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**Hwang Sun-won/Trees on a Slope**

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# I

**LIKE WALKING** *through a big hunk of glass. Feet don't want to move.*

The afternoon sun beat down relentlessly as they neared the foot of the mountain. Unlimited visibility. Dwellings crouched beneath them, half a dozen or more, thatched roofs looking impossibly heavy. The structures seemed untouched by the war, but where were the occupants? You would think they had died off, so still were the surroundings. Not a single living thing was in evidence.

Why did this calm, clear, lucid space feel so resistant, so stifling? It really was like walking through dense, thick glass, Tong-ho told himself again. He had to force himself to move. With every measured step, rifle close to his side, muzzle forward, that massive hunk of glass blocked him, closing all over him, leaving only enough space for the outline of his body. He heard himself panting. Sweat streamed from his forehead.

Six feet ahead walked Hyön-t'ae, rifle at his side. Tong-ho felt the other man look back at him. Another wisecrack coming? Tong-ho ignored him. If he allowed his focus to wander, the dense glass barrier that begrudged his movements would harden fast, immobilizing him forever. It was no more than forty yards to the nearest dwelling, but those forty yards felt interminable.

The house search claimed Tong-ho's attention and his feeling of oppression eased. Hyŏn-t'ae beckoned Tong-ho and two others to keep watch while he and the remaining man prepared to enter the first dwelling. Normally slow to action and fond of clowning, Hyŏn-t'ae grew alert and determined—an altogether different man—when it came time to fight. In an instant he flattened himself against the side of the house and yanked open the door.

“Freeze!” he said in a voice that managed to be forceful but not loud.

The door's rice-paper panels, patched with cloth remnants, were mottled dark yellow from years of exposure to the sun. The open door revealed a dark interior.

“Come out with your hands up!”

The three men on watch sucked in their breath. There was no response from the dark room.

Hyŏn-t'ae poked the muzzle of his rifle inside, then quickly scanned the room. No one there. He checked the kitchen, and finally the outhouse. There were signs that the occupants had made a hasty departure with their meager possessions.

It was the same with the next few homes. Hyŏn-t'ae flattened himself against the side of the house, yanked open the door, and shouted, “Freeze! Come out with your hands up!”

Tong-ho began to feel less anxious. Somehow what Hyŏn-t'ae was doing seemed to be taking place in a world of unreality, a world that did not involve Tong-ho. When another soldier offered Tong-ho a potato left behind in the inner yard, he stuffed it quickly into his pocket. That potato seemed more real.

But then came a new source of tension. Yun-gu, one of the others on guard, discovered a shoe in a pile of ashes next to an outhouse. There were holes in the worn sole and the upper was frayed. Clearly not a shoe the people of this village would have worn.

The ash bins of other dwellings yielded chicken feathers, pig bristles, and dog hair. One of the houses had a larger yard strewn with the bones of those animals—a sure sign that a group had eaten there. A group of outsiders. The mess they had left suggested they had

departed in a hurry—and not long before, judging from the fact that the bones swarming with blowflies were not yet dark and discolored.

The five men looked all about. Ahead were long, narrow patches of corn and sweet potato bordering a valley. Across the valley were hills. Behind them loomed the mountain they had recently crossed, its upper half strewn with light gray rocks and boulders. The summer sun continued to beat down. The surroundings felt too still. Was someone in this deserted place watching them? The mere thought brought a sense of unspeakable oppression. Once again Tong-ho was overpowered by the feeling that he was entering a glass monolith. *If that corner of it shatters, the whole thing will end up in pieces and there's nothing I can do to stop it. Those sharp fragments will stab me, every one of them.* Tong-ho's flesh crawled and he heaved a great shudder.

All he could do to relieve the unbearable sensation of pressure was move. The squad began to search the remaining houses. They arrived at the sixth house. Hyön-t'ae flattened himself against the side of the house, jerked open the door, and shouted "Freeze!" Someone stirred inside. The tension sharpened.

Hyön-t'ae's eyes flashed. With a jerk of his head he beckoned Tong-ho. Then, in a steely voice, "Come out with your hands up!" The three guards advanced from left and right, the muzzles of their rifles leveled toward the dark cavity framed by the open door.

"Come out, and make it quick!"

A moment later the ashen face of a woman appeared in the gloom at the entrance, only to jerk back inside.

"Hurry up, you!" Hyön-t'ae barked.

