

Pink Tissue

Son-Dok went about her business, hosing down the massage table in the bathroom. Once finished she brushed her teeth, took a quick swig of blue mouthwash, gargled and spit. She could see him standing naked on the other side of the short wall that divided the room in half between bathroom and bedroom. Slipping off the plastic shower sandals, she squeezed past his large frame. He had finished drying off and stood on the towel waiting for her next to the bed. She offered him another coffee and he nodded. Like an infant watching a set of keys, he never took his eyes off her naked body. She took a small can of sweetened coffee from the mini-fridge, popped it open and poured it into a Dixie cup. Faking a smile, she handed it to him, then nodded and returned to her preparation.

A minute later, Son-Dok laid him out on the bed, on top of a long towel and a newly cased pillow. The bed was stiff and nearly four feet off the ground. Before climbing over him, she put on a pop music playlist from her phone and took a condom from the drawer. Crouching between his legs, she took hold of him with one hand while the other, extended to the side, held the condom safely like a net. She ran her tongue up his shaft and slid the latex on as soon as he was hard.

Son-Dok lit a cigarette when it was over and offered him one. He timidly declined as she had expected him to. The only time he had made eye contact was when he was inside of her and even then he looked away quickly. He's not bad looking, she thought, glancing at him between drags. He was probably still in his twenties and by far her youngest customer, that evening.

"Coffee?" she raised the remains of the can.

He shook his head no.

Son-Dok was charmed by his bashfulness. He was a relief from the unrelenting approach of the drunk and horny. She sat next to him and slowly smoked the first half of her cigarette. The two lay under the red lights, whose hot glow was actually pink. The room was warm and muggy from the shower though a pleasant retreat inside a city frozen over from December winds.

The phone rang once, the signal from the front desk, as Son-Dok pulled the zipper up her short, cotton dress. It was pink but a lighter shade than the bulbs in the room. It displayed her form, perfectly. She was short and slim with tiny curvy. Her chestnut hair was just longer than her jawline. She had smooth, creamy skin, round features and narrow eyes. Men often asked if her breasts were fake, they weren't, but she said yes because it excited them. Most clients had never seen a D-cup of any sort. While straightening up, she kept a cigarette wedged in the corner of her lips, then snuffed it out in a tissue she spit into. She helped him with his scarf and coat, then hugged and thanked him before sending him on his way. Her routine was flawless.

Son-Dok's shift ended in the middle of the night and while there was no snow on the ground the night air was frigid. It was an overpowering cold that quickly cut through all layers of clothing and no amount of bundling was enough. Above the neon haze that covered the metropolis like a membrane, the evening sky was black and void of stars and the moon shown only as a sliver. Her breath, in clouds, made her crave the cigarettes she had forgotten in her locker. She stuffed her hands deep into her pockets and shivered to her car.

Before she could fish her keys from her purse, a black sedan came tearing around the corner. It barreled through the adjacent intersection but not fast enough to avoid being t-boned on its passenger side. Traffic came to a screeching halt then came the horns. Son-Dok jumped when she saw the accident. She watched nervously from the tiny parking lot as the sedan, motor growling, scraped its way through the cluster of cars before stopping in front of the parking lot. The tinted window on the passenger side had a jagged hole at the top where a skull had collided. A stream of blood ran down and along the cracks of fractured glass. She could see the battered, lifeless face of the man in the front seat. The door behind him opened and a man, also bloodied, fell out on to the pavement. His body twitched a

few times. The one who pushed him out watched for a second before turning his gaze to Son-Dok who stood paralyzed with fear. He had the hollow eyes of a mad dog and for a ten-second eternity he stared at her. His head slowly rotated the half-circle from shoulder to shoulder. Then he smiled, displaying his large clenched teeth. The door closed and the car took off.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Son-Dok swore. How many red lights could she run before she was pulled over?

The man in the back, laid across the seat with his head propped up against the door. He strained to cough up the blood rolling down his esophagus. His eyes were swollen shut and despite the temperature, he was profusely sweating.

“Thank...” He broke into a coughing fit and doubled over. “Thank...” He fell between the seats.

“Be quiet!” she snapped.

Son-Dok slung his arm over her shoulder and carried him inside. He had an easy seventy pounds on her but she had lifted her share of drunken men and knew how to shift her weight to make it easier. Leaving him on the sidewalk was a weight she couldn't carry. He would've died. He still might, she thought to herself.

He was admitted to the ER and while she waited for his condition to stabilize, one of the nurses approached her for information.

