

KAI SONG DREAMS OF BEING A WARRIOR.

She wants to follow in the footsteps of her beloved father, the commander of the Royal Legion. But while her father believes in Kai and trains her in martial arts, their society isn't ready for a girl warrior.

Still, Kai is determined. But she is plagued by rumors that she is the granddaughter of Gumiho, the infamous nine-tailed fox demon who was killed by her father years before.

Everything comes crashing down the day Kai learns the deadly secret about her mother's past. Now she must come to terms with the truth about her identity and take her destiny into her own hands. As Kai desperately searches for a way to escape her fate, she comes to find compassion, and even love, in the most unexpected places.

Set in sixteenth-century Korea and richly infused with Korean folklore, *The Fox Maidens* is a timeless and powerful story about fighting for your place in the world, even when it seems impossible.

"Action-packed and exciting, this family drama is full of unexpected twists and turns. The art is rich with historical details, beautiful nature scenes, and fast-paced fight scenes. Lovers of ghost stories, K-dramas, and queer retellings of fairy tales will find much to enjoy here."

—MAIA KOBABE, author and illustrator of *Gender Queer*

"A book that makes you want to devour the patriarchy. *The Fox Maidens* is a beautiful dive into Korean history, mythology, and social issues we can all learn from."

—LAURA GAO, author and illustrator of *Messy Roots*

"Robin calls forth her entire self to elevate Korean folklore to a haunting, horrifying, and enchanting epic about what (and who) we would sacrifice for love and redemption. Truly a femme fatale I wish I had growing up."

—DEB JJ LEE, creator of *In Limbo*



THE FOX MAIDENS

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THE FOX MAIDENS

FROM THE CREATOR OF *ALMOST AMERICAN GIRL*

BALZER+BRAY

Imprints of HarperCollins Publishers



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Cover design by Dana Fratts

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THE
FOX
MAIDENS

여우아씨들

H
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ROBIN
하트빈



BALZER + BRAY

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한이 맺힌 사람들을 위하여

For those who carry “han (한)”
in their hearts





Prologue: The Legend of Gumiho

Gumiho is a magical nine-tailed fox well-known in Korean folktales. Her story has been told in so many ways throughout history that it is difficult to pinpoint who she really was and where her legend originated.

In the modern era, Gumiho is often depicted as a succubus-like character who disguises herself as a beautiful woman to lure men to her in order to consume their livers, hearts, or souls. The older versions vary, from a dragon-hunting demigod, to a benevolent creature that helps Buddhist monks, to a fox who falls in love with a man and longs to become a human.

Gumiho has many magical powers, including conjuring illusions and shape-shifting into other animals and humans. She can live for hundreds of years, and the older she gets, the more powerful she becomes.

Foxes have been linked to supernatural phenomena and superstitions in Korean culture. Shamans and courtesans in the past have used the dried uterus of foxes to bring good luck. Gumiho (nine-tailed fox), Bulyeowoo (fire fox), Baekyeowoo (white fox), and Yeowoo (fox) are used as derogatory terms for evil women.

A Brief Overview of the Society in Joseon

The Joseon Dynasty was the kingdom that ruled Korea from 1392 to 1910. People lived in the confines of the class and gender they were born into. The top ruling class was called Yangban, which consisted of scholars and warriors.

Below Yangban were Joongin, which included government employees, military officers, and illegitimate children born between Yangban and the lower classes.

