

## **Blackfield 271**

Chapter 271: I Can't Just Go Back (2)

‘Argh!’

Even Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard could feel power surging inside Kang Chan.

‘Daye?’

Gérard quickly turned, finding Seok Kang-Ho glaring straight ahead. His glinting eyes were filled with the determination to defeat the Blackhead while they could still protect Kang Chan.

“Haah! Haah!”

Ragged breaths burst from Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard. They could now see an area illuminated with red light.

Seok Kang-Ho gritted his teeth.

“Captain!”

“Go! Go!” Kang Chan loudly groaned through gritted teeth. With every single nerve in his body seemingly burning up, he began to wonder if this was what electric shock torture felt like. It was as if every strand of hair on his head and body had become a conductor of electricity.

*You son of a bitch! Did you think I was going to lose? Feel free to call your friends too if you have comrades like Daye and Gérard!*

Kang Chan forced himself to keep his glowing eyes wide open. The dust falling from the cave made the light look grainy.

“Arghh!” Kang Chan groaned.

“Captain!”

“Keep going!”

Seok Kang-Ho, Gérard, Choi Jong-Il, and Lee Doo-Hee witnessed the laser-like beam focusing on Kang Chan.

*Swoosh!*

Not long after, they finally reached the wall that was exuding the red light.

“Let go!” Kang Chan shouted.

*Whoooosh.*

“Kegh!”

The light mysteriously concentrated on Kang Chan, instantly engulfing the entire cave in darkness. Even his body was glowing blood-red now.

*I'm connected!*

Kang Chan's gut immediately told him so. As he felt the Blackhead extending its energy toward him, he reached his hand out toward the wall.

*You fucking Blackhead. You want to take back the energy that you gave me? Did I ever ask for it? Did I ever ask to be reincarnated?*

Kang Chan didn't know how he would steal the Blackhead's energy. He was just trying to do what he did in England.

“Agghhh!”

The fist-sized stone kept sending blood-red beams toward Kang Chan, seemingly trying to burn him to death.

Kang Chan forcibly stretched out his hand. The Blackhead was slightly above his head.

*Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum.*

‘Keeeeegh!’

The closer his hand was to the Blackhead, the faster he felt the water in his body drying up. With all his energy being sucked out of him, his mind began to blank out, and his body began to wither. At this rate, he would likely crumble away soon like the dirt that they had stepped on on the way here.

*Pft.*

With all his might, Kang Chan forced his hand to move. The closer he got to the Blackhead, the more his hand was repelled. It was like watching the same magnet poles attempting to touch.

He had forgotten.

Even if he died here, he had Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard with him. They would take the damn Blackhead and avenge him one way or another.

*Really think you're tough? Bullshit! You don't know what these two are made of!*

Kang Chan finally gripped the Blackhead.

*Thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum.*

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

As the vibration intensified, the ceiling of the cave started to collapse.

‘This fucker!’

Kang Chan knew that his and the Blackhead's energies were merging.

This was simply energy but it felt like it was pulling at Kang Chan instinctively. It was as if there was a combination of the desire to release its latent energy and the feeling of rushing in like crazy after realizing that Kang Chan was the channel to let it out.

*You should've asked me!*

Kang Chan gritted his teeth.

It was strange, but the pain disappeared the moment he grabbed hold of the Blackhead, allowing him to feel his heart pounding again.

*Thrum, thrum, thrum.*

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

As the light and vibrations subsided, the amount of dirt raining down from the ceiling increased.

Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard looked at the ceiling and then back at each other. If the situation became too dangerous, they were ready to grab Kang Chan and run.

*Thrum, thrum, thrum. Thrum, thrum. Thrum.*

Finally, the light and vibrations completely disappeared.

The Blackhead fell from the cave wall with a click.

“Captain?” Seok Kang-Ho worriedly called when dirt came pouring down from the broken ceiling. It looked as if the bottom of a sack of soil had been punctured.

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

“Daye! Start running!”

Kang Chan gave the command in French, yet Seok Kang-Ho still dashed toward him as if he understood.

Just like when they had come, Seok Kang-Ho wrapped his arm around Kang Chan’s left armpit, and Gérard stuck his arm under Kang Chan’s right.

*Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!*

The streams of dirt pouring down were becoming larger.

Seok Kang-Ho shouted at Choi Jong-Il and Lee Doo-Hee through clenched teeth. “Get out! Hurry and run outside!”

The dirt from the collapsed ceiling rained down on their heads like waves of water, making it difficult for them to keep their eyes open.

“Run! Get out!” Gérard shouted with all his might. “Roberre! Out! Run outside!”

*Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!*

At the rate they were going, they would never make it out of the cave. The dirt was already clumping together and starting to fall like a waterfall.

“Cha Dong-Gyun! Out! Now!” Seok Kang-Ho yelled.

“Let go!” Kang Chan suddenly shouted.

*Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!*

“Captain!” Seok Kang-Ho protested.

“I said let go!”

These two had to be aware that his strength was already returning. By the time he pulled out the arms supporting him, he was already running on his own.

“Haah! Haah!”

*Swooooooooooosh!*

He felt as if he was running through a waterfall. Ahead of him, he saw the French soldiers running with the old man on one of their backs. Cha Dong-Gyun was carrying the child.

*Swoooooooooosh!*

However, the visibility eventually dropped so low that Kang Chan couldn't even see what was ahead of him.

The dirt collapsing onto his head and shoulders was beyond heavy. His feet were sinking into the crushed earth. His nose was already full of dirt, and he couldn't open his mouth even though he was out of breath. He was pretty much sprinting while holding his breath.

*Swoooooosh! Du du du du du du!*

The ground shook.

“Faster!”

*Whoosh!*

Choi Jong-Il and Lee Doo-Hee lunged for the entrance. Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, and Gérard leaped at the same time.

*Crack! Thud! Thud!*

Pain coursed through him as he hit the ground. Blinding light then greeted them, piercing their eyes. It had been so long since he had found the African sun so welcoming.

“Kegh! Blegh!”

Seok Kang-Ho and the others leaned over with their heads to the ground, throwing up dirt.

“Kegh! Kegh!”

Kang Chan was no different. Hunched over, he vomited dirt.

Only then did he realize that his right hand, which was on his right leg, was gripping the Blackhead.

*Son of a bitch! You should've been this quiet from the beginning!*

Tucking the Blackhead into his thigh pocket, Kang Chan looked up and burst out laughing. The soldiers stared at him with reddened eyes, their hair, cheeks, and eyebrows still covered in dirt.

The old man was touching the now-blocked entrance of the cave in surprise.

“Fuck it! Let's go over there and have a smoke before leaving,” Kang Chan said.

Seok Kang-Ho shook off the dust in his hair. “Alrighty!”

“Hey! Get some distance first before you dust yourself!”

“I'm good now,” Seok Kang-Ho replied with a grin.

Roberre reassured the old man before setting off after Kang Chan.

Choi Jong-Il pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Gérard then flicked on a lighter.

*Clink! Hiss!*

“Hoo!”

“Ptooeey! Is it over now?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“This one is. I don’t know about the ones we might face in the future,” Kang Chan responded.

“No way. The other one was super rare too. They’re only found once in a century or something, right? Let’s just never come to Africa anymore. Talk about bad luck! Ptooeey! Ptooeey!”

“It wasn’t like we’re here because we want to.”

They quickly smoked a cigarette each.

“Give me another one,” Kang Chan requested.

As if Choi Jong-Il had been waiting for it, he immediately handed him a cigarette. Everyone started smoking another cigarette as well.

“Gérard, let’s keep today’s events a secret,” Kang Chan said.

“Copy.”

Gérard held the cigarette between his lips and pulled out the bayonet on his leg with a grin.

*This fucking punk! It’s not like this secret is that important!*

Kang Chan was about to tell him to stop, but it was too late because Gérard had already pulled out his bayonet.

Seok Kang-Ho grinned as he looked on. Choi Jong-Il, Cha Dong-Gyun, and Lee Doo-Hee watched Gérard in confusion.

*Shing!*

Gérard tightly gripped the blade of the bayonet with his left hand. He then handed it to Roberre.

Noticing Choi Jong-Il’s curious gaze, Kang Chan smirked.

“Grabbing the bayonet like that will leave you with two cuts, which will serve as proof that you’ve chosen to keep a secret. Having those kinds of scars means you’re trusted by your comrades. By the time you become a captain, you’ll probably have a few pairs like that,” he explained.

After the French soldiers had gripped and released their bayonets, Gérard mischievously looked at Choi Jong-Il.

“It wouldn’t be a bad idea to share our trust with the French team,” Choi Jong-Il declared as he extended his hand.

*Damn it!*

It looked like Kang Chan would have to cut his left hand as well.

Choi Jong-Il, Cha Dong-Gyun, Lee Doo-Hee, and even Seok Kang-Ho, who muttered under his breath about how crazy they all were, left cuts on their palms.

Kang Chan had no way out now.

*I already have too many scars to count.*

The old man and Akrion were watching them with expressions that asked what the hell they were doing this time.

“Let’s go!” Kang Chan shouted.

“Yup,” Seok Kang-Ho agreed.

“Daye, secure the front with Choi Jong-Il.”

“Got it.”

“Gérard, take the rear.”

“Oui.”

After brushing himself off, Kang Chan approached Akrion, but Gérard stopped him.

“I’ll carry him.”

“You have to watch our backs. I feel a lot stronger now anyway,” Kang Chan said, then nodded at Akrion.

Despite dusting himself off, he was still covered in dirt. Nevertheless, Akrion lunged at him, his smile a lot more relaxed than before.

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Lanok held the phone to his ear, a look of amusement on his face.

- You’ve made a fool of our men.

Vasili paused for a moment and took a deep breath to suppress his anger.

- You didn’t have to kick them out. We were already planning to withdraw.

“I heard the last fight was with the commander of the Foreign Legion special forces team, though,” Lanok said.

- You know what I’m talking about. The Spetsnaz were still bullied in Africa even though I went all the way to South Korea. The same thing happened during the training in France!

“When Monsieur Kang returns to South Korea, I’ll arrange a meeting for the three of us,” Lanok assured him.

A moment of silence enveloped the call.

- Surely Monsieur Kang had gotten a hold of a Blackhead's energy this time?

“He isn't someone to lie. We can ask him when he returns.”

- I know Monsieur Kang won't lie. I just can't say the same about his sly French sidekick.

Lanok's lips curved into a smile.

“How long do you think I can live without Russia's help? Even if I do trick you, it wouldn't take you more than fifteen days to find out about it. ”

- Lanok.

Vasili's tone changed, making Lanok focus on the conversation with a serious expression.

- Abibu has put a huge price on our heads for what happened in China. Don't take that lightly. Unlike us, South Korea is still weak against terrorist attacks.

“Thank you, Vasili.”

- Nobody will be able to stand the moment either of you falls. When Monsieur Kang returns, ask him for help. He has that kind of strength now.

“I will.”

Lanok put his receiver down and smiled with satisfaction.

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The first thing Kang Chan did as soon as they arrived at the base was smoke another cigarette. He then took a shower, changed, and visited the infirmary.

It was already five in the afternoon.

One more night of sleep and he would be out of Africa and back in Korea.

Kang Chan sat on the benches in front of the barracks and drank a cup of instant coffee. Nothing could ever replace this sweetness.

“Captain,” Gérard said as he approached Kang Chan, his face full of mischief.

He looked like he was about to put on a show even though his left hand was bandaged.

“Why would you pull out your bayonet?” Kang Chan grumbled.

“I wanted the boys to share a memory with you, and since we were at it, I thought I might as well make it a good one.”

Gérard leaned against the barracks and pretended to drink something, shouting in glee.

“Instant coffee!” he said in horrible Korean.

*Ha! If someone heard that, they wouldn't be able to tell if he was speaking French or Korean.*

“What about Akrion?” Kang Chan asked.

“He’s fast asleep. He took a shower and drank a glass of milk before going to bed.”

Kang Chan nodded. A few moments later, Kwak Cheol-Ho brought Gérard a cup of coffee.

“Take a seat,” Kang Chan offered.

Sitting down, Gérard asked, “Are you going back to Korea?”

“I think so.”

Gérard lifted the coffee to his mouth and grinned.

“What?” Kang Chan asked.

“Nothing. It’s just that we’ve traveled so much in such a short time. It seems like just yesterday that we were sad about leaving Mongolia. I find it funny that we were both in the operation in Afghanistan and are now in Africa.”

Kang Chan chuckled.

“Where are you going after this?” Kang Chan asked.

“Probably Congo. I heard it’s pretty serious there.”

Turning his head to the side, Kang Chan saw Gérard looking forward with impassive eyes.

Kang Chan wanted to go with Gérard to Congo. There was nothing like having someone they could count on on the battlefield, a place where life and death frequently crossed roads.

“So this is why I was sent somewhere else that time,” Gérard remarked.

“What are you talking about?” Kang Chan asked in confusion.

Both Daye and Gérard were starting to say things that were hard to understand now that they had grown brains.

“Nevermind,” Gérard replied.

“Motherfucker.”

Gérard grinned and turned to Kang Chan. The asshole no longer even batted an eye at this kind of insult.

“Gérard.”

“Yes.”

Gérard turned around again to look at him.

“If I ever need help again, you’ll be the first person I look for.”

“Isn’t that only natural?” Gérard replied as he lifted the cup to his mouth, an arrogant air around him.

“So whether it’s Congo or Mangala, just stay alive.”



Gérard sipped his coffee with a wide smile.

Chapter 272: What I Want to Do (1)

The next day.

After having breakfast, Kang Chan led the South Korean and French teams out of the UN's base.

“Blanchet! Deploy troops at the front and the back,” Kang Chan ordered.

“Oui!”

The two employees from the UN command center watched with smiles on their faces.

Smirking, Kang Chan looked back at them. The two employees sloppily saluted him.

“Let's go!” Kang Chan yelled.

Akrion and his grandfather headed to the French military base in Mogadishu with Blanchet. They seemed disappointed throughout the entire car ride. Meanwhile, Gérard and his men accompanied the South Korean soldiers all the way to the Mogadishu airport.

When they arrived, the French special forces team stood in one line before the aircraft and sent off the South Korean team.

Cha Dong-Gyun clasped hands with Gérard and bumped chests with him. He then did the same with the other soldiers before him. The other South Koreans followed suit, going through the line until they had reached the aircraft.

“Can't believe I have to part ways with this fucker again,” Seok Kang-Ho grumbled as he shook hands with Gérard. He then hopped into the aircraft.

“I'll be waiting, Cap,” Gérard said.

“Yeah. I'll see you later.”

*Whoosh.*

When Gérard saluted Kang Chan, the other French soldiers did as well. He saluted back, then got on the plane. This sendoff was more than enough for them.

*Creeaaaak.*

Before the door could even fully close, Kang Chan sat on a bed connected to the wall.

*Rattle.*

The door soon shut tight, completely removing Mogadishu from view.

The aircraft went down the runway and flew toward South Korea.

Since six of their twenty-one survivors were wounded, only fifteen people were on the plane.

During combat, wounds often looked like they weren't all that serious. However, taking a step back and looking at them again sometimes made people think, “They were this bad?”

That was exactly what was happening right now.

Except for one, all of the soldiers had blood-soaked bandages all over their bodies. A glance was enough to tell their wounds were serious. What else could they do aside from endure, though?

“Check if they brought coffee,” Kang Chan said.

When Seok Kang-Ho looked behind him, their army interpreter—their only unscathed member—quickly went to look. He would have to do errands for them until they arrived in South Korea.

“There’s coffee!” the interpreter yelled.

“And what do we do when there’s coffee?” Kang Chan asked back.

“We drink!”

Hearing the army interpreter’s answer made Cha Dong-Gyun laugh so hard that it sounded as if he was sobbing.

Their army interpreter was so smart that he could’ve just worked as a non-military French interpreter. The horrors of combat were clearly taking a toll on him.

Leaning against the aircraft’s wall, Kang Chan drank coffee. Only then did the fact that they were going home finally sink in.

He gazed at his men. Their tired faces seemed to say, ‘Feeling touched for being recognized? Bullshit.’ It was the best evidence that they had actually become a special forces team.

Kang Chan smirked.

“Let’s have lunch,” Seok Kang-Ho gruffly said. He then turned to the army interpreter.

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Kim Hyung-Jung opened the hospital room door. Fatigue was evident in his expression.

“Sunbae-nim.”

He bowed, greeting Kang Chul-Gyu.

“Welcome,” Kang Chul-Gyu said.

“Do you really have to do this?”

“Haven’t we already talked about this?”

He checked the few pieces of luggage that he had, then zipped up his bag.

“Mr. Kang Chan said that he’s arriving tonight. Why don’t you move your flight to Mongolia by a day? You should meet up with him before you go,” Kim Hyung-Jung said.

Kang Chul-Gyu looked around the room as if he couldn’t care less.

“We don’t even have the results from the tests yet. In your current condition, it might still be too dangerous for you to hop on a plane.”

Kang Chul-Gyu finally looked back at Kim Hyung-Jung.

“I know I’m being stubborn, but I’ve been assigned a duty that I thought I would never get again. I want to do my part. I also can’t relax knowing I’ve left my juniors at the base by themselves, can I?”

“Even so, at least meet up with Mr. Kang Chan before you go. Please.”

“I don’t have the right to ask him for his time.”

Kim Hyung-Jung looked at Kang Chul-Gyu, confusion evident in his expression. He couldn’t seem to understand what Kang Chul-Gyu meant.

“There’s something between the two of us,” Kang Chul-Gyu explained with a calm smile.

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Kim Hyung-Jung sent Kang Chul-Gyu off to the airport, then proceeded with his busy day. Afterward, he headed to the Osan airport with Hwang Ki-Hyun.

“Great work today. Must be tough having to do so much work,” Hwang Ki-Hyun commented.

“I’m fine.”

“What are the Arabs doing?”

“They’re focused on identifying all the people that entered the country.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun nodded, his eyes becoming sharper. “Saudi Arabia is clearly hiding something from us. They wouldn’t have offered us joint rights to the development of their crude oil and the next-gen energy source otherwise.”

Kim Hyung-Jung just stayed silent. There was still a huge difference in ability between the National Intelligence Service and the intelligence bureaus of France, Russia, the US, and other countries.

“Are we manipulating the media for this?”

“Yes,” Kim Hyung-Jung answered. “We’re giving them some footage to use on the news.”

The people would naturally be interested in the special forces team returning from their deployment in Africa, but it wouldn’t be right to show the soldiers’ faces on TV.

They entered the Osan airport mid-conversation.

There wasn’t a welcoming ceremony—only a few military generals, the military band, the guards of honor, and Hwang Ki-Hyun and Kim Hyung-Jung from the National Intelligence Service attended.

Hwang Ki-Hyun briefly greeted the military officials, then sat in the waiting room and drank tea.

An executive Air Force officer soon entered and approached him. “They’re about to land.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun entered the runway through the first floor of the control tower's three-story building, then stood in front of the building.

It was the end of January, which was still cold.

The military band and the guards of honor waited for the aircraft to arrive. Bitter winds cold enough to make their cheeks sting blew past them.

A plane soon descended, landing at the end of the dark runway. The military officials only came outside once it had slowed down and turned toward the control tower.

The aircraft marshaller welcomed the soldiers by waving his arms toward the back. When he crossed his arms, the aircraft stopped.

*Creeeak.*

As the aircraft's door opened, Hwang Ki-Hyun and Kim Hyung-Jung walked toward it.

