

## **Blackfield 281**

### Chapter 281.1: Let's Wait and See (1)

Kang Chan couldn't ask Kim Hyung-Jung to have dinner with them since Kim Hyung-Jung looked very busy. Hence, he and Seok Kang-Ho instead left Samseong-dong early and sat down at the specialty coffee shop by the intersection.

"If it wasn't hard to attend your graduation ceremony before, it definitely is now," Seok Kang-Ho grumbled as he set down the coffee they ordered. He then sat down on a chair with a plop.

"I can't believe thirteen of our agents have been killed! Those fucking sons of bitches! I should just go there myself!" Seok Kang-Ho growled.

"Go where?"

"Algeria is right beside Libya, isn't it? I'm sure I'll be helpful to the agents if I go to Libya with them."

Kang Chan carefully sipped his hot coffee and then placed the cup down.

"We'll both have targets on our backs, so don't be reckless," he responded.

"If we fight them this way, more of our people will die in vain. I'm sure you know that as well as I do."

Seok Kang-Ho looked out the window, his eyes filled with spite. He seemed to be remembering that there were agents on standby somewhere.

"The agents assigned to us have the same look as the Jeungpyeong special forces team had before. They're hungry for experience. I bet they're so worried about what everyone thinks that they can't even shoot anyone without worrying about it first. Shouldn't we teach the agents not only how to fight but to have confidence in themselves as well?"

"Calm down. Now that you've mentioned it, we're only skilled in combat. We don't know much about the information warfare that the agents go through every day."

Seok Kang-Ho frowned. "I doubt it's any different from actual combat."

"Daye," Kang Chan quietly called. "It's good that you care about the soldiers in Jeungpyeong and the agents, but you'll just cause problems if you lose your cool or try to interfere in every matter. Don't you know how the soldiers who look up to you and respect you will react if you get worked up?"

Seok Kang-Ho quietly sighed. "You're right."

"Let's just observe for now. We can't take care of everything, can we?"

Seok Kang-Ho blankly stared at his cup.

“Did you know any of the fallen agents?” Kang Chan asked.

“That’s not it.

“Why are you acting this way, then?”

Seok Kang-Ho looked at Kang Chan. “I just feel bad that they died. I’ve grown close with the agents. We’ve eaten and even played jokgu together.”

Kang Chan smirked, remembering Dayeru sobbing after being beaten up multiple times. In his previous life, Dayeru had been very lonely.

“Both the soldiers in Jeungpyeong and the agents around us are putting their lives on the line to do their duty. Don’t you think the least we can do is make sure that no one dies unjustly?” Seok Kang-Ho asked. He still looked quite upset.

“Got any cigarettes?” Kang Chan asked.

Seok Kang-Ho took out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and handed one to Kang Chan. When Kang Chan took it, Seok Kang-Ho put a cigarette in his mouth and flicked his lighter.

“Right now, we have to prioritize constructing the power plant and connecting the Eurasian Rail. We also need to identify the son of a bitch who sent us to Africa,” Kang Chan explained.

“Got it,” Seok Kang-Ho answered. He picked up his coffee as he exhaled cigarette smoke.

Kang Chan stared at him.

In the past, Dayeru couldn’t completely understand how soldiers could genuinely care for their comrades. Hence, it used to always confuse him whenever Kang Chan’s lid flipped for losing men he genuinely cared about.

That same person had accepted the soldiers in Jeungpyeong. Now, he was starting to genuinely care about all of the agents as well.

“Hoo.”

After blowing out the smoke, Kang Chan took a sip of his coffee.

*How painful would it be for Seok Kang-Ho if we were to lose someone he truly cares about?*

It could drive Seok Kang-Ho insane. He might even fly to Algeria and take revenge by himself.

Dayeru was starting to go through the same things that Kang Chan and Gérard had experienced.

They sat in silence for a moment, drinking about half of their coffee.

“What are you going to have for dinner?” Seok Kang-Ho asked, breaking the silence.

“I’m going to eat at home. The graduation ceremony is in two days. I have to go home early and tell my parents that I won’t be able to attend.”

“Good thinking. They’d probably be very upset.”

“What else can I do? I’ll at least do my best to explain.”

Kang Chan stood up with Seok Kang-Ho.

It was just a little past six.

Kang Chan parted ways with Seok Kang-Ho in front of his apartment building. When he opened the front door to his apartment, Yoo Hye-Sook welcomed him in.

“Good timing! I was just about to call you to ask if you’d be eating out for dinner,” Yoo Hye-Sook commented.

“I’m sorry—I should’ve called you before coming home.”

“It’s okay! You came home right on time. Would you like to eat now?”

“Where’s Father?”

“It seems like he has plans today.”

“I see. Let me go get changed and wash my hands first.”

Kang Chan went into his room and put his pistol and radio back into his desk drawer. He then changed to more comfortable clothing and washed his hands.

Heading to the kitchen, he found Yoo Hye-Sook scooping rice into bowls.

“Why are there so many side dishes?” Kang Chan asked.

“Those are the japchae and the pork bulgogi we had yesterday.”

Lettuce, which they could use to make a wrap, crown daisies, perilla leaves, and blanched squid were also on the table.

“Let’s eat!” Kang Chan exclaimed.

“Alright, Channy.”

Yoo Hye-Sook served Kang Chan some kimchi, then sat across from him.

Kang Chan had missed the taste of Yoo Hye-Sook’s cooking so much. He couldn’t say that it was more delicious than food from restaurants, yet for some reason, he seemed to always crave it.

Eating her food made him happy.

“Did Father say he’ll be home late?” Kang Chan asked as he was scooping up some soup.

*Beep beep beep beep.*

As if on cue, the front door opened, and Kang Dae-Kyung walked in.

“Huh? Is that you, honey?” Yoo Hye-Sook asked.

“Welcome home, Father. Didn’t you have plans?” Kang Chan asked.

“We finished early. Honey, is there food for me?”

“Yes. Go wash your hands before you eat.”

Kang Dae-Kyung went into their bedroom and took off his jacket. He then walked over to the table.

“Here you go!” Yoo Hye-Sook exclaimed.

She served Kang Dae-Kyung rice and soup while Kang Chan prepared his utensils and water.

“This makes me happy. Time to eat!” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

With a joy-filled expression, he picked up his spoon. The three ate together.

*Should I tell them while we’re eating or would it be better to tell them after?*

Kang Chan decided to finish dinner.

After cleaning up after themselves and doing the dishes, Yoo Hye-Sook brought over half of a melon that she had wrapped in plastic wrap. It probably wasn’t the other half of the melon that they had eaten with Kim Mi-Young.

The three sat at the table and ate the fruit together.

“My graduation ceremony is in two days,” Kang Chan said.

“Yeah.”

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook already seemed aware of it.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to go,” Kang Chan said, choosing not to beat around the bush. “They’re planning to construct a power plant in South Korea, which would be connected to the Eurasian Rail. The countries that supply crude oil are very opposed to this new technology, so the government thinks it would be dangerous for us to be in crowded areas for the time being.”

Once done with his explanation, he looked at his parents.

Kang Dae-Kyung was staring back at him, his eyes seemingly saying that he felt bad for Kang Chan. Yoo Hye-Sook was trying her best to hide that she was upset.

“Won’t you be upset for not getting to attend your graduation?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

“It doesn’t really matter to me. I feel guilty for you two, though.”

Kang Dae-Kyung nodded. “Are you involved with this power plant you speak of?”

“A little. Since it’ll be using France’s technology, it’s hard for me to just back out of it.”

“Is that why assistant manager Kim seems a bit more sensitive than usual lately?”

“Is he?”

Glancing at Yoo Hye-Sook, Kang Dae-Kyung responded, “I just felt like he was. Honey, I know you’re upset about not getting to attend Channy’s graduation. What should we do?”

“It’s fine. If Channy is going to be in danger, then it would be best not to go. We shouldn’t force our son to attend just for our sakes.”

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook appeared to have an easier time accepting the news than Kang Chan had expected. Perhaps it was because of the gunfight at the basement parking lot, which forced them to stay in a hotel for a few days, and because they had been around agents for a while now.

“Will the school send your diploma over at least?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked Kang Chan.

“I think so.”

“We should take a picture with it once it arrives, then.”

Perplexed, Kang Chan looked up.

“We can take a picture somewhere like the bench in front of our apartment building. That way, after you get married, your mom and I can look at it and reminisce about it,” Kang Dae-Kyung explained.

*Wouldn't that just make them feel more miserable and heartbroken?*

Contrary to his thoughts, however, Yoo Hye-Sook looked dead serious.

“I’ll be sure to dress up for that day,” Kang Chan said.

“You should wear your school uniform,” Kang Dae-Kyung responded.

“Will do, Father. Mother, will you be giving me a bouquet?” Kang Chan asked.

“A bouquet?”

“Yes. In every graduation photo I’ve seen, the graduates were holding a bouquet.”

“If you want a bouquet, then I’ll be sure to pick a nice one,” Yoo Hye-Sook replied.

“Let’s have dinner together as well,” Kang Chan suggested.

Kang Dae-Kyung chimed in, “It’ll be my treat.”

Despite their acceptance, Kang Chan still felt bad for his parents.

“This must be hard to take in. I’m sorry.”

“Seeing assistant manager Kim and the agents always makes me feel bad. They probably have their own families and important occasions, yet I’ve never seen them take a day off,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

“That’s right, honey. Miss Min-Jeong has never taken a day off either.”

“Right? That’s why we should be thankful we even get to take a picture together in front of our apartment, especially since Channy came back home safely from Af—!”

Kang Dae-Kyung immediately stopped himself and glanced at Yoo Hye-Sook, observing her mood. Had he been even just a second late, he would have said ‘Africa.’

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Yoo Hye-Sook asked.

“Just felt a sharp pain in my stomach. I’m okay now, though.”

“Is it serious? When did it start hurting?”

Fortunately, Yoo Hye-Sook was naive enough to believe Kang Dae-Kyung and his acting skills.

“I’m fine, really. I just need to go to the bathroom.”

“Why are you like this? You’re not a child anymore!”

Kang Dae-Kyung looked at Kang Chan before responding to Yoo Hye-Sook’s grumbling. “Going back, we should be glad that Channy is back home, not out in Mongolia. Let’s take a picture and have dinner after we get your diploma.”

“I’ll make sure to give you a pretty bouquet, Channy,” Yoo Hye-Sook said.

“Thank you.”

Kang Chan felt much better now.

Chapter 281.2: Let's Wait and See (1)

The meeting had been going on for well over an hour already.

Hwang Ki-Hyun was sitting in the middle of the table. On his left, the assistant director and the first to fourth division heads sat in order. Meanwhile, Kim Hyung-Jung was sitting to his right.

“Japan’s intelligence bureau has informed us that their prime minister intends to make an unofficial visit to South Korea without their Minister of Foreign Affairs,” the second division head reported. “If their prime minister’s private meeting with our President gets approved, they would likely send in a formal request to make their visit official.”

The first to fourth NIS divisions were in charge of the United States, Asia, Europe, and North Korea, respectively., and Kim Hyung-Jung was the head of the Samseong-dong branch office, which was tasked with other special duties. The fifth division was responsible for Africa and the countries with no diplomatic relations with South Korea.

The second division head continued, "In exchange for an official one-on-one meeting, Japan said that they'll acknowledge Dokdo as part of South Korean territory, officially apologize for their past crimes, and do their best to reach an agreement about compensation with us."

Surprised, the fatigue from the division heads' faces all disappeared. They looked as if they found the second division head's words outrageous.

"Director Sherman also requested that the president have a one-on-one talk with the President of the United States before he leaves the country. He said they want to strengthen the significance of the alliance between South Korea and the United States and that he wants to conclude the Korean-American currency swap."

"We still haven't answered Russia's request to allow their president to visit South Korea either."

"The same goes for France and the UK's requests."

The department heads' reports sounded as if they were urging the government to give them answers. Providing quick responses to requests like these normally was the wisest option.

"Do the agents we've sent to other countries have enough protection, considering the current situation?" Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

"We've given them the order to return fire as soon as they deem the situation dangerous," the assistant director answered. "Mr. Director, I believe you already know what it would mean if they were to shoot back, so I won't say anything else on the matter. However, let me just remind you that it will be difficult for us to handle the consequences that would follow if things go south and conflicts form between us and the intelligence bureau of the country the agents are currently in."

"On average, we lose ten to twenty agents every year because of similar reasons. We have to make sure that our agents can pull out their weapons and fight back whenever necessary instead of just dying helplessly," Hwang Ki-Hyun responded.

The assistant director and the division heads looked at Hwang Ki-Hyun grimly, remembering the time seventeen National Intelligence Service agents had to sacrifice themselves protecting a top North Korean official ten or so years ago.

The North Korean official first sought asylum in China. Six agents died protecting him there. They then went to the Philippines, where five more fell in a gunfight against the North Korean agents. Six more died in Hong Kong, their last stop.

The National Intelligence Service agents' duty was to protect the second most powerful person in North Korea. However, except for when they were in the Philippines, they died before they could even shoot back at their enemies.

After that incident, the agents that they had sent to Europe ran across agents from enemy countries. Because of the unfair agreement between the intelligence bureaus, they died before they could even return fire.

If a country lacked national strength and diplomacy, the agents of its intelligence bureaus would always be blamed for everything even if the agents from the other countries also messed up.

“Don’t worry. The president is already planning to extend official invitations to the presidents and the prime ministers from the countries that officially requested to visit South Korea. It won’t take long,” Hwang Ki-Hyun added.

Knowing that his answer would be no different from Moon Jae-Hyun’s, the division heads didn’t say anything else.

“This matter aside, we think there’s a chance that South Korea would be under terrorist attack. I want everyone to give extra attention to any intel related to this—even the ones that seem trivial in hindsight. I don’t want to miss even the tiniest detail,” Hwang Ki-Hyun said. After a brief pause, he looked at them one by one as he asked, “Do any of you have anything else to report or questions to ask?”

Having ensured that no one had any more concerns, he ordered, “We’ll adjourn the meeting here, then. Manager Kim Hyung-Jung, I need to talk to you in private.”

“Understood.”

After saying goodbye, the assistant director and the division heads walked out of the meeting room.

“Are you done choosing agents yet?” Hwang Ki-Hyun asked Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Yes. We’ve selected thirteen agents to reside and work in Libya and Egypt. We’ve also handpicked an additional twenty agents to accompany them.”

Hwang Ki-Hyun sighed loudly. “Hmm.”

Kim Hyung-Jung continued, “We chose mainly from the applicants. More than half of them used to be part of the special forces.”

“Have you considered increasing the number of people who would be going to Libya and Egypt?”

“I have, but we haven’t figured out our target yet, and we won’t be going there to engage in any large-scale combat. Moreover, dispatching too many people might cause adverse effects in Libya. Sending too many agents also risks losing contact with our local informants.”

“Assigning our men to missions like this always makes me feel uncomfortable,” Hwang Ki-Hyun commented.



“The agents are doing this because of their sense of duty,” Kim Hyung-Jung firmly answered. His eyes weren’t any different from Hwang Ki-Hyun’s, though. “That only makes it even more heartbreaking.”

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“Lastly, South Korean President Moon Jae-Hyun clearly knows about the future that the development of this new energy will bring,” Sherman reported.

Currently, he was in a meeting with the White House’s Senior Presidential Secretary for Economic Affairs, Senior Presidential Secretary for Security Affairs, the top aide for Asian affairs, and Laude, the President of the United States.

Even though Sherman was done presenting his report, nobody said anything. A moment of silence dawned on the meeting.

“We have to decide right now if we’re going to get involved in that plan, even if it’s just as an observer, by clinging onto France, Russia, and South Korea or if we’re going to side with Saudi Arabia,” Laude finally said.

“Even for us and Saudi Arabia, it would still be difficult to put pressure on France’s DGSE and Russia’s KGB,” the Senior Presidential Secretary for Security Affairs commented. He then turned to Sherman. “I’ve got just one question. I fully agree with constructing the first power plant in South Korea. After all, this would allow us to monitor the response of the Arabs and Jews in advance. However, why are prominent figures like Lanok and Vasili showing South Korea so much favor?”

“Don’t you know what happened in the UK?”

“Of course I do. I heard that a young student took care of their Blackhead. Even so, that isn’t enough to explain why they’re so favorable to South Korea.”

Sherman blinked, seemingly tired of all this. “Let me break it down for you, then. That student is fluent in French, close with Lanok and Vasili, and led an operation so perfect in Mongolia that it’s being hailed as the best in the history of the Foreign Legion’s special forces.”

Sherman took a moment to catch his breath as if he had grown tired of listing them all as well. Afterward, he continued, “He also made a significant contribution to the operations in France, Afghanistan, and Africa. That’s not all. He’s the Deputy Director-General of France’s DGSE, the assistant director of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service, and the head of its counter-terrorism unit. Do you really think we should treat that person as nothing but a young student?”

“Isn’t the CIA supposed to be using its massive budget—which isn’t even properly documented, might I remind you—to find out how that monster could just suddenly appear in South Korea, Sherman?” the Senior Presidential Secretary for Security Affairs asked.

“Are you saying I’m lacking because the situation turned into a mess while you and Brandon were investigating things behind my back? Would you like me to go into further details about the connection between you and Saudi Arabia?” Sherman answered, his smiling seemingly mocking them.

“Director Sherman, let’s not go too far,” Laude said as his blue eyes slowly scanned everyone attending the meeting. Despite his thin physique, he carried himself with authority. “How is North Korea reacting to all of this?”

“They seem to be looking for measures to start economic cooperation with South Korea.”

“This isn’t easy. What do we have to do if we side with South Korea?”

“To start with, we have to provide South Korea economic benefits and attend to the emotional aspects of this collaboration, which is especially important for South Koreans,” Sherman said.

“Are you talking about their history with Japan?”

“Right now, that seems to be the most effective way to do it.”

*Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz—.*

The phone in front of Sherman rang briefly.

*Click.*

Sherman flipped open the phone and read the message he received.

“Haa,” he briefly exhaled, seemingly at a loss for words.

“It seems like Japan has taken the initiative. They have acknowledged that the East Sea, including Dokdo, is part of South Korea. They have also requested permission for their Prime Minister to visit South Korea under the condition that they’ll apologize and provide compensation for their past crimes,” he reported.

Laude rubbed his face with his left hand a couple of times.

Chapter 282: Let's Wait and See (2)

The morning of Kang Chan’s high school graduation day, Yoo Hye-Sook gave him a hug before going to work, tears welling up in her eyes.

He would be officially recognized as a high school graduate today, so seeing him in comfortable workout clothes made Yoo Hye-Sook feel sorry for her son.

Kang Dae-Kyung knew about everything that happened in Afghanistan and Africa, and Yoo Hye-Sook couldn’t forget about the gunfight that had occurred in the basement parking lot.

Even though she couldn’t understand why her son had to go through such a traumatic experience, she did her best to accept it. However, her reddening eyes still carried hope that he would never have to go through similar situations again.

Seeing her like that was heartbreaking, but Kang Chan couldn't attend his graduation ceremony due to the Islamic organizations' holy war against South Korea.

Much like yesterday, Kang Chan had a lot of time to spare. He considered surfing the internet for a moment but sat on the living room sofa and watched TV instead.

As soon as the TV turned on, it showed the news channel that Kang Dae-Kyung always watched.

'What's going on?'

It hadn't even been a minute when the news began to take an absurd turn.

[The Federation of Korean Industries and the opposition party are demanding the government to disclose whether the proposals from Saudi Arabia and the United States are true or not. If the proposals are true, they asserted that the Blue House and the ruling party shouldn't use the proposals for political gain and that they have to reveal everything to the public for the development of South Korea.]

The news then played interviews with citizens, most of whom said, "It doesn't make sense for the government and the ruling party to keep their mouths sealed about something this significant."

[The Federation of Korean Industries is hoping that large and mid-sized businesses will be able to buy shares of the next-generation energy source.]

The news also briefly showed an interview with the chairman of the Federation of Korean Industries.

Kang Chan turned off the TV.

He couldn't blame people for being tempted, they shouldn't get so ahead of themselves over this.

