



Chapter : Operation 01

Headquarters of the National Counter-Terrorism Command Center (NCTC)

Senior Special Agent Yaninn found herself standing in front of the desk of the highest-ranking official in the agency formally known as the Na maintional Counter-Terrorism Command Center.

Her eyes were fixed on her superior, a middle-aged woman dressed in a neat black skirt suit, who was also scrutinizing her in return,

Suchada, or as Yaninn often called her, "Chief," had held the position of director of the agency for over fifteen years. Before this, she had worked at the National Intelligence Office, specializing in counter-insurgency intelligence and tracking the financial networks of international money laundering operations that funded terrorist groups aiming to destabilize target nations.

Yaninn respected her as if she were a family elder and trusted Suchada's decisions more than anyone else in the agency.

The National Counter-Terrorism Command Center was established over thirty-six years ago. Its primary responsibility was monitoring the activities of individuals or groups that posed potential threats in targeted areas, escalating to domestic terrorism if necessary.

The agency also handled intelligence operations, financial tracking, countering disinformation and cyber theft, and maintaining special

operations teams ready to intervene in violent incidents orchestrated by malicious groups aiming to undermine national security.

It was one ofthe nation's key security agencies.

However, modern-day terrorists no longer appeared as heavily armed combatants as they once did. Instead, they often infiltrated target countries disguised as legitimate organizations, both overt and covert, or entered with financial backing under various guises.

Investigating and ensuring that such disruptions did not occur within the country was the agency's responsibility.

Yaninn, now a senior special agent, was tasked with assessing, analyzing, and managing risks before, during, and after incidents ofunrest. She relied on criminological principles related to terrorism to understand, explain, predict, and prevent incidents before lives were lost.

It was undoubtedly a tough, demanding, high-pressure, and dangerousjob.

Despite her senior position, Yaninn still oversaw the special operations team as its leader. However, in recent years, she rarely had the opportunity to take up arms and join field missions.

This was because the director had promoted her to senior status to "keep her in the right place. " As a result, her role was often limited to sitting in a surveillance vehicle, observing, evaluating, and issuing commands.

She often wondered what "the right place" that Suchada referred to truly meant.

"You called me, Chief? What's the matter?"

Yaninn asked as she was invited to sit down. She complied, her gaze still fixed on her superior.

"About the new team member, I asked you to find any progress?"

Suchada's question made Yaninn press her lips together before shaking her head in response.

"The current team can still handle the situation,"

She replied politely, despite her long-standing familiarity with the sixtyyear-old woman.

"lfthere's an emergency, I can step in to help."

She paused, looking directly at Suchada.

"But is this why you called me in? Something related to this?"

"You're always good at reading people."

Suchada said with a smile on her round face, nodding in acknowledgment.

"A1right, I'll get straight to the point. I want to assign someone to your team. "

She began explaining.

"Actually, it's not a new recruit but a transfer."

Yaninn narrowed her eyes slightly as she listened, watching as Suchada slid a brown folder across the desk.

"This is their file."

"We haven't accepted transfers in a long time, Chief, and you know why," Yaninn said, not even glancing at the folder.

"lfyou're looking for someone to replace Dol.. .well, I could promote one of the juniors from Team Two.

"Consider this a personal request,"

Suchada interrupted. Yaninn knew that when Suchada took this approach, it was nearly impossible to refuse. If she resisted, the request would quickly turn into an order Suchada often used this method, as she had taught Yaninn to do.

But Yaninn was stubborn, headstrong, and not one to easily back down. Even now, knowing she couldn't refuse, she still tried to push back.

She glanced at the brown folder in front of her, then back at her superior, hesitating for a moment. She felt a twinge of self-pity. Despite being the leader ofthree operational teams, she couldn't refuse a transfer to her teams.

After a brief silence, Suchada spoke again.

"Assign them directly to the main team.

"A new recruit going straight to the main team? Are they ready for that?"

Yaninn questioned, still trying to find a way out To be honest, she disliked having team members she hadn't personally selected. The six members of the main team, or Team One, were all handpicked and trained by her.

"This will make it hard for me to face the others and complicate our work Chiéf."

"Give it three months. Ifit doesn't work out, we can reassign them."

"Why not start them in Team Two? Team One might be too intense. "

"I trust you to train her"

"Her...

"Read the file first,"

Suchada said with her usual conciliatory smile, knowing Yaninn's straightforward nature well.

"Who knows? She might even make your job easier."

Yaninn fell silent for a moment.

"As long as she doesn't burden the team, that's fine

She finally said, picking up the file.

"1'11 leave it to you,"

Suchada reiterated. Yaninn knew this was a semi- order disguised as a request. No matter who this transfer was, she had no choice but to accept. If she turned out to be unsuitable for the elite team, codenamed "Black Panther," Yaninn would have to write a report recommending their reassignment.

"1 want this person to be as skilled as you." "No one can be exactly like anyone else. "

Yaninn replied.

"You've been in this field long enough to know that everyone has their own methods."

"You're always so serious,"

Suchada said with a light laugh.

"This job demands seriousness. The stakes are too high for anyone to take responsibility for mistakes. That's why I believe there's no room for interns in this line ofwork."

"Be careful not to stretch yourself too thin, Yamnn,"

Suchada said casually.

"Is that all? If so, I'll take my leave."

"GO ahead. I'll email you the details of her arrival later."

"Understood, Chief."

Yaninn, the senior counter-terrorism agent, slumped into her office chair, frustrated. The personnel file she had received about ten minutes ago lay unopened on her desk. Her eyes lingered on its cover, filled with curiosity.

As Yaninn had mentioned earlier, it was rare for the center to accept transférs. The nature of counter-terrorism work required individuals with exceptional analytical skills, the ability to assess real-time situations, and the tactical expertise to survive high-risk scenarios.

These were not qualities easily found in someone who hadn't been rigorously vetted.

The center's primary mission was to protect innocent lives at risk during incidents. For this reason, Yaninn rarely trusted anyone outside her personally selected team members.

Typically, new recruits or transfers would start in Team Three, undergoing bi-weekly training sessions. Once their field skills were deemed acceptable by the trainers, they could move to Team Two, the reserve team that supported the main team, Team One.

If Team One had a vacancy due to transfers, resignations, or even fatalities, Yaninn would personally select a member from Team Two to fill the spot.

But now, the director was disrupting the chain Of command and the principles Yaninn had upheld by forcing her to accept a transfer directly into Team One, a position that had been vacant for two years.

This is ridiculous...

Yaninn had dealt with similar situations early in her career as a team leader. Those experiences had ended disastrously because the transferred individuals often disobeyed orders in the field. Such individuals usually had more ego than skill, forcing Yaninn to write three separate reports to have them reassigned.

That incident had caused dissatisfaction among some higher-ups, who found her approach too rigid-something she had just been reminded of.

Yaninn knew this job left no room for error, or at least as little as posible. While she and her team were trained to face risks, the lives of civilians were not something she was willing to gamble with.

She left the file on her desk, intending not to open it. Regardless ofwho this person was, she had no choice but to accept her. Still, she couldn't understand why she was being placed directly into Team One without first training with the reserve teams.

Team One was the frontline, handling the most challenging missions, unlike the reserve teams, which only stepped in when Team One was unavailable. Joining the main operational team was not something to be taken lightly.

So, who was this girl?

That thought finally pushed Yaninn to open the file. Iler frustration grew as she found only two pages of information inside.

The individual was the same age as Yaninn, which was neither too young nor too old for a new recruit. However, their experience was limited to eight years of VIP protection.

VIP protection ?

The director must bejoking.

Yaninn regretted opening the file, as it only worsened her mood.

VIP protection and special operations were worlds apart.

Her eyes moved to the name at the top Of the page, which she hadn't bothered to notice earlier.

Nitha

Then, her gaze shifted to the photograph attached to the top-right corner of the page.

In her mind, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. However, what frustrated her was the work history. The candidate had only ever worked in personal protection for high-profile individuals.

As she had mentioned, the work of personal protection and counterterrorism operations, especially within a tactical team, were almost nothing alike.

But what was even more intriguing was...

Who was this person? And why had the highest-ranking officer of the agency personally recommended her?

Over the past two or three years, Yaninn had noticed some unusual occurrences. It felt as though the agency's operations were being interfered with, though she couldn't be sure if it was from external forces, internal ones, or perhaps both.

This interference had begun to disrupt the chain of command and operational procedures. Additionally, there were growing tensions within the agency itself.

Although Suchada often acted as her intermediary and managed these issues quite well, there were times when it still affected Yaninn's ability to work or give orders effectively.

This agency was one that dealt with national security. Any internal instability would undoubtedly cause significant damage. For this reason, Yaninn had always adhered to the principle of not accepting "recommended hires " because they were difficult to manage and posed additional risks to operations.

However, at this point, it seemed like something she would have to accept. Perhaps this was a test of her abilities, especially now that she had recently been promoted to Senior Special Agent at the young age of thirty-five -a remarkably fast progression.

Maybe it was time to see how things would play out.

With that thought, she exhaled deeply, realizing this situation was beyond her control. She decided to close the file on the recommended candidate and planned to head to the common room where her team members usually gathered.

Besides, she needed to inform her team about the new member who would be joining them, likely within the next week or two.

It was certamly a surprising day for Special Agent Yaninn. And more than that....

It was an incredibly frustrating one.

Yaninn stood up, rolling up the sleeves ofher white shirt to her elbows and unbuttoning the top button to ease her discomfort, though it didn't help much.

She then gathered her slightly wavy, jet-black hair, which reached almost to the middle of her back, into a ponytail-a style she often wore during field operations.

Her large, dark eyes, which often carried a fierce intensity, scanned the room irritably before she raised a hand to pinch the bridge of her nose in exhaustion.

She exhaled again, hoping to calm herself down.

The agent headed straight for the door, intending to go to the common room first and then proceed to firearm practice. The troublesome personnel file that had been causing her such a headache was left forgotten on the desk behind her.

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Operation 02

Special Agent Yaninn stepped out of her office, walking through the dimly lit hallway toward the team operations lounge. Even though she told herself not to dwell on it, her mind kept circling back to the file and the story of the new recruit she had just reviewed.

"Hello, Chief,"

A young man greeted her as she walked past the black- painted walls under the faint glow of the hallway lights. As a senior special agent, Yaninn held a position that commanded respect, second only to the executive level in authority.

The center was structured into several tiers of command. At the base wers general officers, divided into administrative, field operations, and support teams.

Above them were the special agents, followed by senior special agents-a rank currently held by only two individuals in the unit, one ofwhom was Yaninn. At the top were the high-level executives.

"How are you doing?"

Yaninn responded.

"Recovered enough to be back at work?"

She asked the young man from Field Operations Team Two, who had recently been injured by a gunshot to his right thigh about fifteen days ago.

'Yes, ma'am," he replied.

"The doctor cleared me to return to duty." "Where are you headed?" "To pick up some documents from HR " He said in a calm tone.

"After that, I'll take them to you to sign."

"Alright, welcome back. "

As he walked away, Yaninn continued toward her destination.

However, when she opened the door to the team's common dining area, she found it completely empty. Normally, when there were no assignments, this room served as a gathering spot for casual conversations, informal meetings, or meals. It was essentially an unofficial workspace.

Seeing the empty room, she walked in and grabbed a bottle ofwater from the fridge, hoping it would help cool her irritation and simmering emotions.

Perhaps the team members were at the gym or the training field behind the building.

With that thought, she headed outside. Although her day had started on a sour note, she was relieved there were no critical incidents requinng her to be on-site today. However, in recent times, the frequency of severe incidents threatening civilian lives had alarmingly increased

Over the past decade, what used to be fewer than five cases a month had surged to an average of two per week a troubling statistic in her view. Perhaps the center's expanded jurisdiction had led to a higher volume Of cases to handle.

This center was a specialized operations center within the national security framework, staffed by personnel from various sectors, including civilian officials, military, police, and special agents.

Some were recruited and trained directly by the center in collaboration with military academies, while others were sent for additional training at domestic and international crime prevention institutes.

After completing their education, they underwent further theoretical and practical training in violence prevention and counter- terrorism.

"Pete,"

Yaninn called out to a young man walking toward her. He was a new field operations recruit who had not yet been assigned to a team. Pete, with his athletic build and military-style short haircut, was wearing a white tank top and shorts as he practiced punching a heavy bag in the gym behind the building.

"Where is everyone?"

"The instructor sent them to assist Team Two with training,"

He replied, and Yaninn nodded in acknowledgment.

Today was Team Two's monthly training day, something Yaninn had almost forgotten amidst her frustration over the unexpected arrival of the new recruit.

Counter-terrorism was a high-risk job, especially for field operations teams. Over the past decade, both publicized and unpublicized severe incidents had occurred with alarming frequency.

These included bomb threats at critical locations like hospitals and government offices, hostage situations, assassinations of key figures, cybercrimes, drug trafficking, and money laundering linked to insurgent groups.

Such incidents Often had deeper, hidden motives.

Even incidents originating within communities, such as mass shootings driven by prejudice or Other conflicts, posed significant threats to public safety and fell under the center's purview, even ifthey didn't meet the strict definition of terrorism.

These were considered pseudo-terrorist acts, no less severe in their impact.

The center's mission was to prevent and suppress these threats to ensure they didn't disrupt the lives and well-being of the general public.

Yaninnjoined the field training supervisor for the day.

"lnstructor, "

She addressed the tall, broad-shouldered man in his mid-forties, a tactical training expert, with a respectful nod and a smile.

"Ah, Boss Ninn, good morning,

He greeted her with a smile.

"Please, don't call me that,"

She replied. The instructor had known her since she transferred to the center about eight years ago.

"I heard about the bomb threat three days ago.

'Yes, fortunately, we managed to defuse it in time."

"Do we know who was behind it yet?"

"The engineering team is still analyzing the bomb. Preliminary findings suggest there was no detonator. It might have been a prank or an attempt to create chaos "

Yaninn replied thoughtfully, though she wasn't entirely convinced by her own words.

The instructor simply nodded in response.

The sound of gunfire from the three-story mock building in front of them interrupted their conversation. Yaninn turned to look. They were standing in an open area where Teams Two and Three were practicing suspect apprehension in a closed building, part of their regular monthly training Team One, the primary team, had been assigned to play the role of armed insurgents.

"How's the new recruit in Team Two doing?"

Yaninn asked, shifting her attention to the training.

"Still adjusting, but learning quickly."

"And Team One?"

She asked with a smile.

"That team? Their leader handpicked them. They're tough as nails," The instructor said with a laugh

"Team Two has already had to redo the exercise twice this morning."

"You're a great instructor,"

Yaninn complimented him modestly.

"Care to join in?"

"Sure,"

She said, grabbing a bulletproofvest from a nearby table the scanned the array of firearms four or five pistols and rifles-laid out alongside boxes of training ammunition.

'Don't go too hard on the rookies,"

The instructor teased as Yaninn picked up a semi-automatic submachine gun before switching to a standard nine-millimeter pistol.

She pulled back the slide to check for any chambered rounds, then inspected a magazine loaded with rubber training bullets.

Soon, the operations teams, having completed their third exercise ofthe morning, began to emerge.

"Good morning, Chief,"

Members of Team One greeted her.

"Watch out, 101 is in the area,"

One of them joked, referring to Yaninn by her code number as they surrounded her Team One currently consisted of five members-three men and two women. Including Yaninn, there were six. Each had specific roles.

Back when Yaninn was still a special agent, she often joined them in the field. But now, as a senior agent, she rarely handled weapons unless absolutely necessary.

Most of the time, she operated from the command vehicle, a role she didn't particularly enjoy but couldn't refuse.

At just thirty-five, Yaninn's promotion to senior agent had been relatively quick. Even she didn't fully understand why. More than the title, she felt unprepared for the responsibility of planning and directing operations, especially when faced with imminent threats like armed insurgents or live explosives.

The weight ofher duties often felt overwhelming, compounded by the sudden addition of a new recruit to her team.

"Shaking offthe rust, Boss?"

A young man in full tactical gear, wearing a bulletproofvest and helmet, asked with a grin. A semi-automatic submachine gun with high-penetration rounds hung from his shoulder.

"You're joking, Tum?" Yaninn replied.

"Didn't I just join you on a mission to escort the engineering team?"

Tum, or Yutthana, was the deputy team leader but had essentially taken over as leader since Yaninn's promotion. He was the closest to her, having joined the main team shortly after she did. Two years younger, he had completed rigorous tri-environment training-land, sea, and air.

He was undoubtedly one of their best.

"lfyou can take me down, I'll buy you lunch,"

Tum challenged. noticing the slight smirk forming on Yaninn's lips

"0ne against five? You're giving me too much credit,"

She said, prompting laughter from the team.

"Let's see."

She removed the magazine from her pistol to check it again before reinserting it and chambering a round. Then she grabbed another magazine and held it in her hand.

"Just one mag, Boss,"

Tum teased, causing Yaninn to glance at him before shrugging.

"Fine by me,"

She said, placing the extra magazine on the table.

"Just coffee's enough, like last time,"

She added with a grin before leading the way to the training building ahead.

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Operation 03

The black door creaked open slowly, and a tall woman stepped inside after receiving permission from the office's owner. Yaninn, who had been focused on her desktop computer moments earlier, glanced up at the visitor.

She realized that while she didn't know the woman in the dark suit, her face seemed oddly familiar.

Yaninn's dark eyes narrowed briefly as she tried to recall where she had seen her before. Then, it clicked.

Her gaze darted to the desk calendar, and she remembered that today was the day Suchada, the center's director, had arranged for a new recruit to report for duty and begin her first day of work.

"Good morning,"

The woman greeted in a low, steady voice.

"Agent Yaninn."

That prompted Yaninn to rise from her chair, meeting the visitor's dark, steely eyes before giving her a quick once-over from head to toe.

The woman's appearance wasn't much different from the photo in her personnel file. Long black hair cascaded down to the middle Of her back, her sharp features complemented by deep-set eyes, a slightly prominent nose, and full lips.

Yaninn's irritation from reviewing the personnel file earlier that week had left a lasting impression, making it easy for her to recognize this woman. "Please, have a seat, Ms. Nitha,"

Yaninn said formally, gesturing toward a chair. Despite her annoyance at the fact that this woman had been placed on her team without prior notice, Yaninn knew there was nothing she could do about it. She decided to set her feelings aside for the sake of professionalism.

The stakes in their line ofwork were far too high to let personal grievances get in the way.

The newcomer complied, taking a seat. In truth, she wasn't exactly "new"Nitha was the same age as Yaninn. It was unclear why she had been transferred or recommended to the special operations team. At her age, she could have already been a department head or, if exceptionally skilled, a senior agent like Yaninn in her previous role.

Starring Over in a high-risk job like this in one's mid-thirties was far from ideal.

Yaninn shifted in her chair, searching for the personnel file she had carelessly tossed aside days earlier and had nearly forgotten about. Seeing the person behind the file brought it all back to her.

"Ms. Nitha,"

Yaninn began, flipping open the file.

'Experience in high-level personal protection,"

She read aloud before looking up at the yoman, who had previously been part Of a VIP protection team-or, more succinctly, a bodyguard. The file didn't specify the exact level of her assignments, but the fact that she had been transferred between departments suggested she had worked with some very important individuals.

"1 graduated from a private security academy."

Nitha said in an even tone.

"Your file doesn't specify which academy,

Yaninn noted, raising an eyebrow.

"So, you didn't come from a government background?"

"No, I didn't,"

Nitha-or Way, as she preferred to be called-replied.

"1'm from the private sector."

Yaninn had heard that private sector security personnel, or those trained elsewhere, weren't much different from freelance bodyguards "After graduating, I worked for the National Security Office,"

Nitha added.

"Oh, really?"

Yaninn raised her eyebrows, intrigued.

The National Security Offlce was a prestigious organization specializing In VIP protection.

"So, you didn't follow the traditional career path. Am I correct?"

"That's correct,"

Nitha confirmed firmly.

"Typically, those in government positions advance more quickly. Privatesector teams are usually considered supplementary.

"Let's get one thing straight,"

Yaninn said seriously, closing the file and locking eyes with the woman across from her.

"Do you understand the responsibilities of the Counter-Terrorism Special Operations Team?" "I've done my homework,"

Nitha replied curtly.

"Normally, I don't accept recruits who are placed here without my approval."

Yaninn stated bluntly.

"This job is too dangerous to bring in someone without relevant experience. "

"Don't you think my background in personal protection could benefit your

Nitha countered.

Yamnn paused, caught off guard by the remark. She met Nitha's intense gaze, noticing a faint, enigmatic smile in her eyes.

"You don't think so, do you?"

Nitha pressed when Yaninn didn't respond. She shifted slightly in her chair.

"Who knows? I might prove useful."

Yamnn narrowed her eyes, wary. Recruits from the private sector were notoriously difficult to manage and often resistant to authority. She couldn't understand why Suchada had insisted on placing this woman on the main team without consulting her first.

Perhaps there was more to this than simply onboarding a new recruit.

"Let me make this clear, "

Yaninn said firmly.

"The only reason I'm accepting you is because I have no choice. So, please, don't cause problems for me, the team, or yourself."

"I'm in the same position as you,"

Nitha replied, her words only adding to Yaninn's confusion.

"Fine. But if anything goes wrong, I'll have to report it,"

Yaninn stated matter-of-factly.

"That's your right,"

Nitha acknowledged.

"And you should."

"Good. As long as we're on the same page,"

Yaninn said, pulling the file closer and scanning the name written on the paper.

"Okay, Ms.

"Way," the other woman interjected.

"Just call me Way It's easier"

"Alright, way,"

Yaninn replied, clearing her throat.



"Since we're the same age. I'll try to be accommodating.

"Thank you, Chief,"

Way said with a nod.

"1 understand your responsibilities, and as part of the team, I'll follow orders."

At least she seemed more reasonable than Yaninn had initially expected.

'Let's start by clarifying our work,"

Yaninn began. Way nodded attentively.

"0ur department is directly responsible for countering threats to national security in all forms. There are more than you might imagine. Our primary goal is to minimize civilian casualties in high-risk situations. I'm the senior special officer in charge of directing and managing the operations team. "

Yaninn paused to take a breath, studying Way's composed expression before continuing.

"We have three operational teams. Team One is the primary team, followed by Teams Two and Three. Each team consists of five to eight members. You're the seventh member of Team One, with the code 107."

"Understood, "

Nitha replied succinctly.

"1n addition to fieldwork, I oversee desk duties related to risk analysis and threat assessment involving insurgent groups, "

Yaninn explained.

"You need to understand that counter-terrorism operations are very different from VIP protection. " "1'm fully aware ofthat,"

Nitha responded.

"For now, you'll stay in the control van with me until I determine you're ready for field operations, "

Yaninn said.

"During this time, you must attend all field training sessions without fail, participate in team meetings every Wednesday morning, and gradually learn about data analysis and other situational assessments. I hope your experience in personal protection has taught you enough to help you adapt and perform well here. And, most importantly, don't get yourself in the line of fire. "

"That was my old job," Nitha quipped.

"Getting in the line of fire."

"We11, here, you'll have plenty ofbullets to dodge without volunteering for it, Ms. Nitha,"

Yaninn shot back

With that, Yaninn turned to the bookshelfbehind her, pulling out two thick books-one with a black cover and the other white, each roughly 300 pages long.

She placed them on the desk in front of Way.

Nitha read the silver-embossed title on the black cover.

Risk Management and Crisis Handling in Criminology.

She glanced at the Other book underneath:

"Psych010gical Aspects of Terrorism,"

Yaninn announced before Nitha could finish reading.

"Take these and read them,"

She instructed, sliding the books toward Way,

"You have one month from today. Next month, we'll have your first theoretical assessment."

Way raised an eyebrow, locking eyes with Yaninn.

"1 need to be sure you fully understand the scope of this job before assigning you to the team,"

Yaninn explained, addressing the unspoken question on Way's face. Nitha smiled faintly, impressed by Yaninn's ability to read her expression so quickly.

The newcomer pulled the books toward her with one hand.

"Understood," Nitha said.

"So, for the first month, I won't be in the field, Is that correct?"

"You'll observe from the control van with me,"

Yaninn confirmed.

'During the first three months, I might assign someone from the team to help train you so you can understand how we operate."

"lfyou train me yourself, I'm sure I'll learn quickly,"

Nitha remarked. Yaninn wasn't sure ifthat was a joke, but she noticed a fleeting smile in Nitha's eyes before it disappeared.

'Don't be overconfident,"

Yaninn warned.

"This job doesn't leave room for arrogance.

Her tone was stern, but she couldn't help noticing the peculiar smile returning to Way's lips.

"Of course. I'm committed to following orders strictly,"

Nitha assured her.

"Good "

Yaninn replied, opening a side drawer and pulling out an access card. "1Jntil you get your official ID, use this to enter and exit the building "

"Understood, Chief."

Yaninn stood up.

"Alright, let me introduce you to the team,"

She said.

Nitha rose from her chair and followed her new leader out of the office.

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Operation 04

Agent Yaninn slowly opened the door to the shared team quarters for the operations unit. Inside, she found the primary team members, casually referred to as Team One, all five of them seated in a circle, chatting and preparing to enjoy their breakfast together.

"Boss,"

Tum, the current deputy team leader, called out as everyone in the room stood up when Yaninn entered, accompanied by a new team member who stopped just slightly behind her.

"Everyone, today I'd like to introduce the new member I mentioned a few days ago,"

Yaninn announced.

"Please, Ms Nitha."

Upon hearing her name, the new member stepped forward while the rest Of the team turned their attention to her in unison.

"Oh my gosh!"

Exclaimed the shoulder-length woman on the team. Her hair was now let down, unlike when she was on the field.

Jane, who had just turned thirty-one this year, called out and quickly walked over to embrace the newcomer, leaving the rest Of the team visibly puzzled. "What wind blew you here?"

She asked as she stepped back, her tone filled with surprise.

"You know her, Jane?"

"Yes," Jane replied with a smile. "Excuse me, Boss,"

She said before stepping aside.

"This is Way, my senior from the Security College. I believe she's the same year as you, Boss."

The person in question looked slightly confused, but Yaninn nodded in acknowledgment.

"Hello, everyone,"

Nitha greeted with a warm smile.

"Please take care of me,"

She added, bowing slightly before straightening up, her long black hair swaying with the motion. Her dark eyes scanned the faces ofthc operations team members.

## "Hello,"

The team members responded in unison

"So, how did you get here, Way?"

Jane asked excitedly.

"1 heard you transferred to the private sector. "

"My Old boss hated me, so I got fired,"

Nitha joked without thinking, then quickly glanced at her new boss, realizing her slip.

"Sorry, I mean, I thought I'd try something different.

"1 don't believe that,"

Jane retorted knowingly, narrowing her eyes.

"1 asked you to join me here back then, and you said no.

"We11, I'm here now, aren't I?"

"Alright, let's do introductions,"

Jane said, turning to the rest of the team, who were also watching the exchange.

"Startingwith our deputy chief, 102, Tum."

Nitha turned to the tall man in a black field uniform, standing slightly over 5'8". His sharp features, tanned skin, and high-cut hairstyle gave him a commanding presence. "11ello, nice to meet you," Tum greeted warmly.

"Nice to meet you too,"

The former bodyguard replied. "Please take care of me."

'Over there is Mod, 103,"

Jane gestured toward another woman in a field uniform and boots, slightly shorter than Nitha. Her pale complexion, neatly tied hair, and constant smile made her stand out.

"She's our sharpshooter. If it's long-range shooting, Mod's the one to trust."

Mod gave a polite nod, which Nitha returned.

"Nice to meet you," Nitha said.

"And those two are Pong and Korn, 105 and 106,"

Jane continued.

"Pong is our secondary sharpshooter, and Korn handles everything else. "

"1t's great to meet all ofyou,"

The new member said cheerfully before turning to Jane.

"But I'm already tired of seeing your face, Jane,"

Nitha teased, then turned to Yaninn, who had been silently observing with her arms crossed.



Yaninn simply nodded in acknowledgment before leaving the room.

"Come on, Way, have a seat. So, what's your story?"

Jane asked as everyone settled back into their seats and resumed their breakfast. Jane, ever the thoughtful one, grabbed a bottle of water and some communal snacks from the fridge for her senior.

"Jane, you knew Way before this?"

Mod asked curiously.

"Way was my senior in college. We trained in the same unit,"

Jane explained.

"What unit was that?" Pong chimed in.

"Rapid Response. "

Jane replied, prompting nods of understanding from the group.

"Way transferred to the personal protection unit just a month after graduating. "

"1'm not as quick anymore, my back's not what it used to be "

Nitha joked, earning smiles from everyone.

"lfthere's anything I need to know about working here, let me know. I might be the oldest, but I'm still the newbie in the team."

"We don't have much to say,"

Tum said, scratching the back of his neck nervously.

"But our boss.....she's, uh...."

Ile paused, searching for the right word.

"Particular. "

"Particular?" Nitha raised an eyebrow.

"Yes," Tum confirmed.

"I'm not badmouthing her or anything,"

He added with a small smile. "But Yaninn is quite...strict."

"1 think I understand,"

Nitha replied caimly.

"Don't worry, I can handle it."

Jane, one of the special operations team members, found herself standing in front of Agent Yaninn, who was pacing back and forth in her office.

"You called for me, Boss? Is there something you need?"

Jane asked casually.

Yaninn stopped pacing and sat down on the long sofa, looking up at Jane.

"Take a seat,"

The team leader instructed, gesturing to a smaller sofa. Jane complied.

"1 have a few questions for you."

"1s this about Way?"

Jane asked knowingly, noticing Yaninn's neutral expression.

"We all know."

Jane began, referring to the entire team.

"1 know you're concerned."

Yaninn furrowed her brows slightly. It was surprising how well her subordinates seemed to understand her. She had always thought she had a good read on everyone, but perhaps she had underestimated them.

"What do you think\*"

Yaninn asked vaguely.

"Are you all okay with me bringing Way onto the team?"

"1 can't speak for everyone,"

Jane replied.

"But for me, it's not a problem. If it's you and Way leading, I'd feel even more confident. "

"That much?"

Yaninn asked, intrigued.

"Yes,"

Jane said firmly.

"She might look a bit scatterbrained, but you can trust her judgment and

"Tell me how you two know each other,"

Yaninn prompted. Jane nodded and began to explain.

"1 met Way right after graduating from the police academy. I went on to study at the Security College,"

She noticed Yaninn nodding.

"1n my first year, she was a third-year student. She was close friends with my mentor. We trained together in the Rapid Response unit for about a year, where she was an assistant instructor. After graduation, she transferred to the personal protection unit.

Jane paused to take a breath, her eyes wandering as she recalled her first encounter with Nitha. Yaninn listened attentively, nodding occasionally. "The National Security Office, have you heard of it?"

Jane asked.

"I've heard of it,"

Yaninn replied briefly.

"Then you probably know it's not an ordinary place."

"1've heard some things, but I don't know much since I don't know anyone who works there."

"The National Security Office is known for being highly selective. From what I've heard, there are two tracks one under government jurisdiction and another in the private sector as a support team. Members undergo additional training for one to two years before starting assignments. Most of their work is confidential, with no external contracts or promotions, but the pay is exceptionally high. After that, I didn't see much of Way anymore, only hearing updates through my mentor. "

At this point, Yaninn nodded in understanding. "So, it's a pretty secretive organization, right?"

"Exactly," Jane confirmed.

"To prevent interference, team members aren't officially listed under any specific agency. It's more Of an internal contracting system, and the pay reflects their skills."

The risk of interference in a personal protection team is significant and dangerous. If a protector were ever compromised, the gun could easily turn on the employer.

Despite having a well-paying and prestigious job, why would Nitha transfer here and switch career paths?

The answer she gave about seeking new challenges in life couldn't possibly be the whole truth.

"Why do you think she requested to transfer here?"

Yaninn asked casually, trying not to reveal her curiosity about Nitha's motives.

Jane simply shrugged.

"1 have no idea,"

She replied honestly, causing Yaninn to frown slightly.

"Way's always been a bit unconventional."

"1 was hoping for a more professional answer,"

Yaninn said, her tone serious, making Jane laugh.

"I'm serious,

Jane insisted.

"Even her best friend, my mentor, said the same. But when it comes to work, you can count on her."

"But you just said she's unconventional." "1t's probably just her sense of humor,"

Jane reasoned.

"Is that so?"

"Trust me, she's reliable," Jane assured.

"Next week, we have a training session with Team Three. Should we let Way join in?"

"Not yet," Yaninn replied.

"1 need to evaluate her theoretical knowledge first"

"She'll pass for sure,"

Jane said confidently.

"That confident?"

"Don't worry, Boss. I vouch for her," Jane said firmly.

"What about the rest of the team?"

Yanmn asked.

"110w do they feel about her suddenly joining without going through the reserve team first?"

"We follow your lead, Boss,"

Jane replied, her answer visibly easing Yaninn's concerns.

"Whatever you decide, we'll support you."

"Alright," Yaninn said.

"Get back to work."

She gestured for Jane to leave.

"We've got your back, Boss. Don't worry,"

Jane said as she stood up Yaninn nodded slowly, watching her team member leave the room.

# øøøøø

Operation 05

The former bodyguard found herself sitting in a meeting room.

Actually, calling it a meeting room didn't feel quite right. Nitha felt it resembled a classroom more. Despite the long rectangular conference table and the two rows of chairs lined up opposite each other, totaling over twenty seats, there was no head chair for a meeting leader.

Moreover, there wasn't even a meeting scheduled for today.

Nitha's gaze was fixed on the front of the room, where a woman stood by a large whiteboard that spanned the wall. In one hand, she held a marker for the board, and in the other, a remote control to advance the slides for her presentation.

The former bodyguard felt as though she had been transported back to her school days, even though many years had passed since then.

In front ofher sat Jane, and next to Jane was Mod, along with another team member dressed in a short-sleeved black t-shirt with the center's white circular emblem on the front. They wore thick black tactical pants, the standard attire for both field operations and office work.

Nitha herself was dressed in the same uniform, which now served as both her work and training attire, even though she had yet to participate in any field missions or training sessions as a team member.

Her shirt still carried the scent of newness, having just been unpacked and washed the day before, though the smell hadn't completely faded.

It felt strange to her. Previously, she had always worn formal suits, the standard uniform for protecting VIPs, a role she had held for many years.

This was the first time she had received a new uniform for fieldwork.

She felt Yaninn, who was standing at the front of the room, staring intently at her. This startled Nitha, causing her to sit up straight in her chair, even though she was feeling quite drowsy. Beyond tactical skills, she also needed to grasp the theoretical aspects.

When would there ever be time to review theory in the field...

Counter-terrorism work was challenging and required specialized skills to assess and resolve high-stakes situations. It wasn't just about ensuring one's own survival but also protecting civilian lives.

On the surface, it didn't seem much different from her previous bodyguard work, except that in bodyguarding, the employer's life was the top priority.

That was it..

She wasn't sure what had compelled her to accept the request to switch career paths and end up here.

Thinking about it made her chuckle to herself, though the air conditioning in the room was so cold that it stifled her laughter.

Today's session was a theoretical training on criminology in terrorism conducted by a senior special officer of the center. The audience consisted of three operational team members and some other center staff, totaling about thirty people.

Part of her couldn't help but admire Yaninn. At such a young age, holding a senior officer position was no small feat.

Nitha heard the lecturer say something about childhood development theories and how they could influence tendencies toward violent behavior.

Then she drifted in and out Of sleep.

Until..

She felt a strong impact on her left shin. Before she even opened her eyes, her instincts kicked in. The former bodyguard used her left leg to push off the ground and propelled herself upward, swinging her right leg, clad in field boots, in a reflexive counterattack. She couldn't stop herself in time. The next thing she knew, she was swept offher feet and landed on the floor.

The sound of her body hitting the floor was followed by a loud groan of pain.

Then, murmurs filled the room, snapping Nitha back to her senses. She slowly opened her eyes while still lying on the floor.

"Right in front ofmy eyes, Agent Nitha,"

A familiar stern voice said. The former bodyguard looked up to meet the piercing gaze and stern expression staring down at her. She immediately jumped to her feet.

"Should I punish you for falling asleep in a meeting during your first week on the job or for nearly assaulting a senior agent? Pick one."

Nitha glanced around the room. Almost everyone had a smile on their face, their eyes gleaming with amusement.

'Tm sorry, ma'am," she said calmly.

"1fI hadn't dodged in time, your boot would've hit my chin squarely,"

The senior offlcer remarked.

'ISO, which one will it be, or should I punish you for both?"

"Whatever you decide, ma'am,"

Nitha replied.

"Take every gun in the armory and clean them, starting tomorrow. You have one week,"

The stern voice ordered. "1'11 check every evening at 4 PM."

"Understood, ma'am,"

The former bodyguard said, standing straight and acknowledging the order. The senior officer gave her a sharp look before returning to the front of the room to continue the lecture.

"0h, come on,

Nitha muttered as she opened a two-door metal cabinet and saw the rows of guns inside. She stepped back to look at the five cabinets lined up, each filled with rifles and handguns. A quick glance estimated there were about fifty guns in total.

The sight made the new special officer lean her forehead against the top shelf of the cabinet and let out a deep sigh.

"Hey, Way,"

Jane's voice called out as she and Mod approached, each carrying a box of supplies.

"Here's some gun cleaning solution and tools,"

Jane said with a teasing smile, followed by laughter. Mod, standing beside her, offered a small, encouraging smile

'Quiet, Jane,"

Nitha said, her face showing her annoyance as she reached for two semiautomatic pistols.

"1 didn't even say anything yet, sis."

"Your face says it all,"

Nitha retorted knowingly.

"Well, you did fall asleep in front ofthe boss,"

Mod chimed in, placing her box on the table in the center of the room.

"No one's ever dared to do that before." "1 was just resting my eyes for a moment,"

Nitha defended herself.

"Fa11ing asleep is one thing, but throwing your boot at her is another,"

Jane added.

"1 was startled!" Nitha argued.

"Anyone who touches me without warning would get the same reaction."

"Startled enough to break someone's neck with a kick?" Mod teased, laughing.

"1f the boss hadn't dodged, it would've hit her chin." "1 did try whispering to wake you, but you didn't budge."

Jane said with a grin.

'Good thing I didn't nudge you, or I might've ended up on the floor.

"This is just my luck,"

The new special agent grumbled.

"Back then, I only had three meetings a month, mostly online. Now, it's meetings every three days, plus training. I'm not used to freezing cold airconditioned rooms. "

Her complaints made the two women laugh before Nitha began her task for the day. She disassembled a gun, placed its parts in a box, and grabbed a white cloth soaked in a cleaning solution to start wiping it down.

"Alright, we'll leave you to it," Jane said, standing up with Mod.

"Good luck, way,"

She added with a teasing laugh as they left the room.

"Just you wait, Jane,"

Nitha called after them.

About two hours later, the armory door opened, and Yaninn, the one who had assigned Nitha the task, stepped in. Dressed in a white shirt, she stood observing for a moment before walking further inside.

"Ma'am," Nitha said, standing up.

"How's it going?"

Yaninn asked, glancing at the disassembled guns on the table.

"Slowly but surely,"

Nitha replied, sitting back down.

"Today, tomorrow, the day after, and the rest of the week-it's going to be a long one for me,"

She added with a sarcastic chuckle.

"Anything else you'd like to add, ma'am?"

"Just checking in,"

Yaninn replied curtly, crossing her arms as she tood. Her silence made Nitha look up, meeting her icy gaze

"1'm sorry for...uh... kicking you,"

Nitha stammered.

"1t wasn't intentional."

"1t's my fault for tapping you without warning."

Yaninn admitted after a pause.

"1 didn't expect you to react so quickly."

"1t's just instinct,"

Nitha explained, noticing Yaninn nodding in understanding.

"Next time, if you're going to sneak a nap, make sure your gun's safety is on,"

Yaninn advised, sitting across from her.

"Otherwise, you might end up shooting someone in a panic. "

"1 won't, ma'am. I promise,"

Nitha assured her, continuing her work with a relaxed demeanor.

"1'm more afraid of you knocking me to the ground again.

"1 didn't know private sector training was so intense that you could knock someone out while half-asleep,"

Yaninn remarked, making Nitha glance at her. Unsure if it was a statement or a question, Nitha didn't respond immediately. Of course, Yaninn would want to dig deeper into the background of someone joining her team, especially someone she hadn't personally chosen.

"Well some of my skills weren't learned in training,"

Nitha admitted, avoiding eye contact. Her words piqued Yaninn's curiosity.

"1s there anything else I should know about you, Agent Nitha?"

Yaninn asked.

"Nothing to worry about, ma'am. I mean, some things I just picked up on my own,"

Nitha replied firmly, prompting a suspicious look from Yaninn.

"1 assure you, I have no hidden agenda,"

She quickly added.

"Honest."

"Ilonestly, I wasn't thrilled about your background to begin with,"

Yaninn said bluntly.

"And now you're making me even more suspicious."

"1 knew you'd be suspicious, so I said it,"

Nitha countered.

Yaninn shot her a sharp look.

"So, you're deliberately being annoying."

"Maybe it makes you curious and eager to find out more. Am I right?"

Nitha asked with a slight smirk.

"Don't worry, ma'am. There's nothing to uncover." "From your demeanor, that's hard to believe,"

Yaninn commented.

"Check which guns are still functional and which aren't so we can decommission them." "Understood, boss,"

Nitha replied evenly.



"Alright. I'll check back before the end of the day,"

Yaninn said.

As Yaninn was about to leave, her phone rang.

"Yaninn speaking, "

She answered. After listening for a moment, Nitha noticed her expression change.

"Got it. I'll be right there."

She quickly pocketed her phone

"Let's go, Ms. Nitha. Leave this for now."

# øøøøø

Operation 06

"Is there an emergency, Chief?"

The former female bodyguard asked as she realized she was sitting in the passenger seat with the operations team chief driving. They were heading straight to the scene, guided by the car's navigation system.

"There's been a report of a sniper attack with heavy weaponry. It seems the negotiation team couldn't make any progress because the perpetrator refused to talk. The police want us to take over."

"Oh. '

Nitha responded with just that, taking a deep breath. Although she had never taken on the role of an anti-terrorism agent, she knew well enough that situations like this were never easy.

Yaninn decided to turn on the siren to clear the way as traffic heading into the city began to build up. According to protocol, they were supposed to reach the scene within fifteen minutes if it was within a thirty-kilometer radius.

Another SUV carrying team members followed about fifty meters behind, and further back was a command van driven by the center's programmer.

In less than eight minutes, they arrived at the Scene. As they approached within two hundred meters, Yaninn instructed the team to turn offthe siren and park the vehicles at a distance to avoid drawing attention or stray bullets as they entered the area.

"Take cover inside the building!"

As soon as they stepped out of the car, they heard a police officer shouting through a loudspeaker, his voice echoing across the area. He himself cautiously moved under the building. urging civilians in the vicinity to do the same.

Bang!

The sound instinctively made Yaninn crouch down, pulling out her ninemillimeter sidearm from the holster she always carried under her jacket. She raised the weapon, aiming at the tall building where the sound had originated.

Before she could react further, Nitha, now armed with an eleven- millimeter handgun, grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the cover of a parking structure about fifteen meters away.

The police officer who had been shouting earlier collapsed to the ground after the gunshot, followed by the piercing screams of people in the area.

Many civilians were still running for their lives in the open, ignoring the earlier warnings, which made the situation even more dangerous.

Initial reports indicated that a group of individuals had taken to sniping from a nine-story building as some sort of twisted joke.

"We need to act fast."

The operations team leader quickly ran to the command van, which had been modified into a mobile workstation equipped with essential tools.

It was parked about two hundred meters from the scene, hidden around the corner of a building to avoid drawing attention. Inside, the IT specialist was already waiting.

Yaninn grabbed her headset with a built-in microphone, placing it over her ear. She took a deep breath to steady herself and prepare for the situation.