*Clank!*

When the aircraft's door touched the ground, Kang Chan led the entire special forces team out.

"Mr. Kang Chan!" Hwang Ki-Hyun exclaimed.

"I'm back," Kang Chan replied.

"Good work, Assistant Director. Mr. Seok! Well done."

Kang Chan then briefly greeted Kim Hyung-Jung.

"You all have outdone yourselves," Hwang Ki-Hyun said.

Hwang Ki-Hyun nodded at Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee. The three were behind Seok Kang-Ho, saluting.

"Where are our wounded and fallen?" Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

"Our fallen are expected to arrive around this time tomorrow. The wounded will have to wait until the medical team gives them the green light to travel," Kang Chan said.

At one side of the runway, Cha Dong-Gyun greeted a military officer.

"It's cold. Why don't we head inside?" Hwang Ki-Hyun suggested.

"Sure," Kang Chan answered.

Their party immediately went past the first floor of the control tower.

When they arrived at the back of the building, Choi Jong-Il approached Kang Chan.

"We're going to the police hospital now," Choi Jong-Il said.

"Alright. You guys did great. Keep me posted."

"Thank you for your hard work."

After parting ways with Choi Jong-Il, Kang Chan got in the car with Seok Kang-Ho.

“We’ll stop by Bang Ji Hospital first,” Kim Hyung-Jun said.

“Did you discuss this with the hospital?” Kang Chan asked.

“Yes. The agents are waiting at the hospital.”

“Assistant Director, I’ll be leaving as soon as we arrive at the hospital,” Hwang Ki-Hyun said. “We should meet again once you’ve been treated and gotten enough rest.”

“You coming to see us at the airport is more than enough.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun and Kang Chan conversed until they arrived at the hospital, but apart from the situation in Africa, they didn’t really talk about anything important.

The car stopped at the entrance of the hospital. As it did, National Intelligence Service agents came out and surrounded Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho. They then guided the two inside the establishment.

Yoo Hun-Woo greeted Kang Chan. Seeing his wounds, he frowned and sighed.

“None of them seem to be infected, but we should do an MRI on your shoulder. Where did you get this stitched up?” Yoo Hun-Woo asked.

Kang Chan just answered with a smile.

“Isn’t this dirt?” Yoo Hun-Woo prodded.

Using a pair of tweezers, he cleaned the wound with an antiseptic-soaked cotton ball. Soon after, his frown deepened.

They had just ran out of a collapsing cave. Hence, Kang Chan didn’t find it odd that Yoo Hun-Woo wiped off dirt every time he rubbed the cotton ball on the wound.

“Does Mr. Seok also have dirt in his wounds like this?” Yoo Hun-Woo asked afterward.

“Yes—his wounds are probably in a similar state to mine.”

“Let’s disinfect yours first. Head over there.”

As Kang Chan changed into hospital pants, Yoo Hun-Woo called another doctor over. The two spent the next forty minutes wiping him down and disinfecting his wounds until the cotton balls no longer got any dirt.

“You must be tired, Manager Kim. You should head home. Feel free to visit us tomorrow,” Kang Chan said.

“I’m fine. Oh, right! Section chief Jeon said he’s coming over.”

They spent another forty minutes on the MRI, then thirty to restitch his wounds up. Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho also got five injections each.

“Thank you,” Kang Chan said after the treatment.

“No, Thank you,” Yoo Hun-Woo answered with a sly expression.

*Seriously, what’s wrong with this man? Did he get a lot of money for treating us?*

Kang Chan looked at Yoo Hun-Woo intently out of curiosity. However, apart from their room number, Yoo Hun-Woo didn’t tell them anything else.

Their room was on the fifth floor.

Kang Chan soon got out of the elevator, finding the floor crowded with agents.

“Do we really need all these agents stationed here?” Kang Chan asked Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Yes, we do.”

Kang Chan went into the room with Seok Kang-Ho and Kim Hyung-Jung.

“What would you like to have for dinner?” Kim Hyung-Jung asked.

He immediately put cigarettes on the table and made coffee, making it seem as if he had been waiting for this moment.

“The section chief is coming, right?” Kang Chan asked.

“It’s already nine, so he’s probably already had dinner.”

*Rattle.*

As Kim Hyung-Jung put down his paper cup on the table, Jeon Dae-Geuk opened the door and came inside.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Kang Chan said.

Jeon Dae-Geuk walked over to Kang Chan and patted his shoulder. He then shook Seok Kang-Ho’s hand. Despite his sharp eyes and angled chin, he still looked like he had a lump on his chest.

“You did great, Kang Chan, Mr. Seok,” Jeon Dae-Geuk said.

After exchanging greetings, the four sat at the table.

“Have you had dinner yet, sir?” Kim Hyung-Jung asked.

“Not yet. You guys haven’t eaten yet either, have you?”

“I was actually just about to order. What would you like to eat, Mr. Kang Chan?”

“You don’t know what kind of person Mr. Seok is? Send someone to a nearby restaurant and order a lot of meat as takeout,” Jeon Dae-Geuk suggested. “How does that sound, Mr. Seok?”

“Sounds good!”

They had galbi for dinner. By the time they were done eating and cleaning up, it was already eleven in the evening.

“Get some rest. I’ll stop by again tomorrow,” Jeon Dae-Geuk said.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll also get going, then,” Kim Hyung-Jung said.

The two soon stood up and left.

Honestly, Kang Chan was feeling disoriented and a little blank, probably because of the aftereffects of the long flight and the shots that he received.

“Go get some sleep,” Kang Chan told Seok Kang-Ho.

“I’ll just sleep here. There’s an extra bed anyway.”

“I’m going to kill you if you snore.”

“Hnngghh! I’m tired!”

Seok Kang-Ho shamelessly laid down on one of the beds, pretending not to hear what Kang Chan said.

*What do I do with this bastard?*

Shaking his head, Kang Chan laid down as well.

The city lights coming through the window, the clean building, the bright fluorescent lights, the cold weather... everything seemed to be telling him that he was back in South Korea, yet it still didn’t feel real.

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The next morning, Kang Chan woke up from his deep sleep at five.

It wouldn’t have been odd for him to wake up at a slightly different time since Africa and South Korea were in different time zones. Strangely, however, he always woke up at this hour.

Perhaps it was because he had just flown from Africa, but he remembered how he felt when he reincarnated.

Kang Chan shook his head. He stood up and looked outside the window. He was back in South Korea—where Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook were.

He wasn’t sure if it was because he had finally relaxed or because of the treatment yesterday, but his shoulder and thigh were throbbing.

“Hngghh!”

Seok Kang-Ho woke up with a big stretch.

“What time is it?” he asked, his voice cracking.

“Five.”

“Ugh!”

Sniffling, Seok Kang-Ho sat up. He was about to get out of the bed but frowned instead.

“Huh? Why am I in so much pain?”

“Probably because of yesterday’s treatment. My wounds are throbbing as well.”

Forcing himself to move, Seok Kang-Ho drank water, then went to the bathroom.

“Want some coffee?” he asked afterward.

“Sure.”

As Seok Kang-Ho made coffee, dragging his IV pole around, Kang Chan walked to the table.

“I feel blank.”

“Same,” Kang Chan replied.

Kang Chan accepted the paper cup Seok Kang-Ho offered him, then took a sip from it.

*Rattle.*

A moment later, a nurse came in and added another medication into their IVs.

“What are you planning to do now?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“I have to meet a couple of people. I’ll start with Ambassador Lanok. For some reason, I also feel like Section Chief Jeon and Manager Kim have something to tell us.”

“You also noticed, huh?”

Kang Chan nodded.

“Don’t you find our deployment in Africa weird, Cap?”

“I do. Nothing about it made sense. My meeting with the ambassador should at least give us an overview of the current situation. I couldn’t talk to him properly back in Africa due to security risks.”

“Please look into the fucker that sent the Quds after us.”

“I will.”

As the two talked about random topics, the door opened. Yoo Hun-Woo came inside.

“You’re here early,” Kang Chan told Yoo Hun-Woo.

“I should be. You two are VIP patients.”

Yoo Hun-Woo approached them with a relaxed look on his face.

“How do you feel?” he asked Kang Chan.

“My wounds are throbbing a bit more than yesterday.”



“That’s to be expected since they just got disinfected and restitched. What about you, Mr. Seok Kang-Ho?”

“Not much different from him, really.”

“The MRI scans didn’t show anything concerning, so you two should be okay for as long as you let your wounds heal properly. Mr. Seok Kang-Ho, your injuries also seem to be healing a bit faster than before, but I wouldn’t worry about it. I attribute it to your idiosyncrasy.”

Yoo Hun-Woo seemed to be hinting at the time Kang Chan gave Seok Kang-Ho a blood transfusion in the past. Kang Chan didn’t really have anything to say about it, though.

“Let’s dress the wounds after breakfast. We should be able to get a better idea about how you’re doing then,” Yoo Hun-Woo said.

“Alright.”

While talking to Yoo Hun-Woo, Kang Chan suddenly felt as if the fact that he had returned to South Korea felt more real. Perhaps it was because of the peace and modern lifestyle, which was different from Africa.

“Right, Director—you thanked me yesterday. What was that about?” Kang Chan asked.

“Pardon?”

“When I thanked you after our treatment, you thanked me back. You made it sound like you should be the one grateful.”

“Ah!”

Yoo Hun-Woo looked at Kang Chan as if he had just understood what he was talking about.

“Someone called Manager Kim Hyung-Jung promised the hospital medical supplies and to take care of uncomfortable matters on the condition that we’re entirely responsible for treating you. I was thanking you for that,” Yoo Hun-Woo said.

*I feel like that’s not the reason...*

Kang Chan looked at Yoo Hun-Woo suspiciously, but Yoo Hun-Woo’s sly expression didn’t change at all.

“I’ll drop by again at around nine,” Yoo Hun-Woo said. He then left the room.

Kang Chan suddenly felt hungry.

“What do you want for breakfast?” he asked Seok Kang-Ho.

“Let’s order the galbi-tang that we had last time.”

“Sure.”

Seok Kang-Ho stood up. While he was ordering breakfast, Kang Chan went into the bathroom and washed his face.

“Phew!”

Without wiping the water on his face, Kang Chan looked into the mirror and exhaled deeply.

*What had I been doing before coming here? Is this really the life that I wanted to live?*

After reincarnating, he started all this to protect those precious to him. Everything seemed to have gradually spiraled out of control, though.

Chapter 273: What I Want To Do (2)

Kang Chan had just finished having breakfast with Seok Kang-Ho when Yoo Hun-Woo entered the room to sterilize their wounds and change their bandages.

“When do you think I can be discharged?” Kang Chan asked.

“Well, it’s not like you’re going to stay in the hospital even if I tell you to,” Yoo Hun-Woo replied with a scoff as he bandaged Kang Chan’s wounds. “This is a gunshot wound.”

Looking up from the wound, he continued, “The wound on your shoulder is bad enough to consider surgery. If I wasn’t aware of your unique physical abilities, I would have put you on the operating table.”

Yoo Hun-Woo replaced his surgical gloves with a new pair. “Mr. Seok’s wounds are similar to yours, but the way it’s healing up is a bit different.”

*Snip. Snip.*

While talking, he skillfully cut off Seok Kang-Ho’s bandages with scissors.

“I think I’ve already gotten the gist of what you do, Mr. Kang Chan, but if you push yourself any harder than this, you might never get to use your shoulder properly again. Not even surgery would be able to help you.”

Based on this sly snake’s facial expression and tone, Kang Chan would likely have to say goodbye to being discharged immediately.

“What about me?” Seok Kang-Ho questioned.

“You’re a perfect candidate for surgery,” Yoo Hun-Woo replied so firmly that Seok Kang-Ho immediately shut up. “Mr. Kang Chan.”

“Yes?”

“I know what a gunshot wound means. I also understand that there were probably unavoidable circumstances,” Yoo Hun-Woo said as he changed the bandages on Seok Kang-Ho’s shoulder. “Still, next time something like this happens, at least try to protect your body.”

He meticulously taped the bandages, then glanced at Kang Chan.

“I’m saying you shouldn’t leave a wound full of dirt. That goes for you too, Mr. Seok.”

Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho could only meekly reply, “Got it.”

“You can be discharged in three days,” Yoo Hun-Woo directed.

“Three days?” Kang Chan repeated.

“At the very least, you can’t leave until I’m sure your wounds have closed. You have to be considerate of the hospital’s income too. This is the first time you’ve come here in a while, you know.”

Kang Chan chuckled at the snarky comment.

Yoo Hun-Woo stood up. He then took off his gloves and tossed them into the bin.

“Don’t you dare lift anything heavy.”

“Yes, sir,” Kang Chan responded.

When Yoo Hun-Woo left the room, Seok Kang-Ho turned to Kang Chan. “Your condition’s pretty serious, huh?”

“He said all those apply to you too,” Kang Chan countered.

“Well, you just got me caught in the crossfire. I bet your wounds worsened while you were holding onto Dong-Gyun in that pit.”

Seok Kang-Ho stood up and started making coffee. At the same time, Kim Hyung-Jung opened the door and walked in.

“Right on time. Coffee?” Seok Kang-Ho offered.

“Sure. I’ll make it,” Kim Hyung-Jung stated.

“Just take a seat. I can do this much. I’ve already got it started, see?”

“Well, it certainly has been a while since I last had coffee that you’ve made. I’ll take you up on that offer, then.”

Kim Hyung-Jung sat down at the table and pulled out two phones, setting one of them in front of Kang Chan.

Seok Kang-Ho brought four paper cups to the table on a small tray. One, of course, was a substitute ashtray, half full of water.

“You brought the phones! Nice!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed in excitement.

Kim Hyung-Jung peered into the paper cups and chuckled in disbelief.

They didn’t care what anyone said. To them, instant coffee should always be accompanied by cigarettes.

Kim Hyung-Jung quickly opened the window. The three then lit a cigarette each.

“Mr. Kang Chan, Kang Sunbae left Korea yesterday,” Kim Hyung-Jung began.

Seok Kang-Ho briefly peeked over at Kang Chan before nonchalantly taking another sip of his coffee.

“One of our agents has also reported that your father knows that you’ve been deployed to Africa. He has been informed of your return. At the very least, I believe you should tell your father that you’re in the hospital.”

“I’ll give him a call,” Kang Chan replied.

“On another note, we have finished organizing the team that’ll be taking charge of the Eurasian Rail. Why don’t you meet them? I’ll set up the meeting.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

After replying to Kim Hyung-Jung, Kang Chan finally decided to ask what he had been curious about.

“Manager Kim.”

“Yes?”

“There’s a hidden story behind this deployment, isn’t there? Do you know anything about it?”

Kang Chan didn’t pose the question as suspicion or accusation. He genuinely just wanted to know what happened.

“Before and after the deployment, the National Intelligence Service was flooded with information,” Kim Hyung-Jung immediately replied. He sounded as if it was only proper that he answered the question. “We concluded that there had to be more to it, but we couldn’t figure out what it was. That aside...”

Kim Hyung-Jung proceeded to tell them about Vasili’s visit and the offer from Saudi Arabia.

“To be honest, the Director feels very apologetic toward you, Mr. Kang Chan. As Director Vasili said, you’re at the very center of the world of intelligence right now, struggling to bear its entire weight, and the current National Intelligence Service can’t even support you.”

Kang Chan hadn’t known Vasili had come by.

Russia helping South Korea with no strings attached? Bullshit. A passing polar bear would scoff as he drank his Pepsi if he heard that.

“What did you decide to do?” Kang Chan asked.

“We’ve informed both Russia and Saudi Arabia that we’re going to delay our decision,” Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

It was the only sensible option they had.

He continued, "Even if you didn't ask, I was already planning to tell you all about this today. You're the only one who can get to the bottom of this deployment and why the joint oil venture was proposed."

"So we're in a race against time?" Kang Chan asked.

"Unfortunately, yes," Kim Hyung-Jung replied, his tone heavy.

He seemed to be feeling down because of the National Intelligence Service's inadequacies, which he had just acknowledged, and for putting such a heavy burden on Kang Chan even though he had just returned from Africa.

"What about Mongolia?" Kang Chan inquired.

"Things are going pretty well there. The Mongolian border patrol has taken over the security. Everyone requires President Oh's permission to pass through the area now."

Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho chuckled, lightening the mood.

"Manager Kim, I would like to start attending to business this afternoon. Can you provide me a vehicle?" Kang Chan asked.

"Of course. There's already one waiting outside."

Kang Chan nodded. He planned to call Lanok before getting to work.

"I also need some clothes," he added.

"We already have some prepared for you and Mr. Seok," Kim Hyung-Jung stated.

He was definitely meticulous about whatever he did.

A few moments later, a thought crossed Kang Chan's mind.

"Oh, right! We received letters while we were in Africa. How was that possible?"

"Ah, that." Kim Hyung-Jung smiled at Kang Chan.

"While your mother was talking to the Prime Minister's office about the foundation, she asked if we could deliver a letter to you. Kim Mi-Young sent hers through her father, and Lee Yoo-Seul through the unit in Jeungpyeong."

Kang Chan looked at Kim Hyung-Jung with a dazed expression. He understood how Yoo Hye-Sook and Lee Yoo-Seul had done it, but the way Kim Mi-Young did it made no sense to him.

"Is this about Kim Mi-Young's letter?" Kim Hyung-Jung knowingly asked.

"Yes. I don't understand how she managed to send me one."

Seok Kang-Ho looked at Kim Hyung-Jung, suddenly growing curious as well.

“The legal overseer of the Eurasian Rail is Judge Kim Kwan-Sik, Kim Mi-Young’s father,” Kim Hyung-Jung answered.

Kang Chan had heard about this from Kim Mi-Young. If he were being honest, he had a lot of uncertainties about it. It wasn’t like her father was the only judge in all of Korea, after all.

This wasn’t right. If he had known about this before her father was appointed, he would have done whatever it took to prevent it from happening.

“What a small world...” Seok Kang-Ho mused in amazement, speaking for Kang Chan’s feelings too.

“Mi-Young’s father will be coming to the meeting as well, then?” Kang Chan asked.

“That is correct,” Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

Kang Chan laughed in disbelief.

“And he knows what my current line of work is?”

“He probably already has a gist of everything up to Mongolia.”

Kang Chan couldn’t help but scoff in disbelief again.

“Does it make you uncomfortable? We had a meeting about it, but he’s a very reputable judge, and he volunteered for the job, so we saw no problem in approving him.”

“He didn’t know that I was in charge of the Eurasian Rail when he signed up, did he?” Kang Chan asked.

“He had his suspicions.”

That meant Kim Mi-Young’s father volunteered despite knowing that Kang Chan was the Eurasian Rail’s primary coordinator.

*What in the fucking world is going on?*

Kang Chan tried to raise his arm to scratch his head, but when the pain from his shoulders stopped him, he scowled instead.

“Let’s think about it over some cigarettes,” Seok Kang-Ho suggested.

Kim Hyung-Jung lit another cigarette using Seok Kang-Ho’s.

“I heard you were ambushed in Africa,” Kim Hyung-Jung said, finally delving into his curiosity.

“It was the Quds,” Kang Chan replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Very.”

Although Kim Hyung-Jung would probably get a report from the Jeungpyeong agents anyway, Kang Chan still told him about what happened in Africa and what the atmosphere had been like. Of course, he left out the part about the Blackhead, which everyone involved agreed to keep a secret.

