

Once Again 751

Chapter 751. Sequence 1

"Dammit, this won't leave behind a scar, will it?"

Yoon Hyungseok touched the cut on his chin as he looked into the mirror. An old razor ended up making a cut on his skin. He wiped away shaving foam with warm water and checked again. It was a sharp cut, so it looked like it would heal soon. That was good.

He shook the water off his razor and left the bathroom. 'Zeck' was crouching under the sunlight coming through the whole-wall window. He was posing in a 'baking bread' pose, and his yellowish-brown fur was really similar to a piece of baked bread. Hyungseok approached him and patted him from the head to the tail. Zeck cried in a pleasant manner and stood up before walking away proudly.

"You up?" asked a woman as she picked Zeck up.

She, wearing shorts and a black bra, was opening the door to the refrigerator like it was her own house.

"I dislike women who touch items in other people's houses."

"How petty," the woman replied as she took out some milk from the fridge before pouring some into a glass.

"Do you live alone, oppa?"

"That's why I could bring you here. Rather than that, why don't you put something on?"

"We've seen everything about each other already. Now that I look at you, you have quite a naive side to you. You were like a beast last night too."

"That was because I was drunk."

"That excuse bores me the most."

The woman tickled Zeck's chin. Hyungseok clicked his tongue. This guy scratched and bit his master despite him feeding him all the time, yet he was like an angel in a woman's arms. Where was he hiding those sharp claws?

"I need to go now."

"Do you work too? I thought you were totally unemployed from how you were rocking like mad last night at the nightclub."

"Unemployed? Oh please, I'm going to become big later."

"Big? The thing I saw last night wasn't that big."

The woman's eyes headed down. Hyungseok twisted his body a little with an awkward expression. The blatant gaze prickled him a little.

"Is it up?"

"No, it isn't. Anyway, you can either leave with me after breakfast, or you can go first."

"I'm fine with this."

The woman finished the milk and entered the bathroom. The sound of the shower continued on for a while before she came out while drying her hair.

"You're really neat alright. I thought I was in a motel or something. No wait, motels aren't this clean either. Do you have an obsession or something?"

"I just like things tidy."

"You really like that word, huh. Yet such a guy brought a girl for a one-nighter?"

"That's that and this is this. But hey, you're acting totally different from last night. Were you just pretending?"

"How can people live with just one personality? You were obviously into cute and docile girls, so I put up an act for a bit."

"Put up an act? You're like a child in front of an adult."

"What do you mean by that?"

Hyungseok just shook his head and waved his hand. The woman didn't seem to intend on prying either and just threw the wet towel on the ground before entering the room.

"No wonder. Her skills were extraordinary."

Hyungseok sighed as he remembered last night. Zeck came by his feet and scratched his foot. Hyungseok frowned and lifted Zeck up.

"Hey, you're taking revenge because I neutered you, aren't you?"

After staring holes into Zeck for a while, he put him down on the sofa. Zeck got ready to sleep again with a yawn as though he was satisfied after bullying his master. Hyungseok sometimes thought that Zeck was a human behind a cat mask. He was way too cunning.

"Hey, this place is pretty good. How much does it cost per month?" the woman asked after putting her clothes on.

"And why do you ask that?"

"Because I need to graduate college and move out. What's the deposit like for this place?"

"It's definitely not a place a college graduate can afford."

"Didn't you say you were twenty-five? Aren't you still in college if you did your military service?"

"I never went to college. Also, do you think a poor college student can afford a place like this?"

"What the, you're secretly boasting that you're quite capable, huh? Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Stop asking. You're bothering me in the morning."

"It's good to get to know each other. Anyway, I'm going to leave now. I put my number in your phone, so contact me from time to time. I'll play with you."

"Forget it, girlie. You might suck the life out of me if I play with you a second time."

The woman opened the door and left. Hyungseok cleaned up the towel on the floor and cooked some breakfast: chicken breasts and a handful of cereal. He also gave Zeck some cat food when he purred for food.

"That's all you get. You seem to be gaining weight recently."

As soon as he said those words, a front paw flew into his face. This guy definitely understood human language.

After finishing his meal, he started cleaning. He cleaned twice a day, and it was an important ritual he had to do every day. Hyungseok found this time very important since he could organize his thoughts.

He looked around his house, which had become clean, before smiling in satisfaction.

"Bro's going out, so watch the house, okay?"

He glared at Zeck, who did not reply, before leaving. As soon as he got on the elevator, he started missing the air conditioning. The heat was vile.

He got into his car and started it. The first thing he did was to turn the air conditioner on. It was 11 a.m. Hyungseok tuned the radio frequency to KBS and increased the volume.

-Today's way too hot for a drowsy afternoon, is it not, everyone? For some reason, even the wind that's blowing through the window feels hot. I wish to gift you all a breeze of cool air. Hello, I'm Han Gaeul, and I'm your host for Movie Stroll.

"Good voice."

Hyungseok changed gears and drove off. He grabbed the wheel with one hand and put his smartphone next to his ear with the other.

"Hey, I'm on my way there. Where are you? In front of Renait in the 1st district? Alright. The others? I'll pick you up and then think about it. Okay, wait there."

He drove towards the first district of Anyang. His friend was waiting in front of a famous hair shop, Renait. He stopped the car on the other side and sounded the horn. His friend waved his hand and crossed the road.

"The weather is crazy," that was the first thing his friend said after getting on.

"It is crazy alright. But hey, it's been ages since we saw each other, yet it feels like I saw you yesterday."

"We've seen each other enough for two years, that's why. Hey, got anything to drink?"

"Since it's hot and all, why don't you go buy something? There's a convenience store right there."

"Dammit, you were always good at making people run errands. What do you want?"

“Coffee; buy me a sweet one.”

His friend got out again. Hyungseok called his other friends who should be waiting.

“Hey, I met Gitae. Where are you? You’ll be in Anyang soon? ...Alright, we’ll be waiting so call me up when you get here. Gitae, you, Youngjin, and I just need to pick up sergeant Han. ... Alright, see you there.”

His friend that went to buy drinks returned and gave him a coffee.

“Who was that?”

“Beomsoo. He’ll be arriving at Anyang station soon.”

“That dude has it the hardest. He said he lives in Ulsan, right?”

“Yeah. He arrived at Suwon last night and slept there. He’s coming right now.”

“That sounds like a pain.”

“That’s why I don’t plan to collect money from him. Everyone else is living in Gyeonggi-do or Seoul, but he’s the only one from Ulsan^[1]. Such a pitiful guy.”

“At least he’s coming. I’m touched. It has been, what, a year since we were discharged?”

“It’s been about that long. What are you up to these days?”

“College.”

“Ah, right. You’re only twenty-three, aren’t you? Hey, call me hyung while I still feel good. You know this bro’s twenty-five right?”

“Bullshit. Once a colleague, forever a colleague, don’t you know that?”

“Damn this guy.”

“If you didn’t want that, you should’ve come to the military early, Mr. Hyungseok. Eh?”

“You’re getting way ahead of yourself.”

Gitae giggled and opened his drink.

“Okay, so I’m in college. What are you up to? Are you still doing your business?”

“No, I quit a while ago. The business a friend of mine and I raised together was taken care of entirely by him while I was in the military.”

“I heard you made some good money selling clothes. Why did you quit such a good thing?”

“Because I found something I want to do. I have the money, so don’t you think it’s about time I do the thing I want?”

“Good for you. Meanwhile, here I am worried about employment even though I’m not in the graduating year. But hey, is selling clothes online even profitable?”

“It’s already a red ocean there. It’s been taken over by large companies now. Don’t get tempted to waste your money by ads that tell you that you can make a quick buck. This bro knows everything about it.”

“Looks like I should just shut up and focus on studying.”

“That’s right, you should focus on studying. Twenty-three is the perfect age for studying.”

Hyungseok turned on the radio again. With perfect timing, the ads were ending.

-August 2nd, 2011. Let me read some messages from people who have their birthday today. The music is BGM from a film I like. The first one is from Miss Ahn Jeonghee. Hello, Gaeul-unni, I’m an examinee student in my 3rd year of high school. I became a fan of yours after I chanced upon your program while studying. Uhm, I’m really grateful that you became a fan, but isn’t 11 a.m. time for you to be studying, Miss Ahn Jeonghee? You’ll get scolded by your teacher. Turn off the radio right now and focus on class. Also, you’re an exam student, you can’t do this. Please listen to my radio once CSATs are over. Oh yes, you said it was your birthday today, wasn’t it? Then let me send you a set of red ginseng extracts to help with your studies. Happy birthday and I hope you can cheer up with these.

“Isn’t her voice good?” Hyungseok said.

Gitae just said that it was meh and fidgeted with his smartphone. He was giggling while messaging someone, and it didn’t look like he was talking with a dude.

“Your girlfriend?”

“No, not yet. She’s a new student in my department.”

“Is she pretty?”

“She’s cute.”

“You were worried about employment and all, but hey, you seem to be having a good life.”

“Money isn’t all you need to live in this world. You need other things too. Hey, isn’t that Beomsoo over there?”

“That’s him alright. His face is so dark.”

Hyungseok got out of the car and waved his hand. Beomsoo, who was looking around, grinned and came over.

“He has that same smile alright.”

“He smiled when the seniors picked on us. Hey, Beomsoo! Run!”

Beomsoo crossed the road in a flash and got in the car.

“Long time no see. It must have been hard taking the train all the way here.”

“Nah. Where’s Youngjin?”

“I’m going to have to pick him up now. He’s in Suwon, so it won’t take that long.”

Gitae, who was in the passenger seat, gave Beomsoo something to drink. After drinking a sip of water, Beomsoo spoke,

“Where’s Sergeant Han?”

“We’re gonna have to pick him up as well. Man, I wanna see him, our direct senior.”

“Hey, do you have anyone other than Sergeant Han that you keep in touch with?”

“I don’t. How about you, Gitae?”

Gitae shook his head. Hyungseok rolled his phone around in his hand and spoke,

“Right, that reminds me. Beomsoo, this guy, he cried the day Sergeant Han got discharged.”

“Hey, I wasn’t the only one. Gitae probably cried too.”

Gitae snorted and said that he didn’t. Hyungseok probed his memories. He saw Gitae with teary eyes next to Beomsoo who was crying. Gitae was a proud guy, so he would probably deny it until the end if he said the truth, so he decided to stay quiet.

“I wonder what he’s doing.”

“I heard he was doing plays in Daehak-ro before he got enlisted. Maybe he’s still doing that.”

“Maybe. I’ve called him and talked to him about stuff, but I didn’t ask what he was up to. It’s been a year since we last saw each other.”

Listening to the conversation between Beomsoo and Gitae, Hyungseok frowned.

“Hey, I’m also the same age as Sergeant Han. Why do you give him the big brother treatment but not me?”

“Because he’s different. He’s a class above us too.”

“Forget class. If you’re going to give him the big brother treatment, you have to call me hyung as well.”

“Hey, Yoon Hyungseok. Can you go up to him and say that you wanna be friends with him? If you do, we’ll gladly call you hyung,” said Gitae indifferently. Hyungseok hesitated for a moment before shaking his head.

“Forget it. Why would I want the big brother treatment from you guys? It’s not like you’re anything special.”

“Fucker, you’re wimping out, aren’t you?”

“Who’s wimping out!”

“You are wimping out. Han-hyung is a good person, but he was scary when he got angry.”

Those words reminded Hyungseok of what happened 3 years ago; back when he was all smiling after having finished boot camp. The day he was assigned to his station was freaky even when he thought about it now.

“For now, we’ll go pick up Youngjin.”

Hyungseok trembled and started the car.

[1] Ulsan is in the South end of South Korea, while Seoul and Gyeonggi-do are relatively North.

Chapter 752. Sequence 1

“Hey, let’s keep in touch when we leave.”

“Yeah. Boot camps friends forever.”

Yoon Hyungseok felt his eyes feel hot.

He gave up on going to college and jumped into the apparel sales business. Unlike his initial plan of getting a small store in Hongdae, his friend and he started an internet sales business. As he was quite confident in his face and figure, he also acted as the fitting model. He created the site, and thanks to his friend’s experience with marketing, he gained quite a lot of profit in just one year.

He would wake up at early dawn, get some clothes from Dongdae-mun, take photos, package clothes, and pick up customer inquiry calls for the whole day, but he didn’t feel that exhausted since he felt proud that he was building up his foundation. When the business gained stability, and he even expanded his warehouse and hired employees, he got his draft notice. Hyungseok chose to enter the military service without hesitation. Until the day he was drafted, he thought that military service was nothing compared to selling clothes. He only thought about playing boy scout for two years and about how to continue his clothes business.

The impression he had of the military broke on the first day.

“You are not here to play around!”

Why was it so scary when that came from someone younger than him? It wasn’t just that either.

“Get out of your Civies.”

When he stood in a daze because he didn’t know what that meant, the instructor shouted at him to change his clothes. When the other recruits next to him started taking off their clothes, they got shouted at again.

“Do you think this is society? Get changed right now!”

Hyungseok never had difficulties changing his clothes in his 22 years of life. It was probably the same for the other recruits as well. However, during that moment, everyone wasted time changing clothes as though they had all become idiots. The one standing opposite him put the pants on front-side back, and the one next to him wore his top inside out. He felt like he had become an idiot.

To sum up his bootcamp life in one word, it would be ‘horrible’.

The steaming weather gifted him with a sticky and terrible heat. As Hyungseok was quite picky when it came to where he slept, he felt like he was going to die because he couldn’t sleep for two days, but on his third day, he fell asleep like a log. Humans adapted to extreme environments in order to survive.

The colleague who grumbled about the terrible food at the boot camp on the first day was given the nickname of 'shit glutton' on the day the fifth week ended. His colleagues laughed at the guy, saying that he would probably eat out of the food waste.

Another one, who was chubby when he entered, suffered from constipation during his first week, then on the last day, he became a man who went to the toilet earlier than anyone. Not to mention that he had lost a lot of weight.

Hyungseok had also experienced some changes. He thought that he would never be able to fall asleep on a hard surface but found himself dozing off in the middle of a dust cloud, and he usually never slept before 2 a.m. because of his business but found himself under a spell that magically closed his eyes at 10.

Thinking about how he was going to be separated from his colleagues with whom he had spent five weeks training and eating, he really felt disappointed. This was especially true for his colleague who he went to the same religious service with; alternating between the Catholic church, the Buddhist temple, and the Protestant church, to get choco pie^[1] from all of them. He felt like he would become life-long buddies with this guy.

