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DongWon Oh
SUNY Geneseo

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Under the aEgis

There is a certain calm in the barracks at this hour, in the half hour after dinner and before evening roll call. The unspoken agreement here is that even amidst the wide expanse of the barracks, this half hour belongs to each man, and is his alone. Private Yun Ji-sung watches his unit leader, Corporal Kim Jae-hyun, lounge in the corner and go about his evening routine. He has flipped his beret into a makeshift bowl full for chips. The latest music video from BLACKPINK is stuck on repeat on the screen in front of him, its repetitive chorus ringing off the metal cots.

Corporal Kim powers through a third bag of chips. What a fucking pig, Ji-sung thinks. With an overhead announcement that it is twenty-one-fifty, the TV turns automatically to the evening news. Before the screen's static has a chance to settle, the corporal grunts and reaches over with his toe, pushing the off button. Ji-sung wonders if he could follow this man into war. The men turn to each other and talk about the day, their girlfriends, dinner.

The metal cots ring with the grunts of bored men doing pushups. Ji-sung watches one man across the hall grunt between sets of twelve pushups. "If I make ninety-two pushups in under a minute," he says, "I can get three extra days off next month." He flips over onto his back, huffing as he comes up for air.

Ji-sung winces as Corporal Kim tunes the barracks' decade old guitar for the thousandth time, all the while insisting that "Wonderwall" by Oasis is worth playing daily. Since the workday has ended, Corporal Kim wears his uniform unzipped, exposing a burgeoning belly filled with ramen and snacks from the on-base convenience store. Ji-sung watches him strum away, making the guitar strings shinier with each pass of his fingers. Within a few chords Ji-sung is entranced. Corporal Kim might be a pig but he sure sounds like an angel.

In the cot adjacent to the corporal's, Ji-sung sits at his cot with a journal in his lap. *Day 5*, he scrawls. *First night on patrol. I should call Mom. I miss JiYeon...* He stops, not sure what else to say. He looks up at the wall-mounted clock, watching the second hand tick away. It's 9:50 PM—no, it's twenty-one-fifty. He has to remind himself he's a soldier now, and that's how soldiers speak. A wad of paper enters his peripheral vision and lands near his chest.

"Shit, sorry Private. I was aiming for that broken record to your left."

Ji-sung looks up to see Corporal Lee Min-ho grinning down at him. The corporal's body shines bright and tan after five hundred days of labor under the sun. His lean and mean workout routine is visible beneath his undershirt, fatigues, and loosened boots.

"Ji-sung, was it?"

Private Yun nods.

"I think we're paired up for patrol tonight."

Private Yun shrugs.

"Your unit leader didn't tell you? At twenty-two hundred, two men from the barracks go up into the mountains to check the Super aEgis II turrets in our sector. In ten minutes, kid."

I said maaaybe, you're gonna be the one that saaaves me, Corporal Kim sings.

Corporal Lee retrieves the wad of paper and hurls it at Corporal Kim.

"Yeah, yeah," Corporal Kim says, tucking the guitar away beneath his cot.

Corporal Lee reaches over and ruffles the little hair that Ji-sung has. "I'll see you soon, Private Yun."

Ji-sung runs his hands through the remnants of his hair, feeling where he had longer locks just seven weeks before, six weeks in boot camp and a week at his assigned base. His fingers settle on the red grooves created by the interior netting of the helmets, created to provide support. He rubs the almost bloody welts, hoping to massage some circulation back into his skull. Ji-sung slips his journal underneath his pillow, hoping he will have more to write about when he wakes up. He hopes he will sleep better. Lately, his dreams are of rolling around in dirt. In uniform, crawling through barbed wire. A canteen, shovel, extra magazines, radio are all clipped to his waist and with every wriggle, they get snagged on the barbed wire just inches from his face. The world is on fire and the war is real. Other nights, he dreams he is a small turtle, and the helmet is his shell, its rough canvas interior netting chafing his whole body. Either way, he wakes feeling itchy and trapped. Ji-sung wonders if the others have similar nights. He hopes they do. He hopes all these men have had similar nights and that their dreams faded with time. Six hundred more days, he tells himself. Ji-sung clips his tactical vest at his sternum, secures the helmet at his chin with a wince and pulls his bootstraps up.

Corporal Lee whirls by Ji-sung, with boots polished darker than the war-paint Ji-sung used at boot-camp. “Up and at ‘em,” he says to Private Yun; then back at the barracks in general, he shouts, “The war hasn’t ended yet!”

After yanking up his boots, Ji-sung catches up to his corporal. Corporal Lee’s knuckles ring dully on the wrought iron doors of the armory. They duck in as rain begins to fall, trekking in size eleven and nine boot prints. Corporal Lee salutes the draftee on duty, Sergeant Park Kyu-jin, who has his feet up, bootlaces undone, and a copy of *Die Another Day* in his hand. After dismissing the salute with a flick of his eye, the sergeant waves his hand toward the racks of K2 rifles. Ji-sung stands still. He looks at Sergeant Park, then at Corporal Lee.