“It did seem like the UN was working with someone,” Kim Hyung-Jung agreed.

By the time he had finished asking questions, it was already around lunchtime.

The three ordered some stir-fried octopus. After lunch and some tea, Kim Hyung-Jung left the room.

“I wonder why Mi-Young’s father did that. Got any guesses, Cap? Maybe...”  
Seok Kang-Ho trailed off.

“Maybe what?” Kang Chan repeated.

“Do you think he has his eye on you as his son-in-law?”

“Shut up. Would you give me your daughter if you were him?”

Seok Kang-Ho tilted his head and looked back at Kang Chan, clearly deep in thought.

“You’ll have to call me father-in-law if you marry my daughter, won’t you? Phuhuhu. That’s a tempting idea.”

*I shouldn’t have asked.*

Kang Chan shook his head and brushed aside thoughts about Kim Mi-Young’s father. It wasn’t important right now.

“I’ll go make some calls,” Kang Chan said.

He dialed Lanok’s number first.

- Mr. Kang Chan.

“Mr. Ambassador, it’s me. I arrived at the hospital yesterday, but I just got my phone back today, which is why I haven’t been able to call you.”

- Don’t worry about it. How are your injuries?

Now that Kang Chan could talk to Lanok with such crystal-clear sound quality, he felt more like he was finally back in Korea.

“I’m feeling good enough to go see you in the afternoon or the evening if you’re available.”

- Why don’t we have dinner together, then?

“Sounds like a plan. Where should we meet?”

- Six at the embassy would be nice.

“Understood, Mr. Ambassador. I’ll see you then.”

After hanging up, Kang Chan told Seok Kang-Ho about their conversation.

“About the Blackhead. I’m thinking of giving it to the ambassador,” Kang Chan hesitantly said.

“Do what you want,” Seok Kang-Ho responded so quickly it seemed as though he didn’t even want to think about it. “Why are you telling me this?”

“We worked hard together to get it. Don’t you want it for your efforts?”

“Nobody who was there that day would covet something like that. Having an office with you is good enough for me. You also took care of them last time. To be honest, we have Ambassador Lanok to thank for all the freedom we’re enjoying. Nobody would be upset if you gave the Blackhead to him.”

“All right. Since it’s a gift, we should at least wrap it up a bit.”

“Good idea.”

Seok Kang-Ho stood up and told an agent outside to bring them a gift box, some wrapping paper, and a paper bag.

“That’s strange,” Seok Kang-Ho mused when he returned.

“What?” Kang Chan asked.

Seok Kang-Ho closed the door and walked over to the table. He then tilted his head.

“There are too many of them outside. This level of security is the same as when we had to stay in a hotel before.”

“Really?”

Kang Chan glanced at the door. It wasn’t like he could see anything, though.

“Stay here for a bit. I’ll get some fresh air outside and call my Father too,” Kang Chan said.

“It’s cold out there,” Seok Kang-Ho warned him.

Kang Chan nodded. He then left.

Seok Kang-Ho was right. Agents were standing with sharp gazes in the hallways, elevators, and even the stairwells. Something was definitely up with the security.

“Do you have any orders for us, sir?” an agent asked.

“No. Is the room next to ours empty?” Kang Chan asked.

“Yes, sir.”

Kang Chan slid open the door that was labeled “Seok Kang-Ho” and walked inside.

He spent a moment thinking about where to sit. Liking the sunlight coming in through the window, he sat on the bed by the window and looked at his phone.



He knew he should just say he was fine and honestly answer the questions he would be asked, but he kept thinking about how Kang Dae-Kyung learned about his deployment to Africa.

Kang Chan finally pressed the call button. The dial tone rang twice before the call was picked up.

- Hello? Is this Channy?

“Yes, Father.”

- Where are you?

“I’m at a hospital. I returned yesterday, but I just got my phone back today, so I only got to call you now.”

Kang Dae-Kyung sounded unexpectedly casual.

- Did you call Mom too?

“I called you first.”

- Good. Your mom still thinks you're in Mongolia, so tell her that. When are you getting discharged?”

“They said I can leave in three days.”

- How’s your condition?

Kang Dae-Kyung was feigning nonchalance, but the worry and concern in his voice were delivered as warmly as the sunlight sipping in through the window.

“I’ve healed up enough to have dinner with Ambassador Lanok later. The doctor just wants me to stay until the results are in, so you don’t have to worry.”

- Are you coming home once you’re out of the hospital?

“That’s the plan.”

- Do you want me to get you some sushi?

Kang Chan didn’t realize sushi could be such a heartwarming food.

“Yes.”

- Why are you being so quiet today? Are you sure you’re okay?

“I really am, Father,” Kang Chan reassured him. He then heard a low sigh from across the line.

- Can I visit during lunch tomorrow?

“Father, there are a lot of people here,” Kang Chan said worriedly.

- I said the same thing last time, but if my son wants to eat, who cares about the number of people present? How many are there anyway?

“About twenty people, I think.”

- That is quite a lot.

Kang Dae-Kyung pleasantly chuckled into the phone.

- I'll come by during lunch tomorrow, so don't eat and just wait for me.

"Will do."

- Chan.

"Yes?" Kang Chan nervously answered, not knowing what Kang Dae-Kyung was going to say.

- Thanks for giving me a call. Now hurry and call your mom too, okay? I'll see you tomorrow.

"Yes, Father. See you tomorrow."

After hanging up, Kang Chan looked outside the window for a moment.

Even though he had to fight battles he didn't necessarily want to fight, it still wasn't so bad. After all, he had such amazing parents now.

Kang Chan called another number.

This time, the phone didn't even ring twice.

- Channy!

Yoo Hye-Sook already sounded both delighted and teary.

"Mother! It's me!"

- Channy! Are you okay? Are you doing well? Are you eating well?

"Yes. I'm doing well. What about you, Mother?"

- I am too. Except for missing you so much, I'm doing just fine. You're not hurt or sick, are you?

"Nope. I really am doing well."

They didn't have much to talk about. Even so, their conversation still lasted almost twenty minutes.

- I finally feel like I can breathe now. I was worried, you know. You looked unwell in my dreams the past few days. Anyway, keep safe until you come home, okay? Should I go to the airport?

"I heard other people will be coming to get me. I'll say hello to them and go straight home."

- All right. Be careful, okay?

Kang Chan hung up with a warm feeling in his heart.

Now, all he had to do was return to his room, wrap the Blackhead, then idle around with Seok Kang-Ho until he had to go see Lanok.

Kang Chan looked down at his phone and flipped through his contacts list in search of Kim Mi-Young's number.

*Why do you keep hesitating? You know you miss her.*

Kang Chan fiddled with the call button.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

His phone began to ring, receiving an unexpected call.

Chapter 274: Is This Really a Gift For Me? (1)

As sunlight poured in through the window, Kang Chan pressed the call button.

"Hello?"

- It's Vasili.

*Why is this bastard calling me?*

Growing suspicious, he lowered the phone and checked the caller ID.

- Have you heard that I went to Korea recently?

"Cut to the chase, Vasili."

Vasili's distinctive laugh came from the other side of the phone.

- Have you made arrangements with Lanok?

"I'm about to have dinner with him tonight. Why?" Kang Chan admitted, knowing he couldn't deceive Vasili. There was no need to hide it anyway.

- The UIS is targeting you and Lanok, Monsieur Kang. Since South Korea lacks the experience to keep itself safe from terrorism, I thought I should let you know. I don't know why Lanok hasn't sought your help yet.

"Why would they have us in their sights? And why did Russia propose to share the development rights over its oil fields?"

- It would be best to let Lanok answer that, so ask all the questions you have over dinner. I just wanted to give you a hint. One more thing, Monsieur Kang.

Kang Chan silently waited for Vasili to continue.

- I know Korea lacks talented people and national capability, but running around Mongolia and Africa isn't wise. Such a strategy can inadvertently signal your enemies that if they wish to bring you down, they can strike in Mongolia, Africa, or even just about anywhere.

*Is that how they see it? It's amazing how people's perspectives differ.*

- Information warfare acknowledges revenge taken to ensure similar incidents don't affect those close to us again, but intervening in every situation might cause confusion. It could make enemies feel safe to mess with anything they want.

Kang Chan had digested most of the information quite well, but he couldn't quite understand Vasili's last remark.

"Doesn't revenge imply that you've lost someone dear to you? Are you telling me not to protect my people even if I have to?"

- That's right. You're quick on the uptake. If everyone you care about found themselves in danger at the same time, who would you save first?

Kang Chan had never thought about that before.

- A person you cherish? Or someone who plays a pivotal role? Who would it be, Monsieur Kang? It would be wise to consider this now that you've entered the world of information. It's only a matter of time before you find yourself in such a situation.

Unable to come up with a reply, Kang Chan remained silent.

- Protecting everyone yourself might seem like the most effective method right now, but don't forget that the more you do it, the more frequently you put them in danger. The deeper the danger itself, too.

*Really?*

Kang Chan got lost in thought.

- Why not spare some time to consider the supporting characters?

*Supporting character? What does he mean by that?*

As Kang Chan pondered about it, the call abruptly ended.

'It would be hard to find someone as confusing as him,' he thought.

Just like with that damn bastard Andrei, it was hard to tell whether Vasili was a friend or foe.

The once-warm sunlight felt completely different now. Craving coffee and a cigarette, he sighed and got up. He then went back to his room.

*Swoosh.*

Kang Chan found Seok Kang-Ho seemingly on the verge of cutting the table in half with scissors. He had a weird expression on his face.

"What are you doing?"

"Agh! This is hard!"

After making coffee, Kang Chan walked over to the table. Seok Kang-Ho showed him a box and wrapping paper.

"Shouldn't I cut it to fit this?"

"Where?"

Kang Chan went to the closet and pulled out the Blackhead from the side pocket of his military pants. Its unique, dark-red gleam made it look valuable enough to fetch a decent amount of money.

Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho laid out the cut paper inside the box, then put the fist-sized Blackhead inside.

Everything had gone smoothly so far. However, cutting the wrapping paper and wrapping the box with it proved no easy task. The process took a full thirty minutes, yet it still felt as if it was lacking something.

*Damn it! You know what? It's the thought that counts, not the wrapping!*

"Done! This is the best we can do," remarked Kang Chan.

He then lit a cigarette and told Seok Kang-Ho about his conversation with Vasili.

"Is that why our room's so heavily guarded?" Seok Kang-Ho wondered.

"I have a meeting with the ambassador later. I'll ask him why the UIS is targeting us and why Russia and Saudi Arabia are offering such unrealistic deals," Kang Chan said.

"Alright. Guess I'll be eating dinner on my own then," Seok Kang-Ho answered.

"Yeah."

After their conversation, Kang Chan asked the agents outside to prepare him some clothes and a sedan for his trip to the embassy.

"Damn! Look at this!" Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed as he picked up the paper bag, seemingly astonished.

He then set it back down on the table. It was just an ordinary gift paper bag. Who would guess it contained a Blackhead?

The two were still laughing when an agent brought in formal, casual, and sports clothes.

Kang Chan put on comfortable cotton pants, a shirt, and a suit jacket.

"Aren't you cold?" asked Seok Kang-Ho.

"I'll be going straight into the embassy from the car and back, so I should be fine."

"That's true."

Kang Chan picked up the paper bag and left the room.

The security for their room was so tight that he could feel sharp tension coming from the agents. When the elevator reached the ground floor, agents quickly surrounded him and escorted him to the car, making sure that no one could come within ten meters of him. The driver stepped on the gas as soon as Kang Chan got in and another agent hopped into the front passenger seat. Cars with agents in them drove in front of and behind them.

Kang Chan looked out the windshield, staring at the view between the square jaws and sturdy shoulders of the agents. Vasili underestimated South Korea. These agents were not only talented but would also put their lives on the line for their mission and country.

"Hold off on lunch tomorrow," Kang Chan said.

The agent in the passenger seat turned to him.

"My father is bringing sushi. Eat with us."

"During security details, we can only eat food we've gotten ourselves," the agent explained, smiling briefly before looking back at the road.

"There's a regulation like that?"

"It's a rule that all protective services personnel follow, including the Presidential Security Service, as a countermeasure against the possibility of food contamination."

"Isn't that a bit too strict?"

"It's simply part of our duty as the deputy director's security detail."

The agent's response was firm yet not irritating. Kang Chan could only smile.

The streets of Seoul were peaceful, evidenced by the warm sunlight that was unusual for winter, the various vehicles filling the roads, and the expressions of the people walking on the streets.

Kang Chan suddenly thought of Gérard, his men, Akrion, and the old man, all of whom they had left in Africa. Every now and then, he would catch himself wishing Gérard was with them. Despite all the events happening here, he still daydreamed about how nice it would be to sit in a quiet corner of the street, drinking coffee and smoking together with Gérard.

'Wait, why hasn't Smithen contacted me?' Kang Chan wondered, realizing that he had forgotten about Smithen.

He was still deep in thought when the French embassy came into view. Their convoy soon entered the parking lot.

As South Korean agents surrounded the car Kang Chan was in, French agents also stepped out of the building and further tightened the security, dominating the parking lot with a swarm of people in black suits.

Having fought a desperate battle to protect his team in Africa just two days ago, Kang Chan found this treatment awkward and uncomfortable. However, the agents' dedicated expressions made it hard for him to say anything.

As they entered the embassy, Kang Chan found Raphael waiting for them.

"It's been a while, Monsieur Kang," he greeted. "The ambassador is waiting for you in his office."

Kang Chan, carrying a paper bag, followed Raphael to Lanok's office. The corridor was still adorned with antique-style walls and doors, complemented by a carpet laid along its length. The French embassy hadn't changed one bit.

"Monsieur Kang!" Lanok exclaimed.

"Mr. Ambassador!" Kang Chan replied.

Kang Chan was pleased to see him again. He didn't expect he would be this glad to see him and his cold eyes and sharp nose, though.

They gave each other a warm hug, then a French greeting, complete with exaggerated cheek-kissing sounds. Kang Chan couldn't be happier right now.

"Please have a seat," Lanok said, gesturing with his long arm toward the sofa.

Raphael prepared tea and cigarettes. His routine hadn't changed at all either.

"How are you feeling?" asked Lanok.

"The doctor told me not to lift anything heavy. Oh, right, Mr. Ambassador!" Kang Chan exclaimed. He handed over the paper bag he was carrying to Lanok.

Subconsciously accepting it, Lanok looked at Kang Chan with curiosity.

"Consider it a gift to commemorate my trip to Africa."

"May I open it?"

"Of course," Kang Chan answered, then sipped his tea.

Lanok tore through the gift wrap, his expression seemingly asking, 'What is this?'

*Crink. Crink.*

'Westerners really do tear open packaging roughly,' Kang Chan thought.

Lanok glanced at Kang Chan. Upon opening the box, he suddenly froze.

"Monsieur Kang...?" He looked so bewildered that Kang Chan began to worry if the Blackhead had been swapped with dynamite or C4. "This is...?"

This was the first time that Kang Chan had heard Lanok's voice tremble and seen him so flustered that his face turned red.

"Monsieur Kang...?"

"Mr. Ambassador, your reaction is making me nervous. Is it not to your liking?"

"Could it be... do you not know what it is that you've just given me?"

Lanok still hadn't taken the rock out of the box.

"It's a Blackhead, isn't it?" Kang Chan questioned.

Lanok wheezed, his breath escaping him in a strange, windy sound. "Are you sure you still want me to have this despite knowing that?"

"Yes."

Lanok burst into laughter. Kang Chan could see his eyes glistening.

"For you to give me a Blackhead..."

Lanok carefully took it out of the box and looked down at it.

*Not even hundreds of billions can make Lanok blink. He wouldn't fuss over the cost of a mere Blackhead.*

"Is this really a gift for me?"

"It is, Mr. Ambassador," Kang Chan replied.

As if trying to suppress his emotions, Lanok swallowed dryly and then took a deep breath.

"Could you tell me how you obtained this?"

"Of course," Kang Chan said.

Kang Chan smoked a cigarette—and Lanok a cigar—as he told the events that had transpired in Africa. He did his best to summarize it. However, since it would be difficult for him to tell the latter half without starting from the beginning, it still took him forty minutes to cover everything important.

"The cave completely collapsed afterward," Kang Chan said, finally reaching the end of his story.

As Kang Chan took a sip of his tea, Lanok stood up and walked to a corner behind his desk. He pressed his palm against the wall.

*Beep-beep. Click.*

A door the size of a picture frame popped out from the wall. Lanok opened it and deposited the Blackhead into the safe. After closing it, he returned to his seat in front of Kang Chan with a composed expression.

"I'd like to discuss something over a meal. If you still feel inclined to give it to me afterward, Mr. Kang Chan, I'll accept it," he said.

Lanok was exhibiting behaviors Kang Chan had never imagined before, an indication that there were things about the Blackhead that Kang Chan was unaware of. Lanok walked over to his desk and pressed the intercom button.

- Yes, Mr. Ambassador?

"We will eat in my office," Lanok declared.

- We will prepare accordingly, sir.

Shortly after, Raphael pushed a large table into the room. He covered it with a white tablecloth and set dishes, forks, and knives on it.

"Let's move this to the table, shall we?"

Once seated, Lanok poured Kang Chan some wine, then himself. French meals were known for being lengthy.

"I am most pleased to see you again, Monsieur Kang," Lanok said.

Kang Chan raised his glass in response, then took a sip. Not long after, Raphael brought in hors d'oeuvres consisting of salmon, caviar, and escargot dishes.

Using a small fork, Lanok took a bite. He then looked at Kang Chan as if he had steeled his resolve.

"The greatest utility of the Blackhead lies in the energy it contains," he began.

Kang Chan couldn't help but agree, having been forced to face deadly situations in England and Africa due to the Blackhead's energy. Lanok knew about the events that had taken place in England better than anyone else.

Opting to just listen for now, Kang Chan focused on Lanok's words, timing his eating to match the pace of the conversation.

"That was also the main reason our country developed the Large Hadron Collider," Lanok said.

He took a sip of his wine before continuing.

"The Blackhead is a gem that condenses energy. In an attempt to utilize the energy, France developed the Large Hadron Collider. However, to extract it, we had to destabilize it first."



"Is that why there were plans to create earthquakes?" Kang Chan asked, then put a piece of snail into his mouth.

Lanok shook his head. "Our intention was to project the energy outward, not start earthquakes. It only turned into a big issue when Britain misjudged it as a weapon."

*So that's why.*

Kang Chan nodded and took a sip of water.

Lanok continued, "I won't delve into details, but the main problem is that artificial Blackheads are too unstable to be used as an energy source. Ethan's subterranean shock device project quite perfectly demonstrated that."

Catching Kang Chan's gaze, he immediately added, "However, your visit stabilized the energy release of the Blackhead in Britain."

Kang Chan felt as if a new pit was opening up before him.

"But the energy from Britain's Blackhead lacks three wavelengths. Without the specific wavelength you possess, compensating for the other two is impossible. However, according to your story, the Blackhead you've given me might just be the stable energy source that Vasili and I have been risking our lives to find."

Lanok's grave demeanor prompted Kang Chan to set down his fork and take a sip of wine.

"Mr. Ambassador, I'm not quite sure how potent the energy inside the Blackhead is for you to have such a reaction," remarked Kang Chan.

"According to research-backed predictions, for as long as we can keep providing denadite and cetinium, that Blackhead could supply South Korea with an endless amount of electricity for approximately five hundred years."