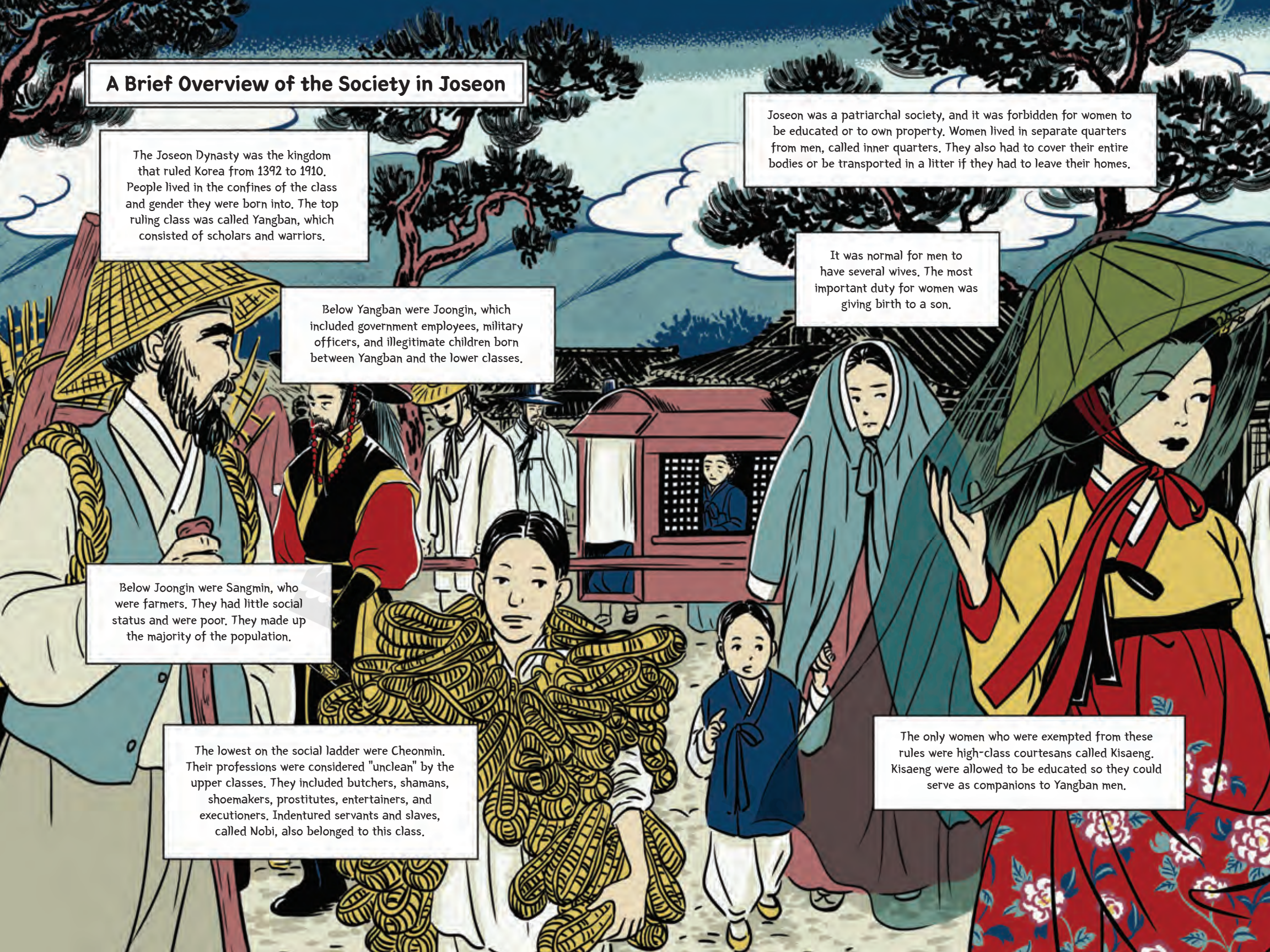
Below Joongin were Sangmin, who were farmers. They had little social status and were poor. They made up the majority of the population.

The lowest on the social ladder were Cheonmin. Their professions were considered "unclean" by the upper classes. They included butchers, shamans, shoemakers, prostitutes, entertainers, and executioners. Indentured servants and slaves, called Nobi, also belonged to this class.

Joseon was a patriarchal society, and it was forbidden for women to be educated or to own property. Women lived in separate quarters from men, called inner quarters. They also had to cover their entire bodies or be transported in a litter if they had to leave their homes.

It was normal for men to have several wives. The most important duty for women was giving birth to a son.

The only women who were exempted from these rules were high-class courtesans called Kisaeng. Kisaeng were allowed to be educated so they could serve as companions to Yangban men.



General Song's Household

송씨가문

Name: Halmum
Age: Unknown
Personal servant of Meorhu (Nobi).
Class: Cheonmin

Name: Gilsung
Age: 12
Grandson of Halmum. House servant (Nobi).
Class: Cheonmin

Name: Meorhu Kim
Age: 34
First wife of Tamjin.
Mother of Kai.
Suffers from chronic joint pain and fatigue.
Class: Unknown

Name: Tamjin Song
Age: 34
General of the Royal Legion.
Headmaster of the martial arts school Palgwaedan.
Father of Jinho, Bisap, and Kai.
Class: Born Joongin. Became Yangban for killing Gumiho.

Name: Sunhwa Lee
Age: 32
Second wife of Tamjin.
Mother of Jinho and Bisap.
Class: Yangban

Name: Jinho Song
Age: 14
First son of Tamjin and Sunhwa. Half brother of Kai.
Class: Yangban

Name: Kai Song
Age: 10
Only daughter of Meorhu and Tamjin.
Half sister of Jinho and Bisap.
Class: Joongin

Name: Bisap Song
Age: 12
Second son of Tamjin and Sunhwa.
Half brother of Kai.
Class: Yangban



GUMIHO'S DAUGHTER

Outskirts of Hanyang*



The inner quarters of General Song's house



Keep your backs straight and do it again.

Excuse me, Master Song. Your students are ready for you in the main yard.



All right, keep practicing. I'll be back to check on your progress.

Father, please. Could we join the class?



Yes, we're sick of being stuck in the inner quarters like babies!

We'd be in the main yard with the other boys if it weren't for her!

Enough!



Be nice to each other. I'll be back soon.