"We will be able to make calls on our first vacation after getting stationed, so let's call each other then. This is my phone number."

"This is mine."

He exchanged numbers with his colleagues. Hyungseok promised to meet them on their 100-day vacation^[2] as he got on the vehicle leaving the Nonsan bootcamp^[3]. Hugging his duffel bag, he was slightly uneasy that he was being separated from the rest of his colleagues, but thanks to his confidence from having endured 5 weeks of hellish training, he didn't feel that nervous. He thought that his station wouldn't be more difficult than the bootcamp.

"Line up. Don't chitchat inside the train, okay?"

He got on the train under the guidance of a kind-looking staff^[4]. Quite a lot of people were on that train^[5]. Although it had been a little more than a month, the outside scenery felt foreign. While he was imagining what kind of place he was stationed, he arrived at Cheongnyangni station. Having gotten off at the station, Hyungseok got on a military bus without getting any time to rest.

"Choonsik, let's'a go."

Three Vs stacked on top of each other was the mark of a master sergeant he saw quite frequently in games. A total of five people got on the military bus. He didn't know any of them, so he didn't say anything to them. One of them got off mid-way before the bus departed again. Hyungseok saw a sign that said 'Welcome to Pocheon'. Pocheon. He was reminded of rice wine and grilled ribs^[6].

"Boys, ge'off."

The roads were well paved, and the military base was rather close to a nearby town. The first impression wasn't that bad. The building he saw in the distance was also quite clean unlike the one at the bootcamp. The air was good too, and the staff in charge of leading them here didn't look bad either. Maybe he got a good lottery.

“So, three of you are artillerymen for the brigade HQ, and you are 322’s HQ^[7].”

The three people assigned to the artillery brigade’s HQ entered the building right next to the drill grounds. It was a worn-out building that was only 2 stories tall. Hyungseok inwardly sighed. For some reason, he felt like the personality of the people in that base would be directly proportional to how worn out it was.

“You follow me.”

He followed the master sergeant who had his hands grasped behind his back. The place the master sergeant walked to was a newly built building. Hyungseok inwardly cheered. He had the vague hope that his military life would be much more comfortable than the three before him.

“First sergeant, this one’s for HQ.”

“Thank you.”

Hyungseok entered the administration office. Only the man titled ‘first sergeant’ was inside this strangely quiet room, his legs crossed.

“Name.”

“Private! Yoon Hyungseok!”

“Nice voice. I’m in charge of the supplies here, so let’s get along.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Want some coffee?”

The first sergeant patted him on the shoulder before leaving. When he peeked out, he saw a vending machine right in front of the administration office. Hyungseok received the coffee the first sergeant gave him with both of his hands. He was treated so well and was even given some fragrant coffee. He felt like his lips were going to curve upwards.

“Aight, Hyungseok, you hurt anywhere?”

“No, sir!”

“Where do you live?”

“I live in Anyang, sir.”

“Anyang, huh. Nice place. What did you do before you got drafted?”

“I sold clothes.”

“No college?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re quite smart. Yeah, it’s much better to focus on other things if you don’t feel like you can keep up with studying. Let’s see. Looks like you’ll be assigned to signals. Everyone around here is a good guy, so

you won't have trouble in your military life. You saw the building right? It's clean and neat. You just need to stay here comfortably for 2 years before getting discharged."

"Yes, sir!"

"How lively. I'm sure you'll do well."

Hyungseok sipped some coffee. The pressure given to him by the word 'station' completely disappeared. This building was considered new compared to the building he lived in at his bootcamp, and the staff seemed so nice as well. He felt like he could spend the next two years comfortably. He was once again reminded of the 3 people who were dragged to the tattered building. They were so pitiful.

"Looks like people should be returning from work. Sit here and watch TV for a while."

As soon as those words ended, Hyungseok immediately turned his head to the TV. Actually, he was dying to watch it, but he held it in because he felt like he would get chewed if he watched without permission. Although it was a news channel, he found it so interesting because it had been a month since he last watched anything. He blankly watched the TV for a while.

He heard footsteps getting louder. It wasn't just one or two people. Hyungseok took his eyes off the TV and sat upright. As soon as he 'postured' himself, people walked by in front of the door to the administration office. He could smell grass and mud. There was also a sour smell that he never smelled before, even back at bootcamp.

"Oh hey? We got a new guy."

"Where's he assigned?"

"Is he transport?"

"Surely he's not, senior. He's admin no matter how you look at him."

"Hey, he's in geodesy^[8]. I can tell."

"He's in signals, so mind your own business."

He felt like a piece of meat in the butchery. Prickly gazes stayed on his back for a long time before disappearing. Hyungseok gulped. The warm air of the administration office instantly turned chilly. He gulped in order to clear his throat. He had to be overthinking. He recalled how the first sergeant said that everyone here was a good person.

"Oh, you're here? Hello, I'm the company commander."

A man with the lieutenant mark entered the administration office. Hyungseok abruptly stood up, getting ready to salute, but he sat down again when the lieutenant waved at him to sit.

"Hm, you've talked to the first sergeant, right?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then that's fine. Let's say we did the talk with the commander. You hurt anywhere?"

"No, sir!"

That was the question he received the most today: You hurt? Did people look after the soldiers' health?

"Okay then. I hope we can get along. Oh, you'll be in signals."

The company commander disappeared through the door leading to the commander's office on the other side of the administration office. Just as he was thinking that the commander was a rather jolly man, another person entered, wearing a white tank-top and navy pants. The man said 'sergeant' as he entered the office, and the rest of his words were so murmur and fast that he couldn't understand a thing. He seemed to be saying 'Sergeant OO, came for business'.

"You new?"

"Yes!"

"Ah, okay. You're new."

For a moment, Hyungseok felt a chill run down his back. The man's scanning gaze was scary.

"Announcement."

The man left the office and shouted. When he did, shouts could be heard from all around. A man came out of the room right in front of the administration office and shouted 'ready for announcement!'. Signals, Geodesy, Transport, such names could be heard as well.

"Good job on the maintenance work today. There will be extra snacks tonight, so get one guy from each room to come to the office. Also, signals, come get your new guy."

As soon as the man said those words, a man who had slightly scary-looking eyes came into the office.

"Private Han Maru has come to the administration office for business."

"Oh, our dear Super A-tier is here? This guy's your junior. Take him with you."

"Yes, sir. Let's go."

Private Han Maru has finished business and will return - this man, named Han Maru, said such at the entrance before turning around. Hyungseok quickly followed him with the duffel bag.

Han Maru entered a room that said 'wireless comms'. The room was very clean, unlike the worn-out one he used at the bootcamp. The lockers were also made of metal, not wood.

Just then, the people he did not notice because of the good facilities entered his eyes. Starting with the three people lying down on either side of the TV, there was a person who was sitting upright in the place right next to him. He felt his knees shake. He finally realized how foolish it was to think that this couldn't be harder than the bootcamp.

"Hey, shit. You're fucked. You'll be fucked if you can't do better than Han Maru."

"Hey, that's going too far. It's hard to do better than our Super A-tier Maru. Hey, private first classes, go undo his duffel bag for him."

"Yes!"

He felt like he was looking at a well-lubricated machine. It felt as though a word from the person lying down next to the TV moved everyone else in the room.

“Hey, new guy.”

“Yeah?”

Hyungseok unknowingly uttered those words in a daze. At that moment, Hyungseok realized what it meant for the world to be frozen stiff. Even his heart skipped a beat.

“Yeah? YEAAAAH?”

“Duude, let me see you after your chick period^[9] is over.”

The only thing Hyungseok could do was blink. If someone didn't tap him from the side, he would probably have forgotten to breathe. Hyungseok looked at the man that tapped his flank. Han Maru - that name was engraved into his head.

“I'm sorry!”

He shouted, but he felt that it was too late.

“Private first classes, are you going to take all day to undo his duffel bag? Are you not gonna eat?”

“Sorry!”

“Let's be quick, alright? Wired, you can go eat first. Sarge Choi, I'll feed them first.”

“Alright.”

“Are you going to PX^[10], sarge?”

“I heard it's fried croakers tonight. I'd rather eat choco pie than eat that shit.”

“Maybe I should go to the PX too with sarge Choi.”

“You buying?”

“Forget it. You're gonna be leaving soon, and you're a total miser. Boys, let's go.”

Hyungseok thought that the two people talking comfortably with each other lived in a different world. It felt like the status difference between him and those two was akin to that of a serf and a noble.

The sergeant that passed next to him pushed his shoulders. Hyungseok immediately made way. The sergeant snorted once before shaking his head. After the wired comms people left, Han Maru came over and spoke in a small voice,

“Say your name and position if a senior taps you.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Leave out the 'ah'.”

“...Yes.”

“Make your voice as loud as possible. Just remember that for now.”

Hyungseok gulped.

[1] Every Sunday, bootcamp soldiers are (practically) required to attend a religious service. The Korean military currently acknowledges four main religions, 3 of which mentioned previously, and 1 of them is Won-buddhism. Attending one religion’s service for the first time, they would give you choco pie as a first-time gift. The variety has increased over the years though, and you get more than just that depending on where your bootcamp is.

[2] Also called ‘New Recruit Consolation vacation’. It’s called 100-day vacation because it happens around 100 days after ENLISTING (not after getting stationed). Again, this has mostly changed in the recent years, and soldiers are able to dynamically adjust and reschedule their vacations according to their and their base’s schedule.

[3]The largest bootcamp base in Korea. Nearly 70% of all Korean recruits are trained here.

[4] A non-soldier. Includes both NCOs and officers.

[5] A train specifically assigned to carry soldiers away from bootcamp to various parts of the country.

[6] Rice wine is a specialty of Pocheon, while grilled ribs became popular in the 70s as food for soldiers and their visitors on their outing.

[7] In this specific case, this brigade has several artillery battalions under its command, one of them being “322”. 322’s “HQ” means the “HQ” Company within that battalion.

[8] The field of measuring the Earth accurately.

[9] A week or two of adaptation period for newly assigned recruits, where they aren’t assigned to any duties including night shifts.

[10] Stands for Post eXchange. Basically, a military convenience store.

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“Hey, Hyungseok, this guy’s your colleague.”

Hyungseok looked at the man standing in front of the corporal. The first thing he saw was the cap with a flat visor. Under the visor were eyes that awkwardly looked around the room. Hyungseok instantly realized that he was a comrade in the same position as him.

He spent the first day with his breath abated. He couldn’t sleep during the night when a senior told him that he would kill him if he snored. The sudden appearance of a colleague that appeared after the first night was a ray of light to him. The clumsy-looking expression and the eyes that couldn’t stay in one place. Just the fact that there was one more person who hadn’t adjusted to this desolate environment gave him a sense of relief.

“Joonsoo, you came here two days earlier than him, so teach him the basics.”

“Yes, sir!”

His voice was energetic. Hyungseok followed Joonsoo and climbed down to the first floor of the building with his boots. He turned around to the left, went behind the building, and saw some people smoking. A man who was holding a shovel between his arm and his flank while smoking suddenly saluted. Hyungseok looked behind him. There was no way that salute was directed at him, so he wondered if there was a staff behind him.

When he looked behind, he saw no one there. Hyungseok turned his head to the front. The man who saluted giggled as though he found something extremely interesting. Hyungseok thought that the man saluted him to tease him.

“Corporal Park Jinjoo, may we clean our boots here?” asked Joonsoo.

A man was named Jinjoo^[1].... Hyungseok stared at Jinjoo and his group who left after saying that they could before crouching down.

“I thought I didn’t have any colleagues. How fortunate.”

Joonsoo smiled with a big grin. Hyungseok also smiled.

“I came here just yesterday, so I was also worried because I didn’t see any colleagues.”

“In our base, we count colleagues by the month^[2], so as long as other people enter by the end of this month, it’ll mean that they’ll be our colleagues as well. For now, you and I are the only colleagues in Signals, but if we expand to other platoons like Geodesy and transport, there’s about 9.”

“There are seven more?”

“Yeah. I’ll introduce them to you later. Even if you’re in different platoons, you can drop the honorifics if they’re colleagues. Also, everything to the left of the administration office is, us, HQ and to the right is Alfa company. People from different companies are practically ahjussi, so you can just call them that. Don’t end up saluting them or something. Right now, you might not be able to differentiate them because you don’t know everyone’s faces, but it should be easy for you to know who belongs where.”

“I see. Oh, I heard yesterday that I must learn who everyone in the company is. Is that true?”

“Yep. You have to learn the faces of all the seniors and know who’s your colleague.”

“How many people are there in our company?”

“Around sixty?”

“When am I going to learn them all?”

“It doesn’t take that long. There’s a guy called Han Maru among our direct seniors, right? He learned them all in just two days.”

Han Maru, this name came up again. Hyungseok heard this name many times yesterday. The thing he heard the most was ‘just do as well as Han Maru’.

“Did this Han Maru do well?”

“You bet. That dude didn’t seem like a new recruit. He seemed like a veteran. Thanks to that, the seniors really like Han Maru even though it’s only been a month since he came here. He’s really good after all.”

While listening, Hyungseok perked his head up and looked around like a meerkat. He knew that they would get in trouble if the seniors found out that they were addressing their senior with something like ‘that dude’ or simply by name.

“Anyway, isn’t the wired comms squad leader kinda shitty?”

“Who’s the wired comms squad leader?”

“The one who’s ridiculously tall. His name is Kim Soonyeol.”

Hyungseok recalled the man who took the wired comms squad to dinner. He remembered how that person bumped his shoulder on his way out. That dude was really cocky.

“He definitely doesn’t have a good first impression.”

“Right? He’s not good. Also, there’s Yang Byungjo! He’s the boss of wireless, and he looks like a frigging toad. You know who I mean, right?”

Hyungseok realized who Joonsoo was referring to as soon as he heard the word ‘toad’. It was the person who chewed the privates and private first classes during roll call. Hyungseok was also very tense back then, so he listened to that person carefully.

“I remember him.”

“Isn’t he really ugly?”

“No, well....”

“Hey, it’s only the two of us here, so there’s no need to hold back. This is just how the military works. When you’re with a colleague, you should be at ease, and in front of seniors, you do what they say. Alright?”

“Is that how it is?”

“That’s right. Also, there’s a really funny guy among the private first classes....”

