First published in 2024 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA, UK
Vijverlaan 48, 3062 HL Rotterdam, Nederland
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Published by arrangement with Transatlantic Literary Agency Inc.
All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher.
The right of Robin Ha to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.
Copyright © Robin Ha, 2024
Typography by Robin Ha and Dana Fritts
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.
ISBN 978 1 83913 487 6

Printed and bound in China

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

1

GUMIHO'S DAUGHTER

*The capital of Joseon

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

That was mean. What's the harm in letting him practice?
Shut up, you shouldn't be here either. Father is crazy to teach a girl how to fight.
Let's spar!
Hey, don't leave me out!
Why don't you just go play with other girls?
I don't want to play with the other girls. I want to practice Palgwaedo!
What are you talking about?
It's more like, the other girls won't play with you because you stink.

My mother says your mother is Gumiho's daughter and she fed you livers to keep your demon blood strong.
What? That's an outrageous lie!
Take it back!
Be careful. Your tails are showing!
It must be the demon blood that makes you so wild.
Get away from me, you're giving me demon cooties.