

Un-byol

Chapter 1

Sometimes I feel as heavy as a wet, wooden barrel floating in the open sea. Maybe it is like being squeezed through the eye of a needle and it is always better on the other side. It is here among the pestilence where the feeling of home is closest to me. We all live to die and die to live again. The beginning is the end, and the end is the beginning again. They will never let me go. *Slosh.* The mud squishes beneath my bare toes and fireflies light the footpath of the runny, filthy, clay-like mud. My head pounds at the thought of getting two hours of sleep and my heart flutters along with the fireflies.

It is at this moment my eyes squint through the shadows and a figure appears. The figure sways and trips along in the wind. The area below its neck glows like the luminescent fin ray of an anglerfish. Dark matter pulsates and pixelates as the figure draws closer to me.

My stinking, quivering feet are frozen in place. I haven't showered for days and my skin itches and burns, causing me to shake as I walk.

There's no freaking way. I walk through the dark foggy prison fields leading to the forbidden orchard filled with plump, glistening fruit enjoyed by the elite prison officials.

I cannot believe my eyes. The oranges and the apples glow, but so does something else.

"Ma, is that you?" My shrunken prison clothes of godforsaken wool stretch as my chest and heart swell like the pictures of balloons at the Mangyongdae Funfair amusement park in Pyongyang.

The figure approaches me, step by step. She sways back and forth, arms hanging by her sides like heavy logs. Her skin is outer space grey with spots of smoky black and crusty yellow.

“Ma?” Tears well in my dirt-filled eyes as my body quakes and quivers. An uncontrollable tremble takes over my body.

“*Ma!*” My right-hand rattles as I try to cup her face and my hands fall through her opaque form like dirty hands through running water. “Holy . . .” The ghost woman flails her arms and seems to shout.

“Say it, ma. Just try to say it.”

No words come out of the sullen ghost as her eyes spin in frantic circles, and her head cricks from left to right. “You can do it. I’m here. You found me,” I say with bated breath and a half-hearted smile.

“If I had to sacrifice one person to save us, it would always be me. Yes, it would always be me, and it’s not because I am so courageous or altruistic. Maybe I just think I’d be the least missed.” She opens her mouth wide, squeezes her eyes shut, and covers her ears with her hands. A shrill scream fills the deepest darkest parts of my soul. My feet are glued in place as I stare at the rotting ghost of my mother.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t mean it. Ma, don’t get me wrong. The little joys of life haven’t escaped me. It is impossible for me to survive here if I let them take my dignity and my pride.”

My head and arms tilt forward. My shoulders fall forward with sudden heaviness and my temples tighten as fear infused sweat beads form on my forehead. My hands move to wipe away the sweat. Though, I’m met with a familiar aluminium scratching, and I squirm awake. My eyes squint out of the makeshift window through the orchard where I can see some Officials gathering around a grainy TV screen. It shows a familiar television presenter Chon Hyong-kyu. She wears all black and her face is contorted in pain. My eyebrows raise at the sight of her clothed in the official colour of mourning on national television.

The loudspeaker screeches on as her disembodied voice fills the camp. "I'm announcing in the most woeful mind that our Great Leader Kim Il-Sung passed away yesterday due to a sudden attack of illness on July 8, 1994." Her voice continues to shake. "Under Kim Il-Sung's leadership, we will change the sorrow into strength and bravery so that we can overcome current difficulties." Tears stream down her cheeks as she trembles. "We will fight more roughly for a new victory for our Juche revolution."

The echoing words send a tangible current through the camp. An uncontrollable tremble vibrates through my body as fear swells in my chest.

"*How do we live without our Abogi, our Father?*" I hear an inmate in a bunk close by cry. His head bobbles as he wails.

"*It's the end of times,*" another inmate says, running out into the mud and in circles, scratching her skin as if to reach the bone.

"*Woe is me,*" another says. The prison is soon filled with mourning guards and inmates as the news sets in.

"God is dead?" I whisper. It's been at least five years since I met Icarus. A few days after meeting him I was released from solitary confinement, and it was then that I learned Ji-hoon hadn't survived. Since then, I've confronted hunger, the snitches, the guards, and the sorrow alone. The words of Icarus give me resolve on most days. It's one of the few memories, or hallucinations, that still give me hope.

"Life doesn't want to break you. It wants to break you open," I whisper to myself working in the dark mines. "Few are here to save many, though most are here to save themselves," I say, during the morning roll call.

Today, my feet guide me from my bunk and on most days from my post inside the mines, into the daylight, and the warm air. Silence envelopes Davey's grey moist wood as I head towards the prison fields.

