

He kissed me. For a little while, we stayed where we were. Then he moved beneath me and brought me closer.

“Like that?”

“Yes.”

I followed his movement. He found a rhythm with me, his fingers at the back of my neck. When I slowed, he kissed my cheek and drew me nearer again. I could hear him breathing beside my ear.

“There,” he said.

I kissed him and stayed close. His arms tightened around me, and when he reached between us, I followed the pace he wanted.

Afterwards, I rested against him, still trying to catch my breath. His hand settled at the back of my head.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Yes.” He laughed quietly.

“What?”

“I think I understand what they were arguing about.”

I began laughing too, and he held me while I tried to stop.

He kissed my forehead. I eased away to take the towel from the chair. I cleaned us both before lying beside him.

He rested one hand against my chest.

For a while, neither of us spoke. I could feel his breathing becoming steadier beneath my arm.

“Are you comfortable?”

He shifted nearer.

“I am very comfortable.”

I kissed him.

“Would you like some water?”

“Yes, please.”

When I returned with water, Hyeon had put the pillows together. I set the glasses beside the bed and lay beside him.

He drew me close, then began smiling.

“I would like that again. This way.”

“So would I.”

“Are you happy?”

“Very.”

“So am I.”

He drank some water, then settled beside me again.

“Are you hungry?” I asked. “We still have dinner.”

“A little. We can eat in a while.”

I rested my head beside his on the pillow. He looked towards the novel by the lamp.

“I still want to know where the sisters go.”

I reached towards the book, but his arm tightened around me.

“After dinner,” he said. “And bring my book too.”

I put my hand over his. He turned it beneath mine and held on.

Hyeon had emptied his drawer onto the bed. I stopped in the doorway with the laundry basket.

“Are you looking for something?”

“Room.”

“There was room when I put them in.”

“You put them in very firmly.”

The jumper I had folded was too thick to sit beneath the shirts. He folded it differently and put it back.

“Now there is room.”

“For more clothes?”

“For these clothes, without having to pull everything out when I want one.”

He handed me the green shirt and followed me to the washing machine. I showed him the setting and detergent drawer. He read the time on the display.

He pressed the button. As the water began running, he turned to kiss me.

“There. Now we can go.”

I followed him out.

The museum job posting I had opened before breakfast was still on the screen. Hyeon read the first few lines.

“At another museum?”

“Yes. Hyejin dismissed me the morning after the first attempt. While you were with Subin.”

He sat down.

“Because you had brought the goreum home?”

“She’d told me to leave it there.”

“I thought you had been called away to answer questions.”

“I’d already given her my key when I came back to you.”

He put his hand over mine. There had been several chances to tell him since we came home. Each time, I had wanted a little longer with whatever we were doing.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I know you liked it there.”

Checking the requirements had been easier than imagining a workroom where nobody knew me.

“I miss having something to finish. Knowing what I was going to look at next. And seeing Subin every day.”

“You would tell me about the papers when you came home.”

I looked down at our hands.

“I wanted you home with me.”

“I am glad you kept trying to reach me,” he said. “I would like you to find somewhere you enjoy.”

We went through the posting together. They wanted experience with collection records and source research, a statement and an application form. Hyeon pointed to the first two requirements.

“You have done these things.”

I read them again, then opened the application form. I could begin the statement that afternoon.

Before that, I needed to know how long I could manage without work. I opened my banking app and wrote down the rent, bills, food and travel costs. I showed Hyeon what I had in the account and told him about my savings.

There was enough for the immediate expenses. I would have to be more careful while I looked for work, but writing the costs down made them easier to consider.

Hyeon turned the paper towards himself.

“You can cook. We should do that more often.”

I told him about the stew my mother had taught me. He asked what went into it, then went to see what we already had while I began a shopping list.

Seoyeon messaged to ask whether we felt like watching the film that evening. Hyeon agreed at once, and I invited them here for dinner. She offered to bring something to share; the others could come too.

“We should make enough,” Hyeon said.

He sat beside me and wrote the ingredients as I named them, then added detergent when I remembered how little was left. Before putting down the pen, he looked back at the expenses.

“I would like to know what we can spend on books before I choose another.”

I added a line beneath the regular costs, and we worked out what we could leave for that.

He put the shopping list beside my keys. I left the expenses on the table, where we could both find them again.

While Hyeon found his jacket, I wrote to Mr. Yi to ask whether we could visit the following day. Then we went out for the ingredients.

At the supermarket, Hyeon took the basket while I checked the list. He compared two packets of mushrooms.

“There are more in that one.”

“We don’t need that many.”

“Would we use them tomorrow?”

“Possibly.”

He showed me the prices.

“Then this is better.”

I gave him the larger packet. We added pork, eggs and detergent, then paid.

Outside, he took the heavier bag and gave me the one with the tofu.

“You can tell me what to do with these.”

“The mushrooms?”

“Yes.”

“Wash them. Cut them.”

“I think I can manage that.”

At home, we hung the laundry together. Hyeon moved one of my shirts to make room for the green one.

I let him.

My mother had sent a message while we were at the supermarket, asking how the collection was going.

I took my phone to the window and called.

“Jiwoo? Have you eaten?”

“Not yet.”

“I’ve made more stew. Do you want me to put some aside?”

“Thank you. Mum, I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t work at the museum anymore.”

“Your contract ended?”

“No. I was dismissed.”

For a moment, I could hear only something running in her kitchen. She turned it off.

“Dismissed? What happened?”

“I kept taking a garment tie home. Hyejin had told me to leave it at the museum.”