Kang Chan couldn't help but smirk. This was certainly unbelievable enough to at least warrant surprise or curiosity.

"Assuming Blackheads appear in Africa every few decades and taking previously traded Blackheads into the calculation, the supply could somewhat be met. If that happens, the demand for oil will gradually diminish," Lanok noted.

*This one I can somewhat understand.*

"This plan puts a target on me, Vasili and Loriam. As for South Korea, it would be you, the President, and the NIS director," Lanok clarified.

Anyone hearing this for the first time would feel overwhelmed. Kang Chan was no exception.

"South Korea could utilize that energy for the next five hundred years. Knowing that, would you still offer it to me as a gift?" Lanok asked, his expression inscrutable.

Kang Chan and Lanok locked eyes.

Chapter 275: Is This Really a Gift For Me? (2)

As Kang Chan smirked, Raphael walked in with their steaks. Lanok's gaze on Kang Chan didn't budge at all while Raphael set down the plates.

"Mr. Ambassador," Kang Chan began.

As if sensing something was up, Raphael hurried up.

"Do you remember when I asked you to let me go to Mongolia?" Kang Chan asked.

"Of course," Lanok replied.

"Since then, you've helped me protect those important to me and shaped me into the person I am today. I don't know how much energy this Blackhead contains or how much it's worth, but..."

While Lanok briefly nodded, Raphael quickly exited the room.

"... the moment I got my hands on it, I immediately thought of you. I don't know anything about its worth, but it doesn't really matter. It's my gift to you. I hope you can take it as a token of my gratitude for all you've taught me."

Lanok's lips curved into a smile.

"You have a way of making people feel touched sometimes, Mr. Kang Chan," he said.

"I do?" Kang Chan questioned.

The mask was completely off of Lanok's face now.

"To properly utilize the Blackhead as an energy source, I would need the red wavelengths that you give off along with denadite and cetinium," Lanok stated.

Lanok picked up the wine glass in front of him.

"You've given me a great gift. It's only proper that I return the favor, yes?"

Kang Chan also raised his glass. It wasn't polite to refuse a toast from the host.

"I'm going to build a power plant in South Korea to generate electricity from Blackheads. Naturally, it requires your active cooperation and a supply of denadite and cetinium."

*He's going to make what that needs what?*

"Once this plan succeeds, South Korea will become an undisputed superpower in the world."

Lanok took a sip of his wine.

"I didn't know you could be surprised, too, Mr. Kang Chan."

“Mr. Ambassador. Your plan would require concentrating France’s technology and intelligence in South Korea. Is that even possible?” Kang Chan asked in disbelief.

Lanok burst into laughter. Soon after, he replied, “France, Russia, and my other friends’ countries would prepare the facilities. If this pushes through, I would like to ask for your cooperation.”

“Of course, Mr. Ambassador.”

“One more thing. Please look after the future of France.”

“I’ve already promised you that,” Kang Chan said, reassuring him.

Lanok set his glass down. The steak was growing cold, having failed to stimulate their appetites.

“The Eurasian Rail will only truly be a success once we’re free from the oil of the Arabs. After all, new logistics centers can only be made once we’ve rid ourselves of their influence. That’s precisely why Vasili agreed to this plan.”

Matters like this were still too complicated for Kang Chan. He wished they could have some coffee instead of steak right now.

“An infinite supply of electrical energy will change the engines of locomotives and other vehicles. The future is going to be the age of electric engines, and South Korea will be at the center of it all.”

Lanok couldn’t just be making things up, but Kang Chan thought his explanation seemed too good to be true.

“There will be a revolution, just like when humans invented the oil engine. A huge battle will ensue to prevent this from happening and to take over Korea’s vested interests.”

So this was why the UIS was throwing a fuss.

Kang Chan finally felt like he understood a bit of what was going on.

“I recommend immediately starting an energy project that would connect France and Russia to South Korea. The denadite and cetinium being supplied from Mongolia and the Blackhead in my safe... I can’t wait to see you use those materials to open the doors to a new world,” Lanok said, his expression tinged with a hint of regret.

*What’s wrong with him? Aren’t we doing this together?*

“It seems we’ve passed the timing for a meal. Why don’t we enjoy some tea and cigars instead?” Lanok suggested.

Kang Chan brightly agreed. “Let’s do that.”

Lanok smiled at him as he pressed the intercom button. A moment later, Raphael cleared away the food and set down hot tea, cigars, and cigarettes on the table.

“Raphael, could I have some coffee instead?” Kang Chan asked.

“Of course, Monsieur Kang,” Raphael replied.

After taking the plates away, he brought a small porcelain teapot and cups. He then poured Kang Chan a cup of coffee.

“You have no idea how much I’ve been looking forward to this day,” Lanok said, seemingly reminiscing, as he exhaled the smoke from his cigar. “I’ve always wanted to defeat the power of the Arab oil and Jewish money—to create a new order through the Eurasian Rail.”

Kang Chan wordlessly sipped his coffee, staring at Lanok.

“It is my greatest fortune to have met you, Mr. Kang Chan.”

*Is he trying to make me fucking blush or something?*

“On another note, Mr. Ambassador, I would like to strengthen the security of the embassy,” Kang Chan said.

“Vasili called you, hasn’t he?” Lanok mused.

“Yes.”

Kang Chan had forgotten that he was dealing with a bunch of sly snakes here.

“I see. Our security will follow your instructions, then,” Lanok stated.

“Instructions? I just want to be of help.”

“There will be a lot to do. You’ll have to negotiate with the Korean government about what you just discussed with me, and then there’s the arrangement between France, Russia, and Korea. It would be difficult to deal with the resistance from the Arabs and the Jews while doing all of that.”

“Can’t I avoid all of that in exchange for giving you the Blackhead?” Kang Chan joked.

“Hahaha!”

The two spent about two hours talking about different topics, including what happened in Africa, what Kang Chan was thinking about, and what they had to do moving forward.

Kang Chan found it nice to be able to catch up with Lanok after such a long time. Heedless of the time passing, the clock soon went past nine o’clock.

“It’s getting late,” Lanok said as if breaking a magical spell. The mask returned to his face.

“We can’t finish this overnight, but I’d still like to ask you a favor now. Use the Blackheads’ energy properly, and no matter what obstacles lie ahead, make sure the Eurasian Rail gets connected.”

*There must be something I don’t know about.*

Kang Chan could see in Lanok’s expression that something was troubling him—something he couldn’t talk about. However, Lanok wouldn’t reveal what it was even if he were to ask now that the mask was back on.

“I’ll come back soon to finish the steak I didn’t get to eat today,” Kang Chan said with a grin.

“Perhaps Vasili will join us next time,” Lanok replied.

After exchanging a French greeting, Kang Chan left the office. Now that he thought about it, Raphael, who was waiting outside, and the French agents standing in the middle and at the end of the hallway had tension in their eyes. Was this simply because of the threat from the UIS?

Stepping into the embassy’s parking lot, the darkness and cold rushed at him.

“Raphael,” Kang Chan said.

“Yes, Monsieur Kang?”

The streetlight illuminated Raphael’s nose swiftly turning red.

“Is the ambassador under some threat that I am not aware of?” Kang Chan asked.

“I am not aware of any such thing.”

Raphael sounded as if he had memorized that answer.

“You got my number, right?”

“I do.”

“Let me just say one thing. The ambassador is like a teacher to me. If anyone, for any reason, threatens him, I want to be the first to know.”

Raphael’s eyes glistened as he looked at Kang Chan. Perhaps it was the Frenchman’s weakness for the cold, or maybe he was moved by his words. Maybe it was both.

“Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Kang,” Raphael said.

Kang Chan climbed into the car surrounded by agents.

On his way back to the hospital, bright lights that he didn’t see yesterday caught his attention. He was doing something that the people laughing and chatting behind those glass windows had no idea about.

Just a few days ago, soldiers were killed in Africa, and Park Chul-Su and other members of his team stood right in front of death’s door.

Five hundred years of electricity from the energy of the Blackhead? A huge economic impact from the Eurasian Rail?

Would that mean anything to their fallen brothers?

Should they simply accept their death because, as special forces soldiers, they were supposed to put their lives on the line for their country in the first place? What about the families they left behind, then?

Shouldn't the families of those killed in Africa not be thrown into a challenging environment like Lee Yoo-Seul? Shouldn't the value of the Blackhead, which was paid for through the soldiers' blood and flesh, be returned in part to the families?

Kang Chan looked out the window. Thought after thought crossed his mind. He even wondered if what he was about to do would inadvertently fill the stomachs of bastards like Yang Jin-Woo.

He mindlessly turned his head, finding the agent in the passenger seat busily bobbing his head up and down.

What was the best course of action he could take right now?

He was still lost in thought when the car arrived at the hospital.

He was hungry.

Kang Chan entered the building with a crowd of agents around him. As he got on the elevator, he turned to an agent.

"What are you having for dinner?" Kang Chan asked.

"There are packed meals upstairs," the agent replied.

"Got any extra?"

"We do, sir. Did you not have dinner?"

"No," Kang Chan replied.

Two agents quickly exchanged glances.

"If you need something, we can quickly prepare it for you," one of the agents said.

"No need. Let's just eat together," Kang Chan insisted.

The agent awkwardly stared at Kang Chan. The elevator soon reached their floor, letting out a ding. The agents standing in the hallway greeted Kang Chan.

"Where are the packed meals?" Kang Chan asked.

"We'll bring one to you, sir," an agent replied.

"There's no fun in eating by myself. Where are they?"

The agent pointed to the room at the end of the hallway.

"Let's go."

Kang Chan walked down the hallway. On the way there, he opened the door of the room that Seok Kang-Ho was in.

Creak.

Seok Kang-Ho turned from the TV and got up. "Hey, you're back!"

"I haven't eaten yet, so I'm going to grab some food with the agents," Kang Chan informed him.

"Huh? Why? The ambassador didn't prepare a meal for you?"

"He did. We just didn't get the time to eat. Have you eaten?"

"I'll come with you anyway. You mentioning food got me feeling hungry again."

When Kang Chan turned around, the agent told him they had enough for Seok Kang-Ho as well.

Dressed in shabby patient clothes and dragging an IV behind him, Seok Kang-Ho followed Kang Chan and the agents who went to the embassy with him into the room at the far end of the hall.

The agents resting inside jumped up and greeted Kang Chan.

"Where's the food?" Seok Kang-Ho immediately asked.

*Didn't this bastard have dinner already?*

The room seemed to have been repurposed, considering it had a table large enough to be used in a cafeteria.

The agents quickly put meals, soup, and water on the table.

"Come, take a seat," Kang Chan said, a pack in front of him. The agents all sat down.

The atmosphere filled up with nervousness. No one dared pick up their spoons first.

"You're not going to pray, are you?" Kang Chan joked.

"What are you talking about? Hey! Let's eat already!" Seok Kang-Ho grumbled.

Everyone finally opened their packs, revealing white rice with separately packed side dishes. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't great either.

Kang Chan felt a bit sad. It was rice, side dishes, and soup. However, unless it was an urgent situation such as war, the food felt insignificant to feel the pride of risking one's life.

"About my visit to the embassy..." Kang Chan began as he scooped up some rice with wooden chopsticks and popped it into his mouth.

Everyone's eyes immediately darted to him. He could even feel the gazes of the agents sitting near the table.

"I was told we have a chance to make South Korea the strongest country in the world."

The statement probably sounded random and ridiculous. He could see the confusion in the agents' faces.

“Just like how some of our men sacrificed themselves in Mongolia and Africa, trying to claim that chance will likely require the NIS agents to lay down their lives.”

A few of the agents stopped eating.

“I debated about this on my trip back from the embassy. It's funny, but seeing this meal box helped me decide. I want to take this opportunity to turn our country into the strongest in the world and allow the future generation of agents to work for an intelligence bureau that can rival even the intelligence bureaus of France, the United States, and Russia.”

The agent sitting across from him gulped.

“I've got just one question...” Kang Chan trailed off, looking at the agents.

“Considering the severity of the situation, even I can't say how many agents will have to be sacrificed in the future. Are you sure you won't regret becoming just another nameless star on the NIS wall?”

Kang Chan made eye contact with the agent who had been in the passenger seat during his trip to the embassy. He saw the same determination that he had seen in the eyes of the soldier who died with a broken finger, Yoon Sang-Ki, who held on despite being shot in the stomach, and Cha Dong-Gyun, who would much rather let go than let his brothers-in-arms die.

The room had become so quiet that Kang Chan could even hear something being dragged outside rather clearly. Everyone seemed to be holding their breaths.

“You're not sure?” Kang Chan asked.

“We...”

The answer came from his left.

“Every day, we go out there with only one mission in mind—to serve our country. If our sacrifice would allow South Korea to shine, everyone here would gladly become a star.”

Kang Chan grinned.

“Geez! This atmosphere is affecting my appetite. Oh, I know! Why don't we mix this all up?” Seok Kang-Ho suggested.

He pushed his half-eaten meal to the middle of the table. They all stood up at the same time. Unfortunately, there wasn't any big bowl they could use.

“Look in the bathroom! There should be a large basin in there,” Seok Kang-Ho said.

An agent went inside and brought out a plastic basin.



*This motherfucker! We could've just asked the nurses!*

In the end, they mixed all their food in the basin.

Men were strange. The awkward atmosphere they had while eating clean lunch boxes disappeared as soon as they mixed all their food in the basin.

“This is what we’re made for,” Seok Kang-Ho uttered, his mouth filled to the brim with rice. He dunked his spoon back into the basin.

Combining all their meals resulted in an enormous amount of food. Although the agents had put a good portion into their containers, there was still more than half left.

Kang Chan ate a spoonful.

*Creak.*

The doors opened, and Hwang Ki-Hyun and Kim Hyung-Jung walked inside, instantly dampening the atmosphere. The agents greeted them, then anxiously looked at each other.

Much to their surprise, Hwang Ki-Hyung approached the table with a nonchalant expression.

“Got any extra spoons?” he asked.

“Here, sir,” an agent said, quickly ripping off the plastic wrap of a disposable spoon.

“Can I also have some?” Kim Hyung-Jung asked with a smile, walking over.

When one of the agents tried to scoop a portion into a meal pack container, Hwang Ki-Hyun shook his head. “Stop that! Bibimbap doesn’t taste good when you put it in a separate container,”

He then dug his spoon into the basin.

*Nom, nom.*

This old, refined gentleman filled his mouth with rice. Right after, he reached for the basin with the spoon again.

“Who mixed it?” he asked.

“I did, sir,” an agent quickly responded.

“Manager Kim, why don’t we assign him to the kitchen?” Hwang Ki-Hyun joked.

“We should definitely consider it,” Kim Hyung-Jung joked back as he ate a spoonful of rice, his left hand right below the spoon to catch any food that might fall.

The awkwardness was short-lived.

The spoons clattered back and forth until the basin was finally empty. After a moment, they each took a paper cup of instant coffee.

Hwang Ki-Hyun sat down at the table and glanced at the agents sitting across from him and standing around him.

“That was a good meal.”

The scene looked more like a company executive comfortably gathering his employees rather than the director of the National Intelligence addressing his field agents.

“I cannot risk my life in the field like all of you do, but...”

Hwang Ki-Hyun sharply gazed at the men.

“I love and I am proud of South Korea just as much as all you do. I will do my best to make sure all of your hard work and suffering will not be in vain.”

Kang Chan grinned, impressed by Hwang Ki-Hyun’s speech.

“Let’s have a toast! Bottoms up!” Seok Kang-Ho shouted as he raised his cup high.

*You fucking crazy son of a bitch! Our coffee is still scalding hot!*

Chapter 276.1: I Should Trust Them (1)

After their coffee break, Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, Hwang Ki-Hyun, and Kim Hyung-Jung went to a different room. Kang Chan then told the three about his conversation with Lanok.

He couldn’t disclose everything about the Blackhead. Hence, he beat around the bush instead, telling them that France wanted to build a power plant for the next-gen energy source in South Korea and that it would be the foundation for the Eurasian Rail’s success.

“Assistant Director, do you know anything about the energy source the ambassador was talking about?” Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

“From what I heard, the facility will be able to supply about five hundred years’ worth of electricity, and South Korea will get unlimited use of it.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun looked at Kang Chan in surprise. His expression seemed to say, ‘What does that even mean?’ and ‘Has he gone crazy?’

Awkward silence engulfed the room for a brief moment.

“Is the energy source a nuclear weapon?”

“France and the UK apparently already have the technology needed to produce that much energy, but I heard they will need to use Blackheads and the supply of denadite and cetinium from Mongolia as raw materials.”

“Blackhead?”

“It’s a type of gem. One Blackhead is discovered in Africa once every several decades, maybe once every ten years at most.”

“Hmm.”

Kang Chan couldn’t blame him for being confused.

Hwang Ki-Hyun sighed and groaned. He then glanced at Kim Hyung-Jung as Kang Chan continued with his report.

“The ambassador also mentioned that if we push through with this plan, the engines of locomotives and vehicles would inevitably change from oil to electrical ones. The Arabs, who export crude oil, and the Jews, their investors and traders, will do everything they can to stop that from happening. Their resistance will likely prove difficult to deal with.”

“This has at least given me a rough guess about why Russia and Saudi Arabia both offered us joint oil development rights.”

“If what you said is true, does that mean the Eurasian Rail will be using electric trains?” Seok Kang-Ho wondered.

“Now that you’ve mentioned it, that would likely be the case, wouldn’t it?”

Kang Chan, Hwang Ki-Hyun, and Kim Hyung-Jung turned toward Seok Kang-Ho in surprise, the possibility only coming to them now.

Seok Kang-Ho continued, “Won’t that force the trains to go to South Korea to recharge?”

*That’s right!*

The three stared at Seok Kang-Ho in awe. If what he said was right, then South Korea would become the starting point for all of the Eurasian Rail’s operations.

“I’m sure you’ve already heard about this, Assistant Director, but Russia and Saudi Arabia have given us proposals that are quite similar. Which one do you think we should accept?” Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

“I heard that Russia and France have the same goal. The Ambassador told me that I’ll have to negotiate with our government, but if I could choose, I’d say the right choice would be to work with Russia.”

“Would the facility we’re talking about here be exclusive to South Korea?”

“No. The ambassador said that France, Russia, Germany, and even Switzerland would like to have their own down the line as well. He would ask for my help when we get to that point.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun briefly stared into nothingness, seemingly pondering about what to do.

“On one hand, this will give us all the vested interests, but on the other, this will turn South Korea into a testing ground,” he commented afterward.

Kang Chan silently listened.

“I’ll have to report this to the President first. Do you have any solid evidence we can use to back this up?” Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

“I unfortunately don’t.”

It was too preposterous for them to believe what Kang Chan had just said, but they couldn't just ignore it either due to the proposals they had received from Russia and Saudi Arabia.

Hwang Ki-Hyun's expression seemed to be telling them as much.

"On another note, Director, I would like the French embassy's security to be strengthened," Kang Chan said. "Is there any way we can make that happen?"

"That won't be a problem. You're the head of the counter-terrorism team, after all. I'll discuss this with manager Kim," Hwang Ki-Hyun answered, then looked at Kim Hyung-Jung.

Afterward, he turned back to Kang Chan. "Assistant Director."

"Yes?"

Being called his position felt awkward, but Kang Chan couldn't bring himself to tell Hwang Ki-Hyun.