Go figure. Great Leader Kim Il-Sung is not only dead, but his mourning period is on my birthday? Is this a sick joke?

The announcement repeats again and again over the loudspeaker as mourning commences all around, but I cannot shed even a single tear. I walk to the stream to wet my face and appear to be sorrowful.

What is sad is the dream of our immortal leader now slips between the cracks of the People's Republic.

If Kim Il-Sung is not immortal, but a human like the rest of us, then the basis of our entire country is built on lies. The hard truth begins to set in for me.

Walking along the dirt fields and the tall cement fence, my mind drifts to Berlin, and the word freedom.

"*That's it,*" I say, my face warm and my eyebrows furrowed. Holding the words in my chest with puckered lips, I'm filled with resolve. I always dreamed of an island of safety, far, far away from here. It is there I lost a piece of me, and I want to go back. This entire country is built on lies. I will try to escape . . . tonight.

The heat of summer makes the biting textile fabric of my clothes even more unbearable as I dream of this unfamiliar word, freedom. The thought of a whole new world makes me sweat, and

toss, and turn. Before I know it, I'm on a slow tiptoe out of my dirt cot into the warm dark summer night.

The moonlight dances and stars waltz in the summer night sky. Without a plan, my escape feels like a death wish. If the guards catch me, they will torture and execute me with an audience. Then, they will find my family and kill them too. My stomach flips and I scrunch up at the thought. Yet, each slow step through the mud feels like. . . freedom.

“What’s left for me here?” I say into the dark night. “It’s impossible to stay here knowing our leader lied about being immortal. He promised us he would never die.”

Before I realise it, my feet have brought me back to where I first met Icarus. *Freedom*. Without a plan, I try to replicate his magic from that mystical day, flailing around and swiping my hands in the air. With a flick of my wrist, I try to conjure the twinkling stars and cosmos. I cut the air with my hands, spinning, and smiling like Icarus. My right hand with palm facing outward waves from top to bottom and then left to right.

No glowing portal appears. My hand strokes my chin. My hand quivers as I draw my finger along my chin. My hand is covered in sweat.

“*Nothing’s working. It’s useless!*” I sigh.

I notice another prisoner approaching out of the corner of my eye. The field is vast with nowhere to hide. The odds of escaping this place are low for a reason.

“Watcha doing?” Yu-jun says with a smile.

Yu-jun was born in the prison like many of the other prisoners here. He’s never seen outside of these labour camp walls and probably never will.

“I’m getting fresh air.”

“During a forbidden hour? Without any supervision?”

“You must understand, Yu-jun. I was feeling quite unwell.” I twist my face and hold my stomach. Pointing at the ground, I continue. “And here in this spot the light of the moon feels . . .the most comforting.” I look up at the full moon with mock wonder and elation in my eyes. “*That’s no excuse.*” Yu-jun’s face is red and small fists clenched. He takes a deep breath, and smiles. “I saw when you left. You had a mischievous air to you.” Yu-jun says as he looks me up and down.

“Oh, Yu-jun. Just this once, I beg you, go back to bed and leave me here with the fresh air and the moonlight,” I say with wide, watery eyes.

“You know that’s not possible, Un-byol,” he says, crossing his thin arms.

Rage bubbles up inside. A pain shoots up from my arm to my head. “What do you mean it’s not possible? Of course, it’s possible. You take your two feet, and you walk in that direction.” I point towards our rotten, wooden sleeping area. As my finger hovers in the air, a line of prison guards run single file towards us with heavy weaponry in their hands and over their shoulders.

“I of course notified the guards, Un-byol. What’d you think was going to happen?”

“*You. You.*” I lunge at Yu-jun, but he manages to step out of reach.

“What do we have here?” One approaching guard grabs the neck of my shirt with a smile.

“It looks to me like we have an execution wish,” another guard says, grabbing and twisting my arm behind my back in one swift motion.

“Thank you, Yu-jun,” he says. “You’ll be rewarded for following protocol and protecting the interest of your fellow prisoners.”

Yu-jun blushes and smiles.

“And Yu-jun, please help gather the other prisoners to witness this execution.”

“I’d be honoured to,” he says, jogging back in the direction they came with one of the guards by his side.

I gasp and no words seem to come out.

“Wha . . . wha . . .” I try to say. My heart pounds in my chest. I understand my imminent and somehow unanticipated fate. It’s all a dream. Madness and imagination took me over that night in solitary confinement. There’s no Icarus. There’s no East Berlin or Berlin Wall. There’s no such thing as freedom.