“To work on it?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“I thought it would help someone.”

“Help them with what?”

I had been ready to tell her what I had done. I had not found an ordinary explanation for needing an old garment tie in my apartment.

“I can’t explain it properly yet.”

“Jiwoo, that doesn’t sound like you.”

I looked towards the kitchen. Hyeon had taken the mushrooms to the sink. He lowered the running water until I could hear her more easily.

I would have to tell her about him before I could explain the goreum. We had not discussed telling her anything.

“I don’t understand any of this,” she said.

“I know. I wanted you to know about the job. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner.”

“When did it happen?”

“A few days ago.”

“And you’ve been at home?”

“Yes.”

She took a breath.

“Have you applied anywhere?”

“I’ve found a position I could apply for. I’m working on it.”

“Have you sent anything?”

“Not yet.”

She asked about the rent and my savings. I told her there was enough for the immediate expenses, and that I would have to be more careful while I looked for work.

“You can ask us for help,” she said.

“I will if I need to.”

“Before you’ve used everything.”

“All right.”

“What does the new position involve?”

I told her about the records work and the statement they wanted. She asked whether Hyunwoo could read my application.

“I need to finish it first.”

“Then finish it. You can send it to him afterwards.”

“I’ll ask him.”

After a moment, she returned to the garment.

“You’re sure there wasn’t some misunderstanding about what you were allowed to do?”

“No. There wasn’t.”

“I would have thought that before I thought you’d just taken it.”

“I know.”

She was quiet for a while.

“Shall I tell your father?”

“Yes, please. I’ll speak to him.”

“He’ll want to understand too.”

“I know.”

Before we said goodbye, she asked whether I still wanted the stew.

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll freeze some. Let me know when you can come.”

“I will.”

When the call ended, I stayed by the window with the phone in my hand.

Hyeon had put the mushrooms aside.

“How was it?”

“She doesn’t understand why I did it. She keeps thinking there must have been a mistake.”

“Will you tell her?”

“I’d like to. I need to think about how.”

He nodded, then asked where we kept the smaller pan.

I put the phone down and went to help him with lunch.

CHAPTER 39

After lunch, I returned to the application. Hyeon sat opposite me with his new book.

My CV needed updated employment dates. The description beneath them had been written while I still expected another contract: entering records, helping with photographs. I had made the work sound small.

I added the source research and the work matching donation lists to objects.

When I showed Hyeon, he asked about one of the lines.

“Did you like doing that?”

“Yes.”

I told him about finding the name of a woman whose box had been described only as belonging to someone’s grandmother. Her name was in the donation papers. I had wanted something better to put in the record.

“You should tell them that.”

“I could use it as an example.”

“Then use it.”

He returned to his book while I wrote the paragraph.

The application also asked why my previous employment had ended. I read the question twice. Across the table, Hyeon turned a page.

I left that part for later and saved the files.

Eunjae had written to ask whether we were all right. Subin had told him about Hyeon’s return.

I wrote that Hyeon was well and thanked him for the care he had taken with the pieces. Then I added that I still wished he had warned me before we left on Friday.

I read the message twice. I sent it with that sentence still there.

“Finished?” Hyeon asked.

“For now.”

“Come here, then.”

I went around the table. He drew me down to kiss me.

“Was that why you wanted me to finish?”

“One reason.”

“What’s the other?”

“I want to ask you about this story.”

I brought my chair beside his, and we read until it was time to begin cooking.

Hyeon had cut the mushrooms by the time Seoyeon arrived. He thanked her for remembering the film and asked whether the sister who wanted to sell was the older one. She wouldn’t tell him before we watched it.

Subin came with Doyun, bringing grapes. Hyeon embraced her at the door, then took the grapes to the kitchen. She stayed beside me.

“Hyejin spoke to me this morning,” she said. “I told her I’d brought you and Ms. Seo in. I’m still on the collection, but I’ve got a write-up. For now, someone has to be with me when I handle the originals.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I knew she’d said no when I called you.”

She set her bag beside the door and looked towards the kitchen.

“He looks well.”

Then she went to join him.

Minjae arrived last with potato pancakes. Hyeon moved a cushion for him where he could see the television.

We ate while Seoyeon and Doyun prepared the film. Hyeon told Subin about the bookshop, then served her more stew. I had forgotten how much I liked cooking for people. When he offered to refill my bowl, I handed it to him.

The older sister wanted to keep the guesthouse. In the opening scene, she was repairing a door while the younger stood beside her car, her bags still inside.

Minjae thought she should help with the door. Hyeon was watching what happened to the bags. The older sister carried them into a room and handed her a list of bookings, though the younger had work in another city and had only come for a visit.

As the sisters began arguing about the guesthouse, Minjae urged them to keep it. Subin pointed out the repairs it needed, and Doyun wanted to know how much the roof would cost. Seoyeon paused the film while they discussed whether the sisters could borrow the money.

“I would like them to keep it,” Hyeon said. “But she cannot make her sister stay and work there simply because she has stayed.”

He looked towards the screen. The older sister had kept the guesthouse running for years, but still refused to show her sister the accounts.

Seoyeon started the film again.

Hyeon settled beside me and kept my hand between both of his while we watched.

By the end, the sisters had agreed to keep the guesthouse and close it temporarily for repairs. The older would oversee the work, while the younger returned to her job in another city, promising to visit when it reopened.

In the final scene, the older sister stood in a room cleared for renovations, deciding where to put the bed.

“They didn’t sell it,” Minjae said.

“They did not make her stay either,” Hyeon answered.