"Big, I need an aerial view Of the building within a two-hundred- meter radius from our vehicle. Use whatever means necessary to get it for me," Yaninn ordered swiftly. Big immediately complied, typing away on his laptop connected to three monitors inside the van. After a moment, the requested aerial view appeared on the largest screen, while the other two displayed footage from the van's external surveillance cameras.

"Where's this image from?"

"Military satellite, ma'am. The images are delayed by about three to five minutes. "

"How many times do I have to tell you? If you're gomg to use external resources, try private satellites first. If the government catches us using theirs, it'll be a bureaucratic nightmare."

Nitha's ears perked up at that Yaninn, whom she had always thought of as strict and by-the-book, was instructing the center's IT agent to hack into private satellites instead of government ones to avoid lengthy explanations to the administration if caught.

Sometimes, even the most disciplined have their rebellious moments.

"No private satellites are in range, ma'am," Big explained with a proud smile.

"This one is the closest, but it's still delayed."

"What about the drone I ordered to replace the one that got shot down?"

"It'll arrive next week, boss."

'Make sure it doesn't get shot down again,'

Yaninn said, prompting a sheepish smile from the programmer before he returned to his work.

The team leader fell silent, focusing her thoughts. She stared at the monitor in front of her.

'IThere,"

She said, narrowing her eyes and pointing to an image of a building rooftop where a group of people was scattered.

"Zoom in for me."

"Unbelievable, "

The young agent muttered as he zoomed in. Although the image wasn't crystal clear, it was enough to discern what was happening Nitha stood frozen, staring at the screen in shock. She had faced many dangerous individuals before, but this was something else entirely.

On the rooftop were six perpetrators. Two were aiming rifles from opposite corners, while the other four were strategically positioned to provide cover.

It was a bizarre sight for the former bodyguard.

Clearly, this was a calculated act with a specific objective. Armed with heavy weaponry, two snipers, and four guards, it was a textbook example of creating chaos and fear to destabilize internal security, as described in Yaninn's counter-terrorism manuals.

But seeing it in real life was a whole different story-it was terrifying.

Yaninn's expression changed drastically. Already tense, she now looked even more intense. Her shoulders straightened, and her eyes scanned the monitor with a sharp focus, devoid of any emotion.

She was deep in thought, calculating how to resolve the situation with the resources and personnel available as quickly as possible.

Bang!

A gunshot echoed outside, followed by the screams of those nearby.

"Take cover inside the building!

Shouted another police officer who had taken over for the one who had just been killed.

'You there, get inside!"

Bang!

"Two snipers at opposite corners with four guards scattered around,"

Yaninn muttered.

"Do we have the building's blueprint?"

"0ne moment,"

The programmer replied, frowning at the monitor.

"No, we don't."

"Didn't they make it mandatory to submit blueprints to the city planning office before construction anymore?"

Yaninn grumbled.

"What about the CCTV feed?"

She asked, while Nitha silently observed her with newfound admiration. If Yaninn was focused during normal times, it was nothing compared to her composure and confidence in emergencies.

"No CCTV feed either, ma'am."

"Damn it!"

Yaninn cursed under her breath.

"What now, Chie??"

The former bodyguard asked. Yaninn didn't respond immediately, pausing to think.

"Radio Team Two for me. Tell them to get here immediately,"

She said, patting Big on the shoulder.

"Mod and Pong, come meet me in the van."

Within two minutes, the team members Yaninn had called for squeezed into the van from the back.

"Big, zoom out to show the surrounding buildings and place the one with the perpetrators in the center, " Yaninn instructed.

"What can we do from here?"

Yaninn turned to the two snipers, who exchanged glances before studying the monitor. Nitha watched the three of them work with interest Yaninn wasn't the type of leader who just barked orders, even though it was her job. She allowed her team to think and contribute based on their skills and expertise.

"1 think this spot could work,"

Mod, the lead sniper, pointed to a tall building northeast ofthe target. It seemed to be Of similar height.

"But I'm not sure about the range."

"Big, measure the distance from this building to the center Of the rooftop, passing through the first sniper's position at the corner,"

Yaninn ordered.

The IT specialist quickly complied.

Bang!

"Hurry up," Yaninn urged

Approximately four hundred and forty meters,"

Big reported.

"Can you handle it at that range with this wind speed?"

Yaninn asked.

"Yes, ma'am," Mod replied confidently.

"Pong, what about you?"

"This building seems like the best option to take out the second sniper at the opposite corner. The other buildings are too far."

Pong replied, pointing to another structure of similar height but on the other side.

"Way, check the area around the building for external fire escapes or back doors. If there are any, have the police guard them and report back,"

Yaninn instructed. The officer jumped out of the van and ran off immediately.

"There's a small external fire escape that allows one person to climb down at a time,"

Nitha reported back via radio within three minutes.

"Assign two officers to guard it."

'Understood, Chief." "Okay, here's the plan," Yaninn began, turning to the two snipers who were waiting for her instructions.

"This building has only one escape route- the fire escape. That means we have a chance to capture them all ifthey don't resist. I'll have the police stationed at the main entrance and the fire escape at the back,"

She explained, thinking quickly to devise the most secure plan Then she continued,

"We need to act simultaneously I'll have Tum, Korn, and Jane prepare at the rooftop door to avoid alerting them. Wait for my signal Mod will take out the first sniper, and Pong will handle the second. You each get one shot because as soon as the first shot is fired, they'll start running. You have no more than fifteen seconds. After that, Tum, Korn, and Jane will move in to deal with the rest on the rooftop. If they escape down the fire escape, the police will be waiting."

Both snipers nodded in agreement, along with the voices of other team members who heard the orders over the radio.

"You two, move,"

Yaninn instructed the snipers.

"Stay hidden as you move between buildings. Don't let them spot you. Report back when you're in position."

The two immediately exited the van.

"Tum, Jane, Korn, ifyou're ready, head into the building."

'What about me, Chief?"

Nitha, who had been silently listening. finally spoke up.

"You stay here," Yaninn replied curtly

"But I can help.

"Stay here and pay attention. Don't make me repeat myself,"

Yaninn said in a low voice, turning to look at Nitha with an intensity that silenced her immediately.

Within five minutes of the orders, Mod reported via radio that she was in position and within range, followed by Pong two minutes later.

"My angle isn't clear, ma'am. The target is short, and I don't have a clear shot. I can only guarantee a fifty-fifty chance,"

Pong reported.

"1'11 take that fifty percent,"

Yaninn replied, hearing Pong acknowledge.

"0ne-Zero-Two, you heard that,"

She called to mum.

"1f Pong can't take out the second target with one shot, you're up next."

"Understood, ma'am."

Bang!

Gunfire echoed intermittently outside, followed by the panicked screams of people in the surrounding area. "Has Team Two arrived yet, Big?" "Not yet. The tramc is terrible."

"Alright,

Nitha watched as her new boss acknowledged the response, glancing at her wristwatch.

"Then we can't wait any longer."

Yaninn took a deep breath.

"In five seconds, 103 and 105, you start the operation."

She directed her command to Mod and Pong.

"1Jnderstood "

Came the clear response from the female sharpshooter, who was stationed in a nearby commercial building, ready and waiting, her voice transmitted through the radio.

The former bodyguard felt a chill run through her body.

Three seconds.

Five seconds.

Eight seconds.

Nitha observed Yaninn, who stood watching her wristwatch, counting each second while straining to hear gunfire from one of the team's sharpshooters. She couldn't see anything herself, as there were no surveillance cameras, and the satellite feed lagged behind real-time events.

It felt like being underwater in a dark cave, surrounded by pressure, as the commander had no visual Of the situation and had to rely solely on the reports coming in from her team.

And yet...the first gunshot they were waiting for never came.

Ten seconds.

Bang!

"Target one, neutralized."

The first sharpshooter initiated the operation.

"They're fleeing!"

Mod's voice came through, reporting what she saw through the scope ofher rifle.

"Fire escape stairs!"

"Target two is moving. I can't get a clear shot l'

Pong reported, observing through his scope as his target stumbled awkwardly after seeing one of their group collapse from a gunshot. This made it difficult for Pong to find the right moment to act. He watched as the group Of criminals clumsily descended the narrow exterior stairs one by one, trying to line up his shot on the second target.

Eleven seconds.

But the second gunshot from Pong, as planned, had yet to come.

Thirteen seconds.

"Black Panther 102, requesting permission to proceed,"

Tum's voice came through, reporting from the other three team members waiting by the door on the opposite side of the rooftop entrance.

"Hold on," Yaninn interrupted.

" 105 hasn't aborted the mission yet. "

This indicated that Pong still needed time and space to complete his task. If the operation team moved in now, the chaos could make it harder for him to aim from a distance.

Sixteen seconds.

Bang!

"Target two, neutralized."

Pong's voice followed the sound of the gunshot. Despite his earlier difficulty, he had completed his task effectively.



Yaninn commanded.

The deputy team leader, along with Jane and Korn, kicked the door open.

Gunfire erupted for no more than ten minutes amidst the heart- pounding tension. The new team member could only watch Yaninn, who remained calm, listening to the radio reports while her eyes stayed fixed on the computer screen in front of her. She couldn't issue any commands, as she had no visual ofthe scene.

"Two o'clock"

Korn's voice shouted through the radio.

Bang! Bang!

"Ten o'clock!"

Jane's voice followed.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Final target, neutralized,"

The deputy team leader reported back.

Hearing this through her earpiece, Nitha exhaled in relief. She noticed that the other woman standing in the van, as well as the young programmer, seemed to feel the same.

"Okay, everyone did great,"

Yaninn's curt voice came through the radio before she yanked out her earpiece and set it down with a bit more force than necessary. She patted Big on the shoulder twice in gratitude before stepping out of the van.

Nitha watched her leave and decided to follow suit.

She trailed behind the woman who was now officially her team leader. Along the way, people began emerging from the building. But what was more disheartening were the lifeless bodies lying in pools ofblood on the street within view.

The former bodyguard spotted two bodies, one male and one female, before noticing that Yaninn had stopped walking and was now looking up at the sky, taking a deep breath to steady herself.

In that moment, the new team member felt an inexplicable sense of pity for the woman in front of her She stood there for a moment before stepping closer.

"Chief,

She called from behind. Yaninn didn't turn immediately, instead keeping her gaze upward amidst the towering buildings, trying to collect herself.

"Do you know,"

Yaninn began in a calm voice,

never liked being a Senior officer. All I do is stand here giving orders and listening while my team risks their lives against people who only care about their own gain. Sometimes, I don't even know why I'm doing this crazy job.'

She continued to face away from Nitha, who stood silently listening.

"1 should be out there with them, not standing here rambling in front of a monitor or listening to reports over the radio while sending my team into danger. "

Those words prompted the former bodyguard to step closer.

"But I don't think that's true,"

Nitha said, causing Yaninn to turn and meet her gaze.

"Sure, they take risks, but I think what they need more than a leader who risks everything with them is a leader they can trust to make the right decisions for them."

Yaninn stared at her for a moment, her expression unreadable.

"Let's go I need to talk to the police, who will take over clearing the area,"

Yaninn finally said.

"Today, I failed. Too many people died."

Iler voice was barely above a whisper as she walked away, leading Nitha out of the area.

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Operation 07

The newest member of the Special Operations Team found herself standing outside the office, reading the nameplate and title of the senior officer who was now her new supervisor.

Sometimes, Nitha still couldn't quite figure out why she was standing in the administrative building of one ofthe nation's security agencies. From being a high-paid bodyguard to becoming a new member of the counter- terrorism team, the nature of her work had shifted drastically.

Perhaps it could be said that she was in a position where refusal wasn't an optlon.

She sighed deeply, then raised her hand to knock on the door a few times. She had volunteered to fetch her new boss since the meeting had already run five minutes late.

"Come in,"

A curt voice responded, prompting the former bodyguard to open the door and step inside.

"Everyone's ready, ma'am,

She said to Yaninn, who was standing with her back turned. Nitha's eyes caught sight Of numerous photos of victims from a recent sniper attack scattered across the desk, along with a crumpled pile of tissues nearby.

'Alright, give me two minutes, and I'll be there,"

Yaninn replied, her voice muffled and uneven, as if she were struggling to speak.

"1 just need to finish preparing these documents."

"Understood

Nitha replied simply before quickly stepping out to give Yaninn some space. Judging by the faint sobbing tone in her voice and the grim photos of the crime scene and victims scattered on the desk, Nitha could piece together what was going on...

But there wasn't much time for grief, nor was it appropriate to let personal emotions interfere with the job at hand.

Work was work, even if it revolved around violence, injuries, death, and the suffering of others. This time, it might have been seen as a failure in the eyes of someone like Yaninn. No matter how many times it happened, one could never truly get used to it. Yet, it was still the job. Allowing personal feelings to seep into work like this...

Sooner or later, it would drive someone to the brink of a breakdown.

Three minutes later, Senior Agent Yaninn entered the meeting room. In the blink of an eye, she had composed herself, though the sorrow from the recent events still lingered. The work waiting for her didn't allow much time to process her emotions.

Yaninn buried her feelings deep, reminding herself that she would do everything in her power to prevent such tragedies from happening again.

Even though she knew better than anyone that it was an impossible goal in a world driven by competition and conflict.

Yaninn placed a light blue folder on the table at the front ofthe room, followed by a partially consumed bottle ofwater. Her eyes were still red, but her demeanor had returned to its usual steely resolve.

The room was filled with over thirty personnel, the highest ranking being the Deputy Director. Most of the attendees were department heads and analysts from various counter-terrorism divisions, along with members Of the operations team and engineers. Nitha sat in her usual chair, with Jane in front of her and Mod behind her.

The team chief scanned the room, making eye contact with several people who were waiting for her to speak. She took a deep breath to steady herself, even though she didn't feel confident at all.

Especially since the center's director was still overseas attending a counterterrorism conference and was expected to return abruptly in a few days due to the recent violent incident.

In the meantime, the responsibility fell on Watin, the Deputy Director, who didn't exactly see eye to eye with Yaninn.

There was a chance that today, Yaninn might metaphorically lose her head in this meeting, as she was essentially being held accountable for the violent events that had occurred.

"Good afternoon, everyone,"

Yaninn began, her voice firm.

"Today, we're here to discuss what happened the other day."

She nodded toward Big, who was seated near a computer screen. The young officer tapped a few keys, and an image of a group of six men dressed in concealing clothing appeared on the screen.

The image, taken from a security camera, was blurry and showed the men from a distance as they approached the building where the incident occurred.

Big banded the remote to advance the slides to the team chief.

"Before we dive into other details, I'd like everyone to take a look at this first,"

Yaninn said, raising the remote to advance the slide on the large white screen at the front ofthe room. Within three seconds, an image of a man in his late thirties to early forties appeared. His pale body lay on an autopsy table, covered from the waist down with a sheet.

"This man was one of the victims of the recent sniper attack," Yaninn began.

"He was a department head at the National Intelligence Agency. "

The room immediately erupted into murmurs as soon as she finished speaking.

"Do you think he had any connection to this incident, Agent Yaninn?"

Someone from the administration asked.

"In my personal opinion, without concrete evidence, I believe so. However,

I can't yet determine how he was connected,"

Yaninn replied

"The Intelligence Agency hasn't provided us with much information. They've only informed us of this and are awaiting detailed forensic results from the police."

Yaninn continued her report.

"What we know for now is that he was a victim. But the point I want to make is..."

Yaninn turned back to the screen and advanced to another image, showing a clearer view of the gunshot wounds on the man's torso.

"Take a look at the gunshot wounds."

The attendees followed her instructions, and within seconds, the atmosphere in the room grew tense.

After a brief pause, Yaninn continued.

"According to the preliminary autopsy report, three bullets struck the upper left torso, one of which hit the heart,"

Yaninn explained.

"The trajectory analysis shows that the bullets were fired at the same level as the victim, entering from the front and exiting through the back. There were no upward or downward angles, meaning the shots didn't come from a higher or lower position. "

She advanced the slide to display more forensic images.

"Therefore, it's unlikely that he died from a sniper attack. Forensics is currently examining the bullets to determine if they match the sniper's weapon. But ifl had to guess, I'd say they don't." The murmurs in the room grew louder this time.

"\Vhat's your take on this, Agent Yaninn?"

Asked an administrative officer overseeing intelligence operations, his face filled with concern. A targeted attack on a National Intelligence Agency officer was undoubtedly no ordinary matter.

"1f this is the case, it suggests that there was another incident overlapping with the sniper attack,"

Yaninn replied, her expression serious.

"Typically, there's a primary mission and a secondary one to divert attention. In this case, it's clear that the sniper attack was secondary. If the sniper were caught, the person who shot the department head could escape unnoticed amidst the chaos."

The middle-aged man in a suit nodded in agreement.

"However..." Yaninn continued,

"Since he was an intelligence officer, this tells us something. I'm waiting for more information from the Intelligence Agency, but I'm fairly certain they won't disclose much. "

"I'll follow up with the Intelligence Agency,"

Offered a forty-two- year-old man in a white shirt and black tie. He was the deputy head of the agency's intelligence division and often coordinated with the National Intelligence Agency.

"Thank you, Mr. M," Yaninn said.

"Now, let's move on to the second incident."

She raised the remote again, advancing to an image of six men, ranging In age from their mid-twenties to late forties, who had been shown earlier.

"The two men in the top right corner were the snipers,

Yaninn began.

"The other four were their guards. Our team has confirmed that none of these individuals appear in any watchlists or wanted databases." She scanned the room, taking a deep breath before continuing.

"In this incident, they killed thirteen people, including civilians, police officers, and the intelligence department head,"

Yaninn said, her voice heavy. Nitha noticed a slight change in Yaninn's expression, a hint Of sadness.

"1fwe had been slower to intervene, the death toll could have been even higher."

"Is there any indication that this might be an act Of terrorism?" Asked a forty-five-year-old officer in charge Of coordination. "Based on preliminary analysis, I believe it's a possibility,"

Yaninn replied firmly. Her response caused everyone in the room to shift uncomfortably in their seats, some turning to discuss with their neighbors.

Many began to show signs of concern.

"Do you think it could be a case of false-flag terrorism or imitation behavior?"

Asked a female officer, about two years older than Yaninn, seated near the back of the room

False-flag terrorism often mimics acts of unrest but is typically carried out by individuals with experience in using weapons to create chaos or by those hired to achieve specific goals unrelated to undermining security.

"False-flag terrorism is a possibility, but I'd rule out imitation behavior due to the weapons used, the precision, and the confidence in executing the attack. Ifwe had been slower, I believe they would have escaped,"

Yaninn explained.

"lfyou believe it's terrorism, has any group claimed responsibility or made demands yet?"

Asked a senior officer responsible for security policy.

"Not yet,"

Yaninn replied. Typically, after an attack, insurgent groups would claim responsibility to assert their defiance against authority.

But that wasn't always the case.

"Then why do you believe it's not false-flag terrorism?"

He pressed further.

"Because of the death ofthe intelligence department head "

Yaninn answered firmly.

"The target was too specific to be a random or imitative killing. They had a clear objective and operated systematically."

She advanced the slide to show the deceased officer again.

"Moreover, accessing the rooftop of a building with only one entry point was a high-risk move executed with confidence. Therefore, the primary mission had to succeed."

Yaninn continued to support her hypothesis.

"The sniping from the rooftop was well-practiced. Despite the height, only a few shots were missed, and most were fatal within one or two hits. This indicates something... perhaps a single act meant to achieve multiple objectives: assassination, creating chaos or fear, or even declaring war to destabilize national security."

The former bodyguard noticed several attendees nodding in agreement, some exhaling heavily as they processed her words. "Not to mention the highly effective weaponry, "

Yaninn added.

"Forget about imitations; guns like that can't be bought or smuggled into our country. Besides, my team has informed me that anyone using such a weapon must have considerable experience."

Yaninn's words hinted at a troubling reality: experienced insurgents were now blending into the largest urban community in the country, ready to strike again at any moment, just as they had done days before.

As the meeting room feli silent, the female officer took a deep breath before continuing.

"1 believe this incident marks a transitional phase for the insurgent group.

They're on the verge of escalating into full-blown terrorism."

Although Nitha didn't fully grasp the gravity ofthe situation, she felt a sudden chill in the air. She knew it wasn't from the air conditioning but from the weight of Yaninn's recent statement.

"Therefore, ifpossible, we need to act before it reaches that point."

What concerned her most was the pressure Yaninn seemed to be under. While she knew Yaninn was adept at managing her emotions, the tension she had displayed in her office earlier left Nitha uneasy.

She studied the special agent carefully, wondering if there was any way she could help lighten the heavy burden Yaninn was carrying.

It was true-Nitha herselfwas no stranger to the responsibility of safeguarding others' lives throughout her career. Yet, it couldn't compare to the weight can-ied by the woman standing at the front of the room, recounting the horrific events that had just unfolded

Yaninn had to remain strong, even when she likely wanted nothing more than to mourn the victims of the tragedy.

"This situation is extremely precarious,"

The team leader's firm voice continued, despite the exhaustion evident in his tone.

"1 suggest that, in addition to monitoring which intelligence channels this leader oversees, we also trace the financial trails Of all the perpetrators,"

A young analyst in his late thirties proposed.

"Start with these two gunmen,"

Yaninn said.

"Then we need to identify the culprits as quickly as possible and trace everything back-their backgrounds, families, occupations, and how they came together. We should also investigate their connections over the past six months."

"Understood," came the response.

"Sir,"

She turned to Watin, the deputy director standing in for Suchada during the debriefing

"1 propose forming a special task team to analyze this group's data. I believe this is an urgent matter."

The fifty-six-year-old man studied her carefully but didn't immediately respond.

"Come see me this afternoon to discuss this further,"

Watin said in a low voice after a brief pause. Yaninn simply nodded in acknowledgment.

The meeting continued with a tense atmosphere. This was a rare and shocking incident, and it seemed the perpetrators had no fear of death.

To Yaninn, this was a troubling sign-it meant these individuals were capable of actions beyond anyone's expectations without regard for their own lives.

Most people fear death and strive to survive. But those who don't fear it are unpredictable in both thought and behavior.

The sound Of heavy footsteps echoed into the shared operations room, filled with frustration after an hour-long explanation to request the formation of a special task force to track the insurgents responsible for the deaths of thirteen people.

Despite her irritation, Yaninn's face remained composed. However, the louder-than-usual footsteps caught the attention of the primary team members, who turned to look

"Yaninn,"

Someone called out as she dropped into an empty chair next to Nitha.

"Is there something you need to discuss with us?"

Mod asked. Everyone could sense the frustration Yaninn was trying to suppress, though it was evident on her face. "1 have something to talk to you all about." "Should we move to the small meeting room?"

Tum, the deputy team leader, suggested.

"No need. We can talk here. I've had enough meetings for one day. There are only twenty-four hours in a day, and I've already spent thirty of them in meetings,"

She grumbled.

"This is why we're always a step behind the insurgents."

Her words prompted the team members to exchange glances. It was rare for Yaninn to show any emotion in front of others, which only underscored how overwhelming the past few days had been for her.

"How about some coffee to perk you up, Chie??"

Nitha offered, not waiting for a response. She got up to prepare a cup of coffee and brought it back along with a bottle Of water. Mod added a plate of buttered toast with a kind smile.

"Thank you, "

Yaninn said softly, taking a sip of coffee and exhaling deeply before addressing the team.

"The administration has denied the request to form a special task team for the sniper case,"

She began in her usual calm tone, though it was slightly quieter than usual.

"They claim it's no different from other insurgency cases."

She paused to take a breath.

"What do you all think?"

At first, no one responded. They exchanged glances, unsure of what to say. The operational team members weren't typically involved in paperwork or analysis; their role was to execute Yaninn's orders in the field. Most of the time, their response was simply.. "Whatever you think, boss, we agree.

This time was no different.

Yaninn turned her gaze to Nitha, clearly expecting a response when no one else spoke up.

"What about you, Nitha? What are your thoughts on your first case here?"

Caught off guard, Nitha hesitated, letting out a soft hum.

She stammered, her mind blank as she forced an awkward smile.

"1 hope you've had time to read the materials I gave you and reflect on the incident during the van ride, "

Yaninn said, noting Nitha's nonchalant expression. Nitha nodded but offered no further response.

Yaninn shot her a sharp look before addressing the entire team again.

"1 want you all to understand that this is an urgent case and poses a significant threat to many lives,"

She said.

"Thirteen people died in an urban area. This is a serious matter, even if the administration doesn't see it that way."

"What can we do, boss?"

Korn asked, prompting Yaninn to glance around cautiously before replying.

"1 want this case treated as a priority to identify the perpetrators,"

Yaninn said.

"And since there are no official orders, let's just say... there are no orders."

"You mean investigate secretly?"

Jane blurted out, earning a glare from Nitha for her poorly timed question.

"Just make sure no one else finds out," Yaninn instructed.

"Understood, "

The team responded almost in unison.

"Ms. Way, I want you to write an analysis report on this case. We'll discuss it in two days."

"Yes, chief," Nitha replied firmly this time.

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Operation 08

"0peration 13?"

Agent Yaninn asked as she flipped to the first page of the analysis report she had ordered the new team member to write three days ago. The first page prominently displayed the words "0peration 13," handwritten in bold letters at the center of the page.

"1t's just a habit of mine to assign code names as memory aids,"

Nitha explained, prompting a nod of acknowledgment from her listener.

"And what does thirteen signify?"

"1t's to honor the thirteen lives lost. Every time I think about it, it serves as a reminder of what I'm doing and why. "

Yaninn, seated at her desk, looked up at the other woman with a mix of emotions stirring within her.

"Take a seat,"

She said, gesturing to the chair across from her. The former bodyguard complied without hesitation.

"So, what's your take on this incident?"

"1f you want me to answer from the perspective of counter-terrorism, to be honest, I'm not entirely confident in that area yet,"

Nitha replied firmly.

"And from your experience in your previous line of work?"

"From a protective services standpoint, the first thing I know is that this was an event that was extremely difficult to prevent,"

"Explain what you mean by 'difficult to prevent,"

Yaninn said, leaning back in her chair to listen attentively.

"It can be divided into two scenarios: the deaths of the intelligence officers and the rooftop sniper attack, " Nitha began.

"Let me share my assumptions."

Yaninn nodded slowly; adjusting her posture to focus.

"From the perspective of a former protective agent, I would classify the assassination of the intelligence head as the primary target, while the sniper attack served as a diversion." "You really do think like a bodyguard,"

Yaninn remarked knowingly. "1 used to be one,"

Nitha replied matter-of-factly.

"Maybe I still am,"

She added with a nonchalant expression, noticing the curious squint from her listener.

"Is that so?"

Yaninn responded before continuing,

"Why do you believe the intelligence head was the primary target?"

"Based on the three bullets that struck the upper left torso, all aimed to ensure a fatal hit. There are only a few critical areas on the human body where a shot is almost always lethal. The head is the most vulnerable and easiest to target, followed by the heart, and then major arteries, though those aren't typically aimed for "

Nitha explained, drawing from her experience in protective services.

"Professionals always aim for the head first. "

She paused, scanning the room thoughtfully before continuing,

"1n this case, I think the perpetrator was likely hidden among the panicked crowd, not in close proximity to the victim. The torso is a larger target, easier to hit, and doesn't require close range. Even though the gunshots might have gone unnoticed due to the chaos caused by the second diversionary event, they chose the heart as the next critical target."

Yaninn nodded slightly in agreement.

"Go on."

"Another assumption is that the perpetrator might not have been a professional. Otherwise, they would have aimed for the head when given the chance. However, I don't give much weight to this theory because, in a chaotic situation, it's challenging to execute such precision. But the perpetrator definitely intended to kill the intelligence chief, as evidenced by their deliberate aim at a critical area. They then escaped by blending into the crowd. Even WIth surveillance cameras, capturing clear footage would have been difficult."

"1 agree with your point that the perpetrator wanted to ensure the victim's death,

Yanina said, her tone aligned with Nitha's analysis. The former bodyguard nodded in return before continuing.

"Considering his position within the intelligence unit and the fact that he was assassinated by someone suspected to be part of an insurgent group, I've concluded that he was the primary target of this incident."

"Hmm "

The operations team leader murmured, flipping through the file.

"Now, let's move on to the next topic..."

She glanced down at the document in front of her.

"The location of the incident."

"There was one specific target chosen with clear intent, utilizing the chaos to their advantage. Meanwhile, the rooftop sniper attack, which served as a diversion, took place in an open area with no specific target. It was planned, with victims selected randomly,"

Nitha explained.

"Being at a high vantage point made it extremely difficult to counter because the perpetrator could see everything. "

She continued,

"Therefore, there was almost nothing we could have done to prevent this incident. In such a crowded area, it's nearly impossible to instruct everyone to remain calm and still. The police's decision to have people take cover inside buildings was the best immediate response at the time.

This time, Nitha noticed Yaninn pressing her lips together, her expression thoughtful.

'IAS someone who used to work in security, how would you have saved civilian lives during the second incident?"

The senior agent asked.

"We were trained to ensure our client's survival. No one else is more important than that,"

The former bodyguard replied firmly.

'Our duty begins and ends there. Bodyguards aren't trained to handle the responsibility ofprotecting large groups of people."

"And what do you think of how I handled this situation?"

For some reason, Nitha felt that Yaninn had been waiting to ask her this question from the start. Perhaps it stemmed from self-doubt or even the beliefthat her handling of the situation had been..

A failure.

Hearing the question, Nitha offered a faint smile, hoping to provide some encouragement before responding.

"Even though I don't fully understand the principles or protocols here yet, despite your insistence that I read up on them, I think you did the best you could,"

The new team member replied, gazing into Yaninn's eyes, which still seemed to carry a hint of sorrow.

Yaninn nodded before glancing down at the document in front of her, deep in thought about Nitha's words.

"It's clear that it wasn't as good as it should have been,"

The senior officer admitted after a moment, followed by a sigh. "Thirteen civilians died. That's the highest number I've ever been responsible for in my career.

"This isn't anyone's fault, especially not yours,"

Nitha interjected.

"From my perspective, I think we responded quickly. You made decisions in under ten minutes. Mod and Pong reached the building in less than ten minutes. The entire operation, from our arrival at the scene to neutralizing the last perpetrator, took thirty minutes. That's incredibly fast."

Yaninn raised an eyebrow at the statement.

"You timed it?"

"1 glanced at the clock periodically out ofhabit. Sometimes, if a client is missing for too long, it's a sign to check on them,"

Nitha explained.

"We can't save everyone, no matter how much we want to."

"1 understand," Yaninn replied evenly.

"But you don't accept it,"

Nitha countered knowingly, prompting a faint, melancholic smile from Yaninn.

"Over the years, I've found that accepting these truths isn't easy for me, Ms.

"1 know," Nitha replied.

"Haveyou ever had a client injured or killed?"

"lnjured, yes. But never killed,"

Nitha answered firmly.

"And if one day, you return to your old job and it happens, will you be able to accept it?"

The question made Nitha pause, meeting Yaninn's gaze thoughtfully.

"Since no one has died yet, what if it happens? How will you handle it?" "1 can't answer that because it hasn't happened yet."

"Exactly. But for me... it happened just a few days ago. The sniper attack that day resulted in the highest civilian casualties I've ever experienced in my career,"

Yaninn said coldly.

"1n this line of work... you may need to prepare yourself to face your own doubts, Ms. Way,"

She advised.

"The moments when we question our abilities are the most unsettling, even though we know the truth-that we can't save everyone."

This time, Nitha simply nodded in agreement before Yaninn continued. "Do you still want to stay on this team, knowing you have a leader like

The question made Nitha chuckle softly.

"1 don't have many options. If I leave, I might end up unemployed,"

She replied ambiguously.

"Let's just say, ifyou ever think I'm unfit for the job, write a report and have me removed. That would be easier for me to accept."

"Someone like you, unemployed? You must be joking, Ms. Way,"

Yaninn said knowingly.

"At my age and with my experience, no one would want to hire me back. They can't afford my salary,"

Nitha reasoned.

"There are plenty ofyounger, faster, and more energetic people out there." "True," Yaninn agreed.

"At your age, why did you transfer here? Someone like you would have been a team leader by now if you'd stayed."

Yaninn noticed Nitha rolling her eyes around the room, avoiding the question, which made her squint suspiciously. 'Maybe I just wanted a little more excitement in my life,"

Nitha finally replied, avoiding eye contact.

"Even ifmy back is starting to ache,"

She added with a sweet, teasing smile.

"I've talked to plenty of insurgents, Ms. Way," Yaninn said, her expression turning serious. 'Tm quite skilled at detecting lies if I want to."

"But I'm not an insurgent, Chief,"

Nitha countered.

"1 just wanted to try something different before I can't run anymore."

"Fair enough,"

Yaninn concluded knowingly.

"Just don't let me catch you."

"DO I look like someone who's lying?"

Nitha retorted playfully.

"lfyou ever catch me doing something wrong, feel free to shoot me. Don't hold back."

"Of course, I'd do it without hesitation, Ms. Nitha. I still haven't gotten over the fact that your shoe missed my chin by half an inch the other day.

"0h, that wasn't intentional! Besides, I almost finished cleaning the am-lory, ''

Nitha protested.

"How about I buy you coffee to make up for it? Would that work?"

"Fine," Yaninn agreed unexpectedly.

"This afternoon, I'm heading to the crime scene. You're coming with me."

"Understood, Chief."

A paper cup of hot cappuccino, courtesy of a kind gesture, rested in Yaninn's hand as she stood on the rooftop where six insurgents had carried out a sniper attack on civilians.

All six had been killed, but faint brownish bloodstains still marked the ground in scattered patches.

"1t's strange, isn't it?"

Yaninn said, turning to Nitha, who was sipping black coffee from her own paper cup. The former bodyguard was staring at the faded bloodstains on the ground.

"That people would risk their lives for something like a twisted ideology or extreme beliefs. "

"Not really," Nitha replied.

"Once you're indoctrinated, it's hard to think otherwise."

"You think so?"

"For someone like me, trained to take a bullet for someone else, it's not hard to understand. And don't forget, my old job wasn't about anything noble. It was just for the money,"

She said, shrugging as she met Yaninn's gaze over her coffee cup.

"It must have been a hefty amount of money for you to agree to it,"

Yaninn observed,

"Strange, I thought you were better than that."

She then scanned the area thoughtfully. Analyzing crime scenes was part of her job. Often, she could narrow down suspects or suspect groups by examining the nature of the crime or the location where it occurred.

Most acts ofunrest followed a predictable pattern. They were typically carried out by groups ofpeople who shared the same beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors, often resorting to violence to achieve their goals, which usually led to loss and destruction.

The majority of violent perpetrators were not mentally unstable.

Instead, their beliefs and thoughts often deviated from reality or societal norms.

Loss was a key part ofthe goals Of these groups. The greater the loss, the more they felt they had achieved their objectives.

These objectives often came in the form of demands. Therefore, groups causing unrest typically issued demands or statements after their actions.

However, there were times, like this one, when no statement or claim of responsibility was made by any group.

Even so, they considered it a success. At this moment, civilians were gripped by fear, and this fear would drive the achievement of their desired goals, possibly accompanied by the spread of fake news or manipulation.

"It's bold ofthem to come up here to a building with only one entrance and an external fire escape as the only way out. They must have been confident they could escape quickly or fight their way out,"

Yaninn remarked as she surveyed the area.

"But it's clear they were... very wrong."

"Chief, who do you think the perpetrators might be?"

"Anyone with some experience. They were confident but not skilled, especially when it came to escaping,"

The chief replied before walking to a corner ofthe rooftop used as a sniper's perch.

"The troublemakers are hiding just around the corner from our homes, aren't

"So close that it's almost unthinkable, Ms. Way,"

Yaninn said knowingly.

"Sometimes, it's people we see every day. Then, one day, they turn into insurgents. "

Nitha simply nodded, listening intently to those words. Yaninn didn't say anything further. She just looked up at the sky, now cloudless, as Nitha remembered seeing her do after the harrowing events of that day. The officer then let out a heavy sigh.

"Isn't this a bit over the top?"

The former bodyguard asked, trying to draw Yaninn's attention back.

"lfthis incident was just a distraction from the main target, there was no need to cause such chaos or risk six lives just to assassinate one person."

"What do you think?"

The operations team leader countered with a question of her own.

"Based on your experience,"

She added, raising an eyebrow and waiting for a response.

"1 don't know."

"That's an easy answer," Yaninn said sarcastically. 'Tm a shooter, not an analyst," The other woman retorted.

"Shoot first, ask questions later."

"Then you should start getting used to analysis and report writing from this moment on, Ms. Way. And get familiar with attending meetings too."

The sarcastic advice made Nitha hum in her throat, unable to hold back. Still, she felt it was a good sign, as it seemed her new boss, who had been tight-lipped, was starting to talk more, even if it was in a sarcastic tone.

It might help ease the tension between them.

Even though Nitha understood that Yaninn wasn't thrilled about her joining the team, as she had been recommended for the position, she was determined to do her best in this role, even if it was entirely unfamiliar to her.

"1've noticed you sneaking in naps during meetings quite often,"

Yaninn added, causing the accused to smile.

"1'm not very resistant to cold air conditioning,"

Nitha joked.

"1n that case, next time, I'll have you stand and speak. That way, you won't fall asleep."

"P1ease don't, Chief. I'm not good at public speaking."

"From what I've seen, that's not true,"

The officer said, giving her a sharp look.

"1'11 try not to fall asleep next time,"

Nitha promised with a toothy grin.

"1fI catch you sleeping again, I'll make you run laps around the field to wake up."

"0h, come on..."

The former bodyguard groaned.

"So, what's your answer to my earlier question? Don't try to dodge it. Remember, I still have to evaluate your theoretical performance. If you don't pass, don't expect to be out in the field, Jane vouched for you, saying you'd pass no matter what.

"Don't pressure me,"

The other woman said, frowning.

"Buying you coffee doesn't earn me any favor points?"

"Are you trying to bribe me, Ms. Way?"

"Not trying, Chief. I'm doing it,"

The former bodyguard replied with a straight face.

"Then write me a report on this,"

Yaninn said in a flat tone. "0n the favor points?"

"Ms. way."

"But I just submitted one to you,"

The other woman protested but fell silent when she saw her boss's stern expression.

"Focus on the topic you asked me earlier-besides distraction, what other outcomes could this sniper incident aim for?"

"Got it,"

The subordinate replied, dragging out the word.

"Submit it by tomorrow."

"Sure thing, Boss."

"Let's go. There's nothing more here,"

Yaninn said before heading toward the door.

"l've got some familiar tasks for you to handle this afternoon."

"Familiar tasks?"

"Yeah," the team leader confirmed.

"Driving. Thought you might miss your old job."

"Driving is my specialty,"

Nitha replied enthusiastically, Yaninn simply nodded in acknowledgment.

'Let's stop by the office to grab some things first,"

The operations team leader said before heading down from the rooftop toward the car.

# øøøøø

Operation 09

Aside from being recognized as the newest counter-terrorism officer in the center, Nitha now found herselftaking on the role of a driver-a task she was particularly skilled at, as someone else had once pointed out.

The reluctant driver sat behind the wheel of a black seven-seater SUV with heavily tinted windows, designed to obscure the view from outsiders. Beside her, in the passenger seat, sat her superior. The SUV led a convoy, maintaining a twenty-meter distance from a black armored van following behind.

Inside the van was Suchada, the director of the counter-terrorism center, accompanied by four special agents tasked with her protection.

The director had just returned from an international counter- terrorism conference abroad.

"Status report,"

Yaninn's voice came through the communication device clipped to her right ear, addressing the team in the vehicle behind them.

"All clear,"

Came the response from one of the agents in the second vehicle.

It was unusual for Yaninn to find herselfin a convoy protecting a highranking official. Such measures had never been necessary before. However, as she had recently explained to Nitha, new protocols had been implemented not long ago.

Over the past four or five years, there had been a noticeable increase in attacks targeting security center executives. This indicated a significant breach in national security, both through direct violence and indirect sabotage.

Wealthy groups with the means to hire insurgents had been causing chaos in targeted countries, including assassinations of individuals deemed obstacles. Naturally, high-ranking security officials were prime targets.

As a result, the center had revised its protocols, mandating protective measures during travel.

The convoy moved steadily along the road toward the office building. About two hundred meters ahead, a small intersection came into view. The route had been carefully chosen to avoid frequent stops, a key aspect of high- level security protocols.

Frequent stops or delays made vehicles easy targets, whereas moving targets were harder to hit.

Suddenly, the new operative acting as the driver brought the SUV to an abrupt halt, prompting the second vehicle to stop about thirty meters behind.

'Why did you stop the car?"

Yaninn demanded, her voice sharp with irritation as Nitha's sudden braking nearly sent her crashing into the dashboard, saved only by her seatbelt. She followed Nitha's gaze toward the small intersection ahead.

What caught her attention was a car accident blocking the intersection. The drivers involved were argumg in the middle ofthe road, causing a significant traffic jam. Looking behind, Yaninn noticed another vehicle parked in a way that blocked their retreat.

Yaninn observed Nitha scanning their surroundings through the front and side mirrors, her movements quick and deliberate.

"What's going on?"

Yaninn pressed, her tone growing more impatient.

"Get out of the car "

Nitha ordered abruptly, her voice firm.

"Now!

Bang!

Before Yaninn could respond, a bullet shattered the rear passenger window. She instinctively ducked, fumbling to unbuckle her seatbelt. Nitha, already moving, opened her door and used it as a shield against the incoming fire.

The special agent scrambled over to the driver's seat, noticing the windshield now bore a bullet hole. Without hesitation, Yaninn followed Nitha out of the vehicle, staying close behind.

Once outside, Yaninn saw their SUV riddled with bullet holes from what appeared to be heavy weaponry. Nitha had already crossed the street, taking cover behind a large green dumpster with a handgun in her grip.

She then moved to use the SUV as a shield, her eyes darting toward the arnnored van behind them, where agents were returning fire in all directions.

"Damn it!"

Yaninn cursed loudly, ducking as bullets whizzed past her head. She grabbed her communication device and called for backup.

"Black Panther One-Zero-One to base, Code A (assassination attempt). Requesting immediate reinforcements. Use alternate routes to avoid interception.

The question lingered in her mind: could the four agents hold their ground until reinforcements arrived?

"Black Panther One en route.„

Nitha peeked out to assess the situation. She saw Yaninn crouched beside the SUV for cover. Gunfire erupted around the armored van, accompanied by screams from bystanders scrambling to escape. Yaninn locked eyes with Nitha, signaling toward the director's vehicle, which was under heavy fire,

The sound of shattering glass reached Nitha's ears, signaling that the armored van's defenses were falling. She nodded grimly at Yaninn.

Yaninn raised two fingers, pointing toward a nearby building to indicate two snipers on the second floor of an old three-story commercial building. Nitha responded with a signal of four fingers, pointing to the ground behind Yaninn, indicating four more assailants.

Their eyes met, and they nodded in unison.

As the gunfire momentarily ceased, Nitha seized the opportunity to fire back at the attackers while sprinting toward the director's vehicle. Meanwhile, Yaninn dashed into the building to confront the snipers.

Thud!

A bullet struck Nitha's bulletproofvest near her abdomen, causing her to stumble and fall. Though the vest absorbed the impact, the force left her winded.

She gritted her teeth, rolled onto her stomach, and began crawling toward the armored van, ignoring the pain and the pounding of her heart.

Bullets zipped past her from all directions as she reached the open door Of the van. Inside, she found Suchada slumped unconscious against the seat, blood pooling from a wound on her torso. The absence Of an exit wound suggested the bullet was still lodged inside.

In her career, no client had ever died on her watch. She was determined not to let this be the first.

Nitha quickly checked Suchada's pulse. It was faint but present. She pulled the unconscious woman closer, crouching to shield her while assessing the situation.

"Cover me! On three "

She shouted to the nearby agents.

"0ne... two..."

She took a deep breath.

"Three! "

With all her strength, Nitha hoisted Suchada onto her shoulder and sprinted toward the green dumpster across the street. The gunfire had lessened, likely because Yaninn had neutralized the snipers. Once behind cover, Nitha gently laid Suchada down and checked her pulse again.