The next instant the woman stepped barefoot down to the ground. Her lips trembled. She appeared to be in her early thirties.

"The rest of you, come out!"

The woman shook her head a couple of times. Her pointed chin quivered.

Hyön-t'ae quickly inspected the interior. Toward the back of the dark room, lying motionless beneath a soiled wrapping cloth, was a tiny little child.

“Who were they? Chinks? Or those People’s Army sons of bitches?”

“Northerners.”

“When?”

“They came last night . . . and they left this morning, before it was light.”

“Which way did they go?”

The woman’s quivering chin jerked toward the front of the hamlet.

“How many?”

“Fifty? . . . A hundred?” said the hill woman, who seemed unable to grasp the concept of numbers.

“Where’s everybody else?”

“They took the young men . . . and the rest of us ran away, ‘fraid they’d kill us. . . .”

“How come you stayed?”

Hyŏn-t’ae’s tone softened but his gaze continued to bore into the woman’s eyes.

The woman blinked several times, then turned her trembling head away from Hyŏn-t’ae and back toward the room. Inside, the child lay still, an emaciated arm outside the wrapping cloth. A dark cluster of flies had settled about its nose, mouth, and eyes.

“Fraid if I set off with the little one on my back,” the woman said in a strained voice, “it wouldn’t last the trip.”

After searching the last two dwellings and finding them empty, the men filled their canteens at the village well, then set off back up the mountain behind the hamlet. Five forms flickering against the base of the mountain in the broad light of day—dangerously exposed. After passing through woods higher up they found shade beneath some boulders on a ridge near the top.

The first order of business was to make contact with base. Some two years had passed since the start of the drawn-out cease-fire talks, and by now hostilities were reduced to sporadic skirmishes involving search parties—no large-scale fighting to speak of on any of the fronts. And even if the evacuation of the people in this hamlet was only an enemy ploy, it was unusual in the light of recent intelligence.

Yun-gu was the man who packed the radio, and Hyŏn-t’ae now

ordered him to radio base. Yun-gu picked up the mouthpiece, pressed the transmit button, and called out, “Toad . . . toad . . . toad,” using the code word for base. As soon as he released the button there was a response.

“Tadpole . . . tadpole.”

Yun-gu looked expectantly toward Hyön-t’ae.

“Tell them we’re four miles to the northeast.”

Yun-gu translated this into code and radioed: “Four squid and pollack.”

“Eight thatched houses,” said Hyön-t’ae.

“Four pairs of straw sandals.”

Hyön-t’ae had Yun-gu report the evidence of two or three People’s Army platoons passing through the village and moving west. Finally: “All the villagers have been evacuated—there’s no one left.”

Yun-gu, hand covering the mouthpiece except when transmitting, looked quizzically toward Hyön-t’ae, wondering about the woman.

Disregarding Yun-gu’s gaze, Hyön-t’ae quietly repeated: “The villagers have evacuated—every last one of them.”

Yun-gu radioed: “Straw all blown away.”

Base responded with orders: The men were to hold their position till nightfall and watch for signs of enemy activity.

After Hyön-t’ae had positioned men on both sides of the path where it bent around the hillside, he lit a cigarette. He took several deep drags, then turned to Tong-ho, sitting beside him.

“Hey, Poet, what was going through your mind back there?”

Now *what*, Tong-ho thought as he fished hardtack out of his pack. He didn’t respond.

“Poet, there’s nothing like a smoke at a time like this. Lonesome mountains, clean air, makes a cigarette taste fantastic! Gives the brain a good jolt.”

Some time ago their unit had arrived at the edge of a steep outcrop. As the others looked down and flexed their aching knees or complained of dizziness, Tong-ho had simply mentioned that he was cold. That one word had earned him his nickname, Poet.

Hyŏn-t'ae tried again. "You know, Poet, I felt *lousy* back there. I mean, here we are heading down to a deserted village and I feel like I'm walled in somehow. Now why should that be? You were looking awful serious yourself, you know, like you were trying to fight off something. What a weird feeling."

So Hyŏn-t'ae had felt it too? Hyŏn-t'ae, always resolute and self-possessed once he had readied himself for combat. So he too had experienced that peculiar feeling of oppression from the silent clarity? Tong-ho had wanted to tell Hyŏn-t'ae how he'd felt—the sensation of making his way through an endless glass shield. That inside this shield he somehow felt less burdened by the possibility of the enemy appearing. But he had kept quiet, wondering what would happen if the enemy actually were lying in wait for them and a firefight broke out. How many times had Hyŏn-t'ae seen him lose his composure in battle? He couldn't for the life of him talk to Hyŏn-t'ae about combat now.