Over grapes, they argued about which sister had apologized first. Doyun came with me to the kitchen, carrying the empty bowls. While he put away the leftovers, I filled the water jug.

Hyeon was laughing in the other room. I listened before taking the water back.

Before they left, Seoyeon promised to send us the name of the other film she had mentioned so we could choose a day.

Once the door was closed, Hyeon joined me at the sink. I washed the remaining bowls while he dried them.

Mr. Yi had replied. One o’clock the following day would suit them. I confirmed the visit, and we decided to take a small box of sweets.

“I would like to thank them properly,” Hyeon said. “And ask how they found the certificate. What is Mrs. Yi like?”

I told him how she had remembered the papers and gone to find them. He listened while drying the last bowl.

In the bedroom, he held the jumper against himself, then laid it beside the dark trousers. I picked up my phone to check the route.

“You can do that in the morning,” he said. “Come and sit with me.”

I left my phone on the desk and joined him on the bed. He brought his arm around my shoulders.

“Was that enough for today?”

I thought about the paragraph I had finished and the expenses still on the table. There was more to do. I knew where to begin tomorrow.

“Yes.”

He kissed my cheek. I turned towards him and kissed him properly.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I put my arms around him and stayed close.

Hyeon was ready in his jumper and dark trousers, his hair drawn back, when I finished checking the bus route. He straightened my collar and kissed me.

I brought copies of the family record and letters. He chose the pages about his father and sister, then his mother’s letter. The certificate and older packing note stayed in the cabinet.

We bought sweets on the way. He chose the smaller box after asking how many pieces were inside.

On the bus, he rested it on his knees. I held the folder between us.

“Were you very frightened when you first went?”

“Yes. I thought they’d tell me I’d misunderstood everything. Or that I should leave.”

I looked down at the papers.

“I didn’t know how much to tell them about us. Mrs. Yi asked whether I was your lover, and I said yes.”

His hand came over mine on the folder.

“I am glad you told her.”

“She asked what they could do to help.”

“I would like to thank her for that too.”

We reached the building a little before one. Mr. Yi opened the door, his hand remaining on it for a moment as he looked towards Hyeon.

“Yi Hyeon,” Hyeon said, bowing. “Thank you for receiving us.”

Mrs. Yi was waiting inside. She accepted the sweets with both hands, her eyes staying on his face before she passed the box to her nephew.

“Come in. You must both be hungry.”

Over tea, Hyeon thanked her for finding the papers and asked about the father and brother who had kept them. I had spent the journey considering which questions he might want me to answer. Now he was leaning towards her, attentive and quite at ease.

There were four places at the dining table. I had looked at that chair when I could not hear Hyeon, wanting to tell him about the invitation. Now he was moving his bowl nearer to make room for the soup.

Mrs. Yi had remembered the pepper. Hyeon stirred a little through his soup, then tried the beef while she told him about her brother’s books. By the time we finished eating, he had asked to see them.

She brought out several after lunch and showed him the notes between their pages. Then she opened her brother’s list, and I put our copies beside it.

“My father told us the things belonged to someone who had not come home,” she said. “I thought he meant you had died away from home. He never said that, though.”

Hyeon’s eyes stayed on her.

“I did not know anyone would still be waiting for me to come home.”

“We were told to keep your things,” Mrs. Yi said. “We kept them.”

“Thank you.”

He brought the family record forward. Mr. Yi showed him where his branch descended from Yi Gyeom’s brother. Hyeon turned to the entries for Okjeong’s family and began telling them about her.

Mrs. Yi followed the names of her children while he spoke.

“I wonder what she told them about me,” he said.

She looked at the entry again. There was nothing on that page that could answer him.

I put my hand beside his. He took it, keeping his other hand on the paper.

After a while, he brought out his mother's letter and asked whether they had found anything about her later life. Neither could tell him what had become of her after the letters.

Hyeon returned to the letter. I still wanted there to be another page after this one.

"I would have liked to know whether she ever stopped waiting."

He moved nearer until our shoulders touched.

Mrs. Yi let us sit with the pages. Her nephew closed the list without moving the copies Hyeon was reading. When he was ready, I held the folder while he gathered the letter beneath the family record and put them inside.

Mrs. Yi brought tea and opened the sweets. Hyeon asked about the additions in her handwriting on the list.

"My brother would ask me to check something, then want to show me what he had found," she said. "We usually took longer than we intended."

When I first came, she had asked what he was like. Now he was asking why they had changed a description, and she was reopening the list to show him.

Mr. Yi waited until she had finished before asking about my search for work. I told him about the application.

"Send me your CV and a short account of the sort of position you're seeking," he said. "I would like to write you a recommendation. I know someone at another museum here in Seoul. I'll ask whether they have a suitable opening."

I put down my cup.

“You know why I was dismissed.”

“Yes. I can speak about the work you’ve shown us. You knew these papers well enough to help us find what we had overlooked. My father would have appreciated the care you took with his notes.”

“Thank you. I would be grateful.”

For a little while, I let myself think about having papers to work through in another room, and someone asking what I had found.

Before we left, Hyeon invited them to eat with us. Mrs. Yi accepted, and we agreed to choose a day.

Outside, he took my hand as we walked towards the bus stop.

“Next time I would like to tell her more about Okjeong,” he said. “I kept thinking of things she used to say.”

He kept his arm around me until the bus came.

At home, Hyeon read beside me while I checked my CV and sent it with the short account Mr. Yi had requested.

When I closed the laptop, he put his arm around my shoulders and began telling me which dishes from lunch he wanted us to learn to make.