“Relative?” asked the nurse.

“No,” Son-Dok shook her head.

“Wife?”

“No.”

The nurse, a veteran of the hospital, nodded and put a check on her clipboard. She had taken one look at Son-Dok's dress and made up her mind.

“Friend?”

“We met this evening.”

“Is this your concern?”

“I brought him here. I'd like to make sure he's okay.”

“Better business that way?”

“Excuse me?”

“We'll notify any family members we can. Perhaps it's best you go home and get some sleep.”

“Bitch,” whispered Son-Dok under her breath.

Walking out, she caught the news from the television at the front desk.

“Officers are on the scene in the Guro district. They are responding to a shootout which took place, just an hour ago, when four officers were shot trying to make an arrest. Three are dead and one is in critical condition. There have been no official statements on the identity of the shooters, none of which were apprehended, though they are thought to be connected to a syndicate family in a deal gone awry. More to come within the hour.”

The next day, after she had scrubbed the carnage from the backseat, she drove to her grandmother's apartment at the edge of the city. Old Lady Eun-Ji lived on the thirty-third floor of a highrise that overlooked the city. The view was awe inspiring but with her cataracts, she could hardly see the appliances in her kitchen. On her way to her grandmother's, Son-Dok thought about the man. It wasn't for worry of his health, something in her knew he would pull through. She could still see his pulpy face, pink and swollen with a gash across his temple. He was still trying to thank her when the nurses took him from her arms. What was it about him? Who was he?

“Come in,” said Old Lady Eun-Ji, already with her back to the door. She hobbled into the living room and took a seat at the coffee table on the floor. She was short with a stout frame and thinning gray

hair. Her skin was dry and wrinkled and covered in brown liver spots. Her eyelids were so narrow they appeared closed.

"Sit, sit," Old Lady Eun-Ji instructed. "Have some tea."

Son-Dok took a white envelope from her purse, fat in the center, and placed it on the table between them.

Old Lady Eun-Ji opened the envelope and counted the yellow, fifty-thousand won bills.

"Your perfume," she sniffed and then scowled.

"You don't like it?" Son-Dok asked as she poured tea for the both of them.

"It's cheap. Makes you smell like a whore."

"The men like it."

"Don't talk that way."

"You know where the money comes from?"

"Don't wear it the next time you come."

"I'll wear whatever I like."

"Such disrespect. You shame not only yourself but your parents, as well."

"They've passed and it's now it's my life to do with as I chose."

"Despicable. Shameful. Don't you want a husband?"

"I don't need one."

"Such a thing to say."

"Okay, grandma. I mean no disrespect."

"If your mother saw you this way, her heart would break."

"It's too late. My father did that for the seventeen years of their marriage he spent visiting girls like me."

"Be quiet!"

"Okay, grandma."

"This city has become a sewer. Gang violence, police being gunned down and my own granddaughter is forced into selling herself," Old Lady Eun-Ji looked ready to cry.

"I choose to sell my body. It's my choice."

"Why? You're so beautiful. You could've found a good husband and you wouldn't have had to work. Why? You could've had a good home. This is no way to live."

"I don't hurt or kill anyone for a living. I don't steal. I take care of myself and my family. I don't have to justify my work. I am satisfied with what I do."

"Be quiet."

"Okay, grandma."

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"You have a visitor," a nurse knocked on the door. "Are you feeling well enough? Shall I show him in?"

Sun-Shin nodded. It was his fourth day in the hospital. He awoke on the third day to two fractured ribs, hemorrhages in his liver and bladder and an eye socket which had swollen to the size of a golf ball. It still hurt to chew, but he was feeling better. The nurses had propped some pillows behind him and he sat up reading the newspaper.

"Hello," said the man at the door. He wore a trench coat, brown slacks, black loafers and a scarf that had taken more than a minute to tie. He was portly with puffy cheeks and a ten dollar haircut. He carried with him a manila envelope.

"May I?" he pointed to the chair next to the bed.

Sun-Shin nodded.

"You know who I am?"

"I'd be a fool in my profession, if I couldn't recognize Commissioner Choi."

"Good, that saves me some time."

“What were you doing in the Blue Electric, four nights ago?”

“I was on a case and the trail led me there.”

“Who is your employer?”

“Commissioner, you should know better than to ask.”

“And what about The Hyena?”

“I didn't think the police were in a habit of using nick-names. How will the mayor feel when he finds out how you refer to him?”