Yaninn rejoined her moments later.

"How is she?"

"One bullet under her ribcage, no exit wound. Pulse is weak, and she's lost a lot of blood. We need to get her to a hospital immediately,"

Nitha replied, using her jacket to apply pressure to the wound while scanning the area for threats.

"1've called for reinforcements and an ambulance,"

Yaninn said, her voice trembling slightly.

"Don't let her die."

"NO one dies on my watch,"

Nitha said firmly, locking eyes with Yaninn.

"Clear the area so the ambulance can get through. I'll handle things here." Yaninn nodded and ran offto secure the route. Nitha focused on stabilizing Suchada, her hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her vems.

Within five minutes, reinforcements and an ambulance arrived. A large male agent took over, carrying Suchada to the ambulance while Nitha provided cover. The gunfire ceased shortly after, and police arrived within twenty minutes.

Suchada was rushed to the hospital in time. Despite significant blood loss, the doctors successfully removed the bullet and saved her life.

"1 can't figure out who's behind this,"

Yaninn said, standing beside Nitha, who was staring through a large glass window at the unconscious director in the hospital room.

"How is she?"

"Out of danger,"

Nitha replied calmly. Yaninn leaned against the white wall beneath the window, turning to look at her colleague.

"1 never thought what you said would happen so quickly. "

"What i said?"

Nitha repeated, her tone curious.

"Which part? I say a lot ofthings

Her words made the female officer glance at her with an expression that was hard to read.

"The part where you said your abilities might be able to help me."

"Believe me, I didn't want it to come true,"

Nitha replied, offering a faint smile to encourage the visibly worried team leader.

"Thank you,"

Yaninn said curtly after a brief pause, locking eyes with Nitha. "1fit weren't for you, things could've been much worse for her."

The former bodyguard simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"How well do you know the Director?"

Nitha asked, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Let's just say, in this center, she's the person I trust the most. The fact that I became a senior agent beföre turning forty is largely thanks to her support." 'ISO that's why you couldn't refuse to let me join the team,"

Nitha said knowingly, turning her gaze toward the injured person lying on the hospital bed in a secure, undisclosed location.

"1 did refuse,"

The officer admitted bluntly.

"But now, looking back, I feel like I shouldn't have."

She added, "Let's grab some coffee. My treat. The security team has taken over here, so we're off duty for now."

Nitha nodded and followed her out.

"Earlier... did you say you refused to let me join the team?"

Nitha asked again after taking a sip of the hot black coffee, which her companion had kindly offered to pay for.

"1 did,"

The officer admitted in her deep voice, taking a slow sip of her coffee with a thoughtful expression.

"Even though I knew I couldn't refuse, I still tried."

"You're the type who believes in trying things out to see what happens, aren't you, Chie??"

Nitha joked lightly. Yaninn looked at her with her usual stoic expression, the kind that made her seem like a tough nut to crack.

"1'm not a fan of nepotism,"

She said, finally revealing her true reason.

"Especially for a critical position like a member of the main operations team. For me, it's too risky to bring in someone without Counter-Terrorism expenence or tactical training. I couldn't take that risk."

"1 understand,"

Nitha said, her words making Yaninn furrow her brows slightly. "1n situations like that, there's a lot of risk you have to manage.

"Something like that "

The team leader replied, her voice subdued. She absentmindedly spun the paper coffee cup on the table.

"But today's events showed me that my decision-making and risk management weren't as good as I thought."

"The Director is safe now,"

Nitha said softly, offering reassurance.

"This isn't anyone's fault."

"1n all my time working here, this is the first assassination attempt on a high-ranking executive of the center, " Yaninn said thoughtfully. "1t was bold and completely fearless."

"How unusual is that?"

The former bodyguard asked, probing further.

"An assassination attempt on a high-ranking executive of a security center is highly unusual and unprecedented,"

Yaninn replied, her face tense.

"Normally, no one would have access to their travel schedule. But this time..."

She paused, meeting Nitha's gaze. "Things are bound to get worse,"

"What do you mean, Chief?"

"Do you know how to bring down an organization?"

Yaninn countered with a question of her own.

"lfyou take out the head, the rest will flail around aimlessly."

This time, Nitha nodded in understanding.

"What do we do next?"

""There will likely be another meeting with the senior executives. This time, it's going to be a big deal,"

Yaninn answered.

"We'll know what to do after that. In the meantime, just carry on with your usual duties unless there's a change in orders. "

"Understood. "

"Letts go. We need to get backto the unit. I have to discuss this with the team and then return to the scene to coordinate with the police.

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Operation 10

Nitha's voice rang out, calling for the young woman who had been part of the operations team and had known her for over a decade.

"Do you have any pain relief cream I can borrow?"

That made Yaninn, who was about to head to her office, pause mid-step and turn to look. The call prompted Jane to rush over.

"What's wrong, Way?"

"Got hit straight in the stomach by a bullet. Feels like a punch."

"Didn't you just get back from the hospital? Why didn't you let the doctor check it out?"

"Stop nagging,

Nitha replied with a grimace. "So, do you have it or not?" "1 do. Let me grab it for you."

"Thanks a lot."

"Way,"

Yaninn called out as she saw Jane walk away.

"Come to my office for a moment."

Nitha nodded and quickly followed the team leader.

"What's up, boss?"

"Lift your shirt and let me see."

"What?" Nitha repeated, confused.

"You heard me. I want to see where you got shot."

Yaninn noticed Nitha looking around the room, avoiding her gaze. A faint blush began to creep onto her face.

"1t's not that bad. Just applying some cream should do the trick." But when she turned and saw Yaninn's stern glare, she froze.

"Or should I send you back to the doctor?"

Yaninn said, almost as a threat, as she moved toward the first-aid cabinet mounted on the wall next to the file shelves.

"No... no, that's not necessary,"

Nitha quickly protested. She knew that if she ended up back at the hospital, it would mean a long process of evaluations and paperwork before she could return to work-souwething she found particularly tedious.

She hurriedly untucked her black field shirt and lifted it, revealing a red, swollen mark on the lower left side Of her abdomen.

Yaninn leaned in to examine it, opening a tube Of bruise ointment and dabbing some onto her fingertip.

"Why didn't you mention this at the hospital earlier? Does it hurt a lot?" Yaninn asked with concern. "Maybe you should get it checked out."

"Just a little, but it's fine Nitha quickly replied.

"Take a seat,"

Yaninn instructed, gesturing toward the sofa. This time, Nitha complied without a word, though her eyes stayed fixed on Yaninn almost the entire time. Yaninn had always seemed so rigid to her-whether it was her expression, her words, or her demeanor.

Every time Yaninn appeared, Nitha could sense the tension in her voice. Her team leader's face was often slightly raised, her lips forming a straight line that rarely betrayed any emotion.

But now, Yaninn seemed noticeably more relaxed.

As a former bodyguard, Nitha understood the risks and responsibilities that came with Yaninn's senior position.

Strict adherence to rules and protocols was paramount to minimizing errors. In this line ofwork, mistakes were simply not an option.

Counter-terrorism work involved the lives of innocent civilians-too heavy a burden for any one person to bear.

Especially for a woman in her mid-thirties.

"This afternoon, I'm giving you permission to rest. Try applying a cold compress and take some painkillers,"

Yaninn said curtly as she gently applied the ointment around the bruise.

"lfit gets worse, go see a doctor."

Nitha sat stiffly the entire time, feeling her heart race and her face flush with heat.

"Ouch!"

She exclaimed when Yaninn pressed a bit harder than before.

"Am I being too rough?"

"N-no,"

Nitha stammered, shaking her head quickly. When Yaulan stepped back, she immediately pulled her shirt down and stood up.

"Thank you, boss,"

She said before quickly walking out.

The new member ofthe operations team headed to the locker room to change and store her belongings. Finding it empty, she leaned against her locker and took a deep breath.

For someone so stern, when she was kind, it was almost overwhelming...

Nitha touched the spot where Yaninn had just applied the ointment, a small smile forming on her lips for no apparent reason.

"How are you feeling, Way?"

Nitha turned at the sound Of a voice behind her as she walked down the hallway toward the team's common room. She saw Yaninn, who looked groggy, likely from lack of sleep. Nitha guessed it was due to the recent assassination attempt on the agency's director.

The senior officer must have been under immense stress. After all, such attacks on high-ranking officials by heavily armed groups in urban areas were rare. For the director of her own agency to be targeted made it feel all the more personal.

Or maybe the director had stepped on the wrong toes...

That was anyone's guess.

"Good afternoon, boss,"

Nitha said, stopping to let Yaninn catch up.

"1'm fine now, thank you."

Yaninn handed her a blue folder, prompting Nitha to glance at it curiously before opening it to the first page.

Counter-Terrorism Center: Field Operations Manual

'Read it and familiarize yourself with it,"

Yaninn ordered in her usual curt tone.

"I'll be evaluating you on this during field operations."

"Understood,"

Nitha replied with a smile before continuing toward the common room as she had originally intended.

"How many years were you a bodyguard?"

"Almost ten years,"

Nitha answered confidently.

"Why did you suddenly request a transfer here?"

Nitha noticed that Yaninn seemed determined to ask this question whenever she had the chance, and it always amused her.

Even though she had been personally recommended by the highest-ranking official Yaninn trusted, the team leader's suspicion never wavered..

Nitha hesitated, pretending to think

"1 guess I wanted a new challenge in life„ maybe."

She chuckled softly.

"You're a terrible liar, Way."

"Am I really that unconvincing, boss?"

Nitha joked, laughing.

"That's unfortunate."

But when Yaninn shot her a sharp look, she quickly fell silent.

"0h, Way!"

Jane called out as she approached the common room. "1 told you I'd pick you up, but you wouldn't let me."

"I'm fine. I can still drive. Thanks, Jane."

Jane nodded, suppressing a laugh at Nitha's playful remark, but quickly pressed her lips together when she saw Yaninn's expression.

"You came out early to pick me up. Don't let your boyfriend get upset, or you'll be in trouble."

"Oh, you have a boyfriend, Jane?"

Yaninn interjected.

"Since when? I didn't know."

Jane replied, her tone slightly bitter.

"We've been together for six years, but I'm not sure we'll make it to the seventh. The seven-year itch is real."

"Why's that, sis?"

Nitha asked playfully.

"Let me answer like a celebrity,"

Jane joked, though her face showed no amusement.

"lt's... reached a point where it feels like we can't go on anymore."

"So, who in our team is still single?"

Yaninn asked, genuinely curious. Jane looked at her in disbelief, as it was well-known that their strict boss rarely delved into personal matters.

"Well... ifwe don't count you, everyone else is taken,"

Jane replied.

"Is that so?"

Yaninn mused, prompting Jane to burst out laughing. Nitha simply offered a faint smile.

"And Way, too," Jane added.

"I don't count,"

Nitha quickly retorted.

"1'm fine staying fabulous on my own."

She playfully flipped her hair back

"Nope,"

Jane said firmly as she waited for Nitha to open the door to the common

"1'11 find you a gorgeous girl"

"Ahem,"

Nitha cleared her throat immediately. "Not here, Jane. It's inappropriate."

"Oops, sorry,"

Jane said with an awkward smile before grabbing three bottles of water from the fridge for herself, Yaninn, and Nitha.

"Boss, would you like some coffee?"

"Sure, thanks,"

Yaninn replied, glancing at Nitha, who was sitting nearby, skimming through the folder she had been given. "Way, would you like some, too?"

"lfyou're feeling generous, then yes,"

Nitha said, flashing a sweet smile.

"Don't try to charm me. I'm not falling for you,"

Jane teased.

"1 didn't dig a hole for you to fall into because I know you wouldn't,"

Nitha replied, making Jane laugh out loud. Yaninn, meanwhile, observed their camaraderie with a peculiar feeling. As a straightforward leader, she wasn't particularly close to her subordinates, but she trusted them completely as their team leader.

Soon, two cups of hot black coffee were placed on the table.

"It's rare for you to sit down and have coffee with us, boss,"

Jane remarked.

"I don't have morning management meetings right now because the director isn't around, "

Yanlnn explained.

"The rest ofthe team doesn't seem thrilled about me attending anyway, as you know."

Jane nodded in agreement, while Nitha pretended to read the manual, her ears tuned in to the conversation.

"How's the director doing, Yaninn?"

"0ut of danger and stable,"

Yaninn replied.

"1'm working on transferring him to another facility to prevent further attacks. "

"Do we know who's behind it?"

Jane asked.

"lntel says they're investigating,"

Yaninn replied.

"I've sent the IT team to review surveillance footage on-site. We should have something in the next couple of days."

She then turned to Nitha, who was quietly reading the manual.

"1t's quite bold, isn't it?"

Jane commented.

"An assassination attempt on the director of a security agency. "

"Do you know what that means?"

Yaninn asked. Jane, sipping her coffee, shook her head.

"1t's a declaration ofwar,"

Yaninn said in a low, serious tone.

"To destabilize the state, the security agency, and with a very specific target in mind."

She sipped her coffee thoughtfülly, her brows furrowed.

"We're in for a tough fight."

"Could it be more symbolic than an actual attempt to achieve something,

Jane asked.

"Both, but I lean toward it being goal-oriented,"

Yaninn explained.

"Judging by the concentrated fire on Director Suchada's car alone-our car was hit less than ten times and the use of seven armed individuals with military-grade weapons, they clearly intended to leave no survivors. Often, such attacks are meant to intimidate, but I don't think that's the case here Director Suchada was incredibly lucky to survive."

"Do you think they'll come back to finish the job?"

Nitha speculated.

"Based on the current trends, that seems to be the case. That's why I've arranged for the transtér to another hospital as soon as it's safe to move the patient, "

The senior officer of the unit explained.

"This isn't some kind ofconflict of interest or sabotage, is it?"

Nitha asked, her tone cautious.

"It's unlikely. I've been overseeing this place for a long time, and nothing like this has ever happened before. But I'm not ruling it out entirely," Yaninn replied in a deep voice.

"Things have been unusual lately. Since you're new here, you'll need to adapt quickly,"

She advised.

"Don't say anything unnecessary. Eyes and ears are everywhere. Even I've stepped on a few toes, especially during the recent personnel reshuffling. That included our team and myself. It's possible I'm being watched too." Nitha nodded in understanding.

"lfyou have any questions, ask Jane or the team. Or you can come directly to me,"

Yaninn instructed the newcomer firmly.

"Yes, ma'am,"

Nitha replied calmly.

"1f you'll excuse me, I'll get back to cleaning my gun."

"Wait... You're conung with me to the field first, Today, I'm checking out the head of the intelligence unit's office "

Yaninn said, stopping her.

"Do we even have the authority for that, Yaninn?"

Jane interjected with a skeptical tone.

"1fl decide to make it happen... then we do,"

Yaninn replied, her tone a mix of confidence and caution.

"Chief,"

Nitha muttered, exchanging an uncertain glance with her close junior colleague.

"Don't worry. If anything happens, I'll take responsibility,"

Yaninn reassured her.

"1fwe just sit around waiting for the intelligence unit and forensics to send us something, it'll be too late."

With that, she stood up.

"Let's go, Ms. Way."

Then she turned to Jane.

"1f anything comes up here. give me a call."

# øøøøø

Operation 11

"How well do you know the Director?"

Yaninn asked as the two ofthem walked down the ninth-floor hallway of the apartment building, which housed intelligence offlcers. It was also the residence of one of the victims of the recent shooting incident.

"1s there something on your mind, chief? Why are you asking this?"

"I've been curious since the first day Suchada practically forced me to have you and even placed you on the main team. It was obvious there had to be something behind it,"

Yaninn replied bluntly.

"1 didn't want to keep wondering, so I decided to ask directly."

She glanced over and noticed a faint smile forming on the lips ofthe person she was questioning.

"But I already know you probably won't give me a straight answer." "Ifyou're saying that, it means you already have an answer in mind,"

Nitha responded, almost as if challenging her.

"Even ifl told you the truth, you wouldn't believe me anyway, would you?"

"You always know how to get under my skin, don't you, Ms. Way?"

"Good," Nitha replied with a smirk.

"That way, you'll show some emotion for once."

She noticed Yaninn exhale deeply.

"So, are you going to answer or not?"

Yaninn asked curtly.

"The Director? Why would you think I'm close to Director Suchada?"

"Because she recommended you, even though she knows I don't take referrals."

"1fI don't answer, you'll just keep wondering, right? And maybe even lose sleep over it, thinking about me... or rather, thinking about this?"

Yaninn shot her a sharp glare at the teasing remark, wiping the mischievous grin off Nitha's face in an instant.

"But even ifl told you, you wouldn't believe me anyway. "

"Because you're a liar,"

Yaninn retorted immediately, prompting a burst of laughter from Nitha.

"Do I look like a liar to you? I'm the most honest person you'll ever meet," The former bodyguard defended herself.

"lfyou're being honest, then why do you think I wouldn't believe you?"

"Because that's not how someone like you operates," Nitha replied, causing Yaninn to glance at her. "Then please, enlighten me. \Vhat kind Of person am l?"

Yaninn asked, her tone tinged with irritation.

'IAS someone who evaluates situations, you usually observe, analyze, and then predict outcomes. Most of the time, you already have an answer in mind. You don't ask questions, you wait patiently for the answer to come to you. Am I right? I'm an evaluator, too,"

Nitha explained.

"But I'm not as patient as you. I shoot first and ask questions later."

"Some situations require timing. A wrong decision can ruin everything."

"1 understand,"

Nitha acknowledged as they walked side by side.

"Like during the ambush the other day. You waited for Pong's gunfire even though you couldn't see what was happening because there were no surveillance cameras, and the satellite feed was delayed. All you had were radio reports. It was like waiting for light in the darkness. If it were me, I would've ordered Tum to move in immediately."

"1fPong hadn't called off the mission and I had sent Tum in, it would've shown that I didn't trust Pong,"

Yaninn explained.

"That would've shaken his confidence in his own abilities. I had to wait for him to make the decision to abort the mission himself. It showed him that I trusted his skills, and in return, he would trust me. As a team leader, that's all I need."

Yaninn noticed a brief glimmer in Nitha's eyes as she listened to the reasoning.

"Everything has its timing and process. Even though the mission is the top priority, I have to consider my team as well. That's why I ordered you to stay put and observe that day."

Yaninn stopped in front of room 201, the last room at the end of the hallway. Yellow police tape marked the door, warning against entry.

"This is the room."

As she finished speaking, Nitha noticed Yaninn reach into her coat pocket and pull something out.

"Put on gloves,"

Yaninn instructed.

'twe need to make it look like we were never here,"

Using a spare key left with the building management, which they had borrowed with cooperation, Yaninn unlocked the door and slowly pushed it open. She ducked under the yellow tape and entered, followed closely by Nitha Yaninn then quietly shut the door behind them, ensuring no one would know they had entered the now-vacant room.

Technically, their visit here was beyond the scope of their duties. Even though it was the residence of a victim from the case Yaninn was handling, there had been no orders from higher-ups. This action was entirely unofficial and, to put it bluntly, secretive.

Normally, Yaninn and her team weren't tasked with investigating or gathering additional information unless requested by the police or ordered by superiors. Given the current situation, Yaninn doubted anyone would comply with her wishes.

In truth, the risk ofbeing suspended for being here was driven purely by curiosity.

The two entered the room silently. Yaninn didn't expect to find much, as the forensic team had likely collected all the evidence. However, she hoped to analyze what remained to uncover clues about why the victim had been targeted, especially since the perpetrator had gone to such lengths to stage the incident.

This suggested the victim might have known something significant.

Yaninn scanned the small apartment, which was suitable for no more than two occupants. The bed was separated from the main area by a sliding glass partition, just large enough to fit a queen-sized bed.

It was a practical setup for a single man without a family. Nitha stood nearby, still unsure why they were there

"There's nothing here, Chief,"

Nitha remarked. "1 didn't expect much,"

Yaninn admitted.

"The police probably took all the key evidence. I just wanted to make sure they didn't miss anything."

Despite her words, Yaninn continued to walk around as if searching for something.

"\Vhat exactly are you looking for?"

"1 don't know,"

Yaninn replied simply, causing Nitha to glance at her. "1 don't know what I'm supposed to find."

"You have a hidden sense of humor, don't you, Chief?"

"I'm not joking. When I say I don't know, I mean it,"

Yaninn said defensively, shooting a sharp look at Nitha before heading to the desk where a computer had once been. The forensic team had already removed it. She opened the drawers carelessly, not expecting to find anything, and skimmed through the documents inside.

As expected, there was nothing noteworthy. It wasn't surprising, as intelligence officers were typically meticulous about securing sensitive information.

"Ifwe're stuck here, what's the next step, boss?"

"1 don't know yet," Yaninn replied.

"Maybe... we just haven't found the evidence we're looking for."

"That's what I mean by stuck,"

Nitha said in a resigned tone.

"The rooftop shooters are all dead. The sniper who targeted the department head is still at large. There's no concrete evidence. Even though there were plenty of witnesses, their testimonies were all over the place. The surveillance footage isn't helpful,l either. And now, this place seems to hold nothing."

"1 just wanted to confirm that there's nothing here,"

Yaninn said flatly.

"So we can figure out our next move."

"What's the next move?"

"Like you said, we can't rely on evidence, the perpetrators, or surveillance footage. So, I'm looking for another angle."

"Like what we're doing now? Investigating the victim?"

'You catch on quickly,"

Yaninn said, unexpectedly complimenting her.

"Analyzing the victim is crucial. That's why criminology has an entire field dedicated to victimology-it's not just for fun."

"From your experience as a bodyguard, what are the usual motives behind assassinations?"

"That's a broad question, Chief. I wouldn't finish talking about it in a day."

"Then write me a report."

"1 can just tell you. I don't mind talking all day."

"1 believe that,"

Yaninn replied sarcastically.

"1 want you to analyze what we can learn from the victim. Maybe your experience in VIP protection will come in handy."

"Statistically, most assassinations are driven by conflicts of interest,"

Nitha began, gesturing as she spoke.

"And who's usually the first suspect in an assassination?

"Someone who had a conflict with the victim within the past sixty days,"

Nitha answered promptly.

"The first fifteen days are the most intense drive."

"1 like that term-intense drive,"

Yaninn said, nodding.

"Elaborate.

"An intense drive is like a sudden emotional surge that makes someone pick up the phone and order a hit or pull the trigger themselves, like ordering food when you're starving. It could stem from anger, rage, or revenge. It's a fleeting moment, lasting no more than an hour, but it can be triggered repeatedly, especially if there's an underlying issue. In such cases, the drive is more easily provoked."

"What about the sniper targeting the intelligence department head?"

"1 believe it wasn't about an emotional drive but rather a calculated objective."

"And we're trying to figure out what that objective is," Yaninn added.

"But it seems this place won't provide the answer."

She glanced around the room one last time.

"Let's go. I don't think we'll find anything here. The police have taken everything, even the shredded documents. "

She nodded toward the shredder next to the desk.

Nitha nodded and led the way out, opening the door and ducking under the yellow tape as they had done earlier. She heard footsteps about thirty feet away and peeked out to locate the source.

Her eyes landed on a stocky man wearing a plaid shirt, faded jeans, black sneakers, sunglasses, and a hat. He stopped in his tracks as soon as she emerged. Yaninn, following close behind, halted when Nitha extended her arm to block her path.

Sensing something was off, Nitha instinctively reached for the gun at her side. The man immediately turned and walked away. Yaninn, noticing this, slipped her hand into her coat to retrieve her own weapon.

Nitha shouted, causing the man to break into a run.

'Meet me at the car, Chiefl"

She yelled before sprinting after him, her gun now drawn.

Nitha chased him down the stairs and out to the street near an intersection.

"Gun! Get down!"

She shouted, warning bystanders to take cover. She stopped running and raised her weapon, knowing she couldn't catch him on foot. However, she didn't fire, as the distance was too great and the area was crowded with civilians.

"Damn it!"

"What happened, Ms. Way?"

Yaninn asked, having ignored Nitha's earlier instruction to wait at the car. Instead, she had followed closely behind and now stopped as well, watching the man disappear into the distance.

"I couldn't keep up,"

The former female bodyguard said as she holstered her gun by her side.

"1 didn't dare to shoot because I wasn't sure if he was armed. Ifhe fired back, I was afraid innocent bystanders might get caught in the crossfire. "

"Can you recall what he looked like?"

Yaninn asked, her voice sharp as she glanced around nervously, scanning the area in case the man decided to return.

"Male, slightly taller than me. From what I could see, he was wearing dark sunglasses to obscure his face. I'd guess he's probably in his late thirties to early forties,"

The woman replied, straightening up as she took a deep breath to steady herself.

"Are you okay?"

Yaninn asked with concern.

"Just give me a moment to catch my breath,"

She responded.

"Alright, let's head back to the office for now. We'll deal with everything else later."

# øøøøø

Sunyan daphne.shn@gmail.com

Operation 12

"I'm pretty sure this is an operation,"

Yaninn said as she dropped into her office chair. She had just returned from the offlce of the National Intelligence Division chief, who had been fatally shot, and after encountering a group of men who clearly had a specific purpose for being there.

She and Nitha still needed to discuss the events that had unfolded. Over time, Yaninn had come to realize that the skills and experience of this former bodyguard could be quite useful to her perhaps even more than she had initially anticipated.

Yaninn also noticed that she often sought Nitha's opinion. Moreover, Nitha frequently asked questions that made her rethink certain things. At this point, Yaninn couldn't help but acknowledge that Suchada had made a wise choice in bringing this woman onto the team to fill the position left vacant for over two years by Dol.

A second paper coffee cup was placed on the desk as Yaninn leaned back in her chair, visibly exhausted. The period following the assassination of the agency's director had been particularly grueling for this senior officer.

Between her workload and the battles with upper management to secure a special task force for what she assessed as a significant future threat, it had been a tough time.

However, upper management didn't share her perspective.

The rooftop sniper attack in the heart of the city, carried out by a group of well-armed and skilled individuals, was deemed by the board as something that could wait and wasn't particularly unusual.

It was unclear how many more civilian casualties or injuries would be needed before this became an urgent matter.

"Why do you think that, Chief?"

Nitha asked, setting her coffee cup down as well. Her eyes locked onto Yaninn, waiting for an answer.

"Honestly, it was clear from the sniper attack,"

Yaninn replied.

"But seeing the cleanup crew we encountered only confirmed it for me."

"Cleanup crew? What do you mean?"

The former bodyguard pressed on.

"The media has already reported the death with insider details, despite efforts to suppress the news to avoid compromising the case and public confidence, Ifthe case is already blown wide open, what's left to clean up?"

"You'll get used to the media,"

Yaninn said with a hint of sarcasm, though her face remained devoid of any smile.

"We live in an era where ratings matter more than ethics, and they don't think about the broader impact Of their reporting. It makes our job harder.

"1 know. My former boss sued the media all the time," Nitha said.

"So, why do you think that man was there to clean up?"

"lfthe sole objective was to eliminate the division chief, the mission would've ended with his death. But this doesn't seem to be the case. They're likely searching for or dealing with something else,"

Yaninn explained.

"And we need to figure out what they're looking for."

"Exactly."

"But how do we figure out what we're looking for when we don't even know what it is?"

Nitha asked, noticing Yaninn furrow her brow at the question. "1'm not trying to be difficult; I'm genuinely asking,"

She quickly added when she saw Yaninn's expression tighten.

"1 don't know yet," Yaninn said curtly "You always say you don't know."

"1fI don't know, I say I don't know."

'No, Chief. When you say you don't know, it always means something,"

Nitha said knowingly.

"Sometimes you know, but just don't say,"

"Go write a report on the principles of identifying insurgent operations,"

Yaninn suddenly ordered, pretending to read a file on her desk.

"Chief..."

Nitha dragged out the word.

just made a small comment. Why do I have to write a report?"

"Because you talk too much, Ms. Way,"

Yaninn replied

"Submit it tomorrow. The score will count toward your theoretical assessment." "But I bought you coffee,"

Nitha protested.

"Two cups of coffee don't count as extra credit."

"Then what does count?"

Nitha asked, exasperated.

"How about I treat you to dinner?"

'Ms. way."

"0r I could drive you around. I'm good at that,"

Nitha offered, trying to negotiate.

"Just no reports, please," she pleaded.

"1 still need to assess your theoretical knowledge. If you don't pass, you won't be allowed in the field. And every time, you analyze well and learn quickly. Why the hesitation?"

Yaninn's compliment brought a small smile to Nitha's face.

"Fine, I've changed my mind. No report. Just come talk to me about it tomorrow."

"That's hardly different. I'll still have to read up to prepare,"

Nitha pointed out.

"1've narrowed the topic down significantly. Ten minutes of reading, and you'll have it,"

Yaninn said.

"Or you can do both the report and the oral discussion. Your choice."

"I'll talk. I'll talk,"

Nitha quickly agreed.

"No report. It's a waste of paper. I'm environmentally conscious.

"Then get to it,"

Yaninn said, her tone almost encouraging.

"So, no dinner treat?"

Nitha asked teasingly.

"1t's not about extra credit. I just want to thank you for mentoring me."

Iler words made Yaninn look up from her documents and meet her gaze.

"If you want to thank me, just do your job well. And if I tell you to go left, go left. Don't go right. If I say stay still, stay still. No hesitation."

"I'll... try... I guess,"

Nitha replied with a sheepish smile.

"1 thought bodyguard work required strict protocols. "

"It does."

"But you don't follow them," Yaninn said knowingly.

"Got it."

"1 do what I think is safest for the client. From experience, the best course of action isn't always in the protocol,"

Nitha explained, prompting Yaninn to narrow her eyes thoughtfully.

"Alright. Let's see how your assessment scores turn out,"

Yaninn said simply before returning to her documents.

'Go read up, and we'll talk tomorrow."

"Understood. "

That evening, Nitha, who had been engrossed in reading for her analysis assignment, left the shared quarters about an hour and a half after work hours.

As she headed toward the elevator to the parking lot, she noticed a familiar figure and the sound of footsteps in the hallway leading to the stairs.

She immediately recognized who it was.

Curious, the former bodyguard hid in a corner to observe. She saw Yaninn walking down the dimly lit hallway, glancing left and right beföre quietly ascending the stairs.

What's the Chief still doing here this late?

Her curiosity got the better of her, and she followed as quietly as she could.

When she reached the seventh floor, the hallway grew darker. She heard faint footsteps heading toward the farthest room-the director's office, which was supposed to be off-limits as the director was still recovering in a hospital under strict confidentiality.

Nitha didn't follow Yaninn into the room. Instead, she stayed hidden at the stairwell corner, peeking out cautiously. The dim lighting made it hard to see, but she heard the sound ofbuttons being pressed before the door opened.

What is Yaninn doing in the director's office? And how does she know the access code?

The questions swirled in her mind as she checked her watch, which read nearly 7 PM.

Inside the director's office, Yaninn walked straight to the desk, searching for something. Spotting it on a shelf, she quickly grabbed it-a 14- inch portable work laptop that belonged to Suchada and was always kept there. With the item in hand, she left the room in a hurry.

Yaninn spent no more than five minutes inside, prompting Nitha to move when she heard the door close. She quickly descended the stairs.

At the parking lot, Nitha pretended to check her phone near the entrance, waiting for Yaninn to appear. As expected, within a few minutes, Yaninn walked out.

"Chief, you haven't left yet?"

"I'm standing right here, aren't I?"

Yaninn replied, her tone slightly irritable.

"What about you? Why are you still here?"

"1 was waiting to see if you'd let me treat you to dinner,"

Nitha said, causing Yaninn to raise an eyebrow.

"No extra credit,"

Yaninn quickly clarified, noticing Nitha's teasing expression.

"I wasn't asking for any."

"Then why the sudden urge to treat me to dinner?"

"Can't I just want to treat you?"

Nitha replied though she wasn't entirely sure ofher own reasons. Maybe it was about earning a favor, but not for any assessment. Perhaps it was simply because she wanted to.

Or maybe she wanted to get to know her boss better. Though, upon reflection, it wasn't necessary. Still, Nitha felt there was something intriguing -perhaps even captivating about Yaninn.

Beneath her stoic exterior and emotionless demeanor, there seemed to be layers of complexity that Nitha found fascinating.

'"Even if I let you treat me, you'd still have to discuss your analysis with me tomorrow,"

Yaninn pointed out.

"Don't you know I love talking to you, Chief?"

Nitha said playfully, causing Yaninn to pause and raise an eyebrow in thought.

"You love talking to me?" "You heard me right,"

Nitha confirmed.

"Even though, with all due respect, talking to you sometimes feels like talking to a wall, I still enjoy listening to you."

"Where's the respect in that statement?"

"Everywhere, Chief," Nitha assured her. "1 mean it."

"That's... surprising,"

Yaninn admitted.

"1n all my years, I've never had a subordinate talk to me like this."

"The others wouldn't dare. They're too polite."

"0h, so you're impolite, which is why you're so bold?"

"Don't call it impolite, Boss,"

Nitha countered.

"Call it honesty."

"Fine. I'll remember that. But be careful-I might be honest with you, too."

"1'm counting the days,"

Nitha said with a wide grin, unfazed by Yaninn's sarcasm.

"So, dinner? Yes or no?"

"11mm..." Yaninn hesitated.

"1t's just dinner, Chief. It won't tarnish your reputation, and I promise it's not about extra credit.

"1 wasn't planning on giving extra credit anyway,

Yaninn said.

"But thank you for the gesture. Go home and rest, Ms. Way. See you tomorrow."

Nitha watched as Yaninn walked to her car and drove off, leaving her standing there, deep in thought.

You are so strict, boss.

# øøøøø

Operation 13

"Big.."

A voice called out as the young programmer was making his way to the small office at the back of the main building where he worked. He turned toward the familiar voice before responding.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Do you have any urgent tasks this morning?"

"lfyou need anything, just let me know. I can handle it right away,"

Ile replied, noticing Yaninn glancing around.

"Let's talk in the office."

Big nodded and walked straight to the small room, swiping his ID card to unlock the door. The office wasn't spacious, with a desk positioned at the far end facing the door. Behind the chair was a cabinet and some drawers.

Yaninn pulled out a laptop she had... discreetly... borrowed from the director's office and held it in her hands.

"Handle this for me,"

She said, half-commanding, causing the young officer to furrow his brow slightly before taking the laptop and placing it on the desk. He then sat down, lifted the screen, and pressed the power button.

Soon, the screen displayed the agency's emblem as the background, along with a login prompt. Big's face turned slightly pale when he saw the username displayed

"Boss," he called out.

"Are you serious?" he asked hesitantly.

"Absolutely," Yaninn replied calmly.

"If anything happens, I'll take responsibility, "

She reassured him. He nodded before typing on the keyboard.

"Will it take long? If it does, I'll come back later."

"Not long,"

He replied without looking up, rummaging through his backpack for a moment before pulling something out.

It was a small USB drive.

"This is illegal, you know, Boss."

"1t's not as bad as using military satellites without permission,"

Yaninn said, extending her hand to take the USB drive, which the 28-yearold handed over.

The team chief then moved to plug it into the side ofthe laptop.

"Don't worry. I'll take responsibility. Things can't get any worse than they already are. Sneaking into the director's computer isn't that bad... as long as no one finds out."

The young officer noticed him typing a few more times on the keyboard

"Done," he said, flashing a faint smile. "Are you looking for something specific?" "1'm not sure yet," she replied.

"Just remove the password requirement for me.

"Got it,"

He said, following her instructions.

"There are quite a few encrypted files here,"

Big commented.

"lfyou can't open them, feel free to come back to me."

"0kay, thanks a lot,"

The team leader replied.

"11ave the drones I ordered arrived yet?"

'Yes, they have,"

The programmer replied.

"The engineering team is inspecting and modifying them as per your instructions. "

'Make sure one has a camera that can clearly capture suspects' faces. Even ifwe can't catch them, having their photos in the watchlist database is still useful. Another one should have a wide panoramic view. Last time during the sniper operation, I couldn't see anything, and it felt like working blind," She complained.

"And you better practice controlling them properly, got it, young man?"

"Yes, ma'am,"

Big replied with a cheerful smile, standing up and handing back the director's laptop.

"All set."

"This never happened, "

Yaninn reminded him before putting the laptop into her backpack.

"Got it?"

"1 already know nothing," he joked.

"0therwise, I'd have been in trouble for sneaking into those satellites long ago."

"Good. Thanks a lot, Big"

"A1ways happy to help, Boss."

Senior Special Agent Yaninn walked back from the rear of the office building after finishing her conversation with the team's programmer. Her backpack, containing the laptop, was slung over her shoulder.

As she passed the building's security guard, he greeted her as she entered the main office building. "Good morning, Boss," Avoice called out.

"Good morning, Ms. Way,"

Yaninn replied to the uniformed field Officer.

"Here's your coffee,"

The kind-hearted agent said, handing her a paper cup filled with hot black coffee.

"1 bought it for you. I was on my way to your office."

"You didn't prepare to discuss yesterdays assignment, did you? That's why you brought me coffee?"

Yaninn eyed the offered cup for a moment before taking it.

"Thanks."

"Why would you think that?"

Nitha laughed lightly.

"You told me I didn't have to write a report, but I still wrote one."

"You always find a way to do the opposite of what I say, Ms. Way. Always something here and there,"

Yaninn said, extending her free hand toward the file in the new team member's hand.

"And that file, is it for me?"

"Yes,"

Nitha replied, handing it over without hesitation. "I'll read it first and then call you in to discuss."

'iWe can talk now," the other replied.

"Ms. way."

"I'm free this morning."

"DO you want to be busy? I can arrange that,"

Yaninn shot back immediately.

"Can I take a break from writing reports for a day?"

Way bargained.

"Fine," Yaninn agreed.

"Next week, there will be a tactical training session. Prepare to talk about how your previous work in protective services can be adapted for counterterrorism operations. Share it with the jumors."

The order made Nitha frown before glancing at Yaninn's calm face, which held a glint of something in her eyes.

"Sometimes, I feel like you enjoy giving me tasks,"

Nitha remarked.

"You seem to have a lot of free time, so I find things for you to do,"

Yaninn retorted before heading toward her office, with Nitha following behind.

"But I'd rather talk to you,"

Nitha blurted out, causing Yaninn to pause and turn to look at her.

"1'm not trying to flatter you. I'm serious,"

Nitha added when she saw Yaninn's puzzled expression.

"And it has nothing to do with favoritism."

"Aren't you worried people will think you're trying to suck up? You're new here."

"My evaluation depends on you anyway,"

The former bodyguard replied as Yaninn entered the code to her offlce. "Even ifl am sucking up, it's not a big deal... Besides, when something happens, you're the one who gets blamed first."

As Yaninn was about to open the door, she turned to look at Nitha, who then reached out to open the door for her.

"Just so you know, I have the nickname 'Director's Favorite,"

Yaninn said before nodding in acknowledgment and walking into the room.

"And you were recommended by Su. You didn't start in the reserve team and work your way up to the main team. Be careful not to draw too much attention. "

"1fby attention you mean scrutiny..."

Nitha softly closed the door behind her.

"No one is better at that than you, Boss. With all due respect.."

"Way, that's enough..

"Just kidding," Nitha quickly said.

"I'm not worried. Even if you're the one evaluating me."

'You act like you're on vacation, not at work,"

Yaninn commented.

"Why do you think that?"

"Because you don't seem to care when I say you might not pass the evaluation. " do care," Nitha defended herself.

'%And I know you won't kick me out."

"Sometimes, I want to..."

Yaninn said, her tone deadpan before shifting back to a more serious demeanor.

"Don't be so confident, Officer Nitha. I have the authority to keep you here or remove you with just one signature without waiting for the three-month probation period, especially since the director is away. The final decision lies with the team leader."

"I have a lot of goodwill points,"

Nitha joked, noticing Yaninn deliberately looking away, as she often did.

"You might have goodwill points..."

Yaninn emphasized,

"But earning them from me is a bit harder,"

She said, looking directly at Nitha.

"Really?"

Nitha continued to banter.

"1 think you're kind, Chief,"

She said, causing Yaninn to raise an eyebrow before gesturing for her to sit down.

"At the very least, you're a leader who takes responsibility for your team's actions.

"1fI give the orders, I have to take responsibility," Yaninn replied simply before sitting down as well.

"1„et me read your documents for a moment,"

She said, falling silent as she focused on the papers, all the while feeling Nitha's gaze and faint smile directed at her.

It was strange, making Yaninn feel uneasy.

Since working at this center, no team member or colleague had ever stayed in her office for more than five minutes unless it was a critical work- related discussion. Casual conversations lasting ten minutes were considered excessive.

Yaninn always maintained a clear boundary between work and personal matters, with personal space as vast as the ocean. This habit began when she was promoted to team leader, taking on more responsibilities.

She had to be cautious with her words and actions at all times. Additionally, being labeled as the "Director's Favorite" added immense pressure to her role.

And yet, here was this woman, sitting and smiling at her.

It was irritating to see.

'ISO, Chief, what do you think""

Nitha suddenly asked, sensing the growing tension in the room. Besides, she found teasing Yaninn to be something she enjoyed, though she couldn't explain why.

"Well... for the short time you've been here, I think you understand our work quite well "

Yaninn admitted, noticing Nitha straighten up slightly at the compliment.

"See? I told you my skills might be useful."

"1t's good that they are," Yaninn replied evenly. "Alright..."

She said, turning to search for something in the file cabinet behind her. She returned with a piece of paper in hand.

"1'11 pass you on the theoretical part. When you join the team training next week, take this document to the instructor."

"1 passed already?"

Nitha sounded surprised.

"Why so easy? Aren't we going to discuss it first?"

"1 don't feel like holding an exam."

"Don't pass me yet. I want to take the test"

"What's with you?"

Yaninn asked, frowning.

"Fine... I didn't know you wanted to read more books and write more reports,

She said, raising an eyebrow

"Whatever works,"

Nitha shrugged.

"1t means I get to talk to you more often,"

She added, flashing a toothy grin.

"You really don't seem to care whether you pass or not, and you don't seem worried about losing your job. "

"There are more interesting things here than the job,"

Nitha replied nonchalantly, noticing Yaninn squinting at her.

"The counter-terrorism unit?" "Yes," Nitha confirmed.

"Trust me."

"You're strange, you know that?"

Yaninn said before returning to the documents in front of her.

"May I ask you something, Boss?"

Nitha suddenly spoke up. Yaninn looked up from her papers, hesitating before nodding.

"Go ahead."

"Why did you choose to work here?"

"Are you interviewing me now?"

"Maybe I just want to get to know you better,"

Nitha said, falling silent as she waited for an answer. For a moment, she thought Yaninn wouldn't respond.

"Why are you asking?"

Yaninn responded.

"Because I said it was interesting,"

The former bodyguard replied candidly.

"There aren't many women who can rise to this level. The fact that you came up through the operational field instead of the administrative or intelligence route is even more fascinating to me. I just wanted to knowwhat drove you to get here?"

Yaninn fell silent again after hearing the question, so much so that Nitha thought she might not answer at all.

"Years ago... when I was out in the field gathering data for a case study,"

Yaninn finally began after a long pause,

"There was a little girl walking to the market with her father in a village surrounded by forest. Even though the area was considered high-risk due to frequent unrest, do you know what I thought? All that time, no explosion or gunfire could ever destroy the beauty of that place. But that day... an explosion took away his beloved daughter. I could only stand there, watching the ten-year-old girl's parents cry until they collapsed in front of

She took a deep breath, the weight ofthe memory pressing down on her as she recalled the vivid scene.

"That day, I felt like the beauty of the world had faded. Even the surrounding forest seemed... like..."

She paused, searching for the right words to describe her feelings.

"Black and white... I kept asking myself over and over what I could do, or what I should do, to stop it from fading any further."

Nitha could hear the slight tremble in Yaninn's voice as she recounted the story.

"After that, I decided to transfer from the administrative field to operations. Even now, I'm not sure if it was the right decision, but I try my best to fulfill my duties."