CHAPTER 40

Minjae messaged to ask when he could come for dinner the following week.

“Yes,” Hyeon said, reading over my shoulder.

“Which day?”

“Ask which day suits him.”

I began typing. Hyeon put his hand against my wrist.

“And whether the others can come.”

“There was going to be another sentence.”

“You had already begun.”

He smiled and let me finish. When I sent it, he sat opposite me.

“I would like a phone.”

“So you can tell Minjae when to come?”

“So he can ask me himself. And Subin could write to me.” He looked at my phone on the table. “When she sends something, I would like it to come to me.”

We visited a shop near the station that afternoon. Hyeon compared two inexpensive handsets, decided either would do what he needed, and asked the employee about registering a number. She requested his identification.

“I have none,” he said.

She explained that they could not activate a number in his name without verifying his identity. Hyeon thanked her. Outside, he looked back through the window.

“I thought choosing the machine would be difficult.”

“I thought we might find an option.”

“So did I.” He took my hand. “I would still like one.”

“We should ask someone who knows how to begin.”

“Could we ask Mr. Yi?”

I called that evening. Mr. Yi listened, then offered to arrange a consultation with someone who handled family-registration cases. When Hyeon took the phone, he asked whether he could speak to her himself.

“Of course,” Mr. Yi said.

Two days later, we met him and Mrs. Yi at their apartment. A writing pad lay beside the tea. Ms. Han could see us the following week, and the family wanted to pay for the first appointment.

“We should discuss what you can tell her,” Mr. Yi said.

He suggested that someone raised in an isolated household might have no formal birth or school records. An orphan, perhaps, whose birth had never been registered.

Hyeon put down his cup.

“An orphan.”

Mr. Yi waited.

“I know my parents are gone. But I had parents. My father made sure I was taught. My mother knew where all my things belonged.” He looked at the pad. “I do not want it to sound as though nobody wanted me.”

“Let’s take her the papers we have,” I said.

Mr. Yi set aside his pen.

“I’m sorry, Hyeon. I was trying to make it easier.”

“I would like her to know I studied,” Hyeon said. “I would not like to suggest I can barely read.”

Mrs. Yi smiled. “Nobody here would suggest that.”

“I studied a great deal.”

“I've seen your notes,” I said.

He looked pleased, then touched the pad again.

“I understand why we cannot tell her everything. I would still like you to remember the rest.”

“I will.”

“Their names are in the papers,” Mrs. Yi said. “You may tell us as much about them as you wish.”

“I would like to.”

Ms. Han’s office was above a pharmacy. She asked Hyeon to write his name. He added 李玹　beneath 이현　without being asked.

She wanted to know his age and where he had grown up.

“With my parents,” he said. “I was taught at home. Afterwards, I studied from books.”

She read through the copies of the family records before looking up at him.

“I’ll need time to look into this.”

“What should I prepare first?”

“Write down what you’ve told me. I’d like to read it in your own words.”

Before we left, he said he wanted to read anything submitted in his name.

“Of course,” she said.

At home, I typed his account. Hyeon read it beside his handwritten pages and corrected a sentence about his studies. When we had sent it to Ms. Han, he set the papers beside the family record.

“Those names are still mine,” he said.

“I know.”

He gathered the pages, taking care to leave his mother's letter on top.

That evening, Hyeon sat beside me with his story collection closed.

“I thought I was prepared to say it,” he said. “Hearing myself tell her was different.”

“About your parents?”

“Yes.” He looked down at the cover. “My father let me hold one of his books when I was little. I kept trying to turn the page before he had finished. My mother brought us something to drink and asked why we had been reading the same line so long.”

“Were you?”

“I wanted to know it properly before we went on.”

I smiled. He put his hand over mine.

“There are quite a lot of things like that I have not told you.”

“I'd like to hear them.”

“Good. It may take some time.”

He opened the collection at his marked page, then looked at my phone.

“I still intend to send you messages when I have one.”

“I'll probably be sitting beside you.”

“Then I can see you read them.”

“What would you send?”

He took the small pad from the table, wrote a line and handed me the torn page.

I want you.

I looked up. He was watching my face.

“There,” he said. “That is the part I would like to see.”

I began smiling. He held out his hand.

“Come here.”

I set the page beside my phone and moved nearer. He drew me into his arms and kissed me.

Our friends came that weekend. Hyeon cooked most of the meal, asking me to taste the stew once and refusing to let me adjust it again. Subin wanted to know how he'd prepared the mushrooms. Minjae asked too, after finding none left.

“You should have arrived earlier,” Hyeon told him.

“I arrived at the time you invited me.”

“Then we should make more next time.”

There was no doubt in his voice that there would be a next time. Later, when Seoyeon was describing a shop she was helping redesign, Hyeon drew a question about the doorway on the back of our shopping list. She turned the paper towards herself and began drawing with him.

The morning after our friends came for dinner, Mr. Yi sent me a job posting at a privately run museum and a copy of the recommendation he'd written. He described the work I'd done with his family's papers: tracing sources, comparing conflicting descriptions, and returning to an earlier record when a name didn't fit.

I read the last paragraph twice.

“He has described you well,” Hyeon said.

“I hope they agree.”

“You can tell them about the box.”

The example about Han Sunok was still in my statement. I revised the statement and filled in the application, including the question I'd been avoiding.

I had been dismissed after repeatedly removing collection material without authorisation.

Hyeon read the line while I checked the attachments. I sent the application before I could begin rewriting the explanation into something easier to look at.

