

## **Blackfield 301**

Chapter 301: We Will Have To Live Here (1)

Upon entering the villa that Kim Hyung-Jung had recommended, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook's jaws dropped to the floor.

The multi-story building had a living room with a ceiling so high that Kang Dae-Kyung couldn't help but wonder how they'd change burned-out lightbulbs. To its left were three flights of stairs and a kitchen directly overlooking the Han River.

Yoo Hye-Sook's eyes widened as she looked around the kitchen.

"My gosh...!" she exclaimed.

The kitchen had a refrigerator and oven that were perfectly fitted into the wall, a marble dining table set that seemed to wrap around the entire room, and a secondary dining table that could be taken out by pulling a hook on the wall. It also had an induction cooktop and a four-burner gas stove.

Since Kim Hyung-Jung was waiting for them, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook composed themselves and quickly turned back around.

"There are two rooms downstairs and two upstairs," Kim Hyung-Jung said.

He walked across the living room and opened the door to a room overlooking the Han River as well.

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When the two just stuck their heads in to look around, Kim Hyung-Jung kindly offered, "Please feel free to go in and take a look."

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Its closet was also built into the wall.

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The bathroom had a shower and bathtub, which they could use for bubble baths.

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It even had a separate bathroom next to it.

Kang Dae-Kyung looked up at the ceiling. Like in the kitchen and living room, air-conditioning units were built into the master bedroom's ceiling.

"Would you like to see the lavatory?" Kim Hyung-Jung asked.

"No, it's okay," Kang Dae-Kyung swiftly replied.

The three walked back into the living room.

Still shocked by what Kang Dae-Kyung had seen, he asked, "Are you telling us to live here?"

"I'm kindly requesting that you do," Kim Hyung-Jung answered.

Yoo Hye-Sook nervously glanced at her husband.

“Can I be honest?” Kang Dae-Kyung hesitantly queried.

“Why don’t we talk about it over some tea?” Kim Hyung-Jung suggested, gesturing at the sofa.

Every simple necessity imaginable was already here. TVs, speakers, beds, and most appliances and furniture.

Unable to refuse Kim Hyung-Jung’s invitation, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook sat at the end of the couch, albeit uncomfortably.

Kim Hyung-Jung raised his left arm to his mouth.

“Can you bring some tea?” he requested.

Already used to being around special agents, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook nonchalantly watched on as Kim Hyung-Jung spoke into the microphone on his wrist.

Turning back to them, Kim Hyung-Jung inquired, “Have you heard about the announcements that the president recently made?”

“Well... yes,” Kang Dae-Kyung awkwardly replied.

Kim Hyung-Jung continued, “When the Eurasian Rail is built, our country will have to deal with such an astronomical amount of cargo that our ports won’t be able to handle it. We will have to use the undersea tunnel and borrow Japan’s ports.”

Being a businessman, that kind of information was like basic knowledge to Kang Dae-Kyung. News broadcasts also constantly talked about the ports of Busan and Pyeongtaek needing anywhere from fifty to a hundred more ports.

“The railroad construction will begin this year.”

“So soon?” Kang Dae-Kyung replied.

“Well, except for making sure that it meets the railway standards of each country, the construction itself shouldn’t be too difficult since we’ll be able to use the already existing railroads. And we also plan on using semi-trucks for overland transportation. Of course, establishing dedicated roads in Korea alone requires a budget of about nine trillion won.”

Beep, beep.

Once Kim Hyung-Jung was done speaking, Cha Min-Jeong walked in carrying cups of tea.

Yoo Hye-Sook’s expression relaxed a little. She was relieved to see Cha Min-Jeong, who was now like family.

“Why don’t you sit with us, Min-Jeong?” Kim Hyung-Jung suggested.

Cha Min-Jeong set the tea on the table and quietly sat down on one side of the sofa.

“Have some tea, please,” Kim Hyung-Jung said.

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook sipped their tea. Their expressions made it evident that they hadn't completely shaken off their nervousness.

After wiping the tea from his lips, Kim Hyung-Jung resumed, "We're about to create a next-generation energy business. We cannot even dare predict the expected profits of this business."

Yoo Hye-Sook turned to Cha Min-Jeong. Whenever she was too nervous, she tended to disassociate from its cause.

"However, we're certain that it is the future. Even Russia and Saudi Arabia think so as well, evidenced by their simultaneous joint oil development rights offers."

"Manager Kim," Kang Dae-Kyung replied, "are you telling us because you hope my family will live here?"

"That is correct," Kim Hyung-Jung replied.

"This place is too much for us. Besides, our income is nowhere near enough to maintain a house like this."

Kim Hyung-Jung grinned.

"If I were to give you the rights to develop Russian oil, Mr. Kang Dae-Kyung, what kind of gift would you give me in return?"

"Pardon?" Kang Dae-Kyung replied, his voice tinged with confusion.

It could have been perceived as an offensive question. However, Kim Hyung-Jung's friendly expression and demeanor made it hard to feel upset.

"It's just as I said. If I had brought the Russian oil development rights to our country, I would have asked for all of Hannam-Dong, with the condition that the government would pay for its maintenance," Kim Hyung-Jung continued.

Cha Min-Jeong glanced at Kim Hyung-Jung.

"I'll be honest with you. The first floor will be used by Cha Min-Jeong and the other agents guarding you, Director Yoo, while the third floor will be used by those assigned to you, President Kang."

Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook turned to Cha Min-Jeong with dazed expressions.

"Your son brought the Russian oil development rights to our country. He also brought us the source of next-gen energy."

Their gazes immediately returned to Kim Hyung-Jung.

"If your son were to reach out to France, England, Russia, the United States, China, Germany, Switzerland, or Japan, their presidents would probably fly out to meet him in person. Hannam-Dong doesn't even come close to the reward he deserves."

Yoo Hye-Sook pressed her lips together in thought. She was grateful to hear such high praise about her son, but the compliments also made her miss him.

“Even though all we can offer right now is this house and these bodyguards, we still ask your son to do more for the country. If you refuse this house, the president and the prime minister will come running and begging themselves.”

Well aware that Yoo Hye-Sook was very emotional, Cha Min-Jeong carefully observed her, worried that she would cry.

“I know that if you two had the money to pay for this house, you would rather spend it to help children in need. However, our government badly and desperately needs your son.”

With a serious expression, Kim Hyung-Jung’s gaze alternated between Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

“What do you think your son would do if something happened to you two?”

Yoo Hye-Sook’s lips twitched again.

“There would be no stopping him. That’s why I’m asking you, on behalf of the South Korean government, to stay here. The Republic of Korea desperately needs the Eurasian Rail and the next-gen energy business.”

The sunlight streaming in brightened the morning of the living room.

Kang Dae-Kyung looked out the window, taking in the view of the riverside road under the Dongho Bridge, the cars traveling on the Olympic Expressway across the street, and the Han River in between, which seemed to catch the sun and reflect it across the landscape.

His son had always been like this. He would suddenly disappear, and after a while, they would be told that he had done something incredible.

Their son was still young, yet he would always return to them with a smile and shoulders broader than before.

As a father, Kang Dae-Kyung felt endless gratitude in moments like this. More importantly, it made him miss his son. He wondered if he was eating properly and if he was in some hospital alone because he was injured again...

He recalled the way Kang Chan looked at Yoo Hye-Sook and the way he doggedly ran alongside the van during the underground parking lot shootout. What would have happened if Yoo Hye-Sook got hurt right in front of him?

“Honey,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

Yoo Hye-Sook’s eyes filled with tears as she turned to him. “Yes?”

“What’s wrong?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

“Your eyes... they’re like that again,” Yoo Hye-Sook answered, her voice quivering.

Kang Dae-Kyung chuckled adoringly. “Goodness!”

The sight made Kim Hyung-Jung and Cha Min-Jeong smile gently.

“It looks like we will have to live here, doesn’t it?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

Sniffing, Yoo Hye-Sook nodded.

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As the airplane gained altitude, the seatbelt sign flashed a few times, letting them know that they could now unfasten their seatbelts.

Yang Dong-Sik grinned. “Can we really officially work with the Taegukgi on our fucking chests again?”

“God damn it! Stop asking me that stupid fucking question!” Nam Il-Gyu responded with irritation. It had been touching the first few times, but now that it was happening once every ten minutes, he was starting to feel like he was talking to an idiot.

“It was Kang Chan, wasn’t it?” Yang Dong-Sik pressed on.

“Yes, you dolt! Kang Chan, the head of the counterterrorism team that we’re joining! The deputy director of the National Intelligence Service!” Nam Il-Gyu shouted in frustration.

Yang Dong-Sik looked Nam Il-Gyu up and down.

“Did you age for nothing? Jeez! Answering my questions won’t wear your mouth down, you know!”

Um Ji-Hwan, who was sitting behind them, cautiously jumped into the conversation. “Sirs, would you like something to eat?”

“Hm? Something to eat? Sure! Why?” Yang Dong-Sik answered.

“They said you can have an in-flight meal anytime. I thought I’d remind you just in case you were hungry,” Um Ji-Hwan replied.

“Is that so? Should we eat, then?” Yang Dong-Sik contemplated, turning to Nam Il-Gyu.

Um Ji-Hwan stood up. “I’ll go and prepare it for you.”

“Sunbae-nim,” Cha Dong-Gyun, who was sitting two seats over, quietly called.

Kang Chul-Gyu went around as if to ask what it was about.

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

“I’m good. I don’t drink coffee that much, so don’t mind me and just enjoy your coffee.”

Peeking up to look toward the cockpit, Cha Dong-Gyun said, "Oh! They must be about to hand out the meals. I'll just have my coffee after."

He then looked back at Kang Chul-Gyu. "Are you joining the counterterrorism team, sir?"

"Honestly, I'm not sure yet," Kang Chul-Gyu admitted.

He didn't mind working for Kang Chan, but he wasn't sure about becoming a National Intelligence Service agent.

"A lot of agents would be uncomfortable to be around me because of my age. I don't know if it's really okay for me to join..."

"Sunbae-nim," Cha Dong-Gyun broke in.

The sound of Um Ji-Hwan pushing the meal cart and securing the wheels clattered.

"Captain has a rough way with words, but he's not the type to feel uncomfortable because of someone's age."

"I wouldn't have gotten on this plane if that kind of discomfort was a problem," Kang Chul-Gyu replied with a pleasant smile. "Why did you join the special forces?"

"What do you mean?"

"I used to ask those who applied to join the DMZ team that question. Why the DMZ team? The training is brutal, promotion is hard to come by, and you don't know when you'll die, so why would you sign up for the DMZ team?"

Cha Dong-Gyun looked behind him. The DMZ team members, National Intelligence Service agents, and Jeungpyeong special forces soldiers were mingling and chatting with each other.

"Here's your meal. Enjoy," Um Ji-Hwan suddenly interjected, handing them large in-flight meals.

*Click.*

Kang Chul-Gyu lifted the lid of the meal, revealing rice, bulgogi, and other neatly arranged side dishes.

"For a while, I actually wanted to run away, sir."

Kang Chul-Gyu looked up from his meal to Cha Dong-Gyun's stiff expression.

"The pay was horrible, and my death would mean nothing. It would just make my poor family suffer. If it wasn't for our late general, I probably would have already retired."

Kang Chul-Gyu just looked back at him and listened.

“The general held onto me like a vice. Whenever I got into trouble, he would come running for me and attempt to make settlements or make the case go away. I suppose he got tired of it, though, since he eventually told me to let him know which unit I wanted to be transferred to. He also said that only those who want something in return could become a true member of the special forces team.”

Kang Chul-Gyu now had a wistful smile.

“I shouted at him and asked him what would happen to my family. They wouldn’t have anyone to take care of them after I’m gone.”

“What did the general say to that?”

“The general told me to put my trust in him if I was really acting up because of my family. He said that he would protect me as if I were his nephew and make up for what the government couldn’t. I shouted at him again about why he would go to such lengths to hold onto me.”

Cha Dong-Gyun shakily exhaled. Remembering Choi Seong-Geon seemed to have overwhelmed him with emotions.

“He said it was because the nation and the team needed someone like me as their general....” Cha Dong-Gyun trailed off. After a deep sigh, he continued, “Our special forces team needed someone like me to become world-class. He wasn’t holding onto me because he liked me, but because the nation needed me...”

Cha Dong-Gyun’s eyes reddened. Unable to finish his sentence, he focused on calming his emotions before turning to Kang Chul-Gyu again.

“Sunbae-nim. Please join the counterterrorism team. Come to Jeungpyeong and show us what we lack.”

“Are you doing this for the general?” Kang Chul-Gyu asked.

“No, sir. The country needs a truly powerful special forces team right now,” Cha Dong-Gyun answered, determination evident in his eyes. “To reach that level, we need the guidance of someone like you.”

Kang Chul-Gyu grinned.

“I’d like to make one more request,” Cha Dong-Gyun said.

“Go ahead.”

“Please use informal speech when talking to our men too.”

Feeling genuinely happy, Kang Chul-Gyu smiled from ear to ear.

Before they could continue their conversation, they heard Seok Kang-Ho's trademark laughter from the front.

"Phuhuhu!"

The first-class seats had been stretched out to accommodate the heavily injured soldiers. The medical team was also in the same section.

Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, Gérard, and the army interpreter were in the front row of the first-class seats.

"You're not eating?" Seok Kang-Ho asked Kang Chan.

"You just ate two uncooked packs of ramyeon," Kang Chan said in disbelief.

"Huh? Why do you make it sound like I'm the only one who did? We all ate the same thing, didn't we?" Seok Kang-Ho countered.

The army interpreter right next to Gérard relayed their conversation to him in French, making it seem like a multilingual broadcast.

"If we're going to eat anyway, let's eat with some ramyeon, hm?"

Despite Kang Chan's disturbed gaze, Seok Kang-Ho stood his ground.

"Don't look at me like that! Uncooked ramyeon and cooked ramyeon are two completely different foods," Seok Kang-Ho defended.

"Everything is just new and unique food to you, isn't it?" Kang Chan sarcastically asked.

As he shook his head from side to side, the army interpreter quickly headed to the kitchen in the back.

"We've got more people now, so I'll have to step up to the plate," Seok Kang-Ho said, his tone serious.

"Motherfucker!" Kang Chan jokingly swore at him.

Seok Kang-Ho laughed. Afterward, he said, "Captain."

"What?"

"Thank you."

Kang Chan smirked at Seok Kang-Ho. "Get back on your feet already so we can destroy their leaders. Only then can we get some rest. We can't live on the edge like this forever."

"Sounds thrilling!" Seok Kang-Ho replied, his expression revitalized despite the bandages all over his body.

Turning around, Kang Chan saw Gérard flipping through the magazines.

This was nice. With these two by his side, he had nothing to be envious of right now.



Just then, the interpreter walked back carrying a cup of ramyeon with hot water and in-flight meals. He had a bandage around his right hand, so Kang Chan had no idea why he looked so bright.

The interpreter pushed down the tables attached to the seats and set down the in-flight meals and ramyeon.

“Enjoy your meal.”

One of the agents and the medical team worked together to bring porridge and other easily digestible food to the wounded, creating the perfect mealtime atmosphere.

After inhaling the noodles, Seok Kang-Ho looked up at the interpreter. “What are you going to do now?”

Now that Kang Chan thought about it, he still didn’t know his name.

Flustered, the army interpreter looked back at Seok Kang-Ho. Since his index and middle fingers had been blown away, he was having a hard eating the noodles with a fork.

“You’re going to be discharged anyway, aren’t you? What’s your plan now?”  
Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“I’m going to look into some companies,” the interpreter replied.

“What about your family?”

*What is this punk doing, suddenly starting an interview in the middle of a meal?*

“I have a six-month-old daughter.”

“What? You were married?”

“Yes. Why do you find that surprising?”

To be honest, that was completely unexpected. He already had a child despite looking almost as young as Kang Chan, he had a daughter.

Kang Chan supposed one didn’t have to be old to have a child.

After their meal and a couple of random conversations, Um Ji-Hwan brought some coffee over.

“Have you eaten?” Kang Chan asked Um Ji-Hwan.

“Yes, sir.”

Kang Chan chuckled at the absurdity.

Um Ji-Hwan looked the same way Daye did during his first few days as his subordinate.

Things didn’t always work out the way one wanted them to.

It would be nice if just their combat abilities and experience were passed down, but they were following him and relying on him the same way too.

Kang Chan lifted his cup of coffee to his mouth.

His mind flashed back to the man who would always wait for him with a water bottle, then the last time he saw the man who had died in Africa before he could even finish his cigarette.

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"No, it's okay," Kang Dae-Kyung swiftly replied.

The three walked back into the living room.

Still shocked by what Kang Dae-Kyung had seen, he asked, "Are you telling us to live here?"

"I'm kindly requesting that you do," Kim Hyung-Jung answered.

Yoo Hye-Sook nervously glanced at her husband.

"Can I be honest?" Kang Dae-Kyung hesitantly queried.

“Why don’t we talk about it over some tea?” Kim Hyung-Jung suggested, gesturing at the sofa.

Every simple necessity imaginable was already here. TVs, speakers, beds, and most appliances and furniture.

Unable to refuse Kim Hyung-Jung’s invitation, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook sat at the end of the couch, albeit uncomfortably.

Kim Hyung-Jung raised his left arm to his mouth.

“Can you bring some tea?” he requested.

Already used to being around special agents, Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook nonchalantly watched on as Kim Hyung-Jung spoke into the microphone on his wrist.

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Cha Min-Jeong set the tea on the table and quietly sat down on one side of the sofa.

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"If I were to give you the rights to develop Russian oil, Mr. Kang Dae-Kyung, what kind of gift would you give me in return?"

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Well aware that Yoo Hye-Sook was very emotional, Cha Min-Jeong carefully observed her, worried that she would cry.

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With a serious expression, Kim Hyung-Jung’s gaze alternated between Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook.

“What do you think your son would do if something happened to you two?”

Yoo Hye-Sook’s lips twitched again.

“There would be no stopping him. That’s why I’m asking you, on behalf of the South Korean government, to stay here. The Republic of Korea desperately needs the Eurasian Rail and the next-gen energy business.”

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Their son was still young, yet he would always return to them with a smile and shoulders broader than before.

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He recalled the way Kang Chan looked at Yoo Hye-Sook and the way he doggedly ran alongside the van during the underground parking lot shootout. What would have happened if Yoo Hye-Sook got hurt right in front of him?

“Honey,” Kang Dae-Kyung said.

Yoo Hye-Sook’s eyes filled with tears as she turned to him. “Yes?”

“What’s wrong?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

“Your eyes... they’re like that again,” Yoo Hye-Sook answered, her voice quivering.

Kang Dae-Kyung chuckled adoringly. “Goodness!”

The sight made Kim Hyung-Jung and Cha Min-Jeong smile gently.

“It looks like we will have to live here, doesn’t it?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

Sniffing, Yoo Hye-Sook nodded.

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“Yes, you dolt! Kang Chan, the head of the counterterrorism team that we’re joining! The deputy director of the National Intelligence Service!” Nam Il-Gyu shouted in frustration.

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“Did you age for nothing? Jeez! Answering my questions won’t wear your mouth down, you know!”

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“Hm? Something to eat? Sure! Why?” Yang Dong-Sik answered.

“They said you can have an in-flight meal anytime. I thought I’d remind you just in case you were hungry,” Um Ji-Hwan replied.

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“A lot of agents would be uncomfortable to be around me because of my age. I don’t know if it’s really okay for me to join...”

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“For a while, I actually wanted to run away, sir.”

Kang Chul-Gyu looked up from his meal to Cha Dong-Gyun’s stiff expression.

“The pay was horrible, and my death would mean nothing. It would just make my poor family suffer. If it wasn’t for our late general, I probably would have already retired.”

Kang Chul-Gyu just looked back at him and listened.

“The general held onto me like a vice. Whenever I got into trouble, he would come running for me and attempt to make settlements or make the case go away. I suppose he got tired of it, though, since he eventually told me to let him know which unit I wanted to be transferred to. He also said that only those who

want something in return could become a true member of the special forces team.”

Kang Chul-Gyu now had a wistful smile.

“I shouted at him and asked him what would happen to my family. They wouldn’t have anyone to take care of them after I’m gone.”

“What did the general say to that?”

“The general told me to put my trust in him if I was really acting up because of my family. He said that he would protect me as if I were his nephew and make up for what the government couldn’t. I shouted at him again about why he would go to such lengths to hold onto me.”

Cha Dong-Gyun shakily exhaled. Remembering Choi Seong-Geon seemed to have overwhelmed him with emotions.

“He said it was because the nation and the team needed someone like me as their general....” Cha Dong-Gyun trailed off. After a deep sigh, he continued, “Our special forces team needed someone like me to become world-class. He wasn’t holding onto me because he liked me, but because the nation needed me...”

Cha Dong-Gyun’s eyes reddened. Unable to finish his sentence, he focused on calming his emotions before turning to Kang Chul-Gyu again.

“Sunbae-nim. Please join the counterterrorism team. Come to Jeungpyeong and show us what we lack.”

“Are you doing this for the general?” Kang Chul-Gyu asked.

“No, sir. The country needs a truly powerful special forces team right now,” Cha Dong-Gyun answered, determination evident in his eyes. “To reach that level, we need the guidance of someone like you.”

Kang Chul-Gyu grinned.

“I’d like to make one more request,” Cha Dong-Gyun said.

“Go ahead.”

“Please use informal speech when talking to our men too.”

Feeling genuinely happy, Kang Chul-Gyu smiled from ear to ear.

Before they could continue their conversation, they heard Seok Kang-Ho’s trademark laughter from the front.

“Phuhuhu!”

The first-class seats had been stretched out to accommodate the heavily injured soldiers. The medical team was also in the same section.



Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, Gérard, and the army interpreter were in the front row of the first-class seats.

“You're not eating?” Seok Kang-Ho asked Kang Chan.

“You just ate two uncooked packs of ramyeon,” Kang Chan said in disbelief.

“Huh? Why do you make it sound like I'm the only one who did? We all ate the same thing, didn't we?” Seok Kang-Ho countered.

The army interpreter right next to Gérard relayed their conversation to him in French, making it seem like a multilingual broadcast.

“If we're going to eat anyway, let's eat with some ramyeon, hm?”

Despite Kang Chan's disturbed gaze, Seok Kang-Ho stood his ground.

“Dont look at me like that! Uncooked ramyeon and cooked ramyeon are two completely different foods,” Seok Kang-Ho defended.

“Everything is just new and unique food to you, isn't it?” Kang Chan sarcastically asked.

