JUN DO'S mother was a singer. That was all Jun Do's father, the Orphan Master, would say about her. The Orphan Master kept a photograph of a woman in his small room at Long Tomorrows. She was quite lovely—eyes large and sideways looking, lips pursed with an unspoken word. Since beautiful women in the provinces get shipped to Pyongyang, that's certainly what had happened to his mother. The real proof of this was the Orphan Master himself. At night, he'd drink, and from the barracks, the orphans would hear him weeping and lamenting, striking half-heard bargains with the woman in the photograph. Only Jun Do was allowed to comfort him, to finally take the bottle from his hands.

As the oldest boy at Long Tomorrows, Jun Do had responsibilities—portioning the food, assigning bunks, renaming the new boys from the list of the 114 Grand Martyrs of the Revolution. Even so, the Orphan Master was serious about showing no favoritism to his son, the only boy at Long Tomorrows who wasn't an orphan. When the rabbit warren was dirty, it was Jun Do who spent the night locked in it. When boys wet their bunks, it was Jun Do who chipped the frozen piss off the floor. Jun Do didn't brag to the other boys that he was the son of the Orphan Master, rather than some kid dropped off by parents on their way to a 9-27 camp. If someone wanted to figure it out, it was pretty obvious—Jun Do had been there before all of them, and the reason he'd never been adopted was because his father would never let someone take his only son. And it made sense that after his mother was stolen to Pyongyang, his father had applied for the one position that would allow him to both earn a living and watch over his son.

The surest evidence that the woman in the photo was Jun Do's mother was the unrelenting way the Orphan Master singled him out for punishment. It could only mean that in Jun Do's face, the Orphan Master saw the woman in the picture, a daily reminder of the eternal hurt he felt from

losing her. Only a father in that kind of pain could take a boy's shoes in winter. Only a true father, flesh and bone, could burn a son with the smoking end of a coal shovel.

Occasionally, a factory would adopt a group of kids, and in the spring, men with Chinese accents would come to make their picks. Other than that, anyone who could feed the boys and provide a bottle for the Orphan Master could have them for the day. In summer they filled sandbags and in winter they used metal bars to break sheets of ice from the docks. On the machining floors, for bowls of cold *chap chai,* they would shovel the coils of oily metal that sprayed from the industrial lathes. The railyard fed them best, though, spicy *yukejang.* One time, shoveling out boxcars, they swept up a powder that looked like salt. It wasn't until they started sweating that they turned red, their hands and faces, their teeth. The train had been filled with chemicals for the paint factory. For weeks, they were red.

And then in the year Juche 85, the floods came. Three weeks of rain, yet the loudspeakers said nothing of terraces collapsing, earth dams giving, villages cascading into one another. The Army was busy trying to save the Sungli 58 factory from the rising water, so the Long Tomorrows boys were given ropes and long-handled gaffs to try to snare people from the Chongjin River before they were washed into the harbor. The water was a roil of timber, petroleum tanks, and latrine barrels. A tractor tire turned in the water, a Soviet refrigerator. They heard the deep booms of boxcars tumbling along the river bottom. The canopy of a troop carrier spun past, a screaming family clinging to it. Then a young woman rose from the water, mouth wide but silent, and the orphan called Bo Song gaffed her arm—right away he was jerked into the current. Bo Song had come to the orphanage a frail boy, and when they discovered he had no hearing, Jun Do gave him the name Un Bo Song, after the 37th Martyr of the Revolution, who'd famously put mud in his ears so he couldn't hear the bullets as he charged the Japanese.

Still, the boys shouted "Bo Song, Bo Song" as they ran the riverbanks, racing beside the patch of river where Bo Song should have been. They ran past the outfall pipes of the Unification Steelworks and along the muddy berms of the Ryongsong's leach ponds, but Bo Song was never seen again. The boys stopped at the harbor, its dark waters ropy with corpses, thousands of them in the throes of the waves, looking like curds of sticky millet that start to flop and toss when the pan heats.

Though they didn't know it, this was the beginning of the famine—first went the power, then the train service. When the shock-work whistles stopped blowing, Jun Do knew it was bad. One day the fishing fleet went out and didn't come back. With winter came blackfinger and the old people went to sleep. These were just the first months, long before the bark-eaters. The loudspeakers called the famine an Arduous March, but that voice was piped in from Pyongyang. Jun Do had never heard anyone in Chongjin call it that. What was happening to them didn't need a name—it was everything, every fingernail you chewed and swallowed, every lift of an eyelid, every trip to the latrine where you tried to shit out wads of balled sawdust. When all hope was gone, the Orphan Master burned the bunks, the boys sleeping around a pot stove that glowed on their last night. In the morning, he flagged down a Soviet Tsir, the military truck they called "the crow" because of its black canvas canopy on the back. There were only a dozen boys left, a perfect fit in the back of the crow. All orphans are destined for the Army eventually. But this was how Jun Do, at fourteen, became a tunnel soldier, trained in the art of zero-light combat.

And that's where Officer So found him, eight years later. The old man actually came underground to get a look at Jun Do, who'd spent an overnighter with his team inside a tunnel that went ten kilometers under the DMZ, almost to the suburbs of Seoul. When exiting a tunnel, they'd always walk out backward, to let their eyes adjust, and he almost ran into Officer So, whose shoulders and big rib cage spoke of a person who'd come of age in the good times, before the Chollima campaigns.

"Are you Pak Jun Do?" he asked.

When Jun Do turned, a circle of light glowed behind the man's close-cropped white hair. The skin on his face was darker than his scalp or jaw, making it look like the man had just shaved off a beard and thick, wild hair. "That's me," Jun Do said.

"That's a Martyr's name," Officer So said. "Is this an orphan detail?"

Jun Do nodded his head. "It is," he said. "But I'm not an orphan."

Officer So's eyes fell upon the red taekwondo badge on Jun Do's chest.

"Fair enough," Officer So said and tossed him a sack.

In it were blue jeans, a yellow shirt with a polo pony, and shoes called Nikes that Jun Do recognized from long ago, when the orphanage was used to welcome ferry-loads of Koreans who had been lured back from

Japan with promises of Party jobs and apartments in Pyongyang. The orphans would wave welcome banners and sing Party songs so that the Japanese Koreans would descend the gangway, despite the horrible state of Chongjin and the crows that were waiting to transport them all to *kwan li so* labor camps. It was like yesterday, watching those perfect boys with their new sneakers, finally coming home.

Jun Do held up the yellow shirt. "What am I supposed to do with this?" he asked.

"It's your new uniform," Officer So said. "You don't get seasick, do you?"

*

He didn't. They took a train to the eastern port of Cholhwang, where Officer So commandeered a fishing boat, the crew so frightened of their military guests that they wore their Kim Il Sung pins all the way across the sea to the coast of Japan. Upon the water, Jun Do saw small fish with wings and late morning fog so thick it took the words from your mouth. There were no loudspeakers blaring all day, and all the fishermen had portraits of their wives tattooed on their chests. The sea was spontaneous in a way he'd never seen before—it kept your body uncertain as to how you'd lean next, and yet you could become comfortable with that. The wind in the rigging seemed in communication with the waves shouldering the hull, and lying atop the wheelhouse under the stars at night, it seemed to Jun Do that this was a place a man could close his eyes and exhale.

Officer So had also brought along a man named Gil as their translator. Gil read Japanese novels on the deck and listened to headphones attached to a small cassette player. Only once did Jun Do try to speak to Gil, approaching him to ask what he was listening to. But before Jun Do could open his mouth, Gil stopped the player and said the word "Opera."

They were going to get someone—someone on a beach—and bring that someone home with them. That's all Officer So would say about their trip.