When she finished speaking, she locked eyes with the former bodyguard, who was looking back at her just as intently.

"Boss.

Nitha's low, steady voice broke the silence.

"You make me feel honored to have chosen to be here."

"What do you mean by that?" Yaninn asked. "1t doesn't mean anything," Nitha replied.

"Alright then..." She stood up.

"Sit down. We're not done talking yet."

"1n case you need some time, I've already bothered you early this morning."

"1'm fine," Yaninn assured her.

But before Nitha could sit back down, a knock on the door interrupted them.

"Come in," Yaninn called out.

Jane opened the door, her expression showing a hint of surprise when she saw her close senior standing inside the room.

"Boss... Way," Jane greeted.

"Is something urgent, Jane? You don't look well,"

Yaninn asked, noticing her expression.

"The radio just reported,"

Jane said quickly, her tone urgent.

"Mr. Watin has been shot."

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Operation 14

"Mr. Watin was ambushed and shot in front of his residence less than twenty minutes ago. The radio just reported it."

"How is he?"

"11is condition is critical. His driver has already passed away."

"You all go ahead. I'll catch up,"

Yaninn instructed.

"Block off a 200- meter radius around the scene, leaving only authorized personnel. Ilave Team Three sweep the area within a 500-meter radius in case any suspects are still around." Yaninn issued her orders swiftly.

"Understood, Chief,"

Jane replied before sprinting off.

"The Deputy Director was ambushed. This is bad. And Suchada's wounds haven't even healed yet,"

The team leader exclaimed as she abruptly stood up, hastily gathered the documents in front Of her into a folder, and grabbed the jacket draped over her chair.

"Let's go, Ms. way."

The two arrived at the scene about ten minutes later. Yaninn, her face tense, quickly stepped out of the car. Nitha followed closely behind. She noticed her team leader pause briefly upon seeing the pool of blood on the road before hurrying to join the team members standing nearby.

"What's the situation, Tum?"

The special agent called out.

"Team Three is spreading out to clear the 500-meter radius. Mr. Watin has been transported to the hospital,"

Tum reported. "How serious is it?"

"Quite serious,"

He replied with concern.

"11e was ambushed while getting into his car."

'Did anyone see anything?"

'ISO far, no one has come forward,"

Tum explained.

t'The houses in this area are far apart. Some witnesses reported hearing gunshots but were too scared to come out. The police are currently questioning them."

"Do we know the caliber of the bullets?"

Yaninn asked, glancing at the bullet holes riddling the car, more than ten in total.

"From What I've gathered, the forensic team mentioned both rifles and handguns were used,"

Pong answered.

Yaninn scanned the area. It was fortunate that the incident occurred in the morning, and no residents in the vicinity were caught in the crossfire. She then noticed the rescue team loading the driver's body into a van to be taken for a detailed autopsy at the hospital.

"What do you think, Ms. Way?"

Yaninn asked calmly as the other woman approached. She saw Nitha surveying the surroundings before responding.

"He probably let his guard down,"

The former bodyguardcommented.

"1fhe had gotten into the car while it was in the garage instead ofparking it outside and then getting in, the chances ofthis happening would have been lower. It might have also been easier to identify the perpetrators."

She nodded toward a security camera mounted on a nearby post and then gestured toward the garage.

"Parking outside increases the risk of theft or ambush."

"1t might have been out of habit. With this many bullet holes, there must have been at least two attackers, maybe more. It's similar to what happened to Suchada,"

The senior agent remarked.

"This is unusual for our unit. Two high-ranking officials were ambushed in less than two months. Since I've been here, there have been very few instances of senior management being targeted, and most were due to conflicts of interest..."

Considering the connections between all the incidents-the ambush and shooting ofthe intelligence division head, followed by the director Of the counter-terrorism unit in quick succession-the common link seemed to be intelligence work.

Even though Suchada had been out of the intelligence field for a while, it appeared to be the most plausible connection.

The problem was... Yaninn had no information about what intelligence might be involved or in what area.

And now, Watin was the third victim. The fact that two high-ranking officials had been assassinated seemed strange and increasingly suspicious.

Yet Yaninn couldn't see how all these events were connected.

She was fairly certain that a group of insurgents orchestrated the incidents. Despite the abundance of evidence left behind, there was nothing to follow up on. The lack ofwitnesses and tangible evidence made it difficult to pinpoint the culprits.

The operation was systematic, involving multiple individuals to assassinate a single target, which seemed excessive. This indicated that the perpetrators were likely extremists with a well-thought-out plan and sufficient funding to carry out the attack.

This was undoubtedly the work of an insurgent group.

Yaninn's eyes swept over the scene. The sedan, riddled with bullet holes, was a stark reminder of the attack. Although Watin had been shot while still outside the car, preparing to get in, the damage was extensive.

She noticed three forensic officers meticulously collecting evidence, mostly bullets embedded in the car. Across the street, where the attackers had Stood, Other offlcers were gathering shell casings.

Not far from there, several media outlets were reporting on the incident despite the area being cordoned off over 200 meters away.

"Could this be a conflict Of interest, Chief?"

"1 haven't ruled that out,"

The female officer replied.

"In this line ofwork, it's inevitable. But this feels too brazen to be just a conflict of interest."

She paused.

"1 don't know. There's so little evidence right now that it's hard to draw any specific conclusions."

"1n my experience, conflicts of interest are usually the first angle we investigate,"

The former bodyguard added.

"You must be familiar with this type of assassination, right, Officer Nitha?" "Yes," the former bodyguard replied.

"1n protection work, what motivates or prompts attackers to use firearms for assassinations?"

"1t's the most classic method. Guns can be used for both defense and killing, depending on the intent of the wielder. They're quick, efficient, and don't require much space to operate. Ifthe gun is unregistered, it's hard to trace."

Yaninn nodded in agreement.

"That's true."

"Chiefl"

Jane's voice interrupted as she ran over.

"The hospital just reported that Mr. Watin has passed away."

She whispered, trying to keep others from overhearing.

The news left the team leader pale and overwhelmed. Even though she and Watin had a professional relationship and rarely spoke, his death felt like losing a respected elder.

"Okay, I understand,"

The female offlcer said softly.

'Make sure our team handles the arrangements and looks after his ex-wife and child. I'll inform you later about the meeting's decision on this matter." Jane nodded and hurried off.

"Are you okay, Chie?? You don't look well. Should we get some water?"

"This has been a rough time for me, Way,"

She replied, her voice trembling slightly.

"Ever since the ambush and then Su, everything has been going downhill. I thought I could stop it at thirteen, but now it seems like..."

"Let's step away from here for a bit,"

Nitha suggested, gently placing a hand on her arm.

'Come on, let's go."

This time, Yaninn complied. Her ears were ringing, her mind blank, and she couldn't think straight after hearing about the Deputy Director's death.

The former bodyguard led her to a small coffee shop not far from the scene. Yaninn, her brow furrowed deeply, had been silent since leaving the site.

"Chief, have some coffee "

Nitha said, placing a cup in front of her. Yaninn nodded slightly as Nitha went to order two black coffees and returned with two bottles ofwater.

She handed one to Yaninn, who still looked visibly shaken.

"Drink some water first, Chief "

Nitha urged, placing the bottle in front ofher. Yaninn didn't respond, only exhaling heavily with a weary expression.

"Thank you, "

She finally said before falling silent again.

Soon, the strong black coffee arrived. Yaninn stared at it for a moment before taking a sip, hoping the bitterness would help her regain focus. Deep down, she knew the situation was urgent, but she couldn't figure out what to do next.

Right now, all she could think about was how this violence seemed so targeted, yet she couldn't piece together the connections or motivations behind it due to the lack of evidence.

"You need to open your eyes wide."

Suddenly, DOI's words echoed in her mind.

"Open your eyes wide. Clear your mind. Sometimes, the answer is right in front of you. "

The answer... right in front of her.

At this moment, the only thing in front of her was the new team member, who was looking at her with concern.

That thought made Yaninn blink rapidly, trying to regain her composure.

Of course, the answer must be right in front ofher. At every crime scene, suspects or perpetrators always leave something behind, even if it's just a little. She just hadn't figured out what the three crime scenes had left behind.

The image that stood out most vividly in her mind was ofthe thirteen victims of the ambush.

Lately, Yaninn had avoided openlng the case file for the ambush she was responsible for, which had the highest death toll in a single incident. Every time she reviewed it, the images of the victims became clearer, as if etched into her conscience.

Each time she opened the file, she silently prayed that there wouldn't be another incident with more casualties

Thirteen.

It had become a haunting number in her career.

The team leader sighed into her coffee cup before setting it down, trying to swallow both the dark liquid and the lump in her throat.

She felt completely dazed.

"Feeling any better, Boss?"

The person sitting across from her asked. Yaninn's response was a faint smile that didn't convey any real comfort.

"Right now, I don't have the luxury of not being okay, Ms. Way,"

She said, her face falling slightly as she stared at the white coffee cup. She took another sip absentmindedly. After setting it down and swallowing, Nitha watched as Yaninn straightened up, took a deep breath to steady herself, blinked a few times, and lifted her chin.

She had transformed back into the senior agent she always was.

Part ofNitha admired the woman in front of her, but another part felt a deep sense Of sorry for her.

"Let's go,"

Yaninn ordered curtly, standing up immediately.

"We have work to do."

The beautiful world Yaninn once vowed to protect now seemed to be turning against her.

# øøøøø

Operation 15

"Chief. "

"Chief..."

The voice calling out startled Yaninn, who was leaning against her car in the three-story parking garage reserved for agency personnel. It was late in the evening after a grueling day.

She flinched slightly but only raised her head to offer a faint smile-one that barely qualified as a smile-to the owner of the voice.

t'Are you okay?"

The voice was filled with concern.

"I'm fine,"

Yaninn replied, giving the answer Nitha had already expected. She noticed Yaninn blinking rapidly, yet the woman remained leaning against her car, refusing to move.

"You don't look fine to me."

'Maybe I'm just a little tired. It's been a tough time for me lately, Way."

"Come on, let me drive you home,"

Nitha offered, her tone firm. Yaninn looked at her, surprised by the suggestion. "No, it's okay,"

Yaninn declined, as was her usual response.

"No, it's not okay,"

Nitha countered firmly.

"Come on. There's no way I'm letting you drive yourself home tonight."

Without waiting for further protest, she grabbed Yaninn's arm and the laptop bag in her right hand, half- dragging, half-guiding her toward her own silver

Yaninn wanted to refuse, but she lacked the energy to do so. It truly had been a rough time for her, as she had just admitted. She was aware that her mind wasn't fully sharp.

After the assassination attempts on two executives, she could barely focus on work or even read documents. Her brain felt foggy, unable to process or piece together the events that had unfolded.

The pressure to analyze three violent incidents within less than two months weighed heavily on her. And then there were the faces of the thirteen victims from the ambush, faces that haunted her every time she closed her eyes.

It was an unbearably heavy burden on her heart.

Now, she found herself sitting in the car of her newest team meniber -the very person she had initially resisted hiring.

Yaninn glanced at Nitha, who was climbing into the driver's seat with enthusiasm. She quickly averted her gaze when she noticed Nitha looking back at her.

"Let's grab something to eat before heading home, Okay? You need to rest,"

Nitha suggested,

"I'll just order something when I get to my place. Too tired to go looking," Yaninn replied lazily, leaning back against the seat and closing her eyes.

"Having someone drive me home today isn't so bad "

She added, almost to herself.

"1f you ever feel too lazy to drive, just let me know. I'm good at this. I can pick you up and drop you off anytime,"

Nitha offered.

"Thank you," Yaninn said softly.

"Don't mention it. If there's anything you need me to do, just say the word," Nitha replied.

"You've already helped me a lot, Ms. Way. Some things, though, if they're beyond your duties, might not be appropriate,"

Yaninn reasoned.

"Like driving me home or treating me to meals or coffee-it feels like I'm Imposlng on you."

"These things come from the heart, not duty,"

Nitha said. Hearing this, Yaninn slowly opened her eyes to see Nitha smiling at her.

"Get some rest. I'll wake you when we arrive."

This time, Yaninn complied without resistance.

An hour and twenty minutes later, Nitha found herself standing in Yaninn's apartment on the nineteenth floor Of a high-rise in the business district. She glanced around the room.

The space was neat and orderly, just like its owner. Everything was clean, and the faint scent of air freshener lingered in the air. Yet, the atmosphere felt lonely. Or perhaps it was just Nitha's perception, but the place seemed devoid of life.

It oddly suited its owner

"Make yourself comfortable,"

Yaninn said, her voice carrying a slight tremor that hadn't been there before.

"This place really suits you,"

Nitha blurted out, unable to stop herself. She stared at the smoky gray walls, which gave off a strangely somber vibe, before turning back to Yaninn, who was watching her intently. "1 mean, it feels... cold."

"Cold, as in unfeeling?" Yaninn asked.

"That's not what I meant," Nitha quickly clarified.

"But... something like that."

She watched as Yaninn moved to the fridge, grabbed a bottle ofwater, and handed it to her. Then Yaninn removed her outer jacket, hung it on a nearby rack, and placed her shoulder holster on a chest-high shelf.

"lfyou've been in this line of work long enough, you'll understand,"

Yaninn said.

"1 think I do,"

Nitha replied, sitting down on the long sofa after Yaninn gestured for her to do so. Yaninn sat beside her.

"But the person I've seen these past few days doesn't entirely match that description,"

Nitha added, meeting Yaninn's gaze, which seemed clouded with worry.

"That woman isn't me on a normal day,"

Yaninn said, her tone softer than usual, tinged with a weanness that Nitha could feel.

"1t's okay to feel upset sometimes. It's normal. There's nothing wrong with that,"

Nitha said.

"I was taught never to let personal feelings interfere with work, even though the person who made that rule probably knew it was impossible. After all, even bodyguards sometimes feel sympathy for their clients-or pity for those who have to hire someone to take a bullet for them. Those people don't live normal lives. "

Yaninn raised an eyebrow at the lengthy comment, then reached for the water bottle and took a long drink.

"1'11 order dinner. Do you have anything in mind?"

Yaninn asked suddenly.

"Are you inviting me to dinner, Boss?" Nitha asked, her eyes lighting up slightly.

"Sure. Whatever you're having, I'll have to."

Yaninn picked up her phone and began ordering food through an app while Nitha watched silently.

"Thanks for driving me home,"

Yaninn said after setting her phone down. "1'm not great at expressing gratitude, but... thank you."

"You've thanked me three times now,"

Nitha said with a soft laugh. "1 told you, it's no trouble." "1'11 remember that, "

Yaninn said with a faint smile.

"Ms. Way..."

"Just call me Way," Nitha interrupted.

"1 think we're familiar enough now. Besides, I'm your team member, Chief. "

"We're the same age. Calling you by just your name feels a bit disrespectful, doesn't it?"

"1 don't mind," Nitha quickly replied.

"By the way, for someone our age, you've already become a senior officer. That's impressive, isn't it?"

She teased lightly.

"What do you think, based on the time we've worked together so far?"

Yaninn asked.

"Well..." Nitha pretended to think.

"You're definitely deserving ofthe position, "

She said, then added,

"For a woman to lead a special operations team, you must be exceptional."

"1'm not particularly proud of it,"

Yaninn said, her voice distant. She met Nitha's gaze, and Nitha noticed the glimmer ofunshed tears in her eyes, reflecting the room's light.

"Why not?" Nitha asked

"Because it's not just about being one of the youngest senior agent in the center. It's about the doubts surrounding my experience and abilities," Yaninn explained, hesitating as if unsure whether to continue,

"There were others more qualified before me. Do you know why I got the position?"

She asked, receiving a shake of the head in response. Yaninn gave a sad smile.

"Because he died... on duty. And I was there."

"Chief..."

'ISO, not everyone is happy about it. At least not Watin. But since it happened, all I can do is perform my duties to the best of my ability," Yaninn said.

"Especially now, with the Director absent and executives being targeted.

Yet, as both an analyst and team leader, I've been unable to do anything. Who knows? One day, I might lose my position without even realizing it." 'Who would dare? You earned this position fair and square," Nitha said. 'Besides, I believe someone like you is worth more than just a title."

Yaninn met her gaze.

"1t's clear that I haven't been handling myself or the situation well lately,"

Yaninn admitted after a pause.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Nitha asked, seeing Yaninn look back at her.

"1 promise I won't judge."

"1..."

Yaninn began hesitantly after a long silence.

"1 don't know... I don't even know where to start or what the real problem

Her words made Nitha furrow her brow.

Nitha nodded, understanding the uncertainty in Yaninn's voice. It was clear that Yaninn doubted herself, feeling that she had only risen to her position because her predecessor had died.

Her mind was likely filled with questions about whether she truly deserved her role. It wasn't surprising. This explained the walls and boundaries she had built between herself and her team members.

She probably wondered if her team supported her, which led to her strict adherence to duty-a pressure stemming from both herself and those around her.

"Honestly, I'm not sure how to handle everything that's happening," Yaninn admitted.

"1t feels like everything is hitting me at once, and I don't know where to start. 

"1n every situation, there's always something left behind. Don't you think

Nitha offered.

"Right now, the problem might not be the situation, the evidence, or the clues. I think... with all due respect... you might need to center yourself."

"Are you saying the problem is me?"

Yaninn asked.

"You've been different lately. Have you noticed?"

Nitha said.

"Even though I haven't known you for long, I remember the first time I met you. You struck me as determined and resolute. But now... you're different.

Especially today."

"What do you mean?" Yaninn asked.

"When I saw you leaning against your car earlier, I knew right away that you weren't okay. It's not like before. I used to think that someone like you could handle anything, no matter how tough it was... "

Nitha paused, offering a reassuring smile.

"Especially after the ambush. It made me admire you even more. Even though you're reserved, you always think of others, especially your team."

Yaninn nodded in acknowledgment.

'You know.."

Yaninn began as if finding her voice again.

"In my entire career, that ambush was the deadliest incident... thirteen people died. "

She paused as ifto take a deep breath.

Her voice began to tremble.

"1t was my greatest failure as a team leader. You once said that no one had ever died on your watch. But if that record were ever broken, what would you do?"

"1 don't know,"

The former bodyguard replied simply.

"But I will do everything I can to make sure this record isn't broken."

She stared into the eyes that were beginning to glisten with unshed tears, reflecting the bright lights of the room.

"1 believe you feel the same way, Chief. What happened isn't anyone's fault. "

"1 can't say that because it's clear that it still isn't good enough,"

The voice trembled slightly.

"And I can't continue with this case."

"You'll be fine, Chief,"

Nitha said firmly to the Other woman, leaning forward and placing a reassuring hand on her arm.

"But today, if you try to be something else, it might not be such a bad idea."

"1 don't know..." understand what it's like to be a woman in your position, MS. Ninn," The former bodyguard said, this time addressing her by name as if the dynamic between a leader and her subordinate had shifted into one of the caring friends. She reached out and gently took Yaninn's hand, stroking it softly.

"You've worked so hard to get here amidst all the criticism within the organization and the responsibilities that not everyone can handle

Sometimes, you forget that at the core, we're just women-or simply people with feelings like anyone else."

"The job doesn't really allow me to be a normal person."

"Believe me, we can be normal people doing an abnormal job. Don't let bad people or terrible situations come back to hurt you,"

Nitha said in a low, steady voice.

"We can feel pain, sadness, and weakness whenever we need to. The key is not to run away from your own emotions."

"1'm not sure ifthat would be good for me."

"You manage your emotions better than anyone I've ever known,"

The other woman said.

"You're not cold-hearted. You just choose not to let your emotions lead the way."

"I've trained myselfto be that way,"

Yaninn explained.

"Emotions usually cause more harm than good.

"so, you choose to cut them Off immediately, whether they're good or bad."

"NO matter what happens, I have a team to take care Of. Every time we go out, I have to make sure that every one of my subordinates comes back. I will never allow history to repeat itself like it did with my former chief, who didn't make it back..."

Yaninn explained though she wasn't sure if it was truly a reason or just an excuse.

"That's all I think about."

"You're not on duty right now,"

The other woman said with a warm smile.

'ISO, you can allow yourself to be vulnerable."

Yaninn met the other woman's gaze as she listened. Then, she pressed her lips together, and moments later, a sob escaped her. The strong, composed officer's shoulders slumped as if all her strength had drained away.

Before long, Yaninn realized she couldn't hold back her tears while being embraced by the other woman.

# øøøøø

Operation 16

"Small meeting room. Five minutes."

The sound of the door openmg was accompamed by the curt, tense voice of the team chief, issuing a command that made everyone in the main operations team exchange glances Nitha, who had been animatedly recounting stories from her previous job, shifted her gaze to the folder in Yaninn's hand as she walked toward the small meeting room.

It seems like something important is about to happen.

The entire main operations team followed into the meeting room as instructed three or four minutes later. They noticed the tense expression on their team leader's face as she leaned back in her chair at the front of the room, her eyes fixed on the documents in the folder resting on the table. "1 just received the ballistic comparison report from the crime scenes..."

Yaninn began speaking once the team members had settled into their seats. Despite the tense atmosphere, one thing Nitha observed was Yaninn's perpetually calm and emotionless demeanor.

The only exception was the sharp intensity in her eyes and the chilling aura that seemed to surround her.

Though, in truth, her inner state was likely the complete opposite.

Nitha watched as the officer took a deep breath and blinked a few times before continuing.

"It turns out that the bullets from the attempted assassination Of Director

Suchada and the sniper incident on the rooftop match. "

Yaninn paused, scanning the room as the team exchanged glances, but no one spoke.

"So, this means the group targeting the intelligence officer and Director Suchada is the same,"

Tum stated.

"What do you think about this, Chie??"

"Agent Nitha, "

Yaninn called out, making Nitha sit up straight immediately.

"What's your take on this?"

"LJh

Nitha inhaled deeply. She knew Yaninn wanted her to practice analyzing real-time situations. In this case, the evidence pointed to the same group being responsible for both incidents.

Ilowever, interrogating the perpetrators was impossible since those involved in the sniper incident had been neutralized, and the identities of those who escaped from the assassination attempt remained unknown. This meant....

'Right now, we can only investigate based on the physical evidence from the crime scenes,"

Nitha began.

"Because all the perpetrators are dead."

Her response made Yaninn, who had been leaning back, lean forward slightly The former bodyguard wasn't sure if her answer satisfied Yaninn or not.

"And ifwe have no other evidence besides the ballistic comparison, what can we do?"

Yaninn pressed further. Nitha exchanged a glance with Jane who smirked teasingly as if mocking her for being put on the spot like a student being grilled by a strict teacher.

"1 think tangible evidence is the most reliable,"

Nitha replied, turning the question back to Yaninn.

"That's a good perspective, but it's not always applicable Like in this case, where we have nothing else to go on."

Yaninn offered a faint smile, but it was a smile devoid ofwarmth, filled instead with tension. "Remember this, everyone..."

She began again.

"The first thing we need to look for is tangible evidence, both physical and testimonial. Typically, physical evidence is the most reliable. As for witness testimony, if you've worked with people long enough, you'll know to take it with a grain of salt. Beyond these two types of evidence, we need to look at the bigger picture. Counter-terrorism is similar to police investigations in some ways, but it requires us to delve deeper into the violent behaviors individuals or groups inflict on others. This means focusing on the broader context rather than just the details."

The team members exchanged glances before nodding in agreement.

"More than just identifying who did it, we need to answer why they would kill so many innocent people,"

Yaninn concluded, turning her gaze back to Nitha.

"DO you understand, MS. Nitha?"

"Yes, I understand," Nitha replied.

"Then answer this: ifwe have no evidence, what can we deduce from the bigger picture I mentioned?"

Yaninn noticed Nitha furrowing her brows in thought.

"1'11 give you a hint. What's the connection between the director and the intelligence officer killed in the sniper incident, aside from the matching bullets I just mentioned?" "Intelligence,"

Nitha quickly responded.

"Both worked with the National Intelligence Agency. "

"Correct.

Yaninn seemed to relax slightly, leaning back in her chair again.

"What do you think, Yaninn?"

Mod asked this time.

"1 think it's interesting, "

Yaninn replied ambiguously. "But it might be related, or it might not."

"So, what's our next move?"

Grae asked.

think waiting for the police won't get us anywhere. Director Suchada would have suffered for nothing."

"Let me think about it and get back to you. For now, I just wanted to inform you so you're all on alert. I believe we might be dealing with an unusual situation in our line ofwork,"

Yaninn explained.

"The fact that the perpetrators could target high-ranking officials or eliminate intelligence heads is highly irregular. Do you understand? I think this group is dangerous."

"Understood "

The team responded in unison

"And what about the incident with Mr. Watin?"

Mod asked again.

"1'm waiting for the ballistic results from the police and witness statements, "

Yaninn replied.

"Could it be the same group?"

The former bodyguard asked.

"It's possible,"

Yaninn answered calmly.

"1 called this meeting to discuss this with you before I meet with the administration again. "

She paused, taking a deep breath.

"Based on my assessment, I suspect that security agencies, including intelligence and our unit, are being targeted. Even though our operations are usually low-profile, these targeted attacks suggest that insider information might have been leaked."

"Insider information?"

Tum, the deputy team leader, echoed.

"From someone within?"

"1'm not pointing fingers because we don't have concrete evidence yet," Yaninn clarified.

"1t could have come from anywhere. I'm considering how the perpetrators knew Director Suchada's travel route, attacked the intelligence officer in a crowded area, and knew Mr Watin's schedule. The latter could have been from surveillance, though."

"What are you trying to tell us?" Jane asked though she had a bunch about the answer

"You all need to be cautious,"

Yaninn warned, her face showing concern.

"Until we have leads or neutralize this group, anyone who wants to move to a safe house can request the necessary documents and keys from me. If you're comfortable, I suggest staying together or avoiding being alone, as it makes you an easier target. I'm not sure how severe this will get, but we should be prepared."

The team exchanged worried glances but said nothing. If Yaninn, who had never raised such concerns before, was saying this, it was clearly something to be taken seriously.

"Do you understand?"

Everyone responded almost simultaneously.

"1f anyone has any issues, come talk to me,"

Yaninn said.

"Alright, that's all for today. If there's anything else, I'll call you."

With that, everyone acknowledged her words and dispersed, their faces filled with worry.

"Chief,"

A voice called from behind as Yaninn was heading to the parking lot outside the office building in the evening. She turned to see Nitha walking up to her.

"Do you have a moment? I'd like to discuss what we talked about in the small meeting room."

Yaninn glanced at her watch

"But if you're busy, we can talk tomorrow,"

Nitha added, noticing Yaninn's hesitation. "You seem like you have something on your mind,"

Yaninn replied, catching Nitha Off guard.

Nitha asked, surprised.

"I can tell from your tone,"

Yaninn said.

"Alright, I'm heading home early tonight and don't have any plans. Let's

She glanced to the side as someone walked pasta middle-aged man from the administration, heading to his car with a worried expression about the ongoing situation.

"How about I treat you to dinner as a thank-you for driving me home the other day?"

Yaninn added.

"1n that case, I won't say no,"

Nitha replied with a smile.

"You can pick the place"

Less than twenty minutes later, Yaninn fountl herself waiting outside a restaurant not far from the agency's headquarters. It was one of the rare occasions she allowed herselfto be invited out for a meal. Nitha soon joined her after parking her car.

"This way, boss,"

Nitha said, leading the way into a cozy restaurant on the last workday ofthe week. The evening sun had lost its intensity, and the sky was dimming as dusk approached.

The restaurant was open-air, with a pavilion extending over a large pond. A gentle breeze added to the relaxing atmosphere Yaninn followed Nitha to a table near the back, where Nitha pulled out a chair for her.

Yaninn looked at her, unsure if this was kindness or a habit from her previous job.

"Thank you,"

Yaninn said softly, met with a smile from Nitha as she took her seat across the table.

"Order whatever you like. Don't hold back,"

Yaninn encouraged as Nitha opened the menu.

"Do you drink alcohol, Chief?'

Nitha asked after a moment of silence.

"1 thought, since tomorrow's a day off, you might want to unwind."

"No, I don't usually drink outside,"

Yaninn replied.

"Thanks, though. But ifyou want to, go ahead. It's after work." "1 don't drink much either. It's a rule from my bodyguard days,"

Nitha said.

"But if you do decide to drink, I can drive you home."

Shortly after, the dishes they ordered were brought to the table.

'ISO, what did you want to talk about?"

Yaninn asked.

Nitha struggled to swallow her food quickly, caught off guard by the question

"Take your time. No rush. I don't want you choking,"

Yaninn said, realizing her question might have been poorly timed.

was just curious about something you mentioned during the meeting this mornmg. "

Nitha explained.

"Which part? Go ahead"

"The part where you said there seemed to be a connection between the assassination attempt on the director and the intelligence officer."

"1t's pretty straightforward, don't you think?"

Yaninn replied.

"The bullets from both scenes came from the same gun, which suggests the same perpetrator is still at large."

"Yes," Nitha agreed.

"But what about the intelligence connection you mentioned?"

"It's just my assumption, trying to find a connection, imagining things, you know,

The female offcer explained.

"1t might be something, or it might be nothing. I just think there must be a reason why the perpetrator moved from one crime scene to another. Besides the matching bullets, I'm trying to find other links based on theory and figure out the motive,"

Yaninn reasoned, Supporting her thoughts.

"What do you think?"

"From a security perspective, it's not unusual,"

The former bodyguard replied.

"For the same person or group to assassinate two or maybe three people in close succession. "

This time, Yaninn nodded in agreement.

"But now, there's another variable-Mr. Watin,"

The team leader added.

"I'm just waiting for confirmation that the bullets from all three crime scenes came from the same gun,"

Yaninn said.

'"Do you have any thoughts on the third case, Ms. Way?"

'IAssassinations using the same method repeatedly tend to point to the same perpetrator. But the method is very classic-sniping is as basic as it gets,"

The former security officer replied with a hint of hesitation.

"What you're saying is true,"

Yamnn's dominant hand scooped up a bite of food before meeting the other's gaze.

"But my gut tells me there's more to it."

"Do you analyze with your gut, too, Chief?"

Nitha blurted out, unable to hold back, earning a sharp glare without a verbal response.

"lnstinct..."

Yaninn corrected her word.

"I mean, you're so precise with principles. I didn't mean it like."

The speaker trailed off, unsure ofwhat she wanted to say, but simply smiled at the other's furrowed expression.

"Using principles is safer for the job than relying on instinct,"

Yaninn explained.

"1 wouldn't dare argue with someone experienced,"

Nitha replied.

"Experienced in what. instinct or principles?"

"Both maybe? If you've never used both, how would you know what's safe or not?"

Those words made Yaninn look deeply into the dark eyes ofthe person sitting across from her.

"1n this line ofwork, putting your heart into it isn't good. You must've seen my state that day when I took things too personally,"

Yaninn referred to the day the former security officer had escorted her to her room, and they had talked for quite a while.

"1'm trying to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"That day, you were just being yourself, and that's okay,"

The listener exhaled deeply before continuing to eat in silence.

"So, what made you invite me to dinner today, Ms. Way?"

Yaninn asked after a moment of quiet, staring at the other as if trying to extract an answer Nitha simply smiled but didn't respond immediately, as if she was also gauging the other's reaction.

"You said you had something to ask?"

'Maybe I just wanted an excuse to take the Chief out for dinner, "

The other replied, causing Yaninn to frown.

"You're so good at reading people Don't you already have an idea ofwhat I want to ask?"

"1 don't read people, Ms, Way. Don't think that,"

Yaninn said, contradicting the assumption,

"What I read are situations where people are key variables. And let me tell you, no one can truly read another person."

"1s that so?"

"1s it something personal?"

Yaninn pressed on.

"I'm guessing you know Ms. Suchada personally."

"Didn't you just say no one can read anyone?"

The person across, who was sipping a glass of water, smiled knowingly.

"Yes," she finally admitted.

"Alright," the officer acknowledged.

"Then I won't ask again."

"Not curious anymore?" don't pry into anyone's personal matters, especially those on my team,"

The team leader explained.

"Because it could affect how we work together. "

"You're quite strict, Chief,"

Nitha commented.

'IThat's something I admire about you."

"1t's not hard to see, is it? You transferred from a field unrelated to counterterrorism, and Ms. Suchada recommended you." "Forced... is that the word you want to use, Chief?"

Nitha interjected with a light laugh.

"Exactly, forced It's obvious you must know each other quite well."

This time, the former bodyguard simply smiled but didn't offer any rebuttal.

"Would you mind if I invited you for a drink, Chie??"

'Do you realize you're the first subordinate everto dare invite me for a

Yaninn's question made Nitha raise an eyebrow.

"Just thought I'd try. Maybe the Chief feels like getting drunk these days. "

"Alright, but it has to be at my place ifyou're okay with that. It'd be too reckless to drink outside during such risky times."

"No problem at all."

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Operation 17

A dozen cans of pale yellow alcoholic drinks were placed on the coffee table in Yaninn's living room about an hour after dinner had ended. The person who had suggested the drinks plopped down into a seat, accepting the invitation from the room's owner.

"Thank you, Chief, for letting me drink,"

Nitha said, looking up at Yaninn, who was still standing and taking off her outer jacket.

"You don't have to drink until you're drunk, you know. Funny how you're not hesitant to follow my words this time,"

Yaninn teased, her sharp gaze making Nitha burst into laughter.

'You're exaggerating, " Nitha defended herself.

"Have I ever disobeyed you""

"Not outright, but usually, you hesitate or come up with strange questions and then don't follow through,"

Yaninn replied, looking directly at her.

"Let me tell you, ifyou keep this up after joining the team, I won't let it slide."

"Are you threatening me?"

The former bodyguard asked with a smile.

"1 promise I won't disrupt your command. "

"The disruption started the moment Suchada recommended you to join my team, Ms. Way,"

Yaninn said, grabbing a green can of the drink before sitting down on the long sofa.

"Luckily, my team doesn't have any issues, but the management is watching closely Also, the reason they didn't let me form a special task force might have something to do with this."

The newcomer laughed at this, then grabbed one of the alcoholic drinks they had bought.

The two of them sipped the slightly bitter drinks in silence, occasionally glancing at each other. For Yaninn, it félt a bit strange to have someone visit her room two or three times a week. And it was always the same person.

Normally, Yaninn didn't allow many people into her personal space, but for some reason, refusing the invitation of the smiling woman sitting across from her seemed unusually difficult.

"Do you want to ask me something?"

"Why do you think I want to ask you something?" Yaninn countered with a question ofher own.

"I don't know," Nitha shrugged.

"Maybe you want to get to know me better."

Her words made Yaninn narrow her eyes.

"Do you have anything that would make me want to know you better, Ms. way?"

Yaninn asked. IfNitha wasn't mistaken, she could swear she saw a fleeting glimmer in Yaninn's eyes before it quickly disappeared.

Not even drunk yet.

"That depends on how much you want to know me, Chief, "

Nitha replied playfully.

"Who knows? I might have something interesting that you wouldn't expect."

"The only thing I'm interested in about you is... why did you transfer here?"

"Still not the answer you wanted, huh?"

Nitha said, placing her drink on the small table in front ofheru

"Even though you've tried to subtly ask me several times."

A smile tugged at the corner of her lips. "1 haven't lied to you about anything, you know."

"But you haven't told me everything."

"You're being too suspicious,"

The former bodyguard retorted immediately. "Believe me, I'm as genuine as they come."

'Tine,"

Yaninn said, cutting the conversation short.

"1 trust you because of Jane.

"1s that so? Well, I told you, maybe you should get to know me better. Then you'll see that deep down..."

Nitha's dark eyes met Yaninn's curious gaze.

"There's nothing to me."

Yaninn turned her face away to avoid Nitha's gaze, feeling a sudden warmth rise to her cheeks.

"0r maybe" Nitha continued,

"You could let me get to know you better."

'IAre you drunk already? You're starting to talk nonsense."

"I'm a lightweight," Nitha admitted. "Not much of a drinker."

She watched as Yaninn stood up.

'Make yourself comfortable. I'm going to take a shower."

Twenty minutes later, Yaninn emerged from the bathroom to find Nitha fast asleep on the small sofa. Out of the dozen drinks they had bought, only one can had been opened.

Yaninn stood there, observing the other woman thoughtfully.

In truth, Nitha didn't seem dangerous or threatening. She was just an woman who could fall asleep in someone else's room within half an hour. Her dark hair, usually tied back during work, now fell loosely, partially covering her face,

But sometimes, Yaninn felt like this woman wasn't telling her everything. Or maybe it was just Yaninn's own suspicious nature.

"Way,"

Yaninn called out, trying to wake her up gently, to avoid a repeat ofthe incident in the small meeting room where Nitha's boot heel had narrowly missed her face by mere centimeters.

"Ms. way."

The person being called slowly opened her eyes, still groggy.

"Move to the long sofa and lie down properly,"

Yaninn said in a firm yet instructive tone, nodding toward the larger sofa.

"0h it's fine,"

Nitha said, rubbing her eyes.

"I'll just head home. "

"Not in this state. If you're sleepy, sleep. Ifnot, take a shower and then sleep."

"1 don't want to impose on you, Chief."

"You already have,"

Yaninn said with a hint of sarcasm.

"You should've stopped worrying about imposing the moment you invited me to drink, Ms. Way."

"Then I won't hold back anymore,"

Nitha said, flashing a cheeky grin. Instead of being deterred by Yaninn's Sharp glare, she seemed amused

'Decide whether you're going to sleep, shower, or keep drinking. Don't leave the rest here, I won't touch it."

"1n that case, I'll come drink with you every day until it's all gone. How about that?"

Nitha proposed with a smile. "Or you could come drink at my place."

"Let's just focus on tonight,"

Yaninn said, cutting her off, unsure how to respond.

"So, are you drinking more or sleeping?"

'ISO, I have to sleep here, right?"

'Did you forget what we discussed in the small meeting room? Going home late at night is risky."

"Are you worried about me?"

Nitha teased, her words making Yaninn's expression falter. Despite her best efforts to maintain a neutral face, Yaninn's heart raced.

"1 thought you weren't happy about having to take me on."

"1f you ever leave this job, it'll be because I sign the papers, not for any other reason like being taken out. So, are you going to keep hesitating?" "No more hesitation... ifyou're being this kind, I'll accept your generosity."

"lfyou don't want it, just leave it there,"

Yaninn said, her tone showing a hint of irritation as she crossed her arms. Her mock sternness only made Nitha smile wider.

'Don't be so harsh," Nitha said. 'You're actually quite kind." With that, she stood up.

"1'11 go grab my overnight bag from the car."

"You always keep an overnight bag in your car? Do you stay over at places

"You're overthinking it,"

Nitha laughed.

"1t's just a protocol to be prepared for emergencies."

"Fair enough. Go ahead,"

Yaninn said, sinking back onto the sofa. Nitha left to retrieve her belongings, determined not to refuse the kindness extended to her.

"Fall back!"

A young man in tactical gear shouted into his radio amidst the chaos Of gunfire. In front ofhim was a denseforest where insurgents were hiding. The Black Panther Counter-Terrorism team, usually stationed in the capital, had been called infor a major operation to clear out the insurgents.

"Retreat! "

Shouted Chaidol, or DOI, the chiefof the team.

"Fall back and regroup at the rendezvous point! "

The team members, no more than ten meters apart, hesitated briefly before slowly stepping back as ordered.

Yaninn, in her early thirties at the time, felt her heart pounding. Despite being part ofthe operations team for over six or seven years, this mission was different. The team wasn't trainedforjungle operations. Everywhere she looked, all she saw was the endless green oftrees, all looking the same.

Her bare hands were slick with sweat, as was herface under the helmet and scarfcovering it. She couldn't tell ifit was from the heat or the tension of the situation.

Yaninn's vision began to blur....

At that moment, she was tasked with covering the leftflank But all she could see were large and small trees interspersed with knee-high grass. Her eyes weren't trained to adapt to the green surroundings, which, while soothing, werefraught with danger

The Black Panther Special Operations Team was more accustomed to handling chaotic urban scenarios. In such situations, her brain could quickly assess and respond to events. But here, surrounded by dense jungle, it was a different story.

Yaninn raised her semi-automatic rifle to her shoulder, ready at all times.

The team leader had ordered a retreat.

The sound ofgunfire grew louder with each passing moment, indicating that the insurgents might have reinforcements. Bullets whizzed past her head, and Yaninn couldn't tell which breath might be her last. She wasn't sure Ifshe'd make it out alive.

"Maintain a ten-meter distance while retreating" was the command to ensure the team stayed Close enough to cover each other.

"Black Panther 102, exiting the area, "

Yaninn reported over the radio. At that moment, her position was 102, where "l " indicated the primary team, and "02" was her role within it.

She was the deputy chief

She passed a male teammate, tapping his shoulder before retreating another ten meters. She knelt on her left knee, rifle raised andfiring continuously.

"102, in position. "

"Black Panther 103, exiting the area, "

The man she had tapped on the shoulder reported, seeing Yaninn take cover behind a tree line to provide coverfirefor the others.

She saw the team leader slowly retreating whilefiring intermittently. Yet, the number of insurgents didn't seem to decrease at all.

Ifthis continuedfor another ten minutes, lhe entire team might be wiped out.

"Watch the left!"

She shouted, prompting the person covering the leftflank to turn. She saw three orfour insurgents rushing in, managing to take down two while the Other two took cover behind trees.

"Smoke grenade!"

The young team leader shouted as he threw the smoke grenade White smoke began to spread across the area, obscuring visibility. Ifthey couldn't escape within the nextfive minutes, the Black Panther operation team would be surroundedfrom all sides, and no one would make it out alive.

"Abort the mission immediately, "

DOI commanded. It was the signalfor everyone to flee and do whatever it took to meet at the rendezvous point alive.

As the smoke thickened, so did the hail of bullets. Every team member began retreating whilefiring intermittently to hold offthe enemy.

Until...

"Black Panther 101 has been shot!"

The announcement over the radio made Yanmn's earpiece buzz loudly. Her legs, trained to retreat in such situations, froze instantly.

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She couldn 't move. All she could do was fire to prevent the enemyfrom advancing while scanning the area. At that moment, DOI was about thirty meters away to the northeast.

If Yaninn ran back to him, it might mean not returning alive Besides, the smokefrom thefour grenades earlier had made visibility almost nonexistent.

"Let's grab dinner tonight, Ninn. "

The invitation made Yanmn, who was then the deputy leader ofthe special operations team for counter-terrorism, look up from the operation report she was reviewing before submitting it to Dolfor approval.

Yanmn knew how DOIfelt about her.

But she simply didn 'tfeel the same way.

Chaidol, or as Yaninn Often called him, "DOI, was a highly skilled and capable team leaden earning her respect in that regard. Beyond being a leade'; he was a mentor, a colleague, and a trusted advisor. Whenemer she faced problems, DOI was often one of thefirst people she thought of.

He was a leader Yaninn deeply respectedfor both his seniority and skills, but between them, there could never be anything more.

And DOI knew that, too.

Even so, he never gave up, often inviting her to go places together. Rarely did she agree, partly because she didn 't want to give him false hope for something she knew could never happen. Still, deep down, she silently wished that DOI would somedayfind someone truly deserving ofsomeone as good as him.

"1 haven 't made much progress on the operation report yet, I'll probably be stuck at the office all night, "

Yaninn politely declined, looking up at the young man who was also looking at her. She saw him smile nervously at her rejection beforefalling silentfor a moment. Then, DOI simply nodded in acknowledgment.

"I won 't give up, "

He said before turning and walking out of the shared workspace designated for special operations officers.

"Everyone, maintain yourpositions. "

With the team leader injured and unable to continue, Yaninn, as the next in command, took over;

"One-zero-two is moving in.

"With that, she quickly moved toward DOI, who was less than a hundred meters away to the northeast

But then

Boom!

Yamnn jolted awake, startled. She could still hear the explosion from that day echoing in her head, and worse she could faintly smell smoke at the tip of her nose. Even though the tragic loss of the operation team had occurred nearly three years ago, it still haunted her.