"Do you think all those special forces were dispatched to Africa as part of some powerful country's scheme to take you down?"

"What a coincidence. I've been meaning to ask you that exact question."

When it came to the reason they were sent to Africa, Kang Chan was just as cautious as they were.

"I see. I'll arrange a meeting with you and the President soon. I know how bothersome this can be, but I hope you lend us a hand anyway," Hwang Ki-Hyun said, then glanced at his watch.

They only had an hour left before midnight.

"I can't believe it's already this late. I've taken too much of your time. You two should get some rest. I'll be sure to update you if anything comes up," Hwang Ki-Hyun told Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho.

He then stood up and walked out of the room with Kim Hyung-Jung, leaving Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho behind.

"For some reason, I just can't bring myself to smoke when the Director is around. Anyway, have you given the Blackhead to the ambassador?" Seok Kang-Ho asked.

"I have. He told me they'll need the red wavelengths that I possess to generate energy, but since neither of us has any idea what they're talking about, let's just assume that what everyone is saying is true for now."

Seok Kang-Ho poured water into a paper cup. As he set it down on the table, Kang Chan changed into a hospital gown.

“Won’t this project cause earthquakes in South Korea? Isn’t that what happened in the UK?”

“We have to believe that the ambassador has all of this under control,” Kang Chan replied.

“Even so, things can still get dangerous.”

Kang Chan nodded as he sat at the table. Seok Kang-Ho had certainly become smarter. Unfortunately, the more he talked now, the more issues Kang Chan had to think about.

*Chk chk.*

“Hoo.” Kang Chan exhaled the cigarette smoke, feeling as if this long, tiring day was finally ending.

“Well, anyway, you must be destined for this!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed.

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Why else would you never get time to rest? You can’t even get a moment to catch your breath. Haaa! Compared to you, I’m living a far easier life.”

Seok Kang-Ho spoke, shook his head, and blew out smoke all at the same time. The sight made Kang Chan acknowledge that he was very talented.

“Oh, right! My father is going to buy sushi for lunch tomorrow,” Kang Chan said.

“Did you tell him to buy enough for all of us?”

“I did.”

“Phuhuhu! I’m so looking forward to tomorrow’s lunch.”

Kang Chan relaxed as he and Seok Kang-Ho conversed. After a while, he lay down in his bed.

It was wise to sleep whenever he had the chance to.

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Although it was still quite early in the morning, loud noises from military trucks were already echoing all over Jeungpyeong.

On the day of their return to South Korea from Africa, one of the generals who had been waiting for them at the airport had told Cha Dong-Gyun to let them know if they needed anything, and he immediately used that opportunity to request his unit be reinforced as soon as possible.

*Screech!*

When the trucks stopped, ten soldiers from the First Airborne Forces jumped out of them and walked toward the barracks. They all had fierce eyes, tanned skin, and broad shoulders.

“First Airborne Forces reporting for duty, sir!” one of the soldiers exclaimed.

“At ease. We’re going to have a mock battle in an hour. Rest until then. The Third Airborne Forces and the soldiers from the 606 are at the barracks next door. Be sure to greet them,” Cha Dong-Gyun said.

The Second Lieutenant talking to Cha Dong-Gyun and the other First Airborne Forces soldiers stared at Cha Dong-Gyun. His face was covered in cuts and scars, and his military uniform was puffed up, a clear indication that he hadn’t had his wounds properly treated yet and instead had just wrapped more bandages around them.

‘Why is he in such a hurry?’ the soldiers wondered, quite perplexed by his appearance.

Cha Dong-Gyun looked back at the soldiers, then took out cigarettes and a lighter from his pants pocket.

Since it was still January, mornings deep in the mountains were cold and chilly enough to remind people that they were still in the middle of winter.

“Anyone want a smoke?” Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

“No, thank you, sir.”

Despite the soldiers’ refusal, Cha Dong-Gyun started handing out cigarettes to all of them anyway, starting with the Second Lieutenant. He then flicked the lighter on for them.

*Chk chk.*

“Hoo!” they exhaled, steam and smoke mixing as they came out of their mouths.

“Haven’t you just returned from Africa, sir?” the same soldier asked.

“It’s already been two days.”

“If I may ask, why did this unit need reinforcements so urgently?” he prodded on, wondering if there were plans to dispatch them again somewhere else.

“What’s your name?” Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

“Second Lieutenant Han Jae-Guk, sir.”

Looking straight at Han Jae-Guk, Cha Dong-Gyun put a cigarette in between his lips. “As a member of the Airborne Forces, what do you want to do the most?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.”

Han Jae-Guk looked at the soldiers who were with him. “I want to fight in the frontlines, sir.”

“In the frontlines, huh? How would you prefer to die, then?”

Han Jae-Guk hesitated for a moment. Steeling his resolve, he answered, “I believe soldiers, combat, and death come hand in hand.”

Having finished his cigarette, Cha Dong-Gyun extinguished its embers. He then threw it into the old paint can next to him.

“We lost eleven men in Africa,” Cha Dong-Gyun said.

The atmosphere around them suddenly grew as cold as the weather.

Cha Dong-Gyun continued, “My brothers fought relentlessly. They left me with experience. I’m thinking of passing on that experience to you all before I forget even a little bit. That’s why I’m in a rush. See that bell?”

The soldiers looked at the bell behind Cha Dong-Gyun. They initially thought it was used to wake the soldiers up or gather them for a meal. However, it now seemed like it had a different purpose.

“If any of you find the training too difficult to endure and wants to quit, you may ring that bell,” Cha Dong-Gyun explained.

Han Jae-Guk smiled defiantly.

‘How dare you imitate the Americans? Let’s see how hard this training really is,’ Han Jae-Guk thought.

Cha Dong-Gyun locked eyes with him, looking quite amused.

Chapter 276.2: I Should Trust Them (1)

After about thirty minutes since assistant manager Kim called him, Kang Dae-Kyung entered Kang Chan’s room.

Happy to finally see each other again, the awkwardness between them quickly disappeared like the wind. Being in each other’s presence made them feel strangely reassured.

“Father,” Kang Chan greeted with a bow.

Kang Dae-Kyung found it hard to look at him properly.

“Have a seat. I bought sushi,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

He put the paper bag on the table and quickly took out their takeout.

“Father,” Kang Chan called again.

“You must be hungry. Let’s eat,” Kang Dae-Kyung barely managed to utter. He turned his head away from Kang Chan.

*Is he crying because it’s been a while since we last saw each other?*

After a moment of silence, Kang Dae-Kyung reached out for their takeout sushi again.

“Father?”

“I’m fine now that I’m sure you’re okay,” he said.

Sniffing, he rubbed his face with the palms of his hands.

“I keep catching myself acting like your mom. I heard that the amount of female sex hormones increases with age for men. That’s probably why I’m crying.”

Kang Chan leaned forward and looked up at Kang Dae-Kyung.

“What are you doing?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

“You haven’t been looking at me.”

Only then did Kang Dae-Kyung look at Kang Chan, his eyes still red from crying.

“I can’t get used to this no matter how hard I try. My heart breaks whenever I hear on the news that someone died. Even just knowing that people have been wounded makes it hard for me to breathe.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for? I’m just thankful that you came back alive. I can’t help but get emotional too when I think about the families of the fallen soldiers coping with all of this, though.”

*Click.*

When Kang Dae-Kyung started taking off the lid of the container with the doenjang broth, Kang Chan quickly opened another container.

Kang Dae-Kyung glanced at Kang Chan’s hand. A moment later, Kang Chan heard him sniffing again.

Kang Chan wasn’t expecting this to happen. Throughout his entire two-day stay in the hospital with Seok Kang-Ho, never once did he imagine that seeing his wounds would make Kang Dae-Kyung sad.

His hands had cuts and scars all over.

Kang Chan sincerely felt bad for having thick scabs on his hands.

“We should eat,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

“Alright.”

Kang Dae-Kyung pulled his wooden chopsticks apart, then picked up a delicious-looking sushi made with clam meat. He dipped it in soy sauce before eating it.

“Try this first,” Kang Dae-Kyung told Kang Chan.

Kang Chan felt embarrassed. He could never get used to things like this.

Still, how could he refuse?

Kang Chan opened his mouth and ate the piece of sushi that Kang Dae-Kyung had picked up for him.

“Assistant manager Kim has given sushi to the people outside,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

“You should eat as well.”

“Alright.”



Looking like Kang Dae-Kyung had finally calmed down, he picked up a piece of sushi and ate it.

“What’s mother doing?” Kang Chan asked.

“I heard that she’s having lunch with the employees of the foundation, but she’s really looking forward to your return home. She even said that she’s going to the supermarket on the day you arrive, so you better be ready for all that before you go home.”

*Have I ever seen a middle-aged man eating sushi with eyes red from crying? What does a child mean to their parents anyway?*

Kang Chan was thankful for being reincarnated.

He shoved a piece of sushi into his mouth the same way Seok Kang-Ho would.

“You’ll upset your stomach if you eat like that. Slow down,” Kang Dae-Kyung suggested.

“It just tastes so good.”

Kang Chan noticed two more takeout boxes in the paper bag. Their food right now was not just some delicious sushi. It was Kang Dae-Kyung’s love and affection for him as a father.

Kang Chan continued to eat the sushi because he was thankful, and because he didn’t have anything else to do in return right now, other than eating.

“Cough!” Kang Chan choked.

“Jeez! Here, have some of this.”

Smiling, Kang Dae-Kyung offered the doenjang-guk.

Kang Chan got a lump in his throat for experiencing a father’s affection. He couldn’t help but find it funny.

He drank some of the doenjang broth, pushing down the sushi in his throat and the emotions he felt.

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The First and Third Airborne Forces and the soldiers from the 606 stood at attention, clearly at a loss for words.

They all had ten soldiers each, reaching a total of thirty. Cha Dong-Gyun led only ten men against them, yet they were completely decimated in the mock battle. They couldn’t even take one enemy down. However, what they found most humiliating was that Cha Dong-Gyun and his men needed less than an hour to do it.

“Do you know how incapable you are now?” Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

*Fuck! How can he ask that when we conducted the mock battle in a base that they’re familiar with?*

None of the thirty soldiers answered.

Cha Dong-Gyun turned his head to Kwak Cheol-Ho. “Bring the bulletproof vests, helmets, and live ammo!”

“Yes, sir!”

*Bring what and what now?*

“Where are the medics?” Cha Dong-Gyu asked.

“They should be here in ten minutes.”

*He’s doing an amazing job at setting a scary atmosphere!*

The newcomers looked at Cha Dong-Gyun and his men with an expression that seemed to say, ‘Let’s see what you guys can do!’

*Clank! Clank!*

The soldiers first brought over a box of live ammo, then the helmets and bulletproof vests.

“We’re going to use live ammo for the next session! Remember, you are only allowed to aim for the vests and helmets! Hitting others anywhere else will result in immediate disqualification! The same goes for failing to take out even just one enemy!” Cha Dong-Gyun explained with a low and husky voice.

The soldiers behind him skillfully held up the bulletproof vests, then the helmets.

“If someone is wounded, the one who shot them will take the responsibility of getting them out of the battlefield! Any questions?!”

*Click! Click!*

None of the thirty soldiers moved. They just kept watching the special forces soldiers putting on helmets and buckling them up, then putting live ammunition into their magazines.

Cha Dong-Gyun smirked in response.

“Are you seriously going to train us with live ammo?” the commander of the 606 gruffly asked.

“If you don’t want to participate, you are more than welcome to back out! Just ring the bell over there, head into the barracks, and have a nice cup of coffee! No one is forcing any of you to join this training!”

“Have you ever done this kind of training before?” Han Jae-Guk, the second lieutenant from the First Airborne Forces, asked.

Cha Dong-Gyun turned toward him. The thirty soldiers blatantly showed their defiance. They even seemed to be working together as one.

“I understand how you all feel. We also felt that way at first. By the time we were done, we already had quite a lot of wounded in our hands. However, let me

make one thing clear! The bullets you'll be shooting can kill or wound anyone, even myself and every single man in my team!" Cha Dong-Gyun explained.

*That's true.*

A moment of silence passed.

"Why would I or my do something like this?" Cha Dong-Gyun asked. "Han Jae-Guk!"

"Second Lieutenant Han Jae-Guk!"

Han Jae-Guk didn't mean to yell out his official rank and name, but seeing the look in Cha Dong-Gyun's eyes made him instinctively feel like he had to.

Cha Dong-Gyun's expression right now was so terrifying that it made the soldiers wonder if he was still the same person they had been looking at all this time.

Cha Dong-Gyun continued, "Earlier, I told you all that we lost eleven of our men in Africa. Since then, I always see their faces whenever I lie down to sleep. I keep telling myself that if I had been just a little stronger—just a little sharper—they would still be here with me!"

*What's going on?*

Kwak Cheol-Ho and the other soldiers behind Cha Dong-Gyun now had the same glare as Cha Dong-Gyun. Their eyes were glinting, seemingly telling all of the newcomers that they would shoot them down if they ever tried to do or say anything funny.

"If any of you are satisfied with the training you've already done before coming here, then you may return to your respective bases right now! I need soldiers who will return alive no matter the situation we dive into! I need soldiers who can pass on all the pitiful and unfortunate experiences that I've accumulated to our juniors!" Cha Dong-Gyun added.

Silence enveloped the area as the atmosphere turned even colder, seemingly freezing everyone in place.

Cha Dong-Gyun paused for a moment. He then turned his head toward Kwak Cheol-Ho.

"We'll do the training between ourselves! Kwak Cheol-Ho! You're deploying first! Take five men with you!"

"Underst—"

Someone walked forward, interrupting Kwak Cheol-Ho. Han Jae-Guk looked straight at Cha Dong-Gyun as he picked up a bulletproof vest and helmet.

"First Lieutenant Han Jae-Guk, volunteering for live ammo training!"

The white steam coming from his mouth seemed to be conveying how touched he felt.

Soon after, a soldier from the First Airborne Forces walked forward.

“Sergeant Lee Jae-Ho, volunteering for live ammo training!”

“The entire 606 volunteers for live ammo training, sir!”

As if signaled to finally move, the soldiers stepped forward one after another, picking up their own set of helmets and bulletproof vests.

Cha Dong-Gyun wanted to show this to Choi Seong-Geon, Park Chul-Su, and Kang Chan.

“First Lieutenant! May we yell our chant, sir?!” Han Jae-Guk requested after picking up live ammo.

They always yelled their chant during their training.

When Cha Dong-Gyun nodded, Han Jae-Guk turned toward the thirty soldiers.

“I am Second Lieutenant Han Jae-Guk of the First Airborne Forces! Do whatever it takes to win! We’re the First and Third Airborne Forces and the 606! We might be lacking in skills, but we won’t lose in spirit! Everyone! What’s our chant?!”

“If I can!” the soldiers yelled deep inside the quiet mountain. The barracks’ windows shook as the seemingly startled mountain echoed their chant.

*Rumble!*

“Protect the country with my blood!”

*Rumble!*

“I am!”

‘General! Do you see this?!’ Cha Dong-Gyun wondered.

“Happy!”

*Rumble!*

The echo rang out in the distance, bringing their lingering emotions with it.

Tightly gritting his teeth, Cha Dong-Gyun looked at the soldiers.

*Vroom!*

At that moment, the medical team’s vehicle urgently rushed toward them.

Chapter 277: Day by Day (1)

Men certainly had their oddities. Reflecting on that thought, Kang Chan found himself dumbfounded and profusely shaking his head.

Seok Kang-Ho burst into laughter again with a distinctive 'Pfffffft!'

His unique chuckle echoed in the hallway. The agents tried hard to stifle their laughter but eventually gave in and laughed heartily as well.

Madmen! How could they become so close simply by sharing food in a washbasin?[1]

Kang Chan would be discharged tomorrow.

Earlier today, he had reached out to the National Intelligence Service, requesting to strengthen the security of the French Embassy. He also recommended elevating Hwang Ki-Hyun's security detail to VIP status.

Wanting to take care of a certain matter before being discharged, Kang Chan picked up the phone. The call was picked up almost as soon as he pressed the dial button.

[Anne speaking.]

"This is the Deputy Director-General," Kang Chan responded in an uncharacteristically formal manner.

Perhaps because of that, Anne hesitated for a moment before answering.

[Awaiting your orders, Deputy Director-General.]

"Anne, I want you and Louis to work in South Korea. Your mission is to protect and assist Ambassador Lanok. Make arrangements to transfer as soon as possible."

[Monsieur Kang—Deputy Director-General.]

"If you don't hurry, Anne, I might have to find someone else. I have the authority to do that, don't I?"

[You certainly do, but is the ambassador aware of this?]

"Anne," Kang Chan called.

[Sir,] Anne responded, trying her best not to lose her formality.

"Do you know what the ambassador means to me?"

[Yes, sir.]

"Then it's settled. I'd feel more at ease with you and Louis by the ambassador's side. The situation will likely become difficult as we move forward, so hurry over and give us a hand," Kang Chan said.

[Understood, sir.]

"Louis is coming with you, right? If things have soured between you two, should I mark you down as coming alone?"

[We will go together.]

Kang Chan chuckled. Anne surely would have heard it.

"Good to know, Anne. I feel a bit relieved now."

[Thank you, Deputy Director-General.]

Voices easily conveyed emotions. Kang Chan could tell that Anne had been wanting to return to South Korea. If he was wrong, though.... then there really wasn't much that he could do about it.

*Whoosh.*

Soon after, Seok Kang-Ho opened the door and entered the room.

"Pfff, what are you doing?" he asked.

"What's so funny?" Kang Chan asked back. "You've been out in the hallway all day."

"The kids are hilarious. The National Intelligence Service apparently has quite the tough training program."

Seok Kang-Ho sat at the table, pulled out a cigarette, and put it in his mouth. Seeing him smoking made Kang Chan suddenly crave one too. When he walked over, Seok Kang-Ho instinctively pushed a cigarette toward him.

*Rustle.*

Kang Chan blew out the smoke. "Hoo!"

This time, it was the instant coffee that tempted Kang Chan. Life truly was a series about fulfilling desires. Before he could even say anything, Seok Kang-Ho was already by the water dispenser, the sweet smell of coffee filling the room shortly after. He set down a paper cup in front of Kang Chan.

"Keep a gun and a radio with you at all times. Even after you've been discharged."

"Got it," Seok Kang-Ho responded.

"You may not know about the UIS, but I'm sure you know how they operate. Don't let them catch you off guard."

After taking a sip, Seok Kang-Ho tilted his head. "Things are about to get real fucking difficult around here, huh?"

"This issue is apparently larger than we thought. If what the ambassador said about the Eurasian Rail and electric energy is true, then we might just be moving toward a world that doesn't heavily rely on oil."

"We will still need oil until then, right? Well, if the Arabs stop importing theirs to us, we can always just buy some from Russia, so no worries there."

Kang Chan stared at Seok Kang-Ho in astonishment. This guy seemed to be evolving day by day. Kang Chan recalled a term for this in Chinese idiom[2], something Kim Mi-Young, who had extensively studied the subject, would likely know more about.

"Anyway, I'm thinking of visiting Jeungpyeong after being discharged tomorrow," Seok Kang-Ho stated.

"Why not just stay here?" Kang Chan asked.

"Visiting it at least once should make me feel more at ease."

"Do as you please."

"Those bastards! Have I grown fond of them? It hasn't been that long, but I already miss them," Seok Kang-Ho mumbled.