As he shook his head from side to side, the army interpreter quickly headed to the kitchen in the back.

“We've got more people now, so I'll have to step up to the plate,” Seok Kang-Ho said, his tone serious.

“Motherfucker!” Kang Chan jokingly swore at him.

Seok Kang-Ho laughed. Afterward, he said, “Captain.”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

Kang Chan smirked at Seok Kang-Ho. “Get back on your feet already so we can destroy their leaders. Only then can we get some rest. We can't live on the edge like this forever.”

“Sounds thrilling!” Seok Kang-Ho replied, his expression revitalized despite the bandages all over his body.

Turning around, Kang Chan saw Gérard flipping through the magazines.

This was nice. With these two by his side, he had nothing to be envious of right now.

Just then, the interpreter walked back carrying a cup of ramyeon with hot water and in-flight meals. He had a bandage around his right hand, so Kang Chan had no idea why he looked so bright.

The interpreter pushed down the tables attached to the seats and set down the in-flight meals and ramyeon.

“Enjoy your meal.”

One of the agents and the medical team worked together to bring porridge and other easily digestible food to the wounded, creating the perfect mealtime atmosphere.

After inhaling the noodles, Seok Kang-Ho looked up at the interpreter. “What are you going to do now?”

Now that Kang Chan thought about it, he still didn’t know his name.

Flustered, the army interpreter looked back at Seok Kang-Ho. Since his index and middle fingers had been blown away, he was having a hard time eating the noodles with a fork.

“You’re going to be discharged anyway, aren’t you? What’s your plan now?”  
Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“I’m going to look into some companies,” the interpreter replied.

“What about your family?”

*What is this punk doing, suddenly starting an interview in the middle of a meal?*

“I have a six-month-old daughter.”

“What? You were married?”

“Yes. Why do you find that surprising?”

To be honest, that was completely unexpected. He already had a child despite looking almost as young as Kang Chan, he had a daughter.

Kang Chan supposed one didn’t have to be old to have a child.

After their meal and a couple of random conversations, Um Ji-Hwan brought some coffee over.

“Have you eaten?” Kang Chan asked Um Ji-Hwan.

“Yes, sir.”

Kang Chan chuckled at the absurdity.

Um Ji-Hwan looked the same way Daye did during his first few days as his subordinate.

Things didn’t always work out the way one wanted them to.

It would be nice if just their combat abilities and experience were passed down, but they were following him and relying on him the same way too.

Kang Chan lifted his cup of coffee to his mouth.

His mind flashed back to the man who would always wait for him with a water bottle, then the last time he saw the man who had died in Africa before he could even finish his cigarette.

Chapter 302: We Will Have To Live Here (2)

They arrived at the Seongnam Airfield around five in the afternoon. At the end of the runway, a large airplane slowly turned its head and moved toward the airport terminal.

Outside the window, they could see many ambulances, buses, vans, and cars.

Hiss.

Upon confirming that the hatch had been released, an agent opened the door.

Kang Chan was the first to disembark. Much to his surprise, someone was waiting for him outside.

“Deputy Director Kang, thank you for your service,” Moon Jae-Hyun greeted.

Behind him were Go Gun-Woo, Hwang Ki-Hyun, Jeon Dae-Geuk, and Kim Hyung-Jung.

While Kang Chan and Go Gun-Woo were exchanging greetings, Moon Jae-Hyun shook the hands of each of the men as they gave their names, thanking them for their hard work.

“Thank you.”

“Lieutenant Cha Dong-Gyun, sir!”

“Thank you.”

“Second Lieutenant Kwak Cheol-Ho, sir!”

Afterward, Cha Dong-Gyun introduced himself again while shaking Go Gun-Woo’s hand.

“Thank you.”

“Agent Choi Jong-Il!”

Moon Jae-Hyun then shook the hands of the National Intelligence Service agents. Afterward, Kang Chul-Gyu stood in front of him.

“Thank you for your hard work. From now on, South Korea will no longer turn its back on those who have served it,” Moon Jae-Hyun said, holding out his hand.

Kang Chul-Gyu shook the president’s hand and then made his way to their designated bus.

The members of the DMZ team all looked overwhelmed with emotion.

“Let me go check on the special forces team real quick,” Kang Chan told Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Please do,” Kim Hyung-Jung amiably replied.

Kang Chan headed to the bus of the Jeungpyeong special forces team.

“We’ll be training with the DMZ team soon, so get some rest. Don’t strain yourselves.”

On Cha Dong-Gyun’s command, the soldiers saluted him. Kang Chan returned the gesture.

It was crazy. Every single one of them had made their way to his heart.

When Kang Chan stepped off the bus, he saw Oh Gwang-Taek shaking hands with Moon Jae-Hyun. For some reason, he looked like a thug. He also shook hands with Go Gun-Woo and Hwang Ki-Hyun before everyone was introduced to one another.

“What do you plan to do next, Deputy Director Kang?” Moon Jae-Hyun asked.

“I heard the DMZ team decided to stay at the Namsan Hotel. I’d like to accompany them for now,” Kang Chan replied.

“I see. Once again, thank you for carrying out the South Korean agents’ age-old desire.”

Moon Jae-Hyun shook Kang Chan’s hand one more time before turning back.

Jeon Dae-Geuk briefly nodded at him before walking toward the cars with Moon Jae-Hyun and Go Gun-Woo.

The severely injured were now being brought out of the airplane.

Hwang Ki-Hyun watched them for a moment before turning away and looking at Kang Chan. “The Jeungpyeong special forces team has been granted special first-class promotions. The order will be given out tomorrow.”

“I have a lot of things I’d like to discuss with you. I would be grateful if you let Manager Kim Hyung-Jung know when you are available,” Kang Chan politely requested.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

After Hwang Ki-Hyun walked away, Kim Hyung-Jung came closer to Kang Chan.

“Your parents have agreed to move. I will text you their new home address.”

Kang Chan just blinked. He did hear that they would be moving while their hopeless son was away, but he didn’t expect them to actually push through with it.

Kim Hyung-Jung continued, “One more thing. Please give me the passport of the man named Gérard. It would be best to process his entry to the country.”

“Ah. Got it.”

Kang Chan turned to Gérard, who was watching from a few steps away, and asked him for his passport.

“I’ll be at the hotel,” Kang Chan informed Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Understood.”

Parting ways with Kim Hyung-Jung, Kang Chan hopped onto the bus with Gérard. Maybe it was because they were all wearing plain clothes, but he felt as if he just boarded a service that was taking workers home from a construction site.

“Ah, fuck! My life is blossoming. Blossoming, I tell you! I can’t believe I just shook the president’s hand!” Oh Gwang-Taek exclaimed. “President is a nice way of putting it, but he’s basically the big boss of South Korea, isn’t he?”

The bus abruptly started, seemingly surprised by Oh Gwang-Taek’s words.

“Where are we going to stay anyway?” Oh Gwang-Taek asked.

“Namsan Hotel,” Kang Chan answered.

“What?”

“We have reservations there. We shouldn’t part ways just yet, and after we get some rest today, I’ve got a couple of things I’d like to discuss. That’s why I want us to stay there for a few days.”

Oh Gwang-Taek laughed in disbelief. He probably thought it was funny and strange that he was staying at a hotel he had a stake in.

“Can we go home in the evening?” Oh Gwang-Taek asked.

“You can do whatever. Just remember to keep your mouth sealed about this,” Kang Chan reminded.

“Will do. I have to check in on Do-Seok regarding the camera footage anyway, so I might head out for a bit in the evening.”

A thrum of excitement filled the bus.

Moon Jae-Hyun personally coming out to greet them and having hotel reservations seemed to have spurred the DMZ team on.

“Gérard, you tired?” Kang Chan asked.

“I’m fine,” Gérard said with a grin.

“Then let’s buy some clothes. We can have dinner afterward.”

“Sure.”

Kang Chan wanted to introduce Gérard to Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook. Hence, he had to make sure Gérard looked neat and presentable first. He didn’t want his first impression to be bad just because of his piercing eyes, sturdy figure, and sharp aura. Moreover, he wanted to do something for him since this was the first time in a while that he had returned to the outside world.

Kang Chan glanced behind him, finding Kang Chul-Gyu looking out the window.

*He should dress more cleanly now that he’s older. He looks like an elderly grandpa from the countryside on his first train ride!*

Fortunately, they left right before rush hour, so traffic wasn’t too bad.

Kang Chan pulled out his phone and called Michelle.

- Hello? Channy?

“Yeah, it’s me. Do you have time this evening?”

- What’s the sudden occasion? Gonna me a present or something?

“What?”

- My birthday present. I want to prepare myself beforehand if so.

Kang Chan slightly regretted making this call now, but he didn't know anyone else he could comfortably ask for a request like this.

“Not exactly. There's this guy who's...” Kang Chan trailed off and glanced at Gérard. “He's one of my favorite juniors from France. I was hoping you could buy him a suit, a dress shirt, oxfords, and some comfortable clothes. I was hoping you could clean up his hairstyle a bit too. We can have dinner together afterward.”

- That's right up my alley. All right. For you, I would turn even the Hunchback of Notre Dame into a gentleman. Are we really going to have dinner together today, though?

“That's the plan. Can you come to the Namsan Hotel in about an hour?”

- Sure, Channy. I'll see you soon.

Michelle then excitedly hung up the phone.

“Gérard.”

“Oui.”

Kang Chan briefly explained who Michelle was to Gérard and told him not to talk about his past life and the Foreign Legion.

“Understood, sir,” Gérard responded with a grin.

They arrived an hour later, finding Michelle already waiting in the lobby.

While National Intelligence Service agents assigned the DMZ team members to their rooms, Kang Chan introduced Gérard to Michelle. Since it was just the three of them, he naturally spoke in French.

“Could you give him a haircut then buy him a suit and comfortable clothes? I want to introduce him to my parents. He might stay at my house for a while, so prepare some extra clothes for him too,” he requested.

“Should I just call you when we're done? It might take a while, though,” Michelle mused.

“Don't worry about that. When you're done, we'll go somewhere nice and have some fun tonight.”

“All right. I'll call you when we're about to finish.”

Michelle told Gérard that they should get going in rapid French. Gérard naturally understood what she was saying.

“See you later,” Gérard told Kang Chan, following Michelle out the front entrance.

Kang Chan went to his room and rested for a bit before having dinner at the buffet-style restaurant. He then summoned an agent and asked where Kang Chul-Gyu's room was.

*Ding dong. Ding dong.*

When he rang the bell, he heard someone inside ask, "Who is it?"

The door opened soon after.

Click.

A look of surprise flashed across Kang Chul-Gyu's face.

"Can you come out with me for a minute?"

"Right now?" Kang Chul-Gyu skeptically asked.

Kang Chan didn't answer, thinking the old man could be in the middle of something stupid.

Kang Chul-Gyu looked at himself. "Can I go out like this?"

"Come on."

Kang Chul-Gyu turned to his room for a moment, wanting to bring something, but immediately followed Kang Chan out instead since he looked as if he would leave without him if Kang Chul-Gyu took any more time.

The cotton pants he was wearing were so old that the knees stuck out. Because its overall length was shortened, its leg openings ended above his ankles. His shirt was worn and frayed, and his "World Cup" sneakers had to be at least ten years old.

Kang Chul-Gyu didn't even ask where they were going. He just quietly stood by Kang Chan as the latter pressed the elevator button.

This man's fighting skills were among the top in the entire world. If he had been born in the United States or Russia, he would have been praised as a hero and gained wealth and honor. Unfortunately, he was standing beside Kang Chan in shabby clothes instead.

The elevator doors soon opened, revealing its empty, mirror-like interior. Its walls reflected them as they entered.

They were dressed comfortably. Since the clothes that Kang Chan was wearing were also wrinkled from the long flight, they looked equally shabby.

Ding.

When they reached the ground floor, two agents quickly approached them.

"We're heading out for a bit, so you can cross us off the dinner list. Let the agents upstairs know too."

"Understood, sir."

Not wanting to say where they were going right now, Kang Chan went straight to the front door while the agent was quickly radioing others. He felt as if he would lose the courage to get there if he said their destination out loud.

The moment he stepped out of the front entrance, a black sedan stopped in front of him. An agent opened the rear doors for them.

“Get in,” Kang Chan told Kang Chul-Gyu with a nod. He then sat behind the passenger seat.

Kang Chul-Gyu walked around the trunk of the car and got in beside Kang Chan. The agent who opened the doors for them sat in the passenger seat.

“Take us to the most expensive department store in Gangnam.”

The agent in the driver’s seat tilted his head in confusion but still immediately drove off, crossing the Hannam Bridge to Apgujeong-Dong. The atmosphere in the car seemed to be a combination of awkwardness and discomfort. Unfortunately, since it was rush hour and traffic was heavy, it took them nearly an hour to travel that short distance.

It wasn’t even completely dark yet, yet the department store building they had gone to was already illuminated by shining lights, making its vicinity as bright as daylight.

Kang Chan got out in front of the entrance, while Kang Chul-Gyu got out on the side of the walkway. The agent in the passenger seat quickly exited the car and stood beside Kang Chan.

When Kang Chan entered the department store, Kang Chul-Gyu paused for a moment. He then silently followed suit.

What greeted them was a completely different scene from the ones they were familiar with. The two looked completely out of place.

Unsure about where to go, Kang Chan took the escalator up from the first floor. Fortunately, there was a store on the second floor that sold menswear. Its brand was considered a luxury.

Kang Chan entered.

The agent stood at the entrance, while Kang Chul-Gyu awkwardly followed Kang Chan.

He had done nothing wrong. Fighting for South Korea was the reason he ended up like this. Although he should be guilty of what he did to his wife and son, he shouldn’t be ashamed of standing in this damn store.

A clerk cautiously walked over to them, trying to understand the mood.

Kang Chan glanced at Kang Chul-Gyu and then at the agent at the entrance.

“We’d like to buy clothes for this man. Please pick a few comfortable outfits for him,” Kang Chan said.

“I’ll do my best. Sir? Would you please come this way?”

Kang Chul-Gyu looked at Kang Chan.

“Just do it. Consider this my thanks for your help or simply my way of saying I don’t want to see you in those clothes anymore.”

The clerk awkwardly stood nearby with clothes in hand, trying to read the room.

Kang Chan and Kang Chul-Gyu glared at each other, neither of them backing down.



“Is this what you want?” Kang Chul-Gyu asked.

Kang Chan didn't respond.

*Damn it! I shouldn't have come here.*

Perhaps leaving this old man alone would have been for the best. He could have just pretended not to notice him, called him up when things got tough, and used him from time to time.

“I want to know if this is what my dead son would want,” Kang Chul-Gyu suddenly said as he walked into the changing room.

Kang Chan was dumbfounded.

“Please try these on,” the clerk told him, handing him a pair of beige pants and a sky-blue shirt. He then closed the glass door and carefully read the atmosphere again.

A moment later, the door opened, and Kang Chul-Gyu walked out, his movements awkward and unnatural.

“That's nice. Do you have anything else?” Kang Chan asked the clerk.

“Pardon?”

“Do you anything else?” Kang Chan repeated.

“Oh, yes. Then...”

Kang Chul-Gyu, wearing new clothes, gazed at Kang Chan, his eyes clearly conveying his thoughts.

*What about you? Why don't we get something for you?*

His eyes were filled with the yearning of an old father who couldn't ask the clerk to pick out Kang Chan's clothes because he didn't have any way of paying for them.

*What's wrong with you? Why do you have such a fatherly look in your eyes? Shouldn't you be greedy and shameless for new clothes just like in the past?*

“Try this on, sir,” the clerk said.

Kang Chan exhaled quietly, calming his emotions.

“Go for it. I'll get some for myself too,” he told Kang Chul-Gyu even though it was unbecoming of him.

Kang Chul-Gyu awkwardly went back inside.

After a while, the door opened again. He came out looking a little more used to it, albeit still awkward.

“He's going to leave wearing this, so please pack the clothes he tried on with the ones he was wearing when we got here instead,” Kang Chan told the clerk.

“Pardon?”

Rather than responding, Kang Chan simply turned to them.

“Yes, sir,” they quickly responded and got to work.

“I already have clothes like those at home. I’ll stop by another store and get a suit instead,” Kang Chan said, giving a lame excuse.

“Um...” the clerk awkwardly walked over to them, a shopping bag in hand. After taking the card that Kang Chan held out, they made their way back to the counter.

“Please sign here, sir.”

Kang Chan did as instructed. A moment later, the machine beeped and printed out the receipt.

For two pants, a dress shirt, and a cotton shirt, 2.17 million won was a lot.

Kang Chan went into the suit store that Oh Gwang-Taek liked so much and bought suits and two dress shirts for Kang Chul-Gyu and himself.

Next were shoes and belts.

Kang Chul-Gyu must have realized the price, but he didn’t say anything about it. Rather, he said he wanted to try on the suits and the shirts. Kang Chan didn’t stop him.

The two left the department store about an hour later, both wearing the same brand of suit, shirt, shoes, and belt.

“I’m hungry,” Kang Chan said, almost to himself.

“Let’s eat,” Kang Chul-Gyu replied as if speaking to the air.

Kang Chan asked the agent to take them to a nearby barbeque restaurant.

Impeccably dressed, they walked into a palatial restaurant and ordered some bulgogi. The waitress set juicy meat on a round grill and served it with side dishes and rice.

Kang Chan stared ahead, waiting, so Kang Chul-Gyu lifted his spoon first.

*Click, clatter.*

This was their first meal together, just the two of them. Kang Chan couldn’t remember ever sitting down and eating with him in the past either.

After a few spoonfuls of rice, Kang Chul-Gyu stopped eating and just stared at his food.

Kang Chan used his chopsticks to pick up a handful of meat and put it on top of Kang Chul-Gyu’s rice.

Kang Chul-Gyu froze with his chopsticks in the air. Slowly, he looked back up.

Maybe it was because of the charcoal fire or because he was tired, but his eyes were red.

“I can’t call you father yet,” Kang Chan said.

“It’s okay.”

It was a ridiculous response to a random statement.

“I’ll try to speak to you formally.”

Kang Chul-Gyu just smiled.

“Thank you for what you did in Libya.”

Kang Chul-Gyu looked at him as if to say, “What do you mean?”

“I thought of you when I really needed help.”

*Pft.*

Kang Chan thought Kang Chul-Gyu didn’t really look happy even though he smiled.

“Thank you,” Kang Chul-Gyu said.

“For what?”

“For buying me clothes and food.”

*Pft.*

When Kang Chan grinned, Kang Chul-Gyu used his spoon to scoop up all the meat that Kang Chan had put on his plate. He then ate all of it.

Chapter 303.1: With Everyone

Due to her six-year-old and four-year-old sons, Han Kyung-Mi’s morning was quite busy.

Before marriage, she had been quiet and timid, but because of her two mischievous children, she now often found herself shouting, “You little punk!”

It hadn’t always been like this. Seeing them sleeping soundly had made her promise to herself that she would raise them with love probably more than a hundred times. However, as the years passed and the boys got older, things changed.

One day, while wiping up a spill in the living room, she heard her eldest son, Cha Seung-Ho, shouting, “Fly, Pororo!”

Soon after, she heard the dining table go crack!

Han Kyung-Mi felt her heart drop to the floor with a thud. Cha Seung-Ho had managed to climb up to the sink and jumped onto the table, causing it to tilt to the side. He then nonchalantly slid down to the ground.

“Seung-Ho!”

What kind of mom wouldn’t be surprised by that situation? What if he got hurt?

Cha Seung-Ho shamelessly stood up and brushed off his head and butt a few times. Afterward, he started walking back to his room.

*Argh!*

Han Kyung-Mi couldn’t help but be angry at herself for being so worried and upset that their dining table, which she had carefully polished to a shine to prolong its use, had been destroyed.

Thwack!

Han Kyung-Mi swung her arm as hard as she could. A startlingly loud crack came from Cha Seung-Ho's back.

She didn't mean to do that. She didn't mean to hit him so hard. A cry threatened to escape her.

Children his age naturally overflowed with energy. She had kept him pent up in the room for so long that she couldn't even imagine how frustrated he must have felt. She looked at Cha Seung-Ho with pitying, sorry, and regretful eyes.

“Haha, that didn't hurt! You didn't hurt me at all! Bleeegh!”

Cha Seung-Ho mockingly shook his legs and hands.

*This little son of a bitch! No, wait!*

That would make her husband a dog. It would also mean she lived with a dog and gave birth to a dog.

Such shenanigans had become a common occurrence since.

When Cha Seung-Ho, who was two years younger than Cha Seung-Ho, started to copy his older brother, Han Kyung-Mi's mouth grew even fouler.

She thought raising ten beagles would be much quieter than this.

It was already dinner time, but she was still shrieking at the top of her lungs.

“Cha Seung-Ho! Do you really want to die?!”

Despite already being used to her loud voice, Cha Seung-Ho still flinched. He obediently changed into new clothes, shaking his dirty ones off like a snake shedding its skin and then kicking them away.

Cha Seung-Ho copied what his brother did. However, since he was a bit younger, he cautiously observed how his mother would react.

After the warlike preparation, Han Kyung-Mi left the military residences holding her sons' hands. She took the car that her father had passed down to her twelve years ago. She had been driving it since.

*Creak.*

The sedan's doors begged to be put to rest along with the rest of the car, but she wouldn't be able to save a dime if she cared about all the little things.

“Whoa!”

On the way, Cha Seung-Ho and Cha Seung-Ho kept jumping around in the back, prompting her to shout at them a few times. Just as darkness began to loom over the city, they reached a coffee shop in downtown Jeungpyeong.

*Creak.*

Pulling into the parking lot and opening the door, Han Kyung-Mi's eyes began to water. Her husband was standing right outside.

His face was gaunt and pale. She had no doubt he hurt himself again.

It had been ten days since they last saw each other. He normally spent more than half of the year sleeping in some barracks.

“Dad! Daaad!”

Cha Seung-Ho and Cha Seong-Ho dashed over to him.

With a smile, Cha Dong-Gyu took both of his sons into his arms. A frown briefly flashed across his face as he tried to fight off the pain.

“When did you get here?” Han Kyung-Mi asked.

“Just now. Cheol-Ho is here too,” Cha Dong-Gyu responded.

Han Kyung-Mi tried hard not to cry.

Wives of soldiers, especially those in the special forces, had to be strong.

Kwak Cheol-Ho soon exited the coffee shop.

“Hyungsu-nim[1].”

His left shoulder was bulging. It was probably bandaged underneath his clothes, stained dark with blood.