“Cut the crap, Shin. Young-Chul is running wild and he needs to be put down.”

“He's a small-fry.”

“That shows just how effective you are in your line of work. Young-Chul is more than just syndicate muscle, he has an unchecked ambition. Two days ago in Gangnam, he publicly executed the head of the Chijon family in broad daylight. Him and his men held the restaurant hostage for ten minutes. In that time, they made them watch while he used the kitchen's knives to carve out Chijon Ji-Min's heart. Witnesses said he held it above his head before squeezing the blood into his mouth. Small-fry, shit.”

“Good riddance. The Chijon's will be one less pain in your ass.”

“Wake up. Young-Chul is off his leash. Unlike his predecessors he has no concept of restraint. The guy's a speed-freak. He gobbles amphetamines for breakfast. He gets 'em from ties he has north of the border. He thinks of this city as something between his playground and his kingdom. Either way, he's going to make it his.”

“How do his superiors feel about his sudden motivation? That much gumption has got to be pulling at the short and curlies.”

Commissioner Choi shook his head. “The head of the Lee family has been missing for a week, the blood of my officers is running through the streets, and this is only the beginning. Young-Chul is going to rip this city to shreds and devour the pieces.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Any information you have on Young-Chul's activities but now I see, you know even less than we do.”

“I haven't lost faith in Seoul's metropolitan police force.”

Commissioner Choi stood up and buttoned his coat.

“Could you do me a favor, commissioner?”

“You're serious?”

“Yeah, think of it like a chip you can cash in for a favor or information one day. I may come in handy, you know?”

“Not likely.”

“The girl who brought me in. Could you find out who she is? The nurses avoid the question, everything I ask. I'd like to thank her,” Sun-Shin smiled.

“After we catch our monster.”

“Thank you, commissioner.”

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Returning home from the mart, Son-Dok left the groceries on the kitchen counter and hung her jacket in the closet. She lived in a studio apartment with a bed, a wooden table, a mini-fridge, and a frayed black couch claimed from the side of the dumpster. The walls varied from peach to white and at times she felt a draft from an unknown source. With no friends, she had little reason to dine out but didn't mind as it gave her more reason to cook. She adored American cooking programs and downloaded several episodes, each week. Son-Dok had a natural intuition in the kitchen and was able to mimic her chef idols with ease. In this way, she became proficient in both cooking and the English language. Daily, she braved her way through the savory and the sweet. Come spring she would have enough in savings for the deposit money on new apartment, one with an oven.

Turning around she noticed a white envelope on her pillow. It was old and had been torn open at some point then taped back together. Son-Dok needed a knife to cut through the many layers of masking tape. Inside was a letter folded neatly into three sections. Handwritten in large erratic lettering it read:

"Whore's should keep their eyes shut. I will tear off your flesh and show your bones. Slowly."

Son-Dok was unable to sleep for the next few days. This was the fear that she had heard the other girls speak of. She had been struck by clients before, but they were belligerent and none had gone so far as to stalked her. She thought of the man in the car and his enormous teeth and a cold sweat came over her. At work, her muscles were tense and the men noticed, some complained. Normally, she was able to remove herself from the act. She could go through the motions as a surgeon or motorist might but after the letter, every client was her potential killer, every room her potential grave. She jumped after a client dropped a shoe on the floor. Her heart raced when the men touched her. On the third night, while on her back, she saw the grotesque images from the news and screamed. The man on top of her, semi-intoxicated and startled, began to shout but quickly gave up when she drowned him out. He ran from the room with nothing but a hand towel to cover himself.

* * *

Sun-Shin sat up in bed. It was his second week in the hospital and he was able to do such things for himself, again. The tissue around his eye socket had shrunken and in a day the stitches in his forehead would come out. For a week and a half he had done little but stare out the window at the mass of concrete and the intersection, below. Each day he asked the nurses if he could be released and each day it was the same answer: not yet. Finally, that morning, he was able to get the attention of the doctor who told him, he would have to remain in their care for another week. If his recovery continued on at the same pace, perhaps, they would discharge him.

Sun-Shin was given the daily paper and there was a television in the corner of the room but he paid little attention to either. He couldn't take his thoughts from the girl. The only picture he could recall was a blurry one. He remembered the side of her face as he looked up at her from the backseat and the angelic light that reflected off her skin. The fragrance of her perfume still clung to his nostrils. It drifted in and out, intoxicating the flat stench of hospital sterility he was forced to endure. By now, his client had either found someone else or discovered his whereabouts. Either way he was cut loose and happy for it. This mess with the Lee family was too big a beast to tangle with. He was lucky they hadn't cut his throat. He would be more than content to get back on the trail of a cheating spouse.

