Chapter Ninety-Four

As he approached the temple Hwani looked at the western hills. The sun, only a deer’s tail in size, still shone. He sank down beneath a tree as he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. He stared for a long time at a low hill opposite where drifting soil was held in the grip of a pine tree’s roots. Then he buried his head to stare at his straw shoes for a long time.

(‘I was once a member of the Tonghak army and knew Kim Kaeju very well… If he was still alive, he’d be of your age. I am one who saw the son of Kim Kaeju as a young boy.)

From his demeanour and looks, it was obvious that he had held a high position. Had he persisted in asking, the old man would have revealed his identity to him but Hwani did not. What good would that do?, he had thought. There was nothing new in what he had heard about his father. But hearing it again had been a great shock. For many years now he had not thought about him. Even while he sat slumped before the grave of Lady Yun the night before the thought of his father had not so much as crossed his mind. He now wondered why. The memories of those miserable days he had spent with his father as well as those times when father and son had been bonded in deep affection and he had worshipped his father as his hero – they had all been completely obliterated from his mind. When and how had it happened? Even at the time when he entered the Ch’oe House to become a servant his heart was vengeful. That his father had been decapitated at Chônju prison was not Lady Yun’s fault. On the contrary, she was his victim. Single-minded as he had been then, he could not look at it rationally. He had a perverse desire to tear Lady Yun’s heart to pieces, and at the bottom of this desire were hatred of her social status as the mistress of the Ch’oe House and resentment of a woman who, while being Ch’isu’s mother, could never be his mother. There was the irony of fate. The fact was that the two
generations of them, the father and the son were the very people who had inflicted indelible disgrace on the Ch’oe family.

How long ago was it? His father had lain in bed seriously ill. He had been tending him. It was past midnight. All around them people were asleep.

‘Hwan-a.’

‘Yes, father.’

‘What do you think makes a heroic man?’ He turned his face in the shadow cast by the candle flame as he asked this strange question.

‘I would say that a heroic man is someone like you, father.’

He chuckled as he half closed his feverish eyes. ‘If that is true, heroism is mere vainglory.’

‘What?’

‘I wish I could say that I am a man who picked up a lance and sword and set out to save the people, or that I am one of such men. At times I even believe that I am, but…’

‘Are you saying that because you don’t know that a great number of people look up to you?’ Hwani truly believed what he said.

‘I understand your thinking like that. You are still too young to know otherwise. But if I try to rule others while I can’t rule my own self – what is it but vainglory? I cannot sleep at night. So there.’

‘Confucius is said to have been free from delusion only at forty.’

‘That’s different. He dedicated all his life to the search for truth. Your father is only an ordinary man. As a leader of the Tonghak I have long since broken God’s commandments. I am not an ascetic. I only want to throw myself into endless battles, the whirlwind of battle. And I await only death.’

‘Father!’

‘The day the Tonghak comes out victorious, if that ever happens, and peace settles on this land, then my life is as good as over.’

‘How can you even think such a thing?’

‘I don’t know. I do not know why I think like this…Serving the people must be ascetic, don’t you think? But I am a wind that momentarily blows only on the borders of ascetism. I am the hero who can spur the horse only in chaos. I am not the right one to