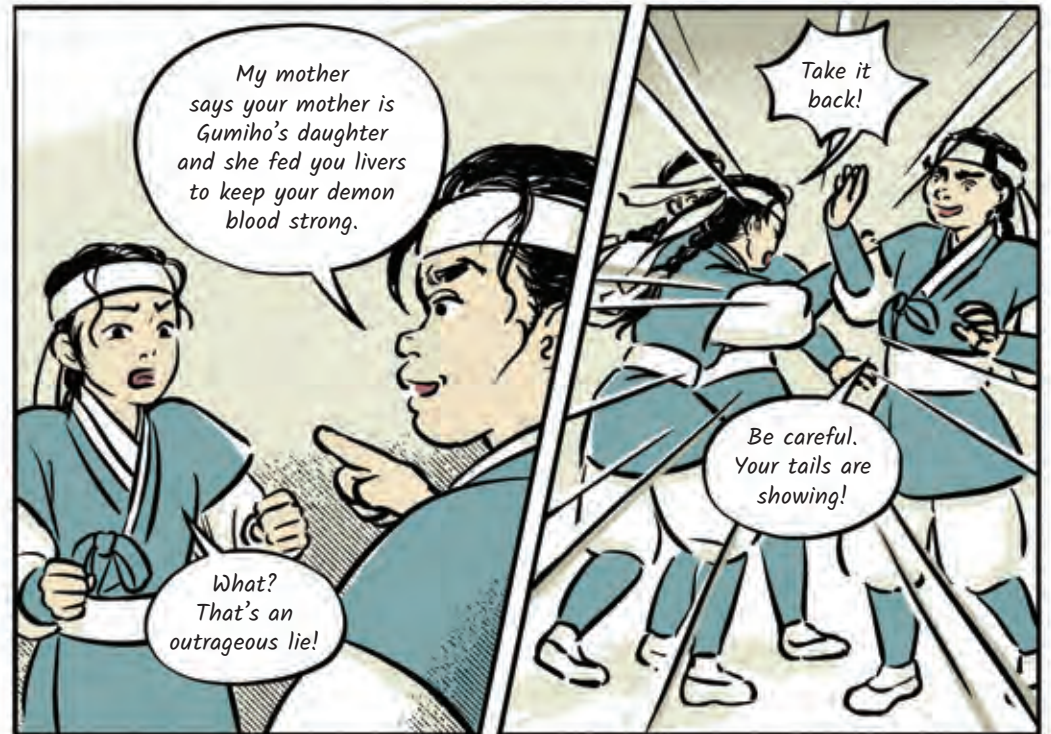
Hey! Palgwaedo* is for Yangbans only, not for a Nobi boy like you!



Get lost or I'll kick you out of our house.

*The capital of Joseon

*"The Way of the Eight Gates" is a fictional martial art form.





I said: Take. It. Back!!!

AHH!



I'm sick of your lies!

Oof!



Let him go!

I will if you promise never to make up rumors like that again.

Ahem!

Kek!



You can't go half an hour without fighting?!

She started it!

No, they did!



They said mean things about me and my mother first!

It doesn't matter. I told you never to use martial arts in anger. You are all grounded.



But Father...

Enough!



I hate them so much!

Honey, what's wrong?



Mother, do I smell like liver?

What are you talking about, darling?



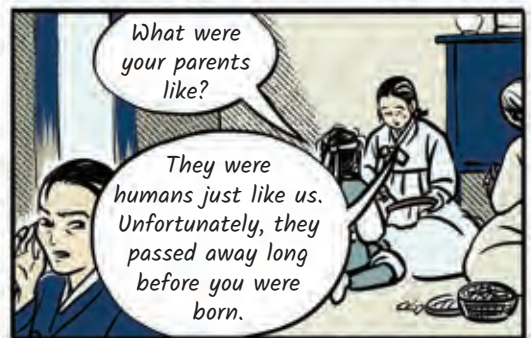
Bisap and Jinho said that you are Gumiho's daughter and you fed me livers.



My dear Kai. Aren't you too old to get riled up by silly stories like that?

So you're not Gumiho's daughter?

Of course not.



What were your parents like?

They were humans just like us. Unfortunately, they passed away long before you were born.



Whisper

Then why do people avoid us and make up rumors about us? You never sit with anyone else but Halmum, your servant.



Come take a walk with me, Kai. I have exciting news for you.



The king has made your father Yangban as a reward for destroying Gumiho. But Yangbans still regard us as beneath them.

It might be hard for us to find a Yangban suitor for you when you come of age.



And you have a yearning for things reserved for men. I wonder if you'd be unhappy as a respectable Yangban's wife even if we find a suitor.



I found out the prestigious Kisaeng house has an opening for an apprenticeship. We'll go there tomorrow.

What?! I don't want to pour drinks for men for a living!



Be realistic, Kai. Kisaengs get to roam around freely, and some of them are even respected as poets.