“*Everyone, single file to the firing wall,*” shouts the guard still holding me as he pushes me towards the firing wall. Many familiar faces surround me, but there’s no emotion in their eyes. They’ve been trained in self-preservation amid immense terror and pain.

My mind drifts back to the dark and lonesome day ma was murdered before my eyes.

“Ma?” I whisper. “Ma, it’s your blessed boy. I’m sorry I haven’t spoken to you in so long. Do you know you’ll always be my blessed best? And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

The guard shuffles me towards the execution fence.

“I guess I’ll be seeing you soon, ma. That’s great because then you can stop looking for me,” I say with a laugh as tears fill my eyes.

“Turn,” the guard says to me. My back faces the guards and the quiet crowd. “Point,” dictates one guard to another. The firing squad prepares their rifles as a well of sorrow opens inside of me.

“We can . . . we can rest together now. We will rest together now, ma. My life was nothing special. At least I tried my best to keep my dignity, and I never lost gratitude for the simple things in life. That counts for something, I’m sure.” An eruption of tears escapes me. My body trembles in anticipation of the end.

“*Shoot,*” shouts the guard.

“The land, the trees, the air and the sea will never forget me. Few are here to save many, though most are here to save themselves.” The words dance off my lips as I accept my fate and close my eyes.

Seconds that feel like minutes go by as silence fills my ears and mind. When I sheepishly open my eyes, I find I’m still alive. There are no shouting guards and almost no sound at all. So, centimetre by centimetre, I turn around to find bullets headed straight towards me hanging frozen in mid-air. The aggressive guards and solemn prisoners are still as if time and space cease to exist. Stepping forward, I curl and uncurl my fingers, moving my shaking hand to touch the unmoving face of the executioner guard. Words come rolling off my tongue. “I’m truly sorry. Please forgive me for what I’ve done. Thank you. I love the Hermit Kingdom.” Unsure of how long this time freeze will last, I turn towards the camp fence, plotting a swift escape. “I’m . . . I’m alright,” I say, trudging towards the fence. “It’s going to be okay. I am going to be okay. I am safe. I am strong.” Pinching my skin, I turn to take in the camp one last time. It’s a scene I’ve known for seven or eight years. “I am safe. I am strong.”

Then, I hear it. A throbbing, whooshing sound fills my ears.

Then, I see it. A glowing portal appears before me. It twinkles like summer sunlight on water, and without hesitation it becomes clear what I must do. Taking one step forward, I enter the portal.

The morbid camp scene comes back to life behind me as the portal shuts, taking me with it. A part of my soul is feather-light and dense all at the same time as I rush towards an unknown kaleidoscope place.

“It’s about damn time you got out of this place,” I hear a disembodied voice that sounds like Icarus. “It’s time you let go of it all and it’s good you acknowledged the reality of it all too. Bad timing can ruin anything, but there is no such thing. Yes, it is pure bliss when we get off the jagged hill of life, through the leaking tunnels, around the Nessie Lake, and move towards the bright shining sun to find ourselves again. Just remember to keep your eyes on the road or you will crash. The rear-view isn’t the main view, my friend.”

A blinding white vibrating light fills the vortex as the words echo around me, and I spin into infinity. “Yes, just remember once a portal opens it does not ever close. No, never. *Not ever.*”

Chapter 2

“Hello, can you hear me?” My blurry and watery eyes struggle to open.

“Yes, that’s right. Almost there.”

A gentle tap in the centre of my forehead sends chills down my spine.

“Almost there,” the smooth meditative voice says. “Let yourself rest within the warm light for the next few minutes.” Flowing green light expands into me and around me. “In a moment, there will be a count from ten to one, and then you will hear a soft chime.”

After a long pause, the smooth voice counts from ten to one. After hearing one, my limbs feel heavier, so I begin to stretch. My eyes open to a sea of limitless white. The walls, floors, ceiling and the seat I’m seated on turn into porcelain. The hardness makes me feel more real.

“Rise commencing. Number one hundred and forty-three is ready for emission.” Scentless smoke fills the air clouding the white space around me. “Number one hundred and forty-three is

ready for emission.” A beeping sound like chimes in the wind fills my ears and mind as a door opens before me. Electronic steps stretch to the ground like an accordion.

“What in the . . .” I say, considering as I descend the steps into an enormous room. The room is all white with no perceptible ceiling or floor.

Thousands of pods float a few metres above the ground. A cacophony of numbers fills the air.

“Number one thousand seven hundred and forty-eight is ready for emission. Number two hundred and nineteen is ready for emission. Number nine hundred and thirty-two is ready for emission . . .”