There was that time they had come under enemy bombardment near Ch'up'a Pass. They were on level ground with no place to hide. Nothing to do but lie flat on the ground. Tong-ho, in spite of himself, had kept trying to worm his head beneath Hyŏn-t'ae's waist. Suddenly Hyŏn-t'ae had bolted to his feet. Tong-ho had jerked his head up to see Hyŏn-t'ae, bent low, running toward the pit where a shell had just exploded. Tong-ho realized he should follow. He knew that no two shells ever land in the same location, even if they're aimed there. It was a kind of law called the scatter effect. Tong-ho saw other soldiers scrambling one after another toward the pit, Yun-gu among them. But Tong-ho's legs wouldn't obey. Through the dust he could see Hyŏn-t'ae's eyes beneath his helmet and his beckoning hand. But Tong-ho's legs felt rubbery and he couldn't move. It didn't seem to be a matter of their different battle records—reflected in Hyŏn-t'ae's rank of sergeant first class and Tong-ho's rank of sergeant second class. Yun-gu was a sergeant second class too, and look how sharply he had moved. Finally Hyŏn-t'ae had run back to Tong-ho, slung him over his shoulders, and toted him to the crater. An incongruous realization had loomed large and clear in Tong-ho's shattered mind as he was carried along, his hearing numbed by explosions: the contrast

between Hyön-t'ae the unflappable warrior and himself who couldn't have been more cowardly and stupid.

This was the longest bombardment the unit had sustained to date, and there was considerable loss of life. Tong-ho felt certain that the soldiers who had flattened themselves on the ground next to him had been hit. When the shelling finally stopped, Hyön-t'ae, his copper-colored face covered with dust, displayed a toothy grin. "How come a skinny fuck like you has such a heavy ass? You ought to clean out your pipes now and then—lighten your load and your body will do what you tell it." This was how he kidded Tong-ho when they had been transferred back to the rear. Though Hyön-t'ae and Yun-gu had taken to visiting the women at the "comfort centers," Tong-ho had never felt up to joining them. As soon as Hyön-t'ae returned from one of these visits he would start in on Tong-ho: "Hey, Poet. Lose that look of disgust—what do you think I am, a dirtball or something? I'm just being true to myself—remember that. Love, hate, all that emotional crap—I'm free of it, free and easy. If there was a pretty girl beside me right now, I'd just ignore her—that's how peaceful and relaxed I feel. But you wouldn't understand." After rambling along drunk like this he would sprawl out. Tong-ho had never responded. Instead he would wait for Hyön-t'ae to fall asleep. But now he said: "Good thing you're not free of all that emotional crap today. Otherwise you wouldn't have thought of dragging me to that hole, right?" "Yeah, all of that hero stuff is useless," Hyön-t'ae had rejoined. "It's kind of ridiculous playing the brave fool—not worth giving up my life for." Tong-ho had listened silently. "Yeah, thanks to that, they could call me the bravest guy in the world, but so what?" Hyön-t'ae had grinned, revealing his white teeth. "You're quite a guy—a little while ago you were shaking in your boots, but now your yap is working. To be honest, pulling you over here wasn't a matter of us being old friends or war buddies. Maybe like you say it was an outburst of courage. Maybe what it comes down to is being rash, you know?"

And there was that battle near the Kūmsōng River. In the confusion of the fighting their unit had come under friendly fire. Too pan-

icked to find shelter, Tong-ho had allowed himself to be led to the foot of a tree by Hyŏn-t'ae. Hyŏn-t'ae drew Tong-ho close against the back of the tree while keeping an eye on a fighter plane coming at them. Along with the roar of the engines came the staccato pop of the fighter's machine guns, the bullets making a furrow in the ground from left to right and thudding into the tree. The impact of the bullets made Tong-ho feel as if the rounds had slammed into his chest. From several directions he heard screams of agony. Tong-ho squatted, trembling, behind the tree, too scared to stand; Hyŏn-t'ae, in back, held him motionless. The strafing ended and the fighters circled back, sunlight glinting from their silver wings. Again Hyŏn-t'ae moved so that he faced the oncoming planes, and calmly he told Tong-ho to drop his arms to his sides—it was dangerous to hug the tree. Suddenly Tong-ho experienced an oppressive feeling of constriction, the stifling sensation he remembered when as a child he had been playing in an alley near home and a big, strong neighbor boy had come up behind him, put his hands over his eyes, held him tight, and refused to release him no matter how he struggled. But along with the feeling of confinement that came from being under Hyŏn-t'ae's sway was a hint of a firm, unshakable friendship.