Han Kyung-Mi covered her mouth with her hand, unable to stop herself from crying. Although she was grateful for what they did, she couldn't help but think about how much their wounds probably hurt and what horrible things they'd had to live through.

Witnessing the grueling battle in Afghanistan on TV made these emotions of hers even more intense.

Even before that incident, the wives of the Jeungpyeong special forces soldiers already couldn't bring themselves to watch war movies. Seeing soldiers shooting and being shot suffocated them.

“Unnie!”

Kwak Cheol-Ho's wife came running out as well. Her eyes were also red.

Having read their mother's mood, the two mischievous children nervously glanced at her.

“Get down, you two.”

Receiving Han Kyung-Mi's fierce glare, Cha Dong-Gyun carefully set his two children down. There had been a time when he refused to put his sons down despite being injured. The merciless scolding he got back then had since erased all stubbornness in him.

Just then, a mid-sized car pulled into the parking lot. It was also an old car, well over eight years old.

*Creak.*

The doors opened, and Choi Chang-Hoon and Park Yang-Ja got out.

Han Kyung-Mi and Kwak Cheol-Ho's wife quickly greeted them.

“How have you been?”

“Good to see you again.”

Politely bowing, Chio Chang-Hoon answered, “I’m doing well. It’s great to see you too.”

“You’re already here? Wait, why is the first lieutenant and second lieutenant here as well?” Park Yang-Ja rebukingly asked as she turned toward Cha Dong-Gyun and Kwak Cheol-Ho, wondering why they were pushing themselves even though they were injured.

Cha Seung-Ho and Cha Seong-Ho swiftly remembered that one of the only times their father, Cha Dong-Gyun, got mad at them was when they behaved badly toward Park Yang-Ja. Hence, they immediately clasped their hands in front of them and did a ninety-degree bow.

“Hello, Mrs. Park,” they politely greeted.

Park Yang-Ja bent over toward them and asked them how they were doing. She then stood back up and hurried inside.

The wives didn’t take offense, however. They all knew she was just trying hard not to show weakness or her tears. Park Yang-Ja knew better than anyone that the “Seong” in Cha Seeng-Ho, the name of Cha Dong-Gyun’s second son, came from Choi Seong-Geon.

The coffee shop only had one table available. On this day of the month, its owner didn’t take any other customers.

Park Yang-Ja sat down, and Cha Dong-Gyun, Kwak Cheol-Ho, and the wives followed. Choi Chang-Hoon took their orders and went to the counter.

In their world, the husband’s rank determined the wife’s rank. However, to act like that in front of Park Yang-Ja was horrifying to even just think about. Once, during the holidays at Choi Seong-Geon’s house, she had scolded a sergeant’s wife for trying to wash the teacups for her.

Choi Chang-Hoon was Choi Seong-Geon’s second son. He always came to these gatherings to run tea errands and play with the children.

“We have all been promoted by one rank,” Cha Dong-Gyun informed Park Yang-Ja.

This was Han Kyung-Mi and Kwak Cheol’s wife’s first time hearing about it as well.

Cha Dong-Gyun added, “We heard on the way here.”

“Congratulations,” Park Yang-Ja said, masking her sadness, as Choi Chang-Hoon brought over coffee and tea. He set them down and took Cha Seung-Ho and Cha Seong-Ho outside. The children loved playing with him.

“First Lieutenant Cha—I mean, Captain Cha.”

Park Yang-Ja looked at Cha Dong-Gyun.

“You know I hate my husband, don’t you?”

Cha Dong-Gyun didn’t know what to say.

“That wretched man never wrote me a letter, but before he died, he wrote me one.”

Cha Dong-Gyun gulped. Witnessing his attempts to hide his emotions, Han Kyung-Mi and Kwak Cheol-Ho’s wife wiped away their tears.

“That mean man...”

Park Yang-Ja briefly exhaled to maintain her stoic expression.

“He must have known it would happen. He said it was our duty to repay our country for living off of it, but he also said that unless one’s a general, it would be hard for their family to get by.”

Even though it wasn’t his fault, Cha Dong-Gyun still apologized. “I’m sorry.”

Park Yang-Ja smiled.

“For the first time in so long, I feel proud of him. Seeing the people who remember him shows me that he didn’t die in vain.”

Outside the window, they could see Choi Chang-Hoon running around with the two children.

Park Yang-Ja added, “I’m done raising my children now. I’d be satisfied with my life for as long as I can fulfill his foolish wishes.”

“Captain,” she then called.

“Yes?”

“Don’t come to these gatherings anymore.”

Cha Dong-Gyun’s eyes reddened.

“We need to be alone so we can talk bad about you and First Lieutenant Kwak.”

Cha Dong-Gyun still couldn’t speak.

At that moment, the door opened, and the wives of the other special forces soldiers filed in. Lee Yoo-Seul’s widowed mom was one of them.

They each had a meal worth 5,000 won and reminded one another not to forget that they were families of soldiers living off of the country’s support.

With her restaurant’s income, Park Yang-Ja continued to help the families of the fallen soldiers.

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“My goodness! My son!”

An old woman ran out the front door and greeted Um Ji-Hwan. Despite having no idea about what happened or that he had left for an operation, she still rushed toward him and carefully looked him up and down.

Um Ji-Hwan grinned. “What?”

“Are you okay? You’re not hurt anywhere, are you?” she worriedly asked.

“Look. I’m completely fine. What is it?”

The old woman’s legs shook, the strength leaving her.

“My dreams were so horrible that I couldn’t even eat properly.”

Um Ji-Hwan felt guilty for a moment. However, he still gave her an innocent look.

“You must really be getting old now.”

“I guess so. Have you eaten?”

“I’m hungry.”

“Alrighty, I’ll fix something up for you.”

His mother hurried to the kitchen.

They lived in an eighteen-pyeong residence—a home that his mother had slaved over to obtain after losing her husband early. Since Um Ji-Hwan now made money, she had been able to little by little put some money in a savings account.

Um Ji-Hwan went into his room and changed into comfortable clothes. He then walked back out into their tiny living room. His mother had cut a sweet potato and put it on a plate for him.

“Here. Snack on this. It’ll fill your stomach a bit.”

His mother was the type to always make a fuss, which annoyed him. However, he was her only hope and family. How could he turn a blind eye to her sincerity?

“I brought back a lot of laundry. I’m sorry,” Um Ji-Hwan said.

“I do nothing but lounge around all day at home. What makes you think I can’t handle a couple of dirty clothes?” his mother rebuked.

“You don’t just lounge around all day. You do all the housework.”

“Everyone in the world knows all I do is eat and laze about with your hard-earned money. They’re all jealous of me,” she swiftly replied without pausing from cooking.

“You don’t have to cook me anything,” Um Ji-Hwan said.

“I have to. People who work need to have hot soup to warm them.”

His mother pulled out all the side dishes and hurried to her room, fetching a rice container that was stored under the futon.

No matter how hard Um Ji-Hwan tried, he couldn’t change that habit of hers. She would always carefully scoop out the rice in the morning and store it under the futon to keep it warm.



Kimchi stew with large pieces of pork, a piece of hastily grilled mackerel, radish salad, and two kinds of kimchi were set on the table.

“Come, sit down,” Um Ji-Hwan urged.

“You go on ahead. You must be hungry,” his mother refused, busily moving around the house.

“It tastes better when we eat together.”

His old mother brought him some water and sat in front of Um Ji-Hwan.

“We have a really cool new hyung-nim at the company,” Um Ji-Hwan began.

“A hyung-nim?”

The longer they lived in Seoul, the harder it was to pin down his mother’s dialect. It came out more whenever she was panicking or in a hurry.

“Yes. He’s a lot older than me, but he treats me well.’

“That’s so nice of him. Don’t grow complacent and start taking advantage of him just because he’s nice.”

“That goes without saying.”

Um Ji-Hwan scooped up lumps of his food, quickly making his way to the bottom of the bowl.

“Want some more?” his mother asked.

“Do you have any?”

His mother probably couldn’t have made a happier face even if he had given her a check with her name on it.

She pulled out a clear container from the fridge, put it in the microwave, and pressed a button.

“Why don’t you ask that hyung-nim to introduce you to a nice girl?” she asked.

“There you go again.”

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

She pulled out the container from the microwave and picked up the steaming bowl with her bare hands. She then set it down in front of Um Ji-Hwan.

“This house might be small, but it’s enough for two people, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Geez!”

“Oh stop it. If you get married, I’ll move to your uncle’s place.”

“That’s ridiculous. How would I be able to live with myself if I sent you away?”

“Do you want to live with me forever, then?” she scoffed.

Instead of answering, Um Ji-Hwan scooped up some of the meat and kimchi from the stew and dumped them into his rice bowl.

“Son,” his mother called.

Click.

Um Ji-Hwan set his spoon on the table.

“Mother.”

She glanced at him.

“What are you doing? When Father died, you started raising me alone in the market. Now that I’m making my own money, you want me to send you back to the countryside so I can live here with a girl?”

During the short silence, his old mother blinked a few times.

“All right, all right. I was wrong. Hurry up and eat again.”

“You gotta stop doing that!”

“I will, I will.”

As Um Ji-Hwan picked up his spoon again, his mother quickly wiped her tears.

After scooping up a spoonful of rice, he glanced at her. “Enough with that nonsense, okay? I’ll find a girl who’ll have fun living with the two of us.”

“Okay, okay.”

His mother kept pushing the side dishes and stew closer to him while he stuffed his mouth full.

“How was the site this time?” she asked.

“Pretty good,” he quickly responded while shoveling rice in his mouth.

His mother believed that he was working for a construction company. If it weren’t for Seok Kang-Ho, she would have received notification of his death in this small apartment.

*Gulp, gulp.*

Chewing the rice in his mouth, he suddenly remembered his fallen seniors and their families, making him choke up with emotion.

“What’s wrong? Did it get stuck in your throat? Drink some water.”

“Heh, heh, heh.”

“What is it? I told you, I’ll stop.”

“Heg. Heghh. Heghh.”

“I’m not going to the country, so hurry up and eat.”

His mother, in the dark, wiped his tears and tried to calm him down. Strangely, that just caused more tears to roll down his cheeks.

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Lee Hui-Sook sank to the floor, seemingly about to collapse. They were supposed to be moving in two days. She was going to go with her husband, Han Jae-Guk, to a military apartment in Jeungpyeong.

“I’m so happy.”

She couldn’t believe the last memory she had of her husband was him being excited to be a member of South Korea’s top special forces team. It was only then that she remembered Han Jae-Guk’s phone call.

“Is the training hard?”

*- There’s no such thing as hard training for me. I just can’t get out of it because they desperately need me. Your husband is always in demand wherever he goes, you know.*

“Take care of yourself.”

*- I will. You take of yourself too. Also...*

“What?”

Why had she picked up his call like that? It wasn’t like folding the laundry was so important.

*- I know it’s not easy being married to a soldier. Thanks.*

“Don’t be ridiculous. If I catch you meeting up with other girls at the coffee shop in front of your unit, you know I’ll kill you, right?”

*- I already have my hands full with you.*

“Hang up. I have to fold the laundry.”

*- Okay. I’ll call you once our training is over.*

Why did she talk to him like that? Even if the laundry was torn or blown away, it still wouldn’t have mattered as much as him....

“The late Second Lieutenant Han Jae-Guk was awarded the Eulji Order of Military Merit. He was also promoted to First Lieutenant. The funeral will be in three days, after which he will be laid to rest at the National Cemetery.”

She couldn’t even understand what he was saying. It seemed like she should, though, so she slowly raised her head. Although dazed, her gaze slowly rose past the soldier’s shiny shoes, perfectly pleated pants, white gloves, neat uniform, and white hat.

When her eyes reached his face, Lee Hui-Sook burst out sobbing. The soldier, his eyes bloodshot, had clamped his mouth shut to hold back his tears.

Chapter 303.2: With everyone

The feeling of being alone with someone in a sauna—that was how Kang Chan felt in the car on the way back to the hotel. Fortunately, It didn't take long for them to reach their destination.

After accepting the suit cover and shopping bag that an agent handed to him, Kang Chul-Gyu awkwardly stood in the lobby.

“Take the rest of the day off. I'll come by tomorrow afternoon to discuss the upcoming schedule,” Kang Chan said.

“All right.”

Clothes definitely made the man.

Kang Chan wanted to drag him back out and do something about his unsophisticated haircut, but they had more days left together anyway.

“Go on up.”

Kang Chul-Gyu smiled awkwardly and headed up to his hotel room.

Afterward, a low sigh escaped Kang Chan. He turned around and saw agents standing in front of the car.

“I'm going to have some coffee in the lobby. Do you want a cup too?” Kang asked them.

“We'd feel more comfortable just waiting for you,” an agent replied with a grin. He then hopped back into the passenger's seat.

There were only two hours left before midnight.

Craving for some hot, strong coffee, Kang Chan walked into the lobby.

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

Just then, his phone began to ring.

“Hello?”

- Channy, we're done.

This was the first time he had ever heard Michelle sound so exhausted.

“Where are you?”

- Apgujeong-Dong. What about you?

“I just arrived at the hotel. Where do you want to have dinner?”

- Let's go somewhere we can smoke. What about that restaurant in Bangbae-Dong? The one visited last time?

“Sure. Don't we have to make a reservation, though?”

- I'll call them and let you know.

Kang Chan was about to ask her what happened but decided against it. They were going to meet soon anyway. He could just hear all about it then.

He didn't have enough time to drink coffee, but it was awkward to just sit around and wait.

It was strange how people's emotions worked.

Kang Chan didn't expect that he would miss Joo Chul-Beom, who was in Mongolia. If he was here, Kang Chan could just sit around in the staff office and smoke a cigarette. However, he supposed no matter how much he missed him, he would still be annoyed at how the punk always greeted him with a ninety-degree bow.

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

With nothing to do, he just stood in the lobby until his phone rang again.

- Channy, I've made the reservation. Can you find your way here?

“Sorry, I forgot. Can you send me the address?”

- Sure. We're on our way.

His phone vibrated soon after he hung up. When he went out of the entrance, the agent waiting for him immediately walked over.

The entrance of a lobby was usually bustling with people waiting for their cars.

At first glance, Kang Chan probably looked to be in his mid-twenties at most. Hence, his expensive luxury suit and shoes stood out even more than usual. To top it all off, a black sedan pulled up in front of him, and a muscular man opened its rear door for him.

He climbed into the car as the people around him quickly gazed at him. He then showed the agent in the driver's seat Michelle's text. “Can you drive me to this address?”

Not long after, they arrived at Bangbae-Dong.

“This might take a while. Why don't you go inside and get some rest?” Kang Chan suggested.

“We have twenty agents stationed at this place,” the agent replied.

“What?”

“Your security clearance has been upgraded, so we've increased the number of guards around you. Starting tomorrow, you'll also have a secondary line of security from Yoo Bi-Corp.”

Kang Chan felt as if he was being jolted out of a deep slumber.

“Who issued that order?” Kang Chan asked in surprise.

“The Director did. The National Intelligence Agency has taken over your security.”

Kang Chan sighed, thinking they had gone too far. He decided to discuss this with Kim Hyung-Jung tomorrow.

Nodding, he simply replied, “Got it.”

Just as he was about to enter the restaurant, Michelle’s car pulled in behind Kang Chan’s.

Gérard got out of the passenger’s seat with a dark scowl on his face, and Michelle stepped out of the driver’s seat looking like it had been days since she last had some sleep.

As the agent drove away, Gérard walked up to Kang Chan.

Gérard’s brown hair had been handsomely cut into what Kang Chan believed was called a semi-Mohican style. He was also wearing a neat suit, a dress shirt, a narrow tie, and maroon leather shoes.

“What happened?” Kang Chan asked.

He looked jaw-droppingly handsome, at least. All the women walking by turned to stare at him.

His thick eyebrows, long lashes, and eyes, which had a hint of green, made him look like a lonely, mysterious man. Even the scar on his cheek added to his charm now that he was dressed to the nines.

“What is wrong with that woman?” Gérard growled as he looked at Michelle, who was parking the car. To her credit, he looked more handsome than the famous soccer players of England.

“What’s wrong? You look nice,” Kang Chan responded.

“It took me twenty outfit changes just to find this one outfit,” Gérard snarled.

“Well, that’s—”

“It wasn’t just one store. We went to at least six different stores. First for the shirt, then the shoes!”

Gérard glared at Michelle again, seemingly having almost lost his temper in the middle of his complaint.

If he was telling the truth, that would mean they had gone off to eighteen different stores and changed suits, shirts, and shoes twenty times.

*Whew!*

Just the thought of it sent a shiver down Kang Chan’s spine. He thought it was a relief that Gérard didn’t have a gun on him.

Just then, Michelle came over and approached Kang Chan, completely ignoring Gérard.

“Channy,” she called.

“You’ve both had a long day. Let’s head inside and get something to eat,” Kang Chan said.

All the women and even the men passing by turned their heads to look at Gérard—although the men’s eyes swiftly turned toward Michelle next.

It was worth the effort. However, if Michelle asked the same thing to Kang Chan, he would definitely say no. They weren't planning to be models or anything. What point was there in visiting six different stores and changing outfits twenty times?

As they walked into the restaurant, a waiter froze in his tracks upon seeing Gérard. All the customers inside also stared at their party. With Michelle standing alongside them as well, both the men and women had a reason to look at their group.

Michelle turned to Gérard with a gaze that seemed to ask, "You still don't think I'm right?"

From what Kang Chan could tell, Gérard was desperately trying to contain his anger.

After Michelle gave the name their reservation was registered under, one of the employees led them to a small courtyard at the back of the restaurant.

The night air was still chilly. The employee lit up an umbrella-shaped gas heater and then took their order.

"Do you still serve food at this hour?" Kang Chan asked.

"We take orders until eleven, but you can stay until one."

That was more than enough time.

Kang Chan had already eaten, and the two of them didn't look like they had an appetite, so he just ordered a three-course French meal and some wine for the table.

Michelle pulled out a few cigarettes. They then all gladly lit them.

"Hoo."

Exhaling the smoke, they felt as if the fatigue they had accumulated throughout the day was melting away.

Their server brought them a bottle of wine, biscuits, and cheese first.

*Glug.*

Kang Chan took the bottle and filled their glasses.

At the same time, Gérard glared at the tables inside through the glass. "Why do those annoying bastards keep stealing glances at us?"

"Do you have to say it like that?" Michelle snapped back.

Kang Chan had never seen her act this way.

Gérard turned to Michelle, irritation evident on his face.

Michelle continued, "Why do you keep talking like that? It's a relief the department store employees couldn't understand you. How would you feel if you were in their shoes and they talked the way you did?"

"What's wrong with what I said?" Gérard questioned.

“You asked if we thought you were an idiot! How do you think that made me feel? What did the employees even do that was so wrong?”

“While we’re on the subject, let me just ask one thing. Why did you make me put on clothes that I wasn’t even going to buy?”

“You have to compare the clothes to know which ones to buy. Were you planning to just buy clothes you hadn’t even tried on? What if there were better clothes at other stores?”

“I ended up buying the first outfit I tried on!” Gérard exclaimed.

“Because after trying everything on, we realized it was what suited you best!” Michelle cried out.

It sounded like an argument between a frustrated man and a wrongly accused woman.

*Clink, clink, clink.*

Kang Chan lifted his spoon and tapped his wine glass with it.

“That’s enough.”

This wasn’t an issue of who was right or wrong. They simply belonged to different species. If Michelle were to go on an operation and make a mistake, the tables would have been turned.

“I asked her to do it. Let’s stop here,” Kang Chan told Gérard.

“Understood,” Gérard obediently replied.

Michelle glanced at Gérard.

“Thanks, Michelle,” Kang Chan said. “Gérard isn’t a model or an aspiring actor. He doesn’t know much about things like this. I hope you understand.”

“All right,” Michelle replied.

Gérard looked at her this time, the scar on his cheek twitching.

“This is a special meeting. I wanted two of my favorite people to be acquainted. Here, let’s forget what happened during shopping,” Kang Chan said, raising his glass.

Gérard and Michelle raised theirs as well.

*Clink!*

After touching glasses, they all took a sip before setting their drinks down.

“Cap, I bought two suits, plus other clothes, sneakers, and shoes. It cost quite a bit. I insisted on paying with my card, but…” Gérard began, putting another cigarette in his mouth.



“Channy, I paid for it with the rent we received recently. That reminds me, for God’s sake, please take care of your accounts,” Michelle pleaded.

“Why? Can’t I just leave them alone?” Kang Chan asked.

“I guess, but there’s quite a bit of money in there.”

“Just leave it. I can just use my card if I have to, and I’m good. Oh, right! I spent a lot of money today. I also got this suit and some other clothes,” Kang Chan loudly boasted.

“You spent a lot? How much?”

“I don’t know. I think I spent more than ten million won.”

Michelle narrowed her eyes at him.

“Did I spend too much?” Kang Chan worriedly asked. “I’ll have Cecile put some more money in the bank account.”

She took out another cigarette and lit it up.

“What are you talking about? You earned over seven hundred million just from the drama rights, then you have your monthly salary from DI and the building management company.”

“Does that mean I don’t have to put in more money?”

Michelle laughed in disbelief. Meanwhile, Gérard just stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray like he wasn’t interested at all.

Their food was soon served.

The three shared the meal over wine. Although they were already full, they at least sampled the food. Kang Chan spoke up often to control the pace of the conversation.

Michelle was wise. She didn’t ask about Kang Chan and Gérard’s relationship. Instead, she naturally steered the conversation to the production of dramas.

Fortunately, Kang Chan didn’t have to interpret their French for anyone.

While they filled their stomachs and drank wine, their resentment from shopping melted away.

“When are you leaving the country?” Michelle asked Gérard.

“I have nineteen days of vacation left,” Gérard replied.

“Vacation?”

“Vacation from work. Why do you ask?”

“It would be nice if we could get together again with my friend Cecile.”

Gérard smiled in response, causing the scar on his cheek to twitch.

“Why are you smiling like that?” Michelle asked with a frown.

“I always smile like this. Do I also have to worry about what others think of it?”

Kang Chan just grinned as he watched them.

Michelle wouldn't be able to understand that smile of his—which stemmed from the discomfort of being paired up with someone—even if he tried his best to explain.

Smiles like that could only be made by those who wanted to be an emotionless nobody during missions.

That was the same reason Kang Chan just stayed with Daye during vacations until they had to return to duty.

Michelle sighed quietly and looked away.