After that, Joonsoo’s backtalk about the Signals platoon continued for a long time.

* * *

Hyunseok sat down upright in front of the cleaning shed. He had to wear a yellow epaulet for a week, and Han Maru told him that he would be exempt from work and cleaning during that time. He was reading a booklet about basic military rules and information regarding the base, and it soon became 5 p.m. The platoon members who had gone out for base maintenance returned smelling like grass and dirt.

“Man, new guy has it good. He doesn’t even do work.”

“Fuck, I wanna be a private too.”

The seniors who returned to the room all commented. Hyungseok felt like he was in the middle of the arctic. He stood up and thanked them for their work repeatedly.

“Get changed, and let’s get food at half-past five. Also, Hyungseok.”

“Private Lee Hyungseok!”

“Did you watch the house well?”

“Yes!”

“Did you read the things they gave you to read?”

“Yes, I have!”

“Alright, that’s how you’re gonna spend the rest of the week. If you don’t know anything, you can ask the privates and private first classes. Don’t foolishly talk to a corporal.”

“Yes!”

“Nice answer at least. Joochul.”

The man sitting to Hyungseok’s left replied,

“Private first class Lee Joochul!”

“Teach him artillery numbers and the countersign, as well as the army songs. Well then, we should hold an introduction for the new recruit, right?”

An introduction? Hyungseok looked at the members of the platoon chuckling. If it was an introduction, he had one yesterday. He felt uneasy. The eyes of the platoon all looked at him. Those gazes increased his anxiety even further. Come in, said the wireless comms squad leader.

The firmly shut door opened and Joonsoo appeared. Hyungseok wondered if Joonsoo didn’t get an introduction. Just then, Joonsoo rolled forward before standing in front of the wireless comms squad leader. The two were close enough that their breaths would reach each other.

When he witnessed that scene, Hyungseok was reminded of a post that he enjoyed reading from a community for funny stuff. The story was about a super high ranking senior deceiving a new recruit that just got stationed. It only took moments for his predictions to become a reality and for his anxiety to turn into fright.

Joonsoo went behind the squad leader before jumping onto his back.

“Private Lim Joonsoo! I’m a private, so I’m gonna fool around all day!”

Hyungseok was unable to say anything. A corporal walked towards an empty locker and flipped the name tag, which was flipped front-side back before. Sergeant Lim Joonsoo. Joonsoo put on a discharge cap with the visor that had been bent practically into a circle^[3].

“Hyungseok, this is the Soonyeol with a terrible personality. He’s the wired comms squad leader. Soonyeol, Hyungseok said that you didn’t leave a good impression.”

“Fuck it. Do you want me to act like how I look?” Soonyeol said while frowning.

“And our cutie Byungjo! Byungjo, Hyungseok said you look like a toad.”

“Is that so? Yoon Hyungseok. I hope you can get along with a toad.”

The conversation that occurred after that did not enter Hyungseok’s ears. His mind was filled with the wish for the apocalypse to come tomorrow.

* * *

“I’ll bring Hyungseok and clean our boots.”

Maru pointed his chin outside. Hyungseok looked at the seniors before picking up his boots and going to the back of the building. Was he going to get scolded? Or maybe even beaten? Today was just the worst. Ever since he realized that he was deceived by a sergeant, he was greeted with displeased gazes from the corporals and sergeants as well as sharp words that pricked him. He couldn’t remember how many times he heard the word ‘brain’ today. He felt like there had to be a substance in the military air that lowered people’s intelligence. Even he could tell that it was a really flawed prank now that he looked back at it, yet he was deceived like a complete fool. He found himself despicable for letting his guard down.

“They didn’t do that out of malicious intent, so don’t let it get you,” Maru said as he scrubbed his boots.

No malicious intent. Hyungseok couldn’t believe that. The entire platoon was filled with people born or created from malicious intent. Everyone was out to get him, so it didn’t make sense that they didn’t do it out of malice.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I-I do!”

“Of course, there are lunatics who are crazy enough to commit murder in this world, so I can’t say that there aren’t any crazy people, but there are rarely any people who truly wish for your doom when you’re supposed to be living with them for the foreseeable future. You might feel like the world is ending and that the seniors are like grim reapers, but that will only last for a brief time. This is a place where people live, not other things. You’re bound to adjust in a few days.”

These were the first affectionate words he heard after entering the Signals platoon. Hyungseok almost opened up his heart but became tense again after remembering what the sergeant did to him.

“That’s it. That’s the attitude. For the time being, you should be nervous and listen carefully when the seniors tell you something. You’ll receive a lot of stress. It’ll be quite hard too. Don’t even start mentioning annoyance. But do it anyway. Do what they tell you to do. If you keep doing the things you’re ordered to do and calmly do them, you can change the traditions you don’t like once you become a senior.”

“Once I become a senior?”

“I’m telling you to do that if you have the will to do so when there are four bricks^[4] on your head^[5]. Even if you think things are unjust, nothing changes. Why? Because they went through the same thing. All of

them got sworn at, so they would hardly want to change that for the better at this point. If you don't like this treatment and want to treat the new recruits better, then you change it after you become a senior. Sacrifice isn't something you force others to do; it is something you do yourself."

Hyungseok nodded subconsciously as he looked at Maru from the side. That was easy to understand. Was it a rumor that the direct senior was the scariest? He got a feeling that this person was kinder than anyone and acted for his junior's best interests.

"Also, two more things. If you think 'is it okay to do this?', then it isn't. If you think 'should I do this?', then you should. You gotta learn to differentiate between these two. Above all, if you think you should be the one to do something, then the first thing you should do is step out. If you get caught by the seniors looking around foolishly at the back, they will start bullying you with real malice. Until you take off the chick epaulet^[6], they'll just be teasing you. That's how they probe you out: what kind of person is our new recruit? Alright?"

"Yes."

Hyungseok dusted off the toes of his boots with a brush. This senior was giving him golden advice. He regained his calm and smiled.

"But I'm glad that you're treating me well, private Han Maru. I thought no one was on my side in this platoon...."

Maru, who was next to him, picked up his boots and stood up. Hyungseok looked up at him.

"Hyungseok, the reason I'm telling you all this is not because I'm kind nor because I've taken a liking to you. It's because if you get chewed by the seniors, I'll get smashed^[7]."

Maru's eyes turned scary. Hyungseok understood what Maru meant before when he said something about how the seniors held no malice. Those eyes were what malice was.

"If you make a mistake among the things I taught you and you get chewed by the seniors, consequently giving me damage as well, I will take my time to teach you why the military is shitty, why the clock in the ministry of defense turns backwards, and above all, how shitty this guy named Han Maru can act, so I hope you can keep that in mind. Let's not make mistakes among the things I taught you, alright?"

"Y-yes. I-I will not make a mistake."

"Alright. I have faith that you will do well, Hyungseok."

"Yes!"

Hyungseok abruptly stood up with his boots. The chewing from the platoon members was cute in comparison. The demon lord of fear was right next to him. Maru turned around after taking the first step on the staircase and spoke,

"I'm in a terrible psychological state right now because I've recently lost the person that was my *raison d'être*. So I hope we can keep things peaceful. That should be better for you too."

"I will do my best!"

Hyungseok shouted, raising his chin so that he could see the moon above.

* * *

“Sarge Han left behind such a deep impression when I first talked to him.”

“You think you’re the only one? It was like that for me too.”

“Me too.”

“If I think about it now, Sarge Han was even scarier than four-stars when I was a private.”

“Heck, four-stars are nothing. I mean, we never saw one.”

“Right, but Sarge Han was right next to us.”

Hyungseok trembled as he turned the wheel.

[1] Jinjoo means pearl, and is usually a girl’s name.

[2] In the Korean military, people use honorifics to ‘seniors’ who might even be in the same rank, depending on how ‘colleagues’ are separated. This is different for each base, one base might separate it by the month (like what it’s shown here), but quarterly separation, bi-yearly separation and even yearly separation are possible. In the case of the last one, you’d see your colleague get discharged almost a year ahead of you if you’re unlucky.

[3] Discharge cap: When someone is about to get discharged, a platoon would collect some money and gift that person a ‘discharge gift’, usually a cap (either the cap they were supplied with, or a new one bought from military-related stores) with the names of the members of the platoon (or squad) stitched on it. This ‘tradition’ has mostly discontinued around 2019 as it was considered ‘extortion’.

[4] Soldier rank insignia: private[-], private first class [=], corporal [≡], and sergeant [?]. Maru is referring to the straight line as ‘bricks’.

[5] The ranks were velcroed on the cap so that it makes switching the insignia upon promotion easier.

[6] New recruits with yellow epaulets were called ‘chicks’ because of the color, and their position.

[7] ‘Direct seniors’ are practically responsible for their direct juniors, including their education and attitude. If the direct junior does something wrong, the direct senior will be held responsible for not having taught the junior properly.

Chapter 754. Sequence 1

“The guy who said he’ll come soon is always the latest.”

“Hey, this isn’t the first time Youngjin was late. He’s the dude who overslept on the day of his enlistment.”

“When I think about how we got chewed the next day because of that guy, I still grit my teeth. That was the first time I couldn’t wake someone up by shaking him.”

“If Youngjin had a terrible personality, I would not have befriended him. But he’s a good guy.”

“Yeah. He got up quite quickly once he got smashed once, so there were no problems after that.”

Listening to Beomsoo and Gitae’s words, Hyungseok felt like he had returned to when he was a private. It had already been a year since he got discharged, but his memories were still vivid. Although he could laugh and chat about it because memories are bound to be beautified, he couldn’t have been more scared back then.

“But hey, we managed to get through the private period without accidents, right?” Hyungseok said as he put down his smartphone.

Gitae, who was in the passenger seat, agreed and smiled in relief.

“It’s because Sarge Han covered us a lot, but we were pretty decent as well. Us July recruits were all quite good.”

“There you go again, beautifying your memories. Don’t you remember how you got your ass chewed because you couldn’t memorize artillery numbers or the wireless communication jargon? You had to keep memorizing them in the corner until the evening roll call.”

“Then what about you? You got a barrage of insults because you couldn’t memorize the military songs.”

Gitae and Beomsoo still nitpicked each other.

“How can you not have changed after a year? Idiots,” Hyungseok said.

As soon as he said those words, Gitae and Beomsoo kindly replied at the same time with ‘bullshit’.

“Hey, since we’re all inside a car like this, doesn’t it remind you of when we were in the Signals box truck?”

“Right. The four of us often ate boiled ramyun^[1] together.”

“Do you remember when we first became private first classes? We went to the PX for the first time by ourselves to buy some ramyun and then ate it next to the box truck.”

“That was awesome.”

Hyungseok remembered back to that day.

“It was Sarge Han who treated us that day, wasn’t it?”

* * *

The Signals box truck was the resting place of the Signals platoon as well as a symbol of seniority. Privates couldn’t come anywhere near the box truck unless they were doing their duty or it was during a training mission. The only thing Hyungseok and his colleagues could do was glance at their seniors slowly walking over towards the box truck with boiled ramyun in their hands.

“We finally get to come here.”

Hyungseok put down the lot of frozen food he bought in front of the box truck. Until just last week, he and his colleagues weren’t able to use the PX as they were merely privates^[2]. If they wanted to go, they would only be able to do so in company with a private first class or when they went as a platoon. When

he first heard of the rule that privates weren't able to use the PX by themselves, he gritted his teeth at the unfairness of the military, but it didn't feel like anything now. It was because he had become a first private class and also because he got used to the unfairness. He experienced for himself how foolish it was to look for fairness and justice in the military. The only law in the military was time, aka seniority.

"Good work doing nocturnal specialties last night," Maru said, appearing last with a bag full of food.

"It was you who did all the work, private first class Han Maru. Give those to me."

His colleagues, Gitae, Beomsoo, and Youngjin received the plastic bag from Maru. Hyungseok lowered the foothold that was used to get in the box truck and put the food they bought from the PX in it. Hyungseok finally felt that the fact that he had become a private first class had sunk in when he could eat in an open space like this and not at the PX, where all the seniors would be giving him unpleasant stares.

"It's pretty cold out here."

"I told you we should eat at the PX."

"But we became private first classes, so we should visit the box truck at least once. Private first class Han Maru, thank you for the food."

"Yeah, go on and eat. You guys are gonna have to use a lot of energy from now on. I was always frustrated that I was the only private first class because of the shitty assignment, so I'm expecting a lot from you."

"I'm good at using the shovel, y'know?"

Hyungseok ate some steaming ramyun while giggling. It was as tasty as the ramyun he ate after his night shift. He recalled what Maru said before: you can only endure the military because you get access to more and more as you spend more time. It couldn't be more true.

"Private first class Han Maru," said Beomsoo, who opened a drink and handed it over to Maru.

"What?"

"What did you do outside?"

"I'm curious about that too," Hyungseok interrupted.

While they spent the past 6 months together, he didn't know anything much about Maru. When he was a new recruit, he didn't dare to even talk to him because Maru engraved his presence as the scariest senior, and ever since he adapted, he didn't have the time to ask what Maru did in society as he was so busy with military work. If they were assigned to shifts together, they would be able to talk to each other about a lot of things for two hours, but privates and private first classes were never assigned to shifts together. Not only that, Maru was always called out to various places, so they rarely got a chance to talk to him. Maru was the same age as him, but he felt so distant.

"I did plays."

"Plays, you say?"

That was an answer he didn't expect. Hyungseok's colleagues were all college students. In the Signals platoon, there was no one other than Hyungseok who wasn't a college student. He naturally assumed that Maru was a college student as well, but it turned out that he did plays.

"Were you famous?" Gitae asked.

Maru had a faint smile that was not so much like a smile.

"I guess?"

Hyungseok had never watched a play in his entire life, but he knew through the media how hard a play actor's life was. They would be fortunate if they received any pay, and he heard that most of them did part-time jobs to continue their passion. Was it because he lived a hard life that he didn't make mistakes when talking to other people and was good at everything despite them being the same age?

"Hyungseok, you said that you sold clothes, right?"

"Yes. I thought that I should jump into society early rather than rot in college for four years, so I started a business with a friend of mine."

"Did it go well?"

"I would say yes. My friend is still running it."

"You set on a nice path. Earning money quickly is good. The rest of you said that you were in college right? Now that you're private first class, you can get a light extension^[3] with permission from the squad leader to study, so you should do some studying before your brain solidifies. If you don't do anything for two years, you will really brick your brains."