On the second day, darkness falling, they could see the distant lights of a town, but the Captain would take the boat no closer.

"This is Japan," he said. "I don't have charts for these waters."

"I'll tell you how close we get," Officer So said to the Captain, and with a fisherman sounding for the bottom, they made for the shore.

Jun Do got dressed, cinching the belt to keep the stiff jeans on.

"Are these the clothes of the last guy you kidnapped?" Jun Do asked.

Officer So said, "I haven't kidnapped anyone in years."

Jun Do felt his face muscles tighten, a sense of dread running through him.

"Relax," Officer So said. "I've done this a hundred times."

"Seriously?"

"Well, twenty-seven times."

Officer So had brought a little skiff along, and when they were close to the shore, he directed the fishermen to lower it. To the west, the sun was setting over North Korea, and it was cooling now, the wind shifting direction. The skiff was tiny, Jun Do thought, barely big enough for one person, let alone three and a struggling kidnap victim. With a pair of binoculars and a thermos, Officer So climbed down into the skiff. Gil followed. When Jun Do took his place next to Gil, black water lapped over the sides, and right away his shoes soaked through. He debated revealing that he couldn't swim.

Gil kept trying to get Jun Do to repeat phrases in Japanese. Good evening—*Konban wa.* Excuse me, I am lost—*Chotto sumimasen, michi ni mayoimashita.* Can you help me find my cat?—*Watashi no neko ga maigo ni narimashita?*

Officer So pointed their nose toward shore, the old man pushing the outboard motor, a tired Soviet Vpresna, way too hard. Turning north and running with the coast, the boat would lean shoreward as a swell lifted, then rock back toward open water as the wave set it down again.

Gil took the binoculars, but instead of training them on the beach, he studied the tall buildings, the way the downtown neon came to life.

"I tell you," Gil said. "There was no Arduous March in this place."

Jun Do and Officer So exchanged a look.

Officer So said to Gil, "Tell him what 'how are you' was again."

"*Ogenki desu ka,*" Gil said.

"*Ogenki desu ka,*" Jun Do repeated. "*Ogenki desu ka.*"

"Say it like 'How are you, my fellow citizen?' *Ogenki desu ka,*" Officer So said. "Not like how are you, I'm about to pluck you off this fucking beach."

Jun Do asked, "Is that what you call it, plucking?"

"A long time ago, that's what we called it." He put on a fake smile. "Just say it nice."

Jun Do said, "Why not send Gil? He's the one who speaks Japanese."

Officer So returned his eyes to the water. "You know why you're here."

Gil asked, "Why's he here?"

Officer So said, "Because he fights in the dark."

Gil turned to Jun Do. "You mean that's what you do, that's your career?" he asked.

"I lead an incursion team," Jun Do said. "Mostly we run in the dark, but yeah, there's fighting, too."

Gil said, "I thought my job was fucked up."

"What was your job?" Jun Do asked.

"Before I went to language school?" Gil asked. "Land mines."

"What, like defusing them?"

"I wish," Gil said.

They closed within a couple hundred meters of shore, then trolled along the beaches of Kagoshima Prefecture. The more the light faded, the more intricately Jun Do could see it reflected in the architecture of each wave that rolled them.

Gil lifted his hand. "There," he said. "There's somebody on the beach. A woman."

Officer So backed off the throttle and took the field glasses. He held them steady and fine-tuned them, his bushy white eyebrows lifting and falling as he focused. "No," he said, handing the binoculars back to Gil. "Look closer, it's two women. They're walking together."

Jun Do said, "I thought you were looking for a guy?"

"It doesn't matter," the old man said. "As long as the person's alone."

"What, we're supposed to grab just anybody?"

Officer So didn't answer. For a while, there was nothing but the sound of the Vpresna. Then Officer So said, "In my time, we had a whole division, a budget. I'm talking about a speedboat, a tranquilizing gun. We'd surveil, infiltrate, cherry-pick. We didn't pluck family types, and we never took children. I retired with a perfect record. Now look at me. I must be the only one left. I'll bet I'm the only one they could find who remembers this business."

Gil fixed on something on the beach. He wiped the lenses of the binoculars, but really it was too dark to see anything. He handed them to Jun Do. "What do you make out?" he asked.

When Jun Do lifted the binoculars, he could barely discern a male fig-

ure moving along the beach, near the water—he was just a lighter blur against a darker blur, really. Then some motion caught Jun Do's eye. An animal was racing down the beach toward the man—a dog it must've been, but it was big, the size of a wolf. The man did something and the dog ran away.

Jun Do turned to Officer So. "There's a man. He's got a dog with him."

Officer So sat up and put a hand on the outboard engine. "Is he alone?"

Jun Do nodded.

"Is the dog an akita?"

Jun Do didn't know his breeds. Once a week, the orphans had cleaned out a local dog farm. Dogs were filthy animals that would lunge for you at any opportunity—you could see where they'd attacked the posts of their pens, chewing through the wood with their fangs. That's all Jun Do needed to know about dogs.

Officer So said, "As long as the thing wags its tail. That's all you got to worry about."

Gil said, "The Japanese train their dogs to do little tricks. Say to the dog, Nice doggie, sit. *Yoshi yoshi. Osuwari kawaii desu ne.*"

Jun Do said, "Will you shut up with the Japanese?"

Jun Do wanted to ask if there was a plan, but Officer So simply turned them toward the shore. Back in Panmunjom, Jun Do was the leader of his tunnel squad, so he had a liquor ration and a weekly credit for one of the women. In three days, he had the quarterfinals of the KPA taekwondo tournament.

Jun Do's squad swept every tunnel under the DMZ once a month, and they worked without lights, which meant jogging for kilometers in complete darkness, using their red lights only when they reached a tunnel's end and needed to inspect its seals and trip wires. They worked as if they might encounter the South Koreans at any point, and except for the rainy season, when the tunnels were too muddy to use, they trained daily in zero-light hand to hand. It was said that the ROK soldiers had infrared and American night-vision goggles. The only weapon Jun Do's boys had was the dark.

When the waves got rough, and he felt panicky, Jun Do turned to Gil. "So what's this job that's worse than disarming land mines?"

"Mapping them," Gil said.

"What, with a sweeper?"

"Metal detectors don't work," Gil said. "The Americans use plastic mines now. We made maps of where they probably were, using psychology and terrain. When a path forces a step or tree roots direct your feet, that's where we assume a mine and mark it down. We'd spend all night in a minefield, risking our lives with every step, and for what? Come morning, the mines were still there, the enemy was still there."

Jun Do knew who got the worst jobs—tunnel recon, twelve-man submarines, mines, biochem—and he suddenly saw Gil differently. "So you're an orphan," he said.

Gil looked shocked. "Not at all. Are you?"

"No," Jun Do said. "Not me."

Jun Do's own unit was made up of orphans, though in Jun Do's case it was a mistake. The address on his KPA card had been Long Tomorrows, and that's what had condemned him. It was a glitch no one in North Korea seemed capable of fixing, and now, this was his fate. He'd spent his life with orphans, he understood their special plight, so he didn't hate them like most people did. He just wasn't one of them.

"And you're a translator now?" Jun Do asked him.

"You work the minefields long enough," Gil said, "and they reward you. They send you someplace cushy like language school."

Officer So laughed a bitter little laugh.

The white foam of the breakers was sweeping into the boat now.

"The shitty thing is," Gil said, "when I'm walking down the street, I'll think, *That's where I'd put a land mine.* Or I'll find myself not stepping on certain places, like door thresholds or in front of a urinal. I can't even go to a park anymore."

"A park?" Jun Do asked. He'd never seen a park.

"Enough," Officer So said. "It's time to get that language school a new Japanese teacher." He throttled back and the surf grew loud, the skiff turning sideways in the waves.