By the time they had finished two bottles of wine, it was already almost one in the morning.

The employee walked over to their table and informed them that they were going to close soon. Hence, Kang Chan immediately paid with his card.

“Channy, why don't we go to a nearby gopchang restaurant and have some soju?” Michelle suggested.

*More alcohol with these two?*

Kang Chan glanced at Gérard.

“I'm not tired,” Gérard reassured him.

Kang Chan didn't know if he and Gérard would ever get the chance to drink together like this again, so he just nodded and stood up.

Since the gopchang restaurant was just out front, they informed the restaurant they were currently in that Michelle would leave her car in the parking lot for a bit longer before walking over.

It was still cold at night, and even though it was past one in the morning, the streets of Bangbae-Dong were still busy. If only it weren't for the French man and woman attracting everyone's attention, Kang Chan would have walked more comfortably.

Stealthily glancing around, he occasionally saw the agents assigned to him. It would've been nice if he could invite them all over for gopchang and soju.

“Welcome—”

A woman who seemed to be an employee of the restaurant began to greet them but froze upon seeing Michelle and Gérard. Seeing Kang Chan seemed to have made her feel relieved.

“Hello ma'am, we'll have a platter for three, a bottle of soju, and two beers,” Michelle ordered in fluent Korean.

Curious glances were thrown at them from the other tables in the half-full restaurant.

*Hiss.*

While the gopchang cooked, Michelle whipped up bomb shots made with beer and soju.

“Here we go! Cheers!”

Kang Chan didn't know what it was for.

Gérard's cheek twitched in amusement as he raised his glass.

*Clink!*

Unlike wines, this kind of alcohol was fun to down quickly.

Gérard drank half of his glass. After glancing at Kang Chan and Michelle, he then downed the rest of his cup. He covered his mouth with his fist from the carbonation, and this time, Michelle grinned like she was imitating Gérard from earlier.

“This is fun,” Gérard said, glancing outside.

This wasn't the Africa he was familiar with, but it wasn't France either. They were drinking alcohol together in South Korea, where Kang Chan lived.

Kang Chan could see the complex emotions in his eyes.

“If it's so fun, why don't we have another round of shots?” Michelle suggested.

“Sure.”

*What the hell?*

Kang Chan had no choice but to down another bomb shot.

When he set down his empty glass, the woman came back over.

“You can eat it now.”

She pushed the cooked gopchang to one side and turned to Gérard and Michelle with curious eyes.

“Try it,” Kang Chan told Gérard.

“Okay.”

Gérard awkwardly picked up the gopchang with his chopsticks.

“Should I ask for a fork?” Michelle asked him.

“I'm fine.”

Gérard held his chopsticks in a death grip and managed to get the food in his mouth, albeit barely.

“It's not bad,” he said.

Kang Chan grinned. “Eat up.”

They got to eat good food and have fun drinking alcohol on this joyous occasion. However, Kang Chan couldn't feel at ease knowing that, after his vacation, Gérard would have to fly back to the battlefields in Africa.

The reality of Africa kept nagging at the back of his mind. One could die at any time and anywhere on that continent, and no one would find it strange.

Noticing the look in Kang Chan's eyes, Gérard held out the bomb shot that Michelle had made for him.

“Merci, Capitaine,” he said.

Gérard seemed to have read the emotions in Kang Chan's gaze. He, too, had been keeping the recruit whom he had lost in Africa in the back of his heart.

Kang Chan wordlessly touched glasses with him.

*Clink.*

After downing their shots, Kang Chan raised another. “Merci, Gérard.”

He was grateful for everything—that Gérard made his and Daye's lives in Africa meaningful, that he recognized him even though he looked different now, and for staying alive to this day.

*Clink.*

Gérard's cheek twitched as they both took another shot.

Michelle ordered more beer and soju.

“South Korea is truly fun,” Gérard remarked.

“Drink up,” Kang Chan said, raising another glass with a smile. The three downed their drinks once more.

It was a pleasant and fun occasion.

“Is this the Korean food that you were talking about?” Gérard suddenly asked.

“No.”

“What were you talking about, then, Channy?” Michelle asked.

“I told him about the pork cutlets and bulgogi that they sell at local restaurants.”

The three chatted about light topics as they kept drinking the night away.

“If we have time, I'll buy some bulgogi,” Michelle offered.

Gérard blinked, his eyes heavy with alcohol, as he complacently turned toward her.

“Sounds good.”

By around four in the morning, they had finished around eight beers and three bottles of soju. They were feeling pretty good.

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

Kang Chan quickly pulled out his phone. A call at this time of night was either really urgent or a misdial.

“Hello?”

- Hey! Kang Chan! Where are you?!

Oh Gwang-Taek sounded furious.

*What the fuck is this asshole doing at this hour?*

“What is it?” Kang Chan calmly asked.

- Hey! I’m watching the camera footage right now! It is him! I’m fucking sure of it! Where are you?!

Kang Chan reflexively looked at Gérard.

- Hey! I’m going to the hotel right now! I’ll be there in thirty minutes! That son of a bitch! I’m going to fucking murder him!

Oh Gwang-Taek enraged curses pierced his ears.

Chapter 304: How Much Do They Look Alike? (1)

“Oh Gwang-Taek,” Kang Chan said.

Noticing that the look in Kang Chan’s eyes had changed, Gérard stood up straight, looking as if he had instantly sobered up.

“What would you do if I was the one in the camera footage?”

- What? Motherfucker! I said it was Gérard in the CCTV footage!

“If I saw you in that camera footage, I would’ve asked you about it first. If you said that it wasn’t you, I would’ve looked into the reason the culprit looks like you before getting angry.”

Although still panting in anger, Oh Gwang-Taek had at least stopped yelling.

“What would you want me to do if Chul-Bum, the guy you told me you trust, was the one caught by the CCTV? What if he told you that it wasn’t him?”

Kang Chan heard Oh Gwang-Taek sigh and groan at the same time.

“I told you that I trust Gérard, didn’t I? We’ve also agreed to watch the camera footage together because the fucker said it wasn’t him. Why do you choose not to trust us?”

The silence continued.

With his mood soiled, Kang Chan completely sobered up. Considering Gérard’s eyes were glinting and Michelle, who was beside him, was now walking on eggshells, the change in his behavior was likely apparent.

“Where are you? I’m out with Gérard right now, but I can get to the hotel in thirty minutes.”

- I’m sorry.

Kang Chan thought it would take more than an apology for him to forgive Oh Gwang-Taek.

- Watching the footage made me angrier. It made me think he was making a fool out of me. I now realize that if Gérard were the culprit, he wouldn't have insisted on staying with you. He wouldn't have promised to watch the footage with us either. If I upset you, I'm sorry. Please forgive me.

“You son of a bitch.”

There was no way Oh Gwang-Taek wouldn't know why Kang Chan swore at him.

- Ah fuck! Hey! Just come here quickly!

Oh Gwang-Taek's shameless response showed that he was getting over his embarrassment.

“You bastard! Think before you speak!”

- I already said I'm sorry!

“Alright, alright. Let me just say goodbye to everyone here before I leave.”

- Do you want to meet tomorrow?

Kang Chan burst into laughter.

“Stop talking nonsense and just head to the hotel. I can't stand this anymore. I have to see the footage myself.”

- I'm on my way.

Kang Chan hung up. Smirking, he turned to Gérard.

“That was Oh Gwang-Taek. He called to tell me that he had checked the CCTV footage and that it was definitely you in it.”

Gérard grinned. “That's interesting.”

“Michelle, I'm sorry, but we'll have to call it a night,” Kang Chan said.

“It's okay. I've had enough drinks anyway. I have work in the morning.”

The three stood up from the table.

“I'll pay for this,” Michelle said.

She quickly went to the counter to pay. Meanwhile, Kang Chan and Gérard went outside and lit up a cigarette each.

*Chk chk.*

They exhaled air and cigarette smoke at the same time.

“Capitaine,[1]” Gérard called.

“Quoi[2]?”

“Croyez-vous vraiment moi[3]?”

Gérard glanced at Kang Chan, meeting his gaze.

“You son of a bitch!” Kang Chan swore in Korean.

Gérard burst into laughter. Kang Chan joined him.

“Let’s go check the CCTV footage ourselves. I’m also curious how much you and the culprit look alike or Oh Gwang-Taek to kick up so much of a fuss,” Kang Chan said.

“I’m also curious.”

Michelle, who had just finished paying their bill, suddenly leaned forward. “What’s so funny?”

They found it strangely funny.

Kang Chan and Gérard started to snicker like madmen. Michelle also laughed with them, perhaps because she was intoxicated.

It was fascinating. Kang Chan found Gérard and Michelle so funny when they were laughing.

For quite some time, the three laughed in the middle of the street outside the restaurant, the cold weather making their breaths visible.

Soon, Kang Chan exhaled to stop himself from laughing. He then looked at Michelle. “We should go now. What about your car, though?”

“I’ve called someone to drive it,” Michelle answered.

“Keep safe.”

“I will.”

Michelle’s phone rang soon after Kang Chan stopped talking. The driver she had called approached them.

“Sir, will you bring my car here? It’s in the parking lot of that restaurant. I need a moment to talk to them,” Michelle told the driver.

“Of course. Where’s the key?”

The old man accepted the car key from Michelle and quickly walked to her car.

“We should wrap this up with a cigarette,” Kang Chan suggested.

In response, Michelle took out a cigarette and put it in Kang Chan’s mouth. She then did the same for Gérard.

*Chk chk.*

“I had fun today. We should do this again. I’ll buy bulgogi next time,” Michelle told Gérard.

“You’re not going to visit several restaurants before choosing one, are you?”

“Of course not! We’ll just enter some random restaurant. We won’t even think about it.”

*What are they even saying?*

As the two joked about nonsense, the driver pulled up in front of them.

“See you later. Thanks for today,” Kang Chan told Michelle.

Michelle gave Kang Chan a big hug and then kissed both of his cheeks.

“It was nice meeting you,” Michelle told Gérard.

“Thanks for today. Let’s be more comfortable around each other next time.”

They hugged lightly and said goodbye with cheek kisses. Michelle then got in her car.

Kang Chan looked behind him and found a black car pulling up.

Once he had gotten in the back seat with Gérard, they immediately made their way to the hotel.

“Let’s judge this with a cool head,” Kang Chan told Gérard.

“Understood.”

Their joyous occasion ended with the laughter they shared with Michelle a moment ago.

Being slightly tipsy and completely drunk were two completely different things. This much alcohol intoxication was nowhere near enough to faze them.

Gerard was all too familiar with the tension that stemmed from situations where they could die at any moment, and Kang Chan knew everything that was related to the CCTV footage.

They arrived at the hotel at around thirty minutes past four in the morning.

As soon as they walked into the hotel, Oh Gwang-Taek, who had been sitting in the lobby that was closed for business, approached them with a laptop bag slung on his right shoulder. He seemed to be having mixed emotions.

Nevertheless, being who he was, he still held out his hand first, which Gérard shook.

“Let’s go up to the room,” Oh Gwang-Taek suggested.

The three got in the elevator and then went into the room.

*Click.*

They took off their jackets as soon as they entered. Now wearing just shirts and pants, they then sat around the table.

Oh Gwang-Taek opened his laptop, and the screen woke up at the same time. It seemed he didn’t even bother turning the system off before closing it. Kang Chan could feel how impatient Oh Gwang-Taek was.

*Click. Click.*

Oh Gwang-Taek used his wireless mouse to open the CCTV footage. After putting it on full screen, he swiftly clicked play.

*Click.*

“This is the hallway,” Oh Gwang-Taek started to explain.



The recording showed Chinese men walking out of a room, dragging a laundry cart with them. They were heading to the elevator.

Oh Gwang-Taek continued, "You had just split open Sharlan's side in the room, and those Chinese men had put him inside that laundry cart before going down to the parking lot."

Kang Chan quickly interpreted what Oh Gwang-Taek was saying in French for Gérard. As he remembered what happened back then, his eyes started to glint.

The video was now showing the Chinese men pushing the laundry cart into the elevator.

*Click. Click.*

Oh Gwang-Taek opened another CCTV footage. This time, it was from the camera inside the freight elevator.

"The problem starts here," Oh Gwang-Taek said.

*Click. Click.*

Oh Gwang-Taek looked for and opened one more video. The screen showed the basement parking lot.

Kang Chan expected the video quality to be awful, but it was better than he thought. They could see everything, even the Chinese men's expressions.

When the freight elevator opened, the Chinese men walked into the parking lot.

*Click. Click.*

Oh Gwang-Taek quickly played another footage. This time, it showed the view from in front of the elevator. He soon paused the video, stopping it just as Gérard's face came into view. He was wearing sunglasses.

*Damn it!*

The man on the CCTV footage looked so much like Gérard that even Kang Chan had to acknowledge the resemblance.

"Hmm."

If Kang Chan hadn't heard Gérard's flustered groan, and if he hadn't watched the CCTV footage with him, he would've also grown suspicious of him. The two looked that much alike.

"He does look like me," Gérard said.

Oh Gwang-Taek quickly turned to Kang Chan.

"Gérard acknowledges that the guy looks exactly like him," Kang Chan relayed.

"See? How can I not be confused when the resemblance is so uncanny?"

Oh Gwang-Taek looked at Gérard with glinting eyes, then looked back at Kang Chan again.

Gérard looked extremely flustered not because he had been found out but because he had no idea how to accept that someone who looked exactly like him was in the CCTV footage.

Noticing what Gérard was thinking as well, Oh Gwang-Taek silently asked Kang Chan what they should do.

“Let’s review the rest of the footage for now,” Kang Chan suggested.

“Alright.”

*Click. Click.*

Oh Gwang-Taek unpaused the video. Soon, it showed the white headlights of a car reversing out of its parking spot. Afterward, its brake lights flashed red.

The two Chinese men opened one of its rear doors and lifted the laundry cart into the back of the car.

The man who looked like Gérard held up his hand to say thanks and then left.

Sighing, Kang Chan leaned back in his chair. “Haaa!”

“Got any cigarettes?” he asked.

Oh Gwang-Taek rummaged through his pockets. He then took out cigarettes and a lighter.

Based on the CCTV footage alone, there was no excuse. The man clearly looked like Gérard. Nevertheless, after giving Kang Chan a cigarette, he still offered one to Gérard.

His glinting eyes and dry gulps still showed his hostility toward the man. However, Kang Chan thought it was only natural for him to behave this way.

*Chk chk.*

Kang Chan exhaled cigarette smoke. “Hoo!”

Their priority right now was to look into how this happened.

“Did you make a copy of this CCTV footage?” Kang Chan asked.

Oh Gwang-Taek hesitated for a moment, seemingly contemplating how he should answer.

Exhaling more smoke, Kang Chan smirked.

“I get that Do-Seok was attacked because of this incident and that guy looks like Gérard, but it’s definitely not him,” Kang Chan said in Korean.

Oh Gwang-Taek looked back at Gérard, then nodded.

Kang Chan continued, “If so, then that means that bastard in the video is part of a foreign intelligence bureau. You’d also be in danger if others discover you have this footage. After all, we’re up against people who’d be willing to shoot anyone to hide this incident. I’m sure you’ve also noticed that there’s not even just one news article about what happened in Libya.”

Oh Gwang-Taek likely wouldn’t have believed him if he wasn’t part of the operation in Libya.

“Make me a copy of the CCTV footage. Hide another copy somewhere that only you know and tell someone you really trust where you hid it. From now on, you’re going to have to live knowing that we can die at any moment.”

“Kang Chan.”

“What?”

“You’re the only one I can trust for something like this.”

Kang Chan looked at Oh Gwang-Taek with a dazed expression.

He probably wasn’t saying that because he couldn’t trust his subordinates but because this matter was related to a battle to the death, like what happened in Libya. Still, Oh Gwang-Taek’s words tugged at Kang Chan’s heart.

“Fucking it. Let’s go get some coffee before we continue this,” Oh Gwang-Taek suggested.

Kang Chan was starting to feel moved and touched, but the son of a bitch just had to ruin it.

“Sure,” he answered. He then used the phone in the room to order coffee.

*Click. Click.*

While Oh Gwang-Taek was copying the CCTV footage into a USB, Kang Chan told Gérard what he had talked about with Oh Gwang-Taek.

“Got any ideas?” Kang Chan asked afterward.

“About that...”

*Knock knock knock.*

They kept being disrupted today.

Gérard stood up and opened the door. He then received their coffee from a hotel employee.

As Gérard poured the coffee into separate cups, Oh Gwang-Taek handed Kang Chan the USB.

“You keep this. I’ll hide another copy somewhere tomorrow and tell you where it is,” Oh Gwang-Taek said.

“Sounds good.”

Once Gérard had brought over their coffee, they all smoked again.

“I used to be part of the Mermier family. However, once noble families are abolished, we tend to hide our family name. That’s why I’ve been called Gérard Gee since I was young even though I grew up in that household,” Gérard started.

“That makes it highly possible that the man in the video is your cousin, doesn’t it?”

“It’s a little farfetched, but that’s the best answer I got right now. Honestly, I can’t think of any other way to explain this.”

After nodding, Kang Chan told Oh Gwang-Taek what Gérard said.

“Fuck,” Oh Gwang-Taek swore as he groaned. “Either way, that at least means we have a chance of catching the guy, right?”

Kang Chan nodded in response. He felt as if the hot coffee was waking him up.

“Oh Gwang-Taek,” he called.

“What?”

Oh Gwang-Taek stubbed out his cigarette. He looked at Kang Chan as he blew on his sleeve.

“Don’t take this lightly. Anyone can target you now, so never go out alone. Honestly, I can’t just tell the National Intelligence Service about this either. Right now, the only people I can trust to keep this a secret are you, Mr. Seok, Gérard, and Director Kang.”

Oh Gwang-Taek looked like he was having mixed feelings.

“Don’t leave the hotel unarmed. I’ll get you a pistol tomorrow morning. Is there anyone who can accompany you for the time being? A subordinate you trust, maybe?”

“Chul-Bum and the others are all in Mongolia, and I’m sure you already know this, but Do-Seok is in the hospital.” Afterward, Oh Gwang-Taek hesitated for a moment but soon asked, “They wouldn’t mess with my wife and kid, would they?”

Kang Chan couldn’t answer.

“What’s wrong? Is this that dangerous?”

“If the ones behind this find out that there’s CCTV footage of the incident, it would be best to assume the worst. I’ll ask the DMZ team to guard your family. We should have them accompany you as well.”

Oh Gwang-Taek nodded in agreement. They then drank coffee, causing silence to embrace the room.

“Capitaine,” Gérard called. In French, he asked, “Didn’t you say that Sharlan is imprisoned in Loriam’s basement?”

Knowing Oh Gwang-Taek couldn’t speak their language made him feel relieved enough to say what he wanted to say.

“Where did you find Sharlan again?”

Kang Chan quickly told him about how they found Sharlan in an industrial area in Incheon.

The sun was starting to rise, evidenced by the quickly brightening world out the window.

“Doesn’t that mean there’s a chance Sharlan knows the guy?”

*Is that how it works?*

When Kang Chan turned to him, Gérard continued, “I’ll meet Sharlan. Maybe we can trick him if I behave like the man in the footage.”

Considering even Kang Chan had trouble telling them apart, it could certainly confuse Sharlan.

“Sharlan doesn’t know me that well. I’ve never even met the bastard since you sent me somewhere else. If I act as if you’re working with me, we should be able to learn about who the fucker is, where he is right now, and which organization he’s a part of.”

Kang Chan’s gaze on Gérard sharpened.

*He wants to meet Sharlan?*

Kang Chan felt bad, but for the first time since this incident started, he became skeptical of his intentions. ‘Is Gérard really the one behind this? He could be suggesting this plan so he can scheme with Sharlan.’

*No. That can’t be right.*

Gérard smiled. The scar on his cheek twitched.

*Damn it! I’m doubting him like an idiot even though I said I trusted him when he asked me if I did earlier!*

“I’m sorry,” Kang Chan apologized.

“For what?”

Gérard feigned obliviousness even though he had clearly guessed what Kang Chan had been thinking.

*I trust Gérard. I have to trust him even if I find out later that he’s been manipulating me.*

Being suspicious of Gérard for the rest of his life was too cruel for Kang Chan.

“Let’s do as you said. I’ll meet Ambassador Lanok first thing in the morning and tell him about our plan to visit Loriam,” Kang Chan said.

“Understood.”

Kang Chan felt relieved now that they had finalized their plan.

“You going to bed?” Oh Gwang-Taek asked Kang Chan. “Why don’t we have breakfast before you do?”

Kang Chan wasn’t hungry, but he likely wouldn’t be able to sleep now anyway.

“Alright. I could go for a light meal.”

Kang Chan asked Gérard to join them. He then ordered two servings of an American-style breakfast and one baekban.

“Do you think we’ll be able to track down the culprit?” Oh Gwang-Taek asked Kang Chan.

“I’ll probably find a way once I’ve looked deeper into this issue tomorrow. I’m just worried that people would find out about this, so just stay here until I’ve discussed this with Director Kang.”

“Okay.”

While Kang Chan was talking to Oh Gwang-Taek, a hotel employee brought over their food.

They had to eat and sleep whenever they could. Only then could they bring their best to every fight.

Chapter 305: How Much Do They Look Alike (2)

Kang Chan shared his room with Gérard, the same man with whom he had shared a makeshift bed in a dusty barracks tent and slept beside a pile of corpses in Africa. Having been in situations with no room to be choosy in the past, they now comfortably sprawled out in their underwear, each occupying a twin bed.

Realizing that he had much to do, he soon shook his head to get rid of his sleepiness. Turning his bleary gaze to the side, he saw Gérard with one leg off the bed. He wondered just how deeply the guy could be sleeping.

*Swoosh!*

As Kang Chan opened the curtain, dazzling sunlight instantly filled the room. Gérard raised his head and blinked, seemingly in pain.

*This kid has a remarkably long leg.*

“I’ll shower first. Go order some coffee,” Kang Chan ordered.

“Oui,” Gérard answered.

Kang Chan entered the bathroom right after.

*Ssshhh.*

He turned on the tap and brushed his teeth. He didn’t know who was responsible for Suh Do-Seok’s injuries, but the act of smuggling Sharlan and harming Suh Do-Seok infuriated him as much as the suspicion he harbored toward Gérard. When he came out with a large towel wrapped around his waist, he found Gérard sitting at the table, wearing nothing but pants.

"Here's your coffee, sir," said Gérard.

As Kang Chan settled at the table, the events leading up to dawn flooded his mind.

“What time is it?”