Where the hell am I? Could I have been handed over to the bloodsucking Americans we’ve always been told about?

“Where in heaven did these come from?” Touching my arms and legs, my eyes inspect the special clothes. Twisting and turning, I even swing my bum in the air to get a good look at the stitching there. “Is this American fabric?”

“Man, that’s linen.” A boy with brown skin and green eyes says with a smile. He’s wearing the same outfit as me.

“Linen,” I mutter to myself, unsure of the word he’s said. “Thank you, comrade.”

“The quality is exceptional.” Looking around he continues, “So exceptional I’m surprised everyone else here is also wearing it.”

My squinting eyes lead to a red blinking sign in the distance.

“Mahalla Welcome Centre,” I read aloud. A swarm of people exit the pod filled room through the wide door below the blinking sign. It's seconds before I realise I’m following them too.

“Looks like the right direction,” says the helpful, smiling boy.

The Mahalla Welcome Centre is full of sweet smells of cinnamon and apricot. My nostrils flare as I'm captivated and stuck in one place. A man in all white with a name tag approaches me.

"Are you wondering what that smell is?" He beams.

I nod. "It's the essence of joy," he says, throwing his head back.

My brow furrows as he waltzes away.

"The essence of joy. Acha, that's exceptional," the boy from before says with a smile.

People funnel into lines to our right and to our left. There's a long counter with Welcome signs. People dressed in turquoise linen stand behind it. They speak one by one to the others in white linen.

The same smiling linen boy from before greets me as we both join the Welcome line at the same time. "What's your number?"

"Um, one hundred and forty-three," I say.

"Acha. I'll be damned. I'm number one hundred and forty-four."

My darting eyes give away my nerves as I nod my head, unable to make eye contact.

"What's your name," he asks with a smile.

Flashbacks to ma and the camp fill my mind. Flashbacks to memories I don't remember in places I must've forgotten fill my mind. A darkness takes over my eyes before I even notice his hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay my friend? I can answer first. No problem. My name is Saurabh."

"Saurabh," I say, the darkness dissipating from my vision. My head falls back as I look up into the brilliant blue sky through the translucent glass ceiling.

"Saurabh . . . It's nice to meet you, Saurabh."

"What can I call you?"

“My name is Un-byol.”

“It’s nice to make your acquaintance, Un-byol.”

We’re already at the front of the line somehow. “Welcome, Un-byol,” says a peachy receptionist with a large smile.

“Um, do I know you?”

“Of course, you know me, Un-byol,” she continues. “We’re all connected here in Mahalla.”

“Mahalla? Is that where we are?” I say as I lean forward onto the pristine counter. Petting my hands, she pushes them back off the counter ever so gently.

“Yes, we’re indeed in Mahalla.”

“Is Mahalla a part of South Korea? Or are we in America? Have I been extradited to America?” I ask, sweat beads forming under my arms.

“Ahahaha,” she laughs, holding onto her stomach and knees. “Oh, no, Un-Byol. We’re not in either of those places.” Her soothing voice puts me at ease. “Mahalla is heaven. Mahalla is your promised paradise. Mahalla is your new home. Welcome home, Un-byol.”

“My promised paradise?” I say, tears filling my eyes. “My home?”

“Yes, your home—our shared home.” She smiles. “After taking the train through the Mahalla Dessert,” she points to the long winding train in the distance, “you’ll arrive at the Mahalla City Gates. We all live within the Mahalla City Wall and Gates.”

She passes me a rectangular paper ticket with the number one hundred and forty-three on it. I nod, clutching it to my chest.

“Your seat number on the train is the same as your transmission pod—number one hundred and forty-three. Don’t lose the hard copy of your ticket for boarding purposes, and don’t lose your

room key.” She hands me a large iron key on a single hook. It drops with a heavy thump back on the counter.

“Happens to everyone.” She laughs.

“Hmm,” I say.

“Do you have any more questions?”

“Uhh,” I say, searching for where to begin.

“Well, then see you next time, Un-byol. We hope you’ll have a dandy time.”

She waves and smiles as a man pushes me into the crowd shuffling towards the train station.

There’s a brick archway and Moroccan tiled floors. I head towards the train platform where the smoke billowing green locomotive already awaits.

“Hey, *Un-byol man. Wait up.*” The now familiar voice transcends the bustle of the crowd as I turn around to find Saurabh waving at me with a wide smile. “It turns out we’re train mates.” He slaps my back as a good friend would. “Destiny is funny even here in Mahalla.”