They could see the outline of a man on the beach watching them, but they were helpless now, just twenty meters from shore. When Jun Do felt the boat start to go over, he leaped out to steady it, and though it was only waist deep, he went down hard in the waves. The tide rolled him along the sandy bottom before he came up coughing.

The man on the beach didn't say anything. It was almost dark as Jun Do waded ashore.

Jun Do took a deep breath, then wiped the water from his hair.

"*Konban wa,*" he said to the stranger. "*Odenki kesu da.*"

"*Ogenki desu ka,*" Gil called from the boat.

"*Desu ka,*" Jun Do repeated.

The dog came running up with a yellow ball.

For a moment, the man didn't move. Then he took a step backward.

"Get him," Officer So shouted.

The man bolted, and Jun Do gave chase in wet jeans, his shoes caked with sand. The dog was big and white, bounding with excitement. The Japanese man ran straight down the beach, nearly invisible but for the dog moving from one side of him to the other. Jun Do ran for all he was worth. He focused only on the heartbeat-like thumps of feet padding ahead in the sand. Then he closed his eyes. In the tunnels, Jun Do had developed a sense of people he couldn't see. If they were out there, he could feel it, and if he could get within range, he could home in on them. His father, the Orphan Master, had always given him a sense that his mother was dead, but that wasn't true, she was alive and well, just out of range. And while he'd never heard news of what happened to the Orphan Master, Jun Do could feel that his father was no longer in this world. The key to fighting in the dark was no different: you had to perceive your opponent, sense him, and never use your imagination. The darkness inside your head is something your imagination fills with stories that have nothing to do with the real darkness around you.

From ahead came the body thud of someone falling in the dark, a sound Jun Do had heard a thousand times. Jun Do pulled up where the man was righting himself. His face was ghostly with a dusting of sand. They were huffing and puffing, their joined breath white in the dark.

The truth was that Jun Do never did that well in tournaments. When you fought in the dark, a jab only told your opponent where you were. In the dark, you had to punch as if you were punching through people. Maximum extension is what mattered—haymaker punches and great, whirling roundhouse kicks that took out whole swaths of space and were meant to cut people down. In a tournament, though, opponents could see moves like that coming from a mile away. They simply stepped aside. But a man on a beach at night, standing on the balls of his feet? Jun Do executed a spinning back kick to the head, and the stranger went down.

The dog was filled with energy—excitement perhaps, or frustration. It

pawed at the sand near the unconscious man, then dropped its ball. Jun Do wanted to throw the ball, but he didn't dare get near those teeth. Its tail, Jun Do suddenly realized, wasn't wagging. Jun Do saw a glint in the dark, the man's glasses, it turned out. He put them on, and the fuzzy glow above the dunes turned into crisp points of light in people's windows. Instead of huge housing blocks, the Japanese lived in smaller, individual-sized barracks.

Jun Do pocketed the glasses, then took up the man's ankles and began pulling from behind. The dog was growling and giving short, aggressive barks. When Jun Do looked over his shoulder, the dog was growling in the man's face and using its paws to scratch his cheeks and forehead. Jun Do lowered his head and pulled. The first day in a tunnel is no problem, but when you wake on the second day from the darkness of a dream into true darkness, that's when your eyes must open. If you keep your eyes closed, your mind will show you all kinds of crazy movies, like a dog attacking you from behind. But with your eyes open, all you had to face was the nothingness of what you were really doing.

When finally Jun Do found the boat in the dark, he let the dead weight fall into its aluminum cross members. The man opened his eyes once and rolled them around, but there was no comprehension.

"What did you do to his face?" Gil asked.

"Where were you?" Jun Do asked. "That guy was heavy."

"I'm just the translator," Gil said.

Officer So clapped Jun Do on the back. "Not bad for an orphan," he said.

Jun Do wheeled on him. "I'm not a fucking orphan," he said. "And who the hell are you, saying you've done this a hundred times. We come out here with no plan, just me running someone down? You didn't even get out of the boat."

"I had to see what you were made of," Officer So said. "Next time we'll use our brains."

"There won't be any next time," Jun Do said.

Gil and Jun Do spun the boat to face the waves. They got battered while Officer So pull-started the motor. When the four of them were in and headed toward open water, Officer So said, "Look, it gets easier. Just don't think about it. I was full of shit when I said I'd kidnapped twenty-seven people. I never kept count. As they come just forget about them, one

after another. Catch somebody with your hands, then let them go with your mind. Do the opposite of keeping count."

Even over the outboard, they could hear that dog on the beach. No matter how far out they got, its baying carried over the water, and Jun Do knew he'd hear that dog forever.

*

They stayed at a Songun base, not far from the port of Kinjye. It was surrounded by the earthen bunkers of surface-to-air missiles, and when the sun set, they could see the white rails of launchers glowing in the moonlight. Because they'd been to Japan now, they had to bunk apart from the regular KPA soldiers. The three were housed in the infirmary, a small room with six cots. The only sign it was an infirmary was a lone cabinet filled with blood-taking instruments and an old Chinese refrigerator with a red cross on its door.

They'd locked the Japanese man in one of the hot boxes in the drill yard, and Gil was out there now, practicing his Japanese through the slop hole in the door. Jun Do and Officer So leaned against the infirmary's window frame, sharing a cigarette as they watched Gil out there, sitting in the dirt, polishing his idioms with a man he'd helped kidnap. Officer So shook his head, like now he'd seen it all. There was one patient in the infirmary, a small soldier of about sixteen, bones knit from the famine. He lay on a cot, teeth chattering. Their cigarette smoke was giving him coughing fits. They moved his cot as far away as possible in the small room, but still he wouldn't shut up.

There was no doctor. The infirmary was just a place where sick soldiers were housed until it was clear they wouldn't recover. If the young soldier hadn't improved by morning, the MPs would hook up a blood line and drain four units from him. Jun Do had seen it before, and as far as he could tell, it was the best way to go. It only took a couple of minutes—first they got sleepy, then a little dreamy looking, and if there was a last little panic at the end, it didn't matter because they couldn't talk anymore, and finally, before lights out, they looked pleasantly confused, like a cricket with its feelers pulled off.

The camp generator shut down—slowly the lights dimmed, the fridge went quiet.

Officer So and Jun Do took to their cots.

There was a Japanese man. He took his dog for a walk. And then he was nowhere. For the people who knew him, he'd forever be nowhere. That's how Jun Do had thought of boys selected by the men with Chinese accents. They were here and then they were nowhere, taken like Bo Song to parts unknown. That's how he'd thought of most people—appearing in your life like foundlings on the doorstep, only to be swept away later as if by flood. But Bo Song hadn't gone nowhere—whether he sank down to the wolf eels or bloated and took the tide north to Vladivostok, he went somewhere. The Japanese man wasn't nowhere, either—he was in the hot box, right out there in the drill grounds. And Jun Do's mother, it now struck him—she was somewhere, at this very moment, in a certain apartment in the capital, perhaps, looking in a mirror, brushing her hair before bed.

For the first time in years, Jun Do closed his eyes and let himself recall her face. It was dangerous to dream up people like that. If you did, they'd soon be in the tunnel with you. That had happened many times when he remembered boys from Long Tomorrows. One slip and a boy was suddenly following you in the dark. He was saying things to you, asking why you weren't the one who succumbed to the cold, why you weren't the one who fell in the paint vat, and you'd get the feeling that at any moment, the toes of a front kick would cross your face.

But there she was, his mother. Lying there, listening to the shivering of the soldier, her voice came to him. "Arirang," she sang, her voice achy, at the edge of a whisper, coming from an unknown somewhere. Even those fucking orphans knew where their parents were.

