

1. Xanadu

Moon still in the sky, sunlight spread slowly across Seoul through a front of haze and dust. Dressed in her regular interview suit, piebald and matched to dark heels, Soobin Shin surveyed the mountain-cradled Nowon district from the window of her seventh floor apartment. No one yet stirred in the street, but the roads were already rolling with waves of cars and delivery bikes, and neon signs were alive with words: *Singing Room! Sauna! Church!* Soobin wondered if any of these establishments had even closed shop the night before. Probably not.

Rooms upon rooms, 24/7, she thought. Welcome to Seoul.

Soobin turned and sprayed perfume into the air, lingering beneath the cloud of aroma for a moment. This static emblem of smartness clashed with the tattered band posters on the walls, with the tottering piles of CDs and records around her slippers and on the shelves, stacked-up releases that screamed with colours and nonconformity. Content that enough of the aroma had fallen upon her, Soobin then left for the station, gasping at the cold before blending into the sea of whites, greys, and blues streaming both ways on the road outside. Only a yellow van stood out from the bland wishwash, parked up on the kerb. Kindergarteners were bundled into it, one by one, by a college girl Soobin had seen before, a drowsy-looking young woman in a military cap and parka. Even younger women dragged their feet from the opposite direction, high school girls trailed by middle school boys respectfully keeping their distance. Sleepy herself, Soobin wondered how many of them had gotten any rest the night before. Searching at

the traffic lights for a glimpse of sky, all she could see with her weary eyes were windows and air-con units, ugly dust-battered boxes scattered across the faces of apartments in a tic-tac-toe fashion. Electricity lines trailed from rusting and weathered poles. On ground level, the same store names repeated up and down both sides of the road, and stamped on the cargo of numerous delivery bikes, whose hell-bent couriers sped through the red light and buzzed between lanes, their takeaways tilting them perilously askew as they disappeared into the horizon at either end of the road. Soobin turned her thoughts to foreign lands: sun and greenery, island calm. It was the kind of escape sold by Xanadu Tours, as well as the many other Seoul agencies where she'd failed to get a job recently. As she watched the influx of drowsy commuters streaming onto the escalator down into the underground station, Soobin wondered if she should be trying for an island living, not this city one.

Her subway carriage sped away like the cars and bikes above her. Beside her, every head looked down at the screen of a smartphone, just as she was doing. As ever, Soobin's screen filled with album covers, their nonconformity batted away one by one with the callous flick of her finger, their colours screaming like the screech of the train through Seoul's tunnels. Soobin and the others sped through the shadows, hidden, kept safely away from all the accidents and pollution above. There was safety in numbers too. Each pair of shoulders kept one from toppling over whenever the train pulled into or out of a station, allowing in more bodies to the throng..

Looking up from her smartphone, Soobin saw the usual sea of album covers, comic strips, and puzzle games. But between two sets of shoulders, she could see the scrolling text feed of the morning news. The story woke Soobin up with a jolt:

Korea's entertainment world is today mourning the loss of actress and singer Ahra Boo. The body of the idol, aged 28, was found at her Sinsa-dong apartment last night, in news that casts another shadow on the entertainment industry. Ms. Boo's death follows the recent suicide of actor Jaeil Yoo in the summer, and the attempted suicide of JENNY member Nari Kong last month.

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Jongno District

It was still cold, but Soobin relished the icy wind. Venturing through the myriad of traditional *hanok* houses in the area, she was simply glad to be free from the absurdly packed train, its heads and bodies, its bad news and belligerent behavior.

It would be nice to work here. Jongno always feels like somewhere else, she thought. The area she was walking in was *old* Korea, a part of Seoul left behind by modernity simply because enemies of country and conservation hadn't yet managed to raze it all away in favor of identikit neighborhoods like Nowon. Jongno's modest architecture gave off an honest air, even if the *hanok* around her with their wide-brimmed shingle roofs were probably younger than Soobin herself, maybe by a decade or more. The true history missing from these replicas came from the stalls of fried snacks beyond the labyrinthine alleys. Around them hung the sweet smell of fish oil and red-bean paste. These were the

taste of Soobin's childhood, when her mother was still alive. Winters had felt just that little bit warmer back then.