Hyungseok's colleagues all nodded. If that was from the other seniors who could only yap about without doing anything, they would only pretend to listen and ignore it entirely, but Maru had earned their faith, so they all seemed to engrave it into their minds.

Just then, Youngjin, who was watching Maru quietly from the side, spoke,

"Private first class Han Maru, did you appear on TV before?"

"Why do you ask?"

"N-nothing. I must have been mistaken."

"Don't wimp. I did."

Youngjin's expression brightened.

"It was on a late-night drama on YBS, right?"

"Yeah, it was."

"I knew it. I thought of that as soon as you said you did acting. My sister really liked that drama."

"So it's almost been three years since I shot that drama."

Hyungseok looked at Maru's face. He thought that Maru was an actor who only acted on a small stage, but he turned out to be someone who showed his face on public TV.

"Private first class Han Maru, may I ask you a question?" Gitae asked while picking up his chopsticks.

Hyungseok felt uneasy. Gitae was a good fellow who he would love to befriend if they were outside, but there were times when he wanted to give him a solid smack. Hyungseok always watched his mouth because whenever he asked a question that got on the nerves of the seniors, he was scolded as well for being a colleague. He was going to kick his calf to stop him from speaking if he was going to say something weird.

"Gitae, I said this before, but if you just watch your mouth, you wouldn't need to worry about getting chewed on until you become a corporal," Maru said first.

Gitae flinched and put his hand down.

"Since you're at it, let me hear it."

"Are you not going to chew me for it?"

"Punk, fine. I won't chew you for it."

"...Why did you switch to plays when you were on TV? Aren't plays crappier?"

"Crappier, huh. Well, I guess ordinary people would normally think that. Anyway, hey, watch your choice of words. What the heck is 'crappier'? You're gonna get killed by corporal Choi Taejin."

"I'll fix it."

Maru sipped some of the drink in his hand before speaking,

"The drama did well. It got good viewing rates. It was only four episodes long, but we held a celebration because the last episode got 7%."

"It's good considering it's a late-night series. Also, that result was achieved with practically nameless actors. I did interviews and I was given offers to play child roles in other mini-series. I think they were Iron era and Flaming lady."

"Weren't both of those dramas huge hits?" Hyungseok asked.

He didn't watch those dramas since he was busy setting up his business two years ago, but he did hear the news that they were hugely popular. He heard that women in their twenties couldn't start a conversation without watching Flaming lady.

"Did you appear in those as well?"

"No, I refused."

"Why did you?" Gitae asked in a nitpicking tone.

When Maru gave him a stare, he shrank back like a scolded dog.

"Gitae, you should really fix that habit of yours."

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine if you do that while you’re with me, but don’t do that in front of the seniors. You are private first classes now, so you’ll get chewed really hard. Also, I refused back then because I didn’t have any energy to concentrate on something. I was facing a really important decision in life; I was hung up on that.”

“And what was that?” Gitae asked carefully.

That night, Hyungseok saw Maru smiling bitterly for the first time. The senior who always answered everything perfectly like an encyclopedia gazed at a distant mountain for the first time. If he couldn’t talk to Maru usually because he was frightening when he pointed out mistakes, he couldn’t talk to the current Maru because he looked like he carried all the burdens of the world. He could feel that the weight on Maru’s shoulders was definitely not something that could be shared.

“Giving up on a person,” Maru said after a long time.

“Giving up on a person?”

Hyungseok subconsciously questioned back, but the question just dissipated into the air in vain. Maru only faintly smiled. It was his way of expressing that he wasn’t going to reply. After that, they talked about other things and Maru’s silence thinned out, but Hyungseok couldn’t forget Maru’s face that had a sad smile on while talking about giving up.

After they ate, they put all the trash into plastic bags. His colleagues went back to the barracks first with the trash. Hyungseok checked one last time if there was any trash that they missed. If the box truck was dirty, the seniors would nag them during the evening roll call.

When he stood upright, he saw Maru with a cigarette in his mouth as he sat down on the box truck. Hyungseok was puzzled. Maru never smoked. He was the type of guy who would give the cigarettes he was given to others.

“Do you want me to light you up?” Hyungseok asked as he took out a lighter from his pocket.

“No, I’m not gonna smoke. I used to smoke like mad before, but I didn’t smoke once this time. Since I’m maintaining a streak, I might as well do it until the end.”

His words sounded quite strange. The ‘before’ and ‘this time’ he used were used quite awkwardly. Was he so deeply worried about something that he couldn’t speak properly?

“If meeting has a high probability of causing a problem, it should be better not to meet, right? For both my and that person’s sake.”

Maru’s words sounded like he needed an answer. Hyungseok couldn’t do anything but keep blinking. He couldn’t follow the conversation at all. However, Maru seemed to dearly wish for an answer, yet also want to deny the question at the same time. A detached smile hung on Maru’s face as though he wanted to quit everything like he was at the end of his life. Not that he had ever seen such a person.

“Are you okay?” Hyungseok asked.

“No, I’m not,” Maru replied.

Yet, the smile was still on his face.

* * *

“You should really show up on time,” Hyungseok said to Youngjin, who got in the back seat.

Youngjin, who had his hair dyed purple, made a foolish smile. That smile looked just like the smile he showed when he did his discharge ceremony a year ago.

“Where’s Maru-hyung?” Youngjin asked.

“We’re gonna have to meet him now. Hey, Gitae, get in the back seat.”

“Right, I can’t let Sarge Han get in a cramped space like that.”

Gitae got out from the passenger seat and got in the back seat.

“Well then, let us four stinky men go to Daehak-ro together.”

Hyungseok stepped on the gas pedal.

[1] Hot water poured into ramyun in its packaging. Not cup noodles.

[2] The PX is actually open to all soldiers, including privates, but the seniors would forbid them from going because it’s too ‘audacious’ of them. This tradition has mostly been abandoned

[3] The sleeping schedule in the military starts at 10, but people who request a ‘light extension’ can get an extra hour or two of non-sleep for the sake of studying.

Chapter 755. Sequence 1

“New guy, watch him well. There’s no one in the battalion, heck, the entire brigade who can install a 992^[1] faster than him,” Hyungseok said to the private who had been here for less than a week.

The way the new recruit sat upright so tensely and had a nervous expression reminded him of when he was a private, making him laugh.

“Corporal Yoon Hyungseok, we got mastar^[2].”

“Aren’t there any other flavors?”

“Corporal Park Taein told me that this was it.”

“Damn the Supply department. I know there’s more in the warehouse. Anyway, thanks.”

The private first class holding a box of canned drinks walked over to the other platoon members. Hyungseok gave his drink to the private next to him.

“You can have it.”

“Thank you.”

He saw the private holding still while grabbing the can with both hands. This guy had just adapted to the air in the base, so he should be acting carefully about everything he did. As Hyungseok had to sleep while wearing a gas mask after coughing once, Hyungseok could understand how he felt. The military

drove people to become introverted, passive, and inefficient fast. The reason why the higher-ranking soldiers looked slow was not because they had become lazy but because they were enlightened on the aesthetics of efficiency.

“Did they begin?” Youngjin asked as he undid the belt on his military gear.

Hyungseok shook his head and looked forward. On the drill grounds were various military supplies from various battalions. Centered around the TPQ-37 radar, which looked like it wouldn't have a dent even if a bus crashed into it at 140km per hour, there was various communications equipment, and next to it were bags containing the building set for the 992 mast antenna. Next to those bags were people representing the Signals platoon from each battalion, waiting for the start sign while exercising.

“Do you think anyone can win against Corporal Han?”

“A dude from Charlie said they got a devil at installing 992s.”

“A devil? Can a devil win against corporal Han?”

“I wouldn't know.”

“What became of the bet? I was planning to bet some as well.”

Hyungseok took out a military notepad. It was one of the basic supplies, but no one actually used it. Hyungseok used it as a betting ledger.

“All the ahjussi from alfa bet on corporal Han. Hey, does this bet have any meaning?”

Hyungseok slid his finger down the ledger. It looked like people would win about 100 won if Han Maru won. He would usually take a portion of the wins as a tip, but it looked like he wouldn't be able to do that with this bet.

“It ain't looking good.”

Hyungseok put the notepad inside his pocket.

Today was the second day of the brigade's field tactical training. While it might sound grand at a glance, it was no different from ordinary specialty training. If there was one difference, it was that there was a match of specialties against other battalions within the brigade. Transport versus transport, administration versus administration, geodesy versus geodesy. Even soldiers who were unenthusiastic about training fired themselves up when they were up against other battalions.

Signals was no different. Not only that, it wasn't just their pride on the line today.

“Corporal Han, we believe in you. Please bestow us with pork belly,” Gitae said as he came back after finishing his shift. The task the signals competitors were given was to install a 10-meter tall giant antenna alone. It wasn't just the soldiers that made a bet on this match. Hyungseok gained intel that the signals officers from the battalions and the brigade had bet money on this. The platoon that won would have a barbecue party.

“New guy. You haven't tried installing a 992 yet, have you?”

“Private Kim Dohoon! No, I have not!”

“That tall thing over there is a 992. Do you think you can put that up by yourself?”

“I-I don’t think I can.”

“Punk. You’re supposed to answer ‘yes I can’ at a time like this, okay?”

“Yes, corporal!”

“There will come a time when you have to install it by yourself later anyway. Watch how corporal Han does today and learn. He’ll show you what it means to be a god at your specialty,” Hyungseok said as he looked at the 992 antenna that they installed last night.

The antenna, which had six metal pikes extruding in different directions at the top like lightning rods, was taller than a person when standing upright, and the support pillar, more commonly known as the mast, was taller than an ordinary tree. When it stood upright, it was like a palm tree with all of its leaves stripped, and since there was no way such a tall structure could stand by itself, the building kit included robes and pegs to fix it in place so that it didn’t fall down in the wind.

The representatives of each battalion, standing in a line on the drill grounds, were tasked with carrying, unpacking, and installing all the equipment, which weighed several dozen kilograms in total. It was fortunate that it was summer since there were no difficulties with anchoring pegs into the ground as the ground wasn’t frozen. Anchoring large stake-like pegs into the ground in the middle of winter was an excruciating thing.

“It’s beginning,” Youngjin said.

The officer with a stopwatch stood in front of the signals soldiers and shouted ‘ready’. The soldiers got ready to rush forward. At the start signal, people carried their 992 building kits to their designated locations.

“That’s right!”

The first one to arrive at his designated location with the equipment was Maru. He opened the kit bag and started throwing the installation materials inside to various places. He placed the pegs, the ropes, and even the base of the antenna in their precise locations before picking up a hammer. The hammer landed precisely on top of the peg that he had fixed in place with his boots. He was doing that while the signals soldiers from other battalions were still organizing their kits.

“I still don’t understand. How is corporal Han so strong?”

“I don’t know. You saw him last time, right? When he climbed a frigging mountain with two generators in each hand while carrying a roll of cables on his back. Back then, I almost called corporal Han Maru God. How many kilograms is that? The generators were full of oil too.”

“It was the peak during base maintenance. While we were struggling to carry one sandbag, he was carrying two on each shoulder.”

“He isn’t human. He doesn’t look that bulky compared to me.”

“I heard he did some boxing. Do you think it’s because of that?”

“It’s not that. It’s because his bones are thick. He was born with a worker’s body. That’s not something working out can get you.”

While he was talking to his colleagues, Maru had fixed the antenna support on the ground and was starting to pull the mast up. It was telescopically structured so that it could be pulled out like radio antennas. The difference was that unlike radio antennas, which were pulled out from the tip, it was pushed up from the bottom. Hyungseok clicked his tongue as he looked at the mast that practically sprouted into the air. Although the 992 antenna was something that people could install alone with some proficiency, not anyone could raise one that quickly. The people from other battalions started murmuring. There were people who were just starting to connect the antenna rods together, but Maru had already installed the antennas on the mast and was raising it up.

“What the hell is he?”

“I’m sure he must have greased the mast at least. How is it possible to raise it so smoothly?”

He could understand the feelings of the signals soldier from the neighboring battalion. Hyungseok also felt the same when he saw Maru installing an antenna for the first time; is he freaking human?

While others were busy raising the masts, Maru finished up his cable management. He gathered the scattered tools into one neat pile and shouted ‘finished’. The signals soldiers from other battalions looked pitiful as they were installing their antennas.

“We’re gonna get pork belly once we finish the training exercise,” Hyungseok said as he clenched his fist.

* * *

“Did anyone manage to break Sarge Han’s record?” Hyungseok asked as he stopped the car.

Gitae, who was on his smartphone at the back, shook his head.

“Not a single one. Whether it’s 992, RLI^[3], or even making a trip with a reel of cables, there’s no one who broke his records.”

“Sarge Han should have gotten into sports, not acting. If he was in Taeneung^[4] right now, I’m sure he must have won a medal in the Olympics by now.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.”

Hyungseok was reminded of when Maru leisurely hammered anchor pegs into the frozen ground during sub-zero training. Maru managed to anchor a peg into the ground with two or three hits of the hammer while three private first classes couldn’t anchor one. That matter became a legend among the platoon for a while.

“Thinking about it now, Sarge Han was way too good.”

“Yeah, he was way too good. If he actually stayed in the military, he might have become a warrant officer as a technician quickly.”

“He would have done well regardless of what he did. Even the staff listened to him.”

“He was the first sergeant’s man.”

“The first sergeant always asked ‘hey, where’s Han Maru?’ whenever it was maintenance season.”

Han Maru was always called out by the first sergeant when he became a corporal. People jokingly said that the HQ company’s work would come to a halt without Han Maru.

“He said he only did acting outside, so how’s he so good at work? It’s still a mystery to me.”

“Me too. People might think of him as a master of manual labor. The matters we took a couple of hours to finish with Sarge Han took more than an entire day with others.”

“His proficiency with his specialty is one thing, but he was truly a god of work.”

God of work, that was one of Maru’s nicknames.

“Do you think the pet house we made is still there?”

“It should be if no one tore it down.”

Hyungseok recalled the two cats that had become fat like pigs. Just then, the smartphone on his thigh started ringing. The caller was someone he had been waiting for.

“Sarge Han, where are you? We’re in Daehak-ro right now.”

-Sorry about that. There was a change of order in the events.

“What do you mean by that?”

-I need to do my play now.

“What? Is this how you’re treating us even though it’s been a year?”