As she had told Nitha the other day.

Many people said she had stepped over his dead body to become one- zeroone because of ambition that she hadn't gone in to save him.

What would those who weren't there know? She barely had a chance to move closer, let alone help.

DOI's body had been obliterated by that explosion. She vividly remembered the force of the blast hitting her, leaving her face numb and her legs unable to move.

The female officer sat up against the headboard, wiping the sweat from her face. Yaninn still remembered clearly. Three days after the incident, when the situation had calmed, she and the team went back to bring him home, but they found nothing.

The only thing left was the sorrow she had carried from that day until this very moment.

Not to mention the pressure of the accusations that she had stepped over his lifeless body to advance her career.

It was as if fate wouldn't let her grieve for long, as a noise outside caught her attention.

The sound made the room's occupant quietly get out ofbed.

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Operation 18

Yaninn quietly slipped out of her bed in her private room, moving With the utmost care.

At first, she thought it might be the sound of Nitha, who perhaps hadn't gone to bed yet. But as she listened more closely. .

It seemed like the noise was coming from outside, though she wasn't entirely sure.

This prompted the agent to bend down and retrieve the handgun she kept under her pillow. Lately, strange and unsettling events had been happening around her, leaving her barely able to keep up.

Ever since the incident where Suchada and Watin were ambushed and shot, she had been forced to be more vigilant, unsure of what might come next.

Yaninn moved toward the door, opening it as quietly as possible.

"Shh..."

Someone whispered as she stepped out of her room. It was Nitha leaning against the wall beside her bedroom door in the darkness. In her hand was an eleven-millimeter handgun, its barrel pointed toward the entrance door, the source of the noise.

"I'll handle this."

As soon as those words were spoken, the sound of footsteps outside the room ceased, followed by someone attempting to open the door from the outside However, they failed to get in.

Nitha instinctively moved to shield Yaninn with her body, a gesture that stirred an inexplicable feeling within Yaninn. Her heart began to race slightly, though it wasn't out of fear.

Perhaps it was the feeling of being protected-something the senior agent of the Counter-Terrorism Center had never experienced or been allowed to feel before. Usually, it was her responsibility to protect civilians.

This made her glance at Nitha from behind.

At this moment, she realized she might need to trust someone else's weapon for once, even though she knew how risky it was when the bullets weren't coming from her own gun,

Crash!

Bang! Bang!

The former bodyguard fired her gun almost instinctively, causing one of the intruders who had broken through the door to stagger back as the bullet struck him, sending him collapsing to the ground.

"Damn it!" Nitha exclaimed.

The other two men who had come with him immediately fled the scene.

"Cowards!"

Nitha muttered, moving as ifto give chase.

"Don't follow them, Way," Yaninn's voice called out. "1t's too dangerous in the dark. We don't know who they are or how many of them there might be."

She walked over to inspect the intruder, who was now lying on the floor, barely breathing.

"1'11 call the police,"

Nitha offered before stepping away. She returned five or six minutes later, joining Yaninn, who was standing over the large, dark-skinned man with a beard, lying unconscious and bleeding from his wound, the metallic scent of blood faintly filling the air.

"1 meant to fire just one shot, but it slipped. Luckily, he's still alive-maybe we can interrogate him." "1t's okay, I understand," Yaninn reassured her.

"01d habits are hard to break"

"At that moment, all I could think about was not letting him get to you, "

Nitha blurted out suddenly, causing Yaninn to turn and look at her.

"Sol just."

"Thank you, "

Yaninn said simply before turning her attention back to the man on the floor.

Before long, an ambulance, police officers, and forensic investigators arrived at the scene. Yaninn gave a brief statement to the investigating agent while Nitha stood by, watching the paramedics lift the semi-conscious intruder, weakened from blood loss, onto a stretcher and into the ambulance. She then prepared to give her own statement after Yaninn.

An hour and a half later, Nitha found herself standing in the operations building of the Counter-Terrorism Unit.

'You can go home, Way,"

The operations team leader said, slumping into a chair, exhausted.

"1t's still dark out."

"1t's fine. The morning's just a few hours away," Nitha replied. '"It'll be safer to head back then."

"1'11 make sure to file for your overtime pay,"

Yaninn added, a faint smile appearing on her lips. It might have been her first smile in the chaotic past couple of days. She locked eyes with Nitha, who had also taken a seat.

Not long after, a knock on the door broke the silence. Yaninn glanced at the large round clock on the wall, which read 3:26 am. She frowned at the door, then exchanged puzzled looks with Nitha.

"Come in," she called.

"Yaninn,"

It was Jane, who burst into the room, heading straight for the two ofthem.

"Are you okay?"

"Jennifer,

Nitha teased, using Jane's nickname

"1 hate that name,"

Jane shot back, glaring at her, which made Nitha laugh.

told you not to come, Jane,"

Yaninn said.

"1 was worried about you guys!"

"I'm fine,"

Yaninn replied calmly before Jane turned to Nitha and grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. "What about you, Way?"

"1'm Okay, really,"

Nitha reassured her, sitting back down as Jane finally looked relieved.

"1 rushed over as soon as Way called,"

Jane said, her face still showing traces of concern.

"1 was so scared." "Keep your voice down, Jane," Yaninn scolded.

"You're disturbing the boss."

"It's fine,"

Yaninn quickly interjected, noticing Nitha standing up again

"Boss, you should rest,"

Nitha said, turning to her.

"Come on, Jennifer, let's head to the common room so the boss can get some sleep."

The two of them left together.

"So, what happened?"

Jane asked as she placed a bottle ofwater in front of her senior colleague.

"1 don't know. I just shot-I didn't ask questions."

"1 didn't dare ask the boss," Nitha admitted.

"lfit's important, she'll tell us."

"1 rushed over to talk, and you don't know anything?"

Jane said, exasperated.

"Then why were you with Yaninn?"

The question made Nitha pause, unsure how to respond. Saying she had been drinking with the boss didn't seem appropriate.

"1 was discussing work with her." "Discussing work? At that hour?"

Jane pressed.

"A lot of things,"

Nitha replied vaguely, causing Jane to narrow her eyes.

"Besides, the boss didn't want me to leave because it was too late." "You? Following orders?"

"People can be considerate, you know. Who would dare defy her? You know she's been keeping an eye on me,"

Nitha reasoned.

"Keeping an eye on you by inviting you to stay in her room? Sure."

Jane teased.

"She's never invited any of us to her room. And you, Way, always complain about work orders, but when she asks you to stay, you follow without question." "Jane, if you don't shut up, I'll shove my fist in your mouth."

"Ahem. "

'1011 Yaninn,

Jane's voice rose slightly as the subject of their conversation appeared. Meanwhile, Nitha leaned back in her chair, sipping her water.

"Do you need anything?"

"1 just came for some water,"

Yaninn replied coolly, walking in. She glanced at her two subordinates, who exchanged nervous looks.

"And sneaking out like this doesn't your partner mind, Jane?"

"My partner?" Jane repeated. "0h, no, we're not staying together."

"Really"" Nitha interjected.

"Then I'll crash at your place sometime."

"You still haven't stopped mooching off people's utilities, have you?"

"Just the perks ofbeing beautiful, free, and single,"

Nitha joked, making Jane roll her eyes.

"1s that why you keep a spare bag of clothes in your car, Way?" Yaninn asked, her tone and choice ofwords catching Jane's attention.

"Don't accuse me, boss,"

Nitha laughed.

"1t's just an old habit from work. "

"Jane, you can head home. It's your day off-you shouldn't be at the office,"

Yaninn said, her voice weary. The night had been long for her. "1f anything comes up, I'll call. Way, you can leave too."

"1'm fine here,"

Nitha replied, turning to Jane.

"Jane, you can go There's nothing left to do here. I told you not to come in the first place."

"I'll find a place to sleep near the gym and head back in the morning." Jane said, standing up.

"0h, Chief, everyone sends their regards. They were going to come, but I told them you were fine. We'll check in tomorrow."

With that, she left to find a spot to rest.

"Thanks, Jane,"

Yaninn called after her as she walked out.

"See? Your team cares about you,

Nitha remarked. "You should rest, boss."

"1 can't sleep,"

Yaninn admitted, exhaling in frustration. "And you... aren't you going to rest?"

"1'm used to staying up late,"

Nitha replied simply.

"Thank you so much,"

Yaninn said softly. Though she wasn't accustomed to having someone care for her, it was oddly comforting to have someone by her side tonight.

"Stop thanking me,"

Nitha said with a reassuring smile.

"1 told you, I'm doing this willingly. Don't overthink it-it's no big deal for me."

Yaninn simply nodded in response.

"So, what's your plan to do next?"

Nitha asked.

"What do you mean?"

"1t's clear this isn't normal,"

Nitha observed.

"And it's strange how easily they got to you. I'm just relieved I was there. Even though I know you can take care of yourself."

'You're not wrong," Yaninn admitted.

"But it wasn't entirely unexpected."

"Even so, we need to be more cautious from now on,"

Nitha said with concern.

"1t's always the higher-ups being targeted, and most of them are security personnel.. intelligence, counter-terrorism. Who's next?"

"1t feels like a hit list, doesn't it?"

Yaninn mused, watching as Nitha walked over to the coffee machine and prepared two cups-one for herself and one for her boss.

"1t does,"

Nitha agreed, leaning against the counter as she waited for the coffee.

"This is the worst I've experienced since working here,"

Yaninn said.

"I never thought it would happen to me."

She took the cup of dark liquid that Nitha handed her.

"So, what's your next move?"

Nitha asked again.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think it's safe or practical for you to return to your room right now, not while we don't know who's behind this attack."

The question made Yaninn pause. She hadn't thought about it since the incident. Nitha was right if the attackers knew her location and had the audacity to send three men, it wasn't just a casual visit.

"I haven't decided yet.

"lfthere's anything I can do to help, let me know. Don't hesitate."

"1 will,"

Yaninn promised, almost whispering.

"Thank you."

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Operation 19

"Hey, Way, why don't you invite Chiefto stay at your place for a while?"

"What are you talking about, Jane?" "Aren't you worried about her?" "0r are you not worried?" Nitha countered. "Of course, I'm worried! "

Jane shot back.

"Then invite her. Your partner isn't around right now, right?"

"She wouldn't want to bother us,"

Jane replied knowingly.

"Then why are you asking me to invite her ifyou already know she won't come?"

Nitha scolded.

"Why don't you let someone else ask?"

"lfyou're not brave enough, none Ofus will be,"

Jane said. She and the former bodyguard were discussing Yaninn, with

Nitha feeling uneasy about the recent attack on her and fearing a repeat Of what had happened to the director, who was still in hiding.

Even though she knew Yaninn could take care of herself and wasn't an easy target, the close call with their leader left her unable to shake her concern.

The special operations team members, all present, nodded almost in unison.

"You've been with her long enough to know that someone like the boss wouldn't ask for something like this," One of them said.

"That's why we thought you should ask," Tum chimed in.

"If it's us, Ninn will definitely say no. "

They were all deliberating on who should invite Yaninn to stay somewhere safer until the situation improved, though no one knew when that might be.

"Why do you think that?" Nitha asked.

"We've worked with Ninn for so long, and none ofus even know where she lives,"

Mod said, causing Nitha to furrow her brow.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," Jane confirmed.

"You'd be the first to visit her place."

That made Nitha smile to herself, her eyes lighting up as her heart began to race unexpectedly.

"Not just visit-you'd even get to stay there for half the night,"

Jane added while the rest of the team nodded in agreement.

"Go ahead and ask her, Way,"

Pong, the team's second-best marksman, urged.

"We're all worried, but we don't know what else to do."

"You all trust me that much?"

"lfyou try anything funny, Ninn will probably shoot you herself,"

Jane teased, making Nitha's faint smile vanish instantly.

"Very funny, Jane,"

Nitha said, glaring at her.

"1 think you all worry too much. Your boss can take care of herself." "But we'd like to see someone else take care of her for a change,"

One of the team members said, and the others nodded in agreement.

"Does your boss even know how much her team worries about her?"

The former bodyguard asked with a smile.

"We don't know,"

Pong, the youngest marksman, replied.

"Whenever we try' to talk to her about it, it's like talking to a wall,"

Jane said, making Nitha laugh because she had thought the same thing. She took a sip Of water and glanced around the table at the team members, all Of whom seemed to be silently pressuring her.

Of course, Nitha understood someone like Yaninn. Her job and senior position didn't allow her to show vulnerability in front of others. But in her private moments, like that day in her room, she might have let her guard down.

The weight of her responsibilities was more than any ordinary woman could bear, yet Yaninn carried it all on her small shoulders. She was one ofthe most capable people Nitha had ever known.

But over time, suppressing normal human emotions had made her interactions with others seem strange.

Just like Jane had said earlier-it was like talking to a wall.

"A1right, alright,"

Nitha finally said, cutting the discussion short.

"1 know you're all won-ied about her. I'll do my best to keep an eye on her."

"Who else could we trust more than a former bodyguard like you?"

Tum, the deputy team leader, said with a wide grin.

The team nodded in agreement once again.

"We'll give you a perfect score on your field evaluation for this,"

Jane whispered with a mischievous grin.

i'You're ridiculous, Jennifer,"

Nitha said, glaring at her.

"This isn't something to joke about."

"Don't call me that, Way, or I'll smack you,"

Jane said, pretending to raise her hand as she got up from her chair

Nitha exclaimed, dodging out of the way.

"What's going on here?"

A familiar voice interrupted. It was Yaninn, the subject oftheir discussion, standing in the doorway of the dining room, which was usually left open.

'"Do you need something, Chief?" "Just came for some coffee " Yaninn replied casually.

"Jane,"

Nitha called, motioning toward the coffee machine.

"1'11 take care of it," Jane said quickly.

"What are you all gathered here for?"

Yaninn asked, making everyone exchange nervous glances. Gor was the first to stand, followed by Mod and Tum. Ilowever, the question was clearly directed at the new team member.

'Don't you have boxing practice scheduled today?"

'iWe're heading there now,"

Tum said, quickly leaving the room, followed by the rest of the team, leaving only Nitha and Jane behind.

"You should join them,"

Yaninn said to Nitha, who was lounging in her chair. Jane placed a ceramic mug Of coffee in front of Yaninn before hurrying after the others.

"1 don't know how to box "

Nitha replied.

"Consider it exercise. It'll keep you from getting stiff. I was planning to go, too,"

Yaninn said.

"lfyou want to spar with me, feel free "

"Don't trick me into being your punching bag, Chief,"

Nitha said knowingly.

Fifteen minutes later, Nitha found herself standing in a boxing ring, dressed in a black T-shirt and shorts that ended just above her knees. Her long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, and she wore small black gloves on both hands. Across from her stood Yaninn, dressed similarly, Around the ring, more than ten team members cheered loudly.

"1 told you I don't know how to box,"

Nitha complained, raising her left hand to block Yaninn's incoming right hook.

"Stop talking, it'll distract you. "

"Can I talk at another time, then?"

Yaninn's right fist aimed for Nitha's torso, forcing her to step back and dodge before pacing around the ring.

"Stop dodging, Way"

"If I hit you, will you make me clean the guns again?"

"Hit me first, and then we'll see,"

Yaninn challenged, advancing with a series ofpunches. Despite her efforts, none of her punches landed squarely on Nitha.

"Go for it, Way! Take the challenge! I'll help clean the guns!"

Jane shouted from the side, earning a sharp glare from Yaninn that wiped the grin offher face.

Taking advantage of the moment, Nitha stopped retreating and raised her anns, preparing to go on the offensive

"Throw a left, way!"

Jane's voice rang out again.

Yaninn caught sight ofNitha's right fist coming toward her and stepped back half a step, raising her right hand to block. She countered with a left hook aimed at Nitha's face, but it didn't land cleanly as Nitha managed to dodge just in time

'Right, boss, right!"

Pong's voice joined the cheers from the sidelines.

Nitha set her stance again, throwing a straight left punch before advancing with a flurry of right hooks. Yaninn stepped back, raising her hands to guard her face and torso.

Cheers erupted every time Nitha's punches came close to landing.

For a moment, Yaninn stopped retreating, allowing Nitha to unleash her punches while she stood firm in defense. Then, seizing an opportunity, Yaninn sidestepped, causing Nitha to stumble forward.

Taking advantage of the opening, Yaninn delivered a left hook that sent Nitha reeling to the side. Following up, she landed a right hook squarely on Nitha's face, sending her to the ground.

The crowd erupted in cheers.

"Way!"

Yaninn rushed to help her up, followed by Jane, who jumped into the ring.

"Are you okay?"

"1 told you I don't know how to box,"

Nitha mumbled, her voice muffled and pained. Her face twisted in discomfort as she groaned.

"Uéh..."

She was helped to a bench by the side of the ring.

"Are you alright, Way?"

"You hit hard,"

Nitha replied dazedly, still reeling from Yaninn's punch. She felt someone gently cradle her face, noticing the redness and a small trickle of blood on her lips.

"My face feels like it's been hit by a truck."

Yaninn chuckled, meeting Nitha's unfocused gaze.

"Jane," Yaninn called, "help me take her to my office,"

Soon, Nitha, now looking completely out of it, was laid down on a long sofa.

"I'll get some ice and a towel,"

Jane said before running off.

Yaninn sat beside Nitha, who was now groggy. She gently brushed a strand of hair from Nitha's face, studying her features intently.

"My teeth are all loose,"

Nitha muttered, drawing a soft laugh from Yaninn.

"Here's the ice and towel "

Jane announced, prompting Yaninn to pull her hand back. Jane placed a bowl of warm water, a white towel, an ice pack, and a first-aid kit on the table.

"You hit like a truck, boss. One punch and she's out,"

Jane joked, moving to clean Nitha's face.

"I'll handle it,"

Yaninn said, making Jane pause before setting the towel down in the bowl.

"A1right," Jane said.

"Take care of her for me."

She smiled before leaving and closing the door behind her. Yaninn turned back to Nitha, who was still groaning softly.

"1t's okay, boss. I can handle it myself,"

Nitha said, trying to sit up, but Yaninn gently pushed her back down.

Yaninn met her gaze, shaking her head slowly with a stern look.

Neither ofthem said anything more. Nitha lay still, almost sinking into the leather sofa, while Yaninn carefully cleaned the blood from her mce, trying to be as gentle as possible. Still, Nitha let out occasional groans of pain

"Earlier, when you were about to get hit by the last punch, you stopped moving."

Yaninn said.

"What'?"

"lfyou hadn't stopped, you wouldn't have been knocked down."

"1 don't understand what you're saying,"

She said in a tone that feigned ignorance, letting out a yelp as a warm, damp towel was gently pressed against the swollen, reddened corner of her mouth. Yaninn narrowed his eyes at her.

"1 already told you, I don't know how to box. I'm better with a gun,"

She added, only to be met with a skeptical look from the team leader. who clearly didn't believe a word she said.

The wound cleaning continued in silence after that, lasting about five more minutes until it was done. Then, an ice pack was handed to her

"Thank you," she said.

"Lie down," came the curt command.



"I'll wake you up when I'm done with work."

The order made the injured woman shift, attempting to get up.

"Stay here,"

The owner of the offce said again.

"It's okay. I can find a spot to rest near the break room,"

She replied.

"Way. "

Her name was called in a low voice, and it made her, half-sitting and halflying down, slowly recline again. She knew well enough that she couldn't refuse.

"I'll wake you up when I'm done with work "

She repeated.

With that, the owner ofthe office left, leaving her alone.

# øøøøø

Operation 20

"Way..."

The owner of the name, who had been sound asleep, stirred at the sound of her name being called. She opened her eyes to find Yaninn standing in front of her. Startled, Nitha pushed herselfup from the couch, her face still groggy as she blinked to gather her thoughts.

"Are you done with work already?"

She asked, her voice still heavy with sleep. Yaninn nodded silently and handed her a bottle ofwater with a kind gesture. Nitha glanced at the clock on the wall and realized there were still about fifteen minutes left before the official end of the workday.

"0h no, did I really sleep halfthe day away?"

"Something like that,"

Yaninn replied calmly.

"Come on, let's head home. I'll give you a ride."

Nitha looked up at her boss, frowning slightly at the suggestion.

"That's not necessary,"

She said politely, her face still swollen and red from an earlier incident.

"I think it might not be the best idea for you to be out and about right now.

She was referring to the fact that Yaninn had recently been attacked and should probably avoid public places for the time being There were still no leads on the group of men who had stormed into her condo three days ago.

Yaninn's voice was firm, a mix of a command and a request.

"0kay, got it,"

Nitha replied with a sheepish smile, scratching the back of her neck.

"Let me go change first."

She was still in her workout clothes from earlier that morning.

"I'll wait by the building entrance."

Less than ten minutes later, the former bodyguard found herself sitting in the passenger seat of a large black sedan with her boss, Yaninn, behind the wheel.

"Can I ask where you're staying these days?"

Nitha inquired with genuine concern. She knew Yaninn was more than capable of taking care of herself, but still, she couldn't help but worry.

Yaninn didn't answer right away. She pressed her lips together, deep in thought.

"1'm not sure yet," She finally admitted.

"Okay, "

Nitha responded, and the conversation lapsed into silence.

"Do you want to grab something to eat first?"

Yaninn asked after a while.

"No, thank you. I have some food in the fridge at home. I'll probably just make some rice porridge,"

Nitha replied.

"1t's hard for me to eat much right now, and I don't want to trouble you either. "

"1 feel responsible for your condition,"

Yaninn said simply.

Before long, the black sedan pulled up in front of a single-story house not far from the office building. Despite the relatively short distance, the evening traffic had made the journey take longer than expected

"You should come inside,"

Nitha offered.

"No, it's fine. I don't want to impose. You should rest,"

Yaninn declined politely.

"Please, it's no trouble,"

Nitha insisted. She stepped out ofthe car and went to unlock the chest-high sliding metal gate. Yaninn hesitated for a moment before following her inside.

They walked to the front porch, where a glass door with sheer white curtains stood. Nitha scanned her fingerprint and entered a digital passcode to unlock the door, a precaution that reflected her background in security.

Once the door unlocked, the lights inside automatically turned on, casting a warm glow that made the house feel inviting.

Nitha slid open the glass door and gestured for Yaninn to enter.

"Please, come in."

Yaninn stepped inside, taking in the spacious single-story home. It seemed a bit large for one person but had a cozy atmosphere.

The living room was just a short distance from the front door, with a seating area, a work desk, bookshelves, and storage cabinets all neatly arranged.

On the right wall, a 65-inch television was mounted above a cabinet The top of the cabinet was mostly empty except for a small flagpole about eight inches tall.

The triangular flag was blue on one side and black on the other, with a fivepointed star and the number "519" in white at the center.

"Were you part ofthe 519?" Yaninn asked, surprised.

"Yes," Nitha confirmed.

"Do you know about Unit 519?" did some research," Yaninn replied curtly.

'Research about me?"

"Something like that. I learned that Unit 5 19 is a special protection team that only takes on high-profile clients, often for international assignments."

"That's correct,"

Nitha said with a smile.

"Make yourself at home, boss. Ifyou're hungry, feel free to grab something from the fridge."

She pointed to the double-door refrigerator near the entrance to the kitchen.

"1'11 be right back."

"Your house is really nice,"

Yaninn commented.

The compliment made Nitha pause and turn back to face her boss, who was now casually looking around the living room. Yaninn's gaze met hers with a curious expression.

"Is something wrong?" Yaninn asked.

"Do you have any plans for where you'll be staying?"

Nitha inquired.

## "Hmm,"

Yaninn mused, thinking it over.

"To be honest, I haven't decided yet. For safety reasons, I might try to change locations every three or four days. Ifl can't find a place, I'll probably just stay at the office for now. It's the most convenient option."

"Why not stay at the unit's housing? It should be safe enough,"

Nitha suggested. "NO, it's not convenient,"

Yaninn replied.

"Honestly, I'm a bit particular about where I stay."

Nitha walked to the fridge, pulled out two bottles of cold water, and handed one to Yaninn. She pressed the other bottle against the swollen corner of her mouth, wincing slightly.

"Would you be comfortable staying here?"

Nitha asked, catching Yaninn off guard.

"1've been meaning to ask for days, but I figured you'd say no."

"Why ask now?"

"Well, since you're already here, consider it a tour before you decide,"

Nitha joked lightly. "1 wouldn't want to impose, Way,"

Yaninn said firmly.

As expected, Yaninn wasn't the type to easily accept help from others.

"Chief,"

Nitha called, making Yaninn look at her.

"1t's okay to ask for or accept help from others sometimes."

Yaninn held Nitha's gaze for a moment, a silence stretching between them that felt longer than it actually was. To Nitha, it seemed as though time had stopped, and all she could see were the deep, shimmering eyes Of the woman in front of her.

"1 understand that for you... it's difficult,"

Nitha said softly, pressing the cold bottle against the Other side Of her bruised face.

"1t's a shame when the duties we take pride in start to chip away at our humanity. Before we know it, we lose sight of who we are."

"Being yourself doesn't always align with the job,"

Yaninn replied.

"1 think we can't truly help others if we don't know who we are or what we're risking our lives for,"

Nitha countered.

Yaninn averted her gaze, turning her head slightly. She didn't respond, and Nitha let out a heavy sigh before moving to the kitchen.

"Chief,

Nitha called as Yaninn walked past her. "1'm sorry if I said something wrong."

"1'm just going to grab my bag,"

Yaninn replied, making Nitha smile widely despite the pain in her mouth.

"And by the way... we're offthc clock now, so just call me by my name."

With that, Yaninn stepped out, but Nitha quickly grabbed her arm.

'iWait,"

Nitha said, leading her boss to the front door. She pulled out her phone from her pocket.

'Register your fingerprint for the house. I'll send you the passcode in a message. Once you memorize it, please delete it."

Yaninn raised an eyebrow at the suggestion.

"You're giving me full access to your house?"

"Yes, of course,"

Nitha replied matter-of-factly.

"You shouldn't trust people so easily,"

Yaninn said firmly.

"You were in a protection agency. How can you trust someone so quickly?"

"1'm not in the agency anymore,"

Nitha replied, entering the passcode and nodding for Yaninn to place her thumbs on the scanner.

"Way," Yaninn began, still hesitant

"1 don't trust people easily, Yaninn,"

Nitha said with a faint smile, wincing slightly from the pain in her mouth.

"Just you."

Yaninn said softly, placing a hand on Nitha's arm and giving it a gentle squeeze as if to offer reassurance.

"Don't refuse, please. You've been through enough lately. Let this place be a source Of comfort for you," Nitha said. This time, Yaninn didn't argue. "lfyou weren't so stressed, you wouldn't have invited me to spar with you,"

Nitha added knowingly.

"So, how was it? Knocking someone out-did it make you feel better?"

"1s that why you stopped holding back?" Yaninn asked, realizing the reason.

"You let me hit you."

"You're overthinking it, Yaninn. I told you I'm not great at sparring."

Nitha said with a laugh before heading back inside.

"Go grab your bag, and I'll make something for us to eat."

"Chief, do you have any leads on the people who attacked you?"

Nitha asked as they sat down to eat rice porridge made from whatever was in the fridge. Nitha's face was still swollen and red from their earlier sparring session, while Yaninn, dressed in a loose black T-shirt with the unit's insignia and shorts, seemed more relaxed than Nitha had ever seen her.

"1'm still looking into it,"

Yaninn replied, her voice low as she scooped a spoonful ofporridge into her mouth.

"Do you have any idea why they targeted you?"

Nitha pressed.

"It might be the same reason they went after Suchada or Mr. Watin,"

Yaninn speculated.

"Suchada and Mr. Watin handle administration while I oversee operations. If you're trying to create chaos, taking out the operations team makes things a lot easier."

Nitha nodded in agreement.

"We need to stop them before they escalate." "Escalate? You mean this isn't serious yet?"

"1 don't think so,"

Yaninn said confidently.

"This is just one part of a larger plan. In my opinion, this group operates with a clear division of roles."

She took another bite of porridge. "Your pomdge is really good. "

"Thank you," Nitha said with a smile.

"When you say 'division ofroles,' what do you mean?" "1t's like an organization with a chain of command "

Yaninn explained, her mouth still half-full

"They manage their operations systematically, assigning specific tasks to different members.

"Really""

Nitha asked, intrigued. Yaninn nodded in response.

"Why do you think that?"

"Why don't you tell me what you think?"

Yaninn challenged. "But I'm asking for your expertise,"

Nitha protested.

"Besides, I made you delicious porridge,"

Yaninn smirked slightly,

"You're good at deflecting, Way. You're just too lazy to think,"

Yaninn teased.

"Come on, I'm waiting I enjoy listening to you explain things. It's always interesting and engaging,"

Nitha said, her compliment making Yaninn glance at her.

"1 like it."

"But during lectures, I noticed you always sneaked in a nap,"

Yaninn countered.

"That was because of the air conditioning, not you," Nitha defended herself.

"So, what can we learn from their division of roles?" "It's a traditional way ofmanaging an organization, 't

Yaninn explained.

"Nowadays, violent groups Often operate without a clear chain Of command. Within a large group, they split into smaller factions, each with its own leader. There's no overarching leader, making it harder to track them. If the main leader is captured, the group usually collapses. The old-fashioned chain of command involves appointing a central leader, clearly dividing roles like assassination, creating chaos, or staging situations, and everyone must follow the established rules. This could suggest that the leader or commander might have a background in the military, police, or government service, structuring the organization in a way that facilitates easy command. 't

"1t's strange,"

The homeowner remarked.

"That they would target the administrative side of the agency so directly I don't think I've ever seen anything this bold. "

"1'm not entirely sure oftheir motivation either, but I'm fairly confident we'll find out soon,"

Nitha's dinner companion responded.

"This group is more specific than any we've encountered before. Most insurgent groups avoid provoking government agencies because they know they'll be closely monitored and tracked. But this time, they're targeting anti-terror units like ours or intelligence agencies directly. Do you know what that means?"

"What does it mean?"

"1t means there will be no negotiations,"

Yaninn replied with a tense expression.

"Everyone knows our agency is directly responsible, but targeting the agency's leadership makes it nearly impossible to have any discussions or find a mutual resolution. "

This time, Nitha nodded in understanding as she clumsily scooped rice from her bowl and ate.

"I'm sorry for putting you in this situation,"

The special agent suddenly said, gesturing toward the swollen, reddened face of the new team member.

"Don't worry about it,"

The other replied.

"1t's no big deal ifit helps ease your stress a little. "

She tried to smile after speaking but winced in pain.

Nitha noticed the other woman staring at her for a long moment, but she pretended not to notice and quietly focused on her meal. Someone like Yaninn had plenty on her mind. Just dealing with work was stressful enough, and now she had been attacked herself.

From being someone who saved lives, she now had to be cautious about her own. If it were her, she might have started losing her composure, too.

But for some reason, the former bodyguard felt an urge to help the other woman. Perhaps it was because ofthe job she had taken on, or maybe there was something more to it,

Yaninn was tough. Ifyou spoke or acted carelessly around her, it was like running headfirst into a two-by-four ready to knock you out for a week. But her toughness came from the responsibility ofprotecting many lives. She had to ensure that every team member followed orders to avoid mistakes that could lead to risks and losses.

A woman willing to take on such responsibility for others' lives must have a deeply compassionate side.

That might be the question Nitha wanted to find the answer to.

Or perhaps... she already had the answer, just by looking deeper into her own heart.

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Operation 21

Over the past few days, Agent Yaninn felt like her head was about to explode.

It was rather strange that the recent three or four incidents of unrest seemed to leave no traceable leads.

The rooftop sniper incident still lingered in her mind Yaninn's thoughts kept circling around how to prevent such a tragic event from happening again.

Although unrest wasn't something that occurred frequently, every time it did, it left significant damage and wounds to the people involved.

These events weren't new, but recently, they had become more significant and closer to home. The use of force, violence, or even the declaration of war to achieve certain goals had been around for ages. In the end, no one could claim righteousness amidst the ruins.

This was what weighed heavily on the senior special agent's heart.

Yaninn wasn't sure how much longer she could continue in a role she once took pride in. Sometimes, the job she loved might no longer suit her. It was a role that slowly eroded her conscience and humanity, bit by bit until she no longer felt like herself.

She wasn't entirely sure why she was still here. Perhaps she didn't have enough time left to reclaim her sense of self But it seemed like nothing mattered to her anymore.

She felt a certain pity for herself.

First, there was the sniper case, where all the perpetrators were killed, with the head of the intelligence being the primary target. Second, there were the cases of the executive assassination. And third, her own case, which still had no leads.

She couldn't understand what was happening.

Even though She was fairly confident that the perpetrators were part of the same group, it felt like she had hit a dead end. She couldn't pinpoint any specific group of insurgents because their methods were too scattered and inconsistent.

What connected these cases?

If she could answer that question, she might find some information to continue her investigation.

The right hand of the operations team leader tapped impatiently on the keyboard before the screen lit up. But this laptop wasn't Yaninn's. It was one she had taken from Suchada's office,

Deep down, she hoped to find something useful, even though she wasn't sure what she was looking for. The autopsy and crime scene reports sent from the police department had been opened so many times they were nearly worn out, but Yaninn still hadn't found anything concrete.

She continued to open document files on the computer, starting with the most recent ones, before the unexpected incident occurred.

Most of the files were official documents and operation reports

Additionally, files were pulled from the database. One file that caught Yaninn's attention was a list of insurgent groups that had been inactive for the past five years,

Typically, recurring unrest by the same groups would have some repetitive patterns, even if the methods varied. Some groups were capable of anything-planting bombs, taking hostages, mass shootings, hijacking planes, spreading false information to create chaos and fear, or other tactics. The only commonality was their goals or demands.

However, smce there were no demands or statements yet, Yaninn couldn't determine the direction ofthese incidents.

One thing she was fairly certain ofwas that this was just the beginning.

As she had told Nitha the other day, she believed this group had a clear chain of command and division ofroles, much like an old-fashioned organizational structure.

One group caused chaos, diverted attention, and targeted obstacles. She was quite sure she was one of those obstacles, which wasn't surprising given her role as the team leader directly responsible for this matter. But she hadn't expected it to hit so close to home.

She might need to identify which groups used such methods.

Before long, she began typing to search for the information she had just speculated about.

The search results listed about fourteen groups under surveillance that employed assassination tactics. Some groups were rumored to have disbanded, others had been inactive for the past two or three years, and some had their leaders arrested, which ruled them out.

The senior agent printed out the information she had just searched from the agency's database to examme it more thoroughly. She had to find something.

The sound of a knock on her office door broke the silence after Yaninn had Spent over two hours reading and analyzing information about each insurgent group. So far, she had only been able to rule out three groups after analyzing their characteristics, methods, weapons, and interrogation reports.

She still hadn't found a pattern that matched the incidents she was investigating, the ones that had nearly cost her life.

"Come in," she said.

It was a former protective unit member, a rookie about her age, who walked in holding a black ceramic coffee mug.

"Way, " Yaninn greeted

"Jane asked me to bring you coffee. She noticed you didn't go out for your usual mid-morning coffee today, "

The visitor said, placing the mug in front of the team leader.

"Thank you,"

Yaninn replied, looking up with a faint smile she couldn't suppress.

"I've just been a bit busy."

Her words prompted the visitor to glance at the scattered documents on her desk as Yaninn took a slow sip of coffee.

"Are you hungry?"

The other asked kindly.

"No, I'm fine," Yaninn replied.

"Why don't you sit down?"

She gestured, and the visitor complied.

"I'm reviewing past data on insurgent groups to see if any match the patterns we're encountering.

Nitha glanced at the documents Yaninn mentioned.

"1s there anything I can help with?"

She offered.

"1'11 teach you how to analyze insurgent activity patterns. Do you have

"For you, boss, I'll always make time,"

Nitha replied with a toothy grm.

"0therwise, I might get assigned to clean guns again."

"This time, I'll have you clean the bathroom,"

Yaninn said in a deadpan tone, teasing the other, which only made Nitha grin wider.

"1s my bathroom at home clean enough for you?"

Nitha quipped.

"Keep talking,"

Yaninn retorted with a slight smirk.

"Alright, let's put the bathroom talk aside for now."

"Alright, I'm ready for a one-on-one lesson with the boss,"

Nitha said, sitting up straight in her chair with a focused expression. Her words made Yaninn shoot her a brief, sharp look before beginning to speak.

"I'm trying to identify the patterns ofthe group we're dealing with by comparing them to recorded insurgent activities,"

Yaninn began explaining.

"Typically, even if insurgent groups use different methods, ifthe incidents come from the same group, they usually leave some patterns behindwhether it's the methods, weapons, timing, symbolic gestures, or even the chosen victims. Though the latter isn't always specific, as most aim to impact the masses without caring who. "

"What about the group we're dealing with?"

Nitha asked.

"1 haven't seen any patterns yet,"

Yaninn admitted.

"Oh... I see,"

Nitha responded, letting out a dry laugh.

"From what I've observed so far, we haven't been able to gather much from the crime scenes. Even though there's evidence that the bullet marks at two of the scenes match, all the perpetrators are dead. The ones who escaped after the assassination attempt on the director are still at large. The victims don't follow a clear pattern, except that they work in security-related fields,"

She added thoughtfully.

'ISO, where do we go from here?"

"1've been looking through Suchada's computer files,"

Yaninn said.

"Oh?" Nitha intempted.

"So, when you went to her offce after work the other day."

"You saw me?" Yaninn asked.

"It was a coincidence,"

Nitha quickly replied.

"1 didn't mean to see, but I followed to check."

She looked around the room, avoiding eye contact.

"Let's just say you didn't see anything."

"Can 1 do that?"

Nitha asked, receiving another sharp look.

"Yes, of course. I didn't see or know anything, boss,"

She said, addressing Yaninn as she usually did.

"1 just borrowed it to look through,"

Yaninn explained.

"But I didn't find anything because I don't even know what I'm looking for."

"Are you going to return it?" Nitha asked.

"Way, " Yaninn said firmly.

"Yes... yes," Nitha quickly replied.

"1 won't ask anymore. I didn't see or know anything, really,"

She said before changing the subject.

"so, what's our next step? Also... I want to talk about you, boss. Since the day you were attacked at the condo, you haven't called a team meeting to discuss it."

"1 didn't want anyone to worry, Yaninn explained.

"That's impossible," Nitha said.

"The team members have been meeting for dinner almost every evening to discuss this, but no one dares to ask you directly. "

"Really?" Yaninn asked.

"Why would I lie to you, Yaninn?"

Nitha replied, noticing that Yaninn's previously tense expression seemed to relax slightly.

"0f course, they're worried about their team leader. "

"That's exactly why I didn't want to say anything to make them worry," Yaninn said.

"You should say something, at least, to reassure them that you can handle it,"

Nitha suggested.

"1'm not sure ifl can handle it,"

Yaninn admitted, surprising Nitha.

"To be honest, I'm just another victim in this case. "

"Yaninn." Nitha began.

"Never mind. Let's just say I've taken note of it. I'll think about how to address the team later,"

Yaninn said, cutting off the conversation.

"Let's get back to what we were discussing earlier. We're wasting time.

Nitha agreed, though she fell silent for a moment as if deep in thought.

"1 think..."

Yaninn said, her eyes scanning the room as if contemplating something.

"It might be better to discuss this with the team in the small meeting room."

Suddenly, she changed her mind, stood up, and began gathering the documents on her desk into a folder.

"Call a meeting for me I'll join in five minutes."

Senior Special Agent Yaninn sat at the head of the small meeting room table, with the Team One members present and focused on her Despite the tension or worry she might have felt, Yaninn maintained her usual composed demeanor. Her face rarely betrayed her emotions, a sight her team had grown accustomed to.

"Is there something urgent you need to discuss?"

The deputy team leader asked, his face showing a hint of concern.

"How have you all been lately?" Yaninn asked in return.

"Has anything unusual happened?"

Everyone shook their heads and denied it, one by one.

"And you, Yaninn... are you okay?" Korn asked hesitantly.

"1 mean, not that you seem... not okay."

"1'm fine,"

Yaninn replied in a steady voice.

"Thank you all for your concern."

"I'm fine,"

Yaninn replied in a steadyvoice.

"Thank you all for your concern."

"lfthere's anything we can do to help, just let us know,"

Mod offered.

"We're here for you."

"Thank you," Yaninn said sincerely.

"lfyou need to take a few days off to clear your head, I can handle things in your absence,"

Tum suggested kindly.

'Not yet, "

Yamnn replied, shifting in her chair.

"Even ifl took time off, I wouldn't be able to rest. I want to resolve this first."

"So, what's the reason for this meeting?" Jane asked.

"1 need your help to think this through,"

The team leader said straightforwardly.

"1 can't figure it out on my own. You were there during the incident, so you might have noticed something that I or the security cameras missed.

Nitha noticed the team members immediately straightening up in their chairs, their attention fixed intently on their leader.

"Absolutely,"

They responded in unison.

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Operation 22

Yaninn scanned the faces of her team members, each one looking back at her with serious expressions. For a fleeting moment, she felt a warmth of reassurance, a feeling she hadn't experienced in what seemed like ages. The team leader's gaze briefly shifted to the new recruit, who offered a faint smile of encouragement.

"Alright..."

The female offcer began, her voice uncertain as ifunsure of what exactly to address.

"1 still stand by what I said earlier-everyone needs to stay vigilant. We have no idea what might happen next. I'm doing my best to figure out who's causing this chaos within our center, but the clues we have aren't taking us anywhere. During the ambush, did any of you notice anything unusual?" Yaninn noticed the team exchanging glances.

'Mod and Pong, did you see anything when you went up to the building?"

"1 didn't see anything,"

Replied Mod, the team's sharpshooter.

'Neither did l," Pong added.

"After Mod took care ofthe first target, I just followed her lead. That's all."

His tone was calm and steady.

"Yaninn, do you have any idea which group might be behind this?"

Jane asked.

"1've been digging into the history of old groups, but I haven't found anything yet. "

"1've been looking into it, too,"

The team leader replied.

"But there's no concrete evidence or connections pointing to any specific group. Their methods are so inconsistent that it's hard to analyze."

"But if we set aside the ambush, all the incidents involve targeted attacks on high-ranking security officials, "

The former bodyguard chimed in.

"What does that tell us, boss?"

"1've been researching old groups, both those that have disbanded and those still somewhat active. Maybe if we knew what the intelligence chief was investigating, we could figure out which group it might be. The problem is, the intelligence unit hasn't sent us the information we requested."

"That's going to be tough," said Korn.

"1f they were going to cooperate, they wouldn't be taking this long. I think" "Exactly Even when I had Em call to push then, we got nowhere,"

The female officer said referring to the department head who often worked with the national intelligence.

"It's stalled everything. The police are slow, and the shooter who ambushed me is in the ICU, barely hanging on. We can't get a statement from him."

The room fell silent. Everyone was deep in thought, trying to figure out how to gather the information or evidence needed to move the case forward.

This might be the toughest case Yaninn had ever worked on, not to mention the fact that she herselfwas a victim.

For her, being a victim wasn't as frustrating as not being able to pin down the culprit. Every lead seemed to hit a dead end.

The team leader finally spoke after a long pause.

"That's it for today If any of you come across anything new, you can reach out to me anytime."

"Understood, boss,"

The team responded in unison.

After the meeting, Yaninn dragged herself to the team's shared lounge, hoping a cup of coffee might help ease her stress. Her mind felt completely fogged, and it seemed like a migraine was on its way.

She walked straight to the fridge, grabbed a bottle ofwater, and pressed it against her forehead and the back of her neck, trying to cool down. Her thoughts were consumed by everything that was happening, filled with one pressing question:

What's the next step?

Balancing the roles of both an officer and a victim made this case uniquely challenging. It felt as though her ability to see the bigger picture something She had always relied on as an investigator, had vanished.

Yaninn blinked rapidly, trying to refocus, still standing in front ofthe fridge. She heard footsteps approaching from behind, a sound she recognized even though she hadn't known the person for long.