A week later, I was invited for an interview.

Ms. Park asked about the box and the sources I'd used. I found myself explaining why identifying its owner hadn't established its date. We discussed household papers, old inventories and what to do when two records disagreed.

Then the man from administration turned a page.

“You removed collection material without permission?”

“Yes. More than once.”

“Why?”

I had expected the question, but answering took longer than I wanted.

“To help someone,” I said. “It was personal.”

Ms. Park asked whether Mr. Yi had known about the dismissal when he wrote his recommendation.

“He did. I told him.”

“He confirmed that when I spoke to him. He was very firm about your abilities.” She folded her hands. “Would you make the same decision again?”

I looked at the application between us.

“I would still try to help him. But I should have asked for help myself instead of deciding what I could take. I knew the procedures. I chose to ignore them.”

“And here?”

“I would bring the problem to you. I couldn't ask you to trust me with the material if I made the same decision.”

She nodded and explained who would authorise access to the objects. I knew the procedure. Saying aloud what I should have done was unpleasant.

The man from administration made a note.

“When could you start?” Ms. Park asked.

I gave her a date. She wrote it beside my name.

When I came home, Hyeon closed his book.

“Did you like the people?”

“Yes.”

“And the work?”

I told him about the household papers and the references that needed matching. He asked two questions about them before I remembered he had wanted to know how the interview went.

“Then they must know you are interested,” he said.

“They may know more than they wanted to.”

He laughed and reached for my hand.

Eight days later, the museum offered me the position. Hyeon was beside the kitchen counter when I took the call. I nodded to him, and he came to embrace me before I'd put the phone down. I still had a measuring cup in my hand; he removed it and set it beside the rice.

“Are you happy?”

“Relieved.” I thought of the rent, the savings I'd been counting and a Monday when I would have somewhere to go. “And pleased.”

My first weeks were spent learning a different system of files. A household account book had loose receipts recorded under separate numbers; an intake photograph showed where they had originally been kept. I found three matching entries and prepared cross-references for Ms. Park to review. The writer's name remained uncertain, so I left that question open.

Subin messaged to ask whether anybody had replaced her.

Someone lent me a pen, I wrote. *A promising beginning.*

She replied that she was still using one I'd left behind.

At home, Hyeon wanted to know which page I would examine next. I told him, and he listened while we ate.

During my second week, Seoyeon asked Hyeon to meet her at a café. I would still be working. He had answered from my phone the evening before and looked up the route on my laptop. That afternoon, he went without me.

A photograph arrived during my break: two cups, a notebook full of sketches, and Hyeon smiling at something beyond the camera.

He has questions about the entrance again, Seoyeon had written.

I enlarged the picture. His hair had come loose beside his cheek. I wrote that I hoped she'd brought enough paper.

She replied that he was also very interested in the cake.

He came home with cake for me and a detailed opinion about the position of a shop's counter. I hadn't been there to introduce him, explain a word, or answer for him. He had been very glad of Seoyeon's company. He said she'd shown him two possible layouts and asked which would make more sense for people carrying bags.

“What did you say?”

“That I would like to see the shop before I decided. She said that was sensible, but that she had been hoping I would choose one.”

I laughed. He took another piece of cake.

He had put out two forks. Seoyeon had suggested bringing some home for both of us, but he had told her I would probably share anyway.

I reached for his free hand.

“I liked hearing about your afternoon.”

“I wanted to tell you. And I liked hearing about the book.”

The account book would be on my desk in the morning. There was someone I could ask if the reference still wouldn't fit, and something to bring home and tell him afterwards.

“I missed it more than I thought.”

“I know. I am glad you have it again.”

He leaned over and kissed me.

“I have been wanting to do that since you came home.”

“You could have interrupted.”

“I wanted to hear the rest.”

He kissed me again. I put my arm around him.

I asked my parents and Hyunwoo to dinner that Sunday. Hyeon wanted to meet them, but first we discussed what to say.

“We met through the family collection,” I said. “You study old texts. Ms. Han is helping with your records.”

“All true.”

“Not the whole truth.”

“She does not have to know everything at dinner. But tell her I am your boyfriend.”

“I was going to.”

“Are you worried?”

“I haven't brought someone I love to meet them before.”

His hand came over mine beside the bowl.

“I would like to meet them.”

When I called, my mother asked whether the person I wanted her to meet was a friend.

“My boyfriend.”

“Oh.”

I waited.

“Then tell me whether I should bring something for both of you.”

When I said we were cooking, she offered fruit instead.

On Sunday, Hyeon found me clearing the table for the second time.

“Were those books in the way?”

“They might have been.”

“They were on the shelf.”

I returned the one in my hand.

Hyeon made the fish. One piece broke when he turned it, and he insisted there was no reason to hide it at the back of the plate if it was properly cooked.

My father arrived carrying a folding chair. My mother followed with mandarins and two containers.

“You said fruit,” I told her.

“There's fruit in the bag.”

She asked Hyeon whether he had eaten before I could tell her dinner was almost ready.

“Not yet,” he said. “We have been cooking.”

“Good. Then I won't spoil it.”

By the time we sat to eat, they were arguing about the ending. My mother wanted to know which dishes Hyeon had made. He pointed out the fish and greens.

“He taught me.”

“I taught both of them,” she said. “Hyunwoo still calls to ask how much water to put in the stew.”

“The answer changes according to what I've put in it.”

“Which you could tell me before I answer.”

My father served the rice. Then my mother asked for my good news. I told them about the new museum.

“You've already started?” she said.

“I wanted to tell you in person.”