Late in the night, Gil stumbled in. He opened the fridge, which was forbidden, and placed something inside. Then he flopped onto his cot. Gil slept with his arms and legs sprawled off the edges, and Jun Do could tell that as a child, Gil must've had a bed of his very own. In a moment, he was out.

Jun Do and Officer So stood in the dark and went to the fridge. When Officer So pulled its handle, it exhaled a faint, cool breath. In the back, behind stacks of square blood bags, Officer So fished out a half-full bottle of *shoju.* They closed the door quickly because the blood was bound for Pyongyang, and if it spoiled, there'd be hell to pay.

They took the bottle to the window. Far in the distance, dogs were barking in their warrens. On the horizon, above the SAM bunkers, there

was a glow in the sky, moonlight reflecting off the ocean. Behind them, Gil began gassing in his sleep.

Officer So drank. "I don't think old Gil's used to a diet of millet cakes and sorghum soup."

"Who the hell is he?" Jun Do asked.

"Forget about him," Officer So said. "I don't know why Pyongyang started this business up again after all these years, but hopefully we'll be rid of him in a week. One mission, and if everything goes right, we'll never see that guy again."

Jun Do took a drink—his stomach clutching at the fruit, the alcohol.

"What's the mission?" he asked.

"First, another practice run," Officer So said. "Then we're going after a special someone. The Tokyo Opera spends its summers in Niigata. There's a soprano. Her name is Rumina."

The next drink of *shoju* went down smooth. "Opera?" Jun Do asked.

Officer So shrugged. "Some bigshot in Pyongyang probably heard a bootleg and had to have her."

"Gil said he survived a land-mine tour," Jun Do said. "For that, they sent him to language school. Is it true—does it work like that, do you get rewarded?"

"We're stuck with Gil, okay? But you don't listen to him. You listen to me."

Jun Do was quiet.

"Why, you got your heart set on something?" Officer So asked. "You even know what you'd want as a reward?"

Jun Do shook his head.

"Then don't worry about it."

Officer So walked to the corner and leaned over the latrine bucket. He braced himself against the wall and strained for a long time. Nothing happened.

"I pulled off a miracle or two in my day," he said. "I got rewarded. Now look at me." He shook his head. "The reward you want is this: don't become me."

Jun Do stared out the window at the hot box. "What's going to happen to him?"

"The dog man?" Officer So asked. "There are probably a couple of Pubyok on the train from Pyongyang right now to get him."

"Yeah, but what's going to *happen* to him?"

Officer So tried one last push to get some urine out.

"Don't ask stupid questions," he said through his teeth.

Jun Do thought of his mother on a train to Pyongyang. "For your reward, could you ask for a person?"

"What, a woman?" Officer So shook his *umkyoung* in frustration. "Yeah, you could ask for that." He came back and drank the rest of the bottle, saving only a swish in the bottom. This he poured, a dribble at a time, over the dying soldier's lips. Officer So clapped him good-bye on the chest, then he stuffed the empty bottle in the crook of the boy's sweat-soaked arm.

*

They commandeered a new fishing boat, made another crossing. Over the Tsushima Basin, they could hear the powerful clicks, like punches to the chest, of sperm whales hunting below, and nearing the island of Dogo, granite spires rose sudden from the sea, white up top from bird guano and orange below from great gatherings of starfish. Jun Do stared up toward the island's north promontory, volcanic black, limned in dwarf spruce. This was a world wrought for its own sake, without message or point, a landscape that would make no testimony for one great leader over another.

There was a famous resort on this island, and Officer So thought they could catch a tourist alone on the beach. But when they reached the lee of the island, there was an empty boat on the water, a black Avon inflatable, six-man, with a fifty-horse Honda outboard. They took the skiff over to investigate. The Avon was abandoned, not a soul upon the waters. They climbed aboard, and Officer So started the Honda engine. He shut it down. He pulled the gas can out of the skiff, and together they rolled it in the water—it filled quickly, going down ass-first with the weight of the Vpresna.

"Now we're a proper team," Officer So said as they admired their new boat.

That's when the diver surfaced.

Lifting his mask, the diver showed a look of uncertain wonder to discover three men in his boat. But he handed up a sack of abalone and took Gil's hand to help him aboard. The diver was larger than them, muscular in a wetsuit.

Officer So spoke to Gil, "Tell him our boat was damaged, that it sank."

Gil spoke to the diver, who gestured wildly and laughed.

"I know your boat sank," Gil translated back. "It almost landed on my head."

Then the diver noticed the fishing vessel in the distance. He cocked his head at it.

Gil clapped the diver on the back and said something to him. The diver stared hard into Gil's eyes and then panicked. Abalone divers, it turned out, carried a special kind of knife on their ankles, and Jun Do was a long time in subduing him. Finally, Jun Do took the diver's back and began to squeeze, the water wringing from his wetsuit as the scissors choke sank in.

When the knife was flying, Gil had jumped overboard.

"What the fuck did you say to him?" Jun Do demanded.

"The truth," Gil said, treading water.

Officer So had caught a pretty good gash in the forearm. He closed his eyes at the pain of it. "More practice," is all he could say.

*

They put the diver in the fishing boat's hold and continued to the mainland. That night, offshore from the town of Fukura, they put the Avon in the water. Next to Fukura's long fishing pier, a summer amusement park had set up, with lanterns strung and old people singing karaoke on a public stage. Here Jun Do and Gil and Officer So hovered beyond the beach break, waiting for the neon piping on the roller coaster to go dark, for the monkeyish organ music of the midway to fall silent. Finally, a solitary figure stood at the end of the pier. When they saw the red of a cigarette, they knew it was a man. Officer So started the engine.

They motored in on idle, the pier towering as they came astern it. Where its pilings entered the heavy surf, there was chaos, with some waves leaping straight up and others deflecting out perpendicular to shore.

"Use your Japanese," Officer So told Gil. "Tell him you lost your puppy or something. Get close. Then—over the rail. It's a long fall, and the water's cold. When he comes up, he'll be fighting to get in the boat."

Gil stepped out when they reached the beach. "I've got it," he said. "This one's mine."

"Oh, no," Officer So said. "You both go."

"Seriously," Gil said. "I think I can handle it."

"Out," Officer So said to Jun Do. "And wear those damn glasses."

The two of them crossed the tide line and came to a small square. Here were benches and a little plaza, a shuttered tea stand. There seemed to be no statue, and they could not tell what the square glorified. The trees were full with plums, so ripe the skins broke and juice ran in their hands. It seemed impossible, a thing not to be trusted. A grubby man was sleeping on a bench, and they marveled at it, a person sleeping any place he wished.

Gil stared at all the town houses around them. They looked traditional, with dark beams and ceramic roofs, but you could tell they were brand new.

"I want to open all these doors," he said. "Sit in their chairs, listen to their music."

Jun Do stared at him.

"You know," Gil said. "Just to see."

The tunnels always ended with a ladder leading up to a rabbit hole. Jun Do's men would vie to be the ones to slip out and wander South Korea for a while. They'd come back with stories of machines that handed out money and people who picked up dog shit and put it in bags. Jun Do never looked. He knew the televisions were huge and there was all the rice you could eat. Yet he wanted no part of it—he was scared that if he saw it with his own eyes, his entire life would mean nothing. Stealing turnips from an old man who'd gone blind from hunger? That would have been for nothing. Sending another boy instead of himself to clean vats at the paint factory? For nothing.

Jun Do threw away his half-eaten plum. "I've had better," he said.

On the pier, they walked planking stained from years of bait fishing. Ahead, at the end, they could see a face, lit from the blue glow of a mobile phone.

"Just get him over the rail," Jun Do said.

Gil took a breath. "Over the rail," he repeated.