*If this keeps up, all of the profits from the electrical energy business and the Eurasian Rail might end up in the pockets of sons of bitches like Yang Jin-Woo.*

*Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—.*

Only Seok Kang-Ho would call him this early in the morning.

Kang Chan walked to his room and answered the phone.

"What's up?"

- Let's go to the office.

*Well, I've got nothing to do at home anyway.*

Moreover, if he went to the office, the agents would be able to stay indoors. He would be able to enjoy coffee and cigarettes without worries as well.

- I'm already outside.

"I'll be right over."

After hanging up, he put on a shirt and a suit and then took his radio and pistol from his desk drawer.

As soon as he got to the entrance of his apartment building, Choi Jong-Il approached him.

“I was told that you’re going to the office,” he said.

“Have you had breakfast?”

“Yes, but I haven’t had any coffee yet.”

When Kang Chan smirked, Choi Jong-Il smiled back.

Because the wounds on Choi Jong-Il’s face hadn’t completely healed yet, everyone who saw him likely thought of him as a bad person—a murderer, even.

Kang Chan walked toward Seok Kang-Ho’s car, which was parked near the entrance of the building. At the same time, three agents quickly exited the apartment.

They were likely the ones assigned to guard the staircases above and below Kang Chan’s floor.

Ordered by South Korea to protect Kang Chan, these people patrolled the staircases around the clock in the middle of this cold winter. If they ever found themselves in a gunfight, they would block the bullets with their cars and throw themselves at Kang Chan to keep him safe.

They weren’t doing all that simply because Kang Chan was extraordinary. Rather, it was because their nation had ordered them to.

Kang Chan’s reasons were a bit different from theirs. Although he started all of this because he couldn’t refuse Kim Tae-Jin and Kim Hyung-Jung’s passion, he genuinely cared about the soldiers in Jeungpyeong now. Unable to ignore what he had witnessed, he just kept pushing forward until he eventually found himself in this situation.

“Choi Jong-Il. Once we arrive, tell all of the agents to come up to the office,” Kang Chan said.

“We would need to shut down the elevators for that.”

“I don’t mind.”

Kang Chan got into the passenger seat of Seok Kang-Ho’s car.

“Slept soundly?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

Kang Chan looked at him in surprise as he closed the car door. “The fuck? What’s with you today?”

Seok Kang-Ho wasn’t just wearing a suit. He also had a tie on, which wasn’t like him.

“Did something happen?”

As they hit the road, an NIS-issued car merged into the lane and led their convoy.

“I always look good in a suit, don’t I?”

“Not really, no.”

Seok Kang-Ho laughed. “Phuhuhu.”

*Why is he changing the subject?*

Kang Chan glanced at him once more, but Seok Kang-Ho just focused on the road, pretending not to notice.

It only took them fifteen minutes to reach their office building's basement parking lot. As soon as they arrived, they rushed to the elevator.

"You three, guard the entrance. Once the coast is clear, get in the elevator and join us in the office."

"Yes, sir," the three agents quickly responded.

No one else could use this elevator anyway, so Kang Chan wondered if they needed to do all of this. However, it wasn't right to question the field manager's commands.

They reached the office not long after, the open view of which made him feel a little relieved. It had been quite some time since he last visited this place.

"Would you like to have instant coffee or an americano?" Choi Jong-II asked.

*It's been a while since I've had an americano—*

"What are you saying? Drinking instant coffee first thing in the morning is a must!" Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed with a grin. "Don't forget to use two packets per cup!"

For some reason, Kang Chan felt convinced.

The smell of coffee filled the large office, likely because they made a lot of it. After some time, the three agents guarding the elevator entered the office.

"Huh? Where's Um Ji-Hwan?" Seok Kang-Ho asked, looking around with a cup in hand.

As Kang Chan was handed a cup of coffee, Seok Kang-Ho continued, "I'm talking about the beast yesterday! The one who made us coffee for us in Gapyeong!"

"Ah!" Kang Chan exclaimed, finally remembering the man.

Seok Kang-Ho turned to Choi Jong-II. "Where is he?"

*Why is Choi Jong-II hesitating to answer?*

The uplifting atmosphere instantly grew colder. The agents appeared to be in a predicament.

"He left for Libya yesterday evening," Choi Jong-II answered grimly.

Seok Kang-Ho quietly swore across from Kang Chan. "Fuck."

"He joined that mission even though he's got an elderly woman to take care of..." Seok Kang-Ho trailed off.

"An elderly woman?" Kang Chan asked.

"He lives with his mother."

"How do you know that?"

Without looking away from his cup, Seok Kang-Ho answered, "Two days ago, after you left, Ji-Hwan decided to go home as well, so we had dinner together."

Kang Chan turned toward him.

"He applied to go to Libya a few days ago. He knew two of the thirteen agents who were killed there," Choi Jong-Il explained.

"How old is he?" Kang Chan asked.

"He's twenty-nine."

Kang Chan finally understood why Ji-Hwan wanted to go to where two of his comrades were killed. He was at the age where his blood just kept boiling, especially since he had the skills to back him up.

The atmosphere became even heavier.

Seok Kang-Ho frowned. Kang Chan had another sip of his coffee.

*Seok Kang-Ho is already this attached to Um Ji-Hwan? All they've done is play three rounds of jokgu.*

Kang Chan clicked his tongue as he looked outside the window.

In his previous life, he supposed he did genuinely care about some new recruit just because he handed him a bottle of water after his jogging session. Was that how Seok Kang-Ho felt when he ate with Um Ji-Hwan and heard about his personal life?

Honestly, the bottle of water and the meal weren't that important.

No matter what their people did, Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho couldn't help but want to protect them and wish that they would do well enough to become captains and veterans themselves in the future.

They seemed drawn to individuals who looked lonely.

Seok Kang-Ho pursed his lips as he looked at Choi Jong-Il. "Bring over the things that we prepared."

*What's going on? What's wrong with the atmosphere today?*

Watching Woo Hee-Seung approach the table, Kang Chan couldn't help but smirk.

He was holding a bouquet, an album, and a blue folder that contained his diploma.

Woo Hee-Seung handed the items to Seok Kang-Ho, who in turn stood up and offered them to Kang Chan.

*It wouldn't be proper for me to accept those sitting down, would it?*

Kang Chan awkwardly stood up and held out his hands. At the same time, everyone in the office clapped for him.

*This is crazy!*

Kang Chan wondered if they were planning to kill him with awkwardness.

“Congratulations on your graduation,” Seok Kang-Ho told Kang Chan.

*So this is why he put on a suit.*

“Your diploma and two certificates are in the folder. I bought the bouquet, and the men prepared this,” Seok Kang-Ho added.

Seok Kang-Ho took out a small box from the inner chest pocket of his suit. When Kang Chan opened it, he found an expensive-looking, luxurious fountain pen inside.

As if he had just won a competition, he looked at everyone present while holding the bouquet in one hand and the fountain pen in the other. “Thank you.”

They gave him another round of applause, slightly improving the atmosphere.

Using his phone, Kang Chan took a photo with Seok Kang-Ho using his phone, Choi Jong-Il, then Woo Hee-Seung. Afterward, they took a group photo.

*This isn't so bad.*

Kang Chan didn't get to attend his graduation in his previous life as well, but it was nothing like his life now. After all, no one felt disappointed that he didn't get to attend his graduation back then.

“Dinner's on me,” Kang Chan offered.

“Let's just eat here. We'll be giving the agents a hard time if we go outside now,” Seok Kang-Ho suggested.

“Sounds good.”

Since there was still some time left before lunch, they sat down at the table again. Some of the agents made themselves comfortable on the sofa.

Seok Kang-Ho turned his chair toward the window, then held up his cup. From the side, Kang Chan looked at him from the side. His eyes had crinkled up, but he still had his angular jaw and thick neck.

“Damn it!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed. After pursing his lips, he took out a cigarette and offered it to Kang Chan.

*Chk chk.*

“The first time I woke up in this body, what flustered me the most was the fact that I was a teacher,” Seok Kang-Ho grumbled, smoke escaping his mouth.

“I had a hard time getting used to seeing the kids' sparkling eyes.” Seok Kang-Ho grinned at Kang Chan. “Still, when I saw the bullies, I found myself unable to hold in my anger. That's why I prepared the mask.”

“What mask?”

“The one I put on before fighting Park Ki-Bum.”

“Ah! The monkey mask!”

*This crazy motherfucker! He should've at least worn a fierce-looking gorilla mask instead of a monkey mask with a cute smile!*

“Um, Ji-Hwan told me while we were eating that he liked being an agent because he thinks of me as his hyung-nim. He grew up without any siblings, so when he was younger, he kept hoping that he would have a hyung-nim like me,” Seok Kang-Ho turned to the side and extinguished his cigarette on the ashtray. “That son of a bitch should've told me he's being sent to Libya!”

After voicing out his thoughts, he downed the rest of his coffee.

*Seok Kang-Ho has every right to be upset—wait, isn't that...?*

“Argh, that's hot! Holy fuck!” Seok Kang-Ho shrieked, shaking off the coffee that spilled on his pants.

Kang Chan held up his cup and took a sip of his coffee.

“I now slightly understand how you felt back then,” Seok Kang-Ho commented. He was staring out the window, making it seem as if he was talking to himself.

The two took sips of their coffee in turns while enjoying the view. Afterward, they put their cups down on the table.

The Eurasian Rail and the construction of the power plant—what would those mean to Choi Jong-Il, the agents in this office, and the fallen and the dying agents?

*Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—.*

As soon as his phone rang, Kang Chan took it out and answered the call.

“Mr. Ambassador.”

- Mr. Kang Chan, congratulations on your graduation.

Smiling, Kang Chan replied, “Thank you.”

- Do you have time to meet tomorrow?

“Of course, sir. When and where should we meet?”

Perhaps it was because they were used to it now, but much like Seok Kang-Ho, the agents weren't surprised to hear Kang Chan speaking French anymore.

- How about lunch at the embassy? I hope you will be able to spare me a bit of your time after lunch as well. I'd like to have a meeting with you regarding the construction of the power plant. It's important.

“Alright. I'll be there by eleven-thirty.”

- It's perfect.



After hanging up, Kang Chan told everyone about his phone call with Lanok only to cock his head in the middle of his explanation. This was the first time Lanok had ever emphasized the importance of a meeting.

“Let’s have lunch,” Seok Kang-Ho suggested.

Kang Chan held up his phone and checked the time. There was still an hour left before noon.

He wondered if it was too early for them to have lunch. However, considering the time needed for the trip to and from the restaurant, he concluded otherwise.

Seok Kang-Ho stood up and told the agents to order thrice as many galbi and sirloin as the number of people. He also told them to order enough rice for everyone.

That amount of food would require three people to carry.

*Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—. Buzz— Buzz— Buzz—.*

Soon after, Kang Chan’s phone rang again.

Michelle was calling him.

“Hello?”

- Channy! Where are you right now?

‘Did she install a CCTV in my office without me knowing?’ Kang Chan wondered, looking around the room.

- I had tea with your mother this morning. She told me that you’re back in South Korea! Where are you right now?

*Well, that doesn’t seem too much of a coincidence, considering all of us are in the same building.*

Smirking, Kang Chan looked around him.

“Where are you?”

- I’m at our office taking care of two big projects. Are you available?

“I’ll drop by after lunch.”

- You’re not going to stand me up, are you? Does two work for you?

“Yeah.”

Kang Chan didn’t have anything scheduled today anyway.

“My parents don’t know that I’m in the building.”

- I know that! If they come into our office, I’ll be sure to call you immediately.

Kang Chan hung up not long after.

“Was that Michelle?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“Yeah. I’m thinking of having a cup of tea with her after lunch.”

“Go for it.”

Three of the agents had already left the office to buy their lunch.

“They should’ve just ordered on the phone,” Kang Chan said.

“That would risk having our food poisoned,” Choi Jong-II responded.

*Damn. Even food isn't safe now?*

Kang Chan glanced at Seok Kang-Ho. This was his first time seeing him with such a grim expression after ordering meat.

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“Run! Run!” the agent in charge of their rear yelled.

Um Ji-Hwan, wearing a shirt and a suit, had already been running for fifteen minutes in alleyways with gray walls, which were common in Islam.

“Haah! Haah! Haah! Haah!”

*Du du du! Thud!*

Hearing the agent behind them fall to the ground, he gritted his teeth. He could feel his blood boiling. He wanted to vent out his anger, but he couldn't do anything about it right now.

Their local informant had lied to them and lured them into a trap.

After landing at the airport in Tripoli[1], they immediately headed to Al-Aziziyah[2]. However, they were ambushed as soon as they arrived. Eight of their men had already been killed.

“Haah! Haha! Haah! Haah!”

Going down the alley, Um Ji-Hwan took a sharp turn.

*Bang! Bang! Du du du! Du du du!*

Gunshots rang out. He heard another agent collapse.

“Run!” the agent at the back yelled, reminding them not to deviate from the plan.

Before coming here, they were given plans for certain situations. If they were ambushed, they were told to head to the next secret meeting place. They were also ordered to decide in advance who should serve as the vanguard and who should bring up the rear in such an event.

They had the permission to shoot and return fire, but their current situation prevented them from fighting back.

They were in a narrow alley. If they stood their ground here, a barrage of bullets from a machine gun in one of the buildings' second floors would be enough to decimate them. Hence, all they could do right now was run and use whatever means necessary to get out of this place. Only then could they retaliate.

*Bang! Bang! Du du du du! Du du du!*

Two more agents dropped to the ground.

Using their rifles, they provided cover fire to buy the other agents some time. But it wasn't enough to stop the AK-47s' firepower.

“Fuck!” Um Ji-Hwan swore as the alley forced him to take another sharp turn.

“Haah! Haah! Haah! Haah! Ma!” he yelled in between his ragged breaths, suddenly seeing his mother’s face. He felt as if he had just brushed past her.

Not long after, he saw Seok Kang-Ho smiling at him. It was the last image he saw before everything turned black.

Chapter 283: The Nation Calls (1)

Three agents walked into the office, their hands full with numerous plastic bags. The scent of meat filled the office as the others pushed tables together.

“That seriously is a lot,” Seok Kang-Ho whispered.

“Weren't you the one who ordered three servings per person?” asked Kang Chan.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

*Buzz Buzz Buzz—.* *Buzz Buzz Buzz—.* *Buzz Buzz Buzz—.*

Kang Chan’s phone started ringing. The agents had already set chopsticks on the tables and poured drinks in mugs, but he decided to answer the call anyway.

*Where’s this from?*

The number was the same as the one that Anne always used when calling him from the DGSE. Perhaps it was a new employee trying to introduce themselves.

"Hello?" Kang Chan answered as Seok Kang-Ho handed him a pair of chopsticks.

- Hello, sir. I’m Hugo. I’m the new person assigned to help you.

It seemed his prediction was right.

“I look forward to working with you,” Kang Chan replied.

- It's an honor to work with you, Deputy Director-Generals. I called to submit an urgent report.

Hugo sounded like he was in a rush.

- The Korean agents in Libya are being pursued by the UIS. We have confirmed at least three casualties.

“Say that again,” Kang Chan ordered, his voice suddenly filled with shock.

Noticing Kang Chan's cold tone and serious expression, Seok Kang-Ho and the agents stopped what they were doing and focused their attention on him.

- A local informant has betrayed the agents, leading them into an ambush. They are being chased in Al-Aziziyah as we speak. We believe their next move has also been compromised.

Kang Chan walked over to the window. "What about the National Intelligence Service?"

- They seem to trust the report from the local informant that everyone arrived safely.

Kang Chan glanced behind him, finding Seok Kang-Ho staring at him with a serious expression.

"Hugo, does the Intelligence Bureau have agents on the scene?"

- Our closest operatives are twenty minutes away, sir.

"Is there any way to assist the agents?" Kang Chan inquired.

- We will have to send reinforcements first and then observe how things go. There are only a few UIS personnel.

Sending the French agents over could be no different from telling them to jump into a possibly fatal situation to save the Korean agents. Kang Chan lowered his gaze to the road below them, envisioning helpless agents dying. Sending the French agents into danger was not ideal, but he was certain that he would have made the same decision if the roles were reversed.

"Is there a procedure needed to dispatch the Intelligence Bureau agents?" asked Kang Chan.

- The Director-General's approval is needed.

"How long will that take?" asked Kang Chan.

- You just need to send a text with the approval code.

"Get on it. Get back to me afterward."

- Understood.

After hanging up, Kang Chan slowly turned around.

"I just received a report that the agents we sent to Libya have been deceived by a local informant. Three of them have been killed."

As if molten iron had just poured from the ceiling, heavy silence weighed down on the office.

He continued, "We're now trying to determine if we can send the French Intelligence Bureau's agents over."

"Captain!" called Seok Kang-Ho, his eyes glinting.

*Buzz Buzz Buzz—.* *Buzz Buzz Buzz—.* *Buzz Buzz Buzz—.*

The phone rang again. Kang Chan immediately answered it.

"Hello?"

- The Director-General has approved. Awaiting your orders, sir.

"Dispatch the agents. The mission is to rescue and protect the Korean National Intelligence Service agents in Libya for forty-eight hours. We will send support within that time. Inform us immediately once the code and rendezvous point have been determined."

- We will proceed and report back, sir.

"Will this be reported to the ambassador?"

- Yes, sir.

"Understood."

After hanging up, Kang Chan turned to the agents. "The French Intelligence Bureau agents will be dispatched."

"Captain," called Seok Kang-Ho, his tone more somber than before. Kang Chan recalled the time he had asked Lanok to send him to Mongolia. Throughout their interaction, neither Kang Chan nor Seok Kang-Ho shied away from meeting each other's gaze.

*Buzz Buzz Buzz— . Buzz Buzz Buzz— . Buzz Buzz Buzz— .*

"Yes?" Kang Chan greeted.

- The nearby Intelligence Bureau agents have been dispatched, sir.

"Thank you, Hugo. I want to find the person who issued the order for this operation, the one who's commanding it, and those taking part in it. Do we also need the Director-General's approval for this?"

- No, sir.

"Then let me know as soon as you receive any intel."

- Understood, sir.

After hanging up, Kang Chan scrolled through his phone to make another call. Seok Kang-Ho just kept watching him, chopsticks in hand.

- Yes, Mr. Kang Chan.

"Manager, it's Kang Chan. Our agents in Libya have been deceived by a local informant. Three have already been killed, and the rest are being chased as we speak," Kang Chan explained.

-...Excuse me? Please repeat what you just said.

Kang Chan repeated his report about the situation to Kim Hyung-Jung.

"Before I called, I dispatched French Intelligence Bureau agents in the area and requested them to protect our men for forty-eight hours until we can provide support," he finished.

- I'll report this to the Director immediately!

"Manager."

- Yes, Mr. Kang Chan!

Due to the situation, Kim Hyung-Jung responded quite quickly.

"Have twenty soldiers from Jeungpyeong and ten agents from the National Intelligence Service prepare for deployment. They will be under the command of..." Kang Chan paused for a moment as he turned his attention to his most trusted ally. "... Seok Kang-Ho."

- Will they be deployed to Libya?

"Yes. The French Intelligence Bureau agents have already departed. We can't leave the Korean agents in their hands forever. I'll call Jeungpyeong now. Please focus on getting the Director's approval," Kang Chan said.

- I'll contact you as soon as I'm done.

After hanging up, Kang Chan turned to Seok Kang-Ho.

"You heard me. I need you to call Jeungpyeong and choose twenty soldiers."

"Thank you, Captain," said Seok Kang-Ho. He moved to the corner and took out his phone.

"Is it really okay for us to send agents over as well?" Choi Jong-Il asked.

"Our mission is to rescue agents currently being pursued. We might have to engage in urban combat to bring them back," Kang Chan answered.

Choi Jong-Il looked at Kang Chan in disbelief.

"Those agents put their trust in South Korea when they left. If we abandon them because we're afraid of war and the consequences that will follow, then eventually, no one will step forward."

"There has never been a situation like this before," Choi Jong-Il said.

Kang Chan looked around. With a smirk, he declared, "As long as I am here, this will keep happening. We base our actions on thorough retribution. It does not matter how many times we fail. We will not stop until we get revenge. Just like we did in China, we will dramatically turn things around."

