

CHAPTER 13

THE NIGHT WAS LONG and filled with the sounds of strangers' breath instead of sleep. The next morning, women bustled around their beds, combing their hair and dampening their faces. Those whose bunks were near mine moved their belongings to other beds until my bed became its own island surrounded by empty mattresses.

After breakfast, guards escorted us back down the short covered walkway to our sleeping quarters. We filed into the front sitting room. I noticed that Snow Lily lay back down on her bed. Several women pulled out their sewing and gathered in one corner. Another group started to unpack a set of dominoes. No one invited me to join them, their silent disapproval filling the air around me.

"They keep us in here all day. We only go outside once a week," said a gentle voice.

I looked up to see Spring Blossom, the only one who had not laughed when I said I was going to be American. "Well, that is good."

"Why is that good?" she asked.

"I would hate for the women to miss any display of my faults — my temper, my clumsiness."

"Oh," Spring Blossom giggled. "They would be sorry to miss that. Do you also have warts?" she asked. "They would love it if you had a few warts!"

I smiled. "Of course. Someone as unpleasant as I am is sure to have warts."

The laughter tumbled from deep inside our bellies. The other women scowled at us, but it had been so long since I had laughed that it only made me laugh more.

"I admired what you did at dinner," Spring Blossom said. "The way you stood up for yourself."

I let out a snort. A few women turned to stare again.

"You have spirit, fire in your belly. I wish I had more of that."

"No, you don't," I said.

The woman I spilled rice on came out of the bathroom. "Spring Blossom, come show us the slippers you were sewing yesterday. We want to admire them."

I hid my face so no one would see the hurt that would come when Spring Blossom chose the society of all the other women over mine, as she should. How did women always know what to take from you — the thing that would leave the largest hole?

Spring Blossom hesitated. "In a moment, Auntie."

The woman huffed off to join the others.

I turned back to Spring Blossom. "That is very fortunate, your marriage."

"Yes. That is what everyone tells me." A flicker of unease swept across her face. It was quick, like when the wind blows ripples on the surface of the water.

"Do you know the man you are going to marry?"

She shook her head and looked at her lap.

I tried again, making my voice cheerful. "I am sure you exchanged pictures or gifts?"

This time her head did not even move. I could practically hear Nushi scolding me for my boldness. When the silence began to hang heavy between us, I searched for a way to continue the conversation without letting any more stupidity spill from my mouth. Spring Blossom shifted her weight. I was sure she was leaving to join the other women. "Would you like to hear a story?"

She lifted her head.

"Nushi, our servant, always told the Cowherd and Weaver Girl story when I was sad."

Her eyes found mine again. "Yes, please."

Spring Blossom was a better audience than me. She did not interrupt. She let her gaze slip past the walls that surrounded us, tracing the outline of the holes in Cowherd's coat, finding the rainbow of robes in the grayness of the sitting room. Her hand clutched at her chest when Cowherd and Weaver Girl were separated. Her cheeks dripped with tears when they were reunited.

When I had finished, Spring Blossom looked at me. "I wish love was that beautiful."

"You don't think it is?"

"Only in stories."

"Then where do the stories come from?" I asked.

"Deep inside of us, where we must bury what we desire most in order to protect it," she said softly, tugging at the ends of her sleeves.

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I did not cry the second night. Or the third, or any of the days that followed. No one could tell me when my interrogation might happen. Most women had been there for weeks, some for months, though Snow Lily had been there longest of all. Some were waiting for relatives to come and be interviewed to prove their stories were true. Others were trapped in cycles of questionings, denials, and appeals. Every night, I tried to recite in my mind all the facts I could think of about the Sung family to keep them fresh and real for me.

The women had created a routine out of the limited activities available. In the morning, we watched the ferry arrive, carrying the guards and translators and sometimes new residents — Chinese, Japanese, Russians, even Europeans, all wearing the same lost faces. The people with pale skin would leave on the ferry that evening or maybe the next day, but the Chinese stayed locked in the barracks.

In the afternoon, some women sewed, others chatted. Hours were lost staring at the walls, listening jealously to the birds outside our window. Tedious chores grew heavy with importance because we had nothing else to do. We washed the same clothes to wear day after day, drying them on lines hung between the beds, then wrapping ourselves in the stiff, stale odor of the fabric.

Whatever we did, guards shadowed every movement. They lurked in the entryway of the barracks. They poked through the deliveries that some women received from the mainland. Matrons sat inside the barracks during the day to watch over us. The guards' and matrons' comings and going startled us back into the reality that we were prisoners, and the oppression of their stares made every move, every word, an effort.