There were empty bottles on the pier, cigarette butts. Jun Do was walking calmly forward, and he could feel Gil trying to copy this beside him. From below came the throaty bubble of an outboard idling. The figure ahead stopped speaking on the phone.

"*Dare*?" a voice called to them. "*Dare nano*?"

"Don't answer," Jun Do whispered.

"It's a woman's voice," Gil said.

"Don't answer," Jun Do said.

The hood of a coat was pulled back to reveal a young woman's face.

"I'm not made for this," Gil said.

"Stick to the plan."

Their footsteps seemed impossibly loud. It struck Jun Do that one day men had come for his mother like this, that he was now one of those men.

Then they were upon her. She was small under the coat. She opened her mouth, as if to scream, and Jun Do saw she had fine metal work all along her teeth. They gripped her arms and muscled her up on the rail.

"*Zenzen oyogenai'n desu,*" she said, and though Jun Do could speak no Japanese, he knew it was a raw, imploring confession, like "I'm a virgin."

They threw her over the rail. She fell away silent, not a word or even the snatching of a breath. Jun Do saw something flash in her eyes, though—it wasn't fear or the senselessness of it. He could tell she was thinking of her parents and how they'd never know what became of her.

From below came a splash and the gunning of an outboard.

Jun Do couldn't shake that look in her eyes.

On the pier was her phone. He picked it up and put it to his ear. Gil tried to say something, but Jun Do silenced him. "Mayumi?" a woman's voice asked. "Mayumi?" Jun Do pushed some buttons to make it stop. When he leaned over the rail, the boat was rising and falling in the swells.

"Where is she?" Jun Do asked.

Officer So was staring into the water. "She went down," he said.

"What do you mean she went down?"

He lifted his hands. "She hit and then she was gone."

Jun Do turned to Gil. "What did she say?"

Gil said, "She said, *I can't swim.*"

"'I can't swim'?" Jun Do asked. "She said she couldn't swim and you didn't stop me?"

"Throwing her over, that was the plan. You said stick to it."

Jun Do looked into the black water again, deep here at the end of the pier. She was down there, that big coat like a sail in the current, her body rolling along the sandy floor.

The phone rang. It glowed blue and vibrated in Jun Do's hand. He and

Gil stared at it. Gil took the phone and listened, eyes wide. Jun Do could tell, even from here, that it was a woman's voice, a mother's. "Throw it away," Jun Do told him. "Just toss it."

Gil's eyes roamed as he listened. His hand was trembling. He nodded his head several times. When he said, "*Hai,*" Jun Do grabbed it. He jabbed his finger at the buttons. There, on its small screen, appeared a picture of a baby. He threw it into the sea.

Jun Do went to the rail. "How could you not keep count," he yelled down to Officer So. "How could you not keep count?"

*

That was the end of their practice. It was time to get the opera lady. Officer So was to cross the Sea of Japan on a fishing vessel, while Jun Do and Gil took the overnight ferry from Chongjin to Niigata. At midnight, with the singer in hand, they would meet Officer So on the beach. Simplicity, Officer So said, was the key to the plan.

Jun Do and Gil took the afternoon train north to Chongjin. At the station, families were sleeping under cargo platforms, waiting for darkness so they could make the journey to Sinuiju, which was just a swim across the Tumen River from China.

They made for the Port of Chongjin on foot, passing the Reunification Smelter, its great cranes rusted in place, the copper lines to its furnace long since pilfered for scrap. Apartment blocks stood empty, their ration outlet windows butcher-papered. There was no laundry hanging to dry, no onion smoke in the air. All the trees had been cut during the famine, and now, years later, the saplings were uniform in size, trunks ankle-thick, their clean stalks popping up in the oddest places—in rain barrels and storm drains, one tree bursting from an outhouse where a human skeleton had shit its indigestible seed.

Long Tomorrows, when they came to it, looked no bigger than the infirmary.

Jun Do shouldn't have pointed it out because Gil insisted they go in.

It was filled only with shadows. Everything had been stripped for fuel—even the doorframes had been burned. The roster of the 114 Grand Martyrs of the Revolution, painted on the wall, was the only thing left.

Gil didn't believe that Jun Do had named all the orphans.

"You really memorized all the Martyrs?" he asked. "What about number eleven?"

"That's Ha Shin," Jun Do said. "When he was captured, he cut out his own tongue so the Japanese could get no information from him. There was a boy here who wouldn't speak—I gave him that name."

Gil ran his finger down the list.

"Here you are," he said. "Martyr number seventy-six, Pak Jun Do. What's that guy's story?"

Jun Do touched the blackness on the floor where the stove had once been. "Even though he killed many Japanese soldiers," he said, "the revolutionaries in Pak Jun Do's unit didn't trust him because he was descended from an impure blood line. To prove his loyalty, he hanged himself."

Gil stared at him. "You gave yourself this name? Why?"

"He passed the ultimate loyalty test."

The Orphan Master's room, it turned out, was no bigger than a pallet. And of the portrait of the tormenting woman, Jun Do could find only a nail hole.

"Is this where you slept?" Gil asked. "In the Orphan Master's room?"

Jun Do showed him the nail hole. "Here's where the portrait of my mother hung."

Gil inspected it. "There was a nail here, all right," he said. "Tell me, if you lived with your father, how come you have an orphan's name?"

"He couldn't give me his name," Jun Do said, "or everyone would see the shame of how he was forced to raise his son. And he couldn't bear to give me another man's name, even a Martyr's. I had to do it."

Gil's expression was blank. "What about your mother?" he asked. "What was her name?"

They heard the horn of the *Mangyongbong-92* ferry in the distance.

Jun Do said, "Like putting a name to my problems would solve anything."

*

That night Jun Do stood in the dark stern of the ship, looking down into the turbulence of its wake. *Rumina,* he kept thinking. He didn't listen for her voice or let himself visualize her. He only wondered how she'd spend this last day if she knew he was coming.

It was late morning when they entered Bandai-jima Port—the customs houses displaying their international flags. Large shipping vessels, painted humanitarian blue, were being loaded with rice at their moorings. Jun Do and Gil had forged documents, and in polo shirts, jeans, and sneakers they descended the gangway into downtown Niigata. It was a Sunday.

Making their way to the auditorium, Jun Do saw a passenger jet crossing the sky, a big plume behind it. He gawked, neck craned—amazing. So amazing he decided to feign normalcy at everything, like the colored lights controlling the traffic or the way buses kneeled, oxenlike, to let old people board. Of course the parking meters could talk, and the doors of businesses opened as they passed. Of course there was no water barrel in the bathroom, no ladle.

The matinee was a medley of works the opera troupe would stage over the coming season, so all the singers took turns offering brief arias. Gil seemed to know the songs, humming along with them. Rumina—small, broad-shouldered—mounted the stage in a dress the color of graphite. Her eyes were dark under sharp bangs. Jun Do could tell she'd known sadness, yet she couldn't know that her greatest trials lay ahead, that this evening, when darkness fell, her life would become an opera, that Jun Do was the dark figure at the end of the first act who removes the heroine to a land of lament.

She sang in Italian and then German and then Japanese. When finally she sang in Korean, it came clear why Pyongyang had chosen her. The song was beautiful, her voice light now, singing of two lovers on a lake, and the song was not about the Dear Leader or defeating the imperialists or the pride of a North Korean factory. It was about a girl and a boy in a boat. The girl had a white *choson-ot,* the boy a soulful stare.

Rumina sang in Korean, and her dress was graphite, and she might as well have sung of a spider that spins white thread to capture her listeners. Jun Do and Gil wandered the streets of Niigata held by that thread, pretending they weren't about to abduct her from the nearby artists' village. A line kept ringing in Jun Do's mind about how in the middle of the water the lovers decide to row no further.