-I’m not saying that I won’t meet you. I’m saying that you’ll have to wait about an hour. You can go look around Daehak-ro or something. There should be many people doing street performances since the weather is good, so there should be nothing better than those to kill time.

“You want four stinky men to walk around Daehak-ro on a Saturday afternoon? Are you picking a fight with me?”

-Go to a PC-bang or something then. I’ll go pick you up once I’m done.

“Why would we go to the PC-bang?”

When Hyungseok grumbled, Gitae, who was sitting in the back, asked,

“What is it?”

“Han Maru, this guy, is going to start his play right now.”

“Hand it to me for a sec.”

He gave the phone over to Gitae.

“Yes, hyung, it’s me, Gitae. Are you doing your play right now? Then we’ll go watch you. Where is it? Do we need to buy the tickets there? Oh, you’re going to tell them for us? Okay.”

After replying with a few yeses, Gitae hung up.

“You want us to watch a play?” Hyungseok said as he got his phone back.

“I’ve never watched one before. Also, I want to know what kind of play Sarge Han does. And hey, Hyungseok, didn’t you say you were preparing to be an actor? It’s good to watch things like this.”

“Hey, do you think an actor for a play is the same as an actor for a film? They’re completely different.”

“Your words sound like you’re a bigshot actor when you aren’t. Shut up and let’s get off. I know the location now, so we should just go there.”

Beomsoo, who had been listening this whole time, spoke as well,

“Goddammit. Four stinky men are going to watch another stinky man. And a play at that too. What a time we live in.”

“My words exactly.”

Hyungseok got out of the car while laughing in vain. Han Maru’s acting, huh. Now that he heard about it, he did feel a little curious. As someone who also wished to become an actor, it shouldn’t be that bad to watch a senior’s acting.

“Let’s go boys,” he said as he took the lead.

[1] AS-992K. Mast antenna for long-range communication. Frequently used in training.

[2] A brand of canned fruit drinks supplied to the South Korean military.

[3] A radar dish antenna for wireless communication. Not sure what it stands for.

[4] Taeneung has a large sports complex for Olympic athletes.

Chapter 756. Sequence 1

“He said it was at the Arts Theater in front of Hyehwa station’s fourth exit, so....”

Hyunseok’s sentence trailed off as he looked at the building in front of him. Scaffolding that was usually seen in construction zones surrounded the entire building.

“What the heck? Why is there a bunch of scaffolding here?” Beomsoo said.

Hyungseok looked it up on the internet.

“Apparently, it’s a design choice.”

The internet kindly explained that it was designed that way and that it wasn’t actually under maintenance or anything. Hyungseok tilted his head and looked at the building. The design was something he couldn’t understand with his sense of aesthetics.

“Are you sure they just couldn’t be bothered to take them down after they were done?”

“There’s no way that’s true, no matter how sloppy they are. It should be some weird aesthetic sense that we don’t know of. Let’s go inside for now.”

Unlike the exterior, which was considered ugly by Hyungseok's standards, the interior was neat. To the left was a café decorated with black walls. The ceiling tiles were taken out, revealing the pipes and electrical lines inside, giving a cold yet simplistic image. Inside were people in their 20s and 30s who enjoyed art, sitting with coffee in their hands. On top of their tables were theater tickets. There was a sign that said that there was a discount on coffee for people showing their tickets.

"This is not the kind of place I thought it would be," Youngjin said.

"What kind of place did you imagine?"

"I watched a play in a theater with my girlfriend not too long ago, and that place was really cramped. The chairs were all squished together, and it looked like it couldn't even hold 100 people, but this place is huge. My girlfriend said that the theaters in Daehak-ro are all small, so I thought the place Maru-hyung would be performing at would be small as well."

After looking around the café, they walked to the customer service center. The tickets were sold there as well.

"Hey, why are there so many girls?"

"I wouldn't know."

Hyungseok looked at the ladies who were walking around or sitting on the red metal chairs in pairs. They were holding coffee in one hand and a pamphlet in the other and were checking the time expectantly. Couples could be spotted occasionally as well, but the number was small.

"I think we're the only men-men group."

"You mean men-men-men-men group. It's a hell party."

"I'm ashamed, so let's sit apart."

"That's what I wanted to say."

Although they said those words, they all sat next to each other. Hyungseok could feel his heels lifting. He could see more than a hundred people walking past the information desk at a glance. From the time, it seemed like the people waiting in the lobby right now had all bought theater tickets for the play that was going to be held in the 3rd floor large theater. That theater was a large one with more than 500 seats. There were many people in the audience, and Han Maru would be performing in front of them. Even though he wasn't related to this play at all, he could feel himself getting fired up.

"It looks like Maru-hyung is doing well, right?"

"Just look at the size of this building. Do you think they would let anyone perform here?"

"Man, the rental fees must be expensive."

His colleagues all commented.

"So Sarge Han was serious when he said that before?" Hyungseok uttered.

His colleagues asked what he meant, puzzled.

“During our last tactical training.”

* * *

“It’s freezing,” Hyungseok said as he opened the cargo of the box truck.

It was April. While it might be Spring outside, here in Pochen, it was still snowing. Although hints of greenery could be glimpsed from time to time, the overwhelming majority was still hidden by white. Hyungseok was even a little worried that it might start snowing.

He blew warm air into his hands and looked down the hill. The observation battalion set up camp in the clearing halfway up the mountain. The military green-colored tent installed on top of the white snowy plains seemed like a blemish on a white paper. It was even more eye-catching due to the meaningless camo sheets. They were practically advertising that their forces were right there.

Until just last year, the battalion tactical training was just training for show. They would roughly camouflage themselves, roughly check the equipment, and roughly make rounds around their barracks before roughly returning. The change of such training to an ‘FM^[1]’ training that even involved the communications vehicle was thanks to the new battalion commander’s ambitions. Hyungseok couldn’t care about ‘strong army’ or whatnot, but the commander, who wanted to spread his wings of promotion, was like a disaster to the soldiers below him.

“Let’s just put up the antenna quickly and communicate. You’ll only be able to get some rest that way. If we stay here, we’re all gonna freeze to death. Hey, Cheonsoo.”

“Private first class Kim Cheonsoo!”

“Watch out when you install the antenna and call me when you feel strange. Okay? Don’t break a peg or something while trying to show off your strength.”

“Yes!”

Hyungseok watched the junior installing the antenna. The junior looked pretty decent when he swung his hammer while panting. The appearance of a reliable junior was a blessing.

“Sergeant Yoon Hyungseok! Do we raise the mast all the way up?”

“No! Don’t raise the last bit. We already talked to the guys from Alfa, so you just have to line it up properly. You guys, look at this rock over here. If we install a 992 right next to his place, we’ll get a signal, so remember it and install it here next year as well. Of course, I won’t be here since I would be discharged. You guys are gonna be in trouble if you don’t remember.”

After checking that the antenna was installed stably, Hyungseok entered the box truck in order to communicate with the Alfa company. Inside the cramped box truck were four sergeants curled up into balls like puppies shivering in the cold.

“Sarge Han, you should just go to the staff tent. I’m sure you can have it easy since you’re being doted on by the first sergeant.”

“I saw him with the supply officer. It’s obvious that they would nag me to play chess with them. Why would I go?”

“You should. What are you doing in the box truck when you’re supposed to be leaving for your final vacation soon? This vehicle is designed for only four people. You should be considerate of your juniors.”

“Should I tell the company commander that the sergeants are all holed up in here?” Maru said, picking up his helmet.

Hyungseok quickly grabbed Maru’s arm.

“Sarge, you must be joking. Why don’t you sit back down?”

“Dammit, it’s so lonely not having any colleagues. My juniors are trying to one-up me now that they became sergeants. You guys forgot the things I did for you when you were privates, didn’t you? This must be why people must watch out for people.”

Hearing Maru grumble, Gitae quickly opened a hot pack and stuffed it into Maru’s pocket.

“You know how much we cherish you, hyung. Don’t do that. Take this and let it go.”

“I’m not someone who moves on bribery.”

“There you go again. Sarge Han, we aren’t strangers, are we?”

Beomsoo and Youngjin also shook some hot packs and stuffed them into Maru’s pocket. Maru smiled, as though he had no choice.

“No one’s sick, right?” Maru asked.

Hyungseok replied while undoing his simplified military vest.

“Yes. The prick that retired halfway through the march came back from the medical tent, and he looks okay now. Damn that guy. He was clearly trying to ditch training.”

“You should probe him out before you chew him. It’s really frustrating if you get chewed when you’re actually hurt.”

“I told Sunghyuk that already. The ones in power should be the ones to uphold discipline. I mean, I’m past that stage now, aren’t I?”

“At times like this, I sometimes think that the clock at the ministry of defense is actually ticking properly. I mean, Hyungseok, you’re already a sergeant. The same goes for the rest of you as well,” Maru said, pointing at the sergeant insignia on their chest pocket.

Hyungseok tapped on his own shoulder.

“And I got this as a bonus as well. Honestly speaking, you should’ve been the squad leader. Everyone follows you more as well.”

“Forget it. I received enough vacations as it is. Also, squad leaders are best avoided. Thanks to that, I reached the end of my service period in peace.”

“Yes. That’s why I got the green epaulet^[2] as your junior. So that you can have it easy.”

“You get one extra vacation day for that, so deal with it.”

“It’s so hard these days because the new guys that join are all idiots. One day isn’t enough.”

“Think back to when you just joined.”

“Stop talking about old times. It’s making me feel embarrassed.”

Hyungseok grabbed the walkie-talkie.

“One-two-three-four-five-six-seven-eight-nine-zero. Anyone waiting on this network? This is dude next door. How is the reception?”

-Reception 33, good.

“Roger that. Over and out.”

After checking communication, he put down the walkie-talkie. Hyungseok looked at Maru, who had his legs stretched out and resting on the wireless communication device.

“It’s so weird. Sarge Han is going on his last vacation.”

“You guys are bound to go as well. We’re only a month apart, so it won’t even take that long.”

“How many days is Sarge Han going? Didn’t he get a lot of extra vacation?”

“I think he did.”

“From what I know, he got one from haircutting, posters, one-liners^[3]....”

Hyungseok sighed while trying to count the number of days Maru was leaving as his final vacation. The other sergeants barely accumulated one month of holiday by including their corporal regular vacations, while Maru was getting over a month on his last leave based on extra holidays alone. While the staff members gave him a lot as well, it was still incredible for him to get all those vacation days. It wasn’t that Hyungseok was dissatisfied. In fact, he thought that Maru deserved more.

“It’s gonna be quite empty once Sarge Han leaves,” Gitae said.

Gitae was strictly scolded by Maru when he was a new recruit because of his mistakes, but after that, he became very close to Maru. Their other colleagues should all be the same. He was their direct senior, but he acted like their friend at times and like a father at others.

Hyungseok took out a sausage from his magazine pouch and put it in his mouth.

“Uhm, Sarge Han. Keep talking about the story from yesterday. Did you break up with your girlfriend?” Gitae asked.

They were talking just between sergeants yesterday, and Maru’s history came up. Maru usually didn’t talk about his own stories, but he talked about it yesterday. Perhaps his worries had been resolved, or perhaps he had become emotional because he was approaching his last leave. While they didn’t get to hear anything in detail, they heard that Maru chose to come to the military to physically distance himself from the girl he loved.

“You don’t have to tell the other person that you should break up to break up. It just disappears naturally with the flow of time.”

"It looks to me like you're still in love with her. Why are you trying to break up?"

"Well, I don't know the reason either anymore. It's just, I can be sure that this state is better for both me and her. From the way nothing has happened yet, I mean."

"Sarge Han, you're so clear cut when it comes to other things, but you're so vague when it comes to things like this."

"Don't pry too much. You're gonna get punished if you hurt a guy before his last leave."

Gitae said okay and closed his eyes. The transmission device turned on, and a slight hiss filled the silence. Hyungseok gulped down the sausage in his mouth.

"Sarge Han. What are you going to do once you leave? Are you going to keep doing those plays?"

"Plays? Yeah. I will. I don't have anything to distract me for the time being, so that's the only place I could consume my energy."

"I hope it goes well. Call me if you have it hard. I can give you food and a place to sleep."

Maru flattened his cap and put it on top of his eyes. The visor blocked his face, but his lips could be seen. His lips were raised upwards.

"I may look like this, but I'm actually blessed by god. In a year, I should have settled down and become quite famous."

"Isn't your dream a little too big?"

"If you still remember me after a year, you can see how I'm doing then."

"I've never seen people do well after making guarantees so easily, but I think you should be able to do it, Sarge Han. Alright, I'll see you a year after getting discharged. If you're doing really well like you say you will, you treat me, but otherwise, I'll treat you."

Hearing that, his colleagues all chimed in.

"Let me in as well."

"Isn't a year too fast? Sarge Han, are you sure about this?"

"Yeah. A year is pretty short, you know?"

As soon as they said those words, Maru lifted his cap a little. His slightly narrow eyes were smiling.

"Just think of what you want to eat."

* * *

"Ribeye beef steak^[4]," Hyungseok said.

Next to him, his colleagues all nodded at once. Looking down from the 2nd floor, the theater was larger than an ordinary cinema theater. The audience seats were all filled as well. Sarge Han was acting in front of all these people?

Hyungseok looked at the audience who was waiting excitedly.

[1] Stands for field manual. Here, it means that they're following every single training instruction without 'roughly' doing things.

[2] Signifies squad leader. Squad leaders get an extra day of vacation depending on how long they serve as one. This is different according to each base though.

[3] The military gives the soldiers extra days of vacation on top of the regular vacations upon promotion, for doing various tasks or winning various competitions. Hair cutting is one of the tasks, while posters and one-liners are competitions. The one-liners are basically statements (usually related to cyber security) which is picked every month and distributed to all the bases in the country

[4] One of the most expensive foods people tend to think of that's not too overboard.

Chapter 757. Sequence 1

Before the lights even illuminated the darkened stage, sounds could be heard first. Hyungseok felt like he was in the middle of a pedestrian crossing as car horns could be heard from time to time. The lights only turned on after the sounds settled down.

Two tables were placed on either side of the stage. There was a slightly raised stage at the back where another table was, and on each side of that were sliding doors. There was red cloth on the ceiling, and golden threads were embroidered on it like a rainbow. On the sidewall was a store sign that said 'Azure Dragon Pavilion', and below that was the menu. Jjajang-myeon, Jjam-ppong, tangsuyuk, kkanpunggi, etc^[1].