Father is already teaching me how to read and write. I don't need to be a Kisaeng to do that.



It was very difficult for me to find this opportunity for you. Please give it a chance for me.

Next day



You look so pretty in your new dress, Kai! I am sure the madam will be impressed with you.

This is so uncomfortable. I can't wait to take it off.

No, please!



Huh?



Why isn't anyone helping her?

Kai, what are you doing?!







Kai, look what you've done to your dress!



I couldn't help it. What's the point of learning Palgwaedo if I can't help people?



Kisaeng house

You're late.

We apologize for our tardiness and her attire. We had...an accident on the way.



Bring her in.

Thank you, Madam.



She's got a good face.



But I can sense her foul attitude. She'd need a lot of work to make a proper Kisaeng.



Take this and go stand in the back.



A true Kisaeng can entice the Yangban with her grace alone. Having an excellent posture is the foundation of our craft.



Everyone put the wooden pillow on your head and keep your hands by your side.

You are to follow my commands without dropping the pillow. If you drop it, pick it up and go sit in the back.



The last two remaining will be admitted to my house. Now, sit down.

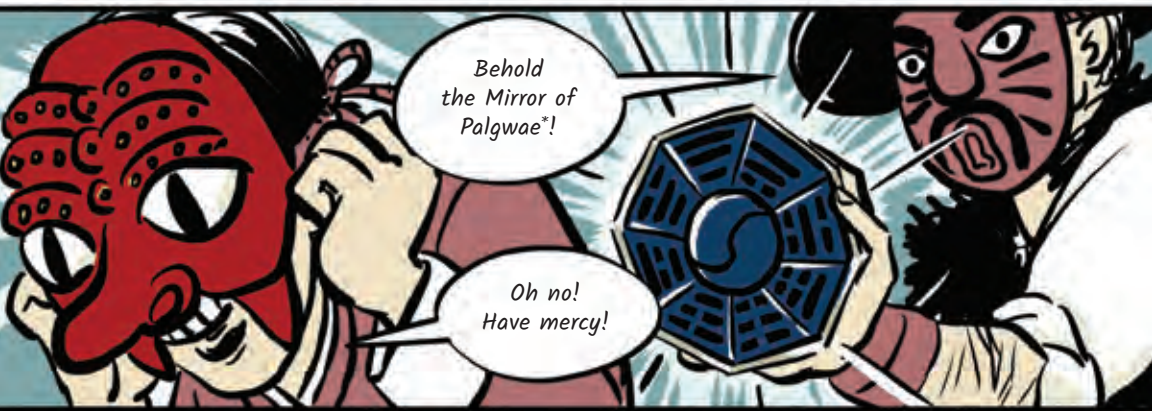


Stand up.



Twirl.





*The eight trigrams representing the fundamental principles of reality in Taoist cosmology



I was a disaster.

Ahahaha! Great!



You aren't disappointed?

I only agreed to let your mother take you there because I knew you would not get in.



I'm not letting my only daughter become a Kisaeng. Your mother doesn't understand the real talent you have.

I've decided to give you private lessons from now on.



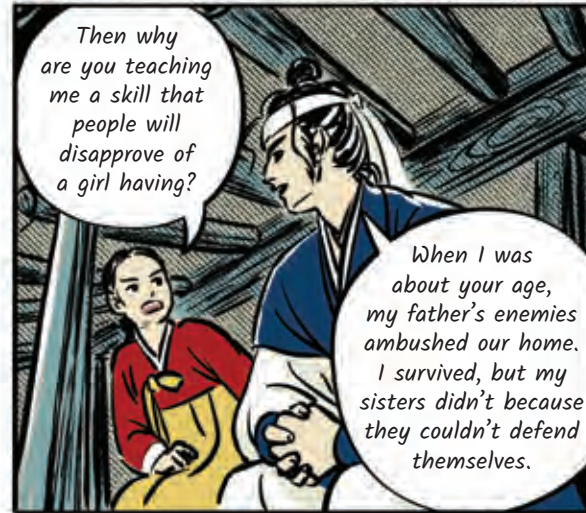
What about Jinho and Bisap?

They'll be joining the class with my regular students.



Father, if they are ready to join them, I am too!

I know. But people don't understand why I am teaching a girl martial arts. I can't put you in there until you become strong enough to show them you are more than worthy.



Then why are you teaching me a skill that people will disapprove of a girl having?

When I was about your age, my father's enemies ambushed our home. I survived, but my sisters didn't because they couldn't defend themselves.



I don't care what other people say. When my enemies come, you'll fight them off.



Your enemies? Who are they?

All I can tell you is that they are ruthless and dangerous criminals, and my team at the Royal Legion is working very hard to find them.