Kang Chan couldn't help but chuckle. If he had looked after his comrades like this before, he would have had many followers.

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"Huff, huff!"

Han Jae-Guk gasped for breath, his mind teetering on the edge of sanity. No, that wasn't quite right. To be honest, he was terrified. He kept wondering if Cha Dong-Gyun had actually gone insane.

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

*He's a madman! How could he pull the trigger toward our alley like that, especially after nearly getting four of us killed?*

The aggressor seemed to fly backward and fall to the ground. A barrage of enemy fire followed.

*Zing! Thud! Zing! Thud!*

Four had already been carried away from the battlefield. Seeing blood pooling on the ground from the severe-looking bullet wound on a soldier's thigh, Han Jae-Guk felt unbearably shocked. Drenched in his subordinate's blood, his sense of duty, which had surged within him when they shouted their chant, had all but dissolved.

*Bang! Bang!*

Cha Dong-Gyun suddenly stood up and sent a barrage of bullets their way.

*That man is fucking insane! He should be reported to the higher-ups for a mental evaluation or even involuntary discharge!*

*Zing! Thud! Zing! Thud!*

As Han Jae-Guk's head crashed against the cement wall of the rooftop, Cha Dong-Gyun quickly changed magazines.

*Click! Clack!*

Han Jae-Guk lifted his head, catching a glimpse of the deep scars on Cha Dong-Gyun's face and the intense gleam in his eyes. Cha Dong-Gyun simultaneously turned toward him, causing their eyes to meet.

"First Airborne Forces, Han Jae-Guk!" Cha Dong-Gyun called.

"Yes, sir!" Han Jae-Guk responded somewhat bluntly.

*Zing! Thud!*

Cha Dong-Gyun slightly raised his head, and more parts of the cement wall were open again. Only the soldiers of Jeungpyeong's special forces team had launched an offensive so far. After four of their men had been carried out, the First Airborne, Third Airborne, and 606 members became too terrified to shoot back.

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

'Hey! At least tell me why you fucking called me before trying to gun us down!' Han Jae-Guk thought.

*Zing! Zing! Thud!*

It wasn't just Cha Dong-Gyun. Kwak Cheol-Ho and the men he led on the opposite side were also clearly out of their minds.

"Why did you call me, sir?!"

Han Jae-Guk raised his head and looked at Cha Dong-Gyun. Concealed on the rooftop, they were in a standoff against enemies attempting to take over their building.

"Later!" Cha Dong-Gyun shouted.

*Zing! Thud! Zing! Thud!*

Cha Dong-Gyun lowered his head below the railing. Getting shot in the face with live ammunition would kill anyone.

'Is he not scared at all?' Han Jae-Guk wondered.

"If we all die, don't bother remembering me, but please remember my men!"

*What the hell is that madman ranting about? Is he mocking me for acting like a coward?*

"Thank you for supporting us, and thank you for watching over us!"

*What the heck was he talking about?*

"We honed our skills by shooting at each other like madmen! That's how we got to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the world's strongest teams!"

*Zing! Thud! Zing! Thud!*

Cha Dong-Gyun was looking straight at Han Jae-Guk.

"Learn from this experience! Become a special forces team that surpasses any other in this goddamn world!"

*Zing! Thud!*

Cement dust flew before his face, but Cha Dong-Gyun didn't even blink.

*What's with this desperation? Why the need for such tenacity?*

"Lieutenant!" Cha Dong-Gyun called out again as their eyes met.

"Why are you going to such lengths?!" Han Jae-Guk asked.

Cha Dong-Gyun turned his gleaming eyes away. For the first time, Han Jae-Guk saw the 'determination' in them.

"We are the last bastion of South Korea. Our homeland has promised to retaliate against any future provocations. Who do you think will carry out that oath? You have to be prepared to lay down your life for our country! As you shouted earlier, if you get to protect our motherland with your blood, you should be happy!"

When Cha Dong-Gyun stopped shooting, the rest of his men held their fire as well.

'Is this what it means to protect the nation with blood?' Han Jae-Guk pondered, overwhelmed by Cha Dong-Gyun's determination.



It was as if all his strength had been sapped away. He had never before seen a soldier embody their motto with so much passion and intensity that it could be seen in their gaze.

*Could this be South Korea's last line of defense?*

Han Jae-Guk had heard rumors that Cha Dong-Gyun served in China, North Korea, France, Afghanistan, and Africa. He thought those who sought out such assignments were merely chasing promotions. He had never met soldiers who carried the weight of their fallen comrades in their hearts, bearing a sense of mission unknown to others.

*What have I been doing all this time? How could I be so arrogant that I considered myself the top second lieutenant of South Korea's Airborne Forces?*

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"Remember to visit as soon as anything feels off. For the love of God, please don't overdo it."

After nagging Kang Chan, Yoo Hun-Woo downed the last of his coffee in one gulp.

*Isn't he the director of this hospital? Shouldn't he eat with a bit more decorum?*

"One more thing, Mr. Kang Chan," Yoo Hun-Woo said.

"Yes?"

"Let's not be petty, shall we?"

"About what?"

"The sushi. How could you give sushi to all the nurses but leave me out? You know I love sushi too."

*That's what this is about? Dealing with him is like grasping a slippery snake. It's so fucking tricky.*

"I was so busy taking care of the agents outside that it slipped my mind. I'll treat you next time," Kang Chan responded.

"Next time, make sure to come with sushi, not injuries. While I take pride in treating you and Mr. Seok, I'd rather not see any more injuries," Yoo Hun-Woo said.

*Does he know?*

Feeling Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho's gazes, Yoo Hun-Woo gestured toward the TV on the wall.

"We also see and hear everything. I was proud and grateful," the sly doctor said, conveying his sincerity while looking directly at Kang Chan.

"Thanks for paying the hospital bills in cash."

The sentiment didn't last long.

"I'll be going now," Kang Chan said.

"If anything feels even just a teeny-tiny off—"

"I'll come running. I'm off."

Kang Chan exited the room, leaving Yoo Hun-Woo laughing. The agents surrounded him and guided him to the parking lot. Climbing into the car waiting for him, the agent in the passenger seat handed him a gun and a radio. It was a sunny winter day.

"Where are you off to now?" Seok Kang-Ho asked.

"Home. You?" Kang Chan inquired.

"I'll head home first, then maybe go to Jeungpyeong tomorrow."

The hospital wasn't that far from their apartment.

"Keep in touch," Kang Chan said.

"Take care," Seok Kang-Ho replied.

Kang Chan got out in front of his apartment. Agents in thick jackets were scattered throughout the complex.

*How long has it been?*

Though not much time had passed, he felt like it had been an eternity since he'd been home. Kang Chan walked into the building and took the elevator to the seventh floor. He then entered their apartment. The curtains hanging on the living room window, the sofa, TV, cabinets, the kitchen... he found everything about it immaculate—a testament to Yoo Hye-Sook's character.

Kang Chan went into his room and changed into more comfortable clothing. He then sat down on the bed. His shoulder injury was now bearable, and the scab on his hand had gotten smaller.

He hadn't called Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook yet, but it wasn't to surprise them. He simply wasn't sure about their schedule for today. Now that he was home, he picked up his phone and scrolled through his contacts to find Kim Mi-Young's number.

The apartment was quiet, and no one would likely barge in. After making sure of that, he pressed the dial button. The call rang about a dozen times before Kim Mi-Young finally answered.

[Hello?]

A light chuckle escaped him. How could she answer the phone with such a clear, unaffected voice? She was certainly untouched by blood, death, or combat.

"Mi-Young."

[Yep! That's me!]

Kang Chan laughed again only to stop when he heard sniffing through the phone.

"Are you crying?"

[No! I'm not!]

She definitely sounded otherwise, however. Hadn't he told her that he wouldn't be going to Africa?

[Where are you?]

"At home. Just got in. You?"

[I'm at home too.]

Kang Chan missed her.

"Want to meet up for a bit?"

[Sure! Where should we meet?]

Kang Chan paused to think about a location. The place wasn't the issue, though—it was the agents who would inevitably surround them that were the problem.

"Mi-Young, it's a bit tricky for me to go outside right now. How about we meet at my place instead?"

[Your place?]

"Yeah."

[Okay. I'm on my way.]

Kang Chan gave her his apartment number and then hung up. He wondered how much Kim Mi-Young had grown since he last saw her. Shaking off the thought, he immediately called another number.

[Hello? Channy?]

"Yes, Mother. I'm home now."

[You are? You should have told me! Have you had lunch yet? No, wait. I'll come home right now!]

"Sure. Oh, right. Mi-Young is coming over to visit."

[She is?]

*Why does she sound so surprised?*

[Should I come a bit later then?]

Kang Chan laughed heartily, a deviation from his usual demeanor.

[What's so funny?]

"Why take your time? I'm hungry. I hurried home looking forward to your cooking."

[Channy! I'll be there soon!]

Kang Chan was still smiling when he ended the call.

*Ding-dong!*

*She's here already?*

He walked out of his room and pushed open the front door only to be stunned as soon as he saw Kim Mi-Young and her long hair, large eyes, and fair skin.

"What is it?" Kim Mi-Young asked.

"Ah, nothing! Come in."

Although hesitant, Kim Mi-Young entered.

"Have a seat. Want some tea?"

"Yes!"

Kim Mi-Young looked around as she walked into the kitchen and sat at the table. Kang Chan filled the kettle with water and put it on the stove.

"Did you see my letter?" Kim Mi-Young asked.

"Yes," Kang Chan responded.

He didn't get to read it, but he definitely saw it.

Kim Mi-Young responded with a shy smile. Not long after, the water began to boil.

*Sniffle!*

"Do you have a cold?" asked Kang Chan.

"Yes! It's been going on for a few days. Do you have tissues?"

"Yeah. They're over there."

Kang Chan gestured toward the living room with his chin before moving back to the kettle. Seeing Kim Mi-Young made his heart flutter. Something had changed, but he couldn't quite pinpoint what it was. Why was he feeling this way?

Steadying his breathing, he prepared both green tea and instant coffee. He then put a cup of green tea in front of Kim Mi-Young.

Seeing Kang Chan's hand, Kim Mi-Young's expression darkened. "Why are your hands like that? You must be in so much pain."

"It's not a big deal. It's all healed now." Kang Chan sat at the table with his cup of coffee. "What have you been up to lately?"

"I've been studying French. I'm getting really good at it."

"Vraiment[3]?" Kang Chan asked in French.

"Bien sûr[4]," Kim Mi-Young responded, complete with the beautiful nasal intonation of French.

Laughter broke out between them, causing the awkwardness to fade.

"When did you get back home?" asked Kim Mi-Young.

"Earlier today," Kang Chan replied.

"From Mongolia?"

"Yes."

"You're not going back?"

"It looks like I'll be staying here for a while, but we'll see."

As Kang Chan lifted his cup, Kim Mi-Young picked up hers as well.

"My mom will be home soon. Is it okay if we have lunch together?" Kang Chan asked.

"Wouldn't she be uncomfortable with that?"

*In moments like these, she does sound like a little girl.*

Chapter 278: Day by Day (2)

*Has it really only been a month since the last time I saw her?*

Kang Chan felt a sense of bewilderment as he looked at Kim Mi-Young. She appeared to have matured, aging as if years had passed rather than just a month.

"Why?" Kim Mi-Young asked.

"It's nothing," Kang Chan replied.

He took a sip of coffee as he watched Kim Mi-Young smile. Even her bangs, previously trimmed to align with her eyebrows—reminding him of Snow White—had changed.

"Did you cut your bangs?" he asked.

"Yes! Does it look good? Should I change it back?" Kim Mi-Young inquired.

"Don't. It looks good, that's all," Kang Chan responded.

Kim Mi-Young touched her forehead, prompting Kang Chan to firmly shake his head. Her current style was definitely a hundred times better than her previous Snow White hairstyle.

"Will you be able to attend the graduation ceremony?" Kim Mi-Young asked.

"Graduation ceremony?" Kang Chan repeated, puzzled.

"It's next week."

"I'll go if I can."

"Are you too busy?"

This was a challenging question for Kang Chan. He felt as if he should attend for Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook. However, the immediate deployment of agents and the threat from the UIS made it difficult to decide. He also had to take Anne and Louis into consideration, further complicating the whole process of finalizing any plans.

"Are we going on a trip after graduation?" Kim Mi-Young inquired.

"What?" Kang Chan asked.

"You promised, remember? To travel together after graduation. You did see the letter, didn't you?"

"Ah!"

*Did I?*

Kim Mi-Young's question nearly flustered Kang Chan. Why was she staring at him so intently anyway? Gazing into her large eyes, he felt as if he could genuinely get lost in them. Remembering that she was still a high school student, he briefly shook his head and downed the rest of his coffee in one gulp.

"So, are we going?" Kim Mi-Young prodded.

"I'll have to check my schedule," Kang Chan answered.

Kim Mi-Young pouted. "Tsk. Meanie."

In moments like these, she truly seemed like a high school student.

*Beep beep beep beep, trrrrr.*

Kang Chan sighed softly. After a while, the doorbell rang.

"Channy!" called out Yoo Hye-Sook.

Kang Chan and Kim Mi-Young stood up as Yoo Hye-Sook entered the apartment.

"Mother!" Kang Chan greeted back.

"Channy!" Yoo Hye-Sook said again.

"Hello?" Kim Mi-Young interjected.

Yoo Hye-Sook cast a cautious glance their way. "Oh, Mi-Young! You're here."

Kang Chan hugged Yoo Hye-Sook. She wrapped her hands around him and gently patted his back in return, making him feel warm and comforted.

"Ah, my sweet Channy." She smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, I am," Kang Chan answered.

"Give me a moment. I'll whip something up."

"I'll help."

Yoo Hye-Sook vehemently refused his offer. As she entered the kitchen, Kang Chan and Kim Mi-Young sat back down in the living room.

"Mi-Young, how are your parents doing?" Yoo Hye-Sook asked.

"They're doing great!" Kim Mi-Young answered.

"What about you? What have you been up to recently?"

"Just studying French and reading some books."

"I see," Yoo Hey-Sook responded.

The awkward atmosphere gradually eased up.

"Don't just stand around until the meal is ready, you two. It makes me uncomfortable. How about some fruits?" asked Yoo Hye-Sook.

"We're good. We're about to eat anyway, and I have my tea," Kang Chan replied, holding a cup of green tea. He then gestured toward his room. "We'll be in my room."

"Okay," Yoo Hye-Sook said.

Kang Chan and Kim Mi-Young went into his room. Out of curiosity, Kim Mi-Young explored every corner as if on an adventure.

"Have a seat," Kang Chan offered.

Kim Mi-Young settled into the desk chair while Kang Chan sat on the bed opposite her. Despite the slim chance, he couldn't shake off the worry that she might open the desk drawer. Explaining the walkie-talkie would be manageable, but there was no way to explain the gun and magazines.

Kim Mi-Young smiled. "So this is your room, huh?"

"What is it?" asked Kang Chan.

"I've just been curious for so long about what your room would look like."

'I'm more curious about how you've changed so much,' Kang Chan thought.

Kang Chan gazed at Kim Mi-Young.

"What?" Kim Mi-Young wondered.

"Just because."

Kim Mi-Young giggled in reply. "Hehehe."

*There! That's more like the Kim Mi-Young I know.*

It was certainly important for people to meet and talk often. As they conversed, Kang Chan noticed the awkwardness quickly fade away.

"What exactly do you do?" Kim Mi-Young suddenly questioned.

"Me?"

"Yeah! Dad always says not to bother you, but he never tells me what you do."

Kim Mi-Young looked at him as if asking a question during class.

"I basically mediate due to my connection with the ambassador," Kang Chan replied.

"That's amazing," Kim Mi-Young said, looking at him as if she was dreaming.

Perhaps because she was still a high school student, she seemed to be idealizing his words. If she knew about the countless shootings and stabbings in France, Afghanistan, and Africa that he had been a part of, she would never look at him the same way.

"What's with the long face?" she asked.

"It's nothing. I'm just wondering if I'm really doing the right thing," Kang Chan said.

"What you do is noble. I wish I could become a diplomat soon and work alongside you."

"Sure."

Suddenly, Kang Chan felt as if a huge barrier had formed between them—a barrier of blood, death, and brutal killings.

"Channy! It's time to eat!" called Yoo Hye-Sook.

Kang Chan and Kim Mi-Young headed to the dining room to have dinner. During the meal, Yoo Hye-Sook expressed her surprise about what happened to Kang Chan's hand, to which Kim Mi-Young noted that it surprised her too. When asked about the environment in Mongolia, Kang Chan

vaguely mentioned that it was fine before going on to describe the surface mines and telling them about the ores denadite and cetinium.

After enjoying a good meal, Kim Mi-Young began to put the bowls and spoons in the sink, intending to wash them.

"What are you doing? Just have fun with Channy," Yoo Hye-Sook intervened, stopping her.

"Let's do it together," Kim Mi-Young said.

"How sweet! It's okay, though. This is your first visit, so just leave this one to me. You can lend a hand next time. Actually, Mi-Young, would you mind grabbing some fruits from the fridge?"

"Not at all," Kim Mi-Young answered.

Feeling somewhat awkward to intrude, Kang Chan simply moved the side dishes from the table. Frankly, the vibe was awkward but in a different way from when Michelle had visited.

Kim Mi-Young took out a melon from the fridge. Since cutting one could be a tricky task for a high school girl, Kang Chan swiftly sliced it for her and arranged it on a plate.

"You're good at this," Kim Mi-Young said.

"He makes omelets like no other!" Yoo Hye-Sook boasted.

'The cooking I learned during my ten-year mercenary life isn't limited to just that,' Kang Chan playfully thought. However, looking at the knife in his scarred hand made the thought bear down on him.

After washing the dishes, Yoo Hye-Sook told the two to eat the fruits in his room without her. However, with Kang Chan's insistence that she join them, they all eventually sat down to eat the melon together.

"Channy! You and Mi-Young should get some fresh air," Yoo Hye-Sook suggested.

Kim Mi-Young looked at Kang Chan.

'Could this potentially escalate into a significant misunderstanding?' Kang Chan wondered.

He did think it would be impolite to just send her away after being apart for so long, though.

"Shall we?" said Kim Mi-Young.

She sniffed and chuckled, reading the room.

"Then we'll just have a cup of tea nearby, Mother," Kang Chan said. He then turned to Kim Mi-Young, "Let me just change, then we'll head out."

Kang Chan went to his room and changed into comfortable pants, a thick tee, and a winter jacket.

*Whoosh.*

He also took out his pistol, strapped it to his ankle, and attached the wireless radio to his waist.

*Chk.*



"I won't be needing proximity security detail. I'm just going to the coffee shop out front," Kang Chan whispered, making sure no one would overhear.

*Chk.*

"Understood, sir," an agent replied.

Kang Chan put his earset in his jacket pocket before leaving the room.

"I'll be back," he said.

"Alright, Channy," Yoo Hye-Sook said.

"Take care," Kim Mi-Young told Yoo Hye-Sook.

"Thank you! Do drop by again," Yoo Hye-Sook responded.

After bidding each other farewell, Kang Chan and Kim Mi-Young left the apartment.

"I ate a lot," Kim Mi-Young said.

"Did you?" said Kang Chan.

*Didn't she eat just one bowl of rice?*

During the elevator ride, Kang Chan observed Kim Mi-Young's expressions and listened to her laughter, which vividly reminded him of something that Kang Dae-Kyung had once said about him,

'When did this kid grow up so much?'