“Did Corporal Kim teach you nothing? The lower ranking soldier signs the paperwork and then I retrieve the rifles.”

“Sir.”

Ji-sung reaches down to the desk, hurriedly scrawling *YunJi-sung / Private / 17-5401254 / 20:50*. Below that, he writes *Lee Min-ho / Corporal / 16-76045990 / 20:50*.

Above them, the rain picks up; the slats that make up the roof are thundering across the armory, shaking the iron cage that holds the rifles. Corporal Lee reaches inside the cage to collect both his and Ji-sung’s rifle, pausing just for a moment to listen to the gathering storm.

“Sarge, are you sure it’s safe for us to go out there?”

Sergeant Park doesn’t look up from his book.

“What do you mean, Corporal?” Ji-sung asks, looking from his accompanying corporal to the sergeant on duty. In the ensuing ten seconds of silence, the rain fills all of their ears.

“It’s raining, Sergeant Park.”

The sergeant puts the book down and looks directly at Corporal Lee. “Good, you can place a tarp over the aEgis II turret on your way. The damn thing has been reporting heat signatures just past the steel fence, go check it out.”

Corporal Lee sighs and motions for Ji-sung to bring along two rain ponchos from the desk. They throw them over themselves and are enveloped by a mass of camouflage print. The corporal retrieves a radio off the shelf, and they head out into the mountain. Ji-sung sees Corporal Lee swing his rifle to his back, breaking protocol. They are taught to always be alert on patrol, to heed regulation. But it’s wet and late. They are tired; so they break protocol. After a while, the rain slows to a trickle and they march side by side, trekking up the usual path lined by dirt-filled tires.

“Chin up, Private Yun. This shouldn’t take long.”

“Sir.”

They continue along the path, grunting as they go uphill.

"I tried my best back there, you know."

"Sir?"

"To get us out of this bullshit duty. Whether we do this or not"—Corporal Lee gestures around them, catching drops of rain in his palm—"doesn't change much." That thing up there? The Super aEgis II has night vision and can shoot accurately up to four kilometers. It's basically a stationary Terminator."

"If you say so, sir."

Ji-sung and Corporal Lee keep on moving, looking just ahead. Left boot, right boot. The butt of his rifle slaps into Ji-sung's left shoulder, just into his wing-bone. He reaches up and adjusts his flashlight so that it points downward. Out in the dark and wild, he only concerns himself with what he can immediately see. There is the wetness of the leaves and dirt all around him, and he finds himself thinking how easy it would be to just lie down in the softness and rest. Just for a minute. He feels the rain seep through the poncho onto his fatigues. He'll feel the cold in his bones soon.

"Do you smoke, Private Yun?" It is less a question and more a statement.

"Sir?"

Corporal Lee points to a stone shelter just ahead. Maybe twenty steps. It looks like it's barely big enough for two men, if that. Ji-sung remembers that in his initial training he was told to take cover there during active conflict and fire north; really, it has turned into a pit stop for soldiers on their nightly patrol. The corporal drags Ji-sung inside and the poncho and fatigues settle onto their skin. Ji-sung imagines himself a snake in the barracks, shedding all these green layers. In the comfort of the stone shelter, Corporal Lee slips out a pack of Marlboro Ice Blasts from a pocket inside his fatigues and taps one out.

"You're Delta Unit?"

"Yes, sir."

Corporal Lee exhales with a laugh. The cold air and the mint of the cigarette clash in the few inches they share. "I'm sorry about your unit leader, Kim Jae-hyun. He was born in the year of the pig and he thinks he can use that excuse to the absolute fullest."

Ji-sung isn't sure how to answer, especially when he isn't addressed by his rank. "So what's out there, Corporal Lee?"

Min-ho continues to smoke his cigarette, looking into the leaves that sway in the wind.

"Legend has it, the souls of boys who were virgins when they were drafted. They roam the DMZ, doomed to roam no-man's land until every draftee gets laid."

Ji-sung looks quickly away. A spurt of smoke escapes his nostrils as he hides a laugh.

“Really though, I hear conservationists have discovered species of tigers and birds native to our country, thought to be extinct, in the DMZ,” Corporal Lee says.

“How did they get there?” Ji-sung looks into the darkness, as if expecting to see the moonlight glint off a tiger’s claws.

“I’m sure those nature nerds got permission to venture into some DMZ areas with some fancy binoculars.” The corporal shrugs, tapping the cigarette with his index finger.

“So, the Super aEgis II turret, “ Ji-sung says, “is it true it can fire in the dark?”

“Yes, and it’s so accurate, it can blow that zit off your forehead.”

“Huh.”

“What, Private?”