As she approached Xanadu headquarters, Soobin practiced her lines to calm her nerves: *While snacking on bungeoppang waffles, you can take a walk around Deoksu Palace. But don't go with your sweetheart. Legend dictates that any couple to walk past its ancient walls is cursed to break up in the not-so-distant future!*

A few local couples were strolling by the palace anyhow, along with the many Southeast Asian tourists who curved around the shingle-topped walls of the palace into the scattered alleyways. Soobin ducked into an alley blessedly free of foreigners. Restaurants and cafés loomed along the steep incline. At the top, where modern Seoul rumbled by on two to four wheels past a vast Abunda department store, stood the highest of the buildings, its ground floor another of the ubiquitous English language academies, the upper four Xanadu's HQ. On the roof was the company's flag in violet lettering, visible again just as proud in the low-ceilinged lobby.

Back to reality. Soobin tried to let the LCD screens around the lobby lull her into a sense of serenity, one free from the nagging doubts and fears that ate at her. Around her, unblinking screens battered her with shots of robots morphing into planes and trains, each snippet separated by the same letters in violet, forming *XANADU* on an endlessly repeating loop of about ten seconds. The cycles turned with no end in sight, immortal and free of diffidence, like a futuristic military campaign, cyberkinetic and soulless.

A distant grandfather clock announced noon, and Soobin was summoned along a corridor, the tolling chimes echoing behind her. The guide was an oddly plastic receptionist, a younger girl who hunched out of deference to her guest; her altered eyes stared like a lemur's.

"This way, ma'am, fifth floor!" the receptionist sang when they reached the elevator, standing aside so Soobin could enter first. The girl seemed apologetic over the ensuing wait—the button had been pressed, but nothing was happening. "That's very strange," she mumbled, looking away from Soobin and up towards the LED number display, which read the letter F in red. "It seems to be stuck on the fourth floor, ma'am."

The unlucky fourth floor, Soobin thought. "Can we walk instead?" she asked. She was keen to get this over with.

The receptionist remained hunched up the staircase and as far as the door to the interview room, where she swiped a card and stepped aside again. The whole floor was full of such faceless doors, white and impenetrable gates to fortresses of commerce. Soobin patted down the sides of her jacket and skirt as the door slid open. Inside the bare room were three people—two men and a woman—in a row behind a rectangular wooden desk and in front of a panoramic view of Seoul through the window behind them.

A bespectacled man in his forties with a large forehead and earlobes, suit dark as his chair, stood up from the desk. "Please make yourself comfortable, Miss Shin," he said.

Soobin nodded at him. She knew who he was: Hyungjin Noh, head of Marketing. As she took her own seat opposite him, Noh introduced the others: the woman was Kyungwha Chung, the personnel manager; and the younger man Jaeguen Seo, head of digital advertising. Soobin pretended not to know them, whilst matching them to their online headshots. Noh had once had thicker, darker hair, and the woman a more natural smile. Seo seemed as eager and keen as he did on the official Xanadu website, giving Soobin a good view of his china-white teeth every few seconds, like an uncontrollable twitch. In front of him was a laptop as flashy and sharp as his image he was trying to portray.

“So, Miss Shin,” Seo began, “you’re here today with a company that’s always been at the cutting edge of innovation, whether it be through travelling or marketing. It was Xanadu who started the karaoke bus craze for our nation’s grandmothers all those many years ago, and it’s us today who fly Koreans to places as far afield as Iceland and Dubai, and even Brazil and Tunisia. This love for the progressive has ensured Xanadu’s success thanks to all the family who walk these halls. We call them *family*, not workers, and isn’t that why you’re here today, Miss Shin? To be part of one of the most successful families in Korea?”

Soobin nodded gingerly, although the way Chung’s stern eyes were avoiding her own was annoying. The old woman seemed only to be interested in her dyed locks, flitting over Soobin’s blonde hair coldly and mechanically.