Just as he was starting to feel puzzled by how there was no one on the desolate stage, the sound of the roller shutter rolling up could be heard. It was followed by the sound of lights being switched on. The lights on the stage then turned on, dyeing the stage red.

"Geez, those cars are so damn loud."

A man wearing white chef clothing appeared from the side. Hyungseok smiled. The one who was staring towards the front while fixing his chef hat was none other than Maru.

"It won't show, will it?"

Maru peeked outside through the invisible door. People's murmurs could be heard from the speakers. After looking around outside while groaning a little, Maru dusted his chef clothes and left through the exit on the right. There was a sign that said 'kitchen'.

"Owner, I'm here."

A woman wearing a deep orange Chinese dress appeared on stage. Maru peeked out from the kitchen and told her to get ready. While the waitress was cleaning the tables, the bell chimed.

"Welcome to Azure Dragon Pavilion. Please, allow me to guide you."

Two guests sat at the table on the left. They were holding large sports duffel bags. When the waitress gave them an order sheet and turned around, the two men started looking around in unease. The stage darkened, and the table the two men were sitting at was given the highlight.

“Hey, you really wanna rob this place?”

“Didn’t you hear? The owner of this place has bars of gold inside the kitchen.”

“Bars of gold? Are you serious?”

“Yes, I am serious. There’s a bunch of gold in a safe that’s as large as this bag.”

“But that’s just a rumor.”

“It’s only called a rumor. Do you think I came here without even validating it?”

“It’s real then?”

“Trust me. If we do this, we can start our lives anew and take our hands off the dirty business. You can go back to your house with your face held proud.”

“Lives, anew.”

The two men uttered in resolution and nodded. At the same time, the lights turned on again. The two people sitting at the table slowly reached out to their sports duffel bags. The moment they tried to open the zipper, the bell chimed again. The two men exchanged gazes and took their hands off their bags.

“Welcome.”

The waitress greeted another pair of customers. This time, they seemed to be husband and wife. The married couple, who seemed to be in their early thirties, were carrying hiking bags on their backs. After looking around, the husband looked at the table where the two men were and clicked his tongue.

“Allow me to guide you.”

The waitress pointed to the table on the right. The man and woman awkwardly walked over and sat down. When the waitress put down some cups on the table and gave the menu to the woman, the woman became startled and flinched back.

“M-ma’am?”

“Sorry about that, my wife gets startled easily.”

When the waitress turned around after putting on an awkward smile, the lights once again dimmed, putting a spotlight on the table on the right.

“I told you to be careful.”

“Sorry honey. I was too nervous.”

“I know, I’m nervous as well. But what can we do? We should endure it. It’s just this once. As long as we get through this, everything will be over.”

“But is there really gold in a place like this?”

"I'm certain. I got that intel from a colleague of mine."

"What do we do about the other customers? I'm scared because they're two men."

"We should look for an opportunity. They're ordinary customers anyway. We have a gas-powered gun, so we can subdue them if it comes down to it. Honey, you practiced how to use it, right?"

"I did. Aim and shoot."

"Good. Aim for their faces. It'll be okay as long as you do that."

"What if we get caught?"

"Why would we get caught? This isn't the bank or anything; it's an ordinary restaurant. We just have to stay calm. We'll take them out in an instant and begin our new life with bars of gold. You and I will live together in a splendid place where we can be happy together."

His wife looked touched after listening to his words. The woman's klutz attitude was quite eye-catching. Hyungseok chuckled at the black comedy. The laughter of the audience could be heard faintly.

The lights changed, and the waitress and the men at the other table started doing their work again. The two men looked around while reaching out to their sports duffel bags, and the married couple, who were looking at that duo, were taking out their gas powered guns while gulping. It was a moment before chaos. Just then, the waitress walked between the tables with some food. The four people, who had come in pursuit of gold, all took deep breaths. While the sense of tension continued on, the bell chimed once again. This time, the customer was wearing a police uniform. With his appearance, the four people who were getting ready to rob gold all stuffed their noses into their plates.

The two men and the couple raised their hands in confusion.

"This tastes..."

"Absolutely terrible."

The people sitting at the two tables glanced at each other before giving the other party awkward smiles. Meanwhile, the waitress approached the policeman.

"W-welcome. Are you by yourself?"

"Yes. I'd like to order jjam-ppong-bap please."

"Ah, okay."

The waitress, who was taking orders proficiently until now, suddenly started stuttering and returned to the counter while swaying. The moment the waitress placed her hands on the counter, the lights all switched off, and a spotlight shone down on her.

"No wait, why is there a police at this hour? How is it possible? According to my investigations, there was zero chance that a police officer would appear at this hour. I will be in danger if I don't rob the gold bars by tonight and leave this place. What do I do?"

The waitress muttered to herself while shaking her feet. Even the waitress turned out to be a robber. Hyungseok's gaze naturally headed towards the policeman. As though they had seen through the psychology of the audience, the spotlight fell on top of the police officer this time.

"Why are there so many people at this hour? I went through the pain of buying a uniform. No one should be suspecting me right? I was acting natural, so it should be fine. Still, there are a lot of people; I should think about what I should do while I eat."

The policeman grabbed the cup of water with shaky hands. The water ended up overflowing due to his shaking, and the policeman flinched at the sensation of the cold water and let go of the cup. The stainless steel cup fell on the ground, and at the same time, clanging noises came out of the speakers on the side.

At the noise, everyone in the store became startled. The two men who were holding their duffel bags in their arms threw them away like they were trash, and the wife who was holding a gas-powered gun started hyperventilating and fell down. The waitress opened her mouth wide and stuffed her fist into it before biting it down, and the policeman crouched on the ground, wiping the spilt water with his clothes.

"Why is it so noisy?"

Maru peeked outside from the kitchen. The people who were acting out of panic all returned to their places as though nothing had happened. Maru, who looked around the restaurant for a bit of time, discovered the police officer and turned around, startled.

"Father in heaven, please bring me salvation."

Maru drew a cross on his chest and started praying. The stage darkened again. Maru, who received the light by himself, kneeled down.

"God, I may have killed the owner of this place out of greed, but it has already happened, has it not? The living should continue to live. Please let me go until I find the safe with the gold bars. Please? I will present a lot of offerings. I will also bury the corpse in the fridge somewhere good. Can you please turn a blind eye just this once?"

The lights all turned on during his prayer. The waitress tapped on Maru's shoulder as he was still kneeling.

"Owner? What are you doing?"

"O-oh, it's nothing. Anyway, how's work?"

"It's my second day, but I think I'm getting the hang of it."

"Th-that's good."

"But, uhm, owner."

"Yeah?"

"Can I go inside the kitchen? I have always been interested in Chinese-style kitchens."

Maru freaked out and waved his hand.

“No! Absolutely not!”

“Absolutely not?”

“The kitchen is a sacred place! It’s also very dangerous. What’s more, inside the fridge is a cor....”

“Cor?”

“Anyway, you focus on your work for now. You must never look inside the kitchen. If you do, I will fire you immediately, so keep that in mind!”

Maru was expressing that he had done something bad with all of his body. The waitress started shaking her legs even more after the owner’s words.

“I should quickly....”

“Rob this place....”

“How should I....”

“Get rid of them?”

The people inside the store each spoke their line and uttered their worries. Just then, smoke started coming out of the kitchen with a loud popping noise. The people inside the store were shocked as though it was their own houses that were set on fire. They all flocked towards the kitchen.

“Is there a fire?”

“No!”

“We should take out everything inside.”

“Don’t ever call 119^[2].”

“Let’s go in for now.”

With the waitress at the helm, everyone rushed into the kitchen. The stage turned dark, and silhouettes could be seen moving around busily in the darkness. A new stage set was brought in from the exits on either side. A fridge, the sink, various food ingredients and cooking tools. The stage was changed into a kitchen.

When the lights were turned on again, what entered Hyungseok’s eyes was the burnt black wall, the ripped open refrigerator, and the person lying down in front of it.

The waitress pushed the policeman’s back.

“Th-there’s a person over there. Is he dead?”

“D-don’t push! I can’t touch stuff like that!”

“But you’re a police officer!”

“F-forget the notion that all policemen are good at things like this!”

The husband, who had been watching the incident from the back, quietly spoke,

“Isn’t that a corpse?”

“A corpse?”

The waitress called out to Maru who was clutching his head next to the sink.

“Owner, who is that person? Why is he in the kitchen?”

“U-uhm.....”

“He looks frozen too. Did he fall out of that freezer?”

Maru, who was panting heavily as though he had been sprinting until just moments ago, quickly changed his eyes and spoke quietly,

“M-maybe he’s a thief?”

* * *

Hyungseok spoke as he clapped,

“The play’s pretty decent. It was more interesting than a movie.”

“Yeah.”

Gitae had stood up to applaud. The story of robbers gathered in the restaurant continued going down the unexpected path. Although there were cliché plot twists at times, the comedic handling of events didn’t make any part boring. The acting of the actors moving across the stage also added to the charm. By the end of the play, Hyungseok found himself liking these evil criminals. If it was reality, he would never befriend such people, but these cute fictional robbers were characters with their own charms.

“Hey, Maru-hyung’s pretty popular.”

There was a photoshoot event after the play, and many female fans took photos with him. Many people gave him presents and bouquets as well. Other actors were taking photos while holding the gifts they were given, but Maru couldn’t hold all of them and had to put them down to take photos.

“He sure keeps his word alright. He said he would become successful after getting discharged, and he definitely seems popular.”

“Should I get Sarge Han to introduce me to a girl? I like that person who played the waitress.”

“Do you even have a conscience? You want to date someone like that with your face?”

“You never know. Anyway, he’s really cool. I didn’t know I would be absorbed until the end.”

Hyungseok agreed with those words. Unlike in films, the audience could make eye contact with the actors on stage. Although it would only be for a brief moment, that short eye contact would transfer a wave of emotions. At that time, Hyungseok felt like he was the one standing on stage.

After the photoshoot, Maru stepped forward.

“Thank you for watching the play, The Suspicious Azure Dragon Pavilion. We will not forget the love you have shown us. Also, I hope you can continue to support us, Blue Sky, in the future. We will return with even better performances. Thank you for your support,” Maru said while bowing.

Hyungseok applauded once again. While everyone applauded passionately, a woman sitting next to him stood up. Hyungseok gave her a glance. Although he couldn’t see her properly because she was wearing a baseball hat and a pair of thick glasses, he could tell that she was a beauty.

“Congratulations.”

Hyungseok tilted his head when he heard the voice. That voice sounded quite familiar. He tried to have another look at the woman again, but she had already left.

[1] Popular menus in Korean-style Chinese restaurants. Respectively, black soybean noodles, spicy seafood noodles, sweet-n-sour fried pork, and fried chicken with sauce.

[2] Korean 911

Chapter 758. Sequence 2

-Noona, where did you go? I asked the writer and she said you left as soon as the live broadcast ended. I’m in front of the KBS building.

“I left first because I had something to do. I don’t have any schedule today anyway, do I?”

-You don’t. But where did you go? I was planning to bring you to the company and pick Mr. Yongjin up.

“I’m fine, so you can go over to him.”

-Okay. I’ll call you when it’s time for the next schedule. Thanks for your work today.

“Yeah, you too.”

Gaeul spat out a short breath and loosened her hand. She hadn’t made a visit to Daehak-ro in a while, but nothing had changed here. The vitality of youth filled the streets, and the artistic beauty grabbed people’s attention. The occasional street stalls were selling hot dogs or waffles, which were the specialties of Daehak-ro, and the people passing by all bought something from the stalls as though they were enchanted. The people walking on the streets were filled with leisure. Sometimes, people were hurrying as though they mistook the starting times, but even they had a hint of joy. Although the weather was hot, the streets of Daehak-ro did not get tired out. It felt like the heat was a driving force.

Gaeul opened the camera app and took photos around her. It wasn’t that there was a specific building or a person she wanted to take photos of. She just wanted to record the fact that she was here.

“Isn’t she Han Gaeul?”

“No way. I’m sure it’s someone who looks like her.”

“I think it’s her. Try talking to her.”

“I said she’s not.”

Gaeul heard other people talking about her. She took a couple more photos before blatantly walking over to the two women. The two women, who were arguing in whispers to each other about how she is or isn't Han Gaeul eventually turned around, saying that she wasn't.

After the two left, Gaeul pressed her cap down even more. She also tied her hair. When her wavy hair was tied, it became messy like a brush, but she didn't care. This 'messy' looking side of hers would erase the 'Actress Han Gaeul' impression. The horn-rimmed glasses also played a role in that. The thick frames blurred her impression on others.

What made celebrities look like one was their confident attitude, their clothing, and makeup. Through a few experiences, Gaeul found out that people would not recognize her if she put on comfortable clothing, erased her makeup, and walked while looking at the ground. Though, some quick-witted people still approached her and asked her about it.

"Err, you are Han Gaeul, right?"

Gaeul nodded to the man right in front of her. The man knew respect and had apologized first for interrupting her before asking for a photo. Gaeul gladly accepted. There was probably no one among celebrities who would act coldly towards a fan who was being considerate.

"I'm listening to the radio. I also enjoyed the drama."

"Thank you."

"I wish you luck with your work."

After shaking hands with her, the man turned around with a faint smile. He called someone while walking away cheerfully; he was probably boasting to his friends. Hey, I just saw Han Gaeul - or something along those lines.

Sometimes, she would get caught and a fan would demand a photo and an autograph. Whenever that happened, she would only think of one thing: what did she need to do in order to not catch people's attention? Through trial and error she found out that sunglasses or masks that covered her face would instead stimulate people's imaginations and attract attention to herself, and based on that, she found a shabby-looking baseball cap and a pair of black rims for glasses frames. People weren't able to detect if someone was an actress if that person looked similar to them.

"One hotdog please."

She paid money and picked up a hotdog wrapped in oil paper. She was thinking about how she needed to add an extra 30 minutes to the treadmill today. Calories had to be a unit of flavor. While tasting the strong flavor of the sauce in her mouth, she returned to her car. She got into her small car and ate the hotdog in a daze. In front of her, she saw a couple walking with tickets in their hands. The woman was holding some cotton candy as well. She handed the cotton candy to the man to eat. After seeing the couple playing around, Gaeul stuffed the rest of the hotdog in her mouth. The sauce seemed to have lumped up at the end as an intense salty flavor assaulted her tongue at once.

