Chapter Forty-Nine

The lone shadow of one who has lost the others in a desert—or could she be likened to a blind snake crawling into a patch of reeds? Yet Lady Yun’s self-control was astonishing and magnificent. There was not the slightest change in her appearance: her tall straight body now wrapped for mourning in plain white cotton skirt and chōgori. Her lips were split and blood-stained but her eyes shone brightly and all her words and movements were clear cut.

Originally from Yŏngch’ŏn, no one knew just when the Ch’oe family had first established themselves in this village on a hill that overlooked the river, but for more than a hundred years they had lorded it over the area through the power of scholarship and property, largely built up and preserved by the hands of strong women. And now a great crowd assembled for the funeral of the last male descendant. As chief mourner—a little girl. P’yŏngsan was also amongst the crowd. To Kim-hunjang, whom in the past he had always ignored, he bowed politely and said, ‘What a strange thing!’

Kim-hunjang was about to shake his head solemnly, sigh, and say ‘Truly, a strange affair,’ but, noticing that P’yŏngsan’s hat was askew and that his tiny eyes seemed to be full of wine, he smacked his lips and turned aside. The eyes of the rejected P’yŏngsan busily searched those of others until they reached the face of Kwinyŏ. This time the lumps of flesh beaneath his eyes trembled violently. Amongst the many mourning servants, her appearance of sorrow was distinctive.

(How many men will that bitch eat up?)

As if starved for conversation, he grabbed hold of Sŏ-sŏbang and hastily said, ‘What a strange thing!’

In fact it was far more than a strange thing. For the people of the village and for all those who had rushed to join them from near and far because of ties of one kind or another with the Ch’oe family, it was a staggering blow, almost as if God had been murdered. There was no space in their minds to inquire into the cause of this unexpected
disaster or to chatter with curiosity. A little more time would be needed for that. Whatever the circumstances they were practical creatures, bound by habit. In a land which, apart from a few items of culture from the North, had been completely shut off, all its necessities, spiritual or material, had to be supplied from within itself. It was probably for this reason that the political system of the Yi dynasty in the Korean peninsular had sustained itself so firmly through five hundred years. This was an unprecedented length of time during which, one might say, the regime had become as hardened as was possible, and also old and exhausted. In such a society, any change is slow, so that, whatever a person’s occupation, there is usually little change in their circumstances, rather like the way that they take out their well-worn tools according to the season and then put them away again. This applied particularly to the farmers who, apart from being sensitive and fretful over the changes in the seasons, were faithful servants of the existing order as they clung to the life of the soil, which, apart from natural disasters, never changed. If the seasons were kind, and the extortion by government officials moderate, if the autumn harvest was enough to last until the barley came in spring, if only they could keep the ondol floor warm, and had enough cotton to pad their clothes, they were bound to be conscientious in carrying out the obligatory rites, rather like traders well trained in commercial etiquette.

They offered thanks to god, to the king, to guardian spirits, and to their ancestors. To say that the farmers were realistic could mean a certain humility in recognizing their own status. Perhaps it was just because of this meekness in accepting their social position that they had been so shocked by the death of Ch’isu. It was, indeed, as if God himself had been murdered. Of course, they had never seen God and, if it came to that, they had never seen the king either, nor had they any idea of what a guardian spirit or their ancestors looked like. They might have seen, when young, ancestors of up to three or four generations, but certainly they had not seen them since their death. The only way in which they sensed God was in sky, sun and moon, starlight or cloud, the river and all the massive things, or mysterious, or dangerous things that existed in nature. They felt the presence of the king in the six-sided cudgel brandished by the police, and in the grand procession of the local governor; the guardian spirits in the