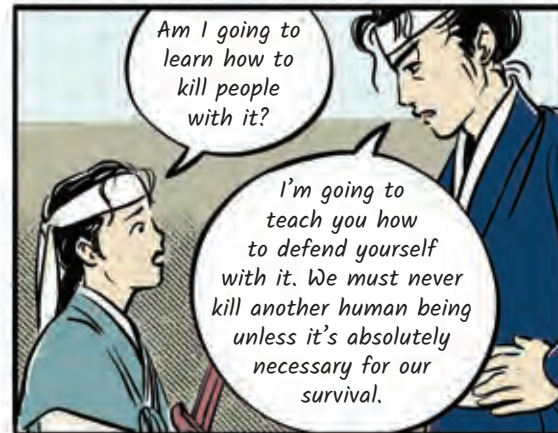
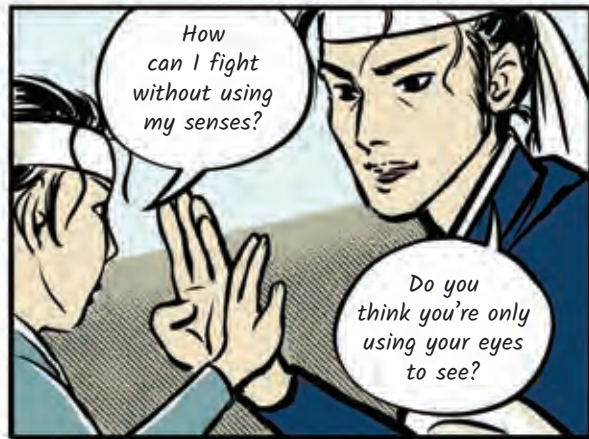
You might be physically weaker than my other students, but you can learn to use their strength against them.

Reading someone's Ki allows you to decipher the opponent's intent, so you react faster than them.



What's Ki?

Ki is the energy that flows through all things. You can feel it when you stop relying only on your five senses.







As long as we don't damage the books, no one will find out.

But...

Don't be scared! I've never seen Gumiho's tails or anything creepy in here.



What about the Mirror of Palgwae?

No, my father told me it went back to the shrine in the palace.



Has master told you about how he fought Gumiho?

Does she really have nine tails?



I'm sorry to say I don't know much more than anyone else.

Every time I asked Father about it, he would say, "Gumiho's gone and she can't hurt anyone anymore" and that's it.

What about Madam Kim?



What about her? You also believe the stupid rumors about my mother?



No, no, I don't!

Good! Now, let's see which one of these books is the one you need.

Four years later



A new student is joining us today. His previous master praised him as his best student.



I'm honored to be joining your prestigious school.



It's our custom to test the new student with the stationary push-hands. Are you familiar with the rules?

No striking, you must stay touching, if you move your back foot, you lose. I was the push-hands champion at my old school.





How about we spar blindfolded so you won't be distracted?

Silly girl! Then I might accidentally hurt you.



We'll see about that...unless you're afraid of losing to a blindfolded girl?



Fine, as you wish!

Bow!



Go!

He doesn't know what's coming.

How many seconds do you think he will last?



HA!



Wow!!!



Huk!



Out!

AHH!



That was too easy!

HAHA

Wow

Impossible! You must be some kind of evil imp disguised as a girl!



Maybe you'd fare better if you stopped relying on your eyes so much.



Teaching a girl martial arts! This is no school for a respectable Yangban!

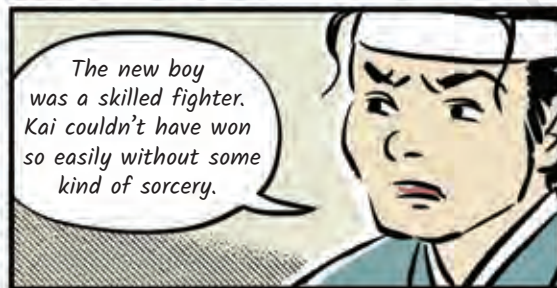
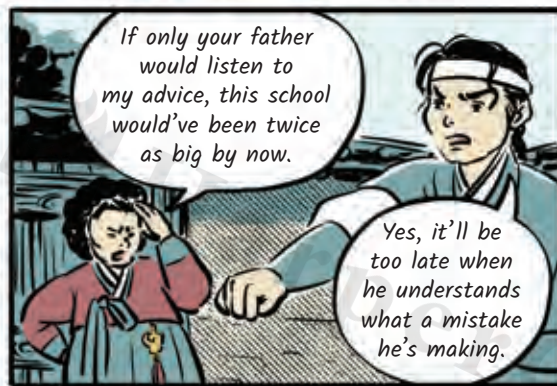
Darling, a visitor from the Legion is here to see you.



Jinho, take over the lesson until I am back.

Yes, Master.

Curse you all!





2

THE SISTERS OF THE BROTHERHOOD



Meorhu's annex at General Song's residence



Madam Lee and Bisap are making up crazy stories about us in front of the whole class!

Oh dear.



I tried to stop them and Jinho banished me from class. It's not fair!



My poor girl. When will you learn to just brush them off?