They walked the city in a trance, waiting for dark. Advertisements especially had an effect on Jun Do. There were no ads in North Korea, and here they were on buses and posters, across video screens. Immediate and

imploring—couples clasping one another, a sad child—he asked Gil what each one said, but the answers pertained to car insurance and telephone rates. Through a window, they watched Korean women cut the toenails of Japanese women. For fun, they operated a vending machine and received a bag of orange food neither would taste.

Gil paused before a store that sold equipment for undersea exploration. In the window was a large bag made to stow dive gear. It was black and nylon, and the salesperson showed them how it would hold everything needed for an underwater adventure for two. They bought it.

They asked a man pushing a cart if they could borrow it, and he told them at the supermarket they could get their own. Inside the store, it was almost impossible to tell what most of the boxes and packages contained. The important stuff, like radish bushels and buckets of chestnuts, were nowhere to be seen. Gil purchased a roll of heavy tape and, from a section of toys for children, a little watercolor set in a tin. Gil at least had someone to buy a souvenir for.

Darkness fell, storefronts lit suddenly with red-and-blue neon, and the willows were eerily illuminated from below. Car headlights flashed in his eyes. Jun Do felt exposed, singled out. Where was the curfew? Why didn't the Japanese respect the dark like normal people?

They stood outside a bar, time yet to kill. Inside, people were laughing and talking.

Gil pulled out their yen. "No sense taking any back," he said.

Inside, he ordered whiskeys. Two women were at the bar as well, and Gil bought their drinks. They smiled and returned to their conversation. "Did you see their teeth?" Gil asked. "So white and perfect, like children's teeth." When Jun Do didn't agree, Gil said, "Relax, yeah? Loosen up."

"Easy for you," Jun Do said. "You don't have to overpower someone tonight. Then get her across town. And if we don't find Officer So on that beach—"

"Like that would be the worst thing," Gil said. "You don't see anyone around here plotting to escape to North Korea. You don't see them coming to pluck people off our beaches."

"That kind of talk doesn't help."

"Come, drink up," Gil said. "I'll get the singer into the bag tonight. You're not the only guy capable of beating a woman, you know. How hard can it be?"

"I'll handle the singer," Jun Do said. "You just keep it together."

"I can stuff a singer in a bag, okay?" Gil said. "I can push a shopping cart. You just drink up, you're probably never going to see Japan again."

Gil tried to speak to the Japanese women, but they smiled and ignored him. Then he bought a drink for the bartender. She came over and talked with him while she poured it. She was thin shouldered, but her shirt was tight and her hair was absolutely black. They drank together, and he said something to make her laugh. When she went to fill an order, Gil turned to Jun Do. "If you slept with one of these girls," Gil said, "you'd know it was because she wanted to, not like some military comfort girl trying to get nine stamps a day in her quota book or a factory gal getting married off by her housing council. Back home pretty girls never even raise their eyes to you. You can't even have a cup of tea without her father arranging a marriage."

*Pretty girls?* Jun Do thought. "The world thinks I'm an orphan, that's my curse," Jun Do told him. "But how did a Pyongyang boy like you end up doing such shitty jobs?"

Gil ordered more drinks, even though Jun Do had barely touched his. "Going to that orphanage really messed with your head," Gil said. "Just because I don't blow my nose in my hand anymore doesn't mean I'm not a country boy, from Myohsun. You should move on, too. In Japan, you can be anyone you want to be."

They heard a motorcycle pull up, and outside the window, they saw a man back it in line with a couple of other bikes. When he took the key from the ignition, he hid it under the lip of the gas tank. Gil and Jun Do glanced at one another.

Gil sipped his whiskey, swishing it around then tipping his head to delicately gargle.

"You don't drink like a country boy."

"You don't drink like an orphan."

"I'm not an orphan."

"Well, that's good," Gil said. "Because all the orphans in my land-mine unit knew how to do was take—your cigarettes, your socks, your *shoju.* Don't you hate it when someone takes your *shoju*? In my unit, they gobbled up everything around them, like a dog digests its pups, and for thanks, they left you the puny nuggets of their shit."

Jun Do gave the smile that puts people at ease in the moment before you strike them.

Gil went on. "But you're a decent guy. You're loyal like the guy in the martyr story. You don't need to tell yourself that your father was this and your mother was that. You can be anyone you want. Reinvent yourself for a night. Forget about that drunk and the nail hole in the wall."

Jun Do stood. He took a step back to get the right distance for a turnbuckle kick. He closed his eyes, he could feel the space, he could visualize the hip pivoting, the leg rising, the whip of the instep as it torqued around. Jun Do had dealt with this his whole life, the ways it was impossible for people from normal families to conceive of a man in so much hurt that he couldn't acknowledge his own son, that there was nothing worse than a mother leaving her children, though it happened all the time, that "take" was a word people used for those who had so little to give as to be immeasurable.

When Jun Do opened his eyes, Gil suddenly realized what was about to happen.

He fumbled his drink. "Whoa," he said. "My mistake, okay? I'm from a big family, I don't know anything about orphans. We should go, we've got things to do."

"Okay, then," Jun Do said. "Let's see how you treat those pretty ladies in Pyongyang."

*

Behind the auditorium was the artists' village—a series of cottages ringing a central hot spring. They could see the stream of water, still steaming hot, running from the bathhouse. Mineral white, it tumbled down bald, bleached rocks toward the sea.

They hid the cart, then Jun Do boosted Gil over the fence. When Gil came around to open the metal gate for Jun Do, Gil paused a moment and the two regarded one another through the bars before Gil lifted the latch and let Jun Do in.

Tiny cones of light illuminated the flagstone path to Rumina's bungalow. Above them, the dark green and white of magnolia blocked the stars. In the air was conifer and cedar, something of the ocean. Jun Do tore two strips of duct tape and hung them from Gil's sleeves.

"That way," Jun Do whispered, "they'll be ready to go."

Gil's eyes were thrilled and disbelieving.

"So, we're just going to storm in there?" he asked.

"I'll get the door open," Jun Do said. "Then you get that tape on her mouth."

Jun Do pried a large flagstone from the path and carried it to the door. He placed it against the knob and when he threw his hip into it, the door popped. Gil ran toward a woman, sitting up in bed, illuminated only by a television. Jun Do watched from the doorway as Gil got the tape across her mouth, but then in the sheets and the softness of the bed, the tide seemed to turn. He lost a clump of hair. Then she got his collar, which she used to off-balance him. Finally, he found her neck, and they went to the floor, where he worked his weight onto her, the pain making her feet curl. Jun Do stared long at those toes: the nails had been painted bright red.

At first, Jun Do had been thinking, *Grab her here, pressure her there,* but then a sick feeling rose in him. As the two rolled, Jun Do could see that she had wet herself, and the rawness of it, the brutality of what was happening, was newly clear to him. Gil was bringing her into submission, taping her wrists and ankles, and she was kneeling now, him laying out the bag and unzipping it. When he spread the opening for her, her eyes—wide and wet—failed, and her posture went woozy. Jun Do pulled off his glasses, and things were better with the blur.

Outside, he breathed deeply. He could hear Gil struggling to fold her up so she would fit in the bag. The stars over the ocean, fuzzy now, made him remember how free he'd felt on that first night crossing of the Sea of Japan, how at home he was on a fishing vessel. Back inside, he saw Gil had zipped the bag so that only Rumina's face showed, her nostrils flaring for oxygen. Gil stood over her, exhausted but smiling. He pressed the fabric of his pants against his groin so she could see the outline of his erection. When her eyes went wide, he pulled the zipper shut.