A fiery passion had been ignited within him. Some agents clenched their jaws, while others' eyes blazed as if they had been set on fire.

"I've spoken with Dong-Gyun," Seok Kang-Ho said as he approached Kang Chan.

"Let's get lunch over with quickly. We have to leave," Kang Chan said.

"Understood."

*Damn it. I was hoping to enjoy this celebratory meal in comfort.*

Given the atmosphere, their post-graduation lunch felt almost like a last supper.

*Buzz Buzz Buzz—. Buzz Buzz Buzz—. Buzz Buzz Buzz—.*

Kang Chan immediately picked up his phone.

- Mr. Kang Chan, the Director has given us his approval. Departure is at 5 PM from Seongnam.

"Thank you. I'll discuss the rest with you this evening."

- Understood.

After hanging up, Kang Chan informed Seok Kang-Ho of the details.

"Daye," Kang Chan called.

"Yes, sir!" Seok Kang-Ho quickly responded.

"This is a rescue mission, so don't push yourselves too hard. Focus on making it back alive. We'll probably get a list of the main culprits behind this and the agents involved in this operation. We can use that to plan a proper retribution later."

"Understood."

After they were done eating, some of the agents cleared the tables. They had eaten more than expected.

"You go ahead. You'll need to stop by home first," Kang Chan said.

"I'll be back," Seok Kang-Ho replied. He left the office with six agents.

*Is this the unease Lanok felt, watching them go but not feeling at peace with it? What would I have done if I hadn't heard about the important meeting about the power plant construction?*

It was certainly impossible to do everything. No matter how much effort he put into the Eurasian Rail, power plant construction, the Mongolian base, African deployment, retribution, and this rescue mission, Kang Chan could still feel the reality kicking in. He could not handle everything by himself.

"Would you like some coffee?" Choi Jong-Il offered.

"Sure," Kang Chan answered.

Perhaps it was because of the good ventilation or because the agents did a great job cleaning up, but the office no longer smelled of meat. Kang Chan turned to face the window from the left side of the table.

*Click.*

Glancing back, Kang Chan saw Choi Jong-Il cautiously putting a cup on the table, his expression apprehensive. Seeing him send Seok Kang-Ho off seemed to have made Choi Jong-Il feel sorry for him.

"Have a seat," Kang Chan ordered.

"Thank you, sir," Choi Jong-Il said as he sat down. "I thought you would be going yourself."

"I have an appointment about the power plant construction at the French embassy tomorrow. Considering they specifically mentioned that it's important, canceling it wouldn't be right."

"I see."

"The agents in Libya are being taken out one by one to obstruct the construction of the power plant. If I put crucial matters on hold and rush to Libya, wouldn't I be doing exactly what they want?"

"Yes, sir."

Kang Chan took a sip of his coffee.

"Does Mr. Seok speak Arabic well?" Choi Jong-Il asked.

"He's very proficient in it."

Seok Kang-Ho was from Algeria. He was not just fluent in Arabic—it was his mother tongue.

Kang Chan knew he should be bursting with energy right now. However, the interviews with greedy individuals on the news, the National Intelligence Service's inadequate capabilities, and the constant need to liaise with the French Intelligence Bureau whenever an incident occurred were draining him. Perhaps this was the price he had to pay for having a huge ambition but not the ability to back it up.

He would rather stop getting involved in everything, even the next-gen energy, than let more innocent agents and soldiers die. Would their casualties decrease if he said he couldn't do it?

Smirking, he looked out the window and laughed. Stopping now would mean wondering what to say to those who had already fallen for their cause.

Being forced to send Seok Kang-Ho to Libya alone only further exhausted him.

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Every time Han Jae-Guk moved, the magazines, bayonet, and pistol on him clicked and clanked. With a fiery gaze, he stopped in front of Cha Dong-Gyun, who was handing over documents to his deputy.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

"Why was I not selected for this operation, sir?" Han Jae-Guk argued.

"What?"

Ignoring Cha Dong-Gyun's gaze, Han Jae-Guk pressed on, "I admit I was lacking at first, but didn't you say I was ready now? Why am I still being left out?"

"This bastard!" Cha Dong-Gyun exclaimed.

"You can curse at me, sir, but please give me a clear reason why Lee Jae-Ho, my subordinate, has been chosen, yet I'm not," inquired Han Jae-Guk.

Cha Dong-Gyun shook his head as he sighed. "How can you be so much like Kwak Cheol-Ho in his early days?"

As he turned his head, Kwak Cheol-Ho quickly entered the barracks.

"Kwak Cheol-Ho!" Cha Dong-Gyun called.

"Sir!"

"Why is this bastard spouting nonsense?"

"Likely because this is his first time receiving a dispatch order, sir."

With an incredulous expression, Cha Dong-Gyun leaned closer to Han Jae-Guk, who had been listening to their conversation.

"You didn't look at the list of soldiers joining the operation before coming here, did you?"

"No, sir!" answered Han Jae-Guk.

Laughing, Cha Dong-Gyun raised his head. "Hey! Take this bastard away and get him ready!"

"Understood, sir!" Kwak Cheol-Ho turned to Han Jae-Guk. "Let's go."

Being two years older, their relationship allowed them to have such casual conversations without feeling out of place.

"Lieutenants or higher are only notified separately when they are not deployed," Kwak Cheol-Ho explained. Han Jae-Guk glanced back briefly before quickly turning his head.



*Clap, Clap.*

His magazine, bayonet, and pistol seemed to be making sounds of joy now.

"Phew!"

The preparations were all complete. They would hold the briefing on the plane with Seok Kang-Ho, their leader.

"The men have completely changed, sir," Cha Dong-Gyun's deputy said, a file in his hand. "I didn't expect them to be so relaxed an hour before departure."

"What about the French interpreter?" inquired Cha Dong-Gyun.

"He's been chain-smoking for a while now."

Cha Dong-Gyun laughed in response. The deputy couldn't help but chuckle as well.

"Are you sure your body can handle it?" the deputy asked.

"The country needs us. What would General Choi say if he heard us complaining about these wounds?" Cha Dong-Gyun responded.

His words reminded the deputy of Choi Seong-Geon's younger days.

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Just like before, Kang Chan found himself meeting Michelle again in a state of unease.

"Your mood seems off again!" Michelle complained.

The staff greeted Kang Chan warmly as he entered Michelle's office and sat down.

"I'm sorry for always being like this when we meet," Kang Chan replied.

Michelle smiled. "Isn't that because you don't see the need to hide your feelings from me? I actually appreciate that about you, Channy."

Her hair cascaded in waves over her shoulders. Her large blue eyes, unnaturally long eyelashes, and pronounced nose bridge caught his attention.

Most French women tended to grow heavier and adopt what was colloquially known as the 'witch's style,' composed of a hooked nose and sagging cheeks, as they aged. However, Michelle, perhaps due to her Asian heritage, had a slightly different facial structure. It made her shine even more.

"Here!" she exclaimed as she put cigarettes and a lighter on the table. She then walked over to her desk and pressed a button.

*Whoooosh.*

A cool breeze wafted in, making the air seem refreshingly clear.

*Click.*

Kang Chan lit his cigarette and the one that Michelle had put between her lips.

"Congratulations on your graduation," she said.

"My mother told you?"

"Of course. I even prepared a gift."

Kang Chan smirked awkwardly as Michelle pointed at her forehead with her right index finger.

*This girl never changes.*

"Is It even really that important?" Kang Chan inquired.

"Even if it isn't, is there a reason to avoid it?" Michelle responded.

*Ha! Why would she even bring it up?*

Amused, Michelle tilted her head and gazed at Kang Chan again. "Why are you in such a mood today?"

"Just feeling a bit overwhelmed with work."

Michelle nodded and leaned back. She was dressed in a white shirt and dark suit. The top three buttons were left undone, revealing almost half of her chest.

"When I saw you at the Eurasian conference, you looked like you would never back down from anything."

Kang Chan took a sip of his drink, not knowing how to reply.

"It's the people, not the work, that are troubling you, isn't it?" Michelle asked, seemingly gazing right into his heart.

"Maybe?" he replied, sounding almost like a sigh, as he set down his glass.

The wind from outside and the way Michelle understood him made breathing a little easier. It was already past two in the afternoon. In three hours, Seok Kang-Ho, the agents, and the Jeungpyeong special forces team would depart.

*Buzz Buzz Buzz— . Buzz Buzz Buzz— . Buzz Buzz Buzz— .*

Kang Chan's phone began to ring. Although Michelle understood French, he had no time to delay.

"Hello?"

- It's Hugo. We've secured nineteen Korean agents and are waiting at the rendezvous point. The situation is dire.

"Understood. What about the French agents' casualties?"

Michelle looked shocked hearing him, but Kang Chan couldn't avoid asking that question.

- Seven have been killed.

Kang Chan gazed out the window.

Surviving a confrontation against the UIS was unlikely. Those bastards would use a khanjar to slit their enemies' throats at the first opportunity.

"Would it be safe to send me a text?"

- We have secured this line from eavesdropping or wiretapping.

"Then send me the location through this line. No matter the time, make sure you contact me if there's any development."

- Understood.

After hanging up, Kang Chan let out a soft sigh. His eyes were glinting, making it difficult for him to look at Michelle.

Chapter 284: The Nation Calls (2)

"Are you sure you should be wasting any more time here?" Michelle asked as she got up. She walked over to her desk and opened a drawer.

"Here." She placed a gift box in front of Kang Chan. "I got you a gift."

The French agents in Libya had not yet found a place to hide, and the reinforcements from South Korea had not yet departed. Suppressing his impatience, Kang Chan unwrapped the gift.

Nestled inside was a watch with a leather strap.

"Thank you," Kang Chan replied.

Following proper etiquette, he strapped the watch onto his left wrist.

"It looks great," he said.

"It suits you. Now, hurry along," Michelle urged.

When Kang Chan got up, she approached and gave him a warm embrace. They then exchanged French greetings.

"Thank you," Kang Chan said.

*Thank you for the gift and for understanding why I'm in such a serious mood even though it's been so long since we last saw each other.*

Feeling Michelle's body getting warmer, Kang Chan kept the hug brief.

"You're even more fit now," she commented.

Kang Chan could only laugh in response.

She continued, "Do you remember the birthday promise you made me?"

"I remember it as a one-sided request," Kang Chan said.

"Let's have dinner next time."

"Sure."

Kang Chan lightly patted Michelle's back and left the office. The newly hired staff tried to read the room, but he couldn't really afford to care right now. Outside, he found Choi Jong-Il and Woo Hee-Seung guarding the entrance.

As soon as he walked into the office on the 17th floor, he checked the message he had received from Hugo earlier. It pinpointed the agents' rendezvous location. He then calling Kim Hyung-Jung.

"I just received the meeting location. Is it alright if I come over?"

[I was just about to ask you to.]

"Understood. I'll be there soon."

Kang Chan left the office and headed straight for Samseong-dong. Since it wasn't that far, it only took him ten minutes to reach his destination. Kim Hyung-Jung was already waiting in the underground parking lot by the time he arrived.

"Mr. Kang Chan, if it's okay with you, I'd like you to come with me to Naegok-dong," Kim Hyung-Jung offered.

"Alright."

Kang Chan transferred to the car that Kim Hyung-Jung had pointed him to. Due to the situation, a significantly large number of agents accompanied them.

"In Naegok-dong, you'll be referred to as Deputy Director," Kim Hyung-Jung explained. Noticing Kang Chan's somber expression, he didn't say anything else.

Taking a large roundabout, they eventually turned into the National Intelligence Service building in Naegok-dong. Just before reaching the entrance, Kim Hyung-Jung took out an ID card and attached it to Kang Chan's chest.

They got out of the car and passed by four elevators in the lobby. After taking a corner, they stopped in front of an elevator guarded by agents.

Once Kang Chan was inside, Kim Hyung-Jung pressed a button that had no floor number, sending the elevator down. Its doors soon opened, revealing agents wearing helmets and bulletproof vests in front of it. They were armed with assault rifles.

Kang Chan walked through the inner door of the corridor and bowed. In response, Moon Jae-Hyun rose from his seat and extended his hand to Kang Chan.

"Deputy Director, congratulations on your graduation," Moon Jae-Hyun greeted.

"Thank you, sir," Kang Chan replied.

"Please have a seat."

Hwang Ki-Hyun pointed to the table. Bottles of water, juice, and cups were on it.

"We've confirmed that one of our local informants in Libya has betrayed us. If it weren't for your, Deputy Director, we would have had more casualties. Thank you, and I'm sorry," Hwang Ki-Hyun said.

After a brief pause, he continued, "The United States, Japan, and the United Kingdom have expressed their willingness to assist with this operation. Saudi Arabia has also proposed mediation with the UIS. Of course, we interpret this as their way of asking to be prioritized in the next-gen energy agreement."

Silence followed. Moon Jae-Hyun, Hwang Ki-Hyun, and Kim Hyung-Jung all looked at Kang Chan. Thinking about the situation and Kang Chan, who held all the keys, keeping his mouth shut likely frustrated them.

"I'm not familiar with the proper reporting procedures, so I'll just start by sharing what I know," Kang Chan said, breaking the silence.

Hwang Ki-Hyun nodded, signaling him to speak without inhibitions.

"I have an appointment at the French Embassy tomorrow. It's been hinted that it's far more important than any other meetings I've had and that it concerns the power plant construction."

Moon Jae-Hyun listened intently.

Kang Chan continued, "Seven agents of the French Intelligence Directorate lay down their lives in Libya today to rescue our men. I don't know what will be discussed tomorrow, but I honestly feel like we're holding onto something much bigger than what we're currently capable of."

Hwang Ki-Hyun's expression hardened, and Kim Hyung-Jung lowered his gaze, perhaps out of embarrassment.

"Maybe not the Eurasian Rail, but it's worth reconsidering our stance regarding the energy facilities. I appreciate your desire for retribution, but this is the second time we've been in this situation already."

Moon Jae-Hyun quickly gave Hwang Ki-Hyun a questioning look before focusing back on Kang Chan.

"Our informant in Mongolia also deceived us, causing the deaths of our agents. Now, for the same reason, our men died not long after they arrived in Libya. We'll keep finding ourselves in the middle of incidents like this," Kang Chan finished, holding himself back from suggesting that they give up on the power plant.

Contrary to his expectations, Moon Jae-Hyun was gently smiling at him.

"Deputy Director," he called.

"Sir," Kang Chan responded softly, his eyes on Moon Jae-Hyun.

"If we were to name what we desire the most, it would be you, Deputy Director."

*What is he trying to say?*

"You're the reason we effortlessly got the rights to the Eurasian Rail and, unexpectedly, the next-gen energy," Moon Jae-Hyun praised.

"Mr. President—"

"There's more," Moon Jae-Hyun interrupted. "You single-handedly brought our special forces team to the highest global standard. I'll always remember how you performed in China and Afghanistan. As embarrassing as it is to admit, you and your team's bravery in Afghanistan moved me, Deputy Director."

Kang Chan remained silent, unable to predict where the conversation was heading.

"What should I do? My nation—our country—has seized this opportunity to stand tall. If you decide to go to France, I will cling to your ankles to persuade you to stay. I don't care if it brings me shame."

Surprised, Kang Chan muttered, "Mr. President...?"

"I have to cling to you, Deputy Director. It's in the best interest of our people and our country," Moon Jae-Hyun declared, his eyes shining with determination.

"I cannot bear sacrificing our agents and soldiers either, yet time and time again, we have endured. With limited land and resources, we have only people to rely on," Moon Jae-Hyun explained, displaying his compelling persuasion skill with his calm voice.

"I am aware that we have sent many sons and fathers to their deaths, but I cannot give up. Our inability to properly nurture talent has already cost us many lives. Failing to seize this opportunity now cost us even more. Moreover, it would take years before we get a chance like this again."

*Is he done?*

Moon Jae-Hyun looked at Hwang Ki-Hyun.

"Deputy Director, if the President is clinging to one of your ankles, then I'll cling to the other," Hwang Ki-Hyun said with utmost seriousness.

Kang Chan sighed internally.

The President and the Director of the National Intelligence Service were clinging to the pants of a mere high school student—who was actually already thirty years old—all in the name of serving the country.

Was it because of his time in the Foreign Legion? The unit and camaraderie always seemed to take precedence over the state for him.

The three people surrounding Kang Chan looked at him with eyes full of passion, the same kind that the fallen soldiers and agents had in their eyes before they died.

"We've also been informed of the rendezvous location. Deputy Director, if you were to lead the next operation as the head of anti-terrorism, how would you proceed?"

Hwang Ki-Hyun's question snapped Kang Chan out of his thoughts.

"Rescuing our men and ensuring everyone's safe return is crucial. We can get revenge once the Intelligence Directorate has given me a list of the people behind this," Kang Chan stated.

Many likely shared the same thoughts.

Raising his gaze, he continued, "I have a few questions."

"Go ahead," responded Moon Jae-Hyun.

"If I go to the embassy tomorrow, there's bound to be a discussion regarding the development of next-generation energy. I would like to know how much authority you're giving me over this matter."

While Moon Jae-Hyun and Hwang Ki-Hyun silently contemplated, Kang Chan voiced his requests.

"I also have a favor to ask. Regardless of the cost, for the sake of the projects we are pushing forward, we have to secure a satellite exclusively for the National Intelligence Service. I would also like you to consider rewarding the people who joined the operations in China, North Korea, Afghanistan, and Africa, and compensating the families of those who lay down their lives for South Korea."

"The President and I are already discussing providing rewards, but compensating our fallen exceeds our regulations. Making exceptions would

differentiate them from other meritorious individuals," Hwang Ki-Hyun answered. "As for the satellite, our technology is far too outdated for one."

"If I were to purchase it, could you manage the transaction?"

Hwang Ki-Hyun glanced at Moon Jae-Hyun for his reaction, then answered, "That would require employing some expedient measures. We'll look into it."

Their willingness was strong, but reality had its limits.

"On another note, do we really have to rely entirely on French technology for the energy facilities?" asked Moon Jae-Hyun.

"As far as I know, yes," Kang Chan replied.

"Then I'll give you the authority to handle this matter, Deputy Director. However, I do hope to get some leeway in negotiations with other countries, including the United States."

"Understood," Kang Chan responded.

"The Eurasian Rail used to be our main objective, but we have stumbled upon something even greater. This might sound too ambitious, but I want you to understand this one thing."

Drawn in by Moon Jae-Hyun's manner of speaking, Kang Chan eagerly waited for him to continue.

"I doubt the Eurasian Rail and the next-gen energy will see results within my term. I am satisfied with having laid the foundation. The completion of these projects will ultimately be up to you."

*Damn it!*

They presented it as if they were offering something nice, but all they were really saying was that Kang Chan had to see things through to the end.

Swallowing a sigh, Kang Chan bid them farewell and left the room with Kim Hyung-Jung.

After sending Kang Chan off, Moon Jae-Hyun and Hwang Ki-Hyun sat back down.

"The deaths of our agents seem to have broken his spirits," said Moon Jae-Hyun.

"That does appear to be his greatest weakness," Hwang Ki-Hyun commented.

Moon Jae-Hyun nodded. He then asked, "How are we doing with the special forces team's rewards?"

"We're pushing for a one-rank promotion."

Considering their contributions, not even a three-rank promotion would be too much. However, not even Moon Jae-Hyun could order a promotion of more than one rank.

"Find a way to offer the families of our fallen some actual help, not just some way to improve the Deputy Director's mood," Moon Jae-Hyun ordered. "Don't forget to consider the fairness with previous honorees, though. Due to budget allocations, it will be difficult to increase their compensation."

With a soft sigh, he changed the subject. "What about our plan to invite other presidents and prime ministers over?"

"After listening to the deputy director's story tomorrow, we're thinking of inviting them over under the pretext of a conference on the development of next-gen energy."

"Are you suggesting we expand our scope?"

"Wouldn't getting them all in one place lead to bigger outcomes?" Hwang Ki-Hyun confidently replied.

\*\*\*

Kang Chan left the National Intelligence Service's main building and hopped in the car. He then checked the time. It was already five in the afternoon. Seok Kang-Ho's team was likely on their way to Libya now.