You are the first mistress of the household. Why do you hide here and let them defile your name?



It doesn't matter what I do or don't do. People believe whatever they want to believe.



If anyone should be pushed out of the main house, it should be Madam Lee, not you!

I asked your father to build this house so I could have peace and quiet.



I just can't stand Madam Lee acting like she owns the place!

You're always welcome to move in here with me.



That would be giving Madam Lee and her sons what they want.

Here's your medicine, Madam Kim.

Thank you, Halmum.



Lady Kai, I made your favorite snack.

Wild berry rice cake! Thank you, Halmum.



Kai, you're fourteen, almost a grown woman now.

Can you please stop your childish obsession with martial arts and start acting like a lady?



At this rate, you really won't find a husband.

Good. I don't want to get married anyway. Boys are dumb.



And I can't live without these rice cakes.

Sigh



Halmum can teach you how to make it so you can make it yourself.

I'd never be able to make it as good as this, so it's no use learning it.



It's easy to make, Lady Kai. I can teach you.



Mother, can you teach me archery? Father said you are even better than him with the bow.



Yet I've never seen you use it.



Give me that!

Oops, sorry, Gilsung!



General Song's stable

General Song, you must come to the Legion right away!

What happened?



Lord Baek was found dead in his cell this morning. We suspect he was poisoned.

Just when we got him to start talking!



I am afraid we may have a spy among us.

I agree. Let's take the shortcut through the mountain.



SHHHH



ACK!

SHAK



Who are you?



GLANK



What do you want?

Your death.



His horse and armor are too fine to be that of an ordinary thief.

He was there when my family was murdered!

The Peacemaker!

He looks familiar. Where have I seen him?

You're slow for someone who calls himself the chief investigator.

Isn't it too bright for a rat like you to be out and about?

I want my message to be as clear as the sky above. Stop your investigation, or you and your family will die.



We won't stop until every last one of you is brought to justice.



Once I get rid of you and your clan, no one will want to be a hero any longer.



I've been training my children all their lives for this moment—so come at me!



General Song's house







Watch out!

Aigo!

Tok

Halmum, get inside!

Pi-O-O



Who's there?



Is that blood?

I can't believe Mother just shot someone.

KYAA!

Whoever it was must've been shot and gotten away!



The main house is under attack!

You must go help them, Kai! We can protect ourselves here.

Whoever they are, they seem to be done with us here. We'll be fine.

I'll protect Madam and my grandmother.

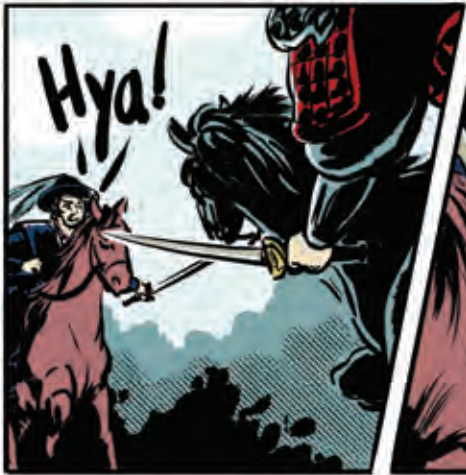


No, I am not leaving your side!



AHHH HELP!







Jinho is dead!



Stop resisting! If you cooperate, you may live to see another day.

You won't get anything out of me!



Poison!



Next morning



Master Song. It's time.



We gather here to remember the lives of our family members who valiantly fought to protect this house. May their souls rest in peace.

The assassins have retreated for now, but they'll be back. We must strengthen our defenses. Women and children must stay in the house.

In order to focus on finding these murderers, I'll be leaving the training of Palgwaedan to our new deputy master...



How could you do this to us when my heart is still bleeding from the loss of our first son?



You've always favored Kai over me, Father. But this time, I won't stand for it!





Is everyone all right?

Like you care!



Master has summoned you to the headquarters.



Headquarters... what a grand name for a hole that we've been hiding in like a bunch of rats.



I knew a girl couldn't be trusted to do a man's job.

The cave reeks of fear.



So many have been injured!



Master will get rid of her for good now.

Traitor!

Is it my fate to always be hounded by my brothers?

I may not make it out of here alive.

Come on.



What have I done in my past life to deserve this?



You're lucky that Master has a soft spot for you.



Come in, Sura.