Quickly, they went through her possessions. Gil pocketed yen and a necklace of red and white stones. Jun Do didn't know what to grab. On a table were medicine bottles, cosmetics, a stack of family photos. When his eyes landed on the graphite dress, he pulled it from its hanger.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Gil asked.

"I don't know," Jun Do told him.

The cart, overburdened, made loud clacking sounds at every crease in the sidewalk. They didn't speak. Gil was scratched and his shirt was torn. It looked like he was wearing makeup that had smeared. A clear yellow fluid had risen through the scab where his hair was missing. When the cement sloped at the curbs, the wheels had a tendency to spin funny and spill the cart, the load dumping to the pavement.

Bundles of cardboard lined the streets. Dishwashers hosed down kitchen mats in the gutters. A bright, empty bus whooshed past. Near the park, a man walked a large white dog that stopped and eyed them. The bag would squirm awhile, then go still. At a corner, Gil told Jun Do to turn left, and there, down a steep hill and across a parking lot, was the beach.

"I'm going to watch our backs," Gil said.

The cart wanted free—Jun Do doubled his grip on the handle. "Okay," he answered.

From behind, Gil said, "I was out of line back there with that orphan talk. I don't know what it's like to have parents who are dead or who gave up. I was wrong, I see that now."

"No harm done," Jun Do said. "I'm not an orphan."

From behind, Gil said, "So tell me about the last time you saw your father."

The cart kept trying to break loose. Each time Jun Do had to lean back and skid his feet. "Well, there wasn't a going-away party or anything." The cart lurched forward and dragged Jun Do a couple of meters before he got his traction back. "I'd been there longer than anyone—I was never getting adopted, my father wasn't going to let anyone take his only son. Anyway, he came to me that night, we'd burned our bunks, so I was on the floor—Gil, help me here."

Suddenly the cart was racing. Jun Do tumbled as it came free of his grip and barreled downhill alone. "Gil," he yelled, watching it go. The cart got speed wobbles as it crossed the parking lot, and striking the far curb, the cart hopped high into the air, pitching the black bag out into the dark sand.

He turned but Gil was nowhere to be seen.

Jun Do ran out onto the sand, passing the bag and the odd way it had settled. Down at the waterline, he scanned the waves for Officer So, but there was nothing. He checked his pockets—he had no map, no watch, no

light. Hands on knees, he couldn't catch his breath. Past him, billowing down the beach, came the graphite dress, filling and emptying in the wind, tumbling along the sand until it was taken by the night.

He found the bag, rolled it over. He unzipped it some, heat pouring out. He pulled the tape from her face, which was abraded with nylon burns. She spoke to him in Japanese.

"I don't understand," he said.

In Korean, she said, "Thank God you rescued me."

He studied her face. How raw and puffy it was.

"Some psychopath stuck me in here," she said. "Thank God you came along, I thought I was dead, and then you came to set me free."

Jun Do looked again for any sign of Gil, but he knew there wouldn't be.

"Thanks for getting me out of here," she said. "Really, thanks for setting me free."

Jun Do tested the strip of tape with his fingers, but it had lost much of its stickiness. A lock of her hair was fixed to the tape. He let it go in the wind.

"My God," she said. "You're one of them."

Sand blew into the bag, into her eyes.

"Believe me," he said. "I know what you're going through."

"You don't have to be a bad guy," she said. "There's goodness in you, I can see it. Let me go, and I'll sing for you. You won't believe how I can sing."

"Your song has been troubling me," he said. "The one about the boy who chooses to quit rowing in the middle of the lake."

"That was only an aria," she said. "From a whole opera, one filled with subplots and reversals and betrayals."

Jun Do leaned close now. "Does the boy stop because he has rescued the girl and on the far shore he will have to give her to his superiors? Or has the boy stolen the girl and therefore knows that punishment awaits?"

"It's a love story," she said.

"I understand that," he said. "But what is the answer? Could it be that he knows he's marked for a labor camp?"

She searched his face, as if *he* knew the answer.

"How does it end?" he asked. "What happens to them?"

"Let me out and I'll tell you," she said. "Open this bag and I'll sing you the ending."

Jun Do took the zipper and closed it. He spoke to the black nylon where her face had been. "Keep your eyes open," he said. "I know there's nothing to see, but whatever happens, don't shut them. Darkness and close quarters, they're not your enemy."

He dragged the bag to the waterline. The ocean, frothy cold, washed over his shoes as he scanned the waves for Officer So. When a wave reached high upon the sand and licked the bag, she screamed inside, and he had never heard such a shriek. From far up the beach, a light flashed at him. Officer So had heard her. He brought the black inflatable around, and Jun Do dragged the bag into the surf. Using the straps, the two of them rolled it into the boat.

"Where's Gil?" he asked.

"Gil's gone," Jun Do said. "He was right beside me, and then he wasn't."

They were knee-deep in waves, steadying the boat. The lights of the city were reflected in Officer So's eyes. "You know what happened to the other mission officers?" he asked. "There were four of us. Now there's only me. The others are in Prison 9—have you heard of that place, tunnel man? The whole prison's underground. It's a mine, and when you go in, you never see the sun again."

"Look, scaring me isn't going to change anything. I don't know where he is."

Officer So went on, "There's an iron gate at the minehead, and once you pass that, that's it—there are no guards inside, no doctors, no cafeteria, no toilets. You just dig in the dark, and when you get some ore, you drag it to the surface to trade through the bars for food and candles and pickaxes. Even the bodies don't come out."

"He could be anywhere," Jun Do said. "He speaks Japanese."

From the bag came Rumina's voice. "I can help you," she said. "I know Niigata like the lines on my palm. Let me out, and I swear I'll find him."

They ignored her.

"Who is this guy?" Jun Do asked.

"The spoiled kid of some minister," Officer So said. "That's what they tell me. His dad sent him here to toughen him up. You know—the hero's son's always the meekest."

Jun Do turned and considered the lights of Niigata.

Officer So put his hand on Jun Do's shoulder. "You're soldierly," he said. "When it comes time to dispense, you dispense." He removed the

bag's nylon shoulder strap and made a slip loop at one end. "Gil's got a noose around our fucking necks. Now it's his turn."

*

Jun Do walked the warehouse district with a strange calm. The moon, such as it was, reflected the same in every puddle, and when a bus stopped for him, the driver took one look and asked for no fare. The bus was empty except for two old Korean men in back. They still wore their white paper short-order hats. Jun Do spoke to them, but they shook their heads.

Jun Do needed the motorcycle to stand a chance of finding Gil in this city. But if Gil had any brain at all, he and the bike were long gone. When Jun Do finally rounded the corner to the whiskey bar, the black motorcycle gleamed at the curb. He threw his leg over the seat, touched the handlebars. But when he felt under the lip of the tank, there was no key. He turned to the bar's front windows, and there through the glass was Gil, laughing with the bartender.

Jun Do took a seat beside Gil, who was intent on a watercolor in progress. He had the paint set open, and he dipped the brush in a shot glass of water tinctured purple-green. It was a landscape, with bamboo patches and paths cutting through a field of stones. Gil looked up at Jun Do, then wet his brush, swirling it in yellow to highlight the bamboo stalks.

Jun Do said to him, "You're so fucking stupid."

"You're the stupid one," Gil said. "You got the singer—who would come back for me?"

"I would," Jun Do told him. "Let's have the key."

The motorcycle key was sitting on the bar, and Gil slid it to him.

Gil twirled his finger in the air to signal another round. The bartender came over. She was wearing Rumina's necklace. Gil spoke to her, then peeled off half the yen and gave it to Jun Do.

"I told her this round's on you," Gil said.

The bartender poured three glasses of whiskey, then said something that made Gil laugh.

Jun Do asked, "What'd she say?"