“It’s a little past ten,” Gérard replied.

Kang Chan took a sip of his coffee.

"I'll arrange a meeting with Ambassador Lanok while you're in the shower. I'll also talk to Director Kang about Oh Gwang-Taek and his family's safety before we leave."

Gérard nodded as he set down his cup. "Let's discuss the rest of the schedule after the call."

"Don't worry about me."

Noticing Kang Chan's smirk, Gérard grinned in return. He then stood up and removed his suit trousers as if they were military pants before heading into the bathroom in his underwear. Similar to Kang Chan, each scar marking his body served as evidence of a narrow escape from death.

*Buzz buzz buzz. Buzz buzz buzz.*

Kang Chan extended his hand to pick up the phone on the table. It was Seok Kang-Ho.

*Did something happen to this bastard too?*

"Hello?"

- It's me.

"Yeah, what's up?"

- You busy? If you're free, let's have bossam[1] for lunch.

A carefree laugh burst out from Kang Chan.

*Ha! Explaining the situation over the phone would take too long!*

However, extending this courtesy to Seok Kang-Ho was only fitting. Kang Chan shared only the essential details with him.

- What kind of situation is that? Gérard must be really upset, huh?

Seok Kang-Ho also had unwavering faith in Gérard.

"I'll swing by in the evening after I'm done working for today," said Kang Chan.

- Cap.

"What is it?"

- I'm healing so much faster than before that even the doctor is surprised, so don't worry about me and take care of Gérard.

Kang Chan smirked. "Got it."

After ending the call, he quickly called Lanok's number.

- Monsieur Kang.

"Ambassador, I apologize for taking so long to contact you."

- I distinctly recall telling you not to worry about me last time.

Lanok's relaxed voice brought Kang Chan a sense of relief.

"I have something to discuss. Do you have some time to spare?"

People's minds would sometimes synchronize enough to let them sense each other's emotions even over a phone call. This was one of those times. Kang Chan could almost visualize Lanok scrutinizing his watch intently through the phone.

- I have a bit of free time an hour after my lunch appointment.

"That should be enough. I'll come by at two this afternoon."

- See you soon.

Right after hanging up, Kang Chan sipped his cold coffee. At the same time, Gérard got out of the shower.

"I've got a meeting with the ambassador at two," said Kang Chan.

"Good to know."

Kang Chan nodded, giving Gérard a thoughtful look. It seemed somewhat improper to leave someone, who barely knew the local language, alone in a hotel.

'Should I call an interpreter?' he wondered.

Kang Chan tilted his head and then immediately reached for the phone once more. As soon as he pressed the call button, Kim Hyung-Jung answered.

- Assistant director.

"We agreed to be informal among ourselves, didn't we?" Kang Chan responded.

- Keeping up with the frequent location changes isn't easy.

His words were followed by a soft chuckle.

"Do you know where our interpreter is?"

- You mean the one who was with us recently?

"Yes, the one who injured his finger."

- His name is Shin Min-Cheol. He's in the hospital right now. If you need a French interpreter, we have others available.

"I'm only looking for him since he's the only one I know. Anyway, I've got a meeting at the French Embassy at two. I'll reach out to you once that's done."

- Got it.

*Should I assign an agent to Gérard? That doesn't seem like the right move, though. The kid's already uneasy.*

With no other choice, Kang Chan pressed the call button again.

- Channy!

Michelle sounded like she had just broken free from a constricted throat.

"Are you tired?"

- No, just looking over some documents. I'm almost done with work, though, so I was thinking of sneaking away to rest. Anyway, what's up? Bringing me a present?

*She never changes.*

"I've got some business to attend to today and was hoping you could look after Gérard. How about you two grab bulgogi for lunch?"



- Really? Where are you right now?

"I'm at the Namsan Hotel."

- Perfect. I'll be right there.

"Call me when you get to the lobby."

After hanging up, Kang Chan told Gérard that Michelle would be coming.

"Captain, can't I just stay here?" asked Gérard.

"Why?"

Gérard shook his head at the thought of meeting Michelle.

"You'll be having bulgogi for lunch. You were planning on doing that anyway," Kang Chan said.

"Hmm."

*Why does he look so troubled about lunch? It's like he saw something unsettling.*

"Understood."

Gérard hurriedly got dressed.

"Wait here. I'll just talk to Director Kang."

"Copy."

Suddenly thinking of getting Gérard a phone, he called Michelle again as he left the room.

- We have an office phone he can use. How about I give that to him and take it back when he leaves?

Michelle was certainly the best choice for tasks like this. The pile of work that had built up from yesterday to sunrise seemed to be gradually getting sorted out. Kang Chan went to Kang Chul-Gyu's room and rang the bell.

"Who is it?"

A voice from inside asked. Not long after, the door opened.

*Click.*

Kang Chan pondered why Kang Chul-Gyu bothered to ask who it was if he planned to open the door without waiting for an answer.

"Can I come in?" Kang Chan asked.

Kang Chul-Gyu moved aside, feeling a bit more relaxed than before. "Of course."

Upon entering, Kang Chan saw Nam Il-Gyu standing by the table.

"You don't have to leave. It might be better for you to be here, actually."

Kang Chan assessed the situation and sat down only after receiving a nod from Kang Chul-Gyu. Except for the slightly disheveled bedspread, the room was neat and tidy. Everything was arranged as meticulously as the hotel initially set.

Glancing around, he noticed a half-empty bottle of water beside the TV stand. A sigh involuntarily escaped him.

"Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes. I ate with the others," answered Kang Chul-Gyu.

"Why not order some coffee?"

"I'm not that fond of it."

Kang Chul-Gyu gave Kang Chan a questioning look.

"Oh Gwang-Taek is in danger," Kang Chan finally opened.

That one sentence made Kang Chul-Gyu's gaze sharper.

"I would like the DMZ team to handle his and his family's security."

"How skilled do you think the enemy is?"

"They're from an intelligence bureau, so they would likely go to any lengths."

Kang Chul-Gyu gave Nam Il-Gyu a quick look before turning back.

"What about weapons?"

"We can prepare handguns and knives. Since Oh Gwang-Taek is already in the hotel, I'd like you to start as early as today."

"Understood," Kang Chul-Gyu firmly replied.

"Can we integrate everyone who's back from the operation into the National Intelligence Service's counter-terrorism team?"

Nam Il-Gyu quickly looked at Kang Chan for cues.

"Do you know Kim Hyung-Jung? He's in the counter-terrorism team."

"Yes, I do."

*Ah, it all clicks, then! He's probably also connected to President Kim Tae-Jin!*

If so, then there was no need to drag this out.

"Just a moment."

Kang Chan immediately picked up the phone and dialed Kim Hyung-Jung's number.

- Kang Chan?

Being called by name, not his position, felt much more pleasant.

"Manager, what else do we have to do for the whole DMZ team at the Namsan Hotel to officially join the National Intelligence Service?"

- The director has already approved of it. Just send over the list, and we will process it immediately.

"Can you issue them handguns, knives, and ammo today?"

- For the entire DMZ team?

"I have a protection task for them. It would be best to discuss the needed weaponry with Director Kang himself, but at least prepare a handgun and magazines for Oh Gwang-Taek. One moment."

Kang Chan handed the phone over to Kang Chul-Gyu. "We only need to submit a list now for to make your agent status official. Anyway, they're asking what and how many weapons you need. It's best you talk to him yourself."

Kang Chul-Gyu took the phone and brought it to his ear.

"Hello? Hmm, that's right. We'd appreciate it if you could arm our entire team. The weaponry... as the assistant director has ordered, it's necessary."

*This old man is actually pretty considerate.*

"We'll need eight handguns and knives each. We're also going to need extra ammo, two vehicles, and radios. I apologize for the inconvenience."

A brief silence enveloped the call. Kim Hyung-Jung seemed to be noting their requests down.

"I believe it would be better for the assistant director to tell you about the mission himself. That's how we operate."

*Why does he keep calling me 'assistant director'?*

Kang Chan got chills being addressed that way, yet Kang Chul-Gyu kept confidently repeating the title.

"Thank you. See you later."

Kang Chul-Gyu briefly nodded as if acknowledging someone in person. He then returned the phone. The previously absent spark of life was now clearly visible in Nam Il-Gyu's eyes.

"This is Kang Chan."

- The tasks you've assigned will be processed today. I was thinking of coming to the hotel in the afternoon. Would that be a suitable time for you?

"We'll have to see. I'll try to be here by then."

- Understood.

Kang Chan hung up the phone and gazed at Kang Chul-Gyu.

"I'll bring Oh Gwang-Taek later after lunch. Please discuss his security detail with him."

"Got it."

Only now did Kang Chan appreciate the reassuring effect of Kang Chul-Gyu's simple acknowledgment.

"Assistant Director," Nam Il-Gyu called. "Thank you."

Before Kang Chan could ask what that was for, Nam Il-Gyu continued, "For giving us the opportunity to serve the nation again."

Kang Chan was rendered speechless.

*What did their pasts mean to these people? Were they not idiots to chant 'country, country' with such blind loyalty?*

*Buzz Buzz Buzz. Buzz Buzz Buzz.*

His phone's ringtone snapped him back to reality.

"Hello?"

- Channy, I'm in the lobby.

"Got it. I'll be right there."

Kang Chan stood up. Turning his head, he saw Kang Chul-Gyu also rising.

*'Don't worry. I've got your back.'*

Despite the cheesiness of the moment, Kang Chan felt as if they had secured an ally they could trust to handle any potential threats.

Kang Chan nodded at Nam Il-Gyu and left the room. He had a busy day ahead. He went to his room, fetched Gérard, and headed down to the lobby.

"Channy!"

Michelle stood up and waved her hand. Those initially looking at Gérard, who was wearing a suit, sharply turned to Michelle.

"What's with your hair?" Michelle asked.

"My hair? What about it?" Gérard replied.

"You should have styled it!"

Gérard ran his fingers through his hair, wiggled his cheeks playfully, and then sat down.

"Got any gel?" Michelle wondered.

"This is my first day, so no. I don't really use products like that."

"Why style your hair like that, then?"

"Who said I was the one who did this? Who do you think sat me down and styled it like this?"

*Ah, these two!*

Fortunately, they were speaking in French, sparing others from their otherwise embarrassing conversation.

*Tap, tap, tap.*

Kang Chan tapped the table with his index and middle fingers.

"Keep it down. Go have bulgogi for lunch."

"What about you, Channy?"

"I've got a lunch appointment of my own."

While he yearned for a hot cup of coffee, the idea of having it in the company of their awkward exchanges was less appealing.

"Wait! Let me put the office phone number in your contacts."

Michelle grabbed Kang Chan's phone and swiftly added the number.

"And the phone?"

"Here."

Following Kang Chan's quick rundown, Gérard took the phone, no questions asked.

"Let's go."

"Channy, make sure to eat lunch. Let's go."

"I'll be back, Captain."

Kang Chan briefly waved at them. He felt like he had just accomplished a major task.

Now, he had to go back up, wake Oh Gwang-Taek, have lunch with him, and hand him over to Kang Chul-Gyu. He originally planned to meet Kim Hyung-Jung and go to Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook today, but that seemed unlikely now.

'I should hurry.'

Kang Chan's muddled thoughts seemed to serve as a reflection of how complicated things had become.

*Ding-dong. Ding-dong.*

Expecting to find Oh Gwang-Taek asleep, Kang Chan was surprised to see him already neatly dressed.

"Come in."

Oh Gwang-Taek stepped aside, allowing Kang Chan to enter and take a seat at the table.

"I've gotten you a meeting with Director Kang after lunch to discuss your security. Manager Kim Hyung-Jung will bring the weapons in the afternoon."

"Thank you."

"I should be the one thanking you instead," Kang Chan corrected.

Oh Gwang-Taek wryly smiled at him.

"And Gérard?"

"I asked someone who speaks French to take him out for lunch."

While Kang Chan's assurances and observations about Gérard were credible, the image that Oh Gwang-Taek had seen the day before continued to trouble him. A glance was enough to tell that he found it hard to come to terms with Gérard.

"I see. Let's go get something to eat," Oh Gwang-Taek suggested.

"Sure. Where do you want to go?"

"How about the baekban restaurant[2] across the street?"

Kang Chan hesitated for a moment. Even though the National Intelligence Service agents would be moving as a unit, he questioned if they really needed to make a special trip just for lunch. Maybe he was overanalyzing the situation, taking it too seriously when the other party might not have even given it a second thought.

"Alright. Let's go."

Oh Gwang-Taek briskly stood up. They left the room, walked down the corridor, and took the elevator to the ground floor.

"We used to have many gang fights back in my day." Oh Gwang-Taek stared straight ahead as he spoke, making it look as if he was talking to the elevator door. "Reflecting on it, the only real change has been the weapons, shifting from sashimi knives to handguns."

With a smirk, he added, "Back then, we didn't have anyone like you. Honestly, Do-Seok, Chul-Bum, and I had to go through hell to get to where we are now."

He turned to Kang Chan.

"I've survived countless brushes with death."

*Ding.*

The elevator announced its arrival.

"If I ever die..."

The doors slid open.

"... please, make sure to bastard in the video is taken care of."

Oh Gwang-Taek walked into the lobby.

Chapter 306: Because I Believed (1)

Oh Gwang-Taek and Kang Chan had lunch at Oh Gwang-Taek's favorite baekban restaurant, which was quite shabby. As if he was her prodigal son returning home, the elderly owner kept serving them various side dishes.

"Try some of this too," she said, patting Oh Gwang-Taek on the back.

"Stop. I'm already full," Oh Gwang-Taek said.

"Is that really enough? Have another bowl."

"I've already had two."

*Is he trying to play cute?*

Kang Chan held back a laugh while drinking water. He missed Yoo Hye-Sook. Maybe that was why he could somewhat understand Oh Gwang-Taek's unusual sulkiness. For him, the elderly owner probably felt like a mother.

However, Kang Chan didn't want to watch any more of it.

"We should go," Kang Chan said.

"Alright."

Just as they were getting up, the elderly lady stuck her head out from the kitchen and tried to stop them.

"Where do you think you're going? Have a cup of coffee before you leave," she said.

"We need to go. We're busy."

"Don't be so cold-hearted. You're upsetting me."

"We really need to leave now."

Following Oh Gwang-Taek, the owner came out to the door.

"Come back inside. Why rush off today of all days? "You'll come back, won't you? Make sure you eat on time."

Oh Gwang-Taek smiled, making him look like a son who often caused trouble.

"See you," he said.

Leaving the disappointed elderly lady behind, Oh Gwang-Taek headed back to the hotel. It was the time of day when the high sun shortened shadows.

"I'll head to the hotel. You go tend to your business," said Oh Gwang-Taek.

"I won't feel at ease until I've seen you with Director Kang," Kang Chan replied.

"Hey! Have you forgotten who I am? I'm the Oh Gwang-Taek!"

"Alright, alright, I get it, you rascal. The Oh Gwang-Taek from Sinsa-dong! How about a coffee and a cigarette before we part ways, then? Also, don't forget to brush your teeth. "

Oh Gwang-Taek just laughed off the jab from Kang Chan. After having coffee in Oh Gwang-Taek's room, Kang Chan headed to Kang Chul-Gyu's.

*Ding-dong. Ding-dong.*

"Who is it?"

Perhaps Kang Chul-Gyu only kept asking that to show that someone was inside.

*Click.*

The door opened, revealing Nam Il-Gyu, Yang Dong-Sik, and several other DMZ team members.

"I'm going. I have an appointment," Kang Chan said.

Kang Chul-Gyu briefly nodded. That was all the acknowledgment that Oh Gwang-Taek received, too.

Kang Chan headed straight to the elevator and went downstairs. After walking through the lobby and out the entrance, a sedan pulled up in front of him without him having to call for it. He got into the back seat.

"Take me to the French Embassy," he ordered, then asked, "Do you have a radio and an extra handgun?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like them now?"

"No. Give them to me when I come out of the Embassy."

Sleep-deprived, he found himself constantly yawning.

The world outside appeared as peaceful as always. Naturally, not all those in the passing cars and those walking by were happy. Some were surely struggling enough to wish for death. Nevertheless, Kang Chan still felt a sense of peace in the world that was distinctly at odds with his personal experiences.

It was as if he was holding onto the tail of a lion. He wished he could just say, 'Just live well,' and leave it at that. Unfortunately, his troubling sense of duty had linked him to the next-gen energy and Eurasian Rail projects, ensnaring him as tightly as the menacing glare from a predator in an African pit.

He arrived at the French Embassy. Upon entering the parking lot, Louis, who looked hale and hearty, greeted Kang Chan. They nodded at each other and then went straight up to the second floor.

"Monsieur Kang."

"Ambassador."

Lanok, wearing a neat suit, welcomed Kang Chan with a pleased expression.

"Please have a seat."

Seemingly anticipating Kang Chan's arrival, they had already prepared a teapot of black tea, two empty cups, cigars, cigarettes, and an ashtray on the table.

*Clink.*

The distinctive, bitter aroma of the black tea filled the air as Lanok poured them tea. He then met Kang Chan's eyes.

"What brings you here? You handled the operation in Libya quite impeccably, so it couldn't be that."

Keeping his gaze fixed on Kang Chan, Lanok brought the teacup to his lips.

"Ambassador, the truth is..."

Kang Chan calmly recounted the attack on Suh Do-Seok, Oh Gwang-Taek's accidental encounter with Gérard, and the events that followed after they checked the CCTV footage yesterday.

"Hmm."

Lanok lit a cigar.

"Do you have any urgent appointments after this?"

"I'm free."

Lanok, cigar in hand, walked to the desk and pressed the intercom button.

- Yes, Ambassador.

That was definitely Anne's voice.



"I need another hour. Please reschedule my appointments."

- Yes, sir.

Lanok stated his order plainly, not bothering to mask it as a favor. Kang Chan felt he was getting a glimpse into Lanok's task management methods.

"Do you have that video?"

"Yes."

Kang Chan set down his teacup and handed over a USB to Lanok.

Lanok pressed a few buttons on the remote. Soon, the video started playing on the wall-mounted TV. He intently watched as the screen filled with the image of a man in sunglasses, head slightly tilted.

*Click.*

Lanok hit a button, pulled out a yellow folder and a USB from a drawer, and passed them to Kang Chan.

"The DGSE has already investigated that case," he said as his cigar emitted a thick smoke. "While you were fighting the Spetsnaz in France, we fired the two deputy directors who came up as suspects in the case."

"Did you find any evidence?"

"If we did, we would have dealt with them differently. The situation was too urgent to leave them be just to investigate their backers."

Lanok tapped off the ash from his cigar and gestured with his eyes toward the file he had handed over.

"You'll find that quite interesting to read," he said, maintaining a perfectly impassive expression.

Honestly, Kang Chan didn't want to read it. He didn't know what was inside, but he didn't want to get even more entangled in this. However, he couldn't just avoid this situation either. Taking a deep breath, he silently flipped the yellow folder open.

*'Gérard...'*

On the first page, in the top left corner, was a palm-sized photo of Gérard.

Lanok continued, "That is a detailed report of the investigation we conducted on him when you issued an order to make him the commander of the Foreign Legion special forces."

Before turning to the next page, Kang Chan looked at Lanok.

"Gerard de Mermier, from a fallen noble family, grew up adopted under the name Gérard Gee."

Everything Lanok mentioned was exactly as written on the front page.

"His adoptive father, Sergey Gee, a former Spetsnaz operative before the Soviet Union fell, gave him the name Gérard Gee."

*Of all the families out there, why did he have to get adopted into that one?*

Kang Chan's mouth filled with saliva. He couldn't swallow it, though, since he didn't want to appear weak in front of Lanok.

"Vasili knew him. Don't misunderstand, though. Any capable head of intelligence would know about him."

Kang Chan took a sip of his black tea.

"You'll find an interesting photo on the next page," Lanok said.

Honestly, Kang Chan had no desire to turn the page. He felt like prying into Gérard's past was something he shouldn't do.

*What should I do?*

Avoiding it now would mean he would keep thinking about what lay beyond.

*Flick.*

Turning the page, on the top left corner, he found a close-up photo of an older man. Below it was a photo of a man lying on the sidewalk in front of a store.

A sigh involuntarily escaped from Kang Chan.

"Sergey Gee was stabbed to death while walking on the street. The next page shows Gérard's adoptive mother and sister, each dying in separate traffic accidents."

*Flick. Flick.*

As Lanok had said, the photos on the next page showed the corpse of an unremarkable French woman beside a totaled compact car. The other was of a younger woman, likely her daughter, lying lifelessly on the road.

The summary of the case and the police officer in charge were also written on it. According to the report, the adoptive mother's compact car collided with a truck, and the daughter was instantly killed by a motorcycle. It was all too strange. There had to be a reason for the deaths of these three people.

*Flick.*

Since he had already looked anyway, he decided to see this through. However, when he turned to the next page, he found himself unable to proceed. Right before his eyes was a photo of a young Gérard in embarrassingly flared pants, pitifully looking back at Kang Chan.

His academic record, grades, and personality were all noted as poor.

*Flick.*

The photos that followed seemingly documented Gérard's growth. They showed him growing taller and, more importantly, his gaze changing to what it was now.

*Flick.*

Next was his application to join the Foreign Legion and records of his deployments, accomplishments, evaluations, and awards.

"He went missing for an entire year before he joined the Foreign Legion," Lanok said as Kang Chan put the yellow folder back on the table. "He vanished so thoroughly that not even the DGSE could trace him before he abruptly surfaced to join the Foreign Legion."

Kang Chan picked up a cigarette from the table.

"Mr. Ambassador, I'd like to check if Gérard was in Africa when the CCTV caught the man with the sunglasses," Kang Chan stated. "I also request the DGSE to investigate if the suspect really is his cousin—a person of pure Lemier lineage."

*Click.*

Kang Chan lit a cigarette. The sorrowful look in young Gérard's eyes from the photos lingered in his mind.

"Hoo!"

Tapping the ash into the ashtray, he looked at Lanok. He had to steel his resolve.

"I have a question, sir."

"Go for it. I'll answer to the best of my abilities," Lanok answered.

"Why have you been keeping Sharlan in Lorient?"

"Although circumstantial, we have evidence that points to his collaboration with Ethan in smuggling out Blackhead."

Kang Chan already knew all of that.

"The pressing question is why Sharlan went to South Korea, especially with drugs in a Gong Te automobile. It could just be Ethan targeting me, but I believe Sharlan's operations were linked to the Star of David."