“*All aboard.*” The train conductor’s moustache wiggles as he speaks. He wears a green felt hat and matching vest. “*All aboard to Mahalla.*” His silver pocket watch glints in the sun.

“I guess it’s time to go home,” Saurabh says with a smile. “Let’s continue this adventure.”

Saurabh walks up the train steps and I follow him.

There are two classes on the train. There’s one class for the Mahalla new arrivals, like us. Then there’s a gated car dedicated to the Mahalla Welcome Committee and Mahalla Leaders.

“Achha,” Saurabh says to me. “That is pure luxury.”

Peering through the gated-car entryway, I notice a vulture with a chilling and commanding aura. He sits at a mahogany wood desk lit by a green shaded lamp. My ears perk up as I hear him speak.

“How do they know someone in this batch will meet her? What makes them so certain?”

A balding attendant with a bulging pot belly sweats and seems tense as he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “I’m . . . I’m not sure. It’s what I’ve been told,” he replies.

Swiping the contents of the desk to the floor with his giant wing, the antagonising vulture rises.

“Get out of here with that rubbish. *Get out of my sight.*”

With a bowed head and hunched shoulders, the Attendant leaves. “I’m so sorry, Iblis,” he says.

The Attendant pushes past us as we turn in the other direction.

Saurabh and I find our seats. The wide windows accent the view outside. A vast sea of sand has one spot of glowing green in the far distance—a forest of some sort stretching for miles. The psychedelic glistening leaves emit a misty, white air.

“According to the map,” Saurabh says pointing to a pocket map he’s laid out, “that’s the Forever Forest.”

A dark violet coloured mountain stands erect emitting billowing umber smoke. The mountain dwarfs the rest of the surrounding nature. My eyes grow wide to behold it. The mouth of the mountain top is lost amongst the clouds.

“That’s,” pointing to the map again, “the Lettgott Mountain. It’s an inactive volcano,” Saurabh says.

“The Lettgott Mountain,” I say, taking a steady breath in and out. “Let go and let God.”

“Let go and let God?” Saurabh laughs. “What are you a poet, man?”

Dragging his hand further, he points to Mahalla. “Mahalla sits inside the Mahalla Wall, so I guess all of what we see on the train is no-man’s land, and nowhere we’ll ever go. Let go and let the scenery unfold.”

Laughing together, we take in the Forever Forest, the Lettgott Mountain and the expansive Mahalla Dessert.

“Oww,” I say as a stick-thin woman burrows past me, knocking me square in the shoulder. She wears a red retro-style dress and matching cardigan. Her skin is fair and her hair a dyed blonde with her dark roots showing. The ends of her hair are curled and dainty. The left side of her cardigan is adorned with a golden winged pin.

She turns as if to apologise to me and instead she smiles as I grimace from the impact. She writes something down on her clipboard. Her heavy energy lingers like the cold air in the Hermit Kingdom as she continues down the aisle.

She removes a cowbell and a microphone from her satchel. She rings the cowbell, shaking it up and down. “Quiet, please,” she says into the microphone, which echoes through the train loudspeaker. “Quiet, please,” she repeats as the train cars fall silent.

Her right hand raises in a delicate gesture. “I am the Grand Train Attendant for Mahalla.” Saurabh and my eyes meet and then go back to her.

“It’s an exceptional honour to be a Grand Train Attendant. I’ve welcomed many happy souls and I’ve walked them through the Mahalla Gates many times too. My sole job is to take care of you, to make you happy, to make you feel at home before you arrive.”

She nods her head, and a pattering of applause follows.

“You can say goodbye to the sorrows of life and hello to the joy of heaven.” She lifts her hands towards the sky. “Every soul visits Mahalla once and only once. It’s but once we enter paradise to enjoy it, and some of us enjoy it into eternity.” She shakes in ecstasy and the cow bell clangs with her.

The train cars erupt in applause. People cheer and feet stomp.

Saurabh bangs his chest as he slaps me on the back. He whoops and hollers with the others.

“Hmm,” I say. An empty feeling in my chest reminds me of the day Great Leader Kim Il-Sung died.

“Un-byol, we’re going to paradise for eternity.” He stands up with the others, clapping and flailing their bodies.

The empty feeling fills my head and I feel dizzy.

“Hello to the joy of heaven,” Saurabh says with a smile. He wraps his arm around my head and rubs my hair.

After a few deep breaths, the feeling passes, and I join the cheering others.

“*Mahalla! Mahalla! Mahalla!*” We chant in elated unison. “*Mahalla! Mahalla! Mahalla!*” I chant and laugh knowing I’ve arrived in heaven to the first friend and first home I’ve ever known.