Eventually, the day would end, and then, finally, we could escape into sleep for a few hours.

This routine left the women plenty of time to scrutinize one another's every word and move, and to battle over subtle shifts of power — all that this world of four walls offered. There were the petty, predictable arguments over missing belongings. When the women weren't maneuvering to get the chair with the cushion, they wore through all the wrongs they had suffered at the hands of the Americans, each trying to outdo the others, almost relishing every barbaric act. It pulled them apart and drew them together in a messy, frail patchwork of uncertainty.

I chose to go to the English classes the Americans offered. The woman did not teach the colorful words Mrs. Ying had used to feed my curiosity. Instead we learned polite phrases favored by Americans — “Good morning,” “Nice to meet you,” “How are you?” The last one we were taught to answer properly — “I am fine” or “good” or “quite good.” What honest answer could you give when you were trapped in a prison on an island?

I spent part of my time letting my mind wander to Sterling Promise — his words, his looks. I wasn't sure why I was so willing to let him linger in my mind, other than an urgent need for distraction. I also thought about Father. Now that the novelty of travel had faded, it struck me how difficult this journey must have been for him — away from his land, his home, all the things that he had wrapped into the layers of his skin, and pretending to be the brother who had abandoned him.

One morning a new energy hummed in the air. The other women did not get out their sewing. Instead they sat, staring at the

door. "What is happening?" I asked Spring Blossom, who was looking over her belongings, spreading them out across her cot.

"We are going to visit our trunks. They let us get the things we need once a week."

"Mostly, you just check what was stolen from you this week," another woman declared.

An older woman clicked her tongue and shook her head. "Nothing was stolen. You wasted your soap."

"I brought plenty of soap," the woman replied and stomped away.

The first woman turned back to me. "You can get anything you need."

"I'm not sure I need anything," I said.

"Of course you want to see your things. And you can go outside," Spring Blossom said.

I looked at Snow Lily, who was curled up on her bed as usual. At mealtimes, the women tried to get her to eat, but she did not seem to hear them. Sometimes her gaze would snap back to the present, sweep over the walls around her, then drift far away again.

"She won't come," Spring Blossom said. "She hasn't visited her trunk for months."

The door clicked open and the chatter stopped. A guard motioned for us to follow. Outside, the sun on my face breathed life into me. It was not as bright as it had been on the day we arrived. Instead, a layer of gray fog hung in the air just above the tops of the trees. The air was fresh with a hint of the salt and water that surrounded us. It clung to our faces, damp and cool. For a moment, I was not a prisoner. My heart opened a little with the old feeling of possibility.

Our belongings were stored down near the docks. The guards escorted us with their customary aloof distrust. But they didn't prevent us from walking slowly, savoring the sun and sky. When we slipped inside the shack that waited at the end, my eyes had to adjust to the dim light. Only then did I see the trunks and bags stacked around the room.

I soon found my trunk. It looked like it had come from another world. When I lifted its lid, smells of the past wrapped around me — the ginger that always covered Nushi's fingers, the river, the sprouts of rice in the fields. The trunk was not the chaotic mess I'd accused Nushi of packing. She had stacked our belongings in neat layers. On top sat soaps, cloth, and other necessities. When I dug a little, I found some of my clothes, a blanket that I used on cold nights. Below that lay the half-finished embroidery that I had abandoned several years ago. I ran my fingers over each item — my rice bowl, my combs, my slippers from the New Year, my favorite quilt, the one that was my mother's. Almost at the bottom was a box of writing I had done when Father thought that calligraphy might teach my wild mind order and discipline.

Something was odd about what Nushi had packed. I dug deeper, pushing past piles of my tunics, pants, and skirts. I tipped the lid down to make sure that I was looking at the right trunk. What was Nushi thinking? She had only packed my belongings, nothing of Father's.

Then I spotted something unfamiliar — a handkerchief, bright red and embroidered with mallard ducks. It was the kind of handkerchief a woman exchanged with her husband at her wedding, to symbolize her wish to stay together forever, like two mallard ducks mating for life. I pulled at the corner and laid it across my hands.

"A wedding handkerchief," said one of the women, trotting up next to me on her bound doll-feet. "You said you were not getting married."

"I'm not," I said.

"It is beautifully made," the woman said, taking the handkerchief and holding it to the slant of light cutting through the stirred-up dust. "Did you do this?"

"No."

"I did not think so." She held it out to me, and I let the silk tumble back into my hands.

I folded the handkerchief carefully and tucked it into the waist of my pants. I was glad that I would not be here when Father opened the trunk for the first time.