Lanok extinguished his cigar in the ashtray. He then continued, "More importantly, Ethan couldn't have deceived me with such actions. That leaves us with Josh, the deputy director of the British intelligence bureau."

"Does that justify keeping Sharlan alive?" asked Kang Chan.

Lanok's eyes glinted with light amusement.

"Eliminating Sharlan would mean one less concern for the Star of David. By keeping him alive, he continues to be a potential wildcard, unpredictable in whether he would spill secrets."

Kang Chan exhaled softly.

*They lead such complex lives.*

Unfortunately, whether he liked it or not, these sticky situations clung to him like tape.

"First off, it would be wise to identify the man in the footage," Lanok suggested.

"Has the DGSE thoroughly investigated how Sharlan ended up in Incheon and whose help he had, sir?"

"In complex situations, it's often smart to return to the basics. The nations connected to your question include China, North Korea, the UK, France, and Korea. That's why we have to prioritize identifying the man in the video."

*What else is there? This is like peeling an onion, layer by layer, with the fear that there may be nothing at the core. No, if this was an onion, I would have just cut it in half.*

Lanok refilled Kang Chan's cup.

"Where's Gérard?"

"He went out for lunch."

"The only reason I appointed Gérard as the commander of the special forces team despite his year-long gap..." Lanok looked at Kang Chan, showing a hint of emotion for the first time today. "... was because I trust you and your judgment."

Could there be any words more comforting in a moment like this?

The turmoil and complexity within Kang Chan instantly calmed down.

"Now, Mr. Kang Chan, you have another urgent matter to attend to."

Lanok gave Kang Chan a reassuring smile.

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After enjoying bulgogi at a spacious Korean restaurant in Apgujeong-dong, Gérard and Michelle headed to a quaint café next to the adjacent park. Located on the basement level, they had to descend a staircase to reach it. Since its entrance was below the building, patrons were allowed to smoke at the tables near the staircase.

"What would you like to drink?" asked Michelle.

"Do they sell instant coffee here?"

"No, they don't."

"I see. Regular coffee it is."

Gérard wearily leaned back in his chair and pulled a cigarette from his pocket. A waiter soon approached them and put an ashtray and water on their table. They then took their order before disappearing into the kitchen.

"Did you like the food?"

"It was fine."

As Gérard put the cigarette to his lips, Michelle also pulled out her own from her bag.

*Click. Flick. Flick.*

Gérard tried to light his cigarette with his Zippo lighter, but it wouldn't catch.

*Click.*

Michelle sparked her lighter and extended it toward Gérard.

"Hoo."

They were exhaling smoke when the waiter brought their coffee.

"I'm not one to judge, but it's not right to outright dismiss the kindness of others," said Michelle.

Gérard glanced at her sideways.

She continued, "And stop giving people that look! That smirk of yours needs to go too."

Gérard chuckled, wiggling the scar on his cheek.

"If you don't like something, just say so. Don't go making faces. It puts the person who treated you in an awkward position."

"The food was fine. Tasty, even."

*Click.*

Gérard took a sip of his coffee, then set the cup down.

"If the captain entrusted you to look after me, that means he has some level of trust in you..."

Michelle firmly fixed her gaze on Gérard when Kang Chan was mentioned.

"I didn't come to Korea for these clothes or fancy food. I wanted to be with the captain, to experience his world, which was free of guns and death—" Gérard abruptly stopped, realizing what he was about to say.

"I've seen Channy troubled because he couldn't protect someone. I don't know the details, but is that what he does?" Michelle said.

Gérard sighed. "He shows his distress over things like that in front of you?"

"He had such a sorrowful expression back then. When I asked, that's what he told me."

Gérard laughed, seemingly deflated. "Let's drop this depressing topic."

Instead of responding, Michelle just quietly sipped her coffee.

After a while, she asked, "Anything else you'd like to see or eat?"

"Bulgogi was enough. Let's head back to the hotel after this," Gérard replied.

Michelle finished the rest of her coffee in silence.

"I'll go pay."

"I'll pay for it."

"No, let me cover this," Michelle insisted. She then went inside to settle the bill.

When she returned, they climbed up the stairs and entered the narrow alley that led to their parking spot.

*Vroom.*

As they were walking, a loud engine sound broke the silence.

*Swish!*

Gérard yanked Michelle back, immediately positioning himself in front of her.

*Crash! Bang! Wham!*

*Vroom!*

A scooter toppled to one side of the road, its engine blaring, with noodles and soups from its delivery scattered all over. People gathered around. The scooter driver lay face down, bloodied, seemingly dead.

"What was that...?" Michelle trailed off, taken aback by the intensity of Gérard's glare.

Hoping to calm Gérard, Michelle forced herself to speak. "Are you okay?"

Gérard turned to her, his expression one of someone struggling to make sense of the situation. Suddenly, his eyes became so pitiful that he looked as if he was about to cry.

Chapter 307: Because I Believed (2)

Michelle and Gérard were at a cafe in front of the park in Apgujeong-dong. They were on a busy road, and to make matters worse, they were also eye-catching foreigners.

The delivery driver had collapsed on the road, covered in blood.

People continued to crowd around them.

Michelle used to be the editor-in-chief of a magazine-publishing company and was now running a drama production company. Because of her career, she had developed the ability to make sound judgments.

She immediately concluded that taking care of this herself would just make things further spiral out of hand.

*Weeeooo. Weeeooo.*

"Move out of the way!" police officers yelled.

A police car was swiftly approaching them.

Michelle quickly took out her phone and called Kang Chan.

The dial tone rang twice.

- Hello?

Hearing Kang Chan's voice made her feel bad for putting him in a difficult position. However, it also made her feel strangely reassured.

"Channy, Gerry suddenly attacked a delivery person. Things have gotten out of control. A police car is here, and I don't know what to do."

Rather than being afraid of going to the police station, she was more afraid of things getting out of hand.

- Are you and Gérard injured anywhere?

Michelle didn't expect that to be Kang Chan's first question. The gratitude she felt made her emotional.

"Gerry and I are okay. We've got a big crowd around us now, though."

- Where are you guys?

“We’re at the cafe in front of the park in Apgujeong-dong.”

Michelle heard Kang Chan laughing.

- After you hang up, you’ll get a call from an unknown number. Make sure you answer it, okay?

“Okay. Thank you.”

Michelle heard Kang Chan laughing again.

After she hung up, two police officers approached them. Around the same time, the man Gérard had attacked began to stand up. He had one of his hands around his nose.

One of the police officers went to Michelle. The other went to the injured man.

With his gaze alternating between Michelle and Gérard, the cop asked, “Do you know how to speak Korean?”

“I do,” Michelle answered.

The police officer, who was glancing at Gérard, suddenly looked very relieved.

“We received a report. Did you guys assault that man?”

Michelle looked behind her to check on the police officer who went to the injured man. Just as she was about to answer, her phone rang.

“One moment, please,” Michelle requested, then answered her phone. “Hello?”

The cop interrogating her looked displeased but allowed her to take the call anyway. His buddy was still helping the man who had collapsed.

“Yes. That’s right. Yes, he’s with me. One moment,” Michelle told the person on the call. She then held out her phone. “I’m sorry, but could you talk to the person on the phone for me? I don’t know much about these things.”

The police officer sneered at Michelle and her phone. If she wasn’t strikingly beautiful and if they weren’t foreigners, he probably wouldn’t have done what she asked.

Taking the phone from her, he greeted, “Hello? Yes. That’s right. Pardon?”

He quickly looked away from Michelle and examined the man who had collapsed. He then looked at her suspiciously again.

“Understood. Yes, I’ll figure out what’s going on first,” he said, then handed the phone back to her, a strange expression on his face. “Here you go. They asked me to put you on the phone again.”

Michelle quickly accepted it and brought it to her ear.

“Okay. I’ll do that. Thank you.”

The brief phone call ended.

“Go in the car for now,” the cop ordered.

“Alright.”

Michelle obediently went into the backseat of the police car with Gérard. The man on the call had also asked her to do the same to prevent people from taking pictures of them.

The rear doors of police cars couldn't be opened from the inside.

After getting Gérard and Michelle into the vehicle, the police officer shook his head. He then walked to the injured man.

The area around his nose was swollen, and sticky blood was still seeping out of his lips, which had burst open.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

The phone in the cop's pants pocket began to ring. After checking the caller ID, he quickly answered it.

“Hello? Yes, this is Sergeant Lee Yang-Ho. That's right. Pardon?”

Lee Yang-Ho discretely walked away and focused on what the person on the other end was saying.

“Yes. I already did that. No, it's nothing. I just did what I was supposed to do. Alright. I'll head to the police station immediately.”

Lee Yang-Ho hung up and then approached his fellow police officer.

“I was told that another police car is on its way. I'll drop those two off at the police station,” Lee Yang-Ho said.

His partner looked confused. Nevertheless, he simply continued, “Take this man to the hospital, then call me.”

Before he even finished his sentence, three police cars consecutively arrived at the scene.

Lee Yang-Ho quickly made his way to his vehicle.

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After hanging up, Kang Chan said, “I apologize for taking that call.”

Lanok simply smiled in response. Before Michelle called, they were in the middle of a conversation regarding Abibu's visit to South Korea.

“Abibu is flying over to meet Song Chang-Wook, the commissioner of the newly founded Energy Resource Administration. He's probably going to request that you attend the meeting,” Lanok said.

“Is this the Abibu that Vasili mentioned last time?”

“That's right. He's also related to what happened in Libya.”

Smiling, Lanok added, “He most likely holds immense fury for you deep down. The crushing defeat he suffered in Libya cost him a lot of influence in the Islamic community. You then further humiliated him and made him incur even more losses by signing the joint oil development rights



between South Korea and Russia, pushing through with the next-gen power plant construction, and more.”

As Kang Chan smirked, Lanok continued, “The stature of South Korea’s National Intelligence Service has increased enough to surprise even the DGSE. Right now, we’re receiving information related to South Korea from all over the globe. That serves as evidence that the informants stationed in other countries want to look good to South Korea by doing work related to it.”

Kang Chan knew that Lanok was saying good things, but he still found it difficult to determine which ones exactly he should be happy about.

“Abibu seems to be planning to make up for all that in one go. However, since he can’t launch a terrorist attack in South Korea right now, he would aim for the next best target—Mongolia.”

*Oh fuck!*

Kim Tae-Jin was responsible for the area that Kang Chul-Gyu and their core military unit had left.

“We learned about this all thanks to you. After you took care of the issues in Libya, our informants became much more enthusiastic about duties related to South Korea. As a result, we can now predict Abibu’s next move in Mongolia. You achieved in just one retaliation what would’ve taken regular intelligence bureaus about ten years of hard work to accomplish.”

Lanok took a sip of his black tea. He then stared at Kang Chan.

“Mr. Ambassador, I don’t know much about things like this, but I do hope we can stop sacrificing soldiers for such matters.”

“Becoming a powerful nation isn’t easy,” Lanok responded. He looked like an uncle with a lot of experience talking to his nephew. “Even France has to sacrifice innumerable men in Africa. There was also an instance when we lost half of our intelligence bureau personnel at the same time. The DGSE was formed in the process of retaliating against all of that.”

*That’s true. Right now, the Foreign Legion is probably still engaged in a violent battle somewhere in Africa.*

Lanok continued. “This is just the beginning for South Korea. Other powerful nations near this nation and the forces that want to steal its vested interests will keep it in check. South Korea has to overcome all of them. It’s cruel, but no country has ever earned honor without spilling the blood of its intelligence agents.”

Kang Chan sighed softly. Now that things had come to this, he was determined to quickly and properly take care of this matter.

“Ethan gave the Blackhead that activated the subterranean shock device to the United States,” Lanok said. As if remembering something amusing, he added, “The United States is going to have a lot in their minds.”

Suddenly thinking of Sherman, Kang Chan nodded. “That’s true.”

“Mr. Kang Chan,” Lanok called.

*Must be time for me to leave.*

Now, Kang Chan could guess what Lanok’s intentions were just by hearing Lanok calling him.

“Let’s wrap this matter up quickly. Let’s go golfing and go on a trip together after. What do you say we go to Russia? We have a friend that’ll treat us to a meal there.”

Although Kang Chan was right that Lanok did want to part ways, he was still caught a bit off guard by his words.

*Does that mean he thinks Vasili owes us a meal?*

Kang Chan couldn’t help but laugh out loud. Vasili would surely complain with glinting eyes.

*I’m glad I came here.*

Meeting his mentor allowed him to somewhat organize the complicated matters that he had to do. It also made him feel as though all the complicated thoughts plaguing his mind had disappeared.

“I’ll contact you as soon as we have more information on Gérard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Ambassador.”

“If he turns out to be related to the Star of David, the DGSE might take this matter into their own hands.”

Kang Chan’s heart sank.

As far as he knew, the DGSE had never acted without Lanok’s orders. Considering Lanok also knew all about his tendencies, those words likely served as a warning.

“If Gérard is related to the Star of David, then we will have no other option. We can’t allow such a dangerous person to be near us. That’s why we removed two Deputy Director-Generals from the DGSE in the first place.”

“Will the DGSE still eliminate him even if I ask you to spare him?”

“Letting a Star of David member stay by our side could cost you everyone else you treasure. That includes me and Anne. Everything that we’ve done and the countless sacrifices we’ve had to make would be all for naught.”

Lanok was clearly telling Kang Chan that he wasn’t going to back down.

“Understood.”

Everything would be fine for as long as Gérard wasn’t a part of the Star of David.

Kang Chan stopped being stubborn. He stood up from his spot.

Lanok's words and the look in his eyes made it clear that he wanted him to become stronger.

Kang Chan smirked as he hugged Lanok.

*I'm no longer in combat, yet life is still so fucking difficult.*

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Upon leaving the embassy, Kang Chan received a pistol and a radio from the agent sitting in the passenger seat. He then gave Kim Hyung-Jung a call.

Gérard was already at the hotel.

Kim Hyung-Jung told Kang Chan that Gérard had seriously injured the delivery person. He crushed his nasal bones.

*That crazy motherfucker! He's the commander of the Foreign Legion's special forces team! Why would he break the nasal bones of someone who just wanted to deliver jajangmyeon and jjampong?*

It was fortunate that Gérard's victim didn't die.

“What about the injured man?”

- We made a deal with him. We're compensating him for his motorcycle, food, and medical expenses. We're also paying him thirty million won to cover the time that he won't be able to work. Miss Michelle paid for all of that from your company.

“Thank you, Manager Kim. I'm on my way to the hotel. Are you free today?”

- I actually have a lot to report to you. Should we meet up?

“I'll see you in thirty minutes.”

- Alright. I'll wait for you at the hotel, so give me a call when you have time.

Kang Chan hung up and then looked outside the window.

*Gérard, you son of a bitch! You're making things so fucking hard for me. It won't be true, but what should I do if Gérard had been a part of the Star of David, even for a moment? What if the DGSE tries to kill him?*

Kang Chan saw the hotel in the distance. He had to decide what to do right now.

Exhaling softly, he made up his mind.

When he walked into the hotel, Gérard and Michelle—who were waiting for him in the lobby—stood up from their seats.

Kang Chan nodded toward the elevator. After they were done paying for their orders, the three got in the elevator and went into Kang Chan's room.

*Click.*

“Have a seat,” Kang Chan offered.

As Gérard and Michelle sat across from him, he glared at Gérard, who was clearly deep in thought.

“You son of a bitch! You wasted thirty million won just to have bulgogi for lunch?!” Kang Chan shouted.

“Channy, about that...” Michelle trailed off and dropped her gaze to the table as soon as she noticed Kang Chan’s eyes on her.

The afternoon sunlight seeped into the room through the window, elongating their shadows.

“Gérard,” Kang Chan called.

“Oui.”

Gérard seemed prepared for the consequences.

Although he looked good in a suit and shirt, he also looked tired and appeared to be having a hard time, which was unlike him.

“Pack your bags,” Kang Chan said.

Gérard glanced up at him, then dropped his gaze again. “Yes, sir.”

Michelle tried her best to read Kang Chan’s mood. She then looked at Gérard, her eyes showing how sorry she felt for him.

“I’m going to go fucking bankrupt trying to pay for your meals if I leave you fucking bastard be. Starting today, you’re staying at my house,” Kang Chan said.

Gérard and Michelle blankly stared at Kang Chan.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?” Kang Chan asked.

“Channy?” Michelle asked back.

“What is it?” Kang Chan asked, then turned to Gérard. “Do you want to stay here instead?”

“That’s not it...”

“Gérard,” Kang Chan called again.

“Oui.”

Smirking, he asked, “Are you pretending to be disheartened?”

Gérard couldn’t help but smile, the scar on his cheek curving.

“You shameless bastard! Why don’t you pretend even harder? Do you want to get hit? If the guys that know you could see the look on your face right now, all of them would—!”

Kang Chan couldn’t bring himself to say ‘They would’ve shot you!’ because of Michelle.

Gérard smiled. He seemed a bit more comfortable now.

“Anyway, from now on, you are never to leave my side. It doesn’t matter how hard Michelle coaxes you. If you have to go out, then you’re going to have to come with me—why do you keep looking at me like that?”

“It’s nothing.”

Smirking, Kang Chan turned to Michelle. She had to go through so much trouble today because he asked her to buy Gérard bulgogi. He would feel bad if he just told her to go now.

“I have a brief meeting with someone today. Would you like to have dinner with us afterward?” he asked.

“Sure.”

The offer appeared to have made Michelle happy.

With their conversation over, Kang Chan took out his phone and called Kim Hyung-Jung.

“Manager Kim, where should we meet?”

- I’m in the room used by the agents. It’s room 1552 on the fifteenth floor.

“Alright. I’ll be there soon.”

Kang Chan turned his head toward Michelle as he was putting his phone into his pocket.

“Wait for me here. I’ll be right back,” Kang Chan said.

Michelle nodded. “Okay.”

“Gérard, come with me.”

Gérard immediately stood up.

The two went out of the room and headed to the elevator. After tapping the key card on the scanner, Kang Chan pressed the button for the fifteenth floor.

*Ding.*

They stayed quiet inside the elevator.

*Slide.*

When the doors opened, two agents guarding the elevator greeted Kang Chan with their eyes.

“Can you guys open the emergency stairs?” Kang Chan asked.

“Please come this way.”

An agent opened the emergency exit door to the left of the hallway.

“Are there CCTV cameras in there?” Kang Chan asked again.

“Not in this one.”

“What about the guards?”

Kang Chan looked down the staircase, clearly examining the general security of the fifteenth floor.

“We’ve got two agents guarding the floor below and above ours,” the agent answered.

“Alright. I’m going to have a smoke before going to the room.”

The agent bowed, then went back to the hallway.

*Click.*

The door closed.

Kang Chan then walked toward the window in front of the emergency exit.

Gérard, who couldn’t speak Korean, just silently watched Kang Chan.

Kang Chan put his right foot three or four steps above the stairs.

*Click. Click. Chkk.*

He took out the pistol from the holster that he had strapped around his ankle, then offered it to Gérard, much to the latter’s surprise.

“Take it,” Kang Chan said.

Confused, Gérard accepted it. Kang Chan then handed him the two extra magazines behind his ankle.

“I went to the French embassy today and told Ambassador Lanok about the person who looks exactly like you in the CCTV footage,” Kang Chan said. He then locked eyes with Gérard. “If you turn out to be the person in the CCTV footage, the DGSE will target you. If you aren’t, the Star of David will.”

Gérard just stared at him.

After a moment of silence, he added, “Hide the pistol around your ankle already. I have to meet someone.”

Gérard raised his long leg on the stairs and skillfully did as instructed.

“You don’t need a key card to go down the floors. Go back to my room and wait for me there. The agents are guarding it, so you should be safe there,” Kang Chan ordered.

Kang Chan waited for Gérard to stand up, then turned toward the emergency exit.

“Captain,” Gérard softly called as Kang Chan was reaching for the doorknob.

Kang Chan slowly turned back.

Chapter 308: Don't Go Alone (1)

"The person in the video isn't me," Gérard stated.

Kang Chan locked eyes with him. Gérard's eyes often glinted like Daye’s. However, there were moments when they seemed sorrowful, mirroring the young Gérard's eyes in the photograph.

*Thank you. I truly appreciate it.*

When Kang Chan chuckled, Gérard swiftly joined him, his scarred cheek twitching.

"Gérard," Kang Chan called.

"Oui."

"When I got Michelle's call, I realized that even if you were the person in the video, abandoning you wasn't an option for me."

Gérard couldn't help but smile. "You truly are undeterred."

Smirking, Kang Chan proceeded to open the emergency exit door.

*I've seriously done it now, but I'm not going back on my decision.*

It didn't matter if he was being misled. Until he was sure of it, Gérard would always be the Gérard he knew.

Kang Chan resolutely reflected on his debts to Gérard from their times in Mongolia, Afghanistan, and Africa. He headed back to the hallway and went to Room 1522. As he did, he caught a glimpse of Gérard turning the corner toward the elevator.

*Ding dong. Ding dong.*

Kang Chan rang the doorbell. Soon after, Kim Hyung-Jung greeted him.

"Welcome."

Kang Chan couldn't help but smile when he saw him.

"You look like you've been having a good day," observed Kim Hyung-Jung.

"I'm just glad to see you, manager," Kang Chan responded.

Kim Hyung-Jung guided him inside with a warm smile. They then sat down across each other at the table that had simple pastries and beverages on it.

"Is there any chance of our conversation here being overheard outside?" Kang Chan inquired.

"No. The agents' rooms are equipped with surveillance countermeasures."

With his eyes, Kim Hyung-Jung gestured to a device that was flashing red and blue. It was about the size of a computer tower.

"How's the DMZ team doing?"

"They're already going through the approval process. The weapons, vehicles, and radios Kang Chul-Gyu sunbae requested have already been distributed, and their IDs will be issued by lunch tomorrow," Kim Hyung-Jung said. He then handed over Gérard's passport. "On another note, Gérard's entry has been processed."

"Thank you."

Kim Hyung-Jung opened a bottle of water and put it in front of Kang Chan.

"I heard a Saudi Arabian named Abibu is planning to visit in about ten days. Is that true?" Kang Chan asked.

"Yes, he will be coming under the pretense of an invitation from the opposition."

"He intends to meet with Energy Resources Commission Director Song Chang-Wook and has also requested that I join them," Kang Chan quickly replied, his tone suggesting curiosity and concern about why and how.

Unfortunately, Kim Hyung-Jung looked like this was news to him as well.

Kang Chan said, "Abibu was one of the people behind the incident in Libya. I've received intel that he wants to meet me to keep me in Korea and target our base in Mongolia."