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook likely felt the same way after seeing Kang Chan after a month.

*Ting—!*

Upon reaching the ground floor and exiting the apartment building, they were met with sharp glances from all directions.

"Those types of people have been flocking around the apartment lately," Kim Mi-Young whispered into Kang Chan's ear.

She walked with her gaze fixed on the ground, avoiding any direct eye contact with the people she was talking about—not knowing she was walking right beside their organization's Assistant Director, Kang Chan.

The two crossed the street and entered the coffee shop. They then ordered a mocha latte and an Americano before sitting down.

"This is nice," Kim Mi-Young said.

"What is?" asked Kang Chan.

"Spending time together and getting to see each other's faces."

After a short giggle, she took a sip of her latte.

She continued, "I wish you wouldn't go abroad anymore."

"I won't be going for a while," Kang Chan said.

"It would be even better if we could go on that trip."

"I'll check my schedule."

Kim Mi-Young pouted again. "That's unfair."

"What is?"

"You always act like you're older, which makes me feel like I'm pestering you like a child. Normally, it's the guy who suggests we go on a trip..."

Kang Chan just smirked and listened. Her words made it abundantly clear to him that although his body might be that of a high schooler, his mind had surely gone past thirty. It plunged him into turmoil about how he should act. It was as if he had to decide whether to live as Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook's son or not.

"What is it that keeps making you think during moments like this?" asked Kim Mi-Young.

"What?" Kang Chan asked back.

"Sometimes, like now, you make that face when you look at me. It makes me curious about what's on your mind."

"I don't know, really."

Kim Mi-Young pouted again.

"Mi-Young," Kang Chan called.

"Yes?"

"Do you really want to become a diplomat?"

"That's the plan."

"But what is it that you really want to do?"

Kim Mi-Young stretched her lips into a thin smile.

"What is it?" Kang Chan prodded.

"A diplomat. So I can give fancy interviews," Kim Mi-Young answered.

Kang Chan felt as if their conversation was just skimming the surface. It made him realize that Kim Mi-Young hadn't changed at all. All that mattered was his mindset. He liked her, but he still didn't know how to bridge the generation gap he felt and confront the harsh reality that they would face together. He felt like a coward. Despite wanting to see her and missing her, he couldn't show her how he truly felt.

*Damn it! What should I say? How much of myself should I show her?*

Kang Chan suddenly thought of Kang Chul-Gyu. Kang Chul-Gyu wouldn't have gotten married expecting his wife to hang herself and his young son to wish for a life as a mercenary.

*Is it right to stain Kim Mi-Young—this pure, smart, and increasingly beautiful girl—with the dark and bloody reality of my life?*

As Kang Chan pondered, over five agents entered the cafe and started to secure the perimeter. Kim Mi-Young nervously glanced around and looked at Kang Chan with a frightened expression.

People had a hard time changing. Some, like Kang Chan, were born never to back down, while others could never adapt to situations like this even if they spent their entire lives trying to.

Lanok was no different. His beloved wife was shot dead in a car, and his daughter could no longer use one of her legs properly. Would he have married if he had known about this future?

"This is bad," Kang Chan mumbled.

"What?" asked Kim Mi-Young, "What are you thinking about all by yourself?"

Kang Chan smiled at Kim Mi-Young.

"Let's go on that trip—ah!" he said.

He wanted to go.

He continued, "Let's go after the coming-of-age ceremony."

Kim Min-Young frowned. "Tsk."

"Let's travel as much as we want once we're adults," Kang Chan said.

"You'll break that promise again, won't you?" Kim Min-Young said.

"Not this time."

"Really?"

"Yes."

Kim Mi-Young extended her pinky finger. In front of the agents' sharp gazes, Kang Chan reached his finger out and hooked it with hers. It made her chuckle.

Before that time came, Kang Chan intended to decide whether to let go or to allow himself to keep listening to her laughter.

After talking for about an hour, the two headed back to the apartment. It was the time when the sun was out the longest.

"I'll talk to you later," Kim Min-Young said.

"Okay," answered Kang Chan.

"See you!"

As Kang Chan nodded, Kim Mi-Young waved her hand and walked toward her house. Looking at the agents surrounding them, Kang Chan suddenly thought of Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee.

*Wasn't Lee Doo-Hee's injury not that serious?*

Kang Chan wanted to visit the police hospital or at least sit on a bench for a while, but he decided to just go back home instead. It didn't seem right to make Yoo Hye-Sook wait for him on such a day.

He took the elevator to their floor. Entering their apartment, he found Yoo Hye-Sook still in the kitchen.

"I'm back. What are you doing?" he asked.

"Ah, Channy! You're home early," Yoo Hye-Sook greeted. "I'm making pork bulgogi."

"It smells really good."

A spicy and savory aroma filled the living room.

"Where's Mi-Young?" Yoo Hye-Sook asked as she looked over her shoulder, still kneading meat with her gloved hands.

"She's gone home," Kang Chan answered as he sat down at the table.

"Do you like Mi-Young?" Yoo Hye-Sook suddenly asked.

"We're still high school students, aren't we?"

"That doesn't mean you can't have a girlfriend, does it?"

*I don't see any problems with just staying as friends.*

"Did you fall in love with Father at first sight, Mother?" asked Kang Chan.

"Yes," Yoo Hye-Sook confidently replied, making Kang Chan turn his head.

She smiled at Kang Chan as she skillfully packed the marinated meat into a rectangular tupperware.

"I fell in love with your father the moment I saw him. I found his big eyes and masculine lips attractive."

"Dad's eyes aren't that big, are they?"

"What? They are."

When Kang Chan laughed, Yoo Hye-Sook washed her hands, looking as if she had been wronged.

"Your dad was popular in school. The only issue was that his family was poor. If he had come from a wealthy family, I would have only suffered from heartburn. You can't imagine how considerate he was toward me."

"Father did say that he can never forget the help you gave him. You even gave up your scholarship abroad and visited him on a snowy day," Kang Chan said.

"Your dad told you all that?"

"Huh? Weren't you with us?"

*Wasn't it?*

Yoo Hye-Sook took off her gloves and sat next to Kang Chan. "You have something on your mind, don't you, Channy? From what I've seen, Mi-Young seems to like you."

*What do I say to that?*

Even though they were close, Kang Chan couldn't tell her about his fear of what could happen if Kim Mi-Young were by his side during incidents like the one in the underground parking lot. It would surely bring up painful memories for Yoo Hye-Sook.

Seeing Kang Chan's expression, Yoo Hye-Sook smiled tenderly. "Seems like our Channy has grown up so much already. Are you worried that Mi-Young, or anyone else, might get hurt because of your job?"

*What? How can she see right through me?*

Kang Chan's face lit up with surprise.

"I'm always on edge, bleeding without a way to stop it, just like when I gave birth to you. That's why I'm always getting checked. Your father never once complained about it." Her gentle smile seemed to herald her heartfelt words.

"I'll always be grateful to your father. He never fails to reassure me even when I'm being difficult or sick. Oh, here's a secret: when I can't sleep and your father is still awake, he pretends to be asleep. I believe he does it to spare me the worry. I can see his eyes twitch when I enter the room."

"Dad is pretty bad at pretending," Kang Chan remarked. The two shared a laugh.

"Isn't being together and staying committed to each other the most important thing?" Yoo Hye-Sook posed, challenging Kang Chan with a profound question.

Chapter 279: This Isn't Easy (1)

When Kang Dae-Kyung got home from work, the three had dinner together for the first time in a long while. It made them feel genuinely happy. After washing the dishes together, they sat down at the table and chatted about various topics over tea, not wanting to waste time watching TV.

"Honey, Mi-Young came over today. She joined us for lunch," Yoo Hye-Sook said, bringing up what happened during the day.

"Really?"

"Yes. Channy seems worried that his job will make things difficult for her."

Surprised, Kang Dae-Kyung turned to Kang Chan. His expression seemed to be saying, "You're always thinking ahead for everyone's sake."

"You're still young. Why don't you just maintain a good relationship with her for now and then give it some serious thought after you graduate college?" Kang Dae-Kyung suggested.

It was a textbook answer, but he would have been right if Kang Chan hadn't promised to go on a trip with Kim Mi-Young. Kang Chan supposed that for as long as they stayed within the boundaries of their friendship, there wouldn't really be any issue with it.

*I'm only worried because I feel like that's not how it's going to be.*

A luminous dining table, a warm living room, laughter, and tea... It felt like a whole world away from Africa, which Kang Chan had been in just days ago.

After spending plenty of time with Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook, Kang Chan returned to his room.

He had to get some sleep whenever he could.

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For the first time in a long while, Kang Chan slept deeply and soundly. It was so refreshing that when he opened his eyes in the morning, his mind and body felt light.

He took a short walk around the neighborhood and returned to eat breakfast with Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

“Have a good day at work.”

After seeing Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook off, he decided to have a cup of coffee—

*Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

It seemed he would have to postpone his coffee break. He went to his room to answer the phone. The caller ID read ‘Lanok.’

“Mr. Ambassador,” Kang Chan greeted.

- Mr. Kang Chan. Were you trying to surprise me?

Lanok’s voice had a hint of laughter in it.

“You said you would leave the security to me, so I requested help from the two most trustworthy people I know for the job.”

- I take it I have nothing to suspect about these people, then?

“To me, your safety is more important than the success of the Eurasian Rail and the development of the power plant.”

- Do you really think so?

It was a childish question, but it was also one that Kang Chan had to answer.

“Of course. I also care about Anne’s safety. I thought it would be safer for her to be here in South Korea.”

- You continue to give me wonderful gifts.

“I don’t think of it as a gift,” Kang Chan said, expressing his genuine feelings.

Lanok laughed in response, surprising Kang Chan.

- If so, I suppose the most important supporting character should put in some work.

*Huh? Vasili said the same thing last time too.*

“Mr. Ambassador, what do you mean by ‘supporting character’?”

- You’ll find out soon enough. That aside, thanks to you, I’ll be having dinner with Anne for the first time in quite a while. I will call you again soon.

\*\*\*

Days had passed since Kang Chan's conversation on the phone with Lanok. Aside from hearing that the wounded and the dead had been brought back to South Korea, nothing worthy of note happened.

During that time, he had met with Seok Kang-Ho, Jeon Dae-Geuk, and Kim Hyung-Jung once each and also called Oh Gwang-Taek and Kim Tae-Jin. Although it seemed like he had been busy the past few days, compared to what he had been doing in the past, his life lately had been carefree and peaceful. He even got to chat with Kim Mi-Young on the phone every day.

Since the power plants would take more than a day or two to build, he found no reason to feel rushed by it. Even so, time passing without any incident made Kang Chan wonder if it was too quiet.

While mulling over his thoughts, he removed the bandages on his shoulder. He then examined his hands, finding the scabs on them almost gone.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Kang Chan recognized who was calling just by looking at the number. Since his parents had already left for work, he picked up his phone and answered it.

“What is it?”

- What are you up to today? Are you going to the office?

“There's nothing to do even if I go, is there?”

- You're going to get fungus from staying inside all day. Let's go to Misari or something.

“It's hard on the agents if we move around.”

- No! No excuses. Let's go get some fresh air. We can just take over the cafe and have coffee all together. What do you say?

“Fine,” Kang Chan hesitantly replied.

-Hurry and come on out. I'm on my way out too.

Kang Chan hung up the phone and looked at the sunlight that was coming in through the living room. Misari on a day like this? It wasn't such a bad idea.

He wore comfortable pants, a thick shirt, and a jacket, then took his gun and radio from his desk drawer. Afterward, he walked out of the apartment, took the elevator down, and walked out of the building. The crisp winter air and the agents' stares greeted him.

Glancing around him, he grinned at the people he saw. Choi Jong-Il was coming over to him from the benches. It was always nice to see someone they had fought alongside with in combat.

“When did you get here?” Kang Chan asked.

“I'm part of your security detail starting today. Hee-Seung and Doo-Bum are also on standby,” Choi Jong-Il answered.

“That works out well. I'm heading over to Misari. Join us for some coffee.”

“Understood.”

As Kang Chan walked ahead, Choi Jong-Il radioed instructions to the agents.

Seok Kang-Ho had parked to the right of the entrance.

The moment Kang Chan opened the doors, three sedans pulled up in line, one of which was driven by Lee Doo-Hee.

“Nice weather we’ve got today,” Seok Kang-Ho remarked. He started the car as soon as Kang Chan hopped into the passenger seat. “How about we head to Gapyeong instead?”

“Gapyeong?” Kang Chan repeated.

“We’d be wasting this weather otherwise. Let’s go to Jeungpyeong or Gapyeong and have some chicken or some other meat with everybody else.”

They were smoothly cruising down a quiet highway. Long stretches of sunlight shone through the bare trees, making the car’s interior look like a preview of the spring to come.

“Are the men done with training?” Kang Chan asked.

“Phuhuhu! They’ve got ten new recruits. Based on their eyes’ crazed glinting, it looked like Cha Dong-Gyun made them go through hell,” Seok Kang-Ho replied.

“Doesn’t it seem like he’s becoming more and more like Gérard?”

“You think so too? Phuhuhuhu!”

Seok Kang-Ho draped his left arm over the steering wheel and let out another amazed exclamation about the fine weather.

“What do you want to do? Gapyeong or Jeungpyeong?”

Kang Chan glanced back. “Gapyeong, then.”

“All right! Good fucking choice,” Seok Kang-Ho eagerly replied. After radioing orders to the rest of the men, he asked, “Is it because of the new recruits?”

Kang Chan nodded. “If we disrupt them during times like this, the chicks are going to feel overwhelmed. We should contact them in advance first.”

“Good point. Oh, right! The soldiers’ funeral will be held next week. I heard they’re going to hold a proper one since they were killed in an official deployment, which means it’s going to be broadcast too. That could make it a bit difficult for us to attend.”

“Unfortunately, we can’t really do anything about that,” Kang Chan mused.

Upon entering the national highway toward Gapyeong, the roads grew even quieter. It took them only a little over an hour to reach the chicken soup place that Seok Kang-Ho recommended.



“Block the entrance with the car so we can see the people who are coming in. Everyone can go inside afterward,” Seok Kang-Ho instructed, loudly using his brain.

As ordered, the agents blocked the entrance of the restaurant to their left with their three cars.

It was winter and a weekday, so there were no customers. Because they were such a large group, the owner took the initiative to help stop any other cars from coming in.

Seok Kang-Ho ordered chicken soup, acorn jelly, and makgeolli.

The agents didn’t feel comfortable drinking since they were on duty. Nevertheless, Seok Kang-Ho still mixed three bottles of makgeolli with three bottles of soda and yogurt drinks in a large pitcher for them. They each had a cup of it.

“Cheers!” Seok Kang-Ho shouted all of a sudden. They all raised their glasses in response.

“Mm!” Kang Chan exclaimed in shock. He turned to Seok Kang-Ho again, amazed by the taste.

\*\*\*

Hwang Ki-Hyun sat to Moon Jae-Hyun’s left, and Sherman to his right. When the White House requested an informal meeting through the US ambassador, this unusual meeting had been hastily organized.

They were sitting around a round table that had side tables between the chairs. The large round table had an ashtray and cigarettes on it, while the side table between Moon Jae-Hyun and Sherman had teacups on it. An interpreter with a small notebook and ballpoint pen was sitting politely between them, creating a triangle.

“Mr. President, I would like to begin by sincerely apologizing for any inconvenience that the Korean team might have experienced during the operation in Afghanistan.”

After glancing at Sherman, the interpreter quickly relayed his words.

Even though it was just an unofficial meeting, expressing one’s condolences in meetings like this was customary. Hence, Sherman delivered a heartfelt apology.

“I would also like to express my regret for the loss of your soldiers who were killed while serving as UN peacekeepers,” the interpreter said with a more comfortable expression than before. “To express our sincerity, we have replaced the director of the DIA and to prevent a repetition of this incident.”

Moon Jae-Hyun and Hwang Ki-Hyun just listened in silence.

Sherman might only be the director of the CIA, but if he was willing to put his life on the line, he had the power to threaten Hwang Ki-Hyun’s and Moon Jae-Hyun’s safety.

It would require a need and a purpose to make such a person fly in out of the blue to announce the replacement of the DIA director, who stood at the peak of the intelligence world, and make them apologize.

“Mr. President, my country hopes to have a closer relationship with South Korea, with which we have had a friendly and progressive alliance until now,” Sherman finished, then lifted his teacup to his mouth. His eyes looked quite large behind his thick glasses.

“Director Sherman, thank you for coming the long way and offering a frank apology,” Moon Jae-Hyun said.

*Click.*

Sherman set down his teacup as if to focus on Moon Jae-Hyun’s words.

Moon Jae-Hyun continued, “South Korea and I also hope to continue our friendly and progressive relationship with the United States.”

Sherman nodded.

“Mr. President, I’ve come to you today to offer you a very special request and suggestion. Allow me to be upfront. Why don’t you develop the next generation of energy with us?” Sherman asked. He quickly scanned Moon Jae-Hyun’s face, but he couldn’t see any difference in his expression.

“Saudi Arabia wants an energy and currency agreement linking the United States, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia. If you approve this proposal, South Korea will gain an unlimited supply of crude oil. You will also be able to issue bonds to Saudi Arabia, which would allow you to buy the product in unlimited quantities. This will have the same effect as entering a currency swap with the United States and stockpiling a trillion dollars.”

Sherman’s lips curved a little. Despite their nonchalance, he could see the corners of Moon Jae-Hyun’s and Hwang Ki-Hyun’s eyes twitching.

“The United States has also prepared its own proposal as well.”

Like a merchant in subway stations, Sherman pulled Moon Jae Hyun and Hwang Ki-Hyun’s attention with a buy-one-take-one promo.

“If South Korea accepts this offer, we will authorize its development of long-range missiles and the purchase of F22 Raptors.”

‘These sly creatures.’

Sherman’s gaze filled with discomfort. He expected Moon Jae-Hyun and Hwang Ki-Hyun to be jumping for joy by now.

Moon Jae-Hyun leaned over and picked up a cigarette from the round table, causing Hwang Ki-Hyun to turn to him, giving him an excuse to hide his expression.

'I see why Washington said they aren't easy folks.'

After picking up a cigarette and a lighter, Moon Jae-Hyun met Sherman's gaze with a relaxed expression.

"Do you smoke, Director?" Moon Jae-Hyun offered.

"I'm fine," Sherman replied.

*Click.*

"Hoo."

The conversation ended on an odd topic. Sherman had been advised to heed caution when treading around South Korea's president because his synergy with the God of Blackfield was one to be reckoned with. However, he still hadn't expected Moon Jae-Hyun to be this bold.

"Director," Moon Jae-Hyun began, shaking the ashes off his cigarette into the ashtray. "Russia has offered to provide us with nuclear missiles."

"That's unlikely to happen," Sherman stated.

"I think so, too," Moon Jae-Hyun readily replied, then put the cigarette back in his mouth.

The cigarette kept interrupting the conversation that Sherman wanted to snatch the damn cigarette from him and shove it in the ashtray.

"However, if South Korea starts developing long-range missiles and buying F22s, we'll have to deal with a huge backlash from our neighbors," Moon Jae-Hyun said.

"Well, the United States will—"

"In the worst-case scenario, a trilateral agreement between Russia, China, and Japan could be formed. Besides, we still lack the technology needed to develop the missiles. Do we really need to create tension in the Korean Peninsula in this state?"