“He has quite a lot to tell me when he comes home,” Hyeon said.

“Always about the same book?”

“Sometimes the same page.”

She asked about the dismissal. I told her the interviewers knew and that Mr. Yi had recommended me despite it.

“Were you the person Jiwoo was helping?” she asked Hyeon.

“Yes. Some of the collection belonged to my family. He helped me understand what happened.”

“I was the one who decided to remove the material,” I said.

“I know what you told me,” she answered.

She looked back at Hyeon.

“Did it help?”

“Very much.”

She reached for the fish.

“This is yours?”

“Yes. That piece became two.”

“It tastes good.”

He served her more.

My father asked about his studies and whether he liked living in Seoul. He drew a route to a riverside path I used to walk with him, then showed Hyeon where it turned beyond the bridge.

“Have you been that way?” Hyeon asked me.

“Years ago. I'd forgotten the turning.”

“Then we could go together.”

My mother offered to send him recipes and asked whether he was getting enough to eat. I had expected to spend the evening defending myself. Instead, they let me talk about the records I hoped to examine on Monday.

When my parents were ready to leave, my mother put a container in the fridge and invited Hyeon to visit. My father left the folding chair for next time.

Hyunwoo stayed to wash the bowls. Afterwards, I asked him to sit down again.

“There's something else,” I said. “About where Hyeon came from.”

“The last night I remember,” Hyeon said, “was in the twenty-second year of King Seongjong's reign.”

“1491,” I said.

Hyunwoo looked between us. “Start again.”

Hyeon described preparing for an examination, going to bed and awakening beside his clothes in the museum. I showed my brother the family record and his mother's letter. He read the account of the woman who had been asked to protect Hyeon, then studied the name in the margin.

“This proves someone called Yi Hyeon lived then. How do I know it's him?”

“The papers can't prove that to you,” I said.

He looked up, surprised that I wasn't arguing.

“But you believe him?”

“Yes.”

“And you knew all this when you asked me to look at your application?”

“Yes.”

He put the family record down, carefully enough that it stayed in line with the letter.

“You told Mum you were helping someone. You told me the same thing. You let me ask about the wording as though that was all there was.”

“I wanted your help with the application,” I said. “And I didn't know how to tell you the rest.”

“You could have said there was something you couldn't explain.”

“I know.”

Hyeon waited beside me. I was grateful he hadn't begun defending me.

My brother looked at his hands. “All right. Tell me what happened at the museum.”

I told him how Hyeon had first been visible without being fully physical, how Subin had met him, and why I had brought the goreum home. I described the day Hyejin dismissed me and the room where Hyeon had vanished.

“Were you there?” Hyunwoo asked him.

“I could see Jiwoo for a time. Then I could not hear him. Afterwards, I remember nothing until he called me again.”

“And Subin saw you like that?”

“Yes. She helped us find the other paper.”

Hyunwoo leaned back. “I was going to ask whether you could show me something. But I don't suppose you can disappear for me.”

“I would rather not,” Hyeon said.

“So would I,” I said.

My brother gave a short laugh, then stopped. He looked at Hyeon's mother's letter once more.

“Can you go back?”

“No,” Hyeon said. “The time passed. I did not know it was passing. It did.”

Hyunwoo read the line about the books on Hyeon's table, the ones his mother had left untouched while she waited for news.

“Does she ever find out?”

“We haven't found anything later,” I said.

He nodded slowly. I could see him trying to put the years in order.

“I don't know how to understand this.”

“Neither did I,” I said.

“You've had rather more practice.”

He asked if he could speak to Doyun another day, after he'd had time to think. Then he opened the paperback he'd brought, turning it over before offering it to Hyeon.

“I'm not saying I've worked any of this out,” he said. “But you wanted to read this, didn't you?”

“I did.”

“You can borrow it. Just don't tell me the ending before I've finished.”

“You can tell me what you think yourself,” my brother added. “Jiwoo's very slow at passing on messages.”

“I have noticed.”

Hyeon opened to the contents and asked why my brother had suspected the lawyer in the previous novel.

“He was unpleasant,” Hyunwoo said.

“So was the daughter.”

My brother sat forward. He had apparently found an argument he understood.

Before leaving, my brother said he wouldn't tell our parents, but that we would need to think about what to say if they asked more questions.

“Let me know if you need something,” he said.

“I will.”

“I meant both of you.”

Hyeon thanked him. At the door, Hyunwoo put his arm around my shoulders.

“You could have called.”

“I know.”

He held me a moment longer before leaving.

Hyeon sat beside me among the things my family had left: fruit on the counter, stew in the fridge and my father's drawing beneath our shopping list.

“I wish they could have met mine,” he said.

“So do I.”

“My father would have asked about your work. My mother would have brought something else to eat before you had finished explaining.”

I could imagine that much. The rest I would have to hear from him.

A few evenings later, Hyeon interrupted a story he was trying to tell me.

“I would like to write one,” he said. “Something longer. About home.”

“The house?”

“The people. My parents, Okjeong, Gyeongmun. He used to come to study and ask one question, then ask six more and borrow something before he left.”

I found him a pen. He began with an afternoon when Okjeong wanted sheets of paper he'd promised her. He and Gyeongmun had used the good ones while arguing over a passage.

“Did she forgive you?” I asked.

“After my mother made me fetch more paper.”

He wrote for a while, crossed out a phrase and began again.

“I want them doing things,” he said. “Not just their names on a page. There were so many afternoons like that.”

By Thursday he had four pages. He asked me to read the first two. One sentence had been crossed out twice, with the new version written in the margin.