Ji-sung takes a long drag off his cigarette. He embraces the nicotine entering his blood stream, imagining that it is actually entering through the space between his index and middle finger. He feels the tension that has built up his neck and elbow joints. “Sir, won’t it still be wet in the morning? And if it’s so efficient, why are we even here?”

“Yeah, kid.” Corporal Lee taps the end of his cigarette with his index finger. His eyes follow the clump of ash down and watch it disintegrate into a puddle by his boot. “How was boot camp? You arrived here last week, which means you graduated boot camp just over a week ago.”

“Sir. It was all flowers and sunshine. You know how it goes.”

Corporal Lee spurts out a mentholated laugh. “I suppose. It’s been so long, I can’t even remember how my boot camp was.”

Ji-sung notes the hints of aging on his young corporal and wonders what that is like. He looks up, lighting up the inside of the hut with his flashlight. Some of the smooth patches of stone are inked in marker by the soldiers who have passed through: *LYS 3.14.2012* and in another corner, *KHY 5.16.2015*. Corporal Lee catches Ji-sung’s eye.

“Here.”

The private looks down, sees a hand holding a faded marker.

“Go on.”

Ji-sung accepts the marker and uncaps it. He reaches up to a small patch of smooth stone and scribbles. *Yun Ji-sung 11.31.2020* and next to it, *Lee Min-ho 5.21.2019*. Maybe in two years he’ll take a fresh-faced private up here and scribble proof that he’s done his 600 days of soldiering. Who knows, maybe the war will have ended before then.

Their cigarettes start to flicker out. Ji-sung mimics his corporal as he drops the butt, stomps it out, and scoots it into a corner of the shelter. The rain falling from their rifle tips makes a clicking sound on the stone floor. The

canvas rifle strap, the metal clutches on their tactical vests, the unwelcoming wet cloth of their fatigues, all seem to weigh more now.

“Just a few more minutes, then we’ll reach the turret. Let’s cover it up and go home,” Corporal Lee says.

Ji-sung wonders how it would be to use his rifle as a walking stick. After all, it *is* just the right length. “Do you have a girlfriend, sir?”

Corporal Lee almost stops; surprised a private would speak first. “No, kid. I don’t. Too much of a headache while you’re here.”

“Oh.”

“Do you?”

“Yessir. We started dating right before I went to boot camp.”

“Unf. Sorry, kid.”

“Sir?”

“Good luck.”

The rain has picked up again, and the two men can feel it more and more, almost piercing their vests and their uniform shirts, onto their bare backs. They trudge along in silence, the air between them heavy with Corporal Lee’s relationship advice. To Ji-sung’s right, Corporal Lee steps and waves again to just ahead of them.

Ji-sung sees it: the Super aEgis II, with its dull green plates, two-meter barrel, and fifty-caliber bullets that snake around the machine. The automated turret is on a raised platform made of stone. It turns, scanning the northern mountain skyline for threats. What threats, Ji-sung isn’t sure. All it sees are the birds and tigers, once thought extinct, now free to roam this patch of the Korean mountains while the war continues.

Ji-sung is wet, miserable; the barrel of the rifle digs into his leg with each swing. He notes the tarp at the bottom of the stone platform, folded into a neat square. From underneath the tarp, ropes snake out in clumps.

“That thing can stop a tank in its tracks—and it’s still not waterproof,” Corporal Lee says and strolls over. He begins to climb the side of the turret, pulling himself up with his right arm. He has a length of rope wrapped around his left arm and begins pulling the tarp up with him.

Ji-sung takes the hint. He jogs over, starts to tie the other end down to the hooks at the bottom of the platform. All he wants is to be dry, back in the relative comfort of the barracks, where he can warm up. So he yanks on the rope, reaching for more of it. His right hand brings the rope over the hook, securing the rope to a piece of curved steel.

His fingers slip and his palm smashes against the protruding hook. Flesh meets steel and draws blood from his right hand. Ji-sung swears into the rain, stepping back to see his work and clutching his hand to his chest. He takes a careful step back, avoiding the steep drop behind him.

“Corporal Lee?”

There's no answer. The tarp comes loose, the wind whipping it toward Ji-sung. The other rope flaps by him. The flashlight on his helmet carves swathes of light through the night as Ji-sung swings his head around, looking around for Corporal Lee. He calls out again before seeing a light halfway down the mountain, fainter than those from the barracks. Just strong enough to be a helmet-mounted flashlight. "Corporal!" he yells, but his voice gets caught in the wind.

Ji-sung looks down at the pristine knot he made, then to the rest of the tarp waving in the wind. The rain flowing down the back of his neck meets his bloody hand, leaving streaks of blood on his uniform. In his hand, Ji-sung feels the rope that sent Corporal Lee Min-ho down the mountain.

Beside him, the Super aEgis II machine gun whirs in the night, scanning left and right for threats. It blows sparks into the wet night.