There was a knock on the door.

"May I come in?"

"Afternoon, commissioner. Good news, for me?"

The commissioner took the seat next to the bed. His face displayed no desire for chumminess.

"We found your girl."

"Where?"

"She works in a brothel on the east side. She's a well-known face at a popular establishment. Her name's Jeon Son-Dok. Has been a girl there for four years. Parents died in a car accident when she was in high school. Only known relative is a grandmother who lives in the city. No felonies, no arrests. Pretty girl, shame she had to end up in such a place."

The commissioner flipped the yellow pages on the notepad and tossed it on Sun-Shin's lap.

"What do I owe you?"

"Funny you should ask. I could tell you were hard-up her, the last time I was here. You're just the sort of idiot to chase after a girl like that."

Sun-Shin chuckled.

"You should know he's coming for her."

"Who?"

“The Hyena.”

“Why?”

“He's got it in for two kinds: prostitutes and the rich. Most of the time he kills for money but those he kills for fun. Something inside his fucked-up skull sees it as a moral duty. He eyed her the night they worked you over and she's an itch he can't help but scratch.”

“Why are you telling me, this?”

“Cause the bastard's held up in that compound of his, on the lower side, with a small army of Lee family muscle between him and us. The only time my boys have spotted him on the outside was when he paid a visit to your sweetheart, last week.”

“She's okay?”

“They haven't touched a hair on her head and I'm starting to believe in divine intervention. Anyways, the bust is going down, tonight. Every day that son of a bitch lives, another dozen bodies hit the morgue.”

“And you want me to go after her in case he shows up?”

“Would you mind?” the Commissioner asked sarcastically.

“Why isn't she being shadowed?”

“She was but I'm pulling every available man for tonight. We're making like it's a god-damn invasion.”

“Does that make me a pawn or the knight?”

“That all depends on how you respond to pressure.”

Sun-Shin laughed.

“You know, I did some digging, went back in your record. Sub-par scores in your high school evaluations, no college education, not married, no personal assets to speak of, you drive a piece-of-shit and even by generous estimates, you're not making more than thirty-five, a year. Do you enjoy this antiquated fantasy of yours or are you *really* the fuck-up your record would lead me to believe?”

“I enjoy my work,” Sun-Shin's tone took a nose dive.

“Oh, you do, do you? Running around, chasing after, let me guess, the husband with a hard-on? You ever pull any cats out of trees?”

“Easy. Watch it.”

“Let's get real. You've found something semi-lucrative and you must have some skill or else your ass would be in a different line of work by now. But you're a little boy playing with fireworks. And sooner or later, one's going to pop right in your face.”

Sun-Shin inhaled slowly then exhaled longer. “And so what? I come join the ranks of your gestapo? Keep the peace, one kick back at a time? The syndicates became the behemoths they are because of your department. You wanna talk homework? Yeah, well, I've done mine. Your department estimated the Lee family's numbers to be around forty to fifty, in 2002 when you took office. In the eleven years that followed, they've more than tripled in size. They've claiming large portions of the city, all the while, swallowing or decimating the smaller gangs. The rap for mid-level members mysterious disappears. Talk about divine intervention. Not one drug-trafficking or murder charge has stuck, since Choi Byung-Jun '*Let's take back our city,*' took office. You sat back and let them nibble away at the city and soon they got tired of waiting for dinner and decided to cut out the middle-man. Stop me when I'm wrong.”

Commissioner Choi stood up and straightened his coat. When he spoke his tone was grave. “You may be done with me, but you'll never be done with this conversation.” He turned to face Sun-Shin from the door. “I've left your things with the nurse. Don't be late.”

A moment later, a nurse entered with a duffel bag. Setting it on his lap, she said, “Here you are,” without making eye contact.

When she left the room, Sun-Shin unzipped the bag. Inside, he found his blue suit, blood removed and dry-cleaned, and a Colt Cobra .38 Special. It was almost sunset.