Before she started her car, she picked up her phone first. She long-pressed two and waited. A name appeared on the screen, indicating that she was calling someone: Myunghwa High, Choi Seol.

“Where are you?”

-Of course I'm at home. I can't go outside and play around on a golden weekend like this.

“Then should I go over?”

-Don't come empty-handed and bring a lot of things. It's punishment for not visiting my house when I moved. Oh, and no toilet rolls or cooking oil. I have lots of those.

“Why don't you just tell me what you need? I can just buy that.”

-Then, a fridge?

“You can't be serious.”

-Let me benefit from having a celebrity friend.

“Then I'll really buy a brand new one, okay?”

Gaeul said that there was a department store not far from her.

-Please take it as a joke. Girl, you don't know how scary money is after you earned so much. Just a five-pack ramyun, beer, and some snacks should do. Oh! And some cat food, expensive bands if possible.

“Oh right. You were raising a cat, weren't you?”

Gaeul put her phone between her cheek and shoulder and started the car. She searched for a nearby mall and drove off.

“I'll buy them before I go.”

-I'll be waiting. Woofie, say hi to unni~

She could hear an annoyed cat growling from the other side. Perhaps the cat was expressing her resistance towards the owner for having received a name that denied her very species. Gaeul organized the list of items she had to buy as she drove toward the mall.

She turned on the music and opened the window. The hot air soon cooled down when she started driving fast. She untied her hair and brushed it with her hand. The mix of music and wind created a chaotic noise. It was just like how her heart was right now.

Her head, which had maintained its calm until now, brought the scene she had seen just a while ago in front of her eyes. The stage that Maru was standing on overlapped with the scenery of the street. Maru, who walked around on the stage with his comedic act, seemed like his acting had reached perfection instead of just being proficient. He was the axis of the stage. He was at the center of the well-structured acting of the actors.

She couldn't believe that that was the acting skill of an actor who was only 25. The audience's gaze was glued to his fingertips, and every word from his mouth made them smile.

Maru didn't seem to be bringing bliss to just the audience; he was bringing it to the actors on stage as well. Any actor would have felt impatient from seeing that stage. There was a sense of excitement that just couldn't be satiated as a viewer.

Gaeul stopped thinking. If she let her thoughts run amok, her memories would go beyond the stage and arrive 3 years ago around this time of the year. That day was pretty hot as well, though, her tears were hotter than the weather that day. Let's stop now - the voice that was still vivid after all this time stuck around her whole body.

"I enjoyed the performance. Congratulations, Han Maru."

Those small words dissipated into the wind. She wanted to say that to his face, but she ended up quietly leaving the theater. It wasn't because of the shame of a woman who was notified of the breakup first. It also wasn't because she was worried that she might look like she had regrets. It was because Maru looked closer than she thought. There was no sense of psychological distance. She felt like they would become friends again like before if she talked to him. That sense of kinship was what made Gaeul flinch back like she had touched fire. It felt like doing so would return her to the past; a time when they were smiling and laughing together and reaffirming each other of their love was something natural.

She parked her car in the parking lot. Just as she was about to get out of her car without hesitation, she saw her face in the rearview mirror. She immediately put on her cap and her glasses. She had to hide traces of the actress Han Gaeul.

Expecting to look like an ordinary salary woman in her twenties buying groceries, she entered the mall. She was wondering what kind of items she should buy before a visit to someone else's house, but she eventually picked up everything that caught her eyes, with the exception of toilet rolls and cooking oil.

She had bought some food ingredients to spend a good Saturday night as well as some gifts before going up to the 3rd floor. In the corner of the floor, where household electronics were being sold, there was a place that sold pet items. There were dogs and cats sleeping on the other side of the plastic wall. When she walked over, they perked up their ears and scratched the wall.

Maybe I should raise one - such a thought passed by in her mind. She stared at them for a long while with her face against the wall but eventually shook her head. She was already raising one. She was raising a coy rabbit that didn't need food. A rabbit that she could see anywhere if she so wished.

She bought some pet food according to the employee's recommendations. The pet food was even more expensive than human food. She thought about Seol's cat, which had three spots on her forehead, wondering if she would like it.

She put the items in a box and loaded them in the back seat of her car before leaving the mall. She sped up towards Oksu-dong where Seol had moved to.

"I've arrived in front of your house."

-If you're here, you should come up. Why did you call me?

"I bought too much. Come down."

-I told you to hold back. Oh well, I guess it's a good thing. Wait a sec, I'll be right there.

She put down two boxes in front of her car and waited. A moment later, Choi Seol pushed open the glass entrance to the apartment and came out.

"You bought a lot."

“A certain someone told me to bring stuff.”

“That’s my Gaeul, so obedient. Anyway, let’s go inside. It’s hot out here.”

Until the sign inside the elevator reached 13, Choi Seol had continually been chatting. Gaeul chuckled, thinking that the tomboy Seol had become chatty tomboy Seol after starting to work. Three months ago, Seol consulted her about a guy she had a crush on in the same workplace. Unlike her resolve to become a campus couple that she mentioned during high school graduation, Seol ended up living a rather plain college life before graduating. This girl, who said that men only saw her as a friend and that she would never become hung up on love again, ended up talking about love as soon as she got a job. Gaeul kindly offered her some advice. It was good to get close, but it was a big problem for the other person to think of her as a member of the same sex. Seol boldly said that she would be clear this time. Right now though, she had become best buddies with that person. What was even more saddening was that Seol ended up introducing that man to another girl. Ever since then, she said something about becoming a prim girl, but from the looks of her today, Gaeul instantly realized that wasn’t going to happen.

“I almost splashed coffee in his face.”

The story about how she talked bad about her team leader ended with the opening of the front door. Gaeul found a cat observing her the moment she entered the house.

“Woofie has grown a lot.”

“She’s a total mistress right now. Come on in.”

She took her shoes off and went inside. The living room was pretty large for one person to be living by herself. There was no furniture either, making it look even roomier.

“Isn’t it too desolate in here?”

“You know I hate things looking messy. What would you like to drink? Coffee? Juice?”

“How about this?”

Gaeul took out a pack of canned beer from the box. Choi Seol snapped her fingers and said ‘great’.

“Sit down for a while. I’ll get some snacks ready. You can play with Woofie in the meantime.”

“Would she play with me?”

“She’s not shy around strangers, so try reaching your hand out to her.”

Gaeul took out some of the cat food she bought and put it in her hand before reaching out to the cat. The cat, which was watching in front of the bedroom, yawned and turned around. I’m not interested, so go away - she seemed to be saying.

“She’s a proud one.”

“She’s a proud one alright.”

Choi Seol soon came to the living room. She brought canned snails and canned fruits. Seeing the two cans on a tray, Gaeul sighed.

“What is it?”

“Gee, you and I are just...”

Gaeul took out the snacks she bought from the mall. They were canned snails and canned fruits.

“Let’s just order some food after we eat them.”

Choi Seol arrived at a clear conclusion and then smirked with a can of beer in her hands. Gaeul looked at the canned beer in her hands with anxiety. The slight movement of her hands as well as that look in her eyes - she could tell what Seol was up to.

“Don’t shake it. This is your own house.”

“I can just clean it up later.”

Her friend, who had pent-up work stress, started shaking the can like mad saying that she would only calm down with an explosion. Gaeul had no choice but to say the words that would paralyze her actions entirely.

“You won’t get a boyfriend like that.”

Tap - the can fell out of her hands.

Chapter 759. Sequence 2

The cat purred in her lap. The black fabric of her pants had turned into the colorful color of cat fur. She did hear that this cat moulted a lot, but she didn’t know it would be this bad

“She’s a total fur generator, not a cat,” Choi Seol said while putting down an empty beer can next to her.

Gaeul tickled the cat on the head with her finger. She could feel the round shape of the skull. When she stroked her finger down the neck and to the butt, the cat stood up. She walked into the room before turning around. Your scratching skills are not up to stuff, her face seemed to say.

“Why don’t you tell me about it now?”

Choi Seol put a thick grin on her face. Gaeul understood what she was talking about immediately.

“There really isn’t anything.”

“Is this how you’re going to act? I’m tight-lipped. I definitely won’t tell other people about it.”

“I said there’s nothing to talk about.”

“No way. How can you say that not a single secretive something happened in the entertainment industry?”

“It’s the same people. Do you think people fall for each other whenever they see each other?”

“There’s definitely a lot of pretty men and women. Above all, a lot of men would be pursuing someone like you, Gaeul.”

“Aren’t you overestimating me?”

“That’s why I prepared something today.”

Choi Seol turned the TV on. Last week’s TV show was showing. Choi Seol put down the remote and after she touched her phone a few times, the TV screen changed into her phone screen.

“I looked for a clip as soon as I saw the live show.”

She looked up the video with the quick typing skills she had gained in high school and pointed at the TV with her chin. There was a video of an actor in an interview.

-If there’s an actress you want to act with, who would you pick?

-I would like to act with Miss Han Gaeul. I fell for the acting that she showed in ‘Flaming Lady’.

-Then since you’re at it, why don’t you give her a video letter!

-Uhm, Miss Gaeul. If we can, I’d love to act with you in the future. Or, I can just follow your schedule. It’d be an honor if you contact me personally but....

The actor scratched his head and asked if he was being too honest, making the atmosphere a lot more gentle. Choi Seol stopped the video.

“Tell me honestly. Did you meet this guy or not?”

A persistent gaze was glued on her. Choi Seol looked like she would never let her go if she didn’t reply. If the answer wasn’t to her liking, she probably wouldn’t change topics either. Gaeul looked at the piles of beer cans. They had drunk 6 cans between the two of them already. If she didn’t put an end to this, the number of cans would only increase.

“Yeah, I met him.”

She decided to be honest. Choi Seol pushed the beer she was about to open to one side. Having found prey that was more enticing than alcohol, beer lost any charm. Choi Seol showed the will to listen to every single detail with a clear mind. She poured some cold water into a bowl and drank it.

“Good, tell me about it.”

Choi Seol’s eyes became clear. Gaeul remembered back to the school trip six years ago. She looked and acted the same as back then when she pressed her to talk about the guy she was dating while hugging a pillow. The difference was that there was no pillow this time and that her cheeks were flushed red due to the alcohol.

“We didn’t meet each other independently. I was just called out by the director, and I saw him there as well.”

“Are you sure it was a coincidence and not a scheme? In order to see you?”

“Even if I say no, you won’t believe me, will you?”

“It’s a lot more interesting that way, exciting too.”

“Whatever. Anyway, we met there and had a conversation. It wasn’t a crowded place, so it took quite some time to relax. He might have said that on TV, but he’s actually a lot more gentle in real life. He seemed shy too.”

“Really? So not a sly one, huh.”

“He’s not. The way he speaks is really quiet, so he wasn’t bad as a conversation partner. No, in fact, it was pretty good. We shared a hobby too.”

“Hobby?”

“Going driving. Apparently, he likes driving his car without a destination. Then, he would come back home and rest once he was tired. He has a lot of similarities to me.”

“You’re right. You also rest at home a lot. Oh, that reminds me. When was it again? I think it was after you finished your drama. I went over to your house and it scared the heck out of me. I was wondering if I entered a pigsty instead of a house.”

“Hey, it wasn’t that bad. It was just a little messy because I just moved in. It was clean when you made another visit.”

“That’s because I cleaned it for you. Anyway, what happened after that?”

“That’s it. Hey, haven't you been reading too many romance novels recently? You should stop watching dramas too. If every man and woman fell in love at first sight, then the novels and dramas you like would not sell. It’s because that doesn’t happen that that plot is made into movies, novels, and dramas.”

“Don’t break the mood. Are you sure nothing happened? I mean, he sure looks interested in you.”

Gaeul pushed away Choi Seol’s face as she was too close. After being pushed away by the forehead, Seol shook her head and approached her again. She was persistent like a detective that was convinced that there was a secret. Gaeul sighed out a warm breath. The detective won.

“Yeah, there was! There was one, okay!”

She gave up and told the truth. She stretched her arms out and lay back. The back of her head was caught on the tip of the sofa. When she loosened the tension in her stomach, her head brushed past the surface of the sofa and reached the floor.

“What? What’s this?”

Choi Seol immediately lay next to her. She put her arms around her knees and rolled sideways like a roly-poly toy. She looked like a child wanting a toy. The detective, whose eyes were on fire in order to seek the truth, had become endlessly gentle in front of the culprit who had confessed. Gaeul looked at the ceiling and probed around the floor with her hand. A pack of almonds that she bought as dry snacks entered her hand. The salty almond that entered her mouth tasted like the same almond she ate that night.

“I was about to go home after the director called me out, but he called out to me. He asked me if I was okay with drinking a little more.”

“He’s a playboy, not actually a shy guy?”

“It didn’t look like it. He looked like he had mustered up the courage. He looked a little pitiful too. He didn’t seem like a strange guy, so I said yes.”

“So? Where did you go?”

“A bar that he’s a regular at. It was a quiet place, and the privacy seemed good. We talked over a drink about various things.”

“What various things?”

“You know, just this and that. From work to everyday life. It wasn’t that awkward. He didn’t ask anything in detail either. It was like a light drinking session between friends.”

“Don’t tell me that’s it? My nose tells me that there’s something more to this. Tell me, tell me now.”

Gaeul turned her head to the right. She saw Seol, seeking an answer. Her nose was twitching.

“He asked for my number, and if we could eat together next time.”

“So? Did you give it to him?”

“No.”

“Why!”

Choi Seol abruptly sat up. She looked disappointed and flabbergasted as though she found a zero missing from her salary cheque. Gaeul also sat up. That man had good manners. They had a lot in common as well. The speed they drank at was decent, and his skills in leading a conversation weren’t bad. There was no need to talk about his looks since he was an actor. He was above average in every aspect. There was no reason to refuse his request anywhere. Perhaps she should have given him her number, telling him that they should eat out some time. She could remember the man’s embarrassed smile as she politely apologized.

“I wanted to focus on work for a while.”

“Can’t you work while you are dating?”

“Actresses are all about image.”

“Hey, this is 2011. There are many people who publicly claim that they’re dating. We no longer live in a world where people are socially ostracized when there’s a dating scandal.”

“On the surface, true. But you need to have a look at the letters that arrive at the agency whenever there’s a scandal. Not only that, think about all the things that come up on social networks. I definitely need to be careful about that since I have a job that shows my face to other people.”

“If you say so. I find it a pity.”