*The bastard didn't even call me before he left!*

"Have they been informed of the rendezvous location?" asked Kang Chan.

"It was sent to the plane in code," Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

"What about their local guide?"

"The National Intelligence Service has already received a response from the Intelligence Directorate regarding our request for a liaison," Kim Hyung-Jung paused for a moment. He then hesitantly continued, "The fallen French agents will be compensated according to the standards of the French Intelligence Directorate."

At Kang Chan's lack of response, Kim Hyung-Jung continued, "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize, Manager. We do still have to follow regulations."

Kang Chan knew that being hardheaded right now wouldn't change anything.

When asked about dinner plans, he told Kim Hyung-Jung that he planned to go home early. When they arrived at Samseong-dong, he had Choi Jong-Il drive him home.

His chest felt tight. For the Eurasian Rail and the new energy to succeed, they would need a power stronger than the National Intelligence Service, just like France had both an intelligence bureau and an intelligence directorate.

"Let's stop by a coffee shop for a bit before I head home."

They parked in front of the coffee shop at the intersection. Kang Chan went inside and took a seat on the terrace with Choi Jong-Il, Woo Hee-Seung, and Lee Doo-Hee. Although they had left three other agents outside, he still wanted to spend some time with these three.

He could feel the wind growing colder, signaling nightfall.

"I've had enough coffee. Something mild would be nice," Kang Chan ordered.

Lee Doo-Hee soon brought back four cups of yuja tea[1].

"Is Mr. Seok's departure bothering you?" Choi Jong-Il asked.

"Not really," Kang Chan replied. He took a sip of the hot yuja tea before setting the cup down.

"We're just too inexperienced to take on projects as massive as the Eurasian Rail and the next-gen



energy. Everything feels clumsy. Filling in the gaps with the deaths of our brothers doesn't sit right with me."

Choi Jong-Il awkwardly held his disposable cup.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, sir," he quietly said. "Think of this as the process of the agents who survive turning into veterans so they can pass down their experience to others."

"Are you sure?" Kang Chan asked.

"We've never even used the term 'retaliation' before. We lose more than ten agents every year in Europe alone, yet we've never received a direct order to fight back."

One could only sigh at such a statement.

"Honestly, no one expected that we would ever get to solve issues this way."

"That's kind of naive," Kang Chan said.

Choi Jong-Il and Woo Hee-Seung burst into laughter. Lee Doo-Hee turned his head away, hiding his smile.

"It might be tough, but please keep leading the National Intelligence Service, sir. Instill pride in our agents and give them the chance to stand shoulder to shoulder with the agents all around the world."

As Choi Jong-Il spoke, Woo Hee-Seung and Lee Doo-Hee surveyed the surroundings. Perhaps because of their intimidating looks and scars, the tables nearby were empty.

"I don't know much about the world of intelligence," Kang Chan admitted.

"I think you'll manage," Choi Jong-Il replied.

Kang Chan felt as if Choi Jong-Il was grabbing him by the ankles.

"Don't you think our fallen agents in Libya died regretting their decision to join?"

"The special forces soldiers didn't," Choi Jong-Il answered.

"Those men at least managed to accomplish their objectives, though. The agents died nearly as soon as they arrived, didn't they?"

"They were the first to volunteer when the National Intelligence Service announced its intention to retaliate."

"So, you're saying their deaths weren't in vain?"

"It was an order from the state. When the nation calls, we gladly answer it. We have lived and will continue to live this way." Looking straight at Kang Chan, Choi Jong-Il added, "We agents exist for the moments our country needs us. I believe now is precisely one of those times."

Listening to Choi Jong-Il's words, filled with unprecedented passion, Kang Chan felt as if an unshakable grip had irrevocably caught him by the ankles.

Chapter 285: The Star of David (1)

*Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep. Click, click, click.*

Kang Chan opened the front door and entered their apartment. He couldn't help but smile when he saw Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook inside.

Yoo Hye-Sook walked over to him and gave him the bouquet that she was carrying.

“Congratulations on your graduation, Channy.”

Kang Chan hugged Yoo Hye-Sook, his diploma and the bouquet that he had received at the office still in his hands. “Thank you.”

It was strange, but embracing his mother sank the chaos of emotions inside him to the bottom.

“Congratulations,” Kang Dae-Kyung praised, coming from behind Yoo Hye-Sook to pat Kang Chan's shoulders.

From nearly falling to his death, their son was now living a life that was difficult for them to understand. Even so, they still tried their best to accept him. They had shown Kang Chan what a true family and parental love looked like.

“I can't believe our son's really moving up.” Yoo Hye-Sook said, her voice quivering with emotions, as she stroked the diploma that Kang Chan had handed her.

After quietly watching them for a moment, Kang Dae-Kyung finally spoke up. “Let's go have dinner.”

“Oh, right! Dear me!” Yoo Hye-Sook exclaimed.

Yoo Hye-Sook put the diploma in the living room cabinet and walked into the kitchen.

“I'll follow. I want to change first,” Kang Chan said.

“Alright. Don't take too long,” Kang Dae-Kyung replied.

Kang Chan went to his room and changed into something more comfortable, then put his pistol and walkie-talkie in the desk drawer. After leaving the fountain pen and watch on his desk, he walked out of his room with his phone, which he always kept with him, in his pants pocket.

He washed his hands in the bathroom and then finally headed to the kitchen.

“What's this?” Kang Chan asked.

“Your dad bought it. It's a special occasion, after all,” Yoo Hye-Sook responded.

“It looks delicious. Thank you.”

Kang Chan could easily tell the difference between beef and pork, especially since he'd had beef for lunch.

*Hiss.*

Kang Dae-Kyung put meat on the grill, and Yoo Hye-Sook carried the vegetables for wrapping the meat in, gochujang, and garlic to the table.

“I’ll do it,” Kang Chan insisted.

“No, let me. Beef doesn’t taste good if it’s overcooked, so move aside already,” Kang Dae-Kyung joked.

*Hiss. Hiss.*

Kang Chan thought he was flipping the meat too quickly, but it would be hard to convince his father otherwise, considering he had such a confident expression.

“Have a seat, Channy,” Yoo Hye-Sook urged him.

“Alright.”

The distinctive aroma of beef filled the kitchen.

Kang Dae-Kyung cut the beef and held out a piece in front of Kang Chan. “Here!”

“It’s okay. You can serve Mother first,” Kang Chan said.

“Today’s your graduation day. You should get the first bite,” Kang Dae-Kyung argued.

Since Yoo Hye-Sook also watched him with expectant eyes, Kang Chan quickly ate the beef hanging on the edge of the tongs.

“Whoa! This is really good,” he remarked.

“Your turn, Honey.” Kang Dae-Kyung picked up another piece and put it inside Yoo Hye-Sook’s mouth.

“Mm! You cooked the meat just right, Honey,” Yoo Hye-Sook praised.

“You think so? Let me try one...”

Kang Dae-Kyung ate a piece of the beef. He then exaggerated his delight.

“You should take a seat too, Honey,” Yoo Hye-Sook urged.

“All right,” Kang Dae-Kyung replied.

Kang Chan put some white rice, pepper, garlic, mixed seasoned scallions, and gochujang on a lettuce leaf and ate it. It was delicious.

The atmosphere right now couldn’t even be compared to the ambiance of their lunch, which had felt more like the last supper. Kang Chan was happy.

*That punk!*

If Seok Kang-Ho had bothered to give him a call before leaving, he would probably feel a lot happier right now.

After eating to their hearts’ content, they helped each other clean up. They then sat back down at the table and had some yuzu tea instead of fruit.

After taking a sip of his tea, Kang Dae-Kyung cautiously asked, “Do you have any plans for the future?”

As Kang Chan's father, he had every right to ask him about his plans for the future or how he wanted to live his life.

Wanting to tell him the truth and discuss some of the things that were on his mind with him, Kang Chan replied with a question of his own. "Have you seen the news?"

"News? Which one?" Kang Dae-Kyung responded.

"The development of next-generation energy."

Kang Dae-Kyung glanced at Yoo Hye-Sook and then brought his gaze back to Kang Chan.

Kang Chan added, "It's probably going to be French technology backed by Russian oil."

"Are you saying... You're involved in that too?" Kang Dae-Kyung asked in disbelief.

"Yes. The denadite and cetinium from Mongolia will serve as its core materials."

Kang Dae-Kyung looked flabbergasted, while Yoo Hye-Sook seemed more worried than anything.

Kang Chan continued, "I had a brief meeting with the President today. Because it's related to the ambassador, I will probably be working on this project for the time being."

"Won't it be dangerous?" Yoo Hye-Sook asked. She turned to Kang Dae-Kyung to see if he agreed.

"Well, what do you think?" Kang Dae-Kyung asked Kang Chan.

"Father."

"Yes. Feel free to say what you think," Kang Dae-Kyung replied. His gaze on Kang Chan was filled with trust and assurance.

*I trust you. I just hope you don't say anything that would surprise your mother.*

Was this what a father-son relationship should be?

Kang Chan replied to Kang Dae-Kyung with a look that said "I won't."

Now that Kang Chan had thought about it, he realized that people's eyes could convey so many words.

"I know it's been hard for the two of you, especially with what happened in the underground parking lot, you being forced to stay at a hotel, and having to see me return home with injuries," Kang Chan said.

Yoo Hye-Sook fiddled with her teacup, seemingly remembering every moment he mentioned.

"They say this is a huge opportunity for our country. To be honest, I don't know about any of that. I want to work on the next-generation energy for other reasons."

Yoo Hye-Sook slightly raised her gaze. She looked a bit afraid of what Kang Chan would say, but at the same time, she looked curious about it too.

Kang Chan continued, "Even if I quit, its development will likely push forward in some way. Either way, until it's completed, we may still have to cooperate with the French."

"Will this project be handed over to the French if you give it up?" Kang Dae-Kyung inquired.

"I think so."

Kang Dae-Kyung nodded in understanding.

"It's not something I'm dying to do, but I also don't want to disappoint the people who've worked hard to get us this far."

"So you're saying you want to try your hand at this project?"

"Yes."

"Because you don't want to turn a blind eye to the people you've worked with?"

"Yes."

Kang Dae-Kyung looked straight at Kang Chan. His eyes seemed to be asking him, 'Do you have to keep doing dangerous things?'

Kang Chan's momentary hesitation was answer enough. Although it might seem insignificant, it was enough for a father to understand his son.

As Kang Dae-Kyung let out a quiet sigh, Yoo Hye-Sook suddenly spoke up.

"Honey? Is this energy thing dangerous for Channy?"

"Well, it's not..."

"It's not that..."

Kang Dae-Kyung and Kang Chan quickly shut their mouths, realizing they were about to say the same thing. Yoo Hye-Sook looked at them.

"Well, Channy's education is a bit of a concern for me," Kang Dae-Kyung said.

"Education?" Yoo Hye-Sook echoed.

Was Kang Dae-Kyung sly or was Yoo Hye-Sook a bit slow? Kang Chan didn't know what to think. Either way, Kang Dae-Kyung's remark seemed to have somewhat diverted Yoo Hye-Sook's attention away from her question.

"Won't our son be in even more danger than before?" Yoo Hye-Sook still asked with concern.

"You know how strong the people who protect us are. There's no need to worry," Kang Dae-Kyung answered, reassuring her.

“That’s a relief, Honey.”

Unable to look Yoo Hye-Sook in the eye, Kang Chan dropped his gaze to the floor. He felt like he was tricking her even though she wholeheartedly believed her husband and son.

“What do you think?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked Yoo Hye-Sook.

“Well, I…” Yoo Hye-Sook trailed off when she saw Kang Chan. Her suddenly eyes turned red, and she began to sniff.

Kang Chan raised his gaze, finding Yoo Hye-Sook already dabbing her eyes with her palms.

“I’m okay. I felt safer after Min-Jeong protected me that time too. Don’t hang your head low for school, Channy. I’m okay. I really am.”

“Goodness, you crybaby,” Kang Dae-Kyung joked.

“You always have to say that, don’t you? How can I not cry when our son is acting so timid on his graduation day?” Yoo Hye-Sook complained, frustration in her voice.

“Does that mean you also support Channy doing what he wants?”

“Sniff!” Yoo Hye-Sook inhaled, seeming unable to let go of her wishes about Kang Chan’s education yet.

“Honey.”

“Yes?”

“Do you trust Channy?”

“How can you ask me that?” Yoo Hye-Sook replied with a tinge of sadness.

“Then let him do what he wants until he’s thirty. After that, if he wants, I can teach him the trade, I suppose.”

Yoo Hye-Sook looked at Kang Chan, regret filling her eyes. “Okay.”

Kang Dae-Kyung turned his attention to Kang Chan. “I need you to promise me something?”

“What is it?”

“If you still don’t have a proper job by the time you’re thirty, I want you to take over the family business.”

“I promise,” Kang Chan answered.

Kang Dae-Kyung chuckled, pride written all over his expression, while Yoo Hye-Sook looked upset for Kang Chan’s sake.

They spent a bit more time reminiscing about Kang Chan’s high school days. Kang Chan didn’t know anything about the things that happened before his accident, so he just went along with the flow.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Amid their conversation, his phone vibrated.

Was that Seok Kang-Ho? Or was it from the DGSE?

Kang Chan quickly picked up the phone.

[Can you call right now?]

“It’s Mi-Young,” Kang Chan told his parents.

“What is it? Oh! She must have texted to congratulate you. You can go into your room and call her,” Yoo Hye-Sook said.

“I can just do it later.”

“It’s okay. Go to your room. I want to get some rest after cleaning this up anyway.”

Kang Chan supposed they had been sitting at the table for a while now. He got up and went to his room, then called Kim Mi-Young.

- Hello? It’s me.

“Hey. Congratulations on your graduation.”

- You too. It sucks I couldn’t see you today. It would’ve been nice to get a picture together.

“Yeah, too bad.”

Time always seemed to fly whenever he talked to her, even if it was just about random things. The call also always ended with her distinctive laugh, which he found strangely addictive.

“Good night. Hehehe.”

Kang Chan didn’t know how he felt about other people hearing this laughter.

\*\*\*

Waking up at six in the morning, Kang Chan headed outside for a workout.

Seok Kang-Ho had likely already arrived at Tripoli Airport in Libya. All Kang Chan could do now was wait for Hugo to contact him from the French DGSE. Still, just to be safe, Kang Chan had taken his phone with him.

After warming up, he began to run around the apartment complex.

His enemy right now was the UIS. No one could say for sure that he wouldn’t be approached by some random person with a bomb strapped to their body. Hence, whenever he went outside,

he always had to be wary of anyone who came close to him. That extra work only further exhausted Kang Chan and the agents protecting him.

For that reason, Kang Chan just ran around the perimeter of the garden that was along the complex.

“Haah. Haah.”

He slowly picked up the pace, eventually getting to the point where he was running at his top speed.

This was Seok Kang-Ho they were talking about. He was a step above Gérard and just as good at fighting as Kang Chan. Lately, he had also been using his brain so well that it sometimes surprised Kang Chan.

“Phew!”

Kang Chan propped his hands on his knees and spat out the sweat dripping into his mouth. As he did, Choi Jong-Il came over and handed him a bottle of water.

“I haven’t received any word yet,” Kang Chan said.

Choi Jong-Il didn’t ask, but he was probably curious. Kang Chan felt inclined to tell him any updates first.

“I’m going to the French Embassy an hour before noon.”

“Understood,” Choi Jong-Il replied.

Kang Chan sipped some water, then walked to the stairs to head back up to the apartment. He always felt bad whenever the agents greeted him with a smile on the occasional flight of stairs.

“Oh? Did you work out?” Yoo Hye-Sook asked.

“Yes. How was sleep?” Kang Chan responded.

“It was great.”

Kang Chan took a shower, put on fresh clothes, and ate breakfast with his parents.

Since Yoo Hye-Sook needed some more time to understand, Kang Dae-Kyung and Kang Chan sat together in the living room and turned on the newscast.

[It remains to be seen if Japan has consulted with our government on this recent announcement, but it is so shocking that it will come as a surprise to our people, as well as the people of China and Japan.]

“What could be so surprising that they had to say that?” Kang Dae-Kyung mused.

“I wonder,” Kang Chan agreed.

Kang Dae-Kyung’s question was soon answered.

[It has been an unusual morning. Earlier today, Japan announced at seven o’clock that it acknowledges Dokdo as a territory of the Republic of Korea and that the country sincerely apologizes to South Korea for the war of aggression. Japan will resolve all issues regarding reparations and compensations with the South Korean government. Again, here is the announcement made by Japan Prime Minister Ida.]

The screen switched to a shot of Japan’s prime minister standing in front of his cabinet. Subtitles played as he made his announcement, followed by a series of flashes too numerous to count.



Yoo Hye-Sook came over while a reporter stated that there was no mention of an apology to China and the rest of Asia in the announcement.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Japan has acknowledged Dokdo as our territory and is apologizing for the war of aggression,” Kang Dae-Kyung answered.

“What?”

It was such a random announcement that it was understandable why Yoo Hye-Sook couldn’t immediately comprehend it.

“Let’s head out. We can take our time watching what’s happening in the office,” Kang Dae-Kyung suggested.

“All right, Honey,” Yoo Hye-Sook replied.

Kang Chan saw both of them off and told them that he would be visiting the embassy today.

“See you later,” he said.

Once back inside, Kang Chan sat down at his desk and searched for more articles related to the news on his computer.

There had to be more to it. He didn’t know what it was, but this couldn’t be happening just because someone suddenly grew a conscience. Unfortunately, the articles online only focused on the apology as well. They didn’t mention anything about the reason Japan suddenly apologized.

Soon, it was time for Kang Chan to go. He got dressed and strapped his gun and walkie-talkie in their rightful positions before picking up his phone.

As always, he was fitted in a dress shirt and a suit.

He had just graduated yesterday. In a way, he felt unshackled. It wasn’t like school had gotten in his way of doing anything in the first place, yet he still felt more freedom for some reason.

Kang Chan debated on making a phone call but decided to just leave straight away. As he expected, Choi Jong-Il came over as soon as he exited the apartment complex.

“You’re not cold?” Kang Chan asked.

“The weather’s warmed up quite a bit,” Choi Jong-Il replied.

Kang Chan realized he had just asked a stupid question. Choi Jong-Il couldn’t really say, “It’s so cold that it’s unbearable.”

They all left as soon as Kang Chan stepped into the car that Lee Doo-Hee was driving.

The topic of conversation on the way there was, of course, the announcement from Japan.

“Manager Kim is going to be worked to death at this rate,” Kang Chan remarked.

“He does seem a bit tired recently,” Choi Jong-Il joked back with a smile.

As they pulled into the parking lot of the embassy, French agents came rushing out. Kang Chan got out of the car and abruptly paused when he saw a familiar face.

“Monsieur Kang. It’s been a while.”

“Louis! How are you?” Kang Chan greeted warmly.

“Perfect,” Louis replied with a grin.

Kang Chan was happy to see him. Now, they had more people to protect Lanok. Maybe it was because it had been a while since he last saw Louis, but Louis’ legs seemed longer than ever.

They entered the embassy, went up to the second floor, then walked straight into the office.

“Monsieur Kang!”

“Anne!”

Seeing her again made Kang Chan ten times happier than when he saw Louis.

Anne walked over with a slight gait and embraced Kang Chan.

“I’m glad you’re here, Anne. Your presence makes me feel a lot more relieved,” Kang Chan said.

“Thank you, Monsieur Kang.”

Kang Chan was genuinely glad to see Anne. He felt much more at ease having her and Louis around than if they had added ten more agents to the security detail.

After exchanging greetings with Anne, Kang Chan shook Lanok’s hand.

“Let’s sit down and have some tea,” Lanok offered.

The three sat down at the table that Lanok always gestured at. Louis stood guard at the entrance with his hands clasped in front of him.

Kang Chan felt as if it took quite a while, but little by little, things were finally coming back to where they should.

Raphael brought them tea, and Anne poured it into the cups.

Lanok took a cigar, and Kang Chan and Anne took cigarettes. The father and daughter didn’t seem uncomfortable at all to be smoking around each other.