Kim Hyung-Jung regarded Kang Chan with a look of obvious astonishment.

Kang Chan added, "We have to keep this matter confidential. If Abibu learns we're on to him, he may adopt a different strategy."

"What's your plan?" inquired Kim Hyung-Jung.

"I want to send the DMZ team to Mongolia."

"What about you, Mr. Kang Chan?"

"I will stay and meet with Abibu."

Kim Hyung-Jung took a deep breath.

"Then will the DMZ team become the counter-terrorism team under my charge?" Kim Hyung-Jung asked.

"That's correct," Kang Chan confirmed. "I'll head to Jeungpyeong tomorrow to coordinate with the special forces team there. In two or three days, we'll dispatch them to Mongolia. We have to remain the only ones who know about this operation."

"It's one thing to dispatch the counter-terrorism team and another to deploy the Jeungpyeong special forces team, Mr. Kang Chan."

"We'll send them on vacation."

"Vacation?"

Surprise enveloped Kim Hyung-Jung's expression.

"All the standard weapons are already at the base in Mongolia. We don't know how many our opponent will send, but I doubt the DMZ team alone will be enough. I'd like about ten people to enter Mongolia individually under the guise of a vacation," Kang Chan said.

Kim Hyung-Jung was momentarily rendered speechless.

After a short while, he asked, "Are you telling me not to report this to the director?"

"I'll leave that to your judgment. All I'm saying is that if word about this gets out, it will inevitably lead to the death of our people."

A brief silence followed.

"Please set my schedule accordingly. I don't want media exposure, but I want it to be public enough to let everyone know I haven't left Korea," Kang Chan requested.

"A meeting with Director Song Chang-Wook or an interview with Chairman Kim Gwan-Sik of the preparation committee should be enough to accomplish that."



Kang Chan was puzzled. He knew Song Chang-Wook, the descendant of an independence activist, but wasn't Kim Gwan-Sik Kim Mi-Young's...?

He sighed softly.

"How about you meet the director in person, Mr. Kang Chan?"

"If that's our best option, I don't see why not," Kang Chan answered. "Please make sure that the counter-terrorism team can go to Jeungpyeong tomorrow to coordinate."

"Got it."

"Director Kang Chul-Gyu will spearhead the Mongolian operation."

"Does he know?"

"I'll talk to him myself."

"Please do."

Afterward, Kim Hyung-Jung proceeded to tell him about the recent events in great detail. Listening to him, Kang Chan realized that he had to meet with Hwang Ki-Hyun at least once.

"We're planning to the next-generation energy facility in Goseong of Gangwon-do. Since it will also serve as the starting point for the Eurasian Rail, we've started building a new highway that would go through Mishi-ryeong."

While lives were being taken and risked overseas, such projects were advancing. Preparing for these matters and dealing with the aftermath of Kang Chan and the special forces team's actions was certainly no small feat.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I was just thinking about all the hard work you've been doing behind the scenes while I was out there causing trouble."

Kim Hyung-Jung shook his head. "Every time I remember our fallen agents and soldiers, I always feel as if I haven't done enough. I'd be too ashamed to face them right now."

He let out a short sigh, seemingly trying to shake off his emotions.

"I'll organize your schedule and send it to you by tomorrow. Choi Jong-Il's team will also be deployed by then. Oh, have you gone home yet?"

"My parents don't even know I'm here. I plan to visit them tonight, if possible," Kang Chan said.

"You should get some rest, even if just a little," Kim Hyung-Jung said.

"I'm fine."

They both smiled bitterly. If there was ever a time to push themselves to the brink of exhaustion, it would be now. As Lanok had said, they could lose everything they had worked so hard for if they weren't careful.

After their meeting, Kang Chan headed to Kang Chul-Gyu's room.

*Ding dong. Ding dong.*

"Who is it?"

*If there's no answer, he's not in.*

*Click.*

Kang Chul-Gyu opened the door.

"Got a moment?"

Kang Chul-Gyu glanced around Kang Chan and then stepped aside to let him in. They sat down together at a table. Aside from the trash bin filled with paper cups and bottles, the room was still tidy.

Kang Chan began by telling him about Abibu's visit and the situation in Mongolia.

"I'm heading to Jeungpyeong tomorrow to coordinate with the special forces team. I'd like you to go to Mongolia in a day or two."

"Got it," Kang Chul-Gyu responded without hesitation.

"Sorry."

Kang Chul-Gyu cocked his head as if to say, 'For what?'

"For always relying on you when I'm in a pinch. I know none of this is easy."

Kang Chul-Gyu smiled in a way that was different from the way he had before.

"Assistant director."

Kang Chan quizzically looked at Kang Chul-Gyu. Following Kang Chul-Gyu's gaze and nod, he saw the clothes and sneakers that he had given him.

Kang Chul-Gyu slowly raised his head. "Don't worry. Not a single enemy who's set foot inside the Mongolian base has come out alive."

*This old man...!*

Kang Chan briefly nodded. Their message of trust couldn't be conveyed any clearer than this.

"I'll get going," he said, standing up.

*What more could be said in this situation?*

Kang Chul-Gyu accompanied him to the door.

*Click.*

The sound of the door closing echoed. Kang Chan let out a short sigh, releasing his emotions, then headed to the room where Gérard and Michelle were waiting.

*Click.*

As he opened the door, both Gérard and Michelle stood up from the table.

"Are you done packing?" Kang Chan asked.

“Yes,” Gérard answered. It seemed his luggage only consisted of a shopping bag full of newly bought clothes and the bag that he had brought with him.

"Let's go."

Kang Chan took Gérard's shopping bag and left the room with him and Michelle, heading toward the elevator through the corridor. Gérard seemed pleased about leaving the hotel and getting to go to Kang Chan's place.

They informed the agents at the entrance that they were going to a barbecue restaurant in Samseong-dong, then went to Michelle's car. Kang Chan sat in the back.

'Damn it!' he thought.

The car was so cramped that the backseat was incredibly uncomfortable.

They visited the restaurant that Kang Chan had been to with Seok Kang-Ho and enjoyed sirloin with a fair amount of soju and beer. Grilling sirloin was no different from a barbecue.

Gérard couldn't help but be impressed by the side dishes. He hadn't adapted to kimchi yet, but he enjoyed everything else quite a lot.

*I'm with Gérard on this. I trust him.*

Kang Chan felt as if he had thrown off a heavy yoke from his shoulders. Toward the end of the meal, he asked for three portions of sirloin and three portions of ribs for takeout.

"Should we have a cup of coffee?"

After getting their packed order, they went to the coffee shop next door.

Although the sun had already set, it wasn't too cold.

They found a table on the veranda and had hot Americanos.

"Are you going straight home?" Michelle asked.

"No. I need to stop by the hospital to see someone," Kang Chan answered.

"Is the takeout for your parents?"

"No, it's for the one I'm visiting at the hospital."

The conversation made Gérard grin.

"What's your plan tomorrow?"

"I might have to go to the provinces."

"With Gerry?"

*When did they start calling each other their nicknames?*

"Yes. It would be boring for him to stay alone in Seoul, wouldn't it?"

"It's settled, then. I was worried you might have something for me to do today, so I brought it up."

"If I end up not being able to take him, I'll let you know."

Michelle nodded. "Alright, Channy."

"Get a driver. We'll go after."

Michelle took out her phone and called her designated driver.

"Thanks and sorry for today. The incident earlier must have been quite shocking," Gérard said.

"No, it's okay. I was partly at fault for not properly keeping an eye on you," Michelle said.

While drinking the rest of their coffee, the driver arrived at the coffee shop. After a French-style farewell, Michelle departed.

Kang Chan told the agents to pick them up through the radio.

"Are you visiting Daye?"

"Yeah. He's alone at the hospital."

A car soon pulled up. He quickly got into the back seat and headed to the hospital.

Thinking about the possibility that Seok Kang-Ho had called his family over, Kang Chan decided to call him.

- Yes, it's me.

"Have you eaten?"

- Yeah, just did. Where are you?

"I'm heading to the hospital. Is your family there?"

- How would I explain these injuries? Puhahaha, hurry up already. I'm starting to get bored, so this is perfect.

"Got it. I'll be there soon."

Hearing Seok Kang-Ho's cheerful voice made Kang Chan laugh for no reason.

Fortunately, Bang Ji Hospital wasn't that far. When they arrived, Kang Chan immediately headed to Seok Kang-Ho's room and slid the door open. Inside, he found Seok Kang-Ho sitting on the bed, the upper part of which had been raised as high as possible.

"Come in! Hey, Gérard!" Seok Kang-Ho greeted.

He could move a lot more now. Moreover, with all the swelling gone, he finally looked human again.

"Huh? What's that?" asked Seok Kang-Ho.

"Takeout. It's the same menu I had with Gérard. Seems like we're a bit late, though."

Seok Kang-Ho frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you already eat dinner?"

"Well, hospital food is hardly satisfying, you know? I was actually considering ordering some pig's feet before bedtime."

Dragging his patient slippers, Seok Kang-Ho walked to the table. "You two should eat some more too."

"I'm full."

Seok Kang-Ho set the meat and side dishes on the table. The aroma of fragrant coffee filled the air. Turning his head, he saw Gérard making instant coffee.

"What did you have for dinner anyway?"

Kang Chan relayed Seok Kang-Ho's questions and Gérard's answers. The initially busy atmosphere soon lightened, and the three started chuckling together. Kang Chan never imagined a day like this would come.

To think that after escaping the terrible battles in Africa, they would be laughing together so joyously in the heart of Seoul. Seok Kang-Ho, displaying a voracious appetite, ended up consuming all six portions of meat.

"Gérard!" He called, then mimed bringing a drink to his mouth.

*He's definitely a patient.*

Without complaint, Gérard prepared another cup of instant coffee and brought it to Seok Kang-Ho.

"Got a cigarette?" asked Seok Kang-Ho.

"You're recovering, don't smoke."

"Don't make me feel left out!"

Seok Kang-Ho genuinely looked upset. Kang Chan got up and opened a window. The three then lit cigarettes.

"The DMZ team will get their IDs tomorrow, and...." Kang Chan informed Seok Kang-Ho about Abibu's visit and the danger that the Mongolian base was in.

"Those bastards! What sin have we committed to deserve their endless madness?"

Kang Chan smirked.

*Sin? If there is one, it's being a weak country that suddenly came into possession of Blackhead's energy. Refusing to obediently hand it over and bow our heads is another.*

"Are you going, Cap?"

"I've asked Director Kang Chul-Gyu to handle it."

Noticing Seok Kang-Ho's expression, Gérard turned his attention to Kang Chan. Hence, Kang Chan explained the situation to Gérard as well. Gérard had hung his jacket over the back of a chair. Dressed in a white shirt, his brown hair and deep-set eyes looked especially striking today.

"Ha! Dude, you look completely different dressed like this! Maybe I should start wearing suits too."

Kang Chan just stayed silent. There was no need to tell him that he looked like a gangster.

Since they were already here, Kang Chan also informed Seok Kang-Ho about everything else, including the updates on the CCTV footage and today's events. However, he left out the information about Gérard's family matters.

Gérard seemed to be attempting to guess what was being discussed.

"Do you trust this guy?"

"I told him that even if he was a member of the Star of David, I wouldn't abandon him."

Seok Kang-Ho nodded.

"Gérard," he called.

"I understand if there's something you can't tell me. We gathered in Africa with that in mind in the first place."

Gérard glanced at Kang Chan, who was interpreting for them, then turned back to Seok Kang-Ho.

"Still, don't go dying in some random place alone."

*Why is he saying this?*

Kang Chan relayed Seok Kang-Ho's words in French.

"If you do, the captain will definitely do something terrible."

Kang Chan blankly stared at Seok Kang-Ho. There was no reason to say such a thing. It was also too embarrassing to interpret.

Gérard gave Kang Chan a serious look. "What did Daye say, Cap?"

"If you die alone somewhere, he says I'll do something terrible."

Gérard smiled, causing his scarred cheek to stretch. "Daye."

*Seriously, these guys!*

"Mind your own business."

Kang Chan ended up laughing so hard he was on the verge of tears.

"What did he say?"

"He said mind your own business."

After a brief silence, Seok Kang-Ho's unique laughter filled the room.

"Puhahaha!"

Chapter 309: Don't Go Alone (2)

Kang Chan had planned to go back home after visiting Seok Kang-Ho, but time flew by while they were chatting.

"You can just sleep here," Seok Kang-Ho offered.

Moreover, Seok Kang-Ho and Gérard's regretful expressions made Kang Chan feel as if he had no choice but to change plans.

“When he beat me up the third time, I finally started crying pitifully!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed.

He was telling the familiar story of Kang Chan’s first encounter with him, his subsequent entry into the Foreign Legion, and the reasons he and Gérard started clashing with each other the moment they met. Although he had told the same story so many times already, it still strangely made them all chortle and chuckle.

Around midnight, a nurse put two injections in Seok Kang-Ho’s IV drip, taking cautious glances at Gérard as she did.

They also recalled stories of their difficult battles. However, they didn’t say a word about the men they had lost. There was no need to open past wounds.

Almost an hour past midnight, Seok Kang-Ho’s eyelids began to falter. The effects of the injection were hard to beat.

“You should sleep. We’ll get some shuteye too,” Kang Chan said.

“All right,” Seok Kang-Ho replied.

Kang Chan and Gérard were sleep-deprived. They had to sleep whenever they could.

After lightly washing up, Kang Chan took the empty bed in the room, and Gérard stretched out on the cot intended for the patients’ guardians.

The lack of sleep washed over Kang Chan like water pouring down from the ceiling. He felt himself falling deeper into the bed.

The sound of Seok Kang-Ho’s snoring lulled him into a deep sleep.

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After eating the breakfast provided by the hotel, Kang Chul-Gyu left his room three hours before noon with his team. Two NIS agents helped him with all his tasks, checking out for him.

Kang Chul-Gyu climbed aboard the bus that was parked at the hotel entrance and stood in the aisle.

Nam Il-Gyu then briefly reported, “All aboard.”

Although the bus had started, Kang Chul-Gyu remained standing in the aisle.

“We’ll be going to Jeungpyeong today,” he announced.

Yesterday, all he had told them was to gather at this time. He only informed them of where they were going now.

“We’ll have a joint training exercise with our juniors there. I’ll tell you our next plans after the training is over. Make sure you use this opportunity to teach them everything you can.”

Afterward, Kang Chul-Gyu looked around the bus and sat down next to Oh Gwang-Taek.

“I’m training too,” Oh Gwang-Taek said.

“Don’t feel like you have to, President Oh,” Kang Chul-Gyu gently replied.

“Why do you say that? No one can stop me from joining.”

Kang Chul-Gyu responded with his trademark smile.

The bus sped along the highway.

All the soldiers saw the black car in front of them and the black van that was following behind.

“Those must be our security escorts, huh?” Yang Dong-Sik asked.

“I think so,” Nam Il-Gyu replied.

“Fuck!” Yang Dong-Sik suddenly swore.

Nam Il-Gyu turned to him, finding him looking outside the window.

“I find it weird to receive this kind of treatment since we were never treated this way while we were on active duty. I just wish my dead wife could have seen this. When I die, I can probably face her with dignity now.”

“Didn’t you also have a daughter? What’s she up to?” Nam Il-Gyu asked.

“So-mi? Don’t even mention her. I heard she’s running a Chinese restaurant on Sewol-Dong Street or whatever. She doesn’t even pick up my calls.”

Nam Il-Gyu turned back ahead, pretending as if he didn’t hear anything.

Most of the soldiers on this bus had a bad relationship with their families since they couldn’t find the time to properly care for their children when they were still young. To make matters worse, by the time they had grown older, their fathers had already turned into good-for-nothing bastards who had been kicked out of society. All they had left were paltry pensions and trauma from grueling battles in the DMZ, and the only jobs they could find in society were usually menial labor.

If only there had been some security companies back then like there were now...

Some of their comrades had even turned to a life of crime.

They all tried their hardest to live, but what they learned in the military was completely useless in society. Moreover, they couldn’t stand people who would try to use their power to beat them into submission.

Gangsters? Bullshit. They could kill any one of them with a flick of the wrist if they wanted to. Breaking an arm or two was nothing.

Having gone through hell and back, they found it disrespectful to be asked to bow down in front of young gangsters or the son of a landlord who drove a luxury car. It was thanks to soldiers like them that landlords had buildings and their sons had cars in the first place.

Considering they had lived lives that made sushi knives look like children’s toys, it was only natural that gangsters didn’t scare them. To top it all off, they also had resentment against the world.

Their frustration and anger even sometimes escaped them. On occasion, when Nam Il-Gyu and Yang Dong-Sik had a few too many drinks, they would shout too loudly and beat up a few gangsters.



Nevertheless, they still couldn't stop themselves from tearing up when they saw the Taegukgi.

“Hey!” Yang Dong-Sik suddenly shouted, interrupting Nam Il-Gyu's thoughts. “We're getting paid for this, right?”

“We've been getting paid since Mongolia. Why?” Nam Il-Gyu responded.

“Do you think we'll get state pensions when we die?”

Yang Dong-Sik looked dead serious.

“The thing is, Somi seems to be struggling a bit these days. I can send her my salary, but I've done some thinking. If I die and receive a meritorious pension—”

“You fucker,” Nam Il-Gyu cut him off.

Yang Dong-Sik turned to Nam Il-Gyu, surprise evident in his expression.

“Hey, you stupidass motherfucker! Instead of spending the rest of your life protecting Kang Sunbae, you're thinking of a meritorious pension? You fucking bastard! What do you think is worth more, you idiot? A salary or a pension?”

“Hey!” Yang Dong-Sik shushed him, signaling him to lower his voice. He then glanced at Kang Chul-Gyu.

Not wanting to make a fuss since Kang Chul-Gyu was on the bus, Nam Il-Gyu chose to drop the subject. However, everyone had already heard. Even Oh Gwang-Taek.

\*\*\*

There had to be something to it.

Cha Dong-Gyun, Kwak Cheol-Ho, and the others who received blood transfusions from him in Afghanistan recovered much faster than the others.

Was this the reason Kang Chan insisted on giving blood even when he himself was injured? Was something like this possible?

It was hard to say, though. Cha Dong-Gyun and Kwak Cheol-Ho could only speculate.

The soldiers, wearing their full uniforms, stood facing the entrance to Jeungpyeong and waited for the bus.

They had all been promoted by one rank.

Cha Dong-Gyun was now captain, and Kwak Cheol-Ho a lieutenant. Park Chul-Su, who was in charge of the special forces team, now had a star on his shoulders.

They soon heard cars coming through the entrance. A sedan came to view first, then a bus. The vehicles turned toward the barracks.

“Eyes front!” Yoon Sang-Ki commanded, his voice drowning out the sound of the engines.

When the bus stopped in front of the barracks, its doors creaked open.

“Salute!”

*Thud.*

As ordered, the Jeungpyeong special forces soldiers saluted.

Kang Chul-Gyu hopped off the bus and stood facing the soldiers. The rest of the team lined up behind him, looking moved.

Kang Chul-Gyu saluted them on behalf of the team.

“At ease!”

*Thud.*

“We’re honored to have you, sir.”

Cha Dong-Gyun took a step forward, signaling the rest of the team to approach the DMZ team.

“Sunbae!”

“Your shoulder has got to be aching. What are you doing here?” Nam Il-Gyu greeted as he shook Kwak Cheol-Ho’s hand. The other soldiers exchanged greetings as well.

“Sunbae.”

Kim Hyung-Jung, who had come out of the sedan, approached Kang Chul-Gyu with another agent.

“I have something I wish to inform you all.”

Kang Chul-Gyu had no idea what it was, but if Kim Hyung-Jung said he had something to say, it was to everyone’s benefit to listen. Hence, he gestured for everyone to gather with a nod. The members of the DMZ team stood behind him.

“The Republic of Korea’s National Intelligence Service hereby appoints you as special agents of the National Intelligence Service Counter-Terrorism Team.”

The DMZ team was already aware of that. A few of them had already even been issued weapons. Even so, they still looked overwhelmed with emotion.

The agent standing behind Kim Hyung-Jung handed him the files that he had been holding.

Kim Hyung-Jung walked up to Kang Chul-Gyu.

“We are living shadows and nameless stars in death. Will you bury your soul in the Taegukgi and offer your fiery blood to your country?” Kim Hyung-Jung asked.

When Kang Chul-Gyu nodded, he was given his documentation.

Next was Nam Il-Gyu.

“We are living shadows and nameless stars in death. Will you bury your soul in the Taegukgi and offer your fiery blood to your country?”

“Yes, sir,” Nam Il-Gyu replied firmly.

Hearing the word “Taegukgi” brought tears to his eyes again.

\*\*\*

Kang Chan, Seok Kang-Ho, and Gérard took turns showering in the cramped hospital bathroom.

Thanks to the extra shirts and underwear that Gérard had bought, Kang Chan was able to change into clean clothes too.

For breakfast, they had the galbi stew that Seok Kang-Ho had been singing about the day before.

“Whew! This is more like it!” Seok Kang-Ho exclaimed, practically flipping the bowl over his head to drink the soup.

Gérard seemed to enjoy the food as well, eating a good portion of it.

Well, they had endured some disgusting food in Africa. Kang Chan supposed this was just plain good food.

“What are you gonna do today?” Seok Kang-Ho asked Kang Chan.

“I’m going to meet my parents,” Kang Chan replied.

Seok Kang-Ho was nodding when the door opened.

*Creak.*

Yoo Hun-Woo walked in.

“How have you been?” Kang Chan greeted.

“Hm? When did you get here?” Yoo Hun-Woo asked in surprise.

“Last night. I slept here.”

After exchanging pleasantries, Yoo Hun-Woo examined Seok Kang-Ho’s wound.

“Can that person understand what we’re saying?” Yoo Hun-Woo asked.

“No, he can’t.”

“Then I can tell you, his wounds are healing very quickly. It’s even faster than yours now.”

Kang Chan glanced at Seok Kang-Ho before speaking again.

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“Too fast can also be dangerous. As I said before, that means you might age faster too. Keep in mind that the opposite is also possible.”

“The opposite?”

“Well, in layman’s terms, it means you’re getting younger, which is actually a very dangerous phenomenon. If you happen to develop cells with mutations, they’ll grow too fast to be stopped.”

Kang Chan gave Seok Kang-Ho a serious look. He wasn’t bleeding, and his flesh wasn’t split, so Yoo Hun-Woo’s warning didn’t seem real. Kang Chan had taken the biopsy for the same reason, but he was still fine.