"She said you look very strong, but too bad you're a pussy-man."

Jun Do looked at Gil.

Gil shrugged. "I maybe told her that you and I got in a fight, over a girl. I said that I was winning until you pulled out my hair."

Jun Do said, "You can still get out of this. We won't say anything, I swear. We'll just go back, and it'll be like you never ran."

"Does it look like I'm running?" Gil asked. "Besides, I can't leave my girlfriend."

Gil handed her the watercolor, and she tacked it on the wall to dry, next to another one of her looking radiant in the red-and-white necklace. Squinting from a distance, Jun Do suddenly understood that Gil had painted not a landscape but a lush, pastoral land-mine map.

"So you were in the minefields," he said.

"My mother sent me to the Mansudae to study painting," Gil said. "But Father decided the minefields would make a man of me, so he pulled some strings." Gil had to laugh at the idea of pulling a string to get posted on a suicide detail. "I found a way to make the maps, rather than do the mapping." As he spoke, he worked quickly on another watercolor, a woman, mouth wide, lit from below so her eye sockets were darkened. Right away it had the likeness of Rumina, though you couldn't tell whether she was singing with great intensity or screaming for her life.

"Tell her you'll have one last drink," Jun Do said and passed her all the yen.

"I'm really sorry about all this," Gil said. "I really am. But I'm not going anywhere. Consider the opera singer a gift, and send my regrets."

"Was it your father who wanted the singer, is that why we're here?"

Gil ignored him. He started painting a portrait of him and Jun Do together, each giving the thumbs-up sign. They wore garish, forced smiles, and Jun Do didn't want him to finish.

"Let's go," Jun Do said. "You don't want to be late for karaoke night at the Yanggakdo or whatever you elites do for fun."

Gil didn't move. He was emphasizing Jun Do's muscles, making them oversized, like an ape's. "It's true," Gil said. "I've tasted beef and ostrich. I've seen *Titanic* and I've been on the internet ten different times. And yeah, there's karaoke. Every week there's an empty table where a family used to sit but now they're gone, no mention of them, and the songs they used to sing are missing from the machine."

"I promise you," Jun Do said. "Come back, and no one will ever know."

"The question isn't whether or not I'll come with you," Gil said. "It's why you're not coming with me."

If Jun Do wanted to defect, he could have done it a dozen times. At the

end of a tunnel, it was as easy as climbing the ladder and triggering a spring-loaded door.

"In this whole stupid country," Jun Do said, "the only thing that made sense to me were the Korean ladies on their knees cleaning the feet of the Japanese."

"I could take you to the South Korean embassy tomorrow. It's just a train ride. In six weeks you'd be in Seoul. You'd be very useful to them, a real prize."

"Your mother, your father," Jun Do said. "They'll get sent to the camps."

"Whether you're a good karaoke singer or bad, eventually your number comes up. It's only a matter of time."

"What about Officer So—will some fancy whiskey make you forget him digging in the dark of Prison 9?"

"He's the reason to leave," Gil said. "So you don't become him."

"Well, he sends his regards," Jun Do said and dropped the loop of nylon over Gil's head, pulling the slack so the strap was snug around his neck.

Gil downed his whiskey. "I'm just a person," he said. "I'm just a nobody who wants out."

The bartender saw the leash. Covering her mouth, she said, "*Homo janai.*"

"I guess I don't need to translate that," Gil said.

Jun Do gave the leash a tug and they both stood.

Gil closed his watercolor tin, then bowed to the bartender. "*Chousenjin ni turesarareru yo,*" he said to her. With her phone, she took a picture of the two of them, then poured herself a drink. She lifted it in Gil's honor before drinking.

"Fucking Japanese," Gil said. "You've got to love them. I said I was being kidnapped to North Korea, and look at her."

"Take a good, long look," Jun Do said and lifted the motorcycle key from the bar.

*

Past the shore break, they motored into swells sharpened by the wind—the black inflatable lifted, then dropped flat in the troughs. Everyone held the lifeline to steady themselves. Rumina sat in the nose, fresh tape around her hands. Officer So had draped his jacket around her—except for that, her body was bare and blue with cold.

Jun Do and Gil sat on opposite sides of the raft, but Gil wouldn't look at him. When they reached open water, Officer So backed off the engine enough that Jun Do could be heard.

"I gave Gil my word," he told Officer So. "I said we'd forget how he tried to run."

Rumina sat with the wind at her back, hair turbulent in her face. "Put him in the bag," she said.

Officer So had a grand laugh at that. "The opera lady's right," he said. "You caught a defector, my boy. He had a fucking gun to our heads. But he couldn't outsmart us. Start thinking of your reward," he said. "Start savoring it."

The idea of a reward, of finding his mother and delivering her from her fate in Pyongyang, now made him sick. In the tunnels, they would sometimes wander into a curtain of gas. You couldn't detect it—a headache would spike, and you'd see the darkness throb red. He felt that now with Rumina glaring at him. He suddenly wondered if she didn't mean him, that Jun Do should go in the bag. But he wasn't the one who beat her or folded her up. It wasn't his father who'd ordered her kidnapping. And what choice did he have, about anything? He couldn't help that he was from a town lacking in electricity and heat and fuel, where the factories were frozen in rust, where able-bodied men were either in labor camps or were listless with hunger. It wasn't his fault that all the boys in his care were numb with abandonment and hopeless at the prospect of being recruited as prison guards or conscripted into suicide squads.

The lead was still around Gil's neck. Out of pure joy, Officer So leaned over and yanked it hard, just to feel it cinch. "I'd roll you over the side," he said. "But I'd miss what they're going to do to you."

Gil winced from the pain. "Jun Do knows how to do it now," he said. "He'll replace you, and they'll send you to a camp so you never talk about this business."

"You don't know anything," Officer So said. "You're soft and weak. I fucking invented this game. I kidnapped Kim Jong Il's personal sushi chef. I plucked the Dear Leader's own doctor out of an Osaka hospital, in broad daylight, with these hands."

"You don't know how Pyongyang works," Gil said. "Once the other ministers see her, they'll all want their own opera singers."

A cold, white spray slapped them. It made Rumina inhale sharply, as if

every little thing was trying to take her life. She turned to Jun Do, glaring again. She was about to say something, he could tell—a word was forming on her lips.

He unfolded his glasses, put them on—now he could see the bruising on her throat, the way her hands were fat and purple below the tape on her wrists. He saw a wedding ring, a birth-surgery scar. She wouldn't stop glaring at him. Her eyes—they could see the decisions he'd made. They could tell it was Jun Do who'd picked which orphans ate first and which were left with watery spoonfuls. They recognized that it was he who assigned the bunks next to the stove and the ones in the hall where blackfinger lurked. He'd picked the boys who got blinded by the arc furnace. He'd chosen the boys who were at the chemical plant when it made the sky go yellow. He'd sent Ha Shin, the boy who wouldn't speak, who wouldn't say no, to clean the vats at the paint factory. It was Jun Do who put the gaff in Bo Song's hands.

"What choice did I have?" Jun Do asked her. He really needed to know, just as he had to know what happened to the boy and the girl at the end of the aria.

She raised her foot and showed Jun Do her toenails, the red paint vibrant against the platinum dark. She spoke a word, then drove her foot into his face.

The blood, it was dark. It trickled down his shirt, last worn by the man they'd plucked from the beach. Her big toenail had cut along his gums, but it was okay, he felt better, he knew the word now, the word that had been upon her lips. He didn't need to speak Japanese to understand the word "die." It was the ending to the opera, too, he was sure of it. That's what happened to the boy and the girl on the boat. It wasn't a sad story, really. It was one of love—the boy and the girl at least knew each other's fates, and they'd never be alone.