“Why don’t we go golfing now?” Lanok joked.

Kang Chan started to chuckle.

*Thud.*

However, he was stopped short by the loud beating of his heart.

Chapter 286: The Star of David (2)

Kang Chan had never experienced anything like this before. His heart sank to the ground, making him feel as if a knife was about to be stabbed into his throat. However, only a moment later, he calmed down like nothing happened.

“What is it?”

Lanok seemed to have seen the momentary flash of anxiety on Kang Chan’s face. He had never been the type to miss anything.

“I’m just worried about the rescue team we sent to Libya,” Kang Chan said.

“You still haven’t heard from them yet?” Lanok asked.

“No.”

Anne’s expression darkened with worry as she listened in.

*Click.*

Before they could continue, Raphael walked in wearing a solemn expression. “The guests have arrived.”

“I’d like to move this to the dining room. Is that fine with you?” Lanok asked.

“Of course,” Kang Chan answered.

He and Lanok stood up.

“We’ll do our own thing,” Anne said, perhaps finding it difficult to join the meeting.

Since Kang Chan didn’t really have any say in things like that, he simply cast a glance at Louise before heading to the dining room.

Raphael opened the door for them. Lanok walked in first, and Kang Chan followed after him.

*Pft.*

The first person Kang Chan saw was Vasili. The Russian greeted Kang Chan with cold eyes and a narrow smile that seemed more like a smirk.

“It’s been a while,” Vasili said.

“Nice to see you,” Kang Chan responded.

“Mr. Kang Chan, I trust you’ve been well,” Yang Bum greeted.

“You too,” Kang Chan said as he shook the hand that Yang Bum offered him.

The eyes, facial expressions, and gestures of a man in power were certainly a cut above the rest. Yang Bum was no exception.

Next was Ethan. Receiving Kang Chan’s gaze, Ethan awkwardly held out his hand.

“Monsieur Kang.”

Kang Chan couldn’t find any reason he should be glad to see this man again. Hence, he just looked him in the eye and shook his hand.

The only one left now was the middle-aged man with a build that was halfway between Ethan and Lanok. He had narrow eyes that seemingly evidenced his stubbornness and brown hair that hollowed out in the center like a monk's.

As if on cue, Lanok introduced him to the man. "Monsieur Kang, this is Romain de Begeade, the Director-General of the DGSE."

Just as Kang Chan was about to greet him, Romain approached him with open arms.

"We finally meet. It's a pleasure to meet you," Romain said as he took Kang Chan in his arms and gave him loud smacks on the cheeks.

"Let's take a seat," Lanok offered, and they all sat down.

Kang Chan was a bit upset. He also felt some disbelief at the situation.

They were in South Korean territory, yet he could guarantee none of the men here had been given an entry stamp by the Ministry of Justice. Moreover, he thought that at least Hwang Ki-Hyun should be here at this meeting.

"Shall we make a toast to this gathering?" Lanok suggested. After pouring himself some wine, he raised his glass.

What was the toast for?

"To the beginning of the new energy source."

The others raised their own glasses and took a sip.

Raphael and three other employees smoothly served the food.

After putting some food in his mouth with the fork, Ethan began, "Monsieur Kang, your contributions in Africa were incredible."

"Can we talk about lighter subjects during meals?" Vasili asked with annoyance.

"That's a plan," Ethan replied.

*What a dumb coward.*

Kang Chan couldn't believe that the leader of an intelligence bureau would make such an expression and say something like that from a mere word from Vasili.

"Monsieur Kang, about the Mongolian base..." Vasili began. Despite embarrassing Ethan for starting a heavy conversation, the subject he opened wasn't light at all. "Don't you think they've done more than enough?"

"What do you mean?" Kang Chan asked.

He ate a snail covered in sauce before turning to Vasili.

"Do you plan on making a new country?" Vasili sarcastically asked.

He ripped his bread apart as he met Kang Chan's gaze. "You're controlling the area around the base too much. Managing normal traffic for foreign companies goes beyond your jurisdiction. Why you need complete control within a fifteen-kilometer radius is beyond my comprehension."

Kang Chan wasn't aware of this either.

"The DMZ King," Vasili said the Korean nickname in a horrid and sickening accent. "Why don't you give him a call? Either shrink down the radius or allow normal traffic to get through."

*The old man caused a pretty big fuss, huh?*

While Kang Chan nodded, steaks were brought out.

"I'll look into it and make reasonable adjustments," Kang Chan replied.

Vasili nodded and then dug into his steak using his fork. The sight was similar to when he had torn into the bread earlier. Kang Chan strangely felt like he had become the bread or the steak.

"I saw Japan's big announcement," Yang Bum suddenly broke in with a new topic. "Considering they only mentioned one country, they seem intent on making it clear that they are only making concessions for South Korea."

"Is that so?" Kang Chan responded.

He found this dull meal a bit uncomfortable. He would rather everyone just directly said what they wanted to say, but they kept on dragging things along. To make matters worse, the pounding of his heart kept bothering him too.

After about forty minutes of small talk, they finally finished the meal. The only person who didn't say a word was Romain, the Director-General. He was also the only one who looked like he had eaten properly.

Following the meeting participants' preferences, Raphael cleared the table and brought out black tea and coffee. After setting ashtrays on the table, he left with the rest of the staff.

*Click. Click.*

Tangible tension drifted across the table as cups of coffee were lifted and lighters were flicked on.

As Kang Chan took a sip of his coffee, someone finally broke the silence.

"Let's get things out of the way one at a time," Lanok said, drawing everyone's attention to him. He exhaled cigar smoke before continuing. "I'm sure everyone knows that South Korea will be building the power plant for the new energy—"

"What about the Blackhead?" Vasili interjected.

"Monsieur Kang has retrieved one from Africa."

Everyone's gazes shot to Kang Chan, seemingly asking for confirmation. Looks couldn't kill, however, so he just nonchalantly took out a cigarette and lit it up.

"So the red light was the Blackhead after all?" Vasili asked, to no one's surprise.

"Yes," Kang Chan answered.

“Abibu must have a death wish. He even used the UN to set us all up only for you to bring back a Blackhead amid it all,” Vasili remarked.

This was Kang Chan’s first time hearing that name.

“You don’t know Abibu?” Vasili asked.

*Vasili really has to stop using that cocky tone and expression.*

“Abibu is one of the princes of Saudi Arabia. He coveted the new energy more than anyone. He’s been working with Brandon from the DIA, but the United States is now trying to get rid of Brandon and work directly with South Korea,” Vasili explained.

If it wasn’t for his arrogant expression, his explanation would have been neat.

He continued, “However, we should keep an eye out for the Jewish intelligence organization that controls Saudi Arabia’s oil money. They are our real enemy.”

Kang Chan let out a low sigh. He had gained yet another enemy before he even got to see what this Abibu guy looked like.

“We haven’t identified this intelligence organization. All we have is their name, ‘Star of David.’” Vasili stated.

*What’s he saying?*

“For now, we’ll focus on dealing with Abibu and the construction of the next-gen energy facilities in South Korea. They will likely come out of the shadows before the plant is built.”

Stifling tension loomed over the table once more.

“Monsieur Kang, remember today’s meeting. Ludwig, Vant, and all of us here are at risk of disappearing into Death’s embrace at any moment. There are only two ways out of this. We either politely hand over the project to Abibu or succeed in building the power plant in South Korea.”

“Why does it have to be South Korea?” Kang Chan questioned.

Vasili looked at Lanok as if asking why Kang Chan was asking such a stupid question.

“It’s because the Star of David can most easily exert its influence here in South Korea, but it’s also this country that they find the hardest to control, Monsieur Kang,” Lanok quickly explained.

“The Star of David’s best weapon is money. South Korea is dependent on foreign capital due to how its economy is structured right now, making it vulnerable to attacks from the dollar. However, if Germany, Switzerland, and the four countries sitting here come together to help, they won’t be able to destroy

the South Korean economy. The change in the US' attitude is also playing in our favor.”

*What scary people.*

This had to be why more than half of Kang Chan's training in France was about economics.

“Wouldn't we yield the same outcome no matter where we do it for as long as all the nations involved work together?”

If France, Russia, England, China, Germany, and Switzerland were to come together, any nation would be able to endure the worst of attacks.

“Russia wouldn't be able to withstand cheap Arab oil, and China would have no choice but to surrender if the yuan was attacked. The other countries all have their weaknesses due to their scale. South Korea, on the other hand, can be protected from foreign capital attacks by having Russia supply it with oil and getting the other nations to help.”

*This is hard! So fucking hard!*

Kang Chan inwardly shook his head.

Lanok added, “I'm sure CIA Director Sherman offered you Arab oil and money, but we still haven't learned the exact details.”

“I haven't heard anything like that yet, but the South Korean government has informed me that it expects at least the barest amount of leeway for negotiations with the United States or other countries,” Kang Chan stated.

Amid everyone listening to their conversation with serious expressions, Kang Chan's heart pounded loudly again.

*Thud.*

Considering he had heard that there was no issue in Mongolia, could he take this as a warning that Seok Kang-Ho was in danger?

Kang Chan glanced at his phone just to be sure, but it couldn't get any reception.

“Electronic devices cannot be used in this room right now. Are you worried about Libya?” Lanok asked.

“Monsieur Kang,” Vasili called before Kang Chan could answer.

Kang Chan really couldn't get a moment of peace in here.

“I won't get into the vast sums of money needed to build the power plant, but if we fail, all the countries involved will be irreparably and irreversibly financially ruined,” Vasili darkly declared.

He kept his eyes on Kang Chan as he leaned back in his chair.

“A few more or a few less deaths now won’t matter. While we’re at it, let me make one more thing clear.” Vasili spoke so confidently that it seemed as though he were speaking for the rest of the room. “Until we actually extract electricity from the Blackhead, I’d like you to recuse yourself from future operations. I’m sure you can guess why.”

Vasili clearly had no idea how much Seok Kang-Ho, the special forces soldiers, and the agents meant to Kang Chan. However, Kang Chan still understood why he was making such a request.

“Can you develop the new energy source without me?” Kang Chan asked.

Vasili glanced at Lanok before answering.

“You’re currently our only means to stabilize the Blackhead. Even if we have a stable Blackhead, this is our first energy plant, so we may need your abilities from time to time.”

“Then what if the Star of David, which we know nothing about, kills me?”

Vasili let out an exaggerated sigh, seemingly exasperated by the questions.

“The agents of our intelligence bureau and the French DGSE took out twenty UIS operatives in China. I hope you know that the intelligence services of all the countries that are a part of this are willing to go the distance for your safety and that this puts our lives in that much more jeopardy.”

“I’ve got one more question. Which can we accomplish earlier? Killing Abibu or finishing the energy plant?”

Vasili glared at Kang Chan.

“Abibu? The Star of David? How about we act while we create the energy plant even if doing so means setting off an earthquake in the Arab oil fields?” Kang Chan suggested.

Ethan swallowed and glanced around the room.

“Get to the point, Monsieur Kang,” Vasili replied.

“Let me make one thing clear,” Kang Chan immediately shot back. “Don’t expect me to hide and come out only when necessary throughout the entire construction of the power plant. I refuse to just stand by and watch as the people I care about get hurt.”

“Ha!”

“Vasili.”



“I hear you. So does China, England, the DGSE Director-General, and even Lanok, who you hold so dear,” Vasili snarked, no longer bothering to hide his dissatisfaction.

“I’m saying that rather than waiting for their attacks, we should show them what we got,” Kang Chan firmly stated.

Vasili chuckled, then sighed in disbelief. “Ha! Hahaha! Ha! Our main character is so ready to act despite being so unprepared! What do you plan to do next? Hm, Monsieur Kang?”

“I will strike Libya.”

“Phew! It sounds like you want to use our power to avenge South Korea and rescue your agents. Might I remind you, Monsieur Kang, that we’re only interested in the energy that the Blackhead can provide, not in the development of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service or their agents,” Vasili bluntly concluded.

With a nod, Lanok suddenly chimed in. “It isn’t such a bad idea, though.”

Vasili scoffed. “It’s not like you to be so emotional, Lanok.”

“Why don’t we offer the US a stake? The condition will be the rescue of the South Korean agents from Libya. Meanwhile, we keep an eye on Abibu’s movements. If we’re lucky, the Star of David might reveal itself to us.”

“You think the Star of David will go out of the shadows just to take out the South Korean agents in Libya?” Vasili sarcastically questioned.

“Wouldn’t they make a move if the Blackhead possessed by England comes into play?” Ethan asked.

Everyone’s eyes shot to him, including Vasili’s.

“You’re willing to give it to the US?” Vasili asked.

“It may have lost its energy, but it’s still unstable. If we offer it as collateral for giving the US a stake, the Star of David will be forced to take action,” Ethan replied.

“If they’re wary of the US acting independently, they may make a move. The US will definitely have other ideas, though.”

“Then their stake will vanish into thin air.”

“Hm! Your plans are indeed different from a certain sly Frenchman I know.”

Ethan’s expression turned sour, but Vasili seemed to be interested in the idea.

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*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Bang, bang! Bang, bang!*

The rooftop wall in front of Cha Dong-Gyun exploded, accompanied by the sound of gunfire. They immediately returned fire.

Although they had a sniper and four soldiers in positions Seok Kang-Ho had pointed them to, they still felt a little tense. After all, they didn't know when an RPG could come flying at them.

They didn't expect anything like this. The moment they arrived, they were met with an endless barrage of attacks. It almost looked like the UIS had taken over the entire Al-Aziziyah.

*Du du du! Pow, pow, pow!*

Every time Cha Dong-Gyun looked up, bullets came flying at him.

If it wasn't for the one-story-high entrance in the middle of the roof, not even snipers would be able to get a good shot.

*Du du du! Bang! Du du du! Bang! Bang!*

Alternating pistol and AK rifle gunshots came from the building across the alley. Afterward, they received a frantic radio call.

*Chk.*

“We're all down to one mag.”

The South Korean and French agents were in the building right across the street. The sly UIS had been watching them the whole time and attacked just before the agents could reach the rendezvous point.

“Damn it,” Seok Kang-Ho spat out.

Cha Dong-Gyun didn't expect Seok Kang-Ho's cursing to sound so comforting.

“They're all going to die when they run out of bullets. Let's rescue them before then, shall we?” Seok Kang-Ho said.

“How many of us will be going?”

“Ten.”

“I'll go.”

“I'll go, so you select the ten.”

*Du du du du! Pow, pow, pow, pow!*

“Hurry!” Seok Kang-Ho shouted.

A standard pistol magazine could only last them so long.

Cha Dong-Gyun quickly raised his hand to his radio.

*Chk.*

“Team One and I will be going in for the rescue. We will be under Mr. Seok’s command. Kwak Cheol-Ho, take charge of this location,” Cha Dong-Gyun ordered.

Seok Kang-Ho just glanced at Cha Dong-Gyun as he listened to the comms.

The sun was already setting below the horizon.

From afar, they could hear the sound of the Quran being read from a loudspeaker.

The grayish-white buildings and walls, the proclamation of the Quran, and the setting sun...

“Fuck!” Seok Kang-Ho swore as he looked at the sky.

Returning to Africa brought him back to a landscape that he found all too familiar. However, only Algeria reminded him so perfectly of home.

“We’re ready.”

When he looked back down, he found Cha Dong-Gyun and Han Jae-Guk standing in formation with the other soldiers.

“Let’s go.”

Seok Kang-Ho stood up, on his face a smirk that was just like Kang Chan’s.

Chapter 287: The Do your best to survive (1)

*Crackle. Crackle.*

Debris from the damaged wall rang out as they walked on the stairs.

*Chk.*

“The rescue team is on their way. Agents, prepare to join them,” Kwak Cheol-Ho radioed in.

*Chk.*

“Copy!” an agent answered from the building across the street.

The rescue team soon reached the entrance on the first floor. Seok Kang-Ho exhaled cigarette smoke as he peeked through a crack in the door.

They were being shot at from every building but the one in front.

Seok Kang-Ho pointed downward with his index finger, then held up four fingers, gesturing at Cha Dong-Gyun to take four men and secure the area below them.

As ordered, Cha Dong-Gyun quickly chose four agents.

Seok Kang-Ho exhaled cigarette smoke again. “Hoo.”

He could feel Kang Chan’s absence now more than ever. He really missed the man.

Seok Kang-Ho already expected that they would have trouble maximizing their potential without Kang Chan. Nevertheless, he still felt as if this was his first time realizing that with Kang Chan, he, Gérard, and even Cha Dong-Gyun always displayed 120% of their capabilities.

*Du du du du du! Pew! Pew! Bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

They heard AK-47s, sniper rifles, pistols, and M16s go off at the same time, a clear sign that the UIS had made another push toward the trapped agents. In retaliation, the rescue team's snipers began opening fire, preventing their enemies from launching RPGs at them and marking the beginning of their operation.

“Let's go!” Seok Kang-Ho yelled. Gritting his teeth, he pulled the door open.

*Screech! Whoosh! Clunk! Clunk! Clunk!*

*Bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

There was only a five-meter distance between the two buildings.

Seok Kang-Ho shot at the hostiles as he ran out. Cha Dong-Gyun and the other soldiers supported him from the back.

*Du du du du! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Prepared to lay down their lives for the mission, Kwak Cheol-Ho and his team covered fire as well.

*Bam!*

Seok Kang-Ho jumped into the building across from them.

*Du du du! Pew! Pew! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bam!*

“Hurry!” he yelled.

*Hisss!*

Two agents in suits and shirts rushed out of the building with a French agent, whose arms they had draped around their shoulders.

“Go! Make it quick!” Seok Kang-Ho urged.

*Du du du! Pew! Bang bang bang! Bang! Pow pow pow!*

More agents carrying or helping the wounded quickly followed the two into the rescue team's building.

*Whoosh!*

Once the entrance was clear, Cha Dong-Gyun rushed into the building that the agents had come from.

“We're going up!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed.

As they had planned earlier, he led four soldiers up the stairs.

*Crackle! Crunch! Clunk! Clunk!*

*Bang!*

Seok Kang-Ho kicked open the door to the rooftop. His gaze immediately landed on Um Ji-Hwan, whose face was covered in dust.

“Get out of here!” Seok Kang-Ho yelled.

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Pew! Pew! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

Seok Kang-Ho bent down and crouched against the rooftop wall that Um Ji-Hwan had been using as cover.

“Hyung-nim!” Um Ji-Hwan shouted.

“You motherfucker! Get your ass downstairs! Now!”

They didn’t even have time to say hello.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang!*

As Seok Kang-Ho fired back at their enemies, Um Ji-Hwan crawled to the door.

*If only this building was as tall as the building across from us, then I would have led all my men to this building instead!*

*Pew! Pow pow pow! Du du du du! Du du!*

All of the agents gathered behind Cha Dong-Gyun, who was guarding the entrance.

Having caught on to their plan, their enemies were now firing at random. Even though the alley was only five meters wide, the unpredictable gunshots made it hard for them to run across.

Amid their hesitation, someone shouted in Arabic from a building nearby. Not even a moment later, their foes began riddling their building with bullets, chipping away at the walls and dirt.

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Pow pow! Du du du du! Pow pow pow pow!*

Kwak Cheol-Ho and his team shot at their enemies in an attempt to suppress them.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

*Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

Cha Dong-Gyun, Han Jae-Gook, and the other soldiers also returned fire.

Their enemies were attacking from both sides of the alley, hoping to kill as many of them as possible here.

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Du du du du! Du du du du!*

*Chk!*

“On the count of three, I want all soldiers to volley fire!” Cha Dong-Gyun, use that opening to rush over to the other building!” Seok Kang-Ho ordered through the radio, shouting over the loud gunshots.

The concentrated enemy fire broke more parts of the walls and sent more dirt flying, but they didn’t let it faze them. After all, this was the only option they had left.

Cha Dong-Gyun gritted his teeth as he looked at Han Jae-Guk and the other soldiers, finding their expressions filled with determination.

*Chk.*

“One! Two!”

Frightening nervousness swept over everyone tuned in to their frequency.

“Three!”

*Bang bang bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang bang bang!*

Their rifles roared awake.