“Let’s wait and see for now. Be sure to immediately let me know if you notice anything out of the ordinary, got it?”

“I will,” Seok Kang-Ho replied.

Afterward, Yoo Hun-Woo said his farewells and left the room.

“Maybe I’m recovering faster because I’m eating a lot?” Seok Kang-Ho asked.

“I’m not sure about that, but it’s worth asking later in the evening, I guess,” Kang Chan replied.

“Alright.”

“Anyway, we’ll be off now.”

Kang Chan couldn’t really do anything about it right now anyway, so he opted to leave for now.

When they reached the hospital parking lot, Gérard greeted Choi Jong-Il with a bright face.

“Choy!”

“Why don’t you get some more rest?” Kang Chan asked.

“You know how my wife is. She was glaring at me, asking how I’m going to take responsibility if anything happens to you while I’m resting...”

Woo Hee-Seung and Lee Doo-Bum turned around to hide their smiles.

The parking lot was no place for conversation.

Kang Chan stepped into the car he’d taken to get to the hospital, and Choi Jong-Il’s group followed behind him.

It took about twenty minutes to get to Kang Chan’s office.

“Amazing view you got here,” Gérard remarked as he sat at the table. While fiddling with his mug, he looked around.

“Can you call the agents and confirm if my father and mother are in the building?”

Choi Jong-Il replied affirmatively and radioed the agents.

Kang Chan continued, “My parents are probably on the lower floors. Once we’re done with our drinks, let’s go say hi. I plan to stay at home for the time being.”

“Understood, sir,” Choi Jong-II replied.

Perhaps staying at the hotel would be easier, but Kang Chan didn’t want to leave Gérard there when he had come all the way here from Africa.

More importantly, since Gérard had to be with Kang Chan, even if there was a language barrier and it was uncomfortable for Kang Chan’s parents, it was only right that they stuck together.

Besides, Gérard could be in danger until the secrets of the camera footage were unveiled.

Kang Chan leisurely drank his coffee.

He had questions, too—especially the story about the entire year that Gérard was missing. However, he had no intention of asking him until Gérard had opened it up first. It was no doubt a wound that he didn’t want to speak about.

Kang Chan still had to deal with Abibu’s visit and the Mongolian base. Nevertheless, he felt lighthearted right now.

“They’re both in the office,” Choi Jong-II reported.

They didn’t have to rush to greet them.

Enjoying this leisurely pace with Gérard, they relaxed and took their time drinking their coffee.

“Alright, let’s go. I’m going to tell them you’re a friend from France. Neither of them can speak French, so we can talk to each other comfortably,” Kang Chan said.

They left the office together.

Choi Jong-II and Woo Hee-Seung followed. Kang Chan knew he couldn’t convince them to stay behind, so he just left them alone.

An hour before noon, Kang Chan took the elevator down and went to the office of Yoo Hye-Sook’s foundation first.

Since Choi Jong-II had already radioed them, Cha Min-Jeong greeted them from the hallway with an expectant smile.

Kang Chan nodded toward the office, asking if he could go inside, and Cha Min-Jeong responded with a nod. She looked like she was having fun surprising Yoo Hye-Sook.

Kang Chan knocked and immediately opened the door.

“Mother.”

The agents stood up from their positions, and Yoo Hye-Sook looked at Kang Chan with a shocked expression.

“Channy!”

She walked toward Kang Chan like a person waking up from a hypnotic trance.

“When did you get here?” she asked.

“Just now.”

Because of Gérard, who was standing beside him, Yoo Hye-Sook didn’t hug Kang Chan. Instead, she held Kang Chan’s hand and arm tightly.

“Mother, this is my friend from France. His name is Gérard. Gérard, this is my mother,” Kang Chan introduced them to each other.

“Nice to meet you,” Gérard said in awkward Korean.

“Welcome,” Yoo Hye-Sook flusteredly responded.

Kang Chan sat down on the sofa with Yoo Hye-Sook and Gérard. He told her he was fine when she asked him how he was, and she informed him that they had moved.

“Manager Kim told me. I thought you moved without telling me because I’ve been such a bad son,” Kang Chan joked.

“How could you say that?” Yoo Hye-Sook rebuked.

With Kang Chan’s frequent appearances and disappearances, Yoo Hye-Sook didn’t cry as before, but her eyes never left Kang Chan.

Gérard looked at her in amusement.

“I’m going to go see Father. Would you like to come with us? Let’s have lunch together,” Kang Chan suggested.

“Sounds good!” Yoo Hye-Sook replied.

“Great. I want my friend to stay with us until his vacation is over. Could you help me to get Father’s permission?” Kang Chan asked.

“Goodness. Your Father would love that.”

“Are you okay with it?”

“Of course.”

Kang Chan, Yoo Hye-Sook, and Gérard went to Kang Dae-Kyung’s office together.

“You punk!” Kang Dae-Kyung greeted. His welcome was a little more vigorous than Yoo Hye-Sook’s. He looked Kang Chan up and down.

“Father, this is my friend Gérard from France,” Kang Chan said.

“Pleased to meet you,” Kang Dae-Kyung welcomed.

“You as well,” Gérard said in awkward Korean again.

“Do you have time to sit down and have a cup of tea?” Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

“I was actually going to ask you to buy us lunch. Are you busy?”

“Oh yeah? That’s even better. What do you want to eat?”

“My friend’s a big fan of Korean food, so anything tasty is fine.”

“Really? Then let’s go get some bulgogi.”

“Alright.”

Strangely, bulgogi was the first thing that came to mind when thinking of feeding a foreigner. Still, since it was Kang Dae-Kyung’s suggestion, Kang Chan didn’t mention anything and just followed him out.

The restaurant was right in the alley behind the office.

Ignoring the stares of the women they passed on the street, they entered the restaurant together.

They ordered and were served bulgogi.

Kang Chan interpreted Kang Dae-Kyung’s words to eat up, and Gérard thanked him in awkward Korean.

Gérard tightly gripped the chopsticks as he ate the meat. He even scooped up some of the broth and mixed it with his rice.

Gérard could tell by their eyes, facial expressions, and the emotions they shared that Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook cared about Kang Chan. With a contemplating expression, he looked between the three of them. He then smiled when he saw Yoo Hye-Sook take care of Kang Chan.

Once the meal was over, Kang Chan asked, “How was the food?”

“I’ve never had a meal that felt so happy,” Gérard quietly replied.

Chapter 310: Taught Very Well (1)

There was a limit to how much people could be pushed. If asked to name someone who had cruelly gone past that limit, Cha Dong-Gyun would undoubtedly think of Kang Chan. The members of the Jeungpyeong special forces team would likely agree as well. This time, however, they felt as if they were encountering monsters charging in packs.

"Is your stomach okay?"

"What about your shoulder?"

The seniors, looking as if they might cry at any moment, inspected the injuries of their juniors. The deep sympathy and regret in their expressions made them look as if they would tear their own flesh and blood if it meant they could take their juniors' places.

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

They soon conducted a mountain warfare drill, which the soldiers accustomed to live ammunition training had adapted. The DMZ team’s objective was to defend a location from the Jeungpyeong special forces team’s invasion. Capturing the flag in the middle of the mountain would end the exercise.

Cha Dong-Gyun busily opened fire alongside two team members.

*Swoosh!*

Much to their surprise, someone popped out of the ground and attempted to slit their throats with a training knife.

They were fortunate that the knives weren't sharp. After all, even if they were, their reckless seniors would still have aimed for their throats. The skin around the area that their seniors had hit turning red and peeling off served as proof of that.

*Whoosh! Thwack!*

Cha Dong-Gyun managed to take out one of the DMZ team members. The impact was strong enough to knock his target's helmet off.

*Thud.*

Shot in the forehead, the man fell backward like a ghost descending back into the earth.

Cha Dong-Gyun learned about this combat tactic from Kang Chan. However, although he had heard about the DMZ team before, he only understood now how fearsome they truly were.

Kang Chan had told them to listen to their breathing whenever they were nervous. Following that advice and drawing on the harsh combat experiences that they had accumulated helped Cha Dong-Gyun survive battles like this.

*Crunch. Click!*

Sensing something nearby, Cha Dong-Gyun reflexively turned his rifle.

*The breathing!*

In such times, Kang Chan had told them to always listen for the enemy's breathing.

*Swoosh! Click!*

*Whoosh! Whoosh!*

He felt as if he was diving into a field haunted by ghosts, not humans. He heard someone rising from the ground, but when he fired, there was nothing.

One was bound to leave traces behind when hiding in the dirt, yet their seniors emerged from the pitch-black soil without leaving even just one footprint.

*These people haven't even fired a single shot yet...*

*Whoosh! Thwack! Whoosh! Thwack!*

As two gunshots echoed, the two soldiers following Cha Dong-Gyun were knocked back.

*It's Kang Chul-Gyu sunbae!*

*Click!*

Guessing the direction the bullets had come from, Cha Dong-Gyun turned toward it and slowly scanned his surroundings. Again, he saw nothing. It was the end of winter. The trees were bare, and the ground was hard. With those meant to cover his back now 'dead,' he was left completely alone.

Kang Chul-Gyu had to be somewhere around here, but Cha Dong-Gyun couldn't find any traces of him.



Hiding behind overlapping trees, Kang Chul-Gyu smirked. He didn't expect one of his juniors to watch out for his breaths. To suddenly confront him with a knife would mean a good chance of dying together.

Kang Chul-Gyu remembered him—Cha Dong-Gyun, the de facto leader of the Jeungpyeong special forces team.

He lowered his stance. This training was disadvantageous for the DMZ team since wearing helmets and body armor made it harder to hide on the ground. Even so, the skills that Cha Dong-Gyun had shown deserved recognition.

Right in front of the flag, Oh Gwang-Taek was hidden. Despite having two DMZ team members helping him, he still left traces of his movements all over. He might feel slighted, but he truly wasn't much help.

In the distance, Kang Chul-Gyu could see Cha Dong-Gyun taking a few steps. He soundlessly aimed his rifle at him.

*Swoosh!*

A member of the DMZ team emerged behind him.

*Click! Whoosh! Thwack!*

Cha Dong-Gyun hit him with his gun, causing his head to tilt away and tumble backward.

*He's that skilled?*

Kang Chul-Gyu tilted his head. The way he held his rifle and reacted was at an elite level, and that was further evidenced by the fact that he had just taken out a DMZ soldier attacking from behind. He had to be as skilled as the Spetsnaz or the Baekrang team, perhaps even more. Kang CHul-Gyu was surprised to see that their juniors had advanced this much. The skills they had shown in Libya weren't just a fluke. They were truly good with rifles.

Kang Chul-Gyu stared at Cha Dong-Gyun within his sights. Pulling the trigger now would end him. Unless one had a natural sense for it, it would be hard to detect an enemy aiming for them.

Grinning a little, Kang Chul-Gyu silently lowered his rifle.

'Why crush his spirit? Whoever taught him did a really good job,' he thought.

*Swoosh!*

The sound of dirt stirring came from afar.

"Ugh!"

A startled scream rang out, signaling that the DMZ team had taken down another Jeungpyeong special forces soldier. That was enough. Should Kang Chul-Gyu actively participate, the outcome would be as clear as a closed case. However, given that this was a non-lethal training exercise, stepping out now would be best.

Kang Chul-Gyu put his hand on the radio.

*Chk.*

"This is Kang Chul-Gyu. The training is over."

Cha Dong-Gyun could be seen exhaling a long breath and straightening up.

*Swoosh! Rustle!*

Near Cha Dong-Gyun, Yang Dong-Sik emerged through the soil.

*Click!*

"Junior! It's me! Me! The training's over!" Yang Dong-Sik shouted as he raised his dirt-covered hands. The training knife in his right hand seemed menacing.

"You okay?" asked Yang Dong-Sik.

"I knew the training was over, and yet.... I'm sorry, sunbae-nim. I was too tense," Cha Dong-Gyun said.

"What are you talking about? You were really great! To think you haven't even fully recovered from your injuries yet!"

As Yang Dong-Sik was noisily moving around, Kang Chul-Gyu and Nam Il-Gyu walked over together.

"Great work," Cha Dong-Gyun greeted.

Kang Chul-Gyu smiled.

"You were amazing!" Nam Il-Gyu said, showing a proud expression.

"Let's head down. One more round this afternoon should be enough for training," Kang Chul-Gyu instructed.

Everyone lowered their rifles and followed him.

"By any chance, do you listen to the sound of breathing during combat?" asked Kang Chul-Gyu.

Cha Dong-Gyun countered Kang Chul-Gyu's question with two of his own. "How did you know? Is there a way to recognize that?"

"Those who do move differently. In crucial situations, listening to your opponent's breathing would allow you to shoot faster than your opponent."

Cha Dong-Gyun focused on Kang Chul-Gyu, seemingly learning something important.

"When you're tense, your body naturally stiffens. That goes for even the most well-trained soldiers. By keeping an ear out for breathing, you become more relaxed. That difference manifests in the timing and accuracy of your shot."

"Was Captain Cha listening to our breathing?" asked Nam Il-Gyu.

His question was met with a nod from Kang Chul-Gyu.

"I almost put a hole in Dong-Sik's helmet."

"Why does he always have to mess around like this..."

Yang Dong-Sik, who was charging in, stopped talking when he saw Kang Chul-Gyu.

Those who had come down first were waiting for them in front of the barracks.

"Good work, everyone. Eat lunch and rest up. We'll have close-quarters combat training later. Prepare accordingly."

Kang Chul-Gyu then dispersed the crowd. It was better to wash off the dirt before eating.

"Sunbae-nim, how will the close-quarters combat training be conducted?" Cha Dong-Gyun asked.

"The men here are faultless in most aspects, but they do lack experience in close-quarters combat," Kang Chul-Gyu explained. "Since we have experience facing the Spetsnaz and Baekrang teams in knife fights, I thought it would be a good learning opportunity."

"Yes, sir," Cha Dong-Gyun immediately responded, but inwardly he was puzzled.

Could he tell that close-quarters combat was lacking just by watching movements without even drawing a knife?

"Captain Cha."

"Yes, sunbae-nim."

"I would like you to prepare sharp knives for the training this afternoon."

"Huh?" Cha Dong-Gyun asked, surprised.

"Why would someone used to training with live ammo be surprised by knives?" Kang Chul-Gyu asked, looking genuinely curious.

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After a hearty meal, Kang Chan, his parents, and Gérard left the restaurant. Kang Chan relayed Gérard's gratitude for the meal.

"Are you busy?" Kang Dae-Kyung asked on the way back to the office. He looked like he had something to say.

"I'm free today. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking we should have tea."

"Sure. I have a request too, Father," Kang Chan said.

"What is it?"

"Oh, right! Honey, Channy said he'd like his foreign friend to stay with us at our place," said Yoo Hye-Sook.

Kang Dae-Kyung glanced at Gérard.

"I'm fine with it as long as you are. It's nice to have a friend stay over. Won't he be uncomfortable, though?"

"I've already discussed it with him," Kang Chan answered.

Kang Dae-Kyung nodded.

"What does this friend do?" Kang Dae-Kyung asked.

"Huh?"

Baffled, Kang Chan looked at Gérard. He hadn't anticipated this question.

What would be a good answer? Student? Employee? Soldier?

Noticing Kang Chan's lack of response, Kang Dae-Kyung generously added, "Maybe he doesn't have a job right now? That's not such a bad thing. He could gain much more through this trip."

The Foreign Legion's special forces commander had suddenly been labeled as jobless, yet that person just kept looking around.

Instead of the office, Kang Dae-Kyung led them to a nearby coffee shop.

"What do you want? Ask your friend too."

"Why are we having it here?" asked Kang Chan.

"We might not have the tea your friend likes in the office. Now, go ask."

After a brief discussion, Kang Chan and Gérard decided to have coffee. Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook chose green tea. Their orders were served soon after they sat down.

"Son," Kang Dae-Kyung called.

"Yes?"

Kang Dae-Kyung glanced at Yoo Hye-Sook before speaking.

"I plan to sell the company. Your mother intends to transfer her foundation to an institution designated by the government too."

"Huh?"

Kang Chan couldn't help but be confused.

"We are thinking of taking a break."

*A break? They're the type to get sick from resting too much!*

How could they give up the Gong Te automobile dealership that they had fought so hard to obtain and the foundation they had been so eager to establish?

"We've discussed this in passing after the Eurasian Rail presentation, but after the president's last announcement, it's become too much to handle. That's why, after talking about it with your mother, we've decided."

"What happened?"

It didn't make sense. Why would the announcements about the Eurasian Rail and the next-generation energy project necessitate the disposal of Kang Yoo Motors and the Kang Yoo Foundation?

"The car orders are overwhelming, and the foundation just received a donation offer of over 10 billion," said Kang Dae-Kyung.

Kang Chan softly inhaled.

"The same group and its affiliates expressed interest in both the car orders and the foundation donations. For now, they're biding their time, but if it becomes known that you're deeply involved in the next-gen energy project, it might truly become unmanageable."

Kang Dae-Kyung maintained an eerily calm facade.

"It's just buying cars, right? And donating money to a foundation that helps needy children. What's the problem with that?"

"The companies asking for corporate vehicles also suggested making donations to your mother's foundation. It seems they're trying to find a way to connect with you. I don't want to sell cars to those with such motives."

Yoo Hye-Sook looked at Kang Chan with sympathy.

"Kang Yoo Motors is practically your achievement, and the foundation was established with your money. That's why we wanted your consent. In exchange, about half of the money you put into the foundation will be replenished with the proceeds from selling Kang Yoo Motors."

"Father, it's not about the money right now, is it? Mother, I know you didn't start this to make money," Kang Chan said.

"It's okay, Channy. Don't worry too much about it," Yoo Hye-Sook said.

"How can I be okay with this?"

Anger surged within Kang Chan.

Those with greedy intentions were desecrating Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook's hard work for their own benefit. Given that they were part of a conglomerate, they were hardly in need. They were the type to purchase corporate cars.

*Did they have to go this far just to make a bit more money? Couldn't they think of making an honest living with the time and effort they spent on schemes like this?*

"You know the executive vice president of the company, right? He has agreed to take over the company. We'll receive half when we hand it over, and the rest a year later."

*How do I even respond to this?*

Kang Dae-Kyung continued, "This opportunity will allow me and your mother to travel and study things we missed out on before. I was hoping you would understand."

"Do you really have to do this?" Kang Chan inquired.

Kang Dae-Kyung nodded and smiled, not wanting to hurt his son's feelings in any way.

"Father, let's think about this a little more. I'll look into an alternative. Those people buying cars or making donations doesn't necessarily mean that they can gain anything from me."

"People's affairs aren't always straightforward, Kang Chan. It might be fine now, but if anything goes wrong, it can become a noose around your neck."

Kang Dae-Kyung was surprisingly firm in his decision. In front of a wary Gérard, Kang Chan lowered his gaze.

*Damn it!*

He never imagined that the result of his hard work would blow away his mother's dreams and force his father to sell the company that he had devoted years to. He almost wished Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook were somewhat greedy, people who knew when to turn a blind eye...

"Captain," Gérard suddenly called Kang Chan. "I'll step out for a bit."

It must have been awkward or uncomfortable for him to stay seated with them.

As Kang Chan nodded, Gérard smiled at Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook before getting up.

"He said he'll be back in a bit," Kang Chan passed on.

Gérard gathered the glances of the women in the coffee shop as he stepped out onto the terrace.

*That guy...?*

Gérard then sat down in an empty spot across the glass, casually lighting a cigarette. Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook quickly turned back their gaze toward Kang Chan.

"In France, smoking isn't much of an issue, but I forgot to mention it. I'm sorry."

"As long as he doesn't smoke in the house, it's fine. Since he's in Korea, it would be best to teach him some of our etiquette, but don't be too hard on him," Kang Dae-Kyung said.

"Understood," Kang Chan answered.

As Gérard exhaled smoke, a sound of admiration came from a table of three women.

"Look at those eyes. Makes me want to hug him," said one of the women.

"Doesn't he have the vibe of a fallen aristocrat?" said another.

*What kind of person is she to notice that in one glance?*

"Chan," called Kang Dae-Kyung.

Kang Chan snapped back. Now wasn't the time to have such useless thoughts.

"Let us proceed with our decision," his father said.

*Why is he so kind-hearted? How can one ask such a thing from their child?*

What worried Kang Chan the most was that the more he resisted, the more it might hurt his parents.

"Father, do you really want to do this?" he asked.

"Let us push through with this," answered Kang Dae-Kyung.

"Have you discussed this with Manager Kim?"

Kang Dae-Kyung shook his head.

"There's nothing we can do about those wanting to buy cars. There's no way to stop those who want to help the needy either," Kang Dae-Kyung said.

Looking at Yoo Hye-Sook, Kang Chan sighed softly.

Gérard's exhaled smoke hit the glass window before disappearing into the air.

"Channy..." Yoo Hye-Sook trailed off.

Kang Chan could sense her empathy and guilt for his situation. It pained her to see her son so concerned.

"I'm sorry. I know how much you both wanted this. I feel like this is all my fault."

"No, Channy..."

Noticing Gérard lighting his second cigarette, Yoo Hye-Sook's tears dried up. Kang Chan couldn't suppress a smirk—a gesture not lost on Kang Dae-Kyung.

Kang Dae-Kyung chuckled, his laughter mixed with tears. Yoo Hye-Sook awkwardly joined in.

"Don't worry about me," Kang Chan reassured them.

"Thank you, Chan," Kang Dae-Kyung said. The mood was now noticeably lighter thanks to Gérard's nonchalant behavior. "We shouldn't keep your friend waiting too long. Shall we? Could you apologize to him for the delay?"

"Of course."

The three got up almost simultaneously.

"What now, Channy?" Yoo Hye-Sook asked.

"I'd like to show Gérard around. We'll head home around the time you return from work," Kang Chan proposed.

"Let's have dinner at home, then. I'll cook something," Yoo Hye-Sook warmly offered.

"Sure. I wanted to show off a bit anyway."

As the three left the coffee shop, Gérard stood up and walked over to them.

"See you at dinner," Kang Chan said.

"Okay."

"See you at home, Channy." Yoo Hye-Sook smiled. She then awkwardly bid Gérard farewell. "See you at dinner."

Gérard, ever so quick to adapt, found his own way to say goodbye. His somewhat hunched and awkward stance almost made him look like he was inviting Kang Dae-Kyung and Yoo Hye-Sook to a taekwondo sparring match, though.