Tong-ho took water from his canteen to moisten his mouthful of hardtack. "Say, how much of a burn does it take to kill someone?" he asked no one in particular.

Yun-gu broke a cigarette in half and rolled a piece of paper into a holder. "A third of your body would probably do it."

"What about broken glass?"

"Hard to say." Yun-gu used Hyŏn-t'ae's cigarette to light his own. "Glass is awful. Get it in you and it keeps going deeper. I stepped on a flytrap once when I was a kid and boy did that glass hurt—much worse than a knife. And even if you manage to get the slivers out, it still smarts like hell. Couldn't sleep at all that night and when they took me to the doctor next day I still had a couple of pieces the size of millet seeds in me. Darned if they weren't pretty deep inside. That pricking and smarting I felt all night long were those things worming their way inside me."

Once again Tong-ho felt as if the imaginary block of glass enveloping him had shattered and countless shards were stabbing him.

“What’s this, a poem about glass?” Hyön-t’ae rose. “Poems are fine, but first let’s get out of the sun.”

It was early July and though the sunshine wasn’t quite so strong at this time of day, it felt terribly hot striking their foreheads directly. They found shade beside a boulder.

“You can think about poetry all you want, but when we’re talking let’s talk about something more pleasant. Where’d you come up with this glass business, anyway?”

Tong-ho understood what Hyön-t’ae meant by “something more pleasant.” He wanted to hear about Tong-ho’s sweetheart. Tong-ho still hadn’t told his two friends that there was a woman who loved him. But Hyön-t’ae and Yun-gu had guessed as much from the letters that arrived for Tong-ho. Tong-ho never read those letters on the spot. Instead he stuffed them deep in his pocket until he could find some privacy. Once Hyön-t’ae had tried to play a trick on him. It was lunchtime a couple of weeks earlier, and the front was quiet. Hyön-t’ae began rummaging through Tong-ho’s pack. Tong-ho jumped at Hyön-t’ae and tried to snatch it away from him, but Hyön-t’ae, anticipating this, tossed the pack to Yun-gu and held Tong-ho fast. Hyön-t’ae was about to tell Yun-gu to find a love letter and read it out loud when suddenly he released his hold on Tong-ho’s waist and jerked backward, a bite mark on the back of his hand. The next instant Tong-ho sprang like a tiger at Yun-gu, butted him in the temple, and knocked him backward. Hyön-t’ae had expected resistance, but never a reaction so strong. Tong-ho clutched the pack, panting, his eyes bloodshot like those of a drunk. Hyön-t’ae made the best of the situation, saying with a smirk, “That son of a gun, next time we’re in battle we’ll have to stick that pack out in front of us—that’ll make him brave.”

If Tong-ho hadn’t yet admitted to having a sweetheart, he wasn’t about to do so now. But Hyön-t’ae brought it up anyway just for the fun of it: “Since you’re so sweet on this little cutie of yours, why the hell not tell us about her? Afraid she’s going to disappear if you men-

tion her? The thing is, it's not good for you to be so damned pure of heart."

Tong-ho ignored this and let his eyes wander to a pine grove below. Among the larger pines stood younger branchy ones. Tong-ho noticed that the tips of the branches were reddish and wondered if the trees were infested with caterpillars.

"I worry about you," Hyŏn-t'ae went on. "You think you own this lover girl of yours? You think you can make a girl yours as long as your heart is pure. Well, it doesn't work that way anymore. Unless you have a real memory of a woman's skin, you're wrong to think she's yours. You have any memories like that?"

"If you don't have anything more useful to talk about, why don't you go sack out for a while?"

"Listen, pal, I'm doing this for your own good. For God's sake, just tell me about one part of her you'll never forget. Lips, maybe? The palm of her hand? Or maybe you-know-where? . . . Uh-oh, he's spitting at me. You going to wash my mouth out with soap? You know, the nicest people can do some pretty strange things. Maybe you put a brand on her back for all I know. Now take our buddy here."