"Boss, are you okay?"

The familiar, concerned voice made her turn around.

"1 don't know," she admitted.

"1 don't even know how I'm supposed to feel. It's like this migraine is about to take over."

Nitha stepped closer, her expression filled with worry.

"How's your injury?"

Yaninn asked, noticing the bruises still visible on Nitha's face.

"Why? Are you ready for another boxing match, boss? Because I don't know how to box,"

Nitha joked, making Yaninn chuckle softly-a rare sound in the past few days.

"You're all talk. If I feel like punching something, I'll stick to the punching bag for now,"

Yaninn replied, leaning against the fridge. 'Maybe you should take half a day off, boss. "

Yaninn murmured as Nitha moved closer.

"1've been overthinking so much my head feels like it's going to explode,"

She whispered, looking up at Nitha.

"But even if it does, I doubt I'll figure anything out."

"How about some target practice?"

"Shooting doesn't really help me blow off steam."

"Then let's go for a run."

"Way."

"Boss, you're way too stressed. Come on."

Without waiting for a response, Nitha grabbed Yanmn's arm and gently guided her to a chair.

"Sit down. I'll make you some coffee."

Yaninn didn't protest. She complied, realizing that having someone care for her like this felt oddly comforting.

Before, only DOI had looked after her If she had felt the same way about him, they might have been together long ago. But no matter how kind he was, Yaninn always saw him as more of a brother. And perhaps, if they had been together, she wouldn't be standing here today, given his sudden passing during that tragic incident.

Now, she wasn't sure how she felt about Nitha or whether history might repeat itself. But that wasn't important at the moment. She decided to set those thoughts aside for now.

A black ceramic coffee mug was placed in front of Yaninn a few minutes later, accompanied by some snacks from her thoughtful teammate.

"Thank you," she whispered softly.

"Boss, you don't look okay," Nitha remarked.

"That's because I'm not."

"Maybe you should go home. I can take you."

"Home?"

Yaninn repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Your home?"

"Well, if you want to claim it as your home, I wouldn't mind. It gets lonely living alone,"

Nitha teased, making Yaninn stare at her for a long moment.

"No, I'm fine. It's just a migraine-an old issue."

"Alright then,"

Nitha said, leaning closer. She gently tucked Yaninn's stray hair behind her ears and placed her fingers on Yaninn's temples, massaging them with care.

Yaninn was startled at first, her hand instinctively moving to push Nitha's away, but she stopped herself and instead lifted her coffee mug to take a sip.

"This morning, I was reviewing the case files."

"Nope. No work talk right now,"

Nitha interrupted.

"We don't want your brain leaking out ofyour ears"

Yaninn pressed her lips together and fell silent, letting Nitha continue massaging her temples. She glanced up at Nitha, feeling something she couldn't quite put into words.

"Feeling better?"

Nitha asked gently. Yaninn closed her eyes slowly, trying to relax.

"Yeah," she replied softly.

"lt's helping."

"You look really pale. How about we grab something to eat outside before heading home?"

Strangely, Yaninn felt her cheeks warm slightly at the mention of going home together.

"What could you possibly eat besides porridge?"

"1'd be happy just sipping water and watching you eat, boss."

"Sorry. "

Yaninn murmured, opening her eyes slowly to meet Nitha's dark gaze.

"For getting you hurt and being such a burden!"

"A burden? Not at all. Believe me, I'm more than willing."

"Really?"

"Absolutely, Willing and sincere" "Then why did you transfer here?"

"Well."

"Answer honestly. "

Nitha pretended to think for a moment.

"1f it meant meeting and taking carc of you, boss, then it was worth the transfer.

"That's your honest answer?"

"The most honest answer No kidding,"

Nitha said with a smile.

"But before, you said you wanted more excitement in your life." "Working with you is exciting, boss," Nitha quipped.

"At this point, do you still not trust me?"

"1t's not that I don't trust you. I'm just curious, so I asked,"

Yaninn replied.

"Then tell me..."

Nitha leaned in slightly, so close that Yaninn could feel her breath. Yet, she didn't pull away.

"What would it take for you to believe I have nothing to hide?"

"1 never said I didn't believe you, Nitha. And don't forget, I'm staying at your place right now."

"Who knows."

Nitha moved even closer, her actions making Yaninn's heart race unexpectedly.

But she still didn't pull away.

'Maybe you're staying at my place to keep an eye on me."

That comment brought a faint smile to Yaninn's lips. Despite the lingering headache and the soothing touch ofNitha's fingers on her temples, she couldn't help but smile at the playful remark.

"lfyou're innocent, how could I possibly catch you doing anything wrong,

"You've got a way with words,"

Nitha said, her finger brushing lightly along Yaninn's jawline before stopping at her chin.

"Chief."

"You should know by now that I'm not great with words,"

Yaninn admitted.

"lfl'm curious about something, I'll ask directly. But some people don't give straight answers."

"Then why don't you try getting to know me better? That way, you'll see

that I. "

Nitha leaned in even closer.

"Don't..

"Have...."

At that moment, Yaninn could feel Nitha's breath near the tip of her nose.

Until.

Thud!

The sound Of the door opening made them both pull away instantly.

# øøøøø

Operation 23

The door swung open, startling both of them. Nitha quickly pulled her hand back and stepped away, settling into a chair.

"0h, hey, boss... Way,"

Jane greeted as she entered with the rest of the team.

"Are you okay, boss? Your face is really red. "

"Uh... yeah, 1.."

She stammered, glancing at Nitha, who maintained a neutral expression.

"Just a slight headache. Where is everyone else?"

The team leader asked.

"They're over at the mechanics' department. Big's testing the drone for the first time today, so everyone went to check if any adjustments were needed. I thought I'd grab some coffee first. Would you like a cup to help with your headache, boss?"

Jane offered kindly, heading to grab some snacks provided by the offlce and placing them on the table.

already have one," Yaninn replied.

"Way, what's up?"

"What?"

Way responded, her tone sharp.

"You're awfully quiet."

"Are you implying that I usually talk too much?"

Nitha feigned irritation, trying to mask her unease. She wasn't sure if Jane had seen the moment between her and Yaninn earlier that almost well, almost happened.

"Make me another cup of coffee,"

She added, noticing Jane's oblivious expression and hoping she hadn't caught on.

"Sure thing, sis,"

Jane replied, narrowing her eyes slightly at the two ofthem, who avoided looking at each other. She then walked over to the coffee machine.

Before long, two cups of coffee were placed on the table. Jane also arranged the communal snacks and sat down next to her close senior, opening a bag of potato chips and pouring them onto a plate before pushing it to the center of the table.

"1fI may ask," Jane began, "how have you been lately?"

"I'm fine,"

Yaninn replied, taking a sip of her coffee.

"We're all worried about you," Jane said, her concern evident.

"Everyone is." "Thank you," Yaninn responded in her usual calm tone.

"The boss can take care of herself,"

The fonner bodyguard chimed in.

"But what about you, Jane? How are things with your partner?"

"Is it okay to talk about personal stuff right now?"

Jane asked, glancing at the team leader.

"Go ahead," Yaninn permitted. "1t's almost over," Jane admitted.

"A1most over? Really?"

Nitha questioned, raising an eyebrow.

'Yeah, almost breaking up,"

Jane clarified.

"What? After all this time? Are you really not going to work it out? That's a shame,"

Nitha said, surprised.

"1f it's not working, it's not working,"

Jane replied vaguely, her uncertainty showing.

"l'm starting to come to terms with it."

"Hold on. Don't jump to conclusions just yet. Ifyou set your mind on breaking up, it might actually happen. Have you tried talking it out?"

Nitha advised.

"We've talked, but it didn't go anywhere,"

Jane admitted. Her gaze shifted to the team leader, who was munching on a potato chip.

"He wants me to quit the team."

That made Yaninn glance sharply at her subordinate, who gave her a sheepish smile. "Well, that's something."

Nitha remarked.

"He's been saying for a while that the job is too dangerous, but I kept brushing it off, Then, after the sniper incident, things escalated,"

Jane explained, her tone slightly somber. However, Yaninn noticed that jane's eyes didn't reflect much sadness. Perhaps Jane had already started coming to terms with it.

"But I've been ignoring it until now, when I have to make a choice."

"And what do you think, Jane?"

This time, the team leader asked, her voice filled with genuine concern.

"I can reduce your field hours, and you can take a desk job. Way is here now, so we can manage. I can cover for you in the field for a while,"

Yaninn offered, her eyes showing a rare glimmer Of hope despite her lingering headache.

"NO way," Jane immediately declined.

trained so hard and risked my life to be here. Getting into the main operations team wasn't easy. If he doesn't like the job I'm proud of, then we're done."

'Girl..." Nitha dragged out the word.

"Calm down first,"

She said, with Yaninn nodding in agreement.

"Work isn't everything in life, Jane"

"Neither is a boyfriend," Jane retorted.

"You have to understand his perspective, too,"

The team leader added.

"0ur job is dangerous. It's not surprising that he's worried about you."

"True," Nitha agreed.

"1fhe wasn't worried, that would be strange."

"1 understand," Jane said,

"That's why I've been ignoring it whenever he brings it up. But if I have to choose, I choose my job. This job is my pride. Way, you know how hard we've worked, how much we've cried to get here So for me, ifwe're going to be together, he has to support who I am. If he can't support me, then don't stand in my way. Don't make me choose because my job is the only answer."

Her voice was firm and unwavering.

"Calm down calm down,"

The former bodyguard said again, her tone stern.

'You're too hot-headed."

"Is this why you don't have a boyfriend, boss?"

Jane suddenly blurted out, unable to resist. The question left Yaninn momentarily flustered and silent.

"Jane, don't be rude!" Nitha scolded.

"This is work, and we're talking about you."

"Sorry, I was just curious,"

Jane said, still pressing on.

'IAS for Way, I already know no one's interested in her."

"Watch your mouth!"

Nitha snapped, but Jane just pouted in response.

"lsn't that right, boss?"

Jane turned back to Yaninn, popping a chip into her mouth.

"1'm starting to understand why being alone is more peaceful. Back then, with Dol... you didn't accept him, did you?"

"You knew DOI had feelings for me?"

Yaninn asked, avoiding eye contact with Nitha, who was listening intently.

"Everyone in the office knew," Jane replied.

"Oh is that so?"

Yaninn said, surprised, before grabbing another chip.

"For a job like this, it's true,"

She said vaguely.

"You never know if each mission will be your last But I try to make sure you won't die."

"Thank you, boss," Jane said.

"1f it's you, I trust you."

Those words made Yaninn look at Jane with an unreadable expression before glancing at Nitha, who was smiling at Jane's comment. Nitha took the opportunity to nod in encouragement.

At that moment, Yaninn's shoulders seemed to relax slightly, and her demeanor softened.

"So, you're not taking a desk job? I can find you a position analyzing the financial routes of insurgent groups. We're short on people there,"

Yaninn offered.

"No way," Jane declined again.

"1'm not smart enough to analyze all that. Just watching you do it gives me a headache."

"1t's something you can learn, Jane,"

The team leader said.

"1 had to learn too. I didn't just walk in knowing how to do it."

"1fI have to sit in an offce, read stacks of documents, and write endless reports, I'll lose my mind,"

Jane insisted, rejecting the analyst position Yaninn suggested.

"so, you're choosing the job over your boyfriend?

"The job, yes," Jane confirmed.

"You're definitely winning the Outstanding Officer Award, Jane,"

Nitha said sarcastically.

"Way doesn't have one, and it's fine,"

Jane shot back, making Way accidentally meet Nitha's gaze before both quickly looked away

"1t's not the same " Nitha said.

"1'm used to it. But you've been with him for so long. It's a shame. It's not easy to find someone who can stick with you for that long. Starting over with someone new means adjusting all over again '

"We've been together this long. We should be past this kind oftalk, Way.

I've been doing this job tör a long time, not just starting."

"1 feel like you're stubbornly trying to break up,"

Yaninn commented,

"She's stubborn,"

The former bodyguard said knowingly. "1'11 call Fon and have her scold you,"

She added, referring to Jane's mentor.

"Fon's busy with her kid. She doesn't have time to scold me anymore."

"You're not getting any younger, you know."

"Worry about yourself, sis," Jane retorted immediately.

"Fine, do what you want,"

Nitha said, exasperated.

"Call me if you need anything, 24/7, okay?"

"Got it, sis," Jane replied. "1'11 set you up with someone"

"Don't!"

The former bodyguard snapped.

"Don't meddie in my business. Just focus on yourself so you don't end up drunk and yelling, forcing me to drag you to the couch again. And don't bring this up in front of Chief."

"It's fine I can listen," Yaninn said.

"0r is there something you don't want me to hear?"

"No no," Jane quickly said.

"Nothing, nothing at all."

"Way wouldn't have anything, boss,"

Jane said knowingly.

"There's not even a bamboo grove, so how could there be anything in it?" "What what kind ofjoke is that, Jane?"

"Playing hard to get, Way. That's why there's nothing in the bamboo grove."

"Playing hard to get? What are we even talking about? Weren't we discussmg your love life? Why is this about me now?"

"My story's over,"

Jane said, still teasing.

"Really over this time. I'm bored "

She grumbled.

"Think carefully, Jane,"

The team leader said with concern. "Let me know if you need help."

"With you two here, I feel at ease. Way..." Jane turned abruptly to her close senior. "Stay here for a long time, okay?"

"1 just got here. I'm not going anywhere,"

Way replied, though her gaze shifted to Yaninn, who was also looking at her.

"And I'm not the type to move around like a wandering spirit."

'Oh, please,"

Jane said, rolling her eyes slightly.

"We all know you're.... well-connected."

That comment made Yaninn glare at the former bodyguard.

"What? You're just Spouting nonsense, Jennifer.

'Don't call me that,"

Jane protested, standing up.

"I'm leaving. I don't want to miss the drone training. I'll ask to try it out." She grabbed her coffee cup and walked out, with Nitha glaring after her. "So, you're well-connected here, huh?"

"Don't listen to Jane, boss,"

Nitha quickly said.

"She's just rambling. There's no such thing."

"Just don't let me catch you, then," Yaninn said, standing up.

"Let's go check out the new dranes."

# øøøøø

Operation 24

"Em,"

Yaninn called out to the department head, who had once promised to contact the National Intelligence Agency for information following the sniper incident. She caught him as he was heading to his offlce late one mornmg.

"0h, Boss Ninn! What's up?"

Ile replied, stopping in his tracks and turning to face her.

"1 wanted to ask about the information you said you'd request from the intelligence office. Did you manage to get anything? I've tried reaching out myself, but they won't share anything," She said, her tone tinged with frustration.

"Ah... right,"

He said, as if suddenly remembering.

"I did call them,"

The forty-one-year-old man explained. "But they didn't give me much Of anything."

"Well, that's just great,"

She muttered, clearly disappointed

"Their usual excuse is that the information is classified,"

Em said with a sheepish smile.

"So what am I supposed to do now? That department head was a key figure in all of this,"

Yaninn pressed, her concern evident

"1 spoke to a friend in the financial tracking analysis unit,"

Em offered.

"He said he'd see what he could dig up for us."

"Thank you so much," Yaninn said, her gratitude genuine

"Of course," Em replied

"How's your progress going, Boss Ninn?" "1'm trying to gather as much information as I can,"

She admitted, her voice heavy with worry.

"But honestly, I haven't gotten much. If we could figure out what the deceased was investigating, it might help narrow down the suspects." understand," Em nodded.

"Alright, I'll leave you to it,"

Yaninn said, preparing to walk away.

'Oh, one more thing."

Em added, stopping her.

"When I spoke to my friend about the deceased department head, he mentioned something interesting. Apparently, the intelligence office's internet system went down for about half a day right before the shooting. The engineering team was scrambling to fix it. No one's sure if it's connected, though."

"Really?" Yaninn frowned. "Was any data compromised?" "From what I heard, no,"

Em replied in his deep voice.

"They concluded it was a satellite internet outage caused by a solar storm. I thought it might be worth mentioning, just in case it sparks any ideas."

"Thanks again, Em,"

Yaninn said sincerely.

"Anytime," he replied.

"lfyou need anything, just come find me. And ifl learn anything new, I'll let you know."

"Got it,"

Yaninn said before heading Off. Initially, she planned to go straight to her office, but she changed her mind and decided to stop by the break room for a coffee to clear her head.

On her way there, she ran into a new team member walking in the opposite direction.

"Boss Ninn,"

The former bodyguard called out.

"Here's your car key,"

Nitha said, handing it over. They had arrived together that morning, with Nitha volunteering to drive.

"Oh I completely forgot,"

Yaninn admitted, taking the key.

"Thanks for driving. I've already gotten so used to it that I forgot my own car key. "

"No problem at all. Your car, your gas-I saved on both trips,"

Nitha replied with a grin.

"Lucky you, "

Yaninn quipped, unable to resist a bit of sarcasm.

"Where are you headed?" Nitha asked. "Just grabbing a drink,"

Yaninn replied.

"Are the others already prepping for training?"

"Yes, they are," Nitha confirmed.

"Then why are you still here?"

Yaninn asked, her tone suddenly stern.

"Don't scold me just yet,"

Nitha said quickly.

"1 just came to return your car key I'm heading there now." Her response made Yaninn narrow her eyes suspiciously.

"Alright, see you this evening,"

Yaninn said, letting it go.

"Yes, Boss," Nitha replied with a smile.

"1n the meantime, ifyou miss me, you know where to find me."

"Miss you? Miss you?"

Yaninn crossed her arms, a strange smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Not likely."

"That's so mean! After all I've done for you, you won't even miss me?"

Nitha teased.

"Get going, Agent Nitha,"

Yaninn said firmly.

"lfyou're late... I'll dock your points."

'Understood, ma'am,"

Nitha replied with a mock salute before heading off toward the training grounds behind the building. Yaninn watched her go, a faint smile lingering on her lips.

"Hey, Jane!"

A voice called from behind as the workday wound down Jane, who was heading to the parking lot, turned to see who it was.

"Way, what's up?" she asked.

"Got a minute? I've been meaning to ask you something."

She said, glancing around before pulling her aside to a secluded corner as if worried someone might overhear.

"What's this about?"

Jane asked, curious.

"It's about the boss," Nitha said.

"Remember when we were talking in the break room the other day?

About... Mr. DOI? I think that's his name."

"Oh, Dol. What about him?"

Jane asked.

"Spill it. Who is he?"

"11e was Boss Ninn's former team leader,"

Jane replied without hesitation. "And where is he now?"

Nitha pressed further eyebrow.

"Why are you so interested in this?"

Jane countered, raising an

"Just answer the question,"

Nitha said, her tone impatient.

"It's not life or death. Can't you just give me a straight answer?"

"Barbecue," Jane said with a smirk.

Nitha snapped, glaring as jane mimed zipping her lips shut.

"Do you want to know or not? You look like you're dying to know,"

Jane teased.

'Fine! Ten barbecue dinners." "Dol was the previous 101,"

Jane finally revealed.

That single sentence made everything click for Nitha. So, the person Yaninn had once mentioned stepping over to get to her current position was none other than Dol.

"1 knew it,"

Nitha said, her voice triumphant.

"It's because they had something going on, isn't it?"

"Had something going on""

Jane repeated.

"No, not at all. Ifyou mean something romantic between DOI and Boss Ninn, then no."

"Really?" Nitha asked, surprised.

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing," Jane confirmed.

"1 even asked Boss Ninn why she doesn't have anyone, but everyone knew

DOI was trying to you know, get close to her. "

"But the boss seemed..."

Nitha paused, recalling Yaninn's expression from that day.

"She seemed really upset about him."

"Did Boss Ninn ever talk about him with you?"

Jane asked.

"She did," Nitha replied curtly.

"That's unusual. Boss Ninn never talks about personal matters with anyone. But it makes sense she'd be upset. They supported each other a lot Boss Ninn got her position here because the director pushed for her, just like she did for you. That's why people called her a 'favorite.' It's also why she wasn't thrilled when you joined she was worried people would say the same things about you that they said about her. Back then, DOI was the one who helped and trained her until she became the 102. Even if they weren't a couple, they were like partners. Boss Ninn respected DOI a lot as a team leader, which is why she never crossed that line. And when DOI passed away, people gossiped that Boss Ninn didn't do enough to save him. I've lost count of how many people I've argued with over that. Those who weren't there have no idea what happened."

"Were you there that day?"

Nitha asked.

"1 was part of the backup team in the field. I heard everything over the radio, "

Jane explained, her voice somber.

"1 still remember Boss Ninn clearly She came back in terrible shape and just sat at the edge ofthe forest for hours, refusing to leave. She said she was waiting in case DOI called her back The team had to drag her to the car to get her back to base."

"That bad?"

Nitha asked, her voice softening.

"That's why she's so hard on herself now," Jane said.

"She's afraid she won't live up to DOI's standards. That's why she's so careful about who she picks for the main team. Ifthey don't meet her high standards, people will criticize her. And even now, she's still accused of being ambitious and stepping over DOI to get where she is. " Nitha stood silently, processing everything she had just heard.

"But do you know what's really scary?"

Jane asked.

"Scary? What's scary?"

Nitha asked, puzzled.

"Since DOI passed away, I've never seen Boss Ninn cry. Not once. Not even at the funeral. I don't know why, but... maybe it's because she's the one who's hurting the most." "1 think I know why," Nitha said quietly.

"Why?" Jane asked

"Because she doesn't know who to cry to, "

Nitha thought to herself.

"You don't need to know. Anyway, I've got what I needed about Dol.

Thanks, Jane,"

Nitha said, ending the conversation. "Barbecue," Jane reminded her. "Yeah, yeah,"

Nitha replied, rolling her eyes.

"Way, please take care of Boss Ninn for me,"

Jane said earnestly.

"Take care of her? Why? She can take care ofherself,"

Nitha replied, brushing offthe request.

"Come on, even the strongest people need someone to lean on during tough times,

Jane insisted.

"Don't worry about her Worry about yourself. You're about to break up with your boyfriend, so maybe take your own advice,"

Nitha said, glancing toward the parking lot where Yaninn Was heading to her car.

"1'm out of here,"

She added, walking away

"Barbecue. When?"

"1'11 let you know

Nitha replied before jogging toward Yaninn, who was standing by her car, looking around. Jane watched as Nitha approached Yaninn and then headed to her own car.

'Boss," Nitha greeted

"0h, Way I was looking for you." Yaninn said.

"Letts go. Time to head home,"

Nitha said.

For a split second, Yaninn froze at the word "home." But Nitha simply smiled and held out her hand for the car key. Yaninn nodded and handed it over without a word.

Maybe she needed to get used to hearing the word "home" or the idea of having someone looking out for her.

Come to think of it it was a strange, new feeling. But not a bad one.

# øøøøø

Operation 25

"Chief, "

Yaninn, who was sitting at the coffee table on the lawn beside the house on a late morning during a holiday, looked up at the sound of the call.

"Coffee," Nitha said.

"There's also hot black tea and some bread."

This made the casually dressed agent, wearing a T-shirt and shorts for her day off, glance at the tray in Nitha's hands, which carried an assortment of pastries and drinks.

"Thank you,"

Yaninn said as the tray was set down, and the homeowner took a seat in the chair across from her.

'You've been staying here for over a week now. How's it been?"

Nitha asked.

"1s there anything uncomfortable or inconvenient?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking if I'm making you uncomfortable, Way?"

Yaninn replied, locking eyes with Nitha before watching her pour hot black tea into a cup for Yaninn and coffee for herself. Nitha then skillfully spread garlic butter on a slice of bread.

"Uncomfortable? Not at all. If I felt that way, I wouldn't have invited you in the first place."

"How many times do I have to tell you? Outside ofwork, just call me by my name,"

Yaninn said with a slightly grufftone.

"1t's a habit, Yaninn."

"Do you realize you're spoiling me?"

Yaninn said, watching as Nitha carefully spread the yellow, semi-solid butter onto the bread. She then took a sip ofthe black tea that Nitha had kindly prepared. The bitter taste of the tea, mixed with a hint of sweetness from the sugar, helped her feel as alert as her usual coffee.

"You're taking care of me too well."

"I assure you, it's not about trying to Impress you or earn extra points,"

Nitha, the former bodyguard, quickly clarified.

"1 never said it was. No need to be so defensive,"

Yaninn replied with a faint smile.

"It's obvious you're not the type to do things for show. Besides, you don't seem to care much about whether you pass or fail any evaluations."

"Hey,"

Nitha responded with her usual retort whenever this topic came up.

"1t's not that I don't take my work seriously, Boss.

"1 know,"

Yaninn said, her tone softening

"1 just like to keep things relaxed."

"Relaxed? You make it seem like you're on vacation,"

Yaninn teased, though a small smile played on her lips, and her eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Way"

Nitha replied, setting down the bread she was holding onto a small plate and kindly offering it to Yaninn.

"Thank you, "

Yaninn said, her voice unusually gentle, a tone Nitha had never heard before. Normally, Yaninn's words were curt and commanding, a habit from her work. Conversations with her were typically brief and to the point, lasting no more than five minutes.

But this time, her simple words carried a warmth that felt entirely different.

"You don't need to thank me. Just knowing you're safe here makes me happy, "

Nitha said, nodding toward the bread she'djust handed over. Yaninn didn't refuse.

"1 want this place to feel like a safe space for you, at least for now."

Those words made Yaninn pause, her gaze shifting from the bread in her hand to Nitha's face. A faint smile appeared on her lips, and she felt a sudden warmth rise to her cheeks for no apparent reason.

"Well, staying with a former 519 bodyguard, I guess there's no safer place than this. Am I right?"

That comment made the former 5 19 bodyguard laugh heartily.

"1 want you to know, Yaninn, that what I do isn't because I used to be a bodyguard or because you're my boss. "

"Then why?"

"Because ofyou,"

Nitha said, tilting her head slightly.

"You."

She emphasized, causing Yaninn to look away, unable to meet her gaze, feeling an inexplicable emotion.

'ISO, please, stay here and feel at ease."

"I'm looking into moving somewhere else. I won't impose on you for long."

"Are you afraid of getting too comfortable? Or wonied you'll grow attached and start thinking of this place as home?"

Nitha's playful tone left Yaninn momentarily speechless.

"1 could give it to you, you know."

"You're joking. "

"Do I look like I'm joking?"

Nitha's question made Yaninn pause again.

"Believe me, I'm serious. Ifyou don't want to go back to that condo- which, let's face it, isn't exactly a place you'd want to return to-I'm happy to have you here."

"How would that even work? What would I stay here as?"

"Why does it have to be about 'as' anything? Just say the word."

"For me, it's not that simple. You should know by now that I'm.... particular, "

Yaninn replied hesitantly, unsure where this conversation was heading.

"And I have to say, you're too trusting. We've only known each other for a few months."

"Chief, someone like you. isn't someone you meet every day,"

Nitha said, her words leaving Yaninn puzzled.

"And... what does that have to do with this?" "Nothing. I just wanted to say that, to me... you're. "

Nitha paused, searching for the right word.

"Special. Yes, that's the word."

Nitha's words made Yaninn's face flush slightly, her heart beating faster.

"You might have chosen the wrong word,"

Yaninn said, trying to deflect.

'Most people would describe me as strict or intense. "

"Well, that's most people,"

Nitha replied with a wide smile.

"To me, you're not like that. At least, not the side of you that I've come to know.

Yaninn didn't respond. She simply sat in silence, staring at Nitha. If she had heard correctly, the new team member she hadn't been thrilled about initially had just called her..

Special.

After that, her ears seemed to ring, and a sudden migraine hit her Her face and neck felt inexplicably warm.

"Are you okay, Boss? Your face is red. Is it too hot outside? Should we go inside?"

"No....no,"

Yaninn said, shaking her head and taking a sip ofthe water beside her tea.

"1 think I just... have a migraine."

"Oh, in that case, let me grab some mint leaves and make you some tea. It helps, "

Nitha said, quickly heading into the house, leaving Yaninn watching her retreating figure.

Once Nitha was out of sight, Yaninn raised a hand to touch her face.

What just happened?

Yaninn realized, for the first time, that when she got flustered, her migraines acted up.

She couldn't remember the last time she felt this way.

Nitha returned with a handful of mint leaves, freshly washed. She poured hot water into a small ceramic cup and added a couple of leaves, letting their mild aroma fill the air.

"Sip it slowly,"

Nitha said, sliding the cup toward Yaninn. At first, Yaninn hesitated, but not wanting to offend, she took a small sip and tried to relax.

Moments later, Nitha stood and moved behind Yaninn, placing her hands on Yaninn's temples and gently massaging, just as she had done in the shared quarters the other day. Yaninn sat still, saying nothing.

"Feeling any better?"

'IA little," Yaninn replied softly.

"1 think you should rest inside. The sun will get hotter as the day goes on."

"1t's fine," Yaninn said.

"This comes and goes."

"But the mint tea is good, Way."

"My previous boss used to get migraines often,"

Nitha said conversationally.

"She told me it helped, so I thought I'd try."

"0h....so I'm your guinea pig now?"

"Do you want to be the real deal?"

Nitha asked, her hands still massaging Yaninn's head.

"Ahem..."

Yaninn choked on her tea, startled by the question.

"1 mean, there's plenty more mint outside. Whenever you feel a migraine coming on, just grab some. Keep trying, and you'll be the real deal in no time."

"0kay, ifyou say so..."

Yaninn muttered, unsure how to respond to Nitha's playful tone.

The new team member, who was about the same age as Yaninn, had a way of leaving her completely flustered. "Why don't you go lie down for a bit?"

"No, it's fine. I'm feeling better."

"Are you sure?"

Nitha leaned in closer, her face so near that Yaninn flinched slightly, their noses almost touching.

"Come inside. I'll massage your shoulders."

Without waiting for a response, Nitha grabbed Yaninn's arm and led her into the house. She gently pushed Yaninn onto the sofa and moved behind her.

"That's enough, Way."

"Your shoulders are so tense,"

Nitha said, ignoring Yaninn's protest and continuing to massage her shoulders. Yaninn initially resisted but eventually gave in, unsure if it was out ofpoliteness or something else.

Or maybe, deep down, she didn't want to reject Nitha's peculiar attenüveness.

"Save the tension for work,"

Nitha teased.

"As if it's something I can control,"

Yaninn replied gruffly, making Nitha laugh.

"You know, you've gotten used to putting too much pressure on yourself, Yaninn."

"With this kind ofjob, it's unavoidable,"

Yaninn said matter-of- factly.

"True," Nitha agreed.

"But leave the pressure at the office. Here, just relax."

"1 don't know."

"Lie back for ten minutes. It'll help,"

Nitha said, gently pushing Yaninn to recline. She knelt beside her, meeting Yaninn's gaze.

"Just rest."

"But I just woke up two hours ago." "You're stubborn, you know that?"

"I'm aware," Yaninn admitted.

"1t's your day off. You can sleep all day ifyou want."

"Really""

Yaninn raised an eyebrow at the suggestion.

"0f course. "

"I'm not used to... sleeping all day."

"What do you usually do when you get migraines?"

"Well...." Yaninn hesitated.

"If I'm not working, I just keep myselfbusy until I forget about the pain.

"You can't just forget a migraine,"

Nitha said.

"That's not how it works."

"Even ifl lie down, I won't fall asleep," Yaninn argued.

"I'm not asking you to sleep, Boss,"

Nitha said firmly.

"Just rest. Close your eyes, clear your mind, and do nothing for a while."

"0kay, "

Yaninn finally relented, closing her eyes to avoid Nitha's stern gaze.

"1'11 try resting for ten minutes."

"Try resting? You're so stubborn,"

Nitha muttered, kneeling beside her.

"Stubborn, headstrong, and hard-headed."

"Just don't say that during work hours, or I'll have you scrubbing bathrooms for two weeks,"

Yaninn shot back, turning away. She heard Nitha laugh softly After a moment, she felt a small blanket being draped over her Nitha quietly left the room, not wanting to disturb her.

Once Nitha was out Of sight, Yaninn turned back and opened her eyes.

For a moment, she felt as if the heavy burden ofwork had lifted, replaced by a sense of safety.

Aside from nearly being shot in her own apartment, things hadn't been all bad lately.

# øøøøø

Operation 26

"Boss Ninn!"

Em's voice called out as he hurried to catch up with her in the main hallway, heading toward her office one early morning.

"Good morning, Em,

Yaninn greeted him with a polite nod.

"1s there something urgent?"

She asked.

"My friend from the finance department of the intelligence agency got back to me,"

Em replied.

"Do you have a moment to talk?"

Yaninn nodded.

"1t might be better ifwe discuss this in my office. The information is... sensitive and unofflcial,"

He added before leading the way up the stairs to his office on the second floor.

"What's going on? You don't look well,"

Yaninn asked as the office door closed behind them. She noticed Em sinking into his chair while she remained standing, waiting for an explanation.

"I found out why the intelligence unit hasn't been sharing information with

He began, prompting Yaninn to raise an eyebrow as she took a seat across from him, her expression serious.

"The head ofthe department who passed away was actually on leave."

"0n leave?" Yaninn repeated, puzzled

"Yes," Em confirmed.

"An indefinite leave. Don't you think that's odd?"

"For intelligence agents, not really,"

Yaninn replied.

"But taking an indefinite leave without stating a reason usually means something unusual is happening in their life."

"Exactly," Em agreed

"So, it's like a gray area, isn't it?"

She asked, her tone thoughtful.

Her question made Em chuckle softly.

"You really are a Sharp analyst,"

He teased.

"Who would dare lie to you, Boss Ninn?"

"Oh there are some,"

Yaninn said, thinking of certain individuals.

"Most of the time, they don't outright lie, they just don't tell the whole truth."

"Well, technically, that's not lying,"

Em said with a light laugh.

"So, what group or organization was the deceased involved with? Being taken out amidst a series of high-profile incidents, followed by the assassination of key security officials, doesn't seem like the work of an ordinary troublemaker,"

Yaninn said, cutting straight to the point.

She considered the possibility that the deceased might have been connected to a group of insurgents What remained unclear was whether he was involved because he was investigating them or for some other reason.

Regardless, he was no longer around to provide answers. This might explain why the intelligence agency was withholding information from the counter-terrorism unit. They likely weren't sure themselves whether their officer was involved in something or if the information was classified.

Or perhaps there was even a mole within their own ranks.

Yaninn didn't lean toward any particular theory In intelligence work or any security-related field, people could be anything, with the ultimate goal being to gather and analyze information.

Some worked diligently and honestly without ever being recognized or praised, while others could be swayed by money, selling information that could range in value from hundreds to millions.

"From What my friend said, they suspect it's an insurgent group.."

Em hesitated, unsure whether to continue.

"From the northern border"

"Oh " Yaninn responded briefly.

"So, they're starting to move again... after."

She trailed off, taking a deep breath.

After DOI was gone. "That's quite strange,"

Yaninn observed.

"After our last field operation, I've been monitoring this group for nearly two years, and it seemed like they had disbanded." "They haven't confirmed it's the same group,"

Em clarified.

"1've asked my friend to dig for more insider information, but I'm not sure if they'll find anything since it's a different department." "We also haven't identified the deceased perpetrator,"

Yaninn added.

"lfwhat you're saying is true, the assailant might be a new recruit, as they're not on any watchlist Or it could be an entirely new group."

'That's possible," Em agreed.

"1fI find out anything else, I'll let you know."

"Thank you, Em "

Yaninn said as she left his office.

As she walked back to her office, she noticed members of her main operations team gathered in a corner near the common room. Only Tum, the deputy leader, and Korn were missing, as they hadn't arrived at work yet.

The group looked tense and engaged in a serious discussion, with Nitha standing silently nearby, her expression troubled.

"What's going on?"

Yaninn asked, stopping in her tracks.

"Boss Ninn,"

Jane greeted her, and the group collectively nodded in respect, as they did every morning.

"This morning, I heard news that the head of the negotiation unit, who was with us during the ambush, was attacked,"

Mod said, her voice filled with concem.

"When?"

"Yesterday evening, "

The sharpshooter replied.

'IA friend of mine who works at the ministry shared the news in our group chat."

"How did it happen?"

"1t was similar to what happened to Director Watin and you, Boss Ninn. An ambush,"

Mod explained.

At that moment, Yaninn glanced at the owner ofthe house where she was currently staying. She noticed the former bodyguard pressing her lips together but refraining from commenting, instead listening intently to Mod and Jane's conversation.

"Let's discuss this in the common room,"

Yaninn suggested.

"Talking about this here isn't very convenient. " The group moved into the common room.

'ISO, what happened?"

Yaninn asked as she waited for Jane to prepare coffee for everyone at the coffee machine, with Pong standing nearby. Nitha sat next to Yaninn, while Mod, who had just shared the news, sat across from them.

"This morning, in our group chat, a friend from the ministry shared that the head of the negotiation unit was ambushed. No officers were harmed, but two civilians were injured. There's no information yet about which group was responsible,"

Mod explained.

"lncidents like this have been happening so frequently lately that it's suspicious, "

The former bodyguard remarked, her expression thoughtful.

"What are you trying to say, Way""

Yaninn asked, using the nickname she was accustomed to, causing the team members to exchange glances.

"This isn't personal,"

The new team member said.

"The fact that security personnel are being targeted so systematically within three months feels like."

"A hit list," Yaninn interjected.

"Exactly. This is a targeted assassination with a hit list. Statistically, those on the list are taken out in close succession by the same group, using similar methods, "

The new member explained confidently.

"Why are you so sure, Way?"

A junior team member asked.

"From my experience in protective services, similar cases occurring m quick succession with consistent methods suggest the same group is responsible, even if there's no concrete evidence yet,"

Nitha replied.

"Even though we're not sure who's behind these recent incidents, the pattern of these assassinations is clear,"

Yaninn added.

"They're targeting security personnel. But I don't think it's professional hitmen because there have been significant mistakes. Three out of five victims survived. It might be a newly formed group with limited skills except for handling weapons. "

"1 think there's a hit list, Boss,"

The new team member said confidently.

"1'm leaning toward that theory, too,"

Yaninn agreed, nodding.

"Remember when we discussed how this group seems to divide tasks? The group we're encountering might be responsible for eliminating obstacles before the main operation begins "

Everyone's faces turned pale at the mention ofthe "main operation,"

Which, as Yaninn suggested, had yet to start.

"We need to act before more civilians are harmed. I'm certain it will happen if this group manages to destabilize security agencies to their satisfaction,"

Yaninn said firmly, though her concern was evident. The team members collectively sighed, almost in unison.

"Boss,"

Pong, the only man in the room, spoke up.

"1'm curious why the assassination ofthe department head involved an ambush as a distraction."

"There could be several reasons,"

Yaninn replied, pausing to think She had been pondering this for a while. It might be a symbolic act of defiance or a declaration of power. However, considering the victim was the head of the intelligence unit, the ambush could have been a diversion for both civilians and the victim himself.

"What do you think, Way?"

"1 think they used the chaos to catch the victim off guard,"

The former bodyguard suggested.

"lt's easier with ordinary people, but dealing with intelligence officers isn't simple. They're usually cautious, especially when they know their lives are at risk. The gunman might have used the commotion to escape as well."

It might be as Nitha said. Em had just mentioned that the deceased victim was on indefinite leave. Perhaps he knew danger was approaching or was even frying to flee.

Pong nodded in agreement

"So, what's our next move, Boss Ninn?"

Jane asked, her voice tinged with worry.

"Stay vigilant. The situation isn't good right now,"

Yaninn advised, her tone firm despite her own unease.

"Try not to go out alone or stay out late I'll update you if there's any progress."

"Understood, "

The team replied in unison.

"Way, come talk to me in my offce. I need your opinion on something," Yaninn said, standing up and heading to her office, coffee cup in hand.

Nitha followed silently.

"What's on your mind?"

Nitha asked after the door closed.

"Take a seat,"

Yaninn said, gesturing to a chair.

"1 need your thoughts on something."

She placed her half-full coffee cup on the desk.

"What is it?"

"1 just spoke with Em from the intelligence coordination team,"

Yaninn began.

"He mentioned that the department head who was ambushed was on indefinite leave."

'"Leave?" Nitha repeated, frowning. "They were taken out while on leave?"

"1t seems so."

"Then something unusual must have been happening in their life They might have been investigating something or trying to escape,"

Nitha speculated.

"You think so?" Yaninn asked.

Nitha nodded.

"1t's possible, but I lean toward the idea that they were trying to escape. They might have known they were being followed. We should check ifthey had been traveling recently or planning to go somewhere, like out of town or abroad."

"Why wouldn't they stay at the office? To me, the office is the safest place " Yaninn pointed out.

"Maybe the information they had or what they were doing wasn't clean," Nitha suggested.

"lfthat's the case, they must have known something important, something the agency wouldn't disclose. Otherwise, they would have shared it by

now,

Yaninn reasoned.

"Or maybe the agency doesn't know either,"

Nitha countered.

"Then we can rule out getting any information from that angle," Yaninn concluded.

"Actually, there's something that's been bothering me for a while."

Boss Nitha began, causing Yaninn to raise an eyebrow as she reached for some documents on her desk.

"1'm not surprised about the others, but the ambush on Director Watin, who returned from abroad on short notice with only a few people knowing-how did they find out?"

It was a question Yaninn hadn't considered until now.

"Based on my experience..."

The former security operative continued, making an observation,

'Most of these people usually gather information from those close to the target. They watch and pinpoint specific times to act based on the target's daily routine. For example, meeting friends every evening, heading to work in the morning like Mr. Watin experienced, or during the commute home in the evening. However, for Ms. Suchada, who abruptly changed her travel schedule due to the ambush, someone still knew. I find that strange."

"You're right,"

The female team leader agreed.

"How did I overlook this?"

Perhaps it was because Nitha was more accustomed to assassination attempts than she was, having spent more time in field operations.

"Okay,"

Yaninn said as she stood up abruptly.

"That's enough for today"

"Where are you going, boss?"

"To get some answers from someone around here,"

She replied before walking out of the room, leaving Nitha puzzled by her sudden departure.

The team chief called out as she entered the room, heading straight for the agency's programmer, who was deeply engrossed in... playing a game to relax during the late morning of a workday. He flinched slightly before quickly closing the game window. "Yes, ma'am. How can I assist you?"

"Caught playing games again, huh?"

Yaninn teased, almost smiling, while Big returned a sheepish grin.

'Before the ambush incident, did you hear anything about solar storms disrupting the internet?"

She asked.

"Oh yes, ma'am," He replied

"Did it affect our internet at all?"

She asked, her tone curious, as the young man paused to think for a moment.

"No, not really. Our satellite internet hasn't gone down in years," Big explained.

"Besides, the storm wasn't strong enough to cause a system outage."

"No impact at all?"

"There were minor disruptions, but nothing significant,"

He clarified.

"1t wasn't enough to cause a complete outage or anything. Our system was fine."

"That's odd. The intelligence reported that the agency's internet went down before the ambush. When the system engineers checked, they said it was due to the solar storm."

"Hmm... I hadn't heard about that. Satellite internet, if it goes down, it would affect everyone, not just one location. Plus, an agency of that level would definitely have backup systems in place."

'Exactly," Yaninn agreed.

"What do you think?"

"Honestly, I can't say for sure,"

He admitted.

"From what I've heard, any solar storm strong enough to cause real issues wouldn't happen for another two years. Maybe it wasn't the solar storm at all-perhaps it was sabotage,"

The programmer suggested.

"But for an intelligence agency, who would dare admit their system was hacked?"

"Hmm, that's possible,"

The operations team leader nodded, her mind flashing back to her earlier conversation with the former security operative.

"Can you do something for me?"

"0f course, ma'am."

"Check the central files for me. See if anyone accessed the travel schedule for the director's return."

"Normally, no one looks at those documents, ma'am. The records department just keeps them as a formality. "

"Exactly. Just check it for me. I have a hunch about something."

Although he didn't understand Yaninn's reasoning, Big chose not to question her. Having worked together for a while, he knew that when she had a suspicion, especially one related to the director's ambush, it was an order worth following.