*Whoosh!*

Cha Dong-Gyun and Han Jae-Guk focused on their left flank, while the other three soldiers covered their right.

*Bang bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang bang!*

*Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh!*

As the soldiers traded blows with their foes, the agents ran toward the building on the other side of the alley.

*Du du du! Pew! Pew pew pew! Du du du du! Du du du!*

*Pow pow pow! Thud! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

Han Jae-Guk flew back and slammed to the ground just as the last agent entered the building across from them.

*Du du du du! Du du du! Pow pow pow! Thud!*

Behind them, they heard another soldier fall.

*Du du du du! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Du du du! Du du! Bam!*

‘Urgh!’

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang bang!*

Cha Dong-Gyun suddenly felt as if a knife had just been jammed into the right side of his stomach. Pushing through the pain, he fired back at their enemies.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang!*

*Swoosh!*

Not long after, Seok Kang-Ho rushed out the door with four soldiers.

“Cha Dong-Gyun!” he yelled, grabbing Han Jae-Guk by the collar. “Pull!”

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang Bang bang! Du du du! Du du du du du!*

However, before they could get far...

*Du du du du! Du du du! Pow pow pow pow!*

... blood splattered out from all over Seok Kang-Ho.

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**BANG!**

Kang Chan felt his heart crash to the ground. He then filled up with so much spite that, if anyone messed with him right now, he instinctively knew that he wouldn't hesitate to draw the pistol strapped to his ankle.

Glaring at the center of the table, Kang Chan's eyes overflowed with murderous intent, making even Vasili nervously look at Lanok.

"Mr. Ambassador," he called. He then raised his head. "Vasili."

He also called Yang Bum, Romain, and Ethan in order.

"Call me thoughtless and tell me I don't have my priorities in order all you want, but I need to go to Libya right now. Either come up with the fastest way to get me there or I'll figure it out myself."

"Can you explain what's going on?" Vasili asked, which Kang Chan didn't expect from him.

"Vasili," Kang Chan called once more.

As if having a staring contest with him, Vasili refused to look away from Kang Chan.

"After requesting to make South Korea a part of the Unicorn project, I meddled in the next-gen energy affairs even though I wasn't interested in it—all for the ambassador. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have cared whether or not France or the UK disappeared from the map," Kang Chan said.

Romain gasped at his words.

"Someone as important to me as the ambassador is in danger right now. If you're wondering how I know, let's just say it's a side effect of my ability to destabilize the Blackhead's energy."

"France, Russia, China, Germany, Switzerland, and the UK are fully prepared to go bankrupt for this," Vasili argued.

"Then don't start."

Kang Chan responded so sternly and coldly that Vasili was rendered speechless.

"So what if this changes the dynamics of the world a hundred, maybe even a thousand years from now?! Will any of us even still be alive then?!" Kang Chan exclaimed. "Why would I pick this over someone precious to me? For the future generation? How can you be so confident that, thousands of years into the future, our people will be living in prosperity when I can't even protect my people right now?!"

Strange emotions permeated the room.

Kang Chan continued, "I wouldn't hesitate to do this again if the one in danger is the ambassador. You'd probably act the same way if your people's lives are at risk, Vasili. Either way, I can't build a

future while there are bastards out there messing with my people and my colleagues! That's who I am, and that's how I've lived all this time!"

"You talk as if you've lived a long time," Vasili commented.

Deciding not to participate in this discussion any longer, Kang Chan coldly said, "I'm out."

He was sure that his heart sank because of Seok Kang-Ho. Something terrible must have happened to him.

It didn't matter what fate the world would suffer. For as long as his closest friend was in danger, he would never be able to do anything else.

Kang Chan stood up, his chair screeching as he pushed it back.

"I fucking hate being a supporting character!" Vasili swore as he glared at Kang Chan, who couldn't quite understand what he meant.

"I'll drop you off in Libya in six hours," Vasili said.

Lanok smirked. Even Yang Bum looked amused. Unlike them, however, Romain simply observed Lanok.

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*Hisss!*

Seok Kang-Ho, Han Jae-Guk, and a soldier left three long trails of blood in the alley.

The agents they had saved armed themselves with rifles, then went up to the rooftop. Thanks to them, the soldiers had a moment to spare.

*Thud!*

The soldiers propped Seok Kang-Ho against the wall on the first floor of the building.

"Hyung-nim!" Um Ji-Hwan yelled.

As he examined Seok Kang-Ho's wounds, the others lay Han Jae-Guk on the floor next to them.

"Huff

. Huff. First Lieutenant," Han Jae-Guk called between heavy breaths. With difficulty, he turned his head toward Cha Dong-Gyun.

"Stay with me! You better fucking survive, you bastard!" Cha Dong-Gyun responded. One of his men wrapped bandages around his waist as they spoke.

"Please pass on this experience to our juniors as well," Han Jae-Guk paused for a moment, then continued, "Our special forces team is really amazing."

"You didn't just say that right to my face, motherfucker! Hey! Pull yourself together!"

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Bang bang bang! Bang! Pew! Pew! Pew!*



Loud gunshots rang out again.

With the sun now setting, darkness had embraced about half of the first floor.

Once the night had fallen, they would have a hard time spotting the RPGs. Hence, the snipers were working extra hard to take out as many as they could.

“You should be the one passing on our experiences to our juniors, not me—hey! Han Jae-Guk! Fuck!” Cha Dong-Gyun yelled. He shook Han Jae-Guk’s face, but the man was already turning white.

“Ugh!” Cha Dong-Gyun groaned. The soldier tending to him had just pulled on the bandages and tied them tightly.

Cha Dong-Gyun wanted to yell. He wanted to take his rifle, run out, and gun down their enemies. However, before he could do anything reckless, a tired, gruff voice snapped him back to his senses.

“Calm down.”

Seok Kang-Ho was covered in wounds as well. He seemed to have been shot above his right knee, his stomach, the right side of his chest, and his right shoulder.

“If the commander gets worked up, all of their soldiers will die.”

Gritting his teeth, Cha Dong-Gyun looked into Seok Kang-Ho’s eyes.

“Head upstairs. Console the men. Think about what the captain would’ve done if he was here. If you can’t do that, then at least imitate him.”

“Yes, sir,” Cha Dong-Gyun answered with determination.

Cha Dong-Gyun groaned as he stood up. Horrible pain washed over him, forcing him to hunch over, but he forced himself to move anyway.

If Kang Chan was in his shoes, this was definitely what he would’ve done.

Cha Dong-Gyun saw it with his own eyes in Africa. Despite collapsing from his bullet wounds, Kang Chan still relentlessly gunned down their enemies. He even pulled Cha Dong-Gyun up even though a bullet had fucked his shoulder up.

Cha Dong-Gyun gained strength Seeing Kang Chan’s determination to protect his men always fired Cha Dong-Gyun up.

*Clank!*

Cha Dong-Gyun took his rifle and went up the stairs.

“You go up there too,” Seok Kang-Ho told Um Ji-Hwan. “Fight with the others.”

Um Ji-Hwan swallowed dryly, refusing to budge.

“Are you really not going?” Seok Kang-Ho asked. The disappointed look on his face finally made Um Ji-Hwan nod and stand up.

*Clatter. Clatter.*

Once Um Ji-Hwan had gone up the stairs, Seok Kang-Ho looked at the soldiers guarding the entrance.

“Any of you got a cigarette?” he asked.

One of them quickly went over and put a cigarette in Seok Kang-Ho’s mouth. He then flicked the lighter on.

*Chk. Chk.*

The flame of the lighter looked beautiful in the dark.

As Seok Kang-Ho smoked, embers and ashes fell from the other end of the cigarette.

Seok Kang-Ho puffed out smoke. “Huu.”

He then locked eyes with the soldier, who had gone back to the entrance.

“You should also smoke if you want to,” Seok Kang-Ho said.

The soldier simply smiled in response

*Why is he smiling? I didn’t say anything funny.*

Seok Kang-Ho’s lips were so dry that the cigarette remained stuck to them even when he spoke.

He exhaled more cigarette smoke.

He understood not being able to move his right arm, but why couldn’t he move his left either? Moreover, the darkness settling in the building was making him sleepy.

Seok Kang-Ho found himself grinning, not because he was afraid of dying but because he was afraid of what Kang Chan would do if he did.

*He’s going to be so fucking lonely by himself... He might even blow up Libya...*

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“It seems like our main character plans to keep acting like this, Lanok. Shouldn’t us side characters at least prepare countermeasures?” Vasili asked as he looked at Kang Chan’s now-empty seat. His voice and the look in his eyes were full of dissatisfaction.

“Shouldn’t we give him power?” Lanok asked.

“Power?”

“As you’ve all just witnessed, Monsieur Kang isn’t the type to be swayed by things like the benefits that the next-gen energy will bring. The South Korean government might be able to influence him, though, but I’ll reach a compromise for that.”

Looking at everyone seated at the table, he continued, “Consider not only the benefits that we’ll earn but also South Korea’s position. They’ll be the first to construct the power plant for this project, after all.”

“Can’t you make it easier to understand what you’re saying?” Vasili asked.

“No matter how much we interfere, it won’t be as effective as Monsieur Kang becoming powerful. Hence, we should encourage him to create his own intelligence bureau instead. That would give us a bit more bandwidth when dealing with any matter.”

“Haha!” Vasili laughed, seemingly seeing right through Lanok. “Are you planning on dragging the US into this too?”

“Well, they have already put a foot into this matter. On that note, I believe it’s now your turn to work hard for us, Ethan.”

Everyone turned to Ethan, who carefully examined their moods.

“You should do things properly this time. If you try another one of your stupid ideas, the Star of David might just target you first,” Vasili said.

“Don’t worry, Vasili.”

“Don’t hold a gun against my head like how you targeted Lanok after all the promises you made.”

“Handing over the Blackhead is my sincerity towards this matter,” Ethan said.

“The problem is that your damn sincerity change way too frequently,” Vasili sharply responded.

When Ethan fell silent, Yang Bum asked, “What are we going to do about Japan?”

“Don’t their promises fall exactly into the leeway that the South Korean government is requesting? For as long as it doesn’t disrupt the international situation as a whole, there shouldn’t be a problem giving them the ability to negotiate with other countries,” Lanok answered.

“We also need to keep an eye on the politicians in South Korea. They’ve been displaying unusual behaviors too.”

“I agree,” Lanok said with a nod. “Even if it means having to employ certain political moves, creating a faction in South Korea would still yield the best results. Considering the Star of David might also choose to do that, you should examine South Korea’s regime, more than anyone else here.”

“Alright. One more thing...” Yang Bum trailed off. With a determined look, he asked, “Was my obtaining authority over China’s Intelligence Bureau part of the plan for the next-gen energy?”

“As I’m sure you already know, we had to kill Suo Ke because he kept targeting me no matter what it would cost him. However, it was Monsieur Kang who decided to put you in power, not any of us here. We accepted you as a part of

this business venture because you have an effective and clean way of dealing with situations. We need people who, at the very least, won't hold a gun to our heads when we're not looking."

Even though Lanok was talking to Yang Bum, Ethan still dropped his gaze.

\*\*\*

'Ugh!'

Kang Chan was losing consciousness, but he forced himself to stay awake.

He didn't expect to feel the difference in ability this badly. The strength of France, Russia, China, and the UK was really amazing.

The moment they regained access to their electronic devices, they made a mere total of six phone calls. Nevertheless, that was enough to put Kang Chan in one of the US' F16s[1]

*Daye! You son of a bitch!*

Kang Chan was about to swear even more, but he held it down.

*I don't care what they make me do! Just stay alive. Don't turn me into the man who murdered all of Libya.*

Kang Chan's head pressed right against the chair, which was slightly shaking.

Chapter 288.1: Do Your Best To Survive (2)

*Du du du! Pew! Pew! PEW!*

With the night deepening, the snipers failed to spot another RPG. As the rocket whistled closer, they saw a faint trace of white smoke.

Ordinary people often imagined that if they were to ever find themselves in a situation like this, they would easily and quickly avoid the incoming rocket. However, in reality, all they would be able to do was freeze.

The special forces soldiers were different, however. Swiftly, they ducked and jumped away from the point of impact.

*BAM!*

One of the walls of the rooftop exploded, causing what remained of it to crumble. Dust from the chaos cascaded like a stream of water.

*Crackle.*

*Bang bang bang!*

*Du du du!*

Sparks burst from the muzzles of the AK-47s, sending bullets toward the roof.

Cha Dong-Gyun quickly took one of the grenades hanging on his vest.

*Ting!*

The hostiles had started rushing toward them from both sides of the alley again.

*Swish! Du du du! Du du du du! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

The heavy fire remained relentless even as Cha Dong-Gyun threw the grenade.

*BOOM!*

The explosion sent the enemies reeling backward almost as if they were flying.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang bang! Du du du! Pew! Pew! Pew!*

Wearing turbans and loose clothes, their enemies instilled immense fear in them as they resumed charging. Before they knew it, the bastards were already quite close to the entrance on the first floor.

*Bang bang bang! Du du du! Bang bang! Du du! Du du!*

Everything would be over if their enemies managed to get through the first floor. Fortunately, thanks to Seok Kang-Ho's quick thinking and judgment, the building they had occupied was on top of an incline.

“Huff huff. Huff huff.”

Breathing heavily, Cha Dong-Gyun leaned against one of the intact walls. Much to his amusement, the stars above them right now were still the same ones that he had seen in Africa.

He had always desperately hoped that their special forces team, like those of the United States and France, would be able to go on operations anywhere in the world with just one command from South Korea.

If he were to die now, he knew he would die happy. For him, special forces soldiers should feel that way about getting to lay their lives down for their nation. However, not long after, he remembered what Kang Chan had yelled at them during their first live ammo training.

“I need soldiers who will do whatever it takes to return from operations alive. I need soldiers who can survive even if information about them is leaked or they are completely surrounded! None of you understand how it feels to watch your comrades get covered in their own blood and fall dead to the ground! So if you're just going to spout bullshit, leave!”

Was this what Kang Chan had meant? Was that how Cha Dong-Gyun felt when he saw Han Jae-Guk die drenched in his own blood?

Remembering that some of their men also died during their operation in Africa only made him more acutely feel the difference of having Kang Chan around.

Cha Dong-Gyun looked at the bodies of the soldiers and agents lying on one side of the rooftop.

He felt sorry. If only he had been just a bit more capable—if only he had predicted their enemies' actions a little quicker...

Cha Dong-Gyun always felt relieved whenever their enemies quieted down. However, at the same time, not knowing why their enemies weren't attacking them or how they should act during moments like this made him feel suffocated. He couldn't bring himself to command the soldiers—he didn't even know what order to issue.

He looked at Um Ji-Hwan, whose face was all dirty. Leaning against the diagonal wall, he kept gasping for breath. Cha Dong-Gyun felt sorry for him.

Cha Dong-Gyun wanted to be one of the soldiers who would survive no matter what—even if information about them was leaked and enemies completely surrounded them.

He hoped that he would be the last to die, not Han Jae-Guk.

He remembered the look in Kang Chan's eyes back in the pit in Africa, right before he attempted to shake Kang Chan's grip off.

“Grab onto my shoulders, you fucking son of a bitch! You're dead when I get you out of there!”

How would he describe Kang Chan's gaze as he pulled him up with his wounded shoulder?

Would determination be the right word?

People shouldn't make it sound so easy.

How could anyone do what Kang Chan had done out of pure determination?

Cha Dong-Gyun looked blankly at the sky.

*Rustle. Rustle.*

After some time, Kwak Cheol-Ho crawled toward him and held out a water pouch. His face was so dark he looked like he had applied camo paint.

*Gulp. Gulp.*

Feeling as if he had returned to his senses a little, Cha Dong-Gyun sighed.

“Phew.”

*Thud.*

Kwak Cheol-Ho sat next to Cha Dong-Gyun and reached into his chest pocket.

“Let's have a smoke,” Kwak Cheol-Ho said.

“Right now?” Cha Dong-Gyun asked. He then looked around their surroundings.

“We're completely out of sight here, so we don't have to worry about our enemies shooting at us. We can even eat something light. Anyway, once we're done smoking, we can probably start a rotation with the other soldiers.”

Seeing Cha Dong-Gyun smirking in response, Kwak Cheol-Ho held out a cigarette and flicked his lighter on.

*Chk chk.*

The flame of the lighter illuminated the blood covering Kwak Cheol-Ho's hand.

After puffing out smoke, Cha Dong-Gyun addressed it. “What’s wrong with your hand?”

“Nothing. I just almost lost a finger,” Kwak Cheol-Ho shamelessly answered as he, too, exhaled the cigarette smoke.

“Anyway, look over there.” Kwak Cheol-Ho nodded to the wall across from them, where the army interpreter was.

The army interpreter was holding his rifle close to him. He was staring right back at them, looking like he was about to cry. The sight almost made Cha Dong-Gyun burst out laughing.

Kwak Cheol-Ho added, “He returned fire a moment ago while looking like that.”

“You should’ve sent him down to the first floor.”

“I was going to, but he told me he wanted to fight. His blood seemed to be boiling as well when he came up to the roof, but getting a glimpse of the enemies frightened the fight out of him. Even so, he still has to relay orders to the two French agents whenever necessary. He can’t really opt out of that one.”

“What time would it be in South Korea?”

“Libya is exactly seven hours behind South Korea,” Kwak Cheol-Ho answered.

*That doesn’t really answer my question, though...*

As Cha Dong-Gyun turned his gaze away, Kwak Cheol-Ho suddenly called him.

“First Lieutenant,” he said, softly, as he rubbed his cigarette on the ground. “You were the coolest today—cooler than anything I’ve ever seen.”

“You fucker!”

The two suddenly snickered, making them look as if they had gone insane.

“Well, that was fun, but playtime’s over. Let’s go rotate in for guard duty.”

They heard a gruff response from the wall across from them.

“Okay, okay.”

Cha Dong-Gyun and Kwak Cheol-Ho stood up and took the post of two soldiers.

“I just realized now how busy we are,” one of the soldiers commented.

“If you don’t like it, then you definitely shouldn’t join the next operation.”

“What made you think I said that because I don’t like being here? I look cool fighting in battles like this, you know!”

“Shut up and finish your cigarette already. We have to rotate in with the others too.”

Despite the atmosphere enveloping the building, the two soldiers still continued their conversation in whispers.

They naturally knew how each other felt. How could they not when the corpses of their comrades were right beside them?

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Kang Chan had lost track of how many times the jet refueled mid-flight.

Every time the pilot said, "Ready to jump," on the radio...

*Pow!*

'Urgh!'

... the aircraft would make it impossible for him to think.

Fortunately, after three hours and twenty minutes in the air, the fighter jet finally began its descent.

The F16 vibrated roughly as Kang Chan heard its tires skid against the ground. After a while, it finally stopped at one side of the runway.

When the canopy of the jet opened, the pilot looked behind him and gave Kang Chan a thumbs up.

*Why is he giving me a thumbs-up when all I did was sit behind him?*

Kang Chan didn't feel like doing it, but to say that he would never forget about his hard work, he gave the pilot a thumbs up as well anyway.

Two people in suits and soldiers in military uniforms quickly gathered near the fighter jet.

Kang Chan almost stumbled as he stepped out of the fighter jet. The bumpy ground below his feet felt as if they were made of sponges, sinking and heaving with each step he took. To make things worse, he felt as if he was sinking with it.

"I'm Kevin, the person the CIA has put in charge of the Middle East."

The night seemed especially dark this evening.

Kang Chan was still feeling dizzy when someone approached him and spoke to him in English. The man next to him relayed his words in French.

*If they were going to use an interpreter, why didn't they just send over someone who speaks Korean instead?*

"The US Army currently has control over Tripoli airport under the condition that we support the anti-Gaddafi regime[1]. Unfortunately, we can only guard this place for twenty-four hours."

Instead of responding, Kang Chan opted to just listen to what Kevin was saying in silence.

He had to meet up with the Foreign Legion and save Seok Kang-Ho as soon as possible. It was upsetting that Gérard couldn't come, but that only showed how bad the rebellion in Congo had become.

Kevin continued, "CIA Director Sherman also has a message for you."