“You’re here today to work with *the best*,” Jaeguen continued, “and to find the best for our family, Xanadu must offer candidates the most challenging way to *shine* in

this economic climate. Today your shining moment will come in an interview, Ms. Shin, as is tradition, but before all that, I'll ask you to look up for one moment."

Look up? Soobin saw a projector on the ceiling. Looking back down, she saw the screen of the laptop now pointing her way.

"And we'll give you a *word*, Ms. Shin," Jaeguen continued, locking his eyes with Soobin's, his teeth once more visible. "Ready to hear it, I hope?"

Soobin wasn't, but she nodded nonetheless.

"*Suwon.*" Jaeguen let his smile linger, waiting for Soobin's reaction.

"*Suwon,*" Soobin repeated. *Okay*, she thought. *Suwon what?*

"Yes, dear old Suwon," Jaeguen explained. "This ancient city has been overshadowed by our mighty Seoul and Busan over the years, and it's the one place that deserves to be discovered by future tourists from all over the West - *and* the East. So Americans *and* Asians, if you please!" Jaeguen rose to his feet with a chuckle, as did the others. "Today therefore, Ms. Shin, we're going to give you twenty minutes to pitch us your proposal to make the city of Suwon stand out for foreigners in this new Asian century. You may reuse images, slogans, and concepts, and recycle ideas from your studies at university if needed. But just remember one thing: nothing already used or copyrighted by Xanadu Inc., because we're going to be the first to spot it, mark my words!"

Soobin tried to laugh along with the others. But the unease won out: she hadn't seen *any* of this coming.

“So are you ready to prepare?”

The others were already getting up to leave. Soobin tore herself away from Jaeguen’s stare to look them all in the face and lie through her own bared teeth.

“Of course I’m ready. What a wonderful opportunity it is to be here at Xanadu!”

Hyungjin smiled, Jaeguen winked, and the old woman nodded, trying to smile but failing on account of something, Botox perhaps. They left Soobin with the laptop. A timer on screen was already counting down, cold and unblinking.

“Suwon, okay,” she announced to the room. “Suwon... what?”

Soobin stared out at the crosses and cranes through the window, the higgledy-piggledy arrangement of shining skyscrapers and the dull offices in styles ranging from the disco era to the present. *Seoul needs one giant lick of paint*, she concluded. *Most of the country does. Who’d want to come here and see this?*

She thought of her boyfriend Choi and inspiration came, even though Choi had forgotten to wish her luck, not calling or messaging her that morning. Soobin got to work.

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She was still working when the trio returned through the sliding door.

“So what do we have here then?” asked Jaeguen, spinning the laptop back around before Soobin could finish the closing sentences of her presentation.

Soobin looked up at the projector, then towards the three interrogators. “May I begin?”

Curtains were drawn. She waited as Jaeguen lowered the projector screen, keeping her eye not on him but on the unblinking gaze of the projector, blinding her to the sight of the judges.

She put on the friendly face she’d mastered over so many other interviews. The words *SUWON: OUT OF THE BOX* then came up on the screen, as violet and bold as the numbing Xanadu corporate brand.

“What do Japanese and Americans want?” Soobin asked.

The room waited for an answer as their guest weighed the small projector remote in her hand, preparing to deal her cards.

“Escape!”

And with a twitch of her hand, the screen changed from text to image: grandmothers hiking a mountain trail in synthetic pinks and purples, a huddle making their way towards a red temple that served as outpost on the trail.

“Americans want the exotic,” Soobin continued, “so we tell them about Suwon’s temples and mountains.”

The screen changed to a photo of a castle: benevolent, well guarded by a ring of old stone, and capped off with a gigantic *hanok* roof.

“The Americans want the exotic, so we let them know about the Hwaseong Fortress. We tell them this is no palace or temple, but an actual, ancient castle. They can hear of its dynasties, of the tragic prince buried alive in a rice box for a coffin. And the Japanese? They’ve seen it all before, right? Yes, it’s home from home, but with *double* the soul.”

A change of image: markets lined up narrow streets.

