

Little Feather

작은 깃털



“Where is Ji-Na? The baby is hungry.”

Cradling the newborn, TaeHyuk’s mother rocked back and forth. **“She will be here. Yes, hold on little one. She is coming for you.”**

The midwife leaned over and kissed the baby’s forehead. **“My job here is done. My prayers are with all of you.”** Turning to TaeHyuk, she lowered her head and sighed. **“TaeHyuk, you are the father. You know that a day-old pigeon cannot fly alone. Embrace her. Teach her.”**

TaeHyuk’s wails ripped through the darkness, and branches of the sacred Dang-namu trees trembled. The poor farming village was so rural that the forest insulated it from the war and the Japanese reign of terror. Still, the farmers needed sons, not daughters. And widowers needed many sons to fill the void.

“Soo-Kyung, Soo-Kyung,” his screams clashing with the baby’s cries in a dissonant duet. TaeHyuk fell into his father’s arms and wept, tears streaming down his cheeks and onto the old man’s chest. **“It is a great loss, my son. She would have been a very honorable mother.”**

The midwife stroked the sheet covering Soo-Kyung. The hemorrhaging had been too much. The only hope was to save the infant. She looked at the grief-stricken family and then paced the small room.

TaeHyuk’s sobs were muffled in his father’s chest. His head, buried, did not move. The midwife caught the old man’s eyes. They were moist, glistening in the flickering light. He nodded and pointed to a meager bowl of rice on the table.

She took a few grains as payment, bowed, and left.

2.

As the midwife entered the darkness, their neighbor greeted her. Having a young child of her own, Ji-Na was available to **nurse TaeHyuk's newborn**. The midwife grabbed her arm, holding on for a long moment. **"TaeHyuk is beyond the river's edge."** Ji-Na took a deep breath and opened the door. She lifted the infant and guided the tiny mouth to her left nipple. The baby suckled and no longer cried. For a few moments, the household was quiet.

At a rapping on the door, TaeHyuk's mother ushered two undertakers inside and shuffled across the room to where Soo-Kyung lay on the dirt floor.

"No, no! Wait." TaeHyuk, his cheeks still wet, rushed to Soo-Kyung. He raised the sheet and stared down at his wife. **TaeHyuk's eyes poured over her ashen face.** His mouth quivered. His throat tightened. He coughed and felt faint. After a glance at the undertaker, his father reached out, guiding **his son's hand to return the sheet to its full length.**

TaeHyuk backed away from his wife and the men carefully carried Soo-Kyung's **body** to prepare it for burial. Ji-Na handed the sleeping infant to the old woman. TaeHyuk stepped outside, followed by his father.

The winter air was raw. A gust blew across their faces.

"What will you call her, my son?"

When TaeHyuk didn't answer, he continued. "It is something you must do."

"No, you name her. I can only dream of the son who will never harvest the crops with me."

A cloud floated down from the mountain, surrounding them in fog.

The elder raised his head. **"Look around us. Even the sky falls.** What is was meant to be. She is your blood. You cannot stop the wind. **Her breath is yours."**

He walked back towards the hut. The cloud thickened, unrelenting. TaeHyuk looked away. With bent head, he pushed farther away through the mist. He breathed deeply. Wisps of moist air circled him. His steps crunched on the wooded paths and squished on moist snow. Nothing seemed to stir. He heard only stillness.

3.

He had no sense of time. Yet two hours passed as tears froze on his cheeks and pine branches scraped his skin. Loneliness gripped him. His tortured pace beat a solitary rhythm and he searched the fog for movement. He saw no life in the dark forest.

But it was in the shimmering fog that shadows crept and slithered around him. TaeHyuk trudged onward unaware of the forms that followed him. *The snow speaks to me in silence. It tells of an eerie calm.*

A fallen tree limb caught his foot and he crumpled, eating snow. Tired, he lay there listening to a soft rumbling. Its soothing vibrations pulsed through him. The noise came in waves but they were not random. Slowly, TaeHyuk raised himself, staring into the dancing mist. He thought he saw a figure. It moved slowly and with grace. He shivered and took a step backwards. **The creature's music** morphed into a deep-throated roar that pitched higher into piercing moans. The distinct cry and the massive shape could only be *horangi*, the sacred Siberian tiger.

Soo-Kyung died giving life and am I to be a wild animal's meal? The regal cat faced TaeHyuk, its yellow eyes so coruscating they radiated like lasers. Unable to move, TaeHyuk thought of his baby. *Who will care for her?* The tiger lifted its head in a groan that shook TaeHyuk like an earthquake. **No mother. No father.**

Breathing smoke, the predator rose up and sauntered to TaeHyuk. **It stopped at arm's length and** held him with its eyes. His life floated away. He no longer felt grief. He no longer felt. **No mother. No father.**

"The wind carries the unsung melodies of the dead bird."

A burst of air pushed the animal odor over his face. He gagged. The tiger slowly maundered past him and entered a white cloud.

Stunned, TaeHyuk clenched his hands together. He swiveled, seeking a way back to the village. In the dark, he strode by instinct. No light guided him. Accompanied by his own steps, TaeHyuk stared into the fog for wildlife. None showed itself.

The tiger is master in the forest. Spirits have spared me.

4.

He entered the village before dawn. Outside his small hut, an owl scowled down upon him. ***And you? What can you tell me?***

The bird stared, motionless. TaeHyuk watched. With a slight twist of its head, it flapped its wings and disappeared into the night. As he reached for the door, a feather floated onto his arm.

“Where have you been?”

“In the forest with the spirits, the horangi.”

His mother caught her breath as she offered him a cup of tea.

“If horangi let you live,” his father stood next to him, “then it must have eaten and was only asserting its territory. You were no threat. The spirits truly blessed you.”

Shedding his coat, TaeHyuk sat at the table and gripped the hot mug with his frigid hands. Shivers dissipated as warm air stroked away his chills.

“What is that?”

TaeHyuk bent over his knee and picked up a brown and white feather. **“An owl greeted me.”**

His daughter’s whimpering called to him. “Give her to me,” he said.

For the first time, TaeHyuk sat with the infant. She rested against his chest. Barely audible sounds chirped forth, a hatchling. He closed his eyes. The gigantic horangi again. Face to face. Silent.

The baby stretched. TaeHyuk gazed upon her. She opened her eyes.

The fire crackled. Its sparks flashed orange and yellow.

She murmured, cuddled. Their eyes lingered.

Just this tiny feather – my Little Feather.