

Dark Rooms

Seoul, South Korea

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[7:00 PM] Traffic was heavy, as rain lashed down from the sky, drumming relentlessly on the roof of the bus. On Hyeonee's lap sat a small cake, its frosting bright and cheery. Beneath the perfectly smooth icing was her favorite flavor: chocolate chip cookie with coffee stout muscovado buttercream – a tongue twister to even say.

Americans aren't super into meanings, so just go with something cheerful and friendly.

Yellow roses, daisies, and sunflowers sat in the seat next to him, wrapped in newspapers with old headlines, their vivid colors clashing with the gray, rain-drenched world outside. The cheerfulness of the sunflowers and roses did not appeal to Hyeonee. Winter had always been his favorite season, where everything felt still, quiet, and at peace.

The bus lurched to a stop, its jerking motion throwing a few raindrops from the roof against the windows. A grandmother boarded, clutching the hand of a little boy. Hyeonee offered his seat.

“Jungkook, you should say thank you to the *hyung-a*,” the grandmother urged softly.

The boy's gaze lingered on Hyeonee, large eyes fixed on him in a way that felt unsettling. “Thank you,” the boy whispered, and though he meant it kindly, Hyeonee couldn't help but feel the weight behind the stare. He forced a smile.

The bus crawled along, its pace barely matching the dripping rain on the glass. The *Trot* music with its quirky and upbeat rhythm and familiar tales of heartbreak played on, but it was

slowly losing ground. The static of the rain was growing louder, consuming the rhythm, until the music was little more than a faint echo.

Paju, South Korea

The room was a coffin of shadows, but Hyeonee could still see – barely. His night vision through the binocular shimmered with a sickly neon-green haze, like the dying flicker of an old cathode-ray TV.

The outpost was no bigger than a prison cell, though comfort was a foreign concept here. Cold air slithered in through the unseen cracks in the walls, the breath from the North seeping in to steal what little warmth clung to Hyeonee's body. His uniform, digital camo and several sizes too large, hung onto him like sloths on a tree. Strapped to the front, a 40mm grenade launcher sagged heavily. Across his back, a 7.62mm machine gun pressed down like an iron hand on his shoulders. His senior had ordered him to hold onto it. Always. No rest, no relief. That was the way. Each breath was a battle against the burden of these weapons, but worse still was the clock. The illuminated digits of his Casio flashed in the gloom – ten hours more in this frozen hell. Ten more hours beneath the weight of everything he carried. Ten more hours being watched, waiting for something that never seemed to come.

His senior, just three months older in rank but a lifetime away in cruelty, snored softly. The man had propped himself up on his helmet, his chest rising and falling in the same steady rhythm as the footsteps now creeping through the night.

Outside, the bushes stirred. Hyeonee paid no mind. In this tenantless DMZ, nature had taken over. Birds, wild animals – they were the only visitors here. Around 4:30 AM, the swan geese would descend upon the Imjin river like spirits of a dead world, honking and squawking in

a discordant symphony. Hyeonee often imagined their cries were like the traffic jams in Bangladesh he'd seen on TV, where thousands of motorbikes honked like a relentless drill that buried the peace of the city.

But something was different tonight. There were footsteps woven into the rustling of the leaves, a slow and deliberate crunch on wet gravel that grew louder, more distinct.

Bup.

Bup.

Bup.

Hyeonee's heart began to stomp in his chest, each beat a countdown to something that had been coming all along.

Bup.

Bup.

Bup.

Each step was slow and calculated, the pace of Death itself – patient, methodical.

Bup.

Bup.

Bup.

...bup.

...bup.

...

Silence. The wind stilled. The flutter of birds faded. Only the soft trickle of the stream remained.

Hyeonee's hand hovered near his gun, trembling. A shiver ran through him, but it wasn't from the cold.

A movement. A breath. The senior stirred in his sleep, a low grunt escaping his lips as he shifted, but didn't wake.

Lazy son of a bitch, thought Hyeonee.

The weight of his machine gun pressed harder against Hyeonee's back. His fingers twitched, feeling the metal, the cold, the power. His Casio flickered again – time bleeding away, dragging him deeper into the night.

Footsteps echoed in his mind, slow and steady. The crunching leaves. The soft rhythm of his pulse. He didn't know where the crack in his mind had begun to widen. He just knew that it had.

And there was a deafening noise –

it wasn't from outside.

It came from within.

In the distance, the stream kept flowing.

Hong Kong

Gravity shifted as Hyeonee descended from the 44th floor of the commercial building located at Queens Road. It was on this floor that a man entered, wearing a missing arm. A broad smile etched across his face, beaming.

ff the lunch crowd rushed in. They were wrapped in mirrored steel, absorbed in their busyness. Unaware of the miracle of nakedness that unfolded before them.

Hong Kong

'Copy watch, copy watch?'

She stood beside the bed in a dimly lit room, covered in the silhouette of the silk nightgown

'Rolex, Rolex, Rolex?'

Hyeonee stared at her eyes

'Glasses, sir?'

Her nightgown swiftly fell to the ground like a soft release of an arrow

'New glasses, sir?'

Every night, drunk men told her that they loved her

'Take a look?'

All the while she was awake

'Shop on ground floor, come inside.'

As if existence had tethered to the darkness

'This way, please'

And there was no life in the gestures, no meaning in the smiles

'Suit, sir? Shirt?'

Her hips strangely rigid, she was there, and yet she wasn't

'Trousers?'

just like the rest of us – tied between life and something else

'Tie?'

Their bodies struck in silence inside the dimly lit room

'Rolex, Rolex, rolexi?'

taking what was never truly given

'Copy watch, copy watch, copy watch?'

His breath, shallow and slow, barely had room to escape his chest. The air was thick with something that felt almost damp. It had the faint scent of earth, like wood and wet dirt.

He pressed his palms against the floor, feeling for something – maybe warmth, maybe the texture of something real – but there was nothing. The walls were too smooth, almost polished, like lacquered wood. His fingers slid over the surface without resistance.

Hyeonee's eyes had long adjusted to the dark, but there was nothing to see. And there was no sound anymore – not even his heartbeat, not even his breathing. As if everything had flattened, smothered over like the walls. But the room didn't seem to have any agenda, any malice. It simply existed, without caring if he did too.

He sank back down. For a long time, Hyeonee laid like that, eyes open but unfocused. He wasn't waiting for something to happen. He wasn't thinking about leaving. He wasn't even sure if he was in the room at all. The flicker of the Casio matched the irregular rhythm of his thoughts. The luminescent digits blinked erratically, casting fleeting shadows on his skin before dimming back into the dark.