The young man began typing on his keyboard. After a couple of minutes, Yaninn noticed him furrowing his brow.

"1t was the records department that prepared the travel schedule,"

He said after a moment of consideration.

"Wait, what?!"

He exclaimed, his face turning pale.

"This can't be good."

"Big." Yaninn called out.

"1... I think I must be seeing things,"

He stammered, blinking before typing again, his expression growmg more confused by the second.

"What is it, young man?"

I don't think I'm seeing things, but or maybe I read it wrong,"

He stuttered, prompting Yaninn, who was anxiously waiting for an answer, to step closer to his chair.

"Ma'am, could you take a look and see if I'm imagining things?"

His words made the team leader glance at him before leaning in to look at the name of the person who had accessed the system to view the altered travel schedule for the center director before the ambush.

Yaninn's face turned as pale as the programmer's.

Chaidol

That was the last name listed as having accessed the travel schedule for Suchada.

# øøøøø

Operation 27

When that name appeared on the screen, the team leader froze, exchanging a stunned look with the department's programmer, whose eyes were wide with shock.

Normally, the department would review, update, and delete personnel records of those no longer in service every five years. "Uh... I... I'm confused. I don't know what to do,"

The programmer stammered.

"Are you sure?"

Yaninn asked, her voice trembling. She wasn't sure what was happening either, especially since.. she remembered that day vividly.

Could the saying "no body, no proof of death" actually be true?

But she had heard it with her own ears-his shout of "Bomb!" followed by the explosion, and then... he was gone.

So... who else could access the system if not the person whose name was on

Could it be that he wasn't dead after all? On that day, about twenty- four hours after the withdrawal order, the operations team searched the area and found no trace of him. But if he was alive, why hadn't he contacted anyone? YVhy had he disappeared for nearly three years?

What on earth was going on?

Yaninn felt a heavy weight pressing down on her. Her mind couldn't process anything at the moment. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, and it felt like a mlgrame was cornmg on.

"Check ifthere are any other documents that this username... accessed."

She couldn't even bring herselfto say his name.

"There are files from the Director and Mr. Watin,"

The young officer replied after a brief pause, his voice unsteady.

It was just as Yaninn suspected. She had recently discussed with the former security unit member how the perpetrators seemed to know.

Watin's travel plans or whereabouts or even her own. Sure, they could have been tracking them, but what was puzzling was how they knew about internal travel schedules that were only shared within the organization.

And then there was the internet outage that Em had mentioned, prompting her to ask Big to investigate.

Still... Yaninn never thought the person accessing the system would be someone presumed dead.

While she believed that "no body, no proof of death" might hold some truth, she never imagined it could actually be real

"What should we do, Yaninn? Should I block it right away?"

The question made the female offlcer look at him.

"Not yet."

"Are you sure?"

'Right now, I need every clue we can get,"

Yaninn explained.

"Can you restrict access to critical files? If this username tries to sneak into the systern again, I want to track it."

She knew this was risky and could lead to sensitive information being leaked, but it seemed like the most direct lead they had since the incident began.

"Alright, I'll restrict access to top-secret documents,"

The programmer replied.

"Do that," she agreed.

"Can you trace where the access is coming from?"

"I'll try," Big said.

"But ifthey didn't leave any traces, it'll be hard to pinpoint the source. It would just look like a regular login."

"That's fine. Try your best to trace it. Narrow it down as much as you can so we know where to töcus. Right now, it feels like we're chasing a ghost," The team leader said, pausing slightly at her own words.

Come to think of it, it really did feel like chasing a ghost. After all, the username accessing the system belonged to someone who was gone... or at least presumed to be gone.

"Got it. "

"Keep monitoring in case there's another login. Check when it happens and, ifpossible, pinpoint the location. Then report back to me."

"Understood, boss."

"Don't tell anyone about this yet. Let me verify the details first. Keep me updated regularly."

"Yes, ma'am,"

The still-shaken programmer replied before getting to work on her instructions.

Yaninn's feet carried her back from Big's offce five minutes later. Her ears still felt like they were ringing. Even she couldn't fully grasp what was happening. The chain of events had started with a sniper attack that left several civilians dead. But as the investigation progressed, the name of someone long gone had surfaced.

While she understood that all these events were connected, she never anticipated it would lead to this point.

The point where DOI's username had accessed the system, snooped through files and indirectly caused the death of one executive while another was sent to a secret location for treatment.

Perhaps the intelligence officer who was assassinated had known something about this operation.

But Yaninn doubted she would ever get confirmation, as the intelligence agency wasn't likely to share anything easily.

The memory ofher searching the site of the explosion that supposedly killed DOI, hoping to bring his body home, still haunted her.

That day, the operations team found nothing-not even a fragment All they discovered was a farge, dark pool Of blood where they believed he had been caught in the blast. She had ordered a search within a two kilometer radius of the site, boping he might be injured and waiting for help somewhere.

But they couldn't go further due to the danger of the area and the risk of another confrontation.

In the end, her team returned empty-handed.

After that, some team members requested transfers, while others left the unit entirely, leaving the core team in shambles. Yanion had to step up as the leader without any preparation.

On top ofthat, with the urgency ofthe situation, she had to accelerate the training ofbackup field agents to replace the demoralized main team.

Many times, Yaninn sat at her computer, drafting resignation letters. She felt unprepared for the responsibility and pressure at such a young age. She typed and deleted, over and over, growing increasingly frustrated. DOI wasn't just her respected leader, he was also her mentor.

But part of her couldn't bear the thought of leaving, knowing it would mean wasting everything he had taught her.

As if fate wouldn't let her find peace, Suchada soon promoted her to senior officer, putting her in charge ofthe entire operations team. Suchada argued that, aside from DOI, no one else was better equipped to handle the escalating violence.

This decision sparked resentment among many staff members, leading to rumors about Yaninn's ambition. The promotion also shifted her role to more Of a command position, leaving her less involved in field operations.

With her new responsibilities, she became so consumed with work that she forgot about resigning altogether.

Until now, she was facing the possibility that the person she thought was gone might not be.

Yaninn heard a familiar voice calling her faintly, but in her dazed state, she didn't turn around. This prompted Nitha, who had just returned from tactical training, to approach her. "Boss, are you okay?" "Oh.. " Yaninn blinked.

"1Jh... I'm fine."

"You don't look fine," Nitha observed.

"1s it a migraine? Let's get you some water."

"No it's not a migraine,"

Yaninn replied weakly, her unfocused eyes betraying her disorientation.

"Water sounds good."

She glanced around, unsure of where to go or even where she was standing.

"This way, boss,"

Nitha said, gently taking her arm and guiding her toward the break room.

'You look pale"

"1....1 think I just saw a ghost." "A ghost?"

"Yeah, something like that." "There are ghosts here?"

"1'm not sure anymore."

"1 think you should rest in your offce. I'll get you some water,"

Nitha said, noticing Yaninn's slight trembling as if she had just experienced something deeply unsettling.

She called to a junior colleague.

"Help me get the boss to her office."

Both Jane and Mod rushed over, flanking Yaninn, whose vacant expression made her seem absent from the moment.

"1 feel dizzy." Yaninn admitted. "Can you walk?" Mod asked.

"1 can, I can,"

Yaninn insisted, but after a few steps, she stumbled forward, prompting Nitha to crouch and catch her.

"Yaninn 

Nitha said firmly, deciding to carry her over her shoulder.

"Jane, get a towel and some warm water"

She then hurried to Yaninn's office.

Yaninn's nearly unconscious body was laid on the long sofa near her desk. Nitha sat beside her, brushing the hair from her face.

"How are you feeling?"

Nitha asked, her voice tinged with worry Yaninn's eyes were closed, her brows furrowed, and she seemed restless Nitha couldn't help but wonder what had happened since they had parted ways that morning.

"You seemed fine earlier.

"1'm not sure," Yaninn murmured. "Rest for now. We'll figure it out later."

"I'm fine. Just dizzy." "Should we see a doctor?"

I'm okay."

Yaninn said, attempting to sit up to prove her point, but Nitha gently pressed her shoulder back down.

"1 know you're okay, but for now, just lie down. Don't get up. You're pale as a sheet. Ifyou keep moving, you'll faint again."

"Are you a doctor now?"

Yaninn grumbled, her irritation showing.

"Don't be stubborn. Ifyou are, I won't drive you anywhere today."

"But it's my car you're driving."

"But I have the keys, Yaninn," I

Nitha said, placing the back of her hand on Yaninn's pale face.

"You look terrible."

"1 just got startled by something and couldn't catch my breath."

"Then take a deep breath,"

Nitha instructed, unconsciously stroking Yaninn's hair. Yaninn slowly opened her eyes, surprised by the gesture but choosing to let it slide. At least she didn't want to hurt Nitha's feelings.

As Yaninn began to breathe more steadily and her dizziness subsided, she sat up under Nitha's watchful gaze.

At that moment, there was a knock at the door Jane entered, followed by Mod, carrying medicine, a hand towel, a steaming kettle, a small basin, and other essentials.

'Chief, how are you feeling?"

Mod asked, setting the items down.

"I'm better now. Don't you have field training today?"

"Team One is on break," Nitha answered, grabbing a bottle of water Jane had placed on the table,

"Here, drink some water, "

She handed the opened bottle to Yaninn, then soaked a small towel in water, wrung it out, and offered it to her.

Yaninn thanked her, handing back the half-empty bottle after drinking. Nitha touched Yaninn's forehead, noticing a slight return of color to her face. The two younger team members exchanged curious glances at the interaction.

"You don't have a fever," Nitha noted.

"1 told you, I'm fine."

"But you collapsed, and I had to carry you in,"

Nitha countered, taking the towel from Yaninn's hand to gently wipe her face. Yaninn tried to grab the towel back, but Nitha was quicker.

"Don't be stubborn, Yaninn," she scolded.

"We'll leave you two alone,"

Jane said, nudging Mod to follow her out of the room.

# øøøøø

Operation 28

"So, what's going on, Ninn?"

Nitha asked after a while, noticing that the person in front of her was starting to return to normal. Hearing the question, Yaninn pressed her lips together, unsure ofhow to respond.

't 1....1 don't know."

"Ear1ier, you said you saw a ghost..." The former bodyguard remarked.

"1 was waiting for you to tell me the story." "I'm not sure yet, sol I don't know what to say," The operations team leader replied softly.

"But no matter what, I need to be certain."

"So, you're not going to tell me what or who made you like this, are you?"

"1 need to check first"

"Alright," Nitha said.

"As long as you're okay, that's all that matters."

She then reached out and gently touched Yaninn's face, which, although better than before, still looked weary Her eyes betrayed a clear exhaustion. "1n that case, I won't bother you anymore. You should rest for a bit."

With that, she stood up.

"Wait."

Her wrist was grabbed by the owner of the office.

"lfthere's nothing urgent, stay for a while."

The request made Nitha furrow her brows, but she sat back down. "1'm not trying to hide anything ifthat's what you're thinking, Way."

"Not at all," the other woman replied.

"But I know you're someone who values personal space, so I don't intrude on your matters."

"Then stay here for a bit,"

Yaninn said curtly, almost as if giving an order.

"Ninn,"

Nitha said, taking Yaninn's right hand in hers.

"You know you can tell me anything, anytime, right?"

"1 just encountered something that... left me at a loss. I don't know what to think or what to do next."

"That's enough," Nitha quickly said.

"Rest first. Should you go hotne? But Yamnn simply shook her head. "1 still have urgent matters to handle, but I don't know where to start."

''Alright,"

Nitha said, placing a hand on Yaninn's arm to offer support.

"lfyou need help, just let me know."

"Stay here for now."

"1'm not going anywhere. "

After that, the conversation stopped. Yaninn lowered her head, deep in thought, while Nitha could only watch her with concern. She couldn't figure out what Yaninn had encountered, especially since they had only been apart for less than two hours that morning. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"For me people are scarier than ghosts,"

Nitha replied, making Yaninn smile faintly She took a deep breath, trying to regain her composure Nitha was right-she needed to focus.

"Did you see a ghost?"

"1t's more like I saw someone I never thought I'd see again,"

Yaninn said, raising an eyebrow at the former bodyguard's reaction.

"But I'm not sure yet."

She took a deep breath and rubbed her face.

"Do you want to freshen up?"

Nitha offered, handing her a damp towel This time, Yaninn accepted it and began wiping her face, adjusting her clothes, and trying to compose herself.

'You don't have to be okay right away."

Nitha said, noticing the lingering exhaustion in Yaninn's eyes.

"Sometimes, you change too quickly. "

But it seemed Yaninn wasn't listening She got up from the sofa, trying to appear energetic, and walked to the cabinet behind her desk to search for something.

Moments later, Yaninn held a laptop in her hands.

"lfyou have something to do, go ahead,"

Yaninn said, her voice steady now, unlike a few minutes ago.

''Alright."

Nitha replied, slightly confused

"If that's what the boss wants, I'll take my leave."

She stood up and headed for the door but stopped, turned back, and walked toward Yaninn, who was still standing and watching her.

She leaned in closer

"What are you doing?"

"1 just wanted to say I care about you.

"Noted, Agent Nitha,"

Yaninn replied, slightly startled by the invasion of her personal space. She feigned annoyance, but her heart raced nonetheless.

"Good. Now, I'm really leaving,"

Nitha said, stepping back.

"Are you still driving me9"

"Do you think I'd let you go anywhere alone in this state, Ninn?"

The former bodyguard reasoned.

"Even ifyou don't care about yourself, know that there are people who care about you.

"1 know,"

Yaninn said, watching Nitha smile and nod before turning to leave. But Yaninn's left hand, not holding the laptop, grabbed Nitha's black field shirt, pulling her back.

"Thank you" "Can you change that 'thank you' into something else?"

"Like what?"

"Like letting me cook you a meal at my place. Going out right now doesn't seem convenient."

"You're inviting me to eat, even though we already cat together every morning and evening, sometimes even lunch."

"I'm not inviting you as a teammate or housemate. I'm inviting you with a deeper meaning, "

The former bodyguard explained.

"What do you mean?"

"1 mean as someone who wants to get to know you better, Ninn."

"And have you thought about..."

Yaninn hesitated.

"lfthis meaningful meal at your place doesn't go well, it might make things awkward between us."

"1 have. I've thought about it for a while."

"For a while?"

"Yes," Nitha admitted.

"1've wanted to ask for a long time, but I kept reconsidering."

"Why ask now?"

"Because I've decided it's worth trying, even if the chances are slim,"

Nitha explained.

"But if you're not okay with it, you can reject me now. It might hurt a little, but it won't cause any major issues."

Yaninn responded briefly.

"1 appreciate your kindness, Way."

"1 understand," Nitha interjected.

"This might not be convenient given our current situation. "

"1 see,"

Yamnn noticed a slight sadness in Nitha's eyes.

"Alright, let's pretend I never asked. I'm sorry if my invitation made you uncomfortable. "

"How is it any different... when we already eat together every day?"

Yaninn asked.

"Because I want to do more than just eat with you every day. I want to care for you, look after you, and have you allow me to be there for you more,"

Nitha said.

"And haven't I already let you do that, Way?"

Yaninn replied.

"1 let you massage my temples, drive me around, and even wipe my face in front of Jane and Mod earlier. Do you think someone like me would let anyone do that, especially in front of others, so easily? I've already let you into my personal space for a while now."

"Ninn."

"0ne thing you need to understand ifyou want to know me better, Way, is that I'm not good at relationships. I don't know how to interact with someone or what to say. My days are spent thinking, analyzing, evaluating, waiting for answers, and giving orders. Sometimes, I get migraines. That's all my life has been,"

Yaninn explained, placing the laptop on the table in front ofthc sofa before turning to meet Nitha's gaze.

might not be the most normal person..."

Yaninn continued.

"You might find that I always prioritize work over everything else. It's not that I'm a workaholic, but this job forces me to be this way. My work-life balarice isn't great."

"1 understand, Ninn,"

Nitha replied with a smile.

"This might help you get to know me better."

"1t's strange, Boss," Nitha said.

"Even though I already knew some of what you said, I still felt I had to take the risk,

"You don't have to call it a risk. I'm not that hard to reach,"

Yaninn said, stepping closer.

"You just need to understand. Look at Jane. See how his relationship with his long-time partner is strained because of the job he loves. Sometimes, it makes us question ourselves and lose confidence."

"1'm confident that I'm not someone who would struggle to understand that,"

Nitha said.

"But you're stubborn, aren't you, Way? When I say left, you go right."

"1 just choose a path that also leads to the destination,"

Nitha joked.

"lsn't that right?"

"At least you saved my life once, so I won't argue with that,"

Yaninn nodded.

"Alright, I think we're on the same page now."

"Ninn

Nitha stepped closer, placing her hand on Yaninn's left arm. She slowly moved her hand down to Yaninn's hand, lifting it to her lips. Yaninn's hand twitched slightly, perhaps out of surprise or unfamiliarity, but she didn't pull away.

"lfyou want to reject me, it's okay. Honestly, I might have chosen the wrong time to bring this up, given your current situation."

"Now or later, it doesn't matter," Yaninn replied, surprising Nitha.

"As long as we understand each other."

"Alright. So, it's settled that you'll have dinner at my place," Nitha said.

"1 have to go anyway. Don't forget, I live at your place,"

Yaninn replied.

That made Nitha smile slightly before meeting Yaninn's still-tired eyes.

"You know what I mean,"

Nitha said, lowering her voice to a whisper as she leaned in, as if afraid someone might overhear, even though they were alone in the room. "Take care. I'll go now before the others chew me out for being late."

"Way,"

Yaninn called, grabbing Nitha's shirt again. She stepped closer and placed a soft kiss on Nitha's cheek,

"Consider that a yes."

# øøøøø

Operation 29

Suchada's computer was turned on again, and even Yaninn wasn't entirely sure what she was hoping to find. Ever since she saw the username that shouldn't have appeared, her focus had been completely shattered, leaving her with a pounding headache.

In less than an hour, more had happened than in the past two or three years combined. From seeing movements of... someone she thought was long gone, only to realize she might have been wrong, to...

....the new recruit, whom Yaninn didn't particularly like at first, invited her to a special meal.

These two events occurred in less than half a day, leaving her barely able to process it all. And yet, she found herself surprised at how easily she agreed to go with Nitha, without much hesitation.

It was unlike her usual response to DOI, who often invited her out only to be turned down every single time.

Yaninn exhaled deeply. She wasn't sure if agreeing to Nitha's invitation was a good idea, but deep down, something told her to do something for herself for once.

This might have been the first time Yaninn chose to follow her heart.

Even though they hadn't known each other long, living under the same roof had quickly made them familiar with one another Yaninn found that Nitha was someone she could always rely on, especially when it came to safety.

Perhaps it was because Nitha had previously worked in security, making her naturally cautious. These days, Nitha wouldn't leave the house unnecessarily, nor would she leave Yaninn alone, even at home.

That made Yaninn realize that sometimes, having someone by your side could feel surprisingly comforting.

Yaninn refocused on the task at hand, scanning through files on Suchada's computer. Using the director's computer gave her unrestricted access to all files in the system without needing special permissions.

That was why Yaninn had borrowed the computer without asking for permission first.

Even so, she wasn't entirely sure what she was hoping to find. But something felt offwhen DOI's username appeared, which was highly unusual. The saying "Don't assume someone's dead until you see the body" might just hold true this time.

She needed to confirm who this person was. But who else could it be ifthey knew both the username and password other than the owner?

So, what would she do if she came face-to-face with him?

Yaninn didn't want to think about what might happen or what she should do next. For now, she decided to respond to the situation as it unfolded, just as she always did.

Was DOI really behind all the chaos?

She didn't want to believe it, nor did she want to think it was true. Deep down, she silently prayed that this wasn't real, that the person wasn't him.

But if it was true, or ifhe was still alive, the thought alone made her heart sink.

NO matter what happened, though, she knew she had to do her job to the best ofher ability.

With that resolve, she walked over to her desk and picked up the phone, "Big,"

She called out when the other line picked up.

"Do you have anything for me yet?"

"1 checked to see if that username accessed any Important documents or files, "

He replied.

"But as far as I can tell, there's nothing there."

"1s that so?"

Yaninn let out a sigh of relief in his response.

"0kay, during the meeting, I'll inform the management team that there's a suspicious individual accessing the system, but I won't reveal who it is yet. We need them to stay alert. Also, find out where the access came from as soon as possible. Got it?"

"1'm on it, boss "

Ile assured her.

"Good. I'll make sure you get a raise this year,"

She said with a hint of encouragement.

'Keep me updated."

"Will do," he replied confidently.

This was a good opportunity to track down the perpetrator's hideout if the programmer could pinpoint the location. Capturing them before another violent incident occurred was crucial.

The sporadic nature ofthe attacks and the lack of a clear timeline made it difficult to narrow down potential areas. In chaotic situations like the ambush, even with numerous witnesses, their accounts rarely aligned.

This made it even harder to gather evidence leading to an arrest, and Yaninn was brainstorming every possible solution.

Yaninn continued scrolling through files without much expectation or focus as her earlier conversation with Nitha kept replaying in her mind. Despite the current dire situation, she felt a sense of reassurance knowing Nitha was there to help.

Her hand moved the mouse aimlessly, but her thoughts drifted to the former security officer and the agreement she had made with her earlier. Then, her eyes caught an email sent three days before the ambush.

It was from the intelligence agency, and at that time, Suchada had been attending an anti-terrorism conference abroad.

Of course, it wasn't surprising. The director had previously worked with them, so exchanging information wasn't unusual.

Seeing this, Yaninn decided to search for all past emails from the intelligence agency.

Within moments, the search results appeared She scrolled through them and found that emails had been exchanged consistently over the past three years.

Most of the content, from what she skimmed, seemed ordinary and not particularly classified. The information mainly pertained to varlous insurgent groups, most of which were already on the watchlist and familiar to Yaninn. Some groups were still active, while others had gone silent.

Then, her eyes landed on one particular group.

It was an insurgent group thought to have gone dormant since that time.

So, the information she had received from Em wasn't wrong. The group she and DOI had once worked to dismantle, which had led to his death, had been active over the past three years. However, they had remained quiet because there had been no movements or incidents.

Yaninn opened email after email until she came across a photograph. She immediately recognized it as the leader of the group who had been killed, standing in front of the camera amidst six men lined up in formation.

At first glance, Yaninn knew exactly why he had been assassinated that day.

The men in the photo were undoubtedly insurgents. Their military- style attire and the weapons they carried confirmed it. Two ofthem wore dark sunglasses to conceal their faces.

A knock on the door startled her slightly. The wornan she had spoken to an hour ago walked in.

"How's it going, boss?"

Nitha asked, holding a small white ceramic cup.

"1 brought you some light black coffee. Thought it might help you feel refreshed."

"Thanks,"

Yaninn replied with a faint smile. "Done with the training?"

"Yes," Nitha answered calmly.

"The team was worried, so they sent me to check on you."

Her words made Yaninn raise an eyebrow slightly before a small smile appeared on her lips.

"They could've come themselves,"

Yaninn said, leaning back on the sofa and trying to relax, fearing another migraine might strike.

"The boss here is strict and intimidating. They're scared,"

Nitha teased.

"And you're not scared?"

"Who said that? I'm more scared ofyou than anyone else,"

Nitha joked.

"Both scared and respectful." "Sure, if you say so,"

Yaninn replied, rolling her eyes. "So, how are you feeling now?

"I'm fine,"

Yaninn said, taking a sip of the coffee. Strangely, she did feel a bit more refreshed, even though it was just ordinary coffee and tasted weaker than usual. Perhaps it was the gesture that made her feel better.

"You still don't look great,"

Nitha observed.

"Do you need anything else besides coffee?"

"You don't have to take care of me this much, Nitha."

"Taking care of you is a bodyguard's duty, "

Nitha replied with a grin.

"lfyou're this attentive, won't your other clients get jealous?"

"Have you gotten attached to me yet?"

Nitha teased, locking eyes with Yaninn. The latter tried to maintain a neutral expression, but a faint blush crept onto her cheeks.

"1fI were in another role, I'd take even better care ofyou. I'd even tuck you in at night. Want to try?"

"You're really trying to win me over,"

Yaninn said, taking another sip of coffee to avoid Nitha's gaze.

"We can start tonight,"

Nitha continued to tease. "Before bed, I could."

"Enough, Nitha,"

Yaninn cut her off, feeling her ears and neck heat up.

"1 can tuck myself in, thank you"

"But if someone else does it, you'll sleep better. You should try.

"You seem to know a lot about this,"

Yaninn said, hearing Nitha chuckle softly. Nitha winked and raised an eyebrow.

"Do you often tuck others in, or do people tuck you in?"

"You've been staying at my place for days. Have you seen anyone tucking me in?"

"Good point," Yaninn admitted.

"1t is a bit strange."

She lowered her.

gaze to the computer screen, trying to refocus.

"So, what did you find this morning?"

Nitha asked with genuine concern,

"1've never seen you like that before I didn't think I ever would."

## "Hmm.. "

Yaninn exhaled, pausing to gather her thoughts.

"1 didn't think I'd encounter something like this either"

"1t's bad, isn't it?"

"Bad is an understatement,"

Yaninn admitted, her face showing worry.

"But right now, I can't make sense of it all."

"If there's anything I can do to help, let me know,"

Nitha offered. Yaninn's expression softened noticeably. She stood up, walked to her desk, and opened the bottom drawer, searching for something.

After a moment, she pulled out a thin brown folder.

Yaninn returned to the sofa where Nitha was waiting and handed her the fol der.

"Do you know who this is?"

Yaninn asked as Nitha opened the folder The former bodyguard remained silent, waiting for Yaninn to continue.

"The person I told you about."

"Your former boss?"

"That's the one," Yaninn confirmed.

"And what does this have to do with what you found this morning? I mean... he's gone, isn't he?"

"That day, we never found his body,"

Yaninn began to explain, though she wasn't sure what she was trying to say.

"Oh," Nitha murmured.

"So, when you said you saw a ghost, you meant him?"

"Something like that. But I didn't see him in person,"

Yaninn said, her voice tinged with exhaustion. Her head still felt foggy, though she was gratefül.

her migraine hadn't returned. "I saw a login to this system under his name."

'iWhat?" Nitha exclaimed.

"Exactly. If I had seen him in person, I could say I saw him. But this..."

"A login to the system?"

Nitha repeated, still trying to grasp what Yaninn was implying.

"Why would he do that?"

"What do you think?"

Yaninn asked, throwing the question back at her. Nitha furrowed her brow, deep in thought.

"Don't tell me the management team was assassinated because this username accessed sensitive information,"

Nitha speculated.

"You're not wrong, Nitha,"

Yaninn said, exhaling heavily.

"1've got Big tracking it, but I don't know if he'll find anything. Right now, this login is the only lead we have if we want to figure out who these people are or where they're hiding."

"Do you think it's him?" Nitha asked.

"1 don't know," Yaninn replied simply.

"But that day, we didn't find his body."

She repeated the statement, not wanting to dwell on whether it was DOI or not. If it was him, she'd have to deal with it. If it wasn't, the outcome would be the same. So, in the end, it didn't matter much to her. What mattered was stopping this madness.

"But if it is him, why would he do this?"

Nitha asked.

"Doesn't it make your head hurt just thinking about it?"

Yaninn said, feeling like She was on the verge Of losing her mind.

"A dead man's name logging into the system, chasing a ghost with no information or trace to follow, and not being able to answer why he's doing this. And on top of that, he knows this place as well as anyone."

"But still, you know him well, don't you, Chief?"

Nitha blurted out, her tone laced with curiosity. She noticed Yaninn's expression shift immediately upon hearing the question, her lips pressing together as if deep in thought. "That's true," a voice floated softly.

"1 do know him."

"Shouldn't we start there? Wouldn't that be a good idea?"

Nitha suggested.

"It might be our advantage that he doesn't know we already know. "

"But I'm not sure...

Yaninn said hesitantly.

'Tm not sure if it's really him " "1t doesn't matter anymore, Chief, "

The new team member interjected.

"What we do know is that he might be involved. His username has already been logged into the system. If you're unsure where to begin, I think we should start here. Who knows? This might be more personal than we initially thought... "

'You're right,"

The team leader nodded slightly.

'You're absolutely right"

"You'll be okay, Yaninn. Trust me,"

Nitha said, reaching out to gently hold Yaninn's hand, offering her reassurance as she noticed the worry in her eyes.

"You're stronger than this."

"1'11 try my best,"

Yaninn replied softly.

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Operation 30

The former personal bodyguard knocked on the door of the operations team leader's office once again, even though it was already half an hour past the end of the workday.

Normally, she would wait for Yaninn outside the building so they could head home together. However, today, it seemed like the other woman might have lost track of time while working, which turned out to be exactly what she suspected.

After knocking, a slightly groggy voice responded, granting her permission to enter.

"Boss, it's time to go home,"

She said, prompting the office's occupant to sit up on the long sofa and glance at her watch.

"Sorry about that. I was just resting my eyes and must've dozed off."

"Would you like to rest a bit longer? We can leave later if you'd prefer. "

"No, that's not a good idea. It's not very safe "

Yaninn replied as she began gathering her belongings.

"These days, you can't trust anything."

She then stood up.

"Give me a moment to pack up."

Nitha said nothing, simply following Yaninn's lead. In truth, what the other woman said wasn't wrong. The current situation was unstable as if a significant variable had been introduced into an already chaotic equation.

Someone who was thought to have disappeared from this world seemed to have returned-though only in name for now.

Without finding the person in question, nothing could be confirmed.

The former bodyguard wasn't entirely sure what Yanlnn thought about the matter or what she planned to do next. However, Nitha could tell from the pale complexion and weary demeanor of the operations team leader earlier that morning that Yaninn might not be handling the situation very well.

But Yaninn was still Yaninn. She was reserved and composed, especially when it came to words, actions, or decisions that could impact her work or the situation at hand. Yaninn always thought things through carefully before making a move.

That was her strength.

No matter the circumstances, this senior special agent could still make precise and decisive decisions, even if she was on the verge of collapsing in front of everyone.

It was these qualities that made Nitha admire her.

However, one thing that worried the former bodyguard in this situation was whether Yaninn could still perform her duties effectively ifit truly were Dol. After all, the person she might have to confront was the very mentor who had once supported her.

As these thoughts swirled in her mind, Nitha found herself glancing at Yaninn from time to time, unsure of how she could help her. She never imagined she'd reach a point where she'd invite Yaninn out for a meal as someone special.

When she first agreed to transfer here, she hadn't thought about how long she'd stay-just that she'd leave once the job was done.

Now, she wasn't so sure what she'd do when the time came for the job to end truly.

It took them about forty-five minutes to get home, longer than the usual thirty minutes due to heavy traffic. Neither ofthem spoke much during the drive.

Yaninn seemed noticeably quieter than usual, even for someone who was already reserved. She leaned back against the passenger seat, sighing occasionally, while the driver stole concerned glances at her.

"1 already ordered food. It should be delivered soon,"

Nitha said as they entered the house.

"Why don't you take a shower first? It'll help you feel better."

At those words, Yaninn, who was walking ahead, turned around. Her face showed no emotion, but the exhaustion was evident. Her usually sharp eyes were now dull and lifeless.

The team leader stepped closer and leaned in, placing a soft kiss on Nitha's cheek. The gesture startled Nitha slightly.

"Thank you,"

Yaninn said. Without thinking, Nitha's left arm wrapped around Yaninn, pulling her closer.

"Are you tired?" Nitha asked gently

"Not too much. I'm okay,"

Yamnn replied softly, her breath brushing against Nitha's nose.

"You're home now. It's okay to be tired. No one will see,"

Nitha said, brushing a stray strand ofhair from Yaninn's face and tucking it behind her ear.

"I'm worried about you."

Yamnn nodded absentmindedly before resting her forehead on Nitha's right shoulder. Her shoulders slumped as Nitha's arms encircled her.

Nitha returned the embrace, wrappmg her arms around Yaninn. After a moment, Yaninn slowly pulled away.

"Are you still feeling dizzy? I can get you some balm,"

Nitha offered. "I'm feeling better now,"

Yaninn replied.

"Go take a shower, then. We can eat afterward."

"A1right," Yaninn said softly.

"With a bodyguard this attentive, I bet you're expensive."

"You couldn't afford me, Boss,"

Nitha teased, making Yåninn raise an eyebrow and smile faintly.

"That much, huh? Maybe I'd be willing to go all in,"

Yaninn replied.

"lfwe get along, I might not charge you at all,"

Nitha said with a grin.

"I might ask for something else instead."

"Name it. Maybe I can negotiate,"

Yaninn said, her tone lighter now, as Nitha laughed and stepped closer.

"For you, Boss? You should know by now that I do this from the heart,"

Nitha said, her hand gently touching Yaninn's pale face.

"As for payment..."

She let her thumb brush against Yaninn's lips.

"Just something small, nothing too much."

"Be careful, Way. When the time comes... you might not be able to handle what I give in return,"

Yaninn said before heading inside to shower, leaving Nitha standing there, pondering her words.

"Eat up, so you can grow big and strong."

Nitha said about ten minutes into their dinner. They didn't talk much, occasionally glancing at each other. The earlier conversation before Yaninn went to shower lingered in Nitha's mind.

She wasn't sure what to make of it. While Nitha had made her feelings clear, it was Yaninn who seemed uncertain about herself.

Part Ofit stemmed from doubts about joining the agency in the first place.

As Nitha had once said, besides having nowhere else to go after being ambushed on that fateful night, another reason Yaninn had agreed to come here was.

She wanted to see ifthe woman sitting across from her, eating rice, had any hidden motives.

But things had turned out slightly differently than she'd expected. It seemed she was starting to feel something more for this former bodyguard than just camaraderie. And it appeared the feeling was mutual.

In truth, during her time here, she hadn't noticed anything suspicious. The only thing that stood out were a few ambiguous remarks.

Yamnn also realized that having someone care for her was a new and surprisingly pleasant experience.

Though she had mentioned wanting to move back to her own condo, in reality, she didn't seem eager to leave.

Especially after hearing that she didn't need to move out unless she wanted to. Her heart was starting to lean in that direction.

It was hard to believe that such words could make someone like Yaninn feel so unsettled.

But she was still herself. Unless absolutely necessary, Yamnn wouldn't say anything.

"Why did you order so much food?"

Yaninn asked, her eyes scanning the three or four dishes on the kitchen table, trying to decide what to eat next.

"We won't finish all this,"

She added, noting the fruit and snacks as well.

"I wasn't sure what you'd want, so I ordered everything,"

Nitha replied.

"1 can eat anything."

'IThere's no such thing as 'anything."

Nitha said with a smile, scooping some minced pork soup into Yaninn's bowl.

"This is too much. We won't finish it"

"lfl'm treating the Boss, I have to do it right,"

Nitha said.

"1 can't just do it halfway."

"Try doing it halfway, Way, and see what happens," Yaninn said, watching Nitha smile at her words

"1 wouldn't dare,"

Nitha replied, sliding a plate of fruit toward her.

"A woman like you isn't easy to find."

"A woman like me how so?"

"I don't know,"

Nitha said with a shrug.

"But I find you captivating. "

The comment made Yaninn look down as if avoiding eye contact.

'Captivating... You're the first person to say that to me."

"Have I softened your heart yet?"

"Softened? Do you mean letting you tuck me in?"

Yaninn teased.

"That can be arranged,"

Nitha said with a grin.

"Or even more than just tucking you in."

"1've never been tough with you, Way, in case you didn't know,"

Yaninn said.

'ISO, does that mean I have a chance?"

"1'm with you every day, almost twenty-four hours a day,"

Yaninn said.

"The rest is up to you. Besides, I just agreed to let you cook me a special meal, didn't I?"

"So, does that mean we're a thing now, Boss?"

Nitha asked with a wide smile, to which Yaninn nodded.

"lfyou're just playing games with me, Way I won't let you off easily."

"Do you really think I'm that kind of person?"

"How many times do I have to tell you? Outside of work hours, stop calling me 'Boss,"

Yaninn said, looking at Nitha, who tilted her head with a playful smile.

"Understood, Boss,"

Nitha replied teasingly before getting up to clear the dishes.

"1'11 take care of it,"

Yaninn said quickly, trying to be considerate.

"You sit down."

"Don't worry about it,"

Nitha said, standing as well.

"0nce this is done, you can rest"

Less than ten minutes later, Nitha found herself watching Yaninn recline on the long sofa in her home. Yaninn's face looked troubled, likely from the stress ofthe day's events.

"1f you're sleepy, go to bed. You still don't look well,"

Nitha said.

Yaninn let out a sigh in response.

"1'm stressed," she admitted.

"At least my migraine hasn't kicked in yet."

Nitha watched as Yaninn stood and walked over to her. Nitha sat down beside her, and Yaninn looked at her with slight confusion.

"1'm here for you,"

Nitha said softly, placing a hand on Yaninn's shoulder and giving it a reassurmg squeeze.

"You can take a break."

To Nitha's surprise, Yaninn leaned into her, resting against her body.

"Do you still think I'm tough with you, Way?"

Yaninn asked quietly as.

Nitha's left arm wrapped around her. Nitha leaned back as Yaninn let her weight rest on the sofa.

Before long, Yaninn fell asleep. She woke up about thirty minutes later to the sound ofher phone buzzing nearby. Nitha, who had been supporting her, was also groggy.

"Sorry,"

Yaninn murmured, sitting up and trying to gather her thoughts. It took her a moment before she reached for her phone. After checking it, she fell silent.

"1s it urgent, Yaninn?" Nitha asked. "Big sent me some information,"

Yaninn replied groggily.

"1s it already eleven? I slept for a while..."

She trailed off.

"1 asked Big to trace the system login under DOI's name..."

She said, frowning.

"Did you find anything?"

"It seems like we did,"

Yaninn said, looking around for her laptop.

While waiting for Yaninn to open her laptop, Nitha went to get her a glass of water.

"lfyou're tired, go to bed, Way,"

Yaninn said.

"1t's fine. I want to know,"

Nitha said honestly, making Yaninn look up and smile faintly before returning her focus to the task at hand.

"Big sent me three potential hideout locations based on the trace,"

Yaninn said after studying her laptop screen for a while.

"1 asked him to narrow down the area of activity using the IP address that logged in."

"Three locations?"

"Yes," Yaninn replied briefly.

"These three locations are the most likely because there has been repeated use of public internet signals to access the system, but they keep changing locations,"

Yaninn said, squinting at the images sent by the young programmer "This shows that they are not far and are circling around, preparing to act for real

"What should we do next, boss?"

"Tomorrow morning, I'll need to request cooperation from the police, including search warrants and local support. Our team alone won't be enough,"

She said, scanning the room thoughtfully.

"We might need to hit all three locations at once because we don't know for sure which one it is. If we miss the first one... and the news leaks out, they'll catch on."

"What ifwe handle each location quietly? Is that possible?"

"1n a community where everyone has a phone capable of recording and is chasing likes without caring about anything else, that's impossible."

The operations team leader explained with expertise.

"A simultaneous operation would be more secure."

The questioner nodded in agreement.

"Alright "

The team leader said before closing her trusty laptop.

"Tomorrow, we'll proceed immediately. We can't wait. It's time to find out what's next. Make sure you're ready, too."

With that, she stood up.

"Go get some rest and recharge. I think starting tomorrow, it's going to be a long haul."

"Understood, boss,"

Nitha replied before standing up as well. She nodded once at Yaninn, who returned the gesture with a smile.

However, as she turned to leave, her arm was suddenly grabbed, causing her to pause slightly What followed was a bold gesture-a soft kiss placed on the side of her face.

"Not tucking you in tonight, just saving it for another day."

'Goodnight, boss."

That brought a smile to the team leader's face.

"Alright... goodnight, Agent Nitha."

# øøøøø

Operation 31

Senior Special Agent Yaninn felt a strange sensation as she silently stepped into the building.

As planned from the beginning, she had orchestrated simultaneous operations at three suspected locations. It was a calculated move, manageable even with some cooperation from local law enforcement.

In her heart, she prayed that one ofthese three locations would be the hideout of the insurgent group causing chaos at the moment. Ifnot, once the news spread, the culprits could escape or even escalate their activities.

Her gut told her this had to be the place.

The field operation teams were divided into three groups, each assigned to raid a location suspected to be a hideout and apprehend any suspects.

But if none of these three buildings turned out to be the right one, it would mean starting over from scratch.

At this point, whatever was going to happen would just have to happen.

The female agent, who had transitioned from giving orders from the van to leading her main team into the abandoned seven-story building in a crowded neighborhood, moved with precision.

Meanwhile, Big, the team's tech expert, remained in the van parked nearly a kilometer away to avoid drawing attention. However, without surveillance cameras in the building, Big's ability to assist was limited,

The possibility that one of these three locations might house someone she thought was long gone left Yaninn feeling unsettled.

She had hesitated for a long time about which location to lead her team to. If it were Dol... where would he choose to go, even though she wasn't sure he was still alive?

The fact that his name had appeared in the system could mean two things. First, it allowed him to avoid hacking into the system, which would have drawn attention. DOI must have known his username was still active since the agency hadn't yet conducted its major data clearance cycle.

Second, even though he used his own name to access the system without triggering cybersecurity protocols if caught, it would mean... he was revealing that he was still alive. Or perhaps DOI was trying to send a message,

Regardless, Yaninn had to figure it out because this was her only chance. If he was still alive, where would DOI be hiding?

Yaninn, dressed in her field operation gear, felt strangely unfamiliar with herself. Wearing a bulletproofvest and carrying a semi-automatic submachine gun equipped with a high-quality silencer, she moved stealthily into the building.

korn, one of her team members, was tasked with securing the first floor. Each team member was assigned a floor: Mod, the team's sharpshooter, took the second floor, followed by Jane, Pong, and Tum.

"I'll handle the rest upstairs," The team leader instructed.

'Wine 0 'clock,

Pong's voice came through the radio as Yaninn ascended the stairs to the nextfloor.

"One-zero-seven, secure this floor,"

Yaninn ordered, noticing the new team member splitting off.

"FirstJloor, clear!"

Korn's voice came through the radio. "Heading up to the secondfloor, "

Amid the sporadic sound ofgunfire.

When she reached the top floor, Yaninn took a deep breath before cautiously moving toward the single door at the end of the hallway. The white door, covered in dust and slightly deteriorated, seemed to hold something she wasn't sure she wanted to face. Deep down, she felt she already knew who was behind it.

"Secondfloor, clear!"

Yaninn wasn't sure if she wanted her suspicions to be true. If it was him... and he was the cause of everything that had happened, she wasn't confident she could handle it. If it wasn't him... she might feel relieved.

The pain of his absence was terrible, but the thought that he might be responsible for all this chaos was even worse.

The gunfire from the lower floors echoed through the building, accompanied by intermittent radio reports. Yet Yaninn could barely focus on the words. Her mind was fixated on the door in front of her.

She leaned against the wall beside the door, gripping her weapon tightly, preparing herself.

Though she wanted to delay, she knew she couldn't. The faster the operation concluded, the fewer casualties there would be.

Her dominant right foot stepped forward as she turned, ready to face whatever was inside,

She kicked the door open with her right foot, and it swung wide, slamming against the opposite wall with ease.

BANG!

A gunshot rang out immediately, but it wasn't from Yaninn's weapon. It came from a man she vaguely recognized.

The bullet struck her torso, but her trusty bulletproof vest absorbed the impact, preventing it from penetrating her abdomen. Even so, the force knocked her back, leaving her momentarily winded.

Yanina gritted her teeth and fired back instantly.

She then retreated to the same corner beside the door where she had been moments before.

Her heart raced as she realized she was about to break protocol for apprehending suspects in a closed building. Without knowing the exact number of suspects, she should have called for backup and waited.

But Yaninn decided against it, fearing the suspect in the room might already be preparing to escape.

She pulled out her protective goggles and a smoke grenade from the side pocket of her bulletproof vest.

Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she counted silently in her mind..

Three

Two

One

She pulled the pin on the grenade, roughly the size of her palm, and tossed it into the room.