The story began with Gyeongmun arriving to study. By the time Okjeong appeared in the doorway, the two of them had covered the good paper with arguments. Gyeongmun offered her the clean back of a page. She asked whether she should include his opinions in a letter to her friend.

“I like your sister,” I said.

“You have scarcely met her.”

“She makes a good impression.”

He laughed, then took the page back and showed me a correction farther down.

“I made my mother sound too patient here.”

In the first version, Jeonghwa waited for the boys to finish explaining why they needed the paper. In the second, she asked Gyeongmun whether writing everything down had helped him understand it, then told him to explain it again without using another sheet.

“Did she really say that?”

“Very nearly. I changed the words because I remembered the way she would speak when she thought we ought to know better.”

He read the sentence aloud and considered it.

“She would turn back after leaving a room if she had something else to tell us,” he said. “You could think you had finished answering her, and then she would be at the doorway again.”

“Usually to tell you what?”

“Something I had hoped she had not noticed.”

He touched the margin.

“I had not thought about the way she put her hand against the door for a long time. I remembered it while I was writing.”

I looked at the sentence again. The correction was small, but he had stopped reading in order to make it.

“Do you like writing it?”

“Very much. I could hear them arguing. I kept thinking what my father would say when he came home.”

“Will he come home in the next part?”

“Yes. Gyeongmun will want to explain everything to him again, rather more politely.”

“And your father?”

“He will ask Gyeongmun to let me speak.” Hyeon smiled, then looked at the page. “I would have liked to show it to my father.”

I put my hand over his.

“He would take a long time reading,” Hyeon said. “Then he would ask about one word. I would argue if I had chosen it for a reason.”

“You usually have.”

“I would like to be told to let him finish reading.”

After a while, he lifted the first sheet.

“I have made myself rather reasonable here.”

“Would Gyeongmun agree?”

“He would object before reading it.”

“Then your father would ask him to be quiet too.”

Hyeon laughed against my shoulder.

“He often did.”

He set the paper beside me while he searched for his pen. There was a little ink along the side of his hand.

“I could spend some time with them this way,” he said.

I remembered the paper basket I'd been working on before the Yi donation came to my table. I'd wanted one complete sentence from the book cut into its cords. Now Hyeon had begun filling pages with voices no surviving inventory could have given me.

I held the first sheet while he changed the last line. When he was satisfied, he took it back and went on writing.

EPILOGUE

The following Sunday, Mr. Yi and Mrs. Yi came for dinner. Afterwards, Hyeon brought out the original examination certificate and older packing note. He had a good photograph of the certificate now, and copies of the letters.

Before he closed the cover, he looked again at the writing.

“My father read this twice when I brought it home,” he said. “I thought he was looking for something I had written badly.”

“Was he?” Mrs. Yi asked.

“No. He was pleased. I had been waiting to tell him about the examination. My mother wanted me to eat first.”

He smiled at the memory, then settled the cover over the paper.

“I would like you to keep them for me,” he told Mrs. Yi.

“Of course.”

Mr. Yi promised that Hyeon could see the originals whenever he wished. The papers went home with them, and the pages about Okjeong and his mother's letter stayed in our drawer. Hyeon watched Mr. Yi settle the supports into their case, then asked where they would be kept. He listened carefully to the answer.

“You may ask for them whenever you wish,” Mr. Yi said.

“I know. That is why I would like you to have them.”

Mrs. Yi also asked about his writing.

“A story about the household I remember,” he said. “My family, and my friend Gyeongmun. He is causing trouble in the first pages.”

“With help,” I said.

Hyeon looked at me.

Mrs. Yi laughed. He told her about Okjeong and the paper, and promised to let her read the story when there was more. She asked whether his sister had been fond of books.

“She wanted to know what they taught before deciding whether to read them,” he said.

“So do I,” she answered.

After they left, Hyeon returned to his pages. He was writing the part where his father came home, and Gyeongmun had apparently stayed for dinner without being invited.

“My mother will have counted him already,” Hyeon said.

I sat beside him with my own book.

Months passed. At the museum, I became familiar with the records and the people who could help when a reference was missing. One morning, Ms. Jang asked for a folder, and I knew where it was.

In the autumn, Subin brought my notebook back. Hyejin had copied the pages she needed for the file. On the inside cover, in her handwriting, was the date it had been returned.

Mr. Yi’s meeting had taken longer than he expected. The museum agreed that the family could arrange to view the pieces, and that Hyeon could come with them.

Ms. Seo came to dinner in the spring. She asked Hyeon whether he was sleeping. He told her yes, and later than he should.

At home, Hyeon's notebooks multiplied. He changed the opening twice and continued to send Ms. Han the information she requested. We had separate folders for her letters and the documents we'd sent. My attempts to tidy before he had finished reading had not been well received.

The laboratory results supported shared paternal ancestry with Mr. Yi. They could not establish Hyeon's identity or nationality by themselves. Ms. Han helped him prepare an application for formal nationality determination. Registration would have to wait for that decision.

Some answers took weeks; others led to further requests. Hyeon read every statement in his name before it was submitted.

When the letters confirming his nationality and registration arrived, he read them himself. By August, his identification card was ready.

We took a number at the resident service centre. Hyeon opened the folder twice while we waited. When the employee called him, he went to the counter himself. She handed him the card.

He held it with both hands. His name was printed beside the photograph: 이현, 李玹. I had known those characters before I'd ever heard his voice.

He examined both sides, thanked her and put it in his wallet. Near the door, he took it out again.

