

# 1



The myths of my people say only a true bride of the Sea God can bring an end to his insatiable wrath. When the otherworldly storms rise from the East Sea, lightning breaking the sky and waters ripping up the shore, a bride is chosen and given to the Sea God.

Or sacrificed, depending on the measure of your faith.

Every year the storms begin, and every year a girl is brought to the sea. I can't help wondering if Shim Cheong believes in the myth of the Sea God's bride. If she'll find comfort in it before the end.

Or perhaps she sees it as a beginning. There are many pathways destiny can take.

For instance, there's my own path—the literal path before me, stretching narrowly through the waterlogged rice fields. If I follow this path, it'll eventually lead me to the beach. If I turn around, the path will take me back to the village.

Which destiny belongs to me? Which destiny will I grasp on to with both hands?

Even if it were up to choice, it wouldn't really be mine to make. For though a large part of me longs for the safety of home, the pull of my heart is infinitely stronger. It tugs me toward the open sea and to the one person I love beyond destiny.

*My brother Joon.*

Lightning streaks through the storm clouds, splintering across a blackened sky. A half second later, a clap of thunder rumbles over the rice fields.

The path ends where the dirt meets the sand. I take off my soggy sandals and fling them over my shoulder. Through the torrent of rain, I catch sight of the boat, tossing and turning upon the waves. It's a small, hollowed-out vessel with a single mast, meant to carry eight or so men—and one Sea God's bride. Already it's a distance from the shore, and moving farther still.

Lifting my rain-soaked skirt, I sprint toward the raging sea.

I hear a shout from the boat the same moment I crash into the first wave. Immediately I'm pulled under. The freezing water steals my breath. I tumble beneath the water, spinning violently to the left, then the right. I fight to get my mouth above the surface, but the waves pour into and over me.

I'm not a weak swimmer, but I'm also not a strong one, and although I fight to swim, to reach the boat and *live*, it's so very hard. It might not be enough. I wish it didn't hurt so much—the waves, the salt, the sea.

"Mina!" Strong hands wrap around my arms, pulling me out of the water. I'm placed firmly on the boat's undulating deck. My brother stands before me, familiar features twisted in a scowl.

“What were you thinking?” Joon shouts over the howling wind. “You could have drowned!”

A massive wave crashes against the boat, and I lose my balance. Joon grabs my wrist to keep me from tumbling overboard.

“I followed you!” I shout, just as loudly. “You shouldn’t be here. Warriors aren’t supposed to accompany the Sea God’s bride.” Looking at my brother now, his rain-lashed face and defiant expression, I want to collapse into tears. I want to drag him to the shore and never look back. How could he risk his life like this? “If the god should know of your presence, you’ll be killed!”

Joon flinches, his eyes flicking to the prow of the boat, where a slender figure stands, hair whipping sharply in the wind.

*Shim Cheong.*

“You don’t understand,” Joon says. “I couldn’t . . . I couldn’t let her face this alone.”

The breaking of his voice confirms what I’ve suspected all along, what I’d hoped wasn’t true. I curse under my breath, but Joon doesn’t notice. His entire being is focused on *her*.

The elders say Shim Cheong was fashioned by the Goddess of Creation to be the Sea God’s final bride, the one to ease all his sorrows and usher in a new era of peace in the kingdom. She has skin forged from the purest of pearls. She has hair stitched from the deepest night. She has lips colored by the blood of men.

Maybe this last detail is more bitterness than truth.

I remember the first time I saw Shim Cheong. I was standing with Joon beside the river. It was the night of the paper boat festival four summers ago, when I was twelve and Joon was fourteen.

It is tradition in the seaside villages to write wishes onto pieces

of paper before folding them carefully into boats to set upon the river. The belief is that our paper boats will carry our wishes to our dead ancestors in the Spirit Realm, where they can bargain with the lesser gods to fulfill our dreams and desires.

“Shim Cheong might be the most beautiful girl in the village, but her face is a curse.”

I looked up at the sound of Joon’s voice, following his gaze to the bridge spanning the river, where a girl stood at its center.

With her face lit by moonlight, Shim Cheong seemed more goddess than girl. She held a paper boat of her own. It fell from her open palm onto the water. As I watched it drift down the river, I wondered what someone so beautiful could possibly wish for.

I didn’t know then that Shim Cheong was already destined to be the Sea God’s bride.

Now, standing on the boat in the pouring rain with thunder rattling my bones, I notice the way the men keep away from her. It’s as if she’s already been sacrificed, her otherworldly beauty separating her from the rest of us. She belongs to the Sea God. It’s what the village has always known, ever since she came of age.