“It’s rough around the edges. It’s got that ‘70s feel. It’s unpredictable. And it’s got —” Soobin switched again with her button. “ — the *other* side of Korea.”

The picture changed. Behind Soobin were two bar girls sharing one pole bar.

“When people think of Asia,” Soobin continued, “they think it’s either weirdly clinical or cryptically horny. A product of repression and ruin. They think the Japanese are all polite but kinky in bed. And us Koreans? They just think we’re Japanese, but *without* the edge. Like a bunch of ex-Communists waiting for some giant bomb to fall.”

Another image, this one a black-and-white shot of scantily clad girls in a karaoke room. Older men surrounded them, leering and tipsy.

“Suwon is a chance to change that thinking, for here we can see the real Korea. This is our country, a place to party. This is Suwon, a home for the Japanese and the Chinese, and an escape for Westerners more familiar with Thailand. It’s got clubs, it’s got gays. It’s even got an army base! This is Seoul with more soul. This is —”

Someone switched on the lights.

“Surely that’s *enough*, Miss Shin?” said Jaeguen, before she could continue. He was emanating a negative sort of aura, glancing tensely at his superiors who were glaring center.

“What do you mean?” Soobin mumbled.

“You mean you don’t know?” Jaeguen replied.

“You can sit down now, Seo,” said Chung, in a steely tone.

“Yes, you may,” echoed Noh, perhaps to remind Chung of her place in the chain of Xanadu command.

“Ms. Shin,” Chung continued.

Soobin bowed her head a little. “Yes, ma’am?”

“Mr. Seo was right earlier when he said Xanadu likes progress. Progress comes from people like you, thinking *out of the box*. You have shown imagination here today; that can’t be denied.”

Soobin could feel the course being changed once more.

“I think we agree with that, sir, don’t we?” Chung asked Noh, who gave a single nod while Jaeguen sheepishly returned to the chair beside her.

“I assume it comes from the music degree you flip-flopped away from, Ms. Shin, am I right? Nethertheless, one must always remember that Xanadu started off as a *family* company. I’m sure you already know this, Ms. Shin. You already know then how we’ve been popular with families because we’ve never forgotten our basic fundamental

principles. We don't charge *our* people unreasonable fares for the sake of it, for stakeholders who hide in the shadows. Absolutely not! And if you want to work for that sort of company young lady, then you need to look elsewhere and stop wasting our time with your *filth*. But even then you may find yourself applying *again* for work, Ms. Shin, because those sorts of companies put money in front of people, each and every time. They're not families, in the long run. But we at Xanadu are, and when I look at you now, I see an interesting mind at work, I can't deny, but – but you don't have the heart for *family*, young lady, do you?"

Soobin didn't answer straightaway. She was imagining a world where her mother had survived to the same age as this matriarch, knowing that in any such world there was no way that Haneul Shin would have ever sported such a sour-looking face.

"Do you?" Chung repeated.

"Perhaps I don't. Not yet, anyway," Soobin shuffled uneasily, waiting for Chung's reproach to continue, trying to hide the dejection from her eyes.

"Perhaps you will someday, Ms. Shin, but, tell me – did you know Xanadu was set up by a Catholic family all those years ago? One man and his sons, looking out for their grandmother, and kin? Did you know that at all?"

Soobin nodded, and saw Chung brandish a gold cross from around her neck.

"Unlike my ancestors, I'm a Protestant, but nevertheless I believe in *family*. And isn't that a kind of religion too, at the end of the day? But whether you have religion or not, or whether you believe in family or not, you have shown me today – shown *us*

today - that you, Soobin Shin, can never be at one with Xanadu. Never, I'm afraid. Not with this kind of perverted attitude to your work."

Soobin saw Seo and Noh nodding in perfect unison.

"And that's all I have to say on the matter today."

Try not to cry, Soob.

"Understood, ma'am," she muttered.

Just keep bowing your head, Soob.

"Does anyone else have anything to add?" Chung asked aloud.

The silence continued. Soobin willed herself to face the jury.

Smile!