“Why do you find it a pity when it’s about me?”

“Because I want vicarious satisfaction. I think I’m hopeless in this life. All the guys I like only see me as a friend. Should I just strip and assault them?”

Choi Seol blinked creepily while licking her lips. This girl was in critical condition. Her disease was lack of affection. Gaeul advised her friend not to step onto the path of a criminal. Her hand gestures were way too indecent and realistic to treat her words as a joke. Her hand movements looked like she was going to strip a man from top to bottom.

“I thought you wanted to live like a woman.”

“It’s because I can’t do that that I’m in this state.”

“Also, stop with your hands. You look like a pervert.”

“You wanna know what a pervert will do to you?”

Gaeul giggled and stood up. She needed more booze. Not one that had warmed up because it was left outside; she wanted a cool, refreshing one with droplets forming on the surface. They switched places. They let the trash become the owners of the living room and sat at the table in the kitchen.

“But hey, what were you doing for an hour? You said you’d come right after you finished your radio.”

As she was embracing the chill of freshly taken-out beer, she received that question from Seol. That question took away her senses to the point that she could no longer tell if the beer in her hands was cold or hot anymore. Gaeul rolled her eyes around. She turned her eyes away from Seol and scanned the fridge, the cabinet, then the sink.

“Something’s up, huh?”

Why was it that acting, which was her source of income, became useless in front of her friend? She stopped trying to put on an act that even a child wouldn’t be fooled by. Perhaps a part of her wanted Seol to understand.

“I went to see a play.”

“A play? In that short time?”

“I only entered halfway. I didn’t watch it properly.”

“If you wanted to watch something, you should’ve told me about it. It would’ve been great if we watched it together.”

“Well, the thing I wanted to see wasn’t the play itself. No wait, I guess I wasn’t exactly watching for the person either.”

“What do you mean?”

“Seol, do you remember Han Maru?”

Choi Seol’s eyes looked up for a moment before coming back down again. She made a puzzled expression for a while because of the unfamiliar name but eventually exclaimed out loud in realization.

“Your ex-boyfriend?”

“So you remember him.”

“You went to see him? Why?”

“There wasn’t a special reason. I just happened to hear that it was his last performance. I wanted to congratulate him, without any special intentions.”

“So, did you tell him?”

Gaeul lifted the can of beer and shook her head. Choi Seol chuckled as though she knew that was going to be the case. After gulping down some beer, Choi Seol suddenly made a surprised expression.

“Don’t tell me you still have feelings for him?”

“Do you want me to be honest?”

“Gaeul, Han Gaeul. That’s no good. I feel really anxious now. Did you forget what happened? You came over to my house and cried the whole day.”

“I did do that.”

“Think about it carefully. Do you still have feelings for him?”

Gaeul shook her head.

“No, I don’t. But when I saw him, I felt strange. We haven’t contacted each other for three years, and I haven’t heard his voice either, but when I looked at him, I just felt relaxed. That’s why I left without even saying hello. I felt like it would be strange to go meet him.”

“Well done. You shouldn’t go meet a guy who dumped you. Not only that, you’re a popular actress. There’s nothing to be disappointed about. Forget your old feelings. Don’t ever look back at him, okay?”

“Okay. Also, it’s not like I felt anything special. I just felt relaxed. You know, like meeting an old friend after a long time. Right, it was comfort rather than love.”

“What the heck is up with that cheesy line? That’s supposed to be a line said between a married couple, so forget about it. You need to meet a better man. I’m sure that Han Maru or whatever is regretting you know? The girl he dumped is doing so well right now. Good, let’s go meet this Han Maru and laugh at him.”

“There you go again. Just drink.”

Just as Gaeul lifted her beer to toast, her phone rang. She got a call. She picked up the phone from the floor and flipped it around. She saw the caller's name. It was producer Park Hoon.

Chapter 760. Sequence 2

Hyungseok was walking in the desert. Whenever he took a step, his foot sank into the ground. When he tried to take out the foot by putting strength into his other foot, that foot would then sink knee-deep into the ground. When he came to himself, he found himself sunken until his thighs. He groaned and twisted his body from side to side. He couldn’t budge as though a giant hand was tightly grabbing onto

his legs. Just as he started having a hard time breathing and thoughts about the afterlife, he suddenly wondered why he was in the middle of the desert.

He felt like he was surfacing from deep within the water, he opened his eyes. He collected his senses and looked around. He was lying down on one bed alongside Gitae, Beomsoo, and Youngjin. Pushing aside Beomsoo's feet and Gitae's body, which were the things that made him have a hard time breathing, he got off the bed. Four grown men were sleeping on one bed, so it was natural for him to have a nightmare. For some reason, he felt like he could smell the military. The stench of the military blanket tickled his nose.

"You up?"

When he opened the door and walked outside, he saw Maru in the kitchen. The large TV in the living room was yapping by itself. Tomorrow's weather will be warmer than today and....

"Where is this place?"

"Of course, it's my house."

The sound of glass being scratched reverberated in his head. He barely managed to squint open his eyes and look at the clock on the wall: 6:20. The sun was setting outside the window.

"So I had about an hour or two of sleep, huh."

Hyungseok sat down in the living room. After meeting up with Maru in the theater, they went to drink immediately. Before they even asked each other how they were doing, they opened a bottle of soju and poured it into beer glasses. The last things he remembered were his friends pouring vodka into their glasses, Maru taking out his credit card, and his phone clock which said it was 4 p.m.

"Sheesh, you can't even drink that much, yet you had to order all that."

Hyungseok grabbed the cup that Maru handed him. Now that he had collected himself, he felt a wave of strong thirst. He felt like fire was burning in the corners of his throat. He drank the lukewarm water in the cup in an instant. After drinking, he saw Maru, looking completely fine.

"You drank with us too, didn't you?"

His head rewind the time back to 4 hours ago. It was when they were drunk but not out of it. Bottles of alcohol piled up behind the boiling soup pot, and they were replacing their stomach acid with alcohol while crying for seconds. Hyungseok clearly remembered the number of green bottles in front of Maru. While the four of them were chatting noisily and eating food, Maru quietly emptied glass after glass. He didn't know exactly how much, but he was confident that Maru drank the most out of the five of them.

Hyungseok looked at Maru like he was looking at a fantastic creature.

"What?"

"Nothing. Rather than that, what happened?"

“Don’t you get it? You guys all passed out while drinking. I expected it when I saw you guys mixing soda into vodka because you found vodka bitter. If you were going to do that, why did you bother drinking vodka at all? You should just drink Yakult instead. What about the others?”

“They should be wandering in the desert right about now.”

“Desert?”

Something like that, Hyungseok said while waving his hand. The air conditioner here was the model that was on recent TV ads, the television was a large, curved screen one, and the leather sofa was clearly a brand name one as well. The balcony had a glass table and there was a view of the Han river. An apartment with three rooms and a good view. The salesman living inside Hyungseok’s head finished his calculations quickly.

“You’re well-off. Is it monthly rent?”

“That’s what you want to know?”

“Sure. I always wanted to live in a house like this if I ever became successful as an actor. Looks like you earn a lot of money even through plays, huh?”

“If plays were enough to earn tons of money, do you think actors would have switched to dramas or films? Play actors don’t earn that much.”

“Then how did you buy this place? I’m not an expert in real estate, but this place is definitely on the higher end.”

“I don’t know the cost since my company provided it for me. As you say, I heard that it’s pricey.”

“Company? You had an agency?”

“Didn’t I tell you? I’m in JA Production.”

Hyungseok looked at Maru in surprise. If he didn’t hear wrong, he heard ‘JA Production’ just now. It was a small agency with super bigshot actors who could hit at least 8 million views if they shot a film. That was the place that anyone aspiring to become a film actor would give a second look at. Hyungseok was no different. Although he was merely a beginner who had just started off, he had set JA as his final destination.

“Seriously? You’re in JA Production?”

“Why? Can’t I be?”

“You can, but it sure is a big blow to me. I never imagined it. Did you take an audition after you got discharged?”

“I was there before I was in the military. Now that you mention it, it’s been pretty long.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me about it?”

“Because I had no reason to say it. It’s not like being in JA would change my military life. In fact, I would get bombarded with annoying questions.”

He was reasonable, yet Hyungseok felt disgruntled for some reason. He even felt slightly betrayed. The colleague he had spent two years with suddenly felt like a foreigner from a distant land.

"I'm disappointed. You should've told us about it."

"Why didn't you ask?"

"We would've if we knew anything. I just thought that you went to Daehak-ro after appearing on TV a little."

"Would anything have changed if you knew I was in JA?"

Hyungseok fell silent. He had already learned that he couldn't win against this man with words in the military. Hyungseok, who lost before he even picked a fight, sighed awkwardly and changed the channel on the TV. An old western movie was airing. It was a movie that started with a former CIA agent falling into danger. He had watched it several times, yet he enjoyed it in a daze every time he watched it.

"I also want to shoot a film like that."

"Looks like you weren't kidding when you said you were receiving acting lessons," said Maru, walking over.

"I handed the business over to my friend entirely, and I'm learning these days. I even heard that I'm pretty good at the academy. I'm a promising student, you know?"

"Usually, academies don't talk bad about their students. It'd be troublesome if they quit."

"Why are you so pessimistic? You should watch my acting. Only after will you know that the teachers at the academy aren't saying nonsense."

"Go on then. I'll have a look," Maru said while tilting his mug.

The bitter fragrance of coffee wafted out. Hyungseok smiled and waved his hand. Acting in the living room of someone else's house wasn't something he wanted to do. Maru, who he expected to say that he was just joking and then switch the topic, kept staring at him as though to urge him. Hyungseok made an awkward smile again. The corner of his lips trembled for some reason.

"You really want me to do it?"

"You said you were serious about it, didn't you? I'm no one amazing, but I can still subjectively evaluate your acting. When I learned acting, listening to other people's critiques was common. You're not going to act in front of a mirror forever, are you? If you want to become an actor, then just consider it a practice run since you're going to eventually have to act in front of people."

"Here? Right now?"

"If you don't want to, then you don't have to. I'm not forcing you or anything."

Maru slowly turned his eyes to the TV. Hyungseok also rested his chin and focused on the TV. The character in the film was wailing while holding a photo of his dead wife. He watched the act for a while before looking at Maru.

It was true that he was receiving good evaluations at the academy. The teacher that taught him confidently told him that he would eventually become good enough to debut if he kept practicing. Hyungseok studied acting not only through the assignments he was given but through things he did during his own time as well. He did so in order to catch up since he started late. When he started his clothes sales business, he did the same thing. He split up his time into tiny bits and didn't waste any in order to catch up to others. Hyungseok had the desire to live better off than other people. To walk ahead of others, he knew that he had to put a lot of effort as well as give up on some things. The thing he sacrificed while starting his clothes sales business was sleep. He also distanced himself from drinking, as well as the friends he drank with every weekend before he started working. He put as much time as he possibly could into his business. The result was a successful business.

"What?" Maru asked, seemingly having felt his gaze.

Hyungseok looked back on what kind of life he had been living ever since he decided to start acting. He made the decision to become an actor before his last vacation in the military. It was an impulsive decision, but the friend that he ran the clothes sales business with encouraged him. He spent the last night in the military planning what to do after getting discharged. Before he was enlisted, he would often get nosebleeds because of the lack of sleep. He reminded himself of that time, when he had a hard time but managed to obtain success and obtained confidence that he would be able to become successful in a short time if he put his time into practicing. He registered at an academy and started practicing. He had never missed a lesson in the past year. His acting should have improved from the day he got discharged. A difference though, was that he wasn't as desperate as he was when he ran his clothes sales business. That was something he was sure of. He met up with friends he hadn't called in a long time on weekends to have drinks and enjoyed his time with the ladies he met at the nightclub. Whenever he had to go to the academy, he put everything down and focused wholeheartedly on acting practice and even studied more when he returned home, but on weekends and on days he didn't have lessons, he had his private time. That was because he came to the judgment that he was doing sufficiently.

In acting, there was no visual proof of achievements like sales numbers and income taxes. Even after investing all that time, the only thing he could rely on was his senses to judge whether he improved or not. The only measure he had, his acting teacher, repeatedly told him that he was improving. That was the reason he wasn't feeling anxious despite being leisurely. That was the reason he felt like he could be at leisure.

He believed that he put enough effort into becoming better than others. As something abstract, he found acting easier than business where numbers proved everything.

"Should I do it?"

Hyungseok believed that it was time to get evaluated. He came to the conclusion that having an interim check through Maru was a good idea to see if his calculations were right or not. He had the confidence. He also had leisure but wasn't playing around. If acting had a score sheet with things that could be displayed as a number, he would have practiced to the death in order to raise those scores, but as judgment was a subjective thing, he believed that investing too much was a waste.

"Did you suddenly have a change of mind?"

“I just thought that it’s not a bad idea to get evaluated by an actor belonging to JA. Who knows? We might eat out of the same pot in the future.”

“Maybe. So, what are you going to show me?”

“That movie. I practiced a lot while watching that movie.”

“This movie’s good. I watched it several times. What about your character?”

“The main character of course.”

Hyungseok refined his emotions. He reminded himself of the main character who cried miserably while holding a photo of his wife. It was something he followed many times over while playing the video. The tone of voice, the expression, and even the breaks in the line were clearly engraved in his head.

He kneeled and looked at the imaginary photo in his hand which triggered his crying emotions. The tip of his nose tingled and his tear glands started doing their job. Feeling tears flowing down his cheeks, Hyungseok said the line: Ohhh, no, no.

He did find it a little embarrassing to act in front of a friend he hadn’t met in a year – someone who also happened to be an actor who was working in the field – but he found his acting satisfactory. The emotions were definitely up there when he was practicing as well.

“Good. You were literally Flippis just now.”

Maru applauded while mentioning the actor’s name. Hyungseok felt proud. At the same time, he came to the decision that acting was a lot easier than running a business. Although he might change it depending on the occasion, he came to the decision that maintaining the status quo on the amount of practice he did now should be enough to allow him to pass an audition not too far in the future.

That was all Maru had to say about the act. Maru just sipped on coffee and looked at the TV again. Hyungseok was satisfied with his achievements, but he was also rather disappointed that there was no detailed evaluation. Maybe acting was extremely subjective and even professional actors had nothing to say. That had to be how it is; it had to be what he was thinking, but he wanted to check one thing.

“Can you show me as well?” Hyungseok said while pointing at the TV.