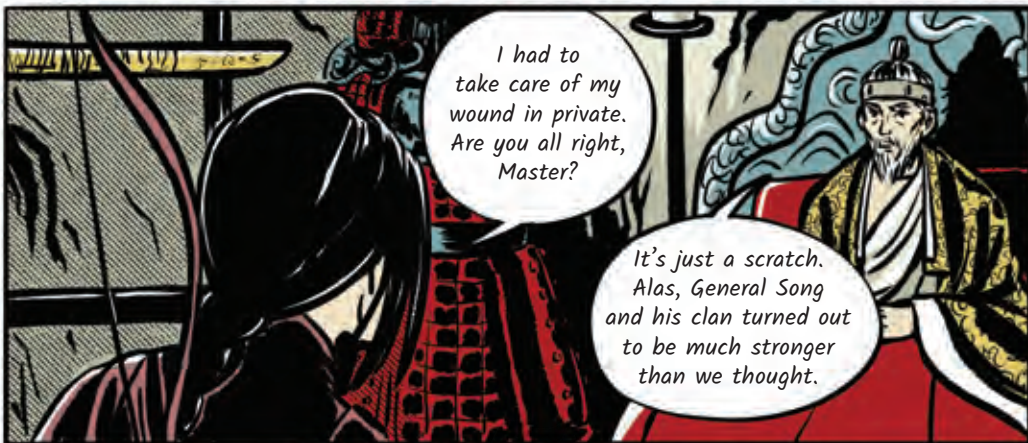
Otherwise, you would have been killed on the spot for desertion.



Leave us.



What took you so long to return after the mission?



I had to take care of my wound in private. Are you all right, Master?

It's just a scratch. Alas, General Song and his clan turned out to be much stronger than we thought.



Is Kai... dead?



She is still alive, thanks to you. She is the only target you've ever missed. Why is that, Sura?



I...I wasn't aware that Kai's mother was an archer.



I've never asked you to kill a girl before, have I?



Do you think her blood will weigh heavier on your soul than the dozens you've killed in the past?



When you took an oath to be part of our brotherhood, you renounced all ties and other relationships. Have you forgotten?

No, Master.



Everyone thought I was wrong to rescue an orphan girl from death row and groom her as one of my own.



I still believe that you can achieve much more than what your birth had dictated. Do not fail me again.

Yes, Master.



Leave your weapons and lie low until my next order. You're dismissed.



I guess I should be grateful that he has spared my life for now.



Is it true that Master has lost his sword arm?

What?



Never mind.

Ouch!



Sura, make yourself useful and go wash these.



We're watching you.



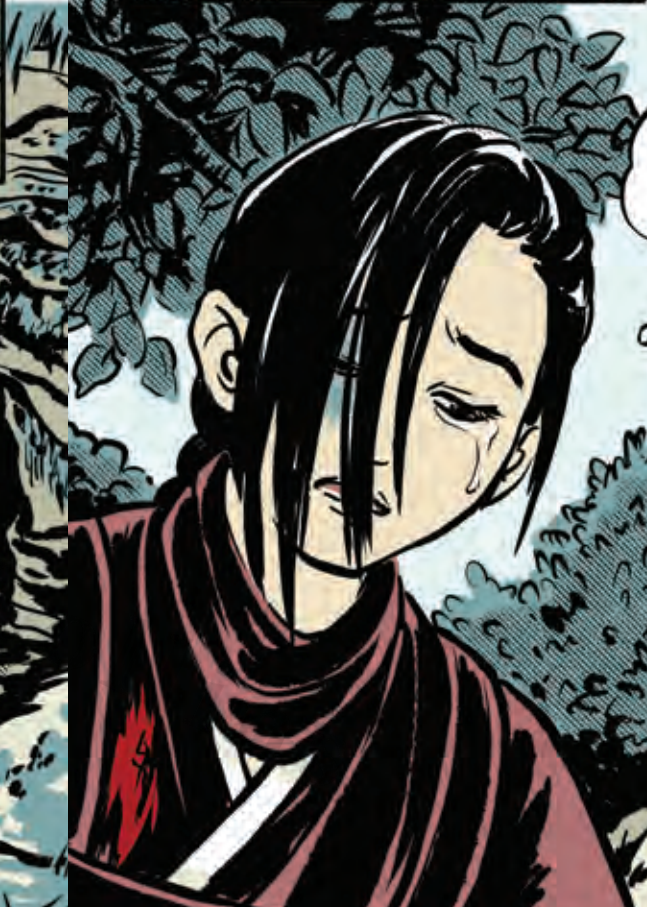
One behind the rock.



And one behind the tree.



One wrong move, and they'll kill me without batting an eye.



But all my troubles are worth it, knowing that she is still alive.



Kai. I thought our paths would never cross again.



Four years ago



You think you can steal everything and leave none for us?



If I don't bring all this back, the mistress will beat me!

Give us what you've got, you freak!



No, please!

I was always at the mercy of those who were much stronger than me.



Are you all right?





I've never seen a girl fight like that. Who ARE you?

I'm Kai. What's your name?

You showed me that being a girl doesn't mean that we are weak.



Thief! Stop her!

The weak must learn to run fast, for our lives depend on it.



And I was the fastest kid on the street.



You'll be hanged tomorrow to make an example of all the thieves.

But running can only get us so far.



We all end up rotting in a damp, filthy hole in the end.

Buhuh...



Psst...



Who are you?

Shh, keep your voice down.



I've been watching you for some time now. You're an extraordinary girl, Sura.