The sound of metal clinking against the floor was followed by white smoke beginning to fill the air.

Without hesitation, she stepped inside.

Through the haze, she spotted a shadow to her right, around one o'clock, behind a wall. She fired immediately, then turned to her left and fired again at another figure. The thick smoke obscured their vision, giving her an advantage.

'One-zero-seven, moving to support one-zero-one,"

Came the voice Of the former bodyguard over the radio.

But Yaninn didn't wait. She pressed forward into the next room on her right after the report ended.

Through the smoke, she saw the barrel of a gun, followed by a flash of light. She quickly ducked behind the left wall as bullets struck the wall above her head, sending debris flying. More shots followed in rapid succession.

When the suspect's gunfire ceased, Yaninn prepared to move again. But then she saw someone else enter the room-Nitha, who signaled for her to stay put before advancing past her.

The former bodyguard's gun fired as she moved past Yaninn, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor. The man who had been shooting fell as Nitha pressed herself against the wall to avoid return fire.

Nitha silently thanked the crumbling walls for providing cover.

Looking up, she saw Yaninn moving into another room. Without hesitation, Nitha followed closely behind, then veered into a doorless room on the left while Yaninn entered the one on the right.

Moments later, Yaninn emerged and followed Nitha into the next room.

Nitha, trailing Yaninn by less than four meters, spotted the shadow of a large man ahead before he disappeared into another room. She recognized his clothing and build, suspecting he might be the man seen at the intelligence chiefs condo, where an assassination attempt had occurred.

"1'11 handle this "



The former bodyguard said, quickly pursuing him.

Yaninn turned to her left, catching sight Of someone from the corner ofher eye.



She recognized him instantly.

"1)01..."

He stood there, right in front of her. The man who had been her mentor, her brother figure, her colleague. The same man who had become a stain on her life was accused ofbeing the stepping stone for her career.

He was alive...

But his appearance was almost unrecognizable.

Yaninn felt as ifher world was collapsing. For over three years, she had been consumed by guilt for not saving him that day-the day her career changed törever.

But now, here he was...

Yaninn felt paralyzed, unable to move. Her gun trembled uncontrollably in her hands.

Without needing to ask, Yaninn knew he was behind everything that had happened. Or if not the mastermind, he was at least a significant part of it.

No matter the reason... she had to stop him.

What cruel twist of fate was this?

Yaninn's eyes locked onto her former commander and team leader. But something about him was different, so much so that she could feel it.

Amid the dissipating white smoke, his gaze had changed.

The gentle eyes that had always brought her comfort were gone.

Now, his gaze sent chills down her spine.

DOI was gaunt, his skin weathered and darkened by the sun. Though he stood before her, he seemed lifeless, devoid of strength, determination, or vitality.

His eyes were vacant as if she wasn't even there.

"Yan.."

DOI still remembered her.

"1've been waiting for you,"

He said in a deep, unfamiliar voice. "Didyou do all ofthis?" she asked.

"1 did what had to be done."

What had to be done...

Yaninn could hardly believe what she was hearing. In the past few months, he had been responsible for countless innocent deaths. Even if he hadn't killed them himself, he was undoubtedly involved.

Innocent people he had once dedicated his life to protecting...

This was madness.

"What are you saying? Are you telling me that what had to be done involved innocent people dying?"

Yaninn's voice trembled as she repeated his words.

"This world needs change," he replied.

"But violence doesn't solve anything. You used to say that, didn't you?

That's why we do this job-because we know violence isn't the answer. That's why we stop it,"

Yaninn countered. She saw a flicker of recognition in his eyes, a glimpse of the DOI she once knew, before his expression hardened again.

The gunfire around them grew louder, drawing closer,

"What happened to you? Who did this to you?"

She demanded.

"No one did anything to me."

DOI replied. Yet his eyes betrayed hesitation and confusion. Yaninn could only stand there, staring at the man she hadn't seen in years. Deep down, she felt that while he stood before her, he was no longer the DOI she had known.

Yes, he was alive, but seeing him again only confirmed that the DOI she knew was truly gone.

The man standing before her was merely someone who resembled him.

Yaninn couldn't be sure what had happened to him during the three years he had been missing, but she was certain he had been influenced or manipulated by the insurgents.

DOI had never looked at her with such emptiness before. Though their relationship had never been more than that of a commander and team member, he had been the person she trusted most.

But the man standing before her now didn't inspire that trust at all.

More than that... she was certain he was no longer the leader she once respected. In the next moment...

The barrel of his gun was aimed directly at her head.

It was almost laughable how her own gun trembled in her hands, and deep down, she knew she couldn't bring herself to do the same to him.

One shot from DOI, and her life would be over.

Yaninn's life had come to this a moment where the man she thought was gone forever now stood before her, ready to take her life.

Ifthis is what you call atonement... then let it be. She... would not hold a grudge.

"Please don't do this, Dol."

"1 have to,"

He said, his voice trembling as the gun in his hand began to shake.

"1fI don't, they will."

She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Unless I can stop you, Dol.

Stop him.

Yaninn wasn't entirely sure if she could do that.

"1 won't say you shouldn't do this, but I can help you. Put the gun down, and let's figure this out together."

"I might not have that many choices," he replied.

"Stop me... Yaninn."

The sound Of footsteps running from behind caught her attention. Without turning, Yaninn already knew who it was.

"Chief."

Nitha appeared, holding a gun aimed directly at Dol. However, he kept his weapon pointed at Yaninn without hesitation. The suspicion that the assassination of security agency officers was orchestrated seemed to be true, as DOI was the one who knew these agencies best.

At this point, DOI was determined to finish the job.

"1'm fine."

"Drop the gun,"

Nitha ordered the man standing about fifteen feet away from her.

"Your group has been apprehended." "Please, DOI, put the gun down."

"1 can't do that,"

He said, his words becoming more erratic.

"1've come too far."

"1 can help you. Let's talk this through... please,"

Yaninn said, lowering her gun to her side to show she had no intention of harming him, even though his weapon was still aimed at her face. Yaninn tried to reason with him, hoping to avoid any bloodshed.

"You know we can talk this out... don't you?"

The young man's eyes darted around as he listened, the gun in his haad trembling with hesitation. Slowly, he began to lower his weapon.

Nitha cautiously moved closer to Yaninn, intending to shield her With her own body as part ofher assigned duty. "lfyou want to talk, I'll put my gun away,"

The former bodyguard said.

But before she could get closer, Yaninn saw DOI take a deep breath and tighten his grip on the gun. In one swift motion, he turned it toward the former bodyguard.

Bang!

Bang!

The gunshots rang out almost simultaneously, with DOI's and Yaninn's bullets causing both Nitha and DOI to stagger backward before collapsing to the ground.

Yaninn quickly ran to kneel beside the former bodyguard, who was bleeding from a wound on her right arm. "1 thought I was wearing a bulletproof vest..."

Nitha joked weakly.

"But I got shot in the arm. Damn it!"

She pressed her hand against the wound.

"Go check on him, Chief. I'm fine.

Yaninn locked eyes with her team leader and nodded, though she seemed torn. Still, she did as she was told.

The young man, shot in the lower abdomen, struggled to reach for the gun that had fallen nearby. However, he failed as the tip of the team leader's boot kicked it away just in time.

"Don't make me do more than this "

This time, strangely, the barrel ofher gun pointed directly at him without hesitation.

"Chief,"

Said Tum, the team's deputy leader, as he rushed over.

"Way!" Jane ran to her close senior.

"Call an ambulance!" "I'm okay, I'm okay,"

Nitha quickly assured.

"Go help the Chief over there first."

She watched as the remaining team members joined Tum, who looked shocked upon seeing Dol. He stood behind the team leader while Jane tried to stop her senior's bleeding.

Both injured individuals were taken to the hospital about twenty minutes later.

"What happened, Yaninn?"

Jane asked as they waited for Nitha outside the emergency room. DOI had been taken into surgery to remove the eleven-millimeter bullet.

"1 suspected for a while that it might be DOI,"

Yaninn admitted. Even so, she couldn't believe what had just happened. DOI, whom she had thought was dead, had just been shot by Nitha and was now in surgery.

"Was all ofthis DOI's doing?"

"1t seems so,"

The team leader nodded, glancing at Jane, who looked stunned.

don't understand.

"1 have a theory, but I'll wait to discuss it with the police and a psychologist first."

"Just knowing DOI is still alive is shocking enough,"

Jane said.

"But ifDol is behind this, I..

She couldn't finish her sentence. Jane had respected DOI just as much as Yaninn had.

Not long after, the injured former bodyguard was wheeled out of the emergency room with her left arm in a sling. After checking on her senior's condition, Jane joined the other team members to oversee DOI's security, ensuring he wouldn't escape or be taken away.

"Let's go home."

Yaninn's soft voice carried a tone of concern. "Aren't you going to handle DOI's case first?"

"Tum can handle it," The offcer replied.

"I'm taking you home,"

She said as she guided Nitha out of the hospital doors.

"1 can take a taxi,"

Nitha said, almost as ifrefusing.

'You should finish this first and then go home. It's fine."

"Don't make me force you."

"Alright, alright,"

Nitha stammered, seeing the stern look in Yaninn's eyes. "Let's go home. Suddenly, I really want to go home." "Consider this a warning-don't be stubborn with me, Way,"

The officer said firmly.

"Who would dare? I promise I'll behave,"

Nitha replied.

"1'11 hold you to that."

"1 just thought... you might want to stay with DOI and sort things out first,"

The former bodyguard said.

'My job is done," Yaninn replied.

"It's the police's responsibility to handle the suspect now."

"Alright," the injured woman agreed.

"In that case... let's go home."

# øøøøø

Operation 32

"Way.

A familiar voice called out from behind, addressing the former security officer who was walking down the hallway with her housemate. The casual tone of the call made Yaninn, who was walking alongside, raise an eyebrow and turn to see who it was.

"You two, come to my office for a moment. "

It was the last day of the first week since the director had returned to work, now that everything seemed to be settling down and the situation was returning to normal. Both Nitha and Yaninn quickly followed their superior to her office as instructed.

"110w are you doing, Ninn?"

"I'm fine, but... I assume you've read the report about DOI, haven't you?"

"1 have," Suchada replied with a nod.

"Do you think we can get anything useful from 1)01?"

"DOI is still confüsed and delusional, so he hasn't been able to provide any testimony yet,"

The operations team leader replied solemnly.

"1t might take some time for therapy."

The director Of the agency nodded in understanding.

"Alright, let me know if there's any progress." "Understood

"And what about you, Way? How are you?"

This time, Suchada turned to ask the other woman, who had been silently listening to the conversation. The mention ofher name made Yaninn furrow her brows in curiosity.

"1'm doing better now. Just a few minor wounds left, but I'm okay."

"Should I grant you leave until you're fully recovered before returning to

The way Suchada referred to herself caught Yaninn's attention.

Aunt....

So, what Jane said about her having connections wasn't wrong at all.

"No need, Aunt,"

Nitha interjected, glancing at Yaninn, who was frying to mask her surprise.

"1 already have someone taking care of me."

"Alright then, it's up to you, Way,"

Suchada said.

"lfthere's anything inconvenient, just let me know."

'Understood,"

The injured woman replied.

"I really hope we can gain something from DOI's return this time,"

The director of the agency remarked.

"1'm not so sure about that,"

Yaninn said.

"1 don't know how long it will take for DOI to return to normal."

"These things take time,"

Suchada said.

"But I've seen cases where people were able to return to almost normal lives, provided there were no additional conditions. "

"Additional conditions?"

The team leader repeated, puzzled.

"Like PTSD,"

The director elaborated, referring to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"People who have had new beliefs forced into their minds often face physical and mental instability, which can result from torture or abuse. But I hope DOI doesn't develop PTSD."

"The doctor didn't mention anything about that when I spoke with them, but they did find multiple injuries on his body, including recently healed fractures," Yaninn reported.

"1'11 leave DOI's case in your hands, then."

"It's already my responsibility,"

Yaninn replied. She noticed the Other woman in the room pursed her lips at that statement, but Nitha said nothing.

"Alright, get back to work."

"Understood. "

"So, you knew Suchada from the beginning.

Yaninn, who had been holding back her curiosity all day, finally blurted out the question in the evening after they had both returned home.

The question made the homeowner look at her before hesitantly nodding.

After all, things had reached a point where she had to explain everything to Yaninn, given how their relationship had grown beyond that of a team leader and a team member.

The former security offcer had been contemplating the right moment to reveal the truth, fearing that if she walted too long, it might complicate their budding relationship.

The officer sat back on the couch, her face showing signs of tension as she received the answer.

"And you've been hiding this from me all along,"

Yaninn said, twing to keep her voice steady, though it was clear she was upset.

Yaninn now understood the reason for Nitha's sudden transfer to fill the vacant position in the counter-terrorism field operations team.

While Nitha's arrival might not have been harmful or malicious, someone like Yaninn couldn't help but feel displeased upon learning the real reason.

Besides, it wouldn't be fair to anyone if she didn't reveal this truth.

The truth was... she had been transferred here at Suchada's request, which Nitha couldn't refuse.

Because the middle-aged woman who held the position of director was her biological aunt.

The former security officer could still recall the day Suchada-or as she called her, Aunt So-had asked her to join the field operations team. And more than that. to take on another role.

"Is this really a good idea, Auntie?"

"I want someone I can trust in there. I suspect something bad might happen. "

"Something bad.. ? "

She saw Suchada, seated at a table in a restaurant, nod in agreement.



"That's why I wani you to do somethingfor me.

"What is it?"

"Help keep an eye on the field operations team leaderfor me. "

"Keep an eye on them?"

Nitha repeated, confused.

"With all due respect, but shouldn't the special operations team leader be able to take care ofthemselves, Aunt?"

She saw Suchada look back at her thoughtfully.

'Why, you 'rejust like yourfather, " She said with a peculiar smile. "Alright, let me rephrase. Let's call it monitoring their behavior. "

"I'm completely lost, Aunt. "

"It's a long story. "

"I have all day ifyou'd like to start, "

The then-security officer said, sipping her coffee as ifit were a leisurely day OJI which contrasted sharply with her aunt's serious demeanor.

"Recently, the National Intelligence Agency has been sending me reports...

"You're still in contact with people there?"

Her niece asked, then quickly apologizedfor interrupting when she saw Suchada's expression.

"They've reported that a certain insurgent group has started to resurface, "

Suchada continued, her tone growing more serious.



"It's the same group we were monitoring about two years ago.

"1 see.

"The last time this group disappeared, [ was the one who ordered the operations team to clean up... "

Suchada said, herface growing more tense.

"That day could be described as unlucky, as the team leader was declared deceased. "

"I see, " her niece said.

"And thlS is related to myjob transfer, isn't it?"

"After the previous team leader's death during that operation, I promoted a new team leader, "

The director continued.

"Not long after, I received intelligencefrom the National Intelligence Agency that this group was starting to resurface. "

The middle-aged woman paused, unsure ofwhat to say next. But she knew she had 10 provide a reasonable explanationfor asking her niece to transfer to her agency so suddenly.

"I can't confirm this news yet, but the intelligence agency seems quite confident, which is why they sent the report. Now, the task I need your help with is... "

The director paused to take a deep breath.

"Monitor lhe behavior ofthe new team leader who replaced the previous onefor me. At least until we can confirm whether this group's activities are real or not. "

"Ninn... I mean the new team leader... she's quite headstrong and.

emotionally sensitive. I'm worried that ifshefinds out it's this group, she might do something I can 't control. Ijust need you to make sure she doesn 't go Offtrack or, ifanything happens, report back to me. "

" Understood, " Nitha said.

"You want me to keep an eye on her and report back, correct?"

"Ifyou see anything inappropriate, handle it as you seefit. I trust your judgment, Way.

The young bodyguard simply nodded in agreement.

"You don 't trust herjudgment, do you?"

"It's not that, " Suchada denied.

"But sometimes, bad memories can cloudjudgment when making decisions about operations. I'm just being cautious. It's true that Ninn is decisive, but she's also human, and emotions can influence decisions, even ifshe tries to control them. Especially during risky times. Just in case. "

"Understood, "

The young bodyguard replied.

"When do you want me to transfer? "

"As soon as possible because I don 't know what might happen next. "

"Alright, Aunt. You know I wouldn't refuse you. "

"Andfrom now on... we must not know each other personally. You'lljust be someone I recommendedfor thejob. Al least until lhis situation is resolved, "

Suchada said calmly, causing her niece to look al her with a moment Of understanding before nodding.

"Or ifNinnjinds out. "

"Is that so?"

Nitha repeated, raising an eyebrow.

"Interesting. Then she added,

"From now on, I'lljust be an officer recommended by the director. "

"lfyou want to call it from the beginning, then yes... from the beginning. Because she's my aunt."

"And you've been hiding this from me all along," Yaninn's voice rose slightly with frustration.

"1t wasn't intentional. I just didn't think it was relevant,"

Nitha explained, though her reasoning seemed weak to Yaninn.

"Not relevant?"

Yaninn repeated, her anger bubbling up.

"You know everything about me, but I barely know you, and you call that irrelevant?" 

"1 don't know everything," Nitha corrected.

"Just enough to do my job."

"So, I'm just a job to you?"

Yaninn's voice grew noticeably louder, her expression even more stern than usual. She crossed her arms in displeasure,

"This is all just work to you."

"Boss... don't be mad."

"I'm not mad..."

"By now, you should know how I feel about you,"

The former bodyguard tried to explain.

"1f I didn't care, why would I sit here explaining myself while you glare at

She sat down and moved closer.

"1 want to do more than glare at you, Way. Just so you know."

"Please don't be angry. I really didn't mean to hide it,"

Nitha said, holding Yaninn's arm.

"My aunt was just concerned about your safety."

"1 can take care of myself."

"1 know you can," Nitha said.

"But having me help wouldn't hurt." "Don't try to sweet-talk me, Way. I'm still upset with you."

"0h, come on, Ninn," Nitha pleaded.

"Don't be mad. You'll get a migraine. "

"Now that everything's settled, I think it's time I start planning to move out.

I've probably imposed on you for too long."

"Please, impose all you want,"

The homeowner quickly interjected.

"Stay as long as you'd like "

"1t's not that simple, Way,"

Yaninn said, her tone softening slightly.

"Even though our relationship has progressed, I still need to give you your space. Besides, the cleaning service has already taken care of my room. I should be able to move back."

"So, you're not mad at me anymore, rightQ"

"1'm not mad, just annoyed that Suchada secretly sent you to babysit me,"

Yaninn said with a faint smile at the word "babysit." In truth, it wasn't entirely wrong, but more accurately, Suchada had sent Nitha to monitor and manage Yaninn's behavior.

"But Suchada was spot on in having you keep me in line." "Who said that? My aunt didn't think you'd dare... handle Dol."

"So, did Suchada know DOI was still alive?"

Yaninn asked, puzzled.

"Not at all. But my aunt always plans for contingencies,"

Nitha said, knowing her aunt well.

"If something happened that you or the team couldn't handle..."

'You'd be the one to step in,"

Yaninn finished.

"Something like that. But this time, you've proven just how dedicated you are to your duty. Even the person you respect the most-if they do wrong, you won't let it slide. From now on... I guess I'm not needed anymore,"

Nitha said softly.

"1've always put my duty first," The team leader replied firmly. "Dol taught me that. He would have wanted me to act this way. Otherwise, he wouldn't have stayed there waiting for me. He wanted me to be the one to stop him. "

"Is that so?"

Nitha asked, her voice tinged with curiosity.

"Yes,"

Yaninn confirmed with conviction.

"11e could have run, but he chose to stay there and face me."

"At this point, I truly believe in your dedication,"

Nitha said, stepping closer. She reached out and gently brushed a strand of hair away from Yaninn's face.

"1'm so glad I had the chance to get to know you, Yaninn."

"And another thing... he pointed the gun at you,"

Yaninn added.

"1t's strange, but it made it easier for me to pull the trigger without hesitation."

"Boss..."

Nitha was overwhelmed by the words, leaving her momentarily speechless. All she could do was smile warmly.

"1'm really not good at this, am I? My aunt entrusted me to look after you, but instead, I ended up causing you trouble," Nitha admitted, her voice tinged with guilt.

"You've been taking care of other things,"

Yaninn replied, her eyes scanning the room.

"As for the dangers of the job, they're something we can't always avoid." Her tone was encouraging, though her expression remained serious.

"Thank you, Yaninn,"

Nitha said sincerely,

"lfyou ever hide anything from me again... you'll regret it, Way,"

Yaninn warned with a teasing edge.

"No more secrets,"

Nitha promised, her voice soft as she leaned closer.

"None at all."

Before Yaninn could respond, she felt Nitha tilt her head slightly as if inviting her.

Of course, the former bodyguard didn't refuse the unspoken invitation. She pressed her lips gently against Yaninn's, her hand resting lightly on Yaninn's arm. Yaninn didn't hesitate to respond in kind.

Nitha felt herselfbeing gently pushed back onto the long sofa, with Yaninn following closely. Yaninn barely gave her a moment to catch her breath. If Yaninn was intense in her work, Nitha was now discovering that this intensity extended to other moments as well.

All Nitha could do was surrender and go along with it.

"Stay here with me, Yaninn,"

Nitha whispered, her voice small and pleading.

"lfyou're not here, this house feels too big for me..."

Yaninn murmured, her voice uncertain.

"Please," Nitha added softly.

But Nitha didn't wait for an answer. She placed her hand on the back of Yaninn's neck and pulled her down for another kiss.

Yaninn wasn't sure how to respond to the request. And, as it turned out, she didn't have the chance or the time to think about it for the rest ofthat night.

# øøøøø

Operation 33

"Brainwashed?"

Jane asked, her voice filled with shock, as she sat in the small conference room where an emergency meeting was being held the day after they apprehended the mastermind behind everything. Surprisingly, it turned out to be someone not too far removed from their circle.

"110w did it happen, Yaninn?"

"DOI seems to be suffering from delusions caused by being manipulated into believing or holding onto altered truths repeatedly, to the point where his thoughts and behavior have changed,"

Yaninn explained, her words causing the entire operations team to exchange glances and let out collective sighs

"When I spoke with the psychiatrist, they mentioned that treating this condition takes a considerable amount of time. He needs to fully recover before undergoing detailed evaluations and being able to provide a statement again.

The brainwashing Yaninn referred to involved making someone believe in something by repeatedly feeding them informatlon, either in the same format or adjusted to fit the situation. The information could be made to appear credible.

When a person is exposed to repeated information, especially when they are unaware or in a physically and mentally unstable state, it can lead them to believe in something-whether true or false.

This belief then becomes the foundation of their thoughts and behavior, eventually resulting in a condition known as delusional disorder.

Beyond altering beliefs and behavior, this method could also be used to extract desired information from the target. This typically happens once the target's original beliefs have been successfully replaced,

Yaninn speculated that Dohn might have been subjected to this method to extract confidential information and to comply with the demands of the insurgent group.



Tum began, "1 thought it was a good thing that DOI was still alive. But seeing him like this... I honestly don't know whether to feel happy or sad."

His face was filled with worry.

"Why did Dol target us, Yaninn?"

Jane asked.

"Initially, I thought our unit or even the intelligence agency was a major obstacle for him. But now, I think he wanted us to stop him,"

Yaninn replied.

'ISO, if he regains his senses, could DOI provide us with critical information about this group?"

Mod speculated.

hope so," Yaninn nodded.

"I need to track down those responsible for doing this to Dol."

Nitha sat silently, listening to the team's discussion. She didn't speak or

Offer any opinions, as this was about DOI, and she didn't know much about the situation. She simply observed Yaninn, whose face was tense-a look that was not uncommon for her.

"Will DOI get better?"

Jane's voice was filled with concern.

"1 can't give you an answer, Jane. But I want to see him get better,"

The team leader replied.

"These things take time, though. How long? I don't know."

She took a deep breath.

"1n the meantime, visit him when you can. I believe DOI will gradually Improve.

"A1right," Jane agreed.

With that, the meeting concluded. Even now, Yaninn found it hard to believe everything that had happened despite some time having passed. Of course, it was a reliefthat DOI was still alive.

However, seeing him in this state, from their conversations, it was clear he could barely distinguish between truth and lies.

His mind was in utter chaos. He remembered events but couldn't recall specific timelines, as if the information in his brain was all jumbled together.

Judging by the scars on his body, Yaninn guessed he had been through significant physical abuse.

Physical harm is often a step in the brainwashing process, used to weaken the body and, more importantly, the mind. Once the target is in a vulnerable state, the desired information is repeatedly fed to them until they believe it to be true.

This new belief replaces the old one, making it easier to persuade the target to act as desired.

It was a chillingly cold-blooded method.

Yaninn vividly remembered DOI's words to her in that building.

"This world needs change..."

Under normal circumstances, she would have laughed at such a statement. DOI, of all people, wanting to change the world? Especially through methods filled with violence and hatred?

Such things could never bring about meaningful change. Spreading violence, insults, or hatred-how could any of that make things better?

She, someone who was all too fhmiliar with violence, never believed such ideas could lead to real change.

And DOI was no exception.

She wasn't sure ifhe remembered causing the deaths of so many innocent people since this all began. And if he did remember... could the old DOI, the one she knew, handle that tmth?

No matter what had happened to him, she had to accept that he was a part of it all.

'Yan inn,"

A concerned voice called out as the office door closed.

"Are you okay?"

Yaninn didn't respond. Instead, she turned to the other person, walked over, and hugged them tightly. She rested her head on the former bodyguard's shoulder and let out a heavy sigh.

"1 want to go home," she said softly.

"1t's only nine in the morning. Why are you already asking to go home?"

Nitha teased, feeling Yaninn's arms wrgp around her waist.

"Tired," came the short reply. "1f you're tired, then rest,"

Nitha suggested.

"Hmm, I am.. "

Yaninn murmured. Recently, she had discovered that hugging someone on a tiring day could be surprisingly comforting.

"Can I stay here?"

"Stay and work here,"

Yaninn clarified.

"So, does this mean you're officially adding me to the team?"

Nitha asked playfully.

"Isn't that what I'm saying? Stay and work here, "

Yaninn replied, her voice still groggy but firm. She continued to hold onto Nitha.

"Unless you're tied to a contract somewhere else?"

"No, I'm not,"

The former bodyguard replied.

"When I agreed to help your aunt, I just quit my previous job. But I could go back if needed."

"Do you want to keep working here? If you don't, I won't force you," Yaninn said.

"But ifyou do, I'll make sure you pass the field test."

'ISO, ifl don't want to, does that mean I won't pass? Is that it, boss?"

Nitha teased, causing Yaninn to pull back and look at her with disbelief.

"lfthat's what you want, then fine,"

Yaninn said before collapsing onto the couch.

"To be honest, while your skills are excellent, I think you're better suited as a bodyguard than being on the operations team."

"Are you trying to get rid ofme, boss?"

Nitha asked as she sat down beside her.

"1 don't want to force anyone, especially you," Yaninn explained.

"Even though... I do want you to stay."

"I might need to talk to your aunt first to see what he thinks "

Nitha reasoned.

"But I've started to get used to working here. Besides, the people around here are quite lovely."

"0h, stop flattering me,"

Yaninn said, trying to maintain a serious expression but unable to hide a small smile.

"Your aunt can't say much. Ultimately, the decision is up to the team leader. If I want you to stay, I'll make it happen. After all, I already let him push you into the team once."

"Well, it's up to you, boss. My job is to follow orders,"

Nitha replied.

"But since youjoined, you've never followed my orders, Nitha,"

Yaninn teased,

"1 won't dare disobey again, I promise,"

Nitha said with a playful tone.

# øøøøø

Operation 34

"0ne thousand two hundred fifty-two steps northeast, six hundred twelve steps west, one thousand two hundred eight steps north..."

The voice of Dol, recorded on a device by the psychiatric department ofthe hospital where he was being treated, played repeatedly in Yaninn's ears. She had been listening to it for over ten minutes.

She could hear the hoarseness in his voice, the labored breathing as if he were exhausted, and the fragmented words that barely made sense. Yet, she could still discern what he was trying to say.

Even though he was still in a state of confusion and barely coherent, the attending psychiatrist noted that his mental state was gradually improving. As everyone knew, recovery in such cases required time.

About twenty days after being admitted, DOI, who had been silent and unresponsive for most of the time, began repeating this phrase over and over as if in a trance while lying down.

After listening for over ten minutes, Yaninn believed it was a set of directions and distances to a specific location. The problem was figuring out where the starting point was.

The fact that he kept repeating it suggested that it was deeply Ingrained in his mind.

About twenty minutes later, Yaninn found herself standing in the psychiatric department, determined to discuss DOI's condition.

"It might be something buried in the patient's subconscious,"

The staff member informed her.

It was quite evident. When people are in a state ofrnental instability, their words, actions, or expressions often stem from their subconscious. However, what intrigued Yaninn further was...

The therapist mentioned that DOI, in his confused state, claimed that today was the same date as two years ago. Moreover, he mentioned a date that coincided with an event Yaninn could never forget.

Considering this.

"Black Panther 101... in position. "

No matter what, Yaninn never liked operations in the same forest where the tragic incident involving DOI had occurred. In fact, it was almost the exact Same spot, just slightly off from the coordinates DOI had mentioned.

From aerial photographs, the operation leader observed that the area was covered with tall trees, seemingly devoid of anything hidden.

However, upon trekking less than three kilometers into the area, it became evident that the place showed signs of habitation. Moreover, there were small footpaths that appeared to be used for crossing between neighboring countnes.

Yaninn requested permission to lead an operation in the area, collaborating with the border patrol police and reinforcements from the narcotics suppression unit, totaling forty-seven personnel.

Intelligence suggested that the caravan residing there might be involved in drug trafficking along the northern border.

The advance patrol reported that within a kilometer Of their current position, there appeared to be a settlement resembling a village.

The memories ofthat day came flooding back, and Yaninn silently hoped that no one would face the same fate as DOI today.

The team spread out to encircle the caravan, which, from the photographs, resembled a small, temporary village. It was not a permanent settlement, with only makeshift shelters visible.

Based on DOI's coordinates, which were offby less than a kilometer, Yaninn was confident that this area was not only a hideout for drug traffickers but also a potential refuge for insurgents.

DOI might have been captured and tortured here.

The operation team, divided into two groups, moved forward silently. Meanwhile, the border patrol police circled around to position themselves on the other side for a complete encirclement.

"There are approximately thirty individuals,"

Came a report over the radio from the advance team assessing the situation.

"105, get up there and keep an eye out at eleven o'clock,"

Yaninn instructed the second sharpshooter to climb a tall tree with sprawling branches upon reaching a position 150 meters away.

Soon, the border patrol police were in position, while Yaninn's team awaited orders.

She glanced at Nitha, who was twenty meters to her right, peeking out from behind a large tree. Nitha raised her binoculars, preparing for what was to come.

In front of them was an open clearing resembling a village square, surrounded by green canvas tents that provided some protection from the sun and rain. Behind the clearing were four or five small bamboo houses.

In the clearing, a few armed men in full gear patrolled, while others sat with rifles either on their laps or beside them.

It seemed they were unaware of the impending operation.

"When they start, some of them will fry to flee in our direction,"

The operation leader spoke into the radio,

"Stay ready and maintain a line formation..."

The first gunshot from the border patrol police leader signaled the start of the operation. Yaninn's team emerged from their hiding spots and advanced.

Soon, gunfire echoed throughout the forest.

The clash between the border patrol police and the drug caravan had begun.

Bullets from Nitha's semi-automatic rifle struck one of the armed men hiding behind a tree ten meters to her right. Another man was taken down by a precise shot to the forehead from Mod, who was positioned further back for long-range support.

Yaninn moved deeper into the area. Her dislike for forest operations grew with every breath she took. Perhaps this was why she preferred urban field operations.

A bullet from a tall, thin man narrowly missed her head, hitting a branch that fell to the ground. She quickly retaliated with three shots to his torso, bringing him down. However, her eyes caught sight of a large man emerging from behind a small bamboo house, preparing to attack.

But... he wasfaster.

A bullet struck the center of her bulletproof vest, causing her to stumble back, followed by another shot that knocked her to the ground.

"101 is hit!"

The report over the radio from Mod, stationed outside, sent a chill through Nitha. She immediately scanned the area for Yaninn but couldn't spot her. "Can you handle it?"

"1 can't see clearly,"

The first sharpshooter replied, while the second was busy dealing with enemies on the other side, too far away to assist.

"Where is 101?"

"0ne o'clock, beside the third house."

Upon hearing this, the former bodyguard sprinted without hesitation.

Yaninn, lying on the ground, fired back, forcing the man who shot her to take cover. Despite the pain from her earlier wound, she couldn't take her eyes off him as he moved to another corner of the bamboo house. She tried to suppress him with gunfire to prevent him from emerging.

But luck was not on her side.

Iler ammunition ran out just as she tried to push herself up.

She fumbled for a magazine in the front pocket of her bulletproof vest, quickly reloading her weapon.

As she chambered a round, she saw the same man step out from his hiding spot. She raised her gun, but he shot her in the right arm. The pain caused her to lose her grip, unable to fire back. She watched as he raised his weapon, aiming directly at her face.

In just one month, Yaninn had faced a gun pointed at her head twice.

Her uninjured left hand instinctively reached for the handgun strapped to her left thigh, though she knew she wouldn't be fast enough.

Still, she tried to survive.

The special operations leader couldn't afford to lose another officer in this forest. It would be a significant blow to the organization, even if the first leader had miraculously returned from the brink of death. She raised her handgun just as another gunshot rang out.

Bang!

But the shot wasn't hers.

Nor was it from the man aiming at her, He fell, a bullet piercing his forehead.

Nitha fired two more shots into the man before rushing to Yaninn's side.

"1 recognize him,"

Nitha said, her voice steady. She remembered his demeanor and attire. "11e was at the intelligence officer's condo and the abandoned building. "

"Are you sure?"

"Yes,"

Nitha confirmed, then noticed Yaninn's injury.

"Boss."

'Tm fine, Yaninn replied firmly, standing up. She slung her rifle over her shoulder and switched to holding her handgun in her left hand.

"We need to finish this."

"But... you need medical attention."

"We don't have time for that."

"N'Tove. The slower you are, the more blood I lose."

Nitha understood the urgency in Yaninn's words. She saw the fresh blood dripping from her wound onto the ground. The longer they delayed, the more danger Yaninn faced.

Yaninn was risking her life to end this mission as quickly as possible.

Her arm was growing numb, especially around the entry and exit wounds.

Despite the pain, Yaninn continued firing with her left hand. Each shot reminded her of DOI's sacrifice, the risks he took to bring her here, and the cost of his own identity.

DOI could barely remember who he was anymore. Yaninn was determined not to let his sacrifice be in vain.

Nitha had disappeared from her sight. Despite her concern for Yaninn's injury, the former bodyguard knew that the longer they took to neutralize the threat, the more danger Yaninn faced.

It was a stubbornness Nitha had never encountered before, but she wasn't surprised to find it in Yaninn.

Fifteen minutes later, the gunfire in the forest began to subside.

Yaninn limped back to regroup with her team, who were gathering in the clearing.

"Boss,"

Nitha rushed to support her, helping her sit against a large tree. She pulled out a first aid kit from her vest pocket.

"How is she, Nitha?"

Jane, who had joined them, asked, her eyes fixed on Yaninn's pale face.

"I'm fine, Jane,"

Yaninn replied weakly, her eyes barely open.

'Quiet. Don't talk," Nitha snapped.

"Don't you dare die on me, Yaninn."

Her tone made Jane curious, but she refrained from asking questions in such a tense situation.

"1'11 call for the border patrol's field medic,"

Jane offered.

"0kay," Nitha agreed. "What about the others?"

"They're clearing the area."

"Tell Tum to take over for me, Jane."

"Got it, Nitha,"

Jane replied before leaving

"1 knew you were stubborn, but not this much," Nitha muttered once Jane was out of earshot.

"Stubborn and reckless. " "1t's the least I can do for Dol-to ensure his sacrifice wasn't in vain."

"By risking your own life?"

Nitha's voice rose in frustration.

"If I can't handle this group today, I don't know when I'll get another chance, "

Yaninn paused and tried to take a deep breath.

"You might think I'm stupid, Way."

"You're not stupid, Ninn. You're just crazy,"

Nitha replied.

"1'm not going to scold you right now, but once you're better, I won't let you off the hook."

Her words came with a stern expression. Yaninn didn't respond; she simply gave a faint smile in return.

"1'm not going to leave you so easily, Way."

"Leaving me? That's not going to be easy, Ninn. No one has ever died on my watch, and I'm not about to let you ruin that record,"

Nitha said firmly.

"We11, there you have it, Officer Nitha. ."

Yaninn managed to say before the field medic rushed in to take over.

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## Epilogue ( The End )

The arrest of the insurgent group led to further investigations into other related networks. Many individuals and factions became suspects in collaborating with the unrest, including certain politicians and influential figures.

Beyond their intent to create chaos m the capital, this group was also involved in drug trafficking along the border regions.

The man Nitha dealt with by shooting him point-blank was one of the group's leaders residing within the country and was listed as a wanted individual.

Evidence from the bullets fired by his gun, which were used to shoot Yaninn, matched the bullets used in the assassination of intelligence officers Suchada and Watin.

From the interrogation of the accomplices, one of whom was the man Nitha confronted in Yaninn's condominium, it was revealed that he barely survived after being shot twice.

His testimony implicated the same man, who appeared to be the mastermind behind all the plans, including the brainwashing experiment that Dohn had undergone.

This man had an extraordinary background. He was a suspect in several unrest-related cases. Initially, he was merely a collaborator in creating chaos but was recently promoted to the group's leader, likely around the time Dohn's was captured.

The raid on the insurgent group proved that Dohn's sacrifice was not in vam.

The former bodyguard stood silently, watching Yaninn converse with Dohn, who was dressed in a psychiatric ward patient's attire. To this day, Dohn's confusion persisted, but he was becoming more coherent.

Although he occasionally spoke ofpast events, what seemed to linger in his mind was his feelings toward his former teammates and skilled subordinates.

Regardless, Yaninn seemed to carry a sense of guilt toward him. However, the thought that she had stepped over him to secure her position as a senior officer-a doubt that had always lingered in her mind-was gradually fading away.

At this point, Nitha wasn't sure if it was just her imagination, but Yaninn appeared more relaxed. Perhaps the pressure she placed on herself was slowly diminishing.

Nitha decided to step outside and wait, giving the two some privacy to talk. Although she had never directly asked about the feelings between the female officer and Dohn, what she had learned from Jane was that Yaninn never saw Dohn as anything more than a respected senior and leader. Nitha had no choice but to believe that.

Afamiliar voice called from behind.

"Why aren't you waiting inside?"

"I just wanted to give you and Dohn some space to talk comfortably,"

The former bodyguard replied as she turned around.

"Is something wrong?"

Yaninn asked, noticing the unusual expression on Nitha's face.

"1'm not sure,"

Nitha replied, causing Yaninn to raise an eyebrow.

"1 just..."

Nitha's gaze instinctively shifted back to the patient building she had just exited.

"1 just feel like you and Dohn seem... um... I don't know how to describe it."

"Are you doubting me, Way?"

"Not at all," Nitha quickly responded.

"1t's just that when I see the two of you together, it's kind of... well

She paused, thinking.

"There's chemistry... something like that."



"Like what people call... a 'ship', "

Nitha said, forming a heart shape with her hands.

"Ifwe're a ship, then Dohn and I have been one for a long time," Yaninn remarked casually before walking toward the parking lot.

"Did you ever have the chance to be something real? I mean... before Dohn... um..."

"What did Jane tell you?"

"How did you know I asked Jane?" "Because I asked her about you too, Way,"

Yaninn replied with a teasing tone.

"Fair enough,"

Nitha admitted with a nod.

"Jane said there was never anything, even though Dohn tried..."

"To me, he was a leader I respected too much to let the relationship develop in that direction,"

Yaninn explained.

"And honestly... I don't think he and I would have worked out."

"Why not?"

"He couldn't handle my stubbornness, "

Yaninn answered with a smile, fully aware of her own personality.

"At some point, he'd have had enough." "And why do you think I can handle it?"

"1 don't,"

Yaninn replied, causing Nitha to frown.

"1 just want to try. Sometimes... you reach a point where you want a relationship with someone, and I think you'd understand me better."

"Do you know that sometimes... I get frustrated with your stubbornness too,

Nitha said, stopping beside her car'S passenger door.

"Like when you got shot in the forest. Do you know how much it stressed me out that you refused to get treated until the mission was over?"

"1 know," Yaninn admitted.

"But in the end, the mission was a success."

"You have a way of motivating your team that I never expected-by putting your life on the line,"

"DO you know, Way, that having your life on the line is something we face every time we go into the field..."

Yaninn saw Nitha nod in agreement.

"That's why I show that even in life-threatening situations, we can still decide whether to live or die. Someone like me wouldn't bleed out from a mere wound."

"And you give your team heart attacks in the process,"

Nitha remarked.

"Why should I be afraid... when you're there? I know you'd help me because you wouldn't let your perfect record of no fatalities on your watch be broken,"

Yaninn said with a faint smile, leaning against the passenger door. Nitha stood facing her.

Yaninn watched as Nitha took a deep breath and looked up at the evening sky, now darkening.

"True," Nitha admitted.

"At least we know who's responsible for all the civilian casualties, especially those thirteen people."

Her words left Yaninn silent.

"Even though the truth about who's responsible... is someone I didn't expect and don't like t'

Nitha said calmly, exhaling before meeting Yaninn's gaze as the surrounding darkness deepened.

"But it has to follow due process."

Despite her dislike for the reality that Dohn seemed to be the root cause of everything-due to his physical, mental, and emotional confusion, or more accurately, his brainwashing-at least capturing the insurgent group's leader was an unexpected bonus.

And it was Dohn who provided the crucial lead: the location of the group's key hideout, even if he revealed it unconsciously while sleep-talking.

It wasn't all bad.

Even so, Yaninn wasn't sure if Dohn, once recovered, could accept the truth that he had been the cause of over thirteen civilian deaths.

She couldn't answer that either. But when the time came, it would be up to her and the team to help him face that truth and move past it.

"So, do you want to stay and continue your duties?" "Are you asking me to stay on the team?"

"Well... good team members aren't easy to find,"

Yaninn replied.

"Training new ones takes time."

"lfyou want me to stay... ofcourse, I will." "1 don't want you to go anywhere, Way,"

Yaninn said.

"You still have that bodyguard habit-like not maintaining proper distance or positioning during the last forest mission. And then there's... your tendency to almost disobey orders. "

"Well, the commander is so stubborn..."

Nitha tried to argue.

"But overall..

Yaninn continued,

"Your performance is impressive, considering you've only been here six months. "

'ISO you admit you want me to stay?" "Didn't I sign your approval papers?"

"Then it's settled. I'll stay."

"You better," Yaninn teased.

Nitha didn't respond, simply staring at Yaninn for a long moment.

"Why?"

"I'll make you stay," Yaninn said. "Or I'll have someone else make you."

"1'11 stay, I promise,"

Nitha replied, sensing Yaninn wanted to say something but remained silent for a moment.

"Thank you, Way," Yaninn said firmly.

"1 wouldn't have made it this far without you.

'Don't say that," Nitha replied.

"You've done your job exceptionally well. I have to commend you."

"Before, it might have been just a job. But now... I hope you know it's not."

"Of course, I know."

"Then there's no need to thank me, Ninn," Nitha said.

"Just take care ofyourself. That's all I ask."

She saw Yaninn smile faintly. "1'11 tW not to trouble you, Way." 'You promise?" Yaninn nodded.

"Let's go home. "

At this point, Yaninn couldn't believe she felt like she was going home, as Nitha had said. Perhaps "home" for her now was the place Nitha had just mentioned. And she intended to stay there for quite some time.

"Alright... let's go home."

# øøøøøø

The End

Sunyan daphne.shn@gmail.com Medan, 11 January 2025

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