I wonder if it happens in a day, for your fate to change. Or if it takes longer for your life to be stolen from you.

I wonder if Joon sensed this loneliness in her. Because ever since Shim Cheong was twelve, she belonged to the Sea God, and while everyone might have seen her as someone who would one day leave, he was the only one who wanted her to stay.

“Mina.” Joon tugs my arm. “You need to hide.”

I watch as Joon anxiously searches the uncovered deck for a place for me to conceal myself. He might not care that he's broken one of the Sea God's three rules, but he worries for me.

The rules are simple: No warriors. No women, besides the Sea God's bride. No weapons. Joon broke the first rule by coming tonight. I broke the second.

*And the third.* My hand curls around the knife hidden beneath my short jacket, the blade that once belonged to my great-great-grandmother.

The boat must have reached the center of the storm, because the winds stop howling, the waves cease their crashing over the deck, and even the rain lessens its relentless battering.

It's dark in every direction, the clouds obscuring the moonlight. I move closer to the boat's edge and look over the side. The lightning flashes, and in the brightness, I see it. The fishermen see it, too, their screams swallowed by the night.

Beneath the boat moves a massive silver-blue dragon.

Its snakelike body circles the boat, the ridges of its scaled back breaking the surface of the water.

The flash of lightning dissipates. Darkness falls once more, and all that can be heard is the endless roll of the waves. I shiver, imagining all the awful fates that might await us, either through drowning or being devoured by the Sea God's servant.

The boat groans as the dragon slides right up against the hull.

What is the purpose of this? What was the Sea God thinking, sending his terrifying servant? Is he testing the courage of his bride?

I blink, realizing my anger has dispelled most of my fear. My

gaze sweeps the boat. Shim Cheong still stands at the prow, but she's no longer alone.

"Joon!" I shout, my heart dropping.

Joon whips his head in my direction, abruptly releasing Shim Cheong's hand.

Behind them, the dragon rises silently out of the water, its long neck extending into the sky. Seawater falls off its dark blue scales, dropping like coins onto the boat's deck.

Its black, fathomless eyes are riveted on Shim Cheong.

This is the moment.

I don't know what's supposed to happen, but this is the moment we've all been waiting for, what Shim Cheong has been waiting for since the day she learned she was too beautiful to live. This is the moment when she loses everything. Most devastatingly, the boy she loves.

And in this moment, Shim Cheong hesitates.

She turns from the dragon, her eyes finding Joon's. She gives him a look I've never seen before—one of agony, fear, and such desperate longing it breaks my heart. Joon lets out a choked sound, takes one step toward her, and then another, until he's standing in front of her, his empty hands spread wide in protection.

And with just this, he's sealed his fate. The dragon will never let him go, not after this act of defiance. As if to prove my fears, the great beast lets out a deafening roar, bringing all the men left standing to their knees.

Except for Joon. My fierce, stubborn fool of a brother, who stands as if he can single-handedly protect his love from the Sea God's wrath.

An unbearable anger rises up within me, starting in my stomach and clawing up to choke me. The gods have *chosen* not to grant our wishes—our wishes from the paper boat festival, but also the small wishes we make every day. For peace, for fertility, for love. The gods have abandoned us. The god of gods, the Sea God, *wants* to take from the people who love him—take and take and never give.

The gods might not grant our wishes. But I could. For Joon. I could grant his wish.

I rush to the prow of the boat and leap onto the edge. “Take me instead!” I whip out my knife and make a deep slash across my palm, raising it up high above my head. “I will be the Sea God’s bride. I pledge my life to him!”

My words are met with utter stillness from the dragon. And right away, I doubt everything. Why would the Sea God take me instead of Shim Cheong? I haven’t her beauty or her elegance. I just have my own stubborn will, the one my grandmother always said would be the curse of me.

But then the dragon lowers its head, turning to the side so I can look straight into one of its black eyes. It’s as deep and endless as the sea.

“Please,” I whisper.

In this moment, I don’t feel beautiful. Nor do I feel very brave, my hands trembling. But there’s a warmth in my chest that nothing and no one can take from me. This is the strength I call upon now, because even if I am afraid, I know I’ve chosen this.

I am the maker of my own destiny.

“Mina!” my brother shouts. “No!”

The dragon lifts its body out of the water, dropping a length of its massive bulk between my brother and me, separating us. In the silence, surrounded completely by the dragon, I hesitate, wondering how much it can understand.

I grasp for the right words. The truth.

I take a breath, lifting my chin. "I am the Sea God's bride."

The dragon drags its body away from the boat, revealing an opening in the churning water.

Without looking back, I jump into the sea.