"Mr. President, Japan has already applied for the purchase."

"There are more important things than Japan buying F22s, Director."

When Sherman didn't say anything, Moon Jae-Hyun continued, "The US must first stop sympathizing with Japan. I believe that your government's attitude toward them is largely responsible for their unilateral actions on all of the current issues, including Dokdo, the shrine visits, the defense forces, the territorial disputes in the Sea of Japan, and the apologies and reparations for past wrongs. Isn't this F22 purchase related to those things as well?"

Sherman quickly raised his teacup. In discussions like this, swallowing dryly due to the opposing party's rebuttal was tantamount to showing weakness.

"Is it really an effective offer to Japan and South Korea to sell the F22s that the United States has stopped producing?" Moon Jae-Hyun questioned. "In the end, stockpiling more weapons will only increase tensions between us. We'll also have to deal with hostility from the Chinese and Russians."

'He truly is difficult to deal with! It's all thanks to him that a young punk like the God of Blackfield managed to prosper!' Sherman thought, looking into the reflection of his own eyes in his teacup.

"As for the energy agreement issue..." Moon Jae-Hyun extinguished his cigarette in the ashtray, then grabbed a wet wipe from the side table to wipe his hands. He then tossed it in the nearby trashcan. "I will give it a positive consideration, but since it's something that will determine the future of our country, we need some time to build a national consensus first and foremost."

Sherman ended up swallowing dryly.

*Should I keep pushing or stop here?*

"Mr. President, we also need to consider North Korea's reaction," Sherman said.

Moon Jae-Hyun agreed. "That's true. I'm sure their pride is very bruised right now."

Deciding to play the game as far as he could in this meeting, Sherman brought up the Korean peninsula's greatest weakness—North Korea.

"You know full well, sir, that it is a terrible humiliation to them that Kaesong was provided to them as an industrial base," Moon Jae-Hyun countered.

*What?*

Sherman blinked, using it as an excuse to raise his gaze.

"North Korea's greatest military base was given away because they were short on dollars. Their people will know all about our economic power, and worst of all, if it's destroyed, it will cut off the most important route for their armored divisions to reach us for a while."

Sherman sighed quietly. It was clear from what Moon Jae-Hyun said just now that he was talking out of his ass.

*Economic power? Armored divisions?*

There was no way Moon Jae-Hyun was really worried about North Korea's reaction for those reasons. However, in a spot like this, talking about North Korea's military power and whether or not Kaesong's industrial base was actually a military base was pointless. The conversation would just run off into the distance.

“Do you have any demands for the United States regarding the energy agreement?” Sherman asked directly, pulling out his last card.

*Fine! What is it that you really want, huh? If you're going to act like you're holding three aces thanks to the God of Blackfield, I'll hold out a blank check!*

“Mr. President, the presidential term in South Korea is five years. Even if you sign this agreement, you wouldn't know what your successor would do. Isn't it about time to start planning beyond your term?” Sherman added, poking one of Moon Jae-Hyun's sore spots.

As if on cue, Moon Jae-Hyun let out his first open sigh.

In times like this, the brutality of twisting an already-jabbed knife could be necessary.

“Right now, South Korea has no more than forty-five days of oil reserves. It's important to look at the distant future, but as they say, you can't get a harvest in the fall by starving in the spring.”

“Considering South Korea's current status, we will be forced to declare bankruptcy if the US central bank raises interest rates.”

*So you're well aware of that!*

The corners of Sherman's eyes sharply curved upward.

*South Korea isn't strong enough yet to completely rule out the US, so why don't we jump into the same boat? Don't just try to fill your own stomachs with the Eurasian Rail, Russian oil, and the next-gen energy. Let's do this together.*

He hid his satisfied smile, having held out the stick after the carrot.

Moon Jae-Hyun turned toward him with an impassive expression. “Director, out of consideration for our closest ally, the United States, I decided to meet with you first.”

‘Wait, what? Is he talking about Vasili and Yang Bum?’

Sherman felt as if he had just been slapped defenselessly.

Chapter 280: This Isn't Easy (2)

Sherman tried to suppress the anger rumbling deep in his chest.

South Korea had always managed to walk a fine line between great powers. With a sudden burst of luck and the emergence of the monster known as the God of Blackfield, it started attracting the attention of France, Russia, and China. However, it could not and should not attempt to stand without the United States.

“Mr. President, do you realize how much your words are jeopardizing South Korea?” Sherman asked.

Ignoring Hwang Ki-Hyun's piercing gaze, he looked Moon Jae-Hyun directly in the eye. “South Korea and its president will be abandoning the hand of an old ally because you were tempted by short-term interests. I believe you need to make a sound judgment about whether your country can

achieve national unity without the United States and whether abandoning Arab oil and Jewish money will help you develop the next generation of energy.”

Moon Jae-Hyun nodded in agreement. “Director Sherman, it sounds like you are well aware of next-generation energy.”

*What is this man trying to say?*

“It will be a whole new world when oil engines are replaced by electric engines.”

*Well, of course!*

Sherman nodded.

“If the United States truly has such a vested interest in this opportunity, would you sign a joint development proposal if my country offered you some terms?”

Sherman looked at Moon Jae-Hyun as if he’d been slapped in the face.

“The foundations of entire industries would change. Every technology and product that South Korea makes, right down to the engine and the littlest parts of it, could become the standard. Why don’t we take a look at the conditions you offered in exchange for the benefits of the electric energy industry and the Eurasian Rail? The development of crude oil, unlimited bond issuance by South Korea, and a trillion-dollar currency swap... all of which we’ll have to pay back in the end even if we accept the terms of joint development.”

Sherman couldn’t help but gulp.

“Long-range missiles? That’s meaningless. F22? If we ask for them right now, the Japanese will probably buy fifty or a hundred and immediately deliver them to us. Allow me to ask you a question. I’ll privatize the next generation of energy development and sell you a stake in it. Since the United States is our closest ally, even if people end up accusing me of selling my own country, I’ll still offer you a thirty percent stake. What will you offer in return?”

Sherman was dazed.

*I have to get a grip, but is he serious? Thirty percent of the shares? How much should we pay for that?*

He had no idea where to even begin.

“How about I suggest some terms for you?”

*Damn it! He beat me to it again!*

“Joint development of oil fields and supply of crude oil, issuance of bonds, a currency swap of one trillion won, and development of long-range missiles and purchase of F22s.”

Seeing Moon Jae-Hyun’s smile, Sherman realized how absurd his offer had been.

“Director, if you truly are our most trustworthy ally, you would be honest and upfront with your demands and offer us terms of equal value. You should consider our stance, offer conditions that don’t exclude Russia and France, and firmly clear up your relations with Japan to appeal to the hearts of our people. I believe it is also only fair for you to offer ample compensation for the shares you covet.”

Moon Jae-Hyun picked up his cooled teacup and took a sip.

*Click.*

The moment Sherman heard the teacup being set back down, he focused his gaze on Moon Jae-Hyun like a man coming out of a hypnotic trance.

“This morning, thirteen of our National Intelligence Service agents in Libya and Egypt were killed. I assume you’re aware of this as well, Director.”

Sherman didn’t just know what happened. He even had a rough idea of who was behind it.

“At the cost of their lives, they sent us two pieces of information.”

*Is he really going to say it out loud?*

“One is an assassination plan against me, and the other is the bombing of the International Building in Samseong-dong.”

Sherman sensed Moon Jae-Hyun’s eyes beginning to glint intensely.

“This morning alone, thirteen agents of the Republic of Korea turned into nameless stars. As president, I will not bow down to any threats, and I will not stand idly by while our agents die.”

*I messed with the wrong person!*

Before Sherman could even finish formulating his thoughts, Moon Jae-Hyun continued, “I will make sure the organization that murdered our National Intelligence Service operatives, who were only doing their job, will be brought to justice. How the United States deals with this matter and what kind of conclusion it will draw will determine whether or not we’ll have another meeting regarding this.”

Even long after he was done, he kept his eyes on Sherman.

A moment of silence enveloped the room.

“I’ll discuss this information with the others before giving you an answer,” Sherman replied awkwardly. He then left the reception room.

Hwang Ki-Hyun saw him out. When he returned, he found Moon Jae-Hyun leaning back in his chair.

“Why are you standing like that? Take a seat,” Moon Jae-Hyun said.

Hwang Ki-Hyun sat back on the sofa that he had been sitting on.

“Director, I achieved today what I’ve been imagining since I decided to become president, but I don’t feel at ease.”

Moon Jae-Hyun looked at Hwang Ki-Hyun, his complicated emotions written all over his expression.

“My heart breaks for the agents who sacrificed themselves for our nation, but I’m proud that South Korea now has the power to talk back to the United States. I can’t help but miss Mr. Kang Chan. He’s the one who made all of this possible, after all.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun stayed silent, listening intently. Moon Jae-Hyun stretched out his hand to pick up a cigarette.

*Click.*

“Hoo. Where is Mr. Kang Chan—I mean the assistant director right now?” Moon Jae-Hyun asked.

“I heard he’s with his security detail in Gapyeong,” Hwang Ki-Hyun replied.

“Gapyeong? Does he have business there?”

“He had Korean chicken soup for lunch with the agents. According to the reports, they are all enjoying a sport called Jokgu[1]

Moon Jae-Hyun smiled. Hwang Ki-Hyun did as well.

“I suppose the losing side will pay for the meal,” Moon Jae-Hyun used.

“Considering the assistant director’s personality, I doubt the agents will ever get to pay,” Hwang Ki-Hyun replied with a grin.

Moon Jae-Hyun stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. He then pulled out a wet wipe and wiped his hands with it.

“Mr. President,” Hwang Ki-Hyun suddenly called. “Do you really plan to avenge our fallen agents?”

Moon Jae-Hyun briefly nodded.

“This will completely change the future. They have likely calculated the risks, which is why they’re telling us to build the electricity generation facility first, but we can’t just throw away this opportunity. I’m sure we’ll have a terrorist attack on our hands in the near future. If we still haven’t gotten our act together by then, our nation will succumb to terrorism. As the saying goes, we should strike while the iron is hot. We must not lower our heads while the United States is being submissive and France, Russia, and China are backing us up. Otherwise, we will never have this kind of opportunity ever again.”



“Assistant Director Kang Chan is currently in charge of the counterterrorism team. According to the norms, he should be the one organizing the team for the operation,” Hwang Ki-Hyun said.

Moon Jae-Hyun let out a quiet sigh.

“I’m already beyond grateful that he came back from Africa in one piece. If we send him to missions like this, our enemies might just start assassinating our agents just to get to him.”

“Understood, sir,” Hwang Ki-Hyun replied heavily.

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*Thud!*

The dirt was hard and stiff, and the ground was uneven. Hence, the ball sometimes bounced in directions no one could predict.

*Pow!*

The agent standing in the middle kicked the ball in a motion that made him seem like he was lying down in the air.

*Thump!*

Seok Kang-Ho slammed the ball down after it bounced near the net.

“Wooo!”

With the ball falling into the net, the game ended.

Kang Chan, who was sitting on a low wooden platform seat, smirked at the attempt.

“Let’s do another round!” Seok Kang-Ho complained as he fiddled with the net.

“Why don’t we wrap this up and have coffee instead?” Kang Chan suggested.

“Argh!” Grumbling, Seok Kang-Ho obediently headed to the flat bench. “Go and make me some coffee.”

“Yes, sir!” the agent who saved the ball earlier with an impressive move eagerly responded. He immediately walked into the restaurant.

“That guy’s moves are almost like an animal’s,” Seok Kang-Ho said.

Kang Chan nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I saw.”

The past three games, the agent looked like the kind of soldier whose body would move before thinking. Agents like him were the scariest in knife fights.

“What a shame,” Seok Kang-Ho remarked.

“What is?”

“We should have an environment where people like them can use their full potential.”

Seok Kang-Ho raised his hands above his head, stretching.

At the same time, the agent returned with two paper cups on a round aluminum tray.

“What’s your name?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“Um Ji-Hwan, sir,” the agent replied.

Even though Seok Kang-Ho was the one who asked, Um Ji-Hwan was timidly looking at Kang Chan.

“Thanks,” Kang Chan said.

“Thank you,” Um Ji-Hwan replied, making Kang Chan laugh.

“What are you thanking him for?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“Everything that the assistant director has done. As an NIS agent, thank you.”

“What about me?”

“You too, sir.”

Once Seok Kang-Ho had taken the paper cup, Um Ji-Hwan walked over to the other agents, the tray still in hand.

“Today’s weather is incredible! It feels like the beginning of spring,” Seok Kang-Ho commented.

“Right?” Kang Chan replied, taking a sip of the coffee in the paper cup.

“That reminds me, what will you do about your graduation ceremony?”

“I shouldn’t go, right?”

“Yeah, probably not.”

“The UIS will probably target me if they learn I’m in an occasion like that. I don’t want to endanger everyone at the ceremony just so I can go.”

“Hmm.”

Seok Kang-Ho nodded.

Attacking a large gathering of people was one of the basics of terrorism. Even if they couldn’t eliminate the target, they could create fear by causing a lot of casualties.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz. Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Kang Chan’s phone started ringing.

“Manager Kim,” Kang Chan answered.

- When will you be back?

Kim Hyung-Jung didn't sound too delighted.

"I was just about to get going. Did something happen?"

- Do you think you can come to Samseong-dong?

"Yes. I'll be right over."

- See you soon.

After hanging up, Kang Chan told Seok Kang-Ho about the call.

"It's about time we catch up with him," Seok Kang-Ho said.

"He sounded like something's up," Kang Chan responded.

"Yeah? We should get going, then."

"Have you paid yet?"

"I'll go do that right now. You can just wait here."

Seok Kang-Ho stood up, then shouted, "Prepare to move out!"

He walked into the restaurant. They had spent quite a bit of time here, but since they arrived early, the clock hadn't struck three yet.

They drove down the quiet roads and arrived at Samseong-dong around four. After parking the car in the underground parking garage, they took the elevator up, where Kim Hyung-Jung was waiting for them.

"How was lunch?" Kim Hyung-Jung asked in greeting.

"It was good. I'm sorry we couldn't extend an invitation," Kang Chan joked.

"Let's head in," Kim Hyung-Jung said, his tone just as heavy as it was on the phone. It made Kang Chan's joke sound as if it wasn't one.

Once inside, Kim Hyung-Jung set some beverages on the table for them. As soon as he sat down, he picked up some cigarettes.

"This morning, we simultaneously received intel from two sources that the UIS is preparing to assassinate the president and bomb the Samseong-dong International Building. Shortly afterward, thirteen of our agents in Libya and Egypt were killed."

Kim Hyung-Jung offered Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho a cigarette and took one for himself as well.

"We hastily rescheduled and canceled the president's affairs, and we have tightened the security at the International Building," Kim Hyung-Jung continued, lighting up his cigarette.

*Click.*

“Thirty minutes before noon, CIA Director Sherman had an informal meeting with the president. He extended a next-generation joint agreement proposal between Saudi Arabia, the United States, and South Korea. The bottom line was that we will discuss it a bit further.”

“Who was behind the agents’ deaths?” Kang Chan asked.

“We still haven’t figured that out yet.”

“What do you plan on doing?”

“The President ordered retribution. Under the director’s discretion, we are currently selecting agent to replace the fallen thirteen and agents who will bring the perpetrators to justice.”

Kang Chan snuffed out his cigarette in the ashtray.

“All of this happened earlier today. Is there any reason you’re only telling me about this now that you’ve already decided what your plan of action is?”

“We wanted you to know of this as you spoke to the ambassador, and also felt that this is something that must be reported to the head of counterterrorism.”

Kang Chan wordlessly sipped his drink.

Thirteen agents had died. That meant that the enemy likely also numbered at least thirteen, maybe more.

“Manager Kim, what is our relationship with Libya and Egypt?” Kang Chan inquired.

“Both countries established diplomatic relations with North Korea first. We’ve been in talks with Libya since 2006, and this year marks the 15th anniversary of our diplomatic relations with Egypt,” Kim Hyung-Jung answered.

“Libya is Shiite, and Egypt is mainly Sunni. Considering both were attacked at the same time, this is probably an Islamic organization’s doing.”

“The NIS thinks so too.”

Kim Hyung-Jung looked at Kang Chan with a hint of surprise on his face. It might not sound like much, but having a clear grasp on the ruling Islamist forces in Libya and Egypt was impressive.

“Manager Kim, I’m sure the National Intelligence Service knows better, but the Shiites and Sunnis have trouble collaborating. If they’ve united to accomplish one goal, it means one of the two parties must have made a move.”

Kim Hyung-Jung’s eyes flashed as he focused on Kang Chan’s words.

“Please determine if a Sunni tycoon had become Shiite or an influential Shiite had become a Sunni,” Kang Chan requested.

Kim Hyung-Jung felt even more surprised now. He froze in place to listen, not wanting to miss a single detail.

“One more thing. Since it hasn’t been that long since the UIS has been established, the number of their key executives is still small. Someone among them might have made a move. Regardless of whether it was the Shiites or the Sunnis, the Islamic Union wouldn’t be able to use the next-gen energy as an excuse to commit terrorism in our country. They need a valid reason for this.”

“According to one of our intels, it was in retaliation for insulting Islamic fighters in Afghanistan,” Kim Hyung-Jung quickly replied.

“Then please find out who gave us that intel as soon as possible. One of the characteristics of Islam is that no jihad is ever without a cause. Another is that before any jihad, they always announce that we have insulted them first. It’s almost like a declaration of war. We have to prioritize figuring out who’s going to make the announcement and where.”

Kim Hyung-Jung wrote down the keywords on his keypad. “What should we do once we’ve identified the announcer?”

“We need to trace their hierarchy and figure out the authorities above and below them.”

Based on what Kim Hyung-Jung said, he seemed aware of that information as well. However, it he clearly wasn’t as familiar with the Islamic forces as Kang Chan was.

“Assistant Director—” Seeing Kang Chan’s expression, Kim Hyung-Jung quickly corrected himself. “Mr. Kang Chan, to my understanding, the Islamic lineage is supposedly endless. If we identify the culprit, should we punish the culprit alone or the person who gave the order as well?”

He would likely have to report this conversation to Hwang Ki-Hyung anyway, so he wanted to know and hear Kang Chan’s decision firsthand.

“You have to choose,” Kang Chan responded.

“Between the culprit and the commander?”

Kang Chan smirked at Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Either we kill the culprit so brutally and horribly that they never ever look our way again or we kill the highest command before anyone realizes it.”

“What if the commander happens to be the head of the organization and his subordinates all retaliate?”

Kang Chan let out a quiet sigh. “They killed thirteen of our agents unjustly, didn’t they?”

“That’s right.”

There was no doubt about that.

“So you’re planning on assassinating the culprit or the one in command?” Kim Hyung-Jung questioned.

“Yes,” Kang Chan replied.

Retribution was a nice way of putting it. In reality, they were simply planning to kill.

He continued, “If you’re so worried about the backlash, I don’t see how you’re going to bring them to justice. I believe retribution is a way to retaliate against those who have wronged us. We will never be able to do that if we’re too concerned about what to do if our enemies fight back louder.”

Dazed, all Kim Hyung-Jung could do was stare.

Sharply, Kang Chan added, “If we were so worried about the aftermath, Jang Kwang-Taek would still be alive and would have likely killed someone special to us.”