* * *

Across the city and hours later, Son-Dok returned home from work. She took a cigarette from her coat pocket before hanging it. As she walked toward the window, there was a knock on the door. Son-Dok froze. It was him. It's was too late in the night or early in the morning, depending on how you looked at it. Either way, it had to be him. She said nothing and waited. The knocking quickly became pounding and soon the hollow thump of the fist against her door was like cannon fire. Then silence. Son-Dok's joints locked up and tears streamed down her face. She heard the cover on electric keypad slide up. He entered her code and flipping the cover down and the door unlocked. He stood in her doorway with a scowl so full of hatred he could hardly contain himself. He was tall, almost as tall as the door frame. He had waxen skin and black, disheveled hair. Beads of sweat clung to its oily spikes. He was thin to the point of famished. He wore a black suit with the sleeves rolled up. It was torn in several places. There was dried blood on his hands and forearm and crusted underneath his fingernails. His lips parted to reveal two rows of long, crooked teeth. She screamed as his skeletal frame stepped inside.

Son-Dok reached for the first thing her hand touched. She whipped a tea cup at him. When it connected with his cheek, Young-Chul bellowed. He covered his face with both hands and howled like a wolf. He began headbutting her wall. Over and over he slammed his head into the concrete wall until a circular splatter dripped red, down the wall. He came at her with the back of his hand, thrashing her over and over, then kicked the leg out of her wooden table. It sent her computer crashing to the floor. Lifting the wooden leg, he brought it down upon her until she was a battered mess and the blood between them was indistinguishable.

Young-Chul lifted his wooden club, panting, he looked into her eyes. He inhaled slowly as he prepared for a finishing swing. What little tissue his biceps contained, tightened, and he swung at her. Suddenly, his neck burned in agony. She had caught him with a metal chopstick through the neck. She didn't let go, even when he fell to his knees. Dropping the club, he wrapped his hands around her throat. Eye-level, she jammed the utensil through the pink tissue until it scrapped at the spinal column. Eye-to-eye, the lioness roared, spitting flecks of blood across his face. Soon, his expression turned to disbelief and he went limp. She unplugged his neck and watched him fall to the floor. The life quickly pooled out of him.

* * *

The weight of the steel in Sun-Shin's hand felt good. He hadn't touched a firearm since his military service, a decade before. Stepping over the two bodies in the hallway, Sun-Shin approached the open door. A moment before, he heard a woman yell and watched as the two drew their weapons and made for the room. They had been guarding the door when he plugged, each, twice in the back. They never saw it coming.

The apartment was a mess. Kitchen utensils lay across the floor, clothes were strewn about and Young-Chul lay prostrate in the middle of the room. His blood rolled through the cracks of the uneven floor. Son-Dok was curled up in the corner.

"Hey," Sun-Shin shook her. No sign of life. "Hey," he patted her cheek. "C'mon. Come back to me," he shook her, again. "C'mon."

Her eyelids cracked the dried blood that had crusted over them.

"You..." her head bobbed. "It's you."

Sun-Shin lifted her in his arms. He stepped over Young-Chul. At the doorway, he saw death flash before his eyes, as a bullet collided with the frame. He jumped back and laid Son-Dok out on the floor, then drew the .38 Cobra and knelt by the door. He listened as the footsteps approached and at the last second, spun around the corner and fired the two remaining bullets into the man's chest. He was laid out atop the other two casualties.

"You," said Sun-Shin. "You're one of Choi's boys. What are you doing here? Huh?" he shook the cop struggling to retain consciousness. The cop was mortally wounded and in such a daze, his head

couldn't remain in a fixed position.

Was it a set up? Sun-Shin asked himself. Had Choi set me up? No. But why? Was this one crooked? Did he work double-time for Young-Chul?

Thirteen cops lost their lives, earlier that evening. Sun-Shin heard the broadcast on his way to Son-Dok's. Every news outlet in the city was reporting it. The shootout had left most of the Lee syndicate dead and would subsequently be known as Seoul's bloodiest conflict in the sixty years since the Korean war.

Sun-Shin frantically looked up and down the hallway. It was dark on both ends. He had to wave his hand every twenty second to keep the sensor lights going.

"Who were you after?" Sun-Shin demanded. He back handed the cop, who coughed up blood. "Was it me? Did he send you after me?"

Finally, the cop fixed his gaze on Sun-Shin. "He said..." the cop coughed. "No loose ends."

The cop was dead and Sun-Shin went back inside for Son-Dok. With her in his arms, he proceeded cautiously into the hallway, then quickly down the stairwell. With each step, she bounced in his arms. She looked up at the man carrying her. His hair was short and jet-black, as were the irises of his hooded eyes.

"Thank you," she tried to smile.

"Hush," Sun-Shin spoke. "Now, it's my turn."