*This bastard's still talking? I'm in a hurry, for fuck's sake!*

The look in Kang Chan's eyes changed.

“We have five Hellfire[2]-armed Apache helicopters[3], five Black Hawk helicopters[4], and fifty Delta Force[5] soldiers standing by. The Black Hawks, in particular, have been fitted for rescue missions. In return, Director Sherman only requests that you have a private meeting with him as soon as the rescue operation is over,” Kevin said.

Kang Chan noticed that the interpreter wasn't that good at his job. However, at the very least, he was doing well enough for him to understand what Kevin was trying to say.

*A private conversation with Sherman?*

Kang Chan would even talk to the god of death if it meant saving Seok Kang-Ho.

Chapter 288.2: Do Your Best To Survive (2)

“Where's the Foreign Legion?” Kang Chan asked.

“They're on standby outside the airport,” Kevin quickly answered.

“I'll have the meeting with Sherman. Where's the helicopter?”

“Please come this way.”

Kang Chan tried his best to regain his senses as he followed Kevin down the bumpy runway.

*Wooong.*

As they turned to the freight warehouse in the airport, Kang Chan heard the roar of an engine. It was quickly followed by helicopter blade noises.

*Thwup thwup thwup. Thwup thwup thwup thwup. Thwup thwup thwup thwup thwup thwup.*

“Please come this way,” Kevin said as he guided Kang Chan to the Black Hawk right in front of them. “This is Mark, the commander of the Delta Force. You can discuss the rescue operation with him. Our ground forces will be joining you as well.”

Kang Chan greeted Mark with a brief nod, then got on the chopper. Mark soon followed him.

*Thwup thwup thwup. Thwup thwup thwup thwup thwup.*

As the helicopter rose into the sky, Kang Chan wiped his nose with the back of his hand and found blood smeared on it. He had never had a nosebleed before—not even in combat.

\*\*\*

In the middle of their fierce battle, the South Koreans and Frenchmen were gifted a sweet break by their enemies.

They only managed to rest for twenty minutes, however. They wanted to rest a little longer, but it would be unwise to assume their enemies would willingly grant them their wishes, especially ones that would give them a fighting chance in this battle.

Shortly after hearing people shout in Arabic, they heard their enemies rustle in the darkness.

*Clink! Clank!*

Cha Dong-Gyun picked up his rifle and propped himself against the walls. Following his lead, the surviving soldiers and agents also readied their guns and manned four different spots.

*Du du du. Pow pow pow! Du du du du. Pow pow pow!*

Their enemies started with a simple attack, firing at everyone on the roof of the building. However, they soon started dashing toward the building from the alley.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

Their urban warfare maneuvers were perfect.

Cha Dong-Gyun and his men swiftly retaliated, sending the incoming hostiles to their deaths. However, the sparks from the muzzles of their rifles gave away their position.

*Du du du! Du du! Du du du du du!*

Targeting where the flashes came from, the hostiles swiftly assailed them with bullets.

*Pew! Pew! Pew!*

*PEW!*

As the snipers took down as many as they could, an RPG sharply flew toward the building.

*BOOM!*

The powerful impact shook the building. Another wall had been blown up, its pieces pouring down to the ground.

*Bang bang bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

The French army interpreter lowered his head behind the wall but continued firing back. Empty shells piled up on the floor until he finally managed to hit one of their foes. However, he soon fell backward as well.

“Arghhh!”

The army interpreter rolled on the floor, clutching one of his hands.

People would never understand how much just one scream weakened their allies and destroyed their morale.

“Urgghh! Argh!”

The soldier next to the army interpreter pulled him by the shoulder and propped him against the wall. The army interpreter groaned and cried as he looked at his right hand, which he was holding up with his left.

His index and middle fingers had been completely blown off, leaving him with nothing but two unsightly gaping wounds.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

However, right now, nobody could afford to stop defending to examine the army interpreter. The enemies in the alley had already reached the entrance of the first floor.

*Bang bang bang! Du du du! Du du! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

The two soldiers assigned to defend the door on the first floor frantically fired at the hostiles closing in on their position. If the bastards managed to get past them, they would be as good as dead.

Seok Kang-Ho, who looked as though he was high, tirelessly used his left hand to take out the pistol that he had strapped to his pants. Just looking at the way the soldiers next to the windows were aiming was enough for him to accurately guess how close their enemies were right now.

*They're already right by the door, huh?*

*Bam! Pow pow pow!*

As if to prove him right, parts of the wooden door were chipped away by the bullets coming from their enemies' rifles.

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Du du du du! Pow pow pow!*

*Pow!*

The door shook twice as more bullets hit it. Not long after, the head of the soldier next to the window on the right snapped back.

*Thud!*

The soldier lifelessly fell to the ground.

Cha Dong-Gyun was not stupid. The fact that he only stationed two soldiers by the entrance meant that they didn't have a lot of people to begin with. They likely only had a few on the rooftop as well.

*Chk.*

"There aren't enough people at the entrance!" the remaining soldier yelled into the radio.

"Ugh!" Seok Kang-Ho grunted as he fell to his side. He then tried his best to move, using his left arm to pull himself forward.

*Hisss! Hisss!*

He was bleeding so much that he left a long and thick trail of blood wherever he went.

*Du du du! Pow pow pow! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang!*

*Hisss! Hiss!*

The soldier on the left was almost out of bullets now.

"Ahh!" Seok Kang-Ho yelled. He grabbed the rifle of the fallen soldier and then clung to the window.

*Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

*Clank!*

“Change your mag! I’ll cover you!” Seok Kang-Ho yelled to the soldier.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

Their enemies broke into a charge, stopping only once they had reached the square window. rushed toward them and arrived right in front of the square window, and the enemies collapsed if they shot them.

*Clank! Clank! Clank! Clank! Clank!*

One of the soldiers upstairs quickly ran down to the first floor. At the same time, the soldier at the left side of the building took aim and opened fire once more.

*Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

*Clank!*

*Click! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang bang!*

With Seok Kang-Ho’s magazine now empty, their enemies would have managed to break into the building if the soldier who had just run down from the rooftop hadn’t immediately started returning fire.

*Thud.*

Seok Kang-Ho threw himself to the ground and searched through the corpses of their fellow soldiers. After a while, he finally found a loaded magazine.

*Clink! Clank!*

He couldn’t even remember regaining the feeling in his right arm.

“Ugh!”

Seok Kang-Ho screamed as he stood up, but he couldn’t let the pain stop him now.

*Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang!*

*What would Kang Chan do if he was here?*

Considering Kang Chan’s personality, he would’ve already run out to the alley and gun down every enemy he could find. Once he had pushed the enemies away from their position, he would likely curse, finally realizing that he had been shot.

*Bang bang! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

Now that three men were protecting the entrance, they finally got a bit of a break. However, this wouldn’t have been possible without the soldiers stationed on the rooftop. The moment they heard the soldier’s cry for help on the radio, they likely fought even harder to defend the building.

*Du du du! Du du! Pow pow pow! Pow pow! Bang bang bang! Bang bang!*

Unfortunately, although they were already fighting with everything they had, the battle was still far from over.

Seok Kang-Ho's lips curved into his signature smile, thinking that they would soon meet their end. After all, it was only a matter of time before he and everyone else in their team ran out of ammo.

Once they did, a genuine Islamic battle would ensue.

As soon as their foes right now found out that they no longer had any bullets left, they would do whatever it took to end their targets' lives by slitting their necks.

Their opponent's numbers didn't matter to them. They would charge in relentlessly and grab onto their limbs. Afterward, they would unsheathe their large, curved blades and slowly bury them into their victims' necks.

Some of the rookie soldiers who had been in similar situations had even shot themselves in the head upon hearing their comrades choking on their own blood as their necks were being cut open.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang!*

Kang Chan was the first person to emerge victorious in such a battle.

During a battle in Mangala, Kang Chan rushed into the battlefield to rescue Seok Kang-Ho, whom their enemies had tied up. His eyes back then were burning with ferocity, seemingly informing everyone around him that his lid had been flipped. Outnumbered, he stood in the middle of his enemies' formation, tirelessly swinging his bayonet at them.

*He had yelled at me to stay alive, but...*

"Fuck," Seok Kang-Ho swore.

He was thankful, but he was also sorry.

*Thwup thwup thwup. Thwup thwup thwup thwup thwup.*

Soon, however, they heard the familiar chopping of helicopter blades drowning out the gunshots.

*Bang bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang! Bang bang bang!*

At the same time, Seok Kang-Ho noticed their enemies rushing away from the building and ducking into cover.

*What's going on? Did they send us reinforcements?*

The soldiers on the rooftop could likely see what was going on. Unfortunately, those on the first floor couldn't really see anything.

*Pssshhh! Pssssssssh!*

*What's going on?*

As he tried to make sense of the sudden turn of events, he heard a whistle so sharp it reminded him of air escaping from an enormous balloon.

*BAM! BANG!*

A moment later, a powerful explosion shook the ground. The tremors made Seok Kang-Ho wonder if the building would collapse.

*Du du du du du du du du du!*

Seemingly refusing to give their enemies a break, a white ray of death then filled the alley.

*Ratatatatat! Ratatatatat! Ratatatatat!*

Seok Kang-Ho knew that rapid gunfire. It had to be from a 30mm machine gun.

The machine gun's bullets blew off entire heads and tore apart their enemies so quickly that they almost looked like they were exploding.

*Did we survive?*

Seok Kang-Ho looked at the soldier right next to him.

*Chk.*

"Daye! You son of a bitch!"

*Does he really have to swear on the radio?!*

Chapter 289.1: Did You Think It Would End Like This? (1)

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

The Hellfire missiles disappeared into the building occupied by the enemies. A moment later, flames burst out from all of its windows.

*Boom! Boom!*

*Ratatatat! Ratatat!*

The enemies made intermittent attempts at resistance, but the machine gun tore through them until there were no traces left.

The Five Apache helicopters circling the building in the alley bombarded the area with missiles and machine-gun fire. Massive flames erupted with each explosion.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

The wind from the helicopter blades swept the rooftop debris into the corners.

*Tch.*

[Everyone, move to the rooftop!]

Seok Kang-Ho let out a robust curse.

The Apache helicopters expanded the range of their destruction, demolishing the nearby infrastructures. At the same time, a Black Hawk hovered above the building and dropped a rope to its rooftop.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Braving the fierce wind of the helicopter blades, Kang Chan, dressed in a suit, descended onto the rooftop. Six Delta Force soldiers followed him, securing the corners of the rooftop as soon as they landed.

"Are you okay?" Kang Chan asked.

"Yes, sir," responded Cha Dong-Gyun.

A moment later, one of the soldiers on the first floor burst into the rooftop, carrying Seok Kang-Ho over his shoulder. Kwak Cheol-Ho and another soldier rushed to help, gently laying Seok Kang-Ho on the ground.

"Captain," Seok Kang-Ho called.

"You idiot—!"

Noticing Seok Kang-Ho's struggle to smile, Kang Chan abruptly stopped.

After ordering some of his men to head to the lower floors and bring their fallen to the rooftop, Cha Dong-Gyun turned to the ones still on the rooftop.

"Evacuate the injured! Hurry!"

Kang Chan approached the interpreter, who was holding up his right hand to show his injuries, and patted him on the head. Although he was crying and screaming over the loss of two of his fingers, he brimmed with pride as he looked at Kang Chan, seemingly having just received an award.

Kang Chan silently picked up the rifle beside the interpreter.

*Click!*

It was an odd sensation. Amid the deafening helicopter engines, the distinct sound of Kang Chan pulling the rifle's bolt was unmissable.

'Now, we're truly saved!' Kwak Cheol-Ho thought.

At Kang Chan's signal, a Delta Force soldier tied himself to a rope and fastened an injured person to him.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

As if being sucked up, he was then hoisted into the helicopter. When he descended again, he did the same thing to Seok Kang-Ho. Before they descended, Kang Chan and Seok Kang-Ho's gazes met.

"Captain," said Seok Kang-Ho.

"Survive," Kang Chan ordered.

"Understood."

The mere movement of Seok Kang-Ho's lips was enough to convey his intention.

*Ratatatatatata!*

A distant Apache helicopter fired a white beam of light, preventing the enemies from shooting at them with their rifles and RPGs. It took a considerable amount of time to hoist the injured aboard. Ideally, the helicopter would lower its altitude a little further to make the process easier, but the current situation seemed to be making that difficult.

Once the interpreter, the last injured man on the battlefield, was hoisted up, the helicopter carrying all the wounded left with two Apaches. Another swiftly took its place to load up the deceased. It was a grim task, but there was a limit to how many could be carried, so the bodies had to be packed tightly.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Afterward, the combat-ready soldiers and agents quickly boarded the remaining two Black Hawks. Being able to climb aboard by themselves saved them a lot of time.

"Go! Go!" Mark, the Delta Force commander, shouted.

In response, the helicopters turned and left, the fierce wind from their blades tousling hair and clothes.

This operation resulted in a devastating outcome. More than half of their men had been killed, and not a single one was unscathed. The blood-soaked bandages around Cha Dong-Gyun's waist served as proof of that. Despite symbolizing their determination to punish their assailants and rescue their fellow combatants using any means necessary, the operation yielded nothing.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

The Apache helicopter adjusted its altitude to take the lead, leaving the Black Hawks trailing behind.

The capacity to dive into a hail of bullets and return fire was the result of repetitive training. After all, only those who had the skills and senses for it, in addition to the ability to effectively adapt, could do it. Without sufficient training, one would not survive in situations where they risked having their heads and bodies blown or torn apart.

Even if trained rookies, in their final moments of combat, pointed their guns at their own heads, the battles would still be referred to as operations. Hence, regardless of the outcome, commanders and subordinates alike always felt empty at the end of combat.

However, results like this didn't just make them feel empty. It broke their morale. Witnessing a country like the United States effortlessly rescue them and achieve what they could not only made their disappointment more profound.

*Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!*

Cutting through the darkness, the helicopter landed at Tripoli Airport. By the time Kang Chan and the other able-bodied combatants arrived, the injured had already been moved to the US military's emergency center, and the Delta Force soldiers were already bringing out the deceased agents and soldiers.

As Kang Chan hopped off the helicopter, Kevin quickly approached him.

"We should hurry! Your men will be moved to the emergency center! Mr. Kang, please follow Kevin!" shouted the interpreter over the helicopter noise.

Amid the chaotic runway, Kang Chan locked eyes with Cha Dong-Gyun.

"Go to the emergency center! Stay with our men!" he ordered.

Cha Dong-Gyun saluted him in response.

Kevin led Kang Chan and the interpreter to a private plane. As if in an emergency, the plane took off as soon as they boarded and the door closed.

The plane had tables with grandiose chairs in sets of four. Kevin and the interpreter sat opposite Kang Chan.



Kang Chan felt troubled for not being able to stay with his men until they were out of harm's reach. He also regretted not being able to transfuse blood to Seok Kang-Ho. However, due to the United States' questionable intentions, he couldn't just recklessly let the medics get a supply of his blood.

"Where are we headed?" asked Kang Chan.

"Athens Airport, Greece," answered the interpreter.

*These tedious bastards. Does the concept of national borders and immigration offices even exist to them?*

It wasn't like he was one to talk, though, since he was traveling with them too.

"Would you like some tea? Or wine?" offered the interpreter.

"If it's alright, I'd like to take a nap instead. Wake me up when we arrive," answered Kang Chan.

"Understood."

Kang Chan reclined his seat and closed his eyes. He fell asleep not long after.

He woke up from his deep sleep when the airplane jolted.

*Drrrrrrrrrr!*

After a rough landing, the plane slowed down. He couldn't determine whether the sunlight entering through the window was from daybreak or sunset, but if he had to bet, he'd say it was the former.

When the plane stopped, the door opened almost immediately. They descended the stairs, finding agents in black suits and sunglasses guarding a black limousine.

*Click.*

One of the agents opened the door, revealing seats arranged to face each other. Kevin and the interpreter, wearing clothes and sunglasses that matched the car, sat opposite Kang Chan again.

*What a lack of creativity.*

The car's engine gently started.

On their way to their destination, Kang Chan turned his gaze to the roadside, finding energetic tourists and those waiting for them. The sight made him realize that he was right—it was early in the morning.

After about twenty minutes on the road, the car entered the underground parking of a building with a large signage that said 'Central Hotel.' Together with the agents, they took the elevator to the 7th floor.

*Click.*

'That must be Sherman,' thought Kang Chan.

As the agent opened the door, a Western man in a tieless gray suit walked over from between the men in black suits.

"Mr. Kang? I'm Sherman," he greeted.

"Kang Chan."

Although Kang Chan was fluent in French, he introduced himself simply as 'Kang Chan,' not 'Monsieur Kang'.

"Let's have a seat, shall we? Would you like to have some breakfast?" asked Sherman.

"Sure."

The hotel room offered a spectacular view of Athens.

Two agents put large plates, juice, milk, and coffee in front of Kang Chan and Sherman.

"Please, help yourself."

They set bacon, fried eggs, toast, butter, and jam on the table.

"Thank you for your help," answered Kang Chan.

"It was better than dancing the buttocks dance," Sherman said, then laughed at his own joke.

Kang Chan was reminded of a supporting character blurting out unintelligible lines. However, Sherman took it a step further, uttering even more bewildering statements and laughing about them.

"Hmm, I sincerely apologize for the slight mishap Brandon had caused," said Sherman.

"Mishap?" Kang Chan asked. With his fork, he put a piece of fried egg into his mouth.

"The broadcast in Afghanistan. Just as you forgave Ethan yesterday, we hope you will forgive us as well."

*Ethan, that sly fox!*

"Brandon is no longer of this world," Sherman said out of nowhere. Catching Kang Chan's gaze, he then quickly added, "We want to maintain good relations with Korea and, through this opportunity, express our desire to collaborate on the development of the next generation of energy."

"I don't have the authority to decide on this matter for the government," Kang Chan answered.

Sherman's lips downturned.

"However, as a gesture of appreciation, I will do my best to cooperate with you on issues where I can."

*Click.*

Kang Chan put down his fork and knife, having already finished his meal.

"That would suffice for now. All I want is to forget the Afghanistan incident and create a friendly relationship between our countries," Sherman said.

Kang Chan sipped on his coffee as he listened.

*A friendly relationship? What harm could there be in that? If relationships are lacking, we can simply make more, can't we?*

"Sherman, I have a favor to ask."

"It doesn't involve attacking another country, does it?" Sherman joked.

"I believe this whole energy issue should be decided by our government, Ambassador Lanok, and the heads of intelligence bureaus," Kang Chan said.

With a stiff expression, Sherman focused on Kang Chan's words.

Kang Chan continued. "If there's something you want regarding this matter, it would be better to discuss it with our government than with me. I intend to focus on finding those who ordered and commanded the attack on our men yesterday,"

"What do you plan to do once you find out?" Sherman asked.

"What else is there for me to do but kill them all?" Kang Chan replied.

"Hmm."

A soft sigh escaped Sherman. At that moment, Kang Chan realized that while Lanok hid his thoughts behind an unchanging face, making it seem as if he was wearing a mask, Sherman hid his thoughts by frequently changing expressions.

"The DGSE should be able to get you that information, shouldn't they?"

"That they should," answered Kang Chan.

Even now, he had trouble determining whether Sherman was genuinely curious or just pretending to be.

"However, if you happen to figure it out first, I would like you to inform me, director."

"Why would you want that?" asked Sherman.

"As you know, many agents from the DGSE were also sacrificed in this incident. Hence, we hope to find a solution elsewhere," Kang Chan said.

Sherman chuckled, seemingly amused. "Are you asking me that with full awareness of the symbolic authority you hold, Mr. Kang?"

"Not really."

"I see. May I ask you for a favor in return, then?"

"If it is within my ability, then I'll accept it."

"What would you do if I asked for exclusive rights to distribute the denadite coming from Mongolia? Of course, Korea would retain its production rights," Sherman posed.

Kang Chan looked straight at Sherman. After a moment of silence, he said, "As I'm sure you're already aware, accepting that request would put our government, Ambassador Lanok, and the heads of intelligence in a difficult position. However, I'd consider it under one condition."