What do you want from me?



You are the stealthiest pickpocket in Hanyang. I'd hate to see such talent go to waste. I'm here to offer you a job.

If you accept, I can free you.



Yes, yes, I'll take it! Please get me out of here!

Aren't you even going to ask what job I am offering you?



What kind of job is it?

I want you to join the Peacemakers. Once you join us, it will be for life.

Peacemakers? What is that?



We eliminate people in order to keep the peace in Joseon. If you do as I say, I promise you'll live very comfortably.



So, what do you say?

Ah... Yes! I'll take it!



Whatever he was offering sounded better than death by hanging.



The Peacemakers was the secret brotherhood funded by Lord Baek, who was the most powerful politician in Joseon.

We took care of anyone who got in his way.

I only stole things in the beginning, until I was ready to steal people's lives too.



Doubt is your only enemy.

Slow down your breathing.

Picture the arrow hitting the target.



You and your arrow are one. Release.

I felt strangely calm during my missions, as if I'd been doing it for a long time.



Excellent job, Sura!

Master had awakened the potential that I never knew I had.



They put you in a cage to be hanged with no mercy.

These gentries treated you like an animal.

They don't deserve your sympathy.



I didn't want to know about my targets. The less I knew, the easier it was for me to do my job.

I drowned my guilt and tried to forget their faces.



Lord Baek has given us up for immunity!

The Royal Army is coming for us!



Pack up everything! We'll make Lord Baek regret this betrayal.

Yes, Master!



Lord Baek stored his most valued possessions in this cave. No one knows about this place except for us.

We'll take these treasures as payment for our lifetime of service to that traitor!



But first, we must eliminate General Song's clan to make sure no one dares to come after us again.

I'll draw him out and end him myself while you ambush the house.



Sura, you will take out the most dangerous ones with your arrows. Here is your first target.



This is Kai Song, General Song's daughter. Rumor has it that she is his equal in martial arts.



No! It can't be her!



But it was you—the girl wonder who saved me years ago.



I couldn't summon the usual calm I felt before a mission, no matter how hard I tried.



When the arrow left my hand...

...my will to go on left with it.



I'll never be able to hurt you, no matter how many times Master sends me back. I'll die, whether it is by the hands of the law or by the brotherhood.



So I must do what my heart has been telling me to do since I joined the brotherhood.



Where do you think you're going, Sura?!



I am still the fastest kid I know. But I am ready to stop running.



The brotherhood will kill me no matter how far I run and hide. But maybe I can stay alive long enough to alert Kai to where their cave is.



Alas, we are not meant to see each other again in this lifetime.

I hope we'll meet again in our next lives, Kai.

SPLASH

3
THE MOONBLOOD



General Song's house

There shall be no more dispute over who gets to be a deputy master after this.

Use all you've got. The person who falls out of the ring loses. Are you ready?

Yes, Master!

Yes, Master.

Go!







Kai!



What happened, Lady Kai?



Huff



Blood?



You can leave us, Halmum.

Congratulations, Lady Kai.



She had her first moonblood. Please prepare a bath for her.

Right away, Madam.



Kai, it's nothing to be ashamed of. All women go through it.



It's not fair.



Bisap should never have won!

I know. I am sorry, darling.

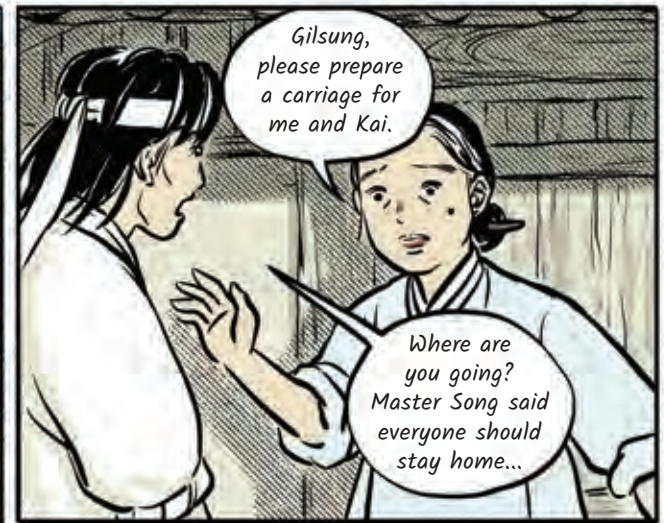
No, you're glad that this happened! You think I'll finally stop practicing martial arts and get married and all that!



Kai, that's not true.

I can do it myself, Mother.





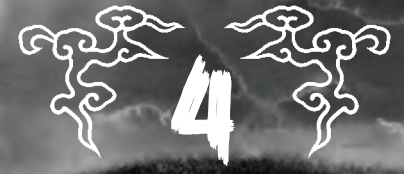






*Literally means "ten thousand spirits." A shaman.

*Korean talisman paper



THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