Soobin was smiling, as she lied, barefaced: "Thank you to all of you for this opportunity today. I'm sorry to have disappointed you so." As she left, she looked up. The window was undressed, the projector screen was raised, and two men and a woman could be seen waiting for the next candidate at Xanadu HQ.

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Soobin chose to take the bus, clearing her mind with the views of rustic *hanok*.

What the fuck was I thinking? she wondered. *I was trying to be too clever, too different. Maybe it never pays to be different in Seoul...*

Was Suwon really as outrageous as she'd said? And where would she find such an escape herself? Again, Soobin's mind turned to island life, walking hand in hand with Choi along the beach.

Why didn't Choi message me? Soobin thought, taking out her phone, an old Samsung that still shone bright in its ruby casing.

Choi eventually answered. He sounded tired. His profile shot filled the whole screen, an awkward-looking selfie of his urchin face, with a little glimpse of his army uniform.

"Babe? Sorry I had my phone in the locker," he said.

"I have to call you back," she replied, sighing. "Can't hear you."

Choi's voice was like an AM radio stream, so weak was the connection tethering the couple together from city to mountaintop. Calling in-app never sounded great, but Soobin liked the idea of a more up-to-date image filling her boyfriend's screen, rather than the old one assigned to her name in his phone contact book, one in which she looked out of disappointed eyes, cheeks precariously round as they bulged around a pert mouth full of big bright teeth, her hair as dutifully dark as any other Korean's.

"Actually, could you call me in a few hours, babe?" Choi asked, his voice sounding smaller and smaller. "I'm on a quick lunch break before more woods patrol."

"Oh..."

“Is it okay?”

“What time?” Soobin asked. “I wanna talk to you about the interview. It means a lot to me.”

Choi sighed. “I know. It always does.”

Soobin paused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“We’re always talking about your interviews, babe, but I’ve got things of my own to think about. You know that, babe. You know I don’t always have time to talk about these things…”

Soobin was too stunned to reply.

Choi sighed. “I’ll call you when I’m ready,” he said. “Okay?”

“Okay, okay,” Soobin replied.

“Speak later, babe. Okay?” Choi sounded half begging, half demanding.

“Yep. Don’t fall asleep, okay?” Soobin asked, trying to hide her desperation. She was sure Choi had cared about her once. As she hung up, she remembered the last home game she had been to in Suwon, standing in the blues and yellows of his team strip – the scarf, the cap, two streaks of paint below each eye. She’d never forgotten their last night in Seoul, or *above* it in fact, surveying the city lights from atop Namsan Mountain. There they had added their own heart-shaped padlock to the thousands already hanging from the viewing deck of the mountain tower, a purple-coloured lock they’d scrawled their portraits on in permanent ink.

"Let's come back in two years. To find *this*," Choi said.

Then Soobin nodded, rustling her head against his shoulder, aiming a photo shot of the padlock to keep forever. She took another photo of them embracing, Eskimo-like in their parkas, Soobin short beside the lanky Choi.

"Sister," Choi began.

Soobin looked up from Choi's shoulder, because he meant her.

"You know, there's only one thing I can say to show how much I want us to stay together," he continued. "To be honest, I sometimes wonder if... maybe... you're *waiting*, you know. For my pledge. And I don't want to delay anymore. I mean, I delayed conscription, and look where that's got us..."

Choi turned his eyes away from the view, into Soobin's eyes, filled with his imminent loss.

"Let's get married," he said. "Do you want to? I mean, you'll be nearly thirty when I come out, won't you? And... and you're going to be thinking about *time*. You don't want to waste that time on searching. On *bozos*. So I want to be there for you. You know that, don't you, Soo? No?"

Soobin nodded. She gazed at the many plastic hearts and messages around her with a longing look. It was one big memorial to eternal love.

"Thank you, Choi. That means a lot to me," Soobin whispered, holding herself as close as she could to his side.

Now, all Soobin could feel was rage. Yet again, she'd been talked down to, ignored. Without thinking, she deleted the photo of the purple padlock, and every other photo from the night at Namsan.

The past was over, and no future was waiting for them on the other side.