Sherman's eyes slightly wavered.

"I want all of the United States' demands regarding the next-generation energy project to stop."

Sherman exhaled softly. "Hmm."

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Hwang Ki-Hyun tried his best to suppress his thoughts as he listened to the interpreter. It was well past midnight, yet the urgency of the situation gave him no choice but to rush over. Fortunately, it proved to be worth the effort.

Lanok staying in Korea made sense, but the same couldn't be said for Vasili, Yang Bum, Ethan, and Romain. World-renowned intelligence bureau directors, whom people desperately begged for a meeting with despite not having any guarantee of success, had just summoned him for a sit. The National Intelligence Service unfortunately was completely unaware of such a gathering, but it seemed wise to put that regret aside for now.

"The South Korean agents and soldiers are currently in Greece. The United States will be handling their transportation, so you should rest easy," Lanok explained with a gentle expression.

Even though they were just sitting together, witnessing him scrutinize every move of the United States still instilled fear and envy.

Lanok continued, "We would like your government to appoint a leader for the Eurasian Rail and next-gen energy development. Of course, Mr. Kang will be those projects' actual leader, but we believe a nominal head is necessary. We hope you will give serious consideration to this matter."

"Our government has limited information regarding the next-generation energy plan. Although we have received various proposals, we know nothing beyond the production of electrical energy using Blackheads and two other minerals. Is there a way to get detailed information about this?" Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

Apart from exchanging greetings, he had mostly just been listening. This was essentially his first time speaking up.

"We will begin by sending you the guidelines that the Korean government needs to follow. Once they have been implemented, France and the UK will send over a research team, and South Korea can insert its own researchers to transfer almost all of the technology over," Lanok responded.

"Are you referring to experts in electrical energy?" Hwang Ki-Hyun inquired.

Lanok turned his head with a dreadful expression. Ethan looked like he was scoffing.

"The Korean government is currently unaware of denadite as well. Regrettably, the previous administrations have been cautious of the eyes of major corporations producing petroleum compounds, making this an unavoidable situation," Lanok explained.

Hwang Ki-Hyun let out a soft sigh.

"Denadite, after the extraction of sulfurous soda, becomes milabanite. Another extraction results in glabanite," Lanok said.

Surely, they didn't convene this meeting just to give a chemistry lesson.

"As a simple courtesy, if South Korea could prepare about thirty STEM researchers, our French and British researchers will proceed with the study with them. Once their training is complete, we will introduce a second wave of researchers," Lanok elaborated.

"How many researchers will be needed in total?" Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

"Let's see," Lanok glanced at Ethan before gazing back to Hwang Ki-Hyun. "Perhaps a hundred or so?"

"Understood," replied Hwang Ki-Hyun, concern evident in his tone.

"No need to rush. As I mentioned earlier, once you have appointed a leader, we will provide the related materials and guidelines. Following them should ensure a smooth process," Lanok reassured.

Unlike Yang Bum and Romain, who were just silently listening to the conversation, Lanok kept talking to Hwang Ki-Hyun with a friendly tone.

"In addition, if you ever need special assistance from the four countries present here, as well as Germany and Switzerland, feel free to send in a request through Mr. Kang," Lanok concluded. He then lifted his teacup, signaling that he had said everything he needed to convey.

DGSE Director-General Romain, who had not spoken a word, carefully observed Lanok's action. After all, a mere command from him could mean that Hwang Ki-Hyun would be found dead the next day.

'Should I take my leave now or should I stay a bit longer even if it risked being asked to leave?' Hwang Ki-Hyun wondered.

Being in such a gathering for the first time, Hwang Ki-Hyun could only try to gauge what to do next.

*Click.*

Lanok put down his teacup, turning with a cold, sharp, and unreadable gaze.

"Director Hwang," called Vasili. The interpreter quickly relayed his French words in Korean. "Mr. Kang won't have much time to spend in Korea for a while."

"However, our protagonist is quite worried..."

*'Protagonist?'*

Hwang Ki-Hyun's questioning gaze prompted the interpreter to nod affirmatively.

"We plan to dispatch two agents from each of our four countries, totaling eight people. For them, we will need office space and accommodations. We will also need an equal number of reliable Korean agents," Vasili elaborated.

"Can you tell me exactly what they will be doing?" Hwang Ki-Hyun asked.

Vasili grimaced as he replied, "We intend to teach them how to use the satellite that we will be transferring to Korea and how to utilize the information that our intelligence bureaus will share."

As Hwang Ki-Hyun looked at him with a blank expression, he added, "We are certain that the UIS will target Korea. If things go south, and Mr. Kang decides to kill them all, it would be difficult for us to handle the aftermath."

*They're transferring a satellite... Wait! Did he just say 'satellite'?!*

"Rather than bolstering the National Intelligence Service, think of it as empowering Mr. Kang," Vasili explained.

Hwang Ki-Hyun couldn't quite understand. However, he deeply felt the immense power that Kang Chan, whom Moon Jae-Hyun had so passionately vouched for, wielded.

#### Chapter 290: Did You Think It Would End Like This? (2)

Kang Chan spent a night in the room that Sherman provided. He then enjoyed a light lunch the next day before making his way to the Athens Central Medical Center. Despite feeling uncomfortable about wearing the same clothes he had worn yesterday, he hesitated to ask the American agents for any favors or errands.

'How long will I spend wandering around today?' he wondered, smirking as he gazed out the window.

Reflecting on the power he had gained, he once again realized that there were limits to what one could achieve alone. This notion had always been on his mind. After all, despite all his preparations, he kept being overwhelmed by his responsibilities. Maybe that was also the reason behind the regrettable outcomes he encountered yesterday.

Now, he found himself in Athens. People from different lives passed by the cafes, restaurants, and bright shops that were hoping to entice tourists. He had never yearned for such a life. Rather, he was already thankful enough to have Kang Dae-Kyung, Yoo Hye-Sook, and the other amazing individuals in his life. He had never had such connections before.

*Blackhead? Next-gen energy? Maybe these are merely byproducts of the things I'm grateful for.*

Either way, Seok Kang-Ho, the agents, and the soldiers saw him as their linchpin and supported him accordingly. Aware of this, Kang Chan realized that he hadn't fully embraced that role yet. Rather, he had preoccupied himself with minor adversaries and shuttling between intelligence bureau offices.

The car soon stopped in front of the hospital, annoyingly interrupting Kang Chan and his thoughts right before he could reach enlightenment.

Exiting the car, a French agent greeted him with a slight bow.

"This way, Deputy Director-General," the agent said.

Kang Chan watched the sedan he had ridden drive away from the hospital. It seemed the DGSE was taking over from here.

*Those kids, always so busy! Couldn't they have at least said hello before leaving?*

He followed the French agent inside and took the elevator to the fifth floor. When the elevator doors opened, he was greeted by two agents standing with their hands clasped in front of them.

"The entire fifth floor has been reserved for the DGSE," one of them said.

Kang Chan around the hall and then entered the first door on the left. It was a small room that contained a bed with complex machinery, a table and a chair

*Hu-wook. Hu-wook.*

An agent laid on the bed, unconscious and connected to a life-support machine. With each labored breath he took, the pouch attached to the device rhythmically inflated and deflated. The dark scabs covering his face, hands, and neck bore testament to the severe struggles he and his colleagues had

to endure in their last mission. This warrior had, without a doubt, dedicated himself to liberation, retribution, and his nation.

‘Well done. And I’m sorry.’

Kang Chan observed the agent's battered features in silence before heading to the next room.

*Drrrk.*

The door creaked open, revealing Seok Kang-Ho in a condition mirroring that of the agent in the previous room.

*Bubble bubble. Hu-wook. Hu-wook.*

Kang Chan approached the bed and examined Seok Kang-Ho's swollen figure. His eyes remained shut, and his face, hands, and ears were so bloated that Kang Chan couldn't see a single line or crease.

Seok Kang-Ho must have been filled with a sense of injustice and anger. Daye, as Kang Chan knew him, would have been seething, insisting on remaining in the fray until he had drawn his last breath. After all, to him, displaying such vulnerability was a fate worse than death itself.

The thought made Kang Chan clench his teeth.

“Daye,” Kang Chan uttered. After a brief pause, he softly added, “Just rest for a bit.”

Leaving the room, Kang Chan proceeded to the adjacent one.

*Drrrk.*

Cha Dong-Kyun, lying on the bed, struggled to turn his head. As soon as he saw Kang Chan, his face filled up with surprise, which was quickly replaced with annoyance as he attempted to sit up.

“Just stay put. This isn't the first time, is it?” Kang Chan chided gently as he walked over to him.

He pressed Cha Dong-Gyun's shoulder, then sat down on the chair beside the bed.

“But I feel sorry...” Cha Dong-Gyun bit down on his lip as he fixed his gaze on Kang Chan. His cheeks were hollow, his jaw sharp, and his eyes intense.

“I have no intention of giving in. If I step down just because they got a hit on us, they'll only grow bolder,” Kang Chan declared, locking eyes with Cha Dong-Gyun. “It's okay to rest if things get too hard, but not for you and Daye.”

“Chul-Ho would be disappointed.”

“He would have said the same thing, just the names would have been different.”

Cha Dong-Gyun laughed, making him wince in pain.

“There's no other way right now except for the special forces team in Jeungpyeong,” Kang Chan pointed out.

“Understood,” Cha Dong-Gyun agreed, his eyes conveying the deep sorrow of a leader who had lost a comrade. Due to Kang Chan’s absence, the heavy toll of death was now his to bear.

“Being in command isn’t easy, is it?” Kang Chan mused.

Cha Dong-Gyun was about to reply but decided to remain silent instead.

"It's only natural for you to feel the loss of a colleague more deeply," Kang Chan advised, "but don't see it as the betrayal of those who have gone before."

Cha Dong-Gyun looked at Kang Chan as if he was conflicted. His curiosity about Kang Chan’s true nature seemed especially piqued during moments like these. Unfortunately, it was left unanswered.

After leaving Cha Dong-Gyun's room, Kang Chan visited also Kwak Cheol-Ho, Um Ji-Hwan, and the interpreter before making his way back to Seok Kang-Ho.

Seok Kang-Ho urgently needed a blood transfusion. Unfortunately, requesting one in a hospital under the vigilant eyes of the Americans proved challenging.

Kang Chan still couldn’t fully grasp the intricacies of the organization, but he at least knew that every person had their own unique approach and style. After gazing at Seok Kang-Ho's swollen face, he took out his phone and dialed a number.

*Tirururuk. Tirururuk. Tirururuk.*

The dial tone let out several old-fashioned beeps before it was answered.

- Hello?

The voice that Kang Chan heard was not the one that he was expecting.

- Kim Tae-Jin speaking. Hello? Hello? The phone's acting up again! Hello?

"It's Kang Chan."

A brief pause ensued.

- Kang Chan?

"Yes."

- Kang Chan! Hey! You're alive! You son of a—how can you be so heartless?!

Oh Gwang-Taek was louder than ever. The Mongolian wilderness only seemed to further amplify his voice.

"Where's the director?" Kang Chan inquired.

- He's out on patrol. Why? What's going on?

"What do you mean?"

At that moment, Kang Chan glanced at Seok Kang-Ho.

- You sound different! Hey, Kang Chan! What's happening?



"Mr. Seok is injured," Kang Chan revealed.

- What? Is it serious?

"It doesn't look like he's going to die, at least."

A deep sigh of relief came from the other end.

- Is there anything I can do?

"Oh Gwang-Taek."

- Tell me. Anything you need.

Oh Gwang-Taek patiently waited.

"Don't you resent me for only coming to you when I need something and for putting you in this situation?"

- What the fuck are you talking about? You're talking to the Oh Gwang-Taek, you bastard! I don't mind helping out a good person! The only ones I can't stand are bad people!

His passionate response was followed by a burst of laughter.

- You're planning to avenge Mr. Seok, aren't you?

"Yes."

- Damn it! I'll discuss it with the people here and then head straight to you.

"And how will things be managed there?"

- Why don't you visit for once, you idiot?! Without our permission, nobody gets anywhere near this place. We've got everything under tight control.

Oh Gwang-Taek's bragging was so outlandish that it would make Vasili shake his head in disbelief.

"Is the old man around?"

- Huh?

Oh Gwang-Taek sounded as if he turned his head as he spoke.

- You mean Director Kang?

"Yes."

- Hold on.

From the other end, Kang Chan could hear Oh Gwang-Taek announce, "Kang Chan is on the line!"

- Hello?

Kang Chul-Gyu sounded different—like he was a lot better and stronger now.

- I happened to be nearby and overheard.

His tone was calm but had a distinct charisma to it.

"I'm up against an enemy too strong for me to fight alone," Kang Chan stated.

The old man chuckled. It sounded almost like a sigh.

- I'll consult with President Oh and decide on our next steps. Do you need more people?

"Following a request from Russia, we have to halve the base's radius and reorganize the personnel. How many fighters will we have left?"

- Well... about two squads.

"We're looking at a situation where more than half of the Jeungpyeong special forces team was wiped out."

Laughter, echoing resignation yet again, filled the line.

- The men with me have been eagerly waiting for such an opportunity. Since they got here, they have shed all their societal excess, ready to play their part.

"Understood. I'll discuss this with Manager Kim. I'll have transportation arranged for everyone."

A moment of awkward silence followed the end of their conversation. Just before Kang Chan was about to end the call, he heard an incredibly awkward "Thank you."

Kang Chan hung up, marking one task complete. He then called Kim Hyung-Jung.

*Those fucking UIS bastards!*

After what they did to Daye and how they left the special forces team in such a state, did they really think he would just let it go?

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Moon Jae-Hyun, always the picture of stoicism, now showed signs of weariness. They had gathered in the reception room of an art gallery tucked away behind the Namsan Hotel. On the sofas arranged around Moon Jae-Hyun were Go Gun-Woo, Hwang Ki-Hyun, and Jeon Dae-Geuk. Kim Hyung-Jung, the junior among them, took up the last seat.

"Former Prosecutor General Song Chang-Wook has agreed to serve as the inaugural commissioner of the newly founded Energy Resource Administration," Go Gun-Woo reported.

Moon Jae-Hyun simply nodded.

"Discussions with them were manageable since they know Assistant Director Kang Chan. Unfortunately, finding the right head for the Eurasian Rail is proving difficult."

"Is it because of the North Korean issue that you mentioned before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ha! Is there not a single candidate out there who addresses even those minor shortcomings?"

"Their issues range from fraudulent residence changes and speculation to the sexual assault of female employees..."

Moon Jae-Hyun massaged his face in frustration. "If the Eurasian Rail connects to North Korea, do we necessarily need an expert on them? Perhaps we should consider other candidates."

"Understood," Go Gun-Woo responded.

Moon Jae-Hyun looked away.

"Is there really no way to dissuade the assistant director?"

"No, sir."

The categorical reply made Moon Jae-Hyun sit up with renewed attention.

"From what I've seen, once the assistant director sets his mind on rectifying something, he remains relentless until he accomplishes it. Considering he's already initiated his plan, there's no turning back now." Go Gun-Woo continued.

"Hmm! We can't just sit by and watch him lead such dangerous missions." Moon Jae-Hyun said sternly.

"I'm sorry," Hwang Ki-Hyun interjected.

Moon Jae-Hyun lit up a cigarette, his demeanor softening a little.

"Has he set an objective yet?"

"It doesn't seem like it. Despite having the help of France, Russia, the UK, and China's intelligence bureaus, the assistant director appears undecided about his target."

"This is just amazing!"

Moon Jae-Hyun laughed incredulously.

He was aware that Kang Chan was not one to act without a definitive goal. Given his request for a team from Mongolia, agents from the National Intelligence Service including Choi Jong-Il, and the special forces team from Jeungpyeong, he had made his intentions more than clear enough for everyone. Nevertheless, he remained reserved about specific details, seeking only potential collaboration.

The time to respond had come.

"What would be the consequences of stopping this operation?" Moon Jae-Hyun asked.

"It would mean breaking the commitment we made to the assistant director."

"The vow to retaliate against any aggression? Why did they ever appoint him as the head of the counter-terrorism division?"

Moon Jae-Hyun pensively mulled over his cigarette.

"The assistant director can mobilize agents from the French DGSE and the Foreign Legion's special forces. Even the leaders of the four major intelligence bureaus I met yesterday seemed powerless when it came to diverting the assistant director from his course."

"His request for our agents and special forces implies that he plans to retaliate on behalf of the Republic of Korea, no?"

"That's right."

"Ha! Never before have I simultaneously felt gratitude, regret, concern, and embarrassment."

Moon Jae-Hyun toyed with the lighter.

"Mr. President," Hwang Ki-Hyun called. "I know Mr. Kang is a talent we must safeguard at all costs, but we cannot dampen his spirit."

"What do you suggest we do, then?"

"The assistant director is on his way to becoming a figure of global significance. For the time being, quietly observing and trusting him might be our best option."

"The assistant director isn't some teenage boy dealing with adolescence," Moon Jae-Hyun quipped, half in jest. Chuckling, he set the cigarette and lighter back on the table. "At this rate, will anyone be left by the time he truly becomes a global figure?"

After a brief pause, he asked, "How's his personnel recruitment coming along?"

"Aside from those arriving from Mongolia, everyone else is ready," Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

"And the transportation arrangements?"

"They're on standby at the base in Seongnam."

"A talent who never backs down, appearing out of thin air.... There's simply no stopping him. Anyway, when did he depart for Libya?"

"He took off yesterday aboard an F-16 provided by the US military."

Moon Jae-Hyun couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"I've always seen you and your predecessor as formidable, Director Hwang, but compared to the assistant director, I'm starting to feel like we're all somewhat lacking."

"It might be somewhat embarrassing to say this, but he has certainly become an important figure in the international scene," Hwang Ki-Hyun admitted. "He's even battling adversaries the National Intelligence Service is yet to fully understand."

"All in the name of the Republic of Korea?"

"Even if that wasn't his intention before, that much is undeniable now."

Moon Jae-Hyun nodded. "Let's proceed according to the assistant director's directives."

"Understood," Hwang Ki-Hyun immediately replied.

"I wonder if I'd get to see powerful nations bow their heads to the Republic of Korea or, at the very least, to the assistant director before my time comes," Moon Jae-Hyun pondered aloud, leaving Hwang Ki-Hyun unable to answer.

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Seok Kang-Ho tried his best to open his swollen eyes.

"Captain..."

Despite the swelling, he seemed to recognize Kang Chan.

"Are you awake?"

"Some water, please..."

Kang Chan moistened gauze in water and carefully patted Seok Kang-Ho's lips with it. After sipping water from it three times, he stopped asking for more.

"You're in a hospital in Athens, Greece. Heading back to Korea right now isn't practical, so it's best you just rest here for now."

"Damn..."

*What a resilient bastard!*

The evening ambiance was hinted at by the aroma of greasy food and the sounds of the hospital room door being operated.

"Got a cigarette?" Seok Kang-Ho feebly inquired, to which Kang Chan responded with a smile and a denial.

He truly had none. Having abruptly left the embassy, he couldn't just say, "I forgot my cigarettes!" and come back for them.

"Won't you have some dinner?"

Kang Chan gave Seok Kang-Ho a sideways glance. Could the effects of the transfusion really last this long? He couldn't come up with any other reason someone so swollen would even think of eating, though.

*Buzzzzz. Buzzzzz.*

Kang Chan answered promptly. "Hello?"

- This is Kim Hyung-Jung. We'll depart from the Seongnam Airport as soon as the team from Mongolia arrives. We should arrive at the Athens Airport in about twenty-four hours.]

"Thank you."

- Mr. Kang Chan.

Kim Hyung-Jung sounded calm.

"Yes?"

- Can you share the target with us now?

This call was supposed to be secure, having minimal risk of interception.

*Should I tell him?*

Kim Hyung-Jung silently awaited Kang Chan's decision.

"Let's discuss this when you arrive, Manager."

- Understood.

Despite the somewhat unsatisfactory response, Kim Hyung-Jung offered no further comment. Kang Chan hung up and glanced at Seok Kang-Ho.

How could he ever say that he planned to destroy Al-Aziziyah with Seok Kang-Ho listening?