“I would like to look at it once more.”

“We can.”

He studied the photograph.

“It makes me look stern.”

“You were trying very hard to follow the instructions.”

“I was listening to you.”

“The photographer wanted you to look at her.”

He smiled and put the card away.

“Now can we go to the phone shop?”

The handset he had chosen months earlier was still on display. This time, when the employee asked for identification, Hyeon had his wallet

open before she'd finished speaking. He read the terms, chose the plan we'd discussed and signed for a number of his own.

At a café, he asked me for my number. He entered it, then told me to wait. My phone lit up.

I love you.

I looked at him. He was watching for my reaction.

“I love you too.”

“You can write it back.”

“You heard me.”

“I would still like to have it.”

I sent the reply. He smiled and saved the messages before writing to Subin, Minjae and the others. Minjae immediately asked whether he could now get an answer without waiting for me to pass the phone across the table.

“He's been waiting to say that,” I told Hyeon.

“Then he should have asked sooner.”

He wrote to Mr. Yi too, telling him the card had arrived and giving him his new number. Mrs. Yi wanted it, so he sent it to her separately.

At home, he put the phone beside his notebook and went back to his writing. I got my own book.

“Shall we go out later?” I asked.

“For dinner?”

“If you'd like. We could walk first.”

“Let me finish this paragraph.”

I opened my book. His phone sounded, but he kept the pen in his hand until he had finished the sentence.

When he put it down, I had reached the middle of a chapter. He waited beside me, with one hand resting on my knee. I read to the next break, closed the book and turned towards him.

He leaned in to kiss me.

“Now?” he asked.

“Now.”

We left the books beside each other and went to find our shoes.

Outside, the pavement was still warm. We passed the shop where we bought rice and the bus stop I used for work. Hyeon had his phone in one pocket and his wallet in the other. He took my hand at the crossing and kept it afterwards.

He suggested the noodle restaurant and told me what he wanted to try this time. Seoyeon’s firm had paid him for his notes on two old entrances, and he had already decided that dinner was his. We passed the turning that would have taken us there directly.

“This way?” he asked.

“If you'd like a longer walk.”

“I would.”

A bicycle passed us near a low wall. Hyeon moved closer, then stayed there while its rider went ahead.

“We can come back this way afterwards too,” he said.

“You haven't seen the rest of it yet.”

“I can change my mind.”

I laughed. He shifted his fingers between mine. Above the wall, branches leaned towards the pavement.

The mugunghwa were in bloom.

GLOSSARY

Byeolsi (별시) — A special civil service examination held during the Joseon dynasty outside the regular examination schedule.

Chohon (초혼) — A traditional ritual calling a deceased person's spirit back, often involving the person's clothing and the calling of their name. Also known as *gobok*.

Eonmun (언문) — A historical name for the Korean alphabet, now known as *Hangeul*. The term was commonly used during the Joseon dynasty.

Gobok (고복) — A traditional ritual of calling back a deceased person's spirit, typically by calling their name while holding an article of their clothing. See *Chohon*.

Goreum (고름) — A fabric ribbon or tie traditionally used to fasten Korean clothing, particularly the *jeogori*, or upper garment.

Gut (굿) — A traditional Korean shamanic ritual performed by a mudang to communicate with spirits and deities, seek blessings, avert misfortune, or guide the souls of the deceased.

Gyeonghuigung (경희궁) — One of Seoul's five major Joseon royal palaces, constructed in the early seventeenth century.

Hanbok (한복) — Traditional Korean clothing, characterized by garments such as the *jeogori* (upper garment), *chima* (skirt), and *baji* (trousers).

Hangeul (한글) — The Korean alphabet, developed under King Sejong and promulgated in 1446. Originally known as *Hunminjeongeum*.

Hanja (한자) — Chinese characters used historically in Korean writing, particularly in scholarship, government records, and personal names.

Hanseongbu (한성부) — The administrative designation for Korea's capital, present-day Seoul, during the Joseon dynasty.

Inwangsan (인왕산) — A mountain in central Seoul, historically associated with the city's defensive walls and known for its exposed granite formations.

Jeongnang (정랑) — An official title within the Joseon government's central ministries, generally corresponding to the senior fifth rank.

Jinsa (진사) — A scholar who passed the literary composition branch of the lower civil service examination during the Joseon dynasty.

Jiseung (지승) — A traditional Korean craft in which strips of paper are twisted into cords and woven into objects such as baskets and containers.

Joseon (조선) — The Korean dynasty that ruled from 1392 to 1897, during which Confucian scholarship and civil service institutions played central roles in government and society.

Mudang (무당) — A traditional Korean shaman who serves as an intermediary between humans and spirits, performing rituals known as *gut* to communicate with deities, seek guidance, and address misfortune.

Mugunghwa (무궁화) — The Rose of Sharon (*Hibiscus syriacus*), the national flower of South Korea.

Seonggyungwan (성균관) — The principal state-sponsored Confucian educational institution of the Joseon dynasty, where scholars pursued advanced study and prepared for civil service examinations.

Seongjong (성종) — King of Joseon from 1469 to 1494, whose reign forms the historical setting of Hyeon's original life.

Yukjo (육조) — The Six Ministries of the Joseon central government. Yukjo Street was the principal thoroughfare associated with their government offices in the capital.

WANT FREE BOOKS?



Sign up for my newsletter and get every future book I publish for FREE, delivered straight to your inbox.

New to my books? Start the 70/90 series for free with *Septante, Nonante*: download here!

Find me on Goodreads here <3