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At work, Soobin reluctantly took off her headphones and washed her hands in the backroom of the Dinky Deez doughnut store. Though it was still November, she was required to put on the in-store soundtrack of late-night Christmas songs. She was also required to put on a friendly face behind the till, as if it was neither cold nor dark outdoors. Her colleague Eunji was having one last cigarette in the street, blowing smoke from her haughty face before joining Soobin for the start of the pair's evening shift. The high schooler was still in civilian wear, her uniform draped over the back of a chair in the small space where Soobin was fitting her garishly violet tennis cap upon her head. Her hands were still wet, for the manager would not allow them to use the hand dryer. As the old man would often stress, it was only November, not the dead of winter.

At the till, there was nothing to do but eyeball the couples outside in mittens and scarves, the single girls stumbling on the uneven paving, almost dropping their cradled poodles onto the ground, all of them no doubt heading into the giant Abunda mall next door. Soobin felt exposed so close to the entrance, even though the windows were partly

covered. One of the panes held a giant cardboard coffee cup, with offers typed on it in the same violet and yellow as the uniform. The other bore a Christmas promotion, two TV actors embracing beneath asterisk-like snowflakes, in earmuffs and wedding wear, each as cutesy as the other.

Snow angel, you're mine

So sweet when you smile

A heart can come in oh so many flavors...

Overhead came the Hawaiian homage of the soundtrack to a Christmas drama that had starred the half-Japanese groom on the window, a handsome actor who was singing the male lines. The song was as saccharine as the confections on display by Soobin's side, the doughnut rings of colours from all across the spectrum. There were Yum Yums too, and Danishes, and Fritters, tempting. Soobin's eyes devoured them all in seconds, though really she tried to be nil by mouth during work hours. Eunji was the same, but still each had watched the other steadily gain weight over the preceding nine months of working together. Soobin sized up Eunji's arms secretly as the girl scribbled with a felt tip in the back room. They had definitely grown thicker as the girl's swan-like frame crouched over a surface caked in castor sugar and flour. Eunji was writing out a sign that declared *SORRY EVERYONE – OUT OF SOYA MILK*, once in giant Korean characters, and another in the Latin alphabet. Soobin bristled at the translation. It seemed scarily accurate and colloquial, written with a smooth hand like it was only second nature.

I'd have written milks like a shit-for-brains.

She looked away. In the far corner of Dinky's was the paunchy, sweaty man who always ordered the same three doughnuts with a sugary Americano, overshadowed as usual by the dozens of napkins piled by his chubby arms, to be used on his big sticky lips and glistening forehead. *Mr. Napkin*, Soobin called him privately, or *Mr. Sleazy*, depending on her mood. There was something altogether seedy about his sweaty balding head, and his brown leather jacket, which was all patched up on the elbows. There was something odd too about his insistence on ordering the same thing every day, and sitting in the same little chair by the window. Beside him two toddler-sized Spidermen were stuck with sucker pads to the glass, one in the classic red-and-blue suit, the other in the black alien variant. Both toys seemed to be forever frozen in a crawl to the heavens. A crawl for freedom from his late-night routine, perhaps.

In the opposite corner of the shop were the kind of girls Apgujeong district was best known for. The district itself was renowned for plastic surgery, and whenever shutting up shop or walking to work, Soobin would always bump into a stream of women of a certain age, with their noses bandaged from eye to eye. The younger ones wore shades to cover up eyelids spliced so they bore more resemblance to the double lids Soobin had been "blessed" with from birth. To amuse herself, Soobin would sometimes play a game of counting how many Westernized cleavages she could see held loud and proud around the neighborhood. It wasn't too hard. The doughnut store was directly below a small surgery clinic, with more just across the street. Each was sandwiched between rooms of closed curtains, more of the usual saunas and singing rooms. Churches and laser treatment. Bars and love motels.

Rooms upon rooms. Spaces to escape.

One of the renovated darlings caught Soobin staring, and seemed to sneer from her corner seat.

I hope my smile looks more genuine than that, Soobin thought.

She noticed that, from his corner, Mr. Napkin was beaming at her with a smile all of his own.