Yun-gu had smoked his cigarette down to the paper holder. "Hey, I'm just an innocent bystander," he said. Yun-gu was not one to be drawn into conversations about women.

"You telling me you don't have any tricks up your sleeve? I know how picky you are. And when it comes to the cuties you've got all the angles covered. You always pick the older ones. Get more loving that way, right? You're a step up on the rest of us."

Every three hours the sentries on the hillside changed. Tong-ho finished his watch and by the time he returned to Hyŏn-t'ae the sunlight was waning and the cool breeze of oncoming evening was stealing inside his fatigues. On the last day of March snow had blanketed this mountainous region midway up the east coast, forcing a suspension of operations. And even now in summer, once the sun started to set, the daytime heat gave way to chill.

Hyŏn-t'ae sat silently behind the rock, sheltered from the wind, arms folded over his chest. Tong-ho sat beside him and silently

replayed the images of Sugi that had risen to the surface of his mind during his recent watch. Two years earlier, he and Sugi had spent a snowy night at a hotel at Haeundae Beach the day before he had left for the army. They had kissed until their mouths were numb. But an even sharper memory was the discovery the next morning, in the clear sunlight after the nightlong snowfall, that Sugi's double eyelid had developed a third fold. Seeing this, the two of them had laughed like children. Whenever he thought of Sugi, he recalled the sensation of their lips rubbing together all night, the feel of her cheeks, the back of her neck, part of her chest. But even more precious to him was the mood, like their own perfect secret, of their innocent laughter at the sight of the difference between her eyelids. In her first letter to him in the army she had written about her eyes. It had taken two days for the eyelid with the third fold to return to normal, and during that time she hadn't ventured from home. What was more, she had avoided her family's gaze, afraid the difference between her eyelids would reveal the secret she shared with him. How she looked forward, she had written, to the day when Tong-ho would return and make her eyelids unequal again. *Those eyelids*. . . . The thought always brought a smile to his lips in spite of himself.

"What are you grinning about, pal?" ventured Yun-gu. "Hey, it's getting chilly." He rose and stretched his arms out front and sideways to warm himself.

Evening had arrived in the mountains. Before the bright orange of sunset had disappeared over the mountains to the west, gray dusk filled in the lower reaches of the valleys and gradually thickened as it rose to the mountaintops. The process seemed slow but in fact was rapid.

Before they knew it stars had begun to appear in the violet heavens. The sentries returned from the hillsides. All awaited Hyön-t'ae's order to return to base.

"Somebody's got a fire going," muttered a soldier who was looking in the direction of the village. Beyond the shadows of the darkly outlined pines drifted a faint wisp of smoke. It came from a chimney.

"I've got a vision of a cloud of steam from a pot of rice," muttered a second soldier.

"Corn gruel's probably the best they can do. Didn't you see? There wasn't a single potato down there—they got cleaned out of anything fit to eat."

"A hot drink of water would suit me just fine."

"Hey, that woman," said the first soldier. "I hope she's not a spy."

Hyŏn-t'ae rose. "Radio base," he told Yun-gu. "Tell them we're on our way back." And with that he shouldered his rifle and strode off down the hill.

Tong-ho had a hunch that Hyŏn-t'ae would do away with the woman. Even if she wasn't an outright spy, there was a chance she'd tell the enemy about their movements. To prevent that they would have to take her back to base. But that would be a bother to Hyŏn-t'ae and he'd be inclined to get rid of her instead. *So that's why he radioed base earlier that no one was left here!*

Tong-ho gazed down at the gloom where Hyŏn-t'ae had disappeared, waiting any minute for the report of the rifle.

Yun-gu approached. "What are you looking so serious for? Don't get sidetracked. Just worry about getting back to base."

Presently Hyŏn-t'ae returned. He was wiping his hands.

*What happened?*

"All right, let's get out of here," said Hyŏn-t'ae. And then to Tong-ho, who was still gazing down the hill: "Why the idiotic look?"

Tong-ho made no reply.

The following day Hyŏn-t'ae noticed a strange look on Tong-ho's face.

"Don't give me that disgusted look—you're provoking me."

"What did you do with that woman?"

"Oh, so that's it. Okay, chump, I'll tell you. She wasn't scared like she was in the afternoon. She didn't put up much resistance either. But guess what—when I get up she grabs me by the hand. Well, I knew what that meant. She's scared, and she wants me to stay with her. Can't very well do that, can I? So I got rid of her. Simple as that."